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Adaptation Past, Present and Future: An Interview with Jim Welsh

Jim Welsh

“Adaptation Studies” as a discipline is a comparatively new phenomenon. In places such as De Montfort University’s Centre for Adaptations in the United Kingdom, adaptations are studied and theses produced at the graduate level; in several other institutions worldwide film and theater adaptations are both researched and taught. The corpus of adaptation studies material has been radically expanded, especially after the publication of Robert Stam’s *Literature Through Film* (2005). However, it is worthwhile noting that ‘adaptation studies’ as a transformative act had been discussed by critics before that time. George Bluestone’s seminal text *Novels into Film* (1957), defined much of the theoretical territory. In 1973 *Literature/Film Quarterly* was started; and since then it has incorporated essays of various kinds on the subject of adaptation. We interview one of the founders of that journal, Jim Welsh, looking at how and why it came about, focusing on its changing role, and looking at the future of adaptation studies both in the United States and elsewhere. Before we do so, we sketch in some background: *Literature/Film Quarterly* was founded at Salisbury State College (now Salisbury University) in Maryland by Tom Erskine, Gerald Barrett, and Jim Welsh, the latter of whom edited the journal for 33 years until his retirement in 2004. By that time, two other journals had been added to the field, both in Great Britain: *Adaptation*, published by Oxford University Press, and *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance*, edited in Cardiff and Bristol and published by Intellect Journals. What had started as a study of a “process” – transforming literary texts into cinematic form – had developed into a discipline, generating new ideas and methodologies.

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Q: How did the idea for creating *Literature/Film Quarterly* come about?

JW: Well, that requires an extended answer, going back to 1971, the year Tom Erskine and I were hired to teach at Salisbury State College in Maryland. Tom was hired to chair the English Department, and he then hired me to fill an immediate vacancy there. Tom proved himself an able administrator and was quickly advanced to Academic Dean. Before coming to Salisbury, Tom and a colleague at the University of Delaware, Gerald R. Barrett, had a pipe dream about starting an academic journal treating film adaptations of literature. Within two years at Salisbury State, Tom discovered he would be able to realize that pipe dream. The President of Salisbury State, Dr. Norman C. Crawford, was agreeable and provided us with a small grant to cover start-up funding for our first three years, and by 1973 we were off and running, with Tom as Editor and Gerald Barrett and I as Associates. We put up a D. H. Lawrence seminar at MLA, and that provided us with a core supply of papers for our first issue (a few of which we had to labor over to make printworthy). Because of our innocence, we neglected to butter up those who edited the *D. H. Lawrence Review*, which, in turn, ignored our “special issue.” We saw ourselves as performing a service for literary scholars, and it was not by accident that our masthead read *Literature/Film Quarterly* instead of *Film/Literature Quarterly*, or, as some would mistakenly refer to us, “Film and Literature Quarterly.” This was done to reveal our primary allegiance to literature. The lead essay of our Lawrence issue was written by Lawrence authority Harry T. Moore and was rather dismissively titled “D. H. Lawrence and the Flicks” (3-11). During subsequent years the emphasis would shift more to the film side of the ledger, as many of our contributors became increasingly interested in work done by creative filmmakers of Europe, such as Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, and, of course, the French New Wave. In 1973, after all, we were just getting started.

The first three years of publication were the Erskine years, but as Tom’s administrative duties increased, the responsibility of running the journal fell increasingly on me, and that was not easily

handled, since I had a four-course, twelve-hour teaching load as well. Salisbury State was then known as a teaching institution and the idea of release time for research did not sit comfortably. Typesetting was not well delegated during those early years, moreover, so I had to learn the computer programming and coding myself at one point in order to get copy set into type, making me editor, proofreader, and typesetter as well. After a dozen years, during which time computer technology became increasingly simplified, I was given some release when my teaching load was reduced by one course, down to nine hours. At first Tom's secretary, Jean Sumpter, handled our subscriptions; but ultimately my wife, Anne Welsh (who worked in the publications office at Salisbury) eventually helped to handle not only subscriptions and mailings, but also typesetting and layout. The two of us somehow managed to hold the journal together for 30 more years. Tom Erskine did resume editing *LFQ* twice during the 1990s, when I went abroad in 1994 and 1998 as a Fulbright Lector in American studies to Romania, and I'll be forever grateful to him for that as well as for having the intelligence and energy to follow through with our original funding. We did meet our initial three-year goal, though. According to the Modern Language Association, the average number of subscribers for an academic journal in the early 1970s was 500. We met that number in our second year, and by the third year *Literature/Film Quarterly* was self-sufficient.

