

Chapter 4

The construction of fitness environments - the case of NordicTrack

Introduction

Total mobilization and motorization *have always been two sides of the same coin in the race for biological and technological supremacy*¹.

Paul Virilio, *The Art of the Motor* (1995: 153).

The previous chapter discussed the broader political-economic and cultural forces which have tended to increase the individualization of the responsibility to manage, maintain, and indeed increase the performance of oneself through practices aimed at improving and reconstructing the body. This chapter illustrates how, within this context, a corporation such as NordicTrack attempts to construct particular types of fitness environments. I argue that NordicTrack mobilizes a number of key actors in order to construct these environments. In particular, I examine how NordicTrack mobilizes ideal models of bodily fitness, fitness technologies, embodied consumer subjects, and the authoritative discourse of science, thereby illustrating that NordicTrack acts as a center of translation, an “obligatory passage point”² through which these actors are mobilized. This leads to the construction of fitness environments that are intelligible and inhabitable by consumer subjects seeking to minimize risk and enhance flexibility through management of the embodied self.

While reference is made to a number of fitness machine manufacturers in this chapter there is a particular focus upon NordicTrack. Currently, NordicTrack is the most successful and certainly the most widely known manufacturer and marketer of home fitness equipment. It is one of two trading names under which the products of CML Corporation are marketed and sold.³ CML states that its corporate mission is the creation of “products that enhance people’s health, understanding of the natural world, and sense of well being” (NordicTrack, 1997). The natural world that CML hopes to facilitate greater consumer understanding of refers to both the natural “outdoors”, and the natural individual consumer body. Together, the products designed and marketed by the two companies owned by CML attempt to appeal to lifestyle management, to the ability of the discerning consumer to manage their environment through the purchase and effective utilization of commodities designed to suit “their needs” (NordicTrack, 1997).

The latter component of the consumer’s natural world, the natural body, is catered for by the products of NordicTrack which designs, manufactures, and sells proprietary exercise products that provide total “wellness at home”.⁴ According to NordicTrack, “a prime concern of today’s

¹ Emphasis in the original.

² See Callon et. al (1986: xvii).

³ The other, Smith and Hawken “offers fine gardening tools and supplies: work wear, outdoor, furniture, plants, bulbs and seeds: and gifts inspired by the garden” (NordicTrack, 1997).

⁴ NordicTrack is headquartered in Chaska Minnesota. Approximately 90% of its products are manufactured in the USA at Belle Plaine and Glencoe, Minnesota. At peak, these facilities can produce 3000 exercisers a day. The company also operates a distribution center in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. It also sells fitness equipment to fitness facilities and health clubs (NordicTrack, 1997).

consumer is understanding and maintaining the basics of a healthy lifestyle”. This is because, as its web-site goes on to suggest, “in recent years, fitness has become a household word. It is associated with looking better, feeling healthier and having more energy” (NordicTrack, 1997).

Mobilizing bodies

As noted above, the contemporary consumer faces a range of pressures and risks which make the body a much riskier space, potentially unfit due to increasingly sedentary lifestyles, and threatened by increasingly fast and flexible socioeconomic conditions. In order to be able to survive in an increasingly competitive world, the consumer subject must be fit, flexible, and as unsusceptible as possible to these potentially immobilizing risks. The task then of the manufacturers of fitness equipment is to provide a model of the body which offers a solution to those fears and uncertainties.

In this context fitness machine manufacturers must mobilize models of bodily fitness that appeal to consumer subjects. This can be seen in the case of NordicTrack. It mobilizes the unfit, high risk body, a body which has been scientifically identified. Thus,

The recent Surgeon General’s Report on Physical Activity and health confirms what many of us had suspected for years: sedentary lifestyles lead to poor health, and a greater risk for serious health problems (NordicTrack, 1997).

To avoid embodying such risk, one must therefore become an actively responsible individual, one who is able to “gain control of his or her own weight for life”, especially because the same Surgeon General’s report is “now stressing the importance of ‘staying active’ to increase life expectancy, prolong independence and make our lives productive” (NordicTrack, 1997). Becoming independently and productively fit then becomes a matter of subjecting the body to a range of exercise regimes. The heart, according to NordicTrack, is the most important, and thus the most responsible element, in the quest of improving one’s fitness. It should therefore be strengthened through cardiovascular workouts because one’s “ability to enjoy a full life depends on how well your heart and circulatory system supply oxygen and vital nutrients to all organs and muscles of your body” (NordicTrack, 1997).

