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Knight's children: techno-science, consumerism and running shoes

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The idea for this article originated from a trip to purchase a pair of shoes during which the prescription process rendered me a piece of meat to be measured. As a consequence, I became interested in how technology affects agency and wanted to evocatively articulate how this process impacts on runners. My goal was to find out how shoes are presented to runners, how runners purchase shoes and how this translates into and shapes running practises. What I present is not a watertight portrayal of all potential ways in which running shoes affect running practices, but rather an empirically-grounded, theoretically-informed, subjective and critical illustration of how techno-science affects the way we run. Running shoes, then, provide a site, or catalyst, for critical conversations about bioethics, technology, agency and how sporting goods stores act as important vectors of the culture industry.

Keywords: autoethnography; running shoes; technology; bioethics; enframing

Introduction

Running shoe stores are important cultural touch points for runners. They provide the integral tools for running and a site, which, for many runners, is the first point of contact with running shoes, exposing them to technologies that will, literally, shape their running bodies. As such, running shoes, as presented and purchased in running shoe stores, provide an empirical context for questioning how the production and application of knowledge affects our bodies and how technology and science discursively construct running and highlights certain, idealised subjectivities in relation to the practice of running. This renders consumers part of what Heidegger (1977) dubs the 'standing-reserve', where runners are deployed, challenged, measured and improved as part of Pronger's (1998) 'sports-industrial-techno-science-nationalist complex'. Beneath the asymmetrical lacing systems, reflective strips, air and gel cushioning this paper presents a questioning of the relationship between human agency and technology.

In my questioning I begin with a story of a shopping excursion and, like Ellis (1998, p. 524) whose story is also based on a shopping excursion, I analyse my narrative by moving 'back and forth among theory, narrative, ... personal experience' and among complementary data collected through interviews with other runners 'to try and understand and convey' my questioning of techno-science. As

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such, this paper also draws on more ‘traditional’ ethnographic methods – namely participant observation and interviews – in order to connect my experiences with those of other runners. This should not be read as some form of triangulation of data, but rather an attempt to ensure verisimilitude of my interpretation of the prescription/purchase of running shoes. Through auto-ethnography, I seek to draw attention to running shoe stores as important sites of the culture industry where the presentation, explanation and consumption of running shoes *enframes* (Heidegger 1977) running. The ontological impact of techno-science is expressed through the multimedia-based experience of running, what Debord (1983) refers to as an ‘integrated spectacle’ (see Andrews 2006), as part of the purchasing spectacle of consumerism and an articulation of the Foucauldian notion of biopower.

Theoretical underpinnings

Running shoe technology is generally understood and investigated within a positivist paradigm; as such, running shoes are the subject of intense academic scrutiny. Excavation of any biomechanical journal will reveal a veritable bounty of studies investigating torsion, impact resistance and influence on running mechanics. Nevertheless, the scientific understanding of running shoe technology has come under severe scrutiny, with Richards *et al.* (2009) finding no evidence to suggest that the prescription of running shoes based on foot type and gait has any positive biomechanical effect on running. The purpose of my research is not to advocate barefoot running or to employ biomedical understandings to critically analyse the impact of running shoes on gait or injury rates. Instead, I seek to investigate how running shoes enframe understandings of our bodies and running practices by critically questioning techno-science vis-à-vis running shoes.

Heidegger (1977) explains the impact of techno-science on agency, by positing the essence of technology as something ‘that is by no means technological’ (p. 4), but rather the way we bring forth things and how we understand them. This is an important point to grasp. For Heidegger, technology is not the practical application of theoretical knowledge or a totality of technological instruments, but an ontological condition, leading Heidegger to argue that technology limits, or enframes, the potential of experiencing being. Enframing, then, is a process of ontological ordering and of resource development affecting our being-in-the-world by requiring everything to be measurable, quantified and comported towards improvement.

Resources, thus, have no significant being of their own, but rather are reordered and challenged by technology to become useful in a multitude of ways and then placed on demand for use whenever and however people deem appropriate as part of the ‘standing-reserve’. The essence of technology invisibly and insidiously shapes the way we value, understand and ‘do’ life by ignoring or marginalising experiences/objects that cannot be deployed as a resource for ostensible advancement of position or value. By adopting Heidegger’s concept, I hope to show how running shoe technology may alter our way of understanding and doing running.

This project takes Debord’s (1983)¹ insights as a potent analytical tool to analyse the consumption process and place or, in Andrews’ (2006, p. 93) words, to ‘exhume the layered complexity and multidimensionality of the spectacle, and its position and function within spectacular society’. Drawing attention to the ‘Spectacle’ of large-scale events, Debord (1983) also highlights ‘spectacles’ – the everyday institutional, technical and economic structures – which obscure power relations and

convert lived experience into images and signs, providing a key theoretical link between the techno-science, the late capitalist system and the body. Debord (1983, p. 1) argues that in contemporary society ‘everything that was once directly lived has moved away into a representation’. This relates particularly to the presentation of running, the advertising of running technologies and running shoe stores as part of the ‘sliding of *having* into *appearing*, from which all actual ‘having’ must draw its immediate prestige and its ultimate function’ (Debord 1983, p. 17) since technology separates the act of running from its appearance on screens, in training logs and on bodies. The contrived constitution of running presented in sports stores is a particularly fruitful area for the application of such an understanding and aligns with enframing and biopower.

Biopower, as defined by Foucault (1979, p. 140), is ‘numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies’. As such, it is important to situate the body, *my body*, before we begin. My body is ‘triumvirate’: white, male and middle class. It is not my intention to either deny or privilege these intersections. Instead, I am attempting to draw our attention to another intersection, namely the technologised body.

