

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## The Bus (1975)

Tunç Okan

### OVERVIEW

Since the 1960s, industrialized and wealthy countries have begun to recruit skilled and unskilled workers from countries such as Turkey, Greece, and Italy to work as labor force. After a while, illegal labor migration, or in better terms, human smuggling, started to ramp up with the end of the importation of workers, and there were incidents where people who wanted to go abroad with the hope of a better life were deceived by smugglers and left in dire situations. The subject of *The Bus* is such an event.

This is the first film of Tunç Okan, a dentist who has just started acting in cinema and whose real name is Mehmet Celal Kulen. Based on the scenario written by Okan who was inspired by a newspaper article, different dates have been given in different sources regarding the shooting and screening dates of the film. However, we may assume that *The Bus* was completed in 1975, based on its 1975 awards at various festivals.

The screening of *The Bus* was banned in Turkey for several years on the grounds that it insulted the Turkish people. There are also criticisms that the film adheres to a strictly Western perspective and has an orientalist approach.

### CINEMATIC STORYTELLING

*The Bus* contains elements that can be considered ambitious as it is the first film of a dentist who did not receive any education about cinema and did not work in the industry. In general, his cinematography, which effectively uses the bus and the relationship between places and humans, faces, the architectural features of spaces, and music has an undeniable artistic flair, especially in that absurd scene at the metro station. It should be remembered that the cinematographer Güneş Karabuda, the music producer Zülfü Livaneli and the actors played a big part in this artful approach.

### CHARACTERS

Bus Driver	In his thirties. Member of a human trafficking ring.
Illegal Workers	In their thirties. Nine male passengers from Turkey who paid a smuggling ring in order to migrate abroad and find jobs.
Swedish Society	Swedes who represent the people of wealthy, industrialized societies.

### SYNOPSIS

To find a job abroad, nine men set off from Turkey in an old bus alongside a man from a smuggling ring, and they enter Sweden illegally. The bus driver, who is a smuggler, leaves them penniless and without passports in the center of Stockholm. These passengers, who have to get off the bus in order to meet their basic needs, encounter a world that is completely alien to them. Two of them die, the others are taken away by the police.

### PLOT

*Souvenir photo.* An old bus is traveling under a snowfall. Inside the bus we see men, most of them sitting alone, some of them napping. The bus driver is cheerful and he is singing tunes. He brags about deceiving the customs officers and calls out to the passengers: "You're saved, civilization is here, money guys money". They stop by a lake to take a break. Passengers, wearing clothes unfit for these weather conditions, get off the bus and attempt to walk on the frozen snow without slipping. They walk to the pier and pee into the water. They squat somewhere and fill their stomachs with the small amount of food on the newspaper spread on the ground. The driver comes up to them in a brazen manner and shares their food without asking permission. They sing and dance around the fire they lit for warmth. Then some pray, some shave, some smoke. The driver collects them all in front of the bus and takes pictures.

*The driver of the bus.* They get back on the road, and arrive in Stockholm. While waiting at the traffic lights in the city center, the driver sees the police car behind him. He dashes into the side streets without paying any mind to traffic rules. The police follow the bus because of his suspicious driving. The driver parks the bus in the middle of a square. He asks the passengers for the money they agreed in advance. Nine men combine their money together and give it to the driver. The driver asks them to put the rest of their money in their passports and hand them to him under the pretext of registering them with the police. They believe and do what the man says. He even takes their spare change. After telling them not to get off the bus, he walks away. The driver throws the passports in a trash can and leaves Sweden by plane.

*Police.* When the 9 men waiting inside the bus see the police walking outside, they close the curtains of the bus and hide between the seats. When the police can't open the door, he writes a fine and walks away.

*Boss.* The driver has left Sweden and arrives in Hamburg with a bag full of money. After passport control, the police open the driver's bag. When they see the money, they suspect that he is smuggling drugs and subject him to a strip search. They can't find any illegal substance, so they release the driver. He goes to his boss, who is having dinner with two people in the restaurant, and delivers his money bag. The boss is satisfied.

*Downtown.* It's evening. One of them says they were deceived. At night, the two of them go outside to find water to drink and a toilet. When they enter the shopping area around the square, they see a couple making love in a telephone booth. They find the toilet and take care of their needs. The other two passengers also come to the toilet. Meanwhile, a Swede asks them for marijuana. They do not understand what the man is saying. While looking at the windows of close up stores around the square, they come across a policeman. The policeman asks them for their ID. The men run away, the policeman chases after them but cannot catch them. They get back on the bus. While escaping, one of them has lost his way inside the building. The lost man calls out to the others but no one hears him; eight men sit quietly on the bus. The lost man meets a Swede walking his dog. He asks him if he saw the bus. The man gets scared, cradles his dog in his arms and runs away.

*Cold.* It's morning. The people on the bus sit shivering, wrapped in whatever they can find to protect themselves from the cold. The passenger who got lost in the bazaar is crouching on a hill, his arms and legs are wrapped, his head is standing motionless in front of him. A Swedish man walks past him and pushes him, calling him "a dirtbag". The man is frozen stiff from the cold, and he falls into the partly frozen water, drowns.