The heart then becomes the center of bodily responsibility for what NordicTrack calls “balanced fitness”. According to NordicTrack’s corporate web-site, while “Aerobic endurance is an essential component of health...flexibility and muscular strength/endurance are of equal importance. Only through adequate fitness in all 3 of these components will you attain balanced fitness and optimal health” (NordicTrack, 1997). This model of balanced fitness is continually mobilized by NordicTrack as the ideal that consumers should strive for through the purchase and use of its fitness products.

However, this model of physiological fitness is connected to another ideal body type mobilized by NordicTrack, that of the Nordic Body, which discursively envelopes the model of the physiologically fit body. The ideal of the Nordic Body has long served as a structuring image

for ideals of health and fitness. Boscagli (1996) has examined this issue in the context of an analysis of the inter-related rise of new fashions of masculine corporeality and forms of modern mass consumption in the early decades of twentieth century European culture. She argues that at this time a new modern masculinity emerged which signified vitalism, muscularity, and renovation. This model of masculinity “found its structuring trope in the corporeality of the Nietzschean superman” which provided an image of “the body as the site of spontaneous naturalness and authenticity for the individual” (2, 77). In this way,

the blond beast of prey was turned into a very successful popular icon and became marketable: his qualities of strength and manliness, and above all a strategically displayed and contained wildness, became part of the imaginary of masses of people by circulating in advertisements and in popular performances such as that of the gymnast and the strongman in the music hall, in the circus, and soon, in the cinema (77).

Through the emergence of this flagrant corporeality, “the western male subject was deftly inserted into the new circuits of commodity culture and consumer desire” (1).

Figure 4.1: Photo of Arnold Schwarzenegger from cover of *Vanity Fair* (June 1997).

Such bodily myths are present in contemporary consumer culture. The photograph of Arnold Schwarzenegger which graced the cover of the June 1997 issue of *Vanity Fair* clearly illustrates this. In this photo Schwarzenegger stands against the backdrop of snow-covered landscapes. He is dressed simply, in black and white, the purity of his clothing combining with the purity of the landscape behind him to suggest the purity of his hard, taught Nietzschean form.⁵ Additionally, and extremely significantly for this study, he is equipped with skiing equipment, standing ready to take on the challenges of the terrain around him.

I want to suggest here that the structuring tropes of the fit Nietzschean and Nordic body situated within a pure, natural landscape are continuously present and mobilized in the advertising of NordicTrack as part of what give commodities such as NordicTrack fitness machines their intelligibility. This is because “complex geographical lores..are partly constitutive of the sociospatial lives of commodified things and experiences” and concern “where these things and experiences come from (constructions of origin), how they got to us (constructions of travel), and appropriate contexts of involvement with them (constructions of usage)” (Crang, 1996:631).⁶ The fact that commodified technologies such as fitness machines are constituted in part by such geographical lores is evident in the images in figure 4.2 below, which are taken from the NordicTrack web-site. The myth of the Nordic body is visible in these images, images that are typical of the type of bodily posture displayed in the advertisements of NordicTrack ski-machines. This bodily posture is uncannily similar to that of the Nietzschean superman striding confidently forward with arms outstretched. Such images are just one of the ways that “myths are appropriated by corporate groups and state agencies to promote their organizational interests in advertising or publicity as the personal needs of their consumers and clients” (Luke, 1989: 26). In a situation where all certainty and security is disappearing, being able to commodify and mobilize myths such as the hard, solid, and concrete corporeality of the Nordic body, is particularly useful. All the better if, as is the case of the NordicTrack skier, this myth situates those who seek to attain its form, in a pure, white, untainted, and natural landscape.

⁵ The same issue carried an article about Schwarzenegger. In this article there was an attempt made to disassociate the actor’s appeal from “fascinating fascism”. According to *Vanity Fair*, “there’s no need to be squeamish. Schwarzeneggers’ alpine determination and solo quest for greatness, his interest in skiing and climbing are in the classic tradition of German Romanticism” (124).

⁶ Here Crang is drawing upon Appadurai (1986).

Figure 4.2: NordicTrack and Nietzsche.

