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Committed Travelers, Reluctant Listeners: Playing Music and Displaying Authority on Public Transport in Modern-Day Greece

This study deals with the use (and misuse) of music in modern Greek public transport, particularly in the long-distance buses, commonly known as KTEL (from their acronym). In short, Greek drivers seem to impose their own repertoire, often loudly, through speakers on passengers, who are not able (or willing) to react efficiently. This happens despite official restrictions by the Ministry of Transport on the public use of music both for drivers and passengers. This phenomenon, allied with other incidents of inappropriate treatment of passengers, has been seen by the latter as a display of power or a sign of indifference. It is also connected with other (occasional) violations by some drivers, such as smoking and talking on mobile phone (both prohibited by the law). Furthermore, the use of music is placed in the broader context of musical entertainment in modern-Greek daily life. This is probably the first such study in Greek bibliography, and among the few in international bibliography, where the issue has recently been taken up. Although I was not allowed to take formal interviews, I managed to talk to several passengers (and to a lesser extent to drivers) and keep detailed notes on the spot. Therefore, my study may be said to employ the methods of empirical investigation and participant observation in a loose sense, since I have been a regular passenger for several years.

Key words: Public transport, drivers, passengers, music listening, audience, authority

Посвећени путници, неради слушаоци: Пуштање музике и исказивање ауторитета у јавном превозу у савременој Грчкој

Ова студија се бави употребом (и злоупотребом) музике у савременом грчком јавном превозу, посебно у међуградским аутобусима познатијим као КТЕЛ (по скраћеници која се за њих користи). Укратко, грчки возачи наизглед намећу свој репертоар и музички укус путницима који не могу ефикасно да реагују услед свог инфериорног статуса у возилу. Ово се догађа упркос званичним правилима Министарства саобраћаја која забрањују јавно пуштање музике и возачима и путницима. Овом феномену (као и другим случајевима непримереног третирања путника) у раду се приступа као демонстрацији прекомерне употребе моћи прекомерној употреби моћи и он се тако интерпретира. Такође је повезан са другим (повременим) прекршајима које чине неки возачи, као што су пушење или разговарање мобилним телефоном (обоје је забрањено). Надаље, употреба музике се ставља у шири контекст музичке забаве у савременом грчком свакодневном животу. Ово је једна од првих (ако не и једина) студија овог типа у грчкој академској библиографији, будући да се бави релативно деликатним проблемом (у смислу приватних података и друштвених односа). Стога, аутору није било дозвољено да направи никакве упитнике, већ је хватао детаљне белешке на лицу места и спроводио неформалне интервјуе. Такође је користио методе личног искуства и посматрања са учествовањем током путовања, будући да је већ неколико година редован путник.

Кључне речи: јавни превоз, возачи, путници, слушање музике, публика, ауторитет

INTRODUCTION

This study examines the public use of music in the Greek transportation system, a phenomenon that has been understudied (if not ignored) in Greek and (to a lesser extent) in international bibliography¹. More

¹ Except for some public (and usually hilarious) posts by suffered travelers in various Greek blogs with telling titles, such as: Bovolos 2016. "How to reach your destination alive traveling by KTEL", a section of which reads: "The devil's music". For the same phenomenon in other parts of the world, such as India, see Ram Sundaram, "Commuters in Chennai urge transport department to ban loud music on government buses", *The Times of India*, 8 June 2022 (frontpage).

specifically, popular music heard in Greek public transports is often played aloud by bus drivers as a means of keeping themselves alert but also of enjoying the trip. The phenomenon is more acute in the so-called KTEL buses², the main intercity public transport service (a cooperation of 62 regional companies), connecting various Greek cities on daily basis. Greek bus drivers have become ubiquitous among Greek passengers (and the general public) for their lack of manners as well as their special taste of music. Whatever their motives and intentions, the thing is that if today one enters a KTEL bus in Greece, one is likely to go through an unintentional music “brainwashing”, usually through the infamous *skyladiko* or doggish-style songs (from the Greek word *skylos* or dog), a subgenre of Greek popular music formerly performed in nightclubs³.

I have gone through this process countless times in the last 5-6 years due to the decision to move *en famille* in the suburbs of Athens and the consequent need to take such buses almost daily. The initial routine and fatigue of the trips became gradually an inspiration to look closely at the phenomenon and then study its various consequences and ramifications for myself and the other travelers as well the tensions between the drivers and the passengers. My repeated journeys proved very useful for they enabled me to get to know several drivers and passengers, observe their actions, and discuss with many of them (mainly with the latter). Though I was not allowed to take formal interviews, I obtained several passengers’ consent to transmit their opinion (with the proviso of respecting their anonymity) and kept systematic notes which I jotted down on the spot or afterwards. Thus, this study is loosely based on empirical evidence (through personal experience) and participant observation (since I was immersed in the daily activities of other participants)⁴.

