FI(T)NESSING OF SOCIETY

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INTRODUCTION

Within the last few years, there have unquestionably been major shifts in technology from social media to the massive biomedical changes accompanying technological developments like CRISPR. As much as CRISPR can serve to radically alter what we often consider fundamental aspects of ourselves, we may be overly sacralising such technology while allowing ostensibly more benign, yet just as potent activities, to discipline our society. I am speaking specifically about the excesses of the fitness trend that has been sweeping the Western world. It seems as if in this, health moves from the primary goal of fitness towards a marginal good, where fitness then becomes more about matching an idealised conception of routine, physical prowess in a limited arena, and bodily aesthetics rather than actual wellbeing. In this work, I intend to specifically target the increasing trend of fitness focusing on the way related technology and culture exert a physically shaping force over our organic bodies.

My major claim is that the fitness culture as it exists today is a nefarious political discourse. This discourse exists as a particular and unashamed instantiation of politics on our physical bodies and uses our physical bodies as politics. It is my hope that in the course of this work I am able to enunciate how fitness can come to act on us, as it is synthesised and propagated by a culture industry 2.0. This nefarious malignant self-production acts on and uses our bodies as a means of weaving a complex web of an ultimately socially unhealthy activity.

GENEALOGY AND FITNESS-CULTURE INDUSTRY

To begin, let us look at the etymology of fitness. Since the 16th century the word 'fitness' has meant 'to-be-fit'; to be able to be suitable for given circumstances. Yet, around 1935, there was a shift. Fitness has gained the extra association with 'physical fitness'. If one goes online and tracks the usage of the word 'fitness' as it is used in Google's vast archive, one will see an interesting trend.[1] Starting in 1800 you begin by

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1   (books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=fitness&year_start=1800&year_end=2008).

seeing the relatively normal plot of fitness as .00060-00065%. This percentage rema-insconsistent until around the time when a new meaning is added to the word fitness. Following the shift in meaning, the word fitness' previously 'normal' life cycle appears to wane as its usage decreases a whole .00010% after '35. Fitness, as a word, reaches a low of .00040% until around the mid-70s when it makes an upturn in use. During this period, there is a marked and unusual resurgence of the term. It peaks in 2001 at .00106.

Why is this an interesting metric? Because in the mid-70s, as this term would morph into the spandex and sweatbands of the 80s, there also appears to be a radical new understanding of fitness entering culture. This new understanding appears to correlate precisely with the resurgence of fitness as a term. To be able to understand the differences here, we must examine the correlates in the past.

Historically, most civilizations had conceptions of diet and exercise, seen as fundamental to their medical practice. From ancient India, Greece, Babylon, and China, diet and exercise were exceptionality important. In the Western tradition, both diet and exercise become less prominent as history moves on. A focus on the physical aspects of health during the mediaeval era was driven by the fundamental asceticism common throughout the time of the early church fathers. For example, John Chrysostom rails against Christians who thought too highly of horse racing (Shepard 2015, 131). Nevertheless, during the Renaissance, with the opening of new views, you would also see renewed attention to nutrition, such as with Ibn Sina or Maimonides, who both advocated for moderate exercise (Shepard 2015, 318). Ultimately, the drive to be 'physically healthy' continually increases through the Enlightenment, alongside the rise of the nation-state and capitalism. The prime example of the birth of this shift is with Montaigne who argues, 'It is not enough to toughen his spirit, his muscles also must be toughe' (Shepard 2015, 318). Montaigne and his contemporaries' views are considered the birth of physical education where the physical body is to be trained in much the same way as the mental body. During this period, reintegrating the body seems to occur with the decline of religious importance (for example with Niccolo Machiavelli) and an opening up to the encroachment of the social by the economic (as critiqued in More's Utopia). Regardless, science and knowledge take their time toying with the physical before creating the complex regimes of ideas that ultimately become expressed during the 19th century. This time period is coincidently one of the most aggressive nationalistic and economic expansionist times in the social sphere. The increasing industrialisation of this period came to climatic proportions, much of which can be seen in the work of Charles Dickens. The extreme industrialization was not good for a worker's well-being. Sedentary workers were unhealthy and less able to work; a cultural counter-weight was obviously needed to balance out this inadequacy. This increased industrialisation would

continue into the 20th century. At pace, Western civilisation had by the early 20th century created a robust culture around exercise with competing philosophies on the subject.

