

Chapter 13

'The brunette with the legs': the significance of footwear in *Marnie*

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Marnie (Alfred Hitchcock, USA, 1964) is a film about sex and crime; in particular, about 'the sexual aberrations of the criminal female', according to the title of the book Mark Rutland (Sean Connery) reads in order to try to understand his new wife, Marnie (Tippi Hedren). These themes make a suitably salacious tagline for the film, described on posters at the time as a 'suspenseful sex mystery' (Nourmand & Wolff 1999: 84). But the film is actually the story of the woman who Mark first describes as 'the brunette with the legs', namely Margaret Edgar, or Marion Holland, or just plain Marnie, and her performance of feminine masquerade using what Michèle Montrelay might have called 'dotty objects' (Montrelay 1970, in Studlar 1988: 70): gloves, purses, handbags, nail files, hair combs, stockings and – most significantly – shoes. In three pivotal scenes, Marnie's footwear plays a major role in conveying her state of mind. In one, it enables her to lose her earlier identity, as her toe pushes the key to a railway station locker containing the accoutrements of Marion Holland down a grating. In another, Marnie's court shoe holds her exposure as a thief in the balance, sidling from her coat pocket as she tiptoes across the floor of Rutland's offices. And in a third, as her riding boots buckle and contort, they demonstrate how her resolve and spirit are being broken by her domineering husband, hell bent on behavioural analysis and psychiatric recuperation.

In this chapter I will demonstrate the film's deployment of shoes as a trope of Marnie's identity, and indeed of Hedren's star image more generally, and explore how they function as different sides to Marnie at stages in her story, speaking for her when she is unable to so herself. In so doing, and drawing on Iris Murdoch's thoughts about the way cinema can show us 'dramatically significant objects' (Murdoch 1956: 98), I will argue that the film unusually imbues feminine footwear with significance and meaning, enabling Marnie's identity to be explored by elements of the *mise en scène* that might ordinarily be considered simply decorative.

When, in 1956, Iris Murdoch wrote about the specific abilities of cinema, she asked,

Now what can the movie camera do which nothing else can do, and what should it therefore busy itself doing? It can present to us human drama and feeling in the form of momentary awareness. [...] It should resemble, not a vague detached awareness of things going forward, but a tense heightened awareness, such as we have in dreams or moments of emotional vision. After all, this is a form of Art. Therefore, objects in films ought never to look normal, since objects do not do this in ordinary life in our moments of most acute observation. A film should show us a strange and startling world, disintegrated and distorted, and full of dramatically significant objects. (Murdoch 1956: 98)

Murdoch's ideas about 'acute observation' and 'tense heightened awareness' relate to how shoes in *Marnie* attract our attention and also contribute to the construction of anxiety and suspense. Shoes highlight Marnie's 'strange and startling world', as parts of her meticulously constructed identities, and Murdoch's insights enable us to understand how they function to make meaning in the film.

Dressing Marnie and Tippi

Tippi Hedren as Marnie wears thirty-two costumes in the film. As Moral says, 'clothes play a crucial role in the plot of shifting identities, camouflage, gender relations, and class distinction' (Moral 2002: 68). There are sequences that look like the work of a meticulous fashion magazine stylist, such as when Marnie swaps her clothes and accessories, discarding the colour palette of a black-haired woman into a grey satin-lined suitcase and packing the new look of a brunette into a rose-lined one, before emerging as a blonde, in the classic Hitchcock blonde eau de Nil suit. In conversation with Deborah Nadoolman-Landis, co-curator of the *Hollywood Costume* exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2012, Hedren said that Edith Head created and named the 'Eau de Nil Green' for the suit worn by her character Melanie Daniels in *The Birds* (Hitchcock, USA, 1963). She also describes how much she had to move around wearing that suit, including climbing into and out of the motor boat that she drives to the Brenner house across Bodega Bay. She says that she could do all that in the green suit, 'but the shoes had to have a little more stability . . . than the spikes that I wore with the black suit at the very beginning'.¹ In that opening scene of *The Birds*, Hedren wears towering high heels, and walks somewhat gingerly across the road and into the pet shop, as somebody wolf whistles at her. This immediately draws attention to her

