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Adaptation as Emigration

Different Paths to Americanization in Miljenko Jergović's *Buick Rivera* and Goran Rušinović's Film Adaptation

Abstract

The following essay compares the novel Buick Rivera (2002), written by Bosnian Croat author Miljenko Jergović, and its 2008 film adaptation by Goran Rušinović. The novel's main plot, dealing with the accidental meeting between a Bošnjak (Bosnian Muslim) expatriate and a Bosnian Serb war criminal in the US, seems unchanged in the film version. However, the director modifies the original setting and several details in the characters' background stories. Analyzing these changes and the story's cinematic rendition, we comment on the two authors' varying approaches to topics such as war, ethical responsibility, emigration, and assimilation in post-9/11 American society. The analysis furthermore develops the idea of the film adaptation process as a unique form of transmediatic and transcultural emigration, in which the plot migrates from one medium to another and from one culture to another with specific effects.

Keywords: *Adaptation studies, Jergović, Rušinović, Bosnian emigration to the United States*

Referring to Spike Jonze's iconic film *Adaptation* (2002),¹ Robert Stam describes the processes characterizing filmic adaptations as evolutionary transformations that help source stories 'survive' in the cinematic medium, adjusting them to changing cultural environments and tastes (2005, 3). These dynamics can also be compared to those of transnational migration, where the newcomer often has to adapt their original identity to a different national context in order to survive in it. This may eventually lead to developing a new, 'hybrid' personality, defined both by the past experiences linked to the previous homeland and by those lived in the new country. According to this perspective, the viewing experience of the adaptation for someone who already knows the source story is not so different from what

¹ Written by Charlie Kaufman, the movie ironically employs the Darwinian concepts of adaptation and "survival of the fittest" not only to depict the changes endured by source narratives in their transitions to the screen, but also Hollywood's competitive ethos and the social anxieties of the protagonist, a Kaufman's homonymous alter ego played by Nicolas Cage (Stam 2005, 1-3).

Edward Said described as the ‘contrapuntal awareness’ of exile, in which habits and activities in the new environment “inevitably occur against the memory of those things in another environment” (2000, 186). In this analogy, the ‘homeland’ stands for the printed pages of the written, verbal-oriented medium. The ‘new country’ represents the filmic dimension, in which the original story needs to adjust to specific multi-sensorial (visual, verbal, acoustic) and production demands (Stam 2005, 11).

In order to emphasize the value of adaptations as intertextual constructs, marked by their explicit connection to previous artistic creations and necessarily considered both as a derivative *and* an autonomous work (Hutcheon 2006), we have decided to treat them as forms of *emigration*, that is, to employ a term that stresses the act of leaving and is principally used in reference to the country one comes from (“Must an ‘Immigrant’” in *Merriam-Webster*). Our view of ‘adaptation as emigration’ suggests that adaptation’s primary origin resides in a different *oeuvre*, conditioned by the distinct features and codes of an entirely different mediatic form.

In her theoretical study, Linda Hutcheon analyzes numerous cases of transcultural adaptation where original storylines *actually* migrate to different ethnocultural, linguistic, and chronological contexts, often acquiring a new political valence (2006, 145). However, the case we analyze in this essay does not fit perfectly into this type of adaptation; it seems to avoid those re-shaping procedures that take place in the adapters’ culture, which Hutcheon designates with the anthropological term “indigenization” (2006, 150). Instead, we would describe Goran Rušinović’s 2008 film *Buick Riviera*, the transposition of Miljenko Jergović’s novel *Buick Rivera* (2002), as a peculiar kind of *emigrant* adaptation. Such a choice is due to two reasons: first, because this category applies to the respective life experiences of the writer and the director, both listed as authors of the movie’s screenplay; second, because the novel’s core narrative (which remains practically unaltered in the film version) deals with the chance meeting of two Bosnian *emigrants* in a town in the north of the US.

The story’s two protagonists, a Bošnjak (Bosnian Muslim) cameraman who relocated to the US before the conflicts in the 1990s and a runaway Bosnian Serb criminal, seem unable to rid themselves of traumas and mutual ethnic suspicions related to the events in their home country. Both the novel and the film insist on the main characters’ psychological and behavioral extraneity to the aseptic small-town American background, underlining the failure of their respective attempts to integrate into it and the enduring emotional consequences of their displacement. The movie is mainly a product of the same cultural environment to which Jergović’s novel belongs. This particular circumstance does not favor the ‘indigenizing’ recontextualization hypothesized by Hutcheon. However, thanks to a few specific changes to the

original plotline and the composition of the film crew, made mostly of Yugoslav emigrants who settled in the US, Rušinović's adaptation provides more verisimilitude to the American context, which is only vaguely evoked in the book, making the original story 'emigrate' in both a metaphorical and real way.

