



## Research Article

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# Walking Through Everyday Life: Tensions and Disruptions within the Ordinary

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**Abstract:** Bringing together a genealogy of authors, concepts, and aesthetic case studies, this article aims to contribute to the discussion on ordinary aesthetics by focusing on the tensions that are intrinsic to walking as a fundamental embodied action in everyday urban life. These tensions concern the movement of walking itself and its relation to one's surroundings, but it also concerns a certain complementarity between home (familiarity) and wandering. Experiencing space and thresholds that disrupt one's relationship with home and the everyday can be understood as part of a modern "anti-home" tendency that lies at the core of several artistic and aesthetic practices. On the other hand, the study of walking and its relationship with the ordinary has also been enhanced and complexified by the mediation of images and technologies of reproduction. Approaching the paradoxes and ambiguities of everydayness from the perspective of walking allows us to better understand the ordinary as an in-between concept composed of evidence and mystery, familiarity and strangeness. Walking itself, as an ordinary element of life, is an unstable stabilisation, an unconsciousness that may become awareness, an immersive action that knows interruptions, a way of repeating paths that can also lead to detours and discoveries.

**Keywords:** action, surroundings, home, familiarity, wandering, threshold, images, optical unconscious, uncanny, ambiguity

*But to be able to come down in such a way that instantaneously one seems to stand and to walk, to change the leap into life into walking, absolutely to express the sublime in the pedestrian – only that knight can do it, and this is the one and only marvel.*

Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 41

## 1 Walking: Action and its Surroundings

Beyond artistic gestures and aesthetic practices, beyond critical approaches to everyday life and the ordinary, let us start with a brief and relatively free-flowing analysis of walking – more specifically, how walking can be understood in relation to everyday life and urban space if we pay attention to certain of its elements.<sup>1</sup>

Walking involves a series of movements that are learned in the first months of life and then quickly becomes automatic and unconscious. Under normal conditions, walking is part of the ontogenetic development of the human being and involves a series of stages, both physiological and functional, that are completed at around the age of six. This stabilisation can, however, be interrupted or disturbed by numerous

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<sup>1</sup> Some sections of this article develop aspects of a previously published chapter on walking as an aesthetic practice, now furthering them in relation to ordinary aesthetics. See Conceição, "Um caminhar que desconcerta".

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circumstances and pathologies, and ageing itself naturally affects its physiological conditions. It is also well known that bipedal walking is intrinsically related to phylogenetic evolution and the freeing of the hands, which allowed *homo erectus* to develop the human faculty of fabrication, together with a spontaneity towards the surrounding world that is at the root of those gestures that attribute meaning to it.<sup>2</sup>

In our daily life, the action of walking has a strong instrumental character, as it is often a means of moving from one place to another to fulfil a certain goal. However, walking can lack this well-defined spatial purpose when, for example, it aims at pleasure itself or the positive consequences of movement: walking as a break from a job that forces one to sit for long periods of time or as a way to stretch one's legs after a long journey. In these cases, we can even say that it is our body that asks us to move, and this sensation is merged with a physiological and unconscious mechanism, a particular bodily knowledge related to imbalance. This knowledge points to the philosophical problem of the mind–body relationship, but at the same time, and in a way that is more deeply rooted in our forms of life, it also permeates our ordinary experience and language, in particular those expressions that convey a certain bodily wisdom.

Apart from the scientific discourse, one can also ask about the relation between *what walking is* and *what happens* when its automatism is disrupted. In this sense, walking refers to a human activity that usually only becomes conscious – conscious of its own execution, of what its movements imply – when a problem occurs, whether a physical problem or the existence of a barrier, built or immaterial, that restricts movement. These barriers often have a normative dimension (take the recent example of the restrictions on movement imposed by different countries during the Covid pandemic: although these were not direct restrictions on walking, but rather on going outside, they nevertheless had the effect of raising awareness of the positive effects of walking outside – hence the “healthy walks” that were allowed in many countries). Consequently, one gains a deeper awareness of the very existence of walking, of what it is and what it gives us, when we face adaptations, pain, or limitations. Tiredness, both physical and psychological, can cause a similar sensation insofar as it can change the way one walks, or at least it can make one aware of bodily particularities and fragilities, perhaps changing one's disposition towards movement. In this vein, walking, one of the most ordinary of human actions, can be understood according to the logic of disruption that Martin Heidegger applies in his analysis of the tool–object in *Being and Time*, concerning the complex passage from handiness/readiness-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*) to the objective presence of things/presence-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*), from instrumentality to conspicuousness.<sup>3</sup> Just as we discover that a tool is an object (a “thing” that can be observed) when it is broken or its functioning is interrupted, we more easily discover the nature – both mundane and problematic – of walking when a problem arises. This does not mean that all spontaneity or naturalness is lost, but the sheer dynamic action and conscious and unconscious aspects of our relationship with our body and our surroundings are thus prone to be transformed.

