JUNE/JULY/AUG 2007

Best Adaptations

BY FRANCINE PROSE, JOY PRESS, GEOFFREY O'BRIEN, ROBERT POLITO, LUC SA
ZACHAREK, STEVE ERICKSON, MOLLY HASKELL, ARMOND WHITE, J. HOBERMA
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FRANCINE PROSE

HOUSEHOLD SAINTS (Nancy Savoca, 1993) Perhaps it's narcissistic, but I h
favorite adaptation is of my novel. By now, the book and the film have so melc
Lili Taylor and Judith Malina when I think of the grandmother and granddaught

WISE BLOOD (John Huston, 1979) This adaptation of Flannery O'Connor's nc
Harry Dean Stanton as the blind preacher.

THE TIN DRUM (Volker Schlöndorff, 1979) The little boy is amazing, and the e
is just as upsetting as it is in the novel.

THE GODFATHER (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) Obviously, but by now it's cc
happened the other way round: the novel as novelization.

THE MARQUISE OF O (Eric Rohmer, 1976) One of the most beautiful films ev
most graceful, faithful, and satisfying adaptations— in this case, of the Kleist
might think, unadaptable.

Francine Prose's most recent novel is *A Changed Man* (HarperCollins, 2005).

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JOY PRESS

AN ANGEL AT MY TABLE (Jane Campion, 1990) Campion crams three autobi
Zealand writer Janet Frame into this film, succeeding in part because she does
things tidy, allowing the author's desires, humiliations, and triumphs an amorpl

BEAU TRAVAIL (Claire Denis, 1999) J. Hoberman once described this film as
western interpreted by Marguerite Duras." Actually, Denis adapted/alchemized
Billy Budd, bringing a startling sensuality and mystical intensity to this French

MCCABE & MRS. MILLER (Robert Altman, 1971) The film may be based on a
Naughton, but its sun-blind visuals and artfully unvarnished performances mag
literary origins. Unsentimental and naturalistic, in classic Altman style, McCabe
rhapsodic dreaminess he rarely reached elsewhere.

THE VIRGIN SUICIDES (Sofia Coppola, 1999) In Jeffrey Eugenides's debut n men pick apart the memory of a household of distant, doomed girls. But the op Coppola's film immediately signals a different perspective, as the camera drifts Lisbon sisters' inner sanctum (their bedroom) and palpably takes up residence

WALKABOUT (Nicolas Roeg, 1971) Loosely spun out of James Vance Marsha kids stranded in the Outback and rescued by an Aborigine youth,Walkabout is almost wordless requiem for the Australian wilderness, which in Roeg's renderi innocence itself.

Joy Press is the culture editor of *Salon*.

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GEOFFREY O'BRIEN

GREAT EXPECTATIONS (David Lean, 1946) The gold standard for "respectfu classics—a relatively new concept in 1946. It's still seamless.

THE ADVENTURES OF ROBINSON CRUSOE (Luis Buñuel, 1952) So spare it 1912, this manages to hew closely to the tone of Defoe's book while constantl enlarging it. The scenes of anguished solitude are incomparable.

THÉRÈSE DESQUEYROUX (Georges Franju, 1962) Franju curtailed his Surre this strictly faithful adaptation of François Mauriac's dour novel of sin and rede to uncannily personal effect. I include this partly in the hope that someone will

THE AGE OF INNOCENCE (Martin Scorsese, 1993) Not so much an adaptatio book itself, with layers of visual commentary added in embellishment and cour musical film right from its operatic opening.

PERSUASION (Roger Michell, 1995) / THE WINGS OF THE DOVE (Iain Softle influence of long-form BBC versions of nineteenth-century novels made the '90 literary adaptations. Michell's is the least glamorous and most persuasive of A updates James just enough to demonstrate that he was really Hitchcock's goo

Geoffrey O'Brien is the author of *The Phantom Empire: Movies in the Mind of t* (Norton, 1993) and *Castaways of the Image Planet: Movies, Show Business, P* (Counterpoint, 2002).

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ROBERT POLITO

FANTÔMAS (Louis Feuillade, 1913–14) For cruel phantasms and everyday sp era would surpass the five Fantômas serials Feuillade directed from the Marce novels. Devotees span from Gris, Apollinaire, and Cocteau to Ashbery.

SHOOT THE PIANO PLAYER (François Truffaut, 1960) A gorgeously claustro Goodis, and Truffaut's prickliest film.

TIME REGAINED (Raoul Ruiz, 1999) / THE CAPTIVE (Chantal Akerman, 2000 Proust, each impossibly smart and touching.

EFFI BRIEST (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1974) Theodor Fontane's novel was a favorite of Beckett's, and in this fierce, elegant film by Fassbinder, you recognize why.