*Daily life.* They run out of food. They share pieces of some dry bread they found. One of them gets sick and starts coughing. Some crouch between the seats, afraid of the sound of the vehicle coming to clean up the square. When the worker in the cleaning vehicle sees the license plate of the bus, he mutters to himself "dirty foreigners". The cops circle around the bus. A few of them are forced to pee inside the bus. Urine leaks out from under the door. The men part the curtain and look outside. We see people in the square, a marching band playing, shoppers moving around the stores, windows of food shops.

*Hunger.* When no one is left around at night, they get off the bus and look for food in trash cans. One of the illegal workers enters the toilet. Inside is a Swedish man; the Swede examines the man, takes his arm and brings him to a nightclub; while the other men, to get down to the lower floor of the building, take the escalator, which they get on for the first time in their lives and with considerable difficulty. The nightclub the single man from the toilet is brought to is a place where porn movies are also shown. The passenger looks in horror at the people around him and at the images of the movie. The man who brought him to the club puts his arm around the shoulders of the passenger, and with his other hand caresses his leg. The passenger starts shouting, attacking and eating the food on other customers' plates. The officers take him out and beat him. Meanwhile, the others find plastic objects resembling food in the subway and try to eat them. Strange masked people surround them with laughter and mockery. The passengers flee.

*Inebriation.* The bus driver gets drunk in a bar. He goes to the hotel with two sex workers and falls asleep. Women take his money and leave.

*Who are you?* The police, who see the bus parked in the square in the morning, bring the bus to the police station with a tow truck. Seven passengers are still on the bus. When the police open the door of the bus and see the passengers, they ask in surprise: "Who are you? What are you doing here? Where are you from?" they ask. The men stare at the cops in fear. They take them all off the bus one by one, and bring them inside the police station.

## THEMES

*External migration.* Migration, especially external-migration, is considered to be one of the main global problems of the second millennium. Migration is people's attempts to leave the place where they were born and raised for reasons such as inequality of income, war, terrorism, political or social pressure, so that they can lead a better life in another place, inside or outside their home countries. Internal and external migration is a phenomenon that has been around for a very long time. The definition of this phenomenon specifically as a problem, especially by industrialized societies, began during the 1980s, when neo-liberal economic policies were becoming widespread, as countries with weak economies became even poorer and mass migrations increased. The global economy, the increase in income inequality and the dominance of multinational companies in the production and consumption chain have increased the desire and demand of people to live in big cities and immigrate to countries with higher levels of prosperity. As mass migrations began to occur, tensions arose between the people and the institutions of industrialized societies, and those who migrated due to cultural, political and social reasons.

In the sixties, countries such as Germany, France, Belgium, Sweden, Switzerland, and the Netherlands needed workers for a plethora of reasons such as aging populations, the increase in production capacity and education levels, the need for a larger labor force to work in heavy duty jobs. So they imported workers from societies yet to be fully industrialized. Turkey has also sent many workers to these countries. Most of the workers who migrated for a few years in order to save money to buy a car or a house became permanent residents in those countries, and they changed from being defined as guest workers to immigrants and citizens of Turkish origin. Immigrants from Turkey have obtained electoral positions such as mayors or parliamentarians, and they have established companies and opened up shops.

In the film, the reason behind people's desire to migrate to industrialized countries is summarized by the words of the smuggler / bus driver when they enter Sweden: "You're saved, civilization is here, money guys money". This is why people were ready to risk even their lives to migrate to these countries, even when these countries did not officially request workers.

*Human trafficking.* *The Bus* is the tale of illegal human migrations which started when the labor importing countries put an end to their recruitment drives. As guest and migrant laborers made more money and increased their living standards, more people wanted to move to the same wealthy countries. Those countries which imported labor force stopped recruiting workers after a while because of their own financial problems, because of the changing status of guest workers to immigrants, and the resulting cultural conflicts of migrations. All this resulted in human mobility and human smuggling directed towards these countries, especially involving unskilled workers. Criminal organizations that smuggled humans started to emerge from partnerships between different countries which caused inhumane incidents in those years, just like the crimes against migrants we are witnessing today. Just like the film *The Bus*, the hopes of people have been dashed; they have been deceived, abandoned in foreign countries that they know nothing about, even the language spoken. Tunç Okan's inspiration for this film was a newspaper article about a real case.

In the film, the bus driver abandons his fellow citizens in a terrible situation and even leaves them to die. The ease of his betrayal serves as an example of the depth of human drama engendered by these smugglers. The driver delivers the money to his boss after collecting it from the passengers. The boss reveals to the people sitting at the dinner table that he has an inside man at the customs. Just like other cases of human smuggling witnessed in recent years, this is a multinational and organized crime that may also involve government officials.