For instance, Pierre de Freddy, Baron de Coubertin, argued for the superiority of the German, more philosophical gymnastics over the more medical Swiss gymnastics (Shepard 2015, 662). Pierre de Coubertin also saw the failure of the French physical education system as an explanation of the Prussian victory; meanwhile, the robust physical education of Victorian England explained their military and colonial success. Pierre de Coubertin is important as he was the founder of the international Olympic committee, arguably one of the biggest cultural events for fitness of the century.

What is particularly intriguing about physical education during the 19th and pre-war 20th- century is its association with the word 'education'. I had traced this focus back to Montaigne, but it remains the dominant way of understanding 'it' (health, fitness, physicality) throughout the Enlightenment. The training of the body, like the training of the mind, was seen as inseparably intertwined. This, in my view, is what distinguishes the early 20th century obsession with health from later obsessions. The notion of 'physical education' here as the holistic improvement of self follows from rational liberal models of John Stuart Mill or Herbert Spencer (note that it was Spencer and not Darwin that coined 'Survival of the Fittest'). This understanding makes sense for both the market and the nation-state. A more fit population is more able to produce, consume, and be utilised in industry, war, and commerce.[2] But why is there a shift from physical education to the fitness of today?

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2   For a contemporary view on this subject, c.f. William James, 1906, 'The Moral Equivalent of War', https://www.uky.edu/~eushe2/Pajares/moral.html.

'FITNESS' SUBSUMED
WITHIN NEO –LIBERALISM

I argue that the major shift happens with the rise of the neo-liberal era (though there is an earlier one around the '30s). This shift was tracked by the increase in the word 'fitness'. Following the cultural revolution of the 1960s, historically with Nixon's effective abolishment of Bretton-Woods, the worldwide fall of Keynesianism, and the increasing monetary influence of the International. Monetary Fund in the global South are all trends marking this new period. A period which is furthermore characterised, as Foucault notes in *Birth of Biopolitics,* by the prevalence of a market logic mechanism of competition as the ideal of management that is implemented in new areas (Foucault 2008, 121) such as medicine and also physical education. The breakdown of older institutions and the shift to 'a society of enterprises' is determined by market fluctuation. Neo-liberalism is the major cultural-economic shift of this period (Foucault 2008, 195). While fitness always served the interests of the state and market, it now becomes part of the market and even more conveniently, another sector of the market as a whole.[3]

To track the shifts in the 20th century, from the de Coubertin model to later notions, I will take three figures as markers in the history of bodybuilding. The first is the strongman of the circus era. This man represents the conception of bodybuilding of the 19th and early 20th century. While impressive, this figure still exists alongside those also *othered* within the idiom of the *circus*. The strongman, obsessed with his figure, is an othered figure alongside those othered for reasons of their different physicalities (e.g. dwarfism). This conflictual relation is exemplified in Todd Browning's horror classic *Freaks (*Browning, 1932). *Freaks* is a particularly intriguing film as it both captures and marks the direct end of the authentic circus era. Browning used actual performers and little to no 'special-effects' to represent this truly engrossing experience of the society's marginalised. It is Henry Victor's role as Hercules, the strongman villain. This intriguing figure is an outsider both to the 'freaks' in his privilege of normalcy and to his society by his fitness, alongside the other 'freaks'. Yet, even as this film exemplifies this relation, in becoming cinema, Browning's film marks the end of an era; a last cry of the 'freakshow' in its touring form. This is largely due to the

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[3]   The relationship of 'fitness', broadly speaking, as being well suited to the market is seen quite well in the shift in working conditions accompanying industrialisation where the increased sedentary workforce was accompanied with health problems that required an ameliorating force to replace the lack of exercise that they previously had in order to keep them commercially productive as Foucault states, 'The adjustment of the accumulation of men to that of capital, the joining of the growth of human groups to the expansion of productive forces and the differential allocation of profit, were made possible in part by the exercise of bio-power in its many forms and modes of application.' (Foucault 1990, 141). The mutually beneficial relationship between 'fitness' in our modern sense and the state is also seen quite well in the relationship of the 19th-century Gymnastics movement. This is exemplified with Friedrich Ludwig Jahn tone of the major Gymnastics populariser, who directly saw the gymnastics of a state as representative of national power and essential military prowess (Shepard 2015, 634).

moral outcry for employment due to physicality. Concurrent with this cultural shift, those physically abnormal through excessive muscle are moved into a degree of normalcy. *Freaks* was released in 1932, around the same time when fitness became a word referring to 'physically fit' and a shift occurred in the perspective on the human body.

