

ROOM 1: INTO THE STREETS

Be it for a parade, demonstration, pride march, pageant or procession, we regularly take to the streets, either in a staged manner or spontaneously. We make our voices heard and act as a group. We watch and are watched.

There are various reasons why we take to the streets in an organised fashion. Commemorate, make political demands, express our solidarity, enjoy ourselves, celebrate our identity, keep traditions alive or promote tourism ... These reasons are not mutually exclusive and may change in time. Parades are continuously evolving. They are invented, modified and revived, or they disappear. For instance, the Pride March is primarily a manifestation that permanently draws attention to LGBTQIA+ rights domestically and abroad. But it has also become an opportunity to celebrate who we are. Carnival is a festivity that nowadays is mostly aimed at entertainment and the promotion of tourism, but it also has a history of social satire and mockery.

Parades vary greatly, but they also have a lot in common. They all play an important social role. They reinforce the sense of belonging to a community. They are inseparable from emotion, passion and commitment. Committed volunteers, organisers, participants and onlookers ensure the creation and continuation of a parade. Banners, music, dance, slogans, clothes and rituals reappear in every parade, each time they get a new creative interpretation.

What if the street was not considered as just a route of transportation, but also as an expression of society itself?

– De straat, 1972, Jef Cornelis

Additional information: A LIVELY LANDSCAPE

Parades come in all shapes and sizes. Some have existed for several generations and boast a long history, while others are relatively new. They can be cyclical or once-only, mobilise large crowds or be rather small-scale. A large number of parades, processions as well as medieval and flower pageants can be found in Flanders and Brussels. The level of participation of citizens in demonstrations and protests is also high. As a result, Brussels is a hotspot in terms of manifestations. Our region has always been known for its parades. What kind of parades did we have in the past? And what types exist today? You can discover the answer on this map. The landscape is dynamic and constantly evolving.

ROOM 2: WORKING TOGETHER

A parade takes a lot of organisation. Processions, historical pageants and flower pageants require a long preparation and strict direction. But there is some organising involved in more spontaneous manifestations, such as demonstrations and protests, as well. Careful planning partly determines the success of a parade. Close cooperation between volunteers, permanent employees, police and government authorities is essential. Organisers coordinate and maintain an overview, look for funding and prepare a plan, a scenario and a budget. They map out the route. With flyers, posters and press releases, they try to engage as many participants and onlookers as possible. Social media have accelerated and broadened the communication in recent years. We can mobilise much more spontaneously and at the last minute.

Parades can rally large crowds. The organisers need to guide everyone safely through the streets. Numerous permits and safety regulations need to be complied with. Proper consultation with the government authorities and police is essential both before and during the parade. This cooperation is not self-evident, however. Until the early 20th century, government authorities were often suspicious of the excesses of carnival celebrations. Local protesters frequently came to blows with the police. Nowadays, the police make sure that parades can take place peacefully, even though their presence can still provoke unrest in case of a protest.

Stewards also play a role in steering the event in the right direction. They are in permanent contact with each other by means of walkie-talkies or smartphones. The route that was previously mapped is carefully marked.

Additional information:

PAGEANT BUILDER

In the 1950s, prosperity increased and the tourism industry began to take off. As towns and cities made efforts to attract tourists, there was a huge boom in parades and pageants that acted out local history. They relied on pageant builders for this new phenomenon of city marketing. This is a director with an extensive network of associations. With the help of actors, giants, musicians, flag-wavers, costumes and animals, they create an exciting parade. The story is peppered with local heroes, culinary specialties and symbols of the town, city or region. One of the best-known Belgian pageant builders was Frans Vromman (1923 - 2006). In 1954, he created the very first 'Breughel pageant' in his home town Wingene. Until the early 2000s, he directed over two hundred locally inspired pageants across Flanders.

His nephew Jan Vromman is currently working on a film called 'The pageant builder' (to be released in the spring of 2022).

ROOM 3: MANY HANDS MAKE LIGHT WORK

A lot of people are involved in the preparation of a parade, which may take weeks, months or even years. Professionals, volunteers and members of associations dedicate themselves to their parade, sometimes for a long time.

The workshops where floats are built, costumes are sewn and routines are practised are buzzing with activity. A great deal of brainwork and creativity are involved too. Floats, costumes and props are designed, made or repaired. Placards are knocked together. Choreographies are rehearsed and actors have their make-up done. These are just a few of the many tasks carried out behind the scenes.