In order to analyze this process, we will avoid the dichotomic biases linked to the so-called "fidelity criticism" (McFarlane 1996), which have traditionally been used to limit the adaptation's value and assess its more or less 'faithful' adherence to the adapted text. Instead, our critical perspective will follow the suggestions proposed by some of the most prominent contemporary adaptation scholars, such as Brian McFarlane and Gordon E. Slethaug, as well as the already quoted Stam and Hutcheon. In particular, we will take into account McFarlane's statement about film adaptations being examples of "convergence among the arts," whose intertextual connections and plot structure may move beyond the sole source novel; their making is in fact also shaped by external factors linked to production and the adapters' interpretation of the story (1996, 10; 21). We will also consider Slethaug's view of postmodern cinematic adaptations as "intertextual freeplays," which reject a hierarchical allegiance to source texts and re-elaborate them within an independent framework of new, multiple sources (2014, 31-32). Slethaug's perspective is linked, in this regard, to our initial metaphor of 'adaptation as emigration,' since it draws from the postmodern perception of ethnic identities as fluid and pluralistic concepts, 'hybrid' rather than monolithic entities (2014, 29). Our analysis tackles this particular transposition as a unitary process, influenced by the authors' diverse sensibilities and experiences as emigrants, as well as by the different chronological periods and cultural realities involved in that adaptation.

1. Miljenko Jergović's *Buick Rivera* (2002): an internal emigrant's perspective on outward migration

One of the most prolific contemporary authors working in the 'former Yugoslavian' region, Bosnian Croat writer Miljenko Jergović was born in Sarajevo in 1966 to a family of so-called *kuferaši*.² In 1993 the writer left his besieged home city and relocated to Zagreb, Croatia. There

² This slang term, derived from the German word *Koffer* (suitcase), was originally used in a derogatory manner for the emigrants who settled in Sarajevo from other regions of the Habsburg monarchy in the late 19th century. In his most autobiographical works, such as the short story collection *Mama Leone* (1999) and the family saga *Rod (Kin)*, (2013), the author has often employed this colloquialism to represent both his maternal family's mixed ethnic background and the fluid, pluralistic perception of his own identity.

he often clashed with the local establishment about the government's belligerent policies, nationalist-inspired language reforms and revisionist historiographic policies.³

In his narrative and essayistic production, Jergović has repeatedly expressed his extraneity towards ethnocentric discourses dominating post-Yugoslav realities, describing himself as a stranger in the fragmented context that once constituted his 'homeland.' Davor Beganović has presented the writer's position as that of an internal "exile" or "emigrant" (2014, 44; 55), determined not so much by a geographical displacement as by the irremediable alterations imposed by the war and nationalist politics to the linguistic and cultural environment of his origins. The author has also remarked on the eminently psychological and temporal characteristics of this condition in a letter to Sarajevo poet and prose writer Semezdin Mehmedinović, who emigrated to the United States in 1996:

I find that my identity and sense of belonging [...] make sense only if I see myself as an immigrant⁴ or to be more precise, a refugee. Edward Said has a simple definition of a refugee: a refugee is anyone who cannot go home. My home [...] has really disappeared given that it was not lost in space but in time, a time that I can no longer inhabit. [...] Nomadic feelings exist even when a person does not move. Everything else leaves, and disappears. (Jergović and Mehmedinović 2010, 551)

This particular feeling animates the topics and the stylistic features of Jergović's diversified narrative work, which includes an impressive number of short stories and novels. The recurring notion of displacement and the author's rejection of postwar monoethnic identity constructions foremost inform his usage of a 'hybrid,' multilayered language, characterized by typical Bosnian elements and different regional dialects and sociolects that go beyond the standardized Croatian idiom (Udier 2011, 17).

These linguistic features accompany the protagonists' frequent choice of feeling isolated and displaced after the traumatic collapse of socialist Yugoslavia, which affects their everyday lives' most prosaic and concrete details (Udier 2011, 46). The attention paid by Jergović to local and material aspects of ordinary reality, in addition to the ironic (often almost polemical) overtones characterizing his depiction of both pre-war and post-war times, led many critics to associate his work to the movement known as *stvarnosna proza* (translatable as 'realist, concrete prose') which dominated the Croatian literary scene in the late 1990s. However, the author's realist

³ For a general overview on the socio-linguistic situation in post-Yugoslav republics, see Greenberg 2008, 119-122.

⁴ Una Tanović's translation here seems to avoid the distinction between *emigrant* and *immigrant*, as the original employs the former term's equivalent: "među emigrantima" (Jergović and Mehmedinović 2009, 59).

narratives distinguish themselves through the unique affective relationship that ties many of his alienated anti-heroes to old, commonplace things (Brown 2001). These mirror their owners' psychological condition of 'relics' from an extinguished society and act as illusory shelters from the violence of the changed external world.

