

Chapter 1

Introduction

This thesis attempts to problematize and rethink the inter-related construction of the categories of “environment” and “fitness”. It argues that environments are materially and discursively constructed through the mutually constitutive mobilization of networks of human and non-human actors and that these processes increasingly involve the construction of environments configured to the requirements of an ideal of fitness - a fitness defined in terms of risk, flexibility, response-ability, responsibility, mobility, and consumption. In developing this argument particular attention is given to the relations between bodies and technologies as actors constitutive of the networks from which environments are constructed. This rethinking of the construction of fitness environments is facilitated by the analysis of other actors, particularly texts and images, which are mobilized by particularly powerful “centers of translation” so that such centers may speak for, represent, and then potentially sell the most ideal arrangements of humans and non-humans as meaningful fitness environments.

Rethinking environments

Why do categories such as environment and fitness require rethinking? First, the category of environment, a category which in both popular and academic discourse is frequently deployed unproblematically to refer to a monolithic “natural” realm which exists beyond the sphere of “culture”. From this perspective, “the environment” is something clearly distinct and separate from human technological and cultural developments but which nevertheless has been polluted, degraded, and destroyed by these developments. This view, taken to the extreme in some forms of ecological and environmental discourse, often leads to the construction of binary opposites in which the natural environment is viewed as inherently good and benign, and thus existing as something to be protected, while human culture is inherently destructive and bad.

Against this view that the “environment” is something inherently natural, a growing body of critical work has argued that the environment, or environments, are discursively constructed to mean different things in different historical and geographical settings. From such perspectives, the term environment is a slippery and contested concept, deployed in different ways for different ends. As one example of this rethinking, Luke’s (1995:64) Foucauldian influenced reading of the term suggests that “environment” may be thought of as “an encirclement, circumscription, or beleaguerment of places and persons in a strategic disciplinary policing of space”, and “environmental act” as a “disciplining move, aimed at constructing some expanse of space....in a discursive envelope”.

Being critically attentive to the discursive disciplining of spaces in this way does not mean that the “materiality” of these environments is ignored but, rather, that the discursive and material enveloping of spaces as environments are seen as mutually constitutive. Nevertheless, it is increasingly clear that the transformation of the lived experience of space through a myriad of commodified technocultural developments throws the question of what constitutes the “material”

of contemporary environments into sharp relief. In a world where embodied subjects are becoming more and more enmeshed within technological networks and systems of various speeds and sizes does it still make sense to speak of “environments” as spaces founded upon clearly and rigidly divided categories such as subject and object, nature and culture, human and machine? If, as I seek to illustrate in this thesis, it does not, then what sorts of perspectives and categories might be used to frame critical interrogations of the types of contemporary environments, inhabited by, and in part constituted by, embodied subjects?

A number of theorists have begun to provide alternative readings of the ways in which contemporary embodied environments are constituted and constructed, readings which seek to provide categories that might go beyond the sclerotic, blinkering dualisms that inhibit understanding of the ways that such environments are, and have been transforming. Although different in a number of respects, the works of Bruno Latour (e.g. 1993) and Donna Haraway (e.g. 1991, 1997) in particular, share the similar aim of problematizing world-defining categories such as nature and culture, subject and object, human and non-human which together have served to structure much of western political, social, economic, and cultural life since the Enlightenment. For Haraway the crucial figure in the project of blurring these boundaries is the cyborg, a being part human and part machine, both material and metaphorical, through which domination is exercised by the gendered political economies of technoscience, but which is also a figure embodying transformative possibilities. Latour’s work, emerging from within that body of literature which has been labeled as Science and Technology Studies (STS), also opens the doors to strange creatures, hybrid quasi-objects/quasi-subjects, formed of networks which are simultaneously material and discursive, natural and cultural, human and non-human.