In the relevant international bibliography, most studies on music listening in public transports deal with the private use of headphones,

² The name KTEL (Gr. Κοινά Ταμεία Εισπράξεων Λεωφορείων) goes for “Common Funds of Bus Proceeds”. No particular line will be specified here for reasons of confidentiality. Yet, the main argument is common to almost every bus line in Greece as I have gathered through my own trips elsewhere in the country, the accounts of other travelers, and the testimonies of the drivers’ themselves.

³ A recent account of Athenian nightclubs is Tsioulakis 2019. For the history and some social aspects of *skyladiko*, see Economou 2017, 725-8.

⁴ For an earlier account of this issue, see Clarke 1975, 95-123. For a more recent approach regarding Ethnomusicology, see Hellier-Tinoco 2003, 19-34.

especially among the young generation, and the sense of isolation⁵; other studies focus on the loud use of music by young people through various technological equipment (such as their mobiles or smartphones) that disturb the other passengers (especially the older generation)⁶. On the other hand, bus (and car) drivers worldwide are said to have been positively influenced from music listening in terms of avoiding stress and keeping themselves calm while driving⁷. Such studies focus mainly on the psychological impact of music on drivers played aloud since headphones are out of question⁸. Other researchers have noticed some dangerous effects of certain musical genres on young drivers in the broader area of the Balkans⁹. The case of the Greek drivers and their musical inclinations is rather unique, for they often create tensions between themselves and their passengers (irrespective of their motives).

To begin with, KTEL buses have often become a stage where opposite forces operate through the drivers' habits including music listening. First, there is what some of my passengers have described as "despotic"¹⁰ behaviour of several drivers, who taking advantage of their role, act as "masters" of the people's lives. This behaviour seems to have created among the passengers a sense of dependence on (and surrender to) the various whims of the drivers including musical taste. This attitude has been linked by some passengers to the feelings of the sick towards their doctor: they feel they are at the latter's mercy and are prepared to make any concessions to "save" their lives. In fact, some passengers travel often to Athens (or other main cities) for medical purposes and are more sensitive to such sentiments. Then, I have noticed the reaction of other passengers (usually the young generation) who try to "protect" themselves by using the same artistic means: they "shut" their ears through headphones and listen to their own musical preferences. Yet this is taken by the elders as creating a sense of alienation with possible negative consequences.

⁵ For the concept of mediated music on public transport, see Mariner i Cortés 2019, 83-101.

⁶ On the use of mobile phone by youngsters, see Murolo 2015, 81-97.

⁷ For the effects of music on drivers, see Mahmoud 2020, 12-21.

⁸ On the positive influence of music on drivers, see Wiesenthal et al. 2000, 1709-1719.

⁹ On this issue in Serbia, see Babić et. al. 2021, 396-407.

¹⁰ The adjective "despotic" is rather familiar with modern Greeks, since it is used to describe the church bishops (despots), who are the absolute masters of their local church. So, by analogy, drivers are often seen by passengers as their own "masters" ergo despots.

This study explores three main aspects of this phenomenon: the setting (being the bus interior), the driver (who sets the music), and the “audience” (that is, the passengers). It should be said that all three elements show some degree of instability or fluctuation, since we are not talking of a single vehicle (each local KTEL possessing dozens or hundreds of buses), the driver cannot be the same every time depending on the vehicle and the route, and the passengers are obviously different (though occasionally you may meet some of them). Yet, some common social and behavioural characteristics of the main human actors (the drivers and the passengers) have been observed and will be presented below. It should be stressed, however, that the following account is from the passengers’ point of view, since most drivers were unavailable or unwilling to talk. The role of drivers has been metaphorically described as one of “DJ” rather than “maestro”, since they simply coordinate and do not produce musical “events”. The “unwilling” audience of passengers and their reactions will be then contrasted to the driver’s musical tastes and choices.

THE “DJ DRIVER”

Let us state from the outset that the bus interior is not the usual (or even the expected) place of a music event, at least in the strict sense of the term. This is not an understatement but results from the fact that playing music in buses is officially prohibited by the Greek State for both drivers and passengers. According to the official encyclical of the Ministry of Transport, passengers, after being urged to behave properly towards drivers, are not allowed to use aloud any “hands-free” equipment¹¹. On the other hand, drivers, after being advised to display “excellent behaviour” to passengers, are invited to obey the prohibition of “personal music listening”¹², possibly

¹¹ Ministerial Decision A 27733/2213. Regulation of Passenger Rights. Article 4. Obligations of Passengers. 3. “Passengers ought [...] to behave with decency and courtesy to the Traffic Staff as well as to their fellow passengers avoiding arguments and tensions. You are not allowed to smoke, make noise (e.g. use a hands-free radio), behave in an inappropriate, provocative or threatening manner and disturb, in any way, the other passengers [...] They do not stick stickers, distribute printed materials, sell goods, carry out propaganda of any kind, play musical instruments and beg” (my translation).