In the context of a discussion on the aesthetics of everyday life and its relation to urban space, Arto Hapaala likewise draws an analogy with Heidegger's analysis, in an attempt to reinforce the link between the familiarity of urban surroundings in everyday life and a sense of place, understood as “home building.”<sup>4</sup> One of his examples concerns walking in a familiar city. Sustained by routine and habit, what is specific to this familiarity is the effacement of strangeness, the latter only arising when something changes or “has been broken by something new.”<sup>5</sup> If the latter is the case, one may begin to look at things differently, finding new perspectives or even discovering and appreciating what usually goes unnoticed: a building, a form, a constellation of events, etc. *At the same time*, something of the ordinary character of walking in this familiar city is transformed.

To a certain extent, and because walking is a complex bodily action that connects with many sensorial and cognitive aspects, this transformation involves an experience of the city in a broad sense. But if this transformation stems, for instance, from the need to walk an unfamiliar path due to construction or from the use of

2 On the ontogenetic and the phylogenetic aspects of walking, see de Baecque, *Une histoire de la marche*, 21–41.

3 Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 66–76.

4 Hapaala, “On the Aesthetics of the Everyday,” 46.

5 *Ibid.*, 45.

crutches after surgery, then we can speak of these events as walking-related inducers of strangeness. In the first case, the cause is external to the action of walking but disrupts the usual pathway, while in the second case the cause is physiological/mechanical, i.e. a disruptive situation the effects of which spread into everyday life. At the limit, one can say that the first concerns walking indirectly or incidentally, while the second concerns walking in a direct and significant way. While walking an unfamiliar path or using crutches need not necessarily immediately change one's routine or everyday experience in a significant way, at least a certain walking-related predisposition to strangeness is thus created. Either directly or indirectly connected with the physiological/mechanical dimension of walking, this predisposition can nevertheless impact the many and simultaneous sensory, cognitive, and emotional elements that constitute us as walking human beings – among them the discovery of new perspectives on the city, such as aesthetic aspects (e.g. pleasing architectural forms) or critical aspects (e.g. lack of accessibility for those with disabilities), that previously went unnoticed.

These examples and analyses show that the relation between walking and the transformation of everyday urban experience is a matter of degree. The transformative effects of walking can vary significantly, and understanding them fully requires empirical analysis, which is beyond the scope of this article. What we can say with confidence is that those effects that have to do with physiological disruption are direct in nature, while social and normative restrictions often only affect walking indirectly. One might be prevented from walking close to a government building due to a bomb threat, for instance, in which case walking is similar to cycling or even crawling: the normative dimension primarily applies to security considerations, and only indirectly to the action of walking. This is related to the instrumental character of walking as a means of moving in order to perceive, do, or obtain something (for instance, in order to purchase a rare book that was in a now inaccessible library close to the government building).

Beyond this analytic framework, in urban walking, the dividing line between cause and effect is often blurred. The instrumentality of routes and the unpredictability of detours are counterpoints of a daily life in which the body is an axis of circulation, disruptive forces, and appreciation of the surroundings. Hence, at a basic physical and dynamic level, walking involves a tension between unconsciousness and consciousness, between automatism and the need to pay attention, between fluidity and disruption. In addition, there are affective elements, such as moods or stress, that intersect with physiological ones in the disposition to walk. Normative, social, and cultural elements add several levels of complexity to these tensions and affective dispositions.

Walking is a good example of “urban kinaesthetics,” which, according to Tea Lobo, is the “study of the perception and aesthetic appraisal of a city in *embodied motion*.”<sup>6</sup> Bringing together this kinaesthetics and Arto Hapaala's example, we might further add that what makes the action of walking particularly relevant to understanding the transformation of routine/familiarity is the singular way it combines movement and sensorial receptiveness. There are other ways of moving in the city, such as driving, cycling, or taking public transport, that may well be part of a transformation of routine, but walking is an activity that places the body and the senses in a direct – usually unmediated by a mechanism – relationship with the surrounding space, a relationship that involves sequences of acceleration and de-acceleration which foster different degrees of appreciation.<sup>7</sup> In an urban context, the bodily act of walking implies a particular point of observation (or, to widen the aesthetic field, a manifold point of sensorial perceptions) and an openness to movement itself and to stimuli that act on at least two aesthetic levels. The first concerns rhythm, not only that of the walker's own body but also the heterogeneity and overlapping of rhythms in an urban environment: natural, cosmological, social, professional, technological, interpersonal, etc. Urban walking can thus be approached, for instance, through Henri Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis, which is also a methodological descriptive tool for studying

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<sup>6</sup> Lobo, “Urban Kinaesthetics.” Tea Lobo's proposal links kinaesthetics with the emblematic cultural figure of the flâneur. In what follows, I will also consider this figure and other foundational dialectical concepts of modernity that help us to understand, both historically and philosophically, the tension between familiarity and strangeness.

