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# "Exercise Teaches You the Pleasure of Discipline" – The Female Body in Jane Fonda's Aerobics Videos

*Melanie Woitas\**

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**Abstract:** *„Exercise Teaches You the Pleasure of Discipline‘: Der weibliche Körper in den Aerobic-Videos von Jane Fonda.* The essay shows how Jane Fonda's aerobics video helped to produce a female body image that claims to differ from the normative standards given by society in a particular social segment. The so-called "aerobic body" was a hybrid of the prevailing delicate woman's body and a body which displays strength and a regular training in the form of muscles. Following selected examples, the following questions will be addressed: How was the female body represented in the videos? How did this influence the common body ideal?

**Keywords:** Aerobics, Jane Fonda, aerobics body, videos, body ideals, Michel Foucault, feminism, female body image, women's body.

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## 1. Introduction

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Jane Fonda, an icon widely known for her achievements as an actress as well as for her political commitment, has succeeded in linking her name to a sport that had been created just a few years before: aerobics. As she helped aerobics to become known world-wide, making it the sport of a decade, in turn aerobics helped her to create a successful empire of videos, DVDs, guidebooks, and other merchandizing. In her videos, Fonda said a lot of things, but hardly any describes the way of life she tried to convey as aptly as "exercise teaches you the pleasure of discipline." Fonda embodies this message. Especially in her books, in which she advises a strict nutritional change in addition to regular training, she shows that self-discipline is not only worthwhile for a lean and firm body, but also for a successful and fulfilling life. In the sense of the proverb: In a healthy body lives a healthy mind, Fonda points out that efforts are worthwhile, because they can be fun by the regularity – especially if one can see a successful result.

By the mid-1980s aerobics had evolved into a phenomenon which the American society could not escape from. In addition to guidebooks, special apparel and equipment, aerobics videos became more and more popular. In the

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public discussions about the videos, the bodies of the athletes were in the centre of attention. They fuelled public debates on common body ideals.

In the context of the second-wave feminist movement the female body became a major site of conflict (Roth 2004). On the one hand, it became the expression of female self-determination, on the other hand, it was in the focus of a social debate about bodily standards. The predominant female body image of the 1980s was a feminine, slim body that should not be strengthened by exercise. Strength was generally a description that was attributed to men and not to women. Even successful professional female athletes had to face debates about their bodies, which were often described as not feminine. With the fitness boom in the mid-1980s, the public debate about women's bodies changed fundamentally. More than ten years after Title IX, the doors to various sports were open to girls and women.<sup>1</sup> As a result, they no longer had to fight for their participation. However, it also concluded that the female body, which had hitherto been disciplined by nutrition, was again the focus of social debates. Pioneers such as Jane Fonda challenged the common ideal of beauty and contributed to its modification. Especially Fonda, a successful and – according to the contemporary conception – good-looking actress, had a major impact. In 1982 Jane Fonda published her first aerobics video, which was in many ways a novelty. There had never been an exercise video before. At that time, it was not even clear whether there would ever be a market for exercise videos. Twenty-four videos later, of which she sold about seventeen million copies, it became clear that the story of aerobics is a story of economic success (Fonda 2012). As the following part of my essay will show, the videos helped to produce a female body image that claims to differ from the normative standards given by society in a particular social segment. The so-called “aerobic body” was a hybrid of the prevailing delicate woman's body and a body displaying strength and a regular training in the form of muscles (Markula 1994, 240).

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<sup>1</sup> Title IX is a federal law enforced in 1972 to end discrimination in various realms based on biological sex, perceived/actual religion, race or color, perceived or actual age, and national origin in the areas of employment and public accommodation. The law had mainly an impact on high schools and collegiate athletics because it guaranteed girls and women the same access to sport as boys and men in education programs and activities receiving Federal financial assistance.

**Figure 1:** Jane Fonda as the Promoter of the Athletic Body



Source: Author unknown. 2015. Jane Fonda Workout Routine and Diet Plan: How the 77 Year Old Star Remains Fit?: <<http://healthyceleb.com/jane-fonda-workout-routine-diet-plan-77-year-old-star-remains-fit/37152>> (Accessed March 20, 2017).

