

# Yusuf and Kenan / Yusuf İle Kenan 1979

Ö. Kavur

## General Overview

During *Yeşilçam* and after, there had been movies either with a child protagonist or a child character carrying a significant role in the films' plot. But even in these movies in which the narrative revolves around a child in the lead role, the child character is usually in the company of an adult movie star who turns out to be the actual hero of the movie. *Yusuf and Kenan* distinguishes itself from these examples with its entirely child-centered narrative.

*Yusuf and Kenan* is one of the social realist films in Ömer Kavur's filmography. The film shows the economic hardships of living in Istanbul's outskirts. The main characters of the film are young people with lost childhoods, who had to start working very early ages and were deprived of love and respect that they deserve, who suffer from the poor conditions of the shanty town.

Film received the Best Film Award in Antalya Golden Orange Film Festival in 1979. However, to renounce the censorship policies of the period, the producers removed their films from the competition. The film only received its award retrospectively in 2011 during the festival's award ceremony, while Ömer Kavur was awarded as the best director.

## Cinematic Narrative

The film, regarding its cinematic narrative characteristics, shows parallels to the milestones of the global cinema, such as *Bicycle Thieves*, (Vittorio De Sica, 1948) and the New Realism genre. The use of mise-en-scène, framing, camera movements, editing and sound serve to provide perspective on the story and characters rather than highlighting film's narrative tools. The film keeps the viewers' attention on reactions of the children to their environment and their emotional states.

As the viewer closely follows motivations and actions of the characters, they also witness the transitions in Turkey's social and economic climate. Especially in the scenes where they journey by train and while the two kids are looking for their uncle, Turkey's changing class dynamics, social conflicts and political shifts become visible through a documentarian lens.

## Characters

*Yusuf* 14-15 years old. The oldest son of a farmer family from a village in Adana.

*Kenan* 10-11 years old. The youngest son of a farmer family from a village in Adana.

*Böcek (Cenk)* At 8-9 years old. A son of a sex worker in the shanty town.

*Çarpık* 14-15 years old. Thief.

*Falkonetti* 12-14 years old. Thief.

*Mustafa* 11-12 years old. Worker in a mechanic.

## Synopsis

Two brothers named Yusuf and Kenan comes to İstanbul in order to find their uncle after their father is killed in a blood feud. The uncle has moved from the address their father gave them and no one knows where he has gone. They run out of money. During this time, they meet the children of the neighborhood. Some of them live on the street, some make a living by stealing. And some among them have started working in an early age. Yusuf joins the crew of the head of the children's gang of thieves Çarpık and he gets arrested and sent to the juvenile prison while stealing for him. While Kenan, with the help of a child worker, starts working at a machine shop.

## Plot

*Escape from the village* Yusuf and Kenan are living with their farmer father in a village in Adana. Their mother has passed away. Their father got killed in front of their eyes in a blood feud, leaving them completely alone. Before getting killed, their father left Yusuf and Kenan some money with the contact information of their uncle in Istanbul, and told them to run away. Two kids left the village right after their father got killed in a gun battle.

*Istanbul* They arrive at Istanbul from Adana after a long train ride. They go to the address written on the note that their father left behind, and they look for their uncle who is working as a doorkeeper in Istanbul. Their uncle is not on that address. The shopkeeper in the building leads them to people who might know where their uncle might be but no one knows where he is. They keep looking for him. They live on cheap food and sleep on streets to save their money. They spend their last bit of money to stay in a hostel where they share a room with others, but Kenan has a nightmare about his father and he wakes up screaming so they leave the hostel in fear.

*Meeting with Böcek* One night later, they are out of money and wandering around hungry, they come across a boy named Böcek. He gives the food in his bag to Adnan and Kenan. Böcek's mom is working at home, so Böcek has to stay outside. They find a derelict car and sleep inside together. There is also another guy sleeping in that same car.