<sup>7</sup> In order to justify her focus on the action of walking, Lobo rightly highlights “the kind of sensorimotor de-acceleration conducive to aesthetic appreciation” that it affords. Yet we should not overlook the fact that walking through urban everyday life also involves habits or fast and unconscious processes of action-reaction that leave little room for “appreciation” in the traditional, contemplative sense. See Lobo, “Urban Kinaesthetics,” n. 2.

everyday life.<sup>8</sup> The second element concerns sensory perception and the various ways in which our senses are solicited, stimulated, and often overloaded.<sup>9</sup> This sense of overloading relates to Georg Simmel's seminal analysis of the "intensification of nervous life which results from the rapid and uninterrupted change of internal and external impressions"<sup>10</sup> that is characteristic of big cities. In this sense, and following Simmel's interaction approach, which "points to the dense network of reciprocal interactions that make up the social world,"<sup>11</sup> the intensification of nervous life in the streets and the ensuing state of alertness has a counterpart: a need for protection that may even produce a certain state of inattention and dullness and the multiple psychological adaptations that are imposed on us by the outside and sociability, weaving the structure of our subjectivity. Against this backdrop, walking in a city is both an aesthetic and a spiritual/mental experience, and the ordinary is a field in which multiple forces interact and stabilise around the objective and subjective conditions of our lives.<sup>12</sup>

All that we have seen thus far means that the disruption of walking automatism – from physiological ones to those of daily routine – takes place at two main levels that in a certain sense complement each other: the first concerns action and movement themselves; the second concerns one's ordinary surroundings, understood as a constitutive background, as part of a form of life that is there to be lived or transformed.

## 2 Home and Wandering

Let us now address a particular tension within familiarity: it concerns *home*, understood both as a domestic space and as a familiar space, and how walking can be thought of in relation to it. The following words by Rita Felski are quite elucidative regarding the importance of home both for the organisation of space in daily life and as a basis for incursions into the outside world:

[Home] is central to the anthropomorphic organization of space in everyday life; we experience space not according to the distanced gaze of the cartographer, but in circles of increasing proximity or distance from the experiencing self. Home lies at the center of these circles. According to [Agnes] Heller, familiarity is an everyday need, and familiarity combines with the promise of protection and warmth to create the positive everyday associations of home.<sup>13</sup>

This sense of home is not only about the building or material structure, nor can it be reduced to the members of a family. Familiarity, and above all a sense of protection, is what characterises home, as well as the "warmth" that can only come from the intensity and density of human relationships. In fact, Heller's considerations involve "everyday contact" as it arises from an experience of space and its perception, which should not be reduced to the concepts of space that have been extrapolated from the scientific sphere into everyday phrasing and that often end up in an "image of space" that does not relate to our forms of life.<sup>14</sup> Heller, in turn, focuses on conceptual pairs related to human orientation – such as left and right, up and down, close and distant – which are meant to show the importance of space in defining the movements and boundaries of everyday life, "the limit of our effective radius of action and movement."<sup>15</sup> Many of these radii are made on foot, or at least with journeys that imply more or less extensive forms of pedestrian movement.

<sup>8</sup> See Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*.

<sup>9</sup> On this topic, and also on rhythm, see Le Breton, *Éloge de la Marche*, 121–46.

<sup>10</sup> Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," 76.

<sup>11</sup> Featherstone, "The Heroic Life and Everyday Life," 65.

<sup>12</sup> On the intersection of philosophical reflection on the city and everyday aesthetics, it is worth mentioning Lehtinen's recent work. See in particular Lehtinen, "Living with Urban Everyday Technologies;" "Editorial Introduction to the Topical Issue 'Philosophy of the City'" in *Open Philosophy*, which traces the interconnections between philosophical, social, political, aesthetic, and environmental aspects; and special volume 8 (2020) of *Contemporary Aesthetics* on Urban Aesthetics, in particular her "Editorial Introduction to the Special Volume on Urban Aesthetics."

<sup>13</sup> Felski, "The Invention of Everyday Life," 85.

<sup>14</sup> Heller, *Everyday Life*, 236–9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

Thus, we can speak of the complementarity of home, as an essential component of daily life which ideally relates to comfort and familiarity, and a dimension of action and movement that is a fundamental part of the constitution of surrounding space, even when this dimension ends up testing the very boundaries of the familiar. Along this dimension is one thing in particular that is of crucial importance to forming and maintaining the familiarity without which all incursions into the outside world – street, work, leisure, travel, testing the boundaries, etc. – lose their meaning: “‘Going home’ should mean: returning to that firm position which we know, to which we are accustomed, where we feel safe, and where our emotional relationships are at their most intense.”<sup>16</sup>

Walking is one of the fundamental ways in which the familiar “radius of action and movement” is made effective. Walking in the city in particular involves the body and the boundaries of space, and in this sense it is also a way of experiencing boundaries. “Experiencing,” here, has two meanings: on the one hand, it concerns repetition, the ratification of the connection between home and boundary-space; on the other hand, and going beyond Heller’s framework, it concerns the imminent possibility of finding a *threshold*. Although it may at first seem unrelated to the previous discussion, an entry from Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project* may be helpful here:

The city is only apparently homogeneous. Even its name takes on a different sound from one district to the next. Nowhere, unless perhaps in dreams, can the phenomenon of the boundary be experienced in a more ordinary way than in cities. To know them means to understand those lines that, running alongside railroad crossings and across privately owned lots, within the park and along the riverbank, function as limits; it means to know these confines, together with the enclaves of the various districts. As threshold, the boundary stretches across streets; a new precinct begins like a step into the void – as though one had unexpectedly cleared a low step on a flight of stairs.<sup>17</sup>

If one reflects on this characterisation of the threshold in relation to everyday life, one realises that a discussion on known boundaries should encompass both the homogeneity/heterogeneity of the city (its surroundings) and the pedestrian’s everyday life. Stepping “into the void” results from an interaction between the heterogeneity of space, with all its latent borderlines, and the action of the pedestrian who predisposes him/herself to encounter – or is surprised by – thresholds, the in-between and transitional spaces that distend or interrupt the familiar. It is exactly this in-between character of the threshold that makes it a precious notion with which to reflect upon the tensions and ambiguities of the ordinary.<sup>18</sup>

Experiencing boundaries often intersects with elements of wandering which are of fundamental importance not only for aesthetic practices that involve walking but also for the constitution and experience of architectural space itself.<sup>19</sup> At another level, a classic reference such as Charles Baudelaire’s characterisation of Constantin Guys as a *flâneur* interestingly points to a metaphorical and provocative sense of home, which in fact embodies a dialectic tension between the comfort commonly ascribed to home and the restlessness and anonymity of the streets:

The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden of the world –

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 88.

<sup>18</sup> This idea of ambiguity will be further discussed in the last section.

<sup>19</sup> On this topic, see Careri, *Walkscapes*, 35–65. Avoiding, or at least softening, the distinction between architecture and nomadism, Careri aims to show how the notions of a journey or path are constitutive of the need to change the landscape that underlies architecture, a process that began in the Palaeolithic period, before the construction of temples or cities: “it is probable that it was nomadism, or more precisely ‘wandering’, that gave rise to architecture, revealing the need for a symbolic construction of the landscape” (ibid., 39). Apart from the speculative and thought-provoking nature of this argument, what is interesting in it is the subtle inversion that characterises the link between nomadism and the need to mark paths in order to make them minimally *familiar*.

such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. The spectator is a *prince* who everywhere rejoices in his incognito.<sup>20</sup>

This passage points in two related directions. On the one hand, leaving home, being exposed, and at the same time seeking the transitory beauty of daily and street life is the sort of tension that Baudelaire developed throughout his work, particularly in *The Flowers of Evil* and in *Paris Spleen*. On the other hand, the prince's rejoicing in his incognito status points to the anonymity of the streets, an element that contrasts with the dimension of interiority that was associated, throughout the nineteenth century, with the bourgeois house. Benjamin described this turning inwards in detail in *The Arcades Project*, characterising it as a sort of counterbalance to the hustle and bustle of urban life, as a comfortable place where one's personality can leave traces and express itself.<sup>21</sup> These two directions account for the complex and contradictory conceptual figures and cultural movements of modernity.

In any case, as Felski remarks, the critical tradition of modernity – celebrating or experiencing movement, exile, the crossing of borders – is based on a “vocabulary of anti-home,”<sup>22</sup> and home is often considered a nostalgic symbol, a concept that involves a false comfort aimed at suppressing existential homelessness, or even a deviation from the tasks demanded by the adventurous outside. Indeed, home as a representation of everyday familiarity – including the more restrictive sense of “house” – lingers in a conflictual relationship with the extension or suppression of its own boundaries. This is most obviously the case when we think about walking. Hence David le Breton begins his characterisation of the temporal and spatial dimension of the walk with a distinction: “the walk is opposed to the house, to the enjoyment of a dwelling.”<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, and although Simmel's study of everyday life opened a multifarious and more nuanced framework, the discourse of modernity is very much linked to a “heroic life” that takes place “outside” and aims to achieve the extraordinary, in opposition to the ordinary, to home, passivity, vulnerability, and the feminine.<sup>24</sup> It is also according to this cultural and theoretical lineage – focusing on streets, on the city as a site of human flourishing – that political life takes shape and materialises, and this is one of the fundamental reasons for the disregard for the house in philosophical thought.<sup>25</sup> This background helps us to understand some of the reasons why home, as well as the intrinsic relation it has with the ordinary, is of great interest to feminist studies.<sup>26</sup> Felski points this out, identifying the complex ways in which home, both as a concrete space and as a metaphysical symbol, as a place of both domination and emancipation, is described, criticised, and rethought by several authors, from Henri Lefebvre to bell hooks. In this sense, her minimal definition of home is a straightforward and clever response to this complex field: “it includes any often-visited place that is the object of cathexis, that in its very familiarity becomes a symbolic extension and confirmation of the self.”<sup>27</sup>

Within this framework, and although the everyday is intrinsically linked to notions such as the familiar and home, although our daily walks rarely escape repetition and routine, the expression “walking through everyday life” is meant to pinpoint a series of actions and interactions that play with the familiar and its thresholds. Thus, a contemporary aesthetic of the ordinary cannot disregard, cannot avoid tackling, the tension between home and wandering that in a general way is a heritage of modernity – a modern way of conceiving of the subject and the social world. Historically and philosophically, this also helps us to understand how difficult it is for philosophy to embrace the everyday and the ordinary, “as if what philosophy is dissatisfied by is inherently the everyday.”<sup>28</sup> With this remark, Cavell is discussing the grounds of Wittgenstein's scepticism, as well as Emerson's and Thoreau's thoughts on the everyday, but the way he

<sup>20</sup> Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” 9.