Q: Why do you think Literature-Film Quarterly was so eagerly taken up by subscribers?

JW: Because movies were becoming trendy academically and because there was nothing quite like what we were offering in the academic marketplace at the time.

Q: Were there competing journals at that time, or was the whole operation an entirely new venture?

JW: Surprisingly enough, there was no competition for the adaptation niche we sought to fill. Of course, there were several cinema-related journals at the time, large and small. *Films in Review* was well established and fan-dominated, in the sense of being

intended for literate fans and trading on Hollywood nostalgia, offering frequent profiles of older generation stars and directors, coverage of film festivals, obituaries and reviews of recently-released films. *Film Heritage* (1965-75) edited out of Wright State University, Dayton by F. Anthony Macklin, was still publishing then, and had featured interviews with writers, such as Charles Webb in 1968 (on *The Graduate*), a longer one with screenwriter Leigh Brackett in 1975, and a much shorter one in 1966 with Norman Mailer. Macklin also interviewed directors and stars, such as John Wayne in 1975, maybe their biggest catch. (Wayne later wrote the editor, “You caught me in print as no one else has. Thanks, Duke” (qtd. Macklin xii)). There were other new start-ups about the time we commenced publication. I had published a piece in *Film Society Review*, a magazine founded in New York City by Bill Starr, whose intention was to show youngsters how to go about film journal production. His idea was to start up *Film Society Review* and to publish it for five years; *LFQ* pretty much copied his format. Part of our “mission,” as I understood it at the time, was to provide an intelligent forum for knowledgeable reviews of current literary adaptations, such as the splashy *Great Gatsby* adaptation, directed by Jack Clayton in 1974, scripted by Francis Coppola, and starring Robert Redford and Mia Farrow. We hoped to provide the same kind of lively space for literary adaptations that *Cineaste* and *Jump/Cut* (a radical journal that was unapologetic about its tabloid/ newsprint format) was doing for political films.

Finding the right path was not easy for us. We were looking for current adaptations (like *The Graduate*, for example) but also willing to cover “classic” cinema. We were not as “academic” as *Cinema Journal* (though I had studied film under the then editor, Richard Dyer McCann), but we were not so “popular” as *Films in Review*. When we went to the Popular Culture Convention in St. Louis in 1975, we met the editors of yet another new journal, *The Journal of Popular Film*, founded at Bowling Green University in Ohio, employing a format that very much resembled ours, though it eventually morphed into a much larger magazine format when it was later taken over by Heldref Publishing and given a new title:

The Journal of Popular Film and Television. Since then it has been swallowed up by Taylor and Francis. I can remember chasing each other around corridors asking the Big Question from *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969): “Who are those guys?” They were, we soon learned, Mike Marsden, Sam Grogg, and Jack Nachbar, newly appointed editors of *The Journal of Popular Film*). And new magazines kept coming. Peter Lehman at Ohio University put together a fine magazine in an odd format worthy of its title, *Wide Angle*. Another excellent journal emerged from an academic seminar devoted to character in novels and film, initiated by Gerald Duchovnay at Jacksonville University, later based at Texas A & M University—Commerce, *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities*, which is still going strong. Lloyd Michaels at Allegheny College founded *Film Criticism*. All of these journals tended to be more focussed on theoretical issues than *Literature/Film Quarterly*.

Perhaps the closest relative to *LFQ* was *Film & History*, edited out of Bloomfield, New Jersey, by a friend of mine, John O’Connor, who taught history at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, and whose “Historians Film Committee” established close and professionally useful ties with the American Historical Association. During the 1990s, John was forced by ill health to leave his editorship of *Film & History*, which ultimately passed to Peter C. Rollins at Oklahoma State University and thence, a decade later, to Loren Baybrook of the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh. With each geographical change, the journal changed its format; now it seems to be less interested in historical issues and more in film history. The latest issue is entirely devoted (beyond film and book reviews) to a single essay by the celebrated film critic Laura Mulvey. The next *Film & History* conference is scheduled for Madison, Wisconsin, and will feature the film theorist David Bordwell as keynote speaker. But forgive this digression. I have long kept a gimlet eye on other film periodicals, since I used to write a column called “Periodically Yours . . .” that appeared in *American Classic Screen*, *LFQ*, and (however briefly) in *Filmnews* (an Australian publication). I have personally known and networked with the editors of nearly all of the film periodicals listed above.

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Q: You have suggested that journals such as Film and History have shifted their agenda somewhat from the days when it first appeared. Let's go back to the early Seventies: what was the major purpose of Literature/Film Quarterly at that time?

