Introduction

In 2016, François Aubart and Benjamin Seror invited gerlach en koop to write a text which was to be read in a bar in Toulouse. *Les mots bleus* the event was called, an edition of which had already taken place in Paris and other editions were to follow in other cities. Texts by a number of artists would be read in various bars across the city. Someone would just start reading aloud, unannounced and unexpected for the majority of the bar’s crowd. A group of listeners would gather and over the course of the evening, ever larger groups would bar-hop around the city.

In 1840, Edgar Allen Poe wrote the short story *The Man of the Crowd*. A kind of detective story, or rather the bones of a detective story, stripped of all the filler that gives this genre of books its commercially appealing length.

A story like this by Poe would greatly intensify the experience of the urban spaces between the various bars in Toulouse. It would make the walkers susceptible to the fabric of the city, something gerlach en koop were after, and — in a sudden fit of unjustified confidence — they decided to rewrite Poe’s story for *Les mots bleus*, but from the perspective of the ‘man of the crowd’. A reversal, like a black mirror. Poe’s 19th-century London, which they obviously couldn’t know, would simply be replaced by 21st-century Brussels.
The man is an open book. Perhaps not to everyone, but he is to me.

He’s not singular. Others like him exist, but they never congregate. They keep to themselves. There’s mutual recognition, I’m certain of that because I recognise them. Even when they don’t smile, their pale faces radiate a certain bliss, the kind you generally associate with cases of serious piousness.

They have been sick.

Gratitude is what you see. They have stepped out of the shadow of death and left the brightly lit hospital hallways. Relieved. Exhilarated. Their energy returning, although their movements are still wobbly, shivery even, as if even the memory of fever needs to wear off. Just like you see in children on the beach that can’t stop their teeth from chattering, even long after they have swapped the cold seawater for a bathing towel.

They still feel the hospital sheets, the cold of metal bed frames, taste the bland, overcooked food in their mouths, but slowly the sickness loses its grip.

Breathing alone fills them with joy.

They have been sick, but are recovering now. They haven’t resumed their daily routines yet. The grip of the everyday is still weak. They’re like guests in their recuperated lives. They float. Their behaviour wavers, there is indecisiveness, although they’re not slow. They are relaxed, yet alert. All senses wide open. Their minds almost electric. Situations keenly observed. A calm curiosity towards everything.

Often you find them in strategic positions, sitting on a bench at the edge of a park, in the corners of cafes, at crossroads. When you see them walk by, you see how they take pleasure in movement, in and of itself. All the muscles collaborating. Their bodies tingling. Alive. Walking. A simple act like walking. Not being slow-moving sets them apart from homeless people, beggars and alcoholics whose lack of speed is connected to aimlessness.

They do have aims.

I am unspecific.

I have no traits.

Sympathy is wasted on me. Being sympathetic towards someone means looking for details, things that mark the difference between one person and the next. Sympathy sharpens the eye.

I have no details.

I can’t be established. I can’t be framed in whatever frame. Nobody can locate me.

I am transparent.
I wear ambiguity like a shield.

All this is not easy. It requires practice. Walking in a crowd means you have to become sensitive to its subtlest motions and inclinations, and must respond in anticipation, almost instantaneously, like an individual bird in a flock does. Although crowds are much more complex than flocks. Obviously. And, contrary to popular belief, crowds are not at all homogeneous. Information travels through a crowd like a contagious disease. Suppositions as to the source of the disease should never point at you. Experience can be a disadvantage. People sometimes sense that you seem to have a better understanding of the movements and intentions of a particular crowd. Beware! This will make you stand out, even if it’s ever so slightly.

Avoid this at all costs.

