

M I R A G E

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Robin de Haan



[Img 1.] Impression of the MIRAGE installation



[Img 2.] Impression of the MIRAGE installation

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[Img 3.] Impression of the MIRAGE book on pedestol

INTRODUCTION

In 2022, I ended up in a burnout. I'd found myself in a hamster wheel of constant work. I expected so much of myself that I kept pushing my boundaries, and I forced myself to be productive all the time until I was mentally and physically too exhausted to go on. At its peak, it felt overwhelming to be among many people. I couldn't memorize a grocery list or even watch a movie or read a book. I had to stop my studies and job so I could recover. I had to stand still and do nothing for the first time.

I started going on walks to get out of my head and to calm myself. Walking is an easy way to reduce stress, and it invites reflection.¹ I would look around and pay attention to others passing by. It was a double feeling, as on one hand, it confronted me with how isolated I felt, but on the other, to receive a smile could make my day. I also wondered why I expected so much of myself in the first place. And when I felt better and discussed my burnout in my surroundings, it turned out many people feel the same pressure.²

This led me to examine image culture and the way we appear to others, with strolling as my main method. So, for this project, I asked myself: How can strolling as an artistic approach be used to examine image culture?

To do this, I used the insights I gained from a song called "*Défiler*" by Stromae, along with a theory of walking and media by Walter Benjamin, to do walks through the city. This resulted in a series of photographs that I collected in a book called "Mirage," which is supposed to question what is real and what is semblance.

STROMAE'S DÉFILE: WALKING AS METAPHOR

During my burnout, I rediscovered a song by Belgian singer/composer Stromae called "*Défiler*" (Stromae, 2018)³. It resonated with me because it describes the loneliness and pressure that I felt. The title of the song is a very clever play on associations, as the word '*défiler*' means 'to parade,' both in the sense of walking a runway and in a military march, as well as 'to scroll,' with a connotation of 'that which passes by,' and made me think of how I passed people by on my walks. The song starts as follows:

*Elle défile
On voit nos vies défiler*

She parades
We see our lives pass by⁴

With these lines, he invites the listener to consider others. Seeing 'our' lives passing by, when 'she' does. But she doesn't just walk, she parades, she shows herself. In the rest of this verse, he wonders what to make of a life that passes so fast, eventually asking: '*Alors dites-moi comment ça marche*' (Stromae), 'So tell me how it works', but literally translated 'tell me how it walks'.

And he goes on:

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1. "How Walking Can Benefit Your Mental Health." Web MD, WebMD, www.webmd.com/fitness-exercise/mental-benefits-of-walking. Accessed 20 May 2024.
 2. "Results Fourth Caring Universities Survey." Caring Universities, 12 July 2023, caring-universities.com/results-fourth-caring-universities-survey/.
 3. Stromae. "Stromae - Défiler (Bande Originale de La Capsule N°5 Mosaert)." Mosaert.Com/Projects/Defiler, Mozart, 27 Apr. 2018, vimeo.com/266172046.

*De toute façon, on marche dans les rangs
 En groupe ou pas, on marche seul
 Qu'on l'veuille ou pas
 on a une valeur marchande
 Du plus jeune âge au linceul
 Marche ou crève mais marche droit
 Marche à l'envers ou ne marche pas*

Anyway, we walk in line
 In a group or not, we walk alone
 Whether we like it or not
 we have a market value
 From our youngest age to the shroud
 Walk or die but walk straight
 Walk backwards or don't walk at all

So, here he presents the *défile* as walking in line in a military march. The connection is made between a life encased in a capitalist system, loneliness (walking alone), and how it can feel oppressive. You have to keep up. In the next verse, he wonders why he even feels he has to keep up in the first place:

*Pourquoi j'ai peur d'être dépassé
 Par qui et par quoi
 Je ne sais pas mais c'que je sais
 C'est que si j'ai peur
 c'est que j'suis pas l'dernier
 Comme si y'avait qu'une arrivée
 Qu'un seul endroit
 Qu'une seule route où on devrait aller
 Ça m'étonnerait
 Tous c'que j'sais c'est que j'sais pas*

J'y vais pas à pas ouais pas à pas ouais pas à pas

Why am I afraid of being surpassed,
 By whom and by what
 I don't know, but what I know,
 Is that if I'm afraid
 it's because I'm not the last
 As if there was only one finish line
 One place
 One road we should take
 I doubt it
 All I know is that I don't know

And I'll go there step by step, step by step,
 step by step

This makes the song more relatable, at least to me. Because he makes it personal, I could identify with how he wonders about his own choices and where the pressure he experiences comes from. It is interesting to me how he uses walking metaphorically to engage with these themes. To further examine them myself, I turned to another allegorical walking figure in the writings of Walter Benjamin: the Flâneur.

