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Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story – the Novel and its Adaptation

Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story – román a jeho adaptace.

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Prohlašuji, že jsem diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně a že jsem uvedla všechny použité prameny a literaturu.

I declare that I have written this thesis myself and that I have acknowledged all my sources.

V Praze dne.....

podpis.....

Ráda bych poděkovala panu profesoru Hlškému za důvěru a cenné komentáře.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	pg. 6
2. History and Context – the Writer and the Director	
2.1 Sterne as Innovator?.....	pg. 8
2.2 Michael Winterbottom – Testing the Limits.....	pg. 10
3. The Novel and the Film	
3.1 Adaptations – Moving from Paper to Film.....	pg. 12
3.2 Defining the Genre.....	pg. 15
3.3 Where to Begin	pg. 18
3.4 The Characters.....	pg.20
3.5 The Narrator and the Hero.....	pg. 24
3.6 The Plot and the Structure.....	pg. 29
4. Modernist and Postmodern Aspects of the Novel and the Film	
4.1 Modernism – Digressions and the Concept of Time.....	pg. 35
4.2 Postmodernism – the Mixing of Genres.....	pg. 39
5. Graphical vs. Cinematographic Devices.....	pg.43
6. The Transformation of the Novel’s Themes in the Film	
6.1 Sexuality.....	pg. 47
6.2 Humour and Hobby-horses.....	pg. 51
6.3 Sentiment.....	pg. 57
7. Conclusion.....	pg. 60
8. Summary in Czech and English.....	pg. 61
9. Bibliography.....	pg.63

1. Introduction

The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman (1759 -1767) is a novel that is unfortunately more talked about than read, perhaps because it retains the stamp of an 18th century classic that is appropriate for study and analysis, but not for a simple enjoyable read. For many, the humorous aspects simply don't outweigh the tediousness of several hundred pages of a digressive narrative and even many students of literature are satisfied with reading the most notorious passages and forgetting about the rest. Those that do 'concur' the text, however, agree that it is an exceptional work not only for the standards of the 18th century, but in context of the whole body of English literature. As a result the novel has established itself as a classic, whose popularity over the centuries has wavered, but never completely disappeared.

It is no longer a surprising fact that when a novel becomes an international bestseller you will very probably soon see it in 'a cinema near you.' Over the past years the film studios' thirst for good stories has reached such dimensions that it has triggered cynical comments such as 'I won't bother reading the novel, I'll wait for the film.' However, although this process has perhaps become more visible thanks to marketing, literature has been an important source of inspiration for filmmakers since the very beginning of film history. The question is therefore pending – why did Laurence Sterne's classic have to wait until the year 2006 to finally make it to the screen? Have not less popular or comparably difficult novels (and poems, we must not forget), reached audiences much sooner and been successful? Primarily, the adaptation of the novel would need a similarly audacious screenwriter and director as Sterne was a novelist, as it does not have what most people look for in a novel to be adapted for film – a coherent plot, a 'good' story (although it does contain several wonderful episodes). Most of its charm is based on

linguistic aspects which do not have cinematic equivalents; moreover it is a narration about narration, making matters even more complicated. Finally, an adaptation in a classical sense would mean that it would be a historical film, and those are expensive, at the same time the novel is hardly material for a blockbuster - the financial risks of such an endeavour would therefore be considerably high.

Notwithstanding all these problems, *A Cock and Bull Story*, a film based on *Tristram Shandy*, finally exists. In many ways director Michael Winterbottom achieved the impossible – he transformed most of the negatives stated above into positives and created a film which is controversial, but generally loved by all *Tristram Shandy* fans. How did he achieve this? How are some of the basic aspects of the novel tackled in the film? How does the film's structure correspond to that of the novel? Who is Tristram Shandy for the 21st century reader (and audience)? All these questions will be discussed in this thesis and the answers will hopefully reveal why *A Cock and Bull Story* deserves a place of honour in the long line of adaptations of 'classical' works of literature.

2. History and Context – the Writer and the Director

2.1 Sterne as Innovator?

It seems to be a generally held view that the novel was invented by the English and that in the context of the 18th century Sterne stood as a lone experimenter among his fellow writers. However, after a closer look the situation ceases to be so clearly cut. In the case of who is to have the ‘patent’ for the invention of the novel, the terminology itself seems to be the difficulty. The definition of the word ‘novel’ is problematic, as the word only started to be used at the very end of the 18th century, after Defoe, Richardson, Fielding and Sterne. Ian Watt, who argues in favour of the novel having its origins in England, says that it is distinguished from previous writings by ‘realism’, the emphasis on individual experience over collective tradition, individualization of characters and finally by no longer borrowing themes from mythology. He, as is widely done, places Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) at the beginning of the tradition. His views are summarized in his 1957 seminal work *The Rise of the Novel*, where he also connects the development of the novel with social, religious and economical conditions of 18th century England.

Although Watt’s views continue to be influential, many arguments have since been made in favour of a broader perspective. The English novel couldn’t after all have appeared out of thin air, and although we perhaps needn’t, as some critics, go back to antiquity, the importance of such works as Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* (1605-15) must not be underestimated, especially in relation to Sterne. For if there is a work that was truly an inspiration to him, it was the story of the knight Don Quixote and his faithful servant Sancho. Tristram mentions *Don Quixote* several times in his narrative and a parallel is

popularly made between Cervantes' heroes and uncle Toby and Trim. Wayne C. Booth in his essay *The Self-conscious Narrator before Tristram Shandy* further points to the combination of sentiment and ridicule, which form the basis of both novels. Apart from comparisons with Cervantes and some French writers such as Marivaux, Sterne should be perceived in context of the English literary tradition of his time, not as standing apart from it. Booth and other critics, in reaction to Watt, emphasize the continuity between Sterne and his predecessors. As Christopher Ricks says in his essay on Sterne in the collection *The Novelist as Innovator*: "Like virtually every important writer, the advances which he made are less a matter of some blinding discovery than of exploiting the potentialities which he glimpsed in his stumbling predecessors."¹ Booth further points to the fact that in the 1750's, the use of the intrusive narrator and extensive digressions was greatly popular (and originated from Fielding), however novels such as William Goodall's *Captain Greenland* were tedious and had a shallow plot - as a result very few people actually read them. With the overnight success of *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne was: "taken to be a much more outrageous original than he really was."² Booth therefore concludes that rather than standing in opposition to the narrative methods of his time, Sterne took them *ad absurdum*. Fielding most famously, but many other writers as well, used intrusions, however they always made them serve the plot, whereas Sterne for the first time made the intrusions and digressions the center of a novel. It is therefore in this sense that he can be seen as an innovator.

¹ "The Novelist as Innovator." Christopher Ricks, *Laurence Sterne*, London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1965, 16.

² Melvyn New ed. "Tristram Shandy – Contemporary Critical Essays," Wayne C. Booth, *The Self-conscious Narrator before Tristram Shandy* Hampshire and London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1992, 56.

2.2 Michael Winterbottom – Testing the Limits

Michael Winterbottom is an extremely prolific film director, who has made 15 films over the past 12 years, three of which were nominated for the Palme d'Or and one (*In This World* -2002) received both the BAFTA and the Golden Bear awards. Sometimes labeled a 'cinematic chameleon', Winterbottom's filmography includes documentaries, war films, sci-fi and even attempts at 'artistic' pornography. *The Cock and Bull Story*, however, is by no means his first historical adaptation, as he already adapted two of Thomas Hardy's novels, *Jude the Obscure* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (renamed *The Claim* and set in 1860's America). Neither of the two films was a great success, although (or perhaps because) they belong among his more traditionally structured works. Winterbottom began as a documentarist and switched to fiction films, but the influence is visible at first sight. Over the past few years he has developed a style which has really become his mark, one which combines documentary techniques with fiction, works with improvisation and chance and makes extensive use of the mobility of a hand held camera. The illusion of reality this technique creates is not too different from television reality shows we have been used to seeing in the past decade, where the manipulation with the audience as well as the protagonists is considerably more elaborate than in classically narrated films. Winterbottom has the testing of the limits of the documentary genre and the shifting of boundaries between fact and fiction as one of his main themes, which is already an excellent starting point when dealing with a writer who perhaps for the first time questioned the limits of literature and story-telling.

Winterbottom's most important film in reference to *The Cock and Bull Story* is the one which came directly before it, *24 Hour Party People* (2002). The film stars not only the same actors, with Steve Coogan playing the role of Tony Wilson, a 70's television

presenter and music producer, but applies practically identical techniques to such an extent that it is probable that Winterbottom, who must think three films ahead with his moviemaking speed, already shot *24 Hour Party People* with *Tristram Shandy* in mind. The film contains many ‘documentary’ passages, which are however fictional, and these are freely combined with original footage to reinforce a sense of realism. This approach is not so uncommon, however the way the main character is presented is – in a film about Tony Wilson, the character not only plays in his life story, he also guides us through it and comments on it. The transitions between Tony character and Tony narrator takes place inside the individual scenes, Coogan simply slips out of one role into the other, without any change of scene. This is of course precisely the same technique Winterbottom will use in his *Tristram Shandy* adaptation. In the film, Tony Wilson also reflects on the fact that he is: ‘only a minor character in his own story,’³ although compared to poor Tristram, he still gets relatively a lot of screen time. However, the idea of not being in control of your life even when it is only up to you to give it some shape is already present here, preparing ground for the coming of Tristram.

³ *24 Hour Party People*, dir. Michael Winterbottom, prod. Andrew Eaton, 2002, 117mins.

3. The Novel and the Film

3. 1 Adaptations - Moving from Paper to Film

In his essay called quite simply *Adaptation*, Dudley Andrew claims that: “over half of all commercial films have come from literary originals.”⁴ It is therefore only logical that the process of adaptation can not be some universally accepted set of rules which will automatically transform a textual work of art into a visual one – on the contrary, each screenwriter has to create his own system and his own key to the original work. There are, however, several possible modes of relation between the film and the text and for example Andrew simplifies them to 3 basic approaches – borrowing, fidelity of transformation and intersection. Borrowing is the most frequent mode of adaptation not only in film (as literature can also be adapted to music, opera or painting), and it relates to the artist employing the idea, theme or form of a previous, usually successful text. As Andrew points out, in these cases: “the adaptation hopes to win an audience by the prestige of its borrowed title or subject,”⁵ and it is therefore this approach that people associate with adaptations in general and which continues to be the main driving force behind using (and reusing) popular literary themes. The absence of any previous adaptation of *Tristram Shandy* clearly shows that this novel is hardly a good example of such a literary text; it has been a great source of inspiration for later writers (ranging from the modernists to contemporary authors such as Salman Rushdie), but filmmakers have carefully avoided it, conscious of its many pitfalls and also aware of the fact that the ‘prestige’ of its title or subject would only work on a relatively small audience.

⁴ Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, eds. Dudley Andrew, “From Concepts in Film Theory” *Film Theory and Criticism 6th Edition*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 462.

⁵ Andrew, 463.

