

Itineraries of walking and footwear on film

Asli Ozgen

NECSUS 11 (11): 360-367

URL: <https://necsus-ejms.org/itineraries-of-walking-and-footwear-on-film/>

Over the past two decades, there has been growing scholarly interest in walking, as evidenced by an increasing number of publications, workshops (or sometimes 'walkshops'), and other events dedicated to the topic. In this review, I focus on two recent volumes that can be positioned within this growing interest, but particularly contributing to the field of film studies. *The Peripatetic Frame: Images of Walking in Film* by Thomas Deane Tucker (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020) searches for a film-philosophy of walking on the screen. Though not strictly on walking, the edited volume *Shoe Reels: The History and Philosophy of Footwear in Film*, edited by Elizabeth Ezra and Catherine Wheatley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), probes into the multifaceted histories and philosophies of footwear in cinema. Across twenty chapters, the book makes a significant contribution to the literature through an in-depth exploration of shoes as signifiers of labour, social class, sexuality, displacement, and fantasy among others. While *The Peripatetic Frame* focuses on the cinematic images of walking (as an act) to explore the ways in which they fulfil a cinematic function in the depiction of mental, psychological, and physical spaces; *Shoe Reels* zooms in on footwear (as an object) and their multifold functions on screen narratives as symbols, indexes, and metaphors. Both volumes provide surprising and enriching insights into the study of walking in cinema.

In my own research into the history of 'cinematic pedestrianism', I witnessed the accelerating growth of the field since the mid-2000s.[1] At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the study of walking was broad but scattered across disciplines, with scant sources on pedestrianism and film. Particularly in the past decade, a noticeable expansion in the study of walking brought gradually more disciplines into contact. Furthermore, the interventions by feminist criticism have contributed significant insights to the methodologies and investigations of pedestrianism. Feminist scholars have produced some of the most influential scholarship on (individual and collective)

walking in the city since the late 1980s. With the rise of intersectional frameworks of analysis and activism, the pressing urgency and interest to analyse walking more critically became more pronounced. Questions such as who gets to walk where, and why, are voiced increasingly loudly. Such critical perspectives help conceptualise (and practice) walking as method to reveal the constructions underlying the public space. At the same time, they allow examining walking as tactic, for example, for dissenting engagements with such constructions. Performing walking as a tactic may be quite empowering, as in the collective marches like Feminist Night March.

In the wake of such critical insights, the field of walking studies is moving away from the perspectives that perpetuate the romantic conceptualisations and practices of walking as an individual act to uncover inner landscapes, without any engagement with the latent structures of security and visibility inherent in any walkable space. Instead, the emphasis is shifting to an analysis of walking as an aesthetic practice that is socially, culturally, and politically constructed. There is an urgency to move beyond the assumptions that underlie the performance of walking based on the white, masculine, heteronormative, abled body as its invisible norm. To break this persistence which keeps the structures of inequality intact and unquestioned, a few scholars and practitioners have pointed to the need for a 'critical walking studies', which dissects 'who gets to walk where, how we walk, under whose terms, and what kind of publics we can make'.^[2] These questions have yet to inform the study and analysis of walking in cinema.

The Peripatetic Frame

The Peripatetic Frame: Images of Walking in Film provides a survey of walking in films from a film-philosophical angle. Borrowing from Werner Herzog's *Of Walking in Ice*^[3] in the Introduction, Tucker conceptualises walking as one of the three traits that 'make us human', alongside cooking and image-making (p. 10).^[4] With the preposition that cinema is an artform where the three coalesce, the author zooms in on several images of walking in cinema throughout six chapters. The opening is poetic and intriguing; however, seen in light of current critical examinations of walking that I explained earlier, the readily accepted category of 'human' raises questions, as it tends to conceal or overlook the privileges and latent structures of power when it comes to the practitioners of walking.

Overall, the book has varying depths of engagement with various cinematic representations of walking – at times examining them in depth through philosophical

ideas such as Heidegger's and Freud's, other times giving quick overviews in short paragraphs per filmmaker. For example, the first chapter is noticeably less interested in the (completely different) philosophical implications of the studies of human locomotion by Eadweard Muybridge and Etienne-Jules Marey,[5] compared to the incisive readings of the detective perambulations of the noir genre in Chapter 4. It seems to prioritise giving the reader a summary of 'First Steps' in cinematic representations of walking. However, it expands about five decades, from the chronophotographic experiments with capturing human locomotion in the 1880s to the Russian avant-garde, which is an era of advanced cinematic language.