Cyborg literatures, instigated by Haraway (1985), have examined closely the entwinement of technology and the body, maintaining that the impact of technology on identities and practices in physical cultures is evident not only in their use of technology, but also in the technological description of, and metaphors for, active bodies and practices. Cyborg theory intuitively comes to mind when dealing with the body and its (inter)relationship with technology and has been used in various studies of sport and physical cultures with varying levels of fidelity to Haraway’s original project. Butryn and Masucci (2003, p. 125) state the general thrust of the interdisciplinary approach of ‘cyborgology’ as investigating ‘the way human identities are transformed through more intimate and regular engagement with the wide array of technologies that exist in contemporary Western technocultures’. However, such approaches as applied to physical cultures tend to default to transhumanism, which advocates causal relationship between improved technology, scientific knowledge and improved quality of life (see Miah 2006), as well as a continual quest to (re)establish, or deny, the quiddity of the body. Other investigations of sporting equipment are undertaken by sports ethicists whose primary focus is the esoteric study of sporting behaviours and a near-obsession with consistency and fairness of policy and use of technology in sport (see Miah and Eassom 2002, Sheridan 2006, Trabal 2008). These studies frequently fail to question fundamentally and critically, the ethical and moral considerations of technology and to locate adequately the impact of technological development within the broader social and ontological context as related to science, progress and modernity. In order to promote a more critical questioning of techno-science, this project takes Heidegger’s notion of enframing as its centre and blends it with Debordian understanding of the spectacular nature of late capitalism and Foucault’s articulation of biopower in order to recognise and appreciate the sociocultural context in which technology is developed and consumed.

Methodological underpinnings

The idea for this project germinated in a trip to purchase a pair of shoes, where technology in the shoe itself and the prescription process rendered me a piece of

meat to be measured and fitted to the shoe. As such, I became interested in how techno-science affected the way I ran, beyond biophysical control/correction of my gait; I wanted to evocatively articulate my experiences. Therefore, auto-ethnography was the research method that made intuitive sense to me. Methodologically speaking, auto-ethnography has traditionally (if such a word can be used in this context) been presented as a method deployed to create space for subjugated voices to tell their own stories as a mode of 'reverse discourse' (Foucault 1979). I use auto-ethnography as one possible way of articulating and showing an experience of techno-science and, in doing so, hope to draw attention to some of the ways techno-science impacts on agency and to how even those readily defined as privileged in modern society might still be colonised. This is particularly pertinent in the 'shadow of technological modernity' (Pronger 2002, p. 66), where the productive nature of the techno-capitalist system develops bodies to be useful in, and to, the system. Therefore, I am not denying the politics of representation of bodies (mine included) and its impact on agency, nor am I presenting techno-science as a more or less important intersection of the body, identity and society. I am, however, seeking to present a less often discussed representation of bodies. As such, I have attempted to produce a personalised narrative that shows the effect of technology on human agency through running. This is a particular important methodological point as a common criticism of auto-ethnography is the potential for self-indulgence within the narrative. As Sparkes (2002, p. 92) explains, characterising 'autobiographical work as self-indulgent is to make claims about its content by invoking a reductive practice asserts the autobiographical to be only about the self of the writer and nothing else'. Therefore, this narrative is not *about* my body, but is told *through* my body (Sparkes 2002). Using ethnographic methods and semi-structured interviews to help craft my auto-ethnography, I aim both to protect against navel gazing and to maximise the verisimilitude of the representation (Richardson 1999, Sparkes 2002).

As part of my auto-ethnographic research, data collection took place across a range of stores selling running shoes, which included three branded retail outlets, as well as 11 specialist running shops over a period of 12 months. Following Thomson (1979), I kept field notes which were overtly recorded during fieldwork. Field notes included accounts of ethnographic conversations I had with runners and store staff and descriptions of the environments in which the events occurred. This project was approved by an institutional research ethics board. However, my auto-ethnography of running shoe stores did raise a number of ethical considerations for me, most notably concerning disclosure. When talking with runners I was fortunate to be able to not only offer disclosure of my research project, but to also discuss the way I was interpreting events. When purchasing shoes, I was concerned that such disclosure might not be appropriate as it could have influenced the actions, decisions and behaviours of those I encountered, thus corrupting data (Silk 2005). There was no overt attempt to deceive during any interaction and to avoid any ethically compromising issue, privacy of all interactions is ensured through presentation of my experiences in various running shoe stores as a single monologue (see Bruce 1998). Moreover, the central object of study is the researcher rather than the shop staff with which interaction occurs. As a result, this strategy is not disempowering for other parties during conversations.

In order to connect more directly with theory and further question and analyse the impact running stores and running shoe technology have on running practices,

the second section of this paper draws on interviews with runners and lays bare my theoretical interpretations. This section does not seek to bolster the narrative by presenting 'real' academic work, but rather highlight my interpretations of technoscience and how they (inter)relate with other runners. As such, my narrative, unlike many auto-ethnographies, is not an investigation of my identity and the ways it might be constructed, compromised, enhanced or negotiated through technoscience, but rather a questioning of agency. Therefore, individual semi-structured interviews complement and underscore the ethnographic conversations, observations and my auto-ethnographic writing.

Interviewees were selected on the basis of theoretical and empirical criteria as well as practical suitability. As such, this paper employs a mix of what Miles and Huberman (1994) define as convenience and criterion purposive sampling. Five subjects for formal semi-structured interviews were selected based on particular characteristics, ability to provide particular insights and unveil different understandings of running shoe technology in order to gain a variety of perspectives and running experiences. The small sample size allowed for in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of runners; their shoes and the depth and richness of the data gained offsets concerns regarding sample size (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). Moreover, while this is a purposive sample, it is not intended to be a representative sample and should not be read as such. A brief biography of the subjects is provided below.

