
Walking in Women's Shoes

Precarity and Feminist Pedestrian Acts in Cinema

ABSTRACT This article traces feminist affinities across images of shoes as signifiers of women's precarious mobilities on the screen. Inspired by Catherine Russell's methodology of parallax historiography, it investigates compelling images of shoes in women's activist filmmaking from two different time periods and national cinemas. The footwear of Eva from Lois Weber's *Shoes* (1916) and Mona from Agnès Varda's *Sans toit ni loi* (*Vagabond*, 1985) lends itself to reflection on practices of feminist historiography and a figurative reconfiguration of the *flâneuse* as a feminist historian who critically revisits knowledge of the past and of the present to set both in motion. **KEYWORDS** feminist film historiography, flâneuse, nomadism, shoes, walking

The shoes always tell the story.

—Ruta Sepetys, *Salt to the Sea*, 2017¹

“She was just walking home” reads a placard commemorating Sarah Everard, a young woman who was abducted and killed in London in March 2021.² Underneath, the sign continues with “97%,” the ratio of women in the UK who have experienced sexual harassment on the streets, according to a United Nations survey.³ After Everard's disappearance, a police expert spoke on television and admonished women to be aware of their surroundings when out. “Keep your headphones out [of your ears],” she said, and “keep looking over your shoulder,” since women walking the streets “can be more vulnerable” if they are “out and about late at night.” She followed that all up with the advisory that caused the most international uproar: “Make sure you're wearing shoes that you can run away [in] if need be.”⁴ But Everard *was* wearing running shoes. They did not help her.

This advice was all unsettlingly familiar to women's ears, as it repeated fallacies about gender-based violence, putting the responsibility—really the blame—on women's shoulders. It is rarely men who are instructed to adjust

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FIGURE 1. “Remember this crowd when in despair,” banner from Istanbul’s 2020 Feminist Night March.

their behavior.⁵ Outraged, many women started sharing on social media personal stories about feeling threatened when out on the street at night. Walking the streets in the darker hours requires being vigilant, speeding up footsteps, taking a safer route even if longer, holding a phone, evading gazes, not answering back if harassed. Many women speaking out recalled the #MeToo movement; knowledge was shared and women’s experiences of the city became visible, audible. Women organized vigils, #ReclaimTheseStreets, as another way to make their voices against gender-based violence heard.

Women’s urban activism takes many forms across the globe, and walking and collective marches have played a central role. Taking it to the streets speaks strongly to the long history of women’s marches, from suffragette rallies to female textile workers’ protests in 1917 Russia, Take Back the Night, and Feminist Night Marches, which attract masses of attendees every year. By walking the streets together, women exhibit their existence, solidarity, and determination for change. While walking alone might feel vulnerable, walking together on the streets feels empowering, especially after dark (fig. 1).

In *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World* (2020), Leslie Kern points to the long history of women viewing the city as both the site and the stakes of struggle: “The city is the place to be heard; it’s also the place we’re fighting for. Fighting to belong, to be safe, to earn a living, to represent

our communities, and so much more.”⁶ For Kern, outbursts of women’s activism in the present resonate strongly with a history of struggles on the streets. In what follows, I shift from contemporary instances of women’s activism to trace footwear in particular and walking more generally as symbols of precarious mobility in women’s filmmaking, taking as my case studies Lois Weber’s *Shoes* (1916) and Agnès Varda’s *Sans toit ni loi* (*Vagabond*, 1985). Although these films may be quite different, they are closely related in their treatment of young precarious women’s pedestrianism, using shoes as a multifaceted symbol for economic and gendered precarity. Though made at disparate historical moments, their respective presentations of precarious mobilities—here understood as both stasis and movement—resonate powerfully, making connections across different times and spaces in the history of women’s filmmaking.

This article traces the history of women’s pedestrian acts on the screen, investigating feminist affinities between visual representations of women’s walking in the city at different times and in different industrial conditions. It focuses specifically on the versatile symbolism of shoes as signifiers of women’s mobilities, from having to walk to save carfare to idle wandering and forced displacement. I argue that the act of walking cannot be homogeneously analyzed for being solely pleasurable (as in *flânerie*) or distressing (as in having to walk) but should be understood in its complexity—in a state of movement, change, and chance. Such a perspective can shed light on the multifaceted forms of women’s mobility, which as I argue below are political in a Rancièrian sense.⁷ Especially from an intersectional perspective, women’s pedestrianism is entangled with precariousness and risk. This is exemplified in Weber’s *Shoes*, where the working-class protagonist, Eva, is approached by a sexual predator as she is admiring the shoes in a shop window, and in Varda’s *Vagabond*, where the nomadic wanderer Mona encounters many harassers. In both, the protagonists’ footwear symbolizes these dangerous encounters.