Nowadays, organisers increasingly opt for paid professionals. However, the commitment of volunteers remains invaluable. Despite the wide choice of leisure activities, thousands of volunteers continue to contribute to all sorts of parades every year. This preparatory work is at least as important as the parade itself. It creates connectedness and a sense of being part of a community.

Since 2019, the worldwide pandemic has been an obstacle to this commitment. Meetings, gatherings in workshops or rehearsals have not been possible. And the parades themselves look very different too. A digital Pride March is held or processions take place with a limited number of participants. We protest on social media, or parades are postponed to better times. Efforts are made to come up with alternative and creative solutions. However, the phenomenon of parades will continue to be alive as long as there is an urge to take to the streets, side by side.

HALLWAY: THE RAISED FIST

There is a wide variety of parades, but their imagery is very similar. That imagery is appealing and powerful, but its meaning is linked to the specific context it is used in.

A famous example is the raised fist. The image contrasts with the fascist outstretched right arm and hand, and symbolises battle and resistance. In the first years of the Weimar Republic, the gesture becomes the symbol of communism. During the Spanish civil war, it becomes an international socialist sign of recognition and greeting. The women's movement and anti-racist civil rights movement used this symbol as well. Even though these movements have influenced one another and there are communalities, they have different contexts of origin, organisational structures and demands. The raised fist represents for each of them their own specific battle.

ROOM 4: LANGUAGE

Language is key in parades. In many historical parades or processions, participants (often children) carry signs that help the audience understand what is happening. Language is also necessary to express emotions, denounce injustice, show solidarity, protest or create a shock effect.

Language is mostly used in two ways during parades. On the one hand, spoken language plays an important role. People often cheer, sing or chant. Both the town criers at the beginning of the parade and protesters use the power of their voice to spread their message. On the other hand, written language is just as important. Protesters write their messages on banners, large signs or pieces of cardboard. People in a procession carry beautifully decorated signs with inspirational messages.

The slogan, written or chanted, is a special genre typical to parades. In a way, it is easy to use. With a piece of cardboard and a marker, anyone can make a slogan very quickly. Then it can be chanted with the help of a megaphone or your own voice. However, inventing a good slogan is not that simple. It must be short and catchy, but clear as well. A slogan often contains rhythm, rhyme and puns. Slogans are gaining importance, thanks to the huge impact of (social) media. Photos and videos can send a message across the whole world. Some iconic slogans even become part of the collective memory.

ROOM 5: ON THE MOVE

You can often hear a parade coming from afar. Marching bands, drums, uplifting beats, whistles, sirens, singing and chanting fill the streets. The noise and the music draw the attention of the audience, policy makers or press. The loud volume completely fills the streets and public space. The absence of noise has the same effect. A silent march can convey a message in a deafening way.

Music makes the participants of a parade move. Each parade, march, procession or demonstration has its own sound and rhythm. The participants parade, march, stride or dance through the streets. Sometimes there is a choreography that requires a lot of rehearsing, but at other times, it's just improvisation. All kinds of dances exist: historical dances, frivolous dances, performances and celebrations as a sign of protest.

For a long time, the marching band, including twirling majorettes, led numerous parades and processions. In addition to the marching band, the concert band or the brass band, mobile DJs have increasingly become part of parades. The music that you hear today during parades is very diverse. A parade is always a physical effort. Not only do the participants walk a long distance, they also move to the rhythm and the beats.

"We can't parade! We have to fucking march. But we have to dance while we do it."
- Bizzy Barefoot – Queer Liberation March, in the documentary *Pride = protest*

ROOM 6: (IN)VISIBLE

Spectators of parades can admire spectacular clothes, creative costumes and remarkable masks. The colours, designs and details are very important and draw people's attention to the message and the story of the parade. They capture the imagination of the public and spark enthusiasm. However, peace and serenity can create the same effect.

Costumes and masks have a special function. The disguise offers you the chance to be someone else, to symbolically turn the tables or exaggerate your personality. Even though costumes and masks attract attention, the person who wears them is usually unrecognisable. Visibility and invisibility thus go hand in hand. Anonymity means freedom for a lot of people. You can do what you want, things you cannot do the rest of the year. For just one moment, you can forget about the daily grind, power relations and differences.