The next figure I examine is Jack LaLanne. He is the handsome bodybuilder and television star of the '50s and '60s. LaLanne opened his first gym in 1936. This is following the demise of the othered muscleman as a concept. The strongman has disappeared and the bodybuilder as icon, that LaLanne and others would instantiate in society through the culture industry, arrives on the scene.[4]

An incisive sobriquet explains this point: LaLanne, at his death, is dubbed by the Los Angeles Times as the 'Spiritual Father of the U.S. Fitness Movement.' In LaLanne, one finds many of the early evangelical aspects of fitness in modern culture: a commitment that you too can do it (become fit), as well as the proselytization of the importance of working out. I am choosing LaLanne to serve as the paradigmatic example of this new fitness episteme. In this example, body-building is attractive and cool. However, it is not dominant, aggressive, or required. It is an attractive pastime, which is useful to the culture industry in brandishing exemplars of human form and sex appeal. This is the role fitness takes in the mid-twentieth century as exemplified by LaLanne.

However, this paradigm changes with the shift to neo-liberalism in the seventies. As described earlier, 'health' could still exist outside the rules of the market and competition. While LaLanne helped sell the products and had his own gym, fitness *itself* was not yet the product. This situation changes with my third major figure, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and his iconic film *Pumping Iron*. The aesthetically oriented black and white footage of Schwarzenegger's extremely oiled, muscular body also concurrently brings fitness as a trophy and competitive force into the popular imaginary.

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4   This survey is of course simplified, and the actual and nuanced history of the process is far more complicated. The complex relationship between 19th-century ideals of physical prowess, gymnastics, and classicism is complex and glossed in this paper. However, the select use of iconic figures and movements helps map out what I see as a general trend in the representation and cultural status accorded to these figures and the act of physical refinement as a whole. Therefore, there are of course exceptions; as one reviewer pointed out, Eugen Sandow, a key figure in the development of bodybuilding in the UK, was hardly 'ostracised' as I've portrayed the 'strongman'. However, the exceptions to some extent prove the rule, and Sandow's particular celebrity status also helped accord a degree of respect. In fact, Sandow's popular work and aesthetic focus in part helped the general shift toward its acceptability. Additionally, Sandow existed at a point of various cultural norms that were non-standard. In particular, his Jewish heritage, during a time Europe experience both the Dreyfus Affair and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, forces one to not discount a degree of othering through the 'exoticisation' his persona took on not the least of which was exaggerated through his attention to physique. The picture of Sandow posing, flexing with a large Star of David points to the nexus of these components. Furthermore, Sandow's attention to the 'Grecian ideal' still places him firmly within the Victorian tradition of strength for wellbeing over pure muscular capacity. This is also seen in Sandow's mentor, Ludwigb Durlacher, who hardly showed the fixation on aesthetic physique and extreme strength of strongmen and rather seemed more geared, a la gymnastics, to overall physical improvement of high society along standards that match the Victorian conception of overall well-being down to Durlacher's original education including piano and languages (Beckwith and Todd, 2002).

This becomes the period when 'body-building' as a competitive activity becomes popular for the first time and it also diversifies to both sexes. With the first female body building competition held in Canton, Ohio in 1977 (the same year as *Pumping Iron* was released), and two years later one sees Florida's first competition hosted by SPA in 1979, this phenomenon of competitive body-shaping becomes ubiquitous (Lowe 1998, 57 & 59). From the late '70s on into the '80s marks this growing focus on fitness as product. Following Schwarzenegger as the ideal type (as he would make a particularly lucrative and well-muscled career through the '80s) we see this idea of fitness as a direct sell-able commodity become entrenched. His body is even placed in association with the Nietzschean Übermench in the film *Conan* (Milius, 1982), taking and asserting a wild Dionysian independence. Hedonistic élan vital became embodied in the muscled body during the late twentieth century. All in all, the muscled body becomes the product. The strongman, Schwarzenegger, and LaLanne exist as explanatory figures for the culture industry as it relates to fitness and how it is used.

