

# BARBARA STANWYCK'S ANKLET

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## 1. Fetish, Icon, Symbol?

"That's life. Whichever way you turn, fate sticks out a foot to trip you", moans Tom Neal into his half-full coffee mug as he begins his grisly tale in *Detour*. That foot is bound to be shod in the noir world, where lowly objects assume large proportions. This chapter considers the plight, or more properly, the power of objects as useful signifiers. I hope to redeem the object and argue that, compared to the subject, it has gotten an unjustifiably bad rap. Film noir achieves its identifying texture from an array of formulaic images, plots, locations, visual styles and objects -cigarette lighters, car windshields, doorways, Venetian blinds and, the focus of this chapter, shoes. Investigating shoes as essential elements of noir's cultural work salvages these lost objects, making it clear that the state of objecthood holds compelling authority within psychic and social formations. There can be no subjects without objects.

Why, from Karl Marx and Vincent Van Gogh in the nineteenth century through Martin Heidegger, Charlie Chaplin and Walker Evans in the twentieth, have men tracked aesthetic value, social standing and the meaning of labor through the boots of workers; while women, following Sigmund Freud's consideration of the shoe as fetish object, have understood shoes to signal freedom and constraint -at once powerful symbols of mobility and icons of and for desire? I speak of two modes of desire: for the commodity itself, objects of use -products, equipment, as Heidegger called them- no matter how apparently excessive; and within its representation in paintings, photographs, films, novels, advertisements. These, as Jacques Derrida goes to great lengths to point out, are not the same thing; yet because of the oddity of this particular object, an object in need of another for it to be put to proper use, desire doubles back on itself collapsing differences between materiality and representation because the "shoes are always open to the unconscious of the other" (Derrida, 1987, p. 381).

The shoe as emblem of death and icon of sex collapses within the tawdry *mise-en-scène* of film noir. When femme fatale Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) descends the stairway to meet insurance salesman Walter Neff (Fred McMurray) in Billy Wilder's 1944 film *Double Indemnity*, the camera lovingly focuses on her gleaming white legs, feet sheathed in a puffy high-heeled mule above one drapes a gold anklet. Moments later, seated crosslegged before Neff, Phyllis waves her foot ostentatiously in his face, distracting him enough that he mentions the "nice anklet you've got there". She removes her foot and straightens up primly; but the scene evokes the power of the woman's foot to control a man. The anklet, no matter how thin its gold chain appears, is always one-half of the shackles that snare him. Cinderella got her prince because only she among all his subjects could fit into

the tiny glass slipper styled for her by her fairy godmother. The anklet, that piece of jewelry adorning one leg, at the bottom of the body rather than the top, calling the eyes to travel down the length of the body and fix on one foot. foregrounds the fetishistic quality of women's footwear, especially, as in the case of Cinderella as well, the isolated, single bare foot and its adornment. Cinderella got her prince; Stanwyck's golden snare leaves Neff a man silently walking home alone after murdering her husband. He hears no sounds, not even his footsteps: "It was the walk of a dead man", he recalls. Derrida points out the important differences between a pair of shoes and a single one: the pair, useful, regular and normal, a heterosexual couple; the lone shoe, perverse, bisexual, destabilizing<sup>1</sup>.

The iconic pan from the floor up to the star's face tells us everything we need to know of her character<sup>2</sup>. So that, for instance, when the camera, with Cornel Wilde, first gazes at Ida Lupino draping one shoeless bare leg over the boss's desk before traveling up to a close-up of her face in the 1948 film noir *Road House*, we know that despite whatever nasty banter ensues they will eventually become lovers. Wilde moves across the room toward the desk dividing them watching Lupino smoke and play solitaire and picks up her shoe -a platform sandal, designed to replicate Stanwyck's anklet and open-toed mule, displaying "toe cleavage" and a bound ankle<sup>3</sup>. She snatches it from him and hides it behind her back as one would any intimate article found lying about in plain sight. Ida Lupino's shoe is out there in a public display so raw she might as well have been naked before his and our eyes. Worse, her naked display is not only of her sex, but of his as well. The single shoe, which "combines in a system the two types of object defined by Freud: elongated, sold or firm on one surface, hollow or concave on the other", for Freud, like "a whole number of dream-symbols are bisexual and can relate to the male or female genitals, according to the context" (Freud, *SE*, v. 5, p. 684; qtd. in Derrida, 1987, p. 269). Hollywood's Hays production code forbade overt nudity and other overt representations of sex, sending directors and cinematographers to search out legible covert symbols. Like Walter Neff, they knew where to look. After all, as Wendy Lesser points out, a far different Stanwyck had already tripped up a man a few years before snagging Fred McMurray. In Preston Sturges's wonderful 1941 screwball comedy *The Lady Eve*, Stanwyck surveys the oceanliner dining room through her compact mirror -which makes a tiny move screen- and comments, like a knowing critic, on the various types of women eyeing the oblivious herpetologist Henry Fonda, who's been "up the Amazon" researching snakes. As he passes

<sup>1</sup> "A pair of shoes is more easily treated as a *utility* than a single shoe or two shoes which aren't a pair. The pair inhibits at least, if it does not prevent, the 'fetishizing' movement; it rivets things to use, to 'normal' use; it shoes better and makes things walk according to the law." He goes on to question what either Heidegger or Schapiro would have done with "a painting with only one shoe, especially a single high heel as in Magritte's *La Lune* or Lindner's *The Shoe*. Would they have been able to produce [...]?" (Derrida, 1987, pp. 332-333).