glamour and fashionable clothing, but also shows her as having a somewhat precarious mobility. Unlike the shoes that Roland Barthes describes in *The Fashion System*, these shoes are *not* made for walking (Barthes 2010: 23). It is interesting to note that the brown courts that she wears with the green suit for the rest of *The Birds* have lower, thicker heels and are clearly more stable. They also function to emphasise Melanie Daniels' walk and the wobble in her heels. As the camera follows Melanie walking down corridors, along roads, and around Bodega Bay, her walk is quick-paced, deliberate and confident, but the wobble in her heels conveys her precarity, just as her confident smile and cheery mood is invaded by the attack of the seagull when she is sitting in the boat, smiling cheekily at Mitch Brenner. As she is attacked by birds in the telephone booth, or the upstairs room of the Brenner house, her confidence and composure are undermined by her physical vulnerability to attack, which is signalled as a possibility from the outset by the wobble in her walk.

This wobble is even more emphatic in *Marnie*. The opening shot of the film is of a woman walking away from the camera. The striking image of the yellow handbag nestled under the arm of the raven-haired, black tweed-suited Marnie walking down the train station platform highlights the significance of costume and accessories in the film. The fascinations, problems and pleasures offered to women by Hitchcock's films have attracted critical attention from the most eminent feminist film scholars, including Tania Modleski, Kaja Silverman and Laura Mulvey, and also attracted analysis in light of some of the foundational approaches of feminist film studies, such as masquerade, fetishistic scopophilia, and the medical discourse (Kapsis 1988: 54–9). Criticism and commentary of *Marnie* tends to focus on fetishism: the labial nature of the folds of the handbag (Figlerowitz 2012: 54), Smith (2016: 52); the womb-like function of handbags in the film as a whole (Bhari 2019: 264–6); Hitchcock's obsession with Hedren (Brody 2016; Fawell 2000: 275; Spoto 2009: 167–78); and Marnie's preference for her horse over men (Modleski; Figlerowitz; Columpar 1999–2000). But it is not just Hedren and her handbags that are the objects of fascination in the Marnie story. Accessories of all kinds feature heavily in the 1961 novel by Winston Graham on which the film adaptation is based (Graham 1997), and the opera which was staged in London and New York (Marfil 2017: 15). In the novel, as Marnie prepares for a new identity, her dressing is detailed minutely:

Everything I put on was new: brassiere, panties, shoes, nylons, frock. It wasn't just taking care; it was the way I'd come to like it. I suppose I have a funny mind or something, but everything has to be just as it should be; and I like it to be that way with people too. (Graham, 1997: 3)

This makes clear that in the novel it is Marnie's way to be precise and meticulous about assembling her identity through the process of dressing. Street notes

how Marnie is referred to by Sidney Strutt (Mark Gabel) as ‘the brunette with the legs’ (Street 2002: 152), and how ‘she must exploit her knowledge of how to masquerade in order to maintain that independence’ (Ibid.:153). This fastidious devotion to image is conveyed in the film through the close-ups on clothing and accessories and the array of garments and outfits that Marnie works her way through, as well as Hedren’s physically assured gestures that convey efficiency and confidence. And it is her shoes that participate in some of the more fundamental stages of her journey.

The legs and the feet

Marnie’s footwear is a more significant accessory than the handbag in the trajectory of her character throughout this film. Shoes not only serve to facilitate Marnie’s changing identities and masquerades, but also play integral roles in her criminal and ‘civilian’ lives, and indeed her psychic journey. As she walks down the railway platform in the film’s opening shot, her firmly planted feet are undermined by the distinct wavering of the heels of her black court shoes. Her first victim in the film, Strutt, recalls with bitterness how she ‘was always pulling her skirt down over her knees as if they were a national treasure’. His comment seems to surprise Mark Rutland at the time, and it is this gesture of Marnie’s that contributes to his recognition of her when she later comes to be interviewed for a job at Rutland’s. As Mark walks past her seated in the waiting area, she looks up at him, their eyes meet, and then she looks down, bashfully, and adjusts her skirt hem down over her knees. This pretence of modesty of course draws attention to the very feature she is ostensibly trying to conceal. One’s eyes are drawn to the gloved hands, adjusting the hem of her beautifully coordinated outfit. And this in turn draws attention downwards to her legs.