*Meeting with Çarpık and Job Offer* They wake up to a loud sound. Çarpık and Falconetti, who both look way older than them, are fighting. Yusuf and Kenan leave the car and start watching the other guys fight. Çarpık and Falconetti are fighting over a car tape that they stole. Falconetti wants to sell the tape for a lower price and Çarpık does not want to be partners with him anymore. While Çarpık starts discussing the tape's price with the others, Falconetti approaches him from the back with a big wooden piece at his hand. Yusuf, with the intention of protecting Çarpık, jumps to the front and gets into a fight with Falconetti and makes him leave. Böcek brags about Yusuf and Kenan, catching the attention of Çarpık. Çarpık hires Yusuf to partner up in Falconetti's place. He pays Böcek to take them to a dinner. Böcek takes them to a street food vendor and orders some meatballs. Child worker Mustafa is there too. He tells them all he knows about Çarpık. Böcek takes them to a derelict building. They make beds out of old paper on the floor. Yusuf leaves Kenan to Böcek and goes to see Çarpık.

*First job* Yusuf and Çarpık break into a car and steal a tape. Çarpık teaches him the details of the job. Meanwhile, Kenan and Böcek go back to the mechanic shop to see Mustafa. While working on a machine, Mustafa tells the truth about Çarpık. Kenan is assisting him by handing him the tools he needs. Çarpık's big brother raped a child, and then he and Çarpık murdered the child. They went into prison. Çarpık was also a child at the time. After getting released from prison, he got involved with burglary and gambling. While they are in the shop, they ask for a job for Kenan but the shop owner does not seem to care. Böcek takes Kenan to his house where he's living with his mother. Kenan's mother sets the dinner table while waiting for her patron. When the man arrives, she kicks them out. They go back to the derelict building with the ground covered with paper scrapes. They spend the night there. Böcek takes an empty bird cage and a wire with him as they leave the house. They get prepared for the next day. When they are asleep Yusuf comes in. Kenan wakes up while Yusuf is counting that day's earnings and gets angry at him about stealing. Yusuf slaps Kenan.

*The bird hunt and the police station* Böcek and Kenan hop onto a commuter rail and leave off to a meadow. There they build traps to catch birds. On their way back home, a guy on the train approaches them. Since he doesn't have a place to stay, he goes back and forth, staying at the train. The train station officer recognizes the boy. Assuming they are all together, the officer takes all three to the children division in the police station. There are other kids on the cell as well. Böcek's mother pays a visit to the station and bails them out. When Yusuf finds out Kenan is at the station, he wants to go and take his brother from there but Çarpık stops him.

*Çarpık's ties to politics* Çarpık and Yusuf meet with a man on the coffeeshop. The man shows Çarpık a gun. Çarpık can't hold his excitement about having a gun but the man tells him that he can have the gun only after they practice it together. They leave for a job that night again. This time, Çarpık leaves the job to Yusuf alone and waits around the corner to watch. Yusuf runs into Falconetti in the car he breaks in. Yusuf wounds him and kicks him out of the car. He then gives the car radio he stole to Çarpık.

*Böcek's death* Falconetti approaches Böcek when he is playing with the other kids on the block. He is looking for Yusuf. Böcek makes fun of Falconetti over a wound on his hand. Falconetti stabs Böcek with a knife. As Böcek falls to the ground Falconetti starts panicking and runs away.

**Çarpık's sacred case** Yusuf meet with Çarpık for drinks at a tavern to receive his share. Çarpık tells him that he will not continue those activities and he is moving on with more significant things. Yusuf will be all by himself after this, as Çarpık devotes himself to the organization for the sacred case. Yusuf gets mad and insists on getting his share. When he sees that he gets less than he agreed on having, he threatens Çarpık with a knife. Çarpık gets scared and gives Yusuf the rest of the money but the police end up catching them. They are taken to the police station. When they are testifying two men come in and quietly talk to the police. They get Çarpık and leave.

**Kenan's choice** Officers release Kenan. He comes to the neighborhood, to the derelict building carrying the birdcage with him. Böcek is not there. He goes to Böcek's home, his mom answers the door, it is obvious that she had been crying. The guy who witnessed Böcek's death calls Kenan and tells him about the incident. Kenan releases the birds that are still alive and crashes the bird cage. Yusuf is in prison, his hair is fully shaved, sweeping floors. Kenan goes to the mechanic shop. Mustafa finds him a job. They go to Mustafa's place at night. He takes a shower, eats a proper meal and sleeps in a tidy bed. The next morning, he wakes up with others and leaves for work. He starts making his living as one of the child laborers in the mechanic shop.

