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AS WE FLIT BY EACH OTHER, FLUID, AFFECTIONATE, CHASTE, MATURED

What is the matter between strangers in a public bus ride setting?
Who is the stranger to another stranger on the bus?

The number of strangers we encounter on a daily basis in the city shapes the reality of our very existence among a society of civilians. Strangers, while having no connection to us, impress us with their presence and their person as well as mirror a bit of ourselves back to us. In trying to understand the meaning of the stranger to us, I chose to specifically watch and focus on the stranger on the public bus. This location, as a moving location, is widely visited and stayed in for an amount of time that allows us to observe a fragment more of each other. Any kind of person could step onto the bus because of its role as a carrier around the city, so it offers a diversity of people to observe that is unmatched by specific geographical locations.

In this scope, I am researching the relationship between strangers on the public bus and the significance of the unknown, yet a certain familiarity, to the individual in a moving environment. This past summer, I spent many bus rides collecting data from various public buses in Brussels, immersing myself in the ever-changing landscape of strangers who were sharing the bus with me. I observed passengers to try and recognise what brings them together and pulls them apart, what unites them in their similarities and differences. How does the bus tie the passengers together and is this tie graspable? What are the structures beneath the relationship of a stranger and the behaviour of the individual. How does the bus enforce or break these structures?

The basis for this dissertation lies within the framework sociological, socio-psychological and philosophical thoughts and research as well as my own observations on countless bus rides through Brussels. My writing includes work from researchers and excerpts of notes from the aforementioned bus rides that are meant to exemplify and illustrate some of the themes that are discussed. I am trying to reveal a substance of a relationship between strangers on the public bus in non-interactions and minuscule interactions and lay bare the invisible structures that create passengers and strangeness. What is the character of this space and the character it designates to the people in it? How do strangers connect to each other without even interacting with each other?

The first part is about the anatomy of the bus, its social possibilities and the rules it brings with it. The second part is about the passengers and the values and conceptions they hold and project onto one another and the order of things. The third part is about the physical and mental relationship the passengers shape and hold as strangers.

1. BODY AND BOUNDARIES

The public bus as a place

You have just entered the bus along with numerous other people who were waiting at the bus stop with you. Getting onto the bus is a bit of a squeeze. You are pushing through people who are standing in the corridor, brushing against their warm shoulders. The seats are all taken, so you try to find a spot to stand which is not entirely uncomfortable and in someone's face. Or them in your face. Most of the people are trying as best as they can to jerk their limbs out of your way so that you can pass by with minimal contact. Yet, it is too tight and you feel uncomfortable thinking about the amount of people that have brushed you with their sweat, stink, germs or any kind of unthinkable dirt. Some people try to meet your gaze in search of predicting and understanding your next move. As you reciprocate this slight contact with the passengers and look them in the eyes, they quickly look away. Looking too long might come across as suggestive but your relationship is not that far yet. At times, it feels like a small touch of embarrassment when the eyes linger for a second too long.

The public bus, as in its name, is driven by the public and made for the members of the public. It is a mode of transport connecting different places to each other. In Brussels, the buses connect places within the city to each other as well as suburbs and outskirts. Depending on the time of day, the bus will be more or less crowded with passengers. At busy times, like rush hour, passengers usually have to squeeze in alongside several others, bringing them very close to one another. When it is not so busy, there are many seats and standing options available. Like a jungle gym, handles are hanging from the ceiling, seats at different heights and facing different directions. The bus is a cabin on wheels and the Brussels bus can typically accommodate around 66-105 passengers. The space on the bus is small and compact. There is a limitation of people because of the limitation of space. The space is easy to navigate around when it is mostly empty but passengers become obstructions, like empty chairs to move around and to be moved around. One has to be a good navigator and full of intent to safely and comfortably move through a crowd of passengers. The individual has to consider their size and deliberate the skilfulness required to make their way through this environment. From most seats, the landscape of the bus, the seats and the passengers, or just a part of it, is easily observable.

The way the bus is set up allows for social exchange, or at least social behaviour. If not conversing with another passenger casually, the shortest interaction you could experience is having to address someone to move past them or ask for a seat next to someone. It is not possible to visually and physically isolate yourself from other passengers. It is almost entirely impossible not to come into close contact with any other passenger on the bus, even if it only means a tiny brush of clothes in passing someone.