The influence of this work is increasingly felt within the discipline of geography. As Matless (1996: 379) notes, its growing impact suggests that “the very notion of what constitutes ‘the material’ [within cultural geography] may be undergoing revision.” While not seeking to mobilize categories such as “cultural geography”, the present thesis is intended as part of this revision, in that it seeks to illustrate that tactically employing the terms of analysis offered by theorists such as Haraway and Latour “could improve our understandings of the built and yet to be built environments in advanced technological economies and societies” (Luke, 1997: forthcoming).

Building upon such work, in this thesis I argue that conceiving of environments as either inherently natural or as merely social constructions is inadequate insofar as both conceptions may fall into the trap of ontological “purification” characteristic of what Bruno Latour (1993) calls the “modern constitution”. This thesis therefore tactically deploys a number of boundary blurring categories in order to argue that environments may be better conceptualized and understood as embodied material and discursive spaces constructed by the governmentality of networks of human and non-human, subject and object, nature and discourse.

Deploying such a perspective does not therefore limit critical inquiry to a focus on “the environment” as it exists in some ideal natural state, as some utopian great outdoors. Rather, in conceiving of environments as hybrid networks, simultaneously natural and cultural, in which

human actors, but also perhaps non-human actors are present, the possibility of critically rethinking the processes involved in the construction of spaces such as the city, region, home, and body is presented.

In arguing for the heuristic utility of such a methodological perspective on the construction of environments I directly engage with the material and discursive construction of the relationships between bodies, technologies, and spaces and how these relationships construct particular types of lived environments. Geographers have engaged to different degrees with questions of technology, and more recently with questions of the body. However, with regard to questions of technology, much of the geographical literature tends to concentrate on the extent to which technologies restructure space on urban, regional, national, and global scales. There is much less evidence of geographers examining “personal” technologies and their mediation of “private” spaces such as the home and the extent to which both are embedded within larger political and discursive economies. With regard to the body, many geographers have begun to direct critical attention towards the questions of the corporeal and corporeality, examining how bodies are discursively and materially constructed, disciplined, identified, and gendered, in particular historical and geographical contexts.¹ Much of this work has been influenced by the writings of Michel Foucault and this study also draws extensively from Foucault’s work because it offers a particularly rich entry point into the complex processes of power involved in the production, disciplining, and governmentality of bodies and embodied subjects in particular spaces, processes made possible by a diverse array of technologies. However, despite the influence that Foucault and others have had within geographically oriented investigations of the intersections of space and corporeality, it is only within the last couple of years that critical attention has been focused upon relationships between bodies and technologies and how these relationships might invite a rethinking of the ways in which environments are constituted and constructed. The present study seeks to contribute to this relatively under-theorized aspect of geographical literature by provisionally deploying perspectives that might facilitate a critical re-imagination of the types of environments characteristic of the late 20th century (Luke, 1997).

Rethinking Fitness

In order to facilitate such an exercise, this thesis examines the processes involved in the construction of what shall be referred to as “fitness environments”. Notions of fitness pervade contemporary American culture. As Cole and Hribar (1995:348) observe,

over the last 15 years, the everyday presences of corporations like Nike, Reebok, and Nautilus have made them into *things*, that play an increasingly influential role in popular politics as they, in their multiple guises, including the firm, tight bodies made under their signatures have captured America’s imagination. Indeed, the contemporary mood in America cannot be understood apart from the exercise equipment, infomercials, sneakers,

¹ For example; Duncan, N (1996), Blunt, A., and Rose, G. (1994), Pile, S. and Thrift, N. (1995), Pile, S. (1996).

spandex, fitness gurus and entrepreneurs constituted by and constitutive of its political and emotional imaginary.²

