

The Adaptation of Metafiction into Metamovie: A Study

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Abstract: Metafiction is a fiction which discusses the process of creation of the fiction itself, and similarly, a metamovie is a movie which shows the process of its creation. *The Life and opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* is a novel by Laurence Sterne, the nine volumes of which appeared serially between 1759 and 1767. Sterne, in this novel discusses the process of its own creation, structure and literary quality with its readers within the very text of the novel. The novel has been adapted to a movie in 2005 entitled *Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull story*, directed by Michael Winterbottom. The movie attempted to retain these features of the novel as a metafiction. This paper attempts to study this adaptation, particularly from the standpoint of adaptation of the features of a metafiction.

Keywords: Metafiction, Metamovie, Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, Winterbottom.

1. INTRODUCTION

Metafiction is a fiction which discusses the process of creation of the fiction itself, and similarly, a metamovie is a movie which shows the process of its creation. *The Life and opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* is an astonishing novel by Laurence Sterne, the nine volumes of which appeared serially between 1759 and 1767. The novel has been adapted to a movie in 2005 entitled *Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull story*, directed by Michael Winterbottom. This paper attempts to study this adaptation, particularly from the standpoint of adaptation of the features of a metafiction.

2. LITERARY FEATURES OF THE NOVEL *THE LIFE AND OPINIONS OF TRISTRAM SHANDY, GENTLEMAN*

The most distinguishing narrative features of the Laurence Sterne's novel which make it completely different from the other eighteenth century English novels are (a) it disrupts the chronological order of the events completely by innumerable digressions, sub-plots, insertions, flashbacks, flash forwards and the like, (b) by referring his work a history of "what passes in a man's mind", Tristram Shandy emphasises that, while writing his own "Life and Opinions", he will be portraying mostly a mental life, which, in a way marks the beginning of psychological novels, (c) some graphic elements like black page, white blank page, marbled page, lines of different shape have been used throughout the novel for strange or obscure purposes, (d) many a times Tristram Shandy, the writer of his own biography, separates himself from the Tristram Shandy, who is the protagonist of the novel, comes out of the courses of events of the novel, and starts addressing and communicating directly with his readers, and most importantly, (e) while doing so almost always he discusses with them the process of writing the novel, i.e., the progress of the novel, the ideal method to write such a novel, problems that he faces while writing. He even frankly admits the blunders he commits while writing, and promises never to repeat those blunders, he predicts the taste of his readers, advises them and almost rebukes them for not having a proper reading taste. Though done in a playful, zestful and light hearted manner, this feature makes the novel fall in the genre of metafiction, as mentioned earlier, a fiction which discusses the process of creation of the fiction itself.

The so called plot of the novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* includes only a few incidents from the life of Tristram Shandy. They are conception of Tristram, buffoonery surrounding Tristram's birth, including the accident on his nose for the use of Dr Slop's newly invented forceps, confusion regarding his christening, accidental circumcision of Tristram, and suddenly, the tour of France by adult Tristram. The major digressions in the novels involve Uncle Toby, his injury at the battle of Namur, his confused love affair with widow Wadman, death of Parson Yorick,

death of Tristram's elder brother Bobby. As the main plot, if there is any, of the novel covers only a very small part of the novel and that too, in a very disjointed fragmentary manner, the main plot in the movie version continues only for 20 minutes within the total movie length of 94 minutes.

Tristram Shandy is a novel which has neither a beginning, nor a middle, nor an end. The events of the novel start in the year 1718 and end 5 years earlier, in 1713. Furthermore, in between these two dates, the novel goes as far forward as 1766 and as far backward as the times of Henry VIII. The story begins with the moment of the protagonist's conception but then the tale so digressed that he nearly barely manages to be born and proceeds a little further before the novel ends. The film version, remaining true to this feature of the novel, includes quite a few digressions within its narrative and like the novel ends very abruptly with the birth of the protagonist. The movie attempts to filter the episodes, generally acknowledged as digressions, through the actors and technicians, who are in a progress of making a film. Here too, Tristram, the protagonist, starts out telling his audience his story, beginning with his conception and birth and then gets so distracted by tangents and after-thoughts that by the time the film ends, he is just barely be born.

As an avid reader Laurence Sterne incorporated a vast amount of reading in *Tristram Shandy*, ranging from medical documents to legal tracts, and therefore, has sometimes been accused of plagiarism. These are another way to digress from the main course of events in the life of Tristram Shandy. The passages he had lifted were from the writings of the authors who were very familiar at that time, viz., Locke, Rebelais, Burton, Bacon, Montaigne, and the like. Similarly, the movie *Tristram Shandy* bears some inter-textual evidences from other movies like 'This Is Spinal Tap'(1984) by Rob Reiner and 'Looking for Richard' (1996) by Al Pacino. From 'This is Spinal Tap' comes the egos of the artists and the shabbiness of their art and from 'Looking for Richard' the film borrows the device of explaining materials to the viewers while it is being explained to the actors. Roger Ebert, a film reviewer was reminded of Stonehenge in 'This is Spinal Tap', when he came across a scene in which a miniature unborn Tristram is seen inside a miniature womb. Thus, the movie has tried to adapt the novel, in terms of using other contemporary works, an act which is on the verge of plagiarism.