Rick is a 42-year-old business analyst from London. Rick has run regularly since his teens in training for other sporting endeavours. Rick has entered some races, including the London Marathon, but for the last 10 years, has run for his own enjoyment and 'sanity'. He runs between three and five times a week usually during his lunch break or at weekends.

Michelle is 31 years old and an investment banker from Norwich living in Central London.

Michelle incorporates running into her general fitness regime, alongside gym-based resistance training and aerobics sessions. Michelle runs three times a week along the Thames River for 45 min during her lunch break.

Peter is a research student involved in a multidisciplinary five-year research project at a prominent UK university. Peter is investigating the anthropometry and biomechanics of the foot in order to develop high performance personalised sports footwear. Peter is from Brazil, runs approximately 35 km a week, and he is 29 years old.

Mark began running after sustaining one too many injuries while playing rugby. Since then, Mark has completed the Marathon des Sables and the Atacama Crossing as well as marathons in the UK and South Africa. Mark is 38 years old, from Plymouth, but now lives and works in London as a project manager.

Henry is a Chartered Accountant from Kenya, but has lived in the UK for the past 20 years. Henry began running in 1994 with work colleagues and entered his first London Marathon. Since then, Henry has completed 26 marathons on six different continents and has started what he calls a 'fun group' which trains together. Henry is 53 years old.

All participants were interviewed at least twice. Initial interviews were semi-structured, with 20 questions addressing how they experienced using and purchasing running shoes constructed in relation to concepts gleaned from the theoretical influences mentioned above. Secondary and tertiary interviews moved towards

‘guided theoretical dialogues’ (Stebbins 2001), where we explored more generally the impact of technology on human behaviour and freedom in late capitalist societies and how this is reflected in our running practices. This approach also allowed participants to review, confirm or clarify their narratives, as well as engage with my experiences and theoretical positioning, thus moulding my conceptual framework. As a result of these discussions, my understanding of techno-science in running shoes was at various times challenged and reinforced, but above all guided by those involved.

Knight’s children

Some people think I’m bonkers, but I just think I’m free. Man I’m just living my life there’s nothing crazy about me. Some people pay for thrills but I get mine for free. Man, I’m just living my life. There’s nothing crazy about me.

Dizzee Rascal’s song is blaring at me, the bass reverberates through the room. The eye-popping colours of the walls stimulate my eyes. People move briskly, some in time with the music mouthing the words; others are locked in conversation or deep in thought, seemingly oblivious to the noise. The ‘bouncer’ keeps a close eye on me as I enter and skirt along the edge of the room. Enormous TV screens line one wall projecting images of Sofia Boutella dancing. I watch Sofia’s supple, yet powerful, body. Her dancing is unashamedly athletic and unapologetically sexual. She is too skilful to be a go-go girl, but that seems to be the role she has been assigned. I make my way beneath life-size photographs of sports stars. Some are action shots usually showing athletes pumped up and baying at a crowd demanding respect and admiration for their talents which have just resulted in a point, wicket, goal, touchdown, try or victory depending on the athlete and sport. They are accompanied by smaller shots created in modelling shoots or stylised photos reminiscent of Korda’s *Guerrillero Heroico*. They watch me closely as I ascend to the second story.

There the music is considerably quieter and I am greeted by a rank of footballer manikins, assembled like terracotta warriors, to my right. On my left are vistas of parks and urban landscapes devoid of people save for lone Nike clad runners. The room is long and thin, divided into men’s and women’s sections. I follow the lone male runner’s gaze to the far end of the store. I begin to walk there past a glass cubicle housing a dozen Mac computers and dozens of brightly coloured shoes, along a three lane running track. As I cross lanes I am confronted with a wall of running shoes all categorised according to functionality. I browse. The shop is humming, staff move quickly between customers. I pick up various shoes and examine them. Pressing and comparing soles, admiring details and sleek design lines all the while pretending to know what the features are. I test them for flexibility, contorting and twisting the soles in a tyre-kicking display to gain attention from the staff, who seem more fashionable than athletic.



A member of the sales team approaches me. He is tall. I attempt to judge his athletic credibility, by reading his body. He is in good physical shape, but I struggle to categorise him. Too large to be a middle or long distance runner, too small to be a sprinter. There are no telltale signs of rugby or any other contact sport. I conclude, moments before we engage, that he must be a footballer or involved in a team sport that requires running as part of training. Having read his body clad in labelled sporting apparel and assessing that his hair is short cropped because it is easy to maintain and does not get in his eyes or add unnecessary weight, I decide he must understand running a little beyond reciting specifications.

'Can I help you?', He asks, seemingly unaware of having tacitly established credibility.

'Yes please' I reply, holding a shoe in my hand, I feel like a child who cannot open a bottle asking someone to help them, 'I'm after a pair of running shoes but I don't know where to start'.

He commences the prescription process.

OK. Well, what kind of running do you do?

I try to avoid running on the road, I run through woods and parks, that kind of thing.

'So trail running then', he retorts, seemingly clarifying and probing my symptoms.

'Yeah' I reply, then add a caveat, 'not extreme off road or anything, though'.

'Great', apparently this is a straightforward case. Or is it? 'Do you know anything about your running style?'

He is met with a blank look. I try to think of something intelligent to say, searching for words to let him know I'm educated and smart and have studied biomechanics at university.

'I mean do you know if you under- or over-pronate', he says without gesticulating the anatomical adjectives.

I concede. 'No, I don't know'.

Have you got a spare few minutes to jump on the treadmill so we can do a gait analysis?