However, the aerobic body could not be compared with bodies of body builders. Jane Fonda, for example, symbolizes this different body understanding. Despite or just because of regular training, her appearance is slender, tight, and especially youthful and thus represents an appearance opposing the body builders' ideal. Many women started aerobics to achieve these three characteristics [Figure 1], underlining how much this different corporeal look appealed to a large number of those practicing aerobics. However, Fonda did not maintain a thin, and for many women enviable body only through regular training and a strict dietary change while she grew older. In the 1980s, she made public her bulimia, from which she suffered for over 30 years (Fonda 1981, 13-6). Figure 1 shows Fonda promoting aerobics. She looks strong, fit, energetic, and youthful, nobody would have thought of her having a serious eating disorder. This picture is an example of the fact that not everything is as it seems at first sight. Images in advertising are often edited. The same is true for videos. While they seem to represent reality, they are not a random product, but planned in detail, too, so they can display "reality" in the best possible light. Still, they are not films that make audiences aware that actors are painted, disfigured, or disguised. Like movies, the videos by Fonda and others did not use images, but moving pictures, so-called "bodies in motion." Body practices serve as a foundation for the films. The production of films and aerobics videos is itself integrated into the social order, which means that they can intervene in the social

order in both affirmative and opposing ways. In the videos, body norms are processed productively by acting as part of the physical order. That means, on the one hand they reproduce bodily stereotypes like delicate female bodies. On the other hand, the videos tried to break with attributions like weakness by showing strong and muscular bodies (Raab 2010, 154). Pictures as sources have similar interpretation and analytical possibilities. Aerobics videos are of particular importance because they were the first training videos, opening a new category of visual sources. With the advent of the aerobics videos in the 1980s, a completely new sort of visual instruction arrived in the field of sport. The videos now allow a completely new access to sports guides because their pictures are moving. What is more: they are coherent media-arrays, comprised of moving pictures, music, and spoken instruction. In general, the videos are an all-in-one solution because they also bring along the appropriate background music that motivates and sets the rhythm and pace of the exercises.

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## 2. Aerobics Videos Enable a New Way of Working Out

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At the beginning of the 1980s, when the first aerobics video was placed on the market, the VCR had been developed only a couple of years before. Only a few households had one. In a survey of the magazine “Dance-Exercise Today” from 1987, 29% of the respondents claimed to use aerobics videos for their workout (Kagan and Morse 1988, 164).

Recently, Jane Fonda was asked by Ellen DeGeneres, a well-known talk show host, how it was like to pioneer a market for exercise videos. Fonda took this as her cue to boast that she also created the market for the VCR, which was too expensive for the average American family. From a desire to use the aerobics videos repeatedly, many households then decided to buy the technical equipment (The Ellen Show 2012). Even though this anecdote might provoke a smile, it still illustrates the importance of the VCR and the videos, which were not part of an average American family home.

Aerobics videos changed the way of exercising substantially. Now it was possible to have an aerobics workout at home instead of going to the gym. At the time, there were short gymnastics units in the TV program, which encouraged the audience to join in. However, these are no comparison to aerobics videos. While the gymnastics program was based on exercises that were easy to understand and imitate, and more or less aimed at the whole body, the aerobics videos, which were not specially designed for specific body regions, gradually trained each muscle group. These exercises were supplemented by cardio units as well as a warm-up at the beginning and a cool down in the end. In addition, the use of the VCR made it possible to determine the time of the training and not to depend on a given time. This made it much easier to integrate the training into the daily routine and was therefore a real advance especially for working

women. Until then aerobics classes were exclusively held in gyms. The VCR technology enabled users to fast forward heavy exercises or to repeat favourite exercises by rewinding. Whenever they lost the desire to exercise, women were able to stop the video and quit or continue the training after a break. That was not possible in the classes. Plus, no instructor made the women feel guilty if they did not perform the exercises with full force. Many athletes thought the videos as a step towards a self-determined training and the sales figures of Fonda and others suggest that it was the right time to introduce this certain way of working out.