The second chapter focuses on Charlie Chaplin's serial character The Tramp. The emphasis on the shoes is fascinating here, and it is complemented powerfully by Margaret C. Flinn's article in *Shoe Reels*, where Max Linder's shoes are analysed insightfully as inspiration for Chaplin to depict socio-economic tensions. Tracing the figure instead in American literature, Tucker argues that The Tramp is the disruptor par excellence of the panoptic city. He examines Chaplin's ability to dissect the expressive movements of human beings into a series of innervations, referencing Freud. From this standpoint, the author links Chaplin's unwanted and uncontrolled bodily compulsions in light of Jean Epstein's idea of cinema as nervous energy.

Chapter 3 discusses mobile framing as pedestrian camera. Following a brief history of the Steadicam, the author examines Bela Tarr's distinctive use of Steadicam point-of-view shots to develop 'a participatory peripatetic point of view' (p. 45). For the author, Tarr's use of this particular image, ambulating smoothly with characters, accentuates 'the everyday body without an event' (p. 61). The characters and the spectators inhabit the same duration of time passed and space travelled. Here, the author finds inspiration to refer to Deleuze's crystal image: 'showing simultaneously the present of the future, a present of the present, and the present of the past' (p. 59).

Chapter 4, titled 'Gumshoes', focuses on detective perambulations on the screen. The author engages with the noir genre conventions from a psychogeography angle. Through an analysis of the characters' navigation of the urban labyrinth, which mirrors the entanglements in their minds when solving a crime, Tucker proposes camera movement as a stylistic convention of the noir. Here *Elevator to the Gallows* (Louis Malle, 1958) shines as a paragon of 'noir walking' (p. 72). In addition, the author also goes deeper into the genre of police procedural and how police legwork is one conventional component of this style. Through this distinction, Tucker delineates different detective pedestrianisms from each other in two adjacent genres: 'In both the detective noir and

police procedural film, the labyrinthine endoskeleton of the city is a disorderly setting of danger, intrigue, and unpredictability.’ (p. 80) The power of cinema lies in opening up ‘the closed, prison-like spaces of the city, allowing us to walk the streets and to set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris from the safety of the screen’ (p. 80). Standing out with its depth and its unique perspectives of analysis, this chapter is a seminal contribution to the study of walking and footwear in cinema.

The next chapter in the book is dedicated to ‘walking home’. Focusing on *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), the author here evocatively recalls the strong connection between shoes and home. Tucker writes that it is ‘Dorothy’s perlocutionary utterance “There is no place like home” while tapping her ruby slippers together that conjures up the most iconic image of home in cinema’ (p. 84). In this chapter, the author also briefly discusses the colonial cartographies of walking via the film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002). Tucker shows how the film portrays a close, embodied engagement with the landscape, enriching the long journey on foot, which is motivation to return home. Perhaps not openly mentioned in the book, this chapter, in a way, aptly addresses forced displacement and the fantasy of home that fuels long-haul journeys on foot.

The last chapter focuses on ‘Aimless Walks’ as an umbrella term for different types of leisurely walks. After an analysis of the eponymous title *Aimless Walk* by Alexandr Hackenschmied (1930), Tucker discusses Guy Debord’s *dérive* (which, as a playful act of situationist disobedience was not aimless in the strict sense), the figure of the *flâneur*, as well as some notes on ‘hiking films’, ‘running films’, and ‘apocalyptic walking’. How these films or acts/performances of walking differ from each other remain unexplained. The examination of walking as an everyday act or its derivations – such as *flânerie*, the Situationist practice of *dérive*, drifting, wandering, tramping, window-shopping, rambling, and roaming--requires a nuanced exploration of how these acts are socially and politically shaped.

Overall, *The Peripatetic Frame* is a welcome contribution to the study of representations of the act of walking in cinema within a film-philosophical framework, although a certain imbalance in terms of depth of analysis is observable in its treatment of the topic. The book provides an overview of possible directions that such a study can take as well as effective film-philosophical analysis in parts, specifically in Chapters 2 to 5. From this perspective, the chapters ‘First Steps’ and ‘Aimless Walks’ are noticeably underdeveloped yet filled with stimulating mentions for those not familiar with the topic. Given the urgency in the field towards more critical engagements with walking, for example at the intersections of race, class, and gender, one disadvantage of the book

might be that it largely relies on an assumed 'human'ness, which might at times align with the invisibility of the white, heteronormative, male, abled body. As such, the study could have benefited from the critical perspectives in the literature on walking and cinema by feminist scholars, for example. Ultimately, *The Peripatetic Frame* would be a stepping stone for readers who wish to start or deepen research into the representation of walking on the screen.

