SPACES OF TIME IN THE MOVIE *TRISTRAM SHANDY: A COCK AND BULL STORY (2006)*

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Abstract

Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story, Michael Winterbottom's 2006 adaptation of L. Sterne's novel, **The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman** is weaving the present with the past, in an intriguing movie that gives a contemporary voice to the words of Sterne/ Shandy. The first focus of analysis in my paper is how the **race against chronological time** functions both in the novel and in the movie. Fear of death motivates the novel writer's attempt to push the story of his life forward, but generates his incapacity to give the story a straight line, at the same time. The 2006 adaptation presents the time of making the movie as the director, cast and crew's struggle to meet a deadline, which becomes a challenge, due to the interference of complicated personal lives, impossible to keep off the set. The second issue I deal with is **time as structural device**, that is the elements of film grammar which are used in organising transitions in time and space. This adaptation is about contemporary actors starring in a difficult, postmodern adaptation of an old, difficult novel that plays with the temporal frames in its characters' lives. The crossing of boundaries between the two media causes amusing and confusing situations. What are the obstacles they face and the techniques used in switching from contemporary settings, costumes, language to 18th century elements, in order to transpose an 'unfilmable' novel?

Keywords: digressions, film editing, movie-making challenges

The process and result of turning a novel into a movie is "endlessly and wonderfully, about seeing things come back to us in as many forms as possible" (Sanders, 2006), since adaptations infuse literary settings with colour and give a face to our most beloved characters, somehow bringing them closer to our times through the choices of the masterminds of movie-making industry.

Having taught eighteen century literature for about five years I have had to somehow overcome the lack of a film adaptation for one of the most interesting novels of the age. There have been new and old adaptations of the other novels discussed, that students could align next to the written texts, yet nothing for *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. The gap was finally filled with Michael Winterbottom's 2006 adaptation *Tristram Shandy – A Cock and Bull Story.*

Once I got over the curiosity and excitement that overcame me on learning that Tristram Shandy has finally been given a face and a voice, I endeavoured to analyse the concept of time in key moments of the film adaptation. According to J. Harbord, "the dependency of film on other texts is specifically a temporal relation" (2007: 44), so the making of a movie that could represent such a complicated novel would mostly have to

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deal with shifts of time frames. As starting point in my discussion, I take a statement from the adaptation that reflects temporal shifts, one of the many appeals L. Sterne's novel has held over the ages: we are told on screen, more than once that the novel is 'a postmodern classic before there was any modernism to be post about.'

The sequences I have chosen relate firstly to the issue of time rendered as duration, either psychological or chronological. In the novel, Tristram Shandy notes at one point that it has taken the reader about ninety minutes to read what happened since Uncle Toby rang the bell and Obadiah left for Dr. Slop, "so that no one can say, with reason, that I have not allowed *Obadiah* time enough, poetically speaking, and considering the emergency too, both to go and come" (*TS,* II, viii, 83).

Here the narrator is dealing with two kinds of time as duration: the literal time of the reader, measurable by the clock, and the reader's sense of how much (fictional) time has elapsed in the lives of the characters; in the fictional time, they have performed actions requiring more than the mere ninety minutes of the reader's real time. Tristram goes on to acknowledge that no real or chronological time may have elapsed: "tho', morally and truly speaking, the man, perhaps, has scarce had time to get on his boots" (*TS,* II, viii, 83).

To some it takes a life-time to read the novel; the movie adaptation takes about one and a half hours to view; while the main character writes in order to cheat death in the novel, the director and the actors have to meet various deadlines in the movie. The novel offers digressions as the solution, such as visuals, double-talk, or insertions of unrelated episodes.

The objections of the reader to the narrator's perception of linear time are refuted with the subtle slip of chronological time into a subjective perception:

> "I would remind him, that the idea of duration, and of its simple modes, is got merely from the train and succession of our ideas--and is the true scholastic pendulum,--and by which, as a scholar, I will be tried in this matter,--abjuring and detesting the jurisdiction of all other pendulums whatever." (*TS,* II, viii, 84)

Secondly, I have labelled time as structural device, namely the means of organising the shift from the space of the movie to that of the novel: flashbacks, flash-forwards, freeze-frames, the soundtrack, editing, costumes being the technical tools exploited by the crew. Examples from the novel will support my comments on relevant scenes from the movie.

