

Not a film review, properly speaking: Michael Winterbottom's *Tristram Shandy*

David Walsh
16 March 2006

Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story, directed by Michael Winterbottom, written by Martin Hardy [Frank Cottrell Boyce and Michael Winterbottom], based on the novel by Laurence Sterne

The prolific British director Michael Winterbottom has recently produced works in a number of distinct genres. *This World* and *Road to Guantánamo* are legitimate political commentaries treating the conditions of some of the most oppressed, *9 Songs* a tedious and pointless film that cuts between explicit sex scenes and rock music concerts. Winterbottom has previously directed two sincere but inadequate adaptations of novels by Thomas Hardy, a shallow film on the Balkans that favored stronger Great Power intervention (*Welcome to Sarajevo*) and an assortment of others. He appears to possess a certain 'film sense,' a flair for comedy and a social conscience, but none of these in sufficient quantities to overcome an essential eclecticism and superficiality.

Winterbottom's film based on Laurence Sterne's classic *Tristram Shandy* (published in nine volumes during the 1760s) is not, in the end, a serious effort. It competently incorporates a few of the novel's more celebrated episodes, but prefers to take the line of least resistance. Even those sequences, largely detached from the book's larger and elaborately constructed concerns, seem little more than comedy skits.

Sterne's wildly digressive novel, with its innumerable stops and starts and turning back (and commenting) upon itself, has been termed unfilmable. Winterbottom provides enough of a hint to suggest this is not so, but the mere existence of his version of *Tristram Shandy* is likely to put off any other attempts for the foreseeable future. This is no small matter. There is something like an intellectual irresponsibility in claiming to adapt a novel and utilizing perhaps five or ten percent of its material, thereby giving viewers a false impression of the work and warding off other potential interpreters (granted, there may not be many). It is difficult to imagine any other time than the present at which such unseriousness would exhibit and be so proud of itself.

Winterbottom's film adaptation more or less gives up on the novel at a certain point and concentrates largely on an occasionally amusing, but generally insipid, film within a film, i.e., a fictional look behind the scenes during the shooting of an adaptation of *Tristram Shandy*. The comic actor Steve Coogan (who portrays both Shandy and his father Walter) plays 'Steve Coogan,' a performer with a considerable ego, juggling a girlfriend and baby with a possible new love (both women named Jenny or Jennie, a reference to Tristram's amour in the novel, who never actually makes an appearance) and dealing with his agent, the media and the film's producers and director.

The banter between Coogan and Rob Brydon (who plays Tristram's remarkable Uncle Toby in the work being filmed) is entertaining, but it has little, if anything, to do with Sterne's novel. The attempt to draw parallels between the events of the book and the scenes of cinema life is rather weak and strained. In comparison to the fictional characters, endowed with urgency and a great deal to say and do, the actors and others seem for the most part somewhat complacent and self-involved.

The issue of whether the fictional Coogan will betray his girl-friend or return to her side, or whether his attack of insecurity will subside, simply does not merit a great deal of our attention.

No, this is a poor effort. Our time would be better employed encouraging the reader to turn to the novel itself. And that we will do.

The long list of *Tristram Shandy*'s devoted admirers includes one of the leading lights of the French Enlightenment, Denis Diderot; American revolutionary Thomas Jefferson; the co-founder of the modern socialist movement, Karl Marx; and twentieth century authors such as James Joyce and Thomas Mann.

In fact, the first significant literary reference in Marx's initial effort as a revolutionary journalist (his comments on the Prussian censorship in 1842) was drawn from Sterne's work; moreover, as a youth Marx wrote a novel in imitation of it. While Jefferson's wife lay dying in 1782, the couple copied out lines from *Tristram Shandy*. Diderot's *Jacques the Fatalist* was directly inspired by Sterne's writings, and, in fact, includes a passage from *Tristram Shandy*.

