Dina Iordanova, ‘The Bus,’

In William Brown, Dina Iordanova, Leshu Torchin.  

*Moving People, Moving Images: Trafficking in European Cinema.*


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*Otobüs/ The Bus*

*(Tunç Okan, Switzerland/Turkey, 1976)*
A dilapidated old bus travels through the snowy landscape of Sweden, a scene accompanied by a sad melody of an Anatolian song. The passengers on board are all silent dark moustached men, wearing scruffy jackets. It is early morning when the bus arrives into wintry Stockholm; it negotiates the busy arteries of the orbital, passes by the harbour, and then, averting an encounter with a policeman, gets head on into the central pedestrian area, a part of town where it is clearly not meant to be, and abruptly stops. Hurriedly, the driver, himself a dark moustached individual, turns to the men on the bus, asking them to pass on their money and IDs; he then puts it all in a bag and instructs the passengers that they should now sit quietly behind the drawn curtains of the bus and wait until he returns from the police station. According to the local custom, he explain, he first will have to register them and their money. Only then they can go out.

The men on the bus are clearly insecure and intimidated; they understand they should not be seen until it is all sorted. The driver leaves in a hurry. The camera goes up and gives a bird’s eye of the square with the bus parked in the middle: a pedestrian city centre area, an easily recognisable landmark of downtown Stockholm, the busy commuter spot of Sergels Torg.

For the next few days the men on the bus will hide behind the curtains of their absurdly parked vehicle while the liberal police will not bother with what appears yet another hippy encampment, amidst street singers, passers-by and hangers-on. The cosmopolitan feel of downtown Stockholm will be contrasted with the images of terrified illegal immigrants clinging to their ‘secure’ space within the bus until, a few days later, a policeman will notice that ‘this vehicle is still here’, would make a call to headquarters to check if anybody is

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1 I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Serazer Pekerman who viewed the film with me and translated the Turkish dialogue, providing invaluable background commentary that significantly facilitated my understanding. I am truly grateful for her support.
claiming it, and then make arrangements for the bus to be towed away, at which point the bunch of petrified illegal immigrants will be discovered inside it. The film ends with a scene showing seven terrified men being removed one by one from the vehicle and taken to the police headquarters. In-between, there are the would-be immigrants’ shy forays into the night metropolis, featuring an outlandish encounter between a timid Middle East and a corrupt West.

Even if not as early as *Traffic in Souls*, *The Bus* is one of the original attempts of transnational filmmaking in raising issues of human traffic, illicit immigration, and the rift between the lifestyles of traditionalist Islam and the late modernity of the West. On the one hand, the film clearly intends to satirise Western consumerism and corruption, specifically amplified through the chosen point of view that the unadulterated primitives on the bus represent. More importantly, however, it announces the resolute arrival of a ‘foreign body’ that is determined to infiltrate and stay on, a ‘foreign body’ that at this point may only observe shyly, but later on will come to judge, will become outspoken, and will learn the Western ways (but mostly in order to criticise them vocally). *The Bus* is an early cinematic testimony, documenting not only the arrival of these immigrants but also the advent of a major new theme in Europe’s social and cultural dynamics. The very image of the dilapidated bus that has been planted absurdly in the very heart of the city, in a place as central as Beaubourg in Paris or Trafalgar Square in London, is an allegory of the idiosyncratic yet powerful agenda that these silent and shy immigrants fetch right into the heart of the Western public sphere. They may appear totally inadequate but they represent sound moral judgement that seems to be missing in their new milieu. The absurdly staged encounter between the hurried busy commuters and the night birds of the Western metropolis and these inhibited Oriental workers takes place is of symbolic value.
Written, edited, produced and directed by Tunç Okan, who also acts in one of the key roles, this is a truly auteurist film, pre-dating by a decade what are considered to be early classics of ‘Turkish migrant cinema’, like Tevfik Baser’s 40 Quadratmeter Deutschland/ 40 sq meters Germany (1986), or the films of the first generation of ‘beur’ directors in France. Alongside with the work of other directors from the South East of Europe (Aleksandar Petrović, Želimir Žilnik, Radu Gabrea) who worked in the West during the 1970s and were the first to address themes of Gastarbeiter long before these came into the spotlight, The Bus is one of those works of European transnational cinema of the 1970s that need to be brought into the annals of film history. Officially a co-production of Switzerland and Turkey, the film is funded privately by Okan, who, reportedly, has invested in it the money he earned while working as a dentist in Sweden. And while the crew involves Francophone and Swedish collaborators, all key roles on the team are kept for Turks – the cameraman is TV professional Günes Karabuda, while the music is by Zülfü Livaneli, an acclaimed leftist intellectual, who later on worked on the music of well-known films linked to Yılmaz Güney (Sürül/The Herd, 1979; Yol/The Way, 1982). Even in today’s context, The Bus remains a rare film in that an immigrant makes it and that the story is told from his fellow-immigrants’ point of view. Thus, even if the [Westernised and educated] director does not necessarily see things the same way as his simple-minded protagonists, he is in control of a narrative device that allows him to reveal the inner logic of the outsiders’ perception of Western society.