CULTURE AND FITNESS INDUSTRY

The culture industry is much more than fitness. Its specificity encompasses all termed 'culture' by an enlightenment logic that thinks this complex facet is calculable. What does it do? Adorno and Horkheimer remark, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* how everything has the 'same stamp upon it'. The culture industry makes the previously difficult to attain cheap and watered down so it is palatable and discourages resistance through busying and satiating (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997, 134).

The culture industry does this first off insofar as it monopolises a person's leisure time. The Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper enunciates in his book, *Leisure*, this notion of true freedom to explore yourself and ideas. This is a similar idea reflected in both Adorno's essay 'Free Time' as well as in Thomas More's place of leisure in *Utopia* (as the period in which the Utopians attended lectures, read etc., expanding themselves as humans beyond their mere work). It is this notion of leisure that Pieper sees as foundational for many intellectual achievements as well as overall well-being. Yet, across the intellectual spectrum, it is precisely this leisure that is monopolised. The notion of work *alone* has colonised leisure time. The work takes precedence. Adorno expertly brings up this loss in enunciating how leisure time can only be an extension of work – that 'work' in which you do not work in order to be able to 'work' (Adorno 2001, 190). This is an important element because this time to be human is stripped away and commodified by the organisation of society.

Another aspect of the culture industry I would like to highlight is the industry's inter-positionality. Adorno brings this up in relation to the famous actors and actresses where they are intended to make you feel as if you could be them (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997, 145). Yet despite the ridiculous odds the industry selects an assumed identifiable 'norm' making you think you will still be lucky. Eliciting identification without accidentally eliciting a consciousness of your situation. Insofar as this is applied to the 20th-century fitness culture you can imagine the TV advertisements juxtaposing the badly photographed overweight individual next to the sleek shot of a gym rat. The consistent cries of the muscle-bound figure that he was you and you can be just like him are the paradigmatic examples of the 'fitnessing' in the 20th -century culture industry. This again is done in a top-down fashion. Companies have their product and select according to norms and specifications who will be the 'successful individual'. Adorno and Horkheimer mention, unlike in Malebranche, that one is unable to see the consciousness controlled by God but by the film execs etc. (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997, 125). In the fitness industry it is the supplement companies or gyms.

Another element demonstrated in the essay 'The Schema of Mass Culture', where Adorno lays out the move to place sports in a pseudo-sacred position. Devoid of the actual act of play, he says, 'Sport is itself not play but ritual' (Adorno 2001, 89). The ritual enacted in exercise becomes an expected activity to do in one's home, like the puja in Hinduism and the Qibla to Mecca. Yet, while these religious activities are loaded with religious and spiritual meaning, dripping from centuries of theology and cultural interchange, the ritual of sports and exercise videos appears empty. What is the theology of sports? Umberto Eco, in one of his essays, remarks that storming a football stadium is worse than storming the Vatican (Eco 1986, 159). Why is this replacement of meaningful ritual with empty ritual important? One needs only to look at the South American Liberation Theology thinkers like Ernst Bloch, Martin Luther King, the Dalai Lama and Gandhi, or on the other side the tragedy befalling the Rohingya, the rise of the Hindutva, and much of contemporary religious terrorism to see the provocative power in sacred meaning. Meaningful rituals can literally imbue power in the otherwise unempowered and can be a very explosive force. Of course providing empty surrogacy for passionate worship is placating. This placation is a key aspect of the culture industry as it creates organised, symbolically complex groupings devoid of meaning in order to castrate passion. This sequestering of political impetus is further seen in the fitness culture. Look at contemporary yoga as it is often sold and practised in the West. This repackaging is the perfect example of the meaning imbued activity turned empty signifier. What about the daily exercise of the fitness video of the 20th century, the Wii fit of the 2000s, or the woman or man who missed their workout and feels guilty? It is a propitiation to the body. A soteriology of health. These religious

metaphors are only partially apt as I intend to enunciate the habitual nature of these activities while highlighting their minimally associated deeper meaning. Unlike a Tibetan wrathful deity, Richard Simmons can do little in the disciple's imagination but help shed weight. These activities are pure activity *sans* invested semantic content.