The discussion of the fidelity of transformation, in which the audience and critics assume that the task of an adaptation is to capture and reproduce something essential about the original text, is in Andrew's view the most 'tiresome.' He distinguishes between fidelity to the 'letter' and to the 'spirit' of a text. Whereas the former can be reproduced more or less mechanically, as it deals with concepts which can be elaborated upon in a film script (such as setting, characters and their relationships, the narrator's degree of participation, etc.), the latter is more problematic because, as Andrew points out, finding stylistic equivalents to intangible aspects such as the original's tone, values, imagery and rhythm is the opposite of a mechanical process and, "the cineaste presumably must intuit and reproduce the feeling of the original."⁶ The success of an adaptation, therefore, seems to be measured according to very abstract criteria, however even these can often be reduced to mechanical aspects of filmmaking, such as editing, montage or photography. Although Andrew finds these discussions tiresome, they are, of course, central to any analysis of adaptation and if they aren't only reduced to general remarks such as 'I didn't like the actor playing so and so,' they can provide important insight both into the original text and the resultant film.

The last attitude toward adaptation in Andrew's division is intersection, which could be seen as the opposite of borrowing. In it, "the uniqueness of the original text is preserved to such an extent that it is intentionally left unassimilated in adaptation."⁷ Andrew uses the example of Robert Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest*, about which André Bazin said that it was "the novel as seen by cinema."⁸ Andrew also mentions other adaptations of the French director, together with some works of Pier Paolo Pasolini, among others his famous *Canterbury Tales*. According to Andrew,

⁶ Andrew, 464.

⁷ Andrew, 463.

⁸ Andrew, 463, citation comes from André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* Berkley: University of California Press, 1968, 142.

All such works fear or refuse to adapt. Instead they present the otherness and distinctiveness of the original text, initiating a dialectical interplay between the aesthetic forms of one period with the cinematic forms of our own period.⁹

The connection with *A Cock and Bull Story* is clear – apart from the first half hour of the film, which pretends to be a ‘classical’ adaptation in the sense of borrowing the novel’s scenes and characters (and which can therefore be discussed in relation to the fidelity of transformation), the rest of the film is clearly a reflection of the specificity of the original work rather than an attempt at its cinematic reproduction. Winterbottom therefore managed to combine several adaptational approaches in one film in order to present a complex view of the novel, but of course the film has many more layers, all of which will be discussed in the following chapters.

One last point in relation to the process of adaptation must be made. The body of critical works written on *Tristram Shandy* during the 20th century is enormous and as Melvyn New points out in his introduction to *New Casebooks Contemporary Critical Essays on Tristram Shandy*, any observation which is made about the novel is strongly affected by an individual’s ‘hobby-horse’, or quite simply by his, “cultural, economic, political and moral baggage.”¹⁰ In exactly the same manner, so is every adaptation. Postmodernism and postmodernity are mentioned most frequently in reference to the film, however the strong influence of reader-response approaches must not be ignored. The reader is not a passive recipient of meaning but is a participant in its creation, only in this particular case the readers are at the same time truly creators of a new vision of the novel. The various members of the crew in the ‘documentary’ part of the film ‘create’

⁹ Andrew, 464.

¹⁰ Melvyn New ed. “Tristram Shandy – Contemporary Critical Essays,” Melvyn New, *The Introduction Polemical*, Hampshire and London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1992, 2

their own versions of the novel and Winterbottom constantly reminds us that the film he presents is only one in a thousands possibilities. It could even be said that the process of interpretation is more important than the result – after all we only see half an hour of the ‘actual’ adaptation of *Tristram Shandy*, the rest is the journey for finding a key to the novel (which, although fictional, reflects the problems of any screenwriter doing a ‘real’ adaptation.) The result is all the more interesting since *A Cock and Bull Story* is not *Tristram Shandy* as seen by scholars and critics, but by filmmakers, whose attitudes are most probably closer to those of ‘ordinary’ readers. Winterbottom admits the book is difficult, however when it gets too much so, he simply disregards it and for example hardly mentions anything about Locke and his philosophy. However, we must not be fooled by the general lighthearted tone of the film – Winterbottom was aware of the principles governing Sterne’s novel and was able to use them to his advantage rather than drown under their weight.

3.2 Defining the Genre

If Sterne’s novel is about the writing of a book (or the incapacity to do so), Winterbottom’s choice to make a film about the making of a film (or a ‘film-within-a-film’) is more than substantiated. When comparing the genre of the two works, the book and the film, we come to realize that they are more similar than may be apparent at first glance, partly because they are both difficult to pin down. Both can be seen as examples of false documentaries, which were greatly popular in the 18th century literary world and are still appealing today, but for different reasons. Whereas Defoe and his contemporaries created fictional characters and presented them as real mainly for reasons of credibility (the protestant reader saw the novel as a sinful waste of time, however if it

presented a ‘true story’ it was elevated to a higher moral level), modern day writers or filmmakers would usually use this technique to make a point about people’s response to art or the diminishing difference between reality and fiction. However, with this definition all the playfulness of the novel and its adaptation seems dissolved in high-brow musings about the function and meaning of art, which are only marginal themes in both works. Perhaps a better term, one which is used more sporadically and only in reference to film (although there is no reason why it couldn’t refer to a novel), is a mockumentary. An obvious combination of the words ‘mock’ and ‘documentary’, the term mockumentary is said to have been coined by director Rob Reiner in the mid 1980’s when he used it to describe his film *This is Spinal Tap*. Unlike false documentaries, where the illusion of reality is important for audience or reader response (half of the appeal of *The Blair Witch Project* or the *Da Vinci Code* was lost after the authors owned up that the presented events were fictional), in mockumentaries if the joke isn’t used as part of the marketing in the first place (as in the 2006 hit *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*) there are usually certain scenes that give it away. Other important aspects of this sub-genre are of course humour and satire, the central ingredients of any mockery. The capability not to take anyone or anything seriously and a willingness to make a fool of yourself in the process seem to be recurring traits of British mentality, making the list of works which could be seen as mockumentaries a long one – starting with Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* and Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* through to the Monty Pythons, Sascha Baron Cohen and his Borat or Ali G films or Steve Coogan presenting a version of himself in *The Cock and Bull Story*.

We may therefore say that although Winterbottom perhaps hasn’t stayed faithful to the plot (if plot isn’t an exaggeration, in this case), he successfully reflected the genre and what we could call the spirit of the novel. That his task wasn’t easy is obvious, but after

all any director who chooses to adapt a novel which isn't based on a plot, or not primarily, but where the writer's style and technique are just as important, is always faced with the problem of transforming literary methods into cinematic ones. It is usually the more daring approaches which are more successful and Winterbottom could have taken inspiration from a whole line of films which aren't only adaptations of famous novels, but which have become acknowledged for their own qualities. In reference to *The Cock and Bull Story*, two adaptations present themselves for comparison – Karel Reisz's adaptation of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Harold Pinter as screenwriter) and Woolf's *Orlando* by director and screenwriter Sally Potter. Both novels do have the advantage of a coherent plot, however in each case the filmmakers had to tackle a similar problem to Winterbottom – metafictionality in the case of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and the role of the hero/heroine and his/her communication with the audience in *Orlando*. Reisz and Pinter used the same method as Winterbottom, a film-within-a-film, where the story of the actors playing Sarah and Charles mirrors that of the characters of the film they are shooting. Although this mirroring effect isn't as strong in the *The Cock and Bull Story*, Winterbottom would have at least seen the film and been aware of the use of this method. In *Orlando*, the hero/heroine is part of a fictional world, but at several occasions speaks directly to the audience and briefly transforms from a character into a narrator, again a similar trick which Winterbottom uses. It has a considerable alienating effect and reminds the audience that it is only watching a film, not a real story - it is therefore applied very sporadically, as the majority of films (and novels) wants to achieve the exact opposite effect. Even the example of these two films therefore supports the fact that Winterbottom's straying from the original was hardly revolutionary (one could even argue it was necessary), but that what may seem as brilliantly original has actually been done before. Just like Sterne, Winterbottom took existing ingredients and

mixed them up in an innovative way, often taking them, just like the novelist, to the extreme.

3.3 Where to Begin

The novel was published in installments over a period of 6 years, consists of 9 volumes and is between 530 – 550 pages long, depending on the print - which is excellent material for a 25 episode television series and a big problem for a 90 minute film. Winterbottom therefore had to make the difficult choice of what to include in the film, what to minimize and what to omit completely (and once having decided to make a film about filmmaking, he could show us all the difficulties with making these choices). But before he could say if he wanted battle scenes, Widow Wadman or both, he had to decide on the structure of the film – and first of all, where to begin.

In his book dealing with *Tristram Shandy*, Wolfgang Iser points to the fact that the novel does indeed have multiple beginnings, and that Sterne's narrator is conscious of the problem of where to begin to the extent that: "all his beginnings are riddled with reservations and must, therefore, remain abortive."¹¹ If taken from the chronological perspective (starting with the page with the lowest number), Tristram can be said to begin literally ab ovo, presenting us with his parents' sexual act and his conception on the very first page. His birth (a few hundred pages later), which would have most traditionally been the starting point, is in this case: "not the beginning, but a doom-laden end."¹² Winterbottom was therefore left with several possibilities of where he would choose to begin. The film can be seen as being divided into two parts – the admittedly fictional

¹¹ Wolfgang Iser, *Laurence Sterne – Tristram Shandy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, 6.

¹² Iser, 2.

film-within-a-film section with Tristram as the narrator and the no less fictional ‘documentary’ section. The film opens (ie. when the opening credits begin) with a grand view of Shandy Hall and Tristram the narrator coming towards the camera, introducing himself as the main character. The story unravels and for a long time it seems that we are really going to see an adaptation of the novel. As it takes almost half an hour before the ‘Tristram film’ stops and a new plot with Coogan as himself begins, the audience almost forgets about the prologue Winterbottom placed before the opening credits, where Coogan and Brydon have an absurd discussion about leading roles, co-leads and the colour of Brydon’s teeth. Although it is no doubt an amusing and memorable scene, the audience has by this time been drawn into the Tristram plot and is now forced to think back to what seems like a very long time ago, which is also one of the narrative jokes Sterne used in the novel. The beginning of the ‘documentary’ section can therefore be seen as another possible beginning, coming 30 minutes after the start of the film.

However, whereas the question of where to begin is voiced and discussed in the novel, the film, although the problem is implied, simply uses it within its structure. This approach will be repeated with other aspects of the novel as well, a fact which only reflects the common division of literature as a medium where things are discussed and described and film as a medium where they are shown. In this respect, however, the genre Winterbottom chose offers him an uncommon luxury – the ‘documentary’ part of the film, though fictitious, allows him to transform the metafictionality of the novel into the film. We can see the processes behind the making of the film and realize that they are actually very similar to the problems Tristram experiences, even though Tristram sitting behind his desk is probably under less pressure than the crew with the producers breathing down their necks. Tristram in the novel as well as the crew in the film are all fictional characters, however the problems they have with the creation of their work of

art are clearly taken from the real world and reflect the problems the actual artists, Sterne and Winterbottom, probably came across at some point in their careers. The cunning sarcasm and humour with which they treat the people who affect their work, all the publishers, critics and producers, by no means excludes themselves, well in the spirit of most mockumentaries where nobody, least of all the author, is taken too seriously.