Until today, Jane Fonda published twenty-four video tapes and six DVDs. From her first until her last video substantial changes in background arrangements, music, outfits, and accessories were made according to the tastes and trends of that time. However, there are also similarities. Jane Fonda for example is still very thin and very trained in every video, as well as the other athletes in the background. It seems Jane Fonda has successfully evaded the aging process. In her videos, not only does her body look much younger, but her radiance is youthful as well. During the fitness boom, a period of about ten years, aerobics seemed to be the key to eternal youth. As a “midlife beauty,” Fonda is the example that a healthy and sport-based lifestyle is better than any anti-wrinkle cream. As a result, the body, which has always been the centre of attention in the videos, gains even more importance. If one gives credence to articles in women’s magazines, a youthful and fit body seems to be more important than a truly healthy one. The men and women who performed the exercises in the videos are also young and trained. In one of the videos, a mid-40-year-old woman wears a grey-haired wig. It can be assumed that Fonda wants to demonstrate that aerobics is for all age classes, but for aesthetic reasons no actually older women were displayed (Jane Fonda’s *Light Aerobics and Stress Reduction Program*). In general, the situation of their fellow trainers has changed. While in the first videos Fonda was supported by only a few women and men in the background (and not during the entire training session), a whole classroom gathered in the videos at the end of the 1980s. These consisted of men and women of different ethnic and age groups, which seemed quite diverse. However, if one looks at the bodies of the different women, one quickly realises that only a single body ideal can be found. This finding allows the conclusion that the illustrated aerobic body, which combines different body images as a hybrid, has rigid boundaries that allow little scope for diversity. This is remarkable as a self-proclaimed emancipatory project – freeing the female body from a prevailing body image – more or less did what it criticized in the first place: it excluded all women whose bodies did not fit the definition.

**Figure 2:** Cover of Fonda's First Aerobics Video



Source: Author unknown. <[http://cdn.iofferphoto.com/img3/item/524/629/220/o\\_original-1982-jane-fonda-workout-dvd-beginner-advanced-5088.jpg](http://cdn.iofferphoto.com/img3/item/524/629/220/o_original-1982-jane-fonda-workout-dvd-beginner-advanced-5088.jpg)> (Accessed March 20, 2017).

On the following pages, I am going to focus on answering two questions, which are crucial: (1) How were female bodies represented in the aerobics videos and (2) what happened to the common body ideal? After all, even seemingly new body ideals must have a certain ability to connect to previous ones, because without the old, there is nothing new. Hardly any other medium had more influence on public debates about body norms in the 1980s. Therefore, the videos are a unique source, which on the one hand produced body norms. On the other hand, they reproduced social norms, within which, for example, Fonda adapted her videos to women's needs, current studies, or the results of social debates about body ideals. The cover of Fonda's first video shows this very clearly [Figure 2]. Compared to the following videos she is almost fully clothed. In addition, she adopts a pose in which her body can be seen completely, but not in a frontal perspective, which often emphasizes the chest and waist area. In contrast to other pictures like Figure 1 it looks like a snapshot, for which long posing or styling was not necessary. Fun and sport appear to be in the foreground and less the result of a seemingly perfect body. Furthermore, the snapshot character seems to indicate that aerobics can be done more or less in passing. Yet, the videos steadily changed in the course of the 1980s and 1990s

and these changes indicate the influence aerobics tried to gain on the common body ideal, in which bodies were presented that were desirable according to Fonda and others.

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### 3. The Impact of Aerobics Videos on the Female Body Image

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Working out with the aim to achieve a certain ideal turned into an everyday practice in the 1980s. The videos are a great source to investigate practices of everyday life in more detail in terms of changed ways of exercising. The videos had the purpose to ensure that women who trained their bodies not in gyms but at home were oriented towards common ideals. Moreover, not only what was shown in the videos had an impact on the body debates in the 1980s. The practice of video making and the practice of video watching likewise contributed to the emulation of an “aerobic body.”