¹² Ministerial Decision (as above). Article 5. Obligations of Carriers. III. “The traffic personnel of the carriers [...] is obliged [...] to demonstrate excellent behavior and appropriate respect when communicating with the passengers and the public in general and to make their Registration Number available to the passenger concerned, when requested [...] To apply the prohibition on smoking, listening to personal music and the use of a mobile phone, except for the official mobile phone for meeting official needs only and always with the use of a wireless handset” (my translation).

with earphones. In other parts of the world, playing music aloud within the bus has been labeled an “unacceptable behaviour” and is considered an offence (though a minor one) that “may be irresponsible, offensive or a nuisance but not physically dangerous”¹³. These rules are not unexpectedly stricter in cases of school buses according to regulations such as the following one: “No driver shall listen to music, podcast, radio, or other recorded or transmitted music or speech while driving a school bus using earphones”¹⁴.

From what I have observed, listening to music is not the only rule to be trespassed by drivers, the most serious violation being smoking within the bus during the trip. That is more intense in the EXPRESS bus lines that normally make no stop before the destination, thus making the drivers craving a cigarette. This can be achieved by the existence of a little window on the driver’s left side (the only one on modern Greek buses) that supposedly dissipates the smoke. Many a driver succumb to this temptation due to their semi-privacy (in front of the passengers) by insisting that this keeps themselves busy and prevents sleepiness. To be fair, Greece was one of the last European countries to be able to declare an anti-smoking law that was passed in 2002 but not effected before 2009. That year Greece had the highest smoking rates in European Union, so the relevant law (3730/2008) concerned a general prohibition for public places and working environments¹⁵. Yet there are still certain public or semi-public pockets that tolerate violation, such as nightclubs, bars, restaurants, and transportation vehicles (at least some of them).

Although an independent activity, smoking has been associated in Greece with popular music, including the abovementioned skyladiko genre, originally heard in nightclubs amidst thick fog coming from heavy smoking. The older generation (drivers included) was also prone to smoking under the influence of an insistent and alluring advertising in popular magazines, public posts, and on the cinema from the 1960s onwards¹⁶. So, as they have confided to me, by listening to this sort of music the drivers are driven to light a cigarette and recreate in their imagination the atmosphere of nightclubs and the associated feeling. Other violations I have perceived include the use of mobile phones, also prohibited by the

¹³ See Tasmania 2022, 8.

¹⁴ See, for example, Rosenthal 2021, 60.

¹⁵ For more, see an official report in Lagiou & Trichopoulos 2011.

¹⁶ The relationship of advertising and smoking in the Greek context is explored in Donatos 2004, 1-13.

law next to headphones (and included in the same passage), with the exception of a special phone in case of emergency. In practice though, many drivers are seen talking for long periods or very often on their mobiles with friends and/or colleagues for non-professional matters (since they talk loudly and can be heard easily).

A further trespass concerns the unwillingness of some drivers to wear face masks during the covid-19 period despite strict instructions (and strong recommendations) from state authorities and the medical community. In Greece, face masks in public transports became obligatory from April 2020 and remained so until recently (1 April 2023)¹⁷. Some of the drivers I spoke with thought that their semi-privacy (as well as the side window) could protect them and their passengers; yet their ambivalence has made several people in Greece unwilling to travel, according to a recent study¹⁸. I have even heard some drivers talking openly against the measures and expressing their doubts of (or disbelief in) the reality of the pandemic. What is ironic though is that when the same doubting drivers approached the tolls or other public points (where the police is often situated) they drew their masks (possibly to avoid the fine). I saw the same happening with the use of seat belts (being mandatory for drivers and passengers alike but not observed by neither of them)¹⁹.

On the other hand, the lack of strict and consistent police inspection seems to have “allowed” bus drivers in Greece to add another activity to their list of transgressions: playing music aloud. In practice, the most affected area is the first 2-3 rows, including 8-12 passengers, unless the driver opens the loudspeakers thus transforming the vehicle, so to speak, into a moving disco! KTEL buses in Greece are divided into two twin rows left and right, both reaching a capacity of 48 to 52 seated passengers (no standing passenger is allowed). The bus driver is situated on the front left, usually on a lower level, having an eye contact with the passengers through the mirror but otherwise relatively isolated, a fact aggravated after the pandemic period, when special plexiglass was sometimes placed between him and the passengers. Although a microphone is available to drivers, it is rarely used: instead, most of them prefer to shout when

¹⁷ On public transportation during the economic crisis, see Nimorakiotaki & Sambracos 2020, 282-297.

¹⁸ On this issue, see Farrukh Baig et. al. 2022, 3567.

¹⁹ According to the European Commission Directive 91/671/EEC, exemptions are only made for taxi drivers, drivers of postal delivery vehicles, drivers of catering vehicles, and pregnant women.

something comes up (an announcement, a reprimand etc.). Some drivers have turned their space into “mini-studio” by placing family memorabilia around (such as photos), hanging amulets from the mirrors, etc.