There is the famous Roman dictum *Panem et Circenses* - in which sport allows an idealised surrogate for conflict. There is much here, as in Chomsky's view, that discussing sport is more socially useful and valuable for the average American than world politics in social situations as it is less likely to cause rifts and more likely to foster common ground. More poignantly, in another of Eco's essays, he describes:

> Talk about soccer requires, to be sure, a more than vague expertise, but, all in all, it is limited, well-focused; it allows you to take positions, express opinions, suggest solutions, without exposing yourself to arrest, to loyalty oaths, or, in any case, to suspicion. It doesn't oblige you to intervene personally, because you are talking about something played beyond the area of the speaker's power. In short, it allows you to play at the direction of the government without all the sufferings, the duties, the imponderables of political debate (Eco 1986, 170–71).

Why is it that Colin Kaepernick is a worse villain than Ray Rice? This is because Kaepernick expressly brings the *political* into sport. The arena for the neutralisation for radicality has been invaded and therefore its neutrality (and by extension its nullifying force) must be maintained. So not only, as Eco points out, is sport invested with more passion than religion, but it also must be maintained as a sacred untouchable by the profane of the political. Described above are elements from the classical model of the culture industry. These are the monopolisation of leisure, inter-positionality and identification with the subjects, replacement of meaningful rituals with empty non-provocative rituals, and finally, my own twist derived from Eco, the allowing of a surrogate space for political passion and intelligence. There are many more aspects to the culture industry, but in its application to fitness, these are the exceptionally relevant ones. In the original neo-liberal fitness culture, the monopolisation of leisure states 'You should be working out'; we see the identification with the subjects (the before and after TV advertisements). Furthermore, home workout machines provide empty rituals deemed valuable for a higher cause, 'health', but without politically provocative potential. Finally, the endless discussions on proper technique or supplements represent the surrogate space for politics and intelligence (though this is less prevalent). These four areas are all covered in the 'classic fitness industry' (late 20th century early '00s). Admittedly, there is less of the fourth one – the surrogate space for political passion and intelligence (this will become relevant further on). All of these methods of the culture industry will find a further modification in our new era.

MODERN ERA

In the previous culture industry, fitness held a spot I described previously. That is, it capitalised on leisure time, making it appear as if the unrealistic was realistic and achievable to the consumer. The activities were reified along pseudo-religious or ritualistic lines expecting strict moralizable adherence. These were the dictums and norms of the fitness industry. Statements like 'Use your time wisely,' (go to the gym), 'You can achieve this fit body,' (look at our example), 'don't cheat– finish your sets and reps,' and 'DO NOT SKIP LEG DAY!' (ritualistic adherence). These explain the dogma. Yes, this model worked to an extent, but it was not as efficient. Now examine how the same dictums are communicated today. While previously this was done through more distal media, such as health magazines, TV like Baywatch, or VHS workout tapes, now social media allows more intimate doctrine conveyance. Previously, with the VHS era, the ideas were conveyed, yet a degree of autonomy remained.

In this first model, if you were not interested, the culture industry was still to some extent more avoidable (though pervasive). Yet with Facebook or Instagram, the dynamic is different. No one has to wait for you to see the movie you are likely, though not guaranteed, to see, or for you to buy the health magazine or rent the exercise tape. Today, with the advent of social platforms, your friend from high school (let's call him Bob) is directly telling you those dictums (Don't skip leg day, go to the gym, etc). Through memes, comments or, more likely, through one's friends' narcissistic impulse to engage in the socially valued act of exercise, you receive the same dictums – 'go to the gym, you can have this body – don't skip leg day'. This is not the only way this can occur.