Moreover, an intersectional understanding of the filmic texts allows us to see how women are more precarious in the social and economic domain. Both protagonists, for example, are women from the lowest economic segments of society. Their pedestrianism becomes emblematic of their own precarity in the sense that Eva *has* to walk because she cannot afford transport, while Mona *prefers* to walk as an act of dissent against socially prescriptive heteronormativity. Regardless of its causes or intentions, the very pedestrianism of both protagonists, I will argue, is a political act in the sense

that it makes visible both women's walking and the inherent gendered dimensions and risks of (urban or rural) space. Footwear becomes a metaphor for class conditions: Eva's deteriorating shoes symbolize her entrapment in poverty, while Mona's decomposing boots signify a shift in her mobility from idle wandering and voluntary perambulation to a crippling drift.

On another level, I want to (self-)reflect on the precarious nature of the feminist historian's work through the lens of Catherine Russell's formulation of parallax historiography and the feminist historian as *flâneuse*. Russell argues that new media technologies such as digital archives have created theoretical passages back to the first decades of film history, enabling scholars to establish new connections between the past and the present.⁸ It is in this vein that I revisit the cinematographic imaginations of women's pedestrianism from the past to reflect on contemporary visual imaginations of precarious mobility of women. #ReclaimTheseStreets is a case in point that establishes the link between a new media tactic (the hashtag) and an older tactic (street protest) to exhibit women's existence, uprising, and solidarity across digital and physical spaces.

Another example is the Istanbul Feminist Night March of 2021, which had a virtual attendance option due to the Covid-19 lockdown. Organizers created a website, feministgeceyuruyusundayiz.com ("we are at the feminist night march"), that allowed participants to log in and mark themselves on the map, simulating an actual march and enabling users from various intersectional subjectivities to support the protests without risk of harm. Such a virtual stratagem sparks a new perspective on earlier tactics of presence on the streets and on the screen. Russell's choice of the term "parallax" is key: it alludes to a critical historiographical venture that puts both the past and the present in motion, bringing about a shift in the knowledge of both. Denoting "the difference or change in the apparent position or direction of an object as seen from two different points," the term encapsulates at one and the same time the mobile gaze of a peripatetic subject and changing vision. In other words, it is not fixed, "securely held," or "in position," which are antonyms of the word "precarious." In its affirmation of mobility, "parallax" approximates precarity in a different way.

The practice of a parallax historiography, for Russell, corresponds to the pursuit of the feminist film historian, who revisits historical knowledge from a critical perspective to set in motion present knowledges of early cinema, how and why we know what we know. This skepticism of historical knowledge underlies the vocation of feminist critique and practices of (film)

historiography. It echoes feminist film historian Jane Gaines's assertion that historical knowledge is unstable knowledge.⁹ Borrowing from Gilles Deleuze, Gaines ponders the "two presents" of historiography: "the present which it was, and the one in relation to which it is now past."¹⁰ Historiographical ventures move between these two presents. How to engage, or reinvent, a historiographical method that is in line with the feminist critique?

Delving into a feminist historiography should not be limited to "writing women back into history" without reflecting on the traditional historiographical method. Feminist film historiography, therefore, puts the past and the present in motion, critically asking what is known, what can be known, and what this tells us about the present. Joan Wallach Scott's notion of history as critique is relevant here. The object of critical historiography is in the present, argues Scott, even though its materials come from the archives of the past: "Its aim is neither to justify nor to discredit," but to illuminate the blind spots—that is, "the grounds of a system's possibility." Different from criticism, the critique spotlights "what seems natural, obvious, self-evident, or universal in order to show that these things have their history, their reasons for being the way they are, their effects on what follows from them and that the starting point is not a (natural) given but a (cultural) construct."¹¹ Scott's notion of history as critique helps us see not only the past and the present, but also the future, in motion and in relation to one another.