The aerobics videos are a unique historical source. To understand why aerobics had such an influence on the contemporary body ideal, guidebooks and articles in magazines are not enough. The videos provide insight into the ambivalence of aerobics, which was caused by them to a certain degree. On the one side the videos push “doing gender,” by reproducing the common female gender attributions. In this analytical approach from the field of gender studies, gender is considered as a product of performative activities rather than a static characteristic. Additionally, this concept emphasizes the approach to one’s own share in the production of sexuality (West and Zimmerman 1987). The videos display perfectly shaped women dressed in stylish outfits with small waists, long and tight legs. On the other side, they portray the female body as strong and powerful, which are male ascriptions. Jane Fonda’s body is thin but strong, too. Her arms are well defined. She is not muscular in terms of a body builder, but she is strong and this can be clearly seen on her body. Plus, Fonda says in her videos over and over again that women should feel comfortable in their bodies and as long as they are healthy, the appearance is of secondary importance. Her words changed the female self-conception of many aerobicizers – as Pirkko Markula, professor of socio-cultural studies, calls former and active trainees – and they no longer wanted to be dictated how they should look (Markula 1994). However, the juxtaposition of empowerment and discipline should not hide the fact that aerobics was primarily considered an ambivalent self-technology that both empowered and disciplined women. Whether women felt empowered or disciplined through aerobics and the associated debates depends on a variety of factors. Thus, the environment, one’s own motivation and satisfaction with the body play a major role. The question arises whether the women were really self-determined or whether they were influenced by debates and ideas and unconsciously wanted to correspond to a certain stereo-



type. Within the framework of the 1980s feminism, it must be said that it was a mixture of both extremes to which women were subjected. In the public, they showed strength and self-confidence, which were celebrated as new and feminist achievements. However, this did not work without the classic “feminine” attributes. For women, those were the link to a basic capitalist orientation that was necessary to secure their place in society. In any case, Fonda managed to get women to increasingly question body ideals and to see if they wanted to fulfil a certain ideal or not.

The veracity of the bodies shown in the videos must not be underestimated, because even supposedly small things help to reproduce old body standards or to produce new ones. In the case of the videos there are accessories that turned a sports outfit into an aerobics outfit. These include the mandatory leg warmers, a tight-fitting leotard, usually in bright colours and patterns, a well-fitting hairstyle, and a smile even at very strenuous exercises (about facial expression during effort and gender construction, see Boddy 2018 in this issue). By putting so much emphasis on what women wear for training, the traditional image of women having to look appealing in the first place, even in sweaty situations, is reproduced. Hence, the clothes’ functionality is subordinate.

**Figure 3:** Still of Diana Ross in “Work That Body,” 1982



Source: loveth80s1. (December 24, 2011). Diana Ross. Work That Body, Still at 2:22. <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDrh7o\\_tiuI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDrh7o_tiuI)> (Accessed March 20, 2017).

Fonda went ahead as an example and made sure that her outfits would also find their way into the everyday clothing style of the 1980s. Not only girls and women used leg warmers etc. to gussy up their outfits. Even singers drew on the special aerobics style in their music videos, which enjoyed an increasing popularity. A famous example for aerobics sportswear in a music video is Diana Ross’s “Work That Body” published in 1982 (Figure 3), the same year

as Jane Fonda's first aerobics video. While the white middle class predominantly consumed the videos and the style was adapted in the videos of white girls and women, the famous African-American singer Diana Ross carried a typical aerobics outfit. It is not clear to what extent African-Americans bought the videos. It is certain, however, that there were few non-white women in the sports classes. This suggests that the inspiration for outfits and accessories, which are reminiscent of aerobics, is more likely to come from the music videos than from the training videos. That means just because an outfit looked like aerobics, it did not have to be an outfit for aerobics.