This can be explained by the fact that drivers are often the bus owners themselves, something that they seemingly wish to make clear to everybody entering their luxurious abode. Drivers are also the shareholders of their local KTEL, acting as employers (when they hire other drivers) and members of the Board of Directors. Greece is broadly divided into some 50 regional units (formerly called prefectures)²⁰ and every local KTEL is the sole transport provider for all long-distance bus lines (usually based on the region’s capital). This has generated an unofficial transportation monopoly, especially after the decline of the Greek railway network and the huge service cuts of 2011 (resulting to the recent deadly train crash at Tempi, Thessaly)²¹. On the other hand, KTEL companies have renewed their vehicle fleet (through purchasing of brand new or slightly used buses from European countries), which has increased to over 200 buses (in the case of the KTEL of Attica). They also employ hundreds of people (as drivers, inspectors, and other officers).

THE “MUSIC BUS”

In light of the above information, KTEL buses symbolize the professional (and consequently financial) status of their owners, who have normally spent a fortune to acquire their vehicle. In a sense, every bus is an extension of the owner’s personality and identity: that is why it is decorated in a special way (often with the assistance and under the care of their wives). Such is the above-mentioned memorabilia showing family photos: either the driver’s father (and often ex-owner of the vehicle or its antecedent) or his family (very few women drivers have appeared so far). According to their testimonies, the amulets and other sacred symbols (mainly a wooden or metal cross hung from the mirror) act as apotropaic (or protective) instruments to prevent or turn away the “evil eye” (still believed

²⁰ The prefectures (Gr. *Nomoi*) were the second-degree organization of local government, grouped into 13 regions, divided into provinces and comprising communities and municipalities. By 2010, their number had risen to 51 but after the so-called Kallikratis reform, effected on 1 January 2011, the prefectures were abolished and turned to regional units (*περιφερειακές ενότητες*) largely taking over the prefectures’ administrative role. For more, see Review 2020.

²¹ An earlier account and warning of this development is Paravantis & Prevedouros 2001, 34-44.

and feared by modern Greeks)²². I have also spot some little sacred icons stuck on the windows (fig. 1) and showing various saints, either recently canonized or associated with traveling (such as St Christopher, patron saint of travelers)²³. In some KTEL headquarters, outside the main office, there is also a little church dedicated to St Christopher (fig. 2). To this, I can add the religiosity of quite a few passengers, as is evident by their crossing themselves, more often at the departure and sometimes while passing by a little church (fig. 3).

In this juncture, I think it is appropriate to introduce the modern-Greek term for mass transportation, namely, *metaphorai* (from which the English word “metaphor” comes from), a point first raised by the French priest and scholar, Michel de Certeau (1925-1986) in his influential monograph, *L'invention du quotidien* (1980). De Certeau even opens Chapter IX of his book (entitled “Spatial Stories”) by using an image from Greece: “In modern Athens, the vehicles of mass transportation are called *metaphorai*. To go to work or come home, one takes a ‘metaphor’ – a bus or a train. Stories could also take this noble name: every day, they traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories”²⁴. In this sense, Greek buses may also be seen and approached as “metaphors within a metaphor”, that is, as carries of various (more abstract but revealing) personal stories, which unfold (or remain hidden) while joining their own carriers (i.e., the passengers) to the latter’s destinations. Furthermore, music played in these vehicles may be read as another metaphor carried through and trying each passenger’s aesthetic, sensorial, and psychological limits!

Other tokens of affection (and personal significance) within the bus can be some little nice blanket for the driver’s back or a lovely-decorated pillow for his seat to make his journey easier and more comfortable. Part of the bus apparatus is the radio cum CD player (formerly radio cum cassette player) placed on the driver’s right to be easily accessible. This is to allow him to turn the radio or change the channel with the least effort (if he is a right-handed!) but sometimes it can become risky or dangerous,

²² On the “evil eye” in the Greeks of a diaspora, see Chryssanthopoulou 2008, 106-118.

²³ Saint Christopher was a 3rd century AD martyr who had become popular by the 7th century, many monasteries and churches being dedicated to him. He is famously said to have carried across a river a child who afterwards revealed himself to be the Christ. He became the patron saint of travelers, small images of him being worn, carried with, or placed in vehicles. For more, see Avramea 1981, 31-36.

²⁴ See the English translation in: De Certeau 1984, 115.

since it may attract (some of) the driver's attention. Former radios did not work properly causing frustration to passengers who hardly listened to music with a lot of fuss, thus asking the driver to turn it off. Conversely, the most sober drivers of the past (being very few indeed!) tried to avoid listening to music (and smoking too) by inventing some excuses whenever they were asked to provide some entertainment by passionate passengers. I remember an old driver and practicing Christian (now passed away), who disliked the popular repertoire of the time, and to avoid any orders by his "audience" often pretended that his radio was damaged!