<sup>21</sup> See in particular Benjamin's Convolute I on “The Interior, The Trace,” *The Arcades Project*, 212–27.

<sup>22</sup> Felski, “The Invention of Everyday Life,” 86.

<sup>23</sup> Le Breton, *Éloge de la Marche*, 26. Here, as below, the translation of non-English texts is my own.

<sup>24</sup> Featherstone, “The Heroic Life and Everyday Life,” 58–62.

<sup>25</sup> Coccia, *Philosophie de la maison*, 9–20.

<sup>26</sup> Hence, the need for a “critique of the heroic life” capable of detecting its contemporary variations. See Featherstone, “The Heroic Life and Everyday Life,” 66–9.

<sup>27</sup> Felski, “The Invention of Everyday Life,” 88.

<sup>28</sup> Cavell, “The Uncanniness of the Ordinary,” 171.

puts things – the everyday as a task, not as a purely given – seems to imply a particular form of wandering, or at least an uncanny relationship with home. In his forward to Veena Das’s *Life and Words*, when interpreting a passage from Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* that seems to reveal the philosopher’s tendency to make ordinary language strange to himself, Cavell writes:

the explorer coming into an unknown country with a strange language is a figure of the philosopher moved to philosophical wonder by the strangeness of the humans among whom he lives, their strangeness to themselves, therefore of himself to himself, *at home perhaps nowhere, perhaps anywhere*. (I have spoken of the *Investigations* as a portrait more specifically of the modern subject.)<sup>29</sup>

This passage resonates with several aspects explored in this section, while also suggesting that the tension between home and wandering takes shape and unfolds through poetic, urban, and philosophical tasks that often intersect.

### 3 Artistic and Aesthetic Practices

There are two fundamental, interwoven threads in contemporary art practices involving walking. The first is related to the previous section and to a modern critical approach that has a twofold desire: to dive into everyday life and subvert it – at the limit, to question the comfort of “home” and all its associations with routine and passivity; on the other hand, a tradition in performance and conceptual art related to experimentation, the exploration of chance, and the ludic dimension.

Margaret Iversen fittingly refers to the seminal role played by Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, and the Fluxus group in the exploration of “chance procedures.”<sup>30</sup> Such procedures involve a disruption of the causal relationship between means and ends, which in turn transforms the very notion of authorship, and instead focus on open-ended processes. This entails not “unbridled spontaneity or sheer chaos” but operations that, although they take place within predetermined conditions, are open to unpredictable results, thus resembling a pack of cards or a pair of dice.<sup>31</sup> Chance, play, and the incorporation of error shatter the autonomy and organic unity of artworks as objects, a lineage closely related to Dadaism and Surrealism. On the other hand, from the point of view of the relationship with the city and walking, this lineage was also a way of exploring the unconscious city, the latter not being easily apprehensible through the mere description of its functionality, nor representable through common artistic expressions.<sup>32</sup>

Let us consider an important example from contemporary performance art. In *Following Piece* (1969), Vito Acconci explored the tensions and limits of urban surroundings by randomly picking out strangers on the streets of New York, chasing them until they entered a private place. The conceptual and performative aspects of this work presuppose, among other things, an experimentation with public and everyday life, where the body and walking emerge as a spatio-temporal mediation of sociability and its limits. Besides, although they take place within an established plan, the random choice and unpredictability of the action take away the performer’s control and at least potentially make him cross the boundaries of his own familiar milieu.

Several works by the Belgian artist Francis Alÿs are also seemingly purposeless actions that incorporate chance in order to explore urban space and delve into the everyday while at the same time disrupting its ordinary character. Hence his interest in accidental encounters as ways of accessing the social, urban, and political unconscious of the ordinary.<sup>33</sup> The walk itself potentiates this in the sense that “it is simultaneously the material out of which to produce art and the *modus operandi* of the artistic transaction. And the city

<sup>29</sup> Cavell, “Forword,” x (emphasis added). On the importance of this passage for the “concepts of the ordinary,” see Fasula and Laugier, “Presentation,” 10–12.

<sup>30</sup> Iversen, *Chance*, 12–5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>32</sup> See Careri, *Walkscapes*, 71–83.

<sup>33</sup> Iversen, *Chance*, 18.

always offers the perfect setting for accidents to happen.”<sup>34</sup> Here, the artist is not an *omnipotens creator* but rather an active intervener in the redistribution of urban circulation, disturbing it and shifting the flows.<sup>35</sup> This intervention is of course imbued with a social and political spirit, with a wish to transform and imagine the everyday by working through some of its tensions and contradictions.