3.4 The Characters

All the important characters – Tristram, Mr. and Mrs. Shandy, uncle Toby and Trim, Susannah, Dr. Slop and finally also Widow Wadman and parson Yorick - appear in the ‘historical’ section of the film, although logically some of the parts had to be reduced. The casting was generally done in accordance with the novel, though every reader of course has his own mental picture of the characters which may differ from the one presented by the film. The characters which have been omitted are those who are only mentioned, but do not play an important part in the ‘Shandean world’ of the novel (such as Tristram’s older brother Bobby or aunt Dinah), and those who appear in some of the many stories and subplots, like Lieutenant Le Fever and his son. In the ‘documentary’ part of the film we also get a whole group of other characters from the cast and crew, some of which reflect or directly mirror the characters in the novel. Tristram and Steve Coogan are discussed in a separate section; however the similarities between uncle Toby and Rob Brydon’s good hearted and somewhat ‘dopey’ version of himself are also clear. It is important to remember that although some characters (mainly actors) have the same names as in reality, they are in fact fictional ‘versions of’ the existing people. Although much of the script for this part of the film would have been improvised, the basic effects of: ‘Coogan as a self-centered narcissist’ or ‘Gillian Anderson as a silly Hollywood star’

would have been outlined and the actors adjusted their actions to these basic characteristics. Probably the only person who really represents himself in the film is Tony Wilson, although it is a question whether once an actual journalist performs a fictional interview for a fictional TV show on a fictional set, if he too does not become a mere fictional character. Most of the other characters, such as the assistant Jennie, Mark the director or the producers are not film professional but actors, a fact which is easily forgotten when they are placed side by side with other actors who are seemingly playing themselves.

One of the central and most popular themes in the novel is the relationship of Walter Shandy and his brother Toby, full of humour and a great deal of sentiment. It is suggested in the 'historical' part of the film, it does not, however, have sufficient space to be developed. The relationship (fictional, we must not forget) of Brydon and Coogan mirrors that of the two brothers in the novel, with the sentiment completely omitted but enhanced by a considerable amount of irony and absurd humour. There is a new element of competition between the two, which Brydon expresses, similarly to uncle Toby, with honest simplicity, while Coogan, feeling superior to his colleague, usually addresses him with unconcealed sarcasm. It is their relationship which frames the whole film and the clash of their personalities is central to the majority of its humorous situations, just like Toby's and Walter's episodes in the novel.

An interesting shift in meaning took place in the case of the character of Mrs. Shandy, who in Sterne's version is a dull, unimpressionable woman and who Tristram describes as having: "a temperate current of blood (which) ran orderly through her veins in all months of the year, and in all critical moments both of the day and night alike."¹³ In the film, however, although she has little opportunity to express herself outside the

¹³ Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 108.

screaming in the birth scenes (or perhaps she can hardly appear calm and ‘unimpressible’ in such a condition), she clearly possesses a great deal of beauty and charisma. Thanks to this shift, her relationship with Walter also changes: whereas in the novel Mrs. Shandy’s stoic and uninterested replies to Walter’s inquiries make Walter appear as somewhat of a victim of the silly woman, in the film it is Walter, sitting comfortably downstairs and smoking while his wife screams with pain in the bedroom, who comes off as the worse one of the two (notwithstanding the fact that this is precisely the way it would have worked in the 18th century, as we are reminded several times in the film). Another female character who appears in the film at the last moment is Widow Wadman, played by the X-files star Gillian Anderson. Here we can only appreciate Sterne’s clever way of describing a desirable woman – by letting the reader do it himself. This is a recurrent problem for directors when they have to cast a character which many people have a specific vision of in their minds – many are bound to be disappointed, especially if beauty or personal charm come into play. In this sense, statements such as that of Marie Mravcová in her essay on the adaptation of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* claiming that: “Meryl Streep ideally fulfills the image of an unusual and timeless beauty,”¹⁴ are highly subjective, as many may not agree, just like Anderson may be a disappointment as Widow Wadman. For this specific character, however, any concretization is harmful, because her charm lies precisely in the fact that everybody can imagine her as they wish. This, of course, would have been an irresolvable problem for Winterbottom who, once having decided to have Widow Wadman in the film, had no choice but to give her a face and lose the wonderful ‘openness’ of her beauty.

To complete the cast of female characters in the film (and there are considerably more of them than in the book), we must also mention a character who remains

¹⁴ Marie Mravcová, *Od Oidipa k Francouzově milence – světová literatura ve filmu, interpretace z let 1982-1998*, Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 2001, 305.

mysterious in the novel and whom Winterbottom sneaked into the film not once, but twice. Tristram's 'beloved' Jenny presented as Coogan's wife Jenny and doubled by the assistant Jennie, who Coogan more or less succeeds not to have an affair with. Ironically, these two Jennies, one of whom has nothing to do with the film and the other only performs practical tasks such as making coffee, know more about Sterne's book and filmmaking than most of the men on the set. In Helen Ostovich's opinion, this would support the way women are presented in the novel. In her essay *Reader as Hobby-horse in 'Tristram Shandy'* she takes a feminist view at the novel's female characters and Tristram's perception of them and comes to the conclusion that, "Tristram's discourse verges on the feminine in its free-form activity, tangentially seeking out a partner with whom and to whom he may relate his narrative with intimate and idiosyncratic abandon."¹⁵ Whereas in the novel it is the female reader addressed as Madam who Tristram often singles out and who is his most loyal listener, in the film it is the two Jennies that have obviously been the most careful and responsive readers. With closer analysis, it becomes clear that the novel's and the film's portrayal of female characters is in fact very similar, mainly because in both cases they are stronger and more sensible than their male counterparts. Elizabeth Shandy is portrayed as a silly woman, but there are also hints throughout the novel that her refusal to engage in any sort of debate with her husband is actually a very clever way (and the only possible way) to shut him up and her universal agreement to anything he proposes is therefore only a strategy how to survive their marriage. Although Jenny does communicate with Steve Coogan, her response to many of his self-obsessed ramblings is very similar to Elizabeth's - she simply rolls her eyes and lets it go. Whereas Elizabeth and Walter have probably gone beyond the point of no return, Jenny's 'grounding' influence on Coogan still has the

¹⁵ Melvyn New ed. "Tristram Shandy – Contemporary Critical Essays," Helen Ostovich, *Reader as Hobby-horse in 'Tristram Shandy'*, Hampshire and London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1992, 157.

capacity to affect him, and his change of mind is subtly reflected in his realization that he really doesn't need shoes with a higher heel than Brydon, on which he continually insisted. The assistant Jennie, on the other hand, seems like quite a lonely, and despite her beauty and intelligence perhaps even a somewhat desperate character. She can be seen as having some similarities with Widow Wadman – firstly the loneliness and secondly her failure to get Coogan because of her overt sexual pass at him, which scares him off just like uncle Toby. However, she still knew what she wanted and she went for it – unlike Elizabeth Shandy and Jenny, Widow Wadman and Jennie take an active rather than a passive approach to life and despite their failure, they are more admirable than the lost and self-centered male characters.

3.5 The Narrator and the Hero

In reference to the subject-matter of the novel, Wolfgang Iser emphasizes the fact that 1st person narration was the best and probably the only option for Sterne, whose aim was to present a subjective view of a character's life. An omniscient narrator knows everything and as Tristram is always trying to get to the bottom of things and constantly comes to the conclusion that reality is unfathomable, the only option was to place the narrator in the center of events, to make him one of the characters. 1st person narrative was quite a popular technique in the 18th century, however even in the case of the most famous examples such as *Robinson Crusoe* or *Gulliver's Travels*, 1st person narration was only a disguise for the authorial perspective. The narrator in these cases tells his story with hindsight and has an objective view on the events of his life, often commenting or moralizing about them, just like a 3rd person narrator would do. Tristram, of course, has also already lived through all the events he describes, however Sterne

chose to emphasize a completely different aspect of 1st person narration than experience and moral growth, “namely the immediacy of experience before it has been coloured by the knowledge of what it may serve.”¹⁶ Moreover, whereas in most novels the actual story the narrator presents and the account of what role he played in it (therefore his function as the hero of his life story) are the most important themes, in Tristram’s narration he is hardly a secondary character, because except for Book 7, he only appears very sporadically. Tristram the narrator, however, is present on every single page of the novel and it is therefore he who is the true hero of the book.

In the film the situation is rather more complicated. In the historical section, Coogan plays Tristram the narrator and guides the audience along, however he still retains a considerable amount of Steve Coogan the actor in his personality and introduces himself both as the main character of the story and the leading role. To reflect the way Sterne places Tristram in the midst of the events he tells, Winterbottom makes Tristram the narrator an actual character in the film, who addresses the audience directly. In cinema, this is not a common technique – whereas a book usually has a narrator, films, because they show rather than tell, do not need one. If there is a narrator in a film, his commentary is most often placed into voice over, however if there isn’t some further reason for doing this (eg. there is a discrepancy between what the narrator says and what the audience sees which has a comic/dramatic effect), it is considered an outdated approach because it reflects literary rather than cinematic devices. Seymour Chatman in his essay *What Novels Can Do That Films Can’t* further points out that very often a voice over commentator leads to film using sound track in much the same way as fiction uses assertive syntax, which results not in cinematic description but merely literary assertion

¹⁶ Iser, 56.

transferred to film.¹⁷ However, it continues to be used in certain genres, for example fairy tales, and it can be seen in many adaptations, precisely because filmmakers don't know how to transform what the narrator says in a novel into something the audience could see in a film. The presence of the narrator in *The Cock and Bull Story* is, of course, not the result of artistic helplessness, but necessity. The narrator in this case could not be omitted and if he was only placed into voice over, the fact that he is the main hero would have been lost, therefore Winterbottom's decision that we must actually see him was only logical. Tristram speaks directly into the camera, which as was already said prevents the audience from identifying with the story and its characters. However, in this case it is again completely substantiated because Tristram in the novel also doesn't let the reader forget about the processes of writing and never allows him to get too caught up in the actual plot. Furthermore, because the presence of the narrator on the screen is a distractive element, it draws all the attention of the audience to him – which is again a similar effect that Sterne achieves in the book.