Deborah Cartmell (1999) argues for three broad categories of film adaptations of novels: transposition, commentary and analogue. The present one belongs to the first category, being an adaptation that contains further layers of transposition, in our case in temporal form. Winterbottom's taste for adapting novels may be familiar to film and literature lovers from his 2001 *The Claim*, a subtle variation of Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, a representation of the Hollywood genre of the Western relocated in the

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1860s gold rush. This 2001 movie belongs to Cartmell's group of analogue adaptations, in which awareness of the intertext is not necessary in order for the viewer to fully grasp the message of the film

The opening clip of the movie takes us behind the scenes, in the dressing room, where we watch actors Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon getting made-up for the shooting. We catch a snatch of their conversation in a real-time scene. Rob Brydon addresses Steve Coogan facing the camera, so the degree of intimacy with us, viewers is higher than that of Steve Coogan. Both are presented in a medium close-up, but the camera zooms in on Steve Coogan as he looks in the mirror. Before seeing the actors the actors, however, we are let in on their 'hobby-horses'. Rob Brydon is concerned about his looks while Steve Coogan worries about the traces of time visible on his face. The latter piece of information is only conveyed visually, as we watch him pat his chin and contract his neck muscles.

The effort Tristram Thandy makes in establishing himself as the hero of his own life in the novel is paralleled by the two actors' constant arguments over who has the leading role. Steve Coogan appears in a profile-shot so we are for now observers of a dispute of egos. The camera focuses the two in a close-up while the two make-up artists overhearing their silly dispute are barely visible. Nevertheless, their giggle illustrates the general mood of not only this brief sequence, but of the entire adaptation, namely a comic view of some participants on matters of life-importance to others.

We jump in time and enter the world of the novel. The first element signalling the shift to the eighteenth century is a heroic tune; next comes Steve Coogan in a period costume, achieving gradual intimacy with us, as he approaches from long shot to medium close-up addressing the camera, similar to Tristram Shandy's style of talking to the reader, Sir/Madam, in the book. Ambiguities arise as to whom Steve Coogan really portrays – Tristram Shandy or himself. There are two reasons causing the confusion; Steve Coogan quotes Groucho Marx, the famous comedian and film star, and he underlines the importance of his role in the adaptation: "Goucho Marx once said that the trouble of writing a book about yourself is that you can't fool around". He goes on to contradicting the quotation as he introduces the character he plays: "Why not? People fool around with themselves all the time….I'm Tristram Shandy, the main character in the story…the leading role" (TS 2006). Thus, Tristram Shandy of the movie adaptation addresses the camera voicing the preferences and concerns of the actor, which results in anachronisms.

An example of ambiguity appears in the next clip, as words are literalised by both image and sound. The close-up of a bull introduces Tristram Shandy's explanation of the expression 'cock-and-bull story', which ends the novel and has become a favourite critical remark related to it. Another anachronism is inserted, as the voice we have to assume is Tristram Shandy's expresses an opinion he cannot possibly hold at the beginning of his

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story: "There are those who say this is a cock-and-bull story" (TS 2006).. Next, Steve Coogan steps into the character Tristram Shandy to expand on the idea: "That is the bull…my father's bull…and I'll show you the cock in a minute"(TS 2006). Tristram Shandy laughs ahead of us, viewers, anticipating our understanding of his double talk. He promises to clarify the ambiguity, mirroring the novel's narrator who does not keep his promises of more stories of interest.

Extra diegetic sound becomes a mark of Tristram Shandy's story world in this clip. The opening credits are still rolling on the screen and we are given the complete picture of the setting of the novel. Tristram Shandy approaches from the background and explains the role of the miniature weapons and tanks Uncle Toby and corporal Trim are carefully planting in the garden. A point of view shot draws out attention to how seriously they take to their duties and to the tiny pieces they use to re-create the fight of Namur. Manipulation of scale is employed to introduce a flashback, as the tiny tank in Uncle Toby's hand turns into a real one, the extra diegetic heroic tune is replaced with the diegetic sound of shots, and the two characters are involved in a smoky war scene. In a matter of seconds, thus, three temporal frames overlap: the post-production time when the credits are added on to the finished film, the novel's present time with Tristram Shandy's re-collections and the past he knows from Uncle Toby, the war that is ever present in the latter's life.