Women's activism today resonates strongly with both past struggles and an idealism for the future. For Kern, "Nothing that we have wasn't fought for; nothing that we will gain in the future will be given without a fight."¹² It is within this conception of interconnectivity and intersectionality of the past, the present, and the future that I approach *Shoes* and *Vagabond*. In my own parallax history, I will argue for the neglected richness of the *flâneuse* and reclaim the mobilizing potential of an intersectional female *flânerie*. The *flâneuse* is evoked by Russell as a suitable figure to signify the vocation of the feminist historian as entangled, or propelled, by constantly shifting perspectives and knowledges.¹³ This contested—and contesting—concept has been taken up narrowly in scholarship over the last three decades. Although there is a supposed familiarity with the discussions around (female) *flânerie*, the same definitions of it have dominated discussions since the 1990s which, as I have argued elsewhere, brought the concept of (female) *flânerie* to a figurative standstill.¹⁴ Scholars and historians, in their search for a counterpart to male *flânerie*, have restrictively linked this figure to commercialism and consumerism.¹⁵ This discourse associated working-class (and immigrant, exiled)

women instead with forced wandering, displacement, and sex work, encoding them as a threat to society, as an index of corruption in industrial urban modernity, or as victims of male dominance. While this is not untrue, it tells only a partial story. A substantial number of novels, essays, and films by women recount pleasures of idle walking on the street regardless of a woman's class. The two films that I analyze in this article are cases in point.

Both *Shoes* and *Vagabond* feature protagonists from the lowest socioeconomic segments of society. Weber's film was lauded as closely based on experiences of young, working, often immigrant women in turn-of-the-century US cities. Working in a low-paid and insecure job, Eva must tread between work and home in disintegrating shoes because she lacks funds for a new pair. In Varda's film, Mona's voluntary wandering gradually becomes a coerced displacement, with the decomposition of her shoes becoming the main signifier of this shift. Both films use close-up tracking shots of the protagonist's shoes as she undergoes distressing moments of significant danger. Aesthetically very similar to each other, these shots function as affect images, to cite Deleuze's concept, and inspire affective alignment with the predicaments of their precarious female protagonists.¹⁶ My hypothesis is that the contemporary use of shoes, specifically in narratives of women's pedestrianism such as feminist activism, idle wandering, or forced displacement, fulfills a similar emotive function, inspiring audiences to empathize with the women in varying sites of precarity. As a feminist film historian, I will shed light on the connections between Eva's and Mona's pedestrianism as well as contemporary feminist pedestrian acts.

EVA'S WALKING IN THE CITY

The restoration and rerelease of *Shoes* in 2010 engendered new opportunities to revisit the film and establish contemporary connections with it. The event rekindled interest in Weber as one of the few women directors in the emergent film industry. This has produced some exciting analyses, especially in the field of feminist film historiography. In addition to a number of articles that have appeared in reputable journals in English-speaking academia, Shelley Stamp has written a monograph, *Lois Weber in Early Hollywood* (2015), only the second in this arena after Anthony Slide's groundbreaking *Lois Weber: The Director Who Lost Her Way in History* (1996).¹⁷ Stamp places Weber in context, commenting on her public persona in the film industry and in popular culture of the time. She analyzes Weber's films to shed light

on the ways they functioned during the period in which they were produced and circulated, and thereby provides new insight into Weber's films, including many that have been controversial, especially from feminist perspectives. Stamp also highlights Weber's talent for setting up a form of sociological inquiry in her films. Weber, for Stamp, develops an "activist, engaged cinema."¹⁸

In this vein, *Shoes* can be seen as a film made with the aim to raise awareness about the predicament of working-class women, especially regarding their precarious living and working conditions, not only literally (as in coerced walking due to poverty), but also figuratively (as in the absence of prospects for social mobility, which makes Eva susceptible to a sexual predator). In her recent study in *Shoe Reels: The History and Philosophy of Footwear in Film* (2020), Pamela Hutchinson also emphasizes Eva's precarious status as a young working woman: "Weber uses footwear to represent the limits of social mobility . . . for young working women." Contrary to its widely recognized connotations of social mobility in language and literature—such as the popular saying "to pull oneself up by one's bootstraps" or Cinderella's glass slipper—Hutchinson notes how Weber encodes footwear in *Shoes* as "a signifier of status that *delineates* class and economic boundaries rather than crossing them." As such, Eva's shoes become a marker of her economic vulnerability. They represent a hidden problem that "the audience is uniquely privileged to view, especially in those excruciating close-ups of her sore feet."¹⁹ There are multiple moments when Eva tries to hide her shoes from view, a reflex to conceal her vulnerability (specifically her economic precarity).

The storyline runs as follows: The only wage earner in her family, Eva is a clerk at a dime store. Her siblings are too young to work, her father is lazy, and her mother is doing her best to support the family by doing others' laundry out of their home. Eva gives all her earnings to her family, and cannot buy a new pair of shoes to replace her terribly deteriorating footwear even though the condition of her shoes damages her physical health. Every week her mother promises to spare Eva a few dollars from her salary so that she can buy a new pair, but this promise is repeatedly broken since the family's tight budget prioritizes household maintenance. One day, Eva is caught in a downpour and falls seriously ill due to her drenched feet. Feeling hopeless, she agrees to spend time with a well-off flatterer in order to obtain new shoes.