Social rules

It is a daily occurrence, almost a ritual, to have encounters with people you do not know; strangers. Moving yourself through public spaces exposes you to the evanescent presence of other bodies, existing in this very space with you. Most of the time, we share only brief moments with strangers, tiny touches of exposure to each other. Most of the time, we are not even aware of all the strangers we share our immediate space with.

In many public spaces, there are social rules that control the way people behave. Usually, these rules are not established clearly, as in visually or by word, like a code of conduct on the wall, but they are socially created and known to those who regularly find themselves in certain public spaces as well as have some moral basis that reflects certain values of society. On public transport, they are known to those who travel regularly and in this way they embody those rules. The special case on public transport is that it forces people into intimate proximity, thus calling for rules on how to respect one another's personal space. I will further discuss the concept of proxemics and its effect on strangers' relationships at a later point.

Different geographical locations have different rules of conduct, social codes that determine how passengers are meant to behave on public transport. The most prominent unspoken social rules are not to make eye contact unless you want to engage with a stranger, not to sit next to someone if there are empty seats available, not to speak too loudly to other passengers as well as on the phone, not to occupy too much space. Certain moral obligations include offering your seat

to people in need, such as old, disabled or pregnant people. Sometimes it includes children. Along with that, on the public buses in Brussels, the first back door should remain unhindered for strollers and wheelchairs.

When one is unfamiliar with the unspoken rules, it is easy to make mistakes and be treated accordingly; be met with reactions of discomfort and disapproval.

A study conducted to research the way passengers create barriers on public transport describes a situation on the Paris metro in which the author was confronted with unhappy passengers who thought she was speaking too loudly and disapproved of her not standing up from her folding seat when the metro got crowded, as was expected of her according to the unspoken rules. She was confused as to why she was being confronted with negative reactions as she was unaware of these rules as a foreigner until someone brought them to her attention.

In my research on the bus, I was met with a family on the bus who were being obnoxiously loud. This is not an uncommon situation as children naturally bring up the volume in public spaces, and so were these children, screaming. This particular family stood out to me because the parents were reacting just as loudly as the children. One of the adults' arms was covered in tattoos with names and birth dates, which indicated their parental status to me. The other adult had a distressed look on their face, I assumed because of the kids. Other passengers on the bus were already looking at this family who seemed to be pulling a lot of attention to them. Once the parent started telling off one of the kids, even more passengers were watching. I remember feeling uncomfortable because of their loudness and because I felt that I was not supposed to be involved in their interactions. There were feelings of irritation from many passengers in the air. The loudness of their presence was uncalled for by the bus.

In reading about social codes on the public bus, I was met with a lot of information on how to avoid others, how to signal to others that you do not want to engage with them.

Something about being confined in a moving cabin, at rush hour tightly packed next to sweaty strangers, at other hours possibly sitting next to someone else you do not know, makes it feel like avoidance and self-involvement are the most comforting tools for this environment.

Simmel (1903) and Milgram (1970) suggest that people tend to shut off, as in intentionally disengage from occurrences in the public, as a coping mechanism for environmental overstimulation in an already overstimulating urban environment. In a public bus environment, you will often find yourself among many passengers who disengage with their surroundings and focus solely on their own entertainment, which varies in activities but can involve anything like scrolling on mobile phones, calling someone, listening to music, reading, looking outside and more. All of these behaviours perpetuate detachment, stranger-to-stranger silence, anonymisation and self involvement. Civil inattention, a term coined by Erving Goffman, describes an acknowledgment of people in close proximity to each other with respect for their privacy. Meaning, people do not impose on each other. This avoidance of interaction allows for people to enjoy the comfort of their own bubble of privacy in an otherwise uncomfortably intimate space. People do not have to engage with others just because they are touching elbows and shoulders, just because they are breathing the same air.

Most passengers sit down; the bus is not so crowded. A woman spreads her body and legs over the one-and-a-half seat as if it were her living room couch. With her bags on her lap, as an armrest, she is slouched over her phone and looks as though she could fall asleep any second. Her headphones in her ears do signal that she has some kind of respect for the overall silence on this bus. "Do not bother me but also I will not bother anyone."