Marnie focuses on legs as an element of Marnie’s character. As Anne Hollander writes, ‘exposing a woman’s legs lays stress on her means of locomotion’ (Hollander 1993: 339); the film shows Marnie frequently in motion, walking briskly through life on those legs. Learning about how Marnie pulls her skirt down over her knees suggests that her faux attempts to hide her legs is intended to send a message to those looking that she will be sedentary and submissive and will be no threat.

It is as the accessories adorning these legs that the shoes in the film come into their own. Paula Rabinowitz describes how ‘shoes facilitate women’s social mobility’ (Rabinowitz 2011: 200), which indicates why shoes feature so meaningfully in Marnie’s carefully orchestrated social passing. From the opening shot, so visually dominated by the yellow handbag, Marnie’s

shoes convey that wobbling walk, drawing attention to the movement of her hips and her outfit, but also focusing on her determined steps. As ‘the brunette with the legs’, her walk conveys efficiency and a relentless forward drive. In due course we discover that it was a severe injury to her mother’s leg during an assault that drove Marnie to kill the predatory sailor (Bruce Dern), thereby traumatising her and creating her fear of the colour red, thunderstorms and men. It is therefore unsurprising that legs, mobility and footwear feature so prominently in Marnie’s armoury of masquerade.

In the novel Marnie describes her mother’s footwear lying in the hall, next to her walking stick, saying ‘her shoes are very narrow and pointed: she’d always had narrow feet and wore pointed shoes long before they were the fashion’ (Graham 1997: 336). Describing kicking off her shoes, or sliding on her shoes, forms a part of her accounts of each of her thefts. This serves to convey the level of detail with which Marnie executes her crimes, and also presents them in a feminine language, describing objects as we might think of them in these circumstances, rather than as they simply look in the ordinary course of events.

Iris Murdoch, objects and cinema

Returning to Murdoch’s works about the ‘tense heightened awareness’ presented to us in a movie, there are certainly moments of heady excess in *Marnie*, which meet Murdoch’s requirements of disintegration and distortion, such as the first time Mark kisses Marnie (Bolton, 2011: 140; Columpar, 1999–2000: 59), and the hyperbolic red drenching of the screen whenever Marnie sees the colour red (Bolton, 2011: 136–7). Florence Jacobowitz describes how the narrative is ‘interrupted by moments that have a dreamlike emphasis exceeding narrative explanation’, such as the anxiety caused when the shoe drops out of Marnie’s pocket or the unspoken violence of the spilt pecan nuts in Marnie’s mother’s kitchen (Jacobowitz 2015: 17). When Marnie’s gloved fingertip scans the newspaper columns looking for a job, we are compelled to follow the fingertip as closely as we would our own doing the same action, at a moment of ‘acute observation’; and when the tree branch crashes into Mark’s office, or the huge ship looms at the end of Bernice’s street, we are certainly being shown a ‘strange and startling’ world. Murdoch’s description of objects in film, in particular, unlocks the peculiar focalisation of the footwear in this film. In *Marnie* shoes are integral to the ‘tense heightened awareness’ that the film creates, and also are ‘dramatically significant objects’.

Murdoch also writes that she is ‘tempted to say that the cinema is an art of indoors’ (Murdoch 1956: 98). Here she is referring to the way that outdoor shots do not linger in her memory, ‘except as reminders of other landscapes’; rather she sees indoor spaces as more able to show the ‘dramatically significant objects’ that cinema can display. It seems appropriate to consider *Marnie* as a film that exhibits the art of the indoors in several key sequences, as offices, houses, rooms and beds become the loci of Marnie’s actions and experiences. Through showcasing Hedren in multiple outfits, immaculately accessorised, one of the main themes of the film becomes the matter of being well dressed. In her work outfits she looks how her mother always wanted her to be, which is ‘decent’; but her shoes point to her less decent behaviour. Her feet are where the action is, as the following close analysis of key scenes will demonstrate. Although Marnie’s walking feet feature so consistently throughout the film, there are three scenes in which footwear plays a central role and is actively foregrounded in order to emphasise what Marnie is thinking, planning and going through.