This short and rather selective history of walking as an artistic practice has other protagonists and theoretical and practical forerunners. The combination of chance and playfulness is also related to Surrealist and Situationist practices, as part of their exploration of the defamiliarising character of the relation between walking and everyday life. As Francesco Careri notes, “[t]he Surrealist city is an organism that produces and conceals territories to be explored, landscapes in which to get lost and to endlessly experience the sensation of *everyday wonder*.”<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, the Situationists’ *dérive* and psychogeography, which are irreducible to artistic endeavours or randomness – although the latter can be included in broader procedures – are not meant to exclude everyday life but to explore its layers and to test the boundaries of urban planning and the different socioeconomic processes and powers that shape it.

## 4 Images

The tension between description and an ideological critique of everyday life that belongs to Situationist practices also marks the thinking of two forerunners of critical theory. Siegfried Kracauer’s thought-images (*Denkbilder*), which combine the sensorial apprehensions of the wanderer and an illuminating reflection on small-scale phenomena, are an attempt to understand cities according to signs that are there to be deciphered, an idea that is concisely addressed in one of his texts on Berlin: “Knowledge of cities is bound up with the deciphering of their dream-like expressive images.”<sup>37</sup> This is related to the possibility of accessing the unconscious, or at least the oniric character of ordinary phenomena, as well as with the notion of surface phenomena.<sup>38</sup>

As we have seen, urban walking not only entails a multiplicity of sensory stimuli but is also grounded in the dialectic, or constant tension, between immersion and interruption, between letting oneself go and paying attention. Thus, several of Kracauer’s texts incorporate and elaborate this dialectic character of urban experience. Describing and deciphering what is before our eyes, on the other hand, may have a social and political function. Beyond a mere description or representation of everyday life, this involves processes of defamiliarisation that can be obtained through images, not only thought-images but also photographic and cinematographic ones. In relation to everyday life and its surroundings, these images have a double function: while familiarising us with our surroundings, they allow for an experience of defamiliarisation.<sup>39</sup>

Walter Benjamin’s work pursues similar objectives. For instance, the dialectic between attention and distraction is inherent to his description of the *flâneur* and unfolds differently in other essays on art and technology that focus extensively on the conditions of aesthetic experience in the context of mass societies. On the other hand, both his reading of Surrealism, which explores the relationship between the ordinary and mystery, and his notion of optical unconscious add interesting insights to more contemporary approaches to everyday life and the aesthetics of the ordinary. The optical unconscious, for instance, aims to describe a technological shift that enhances the human capacity to analyse the everyday:

<sup>34</sup> Alÿs and Ferguson, “Russell Ferguson in Conversation with Francis Alÿs,” 31.

<sup>35</sup> See Davila, *Marcher*, 86.

<sup>36</sup> Careri, *Walkscapes*, 81.

<sup>37</sup> Kracauer, *Straßen in Berlin*, 53.

<sup>38</sup> Kracauer, “The Mass Ornament,” 75. Kracauer and Benjamin extend Simmel’s lesson in their own way and develop a philosophy of culture that is not based on a separation between high and low culture. More important than this separation, even more important than an epoch’s judgments about itself, are the surface-level expressions which, “by virtue of their unconscious nature, provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things. Conversely, knowledge of this state of things depends on the interpretation of these surface-level expressions” (ibid.).

<sup>39</sup> On the alienating effect of photography (which in its own way is also intrinsic to cinema), see Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 12–23.



Whereas it is a commonplace that, for example, we have some idea what is involved in the act of walking (if only in general terms), we have no idea at all what happens during the split second when a person actually takes a step. We are familiar with the movement of picking up a cigarette lighter or a spoon, but know almost nothing of what really goes on between hand and metal, and still less how this varies with different moods in which we find ourselves [*den verschiedenen Verfassungen schwankt, in denen wir uns befinden*]. This is where the camera comes into play, with all its resources for swooping and rising, disrupting and isolating, stretching or compressing a sequence, enlarging or reducing an object.<sup>40</sup>

Benjamin does not mention Étienne-Jules Marey's chronophotographs as a tool for studying movement, particularly walking, but these were definitely part of a general expansion of the visual realm at the turn of the nineteenth century, which at the same time owed a lot to scientific – and even military – interests.<sup>41</sup> The increasing proliferation of images from photography, cinema, and television, the documentation of performances, etc. widen the scope of our understanding of walking. At the same time, this means that our perception of what walking is in daily life and how one can experience it are also mediated by the images that populate our imaginary.