BLOODY MORNING (Shaohong Li, 1992) Li shifted García-Márquez's Chronicle of a Death Foretold to a rural Chinese village for a devastating inquiry into "community."

Robert Polito directs the Graduate Writing Program at the New School. He edited the 1997 Library of America volumes *Crime Novels: American Noir of the 1930s and 40s and Crime Novels: American Noir of the 1950s*.

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LUC SANTE

GREED (Erich von Stroheim, 1924) We'll never know the splendor of its original fortyseven reels, but the ten we have left are pretty spectacular. Where Norris's novel McTeague is a patient enumeration of consequences, Stroheim's picture is a raging fever dream.

NANA (Jean Renoir, 1926) Zola's novel anticipates the movies in many ways, although most would require camera stunts—such as liquid shifts between close-up and deep focus— not available in the silent era. Still, Renoir translates the book with a tonal exactitude that would be impossible for anyone else.

THE LOVE OF JEANNE NEY (G. W. Pabst, 1927) A future Nazi tool adapting a novel by a future Stalinist tool (Ilya Ehrenberg)—this hardly sounds like the makings of one of the most visually ravishing movies ever, but so it is. It helps if you ignore the nonsensical plot.

BIGGER THAN LIFE (Nicholas Ray, 1956) Berton Roueché was the New Yorker's medical chronicler, and his account ("Ten Feet Tall") of a case of temporary insanity caused by cortisone and ACTH poisoning was turned by Ray into his most corrosive—and hallucinatory—portrait of American family life.

POINT BLANK (John Boorman, 1967) Boorman took a tough, stripped-down revenge thriller (The Hunter, by Richard Stark, one of Donald Westlake's pseudonyms) and added psychedelia, TVcommercial imagery, and consumer-culture fatalism to make the preeminent American New Wave film— but just how many of those were there?

Luc Sante coedited with his wife, Melissa Holbrook Pierson, *O.K.You Mugs: Writers on Movie Actors* (Pantheon, 1999). A collection of his criticism and essays, *Kill All Your Darlings: Pieces 1990–2005*, will be published this year by Yeti Publications.

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STEPHANIE ZACHAREK

THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING (Philip Kaufman, 1988) Kaufman and cinematographer Sven Nykvist render Kundera's heady ideas in vibrant visual terms. The quiet eroticism is as vivid as the Prague skyline viewed from a terrace, or the sight of a beribboned piglet stealing the show at a wedding ceremony.

JACKIE BROWN (Quentin Tarantino, 1997) This version of Elmore Leonard's Rum Punch doesn't exactly follow Leonard's rhythms: Tarantino is a wordy filmmaker, while Leonard's prose is most economical. But the director stays true to the writer's energy and cantankerous generosity and uses it

to fashion a magnificent setting for Pam Grier, the movie's pearl beyond price.

LOLITA (Stanley Kubrick, 1962) Kubrick knew—as Adrian Lyne didn't—that approaching the twentieth century's greatest novel on bended knee was the surest way to desecrate it. Instead, he captured everything that's wicked, funny, and moving about Nabokov's sharp-eyed examination of postwar America and of the maddening unpredictability of human desire.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS (Alfonso Cuarón, 1998) Cuarón's verdant reimagining of Dickens is so alive that it honors the author's timelessness in the best possible way. The film recognizes that the erotics of memory are far more powerful than the things—and the people—we can actually touch.

THE LEOPARD (Luchino Visconti, 1963) This gorgeous, mournful adaptation of Lampedusa's elegy for a lost era is a haunted palace of a movie, decked out in faded velvet and tarnished gilt. Yet Burt Lancaster's performance is anything but ghostly: As Prince Don Fabrizio Salina, his dignity is indelible.

Stephanie Zacharek writes about film and music for *Salon*.

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STEVE ERICKSON

DOUBLE INDEMNITY (Billy Wilder, 1944) Raymond Chandler, a hard-boiled moralist, disapproved of the harder-boiled nihilism of James M. Cain, from whose novel he wrote the script. He didn't have much use for Wilder either, who coadapted and directed—Chandler drafted a list of demands that Wilder had to accept in order for the two to collaborate (one was that Wilder couldn't wear his hat in the office). Before this film, the guys who ran the studios were besotted with notions of "taste," adapting Tolstoy and English classics, but with this story of adultery and murder, noir was born.

THE THIRD MAN (Carol Reed, 1949) Graham Greene's novella was more a glorified treatment, embellished in the film by, among others, Orson Welles, who wrote the "cuckoo clock" Ferriswheel soliloquy. What does it mean that the author named the immoral trafficker in black-market penicillin after himself (his actual first name, Henry, becoming Harry, and Greene becoming Lime)?