In the 'historical' part of the film the fact that everything is only staged is given away both by Tristram's presence as well as by other alienating incidents such as the boy playing Tristram as a child dropping out of his role or Tristram putting on a wig and slipping into the role of his father. In the 'documentary' section, however, the effect is entirely opposite – we completely forget we are watching a fictional film. Steve Coogan is now the hero with the camera practically never leaving his side. He reflects the literary persona he portrays in many ways, he is not, however, a modern day Tristram Shandy. Firstly, unlike Tristram, he is not the one who creates a work of art, ie. the film. Although he would like to believe otherwise, he is only a part of the clockwork with the creative element in this case being represented by the whole crew, not one individual. Coogan's

¹⁷ Braudy, Leo and Cohen, Marshall eds. Seymour Chatman, "What Novels Can Do That Films Can't," *Film Theory and Criticism 6th Edition*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 450.

contribution to the film is also much smaller than that of other crew members, as he concentrates most of his efforts on getting as much screen time as possible, preferring his own self-promotion over the qualities of the film. More importantly, Coogan is denied the benefit of a narrative voice. Unlike Tristram in the historical film, he can no longer address the audience and pick out the events he deems important, he therefore becomes the subject rather than a creator of a work of art. The camera simply follows him along, presenting us with what he does and says, but not with what he thinks, which is in direct contrast to Sterne's novel in which we learn little about Tristram's life, but know a lot about his opinions on every possible subject.

There are however some characteristics that Tristram and Coogan have in common. Although Coogan is not trying to narrate his life but simply to live it, similarly to the novel there is the sense of his incapacity to 'catch up' with it. He simply never has enough time to do the things he would like, there are too many events and interruptions constantly in the way. Coogan seems to be dragged around like a puppet, but although the little duties seem petty in themselves, they are the ones which together create the bigger picture – both in the sense of the resultant film as well as by giving us a complex idea of Steve Coogan's character. In terms of personality, Tristram in the historical film does have a lot from Steve Coogan, unfortunately, Coogan is very different from the 18th century gentleman. Whereas Tristram never lets his ego and self-importance get the better of him (after all, he gives Toby or Walter more space in his bibliography than himself), Coogan, despite all his jokes, takes himself very seriously and would be satisfied only if he saw himself in every single scene of the film.

Interestingly, the most obvious link Winterbottom chose to make between Tristram and Coogan is the father-son relationship, namely the relationship between Walter and Tristram and Coogan and his baby son. It is curious because it follows rather a 20th

century interpretation of the novel than a theme that would be predominant in the work. It illustrates the subjectivity of adaptations which has already been mentioned, because everybody chooses an aspect from the original work which is the most personal and therefore most appealing to them, despite the fact this can lead to misinterpretations or shifts in meaning. The father-son relationship is therefore the most interesting aspect of the novel for the assistant Jennie, who clearly has emotional baggage concerning her family, as well as for Coogan, who has just had a son himself and who is actually capable of appearing as a genuinely positive character only in the scene where he takes care of him. This is also why Coogan insists on Walter's presence at the birth of his son, arguing that it would make Walter look better (and more importantly give Coogan an extra scene). Even though the screenwriter emphasizes this would be historically inaccurate, Coogan gets his way, although the scene is given a comical twist and Walter faints instead of being able to express any paternal sentiments, (and the whole scene gets cut out of the final film anyway). In the whole film, therefore, the recurrent father-son theme works on two levels. Firstly, it is a substitute for the sentimental aspects of the novel, where the emotionally charged relationships between Trim and Toby or Walter and Toby are shifted to Walter and his son and Coogan and his son, making it more acceptable for a modern day audience. More importantly, however, as a part of the meta-level of the film, it shows the processes behind the making of an adaptation and the indisputable importance of personal input of the filmmakers, which transforms the original novel into a new, independent work of art.

3.6 The Plot and the Structure

At one point in the film when the director and his crew are at a loss with how to continue, Coogan looks at the novel lying on the table and says: ‘It’s a fat book. There’s plenty to choose from.’¹⁸ Which is certainly true, but it can also clearly be a setback rather than an advantage. Winterbottom’s work was moreover different from Sterne’s in the essential point that whereas Sterne, who published in installments, could freely build up his story and let it swell up to the dimensions we are familiar with today, Winterbottom had to make choices from the very beginning, as he would have been limited both by the usual 90 minutes of a feature film, as well as by financial aspects of the shooting. With film being (despite the cult of the director) a collective work, where many people influence the result, it is often more difficult to control than in literature, which is most usually the work of a single person. In this case there is an additional problem that the novel is a classic and many people have emotional attachments to it, demanding that their favourite episode or character be in the film. All these problems are reflected in the film, where for the intellectual Jennie the most appealing aspect of the novel is the Tristaepedia, for Tony Wilson it’s Widow Wadman, for the producers the chestnut scene and for most of the crew the fact that the book is funny. Winterbottom, therefore, rather than getting as many of the novel’s episodes into his film as possible, chose to capture the metafictionality of the novel and let the audience see all the problems and processes behind the making of a film, and especially an adaptation, just like Sterne presented his readers with his own troubles with writing.

After a closer look, however, it is surprising how many of the novel’s episodes actually did find their way into the film. Winterbottom discarded all the ‘peripheral’ sub-

¹⁸ *Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story*, dir. Michael Winterbottom, prod. Andrew Eaton, 2006, 94mins.

plots, usually presented as stories in the novel, as well as the whole of book 7, where Tristram takes a trip to France in order to escape death. The ‘reflexive’ chapters, such as the ones on breeches, drinking water or auxiliary verbs usually had to go, although their absurdity is reflected in the ‘serious’ discussions of Brydon and Coogan about leading roles or Al Pacino. Apart from these, however, all the important episodes are at least mentioned and most people would be satisfied with finding ‘their’ character or episode in the film. The initial half an hour long section of the ‘historical’ film mostly works with the first five books of the novel, although the events are presented in a different order and are ‘condensed’ into a more coherent narrative. After we meet the narrator and the bull (and are assured we will see the cock in a moment), the events leading up to Tristram’s birth are presented interwoven with a series of flashbacks and flash forwards, however there are considerably less digressions than in the novel. The film also uses no interruptions at this point, because everything somehow connects to Tristram. This, together with the fact that whenever Tristram digresses to something in the future, he always stops himself with the same words, ‘I’m getting ahead of myself – I am not yet born,’¹⁹ always makes us keep in mind where Tristram is trying to get with his narrative. The most considerable difference, however, is the style. In the novel, there is a strong sense that Tristram has all the time in the world (he even threatens to continue as long as his health allows him) whereas in the film the style of editing (fast) and photography (mostly hand-held camera), together with the omission of interruptions and many digressions, creates the sense that things are happening at an incredibly high speed. Winterbottom also makes sure that there is constant action on the screen – especially poor Susannah and Obadiah are constantly running around, creating a sense of perpetual chaos in the Shandy household. The effect of simultaneity, often discussed in reference to

¹⁹ *Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story*, dir. Michael Winterbottom,

the novel, is further enhanced in the film, where it is no longer important what came before and after, because the rapid montage creates a sense that everything is happening here and now. After seeing the whole film more than once, it becomes clear that were the half hour section to be an actual part of an adaptation of the novel, this pace could never be kept up, and even in this film the rhythm slows down considerably after the switch to the 'documentary' part. With the 'historical' section of the film, the effect is that of a roller coaster ride (it is probably no coincidence that Groucho Marx is cited right at the beginning), whereas the novel's techniques are more subtle. This of course, is only a 21st century perspective – many Sterne's contemporaries thought the novel was completely crazy. However, even the way the story is told proves that for Winterbottom, the entertaining, funny aspects of the novel are more important than scholarly analyses, even though he still manages to slip in the theoretical aspects of the novel on various levels.

In the first half hour of the film, several shifts in meaning occur in comparison to the book. Probably the most interesting is the already mentioned relationship between Walter and Elizabeth Shandy. In the novel, although it is clear Mrs. Shandy is giving birth somewhere upstairs and is probably experiencing if not pain, then certainly discomfort, the discussions going on between Walter, Toby and Dr. Slop are given all the attention, it is therefore easy to forget all about poor Mrs. Shandy. In the film, thanks to montage, Mrs. Shandy and her screams are continually present and the juxtaposition of her suffering and the 'important' discussions the three men are having below creates an absurd, comic effect and makes Walter and the others look even more ridiculous. Another considerable shift of the film is the different order of events, often resulting in the individual scenes having a different effect than in the novel. To explain its title, the film practically starts at the very end of the novel: first it introduces the bull and from then on works by a similar method as Sterne. To introduce the cock Tristram first goes

back to Toby's wound of the groin (the very end of book 1.) and then by association continues to talk about his own accident with the sash window, which is not mentioned until book 5. in the novel. Winterbottom can therefore be said to use the same technique (association) as Sterne, but with a different starting point, which in effect jumbles up the sequence of following events. The notorious scene of Tristram's conception, which comes (shockingly) on the very first page of the novel and is the starting point of all Tristram's misfortunes, does not come until the end of the 'historical' sequence of the film. Tristram's comment is that he did not forget to mention it, but he, 'just thought we should get to know each other better.'²⁰ This is of course funny for those who know the book, the scene, however, does not have as strong an effect when it comes after all the other events as when it is at the very beginning. Another problem in this case is that since Winterbottom cut out most of Tristram's theorizing, the explanation of the importance of some events (at least for Tristram and his father), is lost. Without the definition of Locke's theory of the mixing of humours, the conception scene can hardly have the same importance and Tristram's comment that: 'The circumstances of my conception were as confused as those of my birth,'²¹ does not sufficiently correspond to the importance the conception is given in the novel. The problem is that in the book, the humour is often created by the mere tediousness of Tristram's or Walter's theories or explanations, which have been greatly reduced in the film. Most of the scenes are still funny, but the humour is more 'instant' and is often helped along by little jokes more popular in today's film or television comedies than literature.

With the start of the 'documentary' section of the film, both the rhythm and the method of storytelling change considerably. Tristram is gone, the hero is now an actor called Steve Coogan who is on set and his girlfriend has come to visit him with their

²⁰ *Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story*, dir. Michael Winterbottom,

²¹ *Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story*, dir. Michael Winterbottom,

baby son. Whereas in the novel Tristram's larger aim is to tell his life story, in the film it is simply to finish the film. The result in both cases is questionable, as Tristram hardly succeeds at telling us everything he wanted and the reactions to the resultant film are largely lukewarm or disappointed. However, for a considerable part of the novel Tristram also has a smaller aim – to tell us how he was born, in which he finally succeeds (after many interruptions and digressions). In a similar manner, Coogan also has a 'small aim' of his own, less significant perhaps, but certainly important on the day, and that is quite simply to have sex with his girlfriend, who has come a long way to see him primarily for this reason. Just like in Tristram's case, the outside world as well as his own little obsessions and peculiarities keep getting in Coogan's way. It is in this part of the film that the constant interruptions of the novel are reflected and where what the Sterne scholar says about the novel in the film is mirrored: 'Life is chaotic, amorphous and you can't make it fit any shape.'²² After finishing the shooting, Coogan just wants to go spend some time with his girlfriend, however first he must go and try the womb for the next day's shoot, than give an interview, than watch the day's footage and when it seems like they will get some time on their own, Brydon interrupts with his problem with Gillian Anderson, which, with everyone finally gone, makes Coogan go and read the novel with Jenny falling asleep alone on the bed. His own life doesn't seem to be under his control (just like Tristram's), however his need to go see Jenny increases throughout the film, he keeps telling people he must go see his girlfriend, yet somehow he just can't get there. When Coogan resists the final seduction from the beautiful Jennie and returns to his Jenny and makes love to her, it is like a small closure, as everything he did up till then was aiming to this moment.

