READER 1

A Recent History of the Association of Adaptation Studies

Deborah Cartmell, Jeremy Strong and Imelda Whelehan

Deborah Cartmell

Now in its 12th year, we can wholeheartedly confirm that the Association of Adaptation Studies is here to stay. In its short history, it has had conferences all over the world: Leicester, Atlanta, Amsterdam, Berlin, York, Istanbul, Växjö, St Augustine, London and Oxford, returning to Leicester once more in 2017. Its most significant strength has been in its facilitation of interdisciplinary conversations, bringing scholars together from all over the world, for the first time, in disciplines such as Media Studies, Translation Studies, History, Cultural Studies, Film, Radio, Game Art, Linguistics and many more, in collaborative and fruitful exchanges. It exists and thrives within disciplinary boundaries.

Beginnings

Deborah

The Association developed from my experience teaching at De Montfort University, Leicester, UK, particularly with my colleague, Imelda Whelehan. Having been asked upon starting a new job, to teach a module on Shakespeare on screen by Imelda who was in post before me, I was initially dismayed that this would be the end of students’ experience of the “real” Shakespeare. Coming from a background in early modern poetry, what constituted “English” for me had to be written down and I held a deep distrust of showing film clips in lectures and seminars: it seemed to me to be diluting the subject, ignoring the written word, even cheating. Looking back, I owe so much to Imelda whose overwhelming presence swept me into an area that, on my own, I would never have dared to enter and who unwittingly led me to found the Association of Adaptation Studies.

Imelda Whelehan

Adaptation studies shaped my academic career in unexpected ways. The prequel to Deborah’s memories of inheriting a Shakespeare on Screen course goes like this: as a fresh young academic with my first permanent position and employed because of my strengths in feminism, critical theory, and women’s writing, I was handed a course on Shakespeare with less than a month to prepare the curriculum. Had Deborah been appointed before me, this would have been a different story altogether, but with only my undergraduate Shakespeare and a theater colleague and co-tutor who lent me Graham Holderness’ *The Shakespeare Myth* (1988) and taught adaptation in performance, the germs of Shakespeare on Screen was born. I muddled through and then was able to pass something adequate into Deborah’s much more capable hands.

Deborah

I became an overnight convert to Shakespeare and film and, a few years later, turned my course into my first monograph, *Interpreting Shakespeare on Film*, which I presented at a conference that marked the 100th anniversary of Shakespeare on film, hosted by José Ramón Díaz-Fernández in Malaga in 1999. It was clear to me then that Shakespeare on Film had managed to become a firmly established area within the English curriculum, with colleagues working in a range of areas: Shakespeare and popular culture (Richard Burt), silent Shakespeare (Judith Buchanan), Shakespeare films in production (Russell Jackson) and histories of Shakespeare dramas on screen (Kenneth Rothwell). The conference consolidated the arrival of Shakespeare and Film in English Studies (where it has remained firmly planted), but adaptation studies was still, at the end of the 20th century, if anywhere, only on the edges in most departments of English and Film Studies. Imelda and I decided to expand our literary/film courses and offered an undergraduate module, Studies in Literature and Film, and an MA Film/Fiction with Ian Hunter. In 1996 we persuaded Pluto to publish an annual volume of Film/Fiction essays, beginning with *Pulping Fictions: Consuming Culture across the English Media Divide* and ending with *Retrovisons: Reinventing the Past in Film and Fiction* in 2001. In the meantime, Imelda and I, inspired by our teaching, published a collection of essays, *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*, in 1999 in which we attempted to challenge the hierarchy of “literature” over “film” and the underlying assumption that the book would always be better.

Creating The Association

Deborah

It occurred to me, while working outside of Shakespeare studies, that there was an enormous amount that the new brood of adaptations scholars could learn from the field of Shakespeare and film, especially from the work of cultural materialists, such as Graham Holderness and Shakespeare and popular cultural studies scholars, such as Douglas Lanier. It was also the case, and still is, alas, that adaptation studies (unlike Shakespeare and film) resides in a gap between film and literary studies, seemingly too conservative for film scholars and too popular for specialists of English, as Timothy Corrigan has so persuasively argued in his contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen* (2007). It is a discipline that has doggedly remained in a gap between subject boundaries, such as literature and film, film and drama, video games and film and literature and radio, to name but a few, but a gap which at the same time productively “trouble[s] and open[s] disciplinary boundaries” (2007, 42). Its mission to go beyond the literature/film divide distinguished it from the excellent Literature/Film Association, founded in the US almost 20 years earlier.