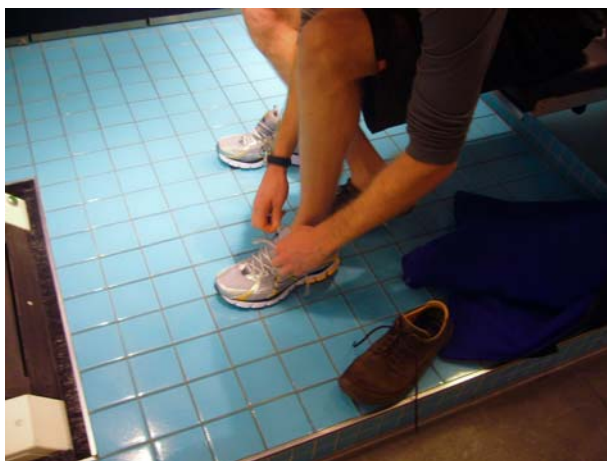
'All the time in the world, mate', I reply non-chalantly. If I cannot convince him of my intelligence I can at least revert to my antipodean charm.

Housed behind a glass façade *The Running Lab* is lined with bright turquoise tiles. Pride of place in the centre is a treadmill, a decidedly low-tech looking treadmill, the belt on which resembles a tank track. End onto the treadmill sits a brand new Mac computer. The screen displays the treadmill, I cannot see the camera anywhere but from the angle on-screen it is clearly low down. The sale assistant presses a button and a shelf pops out of the wall to sit on.

Grab a seat and I'll get you a pair of neutral shoes to run in. What size are you?

About 11 UK.

He opens a concealed sliding cupboard on the back wall and surveys the cubby holes for a pair of neutral shoes for me. I survey the laboratory. Above the Mac is a backlight which displays radiographs of feet, a stylised radiographic picture of evolutionary man which closely resembles a crouch start to full sprint, as well as pressure maps of foot-falls. Above it are several prosthetic models of feet highlighting their biomechanical and anatomical complexity. It reminds me of the models on doctor's desks of joints and ears that they use to explain your injury or ailment. He turns around and presents me with a pair of very new, very yellow and neutral running shoes. I put them on and then join him beside the treadmill.



Have you used one of these before?

'Sure, not one like this, but treadmills, of course' I answer. I realise all my answers have been unerringly truthful built on an eagerness to be as accurate as possible, which strikes me as odd considering I am talking to a total stranger. He briskly demonstrates the controls, paying special attention to the bright red kill button. Two arrows are provided and he instructs me to push up to go faster and down to go slower until I am running 'as I naturally would'.



I manoeuvre myself onto the treadmill and push the up button. It lurches into life. It is about as smooth as the Soviet tank from which the track was stolen. I walk all the while pressing the up button; it is really difficult to find the right speed, to run 'as I naturally would'. As the speed of the belt increases I begin to feel a bit more normal. It still feels far from natural though. The speed begins to seem about right but I am consciously trying not to go too fast even though I feel like the crowd on the other side of the looking glass beginning to assemble is unimpressed with my ungraceful and thoroughly not fast locomotion. I watch my feet strike the front of the belt but I feel cramped up. I realise that I do not tend to run looking down unless climbing a steep hill as if to shield myself from having to know how far I have left before respite and the reminder of the slowness of my climb. The treadmill is flat so I lift my head, my gait relaxes a little. I feel slightly better. On the wall in front of me is a massive LCD screen. On it is the Millennium Bridge attempting to create the illusion that I am running across it. I feel as though my body is performing involuntarily – conditioned and externally prompted by the treadmill and the virtual running-scape in front of me. There is now a small crowd catching my performance both live and projected on the screens around me, I have become an installation for a few brief moments. Despite the uncomfortable awareness of my public and cybernetic performance, I begin to run more freely. As I begin to loosen up, the assistant tells me to stop and then presses the red button for me. The tank track does not stop immediately. It slows gradually as if it remembers

it must dissipate a huge inertia. I slow down with it then slide off the back in a deliberate attempt to look cool.

He takes me to the Mac below the backlight. My skinny legs await on the screen for me. With a click of the mouse, my legs lurch into action.

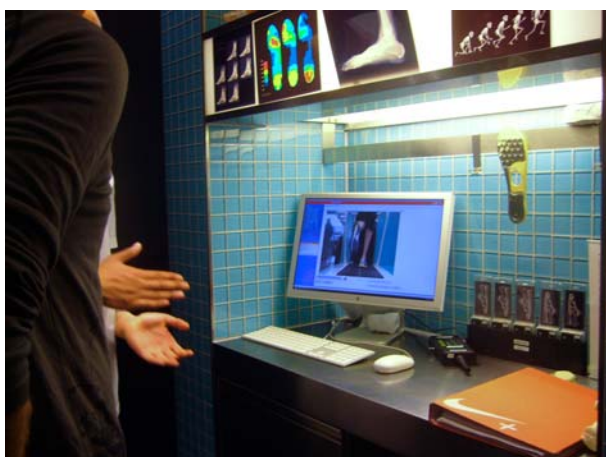
‘What we are looking for is the angles between your ankle and calf while you run’ he tells me whilst tracing his fingers over my onscreen legs. He clicks the mouse again as my right foot makes contact with the belt. My legs freeze.

‘See here’, pointing at my heel, ‘we follow a straight line up from your shoe and ...’ he pauses’ ... well’ ... chequeing ... ‘that’s pretty good, actually pretty’ correcting his use of layman’s terms, ‘neutral, no pronation’. He clicks, just once, on the screen above my calf muscle then my heel bone, albeit concealed by the yellow shoes and a yellow line appears.

‘Actually, that’s extremely straight. Dead on’, He informs me with an element of surprise in his voice.

Let’s have a look at your left leg now.

My virtual chicken legs lurch into action again, taking a few more steps before he implodes time and space with the click of the mouse. My legs freeze. With the left foot on the ground, the analysis begins.



‘So, we see’ ... pause, check, ... ‘again here’ ... tracing the line ... ‘really neutral. That’s extremely uncommon’. He looks again, rationalising, ‘must be because you take a lot of your weight on your forefoot’ explained ... ‘which is good’, he hastens to add. ‘You’re very neutral, that’s rare’.