Much more importantly at this point is the question of race. As mentioned already, the aerobic classes were little diversified. Also, the videos did not have a variety of models of different ethnicities. In the videos there were mostly one or two African-Americans and one Asian woman. In some videos one Latina is also displayed. In relation to the white women and men, they were underrepresented. Fonda did not comment on which target group she made the videos for or that they were not just particularly for the white middle class. Maybe it was the high cost of the VCR and the video itself that kept African-Americans from buying it. Perhaps they did not feel addressed by the courses because predominantly white women trained. However, it can safely be said that the trend to wear clothing from aerobics videos in everyday life was not limited to the white middle class. While in the 1980s tights were regarded as fashionable in some circles, a decade later they were associated with the underclass. In Diana Ross's video tights were left out what additionally sexualized the scenes. She wears a tight leotard, which caused some heated debates. Both music videos like Diana Ross's and aerobics videos were criticized because they displayed female bodies less appressed and in sometimes provocative positions. Additionally, the angle of the camera (close-ups on buttocks, legs, faces) apparently leads to sexually charged videos rather than showing women doing sports. Not only critics wondered whether this partial soft-pornographic representation of women was necessary to animate women to exercise. In the discussions about the videos it was also asked whether such a body-tight outfit had a positive impact on the training effect.

### 3.1 Oral History Interviews with Former Aerobicizers about Aerobics Equipment

In oral history interviews with former aerobicizers that I performed in 2015 in Washington, DC, I asked about the significance of outfits and accessories. It turned out that half of the respondents did not care what they wore back then. However, this statement must be considered critically. From the perspective of thirty years later, it appeared to them that they did not place great importance on fashionable outfits. But the more important information in their statement is the following: it did not disturb the exercises if you did not wear special shirts

or shoes. The other half wanted to look good while working out. But they did not want to spend a lot of money on unnecessary things like special equipment or apparel. Although this survey is not representative, it still shows that while women felt the pressure to work on their bodies, they did not feel the necessity to look perfect during the workout. However, it can be assumed that they put little energy and money on an extravagant outfit. Yet, the question arises as to why the demand for special sportswear grew steadily. I argue that the aerobics sportswear sold so well because it could be integrated as a fashionable trend into everyday wear and girls and women bought tights and sweatbands with no intention of training aerobics. In addition, I believe there were women who wanted to belong to this certain group of fit people. In their sporty dresses, they symbolized that fitness and self-optimization also played a major role in their lives. Last but not least, the pressure that women can exert on other women should not be underestimated. Sometimes glances are enough that reflect disregard, envy, or even respect and admiration. Perhaps women in sports studios were wearing expensive sportswear because they did not want to be exposed to the glances and chitchat of other women. It is, of course, also possible that women in unisex sports classes wanted to be attractive for men and therefore spent a lot of time looking as good as possible during their workout. This selection of reasons is intended to show that there are different motives for wearing special sportswear, stressing that if women had taken care of their appearance in their everyday life, they had neglected this in sport until the fitness-boom.

Susan Strasser, a historian from Washington, DC, answered the question concerning the importance of special equipment in the following way:

It was not at all important. It was a university class; girls were wearing gym shorts. I mean, I don't even remember buying special shoes. I probably wore running shoes. I was never attracted to the gloss. I was never attracted to outfits. I was looking for good exercise, the fun, and the music and all of that. And in this class, even the instructor wasn't wearing anything special or fancy or glossy. (Strasser 2015)

This quote is related to classes in gyms. Women worked out in groups, which could have the effect of being observed, and therefore they placed more emphasis on their appearance. On the contrary, aerobics videos enable women to work out without critical looks from others while wearing what they want. However, it is likely that those women who wanted to be seen during their workouts, trained in public and did not dress up for a workout at home. In 1983 a New York Times article was published talking about a "typical aerobicizer": "She was wearing a satiny red leotard cut high on the thighs and low in the back, a white headband, shimmery white tights, black wool leg warmers, a thin black belt around her waist and a gold Egyptian necklace" (Schultz 2014, 143). The 32-year old graphic designer portrayed here was asked why she put so much effort into her outfit just for a training session. She answered: "I work out every day of the week and when I look good, I work harder" (ibid.). Whether