This symbiotic connection, bonding *things* and their owners in a shared fate of decay and solitude, characterizes many of the short stories included in Jergović's debut collection *Sarajevo Marlboro* (1994) and is fully developed in the successive trilogy informally known as *On Men and Cars*. This loose narrative cycle, composed of the unconnected novels, or "novellas," according to the author's terminology, *Buick Rivera* (2002), *Freelander* (2007) and *Volga, Volga* (2009),⁵ focuses on isolated outsiders who obsessively seek consolation and emotional stability in the quasi-fetishistic liaisons with their old vehicles. These cars assume the cultural role that Bill Brown defines as proper of *things*: they are "not just the physical determinants of our imaginative life but also the congealed facts and fantasies of a culture, the surface phenomena that disclose the logic or illogic of industrial society" (2003, 4). Indeed, this infatuation seems to derive primarily from the automobiles' capability to embody the social values and consumer utopias of past industrial eras, thus ironically underlining the protagonists' pathetic disorientation in the present times.

However, the sentimental anthropomorphizing of cars and their perception as safe havens from the disrupted reality behind the windshield seem to be more global and pervasive topics. As David Laird pointed out by freely referring to Leo Marx's essay *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), a large part of American literature in the second half of the 20th century presents an Edenic image of the car, described as "a sheltering space, free from the conditioning, shaping influences which beset the fallen world" (1986, 245). The main inspiration for the series, which re-elaborates many of the fundamental 'on the road' literary and cinematic genre conventions, seems to have originated from the author's fascination with the particular aesthetic and emotive values that pervade cars,⁶ as he stated in a 2003 interview: "for me the automobile is a mixture

⁵ The trilogy is unavailable in English, while it has been translated in Italian, French, German, Polish and Spanish. English translations of Jergović's works include the collections of short stories *Sarajevo Marlboro* and *Mama Leone* and the novels *Ruta Tannenbaum* and *The Walnut Mansion*. Russell Scott Valentino's translation of the novel *Rod (Kin)* has recently been published by Archipelago Books. A complete list of Jergović's translated works can be found on the author's website: <https://www.jergovic.com/bio-bibliografija/>. *Buick Rivera* was published by Zagreb editor Durieux in 2002, and re-edited after Rušinović's film adaptation, both in Croatia (Naklada Ljevak, 2009) and in Serbia (Rende, 2009). Quotations in this article are taken from the Serbian edition and are translated by Marija Bradaš.

⁶ This interest also seems to have motivated Jergović's participation in Željko Mirković's documentary film *A Long Road Through Balkan History* (2010), where he drove an old Yugo

between a live being, a work of art, a machine, and transmitter of my own psychology” (Dugandžija 2003; quoted and translated by Milas 2011).

The fetishization of cars and their inclusion within the novellas seem to be the principal factors linking the three books, which are independent in terms of characters, storylines and location. While the trilogy’s successive installments are situated in the more usual Bosnian or ‘former Yugoslavian’ geo-cultural context⁷ (thus dealing with the recurring semi-autobiographical notion of internal displacement), *Buick Rivera* is an exception in Jergović’s habitual choices of setting. Besides being the author’s debut in longer prose fiction (until then he had only published poetry, short stories, and newspaper columns), the novel thematizes outward migration. It is set in an unusual location in the United States in order to develop a dark satirical meditation about concepts like postwar displacement, clashing ethnic identities, cultural assimilation and moral responsibility. In what follows, we will show how Rušinović’s film adaptation deepens and universalizes the book’s original message by translating it for the screen and the American cultural reality.

1.1 Buick Rivera: an American novella with multiple identities

Unsurprisingly, the first installment of Jergović’s narrative trilogy on men and cars finds the automobile at its thematic center. The automobile prompts the narration and is a metaphor for the protagonist’s fluid identity; both these functions are equally crucial in the adaptation. According to Davor Beganović, the car has the role of connecting what cannot be connected, “two Bosnian exiles in North America, a Bošnjak and a Serb, two people with diametrically opposed biographies who find themselves in the same narrative flow thanks only to the supernatural power of contingency. Their contact with the help of a broken car is the result of a paradox used to generate the fabric of the narrative text” (2016, 55-56).

The author explicitly defines the genre on the front page of all parts of the trilogy. This unusual peritextual intervention reflects Jergović’s insistence on a thematic and structural level of the genre rather than on its length. The novella is usually defined as a prose fiction of medium length, shorter than a novel and longer than a short story but, more than the shortness of the narrative, what distinguishes this genre from a novel is its limited time and place of narration, a sparse cast of characters, and, above all, the single plotline that involves an unexpected

automobile through former Yugoslavia with Serbian writer Marko Vidojković. The film can be seen with English captions at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ediNpwwdr274>.