I feel an undeniable smug feeling, I thought I was bound to run incorrectly. My legs are laden with quirks and I was sure my gait would be shown to be similar to a buckled wheel. I have got such skinny legs and used to get strips torn off me by my mates at school for flicking my right leg to the side, like a woman running in high heels, when I ran with them, against them or whilst playing some form of game. This feeling fades. My mind whirs and internal dialogue begins.

‘How the hell can I be *really* neutral?’ I ask myself ‘I must have been doing something wrong, I can’t have been running *as I naturally would*’.

I continue to wonder ...

... I have been called a lot of things by a lot of people in a lot of places and languages, but I am pretty sure neutral has never been an adjective associated with me.

He turns from the screen having stopped virtual me from running.

'So, for you, the best way to go is with the Pegasus and given where you run the best option is' ... we leave the glassed running laboratory. Brushing past observers as they turn and watch us then like grazing cattle. Having watched us pass by, they revert their attention to the laboratory, my legs on the screen or continue with their shopping.

I follow him along the wall of shoes.

... 'these'. He produces a single shoe from the wall. 'Air Pegasus ES'.

He passes me an upside down exemplar. It is from the bottom shelf. He then reaches to the middle shelf and gives me another Pegasus, again upside down.

The only difference here is the sole. See how the ES are more suited to trail running?

The sole has multidirectional lugs to give you more traction on the trails and parks.

The 4E have the patented waffle sole so won't be grippy enough for you off road.

I am not sure now whether he really knows stuff or has just read off a cue card such as his masterful command of the jargon. Despite this, I ask if I can try the ES on. After double-checking my size, he heads towards another Mac and begins ordering a pair to be brought down for me. As he does so I look across the shop to the design studio, the glassed room filled with Mac computers and bright shoes I passed on the way in. He returns.

They'll be down in a couple of minutes for you.

'Thanks mate', I reply, 'can I go over there and customise them while I wait?' I ask with thinly veiled excitement at the prospect of making multicoloured shoes to blaze through the countryside with.

You mean with NikeiD?

Yeah, I guess so, like they're doing over there.

Sorry but you can't customise the ES.

'OK', my tone drops partly from disappointment, partly from surprise. 'What about the 4E?'

You can, but only the 25th anniversary edition. Have a go trying on the ES then see what you think.

Perturbed, I aimlessly browse the running apparel. I know how to use the computers, I can pay cash for the shoes, I will actually buy them, I am do not want to just 'play' on the computer. My thoughts, and creativity, are taunted by wild examples of customised possibilities and slogans appealing to 'customise *your* footwear'. He returns.

I sit down on a nearby seat as he opens the box and produces a pair of Air Pegasus ES trail shoes. Bill Bowerman peers at me from the insole of the left shoe and informs me that this model is part of the presumably prestigious

Bowerman Series. The shoes themselves are grey with small blue details. If ever a shoe would benefit from a splash of customised colour it is the ES. They are about as appealing and enticing as a wet dog in a sack. I try them on. They are incredibly comfortable. He checks the sizing, informs me that they loosen somewhat as the tongue padding packs down and as a result should be on the tight side of firm across the top of my foot. I want to go back on the treadmill and run in them, but am content to pace around the store then break into a half-hearted jog along the running track.

‘How do they feel?’ He asks.

‘They feel great’, I say. *I feel like such a dick.*

I feel awkward pacing around the store testing the shoes, partly because there is no way I can recreate the feel, pace, sights and smells of a run inside the store. The bright, multicoloured fluorescent lights and postmodern interior design are a far cry from the soft subtleties of early morning light filtering through tree canopies. The background music does not compare to the dawn chorus of birds. The lazy jog is void of the satisfying rhythmical pounding of my heart in my ears and the sweet taste of air being guzzled to invigorate and fuel my running body. Partly because I do not want to draw attention to myself. I ask again.

There’s no way I can customise these then?

No, sorry.

I know its not an apology; its a courtesy. The possibility crosses my mind that he is apologising for my stupidity, my inability to understand that these shoes have been prescribed for me through a videographic computer analysis. Computer says No. My failure to grasp the explanation that I cannot customise them seems to annoy him.

But I can with the 4E?

‘Yes, but only with the 25th anniversary edition upper’. Brusque. Curt. Answer.

Besides the upper, what’s the difference?

‘The sole’. The answer is succinct, possibly to facilitate easier processing for my brain. He does, however, reach for the shoes again. Tell me and I forget; show me and maybe I will understand.

‘The ES has a trail sole. The 4E has the patented waffle sole’. Short, simple sentences (do not forget it is patented). ‘If you are running on trails you will need grip. The 4E are not what you want’.

‘Clearly they are what I want, mate, maybe just not what I need’. I argue, albeit only in my head.

‘It’s not hardcore fell, they are maintained tracks’ I reason with him.

‘You’re still better off with the ES’. Case closed, buddy.

The grey is unappealing but if that is the way I want to run, in the freedom of the trails, the dales, the forests and along hilltop vistas then these grey Nike Pegasus must be my companions.



Theoretical implications

The first thing that struck me about such stores is their spectacular and highly technical nature and the concomitant impact of the technology housed there on runners' (read: *consumers'*) agency. Ingham (2004, p. 12) points out that questioning the 'wanting to/having to relationship' must take account of the ubiquitous capitalisation of sport. Similarly, Andrews (2006) argues that sport is at the forefront of broader changes in the capitalist system, awash with neo-liberal, consumer capitalist logic and practices. In this vein, I view running shoe stores as an example of Debord's notion of the integrated spectacle that champions a specific understanding of running that both reflects *and* reinforces the rationalisation of production inherent in techno-scientific capitalist systems. In the integrated spectacle, Debord differentiates between upper- and lower-case spectacles, which are simultaneously capitalist product and process. Running shoe stores as Spectacles are the brilliant and entertaining physical phenomena in which 'the social relations and experiences [are] mediated by ancillary commercial texts, products, and services' (Andrews 2006, p. 95) or spectacles.