The unspokenness of the rules, which almost creates a public secrecy, speaks to the idea that passengers on the bus are more connected than expected. Even though it implies an exclusivity, behaviours that not everyone knows how to participate in, it unites those who do. The notion that strangers share a set of rules, without speaking about it to each other, ties them together. They share ideologies of appropriate behaviour on the public bus for the sake of each other's comfort. Additionally, silence, disengagement and avoidance are increasingly more socially accepted, creating a communality among those who behave accordingly. Underneath the avoidance lies a social construct, which disallows unease and awkwardness in connections with strangers. Anyone engaging in civil inattention is caught in this very network of the social construct.

2. MANAGING THE IMAGE OF THE STRANGER

You are sitting in a seat by the window with two other seats facing you. An older man sits down diagonally across from you. You raise your leg onto the small ridge running along the inside walls of the bus and so are sitting “un-orderly”. The man looks at you and snorts. For him this is unacceptable, very un-woman-like. You feel uncomfortable because this man is trying to push his values onto you when you never asked for his opinion or approval. His reaction is entirely unsolicited, yet he feels the need to share it with you. He feels entitled to this because in his world, a woman opening her legs in any sort of way in public is anything but appropriate.

Even though we cannot know for what reasons strangers do the things they do, why they dress a certain way, how they communicate and many other things, we can assume and project the ways they are based on our experiences and how we are. While this does not create an image of a stranger that reflects who they truly are, it gives us great insight about ourselves and the way we think. It tells more about ourselves than it does about the stranger in that moment.

In Kwame Anthony Appia’s publication “Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers” (2006), he writes about the ties that people share on a global scale despite separatist understandings and values of the people. He names the example that Christians have to go to mass while Muslims have to go to Mecca. But a Christian will not tell a Muslim to go to Mecca and the other way around, through which they can both project their beliefs of the ‘good’ deed onto one another; but what they deliberate as right is not inherently what is right or natural for the other. Following the same idea, Albert E. Schefflen (1972) compares the roles of a policeman from Italy to a policeman from the U.S., and claims that the Italian policeman sees himself as a servant to the people whereas the American policeman sees himself as an enforcer of the law. They both represent the same figure in society, but view the roles differently and manifest them in different ways. In line with this, passengers on the bus might assume what they think is ‘good’ for each other about each other, projecting their values on the other, but that is likely not to represent the values of another passenger. This leads to a clash of identities between the real and the projected personality of the passenger. Similarly, if one feels disapproval towards another passenger on the bus, because of prejudices or behaviours that they perceive as ‘bad’ in one’s view of the world, this only reflects this individual’s understanding of the meaning of ‘bad’, rather than representing the image of the ‘bad’ of all the passengers on the bus. Thus, these projections of one’s own values onto other passengers are a mere reflection of oneself, rather than an appropriate judgement of character.

The smelly person is sitting in front of me now. How did we end up on the same bus again? He represents everything I don’t want to be. Greasy hair, addicted to alcohol, doesn’t take care of himself, reeks. At least he has a taken-care-of friend to sit next to and converse with. Maybe he’s not everything I don’t want to be after all.

The stranger and the unknown are often connected to the idea of a threat (Zeeb and Joffe, 2020) and are therefore welcomed with a sense of mistrust. Strangers see the worst and expect the worst from one another. “The unknown poses a threat since it jeopardises the individual’s sense of mastery of a known world.” (Zeeb and Joffe, p.3) Yet, social interactions with strangers are said to improve the mental well-being of an individual. Why do we assume the bad in strangers? In a study conducted by Zeeb and Joffe in London, participants described their encounters with strangers as ‘good’ or ‘bad’. “The ‘good’ stranger is one that is friendly, supportive, interesting, or a potential strong tie. The ‘bad’ stranger is conceptualised as dangerous or rude.” (Zeeb and Joffe, p.6) Participants categorised the conception of the rude stranger, predominantly in the public transport environment, describing this type of stranger to behave selfishly and inconsiderate. This particular interpretation of their behaviour came about because of the emotions, namely annoyance and anger, the strangers were embodying. This showed in annoyed facial expressions and an impatient, hectic manner of moving around the space. Zeeb and Joffe explain that this conception of rudeness in strangers happens in transient places, such as the London tube, because the places were merely a part of their journey and not somewhere they liked to be spending time.