<sup>2</sup> "Shoes. Dream shoes. Shoes to power the imagination. We sat spellbound before *Mildred Pierce*. Our eyes followed her feet [...] her shoes [...]. Inevitably black, they featured three-inch talons, a slightly raised platform, and a delicate strap encircling the ankle. Her shoes were a sign -but of what" ask Shari Benstock and Suzanne Ferriss in the introduction to their collection (1994, p. 1).

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Cora Leland for bringing this term to my attention, which comes from the interdiction against sandals outlined in the dress code governing employees at Arthur Anderson and other accounting firms in the United States. See Colin McDowell (2000) that quotes Blahnik as confirming that "the first two cracks" of toe cleavage is a "very important part of the sexuality of the shoe". Quoted in Penelope Green (2000, B10).

before her, she sticks her foot out to trip him into her lap (Lesser, 1991, pp. 225-261).

For women in the movies, especially post-war B-movies, shoes, most likely high-heeled pumps, clatter methodically along the hard concrete sidewalks. They sing a chorus combining vulnerability -she cannot run too fast in them- and menace -her relentless approach or retreat signal her ever-presence. They tap the cobblestones like armor, like weapons. In Jacques Tourneur's 1942 *Cat People*, Serbian designer Irene (Simone Simon) pursues her American rival, the wholesome "new kind of other woman" Alice, through a Central Park tunnel at night. The camera pans from one set of black pumps to another. As the clicking magnifies and echoes within the space and the sounds merge, Alice is overtaken with a terror that lifts only when she is startled by an oncoming bus which she boards even though it takes her back the wrong way. *Phantom Lady*'s Kansas (Ella Raines) threatens bartender (Andrew Tombes, Jr.) by following him after sitting immobile night after night in his bar. Her slender trench-coated figure waits for him under the streetlight light and again, we see only her black pumps swiftly following him through the night their rhythm matching the man step for step. By all logic, high-heeled women should not constitute a threat; but they do. The opening shot of the British noir film *Yield to the Night* follows Mary as she paces across a square and into an alleyway, clicking heels foreshadows the gun shots she will unload into her lover's girlfriend that land her in prison. The opening sequence of *Caged* (1950) shows Marie (Eleanor Parker) seated in the paddy wagon among an assortment of jaded prostitutes, her demure and plain flats set her apart from them; however, by the time she is released on parole she has been transformed. She signals her "new" life outside, on the streets, by entering a car full of men and crossing her legs so that her high heels are visible and her knee available for fondling. The black high-heeled pump was an essential element of post-war working women's attire.

These examples from classic films noirs (or their 1960s British variation) contrast with Van Gogh's invocation of work boots as signs of poverty; they speak to women's aggressive mobility in post-war urban spaces. The physical movement and sexual predation available to women emerge visually from their shapely legs and aurally from the sound of their heels beating the pavement. They walk the streets, streetwalkers, turning public spaces relentlessly into scenes of crime and themselves into objects of desire. As streetwalkers, their shoes are also useful; they work/walk the pavement nightly. However, the icon of the high-heeled pump rarely registers as working apparel. It is a marker of sexual violation, not labor. Yet an economy of desire is always first an economy, a point exaggerated to absurdity in Samuel Fuller's 1964 noir spoof *The Naked Kiss* in which prostitute Kelly (Constance Tower) beats her pimp by pummeling him with her rigid black patent leather purse while standing over him in stilettos to retrieve the money he owes her. She then disappears into small-town America to enter her new life as a nurse for disabled children, only to discover that she cannot escape corruption: in Grantville, cops pimp for the brothel across the river and the leading citizen and philanthropist is a pedophile. To protect the young women and girls of Grantville, Kelly beats the Madame with her stiff black leather purse and kills the pervert with his black Bakelite telephone receiver (both repeating her shoes, one in its material, the other in its form), only to end up in jail when her pimp presses charges for assault -the shoe was prologue.

In his discussion of "Fetishism" Freud puts it quite simply: "I announce that the fetish is a substitute for the penis [...]. To put it more plainly: the fetish", he continues, "is a substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in and -for reasons familiar to us- does not want to give up" (Freud, *SE*, v. 21, pp. 152-153). The fetish,

as the simultaneous sign of disavowal (of woman's castration) and attachment (to the fantasy of the female phallus), is often connected to this contradiction through its partial nature. Thus the foot or the shoe -seen first from below as the child looks up at the vagina-suits at once "both the disavowal and the affirmation of the castration" (Freud, *SE*, v. 21, p. 156). As a synecdoche, the fetish is at once too much and not enough, anticipatory and remainder. "The fetish, like a 'screen memory', represents this phase [a submerged and forgotten phase of sexual development] and is thus a remnant and precipitate of it" (Freud, *SE*, v. 7, p. 154, fn 2 [added 1920]). "What is substituted for the sexual object", says Freud in *Three Essays on Sexuality*, "is some part of the body (such as the foot or hair) which is in general very inappropriate for sexual purposes, or some inanimate object which bears an assignable relation to the person whom it replaces and preferably to that person's sexuality (e.g. a piece of clothing or underlinen). Such substitutes are with some justice likened to the fetishes in which savages believe that their gods are embodied" (Freud, *SE*, v. 7, p. 153). Thus the shoe, which, like, the foot that holds power "as an age-old sexual symbol which occurs even in mythology", is a "corresponding symbol of the female genitals" (Freud, *SE*, v. 7, p. 155 -emphasis in original-). Age-old and savage, the fetish is anti-modern.