Boldly, out of the blue, breaking down some disciplinary boundaries on my own, I wrote to Brian McFarlane, Douglas Lanier, Timothy Corrigan, Kamilla Elliott and Eckart Voigts and asked them if they would like to form an association with Ian Hunter, Imelda Whelehan and myself: they said “yes.” I then applied for a Leverhulme Award, asking for funding for three years of annual meetings across the world with accompanying conferences. In 2006, I received the award, and our meetings and conferences began with a meeting in Leicester in 2006 with memorable keynotes from Sarah Cardwell, Kamilla Elliott and Robert Giddings, the first meeting of the Association of Adaptation Studies. The Association became a registered charity – 1133677 – soon after this initial meeting. Imelda and I had also gained the support of the distinguished adaptor, Andrew Davies, who agreed to be patron of the Association and who has delivered a number of talks at Association events over the last 12 years, championing us in the early days with the observation: “As a practitioner, I find it rather thrilling to be the object of scholarly investigation!” Recently, Andrew Davies has donated his correspondence and scripts to De Montfort University’s Centre for Adaptations (Home of the Association), all of which have been digitized while we continue to acquire more materials, including three of Andrew’s old computers. The Association’s network of scholars grew to include Thomas Leitch, Joyce Goggin and R. Barton Palmer. On becoming a charity, one of the first things we did was change the name from the “Association of Literature on Screen Studies,” as at this point members were adamant that we should not privilege literature over screen, or indeed imply a simple one-way trajectory, or restrict ourselves to only two media, and this commitment to the recognition of media fluidity is at the heart of the Association’s approach to adaptations.

Imelda

With the synchronicity that often seems to happen in academic life, we were not the only people thinking about the relationships between literature and film in the 1990s. Adaptation studies was emerging by the mid-1990s with new critical strengths. Brian MacFarlane’s *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* was published in 1996 – the same year that we published *Pulping Fictions* (Cartmell, Hunter, Kaye, Whelehan); Thomas Leitch’s article on “Twelve Fallacies in Adaptation Theory” was published in 2003, as was Kamilla Elliott’s *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*; in 2004 Robert Stam’s and Alessandro Raengo’s three anthologies were published; in 2006 Julie Sander’s *Adaptation and Appropriation* emerged and 2007 was a bumper year, with books by Christine Geraghty, Linda Hutcheon, and Thomas Leitch. As editors of the five Pluto ~~annual journals~~ annual collections we encountered a melting pot of critical and theoretical perspectives, where film scholars made an uneasy peace with their literary counterparts. When we started those volumes, there was a degree of scepticism about what a literary scholar could bring to film, or why studies in cinema would care about adaptation, continuing what George Bluestone observed as the creative tensions between the two art-forms, as “overtly compatible, secretly hostile” (1957, 2). In my first forays into adaptation studies my experience was that film colleagues where overtly hostile, only to find themselves much later to be secretly compatible.

For me, following in the tailwind of Deborah Cartmell’s inspiring plans (for many years, I would blanch when she opened a meeting with, “I’ve got an idea…”), this is how the Association was born: at the fulcrum of personal interests, collegial discussions, a growing body of substantial scholarly work that urged a new direction in thinking and the happy chance of research network funding. The Pluto film/fiction collections had proved that a great deal of people shared our interests, if not the luxury of using this work in their teaching. In those early conferences many a paper was derived from a single chapter or section in a PhD or an element of a project still located firmly in its discipline; now adaptation is taught and researched in its many forms across the arts, humanities and beyond.

Jeremy Strong

My involvement with AAS dates back to the summer of 2006 when I met Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan at a conference on adaptations in Lorient, Brittany, where they were giving a keynote presentation. “Would I be interested in coming to their own event, at De Montfort University in Leicester, in a couple of months’ time?” I was, and have been involved with the Association ever since, enjoying every subsequent annual conference and being involved in the organization of some of them.

Through the mid/late 1990s, I had been working on a doctoral thesis on adaptation at the University of Stirling. In retrospect, I came to realize that my own early research into this area – focused on film adaptations of Austen, Hardy and Forster – had taken place in the period immediately prior to the great florescence of new thinking and publications on adaptations that really took off at the turn of the millennium and which continues to the present day. My literature review had not, for example, included Imelda and Deborah’s 1999 collection (which would undoubtedly have enlivened proceedings) and the following years in the field would see the steady accrual of important new volumes, a missing reference to any one of which could justifiably be identified by an examiner as a major omission. That list is now too extensive to encompass here, but books by inter alia Thomas Leitch, Robert Stam, Christine Geraghty, Linda Hutcheon, Kamilla Elliott, Julie Sanders, and Timothy Corrigan, as well as further work by Deborah and Imelda have all added immeasurably to the stock of ideas now available to researchers. The Association’s annual conferences have also been made rich by the contributions of almost all of these figures (we still await a contribution from Robert Stam and Linda Hutcheon!) presenting ideas-in-progress, with many of the most significant publications in our field being preceded by outings and discussions at AAS.