this is her subjective perception or whether one could actually prove in a study that the well-being in training has a tremendous influence on the performance is secondary at this point. It would also be possible to conclude that she had to train regularly and in order to be able to wear such formfitting clothes. More importantly, the young woman's statement clearly reveals two things which played a decisive role in the establishment of the sports market. On the one hand, it was important to stand out from professional athletes, some of whom were still considered masculine and not feminine enough in the 1980s, and sometimes wore training clothes that were rather unfavourable to the female body. Just the description of the fabric, which was bright red, shows that the young woman wanted to be noticed. She didn't try to hide her body in wide shirts and shorts. Her leotard was deeply cut out at the back and thus corresponded to the fashion. Colour-coordinated accessories made their sportswear an outfit, which signalled self-confidence. Additionally, there is the desire to be individual. Many women who did aerobics in the 1980s were part of teams such as softball. During the school days and then later in college, teams practiced in uniform jerseys. Even if tight leotards could be considered as a sort of aerobics uniform, they were available in countless colours, designs and patterns. Thanks to accessories such as belts or jewellery, which are both useless in sports, one could stand out from the rest and create her own style. This individuality prompted sports article manufacturers to put emphasis on details in clothing and to bring the most varied models onto the market.

This little excursion on the importance of what to wear during aerobics classes shows that representation plays an important role in sports, especially in individual sports. In order to be noticed positively, one had to either show a special performance or attract attention through an outfit. Would it have made a difference if Fonda had not attached so much importance to her looks in her videos? This question cannot be answered clearly, since Fonda did not just want to show her seemingly perfect body shape, but primarily wanted to sell videos. One can only raise desires if one emphasizes what potential buyers do not have. In this case, it is an apparently perfect body. To put this into perspective, it needs to be optimally presented. Once the desire is ignited women will train hard to get that kind of body. This in turn has both an impact on the sales figures of aerobics videos as well as on the body ideals.

To answer the question of how the videos influenced the female body ideal, it is worthwhile to look at how Fonda has advertised her work. Just like all aspects of her life, she talked much about aerobics. In interviews on television or in magazines as well as in her guidebooks, she especially emphasized the mental empowerment, which took place in addition to a physical one. Fonda presented aerobics exercise as a remedy for all areas in which women struggled. In her opinion, aerobics exercise was much more than just a sport that made women fit. Thanks to aerobics, she suggested, women were given a strengthened body and a strengthened spirit, which not only helped them to

successfully manage a diet, but also to stand up for their own rights in the workplace and to stand up against male dominance. This, at least, is the power that Fonda attributes to aerobics. The criticism, which credited far less positive and empowering qualities to aerobics, proves that this looked quite different in everyday life.

### 3.2 Critical Voices on Aerobics Videos

Many scholars engaging in feminism saw the influential power of aerobics critically. As already described in the introduction, it was mainly the one-sidedness of body ideals, which many critics observed with concern. The naturalness Fonda attributed to aerobics, which went far beyond a popular sport, and which could not be shown in studies, ensured that the phenomenon of aerobics was explored by social scientists. Scholars acknowledged that aerobics might be fun and convey a sense of strength. However, they claimed that the strength gained did not necessarily affect the discourse on beauty ideals. On the contrary: The discourse influenced sports and ensured among other things that most classes for women were primarily for weight loss. It was not an intention of Fonda and others to strengthen women for daily battles concerning e.g. equality. It must be made very clear: The videos were primarily produced to be sold. They were not feminist reconnaissance works. Although Fonda saw herself as a feminist and tried to promote aerobics as an empowerment method for feminist interests as well, in principle they were the opposite of what feminists demanded for the feminine body.

Alison Bradshaw, a health scientist, made clear that the underlying pressure of society to conform to an ideal in combination with gyms offering classes specifically for so-called female problem areas, cause women to think of themselves as powerful, strong, and self-determining once they give in and train regularly. This, of course, is an illusion of empowerment (Bradshaw 2002, 8). She explains why: Women often think if they refuse food and work out hard to look beautiful, they are empowered because they have control over their bodies. But a slender body is also a sign for fragility and defencelessness and a lack of power. Plus, there is a submission to an external body ideal. Instead, she proposes not to narrow but broaden the concept of an ideal body. That might be the only way to ensure that women have enough physical space to stand up for more important things such as professional equality (Bradshaw 2002). In addition, society would finally get away from the desire to focus on alleged flaws. Using an aerobics video could make women think of themselves as empowered because they decided to stay or get in shape. It seems to be an empowering experience in the context of reclaiming the female body. But in the sense of Foucault's notion on "docile bodies" (Foucault 1979), the women's minds and bodies are disciplined and directed toward self-improvement. Hence, it simultaneously supports and maintains the disciplinary power practices that govern