BENJAMIN'S FLÂNEUR: THE STROLLER FINDS THE MIRAGE

Before Benjamin, the Flâneur as an archetype was brought to literary prominence by Charles Baudelaire around the mid-19th century and played an important part in his articulation of modernity. Sketched as a bourgeois man who can afford the leisure of strolling through the city, taking pleasure in observing the people passing by on his casual walks.

“For the perfect flâneur ‘...’, for the passionate observer, it is an immense joy to take up one’s dwelling among the multitude, amidst undulation, movement, the fugitive, the infinite.” (Baudelaire)⁴

The flowing in and out of consciousness of the people and scenes he passes make his walk a fragmented, associative, almost dream-like experience, like a montage (Van Godtsenhoven, 2005)⁵. However, he always maintains a distance from others, asserting his individuality through this voyeuristic position towards the world around him. It’s an idle figure that wants to be seen. I use him to highlight the similarities between Baudelaire’s and Stroma’s focus on the fleeting, the passing by. Baudelaire saw modern life as distinctly fugitive:

“Modernity is the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent, that half of art of which the other is the eternal and immutable.” (Baudelaire)⁶

When Benjamin wrote about Baudelaire’s *Flâneur* around 80 years later, he recognized the role of the *Flâneur*’s gaze in articulating modernity. (Benjamin 895, 1982)⁷

Modernity, for Benjamin, was characterized by the relationship of the individual to the crowd as one of *seeing* and *being seen*. I understand this as a concern

4. Baudelaire, Charles. “Charles Baudelaire.” Translated by A. S. Kline, Baudelaire, Charles (1821-1867) - The Painter of Modern Life (Le Peintre de La Vie Moderne), www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/French/BaudelaireThePainterOfModernLife.php. Accessed 20 May 2024.
5. Van Godtsenhoven, Karen, and Bart Keunen. Women’s Passages : a Bildungsroman of Female Flânerie. 2005. (For an interesting view on the phenomenon of female flânerie, Karen van Godsterhoven’s PhD thesis is a very interesting read on the subject, and delves into the struggles women had in claiming their space on the street, together with an examination of the phenomenon of flânerie with a specific focus on it’s gendered history.)

with how we *appear* to others rather than how we *relate* to them. Baudelaire glorified the Flâneur’s loneliness, viewed his possession of his individuality as something heroic—a remnant of the Romantic era. With Benjamin, the *Flâneur* became a distinct social type, and his concern with appearance became a mass phenomenon through the advent of technological modes of production.

“The phantasmagoria of the flâneur. The tempo of traffic in Paris. The city as a landscape and a room. The department store as the last promenade for the flâneur. There his fantasies were materialized. The flânerie that began as art of the private individual ends today as necessity for the masses.” (Benjamin 895, 1982)⁸

Essential to his analysis is the immersion of the activity of *Flânerie* into industrialized capitalism. In his “The Arcades Project,” he observed how fairs, world exhibitions, and arcades filled with consumer goods on elaborate displays turned the streets of Paris into a spectacle, constantly providing impulses that triggered the imagination of the mass of consumers. (Benjamin 895, 1982)⁹.

This artificially fabricated version of reality, which he called the *phantasmagoria*—after a kind of illusional horror movie theater popular in his time—I’ve interpreted as the ‘*mirage*’, a natural phenomenon in which the appearance of reality is distorted through heat bending the path of light rays hitting the eye. The fragmented experience of the *Flâneur*’s walks show here as the concern with novelty of the masses. The

6. Baudelaire, Charles. “Charles Baudelaire.” Translated by A. S. Kline, Baudelaire, Charles (1821-1867) - The Painter of Modern Life (Le Peintre de La Vie Moderne), www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/French/BaudelaireThePainterOfModernLife.php. Accessed 20 May 2024.
7. Benjamin, Walter, et al. The Arcades Project. Belknap Press, 1999.
8. *ibid.*

going in and out of fashion, which pushes consumption of goods progressively forward. Therefore, the ‘*mirage*’ is both a socially, as well as technologically created ‘illusion’.