The time gap between the past time battle Uncle Toby obsesses about and the time and space of adult Tristram Shandy is rendered visually with the help of the editing technique dating back to Hollywood's classical age, **the wipe**. Editing is heavily relied on to signal the switch from diegetic present to past, an echo to the famous opinion that the cutting of film renders time elastic, relative (Einstein, 1924). The war scene of the past is pushed to the left of the screen to give room to the present time of the story. The diegetic sound of the cock marks both the novel and the film adaptation's linguistic puns, raising once more the question of who gets the credit as main protagonist. The Tristram Shandy we hear is, strangely enough, fighting to maintain the position of the 'I' in the story, as if he knew that the story he would write would mainly be about his father and his uncle: "When I said this was a cock-and-bull story, it was my cock I was talking about, not Uncle Toby's. After all, am I not the hero of my own life?" (TS 2006)

The play with chronology continues with the connection of Tristram Shandy and Uncle Toby, both victims of the battle of Namur, the former affected by the latter's hobby-horse of using every available material in the house to re-create the battlefield, producing in fact Tristram's accident. This conclusion is voiced after another flashback, introduced by an iris. The flash-forward in the novel "a cow broke in (tomorrow morning) to my uncle *Toby*'s fortifications" (*TS,* III, xxxviii, 187) is rendered with the use of diegetic 'moo' on screen. Tristram Shandy's insistence on his reproductive abilities that

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have not been affected by the incident anticipates Steve Coogan the actor's efforts to fend off rumours about his libido.

The ticking of the clock opens the next clip, in which we become familiar with the world and the words of the father. This time costume is indicative of movement back to story time. Steve Coogan simply puts on a wig and becomes Walter Shandy, which raises the number of roles he plays to three in Michael Winterbottom's production. The main difference between Steve Coogan playing Walter Shandy and Steve Coogan playing Tristram Shandy is that he has no interaction with the camera and with us, viewers in his former role. The moment the wig is on, he turns his back to the camera and ignores everything except Walter Shandy's 'hobby horses'.

Time as psychological duration is rendered in the sequence presenting Tristram's mother and father on their way to London by coach. The mother's assertion that she is comfortable enough is visually contradicted by her position in the coach and the jolty movement of the coach. Now we learn from Walter Shandy that they only have to travel two more days, which is "not long". It all depends on the perspective, a relative one, we may think, before we notice a sign by the road stating the distance, 260 km. The sequence thus produces at once opposite reactions in us, that is sympathy and laughter, as well as raising awareness o the subjective perception of the passing of time: "My father looks at his watch, announces that two hours and ten minutes have passed, but to my imagination it seems almost an age" (*TS,*III, xviii, 149)

Doanne (2002) focuses on three types of editing as ways of building up a filmic time – space coherence: to repeat a scene from various viewpoints, which causes a replay of time; the chase leading to a logic of accumulation and the passing of time and parallel editing that creates dramatic tension, displacing the temporal logic of the film forcing the viewer to make the necessary connections. Simultaneous actions, fragmented and alternating in the novel benefit from both an audio and a visual presentation, though parallel editing, Doanne's third type, on the one hand and the diegetic sound of the mother screaming, penetrating the walls of Shandy Hall on the other hand. It is a sound that Walter Shandy, Uncle Toby and dr. Slop do not seem to hear, engaged as they are in silly demonstrations and empty dialogues. Extradiegetic sound connects the upstairs and downstairs scenes covering Elizabeth's manifestations of pain. A further link between the scenes is established through dialogue, as Uncle Toby's expression of the map of Namur that "could make a man's eyes water" is followed by a close-up of Elizabeth crying. Scale manipulation triggers once more the shift back in story time to Uncle Toby's memories and then to the present scene of the clip.

We are one third within the movie when a major digression takes place and we are allowed to enter the lab of fiction and become witnesses in 'the making of *Tristram Shandy – a cock and bull story*. The frame presenting Tristram Shandy's mother screaming and

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twisting in pain gets larger and includes the director yelling 'cut' and a camera operator behind him. From this scene onwards, the rhythm becomes more dynamic, chaotic at times for all involved. Steve Coogan has no time to meet everybody and spend time with his girlfriend, Jennie, who has arrived on location by train, for two days with their new-born baby.

Making a movie appears to be a race against deadlines; linear time is the enemy as in the novel, meetings are postponed, dialogues are left suspended, emotions are suppressed since there is never enough time for everything. The race against time is lost before its start, an idea the book dwells on in its presentation of Tristram Shandy's efforts to catch up with his lived life in his writings:

> "instead of advancing, as a common writer, in my work with what I have been doing at it–on the contrary, I am just thrown so many volumes back[…] at this rate I should just live 364 times faster than I should write–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." (*TS,* IV, xiii, 228).

