

Jim Welsh (1938-2013): An Appreciation

Laurence Raw

I first encountered Jim on my first academic visit to the United States in 2002, when I attended the Literature/Film Association (LFA) Conference in Carlisle, PA. The environment seemed very familiar to me: downtown Carlisle has that homely feel characteristic of an English provincial town, while Dickinson College is sufficiently compact so that it does not feel intimidating to the visitor. I knew of Jim's reputation as the founder and co-editor of and one of the mainstays of the LFA. He had been kind enough to publish my first major academic article – a discussion of William Wyler's film of *The Heiress* (1949) – in the journal. Needless to say I was very apprehensive about meeting him for the first time.

I had no need to worry. One of Jim's major strengths as an editor and academic was the ability to make even the most timid of colleagues welcome. By the end of the first day I had not only been introduced to many of his close friends (John Tibbetts, Thomas Leitch, Don Whaley), but had been encouraged to ask questions at the end of most papers (a trait which I have not lost to this day). At the end of the event Jim asked me whether I wanted to become involved in one of his (stillborn) projects to collaborate on an encyclopedia for Facts on File, Inc. His capacity to identify and nurture younger talent was legendary; he launched the careers of many an academic, including myself.

Through the last two decades Jim had to accommodate himself to fast-changing theoretical developments in adaptation studies. Fidelity became a derisive term, superseded by more up-to-date concepts such as intertextuality and intermediality. I was never quite sure of the extent to which he welcomed these shifts – as a Shakespearean who studied under the wise counsel of Charlton Hinman, literary scholar and editor of the *First Folio*, he respected the authority of the source-text (especially if it formed part of the English literary canon). Jim often deplored the ways in which such texts were “disrupted” – his term, not mine – by filmmakers

trying to establish their reputations. Yet paradoxically Jim could be exceptionally broad-minded: one of his favorite recent Shakespeare films was Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), which in his opinion kept to the spirit if not the letter of the source-text, despite its dazzling visual style.

Jim had a wide range of interests within adaptation. Although primarily a Shakespearean scholar, he published on American drama and modern adaptation, and with Peter Lev produced *The Literature/Film Reader* (2007), one of the first major reference-books to appear within the discipline. This book quite literally has something for everyone, from the most dyed-in-the-wool supporter of fidelity studies to those who believe that cultures shape the way we understand what adaptation signifies. Jim understood the significance of inclusiveness; if adaptation studies, as well as any form of country studies such as American Studies are going to move forward intellectually, scholars should talk to one another rather than deriding one another's efforts. On the other hand he could be critical of work he deemed of inferior quality. I remember one dispute he had with a specific journal, where the authors of at least two books took exception to the comments expressed in his reviews. But Jim was not gratuitously malicious, or someone who jealously guarded his reputation. On the contrary he defended himself in such disputes by citing the dictum that criticism should have a moral purpose to encourage writers to produce more considered work in the future. This was part of his philosophy of inclusiveness.

Jim was not only an adaptation expert as well as a teacher of American and English Literature; he had an abiding love for Hollywood films of the classical era. In 1968 he encountered John Tibbetts at the University of Kansas, and the two of them became heavily involved in the university film society, where they brought big-name stars to the campus including King Vidor, Jean-Luc Godard and Jonas Mekas. Later on they were involved in the magazine for the National Film Society, an organization dedicated to bringing together lovers of classic Hollywood cinema from all over the United States. They not only managed to interview many stars – whose careers might have otherwise been forgotten – and publish these interviews in the journal, but they invited the stars to the Film Society conferences. Welsh and Tibbetts later collected much of this material in a three-volume anthology (*American Classic Screen: Interviews, Profiles, Features*), published in 2010. While reminiscing about this initiative, Jim's expression invariably altered; this was a labor of love as well as a valuable contribution to film history involving people from all walks of life, not just academics.

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As a teacher, Jim preferred traditional methods: the lecture was always preferable to the seminar and/or group activities. On the other hand he embraced new initiatives; we co-edited a two –volume anthology on *The Pedagogy of Adaptation* (2010) that incorporated pieces from a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives. Jim contributed a highly suggestive piece looking at the future of Shakespearean pedagogy in a fast-changing academic environment, in which “literature” as a self-contained discipline seemed under perpetual attack from cultural and/or film studies.

Jim worked extensively overseas. His two Fulbright stints in Romania were highly successful: some of the students he taught crossed the Atlantic to pursue graduate work and continue their careers in various fields. He visited Turkey twice: on the first occasion as a Fulbright scholar in my own institution where he had to deal with six highly motivated final year undergraduates. I well remember the way in which he sympathetically listened to their future plans while offering practical suggestions as to how such plans might be realized. In a culture where sound advice is often hard to find, his contributions were most welcome. When news filtered through about his passing, my Facebook account was filled with tributes. I only wish that Jim had been around to read them.

Jim’s personality was a fascinating blend of tact and outspokenness. Whenever Jim thought things were wrong, especially in a professional context, he said so – sometimes his comments would upset people, but any disputes were soon resolved. He understood the value of talking to people. I remember him as a supreme collaborator, providing inspiration for new ideas and/or initiatives. On one occasion at his house in Salisbury we were discussing adaptation studies in general. His wife Anne had retired to bed, leaving the two of us to share a glass of something. After going round in intellectual circles for a while, we suddenly came up with the idea of treating “adaptation” in much broader terms, not just relating to textual issues but involving all of us. In the next hour I watched Jim’s face gradually lighten as he warmed to the idea – a classic example of Piagetian adaptation in action. At the end of our discussion we felt like Higgins and Eliza in Lerner and Loewe’s *My Fair Lady*; we could have jumped up and sang “You did it!” to one another. However neither of us could sing very well, and we’d have probably woken Anne up anyway.

Despite living so far apart – in the United States and Turkey – Jim and I worked closely together for over a decade. I value the fact that he came to conferences to support me (just as I did for him), by asking provocative

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questions and spending long evenings discussing adaptive matters. Anne usually came with him; she was very good at deflating his or my flights of academic fancy, if they became too far-fetched. At the end of his life, he and I shared a particular bond; Jim not only served as a member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of American Studies of Turkey*, but both of us suffered from cancer and were thus able to share our experiences.

Jim deserves to be remembered not just as a scholar, teacher and academic impresario (launching the careers of others) but as a mate – to use the colloquial term beloved by my family. Wherever you are, Jim, I raise my glass to you.

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