Shoe Reels: The History and Philosophy of Footwear in Film

Edited by Elizabeth Ezra and Catherine Wheatley, *Shoe Reels* stands out with its intersectional analytical perspective that informs its editorial framework, thus addressing some of the urgent questions in the critical walking studies that I mentioned earlier. Although the book does not limit itself strictly to pedestrianism, the study of shoes is inescapably closely linked to the walking, standing, dancing, working body in its many forms at the intersection of class, gender, race, and abled-ness.

Shoes have a rich history in (political) philosophy and visual arts: from the image of the cobbler in Marx's theory of economics; the index of bodily labour in Van Gogh's famous *Oude Schoenen*; the lure of commodification in Andy Warhol's silkscreens; the semiotic play of concealment and display in René Magritte's *Le Model Rouge*; the epitome of realism's power in Walker Evans's photography series. Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov proudly and playfully called himself the 'shoemaker of cinematography'. [6]

In their detailed and wide-ranging exploration of history and philosophy of footwear in screen narratives, Ezra and Wheatley ask: 'So what is it that shoes actually do?' This emphasis on the potency of shoes provides an inspiring and insightful point of departure to trace their functions besides protecting the feet: 'they contribute to the performance of gender; they indicate aspects of personality, sexuality, race, ethnicity and social class; and they serve as tools of seduction' (p. 1). In addition, shoes help express national identity, and evoke empathy in the daily English-language expressions (p. 2). In the works of feminist writers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf, shoes can signal freedom and/or restraint – which is exemplified in some of the feminist pedestrian acts and footwear imagery in cinema as well (p. 3). Moreover, shoes facilitate mobility – both literal and social mobility. In that, they indicate simultaneously labour and fashion (p. 3). Combining a wide array of authors ranging from film scholars to film critics, the book presents a comprehensive study of footwear in cinema. Class, social mobility, and sexuality are common connotations of shoes across the chapters. In almost

all cases, shoes give away a certain truth – they are there to reveal, to whisper, to establish a relation of confidence across the screen with the spectator.

The twenty chapters address these issues across different genres, time periods, and geographies of film – attesting to the wide reach of the uses and symbolism of shoes. The chapters are organised in a quasi-chronological fashion. The first three chapters focus on the silent era. Margaret C. Flinn zooms in on the function of shoes in Max Linder's slapstick comedy – which was clearly an influence on Chaplin's walk. Here, shoes function as social critique, as indicators of social class and mobility. Flinn's analysis resonates with Pamela Hutchinson's close reading of footwear in Lois Weber's two films: *Shoes* (1916) and *The Blot* (1921). For the precarious female protagonists of these two films, shoes are means of subsistence and represent their financial insecurity. Footwear as signifiers of social class take the central stage in *Amor Pedestre* (a humorous Italian melodrama from 1914, directed by Marcel Fabre) that narrates a love affair showing the actors only from the waist down.

Shifting the focus to the sound and Technicolor era, Ezra's chapter on *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) and *The Red Shoes* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1948) dissects the symbolism around magic shoes. For Ezra, magic shoes have historically been used to represent monogamy, class, and even sexual preference. Although in these films they may appear to offer fantasies of social mobility, Ezra contends that they ultimately reinforce traditional hierarchies: 'Magic exaggerates the hierarchies that already exist, making the restrictions imposed by these hierarchies all the more visible.' (p. 50) Zooming in on *The Red Shoes* specifically, Ian Christie shows how magic footwear represents the young protagonist's will and courage to counter social constructions and traditional expectations. In its double meaning between freedom and restraint, footwear encapsulates the postwar gender politics.

Shoe Reels also addresses the growing scholarship and interest in the history of fashion on film and the debates about preservation of costumes as objects related to film heritage. Keith Lodwick's case study of the ruby slippers at V&A shed light on intricacies of preservation and exhibition practices. Shoes as objects of desire overlapped with the filmic medium's visual splendour, such as Dorothy's shoes in impressive Technicolor red and Marilyn Monroe's shoes in CinemaScope in *How to Marry a Millionaire* (Jean Negulesco, 1953). Shifting the focus to the Hollywood animation produced at around the same time, Christopher Holliday's chapter dissects the faceless African-American housemaid, known as 'Mammy Two-Shoes', bringing a gendered and racialised reading of shoes in the animation genre, in light of the 'Mammy' stereotype.