However, there is a difference between the spaces in which the types of bodies produced under the sign of the Nordic body in the early decades of this century and the spaces of those that are produced under this sign today. The earlier body produced under this sign was fashioned in disciplinary environments where the new leisure time accompanying the Taylorist organization of labor was consumed. These environments where the body could ‘be itself’ included the rambler’s and cyclist’s country-side, the beach, the newly invented holiday camp - and the gymnasium and football field” (Boscagli, 1996:64). In these sites, the rationalization and discipline of the workplace spilled over into leisure time and the modern embodied male subject, now more comfortable with its corporeality, began practicing a whole host of body maintaining and rejuvenating technologies including sports, sunbathing, hiking, nudism and vegetarianism (Boscagli, 1996).

At the same time, the Nietzschean representation of the male body was also to be found within movements such as the Boy Scouts, the goal of which “was to produce the best, most efficient, and disciplined male body for the nation” (Boscagli, 1996: 85). As Matless (1995:111) notes, the scouting movement was part of a broader vision of an “orderly fit new walking England, body and landscape in functional harmony, moving well together”, as part of an “art of right living”. The point that I am seeking to make here is that this Nietzschean corporeal ideal was situated within a larger social, political, and national body, which was to be more efficiently mobilized through the mobilization of the individual body in spaces of collective exercise.

However, as noted in the previous chapter, within liberal societies such collective responsibility to improve the health of the nation has largely been replaced by an individualization of the responsibility to become fit, for the sake of one’s own ability to be a fit consumer and employee. Thus the contemporary body produced under the sign of the Nordic body is produced in an increasingly solitary fashion, in the space of the homes occupied by consumers working out with NordicTrack fitness equipment. This contemporary “art of right living” is an increasingly individualized one, involving self-government through machinic engagement with the commodities offered by corporations such as NordicTrack in one’s own personal exercise space.

NordicTrack thus mobilizes a number of ideal models of the body in order to appeal to consumers, these models becoming “the body that you have always wanted”. These models of the body are themselves actors in that they are made to “speak” to consumers, and their mobilization as actors in the networks translated by NordicTrack is central to the constitution of particular types of fitness environments.

Mobilizing technologies

By mobilizing models of the body, NordicTrack is attempting to act as spokesperson for these bodies, seeking to faithfully represent them in the design of particular fitness technologies, technologies which are then enrolled as actors in the networks that NordicTrack is translating.

The book *Sports and Fitness Equipment Design*, illustrates the way in which the body is incorporated into the design of fitness machines, suggesting that “an understanding of the way the body works, an appreciation of the quality of materials used in the making of sports equipment, and a knowledge of mechanical concepts related to the use of that equipment will lead to constructive advice to clientele and informed choices for users of all abilities”. According to this same book, the perspective of the designer of fitness equipment incorporates three design elements; biomechanics, anthropometrics, and aesthetics. Importantly, from this perspective, the definition of biomechanics is expanded to include not just the body, but also fitness equipment. Accordingly, “biomechanics includes the mechanics of materials used in the equipment, the mechanical properties of the equipment, and the biomechanics of equipment use, including the physical characteristics of the user”. Incorporated into this design process is “anthropometrics, the study of sizes, shapes, weights, and proportions of the human body and its segments. The use of anthropometric parameters by the designer of sports equipment helps to establish the variety of sizes, shapes, and proportions needed to fit different parts of the human body” (Kreighbaum, 1996:xi).

Clearly, from the perspective of the fitness equipment designer, the body is something to be precisely broken down, segmented, and each of its individual parts mapped in order that it may be more truthfully represented in the design of fitness machines. By doing this, the body can be best represented, and can therefore be a better actor in the networks that fitness corporations seek to construct. A recent example of the designer taking the “proper” perspective of the body is provided by the fitness equipment manufacturer Trottor, whose

engineers went beyond conventional wisdom and looked at strength equipment from a whole new perspective: the human body’s. The result is a new generation of equipment which precisely matches each machine to body movement.⁷

This quote is especially noteworthy because it appeals to the ability of engineers to “reveal” the perspective of the human body. It claims the perspective of the human body, its natural, value-free position has been objectively mobilized by the equipment engineers. It is as if by adopting this perspective, the engineers represent themselves as being able to adopt the position of the natural body. In another advertisement therefore, the same manufacturer states that “the human body showed how strength training equipment should work” (See figure 4.3).

⁷ From an advertisement in *Fitness Management*, January 1996.

Figure 4.3: Advertisement for Trottor Fitness Equipment which appeared in the issue of *Fitness Management*, (June, 1995:19).