Tristram Shandy claims that sometimes verbal literal language is incompetent to render one's grief in words and hence, he left a page completely black, the colour of sadness and death, in Vol I Chapter XII, to mourn the death of Parson Yorick. Now, while adapting this rather awkward way to mourn someone's death, Winterbottom, in spite of the doubt that perhaps a black screen may not appeal to the audience like the black pages do in the book, incorporates the same within the film. One actor says, "I don't know how interesting a black screen gonna be for the audience", and the screen goes entirely black for almost 10 seconds following the conversation about Parson Yorick's death.

A very fascinating aspect of Tristram's narration is his direct addresses to the readers. Tristram deconstructs the narrative space between the author and the readers and makes his readers take active part in his writing process. From the very outset Tristram hopes and pleads for the readers' indulgence and approval. In Book I Chapter 6, he thus addresses the reader, quite persuasively and charmingly, "Sir, as you and I are in a manner perfect strangers to each other, it would not have been proper to have let you into many circumstances relating to myself all once" (6). In Book I, Chapter 1 the reader is called "dear sir", in Chapter 4 he addresses a female character as "madam", in Chapter 6 the reader is addressed as "my dear friend and companion". The expressions like words "in which the reader is likely to see me" and "I know there are readers in the world- who find themselves ill at ease", include readers in the process of writing. Sterne's such attitudes to readers was characterised by informality and intimacy. "Writing" he claimed, "when properly managed, is but a different name for conversation."

3. ADAPTATION OF *TRISTRAM SHANDY* INTO A MOVIE

In the movie, Winterbottom too intends to indulge his spectators in the same kind of conversational strategy. He makes his leading actor Steve Coogan appear before the audience to introduce himself as Tristram Shandy. Tristram then proceeds to narrate his own life story introducing other characters in the movie to the audience. During the shooting of a chaotic scene in the movie involving young Tristram's circumcision, Coogan, the actor for older Tristram shows the child actor as young Tristram how to emote in that particular scene, which the child actor readily dismisses. He again directly converses to the audience and introduces his mother, saying "This is my beautiful, lovely mother, Elizabeth". This film version of the literary text is a zesty celebration of story-telling and it tells two stories simultaneously: one of an eighteenth century Englishman Tristram Shandy and another of the group of actors and technicians who are adapting the fiction to a film. The movie thus plays with meta-textual levels, starring along with Steve Coogan, Rob Brydon, Keeley Hawes, Naomie Harris, Gillian Anderson and others. Steve Coogan plays the role of both Tristram Shandy and his father

Walter Shandy. Like *Tristram Shandy* of the novel, he often comes out of his character to communicate with the audience. While asked by a reporter, and the interview is shown onscreen, why he chooses *Tristram Shandy* for screen which many people consider an unfilmable literary text, Coogan answers: “*Tristram Shandy* was a post-modern classic, written before there was any modern to be post about.” With the director’s call “cut”, which is shown on screen, we are directed to the making of a film. As Steve Coogan embodies the dual roles within the film scenario, Rob Brydon plays the role of captain Toby and Rob Brydon himself, Keeley Hawes plays the dual role that of Elizabeth, *Tristram*’s mother and of Keeley Hawes. The intrusions of those who support film industry, from tabloid journalists to financial backers, from prop handlers to production runners make it absolutely evident that a movie is being made. Even then the story of Sterne’s novel is developed in their talks and there are occasional flashes of the novel being screened by the actors who every now and then turn to the characters of Sterne’s novel.

Again, the movie version like the text itself, tries to bring out the arbitrary nature of language system. Language and more rhetoric are used, but all seems futile to communicate with others. In the movie, Jenny (Naomie Harris), a production assistant seems to be the only person of the film who has read the novel and she tries to explain the impossibility of communicating with others. Her experience as well as those of the characters’ speeches are constantly interrupted by other’s statement, much in the line of the book where communicational anarchy is deliberately created. For example, the unique nocturnal conversations between Mr and Mrs Shandy, described in Book VI, Chapter 18 is one of the exquisite examples of non-communication under the semblance of perfect accord. Language again fails when Widow Wadman makes Toby to understand the meaning of her queries regarding the spot where he got his injury. Lack of access to other ideas and opinions characterizes the novel as well as the film.

4. CONCLUSION

There are considerable differences between the literary and movie versions of *Tristram Shandy* in several aspects. While adapting a lengthy novel which runs up to 9 volumes with more than 400 pages to a feature film of normal duration, the Director is certain to omit certain portions of the novel, like the entire tour of France episode, apart from other changes which he/she considers necessary for the change, be it addition, omission or alterations, of the literary text. Also, the novel *Tristram Shandy* is not significant for its storyline, rather, it is the form of the novel that fascinates its readers for over 250 years, which includes its features as metafiction. Hence, it is of little importance whether the film adaptation of the novel maintains its fidelity to the events of the original text. Michael Winterbottom, in his movie version of *Tristram Shandy*, instead of a sentence-to-frame translation, has succeeded to a considerable extent to adapt most of the distinguishing aspects of the novel. Although, film reviewers like Ryan Grim assert that *Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story* is not an adaptation, but rather a movie about making of a movie based on the “unfilmable” novel, it is evident that in the process of adapting a metafiction into a movie, the movie has developed to be a metamovie, a movie about making of a movie.

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