THE GODFATHER (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) Of course everyone will pick this, but sometimes something is obvious for a reason.

THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING (Philip Kaufman, 1988) To anyone who calls any novel "unfilmable," this is how it's done. Kundera's story of the 1968 Czech revolt is broken down, then rebuilt as a more epic, passionate version—did I say sexier, too? A picture is worth a thousand words, if the picture is Lena Olin naked in a bowler hat.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS (Peter Jackson, 2001–2003) I was never a huge fan of Tolkien's books, or of pure fantasy literature—I don't do elves—but a second viewing of the twelve-hour extended DVD version convinces me it's the classic everyone says. Although, with all due respect to Hugo Weaving,David Bowie (who wanted the role) as the Elf Lord would have been a nice touch (as long as we're doing elves).

Steve Erickson's novel *Zeroville*, due from Europa this fall, is about the movies. He also writes about film for *Los Angeles* and is editor of *Black Clock*, published by CalArts.

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MOLLY HASKELL

THE MALTESE FALCON (John Huston, 1941) Huston's amazing cast give a remarkably literal rendering of the dialogue's joyous verbal dance, and in particular, the three villains played by Sydney Greenstreet, Peter Lorre, and Elisha Cook Jr. are so uncannily perfect we feel Hammett somehow wrote them into existence.

HIS GIRL FRIDAY (Howard Hawks, 1940) Normally I wouldn't include an adaptation of a play—already halfway to a screenplay—but Hawks's wildly unusual twist/transformation was to take the Hecht-MacArthur buddy-buddy newspaper comedy and turn it into a male-female love story well suited to the personalities of Cary Grant's ruthlessly charming editor and Rosalind Russell's feisty, no-nonsense career woman.

PRIZZI'S HONOR (John Huston, 1985) Huston's downbeat quality and mastery of wildly varying tones preserves the mood of Richard Condon's novel and goes one better. There is something both deeply funny and primal in the spectacle of Jack Nicholson's hit man, a mordant blend of comedy and tragedy, bedeviled and befuddled by the two sides of Eve, played by Anjelica Huston and Kathleen Turner.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS (David Lean, 1946) Dickens is one of the most cinematic of writers (Eisenstein pointed out that his novels contain the whole grammar of film technique in miniature), but this movie remains in a league of its own and superior to almost any adaptation of a "classic" you can think of.

THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS (Orson Welles, 1942) More deeply felt than Citizen Kane,Welles's melancholy paean to a fragile and vanishing Midwestern aristocracy is, even with the butchered ending, a superb rendering of Booth Tarkington's book. Welles immerses himself in the world of Tarkington, so similar to his own: a childhood and young adulthood cushioned by privilege, rent by Oedipal jealousies.

Molly Haskell is the author of *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (University of Chicago Press, 1987) and *Holding My Own in No Man's Land: Women and Men and Film and Feminists* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

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ARMOND WHITE

WAY DOWN EAST (D. W. Griffith, 1920) Made when people were still alive to the novel as a popular melodramatic form, Griffith's loose adaptation of Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles is a tribute to the possibilities of taking fiction to heart and a lesson in how literature can become cinema with a sense of visual immediacy and aesthetic freedom.

THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS (Orson Welles, 1942) Welles had done a radio version of Tarkington's novel, but this film has the freshness of something newly inspired. Visually, the richest movie I know— it gives the same pleasure as written language and the same depth as kinetic art.

VIVRE SA VIE (Jean-Luc Godard, 1962) Godard's most gothic movie takes Poe's story "The Oval Portrait" and makes it uniquely modern. The director even recites the text—a literal adaptation— in the middle of this Parisian story of a prostitute's travails, which also becomes a confession about Godard and his wife, actress Anna Karina, thus enlarging Poe's relevance exponentially.

MASCULIN FÉMININ (Jean-Luc Godard, 1966) Godard again, breaking unwritten rules with a documentary-style feature on the political and romantic habits of youth in the Pop era. Fact is, it's based on Maupassant's short story "Paul's Mistress" and is perhaps the ultimate proof that adaptations need not be dull-wittedly slavish.

THE COLOR PURPLE (Steven Spielberg, 1985) Spielberg's bildungsroman and still the only Hollywood

movie about a black lesbian, pan-Africanism, and the legacies of Griffith, Fannie Hurst, Zora Neale Hurston, Douglas Sirk, John Ford, and, of course, novelist Alice Walker—all in one postmodern package.

Armond White is a film critic for the *New York Press*. He has been chairman of the New York Film Critics Circle and won the ASCAP–Deems Taylor Award for music criticism.

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J. HOBERMAN

ABISMOS DE PASIÓN (Luis Buñuel, 1954) Transposing Wuthering Heights to a Mexican hacienda, pushing mediocre actors and melodramatic montage to the max, Buñuel produced a great, great Surrealist film.