So, with Benjamin, the *Flâneur* loses his monopoly of the street, but the activity of *Flânerie* becomes a social phenomenon of the Bourgeois class of his time. I see a relation here to Stromae’s idea of the *défile*—a mass society, walking in line, moving forward, as individuals. The voyeuristic world-view of the *Flâneur* becomes the main way of relating to each other. And the concern with appearance, the need to constantly re-invent oneself becomes a drive for the capitalist machine which presents us with an *illusional reality*.



[Img 4.] Still from the video essay “Walter Benjamin’s Paris: Projecting the Arcades.” to illustrate the phantasmagoria. (Parkes 3:31, 2022)

Benjamin also pointed out how new media of his time—particularly mechanical (re)production of images through the camera—enhanced this voyeuristic relationship to the world. To use his example: the medium of film changes the relation of the audience to the actor. Where in a theatre the actor can feel his connection to the audience and can play into it, in a film, the audience becomes more passive, and their response to the performance more informed by the

rest of the audience watching with them. It makes the audience more into a spectator and a critic at the same time. (Benjamin, Walter. 14)⁹

FLÂNER TO DÉFILER

Stromae’s stance in ‘*Défiler*’ shares with *flânerie* the distancing from the crowd in order to reflect on his position and his time. But where Baudelaire’s *Flâneur* defended his individuality with his gaze and status, and Benjamin saw *Flânerie* as a mass phenomenon that presents an illusional reality, in Stromae’s ‘*Défiler*’ this distance is presented as a painful aspect of life. The singer tries to point out how isolated the world has become. Which is why I view the song as a critique of *flânerie*. It’s as if he refers to the act of *flânerie* as walking in a *défile*. And he points out how we judge others:

*On n’est pas tous égaux face à la beauté
C’est si facile d’être gros quand on les voit défiler*

We’re not all equal in the face of beauty
It’s so easy to be fat when we see them parade
(Stromae)

In these lines, ‘*défiler*’ also has a double meaning. On the one hand, it refers to the catwalk and how we make a spectacle of ourselves and those around us (A mirage). On the other hand, through the line that follows: “*La tête dans son téléphone*” (Head in her phone) (Stromae), it can refer to the images that ‘pass by’ on mobile devices.

If the model walking the run-way is equated to the actor and their relation to the audience, it shows

9. Benjamin, Walter. The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. Counterflow Distro, 2023

how our relation to others becomes more critical/voyeuristic and less personal/relatable through the film medium. But also how it becomes every-day practice to ‘parade’ ourselves. This shows me that it is possible that the pressure to succeed before my burn-out is partially informed by the images, both digital and social that are being consumed on a societal level on a daily basis.

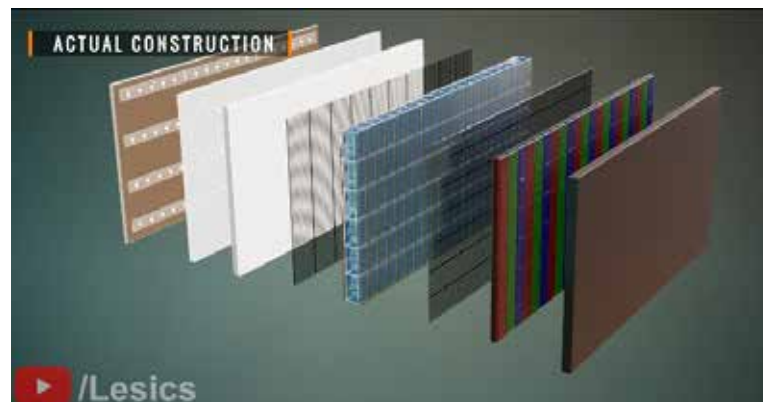
By examining the flâneur in Benjamin and Baudelaire, I learned how their ideas of the disassociated walker have helped to define the understanding of modernity, as essentially fleeting and voyeuristic. And how the rise of capitalist industry and mechanically (re)-producible images made modern individuals concerned with the way they appear to others and appear themselves in the world, rather than how they relate to each-other, which I’ve come to call the ‘Mirage’, inspired by Benjamin’s *Phantasmagoria*. From this vantage-point I arrived at Stromae’s *Défiler*, in which he gives an account of the pressure and loneliness he experienced as a consequence of this Mirage.