Adopting the perspective, attempting to speak for, and thus attempting to enroll the “natural” biophysical body, is also evident in the design of NordicTrack equipment. Recently, NordicTrack introduced its “Leg Shaper”. The product, endorsed by Linda Evans, “was designed exclusively with a woman’s body in mind, to reshape hips, buttocks, legs and upper arms. According to its web-page, NordicTrack (1997) understands

that women get out of shape and put on weight differently than men do. And we believe that exercise doesn’t have to be difficult, to be effective. That’s why we developed the Linda Evan’s Leg-Shaper Plus especially for women. It’s the first machine of its kind to target a woman’s problem areas, while providing an easy, safe, aerobic workout for total-body fitness.

In this way, NordicTrack is attempting to speak for the body of the older female in the design of this particular piece of equipment.

Importantly, the Leg-Shaper is a flexible and adaptable piece of fitness equipment, and NordicTrack claim that it “adjusts to fit everyone in your home.” Flexible, and adaptable fitness equipment, marketed as able to fit any body and enable that body to achieve total body fitness is increasingly important in the design and marketing strategies of NordicTrack. In marketing its new NordicRider for instance, NordicTrack claim that by using it “now, Any Body can be Fit” (NordicTrack, 1997). The importance of flexibility and adaptability is also evident in the marketing discourse that surrounded the introduction of the NordicTrack CTX cross-trainer, designed to offer the consumer “all the benefits of balanced fitness”

by combining the three most important elements of fitness, aerobics, flexibility, and muscle conditioning] the CTX offers you a highly efficient and effective way to exercise. You get three complete total-body workouts - which experts say is essential for a Balanced Fitness conditioning program. Your body will reshape, define, look leaner and firmer as with no ordinary rider. With sensible eating, you can feel better than ever, and achieve your fitness goals on just one machine (NordicTrack, 1997).

NordicTrack then, as spokesperson for the ideally fit body, seeks to mobilize technologies that offer the consumer the ability to obtain total body conditioning.

These technologies are marketed by appealing to their ability to allow the individual consumer to self-mobilize, and therefore be in a position to develop all their resources and productive potential as fit consumer subjects. NordicTrack however, claims to understand that the individual consumer subject needs a little help in successfully self-mobilizing. Accordingly, the fitness machines manufactured and marketed by NordicTrack embody self-motivational and self-disciplining technologies. For instance, “the state-of-the-art technology” that is built into the ProPlus NordicTrack skier includes a 5-window “motivational electronic workout monitor” that lets you get

instant feedback of calories burned, speed, distance(both miles and kilometers per hour and elapsed time to chart your progress and stay motivated. “At-a-glance” readouts give you all the information you need to focus on reaching your ultimate fitness goals (NordicTrack, 1997).

Combining such self-motivational technologies within larger fitness technologies NordicTrack is attempting to mobilize the self-mobilizing consumer subject. In other words NordicTrack, is positing itself as the best representative, or spokesperson, for the best combination of body and machine as part of its effort to map consumer bodies onto commodified fitness machines. This is clearly evident in figure 4.4. Both the ideal fitness technology - streamlined, ergonomically designed, adjustable, customizable, quiet, smooth, stable, and complete with electronic motivational aids - and the ideal body - similarly streamlined, but also firm, well-defined, trimmed, sculpted, sleek, and piloted by a relaxed and in control mind - are visible. While they are kept at a distance in this image, the message is that they work much better together, that each is constitutive of the ideal design of the other. Through the representations in such advertisements, NordicTrack is attempting to speak for and represent ideal human-machinic exercising assemblages, attempting to fit bodies and machines together in the most meaningful way.

Figure 4.4: Advertisement featuring streamlined NordicTrack bodies which appeared in *Health*, (April, 1997: 37).

Mobilizing consumers

The representation of “things” in this way by a corporation such as NordicTrack is only part of the process of translation. NordicTrack must also mobilize the individual consumer subject as an actor within the networks that it is continually engaged in efforts to construct. It does so in a number of ways, the first of these being the attempt to mobilize the “true” needs of consumers. In order to do this it employs methods such as focus groups and questionnaires, as well as regular meetings with sales and customer service associates”. These methods are part of the NordicTrack’s and CML’s “customer loop” the main objective of which “is to stay in close contact with our customer in order to create value at each stage of the CML Customer Loop by effectively identifying their needs” (NordicTrack, 1997). Such marketing tactics are by no means unique to a corporation such as CML. But it is important to draw attention to them because in the process of conducting such research, NordicTrack, as one of the CML companies, is effectively attempting to mobilize consumer “needs” as actors in the construction of those networks which constitute environments of fitness, even if those needs are generated by the very advertising practices and organizational structures of companies such as NordicTrack. Indeed, the information being mobilized by these companies is “co-produced” in the focus-groups and questionnaires employed by CML. This information in turn is also part of the larger informational resources that a company such as CML can access, resources made up of “data banks and data bases that combine more and more variables to identify and classify targeted groups according to common characteristics” (Mattelart, 1994:215). The co-production of such data at sites including point of sale information and focus groups is part of what constitutes and makes possible the governmentalization of hybrid networks of human and machines.