Eva was true to life for many young working-class women in turn-of-the-century US urban spaces, and this film stands out in Weber's oeuvre by



FIGURE 2. Still from *Shoes* (dir. Lois Weber), 1916. Courtesy Milestone Films.

tackling the impact of working-class women on public space. Kathy Peiss notes that young unmarried working-class women dominated the female labor force between 1880 and 1920: “In 1900, four fifths of the 343,000 wage-earning women in New York were single, and almost one third were aged 16 to 20. Whether supporting themselves, or more usually, contributing to the family economy, most girls expected to work at some time in their teens.” A major part of these working daughters “contributed all or a substantial part of their earnings to the family.” Further, “In 1888, 75% of female factory workers interviewed gave all their earnings and this figure remained relatively unchanged into the 1910s, when three quarters to four-fifths handed their pay envelopes over to their parents unopened.”²⁰ In *Shoes*, one scene indeed depicts Eva handing over her wages to her mother in an unopened envelope (fig. 2). The film devotes substantial moments to it. The mother opens the envelope at the proscenium, takes out the money, and after counting it says: “This will only cover the rent, and the butcher will have to wait for another week.” Eva is saddened and enraged when her mother refuses to spare her the three dollars she needs for new shoes. Her mother tells Eva to wait for next week, and until then she must make do with her crumbling footwear (fig. 3).



FIGURE 3. Still from *Shoes* (dir. Lois Weber), 1916. Courtesy Milestone Films.

Stamp argues that the wished-for button-up boots are a metaphor for the film's emphasis on female desire—condensations of the protagonist's aspirations and longings. Despite interpreting the shoes as “the most visible index of her exploitative working conditions,” Stamp analyzes Eva's longing for a new pair in terms of a consumerist desire fueled by the department store and commodified forms of stride in public space. The film, according to Stamp, devotes substantial energy to the moment between home and work when Eva is poised in front of the shop window. In this scene, since we do not yet know that “Eva's shoes are deteriorating badly, a fact not revealed until the following scene, the emphasis here falls solely upon Eva's desire for the boots as stylish commodities.”²¹

I would argue otherwise. The fact that Eva needs a new pair of shoes is not construed in the film as a consumerist desire; decent footwear is a basic prerequisite for her to perform her work at the dime store, survive, and earn a living for her family. We read from Stamp that studies of department store employees in the 1910s found evidence that “standing for periods of up to fourteen hours a day caused physical strain.”²² In the film, Eva's deteriorating footwear is shown to be the very reason for her infirmity: she takes a footbath to relax her feet every night, and in one scene, she literally removes a nail from



FIGURE 4. Still from *Shoes* (dir. Lois Weber), 1916. Courtesy Milestone Films.

her foot. From this perspective, it is possible to argue that shoes stand in the film for the Marxian concept of “the means of subsistence”—all means that are required for the performance and reproduction of labor. This meaning is also emphasized in Hutchinson’s recent work. Quoting Jennifer Parchesky, Hutchinson underlines that “Eva’s shoes are not just a commodity and for her they are far from a fashion item. Instead, they are her means of transport through the city and therefore essential for her to go to work.” “Without them,” the author contends, “she would leave the workforce and lose her economic independence.” That is why the shoes become a symbol of “the deprivation she suffers as a member of the working poor.”²³

The urgent need for durable all-weather shoes is further suggested in a later scene where Eva must walk to and from work in a downpour. In addition to her usual daily exhaustion, we see an extraordinary close-up shot tracing Eva’s footsteps in the pouring rain (fig. 4). The tension builds; with each footfall, the affect grows stronger. The cinematography is unusual for its time—one of the bold experimental scenes that Weber was widely credited for. Instead of showing Eva’s plight as a close-up of her face, we are given a six-second tracking shot focusing on the shoes that powerfully conveys the wetness, cold, and aching in Eva’s feet. Weber’s camera stays with Eva’s footsteps longer than usual to signal her anger, desperation, fatigue, and frailty.