Teaching

Imelda

My early career in academia was a fortunate one for two main reasons: 1) young academics schooled in critical theory were reasonably in demand; 2) not working at an “elite” university meant that part of the job was finding new ways to teach textual analysis to people who didn’t always come with the cultural capital that high school qualifications are supposed to provide.

After my initial scepticism about what literature on screen studies might be contributing to knowledge I found its deployment in the classroom and in my own work liberating as contingent upon my professional life. As junior academics in the UK during a time of exponential growth of the academic community into the “new” universities, this afforded us certain freedoms to take our research in new directions. Finding the usefulness of cultural materialism in teaching literature to those whose backgrounds lent a certain ready scepticism to the ways cultural value could be seen as inscribed in classic literary texts and deployed in particularly ideological ways, the step towards a series of critical positions that dismantled the “literature/film divide” was a small one.

Teaching what we would later describe as adaptation studies was, from Deborah and my point of view, a practical way to raise confidence in students with skills in textual and critical analysis but lacking the conventional means to articulate them. Teaching shaped our future research, as Deborah suggested earlier: our conversations about adaptation and narrative exchange continued and developed. With the freedom to devise courses that some of our younger colleagues might envy today, the undergraduate and later postgraduate adaptations courses grew until we were eventually able to attract funding for PhD students in the field – future Association co-Chair Jamie Sherry being one of our successful graduates.

Jeremy

Teaching adaptation studies to undergraduate and postgraduate students for the last twenty years has, in my case, largely been a matter of including one or two weeks of content expressly focused on adaptation in introductory modules/units on film theory or critical approaches to the moving image. Although liberally – and not infrequently, covertly – supplemented by an adaptation-inflected slant to other modules addressing, among other things, genres, film movements, and the film industry, this has generally fallen short of the concentration upon adaptation studies that I might have preferred. Although students have overwhelmingly responded in positive terms to the ‘triangular’ discussions that adaptations provoke between source-texts, subsequent versions and bodies of criticism and theory, there has been a lack of available curriculum space in awards that combine filmmaking with theoretical approaches. In this respect, I was fortunate to enjoy a period as external examiner for the specialist MA Adaptations at De Montfort University where staff and students were able to pursue a sustained interest in adaptation, producing much innovative and original work.

More recently, at my own institution, the return of English as an undergraduate degree, starting in 2017, has meant the development of at least two new modules in which an adaptation studies approach is foregrounded and will likely prove instrumental in bringing together students drawn from varied academic backgrounds and with a plurality of reading interests.

Conferences and the Journal

Deborah

After founding the Association, I contacted Oxford University Press and asked them if they would be interested in a journal – which would be connected to the Association – and, although fully aware of the excellent *Literature/Film Quarterly*, we wanted something that would broaden the field of adaptation studies, to include adaptations in a range of media, richly illustrated with articles ranging between 3-10,000 words. Timothy Corrigan, Imelda Whelehan and I were given a contract to edit *Adaptation* in 2008, a journal that has gone from two to three issues a year and is home to some of the most influential articles in the field. Among the most notable essays are the prize-winning, Clare Parody, “Franchising/Adaptation” (2011), Thomas Leitch’s “Adaptation, the Genre” (2008a), and “Adaptation Studies at a Crossroads” (2008b), Simone Murray’s “Phantom Adaptations: Eucalyptus, the Adaptation Industry and the Film that Never Was” (2008) and Christine Geraghty’s “Foregrounding the Media: Atonement (2007) as an Adaptation” (2009).

Many of the articles in the journal began as conference papers and were inspired by the annual conferences and the numerous events hosted by the Centre for Adaptations at De Montfort University, such as “Children’s Film and Literature” (2010), “Adaptation and the New Technologies” (2011), “Adapting Historical Narratives” (2012), “Adapting Dickens” (2013), “From Theatre to Screen and Back Again” (2014), “Biopic Adaptations” (2015) and “Dance and Adaptation” (2016).