²² *Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story*, dir. Michael Winterbottom,

Taking a different perspective, the whole 'documentary' section could be seen as an interruption of the historical film, although the end of the birth scene (ending when Walter faints) is only very short. Other passages from the 'historical' film come in as well, although in a very curious fashion, as most of them are not a part of the film at all and exist only in the characters' imagination. This is the case of the Tristaepedia scene that Jennie believes ought to be in the film, the final scene at the dinner table which finally explains why this is a 'cock and bull story' or Toby's courting of Widow Wadman, which gets a surreal twist because it is a dream that Coogan has after reading the novel. Though this of course complicates any attempt to analyze the film's structure, it clearly shows that Winterbottom didn't simply want to make another 'behind the scenes' film, but to reflect the novel's multilayered structure in a clever way while at the same time keeping the film entertaining and comprehensible, just like Sterne's book. The film therefore contains a whole half hour long segment of the novel, which basically follows the most interesting plot line of the novel leading up to Tristram's birth, it also shows some of the most interesting passages from the book which ought to have been in the film but aren't and finally it reflects some of the scenes from the novel in the 'documentary' section, usually through preparations and discussions. Probably the funniest one of these is the 'pocket' scene, where Coogan is trying on the coat Walter should be wearing. The fact that the pockets are set very low is the central joke of the scene in the novel, which Coogan of course doesn't know because he hasn't read the book and argues with the costume designer that they should be redone. He tries to reach his pockets in precisely the same manner as Walter to demonstrate how unpractical they are, being in effect, as he after all often is, just as ridiculous.

4. Modernist and Postmodern Aspects of the Novel and the Film

4.1 Modernism – Digressions and the Concept of Time

Although *Tristram Shandy* is today most often talked about in reference to postmodernism, it was the modernists who rediscovered him and sparked off the critical interest Sterne has continued to receive since. As Melvyn New points out, in the Victorian era,

Sterne was almost always praised for only two accomplishments: his sentimental (warm) characterizations and his attention to physical (domestic) detail. He was condemned for a host of failures, including of course his lack of plot and serious intent.²³

For the modernists, Sterne's appeal was primarily technical, as he used the method of stream of consciousness more than 150 years before it even got a name and was therefore a great inspiration for writers like James Joyce or Virginia Woolf. It was *Tristram Shandy* who overcame the presumption that the modernist concept of time was based on philosophers such as Henry Bergson or current socio-economic trends, because Sterne had already proved that time was relative and subjective, could be stopped or extended at one's pleasure and was one of the most interesting aspects of human consciousness. In the discussion of the link between Sterne and the modernists the central issue will therefore be the stream of consciousness and its two most important aspects – the concept of time and the use of digressions.

Iser writes that: “*Tristram Shandy* must surely be the first novel to attack the substantialist concept of time; instead of time mastering the narrator, he endeavours to

²³New, 3.

master it.”²⁴ Time as an entity is constantly present in the novel and Tristram often feels he’s losing his battle against it, as no matter what he does it is always going faster than he can record it. This theme is also reflected in Walter’s work on the *Tristaepedia*, where some of the chapters are already irrelevant by the time he finishes writing them. Subjective time is central to the novel, to the extent that Tristram even respects the ‘real time’ of the reader (with an absurd, humorous effect), as in chapter 38 of Book 3, where he only wants to let Walter lie on his bed for half an hour, but finally gets back to him in what he says was 35 minutes. Though this method is used several times in the book (and poor Mrs. Shandy gets a pain in the back from being left to stand bent over at the door for such a long time), digression is the central means through which the sense of subjectivity is achieved. Sterne’s time: “is not a linear movement, but a ceaseless re-emerging of the past from whatever may be the standpoint chosen in the present.”²⁵ The problem and the main difference between *Tristram Shandy* and the highly organized works of the modernists, such as *Mrs. Dalloway* or *Ulysees*, is that this ‘standpoint in the present’ is hardly defined and the digressions are not hanged on to some tangible and constant unity of time and space, but are left to float freely, connected to each other by the author’s will. Whereas both novels mentioned above have a central plot line set on a specific day at a specific time from which the digressions stem and where they return, *Tristram Shandy* doesn’t and therefore absolutely supports Tristram’s statement: “Take the digressions out of this book and you may just as well take the book with them.”²⁶

The film, as was already said, has a more coherent structure than the novel and the main reason is precisely that the digressions usually come back to some fixed point. In the ‘historical’ section, it is the moment of Tristram’s birth that all the digressions are aiming at, but another unifying aspect is also the presence of Tristram the narrator.

²⁴ Iser, 76.

²⁵ Iser, 77.

²⁶ Sterne, 57.

Tristram is of course present throughout the novel as well, but in the film his physical presence has a stronger effect than his authorial presence in the book. In the ‘documentary’ section, we have the unity of place (the set) and time (almost one day – from the end of shooting one day to the beginning on the next) with a sort of epilogue in the form of the screening of the finished film, which takes place later. There is also a subplot of Coogan trying to spend some time with his girlfriend, which is in fact a sort of moral journey and development on Coogan’s part, because he realizes that he loves Jenny and his son and avoids the temptation of being unfaithful. This is in direct opposition to the novel, because as Iser points out Sterne rejected the classical method of the journey as the plot line popularly used in 18th century novels and replaced it with a chain of digressions, “refusing to allow the drawing of any connecting thread.”²⁷ In this sense, Winterbottom can perhaps be seen as the less brave of the two as he gave his film a “faint, but traceable arc”²⁸, although some critics were little impressed by it and said the film was about Steve Coogan transforming: “from a self-centered jerk to a less self-centered jerk.”²⁹ It’s perhaps just as well that Tristram remains the same Tristram throughout the novel, with no indication of having learned from his, or anyone else’s mistakes.

As for the film’s use of time, the central effect of the ‘documentary’ section is that of immediacy, or what Iser calls ‘life as a happening,’ which is of course greatly enhanced by the documentary techniques, but also by the use of interruptions, same as in the novel. Iser says that the interruptions break up writing into a “discontinuous sequence of

²⁷ Iser, 73.

²⁸ Leslie Felperin, *Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story*, Variety Posted: Sun., Sep. 18, 2005, 6:00am PT – film review, 12.10.2007. <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117928214.html?categoryid=31&cs=1->

²⁹ Leslie Felperin, *Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story*, <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117928214.html?categoryid=31&cs=1->

aspects,”³⁰ which is not entirely true for the film, which does have the traceable arc, however they greatly enhance the sense of actually watching Coogan’s day happening in real time. It is chaotic and could not be fitted into a straight narrative line, but keeps meandering and breaking up into various episodes, which would normally be omitted were Winterbottom trying to tell a classically narrated story. Ethan Alter in his review of the film says,

Winterbottom's directorial style here is probably best described as controlled chaos. There's a constant swirl of activity in every scene, as people wander in and out of frame and snippets of conversations assault the viewer from all sides. Some of the best gags are the ones that almost pass by unseen, like the horrified reaction of the costume designer who is forced to listen as her work is mercilessly mocked at the screening of that day's footage.³¹

The most interesting point about this comment is Alter’s reference to Winterbottom creating ‘controlled chaos.’ Alter, who like the majority of American critics admits to not having read the book (and unsurprisingly most negative reviews are a result of precisely this fact), uses the exact same words that are frequently applied to Sterne’s novel, which is therefore the best proof that Winterbottom’s portrayal of the Shandean atmosphere was successful.

As for the ‘Tristram Shandy’ section of the film, Winterbottom could actually make use of Sterne’s technique of practically staging some of the episodes he presents, which

³⁰ Iser, 67.

³¹ Alter, Ethan, *Tristram Shandy* film review, 12.10.2007.
http://www.nycfilmcritic.com/display_film.php?id=193

is very visual and is one of the very few aspects of the novel that are highly cinematic. Charles Parish in *Cliffs Notes* to the novel even compares Tristram to a stage director, who makes the characters stop and start without them seeing him, which is of course very similar to the way Winterbottom presents Tristram and his life. Tristram can walk through the various scenes he describes unseen and comment on them as he goes along, or simply stop them as if they were being shown on a screen behind him. It is he who controls time and who can move freely between present, past and future events of his life. However, matters are further complicated by the fact that Tristram in the film is a mixture of the historical Tristram and present day Coogan who portrays him, the events, therefore, are also a mixture of an 18th century perspective and a present day one. This, of course, seems to be a reflection of the modernist subjectivity of time, but moves us to a more recent development and one which the film reflects the most – postmodernism.

Postmodernism – the Mixing of Genres

In the interview with Tony Wilson, Coogan quotes the catchy line (which also became popular with critics writing about the film), that: ‘Tristram Shandy was a postmodern novel before there was any modernism to be post about.’³² That he hasn’t read the novel and would therefore have little idea of what he’s talking about is only typical, as postmodernism seems to be a popular conversational topic, with few people actually being sure what it represents. Postmodernism has the aura of rebellion against high-brow intellectualism and is appealing in its anarchical approach to everything which was ever considered sacred. But can an 18th century novel actually be considered postmodern? The central problem is that postmodernism, even more so than any previous

³² *Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story*, dir. Michael Winterbottom,

movements, can hardly be discussed without keeping in mind social, political, philosophical and technological contexts of the second half of the 20th century. Can we have postmodernism without television, advertisements, supermarkets and microwave dinners? Many would also claim that it is hardly a literary movement at all, that its domain lies in the field of philosophy. The novel, therefore, should be seen as reflecting some particular traits typical for postmodernism, rather than being labeled a postmodern novel itself.

The mixing of genres and meta-narration, or writing about writing, are two techniques greatly used by postmodern authors which are also present in *Tristram Shandy*. The problems he has with trying to structure his own autobiography are a recurrent theme and the list of other narratives in the novel, such as a sermon, a number of stories, an excommunication or fictional footnotes from the editor, is a long one. The question of copying and plagiarism, seen as something positive, even necessary by the postmodernists, is also addressed by Sterne, in his typically tongue and cheek way, when he denounces plagiarism by a text which is itself plagiarized. Sterne displays a playful, self-reflexive spirit and a disrespect for established authorities, however the nihilism, the emptiness, the sense that there is nothing beyond the surface, so typical for most postmodern works, is completely alien to him; though he seldom succeeds he is always looking for meanings of the various events in his life. As Ian Cambell Ross writes in his introduction to the novel, *Tristram Shandy* is “at heart a genuinely moral work,”³³ which is a concept long outdated in the postmodern world, where the problem is precisely that there is no longer any firm base to build upon (God, man, universal spirit...) and everything becomes relative.