Possession and disavowal overvalue the fetish as a relic of an image of plenty destroyed, never quite admitted, and so reinvested with god-like power. Freud's description of the fetish locates the trauma of castration within the "little boy" and presents the fetish object as *his* substitute. Gilles Deleuze remarks that as "the last object he saw as a child before becoming aware of the missing penis (a shoe, for example [...]) [...t]he fetish is [...] not a symbol at all, but as it were a frozen, arrested, two-dimensional image, a photograph to which one returns repeatedly to exorcise the dangerous consequences of movement, the harmful discoveries that result from exploration" (Deleuze, 1991, p. 31). Deleuze distinguishes between the object and its representation. The fetish is a photograph, frozen and arrested; yet the photograph, as Roland Barthes mournfully insists in *Camera Lucida* is a melancholic object, *par excellence*.

Can women fetishize shoes? Or is it instead shoes that stir desire, turning the woman herself into fetish? As phallic mother substitute, the fetish, like the phallic mother, presents an ambivalent homosexual identification with the female phallus as a woman's genitalia. It circulates, ambivalently. The shoe, as Freud admits in "On Dreams," especially the high heel, is both phallus and its lack. As such, it fulfills Victor Turner's definition of a ritual symbol. These incorporate contradictory social practices: "symbols are social facts, 'collective representations,'" he says in *The Forest of Symbols*, that are "multireferential" at once "sensory" and "ideological" whose "empirical properties" include "(1) condensation; (2) unification of disparate meanings in a single symbolic form; (3) polarization of meaning" (Turner, 1967, pp. 28, 29, 30). Rather than being immobile -frozen- as Deleuze calls the fetish, shoes as "social facts" are in constant flux. The shoe and the pair of shoes have almost nothing in common, no matter how redundant (but of course not, they're different) the two are. Hence freedom and death, sex and labor, accessory and necessity, object and symbol: magic, a mysterious thing. "Yes yes, we're magicians," assures Vladimir as he and Estragon struggle to get Estragon's boots on in *Waiting for Godot* (Beckett, 1954, p. 44).

As lowly objects, abject objects, shoes remain as reminders, remainders of death. The lone shoe lying in the middle of a street following the shooting of German SDS leader Rudi Dutschke is a melancholy memento; its photograph part of the collective archive of

1968 and the German Autumn that followed<sup>4</sup>. The piles of shoes lining the railroad tracks of Auschwitz that appear in Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog*, like the recent catalogue of photographs of articles of clothing, mostly shoes -remains of the men slaughtered and buried at Srebrenica during the Bosnian War- are monuments of horror, reminders of the destruction of twentieth-century genocides. Articles meant to take the wear and tear of daily use, shoes remain in tact after other personal effects, and with them, their owners, have disintegrated, disappeared. "The Still Life as a Personal Object," from which Meyer Schapiro argues with Martin Heidegger over a pair of shoes, are the very shoes, as Derrida notes, left behind in the flight from the soil still clinging to one's work boots for an urban exile. *Nature Morte*, indeed, death follows their footsteps<sup>5</sup>. Shoes, as symbolic objects themselves, travel across three fundamental planes of human experience: work, sex, death.

## 2. "A magical object"

"The fetishism of commodities has its origin [...] in the peculiar social character of the labour that produces them". Marx continues, "It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic" (Marx, 1967, v. 1, pp. 72, 74). His example of this oxymoronic process of collective indecipherability goes as follows: "When I state that coats or *boots* stand in a relation to linen, because it is the universal incarnation of abstract human labour, the absurdity of the statement is self-evident. Nevertheless, when producers of coats and *boots* compare those articles with linen, or, what is the same thing, with gold or silver, as the universal equivalent, they express the relation between their own private labour and the collective labour of society in the same form". It is this "fantastic form," this "mist-enveloped region", this "mysterious thing" that fetishizes the commodity, separating it from its use-value as a product of human labour into an abstract value of exchange equivalent to all others and masking the "social character of the labour that produces them" (Marx, 1967, v. 1, pp. 76 -emphasis added-, 72). Walter Benjamin notes that Karl Korsch pushed Marx's insight into the fetishism of commodities to account generally for "human self-alienation [...] revealing *all* economic categories to be mere fragments of one great fetish" (1999, p. 662). As a religious practice, "fetishism seem[s] to appear only among peoples who have already attained to a certain degree of civilization" (Durkheim, 1969, p. 203). In those "mist enveloped regions of the religious world" where "the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation with one another and the human race" fetishism emerges as a transition after totemism (p. 72).

Relying on the same primitivist ideas animating Freud's work on the fetish, Marx also views its power as suspiciously ancient<sup>6</sup>. It depends, according to Marx's story of

<sup>4</sup> The picture appears in Astrid Proll (1998, p. 35). Thanks to Christina White for bringing it to my attention. Its caption reads in English: "Rudi Dutschke's shoe in Kurfurstendam shortly after shots had been fired by a right-wing assailant, 11th April 1968".

<sup>5</sup> On the "ideological" and historical differences between these two men, see Derrida (1987, p. 281); Martin Heidegger (1971, pp. 15-87); Meyer Schapiro (1968, pp. 203-209); Derrida's long essay on this "debate" appears in "Restitutions," in *The Truth in Painting*. It became the jumping off point for Fredric Jameson (1991, pp. 6-11) as well as other less widely-read texts.