⁷ While *Freelander* deals with a Bosnian Croat expatriate driving his old 1975 Volvo back to postwar Sarajevo, *Volga, Volga* tells the story of a devout Muslim military driver caught in a web of lies, crime and fake identities on the eve of the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s.

turning-point event. In the case of *Buick Rivera*, the narration does take place in a limited space and time—one (winter) day in one place (Toledo, Oregon), while the unprecedented turning point is the encounter of the protagonist Hasan Hujdur, a Bosnian emigrant to the USA, with Vuko, his fellow countryman, a Serbian emigrant and war criminal. There are three other characters: Hasan's wife and his two male friends, all emigrants to the United States. Nevertheless, through the frequent use of flashbacks, the narration also explores other places (Bosnia) and times (pre-war and wartime Yugoslavia). In addition to the main narrative thread, the text develops other thematic features, such as male friendship, the exoticization of Bosnia in the USA, the role of old, misused things, Islamophobia, etc. It is important to note that once the text is transposed into a filmic language, only the main plotline is retained, while the number of characters is further reduced.

The plot is told in the third person by an omniscient narrator. The narration itself occasionally becomes an object of extradiegetic remarks. From the outset of the novel, the author brings up the problem of unreliable narration: after introducing the protagonists—that is, the man (Hasan Hujdur) and the car (Buick Rivera)—and their unique, affectionate relationship symbolized by Hasan's freeing of the car from the snow by hugging it, the author immediately launches into ironic observations on a possible external observer/narrator:

If someone could see him, and they couldn't, because who would walk around at minus twenty degrees and watch what people do, they would swear that this man loves his silver Buick Riviera, the first series from 1963, more than a man should love a car, that he probably doesn't have children and is certainly no native of Oregon. Only a foreigner is so indifferent to winter, and a foreigner who came from *some distant cruel country where bodies are not easily frozen and people never fall ill*. [...] In everything—or in most of it—a casual observer would have been right only if he had been there and seen what followed after the hug. (Jergović 2009, 5; emphasis added)

Bosnia is exotically defined as 'some distant cruel country' but from a perspective of an imaginary, casual observer. The exoticization of Bosnia is also recalled in the paragraph where Hasan speaks of his origins to his German wife:

These are different people. Wild, and at the same time tame. Hard, yet softer than the pillow you lie on. Cruel, and so tender that every song is so arranged that a man sheds a tear with it. Bosnians sit by the river, and all Bosnian rivers, except the one after which the country is named, flow from north to south, Bosnians sing softly to each other, drink and eat as if every bite is their last, and try not to cry. (Jergović 2009, 100-101)

Jergović points out how exoticization is not performed only by so-called Westerners (from the outside) but is a process that actively involves natives who tend to represent their origins in a way that would be otherwise unacceptable. The extradiegetic comments warn the reader about different types of self-narration: “It is a pleasure to watch the natives from outside as we watch animals in cages, but it is no less a pleasure to be watched” (Jergović 2009, 102). In Hasan’s case, self-narration (which here corresponds to self-exoticization or, more precisely, self-Balkanization) determines his fate by obliging him to invite over a stranger who helped him twice. By doing differently, he would go against Bosnian customs and therefore also his Bosnian identity, which is supposedly characterized by having no difficulty in inviting passersby to their home for a coffee or lunch. Collective identity prevails over the individual one, depriving Hasan of his freedom. The performance of his identity is made impossible in an environment where too many things would have to be explained. He chooses to leave for good without having become an American and without having found space for his past identities. By doing so, he makes it possible for Vuko to create false stories about him being an Islamic terrorist, thus reducing his identity to his family’s religion and taking advantage of the Islamophobia that was particularly strong in the aftermath of 9/11 (the novel was published in 2002). In Rušinović’s adaptation, all references to unreliable narrations are absent. This is due partially to the film being released six years after the novel, thus making the memory of 9/11 less impactful. However, the main reason for this absence is that the movie focuses solely on the main plotline and the conflict between Hasan and Vuko. By omitting these references, Rušinović softens Jergović’s hyperbolized ending and delivers a more linear plot. This is the primary reason for considering Rušinović’s work as autonomous, despite the obvious similarity to the source text.

The novel develops a broad range of topics dealing with recurring themes in Jergović’s work, such as the question of identity, the Bosnian war, individual and collective memory (Lešić-Thomas 2004), the poetics of things. Through a long list of apparently random objects that Hasan throws away in a garbage bag before leaving for good, Jergović stages an interesting interplay between material culture and multicultural identity. These objects include a shoebox with family photos and postcards from his homeland; everyday items (personal photographs, his parents’ death certificates, other documents) and quite specific ones (a wall clock in the shape of a golden lily, a canvas flag of the Velež Football Club, the old Yugoslav war booklet, a collection of labels from Dalmatian and Herzegovinian wines). The fragments of the past serve as a condensed biography of the main character, a metaphor of his complex identity that creates a very personal and symbolic geography, in which the city of Mostar occupies the central place. References to the Mostar Football Club Velež through the flag and the T-shirt with the image

of Duško Bajević (the player who essentially only played for the Mostar club and was called ‘the prince of Neretva’), a photograph of Mostar’s Stari Most, and a plaster cast of the Počitelj tower evoke precise territories of nostalgia. This Bosnian-Herzegovinian identity, expressed through a wall clock in the shape of a golden (otherwise called ‘Bosnian’) lily, is mixed with his Yugoslav identity, conveyed through references to several typical Yugoslav products like wrappings of Kraš chocolate, movies that speak about a shared Yugoslav past (*Samo jednom se ljubi*) or promote the partisan struggle (*Valter brani Sarajevo*), or through some iconic figures of Yugoslav culture like Bosnian caricaturist and illustrator Zuko Džumhur and Croatian writer Miroslav Krleža. In these memories, America is present in records by Johnny Cash, a photograph with John Huston’s signature and a map of New York. Among the three, only Huston’s autograph creates a stronger and more personal connection to American identity and Hasan’s job as cameraman.