Avoid the opposite too. That’s an easy mistake to make. A clear withdrawal from public concern is immediately spotted. Many times I have witnessed how some lunatic in the metro is recognised within milliseconds by the entire carriage from just a minute gesture or expression that seemed out of place. Walking in a crowd requires permanent attention and that can be exhausting. I remember one particular instance of losing focus on the metro. In front of a policeman, of all people! Police officers in general, especially the ones on the street, are no match for me. They possess no sensitivity whatsoever. No keen eye. No intelligence. Muddy judgement. Rubbish, them.

Such weak opposition makes it all the more embarrassing when you are marked.

I was on a train when it happened. Just before the doors opened at a stop, two policemen approached me.

*Step outside, please.*

I was able to swallow an arrogant *Why?* and we stepped onto the platform together.

*Your ID, please.*

Frantically I tried to detect my indiscretion ... One man stood in front of me. Legs astride. The other man checked my card, a little to the side. I calmly asked what I was being suspected or even accused of. No answer. I repeated my question:

*Tell me, on what grounds was I stopped? On what grounds?*

No answer.

*You have no grounds. You’ve got nothing on me.*

...

*Nothing.*

I know I have rights. I also know that answering would be an act of submission on their part. I knew Mr Straddle wasn’t going to answer me properly and was just making up some kind of pretence. I repeated my
question.  

*It was your behaviour,* the policeman said. *You acted peculiar.*  

I was dumbfounded. There was no possible way to describe my behaviour as peculiar.  

_Peculiar? How so? Please explain to me peculiar._  

Mister Straddle showed unease.  

_Pensive,_ he said. *You looked pensive._  

Both men exchanged a few inaudible words and then returned my card.  

_Move on._  

_Pensive._ I was taken aback and at the same time it dawned on me. Just before boarding at the preceding station, I had seen the two policemen walking on the platform I had been waiting on amidst several other people. Normally, standing on platforms has preference over walking. An unwritten rule. If you’re standing, you only step aside when you know the other has not seen you. Platforms are usually wide enough for that. The two men in uniform walked in my direction. I was aware of their presence, they were aware of mine. Nevertheless, there was no change in their course and I didn’t move either.  

In passing, his shoulder just about skimmed mine.  

And now I know my mistake. Just a tiny motion to the side would have been enough. Not showing subservience was my offence. My false step had been no step. I had allowed my shadow to solidify. I lost transparency. I showed too much substance.  

I was a victim of what may be termed *uniformism,* for want of a better word.  

So, never walk on pavements with two-way pedestrian traffic, as it causes too much tension. Who is supposed to give way? Avoid getting into that power game. Because that’s what it is. The oncoming person will study you to some extent. You don’t want to be studied. If passing cannot be avoided, don’t make the mistake of giving way too clearly and submissively, as this will also get you noticed. Power blurs your transparency, as does its absence.  

In general, touching other people is out of the question for obvious reasons, but sometimes, on public transport for instance — the metro during rush hour, explicit avoidance is rather difficult and you stand out if you try.  

I noticed him when I walked towards the city centre from the Noord-station. He was sitting in the bar next to the casino. His face was rather pale, matte and delicate, almost translucent, like unfired porcelain. A prominent high brow, almost rectangular in shape, held very close to the window pane. Quite conspicuous. A white surface amid dimly lit, draped
and cushioned surroundings. Not easy to miss. Why do people inside buildings always assume the glass is sort of one-way; their way? A false sense of security that is. The bar belongs to a big hotel and is located at the intersection of two of the busiest through roads in the city. An excellent spot, if a bit obvious. I’d say he’s in his thirties, but only just, thirty-one, thirty-two at most.

He didn’t see me the first time, only the second time I came by.

For a brief moment I saw how his features froze, how fear shivered through his body. Fear, unaccounted for.

I had him.

I knew I had him. No need to turn around to know he would quickly grab his things, leave some coins on the table and rush out. I lingered outside a bit to give him time to spot me in the crowd. I saw him turning his head in every direction to see where I had gone. Excited. Like in a comic book. Cartoon-like.