It is not just this friend (Bob) or another girl you know (let's call her Sue) who is feeling uncomfortable about her weight. Yet, she sees this mutual friend's (Bob's) post. Assuming a law of economy, it seems plausible that she, like him, may only performatively engage in this fitness culture, taking a picture showing she went to the gym. Yet maybe, she did it for real and consistently inundates her feed with comparative images denigrating her previous self who (much like you) never works out. Furthermore, you have this implicate identification with this high school version of her because it is the one you know. It isn't hard to see how quickly and easily (and far more efficiently) social networks can manufacture cultural norms and discipline social deviance. Basic assumptions, such as that you find individuals in general more trustworthy and your friends doubly so, as well as ingrained suspicions of large corporations make you far more likely to accept Bob or Sue than some company Octane on TV. Here the importance of influencers cannot be overstated. Take for example the poorly-spelled Fyre Festival and note how a weak idea combined with next to no material planning was so widely accepted almost entirely on the backs of good marketing in heavy combination with social

media influencers (Smitha, 2019a). This functions, in part, as van Dijk notes, because advertising via peers if far more effective than conventional advertising (Van Dijk, 2013).

The idea I have sketched out with Bob and Sue is the simplest level. This idea is even more nefarious when you include two more model figures: Kate and Jim. Kate is an influencer that constantly utilises angles, aesthetic norms, and positioning that reifies standard conceptions of sexuality and beauty in order to most efficiently increase her own market worth and increase her followers. This concept becomes more efficient when combined with a trendy item such as cats, books, coffee, or heavy metal; this trendy theme in conjunction with limited though overt sexuality will guarantee a large follower base. So basically, sex sells while trendy topics make one unique and not shallow. Fitness is one of the largest trendy themes to capitalise on this marketing tool and seamlessly blends here. Of course, this makes it more likely those already following Kate for other reasons will then be sold this 'fad' as well. Here is a third person who now inundates your feed with the same dictums. Now take Jim, an influencer with a specific focus in trendy areas – again let's look at fitness. By being ingrained in this group, once he is followed, he will post consistently about this material and related content. The more you interact with his content, per algorithmic logic, the more you will come in contact with his content (the same holds true for Kate). Assuming norms are more likely to be shallowly approved, this prioritisation of similar content will consistently reify their respective accounts. Furthermore, both Jim and Kate are likely to have connections in this area (like any other social club). This easily and quickly leads to an expansion of those you follow who are related to this topic. In this example, the fourth dictum becomes particularly relevant. That is the creation of a neutralising space in which you can focus energy and intelligence to optimise your workout. By giving any trend an online following, you are able to bring various individuals interested in a topic together by providing them space to discuss the topic. Fitness, unlike potentially more subversive topics, is primed to follow in line with sports, i.e., as an empty signifier devoid of provocative potential but an effective surrogate arena for discussion.

By examining just these four make-believe Instagrammers, I have sketched a map of how the culture industry 2.0 can more effectively spread, domineer, and ultimately nullify autonomy. Through social media usage, through these four Instagrammers, the social media user would constantly be inundated with this fitness ideology. Counter arguments, such as 'this conscious manufacturing could possibly be used with more radical forms that do not placate the populace, not just fitness,' is a moot point. This point does not hold because the platforms will necessarily favour the larger draw, because of initial selection and standard norms such as fitness already have a massive draw from the get-go. This situation creates a digital platform style Mathew effect where the richer

or the more popular norms are reinforced and reengraved more consistently. Ultimately, workout culture creates a self-feedback loop, which mentally disciplines others via their peer recommendation to follow similar regimes. The proliferation of the Adornian culture industry to the populace itself being its own culture industry through social media. We see here a self-adaptive and self-regulative culture industry 2.0 that is able to shift and demand its own aspirational standards to itself as it shifts.

Some of the effects described so far are witnessed in other fields as well, not merely fitness. Travel in particular is a potent object for commodification via Instagram. Significant research has been done on Instagram as a cultural production force for reinstating a colonial perception (Smith, 2021 & Smith, 2019b). For example, Sean Smith analyses in depth how the structuring of an Instagram photo is built to solicit engagement and encourage branding via a socially coded web. In describing a particular travel photo by a well-known Slovenian influencer, Smith states, 'The skilful composition, staging and editing of the photograph– and perhaps the novelty of featuring birds rather than balloons – makes Kamnik's Bagan promontory witness one of the most popular shots she has to date posted to her account.' (Smith 2021, 14). The power and staging participate similarly within the fitness world of Instagram. However, here I have tried to lay out direct thought experiments and general knowledge to most succinctly explain the phenomenon as it functions as a coercive mechanism without relying too heavily on external research so as to most clearly articulate the phenomenon described. However, empirically one needs look no further than Facebook's own research on teen girls and mental health (Wells, Horwitz, and Seetharaman, 2021).