This close-up on shoes also functions as an affect image in Deleuze’s conceptualization of the term. In *Cinema I: The Movement-Image* (2005),

Deleuze describes the affect image mostly as a close-up that abstracts and unleashes a certain affect, which subsequently permeates the entire film.²⁴ He discusses at length the face as an ideal surface for extracting and fostering affect.²⁵ Weber, as a director known and celebrated for her unconventional use of *mise-en-scène*, instead focuses on the feet and shoes to foster affective alignment with the protagonist. After three days of pouring rain Eva is terribly sick, since she must also stand on her feet the whole day at the store. This turmoil drives her to a decision to meet the flatterer (more accurately, the sexual predator) to escape the clutches of poverty and hopefully ensure sufficient well-being to continue working. This sequence clearly shows that Eva was not tempted by a simple consumerist desire to “sell herself for a pair of shoes.”

With its claim to realistic portrayal of the everyday life of a working-class girl, *Shoes* urges audiences to quite specifically imagine themselves in Eva’s shoes. The affective link between Eva and the film spectator is underscored in a theater advertisement from 1916: the Dreamland Theatre in Elyria, Ohio, announced that anyone bringing an old pair of shoes would enjoy free admittance. Under the headline “50 Pair of Old Ragged Shoes Wanted,” the ad announces that “every child who will bring a pair of old ragged shoes (the more ragged and old the better) to the Dreamland Theatre, Monday afternoon, will be given a ticket good for admission to the theatre.”²⁶ It ends with an exclamatory reminder: “Remember Monday afternoon and bring your old ragged shoes!” Such initiatives to attract precarious working-class audiences just like Eva could be seen as an affirmation of Weber’s aspiration to put viewers in Eva’s shoes—to feel her entrapment in poverty, her economic insecurity, and her poor social prospects.

Stamp notes that “Weber’s interest in the fate of underpaid retail clerks echoed many sociological studies of the era that investigated the ‘problem’ of young wage earners, often raising questions about desires unleashed by commercial recreation culture.”²⁷ Weber recognized that her films might intervene in contemporary debates, “not only through on-screen stories depicting social problems like poverty, criminality, and addiction, but also by featuring female characters in complex leading parts that resisted two-dimensional stereotypes.”²⁸ In light of these points, *Shoes* can thus be seen as the product of feminist historiographical praxis as well because it makes visible and gives voice to young precarious women like Eva. Indeed, Eva has many affinities with the protagonist of another feminist text: Mona from Agnès Varda’s *Vagabond*.

MONA'S NOMADISM ACROSS THE COUNTRYSIDE

Vagabond was also recently restored (in 2014) and rereleased (in 2018, to mark Varda's ninetieth birthday), likewise stimulating widespread renewed interest. It recalls Weber's activist cinema in its setting up a form of sociological inquiry—in this case, zooming in on the socioeconomic landscape of the French countryside. From wealthy landowners to low-paid seasonal workers, *Vagabond* paints a dismal portrait of economic inequality, insecurity, and lack of solidarity across an intersectional cast of characters. It follows the peripatetic protagonist Mona, who embarks on an odyssey on foot as an act of dissent. In this case, her pedestrianism is first envisioned as an idealistic venture that confronts the heteronormative societal expectations placed on a woman of her age. The film clearly communicates these norms and expectations through Mona's encounters and dialogues with other characters. She is repeatedly criticized and told to get a job, to take responsibility, to contribute to society, to act prudish (more like a respectable woman), and to stop wandering.

Vagabond deals with precarity on several levels. Just like Eva from *Shoes*, the protagonist is a poor young woman. In addition, Mona's wandering across the French countryside on the eve of winter is laden with unpredictability. For every favorable, pleasurable, and enriching encounter, she also experiences a threatening, hostile, and perilous situation. On the level of aesthetics, the cinematography frames her precarity in unconventional tracking shots, which I will soon explain. The film's international English title also encapsulates multiple levels of precarious mobilities. From the same root (*vagrer*, meaning wandering about) as “vague,” “vagrant,” and “vagary,” the term “vagabond” connotes the precarious, the unpredictable, the uncapturable. The original French title, *Sans toit ni loi*, puts more emphasis on vagrancy as an act of transgression. Meaning “without a roof or law,” it captures the heteronormative societal expectations imposed on young women. While she is expected to have a roof (with its domestic connotations of home, family, and household) and lead an obedient life, Mona transgresses these normative, fixating, and restrictive social apparatuses through her nomadic wandering. Her boots primarily represent her unrestricted and voluntary freedom to move, as opposed to the coerced pedestrianism of Eva in *Shoes*. However, the symbolic meaning of shoes clearly shifts between the beginning and the end, as Mona evolves from emancipated wanderer to outsider perpetually displaced. In this transition, her shoes tell the story.