Returning to the notion of the optical unconscious, one might say that it has a profound relationship with the possibility of studying the ordinary. Eli Friedlander develops this argument by bringing together Benjamin's ideas, Goethe's method of presenting and arranging phenomena, which is informed by a naturalistic approach, and what he terms Wittgenstein's "theatre of the ordinary" (an expression inspired by a note from *Culture and Value*).<sup>42</sup> Friedlander points out the main role that photography plays in this theatre: a space of duplication that allows for the study of ordinary existence as it is revealed by gestures and actions. According to this interpretation, Benjamin's notion of the optical unconscious does not exactly suggest that photography is a gateway to the surreal; in fact, his examples indicate above all a field of experimentation and study in which the "ordinary itself can become a scene of significance."<sup>43</sup> This involves opening the familiar to itself, delving into a tension between strangeness and recognition, between an apparently anodyne visibility that emerges from the automatism of photography in its relation to the everyday and the contexts of meaning that underlie our relationship with objects, gestures, and commonplace milieus, especially urban ones. Following Benjamin's various considerations on the optical unconscious, one understands that photography's potential has less to do with a mere disruption of habits and more to do with the possibility of "investigating in photography the everyday or the habitual as something that is natural to us, or as the natural dimension of the human form of life."<sup>44</sup> This raises the issue of image and reality and, consequently, of the profound but ambivalent relationship between the aesthetic consequences of the photographic reality of walking and its meaning for an aesthetics of the ordinary. More precisely, the representation of walking is one way (among others) of accessing and studying the ordinary – a way that subtly blurs the line between the unconscious and the everyday, between the extraordinary and the ordinary, between the uncanny and the wonderful.

## 5 Notes on Everydayness and Ambiguity

Insofar as they deal with a field of tensions and latent disruptions, theoretical and experiential approaches to the everyday and ordinary often lead to paradoxes. One of these is the paradox of defamiliarisation, which is at the core of recent discussions on the aesthetics of everyday life. According to Yuriko Sayto, "to experience

<sup>40</sup> Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 266 (translation modified).

<sup>41</sup> de Baecque, *Une histoire de la marche*, 26–35.

<sup>42</sup> It is worth recalling a part of this note, as it paints a strong *image* of what is at stake in both Friedlander's discussion and the tensions analysed here: "Nothing could be more remarkable than seeing someone who thinks himself unobserved engaged in some quite simple everyday activity. Let's imagine a theatre, the curtain goes up and we see someone alone in his room walking up and down, lighting a cigarette, seating *himself* etc. so that suddenly we are observing a human being from outside in a way that ordinarily we can never observe ourselves; as if we were watching a chapter from a biography with our own eyes, – surely this would be at once uncanny and wonderful" (Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 6e).

<sup>43</sup> Friedlander, "Wittgenstein, Benjamin, and Pure Realism," 125.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

and appreciate the everyday as something standing out is to negate the very everydayness that needs to be captured and appreciated.”<sup>45</sup> In a certain sense, everything we have seen thus far underlies the problematic character of this everydayness; that is, it reveals a certain ambiguity that is constitutive of the everyday as an object of philosophical reflection. It is certainly not by chance that the notion of ambiguity permeates many attempts to understand what the everyday is.<sup>46</sup>

One way to avoid losing this everydayness is to follow phenomenological and descriptive approaches such as Arto Hapaala’s. A second example of his is the experience of arriving in and walking through a city one doesn’t know. In a first moment, one might experience the strangeness of the new place, which yields the need to pay attention and remain alert, as one is not used to the functional aspects of one’s surroundings. With time and the development of habit, one is familiarised with the city, developing the tools to interpret it while integrating the strange surroundings in the familiar sphere.<sup>47</sup> This is an analysis that makes perfect sense in the framework developed by Hapaala – that of not losing sight of the everydayness that seems to slip so easily through our theoretical fingers. Hence, his focus on the notions of home or place. Felski also highlights the importance of notions such as repetition, a sense of home or habit, and as we have seen she also denounces the certain “anti-home” character of modern critical discourse.

But these approaches to everyday life often end up neglecting two other, equally fundamental aspects. First, highlighting the familiar per se can lead to a discourse that is incapable of understanding the different contexts – or, if you like, the different fluxes – of life that form the ordinary. While the descriptive element is fundamental, it may also overlook the contradictions and obscurities of the various threads of daily life, and consequently the possibility of interrupting or disrupting those traits of individual and collective ordinary life that ought to be transformed. Second, isolating everydayness, ripping it out of forms of social, political, and ethical agency, may cause us to lose the ballast we inherited from an already long tradition of reflection on the “practices of everyday life” (to recover a title from Michel de Certeau).<sup>48</sup> Symptomatically, and despite Rita Felski’s insightful reflections in her abovementioned article, according to it, even influential works like de Certeau’s end up neglecting the everydayness of the everyday, as well as the recognition of the pedestrian’s everyday trajectories as acts of subversion and resistance to the different normative powers that structure urban and social space. In its attempt to counter the attitude of suspicion that characterises modernity, Felski’s approach may induce a disregard for the dimension of freedom and agency that is intrinsic to the ordinary (a dimension that is already a corrective, by means of the micro-powers of the ordinary, to Michel Foucault’s understanding of the society of control).