By throwing out these objects of remembrance that had value only for him, Hasan is determined to erase every trace of his presence in Toledo, Oregon. However, there is no place to get rid of memories. As Jergović ironically states, it is not even possible to recycle them properly, according to our society’s rules, which wants everything divided by type and is intolerant of materials of a mixed nature.

He dragged the garbage bag a hundred meters behind him before realizing he had nowhere to throw it out. He would have to go to the ecological containers in the center of the city and sort each memory according to the strict principles of environmental protection. He was not ready for such a thorough cleansing of his life. Do Polaroids taken in Herzegovina, in front of his birth home count as wastepaper or plastic? And what about things that have materials in them for all five containers, but are neither clean paper, glass, metal, plastic, or fabric? In an ideal world, they would belong to every place, but in a world where everything is made of one piece, there is no place for those made of multiple materials, and they do not have their own container. (Jergović 2009, 166-167)

This highly metaphorical passage reveals Jergović intimate position to the question of identity and a possible container (homeland) for people made of more than one material (identity). In an interview published in the journal *Sarajevske sveske*, speaking about the concept of homeland, Jergović states:

by and large it no longer exists in reality, nor do the homelands of the vast majority of people who survived the 1990s without embracing some kind of nationalism, preferably the majority’s. But even such fictitious, virtual, non-existent homeland obliges me to remain loyal to it. If it weren’t for that, I would have become a native of Zagreb a long time ago; I would have redesigned and renovated myself like an apartment and settled with a different mentality and calmer memories. (Kontić-Jergović 2006, 97, our translation)

Rather than a concrete space, *Buick Rivera's* America is a metaphor created through frequent allusions to the US cinematic imaginary and to European cinema that gives a marginal, bizarre view of American reality, such as that provided by Percy Adlon's 1987 classic *Bagdad Café* (Pančić 2002). The author states in an interview with Davor Pavlović: "That is not America, that is the end of America, the end of the world" (Pavlović 2009). The author's metaphorical approach to his setting can be found in particular in the references to the Coen brothers' film *Fargo* (1996): a small town covered by snow, foreign-sounding surnames, and struggles with an automobile are all common motifs the two works share.⁸ Another element found in both the novel and *Fargo* is mentioned in Scott Lee's analysis of the Coen brothers' movie (2002, 61-62), where the violent appropriation of a vehicle represents the metaphoric appropriation of the other (2002, 73). This is perfectly applicable to Hasan's conflict with Vuko. Moreover, this core event of the novel subverts one of the most recurring tropes of early American films about cars, the 'happy accident,' that is, the car crash functioning as *deus ex machina*, commonly leading to happy outcomes such as marriages or reunions (Smith 1987, 198). In Jergović's perspective, the incident leads to a decidedly unhappy settling of accounts with the protagonists' past.

Besides the previously mentioned functions in the novel, the Buick Rivera car is an artifact of Americana given that it embodies American identity, an objectified fulfillment of American life (Hey 1986, 198). In this sense, the struggle between Hasan and Vuko over the car represents, among other things, a struggle for a successful integration into American society. In Hasan's verbal duel with Vuko, ethnic identities clash; Hasan falls victim to Vuko's projection and is forced to reduce his identity to merely being Muslim in post-9/11 US. Vuko's social rise in America represents the Islamophobic link Jergović detected between Bush's propaganda and Serbian and Croatian nationalists, prone to seeking parallels between the Taliban and Bosnian Muslims. Written a few days after 9/11, Jergović's essay "Can a Man be Muslim?" states:

We have little understanding of America when it preaches human rights, democracy, and coexistence. Still, as soon as America begins to use the language of force, it becomes near and dear to us. If unbridled hatred is a trend of globalization, we, like similar small nations and small tribes, will gladly join in and, like parrots, repeat phrases from CNN. (Jergović 2001)

Comparisons between Sarajevo in 1992 and New York in 2001 reveal the inspiration behind the representation of the American setting in the extremely Bosnian story that unfolds in the pages

⁸ In her review of Rušinović's adaptation, Nataša Milas (2011) particularly appreciates Rušinović's use of "white snow imagery as his main trope, as it reveals the frozen state of these émigrés, particularly Hasan, whose inability to move on in the new land, his suspended career, his frozen marriage, all are reflected in the images of the winter cold."

of *Buick Rivera*. In the same essay, Jergović expresses his fondness for US mass culture, in which he grew up. For Jergović, America is defined by its cultural myths and consumerist utopias, best represented through the automobile as sacred object.