However, the consumers whose “needs” CML seeks to identify are quite selective. They are, according to CML “well-educated, affluent” and “share an active interest in home fitness and gardening products that enhance their own and their family’s well-being and enjoyment of life. The typical age range of the NordicTrack and Smith & Hawken customer is 35-54 which represents one of the fastest growing age segments in the US” (NordicTrack, 1997). By targeting those consumers who share an “active interest in home-fitness” and well being, CML companies are appealing to those who have the financial, but also the informational (in terms of the knowledge about the dangers of sedentary living etc.) resources to enable them to purchase “lifestyle management commodities”. Through this selectivity NordicTrack is primarily targeting fit consumers, individuals who already possess the necessary financial resources to become actively responsible individuals.

Having identified the “needs” of consumers and designed the products which satisfy these needs, NordicTrack then mobilizes a range of means by which the individual consumer can purchase the commodified technologies that will enable them to become fit. For most of its existence since 1975, NordicTrack has relied most heavily on mail order sales, through advertising on TV, in magazines and catalogs and accepting orders by mail or phone. This still remains extremely important and during 1996 Smith and Hawken and NordicTrack mailed over 30 million catalogs. Additionally, during the same years NordicTrack invested \$70 million in advertising and its telemarketers responded to over 1 million telephone calls (NordicTrack, 1997).

However, NordicTrack realized at the end of the 1990's that this direct response marketing strategy was not sufficient to capture the maximum market share. As a result,

after 15 years of meeting the fitness needs of consumers, NordicTrack recognized that hands on trial was becoming one of the most important factors in choosing equipment for a successful fitness program. In order to reach out to the places that its consumers work and play, NordicTrack began a retail operation designed to put fitness within the grasp of the average American (NordicTrack, 1997).

It opened its first store in 1990 in Arlington, Virginia. It is now the largest fitness specialty retail chain in the US with over 300 stores, kiosks, and factor direct sites. The sales performance of these NordicTrack stores is among the highest in the retail industry with an average of \$1000 per square foot (NordicTrack, 1997).

More recently NordicTrack has expanded its marketing strategy by establishing a web-presence. Customers can browse and view products and then purchase these by using virtual shopping baskets. This virtual-presence is closely linked to the "real" retail network owned and operated by NordicTrack because its web-site is equipped with a finder which enables the Internet browser to search for the nearest NordicTrack store within a 75 mile radius of their own "real" location (NordicTrack, 1997).

Clearly, NordicTrack offers potential customers this range of spaces of consumption to enable them to "body-shop" in as many ways as possible. The range of these, as elements in NordicTrack's "customer loop", are necessary in order to provide customers "with the convenience of purchasing CML products in a manner most suitable to their schedules or preferences"(NordicTrack, 1997).

Importantly, while there is much being made about the move to virtual shopping, NordicTrack's offering of real spaces of consumption suggests that "hands-on" experience of technologies is still important for consumers. Rather than the decline of "real" spaces of consumption, which evidently is not the case with NordicTrack, or the inevitable domination of "virtual" spaces of consumption, it may be better to think of a situation where spaces of consumption are increasingly diverse and, combined within the context of a corporation such as NordicTrack, these "real" and "virtual" spaces complement and reinforce each other, with the ultimate aim of mobilizing embodied consumer subjects within the networks that NordicTrack is seeking to establish.

NordicTrack is also attempting to extend these networks. Up until 1996 the company had retail operations in the USA, Canada, the UK, and Germany. In the latter three countries the retail outlets are located in large urban centers - Germany (Cologne and Berlin), Canada (Edmonton, Calgary, Winnipeg, Toronto), UK (Harrods and Surrey). Its European distribution

network was expanded in 1996 when NordicVision was founded to distribute NordicTrack products throughout Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland.