³³ Sterne, x.

Winterbottom's film is another matter, as it would probably satisfy most people's notions of what it means to be postmodern. Structurally, it mixes fiction film with documentary to create a new genre, one which reflects the blurred line between fact and fiction, between life and television in today's world centered around electronic media. It is overflowing with references to modern popular culture - to films, television shows and Hollywood actors. Even Tristram the narrator in the historical section is a meta-character, being the 18th century gentleman and 21st century actor in one person. Because Coogan likes Groucho Marx, Tristram quotes him as well and instead of talking about Locke's theory of humours, he uses the 20th century scientist I.P. Pavlov. Similarly to the novel, alien material is included within the film, such as the original footage of Pavlov's experiment or several interviews with the actors. In the good spirit of reproducing what has already been done, Winterbottom uses almost the identical techniques he applied in his previous film, even 'recycling' the same actors. Especially Steve Coogan is also constantly confronted with the problem that he is being associated with one specific character that he portrayed years ago - Alan Partridge from a fictional television chat show with the same name, and Brydon even suggests that they are in fact the same person, degrading Coogan as an actor and once again blurring the distinction between reality and fiction. The film also, in spite of all its humour, retains the aura of an art film, of a formal joke for festival audiences, not for an average multiplex movie 'consumer.' The film is 'strange' and difficult to label and although it mocks intellectualism and mixes an 18th century classic with Al Pacino, it will, like most postmodern works, be appreciated mainly by intellectuals. Finally, the shallowness and 'surface only' aspect of postmodernism is here as well; on the DVD commentary when the real Brydon and Coogan are trying to decipher the meaning of the final scene where, after the screening, Coogan tells his 'girlfriend' Jenny that she was very good and gives her an awkward kiss,

as if they were only colleagues again, both actors are confused with what this is supposed to mean, whether in fact the film has a another meta-level they weren't aware of (although this particular scene was probably only a mistake on Winterbottom's part). They come to the conclusion that there are more things they don't understand and that the film will retain its charm only if they don't dig too deep into it.

5. Graphical vs. cinematographic devices

The novel is notorious for containing a black page, but it also uses other graphical and typographical devices, including diagrams, pictures, asterisks or a marbled page. This fact is all the more interesting if we consider that even well into the 20th century and practically until the computerization of printing any abnormalities a book contained would have been quite a technical problem and the writer would have to have very good reasons for insisting on them. What, therefore, was Sterne's main reason? Once again, most of these visual aspects of the novel are primarily a huge joke, although it must be said that some of them function on other levels as well. For example, the most famous black page is a symbol of mourning for the death of parson Yorick, hilarious in its literality, seemingly with little further function in the narrative. However, as Iser points out, most of the graphical and typographical aspects of the book have the important function of creating an intimate relationship between the narrator and the reader, as Sterne is always forcing the reader to actively participate in the creation of the novel. In this case, therefore, he is asking him to reflect upon the black page and mourn the death of Yorick. This is also the instance of the many asterisks which Sterne uses instead of letters, especially in rude or obscene situations. Since the number of asterisks very often corresponds to the number of letters in each word, it usually isn't difficult to decipher the meaning (and even when the asterisks don't correspond to the actual words, the general meaning is quite clear). The result is the reader's sense of conspiracy with the writer because he feels that he has co-created the meaning and that it is a dirty joke between himself and the author. In the case of the blank page where Tristram urges the reader to draw his own version of Widow Wadman according to his tastes, he gives him the biggest possibility to make the book and the character truly 'his own.' Reader

participation can therefore be seen as the central reason behind the graphical aspects of the novel, however some devices, for example the many ‘useful’ diagrams are, especially with the enormous importance Tristram gives them, nothing but funny.

All of the graphical devices of the novel are inseparable from the physical qualities of a book and if Winterbottom wanted to retain them in the film, he would have to think of cinematic techniques to substitute the literary ones. Were the film more experimental, this would not have been a problem because already in the 1960’s filmmakers experimented with film material – scratching it, perforating it, creating various effects with light to emphasize the material film is made of, just like Sterne points to the physical aspects of a book. However, Winterbottom probably understood that although this could be done, it would be neither funny or innovative, nor would it enhance the audience’s participation in the film and the reasons why Sterne included these formal aspects in the book would therefore be lost. The only graphical device from the book which the film cites literally is the black page, reproduced quite simply in the form of a black screen which appears during the crew’s discussion about what other scenes from the book should be included in the film. The fact that they are saying the audience would probably be bored by looking at a black screen while the audience actually is looking at a black screen is funny and works well in the form of a postmodern citation emptied of its original meaning - the representation of sadness for Yorick’s death.

Apart from the black page, the film usually doesn’t try to reflect the book’s graphical devices, but instead uses its own, more natural for film. However, at one point the film mirrors a formal joke of the novel in a way that has most probably not been done before and that has been made possible by the rapid development of the DVD market and the fact that filmmakers now shoot their films with the knowledge that more people will see their work at home on DVD, not in the cinema. In the novel, we find several footnotes

from the 'editor', usually included to correct some of Tristram's assumptions or statements. The editor is of course fictional and the footnotes were written by Sterne himself, by an author correcting a fictional author he himself had created. In the film, during Coogan's interview with Tony Wilson, we are informed by a voice-over that the rest of the interview can be found in the DVD's bonus section, together with extended or deleted scenes, which are to function as the footnotes to the film. This is of course what most DVDs today offer, however by calling attention to it inside the film, Winterbottom has not only managed to create a parallel to the footnotes in the novel, but also to finally call attention to the film's medium – which is no longer 60mm celluloid, but a small shiny disc.

Technically, the film is less innovative and playful than it perhaps could have been and there are practically only three cinematic 'tricks' – Toby's map turning into a battle ground, Coogan as a baby inside the womb and a multicran (splitscreen) during the phone call to Gillian Anderson's agent. None of these can be said to support audience participation, although the film in general demands greater attention from the viewers than most contemporary commercial productions. The first two tricks belong to the category of special effects, the multicran, however, can be seen as a direct reflection of Tristram's ridiculous diagrams in the novel. Splitscreens have become very popular in the last years, especially thanks to television series like *24*, and they presuppose that it is important to see what people are doing simultaneously at one moment in time. Diagrams in other novels can be substantiated, because they are used to illustrate a point made in the text, in *Tristram Shandy*, however, they are just a great joke because they are completely useless and have no informative value. Similarly, Winterbottom includes the screenwriter eating his dinner in one of the screens of the multicran during the phone call to America, although his presence, unlike that of the producer, the agent or Gillian

Anderson, who actually have some function in the scene, is completely redundant and is therefore ridiculously funny. In both cases, the writer and the director mock the overuse of a certain technique in their field by applying it in a way that isn't substantiated.

The last technical aspect of the film which deserves to be mentioned are the editing devices used in the 'historical' section of the film to connect the individual scenes. Winterbottom chose such transitions that correspond to the playful tone of the film and used mainly slides (where the last shot of the previous scene moves away to one side of the screen and the first shot of the next scene slides in its place) and fades (where the picture fades to black). Especially the fades are ostentatious, because Winterbottom uses those that fade towards the center of the picture - a style which was last seriously applied in silent films, which, however, has a pleasant 'retro' touch to it and continues to be used from time to time, usually for a comical or playful effect. The slides in many cases correspond to Tristram's narrative style because they allow him to jump in time and space quite fluently and elegantly, wiping away what has just been said and talking about something completely different.

6. The Transformation of the Novel's Themes in the Film

6.1 Sexuality

At the beginning of his essay titled *'Tristram Shandy': Sexuality, Morality, and Sensibility*, Frank Brady quotes 'a specialist in the novel,' who said that: "Tristram Shandy is the dirtiest novel in English."³⁴ This is of course only a matter of opinion, but the fact remains that it is a very dirty novel indeed; after all it both begins and ends with references to sex. Sterne works with this theme on two levels – he either plays with language and seemingly innocent words, which can however have several interpretations (one obviously being sexual), or he presents us with scenes where sex is no longer veiled by other possible meanings, but where it is blatantly clear what he is referring to. In his essay Brady concentrates more on the linguistic level, conscious of the fact that for a modern-day reader many of the double-meanings are lost and it is therefore tempting (and probably entertaining) to try to dig them out. After all, whereas an 18th century reader would have deciphered that 'hobbyhorse' is also the slang term for a whore and found the fact that Walter and Toby are always riding their hobbyhorses hilarious, a reader today will probably miss the joke, simply because the slang in these cases changes so rapidly. But even the completely uninformed reader (with what Brady refers to by Ian Watt's term of "a normally contaminated mind"³⁵), will realize that the nose in the tale from Slawkenbergius is most probably not an actual nose and understand the precise meaning of uncle Toby not knowing the right end of the woman from the wrong. However, a quest for obscenities may also result in taking the theme too far, in finding

³⁴ Melvyn New ed. "Tristram Shandy – Contemporary Critical Essays," Frank Brady, *Tristram Shandy': Sexuality, Morality, and Sensibility*, Hampshire and London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1992, 77.

³⁵ Brady, 77.

indecencies where Sterne didn't intend them and finally in forgetting how the sexual references relate to the novel as a whole. Apart from the indisputable comic effect of the bawdy innuendos, the question remains if there is any purpose in them besides the fun. Perhaps more interesting, therefore, than making a list of all the waggish jokes Sterne managed to smuggle into the novel, is uncovering some of his reasons for doing so.

One of the central reasons is the one already mentioned in reference to the graphical devices of the novel, and that is the sense of intimacy between the writer and the reader. If the reader has to literally fill in the letters of a word or if he only substitutes a different meaning for the obvious one, there is still the sense that it is a private, personal matter between the writer and himself, which of course transforms the process of reading into a much bigger adventure. It is an interesting fact that although the slang may change, people's attitude to sex and any part of the body related to it doesn't – it is either a matter of utmost privacy that isn't talked about, or (and especially if it concerns someone else), a great source of entertainment. The film, therefore, could use exactly the same methods as Sterne, because when Tristram presents the bull to us and promises to show the cock later, it is both funny and keeping in tone of the book. Winterbottom, of course, had greater freedom and could go further than the 18th century writer, who was severely criticized for his bawdiness as it was. Unfortunately, this often results in taking the jokes beyond the point where they are funny because of their double-meaning – Tristram further tells us that he means *his* cock, not uncle Toby's, the possible animal meaning, therefore, disappears completely. By making sure that everyone gets the joke (after all, the film's speed is incomparable to the novel's, the audience has little time to enjoy anything except the plot), some of the novel's subtlety is lost as result.