I invoke Debord's concept to highlight not only the Spectacle of the running shoe store but also, and more importantly, the insidious way in which spectacles alter social practices. I understand the running shoe store as a Spectacle that presents

the omnipresent affirmation of the choice *already made* in production and its corollary consumption. The spectacle's form and content are identically the total justification of the existing system's conditions and goals. The spectacle is also the *permanent presence* of this justification, since it occupies the main part of the time lived outside of modern production. (Debord 1983, p. 6)

Multitudinous spectacles in the store organise and dictate running by (re)producing, endorsing, distributing and presenting shoes and discourse about running which impact on how runners view and use their running shoes. The integrated nature of the spectacle is highlighted through running shoe stores as sites full of multimedia, where shopping, indeed running, is almost subsidiary to the collision of music, art, apparel, computers and television. Therefore, the way running shoes are presented and valued in running shoe stores defines more sharply already established values and positions of techno-science and consumerism by assisting in the creation of, giving physical

expression to and acting as a means of reflecting, dominant cultural values. This, in my experience, is more than ‘the cultural turn of late capitalism’ (Jameson 1991).

Through the spectacular presentation of running shoes, specialist running stores amalgamate techno-science and late capitalism to construct a certain kind of running practice. This is reflected in the multimediatisation of running as expressed by 31-year-old Michelle who, during her lunch time runs along the Thames River, feels ‘naked without my heart rate monitor and music, I have to run with music’. My narration employs defamiliarisation to introduce the vernacular and monumental aspects of the spectacle by drawing attention to the night club-esque atmosphere and gallery-like layout of the stores, which highlights how the stores I encountered are far more complex than the presentation and storage of goods for purchase. This complexity is apparent through the treatment, understanding and discursive construction of my body within the store.

The discursive construction of running bodies within running shoe stores has a significant impact on runners. For example, Rick, a 42-year-old business analyst from London who runs between three and five times a week, described his running to me, ‘I love it but I run terribly, it’s about as far from graceful as you can get. It’s always been like that. I’ve always over-pronated horrifically’. Running, for Rick, is defined more by his ability, as determined by others, rather than by himself in terms of his enjoyment. The use of biomechanical terms gleaned from shoe prescriptions was a common trait amongst those I spoke to and is one example of the way the running shoe store has defined and enframed running.

The discursive construction of the running body through gait analysis would be recognised by Foucault (1977) as a surveilling and disciplining, examination that introduces mechanisms linking a certain way of forming knowledge to a particular way of exerting power. In running, this takes place through the way the examination of my running style knows, understands and (re)produces my body biomechanically as a machine. One gives over one’s body to the machine and offers a ‘confession’ (Foucault 1977), apparent in the unerring truthfulness of my answers to the assistant in the store. This process reveals and organises my body by internalising power on behalf of the spectacular system, allowing ‘the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the population to economic processes’ (Foucault 1979, p. 141). This, to refer again to Foucault, is a more efficient and insidious construction of power than directly disciplining the body. Foucault defines this process as *bio-power*, which sets about producing human life, organising it socially and culturally, limiting the ways in which it may come to presence. As such, it is a decidedly political power (Pronger 2002, p. 103).

Biopower demands that bodies move in prescribed ways, which shoes enforce. Mark, a 38-year-old veteran of the Marathon des Sables and Atacama Crossing, notes how this became problematic for him in that,

I bought this pair of Adidas trail shoes which had quite a lot of cushioning, but a pretty rigid sole. I tend to over-pronate quite a lot and I don’t think that that helped, I don’t think the shoe helped my natural running style.

Mark felt that the examination classified and challenged his body in a way that was ultimately damaging for him not only in a physiological sense, but it also ordered his running in a specific ontological position that damaged his experi-

ence of running as a consequence. Pronger (2002) might define this as the process of *pouvoir*, the coding and disciplining of the body's existential energies and desires.

For me, whilst the examination defined my running style as 'good', the examination-determined neutrality of my gait frightened me in its classification as natural, but presentation as abnormal. The examination and documentation of the body did not locate any objective value within my body. Instead, it defined my body externally by making me a case to be measured, described and, above all, judged as part of a database according to which others are compared, defined by deficiency and deviation from the norm, so that I am neither human nor consumer but calculable entity. Having been calculated and classified, I, like all the runners I spoke to, was fitted with shoes to 'normalise' my gait. The movement of the body is, thus, organised to maximise the running shoe company and store capital rather than to enhance running experience. In reflection, then, the ultimate subject of the fitting process is the discovered 'perfect shoe'; I am only a crude, fleshy object in the process against which science is applied. The goal of the analysis process is the *prescription* of not only an appropriate but perfect shoe. Leaving aside the interest piqued for Foucault at the medical terminology, this process and its goal raise, for me, notions of hyperreality.

The performance spectacle of 'gait analysis' and associated measurement makes running in the store realer than real. So that in the measured, projected, recorded and televised environment of the running shoe store, 'it is the lived life which seems unreal, and will go on looking and feeling unreal as long as it is not refashioned in its own turn into screenable images' (Bauman 2000, p. 83). Examples of how this translates into running practices are evident in the way Peter, a 29-year-old research student involved in a multidisciplinary five-year research running shoe research project at a prominent UK university, records and maps his running routes on Google Earth, uploading and sharing them on www.run.com. Similarly, Mark uses www.garminconnect.com to map online not only his route but also data collected during his run concerning pace and heart rate, thereby managing his training regime. Therefore, running becomes more real when it is quantified, that is, ontologically ordered according to the essence of technology (Heidegger 1977). Hyperreality complements the spectacle by accentuating how use-value has been subsumed by exchange-value, which in turn has been displaced by sign-value just as running shoes and the store has changed the individual from *being* a runner, into *having* the necessary running 'props' (Goffman 1990) such as running shoes, and to then *appearing* to be a runner. This process is clear in the attention I gained as a quasi-performance art piece when running on the treadmill watched by onlookers and also in my assessment by running store staff.