Sterne's novel has also evoked criticism across the years for its fairly insistent 'indecent,' its digressions, its self-consciousness.

How can one describe the work? An early reviewer admitted defeat, commenting, "This is a humorous performance of which we are unable to convey any distinct ideas to our readers." Ostensibly the "life and opinions" of Tristram Shandy, the book, as the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* notes, "gives us very little of the life, and nothing of the opinions, of the nominal hero." Indeed most of the book, including its concluding scene, takes place before Tristram is born.

Volume I, Chapter I, appropriately enough, treats his conception, a rather unhappy episode, as his mother suddenly observes to his father in the middle of the act, "Pray my Dear, quoth my mother, *have you not forgot to wind up the clock?*—*Good G—!* cried my father, making an exclamation, but taking care to moderate his voice at the same time,—*Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question?* Pray, what was your father saying?—Nothing." And so it goes ...

This is a work with a black page for a chapter; a marbled page; a missing chapter with its missing nine pages (Chapter XXIV of Volume IV, whose contents are then helpfully summarized in Chapter XXV); several blank chapters; a chapter on Noses; a chapter on Whiskers and a chapter on *Chapters*. Numerous chapters are no more than a sentence or two in length. It's all quite liberating.

The author's preface unexpectedly appears in Chapter XX of Volume III. Passages in the novel are devoted to such diverse subjects as hobby-horses (i.e., personal obsessions); gravity (i.e., self-seriousness—the passage that Marx referred to in his 1842 article); writing as conversation; writing and living; plagiarism (in a passage that is itself, of course, plagiarized); the best way of beginning a book ("That of all the several ways of beginning a book which are now in practice throughout the known world, I am confident my own way of doing it is the best—I'm sure

it is the most religious—for I begin with writing the first sentence—and trusting to Almighty God for the second”), which is spelled out in the next to last volume and sundry other matters, including *in utero* baptism (!). En route, Sterne dispenses an enormous amount of knowledge about the follies, pleasures and frustrations of human existence.

The principal characters of his novel are Tristram’s father, Walter, and his uncle, Toby. The relationship between the two brothers dominates the book and provides much of the humor and humanity. Walter is a great systematizer and categorizer, with a theory, backed up by dozens of classical references, for virtually all problems of everyday life. Each of his grand schemes, however, is brought to nothing by the actual course of life. Two of his deepest obsessions, for example, are the size and length of Noses (with all the sexual innuendo that implies) and Names. Despite his every precaution, his son’s nose is crushed at birth and the boy is baptized Tristram, the name he most abominates, through a misunderstanding.

Typically, Walter sets out to write a “Tristra-paedia,” a system of education for his son, after the latter’s birth, bringing together his thoughts on a host of matters, “so as to form an INSTITUTE for the government of my childhood and adolescence.” Again, Walter’s plans are thwarted, by his own conscientiousness and the dimensions of the task: “This is the best account I am determined to give of the slow progress my father made in his *Tristra-paedia*; at which (as I said) he was three years, and something more, indefatigably at work, and, at last, had scarce completed, by his own reckoning, one half of his undertaking: the misfortune was, that I was all that time totally neglected and abandoned to my mother; and what was almost as bad, by the very delay, the first part of the work, upon which my father had spent the most of his pains, was rendered entirely useless,—every day a page or two became of no consequence.”

The same general difficulty, life outpacing the writing about life, overtakes Tristram himself as autobiographer. He suddenly realizes in the middle of the third volume of his work that after a year of writing he has gotten “no farther than to my first day’s life,” so that instead of advancing he is constantly being thrown back. If every day is as busy as his first one, “It must follow, an’ please your worships, that the more I write, the more I shall have to write—and consequently, the more your worships read, the more your worships will have to read.”