TV SCREENS

One day, I found something else on the street. A shiny material that is both transparent and reflective. I took it with me, and it ended up in this project in-between the paper pages of my book.

The material is an old LCD screen. Through some research I learned about its strange qualities.

The screen is made up of different layers, that all manipulate light-rays in a different ways. One layer diffuses the light from a light source evenly over the surface of the screen. Another directs it straight forward. Then, there is a layer that filters the direction of the light-rays in opposite directions,



[Img 5.] Still from the video “The Crazy Physics of LED Displays!” to visualise the working of an LCD screen.

so that a raster of only horizontally and vertically directed light passes through. Sandwiched between those is a thin layer of liquid crystal fluid. It’s a liquid that turns into a solid when it’s electrically charged. Because of this, it is possible to manipulate the direction in which the light passes through the middle layer. So that the right amount of light ends up at the last layer, an RGB raster, with units way smaller than a pixel. (Lesics)¹⁰ This creates the images we see when looking at a tv-screen.

This made me realise how far advanced technology has become in its ability to represent the visual world. It’s almost an actual mirage. An illusion created by manipulating light.

LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

Taking a camera on a walk changes my relation to my environment. When I started this project, I was not aware of this enough. Through the theory I read and feedback I got, I started questioning myself on

10.. “The Crazy Physics of LED Displays!” Lesics, YouTube, 25 July 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=96QwqOZ4xjE.

the way I shot my photo's. To do this, I reached out to Jaap Augustinus who is a photo editor and ginger coons, researcher at the Willem de Kooning Academie, to discuss image rights. And this is how I summarize it:

Legally, it is not allowed to take a picture of someone in public, when they are recognisable, unless they are part of a crowd and they are not the subject of the image. Or when the person has given consent. As this would violate the moral right of the subject. Moral right protects 'the reputation, integrity and personal connection that an author or creator has with their work'. (Lawbite)¹¹

If I take an image of someone without their knowing, I infringe their right to their intellectual property. (Lawbite)¹² Knowing this, I re-considered the way I took my images. When it's an image of a limited number of people in the shot, I made sure to ask for permission to use it. For the images I had already taken, I decided for this project to only use them where people are not visibly recognisable in the shot. Many of the photo's do this anyway, as I used reflections and shadows to visually convey the distance to the figures. I will elaborate on this in the next chapter. But this also means that some photo's I won't use.

11. Team, Lawbite. "What Are Moral Rights and How Do They Work?" LawBite, LawBite, 27 Dec. 2023, www.lawbite.co.uk/resources/blog/moral-rights.

12. *ibid.*

CONCLUSION

As graphic designer it is important to me to be aware of the impact images have on how the world is perceived. The walks I made during my burn-out and the distance I felt from the world around me have been a guiding force for me in this project. My own disassociated walks during my burn-out were my time to learn to face the judgement I have toward myself. And they confronted me with an alienation from the world that I haven't experienced that profoundly before.

Through Benjamin's theory of flanerier, I learned about the voyeuristic relation to the world, the concern with seeing and being seen, that developed in modernity with the rise of capitalist modes of production. And how this was enhanced through the medium of film and photography, which I've come to call the 'mirage', the title of my book.

Stromae showed me how this voyeuristic view can be alienating, as if equating flanerier to a defile. He urges the importance to refrain from judgement, towards ourself and to the other.

When I started this project, I didn't consider my own role as an image producer enough. I think my biggest learning-moment was to be confronted with the question of image rights and the way I take my pictures and depict others in them. I learned to ask for consent when using photo's of people. Which I will take with me moving forward. But of course this does not only apply to photo's of people.

Every form of content that is put out into the world will have an impact on the way we perceive it. By thinking of this as a distortion, a fragment of a reality, I hope to be more aware that there is always a part of the story that goes unnoticed.

As an image consumer, I think I experienced through my burn-out what it means to loose my way

in this mirage. With future technological innovations in image (re-)production, images will only becoming ever-more present in our daily lives. To conclude, I would like to turn to Stromae one last time:

*Petit, avant d'apprendre un métier
Faut d'abord apprendre à retoucher la photo
d'un CV*

Little one, before learning a craft
You first have to learn how to edit a CV picture

Maybe walking can offer some reflection. But it will be necessary to find more psychological tools to help separate the genuine from semblance.





[Img 6.] Images from the MIRAGE book



[Img 7.] Images from the MIRAGE book



[Img 8.] Images from the MIRAGE book