The running shoe store spectacle presents the hyperreal space of technologically advanced cultures. Hyperreality is used here to qualify the revolutionary position of Debord's (1983) theorising by drawing attention to the way reality is defined in a space and society, where a multitude of media can radically shape and filter events, images, space and/or experiences (Antonio 2007). Hyperreality is exploited to define possibilities for the consumer, which does not contradict but advances the spectacle. As such, to paraphrase both Debord and Baudrillard, the running shoe store is not a collection of images; rather, it is a relationship between the (late) capitalist system, runners and their bodies, mediated by images which simulate some-

thing that never really existed. Therefore, rather than concealing reality through the spectacle, hyperreality proposes that there is no reality as it has been displaced by signs of its existence, by the spectacle (Baudrillard 1995). Massumi (1987) articulates the general thrust of hyperreality as a break between signified and signifier. Signs are no longer representative of or referential to external models; they refer only to themselves and other signs as 'a copy of a copy whose relation to the model has become so attenuated that it can no longer properly be said to be a copy' (Massumi 1987, p. 91). We can see, literally and figuratively, through the LCD screen in *The Running Laboratory*, that the hyperreal store is not culturally mimetic nor does it replace reality. It appropriates reality. The running store does not replace music stores, concerts, art galleries or hi-tech laboratories, but appropriates them in a self-referential, self-serving system of techno-scientific, cultural and economic dominance. As a result, the running shoe store shapes our desires and social identities in accordance with the techno-cultural-socio-economic project of the hyperreal spectacle.

To ground this notion, runners understand that the measurement of their feet and gait does not produce bespoke shoes, but rather the intricate (hyperreal) detail produced by the examination is used to prescribe one of a limited range of mass-produced shoes. (3-Dimensional 'footmapping' which is becoming increasingly prevalent provides allegorical reference to the map fable used by Baudrillard (1995).) Rick commented that,

from a financial standpoint, obviously shoes have to be mass produced so you can't get something that suits you perfectly, it's not like a bespoke suit, but all the measurements they take help them get as close as physically possible.

Peter, who has special knowledge of anthropometry and biomechanics of the foot derived from his involvement in research in developing high performance sports footwear, expands on this when reflecting on his purchasing experiences and his research that,

shoes are picked from a variety of lasts that [companies] have, not necessarily one made for that person. So for each shoe they would have five different types for size eights: three different widths; neutral cushioning or, for pronators, providing support. They have a fixed number of shoe types and according to gait analysis they would pick one.

From such a perspective, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the body is fitted to shoes rather than shoes fitted to the body. Michelle was 'not particularly enamoured with the idea that the shoes pick me rather than the other way around' and Rick commented,

You can make a case for that and it's not nice to think that's what it boils down to. I mean, it's probably how Asics or Nike, in terms of manufacturing and profitability, see it. That's no surprise but, realistically, it's always a little scary when you take a step back and think you know, to them, I am just a sales number. Still, it's a bloody far cry from us being batteries for *The Matrix*.

The runners I spoke to all recognised the potential for the prescription process to organise the body in the interest of production and consumption, a classic illustra-

tion of Foucault's (1979) 'anatomy-politics' of the body. In my personal experience, the data collected compare my style to norms, rendering me a case and ignoring my desires. This is evident in the measurement of my gait, resulting in the prescription of shoes I did not want, but which the system declared my body needed.

Such a positioning of my body via Foucauldian theory is important to note as it illustrates how historically specific modes of power relations create validated knowledge claims. The central weakness of Foucauldian inspired analyses; however, is an often unacknowledged discursive essentialism, where the body is reduced to an inert biological, physical mass to be inscribed by and created through discourse thus losing the ability to recognise different aspects of embodiment. Indeed, as Shilling (2003, p. 80) explains, 'the bodies that appear in Foucault's work do not enjoy a prolonged visibility as corporeal entities. Bodies are produced, but their own powers of production, where they have any, are limited to those invested in them by discourse'.

Many runners value prescription for its 'objective' treatment of the body. For example, 53-year-old Kenyan marathoner Henry who coaches what he calls a 'fun running group' told me

say you came to me and asked me 'what would you recommend in a pair of shoes?' I wouldn't say because I am wearing Asics you should go and wear Asics. I would say, 'go to a good running shop, the one I go to is Sweatshop, but there are others, and they will actually do your biometrics and everything'.

My interpretation of the biometric process is clearly at odds with some of the runners, such as Henry, that I spoke to. However, before continuing, it is important to point out that I do not view those who value the prescription process as unwitting dupes, nor my authority of interpretation over theirs. I am seeking to open a new dialogue concerning running practice and taken for granted systems. As noted above by Rick, Michelle and Peter, there is an unacknowledged controlling of bodies and reduction of agency in the prescription process. The intricate detail provided by 'foot-mapping' gait analysis allows runners to make 'informed choices'. Bauman (2000, p. 64) notes that as a result of this position, those with specialised knowledge, 'no longer command; they ingratiate themselves with the chooser, they tempt and seduce'. Similarly, Salecl (2010, p. 32) observes that

choice involves the freedom of the individual to determine the direction of their life, but paradoxically the latter is often quick to give up on this freedom and search for an authority to help deal with all those options as long as they have the power to choose which authority to consult.