<sup>6</sup> For critiques of these sentiments, see a cryptic set of questions by Derrida: "What is Heidegger were already questioning beyond this already coded thematics? What is he were also wary of the concept of fetishism according to Marx or according to Freud? And what is he wanted to take the whole of this

Robinson Crusoe, on circulation, that is, on alienation and the division of labor, and on consumption, the appropriation and incorporation of objects as values. Thus commodities carry within them, and thus within capitalism, the residue of the past. In a characteristic gesture, Benjamin, quoting Adorno quoting Wiesengrund, describes fetishized commodity culture as a "phantasmagoria", creating "a consumer item in which there is no longer anything that is supposed to remind us how it came into being. It becomes a magical object, insofar as the labor stored up in it comes to seem supernatural and sacred at the very moment when it can no longer be recognized as labor" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 669). Again, anxiety about the non-Western, primitive, irrational basis of fetishism -"we're magicians"-the commodity and its consumer, like the fetish and its worshipper, are suspiciously feminized, or at least as emasculated as Gogo and Didi.

Unpacking his library, Benjamin notes the peculiar fascination with ownership that certain items produce for consumers within bourgeois culture. These items, like books or shoes, are those that can form a "collection", collections produce "collectors" for whom "ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects" (Benjamin, 1968, p. 67). Collections, like genres, operate on the principle of repetition with a difference, as every item resembles its other, yet must be distinct at the same time. In his dissection of the bourgeois living room's objects, in "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century", Benjamin discerned the origins of detective fiction as a genre that required objects, collected idiosyncratically by their owners, to provide clues, traces of evidence. The generic formula depended on the generic nature of the objects surveyed -every parlor has a chair, but what kind? Is it upholstered and draped by antimacassars or wooden, etc., etc.? Susan Stewart calls this "the total aestheticization of use value" (1993, p. 151). For Stewart, this aspect of collecting acts to annihilate history; however, a shoe collection must always retain its historicity -that is the trap of fashion, it's of a moment, au courant. The collector acts like a criminal in his/her relentless pursuit of the missing items, rare editions, and so forth. "Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories" such that "the life of the collector [is] a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order" (p. 60). Within a commodity fetishistic culture, then, ownership becomes both a sickness and its cure. Furthermore, collectors oscillate between stasis -one needs some place to put the objects collected- and movement. Travel is essential to collecting; Benjamin remarks that he made his "most memorable purchases on trips, as a transient. Property and possession belong to the tactical sphere. Collectors are people with a tactical instinct; their experience teaches them that when they capture a strange city, the smallest antique shop can be a fortress, the most remote stationery store a key position" (p. 63). In short, the collector is always one who walks; she needs a good pair of shoes.

Calling Benjamin our greatest theorist of the object, critic Douglas Mao (1998) argues that the "feeling of regard for the physical object as object -as not-self, as not-subject, as most helpless and will-less of entities, but also as fragment of Being, as solidity, as otherness in its most resilient opacity- seems a peculiarly twentieth-century malady or revelation [...] one of the minor trademarks" of modernism (1998, p. 4). For Mao, the object and desire for it, cannot resemble the fetish and fetishism as charted by either Marx or Freud, despite Benjamin's obvious reliance on their sources. Suggesting that "solid objects"

problem up again, and the whole question of the thing in truth which exercises the notion of fetishism?" (1987, p. 334). See also, the analysis of "the rhetoric of iconoclasm" in W. J. T. Mitchell (1986, pp. 151-208).

were under siege as the concrete and particular gave way to vast abstract systematizing of science, Mao sees a melancholy rescue of the object in the Anglo-American high modernist writers, such as Virginia Woolf. *Orlando's* feat of Restoration consumption in redecorating the ancestral home is matched when, as a modernist poet, she drives to the department store in pursuit of various household necessities, including "boy's boots, bath salts, sardines" only to be foiled by the plethora of stuff spilling across the aisles she glances as the elevator lifts her from floor to floor of loaded counters. Orlando, however, rather than dispute seems to confirm, even in her choice of words, Marx: "In the eighteenth century, we knew how everything was done; but here I rise though the air: I listen to voices in America; I see men flying -but how it's done, I can't even begin to wonder. So my belief in magic returns" (Woolf, 1942, p. 212). All this magic; yet she fails to return with any of her shopping list items -so many products, incommensurate things. Woolf implies that for the modern woman commodities are interchangeable and inconsequential; Woolf's modern woman, is educated, a woman of privilege, striding purposefully through time and space, even if her mansion has become a museum.

### 3. Other Small Objects.

Charlie Chaplin's Tramp cooks and serves his boiled boot to fend off starvation on the Klondike in *The Gold Rush* (1925). His careful dissection of the boot, picking each hobnail out as a finely-trained waiter might debone a trout, and precise twirling of the laces into a mound of spaghetti calls forth the animal quality of shoes -made of leather, absorbing the odors of the feet (one aspect that makes them so likely to become a fetish according to Freud) -and thus close to edible; yet their proximity to the filthy ground, their sweaty smells make them abjectly inedible. Chaplin had his boots constructed from licorice -sometimes called shoe-leather- and thus ate them with relish. In the section of *The Arcades Project* on the Saint-Simoniens, Walter Benjamin quotes from a "revealing" Leon Halevy poem, "La Chaussure":

This people, whose head and hand you fear,  
Must march, must march -no halting!  
It's when you stop their steps  
They notice the holes in their shoes. (1999, p. 594)

They notice the holes in their shoes only when they have time to contemplate their poverty, that is, when they no longer even have work and thus become a curious kind of excess, the detritus of capitalism. This impoverished proletariat, pre-socialist and anarchic, like the Tramp, as Roland Barthes calls him, is "still hungry [...] expressing the humiliated condition of the worker" (Barthes, 1972, p. 39). Work boots full of holes, have no use. They no longer can be considered "equipment," in Heidegger's sense, and like their unemployed wearers, signify a miserable supplement to their lack. Those gone to extremes -forced to eat their own shoes, self-devouring, and empty- are useless as either producers or consumers within capitalism.