JW: To serve as a publication that might bring together like-minded people who were interested in problems of adapting literary sources to screens, large and small. We hoped to garner essays from thoughtful people trained in literature, theatre, film and the humanities. Many (perhaps most) of our contributors had affiliations to English departments or departments of foreign languages, although we did have some contributors from cinema studies and media or communications departments. But I have to admit that many colleagues in those latter areas tended to avoid our journal on account of its perceived lack of theoretical rigor. In truth film theory had not moved much during that decade. Robert Eberwein gives evidence of this in his *Viewer's Guide to Film Theory and Criticism*, published in 1979. Part I was devoted to "Pioneers" (including the Soviets Kuleshov, Pudovkin and Eisenstein, then Vachel Lindsay, Hugo Münsterberg, Béla Balázs, Rudolph Arnheim, Siegfried Kracauer, and André Bazin, the latter of whom certainly offered useful advice about adaptation); Part II covered journalists (James Agee, Robert Warshaw, Pauline Kael, Stanley Kauffmann, and Andrew Sarris), feminist writers Molly Haskell, Marjorie Rosen, and Joan Mellen), and structuralists Christian Metz, Noël Burch, and Peter Wollen). The advances in film theory did not come until the Eighties, and this turned out to be the face of the future.

Q: How did LFQ respond to their spreading influence? Do you think you still managed to attract a gathering of likeminded people interested in adaptation or did the journal's remit have to change?

JW: I think we held on to our core audience – the high level of subscriptions to the journal during that period proved this. Nonetheless I do believe that an over-emphasis on theoretical issues led to an imbalance in the academic agenda. Graduate schools paid less attention to cinema studies (which incorporates film history as well as cross-cultural analysis of the ways in which film is produced

and received in different contexts), and devoted their attention instead to theory-infused analyses. Theorists became lionized; it was more important to publish work that quoted particular authorities rather than to advance film research in more productive ways. This is why great critics such as Pauline Kael never accepted a teaching position, David Thomson explains in his forthcoming book *The Big Screen*, because “it was her opinion that if anything could ever kill the movies, it was academia. (353)” This is not to say that I believe all theory is “bad,” but I do believe that theoretical frameworks can sometimes prove constricting rather than enabling. Rather than looking at the way a film works, or how audiences respond to it, academics are more concerned to fit the text into a pre-ordained framework that completely overlooks the importance of cultural differences. I witnessed the theoretical storm clouds building as one decade replaced another. During the 1970s I became an invited member of the Society for Cinema Studies (SCS), thanks, perhaps (but how could I know for sure?) to Richard Dyer McCann, who knew me from his days in Kansas. (I wrote him a proper letter, back in the days when people wrote letters.) The first decade of membership took me to several interesting conferences at Temple, NYU, and the University of Vermont, and by the end of the decade, I thought I knew just about everyone worth knowing in the field. But the leadership of SCS changed and Tom Erskine and I cashiered out in the mid-1980s after a conference at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where there was a panel of editors of film periodicals, but neither of us was invited to participate. I think this was the culmination of what I said earlier: that *Literature/ Film Quarterly* was being marginalized because of its perceived lack of theoretical rigor. I hate to admit it, but I’m still bitter about that, for I had hoped that SCS could prove to be a broad church, accommodating colleagues with different research and/or theoretical agendas.

Q: *Let’s try and examine in a little more detail why adaptation studies was so marginalized in the Eighties and Nineties ...*

JW: I think you have to understand how film studies developed in the United States, as opposed to other territories. In

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1967, David Thomson informs us in his book *The Big Screen* (307) that “the National Endowment for the Arts set up the American Film Institute,” some 34 years shy of when the British Film Institute was established in London. Just as the BFI published *Sight & Sound*, so the AFI started its own organ, *American Film*, and in the very early 1970s the AFI also initiated its own AFI Education Newsletter. As luck would have it, I was one of their first contributors, asked to evaluate newly published film appreciation textbooks, such as Lou Giannetti’s *Understanding Movies* (1972), which in later editions became a sort of benchmark for film courses in America. The AFI had its own exhibition facility, the Jack Warner Theater, in the Kennedy Center and occupied office space in the upper reaches of that magnificent complex. One could feel pretty special just by being invited there, as I was. I reviewed Lou Giannetti’s book and Lou Giannetti later became a contributor to *LFQ*.