The key down the grating

The identity of Marion Holland is discarded into one suitcase and the preparation of Margaret Edgar’s new wardrobe in another. The camera focuses on two beautifully lined cases, with neatly folded grey and brown clothes and a pair of green satin slippers trimmed with silver in one, with two new pairs of different coloured gloves and tights, and the more casually discarded silks of paler colours in the other, including a discarded brassiere. Marnie opens her compact with a nail file, and an extreme close-up on her coral fingernails shows her thumbing through a selection of social security cards, before selecting Margaret Edgar as her next identity. She washes out her black hair dye, transforms into a blonde, and is next seen carrying both suitcases through a railway station. She wears an eau de Nil suede suit, her hair is neatly coiffed, and she wears pale cream driving gloves, a cream turtle neck sweater and a darker sage green floral scarf. She also wears pale eau de Nil court shoes, with a studded detail around the top edge of the upper. We see Marnie notice a grating on the floor and smile to herself. In noticeably slower steps than she usually takes, Marnie approaches the grating and drops the key to the locker where she has just consigned the suitcase containing the identity of Marion Holland. The key lands flat, highlighted by its bright yellow cap cover, and Marnie uses the toe of her shoe to delicately and precisely poke the key through the grating until it drops, ensuring the accoutrements of her previous identity will not easily be discovered.



Figure 13.1 The shoe as tool, disposing of Marion Holland's key

Shoe in pocket

In the sequence where Marnie steals from the safe at Rutland's, her shoes are the source of suspense that Hitchcock was such a master at creating. The establishing shot is of the interior of the office floor and the screen is divided down the middle by an office partition wall. On the right hand of the screen, Marnie conducts her theft from the safe. On the left, the cleaner enters the room with her mop and bucket. Marnie completes her removal of the money from the safe and needs to make her escape by crossing the floor of the office. She notices the cleaner mopping the floor and removes her chocolate brown court shoes, placing one shoe in each pocket of her matching brown coat. Following the formula Hitchcock describes to Truffaut of showing the audience the bomb under the table (suspense) rather than simply exploding the bomb (shock) (Truffaut 1986: 91), we are able to see Marnie's shoe slipping out of her coat pocket with each of her steps, as she tiptoes across the floor away from the safe, trying to avoid attracting the attention of the cleaner.

The shoe works its way further and further out of the pocket, before falling out and landing on the floor with a loud thud. Marnie's eyes are drawn to the shoe, as she freezes; her eyes then move up slowly towards the cleaner, as she realises that – for some reason – the cleaner has not heard the sound. Marnie picks up her shoe and moves swiftly to the stairs, disappearing down



Figure 13.2 The shoe as traitor, threatening to expose Marnie's crime

them on the right of the screen as the security guard emerges on the left. The guard approaches the cleaner and speaks to her loudly and close to her ear, revealing that Rita the cleaner is hard of hearing. In this sequence, with its heart-stopping tension created purely by the sight of the shoe's impending fall, the shoe is certainly 'dramatically significant' as Murdoch describes, and also a startling and distorted object, demanding a specific and heightened attention. Marnie's removal of the shoe, its falling, and her reactions, also serve to align us with her subjective experience, activating our own fears and emotions (Bolton 2011: 142).