Following these impressions, it becomes clear why people think badly of the stranger in many cases; prefer to keep a distance and not entertain them. The study showed that the conception of

the friendly stranger was more prevalent than that of the bad stranger. However, “the friendly stranger was conceptualised in light of awareness of its opposite” (Zeeb and Joffe, p.8), meaning people felt good about strangers because they felt that it was more likely for the stranger to be bad. Reflecting

on this, encounters on public transport may predominantly be conceived with skepticism. People do not trust strangers because they believe they might behave badly, even though, according to Zeeb and Joffe’s study, there is an overall more positive impression upon interaction with the stranger. However, this skepticism remains but does not entirely shut people off from engagement with the stranger. There will always be passengers who do not behave to one’s liking, but they still act as a big part of the transient crowd and must thus further be free to interact with.

The transient crowd, as established before, holds social rules that maintain an order on the buses. Schefflen (1972) writes about the social order and maintaining certain values and behaviours in order to keep things going as they are. What can trigger change within the order of things, are occurrences and transactions between people of diverse backgrounds and social affiliations, essentially exposure to behaviours that are unusual and disruptive to the individual or wider society. I quote, “Holding different ideas of decorum, etiquette and propriety, they (people of diverse backgrounds and social affiliations) may find each other’s performance unacceptable.” (Schefflen, p.129) This notion adds to the conception of the ‘bad’ stranger, while at the same time opening up a passenger’s world view and perspective on a stranger and categorising it as an interesting or inspiring experience.

In my observations on the bus, there are moments of connection between strangers in spite of conceptions of goodness and badness. The way people look at each other in response to their facial or vocal expression serves as an indicator of a small interaction between people, which can happen in cases of positively and negatively connoted expressions. For example, a visually stressed mother with a child triggers looks of sympathy among select fellow passengers. When a passenger is acting disruptively or going against the social rules of the bus, other passengers sometimes connect in watching the unfolding event and meeting eyes, almost in validation of the others participating in the audience and affirming the disruptiveness.

The idea of an audience watching fellow passengers also becomes relevant in the context of manifestations and performances of the self in the public setting. In this and other public environments it is possible to observe individuals performing their existence. Erving Goffman, a Canadian-American sociologist and social psychologist, became famous for his research and writings in social theory, specifically symbolic interaction, which dissects the construct of social meaning that is attributed to behaviour and as a result the construct of the social world. In his work “The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life” (1956), Goffman posits that any situation in daily life calls upon masks, roles and performances that shape the reality which is experienced. Goffman presents the dramaturgic idea of the front and backstage of social life in the form of a series of performances. The front stage contains every behaviour that wants to be shown by the performer and they want the audience to see. It is a limited view of who they are, a socially constrained character, but, if acted out well, it brings a consistent image of their self in front of the audience. The performance is driven by the desire to be accepted by others. The backstage shows the more honest and genuine form of the individual, a place in which they can behave spontaneously and entirely according to their own nature and needs. Goffman says that there are many different performances an individual can present in order to reveal and manipulate information about themselves. That is to say that individuals tend to, consciously and subconsciously, bring across a certain impression to serve to the people in their presence.

In general, I find that most of the presence of strangers on the bus is not extraordinary. Some days, there might be someone acting a bit jittery or loud who stands out because it feels like they are being a bit more genuine in their behaviour, as though they are not differentiating between a front and backstage in the public space. These people stand out because they are not acting according to any norms or restrictions. They are more liberated and effective in putting this image forward to the passengers. In contrast to this, most people manifest a sort of neutrality in expression. An indifference, that is not going to interfere with the order of the people on the bus. This collective blasé attitude, to me, feels like every passenger is performing their very own bus personality. In all cases, each passenger on the bus is performing an attitude and a behaviour with

their own intentions and, as in the immediate presence of strangers, there is not much time to prove any sort of quality to them, they are forced to believe what they see. As Goffman puts it, the performer has to signal behaviours that they wish to transmit to their audience and convince them into believing that this appearance stands. To maintain the order and harmony on the bus, everyone mostly keeps to themselves and, as a result, the relationship between each passenger remains that of strangers.