CLASS RELATIONS (Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, 1984) The ascetic duo's grindingly literal-minded version of Kafka's Amerika really does defamiliarize the whole notion of the Kafkaesque.

KAPITAL (Sergei Eisenstein, late '20s) Marx's magnum opus isn't a novel (though it's been compared to Dickens), but then, Eisenstein never realized his adaptation. It's the idea.

MARS ATTACKS! (Tim Burton, 1996) Does subliterary count? This is surely the best movie ever made from a series of bubblegum cards.

VINYL (Andy Warhol, 1965) I think it's fantastic that the Factory paid Anthony Burgess for the rights to make A Clockwork Orange and then produced this fabulously desultory version, which features Gerard Malanga doing the watusi and provided Edie Sedgwick her film debut.

J. Hoberman is the senior film critic for the *Village Voice* and the author, most recently, of *The Dream Life: Movies, Media, and the Mythology of the Sixties* (New Press, 2003).

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BILGE EBIRI

THE CONFORMIST (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1970) Bertolucci intended to adhere to the linear narrative of Moravia's psychosexual potboiler about fascism but wound up with one of the most daring structural gambits in film history—a story that repeatedly turns in on itself, like a nightmare.

BARRY LYNDON (Stanley Kubrick, 1975) A remarkably accurate adaptation of Thackeray's novel about the rise and fall of a duplicitous Irishman in eighteenth-century England. But by simply changing the point of view—turning the hero's firstperson narration into a seemingly omniscient, though subtly fallible, third-person voice-over— Kubrick transformed a picaresque into a heartbreakingly ironic meditation on destiny.

THE LEOPARD (Luchino Visconti, 1963) Lampedusa's tale of Garibaldi-era Sicily may have been a classic lament for a bygone era, but Visconti proved, much as David O. Selznick did with Gone with the Wind years before him, that some stories play better on-screen—especially when adapted by a filmmaker with a keen eye for texture and detail.

THE CHOCOLATE WAR (Keith Gordon, 1988) Robert Cormier's novel of conformity and resistance at prep school was a childhood favorite for many of a certain generation. The icy precision of Gordon's

version largely dispenses with the book's juvenile nihilism, replacing it with ethereal sadism: It's both a coming-of-age story and a horror film.

HAMLET (Kenneth Branagh, 1996) Can it even be called an adaptation? By keeping the text intact, Branagh thumbed his nose at those (including his earlier self) who jump through a million hoops trying to reinvent Shakespeare. It didn't click for some, but for my money, it's the most compelling version of the Bard the screen has ever seen.

Bilge Ebiri writes a column on adaptations for *Bookforum*.

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DRAKE STUTESMAN

THE KILL-OFF (Maggie Greenwald, 1989) Greenwald darkens Jim Thompson's novel—not easily done—about small-town hatred and sharpens his characters, especially the two leading women, one a housebound gossip and the other a traveling stripper. Employing vignettes and an agitated sound track, Greenwald shows the strength and the weakness in greed. The mise-en-scène surpasses Thompson's and adds up to a spookier thriller.

FIRES ON THE PLAIN (Kon Ichikawa, 1959) Ichikawa's film somehow floats with the same interiority as Shohei Ooka's first-person narrative. The director skillfully uncovers the fragile, gruesome world of people in the Philippine jungle at the end of World War II, where a consumptive Japanese soldier wanders like a bodhisattva. The pinnacle of antiwar films.

BODY DOUBLE (X) (Brice Dellsperger, 2000) A brilliant reconstruction by French video artist Dellsperger of Andrzej Zulawski's torrid 1974 film L' Important c'est d'aimer, which was adapted by Christopher Frank from his 1972 novel La Nuit américaine. Mouthing the original sound track and appearing in various costumes, drag artist Jean-Luc Verna acts out all of the roles within a cut-up, fragmented, digitalized visual narrative. Remarkable as both an artwork and a perspective on art.

FANTÔMAS (Louis Feuillade, 1913–14) Feuillade's spare, violent serialization of the popular 1911 fiction by Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre (which James Joyce called "Enfantomastic") about a relentless underboss and his gang in an unprepared Parisian world, creates a pervasive sense of danger that outdoes The Sopranos for criminal reality and is frightening to watch even today. THE

SWIMMER (Frank Perry, 1968) Cheever's surreal psychological allegory of a man's breakdown, set in the wealthy estates of Westchester County, unfolds without explanation, but the film focuses on the rural landscape that the swimmer, played by Burt Lancaster, continually walks through. With extreme simplicity, Perry allows the scenery to reveal the man's delusions.

Drake Stutesman is editor of *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media.*