Jeremy

A decade of AAS conferences has charted and contributed to a significant expansion of adaptation studies. This growth has been constituted both in the proliferation of adaptation-oriented texts (including, at journal level, not only Adaptation but also, since 2008, *The Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance*) and in a much wider sense of what might be considered adaptation at all. Whilst there remains a steady throughput of analyses of specific instances of “literature-on-screen” – typically film versions of novels – any delegate at an AAS event would now be able to range over a much wider terrain of adaptation than that phrase suggests. Relationships between texts, their producers, and their users, spanning many different media and including the operations of contemporary multi-platform franchises as well as archival and other research into some of the earliest forms of what might be considered adaptive practice, may all be encountered.

“Doing” adaptation, as well as un-packing and theorizing it, has been a consistently valuable strand of AAS conferences since the beginning. Writers, adapters, producers and film-makers have regularly featured at events. Their contributions have consistently served to remind us that adaptations emerge, not merely out of contexts shaped by “art” or authorial vision, but out of circumstances formed from industrial and economic determinants. Major figures who have spoken at AAS include novelist and screenwriter David Nicholls (York, 2012), novelist and screenwriter Deborah Moggach, (Amsterdam, 2008) and director Kit Monkman (Oxford, 2016). Relatedly, producer Jonathan Powell and screenwriter Andrew Davies “in conversation” at the London 2015 conference – adroitly steered by Imelda as chair – will long be remembered by all delegates for the unparalleled breadth of their recollections, merged with intermittently scurrilous details culled from productive lifetimes at the very pinnacle of work in adaptation.

The Adaptations ‘boom’

Jeremy

Whilst research into television, and specifically TV adaptations, was underway before the current adaptation studies “boom,” more recent developments in technologies, as well as major shifts in commissioning/production and viewing patterns have meant that television (even if not actually watched on a television set!) has come to occupy a more prominent place. Cinema in the second decade of the 21st century is far less certain of any superiority in a presumed hierarchy of audio-visual media. Box-sets, binge-watching, and the increased tendency for many of the most interesting adaptations to take the form of expensively-produced “Quality” television has meant that the focus of those working on adaptations is now as likely to be upon *Game of Thrones*, *Penny Dreadful*, *Sherlock*, or *House of Cards*, to mention just a few, as upon film versions of canonical or popular novels. In parallel, the opportunities afforded by new and inexpensive film-making technologies and for the sharing of materials on the web has meant that scholars of adaptation may also attend to works produced with conventional commercial structures, to – for example – fan-based adaptations and associated engagement with source materials. This collision of domains has been fruitfully scrutinized and discussed at AAS conferences, with analyses of the bewildering variety of ways in which readers/viewers may respond to, (re)create, and make-over the worlds of Harry Potter, *Star Trek*, *Lord of the Rings* and others.

Imelda

If the first AAS conference had a predominantly British flavour that was to change very rapidly, with subsequent conferences in the USA and mainland Europe. This was substantially encouraged by the existence of other conferences such as the one in Lorient organized by Shannon Wells-Lassagne and Ariane Hudelet, where we first met Jeremy Strong, Kamilla Elliott and Joyce Goggin. Latterly more colleagues from the Asia-pacific region have joined the Association and, speaking from my current Australian location, such connections have enriched the reach of both the Association and journal. Adaptation studies still has its many hues depending on disciplinary, cultural and institutional influences, but delegates share a real passion for the subject, even while they may argue forcefully about what it can be – whether discipline, encounter or something as yet not captured in some adaptation critic’s taxonomy.

The Association is successful because of the diversity of its most stalwart members: in terms of our “proper” disciplinary locations, and our doctoral or early research, most of us should never have met. There are many other factors that have facilitated the growing ease by which we can communicate, not least institutional and “industrial” ones, such as the funding of exploratory research by foundations like the Leverhulme Trust; the greater acceptance of inter-and cross disciplinary work in government-led research assessment exercises; the easy accessibility of online materials; the utility of DVD versus VHS technology in the classroom; and the wider range of publication opportunities in three high-quality journals in the field. Also, because of its newness and agility, adaptation studies never feels like a “crowded field”: it is impossible to predict many of the topics that will be presented at conference and I doubt many return from an annual Association event feeling like they have heard it all before.

Mapping the Field

Imelda

Subject-based Associations are delightful because they bring together communities of people who may, in their own institutions, feel isolated and disconnected. We are fortunate in having had some marvellous hosts who give each event a very individual stamp: if this was a different sort of “history” I might dwell on those meals and late-night gatherings, the excursions, and a James-Bond-like departure at dawn from a certain Turkish island … The Association is, above all, a collegial place where new collaborations are made and where articles are devised and tried out on a discerning audience. Members of the long-standing US-based Literature/Film Association often mix with the AAS and vice versa, and this level of engagement and collegiality will ~~hopefully~~, it is hoped, long sustain two annual events. While the community embraced by our several journals and two associations may suggest agreed terms, core knowledges and principles, the ways in which that research is imparted and discussed remains dispersed. Like gender or feminist studies, adaptation studies lends itself to inter- and cross-disciplinary themes. Predictably there will be healthy disagreement in such an environment and the intellectual exchanges which comprise adaptation studies are always ripe for reinterpretation or repudiation, but a lack of “a presiding poetics” as Kamilla Elliott put it, characterizes the field.