Contorted riding boots

The third piece of footwear, the riding boots, are significant as a piece of costume in that they show how Marnie is outwardly changed by marriage to Mark and life as a member of the Rutland household. When Marnie first rides Forio at Garrod's stables she wears a simple cream blouse and jodhpurs with plain riding boots. When Mark brings Forio to be with Marnie at the Rutland home, Marnie kicks off her shoes and mounts the horse without a saddle, gripping his mane and riding away with him barefoot in an expression of pure joy and freedom. Once Marnie has been spotted by Strutt at the house party, however, after jealous sister-in-law Lil has invited him, Mark insists Marnie takes part in

the fox hunt to defy Strutt's suspicion. Marnie is costumed in formal hunting wear: a riding hat, jacket, cravat, and stiff, long riding boots. Marnie witness the capture and mauling of the fox, and the repulsive guffaws of the hunters, and is compelled to ride away on Forio, who misjudges a stone wall while leaping over it and is injured. Devastated, Marnie gets a gun from a nearby resident and shoots the wounded horse. She is traumatised and propelled into a catatonic state of criminal behaviour, and heads to the Rutland offices, suggesting that she plans to steal from the safe and take off again, following her usual pattern of behaviour. Mark finds her at the safe, however, still armed with the gun she used to kill Forio, and challenges her over her desire to steal. Mark tries to force her to take the money but she resists. He shouts, 'you want the money, take it; I said take it!'; and, with a sardonically cruel smirk, he forces her hand towards the wads of cash in the Rutland safe. As Marnie is unable to take it, she resists Mark's force, and, struggling to break free, she twists and squirms under his pressure. A close-up of their feet conveys the battle and depicts their respective status through their feet: his, solidly square and firmly planted, in well-worn brogues with polished toes, and hers in twisting, squirming hunting boots that she is unaccustomed to wearing, looking like her legs themselves are buckling under the battle.

As Mark lets her go, Marnie crashes into the safe, and his smile confirms his feeling that he has beaten her and won this particular battle. This is a significant stage in his breaking her down before the final showdown at



Figure 13.3 The boot as surrender, buckling in the grip of Rutland patriarchy

Bernice's house. Another battle between Mark and Marnie includes the notorious rape scene, where Mark has sex with a catatonic Marnie on their honeymoon, having ripped off her housecoat, which lies in folds at her feet. Here, Marnie's naked, static legs convey that she is frozen to the spot. There can be no suggestion that Mark believes he has consent: the look in his eyes as he descends on Marnie, shown in looming close-up, is one of lascivious domination. Marnie and he return home early from the honeymoon and his project of getting to understand her and ostensibly to rescue her continues to play out through various verbal battles, including a game of word association, which ends with Marnie pleading for somebody to help her. Seen in the trajectory of his assertion of ownership of Marnie, which she herself identifies as his project, the shot of their feet in front of the safe, as Marnie buckles and crumbles, is a visual depiction of the final breaking of her resistance.

The not so neat ending

I have considered in depth elsewhere how the film has been analysed by various waves of scholarship: as exemplary of the male gaze, critiqued and also recuperated by feminist scholarship, and as queered and problematised by more recent scholars (Bolton 2011: 129–32). The ending of the film is a pat Freudian exposition, as mother is honest with daughter about the role sex has played in her life. When Bernice expresses her intention for Marnie to be decent, her daughter replies, 'oh Momma, well you surely realised your ambition – I'm a cheat and a liar and a thief but I am decent'. Mark supplies the neat psychiatric explanation for her thieving, as a child deprived of love taking whatever it can from wherever it can, and her mother still rejects her, as Marnie lying on Bernice is 'aching her leg': the leg that is a constant reminder of the damage a man can do to a woman's mobility and freedom. Mark can provide all reassurance of police, legal system and hospital, in one figure as her husband: she won't go to jail, he reassures, after what he has to tell them. As Columpar describes, 'Mark becomes a condensation of a variety of masculinised figures, including employer, observer, doctor and lover' (Columpar 1999: 58). We are invited to accept his authoritative reassurance as much as Marnie is. Marnie's final words, 'I don't want to go to jail, I'd rather stay with you', are hardly reassuring, although Mark looks pretty happy with the outcome of his project (Bolton 2011: 146). With his arm around Marnie, as he guides her to his car, he now seems to be in control of the previously resistant, independent woman and guiding her movements.