Additionally, in order to expand export sales, NordicTrack has contracted a number of corporations to distribute its products within certain regional markets. In the Philippines, Finix, a member of the Asian trading house Techno-holdings, was contracted to distribute cross-country ski-machines and treadmills while Dyna-Force has been contracted to distribute NordicTrack's industrial cross-country ski-machines to health clubs and medical facilities in Brunei. Singapore Health equipment suppliers organizes retail distribution in Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Additionally, in 1996, NordicTrack set up a partnership with International Business Management Incorporated (IBMI) to develop a distribution network in South America (Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Columbia, Venezuela) and the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, U.A.E, Kuwait, Israel, and Egypt" (NordicTrack, 1997).

By developing these marketing and distribution partnerships, NordicTrack is attempting to enroll embodied consumer subjects across the globe into the actor-networks that it seeks to build. This is an example of acting at a distance, where a center of translation like NordicTrack mobilizes a range of additional actors (retailers, distributors etc.) in order to extend hybrid networks. The consumers that do become enrolled in these networks become part of commoditiescapes that are simultaneously local and global, in that they are all local nodes on networks that are increasingly global in reach.

Mobilizing families

In many cases consumers do not live alone but with a number of other individuals as part of a family. When marketing fitness equipment it makes sense then for a corporation like NordicTrack to mobilize as many of these individuals as possible. To encourage this NordicTrack introduced its *Family Fitness and Healthy Lifestyle Campaign* in 1995. According to its web-site,

The recent Surgeon General's Report on Physical Activity and Health confirms what many of us had suspected for years: sedentary lifestyles lead to poor health, and greater risk for serious health problems. Now more than ever, it is important for all of us to not only exercise for ourselves, but to come together as active and fit families. It takes dedication, but there's nothing like teamwork to get something done. Families make the best coaches and training partners, and if we can all learn to work together for enhanced fitness, we can achieve great things (NordicTrack, 1997).

In October 1995, as part of this campaign, NordicTrack began airing infomercials featuring the former world number 1 women's tennis player, Chris Evert, and her husband, Andy Mill, a former U.S. National Downhill Champion skier, who together promoted NordicTrack's Plus Series Skiers. Additionally, as part of this campaign, NordicTrack offered the *Family Fitness and Healthy Lifestyle Forum* as a resource for families who wish to improve their health. This forum

includes “health and medical facts about the benefits of living well, and the risks associated with inactivity”. By including this, NordicTrack attempts to appeal to the ideal of the risk-free, fit family working out together.

It is in the interests of corporations such as NordicTrack to promote fit families because the family is a good place where “fitness habits” can be learned. Accordingly,

most health experts agree that an adult needs roughly 30 minutes of moderate physical activity a day, and by exercising with our children, we set a good example, teaching them habits that they may continue into their own adult lives (NordicTrack, 1997)

In this view the home is possibly the best place to develop individuals who are impelled by the imperative to be fit consumers. As Luke (1989:100) notes, one can sell one “toaster, to mom, pop, sis, and junior as a family unit, or one can sell on each to separated mom, swinging pop, single sis, and independent junior and his college roommates”. In the case of NordicTrack, the development of embodied self-reconstruction techniques means that parents can become coaches for children, encouraging them to develop patterns that make the future production of fitness environments more likely. Selling only one NordicTrack to each actively responsible family unit is acceptable insofar as that it may be a better long term investment in the training all members of that family to adopt habits that require the purchase and use of commodities such as those supplied by NordicTrack.

Such family fitness campaigns are further evidence of the individualization of the responsibility to be fit, consistent with a model of personal autonomy “involving responsibility for oneself and also for the care and the behaviour of a few select others - who are accordingly regarded as less than fully autonomous” (Hindess, 1996:65). It also resonates well with what “the conception of the citizen as a satisfied customer is all about”, a conception in which one should “leave decisions to the ones in the know, and they will take care of your well-being. As to yourself, take care of things close to your home: preserve family values” (Bauman, 1995:286).

Mobilizing science

The “ones in the know” mentioned above are those experts who claim to most faithfully and truthfully represent ideal models of fitness. *NordicTrack’s Family Fitness and Healthy Lifestyle Forum* thus states that “of course, health and fitness experts can give more detailed health and medical information, so we’ve included a selection of links to some of the most reputable experts and institutions in the field” (NordicTrack, 1997). Included were links to the text of the Surgeon General’s Report on Physical Activity and Health, as well as the American College of Sports Medicine, the American Heart Association, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity, and the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports.