Due to (financial, social, and emotional) value of their large vehicle, some drivers are often seen to get irritated at the slightest mishandling of their passengers. For example, a passenger wishing to use the handles of the seats and (by ignoring how they operate) trying to push or drag them violently, is likely to earn a more violent response from the driver²⁵. Not long ago, a middle-aged couple of tourists having placed one of their luggage in the cabinet above the seats (and not knowing that it was not tolerated by the drivers though not officially forbidden) were severely reprimanded by one of the KTEL staff, asked by the driver to act on his behalf (due to the latter's lack of English), with these words in a strict tone (addressing the man): "Hey, mister, don't put your bag here!". The reason for the driver middleman's reprimand was due to the possible danger of the bags falling down during the trip; yet the warning could have been expressed more politely (even in non-sophisticated English): "can you place your bag underneath your seat, please?". Although the owners' care to preserve their vehicles in a satisfactory condition is understandable, their overreaction is not reasonable and ethically accepted.

In this sense, the public (and often loud) use of (a special sort of) music by the drivers can be seen as another imposition on their passengers who are practically not taken seriously (let alone warned of or asked to). The theme of music's association and relation with any source of power (such as the state and other institutions) has been explored and come up from time to time²⁶. Yet, this issue should not be limited to various authorities (the large picture) but can be traced in various social milieus, even among individuals (the small picture)²⁷. In practice, anyone having assumed control over a group of people is able to use music as a

²⁵ For the social aspects of transport, see Hine & Mitchell 2001, 319-32.

²⁶ One recent account on music's relation to power is Mitchell 2016, 271-76.

²⁷ Aspects of music's function as a device of "social ordering" and its "social powers" are discussed in DeNora 2000, 109-150.

convenient means to exercise (or strengthen) his/her power over them. The imposition of music on other people can next be described as positive or negative, depending on whether it is used purposely by someone to achieve someone's goals or as a sign of ignoring the people's needs and/or tastes. The case of Greek drivers can be said to belong to the latter category, for (according to my investigation) no clear plan or intention against the passengers has come out other than their enjoying themselves²⁸.

Before proceeding any further, I should make clear that the focus (and insistence) on music in the context of this study is not only due to my own specialty, interest or choice but emanates from my ethnographic locus and experience, since music is a constant motive in almost every long-distance bus in Greece, both in the capital and the province. Greeks are widely known for their (often passionate) love of music since the ancient times, and their music's association with political gatherings²⁹, public festivals, and other aspects of their daily life³⁰. Among the various musical manifestations of modern Greek culture related to our main theme, one can single out the public expression and loudness of music listening. A typical example is the famous wedding festivities, immortalized (in somewhat exaggerated version) in the romantic comedy, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* written by Nia Vardalos (2002)³¹ that are overflowed with incessant and loud dance music all night. Even today, one can hardly cope with the volume and decibels of the loudspeakers emitting live or recorded music during lavish wedding receptions all over Greece³².

Such incidents should be linked with another habit of some modern Greeks (irrespective of age) who express themselves by playing music publicly and loudly! Among other quotidian examples (easily perceptible in the less-noisy province) is raising the volume of music from your apartment while getting up in the morning over the weekends (mostly on Sundays) to reach kefi or high spirits!³³ To enjoy the process and achieve that goal you don't have to get ready soon or (still better) go to work at all. This is a typical example from my recent personal experience: first, you open one of the windows or the door of your balcony, though not drawing the (flowing) curtains to reveal completely your looks and mood.

²⁸ For some practical aspects of music's power, see Mahon 2014, 327-33.

²⁹ Music's relation to politics is discussed in Holst-Warhaft 2002, 297-323.

³⁰ On Greek traditional music and various meanings, see Kallimopoulou 2009.

³¹ On some cultural aspects of the film, see Anagnostou 2012, 139-183.

³² For a diachronic account of Greek wedding in Cyprus, see Argyrou 1996.

³³ On the issue of *kefi* in a diasporic context, see Tsounis 1995, 90-103.

Then (preferably before any other activity) you switch on your stereo (Hi Fi, CD player etc.) and leave the loud music to take care of you and your surroundings including the ears of your neighbours. In the meantime, you light a cigarette (evident from the smoke or the smell) and leave yourself in that state for some 15 minutes (the least).

Coincidentally, all three elements included in the above example (that is, the open window, smoking, and music listening) do appear in the case of bus drivers as described before. The only difference is that the window is not the main means to liberate the decibels (which have already reached the ears of the front-seaters within the vehicle) but a “window” to disobedience (for enabling the driver to smoke), and in a sense a further display of his authority and power. As was said before, the bus is in a sense a projection of the driver’s psyche (as well as his body and his habitat). This is not to say, that Greeks are the only people to have such habits in the world (one can get similar experience in other neighbouring countries) or that this is a recent discovery³⁴. What is interesting and noteworthy though is the blind habit to impose one’s favourite music on other people and not caring for that. Therefore, in a culture accustomed (or at least tolerant) to loud and unexpected music, the driver’s decision to turn on his radio or CD player en route may not look so strange.