Judging by the pensive background music that accompanies their screen presence, the men on bus are most likely Kurds. Even though there are multiple close ups of their moustached faces, there is barely much individualisation; they remain indistinct from each other. There is only one professional actor among the group (Tuncel Kurtiz, best-known from his recent role in Fatih Akin’s Auf der anderen Seite/The Edge of Heaven, Germany/Turkey/Italy, 2007); the
director himself plays another one. The others are real members of the immigrant community, village men playing themselves: yet another instance of use of non-professionals that was observed in regard to a variety of instances throughout this volume. They rarely converse with each other – they all feel the same, no need of much talking. Their jackets over sweaters and thin-soled shoes make them look outlandish; they eat something strange wrapped in newspapers, and pray on small carpet, *God Protect! Allah Emanet!*

Even though they suspect they may have been cheated, their behaviour is all sheepish obedience. They stick to the security that the bus’s curtains offer. That is, until natural urges force them, hungry and thirsty, to venture out in search of a toilet into the treacherous territory of the foreign metropolis. They know it must be late at night when they leave the bus and expect to be surrounded by deepest darkness. Instead, they find themselves amidst a brightly lit urban landscape, an outlandish space that they will creep into little by little. Gathered around a garbage bin, they dig out leftovers and eat eagerly, then hunt around for more. When a policeman asks them for papers, they run away along empty alleyways, back to the bus. Not that anyone is chasing them; they, in fact, are quite invisible, even if stationed in the very heart of the city. One who has stayed out is seen in the morning, in deep melancholy, squatting on the edge of icy water under a bridge. In an awful matter-of-factly scene of existential invisibility, he is shown leaning forward and falling over into the canal, to never re-emerge, his death unnoticed by the passers by. Throughout the following day the others cast hungry glances at a nearby supermarket where whole chickens roast on a spit, just the way they would make them back home. One of the men can no longer hold; his urine quietly flows out and runs on the ground underneath the bus; the excrement of the ‘foreign body’ is shown as quietly penetrating into, subverting and polluting the public space that has just been cleaned and sanitised according to rules and regulations.
The forays into the nightly city are, invariably, shown as terrifying encounters with corruption and decadence, which the men confront in silent shock while wandering the empty pedestrian areas of the night, surrounded by advertising images persistently featuring nakedness and by the frozen figures of mannequins, displaying lingerie in well-lit shop windows. The sex toys shop, the man walking his poodle on a leash, the couple making love in a phone booth, the junkie asking them for a fix: it is all received in dazed silence. They do not know how to ride the escalator, this strange staircase that keeps on moving in the middle of the night.

A handsome young man (played by director Okan) strays apart and ends up alone in the night. A young Swede smiles at him in the public toilet and then takes him along. Carrying a bottle of alcohol, the Swede guides him down the sidewalk to the entrance of a bar. They end up in a brightly lit locale where men and women eat and drink, while watching some soft porn film on a large screen. When the film is over, it is followed by the evening’s culmination, a gaudy competition, for which playboy volunteers undress on stage, revealing the image of their preferred make of car on their underpants. The winner is awarded a trophy: a plaster penis. The next act is a heterosexual intercourse, performed live on stage, causing excitement among the audience. The young Kurd watches it all in hungry disbelief, until the Swedish friend reaches out to grope his newly found dark buddy. Terrified, the young man runs away. In his flight, he manages to drag a piece of meat from the hand of a woman, and eagerly bites into it. Thrown out of the bar in disgust, he is followed by some of the playboys who give him a good kicking, and finally knife him, leaving him for dead.

One of the subplots tackles the treacherous bus driver and casts some insights into the traffickers’ identity and ethos. Eighteen minutes into the film, after having left the bus at Sergels Torg, the driver is seen at Arlanda airport taking a Lufthansa flight. Arriving in
Hamburg somewhat later, he is subjected to a gruesome series of humiliating checks, evidently because he is also immediately identified as another ‘foreign body’ on account of his darker skin tone, shrill red blazer, and large moustache. His Turkish passport, compounded by a guilty look, does not help; the extensive customs scrutiny causes congestion and discontent among the other, ‘legitimate’ passengers who line up for entry from Sweden into Germany. He is undressed, his clothes scrutinised, his mouth looked into. When the customs officers express interest in examining his anal area, he protests vocally and is finally left alone.