DESIGN, AESTHETICS AND EXCESS

Why do Kate, Bob, Sue, and Jim act like this? In our highly aestheticized and political cultural landscape, we are in fact forced to self-design. As Groys notes, modern design is replacing the design of the 'corpse' for the design of the 'soul'. What becomes of import is what the designed represents and not just how it looks (Groys 2010, 47-49). We are now expected to reveal our inner process in how we display ourselves online. In the fullest expression of neoliberalism, the gig economy, you are expected to build your 'self' as the ideal market competitor. One creates a LinkedIn and is expected to maximise utility in every action and use of time. Cost effectiveness is applied to all life. Through business courses, your Instagram tagline will show cross-fit alongside entrepreneur as you have come to design yourself through your own self-discipline. Fitness works here as an ideal element in this system. There was even an article that listed what CEOs did in their free time, spending a chunk of the article on their morning yoga routines.

What are the signs you reproduce in participating? Examine the outline of a gym. It is often stockily built to withstand or it exists in a building modelled as such. It uses bold consistent colours, such as blue, red, or purple, covering much of the surface and reiterated like a knight's heraldry. More importantly, gyms are generally designed with massive windows, allowing all those walking by to watch their exemplars doing their duty. Inside, the room is covered with an array of tightly compact and claustrophobic machines in dark and steel colours. Names like Taurus, Octane, and Nordstrom embolden surfaces, connoting strength and mythic associations. Another consistent habit is for gyms to have massive pictures of idealised (oftentimes sexualised) models looking 'in shape' adorning their building. There tend to be massive mirrors ostensibly in order for you to correct form and properly lift, yet they also facilitate selfies, promoting your newest fitness wear. These bright sleek modern pieces of clothing, often skin-tight (noting the sexualised aspect) are a further tool for industry propagation.

This fitness wear and associated activities reveal the pure excess of this ostensibly 'beneficial' industry. If a fully dressed adult in 'business causal' were to start jogging, were to bend over and touch their toes, do stretches etc. this would be labelled bizarre. You are expected to wear markers that you are exercising. This situation demonstrates the fitness industry's norms, and it makes *big* from such norms. According to Allied Market Research the sports apparel market was valued at $167.7 billion, but is estimated to reach $248.1 billion at current trend (Kumar and Deshmukh, 2019).

But what is sportswear? Of course, swimming may be easier with swimming trunks, but many of the activities were done in the 19th century before this 'market' existed. A market and demand have been purely created by this industry. Fitness wear is a product symbolically associated with fitness that serves more to represent fitness that facilitate it. Fitness wear isn't the only associated product of this industry. What about nutrition? This is one of the silliest, but also scariest, parts of our fitness industry. Protein-filled candy bars are bought because they are supposedly 'healthy'. These products, which are full of sugar and other unhealthy materials, because of their protein, are classified in the soteriology of health, and therefore become good. The situation becomes even worse with protein shakes and their pseudo-scientific chemical basis. Consumed in harrowing quantities, especially by young males (though women as well), these excessive amounts of protein are seen as 'healthy'. Note the packaging of these products. Protein shakes and bars are almost always sold in bulky tubs, often displaying solid blacks or other bold colours on their labels, using large fonts and bright lettering. Protein bars bear the same signs as well; though they appear close to candy bars, but never goofy like Reese's or Three Musketeers; protein bars always betray a nod to medicalised sincerity through displayed facts and clean, clear fonts.

Such products give no value, while nullifying the consumers' worry about health. If you take the paradigm of medical science as the standard of health, this is a pipe dream.

These sugared products, and the *ostensibly* de-sexualised bright, skin-tight fitness wear are constantly displayed by those same figures, Bob, Kate, Jim, and Sue. A Diderot effect of associations tightly links the industry.