The vast multiplicity of people that can be found on the bus leads to an extremely diverse record of values and conceptions that reflect the way the people view the world, and hence treat each other accordingly. Some conceptions may be shared among people and unite them, like the social values of the society of the city, which is very big to generalise, however this can also be divided into many smaller communal subgroups with similar value holdings. When conceptions are not shared, they clash with each other and divide people, as happens on the bus when strangers project their values onto others and get irritated at non-conformity with them.

3. INTIMACY AND PROXIMITY

We tend to believe that the stranger is someone who is separated, disconnected from us as individuals. Someone who we have no affiliation to and do not hold close to ourselves. In his essay "The Stranger" (1908), Georg Simmel contradicts this impression by explaining that the stranger is someone who can be far and near at the same time. The stranger is part of society in an urban setting, but holds no responsibilities towards other strangers within this society.

To a Stranger

Walt Whitman (1918-1892)

Passing stranger! you do not know how longingly I look upon you, You must be he I was seeking, or she I was seeking, (it comes to me as of a dream,) I have somewhere surely lived a life of joy with you, All is recall'd as we flit by each other, fluid, affectionate, chaste, matured, You grew up with me, were a boy with me or a girl with me, I ate with you and slept with you, your body has become not yours only nor left my body mine only, You give me the pleasure of your eyes, face, flesh, as we pass, you take of my beard, breast, hands, in return, I am not to speak to you, I am to think of you when I sit alone or wake at night alone, I am to wait, I do not doubt I am to meet you again, I am to see to it that I do not lose you.

Proxemics is a field of study about the spatial boundaries of people between each other, developed by Edward T. Hall during WWII while examining the distance soldiers were maintaining from each other in order to feel comfortable. These spatial boundaries are visualised in a concentric circle with four zones, each ring representing a boundary of relationship and its distance to an individual. The observed distance that Hall determined to be that of strangers is more than three meters. This represents the largest distance people keep from each other in the diagram of proxemics. Smaller distances included that of social space (120cm-360cm), personal space (45cm-120cm) and intimate space (0-45cm)(Hall, 1963). On the public bus, that boundary of distance is broken. Since the distance of more than three meters is not attainable at most hours, but especially busy hours, it forces strangers into intimate proximity to each other. We share intimate space with people, despite having an unestablished relationship. What kind of tension does this create between passengers on the public bus?

Imagine sitting on the public bus on a two-way street. Another vehicle pulls up next to you as the red light ahead urges a slowdown and stop. You look out the window, as you were doing before, simply scanning the dynamics of the street. Now, this other vehicle, maybe another bus, stands next to you and suddenly you find yourself at eye-level with another passenger in a different vehicle. It feels like a strange confrontation. You both look at each other, a bit puzzled as to how to behave because, suddenly, you feel self aware and do not know how to move anymore. A short moment of paralysis later, you might smile or you might look through the other person, as if they were not there. Then the bus moves again and you feel a great tension disappear from your neck. You feel confused as your body and mind relax again.

Why were you so uncomfortable sitting almost centimetres away from this person? How do you feel about them? Do you feel you know them just a tiny little bit because you saw how they reacted?

Now, place yourself back in the bus you are sitting in. Someone approaches the seat next to you and asks to sit down. You move your legs to allow them there. Who is this stranger and how do you feel about them?

Being in intimate proximity with someone is confronting. Sharing intimate proximity with people, who are strangers to you can be very discomforting. On the public bus, most of the time, you have no choice. The discomfort triggered by proximity, especially when it is shared with someone you do not want to confront yourself with, can cloud the brain and tense up the body. Similarly to sharing the elevator with strangers, on the bus, especially at crowded times, we do not know exactly where to direct our attention, we forget how to behave and often resort to distraction, such as the phone, to set a boundary between each other and not confront the discomfort.

One day on the bus, I wanted to challenge the closeness to the person sitting next to me and think about what it could have meant for our relationship to each other. Usually, I do not think about the places my body is touching other people's bodies or when I can feel the heat radiating off of someone else's body. In this moment though, I found it amusing to ponder the electricity between our arms rubbing against each other. I kept thinking to myself that if we were sitting in a bar this close to each other, the intention of our relationship would look very different.