Of shoes: ordinary workshoes may be called 'typical': only if you remember that old Sunday shoes, tennis sneakers, high tennis shoes, sandals, moccasins, bare feet, and even boots, are not at all rarely used: it should be known, too, that there are many kinds of further, personal treatment of shoes.

Mainly, this: Many men, by no means all, like to cut holes through the uppers for foot-spread and for ventilation: and in this they differ a good deal between utility and art. You seldom see purely utilitarian slashes: even the bluntest of these are liable to be patterned a little more than mere use requires: on the other hand, some shoes have been worked on with a wonderful amount of patience and studiousness toward a kind of beauty, taking the memory of an ordinary sandal for a model, and greatly elaborating and improving it. I have seen shoes so beautifully worked in this way that their durability was greatly reduced. (Agree and Evans, 1941, pp. 262-263)

James Agee's treatise on the clothing of the tenant farmers of Hale County, Alabama, like his fellow "spy" Walker Evans's photographs of George Gudger's Sunday shoes drying before the "altar" of the decorated fireplace, or his work boots airing in the sun, refute Agee's call to avoid considering their book as Art. Still they cannot help themselves: Agee compares the blues of the farmer's overalls and workshirts to "the blues of Cezanne" (p. 267); quotes Van Gogh's peasant boots. Each emphasizes the beauty of objects so thoroughly tied to use-value, yet conveying the most private longings for Aesthetics. Agee writes:

There is great pleasure in a sockless and sweated foot in the fitted leathers of a shoe [which are] made of most simple roundnesses and squarings and flats, of dark brown raw thick leathers nailed, and sewn coarsely to one another in course and patterns of doubled and tripled seams, and such throughout that like many other small objects they have great massiveness and repose and are, as the houses and overalls are, and the feet and legs of the women, who go barefooted so much, fine pieces of architecture[...]. They are worn out like animals to a certain ancient stage and chance of money at which a man buys a new pair; then, just as old Sunday shoes do, they become the inheritance of a wife. (p. 270)

These clay-encrusted objects placed symmetrically before the fireplace are emblems of labor, of poverty, and they are symbols of the essential uniqueness and dignity the reporters find in the lives of America's forgotten. "Clay is worked into the substance of the uppers and a loose dust of clay lies over them [...]. The shoes are worn for work" (p. 270). The shoes carry within them the traces of the struggle to survive. Carved up, they are heavy with the grind of fieldwork; they are vessels of pain.

According to Swedenborg, shoes signify a "lowly nature," at once "humble and despicable". Men's shoes, claims Gertrude Jobes, served as "ancient means of binding a contract", because the removal of the shoe meant "loss of legal rights" which corresponds to religious interdictions against wearing shoes in sacred places because they possess "contagion from the secular" (Jobes, 1961-1962, p. 1440). Yet Jean Servier "observes that 'to walk shod is to take possession of the ground'" (qtd in Chevalier and Gheerbrat, 1994, p. 876). These images of land and its ownership entrust the shoe with powers at once menial and imperial. The workingman's shoe carries the earth in its ancient creases and thus remembers labor and its equipment. In their iconic usage the work shoe becomes attached to lowly peasant labor in the fields; whether Heidegger registers Van Gogh's boots as belonging to the farmer's wife (or, as Schapiro insists, as "clearly" the painters' own), we know they must be read as figuring some form of abject masculinity. As Agee points out, women's work shoes began as men's, only becoming their wives' (or daughters' or mothers'-in-law) possessions after they near disintegration. This becomes clear in the two Evans' photographs where women are shown wearing shoes -the family portrait of the Woodses in which Miss Molly wears a battered pair of boots and the picture of Margaret

Ricketts washing dishes in an old pair of men's shoes. The destination of worn boots means that they are not firmly latched to masculinity -or that the masculinity to which they are attached is hardly secure: it is the province of "humble" men tied to the earth; their movement is toward dissolution- the eventual wearing away of the leather soles, but not before they have transferred onto women's feet, sunk even lower. Heidegger relied on Van Gogh's paintings of peasant shoes as a secondary, rather than immediate, way to consider the movement from equipment (as a pure useful thing) to its apprehension in the truth of an artwork. Tellingly, Heidegger reads Van Gogh's shoes as belonging to the farmer's wife -hand-me-downs, already-used, second-hand equipment, leftovers.