The film starts with the discovery of Mona's dead body in a ditch. "Perhaps she tripped," comments one police officer, as the bloodlike red-wine stains are washed off the doors, walls, and windows of the village where she was last seen. At the very beginning, then, we come to understand that a misstep brought the ever-moving Mona to a standstill and her eventual death from cold. The rest of the film is dedicated to following the traces she left behind in order to reconstruct her story. Documentary and fiction, absence and presence, are brilliantly interwoven, setting both ends of the binary in movement. After showing Mona's dead body, Varda's camera gently hovers above the footprints of a bird on the sand. These footsteps lead our gaze to Mona emerging nude from the sea, an image that imitates Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (1485–86). In many ways, Mona is an exceptional character in the history of cinema because she is one of very few nomadic wanderers, and as such she almost fully incorporates Deleuze and Guattari's concept of nomadology.²⁹ As this is the topic of another paper, I limit my focus here to the precarious mobilities of Mona and the changing meaning of her shoes as symbols for displacement. To this end, I will only briefly mention how Mona inhabits nomadism to the extent that it is relevant for my argument here.

Mona is a precarious young woman in the literal sense of the word. Constantly on the move, she boldly treads an insecure path fraught with uncertainties. When asked why she wanders, she avoids giving a clear answer. Only a few details are revealed about her: she has a high-school degree, she studied English and stenography, and she used to work as a secretary. It is suggested that she encountered sexual harassment at work, but this isn't developed. During her wandering, Mona takes up temporary shelter and temporary work, unsure of what comes next. Her shoes symbolize her precarity. In the first part of the film, she has proper boots that enable her to walk long distances in order to access shelter and food. Halfway in, however, her footwear gives the first sign of deterioration: the zippers stop working, revealing the red insides of her boots. This small detail foreshadows her eventual death. Mona literally and figuratively starts to lose blood as her footwear gradually disintegrates. She donates blood for money when unemployed, and she cuts her hands while working in a field. The color red begins to recur, ominously signalling her approaching demise: she receives a red scarf from an immigrant worker, she borrows a red sweater from a goatherd, and she barely escapes the red flames when a temporary lodging catches fire. Mona's emancipated drift starts to feel heavier with each encounter.



FIGURE 5. Still from *Sans toit ni loi* (*Vagabond*, dir. Agnès Varda), 1985. Copyright Ciné-Tamaris.

Toward the end of the film, a close-up of Mona's disintegrating boots underscores that they are so damaged that they inhibit her mobility (fig. 5). The zippers are now completely broken, and the uppers are folding back to reveal even more of the red inner layer. In this scene, Mona's exhaustion can be read from her face and her feet, which scrape along the ground. She has lost her tent and all her belongings. She is cold, hungry, and debilitated. On her last legs, she approaches the nearest village to seek some bread. Like in *Shoes*, the close-up traveling shot of Mona's boots engenders affective alignment with the protagonist. We know she will not survive.

As with the close-up of Eva's shoes in the pouring rain, this scene marks the moment in which the protagonist is propelled toward her demise. In *Shoes*, when Eva catches a terrible cold and resigns herself to meeting her predator, the decision is conveyed via a shattered reflection of her face in a mirror; it seems almost a metaphorical death where Eva ceases to exist. In *Vagabond*, Mona is attacked by people enshrined in tree costumes, enacting a local tradition of throwing red wine at pedestrians. Left thoroughly wet and cold to the bone, she suddenly loses her footing and stumbles into a ditch, where she freezes to death.

Vagabond can be read as a cinematic contemplation on different forms of mobility, both literal and figurative. Mona's unrestricted movement is contrasted in the film not only to stasis (as in, sedentary and established

characters), but also to various other types of mobility, precarious and non-precarious. Mona encounters a goatherd, an immigrant worker, an ambulatory paleontology professor, and a group of vagrants, all of them literally on the move. Some are precarious, while others are presented as secure and invulnerable, such as the goatherd and the professor. Yet some of the latter nevertheless undergo circumstances that expose their underlying precarity. For example, the wealthy landowner Aunt Lydie is displaced from her home and put in a care facility, and her servant Yolande is forced to leave her job, put on a train by her boss, and sent to another part of the country. Indeed, it could be argued that every character is precarious to a certain extent.

In many ways, Varda envisions Mona as a nomadic persona who allows us to “think through and move across established categories,” as Rosi Braidotti puts it.³⁰ Mona constantly eludes capture, thereby becoming a token of the nomadism in the sense that she engenders otherwise unlikely interactions. Each encounter is structured in a similar way: during her loitering, Mona happens to walk into a character’s territory, arriving from the outside. Interweaving documentary and fiction, absence and presence, nomadism and sedentarism, the film’s narration follows the accounts of people who encounter Mona. While each narrative strives to define her, we are aware that she has never stayed long in anyone’s territory, and thus the definitions actually reveal more about the narrators than about the protagonist. What the stories expose, however, is that Mona has also elicited a change in their territories thanks to her outsider’s presence. Mona remains impossible to capture, and her story impossible to retrieve.