By referring to what it calls “some of the most reputable experts and institutions in these fields”, NordicTrack mobilizes, or at least attempts to mobilize scientific authority. This is part

of a broader effort to continually appeal to the authority of scientific and engineering expertise, which, as the previous chapters have illustrated, are extremely important in the marketing of technologies designed to improve the health and performance of the body.⁸ It may only be advertising hyperbole, but it is nevertheless important in the effort to differentiate the scientifically legitimated quality of NordicTrack products from the myriad others that are available on the market. For instance, NordicTrack is eager to point out that its

professional staff of exercise physiologists and engineers work together to assure fitness products have superior quality and exhibit long lasting performance. training programs are updated annually, incorporating the latest innovations and research in fitness and physiology; and engineers and designers from around the world continually reassess product attributes to insure professional fitness standards are being met (NordicTrack, 1997).⁹

Nordic Track has also been careful to mobilize and enroll key figures in the fields of exercise and fitness physiological science, the most important of these being Kenneth Cooper who is popularly known as “the father of Aerobics”. Cooper emerged in the 1960’s as a “guru of exercise” who

developed measurable standards of ideal conditioning, thereby giving fitness the illusion of resting on proven experimentation. Unlike earlier apostles of fitness, Cooper insisted that only exceptionally strenuous activities, such as jogging, running, racquetball, cycling, or swimming raised the pulse rate to sustained levels adequate for one to become what he called ‘aerobically fit’. Only then could the exerciser gain significant cardiovascular benefits (Nader, 1991:258).

Cooper is author of numerous books on health and fitness (e.g. Cooper, 1968) and is regularly referred to in popular media discourse about these subjects. For instance, in the April 1985 issue of *Ladies Home Journal*, Cooper, as “the doctor who started the fitness revolution”, was featured and offered the readers of this magazine a “health and fitness guide - a special exercise program just for you”. It is easy then to see why NordicTrack also regularly appeal to his authority in their marketing. For instance,

of the 31 activities that qualify as aerobic, cross country skiing is the best, states Dr. Kenneth Cooper, founder of the Institute of Aerobic Research in Dallas, Texas and

⁸ This also extends to NordicTrack’s retail operations. Notions of expertise are mobilized at these stores. “Each NordicTrack store is staffed with trained fitness consultants. All NordicTrack fitness consultants undergo the extensive NordicTrack Fitness Consultant Certification Program which provides training on Physiology as it relates to the specific benefits to NordicTrack products. The training program gives fitness consultants the ability to successfully tailor a fitness program to match each customer’s needs and goals” (NordicTrack, 1997).

⁹ NordicTrack’s web-page also has an “inventor hotline” which states that “we’re looking for new, exciting, unique, patented, or patent pending health and fitness products”.

known nationwide as the “Father of Aerobics”. “It involves the arms and legs to give you synergistic effect: one plus one equals three. Any time you can combine the arms and legs you get more benefit over the shorter period of time. That’s why cross-skiing is the single best aerobic exercise. everyone can go out and cross country ski. But you can use a NordicTrack. It so effectively simulates cross-country skiing that the results are virtually the same (NordicTrack, 1997).

However, as noted in chapter 3, scientific authority is increasingly contested, and NordicTrack therefore does not have it all its own way when claiming to most scientifically and therefore most truthfully represent models of bodily and machinic fitness. A study reported in the May 8 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, which carried an article about the relative benefits of different indoor exercisers, is illustrative of this. The study sought to compare a number of different fitness machines and concluded that of those tested, the treadmill offered a better way to burn calories than the cross-country ski exerciser (Zoni et al, 1996). Manufacturers whose main product was the treadmill were quick to mobilize the results of this study in their advertisements.¹⁰

With its cross country ski-machine (patented as the “World’s Best Aerobic Exerciser”) now relegated to third place by this study, NordicTrack reacted by mobilizing a range of other centers of authority. It’s web-site contained the following message;

just when you thought it was safe to buy a treadmill, noted doctors and other medical professionals rally around the cross-country ski-machine as the best cardiovascular workout over treadmills, steppers, stationary bikes and riders (NordicTrack, 1997).

Those experts that NordicTrack helped “rally around”, in defense of the cross-country ski-machine included the researchers in the Applied Physiology Laboratory at the University of Pittsburgh. The results of a study carried out at this center repositioned the cross country skier as a more effective calorie burner. In order to bolster the position of the NordicTrack skier, the corporation also mobilized the results of other studies, including those at the University of Wisconsin (1994, 1995, 1996), Ergonomic Engineering Inc. Pelham, MA (1994), Lehman College (1995), and University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA (1992), all of which sought to compare the performance of NordicTrack fitness machines with others in their ability to improve a whole range of fitness variables.