At that time in the Seventies film studies was a discipline accommodating academics from many different intellectual backgrounds. Giannetti published *Godard and Others: Essays on Film Form*, which would seem qualification enough, but his graduate degrees were in English literature from the University of Iowa. Another *LFQ* contributor, Charles J. (Chuck) Maland, author of the iconic *Chaplin and American Culture* (1989) and the Twayne monograph *Frank Capra* (1980) was trained in American Culture at the University of Michigan (MA and PhD). Back then film Studies scholars came from many other disciplines, because graduate studies in film scholarship were only just getting started. Richard Dyer McCann, erstwhile Editor of *Cinema Journal* and an officer of SCS, was trained in history at Harvard. Frank Manchel, author of *Film Study: A Resource Guide* (originally published in 1975) held an EdD, in the College Teaching of English from Teachers College, Columbia University.

Q: And what about your own background?

JW: As for my own training: an English BA from Indiana University, Bloomington, and graduate degrees from the University of Kansas (an MA thesis on James Joyce, followed by a five-year research

fellowship in analytical bibliography and Shakespeare, concluding in a doctoral dissertation examining the disturbing cinema of the Academy Award-winning British director Peter Watkins, completed 20 years later). Meanwhile, I both took and audited cinema studies courses, and I ran (organized, publicized) the International Film Series at Kansas and also the KU Film Society. I met King Vidor (a friend of Dr. McCann's) three times and Buddy Rogers (married to Mary Pickford) twice and Lillian Gish at Kansas and saw Jonas Mekas and Jean-Luc Godard there (before his American tour with *La Chinoise* collapsed). I also wrote a book with John Tibbetts on the film career of Douglas Fairbanks in 1977 and another (with Steven Philip Kramer) on the French film director Abel Gance in 1978. So, two books for the decade while teaching a full load and also maintaining an academic journal. Makes me dizzy to think of it now.

Q: So it seems that, once film studies became established in the Eighties and Nineties, it became increasingly professionalized, and hence did not like the perceived 'intrusion' of scholars trained in other disciplinary areas such as literature?

JW: I think this is largely true. When we could not find a way of working with the Society for Cinema Studies, we decided to run our own conferences through the Literature/Film Association, which worked fine until we linked with Film & History in Milwaukee, where we appeared to be disrespected again.

Q: So it seems that there's a certain degree of academic ring-fencing here; that film studies and adaptation studies are somehow incompatible. But don't you think that adaptation studies has managed to overcome such distinctions – after all, there have been numerous attempts to integrate film history, theory and adaptation.

JW: This may be true, but I still believe that *Literature/Film Quarterly's* remit has changed since I gave up the editorship in 2004. I still find many contributions to be spoiled by the kind of jargon and awkward writing that was characteristic of cinema studies'

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interventions two decades ago. A thick theoretical wedge, or, more accurately, several wedges, were driven between film and literary Studies in the run-up to the millennium. I remember reading a perfectly specious piece that seemed to argue that the old song from *Forty-Second Street* (1933) “Shuffle Off to Buffalo” was somehow a lesbian anthem and a diatribe against marriage (“Matrimony is baloney, she’ll be seeking alimony in a year or so, Oh, ohohoh, / First we gotta shuffle, shuffle off to Buffalo.”) And now I can no longer listen to a song I thought was great fun because of such theoretical frameworks.

Q: We’ve talked a lot about the ways in which film studies and adaptation studies developed in the United States. Let’s broaden our focus somewhat; in the Seventies and Eighties, were LFQ contributors mostly American, or did you have an international contributorship?

JW: Not to begin with, certainly. Michael Pursell from Nottingham was one of the first, as I recall. After we published his first treatments of Zeffirelli’s Shakespeare, we encouraged him to cover Branagh’s *Henry V* (1989), which he did remarkably well by using a distinctive gaming metaphor that might have been obvious to British viewers, but was not so obvious to American viewers. Wendy Everett from Bath began attending our conferences in Baltimore (hosted by Towson University) and agreed to join our editorial board. After Wendy Everett and Brian Neve helped us launch our literature/film conference at the University of Bath, we began to see more foreign contributors. Wendy had served on our Editorial Board for some time, so she had become a regular, whose work was much appreciated. We were getting submissions from Britain during the 1980s then from Europe during the 1990s.

Q: Did you consciously set out to market LFQ abroad, or did international libraries come to you?

JW: At first we thought only about the domestic market, hoping that enough academic libraries in America would be interested to

make us viable. At the time we started, we had heard that libraries would wait five years before subscribing to a new journal to have some assurance the journal would survive. Each year more and more libraries at prestige schools subscribed, and, eventually, international libraries began subscribing as well. I can remember being surprised to notice that we were mailing copies to over thirty countries abroad. But they came to us. I was also surprised when I dropped in to the offices and library of the British Film Institute in London and discovered the receptionist knew who I was.