The West's wrath and hatred will be enjoyed by the vast majority by people who were not educated and raised on the American culture. [...] To us who grew up with American films and slow blues, in visual, sound and spiritual identification with that vast dream-producing land, in the shadow of its striped flag and with a thousand fascinations coming across the ocean, wrath and hatred should not be close if we have correctly understood ourselves and our life interests. (Jergović 2001)

2. Goran Rušinović's *Buick Riviera* (2008): an emigrant adaptation?

While Jergović's case has been described as that of an 'internal emigrant,' Goran Rušinović's can be described according to the more traditional definition of emigration. Born in 1969 in Zagreb, he first studied painting and later trained as a filmmaker in Denmark and New York City. He permanently relocated to New York in 2003 due to his marriage to designer Olga Grlić, daughter of famed Croatian director Rajko Grlić and a longtime resident of the city; since then he has worked mostly as a storyboard artist and film teacher.⁹

Rušinović debuted as a director with the feature film *Mondo Bobo* (1997), which gained cult status in postwar Croatia due to its gritty representation of marginalized youth and its unique visual style characterized by aggressive editing choices and striking black-and-white photography (Krivak 2009).¹⁰ The director's specific emphasis on the pictorial aspects of filmmaking (a likely consequence of his training as a painter) and his own experiences as a foreigner in the United States spurred his interest in Jergović's *Buick Rivera*. He admitted that he would not have chosen the book if he had stayed permanently in Zagreb, and that he felt most fascinated by its descriptions of vast snowy landscapes, which paved the way for a unique "color film with a black and white scale" (Polimac 2008).

Rušinović's strong personal involvement with the topic of emigration convinced the writer to grant him the novel's film rights (Pavlović 2009),¹¹ and the two started working together on the

⁹ All the details about Rušinović's life and career beginnings have been disclosed by the director himself in an interview with Croatian film critic Nenad Polimac (2008).

¹⁰ Nowadays, the film, which gained Rušinović the Golden Arena prize for Best Director at the Pula Film Festival, is remembered mainly for being the first Croatian feature-length production after Tomislav Radić's *Živa istina* (1972). See: http://hrfilm.hr/baza_film.php?id=67.

¹¹ In his interview with Jergović, journalist Davor Pavlović underlines the author's usual reluctance towards his works being adapted into films. However, the writer's page on IMDb lists two short movies based on his stories: *Šampion* (2010) by Kristijan Milić and *Nedjelja* (2015) by Goran Dević. Excerpts from Jergović's novel *Ruta Tannenbaum* (2006) have been used in Renata

screenplay.¹² In this process, the director worked as the principal adapter, while Jergović opted for a more passive role, limiting himself to periodically discussing and revising Rušinović's drafts; the final result was described by the writer as the filmmaker's own story, with its own identity (Pavlović 2009).¹³ Rušinović's approach towards Jergović's novel may be aptly described in Hutcheon's words, presenting adaptation as "a process of appropriation, of taking possession of another's story, and filtering it [...] through one's own sensibility, interests and talents" (2006, 18).

This appropriation, which is additionally confirmed by the closing frame dedicated to the memory of the director's deceased father, permitted Rušinović to narrow the novel's thematic core while transporting its characters and storyline into a more realistic Middle American background, which he could conceive of thanks to his own experiences. Although the movie retains the source novel's 'outsider look' on the US society in the 2000s, its small but radical plot modifications, character backstories, and location details reveal a deeper knowledge of American reality. These also involve the subtle filmic references that already infuse Jergović's story, intensifying the intercultural references.

Rušinović's highly individual take may also be noticed in the details concerning the production, as he refused HBO's initial proposal for economic support (which would have involved the participation of Croatian-American star Goran Višnjić as Vuko), or Amanda Plummer's involvement in the role of Angela; the director instead opted for a low-budget project where he could enjoy total creative control. It ultimately ended up in a multinational co-production between several small independent companies (Polimac 2008).

Insisting on the film's 'pretty anonymity,' the filmmaker created a product that is mostly made by and for emigrants. Key positions in the production crew were given to professionals from former Yugoslavia residing in the US (such as the New York-based Croatian director of photography Igor Martinović). Real life experiences were also fundamental for casting, as well as for devising the actors' physiognomies and previous roles (Stam 2005, 23). Slavko Štimac (1960) was chosen for Hasan because he actually spent eight years in the US, still had a youthful appearance, and was remembered for his role as Dino, the teenager antihero of the pre-war Sarajevo cult movie *Do You Remember Dolly Bell?* (1981). His role in this popular film was

Poljak's short documentary video *Ruta i spomenik* (2008). See: <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm3072425/>.

¹² The two eventually became friends, and later Jergović composed a short prose about Rušinović and his wife leaving Zagreb for good to stay in New York, which is found in the collection *Levičeva tkaonica svile* (2014).