As this quote suggests, it is not possible to speak of fitness as something that is merely “personal” or merely physiological, but rather as something that must be situated within a broader political economic and cultural context. Accordingly, in this thesis the category of fitness, or “being fit”, will be used to encompass not only scientifically legitimated models of physiological fitness. Fitness will also be taken to include the imperatives, arising out of complex political and discursive economies, to be as risk-free and flexible as possible, to be able to respond (i.e. to possess the “response-ability”) to and fit into increasingly flexible and unstable labor conditions, and to be able to absorb and consume ever greater volumes and intensities of commodified and technologically mediated experiences. Additionally, in speaking of fitness this thesis draws attention to the fact that responsibility to embody this fitness is also increasingly individualized and has become a function of the individual consumer’s ability to purchase the commodities necessary to obsessively engage in ceaselessly repetitive tactics of self-reconstruction, self-management, and self-improvement, tactics which are directed for the most part at the body. This thesis thus seeks to illustrate that “being fit” is a complex, multidimensional, yet increasingly necessary requirement for actively responsible individual consumers in contemporary neo-liberal societies.

Such notions of fitness, as I argue in the chapters that follow, are inscribed in and through the arrangement, organization, construction, and embodiment of particular spaces. More precisely, particular fitness environments are constituted and constructed through the arrangement of networks of humans and non-humans, and thus may be best understood by deploying the boundary-blurring cyborg, hybrid, and amodern categories offered by people such as Haraway and Latour.

In this study the focus is on the ways in which the home is constructed as a particular environment of fitness - a space where the consumer subject is encouraged to engage in tactics of self-management through performing a myriad of practices aimed at improving bodily performance. The choice of the home is function of the availability of empirical data and the constraints of the thesis. The advertising and promotional material concerning the home as a site of technologically aided self-improvement is readily available. Through examining such material and the roles that it plays in the construction of fitness environments I seek to illustrate that the home is materially and discursively constructed as a “body-shop” through the mobilizing of networks of human and non-human actors, the most significant of these being networks of bodies and machines. The home as “body-shop” is situated within circuits of consumption, comprised of “real” and “virtual” environments, which allow the individual consumer - the “home-body-shopper” - to purchase the commodities, such as home fitness machines, necessary to finely tune his or her performance, self-service and supercharge his or her embodied self, and attain a state of ideal bodily fitness. This consumer mobilization is partially achieved through the textual

² Emphasis in the original.

representation of ideal human-machinic fusions in the multi-mediascape marketing strategies of corporations such as NordicTrack, representations that work ceaselessly to give performative force to the identification of the home as an environment for machinically-mediated exercise, self-production, self-discipline, self-reconstruction, and risk-management.

In order to illustrate these points I refer extensively to the case of NordicTrack. NordicTrack is currently one of the most successful corporations seeking to encourage a particular type of “home-body-shopping”, one facilitated by technologically sophisticated and well engineered exercise machines. I illustrate how, through the design and advertising of their home fitness equipment, NordicTrack attempts to map consumer bodies onto commodified technologies with the aim of constructing environments for the home improvement of these bodies. In doing this, NordicTrack is engaged in an effort to construct environments that are meaningful to and inhabitable by consumer subjects seeking technological objects to enable them manage their bodies. In doing this, NordicTrack implicitly appeals to a culturally and geographically specific body type, the healthy and fit Nordic body, located in an ideal, natural, and pure imaginary landscape.

Yet, at the same time as they appeal to the natural biophysical working of the Nordic body by consumer subjects in control of technological objects, thus appealing to the ontologically purified categories of the “modern constitution” (Latour, 1993), the practices of corporations such as NordicTrack are implicated in the construction of much more ambiguous environments which are not adequately described using such categories as “the natural” body, and the technological “object”. In light of this, I seek to argue that NordicTrack acts as a “center of translation” where particular types of fitness environments are produced through the mobilization and governmentality of actor-networks. These networks include the physiologically fit body, the ideal Nordic Body, fitness technologies, the authoritative discourse of technoscience, and consumer bodies.