In this vein, I, like any other runner, am free to choose any pair of shoes but allow the authority to choose which is best for me. Whilst I had the option of purchasing 4E shoes and customising them, I was guided by systematic, scientised understanding of the shoes and my body via the prescription process. Therefore, I was directed by the (productive) power of the techno-scientific, rational, capitalist system, thus investing my authority in the authority of the system.

For Foucault (1979), this process is rooted in bio-politics. Bio-politics multiply the singular body-as-machine schematic to render the general population a controllable set of standardised biological processes. This reveals the core of shoe prescription, namely, that shoes are prescribed to ensure biologically and socially well-functioning bodies that meet the needs of the techno-capitalist system (Pronger

2002). This is evident in how running is valued. A clear example is how those I spoke to attributed increased concentration and productivity at work to running. Michelle said, ‘after a quick burst around the park at lunch time I feel much better, more alert, and can focus much more in the afternoon than if I didn’t go for a run’. Our cooperation with the system, then, lies according to Pronger (2002) in the production of desire by the system, what Debord (1983) would call the *appearance* of the spectacle. The system dictates that shoes must be purchased in order to run and the process of prescription reinforces, or for Heidegger enframes, a particular understanding of how to do running. Therefore, the spectacle, hyperreality and biopower acquire

great controlling power at very low cost ... the almost invisible hand of this power, leads to little chance of rebellion. The ‘positive’ (productive rather than repressive) nature of this fascism makes it attractive to the subjected and requires little more than the promise of success within its system to get people participating wholeheartedly. (Pronger 2002, p. 111)

The success of the system is built on the supposed authority of scientific objectivity and the practical application of theoretical knowledge. However, as Heidegger (1977) argues, ontological questions and human experience cannot always be understood through recourse to quantitative mechanical and scientific means. Therefore, running shoes literally enframe not only our running bodies by fitting bodies to shoes, but also our ontological ordering, through the way we understand and value running. To this end, the prescription of running shoes has a phenomenological impact on running embedded in relations of power, where running bodies cede power over the body *and* being to running shoe companies and the positioning of running shoes. Also, the organisation of running shoe stores orients running towards measurable benefits that (re)produce the social order to maximise the profit and pervasiveness of shoes and companies and, in doing so, marginalises other forms and ways of experiencing running (see Atkinson 2009, 2010).

Ultimately, what I am seeking to demonstrate is how technology functions as not only the practical application of theoretical knowledge but also, and more importantly, an ontological condition. In this sense, running shoes, as presented in running shoe stores, position runners within the ‘clearing’ of techno-scientific thought, where entities are judged according to instrumental value rather than intrinsic worth and the meaningful is marginalised in pursuit of the measurable.

This should not be read, however, as an endorsement of barefoot running or a call to throw away your running shoes. Indeed, the rise of ‘barefoot shoes’ and barefoot running is positioned in the same techno-scientific rationale as running shoes. Techno-science enframes our understanding and practice of running not through the use of technology (Heidegger himself begrudgingly acknowledges the ‘saving power’ as well as the ‘supreme danger’ of techno-science) but through the marginalising experiences and objects, which are not oriented towards measureable production of results or value.

Conclusion

The running shoe store is regarded by those I spoke with as the best place to purchase ‘the most important equipment for a runner’, running shoes. Therefore,

the running shoe store, much like subcultural media, is an important site of discursive formation, which forms the techno-scientific backdrop for running. This article uses auto-ethnographic storytelling to show, rather than tell, how technology, in the form of running shoes, enframes our Being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1977). It is, therefore, important to note that the narrative I present is not anecdotal nor merely illustrative of my theoretical interpretations which follow. Instead, I have tried to lay bare the event(s) which have lead to my questioning and developed my thought patterns. As such, this paper is deliberately without answers. It serves to question the way techno-science in both shoes and the prescription process impacts on the way we run beyond questions of biomechanical efficiency.

The need for such questioning is evident in the growing body of literature regarding the technologisation of sport and subsequent dehumanisation of sporting experience, especially concerning cyborgification (Cole 1998, Butryn 2002, Butryn and Masucci 2003) and transhumanism (Miah 2006, 2007). This study follows Pronger's (2002) lead by mounting an empirically informed critical questioning of technology and hints at the bioethical considerations associated with biological enhancement technology and technology's impact on agency.

Nevertheless, I am not forwarding, or even attempting to develop, a normative ethical framework in regard to technology in physical cultures, instead, I am attempting to articulate a sorely missing phenomenological aspect of techno-science. As such, I am not advocating throwing away running shoes for to do so would be to miss the point of this project. Shunning tactile equipment will change little as it misses how techno-science enframes our understanding. Therefore, whilst those such as Miah (2006) champion transhumanism and view dehumanisation theses within physical cultures as inaccurate and uncritical given the broad adoption of technologies in everyday life, such as smart phones, they fail to critically engage with the impact of technology on bodies, and ignoring the neo-liberal, techno-capitalist environment in which their transhumans operate. On this much we can agree: physical cultures, including but not limited to sport, present an increasingly important area for understanding our bodies and their relationship with technology (see Miah 2004). However, they also provide an area for challenging transhumanist biotechnological libertarianism (see Atkinson 2009, 2010), which I view as harbouring real potential for invasive intrusion into our daily lives and bodies. As such, this article presents a small step forward in challenging those, such as Miah, who champion sport as a ground for free choice of technology because, as I have argued, even the most innocuous of technologies, such as running shoes – let alone biomedical interventions – are pregnant with consequences for human freedom, which will heighten as bodies increasingly interact with technology.

Note

1. Please note that for the sake of simplicity, thesis, rather than page, number is used when referencing *Society of the Spectacle*.

Notes on contributor

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