Shoes, Marnie and Tippi

The focus on shoes, feet and legs in *Marnie* is an illustration of how cinema can do more than simply involve an object in the narrative of a film, but rather it can utilise objects to create affective tension, to convey a character's state of mind and to represent a fundamental theme of the film. The three scenes I have analysed in this chapter use footwear to indicate Marnie's desire to bury her identity, to evoke tension and suspense during her theft from Rutland's and to demonstrate Mark overcoming her will to finally break her. When compared to the work that has been done to analyse the static female chamber of the handbag in this film, the focus on the shoes enables a greater understanding of the centrality of Marnie's mobility and independence. Yes, the handbag is significant for carrying and storing, but it is the feet and the legs that carry the handbag around. And for Marnie, whose mother's leg was broken so badly by a sexually aggressive man and who now walks with a stick, the significance of movement and freedom is abundantly clear. The very dynamic by which she conducts her life – stealing then fleeing – demands fleetness of foot and unencumbered movement. It is through capturing Marnie, holding her and keeping her, that Mark is able to finally bring her under control. As Mark, the amateur zoologist, says, 'I've caught something really wild this time.'

Looking at Tippi Hedren in *Marnie* and *The Birds*, which are by far her most high-profile and memorable film performances, it is striking how strongly her shoes, feet and walk feature in the construction of her characters, Marnie and Melanie Daniels respectively. This is entirely consistent with the confidence that both characters exude in the earlier stages of the films, as their nimble, adept movements are so fundamental to their stories. Both social adventuress and prankster Melanie and serial thief Marnie need to be physically unencumbered and agile. But, as both films trap and attack these characters, either in Bodega Bay or the Rutland empire, their mobility decreases and the physical assault on them increases until they are broken. The early smiles of self-satisfaction that Melanie and Marnie display are replaced with traumatised catatonia. The endings of both films are bleak and ambiguous, with a chance of a future but no guarantees as to how those futures will pan out. This double-edged facet to Hedren's unique screen image is summed up by Florence Jacobowitz's description of how 'she manifests vulnerability beneath the veneer of the competent, assured young woman as well as a façade that is more private and inscrutable' (Jacobowitz 2015: 16). I propose that the wobble in the heel of her court shoes, as both Melanie and Marnie, is the visual signal of this vulnerability and ambiguity.

Allegations about Hitchcock's obsession with Hedren have been made widely, and Hedren herself has recounted that the director sexually assaulted

her (Fawell 2000: 275; Robinson 2000: 59; Hedren 2016: 72). This extra-textual information adds a sinister slant to the abuse that the on-screen Hedren has to go through in her films, and undoubtedly the allegations have damaged Hitchcock's reputation in the eyes of many (Brody 2016). It is also consistent with Hedren's on-screen image that, having captured and imprisoned her, Hitchcock curtailed her acting career and prevented her from accepting or even being told about offers from other directors (Hedren 2016: 74). MJ Robinson assesses *Marnie* as being 'an incongruous and ambiguous conflation of the star, actor, and director, barely held in check by levels of artifice and a dark camp humour' (2000: 63). Whilst this type of commentary may be inevitable given the prominence of Hedren's revelations, and their take-up by critics and indeed other filmmakers such as *The Girl* (Julian Jarrold, UK, 2012), detailed analysis of the costume and accessories in the film still affords the character of Marnie a degree of subjectivity, personality and independence.

Although Street suggests some of the opportunities to read Marnie's subjectivity might not be deliberate on Hitchcock's part (2002: 155), he does certainly use footwear in this film to speak for Marnie. As John Fawell observes, 'Hitchcock had a fascination with femininity, and you can feel it in certain small but precisely etched moments in his films: in the way Marion clutches her purse in *Psycho*, in the close-up of Marnie's feet as she slips out of her pumps before going bareback riding in *Marnie*' (2001: 6). These close-ups on accessories, detailing the textures and structure of how Marnie orders her life, are powerful, affective indicators of her behaviour and feelings, including her battles with the patriarchal structures that seek to contain her. As such, they demonstrate cinema's capacity to show such objects as shoes, boots and bare feet, in ways that answer Iris Murdoch's prescription for what cinema should 'busy itself doing': showing us 'a strange and startling world . . . full of dramatically significant objects' (Murdoch 1956:

Note

1. I am grateful to Keith Lodwick, co-curator of the *Hollywood Costume* exhibition at the V & A Museum, for sharing this interview with me.

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