Clothes are very personal. They enable you to distinguish yourself from the others. However, many parades do display a lot of uniformity. Examples are the gilets jaunes or white balloons, clothes and accessories during the White March. Uniformity in clothing is also very important in military or trade union parades, as it emphasises the togetherness and the common belief of a group. Small details in the costumes often reveal internal hierarchy or different roles.

Additional information: MASKS

Hiding your face with a mask knows a rich history, that dates back to prehistoric times. The mask has a lot of functions and applications. Originally, it was used for sacred and magical ceremonies, and later in theatre. Death masks and medical masks have a protective function. At Mardi Gras, the masks allow you to be someone you always wanted to be. Today their use is limited to the fun and celebration aspect. At the same time, modern protest movements use masks to remain anonymous.

A mask, with its pronounced and expressive grimaces, can portray anything: a god, a demon, an animal, an ancestor, a mythical or legendary character. Sometimes it is rather abstract. The mask usually does not stand alone. It is accompanied by a costume, dance, music and rituals.

ROOM 7: FLAGS

Flags are an intrinsic part of parades. They are proudly carried through the streets. Flag wavers wave and throw flags gracefully through the air. A flag is so much more than just a colourful piece of textile. It bears a message. The meaning we give to a flag is not always the same, it depends on the parade.

A flag creates visibility for a group or association. With a flag, we emphasise a common belief or goal. Under one flag, we feel connected to others. It can be local, regional or national solidarity, but also ideological, religious or very personal. At the same time, we can use them to distinguish ourselves from others. Flags can have a great deal of emotional value. Therefore, you cannot just destroy a flag.

Flags originated as a practical tool in a military context, admittedly with a symbolic function. Afterwards, other types of flags were developed, such as processional, maritime and national flags. For a long time, they are true pieces of art and examples of traditional craftsmanship. Despite the investment it took, almost every marching band, trade union, youth movement, church community or veterans council had its own flag. It was quite an honour to help carry that flag. Today, due to mass production, they are not that unique anymore. However, their symbolic value remains high.

ROOM 8: THERE'S THE GIANT

Giants stir the imagination. They have been part of myths and legends for a very long time. Since the Middle Ages, giants have been part of religious processions in our regions. After the anti-Catholic French Revolution, the giants become less popular. The processions they are part of often lose their religious character. In the 20th century, giants make their comeback, not only in religious processions, but also in all kinds of parades and even protests.

Giants are not just made, they are born. They are often registered at the civil affairs department of their city or municipality by a godmother and a godfather. Giants can also get married and have children. When the happy couple strides through the streets or the brand-new parents parade with their children, the party can begin.

The giants' heads and hands used to be made of papier mâché or wood. Today, polyester is used as well. The body, which contains a supporting structure, used to be made of rattan by basket weavers. As giants often fell victim to woodworm, today other materials are used as well.

The giants' skirts hide the people carrying them. It is their task to make the giant come alive. A good "giant carrier" has the necessary strength and skills. Giants don't walk, they dance: they skip, do pirouettes and move up and down to the rhythm of the music. Some giants even have their own giant song.

ROOM 9: EVERY ENDING IS A NEW BEGINNING

Parades involve a lot of emotions. When the end is near, all of these emotions are released. The preparations, the hard work and the physical effort come to an end when night falls. A lot of parades are concluded with a ritual bonfire or burning of the carnival figures. Participants sing songs or give speeches. People embrace each other and then roam the streets together, trying to get home or to the pub. This usually is not the final end. The organisers make an evaluation and thank the team. New events or editions are already being planned.

Parades are very important to us. We take to the streets to make demands, celebrate our identity or because of tradition, religion, beliefs or anger. These motives are important enough to come together in the streets. Even though we can also experience all of this at home, on the internet or in a conference room, church, cultural centre or debate centre, the streets are still very attractive. On the streets, you are heard and seen as a group. Why would you take to the streets?

Additional information: FIRE AND LIGHT

Fire plays an important role in folk traditions, myths and religion. Fire is destructive and dangerous, but at the same time, it brings warmth and innovation. The ritual use of fire and burning often symbolise a catharsis and fertility. Harvest processions, Mardi Gras parades and carnival celebrations often end with the burning of the carnival figures, a bonfire or fireworks.

Candles and torches are used a lot during parades as well. At sunset, they bring light and show participants the way. In processions, they usually have a religious meaning. During the parade on St. Martin's Day, children wear homemade beet lanterns. In the 1970s, young Belgian feminists held a torchlight procession. They demanded more safety for women on the streets at night.