This essay attempts to explore Michael Winterbottom's daring film adaptation of Laurence Sterne's Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman. Winterbottom's film, Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story (2005), should more appropriately be renamed The Life and Opinions of Steve Coogan, Actor because it focuses mainly on Steve Coogan's triple roles as Tristram Shandy, his father Walter, and the actor himself. By paralleling Steve's life and opinions with those of Tristram in the original novel, Winterbottom tries to materialize and re-present the almost unfilmable abstractions in the novel with regard to the linguistic play and its endless associations, the latent conflicts between the characters, the protean narrative structure, and the ever-present sexual innuendos. Interpolating the life experiences of actors and crew into the film adaptation, Winterbottom ingeniously creates a film as fragmentary and disjointed as the original novel. Nonetheless, the film also presents a simultaneously progressive and digressive story line as Tristram claims in the novel. Just like the world of Sterne's novel which is filled with neurotic preoccupations and personal eccentricities, such as Toby's hobbyhorse of fortifications and battles, Walter's pseudo-scientific philosophy, and Tristram's special kind of writing, Michael Winterbottom successfully, to a great extent, creates a cinematic world of unintelligible asterisks, incomprehensible dashes, impenetrable spaces, and never-ending digressions.

I started reading Laurence Sterne's The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman in 1965, and intend to finish it any day now. That is true, and also a joke (a small one) involving a novel about procrastination. Tristram Shandy begins with its hero about to be born and becomes so sidetracked by digressions that the story ends shortly after his birth. Perhaps Sterne considered writing a sequel describing the rest of Tristram's life, but never got around to it (smaller joke). A Cock and Bull Story (marketed in Australia, New Zealand and the United States as Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story) is a 2005 British comedy film directed by Michael Winterbottom. It is a film-within-a-film, featuring Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon playing themselves as egotistical actors during the making of a screen adaptation of Laurence Sterne's 18th century metafictional novel Tristram Shandy. Gillian Anderson and Keeley Hawes also play themselves in addition to their Tristram Shandy roles.