



FACT SHEET

Week beginning Monday 31 July 2006

Media and Technology Tristram Shandy

A young American movie producer once said to me that movies about the movies are never very successful.

The young man said this to me in a manner suggesting that his advice was set in stone – a kind of motherhood statement of the movie industry.

At the time of this conversation I was in the process of pitching a possible movie project to this man – and it was a movie which was, in part at least, about making movies.

I was not inclined to argue with this producer – in any case, there's never much point in arguing with a producer who has his mind made up. And I chose not to counter his remark with that other statement, made famous by author and screenwriter William Goldman, that in Hollywood the only certainty is that "nobody knows anything."

In other words nobody ever really knows whether a movie is going to do well at the box office until the audiences start buying tickets.

Needless to say the young producer and I did not manage to strike a deal about my possible movie but I am still hopeful that, one of these days, another producer, with more foresight than this bloke had, will agree with me that a movie which includes some great action sequences about making movies would be something that audiences would like to come and see.

Clearly, I quite like movies about the movies. In fact, some of my all-time favorite movies fall into this category.

I'm particularly fond of a French movie called "Day for Night" directed by Francois Truffaut and released in 1973. It's one of the delights of the later phase of the French New Wave.

And, tell me, who did not like A Man and Woman directed by Claude Lelouche in 1966 – a movie which has been described as "one of the 1960's most popular love stories".

Both of these films won the Oscar for the best Foreign Language Film in their respective years, as did Federico Fellini's "8 1/2" in 1963 – another great movie about making movies.

Then of course, reaching further back in time, there was the iconic Billy Wilder movie Sunset Boulevard which won three Oscars in 1950 and Vincente Minelli's, The Bad and the Beautiful which won five Oscars in 1952.

It seems I'm not the only person who gets a kick out of movies about making movies.

The latest film to fall into this self-reflective category is a British production called *Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story*. This is structured as a peep behind the scenes at the making of one of those costume dramas which the British do so well.

And, as the title would suggest, this movie has been made with the tongue firmly planted in the cheek.

The story unfolds on the set of a film inspired by the eighteenth century novel entitled *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, by Laurence Sterne.

This book is one of those worthy pieces of literature which English One lecturers, at least in my day, seemed to feel obliged to put on the reading list along with lashings of incomprehensible Chaucer and, of course, the equally incomprehensible adventures of *Moll Flanders*.

The objective of the lecturers seemed to be to make certain that First Year English students would understand that the study of real literature was about as much fun as a toothache.

In addition, the challenge of turning *Tristram Shandy* into film seems to have posed particular difficulties and, we are told during the course of the movie that, up until now, the novel had been regarded as unfilmable.

We are also told that, of the dozens of people involved in the making of the movie inside the movie, only one – the screenwriter I think – had actually read the whole novel.

Not that this really matters a great deal because the movie is less about *Tristram Shandy*, the novel, than it is about the inter-relationships between the movie makers themselves – members of the cast and their relatives, the crew, the financiers, publicists and agents. Hovering around the set there's even the odd tabloid journalist trying to sniff-out a whiff of scandal.

The publicity for the movie uses the words "hilarious" and "deliriously funny" to describe it – almost suggesting that it's a kind of *Carry On Up the Movies*. Something that might have been entitled *Ealing Studios Re-visited*.

However, I didn't find it overly funny. Chuckly, perhaps, and worthy of a wry smile here and there but it takes itself much too seriously for any hilarity to set in.

I often wish publicists, and also some movie reviewers, could restrain their hyperbole just a little because too much ballyhoo can give you a totally wrong expectation of what you will find in a movie.

And this can only lead to disappointment.

I found Tristram Shandy to be a gently amusing movie but by no means “hilariously funny”.

However, it is a clever piece of writing that first establishes a mannered 18th century world inhabited by eccentric aristocrats and then juxtaposes this with the world of a 21st century movie set – a world which, so the makers of this film would have us believe, teeters constantly on the brink of chaos and is inhabited by its own grab-bag of eccentrics.

The characters morph seamlessly between their on-screen and off-screen personas and most people will find a kind of bemusement in wondering how movies ever actually emerge in a completed form from the apparent dysfunctionalism on location.

The cast members of Tristram Shandy the movie are all competent performers in the British tradition – it is, after all, a BBC Films presentation - and, while you wouldn't recognise most of their names, the publicity material tells us that many of the players have had quite a deal of experience in British television.

The only stand-out name in the cast is American actress Gillian Anderson – you would remember her as Agent Dana Scully in television's long-running series, The X-Files. She is also currently appearing in a leading role in the TV mini series based on Charles Dickens' Bleak House.

In the movie within the movie Gillian Anderson, playing herself, is brought in for a cameo role to give the movie a star performer and hence make it more appealing for the financiers.

It appears that her presence in the real movie may have been motivated by similar reasons – a case of life imitating art.

The notes say that she was on the set for only three days. However, the brief, cameo role that she plays turns out to be one of the stand-out moments of Tristram Shandy, the movie.

However, this brief moment is not enough to turn Tristram Shandy into a must-see cinematic event. I just could not engage enough with any of the main characters and I found myself not caring about their petty problems. It all fell a bit flat. In a generous mood I'd give it two and a half out of five.

John McGowan
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