¹³ The closing credits present Jergović and Rušinović as co-authors of the screenplay.

particularly important, as both Rušinović and Jergović perceived Hasan as an older, emigrated version of Dino (Sertić 2008). A similar approach was used when casting the actor for the role of Vuko; the Croatian actor Leon Lučev (1970) was chosen because of his participation in the 1990s Yugoslav conflict and his poor knowledge of English (Polimac 2008). The exception to this rule was the regional theater performer Aimee Klein, who was identified through casting calls in a local theater in Fargo and chosen for the role of Angela. As stated before, the film was made mostly by emigrants but also for emigrants, as international distribution originally planned to rely on the interest the film would have garnered in various ex-Yugoslav diasporas throughout the world.¹⁴

The director's interventions are mainly aimed at making all references to the American setting more believable. In this perspective, the correct spelling of the car brand's name is restored by adding the *i* that Jergović intentionally omitted in the title.¹⁵ As the Buick Riviera is something of a 'sacred car' in America, the director wanted everything regarding the car to be 'authentic' (Sertić 2008). While the novel's main narrative thread has been replicated onto the screen, some narrative strategies "amenable to display in film," such as analepsis, have been adapted by "finding cinematic equivalents" for them (McFarlane 1997, 13; 21). McFarlane defines this process as the most common adapting procedure, making literary elements suitable to the 'multitrack' nature of the film semantic system. Rušinović commented on this process in terms of loss and gain by saying that every detail discarded from the novel was recuperated through the actors' expressions and dialogue (Sertić 2008). These changes, which also include traditional adaptation procedures such as plot condensation or the audiovisual externalization of the characters' inner feelings (Hutcheon 2006, 36-40), led to the creation of a largely personal work that moves away from the source text's conclusions.

As noted, Jergović's decision to stage a profoundly Bosnian story in America was not a determining choice for the plot. The encounter between the two people could have occurred in any other small town in the States or abroad. More than a physical place, Toledo, Oregon should

¹⁴ This and other production details were revealed by the director in a 2008 interview with Croatian journalist and film producer Oliver Sertić. Unfortunately, it is not available online anymore as the internet portal that hosted it, e-novine, was closed for legal reasons.

¹⁵ By voluntarily misspelling the car brand as 'Buick Rivera' Jergović exerts his authorial freedom and contributes to the anthropomorphizing of the car, given that 'Rivera' is a popular surname (Milas 2008). According to Rušinović, the writer did not want his readers to associate the title with the part of the Adriatic coast known as Opatijska rivijera.

be considered an external display of the characters' psychological conditions.¹⁶ Rušinović's setting of the movie in Fargo, North Dakota, reflects a more specific place and, at the same time, is an ironic reference to the Coen brothers' movie, which is not actually set in the eponymous town (Lee 2002, 65). Another nod to the film is found in Hasan's wife, Angela: in the novel, she is an actress, while in the film, she is a police officer—an apparent reference to Frances McDormand's role in *Fargo*. Moreover, aspects of the Coen brothers' visual style can be noted in other choices by Rušinović, such as the frequent wide shots showing small human figures enveloped by the vast emptiness of frozen landscapes.

In the novel, Hasan is an unemployed cameraman, a biographical detail that seems to recall a detached, indifferent look on the world. The director must have found an unemployed emigrant cameraman in Oregon unrealistic (Polimac 2008) and decided to omit details about Hasan's occupation. His city of origin was changed from Stolac—a small, little-known town outside former Yugoslavia—to the much more familiar Sarajevo. In the novel, there is no mention of what happened to his family during the war, while the film dedicates significant space to his personal traumas. Vuko's past as a war criminal is not mentioned, nor is his obsession with war memories. On the contrary, Hasan is the one haunted by surreal black and white flashbacks about the war. In this, and especially in the changes made to the ending (Hasan takes his revenge on Vuko, giving him the Buick with its brakes severed, thus sentencing him to death) we can recognize the director's intention to put these two characters on the same level and make them 'equal' in the use of violence. The absence of details about their past lives in Bosnia should be interpreted in the same manner. Everything omitted from the source text was meant to be shown implicitly. A surrealist tone permeates the black and white flashbacks, a common device to represent "pastness" (Stam 2005, 21). The central figure in these flashbacks is Hasan's father, wearing the uniform of the partisan forces.

Similar to the novel, the film version emphasizes the vehicle's fundamental role in the narrative construction of the conflict between Hasan and Vuko and their unresolved differences. The camera insists on Vuko's ring, a symbol of his rapid Americanization through marriage as opposed to Hasan's in-between status of someone who, despite having lived in the States longer than Vuko, still does not have citizenship. In this sense, images of trains and trucks moving in the background symbolize the American 'normality' from which the protagonists, as foreigners,

¹⁶ The choice of the name is peculiar: of all the cities with Spanish names, Toledo is the most meaningful one for Bosnian history and tradition since the majority of Bosnian Jews originated from there.

are excluded. Vuko's conquest of Hasan's private, American space is conveyed in a scene where he sticks an Orthodox icon on the Buick he has just won.