I have spent a long time in adaptation studies and have learned that it is too literary, too filmic, lacking rigor, too elitist, too preoccupied with debased forms of culture, too reliant on case studies, too left-wing and postmodern, not adept enough at close reading, too theoretical, too naïve. In short it contains multitudes of sins. Its supposed inadequacies make it both a fascinating and frustrating area to study and to teach: and it is highly rewarding to be able to reassure students that in talking about this topic there is a high probability they still have something original to say.

However, given that adaptation critics are variously located theoretically and geographically, there is not just a concern with finding the appropriate space of knowledge; it is as if we need a topography of the field so that we can navigate the “crossroads” that Thomas Leitch felt we had reached in 2008. A crossroads might suggest hope and forward momentum, as well as a time of choice; but Leitch imagines adaptation studies as also a “prisonhouse” from which only the most flexible scholars, like Christine Geraghty or Linda Hutcheon can escape. Foucault might have something to say about the space from which Leitch is claiming to speak – can he be outside the prisonhouse? As all Leitch fans know, he is adaptation criticism’s harshest critic – the one who anatomizes its shortcomings whilst having become essential reading in its journals, anthologies, conferences, and for teaching purposes. Writing a year later, Eckart Voigts-Virchow (2009) explores the cultural divide which obstructs healthy dialogue between Anglo-American proponents of adaptation studies and European devotees of intermediality. He envisages them as patrons of two rival pubs with quite different theorist “landlords” emphasizing the power and to some extent, arbitrariness of the reign of a dominant thinker or theorist. Disciplinary maps of old are inadequate to characterize the nature of some of our inter- or trans-disciplinary exchanges, and long may the Association facilitate such work.

The future

Imelda

Much as I have valued my term as co-Chair with Jeremy Strong (who is, incidentally, an accomplished map-reader) I am also aware that all areas of study with a critical mass of publications and a relative amount of success at gaining academic attention are going to generate their own gatekeepers, those who have the authority to make judgements about the way the field is taking shape. For this reason if not others it is exciting and appropriate to keep the positions within the Association rotating. As I welcome new scholarship into adaptation, I sometimes wonder whether I have a preferred vision of adaptation studies going forward, one that is more fixed than I would like to admit? As co-editors of *Adaptation* Deborah and I have also recently taken steps to attract more perspectives to the journal through the Associate Editor role and through the commissioning of special issues. Our current book and film review editors, Monika Pietrzak-Franger and Kyle Meikle are both promising scholars who we encountered at our conferences and whose work is contributing so strongly to the field.

For some colleagues the success of adaptation studies as witnessed by its two associations is tantamount to an assertion of disciplinary status. For me, adaptation studies is not a discipline, but has “disciplinary” tendencies; perhaps this is because as a fresh academic in the 1990s it was an escape from the disciplinary core of English. For me still the best understanding of adaptation studies is as a place of encounter, a place haunted and inflected by institutional realities, and particular academic cultural habits acquired at the tail end of the 1980s “theory wars,” and evolving rapidly. It is a place of encounter, because we all write and learn as best we can whilst teaching, administering, applying, reviewing and so forth, and we may or may not see it fitting or possible to always align ourselves with all of the adaptation studies tribe. Some of us who join the Association do so because we suspect that it releases us from other kinds of prisonhouses; and if my own institution in the 1990s was somewhat beyond the pale when compared to what counted as “excellent” in traditional Humanities research, our academic networks and outputs were all the better for it.

Deborah

I was fortunate to be succeeded by Jeremy Strong as chair, then co-chairs Jeremy Strong and Imelda Whelehan and currently co-chairs Jamie Sherry and Judith Buchanan. Each chair brings with them their own interests and plans for the Association. My hope for the Association is that it will continue to bring scholars together who would not normally meet, to forge new ways of approaching adaptations and to break down barriers that prevent subjects from engaging with each other. Adaptations as I have argued, should be celebrated for what they were originally attacked for being: “the art-form of democracy” (Cartmell 2012), appealing to all walks of life; and as scholars we should boldly uncover what hitherto has been deemed unworthy of study – the historical, industrial and economic dimensions that continue to make adaptations popular.

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