*Xenophobia.* The animosity of the industrialized western societies—represented by the Swedish society—against the "eastern" people who do not resemble them is often emphasized in the film through insistently grotesque scenes. The notion that migrant workers and asylum seekers were to blame for the country's issues with crime, unemployment, and drug addiction became widespread after it was understood that migrant workers would not soon return to their native countries. As their stays in these countries extended and they attained the status of immigrants or foreign employees, those who have performed the most demanding, the heaviest, and the dirtiest jobs in manufacturing and service sectors have started to be perceived as the root of whatever the problem is.

In this sixty-year process, there have been issues revolving around culture, society, and the law; there have also been conflicts over ways of life, religious beliefs, and moral principles which have persisted. Of course, antagonism toward strangers and those who are different, as well as discontent with them,

are not exclusive to western society. However, the unhappiness and resentment that developed when foreign workers—who had been voluntarily welcomed and even given official welcomes at the start of labor importation—started to earn a living in those nations also demonstrates the hypocritical moral attitude of the wealthy West.

The most striking scene of *The Bus* may be the scene where a Swede calls the migrant played by Tuncel Kurtiz a "Dirtbag!" and he pushes him into the half-frozen water, and the man disappears under the surface. When this deceased illegal worker previously asked a Swede walking his dog about the location of the bus, the man's flight with his dog cradled in his arms also represents the feelings of hatred and hostility towards foreigners.

Another sequence that deals with this subject in an exaggerated and even grotesque style is the part where the passengers of the bus who struggle to use the escalator are laughed at and mocked by some Swedes wearing strange and ominous masks while a disturbing music plays on. The Western man, present in the minds of the illegal workers, who look with horror at everything around them, is also represented by the Swedes in this scene.

The Swede laborer who cleans up the square with his vehicle says "Dirty foreigners" when he sees the license plate of the bus, underlining the prevalent hostility towards foreigners in society.

*Being modern.* Tunç Okan depicts the rural, ignorant, and desperate Turks attempting to enter Sweden illegally as well as the industrialized, Western, and wealthy industrial societies symbolized by the prosperous Swedes. The film also represents regular Swedes going about their daily lives, but its primary focus is on modern society and its comfortable and excessive use of sex, food, and drugs, as well as its excessive commodification of every single thing. The film does not have much good to say about Swedish society. The way people consume meat, have open sex in bars and phone booths, and their entrenched xenophobia are all examples which illustrate the director's perspective on affluent societies. All these grotesque scenes invoke the sense that the problems we observe, the problems that the bus passengers are dealing with, are expanded in their imaginations and take on exaggerated forms. In this sense, the film's cinematic expression is compelling and mighty.

## CHARACTERS

**Bus driver.** In his thirties, a member of a human trafficking ring. A swindler. Indifferent.

*Swindler.* He takes all the money of illegal workers he brought from Turkey, abandons them in a crowded square in Stockholm and disappears. Considering his indifference, he has done it countless times. He transports humans as if they are goods, takes their money and gets rid of them.

*Indifferent.* He abandons people without ever considering what they would do, how they would get by and does it all without showing any sense of conscience. He does not feel any remorse or sadness for what he does.

**Illegal workers.** Nine illegal workers in their thirties. They give the impression that they are not well educated and they have never been to a big city. They are entirely from rural places. They make a long trip on the bus. During this time, we only learn that one of them is called Mehmet. None of the others are named during the film. In this way, Okan frames them all as if they are a single character. One of the most common names in Turkey stands for all of them. We also do not see any differentiating characteristics among them. Therefore we consider the illegal workers as a single character.

*Naive.* A long time has passed since the bus driver ran off with the money. One of them says that they have been cheated. Another one argues that something may have happened to the driver and defends him. They are so naive that they never question giving all their money to the man. They have completely put themselves in his mercy. It may be that their dreams of a better life have blinded them all to evil.

*People from the country.* The passengers of *The Bus* are defined by their knowledge about life, their culture and their relationship with modern age. The gap between illegal workers and citizens of a wealthy nation is emphasized by their reaction to what they see, their inability to use the escalator, their ignorance of the fact that they do not speak the same language as the Swedes, and the fact that they ask their questions in Turkish.

**Swedish Society.** In one part of the film, we see children playing freely, people shopping, getting off the metro or walking towards it, a woman singing hymns and collecting charity, and workers making humiliating remarks about the bus. The man asking for drugs in the toilets, a gay man taking one of the

passengers to a sex club, a couple having sex in a phone booth are all elements which depict this modern society.

*Xenophobic.* The man who pushes the frozen illegal worker into the water, the cleaning worker who insults him by calling them "dirty foreigners", those who ridicule the passengers who cannot use the escalators, the man who flees with his dog are all representations of the hatred and hostility towards foreigners in Sweden.



Souvenir photo.



The bus that was abandoned by the driver in the square with illegal workers inside it.



Cold, hunger, fear and death.



The bus draws the attention of people but they do not see inside it.





The bus is being towed to the police station.



Illegal workers are removed from the bus one by one and delivered to the police station.