## Themes

**Loss of innocence.** The film's child characters are built around the stories about their past and things that they have gone through, and the themes of innocence and loss of innocence. One of the most important characteristics of *Yusuf and Kenan* is its sympathetic approach not only to its main characters, but to all its characters, even the guiltiest ones. The film embodies the sense of acceptance towards their innocence. The child characters are pushed to criminal activities or they suffer only because of external reasons. Other adults' mistakes, class struggles and bad intuitions lead the children to crime and failure. The film's most misfit character Çarpık, pays the price of his brothers' bad choices. Böcek has to spend the nights on streets because his mother is a sex worker. Falconetti also lives on streets. Based on other kids' story paths, we easily arrive at the conclusion that he is also one of those who are left behind. Yusuf and Kenan, because of the blood feud between adults, had to leave their village and throw themselves out to Istanbul's danger filled streets. Mustafa is a son of a blue-collar family and has to work in order to make a living. The children are incarcerated and they are in jail for minor crimes such as smuggling illegal cigarettes or getting on trains without a ticket. They are forced to endure living in an environment that is hard even for adults at the critical age of playing, learning and personal development. Even the ones who are not involved in criminal activities are then forced to work. Children, who lose their innocence at an early age and strive to survive in the world of adults are at the mercy of class struggles and social tensions.

**Poverty.** Poverty as a symptom of social and economic inequalities is one of the main overarching themes of *Yusuf and Kenan*. Throughout the film, poverty does not come across only as an economic matter. Rather it encapsulates one's lack of access to cultural and social enrichments, their political alignments, and the likelihood of engaging in illegal activities. In the film, the theme of poverty is built around the iconography of hunger, derelict buildings, trains, wandering around in old and dirty clothes, underage workers and having illegal jobs to make a living.

**Class and power relations.** Parallel to the theme of poverty, the film also ponders upon class and power struggles. In one of the first scenes, the doorkeeper of a work hall takes the kids to a house while they are looking for their uncle when they first arrive to Istanbul from their villages. It is the only scene in the films that shows its viewers a visual representation of the upper class through its characters and a house setting. A man, his sister and a visitor who arrive late to their household is a caricature of the upper class. We see their snobbish behavior towards lower classes and the people from the village through instrumentalizing them in making a social analysis. The upper-class homeowners, while admiring the patterns on Kenan's socks, complain about how Istanbul's social fabric is getting destroyed because of internal migration. *Yusuf and Kenan's* perspective on class issues becomes most visible on its distinction between working class and lumpenproletariat. The film also treats working and being a working-class individual as a matter of nobility. Çarpık, Falconetti and Yusuf represent lumpenproletariat, whereas Mustafa, Mustafa's family and Kenan represent the working class. Lumpenproletariat finds survival within living collectively as a part of a gang. The hierarchy between them is ordered around physical power and the superiority provided by money and guns. Towards the end of the film, we get to understand that Çarpık's "sacred case" is an armed protest and he joins a right-wing political group as we can glean from their relationship with the police. This matter is also perceived as an inevitable consequence of him being a lumpenproletariat. On the other hand, Mustafa and his family are working and making their living through honorable ways. As

they stay clear from criminal activities, they also become a stellar example of class-conscious working people. Kenan, unlike his brother, choose to continue his life as a member of the working class.

### **Character Analysis**

**Yusuf** Around 14 or 15 years old. When his father is killed in a blood feud, he takes his brother Kenan with him and escapes to İstanbul. Acting his age, he is impatient and excitable. He has the courage one sees in children from the village and in children who live in harsh conditions. He usually acts according to his instincts rather than his intellect. He cannot bear witnessing injustice and he acts without thinking. He does not have the willpower to take over his little brother's responsibility or protect him at all times.

*Brave* In the morning of the night Yusuf, Kenan and Böcek sleep at a car, they witness the fight between Çarpık and Falconetti. When Falconetti is about to strike down Çarpık with a wooden board, Yusuf intervenes and fights Falconetti. This scene shows his impatient, excitable, quick to anger and brave qualities. However, he gets involved in a fight that does not concern him therefore this scene also demonstrates that he has a personality that acts with his instincts rather than his intellect.

*Irresponsible* In their first days in İstanbul, most of the food they can find Yusuf gives to his little brother. However, later, when Kenan, Böcek and the kid on the train is arrested, he does not go the police station to get his brother out because Çarpık objects. This is one of the scenes which reveal that he does not have much of a sense of responsibility.