Speaking of open space and public performance, one should take into account the drivers’ social and cultural background that may also explain their behaviour and musical inclination. According to their testimonies, most drivers aged 50-60 years (being the majority) come from the Greek province, whereas those ranging 30-40 are born in various urban centres. This has considerable bearing on the former’s listening habits and perceptions of music as primarily a social, communal, and public activity. Some of them even spoke to me with nostalgia for their early and teenage years in their village, where they participated in open space festivals while listening and dancing within their local community. Thus, they found modern uses and functions of music (in the private sphere or in a more discreet manner) pathetic and unattractive. Besides, their small familiarity with musical (and general) technology makes them distrustful towards understanding private listening as is exercised by young passengers. Therefore, their own vehicle seems to work for them as a locus where they can relive their past and show their sense of music to others.

³⁴ On the pre-history of the phenomenon, see Devine 2013, 159-76. For some technical aspects (with reference to the previous study), see Mulder 2016, 56-59.

By referring to the vehicle and its various uses, one can recall here the concept of non-place (non-lieux) for further explaining and interpreting some of the aspects associated with buses and their geographical/cultural space. First introduced by the French anthropologist, Marc Augé (b.1935), in his seminal monograph, *Non-Lieux, Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (1992), the term refers to several modern spaces with a limited or no sense of history, identity, and social relations, including motorways³⁵. Although the concept and its various applications have earned a strong criticism, some of its key ideas still retain their use and significance, such as the perception of the vehicle as a space where individual passengers do not (consciously) share a common identity (communal, social, cultural, etc.) but have randomly and accidentally gathered (rather, selected) to go from one place to another for personal reasons. So, in this socially “neutral” environment, the public exhibition and expression of any cultural code, such as music, can be considered as an attempt of binding and consolidating these people.

THE PASSENGER “AUDIENCE”

But what about the passengers themselves? How do they live their experience during the trip, what is their usual reactions, and how they perceive and explain what is going on within the bus? As was said before, one could divide the passengers (in their additional capacity as “listeners”) into front- and back-seaters, though this is not always the case. The first two or three rows are the most “vulnerable” to the musical whims of the driver; ironically, at the same time, they are supposed to be the most privileged for the passengers. This is obviously because travelling on the front decks offers a more relaxed journey, allowing a better view of the highway, and giving a sense of semi-independence (for not having in front of you, dozens of people). On the other hand, front seaters are exposed to the driver’s various activities, especially if he is sociable, popular, or talkative enough! Other much-desired loci are window seats for offering a nice of view of “raw nature”, since modern Greek highways do not pass through villages and inhabited places anymore. Seats are by rule numbered so each passenger knows in advance where is their place, though sometimes the same number may be given to two passengers of the same bus!

If passengers can be informed of their seats beforehand, what they are not able to get is the type and character of their driver, particularly

³⁵ The English translation of the work is Augé 1995. See also a critical account with regard to motorways in Merriman 2004, 145-167.

his musical inclinations. What must have been obvious from the above is that despite the fact that travelling two or three hours on a Greek bus includes several different and disparate elements (both in the interior and the outside), music, as constant theme and motive, is so strong and powerful that it subordinates (and often eliminates) all the others. It is one thing to sit next to a curious elderly woman (who wants to know about your job, your family, even your beliefs) and quite another thing to have to cope with a loud and incessantly played music coming from an impersonal and mechanical source you cannot control. Some passengers (with whom I have talked) feel totally helpless if they happen to sit in the middle and back seats while the bus loudspeakers are all turned on. That is why, sometimes front seaters ask (or demand from) the driver to lower the volume or change the repertoire but (in most cases) to no avail³⁶.

At this point (and to give a broader picture), I should note that the drivers' musical habits were occasionally tolerated (and in some measure accepted) by some passengers (though not the younger ones). That happened when their repertoire was of the lighter mood in terms of music and lyrics (that is, Greek ballads, pop music, etc.) and not the heavy skyladiko songs (revolving around rejection, separation, unfulfilled love, etc.). In modern Greece, there is an unofficial albeit rather common consensus among the average listeners over the basic genres of Greek popular music, described as songs of the people (*laika tragoudia*). In broad terms, popular songs are divided into light (*elafra*), semi-light (*elafrolaika*) and heavy (*varia*) though in some cases they overlap³⁷. The majority of middle-aged people prefer the first two categories; this is not to say that the younger cling to the heavy ones: on the contrary, they usually despise both genres, turning to Greek (or American) pop or to other modern genres (rock, hip-hop, etc.). Yet, since the majority of drivers stick to the heavy genre, toleration to their music is rather rare and inconsequential.

An interesting discovery from my travelling experience is the correlation between the volume of music played by the drivers and the loudness of the passengers' chattering. When the driver listened to his music in (relatively) high volume he usually made the passengers start talking louder to be heard by their co-seaters (if they happened to have one with no headphone). Conversely, a driver who listened

³⁶ See a relevant case study in China, in Zhang et. al. 2022, 106623. A more recent account regarding conflicts between drivers and passengers is Ye & Tang 2023, 103563.