According to Joseph Kockelman's rendering those shoes evoke for Heidegger a loneliness and rugged tenacity of earth and the "wordless joy of having once more withstood want" through the endless repetition of wearying field work (Kockelman, 1985, p. 127). This "heavy pathos of the primordial and earthy" denied what for art historian Meyer Schapiro was the central point of Van Gogh's paintings -that the still life objects were the *artist's* personal belongings- his self representation (Schapiro, 1968, p. 206). Work shoes symbolized the labor of the artist. Heidegger frequently referred to shoes and shoemakers as exemplary of a being-in-a-world in which materials and labor create meaning (Poggeler, 1994, p. 114). In short, working men's boots, as useful products, and shoemakers -producers of use-values par excellence- aestheticize, even romanticize, human drudgery as survival. Hence Van Gogh's multiple returns to this readily available subject. In one of the remarkable moments in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Vladek describes how he survived liquidation by claiming to know how to repair boots, thus securing himself a source of income by fixing a guards' broken sole. Without any skills, except hustling and a good memory, Vladek lands a position in the shoe shop and earns enough to bribe various capos into transferring his wife Anja into a barracks near him in Birkenau. Ever practical, not only does he describe the story to Artie, he draws a picture for his son, showing how to repair a boot (Spiegelman, 1991, pp. 60-63).

What all this thingness of equipment and beauty of utility and earthy broken shoes and so forth have in common is a remarkably consistent image of the peasants' shoes and the toiling shoemaker as central icons of survival, of noble yet lowly subsistence, of a beauty and truth to be found in the very scraped bottoms of the filthy boots that trudge the heavy furrows to bring forth the meager means of human subsistence, to establish the ground for mid-20th century philosophical musings on death, art, time, work and being. Left-wing cartoonist Hugo Gellert, used a quotation of Van Gogh's shoes for his illustration of Karl Marx's explanation of "Primary Accumulation" in *Capital* because shoes connect the laborer to the earth, and to toil and deprivation. They show the shoemaker as a craftsman who transforms raw materials -leather, itself an organic material- into a useful item. Like evocations of the land and rural life, as antidotes to industrialism (or even as evocations of productive work in general), these images of solidity, earthiness and use are sentimental; left-wing iconography of labor, on the one hand, Fascist icons of soil, on the other, would redeem a bereft manhood. Men's work boots reek of hard labor; and while Agee and Evans revered this, Preston Sturges was mocking it in his satire of proletarian social realism, *Sullivan's Travels*.

But enough with the heavy trod of hobnails and creaky mud-encrusted leather! Yes, men's boots and shoes evidence the nobility of soil and the grind of stoop labor. Shoes, even men's work shoes, also have other uses, signal other kinds of work. In the 1950s, Nikita Khrushchev banged on the United Nations table with his hefty black Oxford,

declaring "We will bury you!" His denunciation of American capitalism -made in New York City, capitol of capital, was a reminder of his peasant origins; yet the shoes were resolutely corporate in their anonymity. Van Gogh and Agee and Evans evoked the individuality of the work shoe, molded by years of wear to the foot; but the black leather Oxford was meant, like the Organization Man who wore it, to fit in and disappear. The opening shot of Alfred Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* (1951) tracks the rushing commuters shoes crisscrossing up and down the aisle until they come to rest when Bruno (Robert Walker) and Guy (Farley Granger) bump into each other, two men outside the corporate economy (as wealthy gay man and tennis player, respectively) who wear more distinctive footwear. In Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly*, another 1950s thriller that explicitly refers to the Soviet nuclear threat, Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker) is able to discern the killers who have gotten hold of the "great whatsit" by recognizing their two-toned wingtips, a distinctive sign of precarious masculinity<sup>7</sup>.

#### 4. Six-inch with ankle strap

Women's shoes, especially those meant for dress-up, are so much more useful; even Mrs. Gudger put on "[b]lack lowheeled slippers with strapped insteps and single buttons" on Saturday, market day at Cookstown (Agee and Evans, 1941, p. 258). The work they do is invisible as work; yet they, too, point to sites of labor. For Agee, shoes are wombs -the worn leather molded to the sweated bare foot, and none more surely convey terror and desire than the spiked high heel-vagina dentata. Mrs. Gudger's demure flats hint, with their straps and buttons, at the sexual intimacy connected to the removal of shoes. A *New York Times* article pictured a Tristan Webber sandal, with four-inch tapered heel featuring spikes protruding from the instep strap, the heel and the ankle strap, over the caption "Shoe or weapon?" (Brockman, 2000, p. 2)<sup>8</sup>. Pierre Silber's advertisement for a \$35 six-inch spike available in sizes 6-14 offers a woman's shoe destined for a transgendered foot walking across skin, not pavement<sup>9</sup>. The stiff black pump of 1940s films noirs operated as a bullet case, sheathing the woman's foot and hardening it against the concrete pavement she traversed in her search for desire and power.

The woman's shoe as weapon begins Fuller's campy film noir *The Naked Kiss*, but it is also a pivotal scene in Herbert Biberman's 1953 left-wing labor film *Salt of the Earth*. In this saga about a New Mexico miners' strike and the increasing activism of the miners' wives, Esperanza (Rosaura Revueltas) wife of macho strike leader Ramon, breaks free from her husband and children, to join the women who have taken over the picket line after a Taft-Hartley injunction prohibits the men from marching. Handing her newborn infant to a stunned Ramon when the sheriff's deputies draw their guns at the women, Esperanza "stops for a second, slips off her right shoe [as deputy] Vance knocks the other woman down, pulls

<sup>7</sup> Marjorie Garber (1992, pp. 44-45) cites *Information for the Female-to-Male Crossdresser and Transsexual* which relies on John T. Molloy's note that "for the small man [...] the best shoes are traditional wingtip" and on Nancy Friday's *My Secret Garden* mention of female transvestites interest in "wingtip shoes" to suggest that wingtips were part of the "imitation man look."