*Pretentious* The evening when he comes back to their room in the vacant house with the money he stole, he responds to his brother's criticisms by slapping him. Putting on airs, he talks about buying new clothes. This scene underlines that Yusuf is not using his reasoning in his choices.

*Angry* The night he goes to the tavern to meet with Çarpık and get the money he owes him for the tape he stole, Çarpık gives him less money than he is owed and he grows violent with anger, attempts to stab him. This scene reveals Yusuf's character as someone who cannot tolerate injustice, who is quick to anger and who acts without thinking.

**Kenan** Around ten, eleven years old. Calm, sensitive, conscientious, with a morality based on being just. Someone who has advanced skills of observation and analysis. He has skillful hands and he is quick to learn.

*Misses his father* Being a small, sensitive child, Kenan cannot easily forget his father's murder. Losing their mother years before, Yusuf and Kenan's only support is their father. In Kenan's dreams, younger and more sensitive than Yusuf, we see the effects of being an orphan. In their third night at İstanbul when they stay at a boardinghouse, Kenan has a nightmare in which he sees his father and Yusuf on a horse riding away. He shouts after them. For a moment Yusuf turns back to look but they go on their way.

*Observant* Looking for their uncle, they revisit the teahouse of the inn. The man in charge does not pay attention to them. Kenan tells Yusuf that this man would do no good to them. Kenan's skills of observation and analysis are first revealed in this instance.

*Ethical* In the evening, when Yusuf comes to the building that Kenan and Böcek is sleeping, and while he is counting his money, Kenan wakes up and gets angry at Yusuf for stealing. Yusuf attempts to persuade him by telling him that he will buy some new clothes. Kenan tells him that stealing is shameful and a sin, that he would work as an apprentice and he would not steal. Yusuf slaps Kenan. Until that moment Kenan acts like an adult with morals. After he is slapped, he tells that he would tell their father about what Yusuf did. In that moment we realize again that Kenan is an innocent child who is repressing the death of his father.

*Sensitive* Kenan is a just and sensitive kid. When he learns about Böcek's death, he both frees the birds and breaks their cage down. He acts out his sadness and rage in this way.

**Böcek (Cenk)** Around eight or nine years old. Böcek is a small and short kid. Even though he is the same age as Kenan, he appears to be younger. He is a pleasant kid who cannot hide his emotions and thoughts, who is friendly and joyful. He has nothing to hide. He appears to be smart and shrewd but he is actually naïve enough not to realize impending danger. He lives with his sex worker mother. He does not know who his father is.

*Helpful* In one of their first evenings in İstanbul, Yusuf and Kenan encounter Böcek. Without hesitation, Böcek gives his bread to them and takes them to a junk car to sleep.

*Open* When he talks about himself, he tells about why he sleeps outside and does not hide that his mother is a sex worker. That he tells the truth about his mother to some kids he just met shows that he has good intentions and is naïve enough to quickly trust strangers. He is also easy going in this instance because Yusuf and Kenan have newly arrived from their villages, which means they are yet “clean”, that they are not yet involved with the usual life in the back streets of İstanbul filled with crime, murder, and betrayal. Telling about them to Çarpık, he tells him that they are fresh from Anatolia and that they are “chill”.

*Friendly* Böcek, to find a job and a place to stay for Yusuf and Kenan, first introduces them to Çarpık, then to worker Mustafa. He takes Kenan to his own home. Even though they cannot stay because “the friend” of his mother arrives, Böcek does everything he can with his friendly attitude.

*Naïve* Böcek’s mother does not care about him but when they take them to the offices of the police branch who deal with underage kids, he says that “my mom will come and get us”, and his joy when his mother arrives shows his untouched trust in humans. However, his mother gets angry at Böcek for ruining her day.

*Kind* In the same scene Böcek shows his kindness and friendliness again. While they are getting out of the police station, he insistently tells his mother that they have to get Kenan out too. His mother does not care, she tugs and pulls him to get him out.

*Trusting* His trust in people, his naivete that belies his shrewd appearance prepares the way for Böcek’s death. While he jokes about the wound in Falconetti’s hand, he does not think that he would stab him with the knife in his hand. He is killed because of his childish purity and his personality.