Aside from the language, the historical part of the film exploits the scenes related to sex or sexual organs to the extent that the result is literally a cock and bull story. The

notorious scene where Tristram is conceived has lost most of its scandalous touch, partly because it is no longer the very first thing we learn about Tristram and his parents, but more importantly because seeing two people together in bed in a film is just as common as seeing them at the breakfast table. The film also humanizes the Shandys, who both appear to be sincerely looking forward to the sex, but Walter forgetting to wind the clock beforehand prevents Mrs. Shandy from producing sufficient ‘saliva’ (a reference to Pavlov’s dogs and a waggish joke precisely in Sterne’s style) and enjoying it. However, the scene still supports Charles Parish’s assertion that throughout the book there is: “a constant suggestion that it (sexuality) is hopelessly bungled and unsatisfactory.”³⁶ After all little Tristram’s sexual life was endangered from a very early age (although we are assured he was only circumcised), however the best illustration of this point must be poor uncle Toby, who doesn’t know the right end of the woman from the wrong. Widow Wadman and the whole ‘love affair’ (which never gets beyond courting) get included in the film at the last moment, and with them Toby’s famous promise to: ‘show the exact spot’ where he was wounded at the battle of Namur. Parish calls this moment in the novel “the greatest and funniest anticlimax in literature,” but also points out that “it could not have been achieved if Tristram had not led up to it so gradually, protracted it so elaborately, rearranged it so misleadingly.”³⁷ This is also the precise reason why it only works as one of the cheaper jokes in the film – it is only introduced by a short dialogue between Widow Wadman and uncle Toby and the expectations and curiosity, therefore, aren’t so high, but more importantly it is already used once before, when little Tristram asks his uncle where he was wounded and Toby replies in exactly the same manner. Perhaps, however, the slapdash result in this case reflects the desperate attempts to save the ‘film’ at the last moment by introducing a new character and a Hollywood star, or

³⁶ Charles Parish, *Cliffs Notes on Sterne’s Tristram Shandy*, Lincoln, Nebraska: Cliffs Notes, Inc, 1968, 28.

³⁷ Parish, 116.

maybe Winterbottom himself wanted to at least mention all the important characters from the novel, even if he could not do them justice in a way they would deserve. Widow Wadman, therefore, gets very little screen time in the film, although she is, as Tony Wilson says, a wonderful character. In the novel her failure in her campaign for Toby's heart is the result of her sexual cravings, although even Walter, who denounces her as lustful, should realize that after having a first husband who could not perform she has every right to know just where Toby was wounded and what effect it had. Unfortunately, to the overmodest Toby her doubts about him are too much to take and it seems he will never again recover from the 'severe blows' he received. In the film, the scene where Toby and Widow Wadman stroll among his fortifications (as showing the 'exact spot' here is visually more interesting than Toby simply bringing a map as in the novel), is merely more than a glimpse at their 'mutual campaigns' in the novel, and it probably ended up being cut out anyway, as is suggested by Gillian Anderson's disenchanted comments after the screening of the film. Brydon's confession of his love for the X-Files star to Coogan reflects some of Toby's naivety concerning love, although Brydon isn't as lost as he seems and even gets a long and not wholly innocent kiss out of Anderson at the end of the shooting.

In the 'documentary' part of the film, sexuality isn't exactly unproblematic either and in many ways reflects the themes of the novel. Coogan obviously likes sex to the extent that he has it with other women besides his girlfriend and a problem emerges when a reporter blackmails him for an interview because one of the women, unfortunately also a lap dancer, didn't keep their adventures to herself. Having sex with his own girlfriend, however, seems to be another matter and he's not too enthusiastic about it, perhaps because it is just another one of his duties, although unlike Walter he doesn't have a fixed schedule for it. The obligatory aspect of sexual intercourse in the novel is linked to

married life, where sex is simply a duty of the husband and wife which should result in producing offspring or simply keeping ‘peace in the house’. Times have changed and Coogan can do that without getting married, however his emphasis on Jenny being his girlfriend and not his wife shows an immature, but understandable attempt to retain at least some of his former freedom (and keep his possibilities with the other Jennie still open). The fact that sex whose main aim is to produce children has little to do with the pleasures of the body is also reflected in the scene where Coogan kisses the assistant Jennie and she tells him to ‘fill her with his babies.’ For the young Jennie, this is simply an expression of her desire to have sex with him; Coogan, however, is completely put off by it, because having children has nothing to do with the erotic for him. He also remembers that there is another Jenny waiting for him in their room and does the ‘right thing’ of not giving in to temptation and returning to her. If the outcome would have been different had Jennie whispered something else into his ear is of course another question.

6.2 Humour and Hobby-horses

The filmmakers in the ‘documentary’ part of the film decide that the main reason why they are willing to dedicate several years of their lives to making an adaptation of *Tristram Shandy* is because it’s funny, which logically raises the question if that is enough. With this particular novel, however, it certainly is, because if labeling it one of the dirtiest novels in English is only an assumption, calling it one of the funniest is nothing but a simple truth. After all, even Tristram himself emphasizes several times that he wrote his book to fight spleen and that *Shandeism* makes “the wheel of life run long

and cheerfully round.”³⁸ Entertainment in his eyes isn’t something that should be looked down upon, it is a way to spice up and prolong life. The novel isn’t easy – the digressions, interruptions and tedious passages, where nothing seems to be happening, make the reading quite a challenge, however the reader is constantly rewarded for his attention by the hilarious lives of the characters as well as the narrator’s own little jokes. Discussing humour and the way it is created is unfortunately very similar to explaining a joke – it ceases to be funny and its most important quality is therefore lost. However humour in *Tristram Shandy* has to be dealt with, even though in the end it simply speaks for itself.

Wolfgang Iser sees subjectivity as the basis of humour in the novel, the comedy, therefore, stems from the individual eccentricities of the main characters and the narrator – “The self-relatedness of the characters discloses itself to Tristram, and his own self-relatedness reveals itself to the reader.”³⁹ At the bottom of these eccentricities are, of course, the hobby-horses, namely Toby’s military and Walter’s scholastic obsessions. At one point, Walter makes the grand observation that: “Everything in this world...is big with jest, - and has wit in it, and instruction too, - if we can but find it out.”⁴⁰ Walter, however, fails to find it out because he is completely blinded by his hobby-horse. By seeing everything through its perspective, Walter, just like Toby, becomes isolated from reality. Their hobby-horses constantly cause them trouble; however they are incapable of self-reflection, because that would require them to get out of their saddles for at least a brief moment, which they stubbornly refuse to do. This, Iser points out, prevents any form of correction and is implicitly comic. Tristram, of course, by no means stands above his characters, his hobby-horse being his writing and as Helen Ostovich suggests, even the reader, whom he, “draws about, harassing, upbraiding, riding him like a

³⁸ Sterne, 280.

³⁹ Iser, 109.

⁴⁰ Sterne, 314.

temperamental jockey trying to manage a recalcitrant horse.”⁴¹ Although Tristram is self-reflexive to the extreme, all of his ideas yet again come from his hobby-horse’s saddle, creating such situations as when he informs the reader that he was forced to tear out a chapter because it contained inappropriate information (chapter 24, Book 4.) or skips certain chapters in order to include them later (chapters 18. and 19, Book 9).

In the ‘historical’ section of the film, Toby’s and Walter’s hobby-horses are portrayed quite faithfully; they are, after all, their central characteristics. Brydon and Coogan in the ‘documentary’ section also have their obsessions, but they are closer to modern day reality as well as their professions – they are both, each in his own way, obsessed with themselves and their roles in the film. The obsessions are no longer completely different to allow for comedy to stem from mutual misunderstandings (as between Walter and Toby), nor is it possible for them to connect in joint efforts (as with Toby and Trim), the humour, therefore, is an outcome of the petty competition between the two actors. Coogan appears as the worse of the two, however it is clear why Brydon’s intensive, good-hearted yet accurately aimed inquiries would get on his nerves. Their relationship works on another comical level as well, one which could be paralleled with Tristram’s chapters on subjects such as the drinking water or breeches. It relates mainly to the two scenes at the very beginning and end of the whole film, which aren’t really a part of it (they come before and after the credits), but which set the tone and are echoed throughout the film. In them, Brydon and Coogan discuss Brydon’s teeth and hair, Al Pacino or acting techniques, however the topics aren’t really important, the point is that the self-centered waffle makes the audience ask itself why it is being made to watch something so pointless and ridiculous, while at the same time thoroughly enjoying it. As was already said, a lot of the humour of the novel is simply the result of Tristram’s self-

⁴¹ Ostovich, 155.

conscious belief that everything he writes is significant and he often describes events with a tediousness which could surpass that of his father Walter. The film does not reflect this in the 'historical' section, whose speed doesn't allow for it, Coogan's and Brydon's discussions, however, are in precisely the same spirit – they have no function in the actual plot nor any relevance to it, they simply present us with certain opinions and suppose we'll be interested. Which most of us, of course, are. Interestingly, this concept works on what could be seen as another meta-level of the film, on the DVD commentary, which is done by Brydon and Coogan, this time as their real selves. DVD commentaries usually serve to uncover the processes behind filmmaking, to analyze specific scenes and give other interesting facts about the film. Coogan and Brydon's commentary, however, is one of the unique cases where one hardly learns anything at all about the film, but has the feeling of just having spent a pleasurable hour and a half gossiping with the two actors. It would be interesting to know if this was Winterbottom's intention, however the 'opinions of Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon' perfectly reflect the concept and tone of the novel.

There is another 'group' hobby-horse which is present throughout the 'documentary' section of the film and that is filmmaking, just like in the novel it is writing. The aim of finishing the film connects this group of otherwise very different people and often makes them behave in a completely irrational 'hobby-horsical' manner, where common sense gives way to individual visions of the future 'cinematic oeuvre.' Because of this, the director is willing to insist on Coogan being put naked, head down into a giant womb and address the audience as an unborn Tristram or a military 'specialist', exactly in the spirit of Toby and Trim, gives his soldiers authentic 18th century names that they can call out to each other during the battle scenes. For an uninvolved observer, these things are of course absurd, however the filmmakers are out there in their saddles and perhaps only

get off after the screening of the final film. Winterbottom looks at them with a loving eye, filmmaking is after all his hobby-horse as well, but just like Sterne his main aim is to uncover, and often satirize the processes behind ‘the magic’ of telling (or trying to tell) a story.

Tristram Shandy is often discussed in reference to wit, however Wolfgang Iser points out that Tristram never actually explains exactly what he means by ‘wit’, and to get a general idea we must satisfy ourselves with the dictionary definition, saying that it is: “the association of ideas in a manner natural, but unusual and striking, so as to produce surprise joined with pleasure,”⁴² Wit, of course, was an important and much discussed concept in the 18th century and D.W. Jefferson in his essay ‘*Tristram Shandy*’ and the *Tradition of Learned Wit* emphasizes that there was no one unique tradition, however with a little simplification it could be said that wit was usually connected to scholastic ideas and their comic applications. The novel is overflowing with references to ‘serious’ scholastic and scientific notions, probably one of the most ridiculous being the idea of baptizing an unborn child with a syringe in the womb of the mother. The most zealous fan of scholastic wit in the novel is of course Walter Shandy and he is also a wonderful example of what happens when wit is not accompanied with a similar amount of good judgment. In his preface, Tristram insists wit should be considered with equal importance to judgment and that the two should always go hand in hand, because separating them would be, “The *Magna Charta* of stupidity.”⁴³

Wolfgang Iser takes a somewhat different perspective than Jefferson, based on the fact that wit is never actually defined in the novel. He says,

⁴² Definitions of Wit, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wit>, 12.12.2007.