He wore plain-looking clothes. Not cheap, just plain and slightly too large. Not an exact fit. There’s a small difference, difficult to make out, between clothes that don’t fit because the wearer has lost a little weight and ill-fitting clothes that were bought too large, because that’s what most men have, the right size all right, but not a perfect fit. You sometimes notice this sad effect in older men, who, shrunk with age, are adrift in the clothes of their younger, more sharply dressed selves. For a moment I thought I saw a white bracelet, perhaps plastic, where one would expect to see a wristwatch.

I had him.

Remember how seduced is borrowed from Latin and means to lead astray.

I led him astray.

I strayed him.

First to the square, the main square. The sun had disappeared behind the large buildings an hour ago. It was slowly going dark. Street-lights lit up. It was easy for him to lose sight of me in the smaller streets closer to the city centre so I stopped here and there, window shopping. The street opened up to the square. It wasn’t particularly crowded. Two groups of people. Workers crossing the square diagonally, at a speed and tourists ambling around, haphazardly, in small groups, looking up, admiring the facades, taking pictures. I joined these groups without becoming part of them, by staying in their proximity, but just not long enough for them to notice my presence. I repeated this several times across the square. I could almost feel his unease, following me, with his lack of experience in this particular type of loitering. Even without the square being very crowded there were several moments where I could have slipped into one of the side streets without him perceiving it. It started
to rain.

I left the square for the long arcade, careful not to lose him in the quieter streets leading up to it. During the hour and a half or thereabouts we spent in this place, much caution on my part was required to keep him within reach without catching his eye. Not once did he see me watching him. I entered shop after shop, looked at the objects, picked up some but didn’t buy anything and spoke not a word. I knew this behaviour would greatly bewilder him and excite his curiosity even more.

I strayed him further.

It was completely dark by now. And still it rained. By taking the narrowest of streets, the ones with all the restaurants and by weaving from awning to awning across the pavement, I didn’t get too wet. Occasionally, aggressive touts hired by the restaurants, tried to coerce people in. Avoiding them demanded all my concentration. Too much of it. A woman grazed my shoulder in passing, trying to avoid a sudden beckoning gesture from a particularly persistent tout. Luckily, both released their irritation at one another, so I was able to slip out of sight. I shuddered with relief. I didn’t dare look behind me, but convinced he was still on my trail, I continued my way.

This area of restaurants, bars, casino and clubs, dance halls, cinemas and amusement arcades is easy, the smoking crowds outside in particular can be joined without raising any suspicion. Alcohol is a great help. The best way is to go with a group that’s heading home or to another bar, where a new crowd can be picked up. Sometimes I entered these places, as the crowd led me. By now I expected him to give up on me, but he proved very tenacious. The rain had stopped. At this time of night, joy and vitality leaves the bars and cafes, and despair seeps in.

I set out for the railway station taking advantage of a large group apparently heading in the same direction. All drunk, they were loud and sluggish, and at just about every corner, one or two people took a different direction. I realised I wasn’t going to make it to the station this way, lingered for a bit in a road with a large footpath down the middle, then decided to walk straight to the big flea market. A little too early, but luckily the bars around the market square were closing, so lots of people were on the streets. I went from one departing group to another, observing the market stalls being set up almost in sync with the receding night. Soon enough the square was filled with different people, merchandise and early morning light. Wares displayed on old carpets, blankets and tables of all types and sizes as well as row upon row of cardboard fruit boxes. I adapted to the mean speed, walked round several times, looked at the objects, picked up some, but didn’t buy anything and spoke not a word. A few hours passed. Almost noon. He was still with me.
I decided to go back to the hotel bar. Approaching familiar ground I was certain a strong feeling of deception, of personal failure, would have crept in by now. I expected him to be on the brink of giving up. He must be. When we came to the hotel where the pursuit started I suddenly turned around and walked straight at him. I carefully avoided showing any sign of recognition. Just a blank expression. He slowed down to a standstill. Isolated from the crowd, his pale countenance stood out. Explicit.

I walked past.