The difficulties of making the movie adaptation are surpassed by problems in Steve Coogan's personal life. Past time love affairs threaten his present relationship and his public image, so he has to decide what deserves more time and consideration at such short notice. We get to know Steve Coogan the actor better than the characters he portrays. Everything boils down to size for him – how long he stays on the set, how large his part is, how high the shoe-heels of Tristram Shandy and Walter Shandy should be in order to make him stand out. The space of the cinema hall is not empty. We are not watching the adaptation by ourselves. The very actors are viewers of the finished scenes, and Steve Coogan pushes for higher heels on Tristram Shandy's shoes. A double screen is thus inserted, pushing 'the making of *Tristram Shandy* further back in time. Rob Brydon feels undervalued, the costume designers burst into tears after altering the shoe heels to no avail, and we feel there are more scenes we have not seen. The degrees of frustration infuses the novel: "[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" (*TS,* V, xvii, 300), seeps into the adaptation, but the feeling transgresses the realm of fiction.

Steve Coogan seems closer to the characters he plays, Tristram Shandy and Walte Shandy, since he asks for more emotional scenes to be included, scenes that would generate greater sympathy in the viewers. Michael Winterbottom's clever digression of presenting Steve Coogan changing his baby's diaper, produces a similar reaction in us, as we start to forgive his flirtations and bursts of vanity. He seems unable to adapt his personality and feelings to those a father in the eighteenth century would have

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experienced, so he takes the director's refusal too personally. The adaptation of this old novel poses cultural problems rather than technical ones, although nobody understands that a faithful transposition of the novel cannot be a commercial success.

The visual character of the novel is conveyed with the shot of a black screen, a visual representation of the black page in the novel. The question of inserting it in the movie adaptation appears to position the choice as left open in the collective effort of turning the movie into a success. Intertextuality is an answer, as the director and the producer try to establish connections between the novel and popular movies and songs.

L. Sterne's novel does not start at the beginning. The question that should have logically been asked before the adaptation of an unfilmable novel had been put into practice is raised now and each person involved in the production has a different answer. It is the moment we find out that shooting the movie took one year and the crew consider the challenges too demanding. How trivial this seems when measured up against the ten year period that passed between the appearance of the first and the ninth volumes of the novel.

The movie ends before its actual ending. The double screen separates us from the ending of the adaptation, as we realise the cast and crew have been watching the same version of the ending. Tristram Shandy is born, we are informed by the diegetic scream and Walter Shandy has fainted. The bird's eye view shot presenting him turns into a medium long shot as the camera withdraws and the screen fade to black. Frustration best summarizes the general reaction of the cast and crew about discarded parts, cheap battle-scenes, and excess of some movie ingredients at the expense of others. It all culminates with the trouble the producers take in bringing Gillian Anderson to shoot for two weeks as widow Wadman and, to her utmost despair, have no scene included in the final version.

A second ending follows, which is either a late adjustment of the previous or the faithful rendition of the ending of the novel. The family are listening to Obadiah's cock-and-bull story and are laughing, along with us, who have followed the transposition of the pun in the novel onto the movie adaptation An **iris** editing technique is used to introduce a shift to the time of 'making the movie', to another teasing conversation between Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon about who best imitates Al Pacino's acting style. Thus, in terms of chronology, the viewers are safely returned to the cinema hall to witness the leading actors' current concerns, while the time-structuring editing device employed to make this time-shift is one of the oldest techniques in the history of film editing.

Tristram Shandy- A Cock And Bull Story (2006) deserves a leading position in the gallery of literary transpositions on screen. It firstly makes its viewers step back in time and browse the novel, as "adaptation into another medium becomes a means of prolonging the pleasure of the original presentation, and repeating the production of a

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memory" (Ellis, 1982, 5). Subjective and objective time overlap in the novel, depending either on the characters' perception of the passing of time, or on the writer's ability to compress large periods of life in brief sentences. Watching the movie adaptation is easier than reading and enjoying the book. The movie both renders the intricacies and digressive techniques of its literary inspiration – L. Sterne' s splendid novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* – and brings to the viewers' attention the comic layers of the movie-making industry, thus becoming a modernization of a classic literary work and a deconstructive movie with a strong meta-fictional discourse.

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