For his part, Uncle Toby, the most amiable and modest of men, devotes his time to the study of military fortifications and sieges, assisted by his servant, Corporal Trim; a particular obsession of his is the battle of Namur, in Flanders in 1695, where he was wounded in the groin. The exact nature of his injury is a matter of much conjecture and interest, especially to the Widow Wadman, who considers him possibly marriageable. Her solicitude about his wound touches Toby deeply (“That was I her brother, Trim, a thousand fold, she could not make more constant or more tender enquiries after my sufferings”), until Trim sets him straight as to the widow’s more practical concern, the state of his ‘equipment’:

“The corporal had advanced too far to retire—in three words he told the rest—

“My uncle Toby laid down his pipe as gently upon the fender, as if it had been spun from the unravellings of a spider’s web—

—“Let us go to my brother Shandy’s, said he.”

John Locke was a great influence on Sterne (1713-1768), particularly his *Essay on Human Understanding* (1689), which argued that the human mind at birth was a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, which experience furnished with reason and knowledge. The novelist called Locke’s groundbreaking essay “a history-book ... of what passes in a man’s own mind.” Sterne also borrowed and to a certain extent parodied Locke’s conception of the “association of ideas,” according to which irrational behavior could be accounted for by the connection through accident or habit of ideas that have no natural or logical correspondence (an early theory of the

unconscious). And, a commentator notes, “since association is thought an accidental or whimsical process, it easily lends itself to a comedy of intellectual incoherence. Hence the casual, digressive motion of the work; hence the tragicomic interruption in the first chapter and other *non-sequiturs* in many other chapters.”

Thus, to Dr. Slop’s comment, “It would astonish you to know what improvements we have made of late years in all branches of obstetrical knowledge,” Uncle Toby, wrapped up in his own private obsessions, replies, “I wish you had seen what prodigious armies we had in Flanders.” The comic possibilities are endless, and Sterne explores a good many of them.

With extraordinary wit and liveliness Sterne treated in his novels important and complex human problems. Of Anglo-Irish heritage, he was an 18th century free thinker of the highest order, challenging conventional wisdom all along the line. An admirer of Rabelais, Cervantes, Swift, Montaigne and Shakespeare, he scorned cant and prudishness; although (or because he was) an Anglican minister, Sterne directed some of his most venomous passages toward the clergy, for their back-biting, careerism and hypocrisy.

His strong anti-slavery sentiments are briefly made clear, as are his sympathy for the condition of women. In one sequence, a group of clergymen discuss, with utmost seriousness, a famous litigation involving the Duchess of Suffolk, which concluded with the greatest minds of church and state “all unanimously of [the] opinion, That the mother was not of kin to her child.” At which point Tristram’s Uncle Toby mildly inquires, “And what said the Duchess of Suffolk to it?”

One of the features of *Tristram Shandy* that made a lasting impression on Marx was its demystifying satire, the book’s contrast of grand ideals and ambitions, couched in the language of the classics (most often, but not only, personified by Walter Shandy), with a cramped, prosaic reality.

Indeed, one biographer of Marx has suggested persuasively that the famous opening passages of his *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), in which the German revolutionist observes sardonically that “all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice” and explains how human beings “just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things ... anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language,” can be traced back, via his early novel in imitation of *Tristram Shandy* (in which the youthful Marx wrote, “Caesar the hero leaves behind him the play-acting Octavianus, Emperor Napoleon the bourgeois Louis Philippe ... Thus the bases are precipitated, while the spirit evaporates”), to Sterne’s work itself.

Sterne died of tuberculosis, probably without his novel having been completed, in 1768, only a few years before the outbreak of the American Revolution. *Tristram Shandy*’s impact on Jefferson at least is undeniable; he once declared that “The writings of Sterne ... form the best course of morality that ever was written.”

Admittedly, a book cannot simply be judged by its ... lovers. Not only Marx, Diderot and Jefferson, but also Friedrich Nietzsche, no friend of social revolution, and Samuel Beckett, a principal recorder of postwar angst and human futility, were admirers. And certainly if it is bourgeois disintegration and the potential at least for despair one is looking for, there are sufficient examples in *Tristram Shandy*. All that lacks is an historical epoch or two.