<sup>8</sup> In response, Deborah L. Rhode (2000, A31) commented on the bizarre spectacle of powerful women lawyers mincing around in their "thigh-high stiletto-heeled boots" and other "footwear that maims".

<sup>9</sup> Advertisement for [pierreilber.com](http://pierreilber.com) in *New York Times*.

his revolver from his holster. Esperanza whacks him over the wrist with her shoe, knocking the weapon out of his hand" (Wilson, 1978, p. 61). Esperanza joins the women's group and forcefully helps lead the strike, leaving Ramon to take over the domestic chores. This labor melodrama, made during the height of McCarthyism by blacklisted actors, screenwriters and directors (film artists), condenses many left-wing feminist and labor ideals in this one scene which taps into latent fears of female autonomy. After this episode, Esperanza, still wearing her demure flats, is rarely home as housewife; she carts her kids to the picket line or else leaves them with Ramon to feed.

Shoes facilitate women's social mobility. In *Salt of the Earth*, a simple flat bests a gun, averting violence; but a hooker's spiked heel can almost kill a man as Constance Towers demonstrates. So we arrive at the third "meaning" of the shoe -as symbols of travel, especially the journey to freedom and/or death- an abstraction that cannot be seen despite its objectification<sup>10</sup>. Dorothy skips her way along the yellow brick road protected by the ruby slippers, which will eventually transport home as she clicks their heels. The shoes transfer their power from one body to another as they are themselves transferred from the Wicked Witch's shriveled feet onto Dorothy's, precipitating the journey and the ensuing struggle to possess them. The ruby slippers are very powerful, as Glenda surmises; yet their power is clearly gendered: no man seems interested in them.

This lavish MGM musical signaling the end of the Depression anticipated the ubiquitous sound of the femme fatale's heels. These post-War emblems of women's newly acquired sexual freedom, in turn, became powerful indexes for female fantasies of escape during the 1950s. Twice in Sandra Cisneros prose poem *The House on Mango Street* (1983), the narrator, Esperanza, astutely notes her sexual vulnerability as a girl on verge of adolescence, child of Mexican immigrants living on the edges of urban poverty. Both of these moments occur through her recognition of her unsettled footing within her world. This footing, literalized in the form of shoes, oscillates between a clunky 1950s girlhood, epitomized by bulbous saddle shoes, those sturdy markers of practicality bought by Depression-era mothers to last a whole school year, worn to the fancy party for which Esperanza is dressed in a new frock. Her ceremonial coming out -a dance with her uncle- is thus forever marred by the twin signs of poverty and gawkiness. No party shoes accessorize this dress. Esperanza has glimpsed the power of impractical shoes when she and her friends try on a few discarded pairs of dyed high heels and wobble around the block eliciting catcalls from the men and boys hanging on the street corners. Thrilled and terrified by their newly acquired swaying hips, the girls toss the heels as soon as they discover that men now see them as sexually desirable. With these two scenes, two crucial aspects of footwear in modern times are represented: that class position is instantly recognizable by looking at the soles of all folk; and that women's desires are tied to their (in)ability to move within them. Ultimately Esperanza dreams of leaving the confines of Mango Street, changing her name to Ze Ze the X and possessing a house of her own emptied of all furnishings save blank paper and a pair of shoes neatly stored by her bedside<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Erwin Panofsky defines iconography as the study of "the subject matter or meaning of works of art" (1962, p. 3). In his rumination on the "theory of imagery," W. J. T. Mitchell notes: "We can never understand a picture unless we grasp the ways in which it shows what cannot be seen" (1986, p. 39).

<sup>11</sup> See "The Family of Little Feet", "Chanclas" and "A House of My Own", in Sandra Cisneros (1991, pp. 39-42, 46-48, 108).

Women's decorative shoes, especially high heels, like Cinderella's glass slippers and Esperanza's yellow heels, reveal female sexuality. They become weapons and as such also convey those attracted/attached to them towards danger, even death. The Little Mermaid suffers on legs sharp as knives as she searches the land for her prince, suffering in silence. Women appear vulnerable in these wobbly unstable objects; but they elevate themselves to greater height, commandeering space through the constant clattering of their heels on the hard surfaces of the city streets and work places (whether office buildings or bedrooms). As objects of desire for both men (who, unlike the aristocracy of 16th century, now only watch them) and women (who can both watch and wear them), these icons also slide across genders. They lead inevitably to death. Not the inexorable, slow death of decay, but rather instead a sudden, violent death<sup>12</sup>. "These boots are made for walking", sang Nancy Sinatra in her thigh-high white boots, "and one of these days they're gonna walk all over you". Through work or sex, shoes journey to death; but the path they take, at least partially, runs through freedom. Pursuit is dangerous; but it's better than bondage. The broken feet of aristocratic Chinese women curtailed their movement, forcing them to take small mincing and painful steps unless carried. Shoes move us across space; desire for mobility leads us to death.

In the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale, the Little Mermaid, pursuing her desire for her beloved prince, succumbs to a witch's brew that allows her to silently walk on legs that felt like knives piercing her body, only to be left mute and alone. In "The Red Shoes", a young girl's desire for shiny red shoes, inappropriately worn to church and funerals, lead to her being controlled by her independent red shoes. Try as she might to take off the perpetually moving shoes, they remained fast on her feet, dancing her frenetically past the coffin of the old woman who had cared for her. Only when an executioner chops off her feet, leaving her crippled, can she stop dancing and repent her vanity. Broken in spirit, like the little mermaid, she dies blessed. These terrifying stories of female lust link female desire to mobility.