The vehicle is also crucial for the main difference between the movie and the novel. Hasan's rebellion is foreshadowed in a scene where he gets out of Vuko's Mercedes after being insulted "as a Muslim." The recurring visual motif of blood dripping from the Buick's windows onto the snow and from Hasan's nose in the closing sequence demonstrate that he has been contaminated by the violence and hatred from which he tried to escape.

The visual parts are paired by sounds that further underline some of the film's main ideas. Through the reduction of the initial dialogue between Angela and Hasan, the director expresses Hasan's self-perceived otherness and isolation. A similar role is reserved to the sounds from the Buick's radio: everyday American chitchat about hobbies and "welcoming places" (Vidan 2010) that underscores Hasan's displacement. On the other hand, Vuko's loud American rock music from his Mercedes before meeting with Hasan shows that he is already more 'integrated.' Nevertheless, once violence and revenge have made them equal, they end up listening to the same melancholic song, *Dvije ruže*¹⁷ by Bosnian singer Mahir Paloš. The song's final verses state "Today we are at the end of the road/there is no going back/so goodbye should be said/no one knows what is in store," predicting the tragic outcome of both protagonists.

The final scene where Hasan listens to his father's voice recorded during the war represents Hasan's lost Bosnian past (the same function of the remembrance objects thrown away in the novel) and the original innocence that was betrayed. His father's words, which remind him not to hate anyone and not to become evil, are the slightly altered ending lines of Jergović's short story "The Communist" (included in his collection *Sarajevo Marlboro* and read for the occasion by Bosnian actor Emir Hadžihafizbegović). The joint presence of English and Bosnian/Serbian in the movie demonstrates the source text's implicit polyphony, giving a more realistic representation of the lives of expatriates and their dual perspectives. The conflict between Hasan and Vuko culminates as they abandon the English language, which underscores their sense of displacement and lack of belonging in the present. This alternation of languages is undoubtedly one of the merits of Rušinović's rendition. An additional one has recently been pointed out by Dino Murtic in his study on post-Yugoslav cinema. "While still exposing the emotional fragility of two men from the former Yugoslavia, deeply traumatised by the recent

¹⁷ The song is another common thread with Jergović's literary work, since it is present as a motif of his eponymous short story: <https://www.jergovic.com/ajfelov-most/dvije-ruze/>.

conflict,” Murtic writes, “Rušinović avoids emphasising the previously preferred ‘ferocity’ of ‘barbaric’ men as seen in the cinema of self-Balkanisation” (2020, 115).

3. Conclusions

As we have sought to demonstrate, Rušinović’s *Buick Riviera* can be interpreted as a postmodern adaptation (Slethaug 2014, 121), a free re-elaboration of its source novel. While, on the one hand, the adaptation restricts the vast thematic range of the novel, on the other it expands its framework by engaging other cinematic works and other texts by the same author (Jergović’s short stories and essays), obtaining an increased intertextual value.

In the terminology proposed by Hutcheon (2006), we have defined the movie as a transcultural adaptation. It is achieved by a director-adapter (and his crew) belonging to the same culture and language of the source novel. While the adaptation features places, languages, and cultures that are only imagined in the novel, it cannot be categorized as ‘indigenization,’ given that the adapter did not ‘transplant’ the story into his new cultural soil but rather into a different reality only familiar to the emigrant. Thus, we have opted for the term ‘emigrant adaptation,’ because this adaptation primarily operates within the cultural context of the emigrant. The main characters are Bosnian expatriates in small-town America, apparently unable to free themselves of traumas and suspicions related to the war in their home country. Indeed, they regard themselves as *emigrants*, not immigrants.

At the same time, the film adaptation allows for a ‘correction’ of the mythicized representation of America as described in the novel, for instance by employing more ‘realistic’ settings. Moreover, the movie further strengthens one of the novel’s most dramatic messages: one cannot keep escaping from the place from which they came. This effect is also mirrored in the film’s reception. On the one hand, it was almost entirely ignored in the United States (only one review appeared in *Variety*). On the other hand, it was highly appreciated in the post-Yugoslav context, winning awards at both the Pula and Sarajevo Film Festivals. Its success in Sarajevo was particularly relevant as Rušinović’s feature won the Heart of Sarajevo as Best Film and was also awarded the international FIPRESCI prize by film critics, while Lučev and Štimac shared the Heart of Sarajevo for best actor. In conclusion, by ‘migrating’ the main plotline from one artistic medium to another, Rušinović expands the novel’s message and its main literary and cultural motifs. The result is, in many senses, the creation of an independent artwork. The condensation of the original story lends intensity to the movie and the film’s atmosphere makes it a more universal reflection on displacement and guilt, in contrast to the ironic tones of its source.

Note: This article is the result of collaborative research and reflection. The introduction and section 2 were written by Enrico Davanzo, while Marija Bradaš wrote section 1 and the conclusions.

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