The semiotics of the gym consistently exudes and is inducive to two major aspects of self-display and dominance. The close conceptual linkage we have between physical strength and social strength is harped on to an extreme degree. This leads to the habitual reproduction of images of individuals narcissistically revelling in their own idea of domination. The illusion is exemplified when the clearly unimposing find themselves participating in this ritual. We find a scrawny individual flexing to a mirror self an otherwise non-existent muscle in order to replicate this ego empowering yet toxic display. The allusion to physical dominance that are pervading the associated space and product is staggering. An industry which through images of large muscles, attractive participants in tight bright clothes who form power stances in their photos –arms spread aggressively in a dominant posture, or hulking over and flexing as if to do battle to a rival – nods to the evolutionary success they hope to be perceived as, but can never act out. This display exemplifies the basic disseminated ideology of Spencerian, literally 'survival of the fittest'. However, the industry only excites the barest desires, but it never allows the *jouissance* as it consistently does not move past its selected or predetermined rhythms. This paradigm creates obedient individuals who are driven to ritualised adherence to strict nutrition consumption, work-out, and socialisation schedules. Such ideology only fuels the greater consumption of this parasitic fitness industry, useless protein, useless clothing, wasted space, and damaging practices. I think this point is the most important aspect of the fitness culture's political ontology. Most items produced for the fitness industry primarily serve the industry's end. It is only as a marginal good that other goals such as health or actual physical strength are achieved. This is one of the most pernicious aspects of the fitness industry.

CONCLUSION

Above, I described the 'consciousness manufactural' production. That is, the way in which social networks allow for the self-governance of populations. The norms of physical health are propagated through image sharing and accompanied 'motivational rhetoric' targeted and specified to encourage the individual to dedicate more hours to this valuable process of physically shaping their inhabited organism. Fitness as self-design as a medium for producing and homogenising a populace falls within the broader array of biopolitics.

Biopolitics is ultimately governance through regulation and systematisation of the body categorised as biological. I then argued for the pernicious effects of the industry, as well as how it serves its own ends and propagates itself symbolically. How did this happen? The shift in episteme from 'physical education' to 'fitness' has long since become entrenched; so much so that it is being built upon. That is assuming that health and fitness are a commodity also engenders finding what leads to them. This episteme is shifting into not only fitness as a commodity but also all aspects of the body as being relevant to fitness and therefore health. The big data know the 'fit'; they now must apply the broken model of the fit to the unfit. Thus, all 'data' is now the commodity which is then utilised to produce increasingly expensive medical products. This is a subtle but seriously important shift that has taken place now and serves as a warning to the future. This shift is magnified by analytics that track user preferences then reinforce those same preferences. This culture industry 2.0, while reliant on the previous norms, is far more effective. In the original culture industry, you could merely leave the theatre, buy another ticket to a more subversive film, etc. There has always remained, even if only thinly, a distance between the subject and the mediating force acting on ideological construction. One had to actively indulge, to a large extent, in placing oneself into the culture industry. The same cannot be said today where you watch one show or video and your next recommended video will be the same, while it is predictively selected for you by algorithms which intentionally work to shape your conscious perceptions. Your searches will appear closer and closer to a selection tailored towards your previous preferences. Making the move to escape, not merely switching a theatre, but the virtual distance of pages of and pages of Google searches. This is the self-regulation by the 'governed' population itself. *We* are the ones who encourage *each other* to go to the gym to work out in every video *we* post. *We* produce the fitness norms for each other.

Before concluding, I want to argue that I am not against exercise. I think exercise is awesome. As mentioned before, exercise was one of the earliest and most consistent norms that was available for good health through all cultures. But 'fitness', however, in its contemporary instantiation serves to subsidize an inherently flawed system. The fitness industry serves to wilfully support the inherent failures of an overly sedentary populace demanded by our current economic and political paradigm. The fact that exercise was once doable within work highlights the bizarre juxtaposition suffered in the same exercise has been converted into a commercialised niche. Walking to work is seen as absurd, yet running the same distance on a treadmill is considered healthy. A deep disconnect has formed between our marketed conceptions of 'normal' health and general human activity and exercise. We need to critically re-examine this uncritically accepted notion of fitness equals good plastered on all our walls. What is good is not 'fitness'; it is being healthy. Until we recognize fitness as much more than that, we will continue to suffer.

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