Carolyn Steedman recalls a recurring dream she had as a child of a woman in a New Look coat entering a doorway, her severe black pumps clicking along the sidewalk just out of young Carolyn's reach. Steedman's mediation on "the politics of envy" dictating the terms of her mother's brutal life's landscape depended upon a thorough understanding of the connection between female mobility and clothing. Buy a good pair of pumps, a New Look coat, a smart suit, and a working-class woman, skillfully shedding her accent, could transform her destiny<sup>13</sup>. Leaving her ratty Lancashire mill town for the precarious possibilities open in London during the Depression, Steedman's mother used her sexuality to secure another future for herself and her two daughters. Fundamental to her mobility - geographic and class- was her ability to wear the proper articles of clothing appropriate to her desires. The trajectory from Lancashire to London depended on learning how to move

<sup>12</sup> The discovery of the bloody size? Bruno Magli shoeprints left on Nicole Simpson's walkway became only the most recent spectacular example of this. The search to identify the tread was undertaken by a Japanese firm specializing in shoe print recognition at crime scenes. The fact that only a few hundred pairs of this size existed worldwide and O. J. Simpson owned one of them, however, was not sufficient evidence to convict.

<sup>13</sup> Leslie Kaufman (2000, pp. 1, 8) notes that in the United States, women's shoe sales have been remarkably consistent since the end of World War II. During the 1990s despite the consumer boom, women's shoe sales have grown steadily at only 1.8 percent per year, consistent with figures from the 1940s, excluding a spike during the 1980s when athletic footwear became popular.

in the smart pumps of post-war women's autonomy. Like the many femme fatales in film noir who traverse the dark city streets of San Francisco, New York and Los Angeles in search of power, pleasure and money, Steedman's post-war London mother knew how to dress for success (Steedman, 1992, pp. 21-40)<sup>14</sup>.

Success for the young middle-class girl growing up in this post-war world was mapped out, as Charlotte Nekola remarks in her memoir, *Dream House*, by "the progression from childhood to full womanhood [...] Mary Janes to flats to pumps with a small tasteful heel, and finally to the realm of pure sex and authority, 'spike' heels". Remembering an incident when she moved her "convertible" strap on her Sunday dress-up Mary Janes so that her girlish shoe would magically appear as a mature flat. Nekola describes how this gesture "instantly transformed [her], now a sinful Cinderella with some new shoes of big-girl life" (Nekola, 1993, p. 48). However, when she showed her mother her magnificent maturity, she was enraged by her disapproval. Like the old woman who tries to steer Karen from the red shoes, Nekola's mother insists Charlotte keep the strap tightly fixed around her instep, maintaining the freedom of her "native girlhood" as long as possible (p. 49). Cisneros's Esperanza and her girlfriends had quickly retreat from "Cinderella" to their native girlhood after their triumphant "tee-tottering" in the "lemon shoes and the red shoes and the shoes that used to be white but are now pale blue" cast-offs of the family of little feet because the threat of their sexual allure -men were suddenly catcalling and whistling, offering each a dollar for a kiss- would inevitably lead to dangers -sex, pregnancy, marriage (p. 40). Or worse: Barbara Stanwyck's anklet and heels, her cigarette and whiskey, her cat glasses and gun, would indeed turn you into a femme fatale -murderous, deadly, and doomed to die in a hail of bullets.

Growing up in the 1950s, many young girls studied these films, found on late-night television, as documentaries of lives our parents might have lived, if not for the fortunes of free education from City College and the GI Bill enabling the institution of the nuclear family in the suburb. Office of War Information photographer, Esther Bublely, had recorded actual noir women who rode midnight buses and trains across country in search of war work, residing in rooming houses. Her bus trip throughout the Midwest and the South undertaken in 1943 took her to such unlikely locales as an Ohio coffee shop shaped like a giant coffeepot now housing a large family, but primarily it took her to bus stations where she photographed single women sleeping on benches waiting for the 5 a.m. to Memphis, their black pumps dangling from their swollen feet. These intimate images of migrant women, solitary and vulnerable, are matched by those of single women seated alone at a bar waiting for a pick-up.

Bublely's single working women in transit during World War II presaged the "evil women [who] were women of psychological difficulties [...] who lived entirely in scenes of blood, murder, suicide, and physical and psychiatric violence of all kinds. Barbara Stanwyck's career... [was] built on the portrayal of this type of gangster woman". These women's crime films were so popular, noted one of America popular culture's critic C.L.R. James's female informants, "a sensitive and well-read observer", because "they are the only performances that seem to be *real*" (James, 1993, p. 131). Quoting documentary photography and dramatizing the pleasures, powers and terrors of women's aggressive mobility, made visually and aurally explicit in the erotic high-heeled slippers and anklet of

<sup>14</sup> See also her book of the same title.

Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity*, the relentless clatter of Kansas's black pumps in *Phantom Lady* and Kelly's vicious spiked heels in *The Naked Kiss*, film noir turns women into magicians. If commodities could speak the secrets therein, they might tell us just what does a woman want -Shoes! Wedgies, platforms, sandals, thongs, mules, flats, pumps, loafers, heels, slingbacks, sneakers and don't even start on the boots...

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