⁴³ Sterne, 160.

Sterne uses it (wit) in order to unfold the singularity of his characters, as wit allows for a spontaneous bridging of all possible differences. Its inventiveness is always individual, arising out of unforeseeable combinations to be derived from virtually every word and every gesture. Wit-inspired associations bracket the character's individuality with its unfathomableness, thus spotlighting its indefinable idiosyncrasy.⁴⁴

Wit in Iser's interpretation is therefore one of the most important means by which the singularity of the various characters is emphasized and it works to uncover those aspects of their personalities which judgment could not. This notion of wit is perhaps closer to its modern day understanding, as a type of verbal humour that is specific for each individual and that characterizes him or her in a different way than logic or common sense.

The film reflects the novel's witticisms both in the 'historical' and the 'documentary' sections (one of the most memorable being Brydon's reaction to the poorly-shot battle scenes – 'I'm leading truly tens of men!'⁴⁵) However, even D.W. Jefferson points to the fact that physical comedy, or at least the potential for it, is also present in the novel, because the "clash between the world of learning and that of human affairs"⁴⁶ implies that when theory meets matter it must very often succumb to it. The 'unfilmability' of the novel is therefore again put into question, because it contains countless scenes which are wonderfully visual, although Tristram's descriptions are often what makes them truly comic, as in the scene where Walter tries to reach his right pocket with his left hand and the action he performs is minutely described in several chapters. In the film it works well as a citation of the novel however if Winterbottom had attempted to film the scene as it is

⁴⁴ Iser, 34-35.

⁴⁵ *Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story*, dir. Michael Winterbottom,

⁴⁶ Melvyn New ed. "Tristram Shandy – Contemporary Critical Essays," D.W. Jefferson, *Tristram Shandy: and the Tradition of Learned Wit*, Hampshire and London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1992, 30.

described in the book, the result would have been far less funny, because the point of the joke lies in the description of the action, not in the action itself.

6.3 Sentiment

Sentiment and sentimentality are other important aspects of the novel, which, however, could not be discussed without reference to the two previous themes – sexuality and humour. Frank Brady says:

The pure, or relatively pure, sentimental scene is unusual in *Tristram*, and can be described as sentimental relief, analogous to what used to be called comic relief in tragedy. It changes mood, allows the reader to relax his attention from the sexual possibilities a little, and presents the theme in a different key...⁴⁷

It is interesting that at certain periods of time the sentimentality of *Tristram Shandy*, such as some of the aspects of the relationships between Walter and Toby, Trim and Toby, or simply the character of Toby himself, was seen as the most appealing aspect of the novel. For example the scene where Toby doesn't hurt a fly which is 'tormenting him cruelly all dinner-time' but instead gives a very heart-felt speech to it, is in William Hazlitt's opinion "one of the finest compliments ever paid to human nature."⁴⁸ In this specific case Sterne is truly trying to present Toby in the best possible light and his character is such that he can carry it off, however even here there are certain hints that can justify an amused smile on the reader's face, for example when Toby tells the fly –

⁴⁷ Brady, 86.

⁴⁸ Parish, 38.

“I’ll not hurt a hair on thy head.”⁴⁹ As Charles Parish points out in reference to this specific line – it is, after all, just a fly. After encountering several of these sentimental scenes it doesn’t take more than a little sense of humour to realize that Sterne, rather than seriously reflecting sentimental traditions, uses them for a humorous effect and often veils the most sexually compromising scenes in them, the best example being the Slawkenbergius tale. Even the sexually ‘clean’ scenes are usually sentimental only up to a certain point, because sentiment, much more than any other mood, needs very careful handling in order not to turn the presented emotions into a parody – which is precisely what Sterne very often does. Parish gives the examples of Le Fever’s death or the ‘touching’ scene where Tristram meets the retarded girl Maria – Le Fever’s pulse stops, goes, stops, goes; Maria looks at Tristram, then at the goat, then at Tristram, then at the goat. Parish says: “In each case, the author pushes sentiment over the border of ridiculousness, as if to say, These delicate feelings easily become mushy feelings; protect yourself from that danger.”⁵⁰

Today, when a thing is described as being ‘sentimental’, it will more often than not have a clear negative connotation. Sentimentality is seen as being the mark of lower art forms, usually connected to cheap love stories and ‘instant’ emotions, even to a point of reflecting lower intelligence of the people who give in to it. The situation in the 18th century was completely different - sentimentality was seen as the natural and desirable ingredient of the best works of literature and it was linked to such concepts as the “capacity for refined emotion” or a “readiness to feel compassion for suffering.”⁵¹ The problem is of course where to draw the line to retain the credibility of such strong feelings, as it is almost too easy to ‘go over the top’ and make the outcome ridiculous rather than touching. This ‘top’ that one shouldn’t go over is a problem – it is not only

⁴⁹ Sterne, 90.

⁵⁰ Parish, 115.

⁵¹ Brady, 86.

different for each individual person but it also develops historically, therefore what was completely standard in the 18th century can easily become unbearable two and a half centuries later. Sterne seems to overshoot the 'top' by a considerable range and the parody of most of his sentimental scenes is clear to a contemporary reader, however at different periods in time, when the sentimental standards were different, the readers and critics could have, and often did, take them absolutely seriously.

The reasons, therefore, why sentiment is almost completely omitted in *The Cock and Bull Story* are quite clear. Sentimentalism has come to describe the state when emotions already are over the top of good taste and all expression of deep feeling is usually balancing on the edge. Today, sentimentality in the 18th century sense can hardly be presented seriously (and it must be said that although Sterne was a great joker, he did achieve some purely touching scenes), there must always be either some comic relief, or a suggestion that there are more layers under the obvious one. Postmodernity, after all, doesn't favour deep emotions. The 'filmmakers' in the documentary section like the novel because it's funny and Winterbottom also bets mostly on this one card. The only scene which perhaps comes near to being touching is when Steve Coogan rocks his son to sleep while singing My Bonnie Lyes over the Ocean. However, it has nothing to do with sentimentality in the 18th century style, which Winterbottom probably considered, unlike the novel's humour, unattractive and alien for a cynical 21st century audience.

7. Conclusion

The question whether Michael Winterbottom (and his screenwriter Martin Hardy, we must not forget) were successful at transforming *Tristram Shandy* to the screen has already been answered. Not only did they manage to satisfy those who wished to see the heroes of the novel and their most interesting adventures, but they also presented a complex interpretation of the 18th century novel and brought it closer to the 21st century. Perhaps after seeing the film many more people will now open the book with a greater understanding of its strategies and be willing to make the effort to be entertained. After all, it is the reading, interpretation and re-interpretation of literature which keeps it alive and that is what Winterbottom presents us with – *A Cock and Bull Story* is not merely a reflection of Sterne's novel, a parade of expensive costumes and notorious episodes, it is a personal interpretation of it, one which many may not agree with, but which at least forces them to formulate their own vision of the book, of what, in their eyes, the film should have looked like. And for those who were truly disappointed by the film and feel that Winterbottom cheated by not making a 'classical' adaptation, the only reply is by citing Tristram's own words: "All I wish is, that it may be a lesson to the world, 'to let people tell their stories their own way.'"⁵² Winterbottom can therefore hardly be reproached for taking his hero's advice and doing precisely that.

⁵² Sterne, 524.

8. Resumé v češtině

Ve své diplomové práci se zabývám románem Laurence Sterna *Život a názory blahorodého pana Tristrama Shandyho* a jeho prvním převedením do filmové podoby v režii Michaela Winterbottoma pod názvem *Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story*. Zaměřuji se především na specifičnosti literárního a filmového jazyka a na způsob, jakým byly literární postupy převedeny do filmu. V první části nastiňuji dřívější práci režiséra především v souvislosti s adaptací a shrnuji některé teoretické postupy týkající se adaptace obecně. Dále se pak zabývám specifickými aspekty knihy, jako je její žánr, struktura a postavy a sleduji způsob, jakým byly převedeny do filmu. Věnuji se též modernistickým a postmoderním aspektům románu a kladu si otázku, zdali jsou aplikovatelné i na jeho adaptaci. V závěrečné části analyzuji některé z centrálních témat románu a knihy, kterými jsou kupříkladu sexualita, humor či sentiment.

Cílem práce bylo především zjistit, zdali je adaptace tohoto notoricky ‚nefilmovatelného‘ románu úspěšná a jakým způsobem pracuje z výchozím textem. Za nejcennější pasáže tedy považuji ty, které odhalují použité adaptační postupy a jejich účinnost ve filmovém médiu. Během práce se postupně rozkryla celá řada paralel mezi románem a filmem, které nebyly na první pohled zřetelné, kupříkladu způsob, jakým funguje sexualita a vzájemné vztahy mezi ženskými a mužskými postavami. Film se ukázal být velmi invenční ve způsobu reflexe metanarace románu a převádí ji do filmového jazyka neotřelým, mnohdy zcela originálním způsobem. I ‚dokumentární‘ část filmu, která na první pohled se Sternovým románem souvisí jen velmi volně, ve výsledku přímo odkazuje na jeho narativní postupy. Celkově by se tak dalo říci, že Winterbottomova adaptace byla úspěšná a že nabízí sice možná subjektivní, vždy však naprosto podložený a poučený pohled na Sternův román.

Summary in English

My thesis is focused on Laurence Sterne's novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* and its first ever film adaptation *Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story* directed by Michael Winterbottom. I concentrate primarily on the specificities of literary and cinematic language and the way the film transforms literary methods into cinematic ones. In the first part I outline the director's previous work with special emphasis on adaptation and summarize some of the theoretical aspects of adaptation in general. I then concentrate on specific aspects of the novel, such as its genre, structure and characters, and analyze the methods by which they were used and transformed in the film. I also pose the question if the modernist and postmodern aspects of the novel are also applicable to its adaptation. In the last part of my thesis I analyze some of the central themes of the novel and the film, such as humour, sexuality or sentiment.

The aim of my work was primarily to find out if the adaptation of this notoriously 'unfilmable' novel was successful and what methods it uses to tackle the original text. The most important passages of the thesis, therefore, are those which uncover the adaptational processes and their application in the film. During the course of the work, many parallels between the novel and the film were revealed that weren't perhaps visible at first sight, for example the theme of sexuality and the relationships of men and women in both works. The film proved to be very innovative in the way it reflects the meta-narration of the novel and it transforms it into the language of cinema in an original and often completely unique fashion. Even the 'documentary' part of the film, which seems only very loosely connected to the novel, finally proves to directly reflect its narrative techniques. It could therefore be said that Winterbottom's adaptation was successful and although it is subjective, it always presents a substantiated and well-informed view of the novel.

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