Subconsciously, an individual is forced into thinking about closer relationships with surrounding strangers. There is an underlying potential of more depth in relationships. Sharing close quarters for a small amount of time and, within that, possibly sharing physical contact, puts a strain on the relationship you share with a stranger. While this nearness of bodies does not mean anything, it creates binding tensions for just that time between each other.

In getting on the bus, we have a sense of awareness of the position we place ourselves in. Passengers scan the bus, looking not only for seats or a place to stand, but also who they are approaching. We choose the people we want to stand or sit closer to. There is a certain awareness of power dynamics and social relationships towards certain individuals that determines the position we end up in, not only physically, but also socially.

"The Stranger is close to us, insofar as we feel between him and ourselves common features of a national, social, occupational, or generally human, nature. He is far from us, insofar as these common features extend beyond him or us, and connect us only because they connect a great many people." (Wolff, p.406). Simmel (1908) reminds us that physical nearness does not go hand in hand with social nearness. In accordance with what was just discussed, on public buses, we do not find ourselves socially closer to strangers just because we share intimate proximity. However, physical nearness and communal mobility on the bus draws strangers closer to one another and brings them together momentarily.

Whether we like each other or not, we sit here together.

In an already transient, ever-changing and moving environment of the outside world, the passengers on the bus add to the transience of place. There is no constant, people keep getting on and off. This environment is almost hyper-mobile. However, there is a sense of communality among passengers. People sit together for just a short amount of time, sometimes longer, sharing this space and being transported together. Origin and destination might feel relevant to some, in relating to another person on their journey. It can act as a similarity but ultimately what binds passengers together is their instantaneous togetherness on the bus. They are being transported somewhere together, unintentionally and very randomly puzzled and combined together. Every stranger on the bus represents the reality of a stranger to the individual. This image is highly malleable and can change on a daily basis, but ultimately the other passengers define this image and the relationship to the individual.

CONCLUSION

Urban life is compiled of an uncountable amount of stimuli and realities. City dwellers are each individually living their lives, moving their own ways along the same paths as people who are entirely unaffiliated to them. Urban life lives outside of the control of an individual, but, by a population, collectively, urban life is created. Individuals themselves cannot fathom the complexity of this endless cycle of city happenings and so have to live passively within most of them. Therefore, at times I find it important to take a step back and observe it happening actively in order to stay in touch with this individual strangeness. In this thesis, I chose to place the magnifying glass on social relationships between strangers on the public bus, to gain a better understanding of this tiny “happening” of social life in the city. I aimed to find out what lies between strangers, what connects them spiritually and physically.

Bus passengers share a special relationship with each other. They find themselves together being moved around the city in intimate proximity. It is a momentary, fleeting relationship, something that is only shared with strangers on the public bus. Within a matter of seconds of entering the bus, passengers are usually forced to huddle against each other.

The social role of the bus is distinct to the city and ties its passengers together in this non-social social environment. It acts as a leeway for strangers to come together, spend time in the same place without placing any restrictions on the nature of their relationship to each other. Strangers, passengers, are not really present for anyone but themselves during their bus rides. Their intentions are not to show up for one another, but to travel to the destination they desire. But even this nature of their role places them next to strangers who have their own desired destinations and spend time on the bus. They are bound together by their being, by their movement along the same roads, in the same directions.

The performance of the self brings in the aspect of manifesting the individual's and the stranger's presence and existence on the public bus. This side speaks more to the personal relationship the individual has to themselves and the world around them. Their conceptions of the world create rules and structures which can be projected onto other individuals around them. Social rules are also created by the public bus passenger “community”, the collective of all people who take public transport frequently enough to know how to behave on the bus. Together, these conceptions and rules create mental boundaries, in which passengers have to learn to navigate both by abiding by the limits of them and imposing their own boundaries and OK's on others. While behavioural ideals can clash, as stated previously, they can also bond passengers together within their similarities and differences.

Lastly, what I have recognised is that passengers on the bus, in the roles of strangers, are strung together by their status as strangers. They act as a collection of values, conceptions, realities and placeholders that are unknown to the individual. All strangers on the bus are individuals and act as that for one another but the unknown quality of their being is what makes them universal and possibly interchangeable as strangers.

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