In this way, I argue, *Vagabond* practices feminist filmmaking as a form of feminist historiography. It starts with the discovery of Mona’s body in a ditch, then proceeds to present the testimonies of those who encountered her in the preceding few weeks. The narration is structured like a *Rashomon*-type investigation, tracing evidence back into the past to discover an untold history. In this sense, the narrative structure is also comparable to feminist film historiography, a form of tracking down archival traces of women who were active in cinema history, but later forgotten. The film follows (and subverts) the style of a typical documentary, given the contradictory accounts of several people revealing their encounters with Mona. Varda states that “the whole film is one long tracking shot” and, according to Susan Hayward, “the tracking shot is Mona’s sign.”³¹ Yet Varda, through several techniques, complicates the tracking shot as a straightforward epitome of wandering. First, she subverts its conventional spatial logic by moving from right to left, which

also subverts the shot's temporal logic. That is, the camera's sliding backward signals going back in time and keeps the motif of death constantly alive. Second, Varda allows an unsettling dynamic to occur between the movement of the camera and the movement of Mona, who mostly eludes framing. Either she walks out of the frame or the camera continues tracking after accompanying her for a while. According to Hayward, this style points to her contingency—or, we could say, her precarity. The fluidity of the tracking shots is contrasted with the stasis of scenes where Varda interviews people who encountered Mona. Varda counterpoints mobility and stasis at the level of the medium by allowing Mona's body to flow smoothly in and out of the cinematographic frame. On the level of the story, she achieves a similar effect by denying information and subverting conventional storytelling techniques through discontinuity, nonlinearity, and causality.

With its female protagonist constantly on the move, *Vagabond*, like *Shoes*, contemplates the latent limits imposed on women's mobility and women's history via cinematic images of walking and shoes. The protagonists' footwear has an emotive function that engenders affective alignment through the presentation of forms of displacement, migration, and toilsome traveling on foot to access food, shelter, and safety.

FEMALE FLÂNERIE AND FEMINIST HISTORIANS

In her self-portrait film *Les Plages d'Agnès* (The Beaches of Agnès, 2008), we see Varda walking backward on a beach to initiate a cinematic passage to images from her past. In this sequence, walking is constructed as a symbol for historiographical practice. Varda's pedestrianism interweaves various spaces and times, recalling Russell's conceptualization of the *flâneuse* as a feminist historian who critically revisits knowledges of the past and the present. The constantly moving gaze that is implicated in parallax historiography and its practitioner, the feminist historian, is exemplified by this scene in Varda's autobiographical documentary. In a related historiographic way, this article has traced cinematic images of shoes as signifiers for women's precarious mobility, an under-studied field that deserves more academic scrutiny. Inspired by Russell's approach, I've practiced a parallax historiography toward the cinematic rendering of women's pedestrianism, where there is an increased emphasis on their shoes. In this venture, I examined the image of shoes as a trope that opens up new passages between the past and the present, as regards the precarious mobilities of women on the screen.

At its core, cinema can be read as a space for otherwise unlikely encounters that create passages to emotions, experiences, and journeys. In tracing the feminist affinities between images of shoes as signifiers of women's precarious mobilities, I departed from today's image culture and travel back to compelling images of shoes in women's (activist) filmmaking. In my analysis of Lois Weber's *Shoes*, I showed how the young working-class protagonist Eva's deteriorating footwear symbolized her painful entrapment in a precarious socioeconomic status as well as her perilous encounters with a sexual predator while walking. Similarly, in Agnès Varda's *Vagabond*, nomadic protagonist Mona's deteriorating boots signal a shift in her perambulations from volitional wandering to painful drift. Mona's precarity as one from the lowest segment of society with uncertain socioeconomic prospects resonates strongly with Eva's. In this film it is possible to see multiple forms of mobility represented by a rich diversity of characters from different class backgrounds and facing different conditions of precarity. In both films, the directors engage in a political act of representing young precarious women on the screen and establishing footwear as an emotive function to encourage affective alignment with their protagonists. They make them visible, audible. As feminist film historians, these powerful images of women's pedestrianism resonate in our minds when we take to the streets. We walk in their shoes. ■