Footwear does not only express gender roles and social class, but it can also function as tools of protest and resistance. Rachael Langford's article in the book insightfully examines the ways in which footwear expresses the tension between agency and oppression in three African films made in the periods of immediate post-Independence and later neo-Imperial globalisation. Langford's intersectional perspective provides enriching readings not only of footwear but also the absence of it, i.e. bare footedness. In that, the article opens up new perspectives to examine the widely circulated images of forced displacement, migration, and exile.[7]

With an expansive focus ranging from the silent era to the contemporary film culture, *Shoe Reels* provides in-depth analyses and an enriching panorama of the history and philosophy of footwear on screen. In its insightful treatment of its subject matter through critical and intersectional perspectives, the edited volume expands the study of pedestrianism and walking in cinema as well – without repeating the deeply entrenched romanticist paradigms that associate endless and aimless walking with an unbounded freedom.

These two recent contributions to the scholarship on walking and cinema expand the field in different ways. Whereas *The Peripatetic Frame* includes some rigorous film-philosophical interpretations, its ambition to prove that walking, alongside cooking and filmmaking, is what 'make[s] us human' (p. 3) falls short of addressing how walking is constructed spatially, politically, and socially across the cinematic and the pro-filmic realms. Although not strictly on walking, *Shoe Reels* addresses the urgency in the field to investigate such social and political constructions that shape the cinematic images of footwear – and tangentially, those of pedestrianism. In the current context of ecological crisis favouring walkable spaces in urban constructions, and also massive forced displacement compelling precarious individuals to undertake long-haul journeys on foot, the urgency for an interdisciplinary and intersectional critical walking studies is more palpable than ever.

References

- Braun, M. *Picturing time: The work of Étienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Herzog, W. *Of walking in ice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.
- Ozgen, A. *The image of walking: The aesthetics and politics of cinematic pedestrianism* (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2018).
- Solnit, R. *Time, space and Eadweard Muybridge*. London: Bloomsbury, 2004.

Vertov, D. 'Significance of Non-Acted Cinema' in *Kino-Eye: The writings of Dziga*

Vertov, edited by A. Michelson. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984: 37.

WalkingLab. 'Introduction to Critical Walking Methodologies', The WalkingLab Podcast, n.d.:
<https://walkinglab.org/podcast/walkinglab-introduction-to-critical-walking-methodologies/>

Notes

- [1] See Asli Ozgen, *The Image of Walking: The Aesthetics and Politics of Cinematic Pedestrianism* (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2018).
- [2] 'Introduction to Critical Walking Methodologies', The WalkingLab Podcast, n.d. available to read and listen at <https://walkinglab.org/podcast/walkinglab-introduction-to-critical-walking-methodologies/>
- [3] Werner Herzog, *Of Walking in Ice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.
- [4] Werner Herzog's words quoted in the Introduction: 'When you travel on foot it isn't a matter of covering actual territory, rather a question of moving through your own inner landscapes.' Tucker, *Peripatetic Frame*, p. 1.
- [5] A few significant studies have provided deep analysis of the works of Muybridge and Marey. Particularly, Marta Braun's seminal book on Marey as well as Solnit's comprehensive study of Muybridge have been groundbreaking contributions to earlier research. See Marta Braun, *Picturing Time: The Work of Étienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992; Rebecca Solnit, *Time, Space and Eadweard Muybridge*. London: Bloomsbury, 2004.
- [6] Dziga Vertov, 'Significance of Non-Acted Cinema' in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*. Ed. Annette Michelson. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, p. 37.
- [7] For example, Mexican filmmaker Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu's virtual reality installation is worth mentioning here. Titled *Flesh and Sand (Virtually Present, Physically Invisible)*, the installation initially premiered at Cannes Film Festival in 2017. Visitors to this VR installation are first asked to take off their shoes. Presented as a cinematic and embodied experience of forced fleeing and publicised as being based on the actual accounts of immigrants and refugees, the exhibition involves a long walk, barefoot, on cold sand and gravel, which pierces the skin painfully at every footstep. In this work, not the visual image of the shoes but the corporeal experience of their absence is used to inspire an affective alignment.