³⁷ A comprehensive overview of Greek popular music and its genres is Bucuvalas 2018, 10-40. See also Kallimopoulou and Poulos. 2017, 448-454.

discretely to his radio or CD player was less likely to give passengers the opportunity to raise their voice since there was no need for that. If the driver happened to be silent both on his phone and over his radio (a rare and curious phenomenon!) the passengers were quiet too as if they respected the former's decision and applauded his behaviour. However, even the most "respectful" drivers used to raise the volume (and turn on the lights, if it was dark) when their vehicle approached its destination, as if to celebrate the safe arrival and the promising staying of their passengers!³⁸

Another backfire caused by the drivers' excessive use of music was the virtual isolation of some of the passengers through their personal headphones. That affected the young people (usually university students and early-career people) who are anyway skeptical of modern-Greek popular music or want to experiment with various musical trends³⁹. From what they have told me, they are driven to put their earphones throughout the trip in higher volume than usual to avoid the musical "invader". And as the word of the drivers' idiosyncratic musical tastes (and disrespectful tactics) has spread through the students' and youngsters' lines, almost all the latter enter the buses preoccupied and armed with any available equipment of modern sound technology. Having said that, it should be added that the majority of them are quiet people with no intention to quarrel with their elder on an issue that can be solved (or alleviated) with little effort. Yet (from what I was told), they are not ignorant or unsuspecting of the possible dangers awaiting them through long exposure to music listening on headphones, having also as background another source of loud music⁴⁰.

The private use of music by youngsters (irrespective of its cause) is also seen by some elderly people with strong skepticism or disillusionment, since it is interpreted as a sign of selfishness, isolation, and alienation⁴¹. They feel the same when their young co-travelers do not respond to their pleas for little chat or look absorbed by other activities (even by reading a book, if they can). In this respect, they

³⁸ This is another symptom of the drivers' ignoring their passengers. According to my experience (corroborated by other passengers known to me) when it gets dark, drivers seldom allow passengers to turn on the light by immobilizing the relevant equipment. No study on the issue has been produced so far in Greece. For a fairly recent survey of musical taste of young people in Russia, see Mozgot 2014, 22-36.

⁴⁰ On this issue and its alternatives, see Bissell 2009, 427-45.

⁴¹ For the social aspects of using smartphones, see Hatuka & Toch 2016, 2192-2208.

seem to share similar feelings and notions with the drivers about the public use of music, despite their reservations of the repertoire and the occasional volume of the recordings. Sometimes, the elders feel threatened by the use of so many mobiles around them for their health; they even complain that they feel dizziness when sitting next to a smartphone holder. I recall a middle-aged traveler (well-known to me in advance) who used to protest publicly at this phenomenon and asked to change seats if he happened to have such an unwanted co-habitant. In this respect, the public use of music by drivers has resulted into the creation (or perpetuation) of two categories of “listeners” according to their age and customs of listening.

The only audience that welcomes wholeheartedly the public and loud use of music during traveling is (not-unexpectedly) the young students, especially during their excursions with those school buses operated by KTEL⁴². Except for my own memories as a child, I have more recently experienced such images and scenes while escorting my own children in long trips organized by the school parent association. Apart from the volume, in-bus activities include dancing while listening to music (of the children’s choice), joining the songs with a loud voice, and teasing each other that may be dangerous when being excessive, according to recent studies⁴³. On the other hand, school bus drivers (ironically) are often placed in the defensive, since the decibels of music and the general noise caused by children is not bearable. Therefore, assisted by teachers, they even try to calm down their young passengers by regulating the volume of music and employing the otherwise-neglected microphone! And yet, this can be used by them for little reflection and empathy, as to how someone (holding some kind of power over others) should use his own desires and impulses (however noble these could be), such as listening to and enjoying music!

EPILOGUE

This study has attempted to touch upon a rather delicate issue in modern Greek society and daily life (affecting thousands of people), that being the use of playing music in public transport on behalf of many (though not all) drivers, and the responses and reactions of their passengers. It is called delicate, because it concerns directly both the author (myself)

⁴² KTEL often undertakes school excursions that are less costly than it is by other private companies and have become popular among schools.

⁴³ A review of intervention methods in school buses is King et al. 2019, 101-28.

as a frequent user of public transport (and thus dependable on the good will and capacity of the staff) and the passengers (who, for the above reason, they were unwilling (some of them out of fear) to give official interviews and expose themselves). To fill the gap, so to say, I have included my own opinion which, nevertheless, does not differ greatly from that of the passengers I have spoken with. On the other hand, this method is not an arbitrary option, for in modern ethnography, the researcher is not expected to act as *tabula rasa* but is allowed (if not urged) to express his/her opinion (provided this is clearly stated)⁴⁴. At the same time, I have had to respect the “participants” wish to keep their anonymity.