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NOTES

1. Ruta Sepetyš, *Salt to the Sea* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), 14.
2. The image can be accessed at Catherine Rottenberg, "The Murder of Sarah Everard and the Shadow Pandemic," *Al Jazeera*, March 14, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/3/14/the-murder-of-sarah-everard-and-the-shadow-pandemic>.
3. Alexandra Topping, "Almost All Young Women in the UK Have Been Sexually Harassed, Survey Finds," *The Guardian*, March 10, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/10/almost-all-young-women-in-the-uk-have-been-sexually-harassed-survey-finds>.
4. Nancy Brown, "Sarah Everard Latest: Ex-Met Officer Slammed over 'Wear Running Shoes' Advice to Worried Women on *This Morning*," *Entertainment Daily*,

March 11, 2021, <https://www.entertainmentdaily.co.uk/tv/sarah-everard-latest-ex-met-officer-slammed-over-wear-trainers-advice-to-worried-women-on-this-morning/>.

5. The attitude of the police recalled the words of another police officer, who in Toronto in 2011 told women not to “dress like a slut” if they wished to remain safe from assault. These words sparked “Slutwalk” protests in cities across Canada. See for example Sarah Bell, “Slutwalk London: Yes Means Yes No Means No,” *BBC News*, June 11, 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-13739876>. See also Leslie Kern, *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World* (London: Verso, 2020), 115–27.

6. Kern, *Feminist City*, 118.

7. The reference is to Jacques Rancière, *Le partage du sensible: esthétique et politique* (Paris: La Fabrique-éditions, 2000).

8. Catherine Russell, “Parallax Historiography: The Flâneuse as Cyberfeminist,” in *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, ed. Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 552–70.

9. Jane M. Gaines, *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 5.

10. Jane M. Gaines, “Film History and the Two Presents of Feminist Film Theory,” *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 1 (Autumn 2004): 115.

11. Joan W. Scott, “History-Writing as Critique,” in *Manifestos for History*, ed. Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow (London: Routledge, 2007), 23.

12. Kern, *Feminist City*, 119.

13. Russell, “Parallax Historiography,” 563–64.

14. Asli Ozgen-Tuncer, “The Image of Walking: The Aesthetics and Politics of Cinematic Pedestrianism” (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2018), 113–22.

15. See for example Anne Freidberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

16. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Continuum, 2005), 105–26.

17. Shelley Stamp, *Lois Weber in Early Hollywood* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2015); Anthony Slide, *Lois Weber: The Director Who Lost Her Way in History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996).

18. Stamp, *Lois Weber in Early Hollywood*, 91.

19. Pamela Hutchinson, “‘An Intensive Study of—Feet!’ in Two Films by Lois Weber: *Shoes* and *The Blot*,” in Elizabeth Ezra and Catherine Wheatley, *Shoe Reels: The History and Philosophy of Footwear in Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 40, 41, my emphasis.

20. Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 34.

21. Stamp, *Lois Weber in Early Hollywood*, 107, 109.

22. Stamp, *Lois Weber in Early Hollywood*, 107.

23. Hutchinson, “‘An Intensive Study of—Feet!’,” 41.

24. Deleuze, *Cinema I*, 89–127.

25. “A face is suited to one particular type of affect or entity rather than others. The close-up makes the face the pure building material of the affect, its ‘hylé.’ Hence, these

strange cinematographic nuptials in which the actress provides her face and the material capacity of her parts, whilst the director invents the affect or the form of the expressible which borrows and puts them to work.” Deleuze, *Cinema I*, 106–7. Although in the subsequent pages, Deleuze opens up what he means by the face beyond the limitations of the human body, here he specifically discusses Bergman’s close-ups on the faces of his female protagonists.

26. “50 Pair of Old Ragged Shoes Wanted,” *Chronicle-Telegram* (Elyria, OH), September 16, 1916, 6, <https://chronicletelegram.newspaperarchive.com/elyria-evening-telegram/1916-09-16/page-6/>.

27. Stamp, *Lois Weber in Early Hollywood*, 101.

28. Stamp, *Lois Weber in Early Hollywood*, 5.

29. On nomadology see Asli Ozgen-Tuncer, “Women on the Move: The Politics of Walking in Agnès Varda,” *Deleuze Studies Journal* 6, no. 1 (2012): 103–16. In addition to the recent film *Nomadland* (2020), to some extent *American Honey* (2016) also features a precarious woman on the move as protagonist.

30. Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 5.

31. Susan Hayward, “Beyond the Gaze and into Femme-Filmécriture: Agnès Varda’s *Sans toit ni loi* (1985),” in *French Film: Texts and Contexts*, ed. Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau (London: Routledge, 2000), 272.