Such an investigation is important not only for the extent to which it engages with the politics of knowledge within a disciplinary body such as Geography. It is also necessary because it engages with the material and discursive politics surrounding the construction of hegemonic ideals of embodiment. Developing an understanding of how the category of fitness serves to structure the construction of embodied environments is important insofar as it engages with the material and discursive construction of corporeal forms that are produced under the signifier of the “fit body” and thus also the differences between bodies that are intelligible as fit, and those which are marked as unfit. Who defines what bodies are fit and unfit, how is this mediated by technologies, and how is this process registered in the material and discursive construction of embodied environments? This thesis seeks to provide some preliminary answers to these questions. It also seeks to go further by briefly exploring the implications that such preliminary and provisional answers have for the types of political, ethical, and moral communities that critical “observers”, including geographers, might become more (un)comfortably aware of and responsive to.

The structure of the thesis is as follows. In Chapter 2 I engage with the problematic of the relations between bodies, technologies, and spaces in order to begin to rethink how environments are constructed. I begin by critically reviewing theoretical and empirical work, most notably that of Michel Foucault, which suggests that bodies are materially and discursively constructed in and through particular spaces, a process which is embedded within and facilitated by networks of power. After this an attempt is made to engage with some of the existing geographical literature on the body. I then review recent efforts by geographers to deal with questions of technology and its relation to space, moving on to consider how the work of theorists such as Haraway offers the potential of incorporating a consideration of the body into these accounts. In the final section I review work, most importantly that which has been produced within STS, which invites a reconsideration of the way we think about the processes involved in constituting and constructing environments.

Chapter 3 engages with the question of fitness and the political and discursive economies out of which arises a global concept of individual fitness, or of being fit. I illustrate here how fitness does not simply involve scientifically legitimated categories of ideal body size, shape, composition, and performance, but that instead such physiological fitness is embedded within political and discursive economies of risk, flexibility, response-ability, and mobility. Additionally I illustrate that becoming fit involves an individualization of the responsibility, mediated through circuits of consumption both real and virtual, to improve ones body-(s)pace by working out with particular fitness machines. The overall aim of the chapter is to illustrate how the political and discursive economies of fitness inscribe themselves in particular spaces, through the construction of environments formed by the governmentality of networks comprised both of human and non-human actors. To this end, I briefly examine how the home is constructed as a “body-shop”, a space of embodied self-management, self-improvement and self-reconstruction.

In Chapter 4 I focus on the case of NordicTrack, arguing that it functions as what Callon et. al. (1986) term a “center of translation”, which mobilizes, or “enrolls”, networks of actors, both human and non-human, in order to produce meaningful and inhabitable environments. The chapter examines how NordicTrack mobilizes models of fit bodies, well fitting technologies, actively responsible consumer subjects, fit families, and the authority of science, arguing that these mobilizations, mediated through circuits of consumption both real and virtual, contribute to the setting up of the home as a fitness environment.

The fifth chapter explores the types of geographies that are associated with the construction of these fitness environments. It illustrates how, by deploying what can be called a cyborg, hybrid or amodern perspective, the boundaries between the categories of subject and object, nature and culture, human and machine, become extremely problematic upon examining the construction of fitness environments. Additionally, the experience of spatiality is destabilized in such environments in that the boundaries between real and virtual, inside and outside, mobility and immobility become harder and harder to discern and position. Yet, despite the difficulties in positioning boundaries in these environments, powerful ordering forces purify these environments in terms of fitness and unfitness, measured against one’s ability to be mobilized

within networks of humans and non-humans. In this situation, fitness is a strong marker of difference. This chapter ends by briefly exploring the kinds of critical geographical imaginations required to engage with a relational understanding of the political, ethical, and moral communities which perhaps constitute fit and unfit environments.

In concluding I outline the terms of engagement necessary to begin approaching the critical investigation of (un)fit geographies. Most importantly here is the requirement to recognize that geographers are not observers of the networks which constitute embodied fitness environments, but rather are enmeshed in them. Finally, I suggest how the tracking of fitness environments may be extended in future research.

Stated briefly then, by examining the case of NordicTrack, this thesis argues that contemporary fitness environment are constructed through the mobilization and governmentality of networks comprised of both human and non-human actors. It thus critically engages with the politics of embodiment in hybrid environments at the same time as it addresses the politics of knowledge within disciplinary bodies such as Geography.