**Çarpık** Around fifteen or sixteen. For aiding in the murder of a kid who his brother raped, he has been thrown in a youth detention center and he has been released two years before. He has had a tough time there. With another kid as a partner, he gets into cars to steal tapes and he sells them for money. Seemingly powerful, he is actually not courageous.

*Coward* In the first scene that Çarpık meets Yusuf, in his attitude towards Falconetti, he acts as if he is lording over them all. However, when he faces real danger, it is quickly revealed that he is actually a coward, that his power comes from manipulating someone more powerful than him. When Yusuf starts fighting Falconetti to protect Çarpık, he settles for watching the fight. Later when Yusuf fights Falconetti again when he meets him while trying to steal a tape from a car, Çarpık sees this and goes away. He tries to run all over Yusuf who wants his money, attempts to take back even the small amount of money he gave him. When Yusuf takes out a knife, he gets scared and gives all the money.

*Criminal* The same evening, he tells Yusuf that he has been constantly beaten by a guardian in the juvie, that his brother has died in the jail 6 months before. In the end, he is the victim of his family and the system that orders the place he has been locked up. He has lost his innocence in a very young age, when his brother made him an accomplice in murder.

*Yearns for power* In order to get revenge for all these troubles he has been through, he desires to possess more power and support and that may be why he gets into a jingoist gang. Just like he uses other children in the street for his own ends, older brothers of the party would utilize him by putting a gun to his hand, making Çarpık do their dirty work under the pretense of their “sacred cause”. Çarpık does not realize this. The older brothers easily get Çarpık out of the police station. The look that Çarpık gives Yusuf while he is getting out expresses that no matter the cost he loves power, that he can only be brave when he is supported by others behind him.

**Falconetti** Around thirteen, fourteen years old. We do not know anything about him. He is reckless enough to commit any crime, he waits for any opportunity to get revenge and he is the loneliest character in the film, the one who is wronged the most.

*Revengeful* After meeting Çarpık and getting thrown out, he returns with a wooden board in hand to attack Çarpık from behind.

In order to get his revenge on Yusuf who wounds him and throws him out of the car they steal from, this time he comes to the neighborhood with a knife in hand but he kills Böcek instead. When he realizes what he has done, he gets scared and runs away.

In all three instances he has been wronged. In the first, Çarpık blames him for not making enough money and throws him out; in the second, Yusuf throws Falconetti out from the car while he is busy stealing the tape; in the third, Böcek mocks him.

**Mustafa** Around eleven, twelve years old. Son of a working-class family. He works at a machine shop. He joins the struggle of the working-class of that period. According to his class and ideals, he is helpful.

*Ethical* Mustafa warns Kenan and Yusuf about Çarpık several times. In the scene in which they first meet, he tells them that Çarpık has been involved in criminal activities since an early age and that he is simply useless. He lectures them about the importance of earning money through morally proper ways.

*Idealist* Böcek, when introducing Kenan to Yusuf, mentions that he secretly writes on street walls at nights. As could be understood from that, Mustafa is not simply a guy who is working at a mechanic shop. He has ties with the revolutionary party and the organizations who support the workers' rights and the workers' movement at the time.

Mustafa tells Kenan everything in detail about Çarpık's story while they are in the mechanic shop together. Mustafa asks his mentor for a job for Kenan.

*Caring* At the end of the film, Kenan goes back to the shop where Mustafa works. Mustafa approaches him in a friendly manner, he throws his arms around Kenan, showing that he would care for him. At the end of the shift, he takes him to his own home. He has initiated another member to the working class. Mustafa's family's attitude toward Kenan is loving, as if Kenan is a member of the family.



Yusuf and Kenan have no place to stay in İstanbul. They sleep on the streets.



Under Böcek's guidance, they pass the night inside an old car.



Böcek shares his food with them.



The tough guy of the neighborhood, Çarpık, comes down on Falconetti for selling the stolen tape for a small amount of money.



Instead of Falconetti, Çarpık takes Yusuf with him.



Kenan chooses to make through honest means.



Falconetti stabs and kills Böcek who teases him.



But he has realized that throughout his life he is going to work for a small pay in rough conditions, that he would not be having a childhood.



Yusuf in juvenile prison. The roads of the two brothers take them apart.