Media responses were also quoted by NordicTrack on its web-site, including the following statement;

If you could redo the study by giving all the subjects time to learn how to operate all the different pieces of equipment, especially the NordicTrack cross country skiing machine,

¹⁰ An Advertisement for the Space Saver treadmill did just this, noting that “ a recent study reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that working out on a treadmill burns more calories than any other type of fitness equipment tested”.

you'd probably see different results than what were reported in the media about the Medical college of Wisconsin study," says Dr. Don Corrigan, professor in the Department of Health, Kinesiology, and Leisure Studies at Purdue University in West Lafayette. Don't be misled by the results of just one study. Treadmills burn a lot of calories, but not as many as a cross country ski simulator or other types of total body exercise machines (NordicTrack, 1997).

A similar defense of the cross-country skier appeared in the Winter 1996 issue of *Health and Fitness* which stated that cross country skiing is regarded "as the best thing you can do for your heart. Cross country skiing not only makes you feel better, but it makes you better inside your skin", will "help reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease" and that "few sports or exercises hit as many muscle groups as does Nordic skiing".

From the examples above, it is clear that the ability to appeal to science is particularly important in the effort to make fitness environments meaningful. In order to legitimate the models of exercise that it seeks to provide NordicTrack continually appeals to the authority of science in its advertising, mobilizing it as an actor within the networks it seeks to translate.

Nordic Tracking fitness environments - a modern interpretation.

In this chapter I have sought to outline how NordicTrack seeks to establish itself as a center of translation through which a diverse range of actors, - bodies, technologies, consumers, scientists, engineers, texts, and images - are enrolled and mobilized. It is important to qualify this by stating that NordicTrack is not a clearly bounded, singular actor pulling diverse strands together at a singular pivotal point. Rather, NordicTrack itself is constituted in and through the networks that it seeks to establish but also "acts" as the spokesperson, or representative, of the networks which it translates. Indeed, its advertising discourse explicitly recognizes this in suggesting that,

NordicTrack's focus on consumer-oriented research and development has helped establish the company as a leader poised to enter the 21st century with products that *speak* to many diverse lifestyles (NordicTrack, 1997).

In acting as such a spokesperson, NordicTrack is continually engaged in efforts to construct inhabitable and meaningful home fitness environments, environments which appeal to the imperative of contemporary consumers to reconstruct themselves in a situation of increased socio-economic speed, risk and uncertainty, where the individual can take control of their body-(s)pace through working out with NordicTrack fitness machines. NordicTrack is selling a myth of self-empowerment, through an appeal to the attainment of a body that is on the right track, is fast, flexible and fit, thereby able to cope with life's increasingly complex contingencies.

Thus, the image in figure 4.5 is one that is instantly familiar to even the most casual surfer of contemporary American mediascapes. It is an image that for the most part tends to be

unproblematically read through an apparently sharp lens ground from a number of ontologically pure categories. The human is a live subject while the Nordic-Track is seen as a non-living machinic object. The human is read as an agency-possessing rational actor, part of a technologically sophisticated culture whose mastery over nature is, in this case, manifested in the construction of an inanimate, passive machine, devoid of agency, which can allow its users to overcome the deficiencies of natural bodies, albeit in as “natural” a way as is “technologically” possible. The NordicTrack is presented as a transformer of “body composition”, allowing its users to use their time, energy, and labor to lower fat, build muscle, enhance cardiovascular efficiency, evade depression, and sculpt tissue, in order to become faster, fitter, and more flexible. In such an interpretation, human and machine, nature and culture, and object and subject are safely separated. These types of fitness environments, constructed by corporations such as NordicTrack appear to fit nicely within the framework of the modern constitution.

Figure 4.5: Modern NordicTrack fitness environment.

This constitution, as noted in chapter 2, is based upon the attempt to purify the world through such categories as nature and culture, subject and object. However, as commentators such as Latour and Haraway suggest, perhaps the situation is not as straightforward, and instead involves the proliferation of “things” that are not as ontologically pure as often assumed. Perhaps, if as Bauman (1995:119) suggests, the switch from societally administered surveillance and drill to self-monitoring and self-drilling cancels the distinction between subject and object, between the actor and the object of action”. In the following chapter I employ an amodern interpretation in order to examine how the boundaries of some of these ontologically purified categories may be a little more difficult to position.