Walter Shandy, a retired merchant, in all sincerity aspires to make life, especially his son’s life, accord with the tenets of the great philosophers; he runs up against the mundane limits of his bourgeois existence, as well as the contradictoriness and unevenness of reality itself. But there is something heroic in his mad effort! This was the era of a progressive and inquisitive bourgeoisie. By 1852, in Marx’s day, history had turned a

page. It has since turned others.

The left literary critic Terry Eagleton (in *The English Novel: An Introduction*) makes a number of valid and interesting points about *Tristram Shandy*, but he commits a serious error when he telescopes the historical process and represents Sterne as Beckett's immediate predecessor or even contemporary, so to speak, in desolation.

From the impossibility of *Tristram Shandy*'s ever *fully* accounting for his 'life and opinions,' Eagleton draws unwarranted conclusions. "If the novel is an impossible form, it is partly because it aims at a linear representation of a reality which is not in itself linear at all. It is therefore bound to falsify its own materials. There is something about narrative itself, or literary design, which is a lie. There is even something falsifying about language itself, since to say one thing means excluding another. Life and language are at odds with each other, despite the fact that the aim of the realist novel is to bind them tightly together."

Eagleton repeats this same thought in a number of different forms: "The more information the novel provides, the less it manages to communicate" and "You can never break through language in order to discover what set it in motion, since you would need language to do so," etc. These are not very edifying concepts, inherited too uncritically from various post-structuralist, post-modernist thinkers.

From the inability of literature and language to capture reality *absolutely*, Eagleton denies its *relative* capacity to reflect essential truths. He forgets, or rejects, the Marxist teaching that "the sovereignty of thought is realised in a number of extremely unsovereignly-thinking human beings" (Engels), that human thought "by its nature is capable of giving, and does give, absolute truth, which is compounded of a sum-total of relative truths" (Lenin)."

It is no doubt impossible to capture in nine volumes, or forty, the thoughts and actions of a single human being on a single day (or perhaps in literary, 'linear' form *per se*), but does that rule out a relative approximation, a picture that carries weight and significance? *Tristram Shandy*, the book, in its actuality and the history of its reception, is evidence that it does not. The work indelibly portrays a social order and epoch, brings to life distinct human personalities, conveys unforgettable images of human existence in its vulgarity and ordinariness (and 'grossness'), its chaos, heightened to be sure, but true to life. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. The ability of the novel to entertain and enlighten readers—and *not* about the hopelessness of the autobiographical or literary or linguistic project—for 250 years has an *objective* significance.

Sterne believed that his work did something other than confirm that there is "no truth of the human subject," that there "is no saying where a human being begins and ends" (Eagleton). There was a method to the novelist's madness. He explains simply at one point, "By this contrivance [appearing to wander from his subject while actually adding to our understanding of it] the machinery of my work is of a species by itself; two contrary motions are introduced into it, and reconciled, which were thought to be at variance with each other. In a word, my work is digressive, and it is progressive too,—and at the same time." Something—of course not 'everything'—emerges and evolves in *Tristram Shandy*, all is not stagnation and futility.

If the book were nothing but a "bleak," if "carnavalesque," account of the "wrecked, damaged, washed up, [and] monomaniacal," written with "a kind of smiling sadism," as Eagleton would have it—a fashionable but deeply ahistorical and misleading conception—how would one explain its impact, in the first instance, on Jefferson, Diderot and Marx, believers in human progress and rationality?

Sterne wrote his novel, a "Cervantic comedy," all the while facing the possibility of death from tuberculosis, and endowed it with great humanity, compassion, an engagement with life, as well as a realism about the latter's terrible disappointments and tragedies. Despite critics and

false friends, the novel continues to speak to the reader who will take it up.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact