

Corona Trips

A visual essay on going out during a global pandemic

By Hanne Collette

In March 2020 the coronavirus finally reached Belgium in a noticeable way after being present in other countries and our daily news for months. It all started with big events being cancelled. After that, everything developed quite quickly and in the weekend of March 14th, strict regulations were imposed. My boyfriend Florian and I had the idea that, while the university was closed due to the lockdown, we might as well spend some time at his father's second residence near the coast. So, on the 15th we packed a few things and left for De Haan, thinking we would be there for maybe a week. The next day however, it was announced that no one was allowed to visit their second residence. Since we were already there, we were not really sure what was expected of us, so we stayed. This way we would be in contact with less people than at home.

As the virus spread further and further through the population, we went out less and less. The supermarket and the beach became our only two possible destinations. One to keep us going physically, and the other to keep us from going insane. I really enjoy going out, it brings some variation into the day. At the same time, it is very confronting. It is the only time I could be directly in contact with the virus. Although you cannot see it directly, its presence is visible everywhere. This visual essay tries to shed light on how the coronavirus and its consequences are visible in De Haan. The pictures were taken on different days, but they could just as easily be one long walk through town. Therefore, I present them to you this way.



In our own street, people are very much involved in the different national acts of solidarity that are going on. A few neighbours have white sheets or pieces of fabric hanging from their windows or balconies to show their support for all of the health workers who are crucial during these times. Some of them even have messages on them. Other neighbours have placed stuffed animals in front of their windows so people can take their children on walks and look for them. This is clearly one of the more positive ways in which the virus has altered our surroundings.



'Merci' is French for 'thank you', but it is also used very frequently in informal Flemish.

Some things, however, never seem to change. Almost every morning, there is still a line at the bakery, although it does look a bit different now. Only two people are allowed inside and the others have to wait outside with a distance of one and a half meters between them. It is a bit odd to see them waiting so quietly and so far apart from each other, when people are usually all happily chatting about their lives.

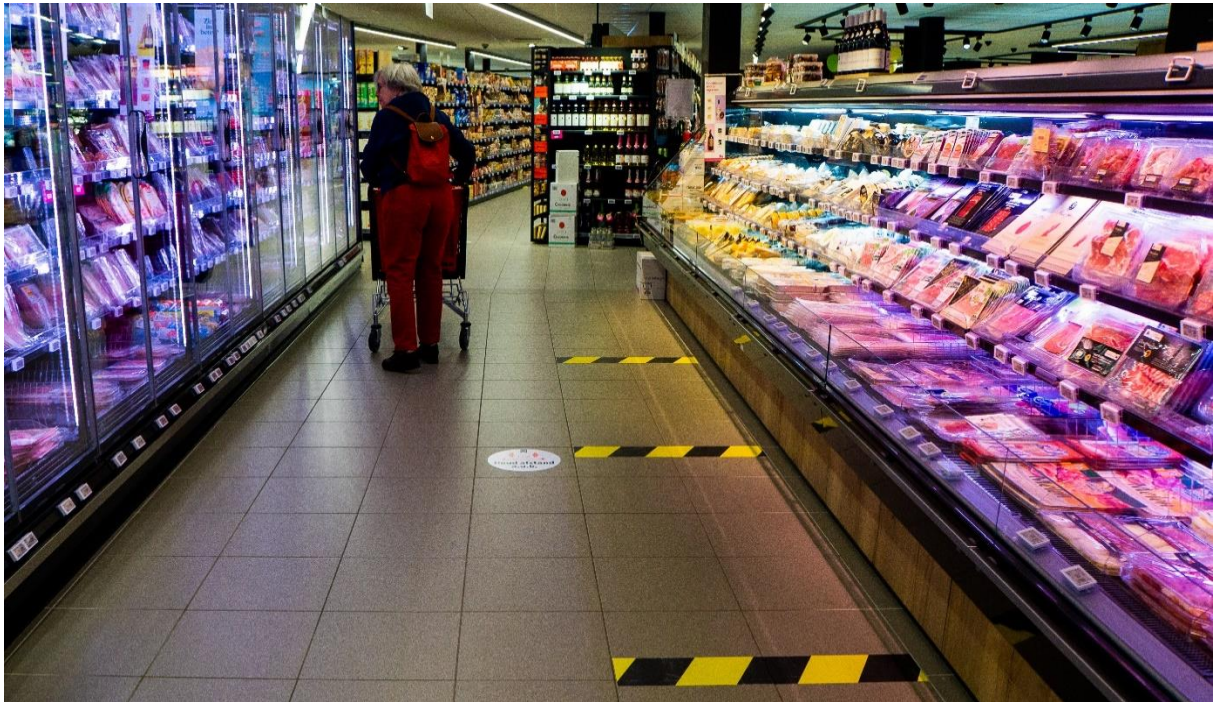


When we go a bit further down the road, to the supermarket, we are confronted with reality once again. Some people, especially the elderly, wear face masks to protect themselves and others. A lot of customers also wear gloves, although it does not do anything except maybe remind you not to touch your face.





It is understandable that people take their own precautions, even if it is not obligated. Because in spite of the various efforts of the store to keep people one and a half meters apart, many customers do not respect the social distancing guidelines. This is quite hard to understand because all over the store there are stickers on the floor to remind you to keep your distance and to show you how much distance is actually required.



The sticker reads: Keep distance please.

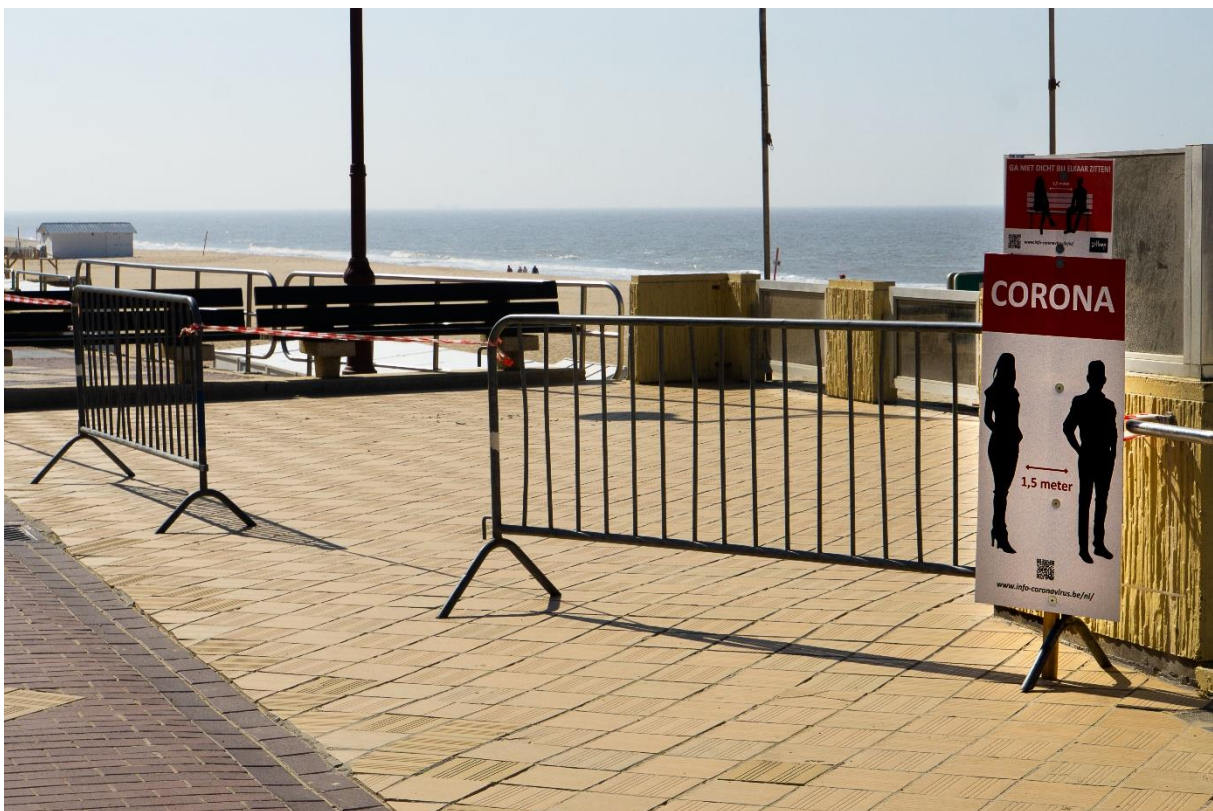


As we continue our walk through the town we come across a statue of Albert Einstein, who lived in De Haan for a few months in 1933. Someone has put a face mask on him, probably as a joke. It is quite a funny picture, but it also confronts us once again with the omnipresence of the virus. It also makes me wonder what he would say in times like these.



Continuing in the same direction, we arrive at the beach. Once more, we are reminded of the 1,5 meters of distance, this time by a big sign. On top of that, most of the seating areas are surrounded with fences and police tape. On the beach itself, the playground is also closed off in the same

way. The swings are even attached to the poles with zip ties. As so many other things, the playground is not allowed to fulfil its normal duty. The beach itself is awfully empty. On a normal sunny day in the Easter holidays, like the one this picture was taken on, the beach would be packed with people from all over Belgium sunbathing and their children playing in the sand. Currently, we can only see a few people walking in the distance. Although the peace and quiet is pleasing, it would be so much nicer to see a beach full of happy people.





After going back home, there is only one thing left to do: wash our hands thoroughly with lots of soap. Together with not touching our face (which is quite a challenge when taking pictures) and keeping distance, this is the most important part of going out. I admit this should already be a habit, but it is different now. In these circumstances washing your hands is about keeping the virus out of your house and keeping everyone inside of it safe.



We can conclude that the outbreak of the coronavirus has had a large impact on everyone's lives. Although the virus itself is invisible, its effects are visible in every part of every trip we take outside. As I am writing this, the guidelines are changing every week. Face masks will become even more common, but the emptiness of the public spaces will probably decline. We are once again in for a whole new worldview and it probably will not be the last time everything around us changes before the coronavirus becomes history.

This visual essay was made for the Seminar Visual Studies by professor Luc Pauwels as part of the master Film Studies and Visual Culture at the University of Antwerp.