Once out of the airport, a taxi takes the driver to a restaurant overlooking the harbour. Here he hands over the bag with the money to two men in suits; this is the only glimpse one gets from those who actually run the operation: they look like reputable and well established Turkish-German businessmen. The driver, however, remains the only trafficker identified by face and action – a petty player, who will have lost the money he has earned by betraying his fellow-countrymen by the following morning. Unlike the shy Kurds he left behind in Stockholm, he is already closely familiar with all agreeable aspects of the Western life of sin, so later that night he ends up, drunk, with two scruffy German prostitutes who drag him into a cheap hotel room in Hamburg’s red light district. He boasts he will go till morning but is fast asleep within minutes, so the girls quietly sneak out after emptying his pockets.

*The Bus* is shot in grey and blue overtones, and makes great usage of its urban setting: both in terms of landscape and soundscape. The chequered surface of *Sergels Torg*, the modernist vertical lines, the geometrically regulated figures, the abundance of glass, steel and plastic, the futuristic shop windows, brightly lit public toilets and pedestrian passages/escalators at night – it all creates an alienating feeling. One can only speculate of the shape, taste and smell of the environment that they come from – in any case, it is probably much more curved
and full of natural materials; the angular patterns that surround them, designed by avant-garde architects, hint at a hostile milieu. The director makes a lot of this quasi sci-fi anxiety; the protagonists could have landed on Mars instead of Stockholm, to the same effect. And indeed, when, toward the end, the bus is lifted for towing, the feeling is as if they are being launched into space.

The syncopated background greatly enhances this feeling of spatial unease, starting with the sad sound of oriental tambour, and then escalating into a disturbing mixture of the distant sounds that make up the soundscape of city routines, from the songs in praise of Jesus through the chant of Krishna followers to the jazz and brass band. The men’s fearfully suppressed coughs are contrasted with the sound of hand-pulled cello strings and crash cymbals, escalating into a panicky crescendo. Any outside noise they hear perplexes and terrifies them: a yellow sweeping machine approaches to clean the tyres of the bus, while the men inside are completely terrified not knowing what may be producing these extraterrestrial sounds. The sci-fi noises of the metropolis are in contrast with the total silence which accompanies some of the key scenes, especially those that involve flashbacks and flashforwards.

The sparingly used subjective visions of the men are a key stylistic element of this otherwise austere film. The black-and white idyllic image of a young woman in a cotton field flashes several times to the handsome young Kurd, especially when he becomes the object of sexual advances in the bar; his very masculinity is challenged here, and the flashback to the beloved woman gives some kind of protective security. At the end of the film the surviving immigrants are taken one by one from the bus to the police building; these scenes, corresponding to the culmination of the protagonists’ fear, are intercut with visions of a
vehicle (the bus?) being crushed at a junkyard. One by one, the men are dragged by two policemen through the geometrically patterned courtyard of the police headquarters; this is repeated six times, for each one of them, with the camera cutting from the man being dragged to the others looking on terrified while remaining on the bus, and then to a flash forward of the bus being scrapped: five, four, three, two, one, until the final very fast zoom into the face and the eyes of the last man, who is dragged through a space overlooked by the rectangular silent windows of apartment building around. This scene takes place in total silence.

The best-known image of *The Bus* shows a group photo of black-clad moustached men gathered in front of the bus, the vehicle that served as a Trojan horse installed in the very heart of the Western stronghold. A similar group photograph is the landmark of another film, produced in Sweden just a few years later – Dusan Makavejev’s *Montenegro* (1981), yet another immigrant story that tackles the theme of illicit migration from the poorer peripheries of Europe to the riches of Scandinavia; only the individuals who have gathered for the photo in *Montenegro* are Yugoslav migrants who cluster around a Zanzi-bar in a Stockholm suburb. One of them has even got a knife sticking out of his forehead; the photo is made before he is taken in to a hospital so that there is a record of this proud moment.² It will take another ten years until Ulf Hannerz identifies Stockholm and other European metropolitan areas as centres of migration, globalisation, and sociologists will start paying attention to the matters of trafficking. *The Bus* is a film that pioneers in discovering and recording what will become key social trends of the decades to come. It shows an early manifestation of the moral shock

² Unlike *The Bus*, however, *Montenegro* introduces the immigrant protagonists through the eyes of a Western housewife, who ends up in their midst by accident and who cannot stop marvelling at their weird yet exciting and exuberant lifestyles. In this, *Montenegro* can be classified in the long line of films where the ‘legitimizing’ normative gaze of a Western narrator is used in telling the story of immigrants, as discussed in the first chapter of this book.
experienced by Oriental immigrants, a silent shock that has, by now, grown into vocal outrage.