Q: Looking at adaptation studies from this international perspective, don't you think there's cause for optimism? After all, the distinctions between film and literary studies which prevailed in American academia in the past might not prevail elsewhere?

JW: I think that's perfectly true. I'm not really sure how film studies developed in Britain, but what I do know is that when I went to Romania in 1994 and 1998, I encountered a very different spirit. Academics and learners were not embracing particular theoretical frameworks in the belief that they were "better" than others; they were just slightly wary of trying something new and different. After all, they had only recently emerged from a long period of colonization. This was the interesting part about the Romania experience; they were trying to *escape* colonization rather than trying to impose anything in a quasi-colonialist manner. When I came to the Republic of Turkey I found people ready to try something new and different, but this could have something to do with the academics and learners I encountered there. It was the same at Kuwait University, which seemed entirely open and welcoming, rather contrary to my expectations there.

Q: So, to look at the idea of "adaptation" in its broadest perspective, it seems that you believe that there are places where people are trying to adapt themselves to something new?

JW: That seems to be the case, yes.

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Q: Looking back over your career in adaptation studies, what do you think your major contributions have been, apart from founding *Literature/ Film Quarterly*?

JW: The answer is not entirely clear. I do not believe, for example, that I am entirely defined by the journal I edited. With my Romanian students, for example, I know I was actually able to change lives, since I was able to set up a five-year student exchange program between the Cuza University in Romania and Salisbury State to enable some of them to come to America to earn Master's degrees and to go on to PhD programs in America. One of them, Mihaila Moscaliuc, earned not only an MA and a PhD but an MFA as well and is now a published poet (her first collection, *Father Dirt*, was published in 2010) who is now director of the creative writing program at Monmouth University in New Jersey. To be part of her process of adaptation to a new culture, I think, was special, and gave me satisfaction.

With regard to *LFQ*, though, and over twenty years of conferencing with the Literature/Film Association, we provided a forum for the discussion of adaptation and larger ideas about the adaptive process. I was encouraged to see *LFQ* cited widely by Louis K. Greiff in his book *D. H. Lawrence: Fifty Years on Film* (2001), for example, and I am delighted by the success of two members of our Editorial Board: First, Linda Costanzo Cahir, whose book *Literature Into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches* (2006), was followed the next year by Tom Leitch's *Film Adaptation and its Discontents* (2007), a career-defining work, described by Indiana University's resident distinguished critic James Naremore as "One of the best books ever written on the topic of motion-picture adaptations" (qtd. Leitch). In that book Tom Leitch defined me better than anyone has ever done, as a sort of gadfly and enabler or perhaps a "whetstone" to borrow a Joycean metaphor (and I blush to quote him): "In thanking Jim, [...] editor of *Literature/Film Quarterly* for over three decades, I echo the thanks of dozens of scholars he has encouraged to take a closer look at books and movies [...] I remain convinced that Jim has worked harder than anyone else for a longer period to keep interest in adaptation studies alive, and I'm proud that, for nearly twenty

years, my own work has had the benefit of his midwifery” (Leitch 9). If such was my fate and function, I’ll gladly accept that judgment. At least I knew how to ask provocative questions and was part of the conversation.

Q: Many thanks for such a candid interview. One last question. If you were asked by someone – let’s say an academic who reads this journal – what the “point” of adaptation studies is, how would you answer? Why do you think it is such a popular topic of academic debate both in the United States and elsewhere?

JW: Your question deserves a pointed answer. Everything gets adapted to film and television these days, from the serious to the trivial: your favorite novel or stage play, your most honored politician or historical figure; and everybody has an opinion about the adaptation process, and if the story is somehow close to them, they want to argue about it. It’s been said that cinema can achieve effects that are beyond the reach of novelists, and that is true, although novelists can achieve effects that are also beyond the reach of the cinema. The question is; how effectively can those effects be directed towards a given end? Effective adaptations can both enlarge and amplify the “truth” of whatever is being adapted, such as the American Civil War, and slavery, a story that a majority of Americans will accept, but one that some Southern historians might reject. Now there is a “point” to be argued, but with difficulty because of a director’s incredible ability to orchestrate emotions to make his “point,” which is probably reflective of mainstream America and which will probably help to make Steven Spielberg’s forthcoming version of *Lincoln* a hit. Forgive this American example, but examples can be found elsewhere. This portrait of Lincoln will influence future generations who may know very little about the Civil War, just as Oliver Stone’s *Nixon* [1995] will set “in stone” future opinions about Richard Nixon and the dangers posed to American democracy by his flawed administration. The cinema is still a powerful medium capable of more than perhaps even critics understand. We all need to attend closely to how events and people are adapted to the screen if only to correct the public memory as needed.

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