These ethical dilemmas put aside, what I have gathered from several off-the-record discussions with passengers was their almost unanimous disillusionment (if not disappointment) with the drivers’ excessive use of music during the journey in terms of volume (music played loudly), repertoire (usually a heavy-mood genre), and (above all) with no sign of understanding of or respect for the passengers’ needs (since some of them travel for medical purposes and have no desire of getting excited). To be fair though, one can understand (and respect) the drivers’ need for a sort of reasonable “entertainment”, mostly for keeping them busy and avoiding sleepiness (in face of the modern highways and the buses’ automatic equipment). One can also accept (and respect) their personal desires and tastes that may not be shared by other people and lead to misunderstandings and disagreements. But this should be controlled and checked (primarily by the drivers) when it gets too far and becomes disturbing for others (the passengers) who are, after all, the formers’ clients. So, by discussing this issue, I have wished to make the public aware of the inherent problems and hopefully to contribute to their possible solution.

⁴⁴ On self-reflection as a central feature of ethnographic work, see Huspek 1994, 45-63.



Fig. 1

Left side of a KTEL bus in Greece showing (from top to bottom) a thick black rosary around a garlic in a little basket (used as apotropaic symbol), a little icon of St Paisios (canonized by the Greek Patriarchate in 2015), and a glass cross.



Fig. 2
A little church dedicated to St Christopher (the saint's name is written in cyclical form above the entrance) outside KTEL headquarters somewhere in Greece (names are not given for reasons of confidentiality).

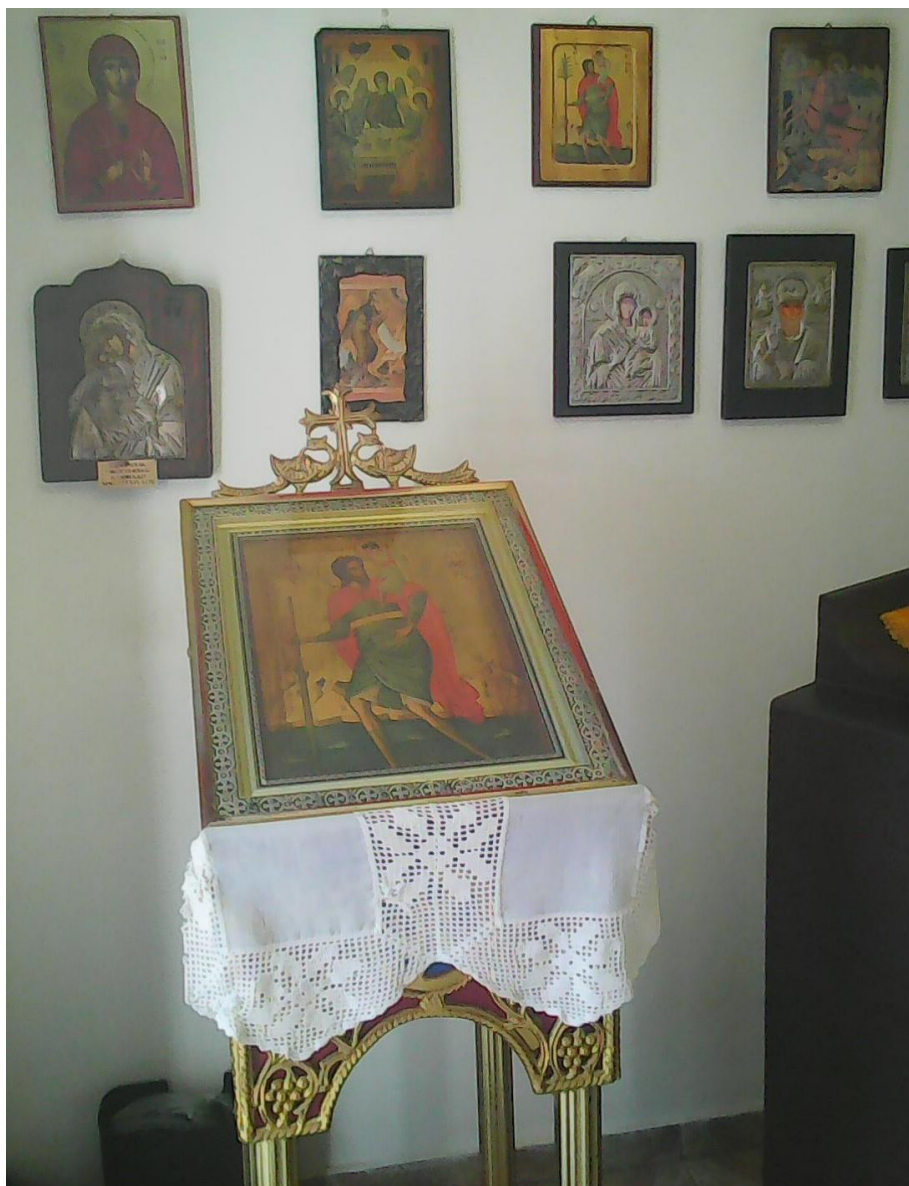


Fig. 3

The interior of St. Christopher's church owned by KTEL showing the saint's icon on a metallic stand dressed with a white linen, and other little icons on the wall (including the Virgin Mary, Saint Nicholas etc.).

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