If we concede that everydayness is located between routine and agency, we can more easily accept that the descriptive elements should at least be counterbalanced by the in-between character of ordinary objects and phenomena, and in particular that of walking. Unfolding temporally, everydayness is not a stable backdrop; it has a certain porosity, an ambiguity that allows for the interplay of subtle dispositions such as letting oneself go and paying attention. Because it involves movement and change in a social and conflictual space, the practice of walking in a city has a complexity that demands not only descriptive elements (showing what life is like) but also gestures of disruption and defamiliarisation (which can create space for other possibilities of

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<sup>45</sup> Saito, *Aesthetics of the Familiar*, 21. There has already been substantial debate on this question, to which Saito contributes by discussing, for example, Leddy’s *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary* and “The Nature of Everyday Aesthetics;” and Carlson’s, “The Dilemma of Everyday Aesthetics.” I will not go into this debate in depth, but I hope that the focus on walking and the discussion of the aforementioned aesthetic and artistic examples will help us not only to better circumscribe the components of this dilemma within debates on everyday aesthetics but also to understand how the dilemma works productively within artistic reworkings of the everyday.

<sup>46</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht proposes a relationship between defamiliarisation, strangeness, and Paul Valéry’s notion of “ambiguous object” (Gumbrecht, “Aesthetic Experience in Everyday Worlds,” 308). Ben Highmore, in turn, tries to establish his social aesthetics by integrating routine without its being hindered in advance by value judgements or by a denunciation of its alienating character. According to this perspective, it is necessary to attend to and draw the necessary consequences from the ambiguous complexity of the everyday (Highmore, “Homework”).

<sup>47</sup> Hapaala, “On the Aesthetics of the Everyday,” 43–4.

<sup>48</sup> de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

living) – not only artistic gestures, but all those that have the potential to explore thresholds and bring greater awareness to the aesthetic, social, and political individuals who walk through the ordinary.

## 6 Last Steps

The previous sections were an attempt to circumscribe several approaches to walking as a means to understanding its aesthetic strength, not only from the perspective of art but also from the perspective of a series of tensions and disruptions that can be helpful for drawing the scope and limits of an aesthetics of the ordinary.

Our initial focus was on the description of some of the physiological and aesthetic conditions of walking and how even at a very basic level its simplicity and automatisms are already marked by disruptive factors, which likewise are able to affect our connection to our surroundings. A further tension comes about in terms of the relationship between home (understood as a space of familiarity, protection, and the expression of personality) and the actions and movements of experiencing the streets and the boundaries of space. Through them, familiarity may give way to strangeness, and the expression of personality may give way to anonymity. As a form of experimentation or spatial expansion, this touches upon the nomadic, transhuman, or transurban aspect that is constitutive of both our relationship with everyday space and the artistic practices that play with it. In this sense, we have also seen how aesthetic and artistic practices that use walking as part of their procedures often end up in an interstitial zone: exploring, for instance, the everyday through the subversion of some of its routines or delving into the ordinary to bring out its extraordinary or uncanny aspects. This is also linked to the possibility of diving into everyday images, of using technological tools as forms of recording and disseminating daily gestures or means that are combined with walking as an aesthetic practice (today, with the proliferation of photography and video through the use of increasingly accessible devices and social media, these possibilities and uses permeate the ordinary completely).

The path followed throughout the different sections of this article converges in the acknowledgement that the ordinary is above all an intersection between evidence and mystery, between the familiar and the strange.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps more important than distinguishing the notion of the ordinary from the notion of the everyday is understanding the tasks that are demanded by this unstable framework. After all, as Cavell put it when commenting on Thoreau's experiments with the present: "grasping a day, accepting the everyday, the ordinary, is not a given but a task."<sup>50</sup> On the one hand, the ordinary shares with the everyday the dimension of the immediately given, which is intrinsic to our forms of life; on the other hand, if observed in the light of walking, this immediately given reveals itself as a field of tensions and disruptions that permeate not only daily life but aesthetic practices and artistic experimentations. Within this framework of the in-between, this article is an attempt to trace some of the coordinates – not in an exhaustive way, of course – of several productive tensions. In this sense, walking, particularly in urban space, raises difficult but important questions for traditional aesthetic categories. Within this context, we can no longer speak strictly of an artistic object that is understood as such because it stands out from everyday life. Implying an action rooted in the body, it summons up a sense of aesthetics that goes beyond its reduction to the field of the artistic, and at the same time this field can be enlarged by a crucial bond with certain forms of life and their ordinary character. In this sense, the article is an attempt to bridge the gap between forms of life and aesthetic and artistic practices. The way in which the latter explore tensions and disruptions in relation to walking has an intimate connection with the picture drawn in the first section of this article: that is, walking itself, as an ordinary element of our life, is an unstable stabilisation, an unconsciousness that sometimes becomes awareness, an immersive action that knows sudden interruptions, a way of repeating paths that also implies detours and discoveries. In the end, repetition and detours are complementary ways of revealing aspects of what is going on both around us and within ourselves.

<sup>49</sup> Fasula and Laugier, "Presentation," 5.

<sup>50</sup> Cavell, "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary," 171.

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