the American society. Fonda represents this disciplinary power even though she claims that every woman should decide for herself how to look and dress and that strong is better than thin and that muscles are okay. One reason is her profession. As an actress, she is supposed to look good and she is constantly under pressure and cannot evade it. Yet, to a certain degree Fonda can control it because she feels strengthened by aerobics. I assume that Fonda is a solid part of the system that she cannot break out from. Additionally, from her perspective, she cannot perceive what it would be like not to fit the common bodily ideal. In the 1980s, however, there were debates about the use of aerobics videos, the advantages of regular training, or the damage that could be inflicted on young women who were still susceptible to external influences.

Margaret Morse's work is a case in point. She worked as a researcher for film and digital media at the University of Southern California in the 1980s, noticed that aerobics was doing something to her, but in a negative sense. She felt uneasy in her body after each course and wanted to find out why and to what extent the videos were to blame. Morse analysed the best-selling videos and watched as women were animated. In addition, she examined the representation of the female body. In a study, she published her devastating results: "Exercise videos may be good for women's bodies – but harmful to their psyche" (Finke 1987). What is more: women are degraded to sexual objects with a passive femininity. Morse was shocked by the fact that she understood the representation of women in the videos as a symbol of their non-equitable social position. The videos tried to convey feminist messages through political rhetoric. What was shown and what was said in the videos did not fit together, and certainly not to the self-empowerment Fonda propagated. So, one could conclude that the aerobics videos rather supported the traditional female body image than challenged the old or produced a new one. This would have been unproblematic if Fonda's sales strategy had not been cheating women into believing that they could create their own body ideals through aerobics. Creating an individual idea of what the female body should look like was one of the central concerns of the feminist movement. So, it is easy to see why the aerobics videos were associated with the feminist movement – even though they were counterproductive and there are no sources to prove that feminists have decidedly opted for aerobics.

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#### 4. The Aerobic Body as a New Body Ideal

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The question whether the aerobic body became a new kind of body image is difficult and there is no simple or distinct answer to it. Pirkko Markula explains it quite validly: "The muscularity could indicate women's liberation from the narrow definition of the female body as frail, whereas the thinness of this ideal restores the connotation to traditional femininity" (Markula 1994, 239). The

mentioned “hybrid” of a patriarchal image (a very feminine look) and a feminist image (strong, muscular) resembled the prevailing body ideal so much because a feminine appearance ensured that women still had influence on men and thus on the patriarchal system (Kenen 1987).

Another reason why the videos did not change the body ideal entirely was the exercises selected. Most movements toned certain body parts. To illustrate this, I select a scene from Fonda’s video “Light Aerobics and Stress Reduction Program,” which was released in 1997. This training unit aimed to carry out classic aerobics exercises in a gentler and somewhat less demanding way, in particular to spare the joints. Compared to other videos, much time was spent on stretching exercises and cardio-phases were kept short. In minute 7’10 to 7’20, for example, an exercise is made which neither increases the heart rate to the extent of a cardio exercise nor strengthens a particular muscle group. In the rhythm of the music, Fonda and her crew move from one leg to the other. They are bent far forward, the angled arms support the movement, and the leg, which is not strained, is raised briefly. It is striking that the hip moves along with it. The scene was taken on the front, so that the bodies can be seen completely. This angle changes with the focus on the legs. In addition, this exercise is followed by a further one, which ensures that the direction in the room is changed and the trainees lift the legs and move their upper body in a more dancelike way. The exercises look as if they are fun. The bodies move to the music. But that is all there is to it.

The exercise described above is not an isolated case. Of course, exercises are also presented which target the cardiovascular system and strengthen special muscles. But there are too few in the videos which do not refer to special body regions. It was not about functionality. This, however, would have been necessary to strengthen the female body and empower women to develop new bodily standards. Additionally, aerobicizers disliked big muscles especially in the upper body. This serves the traditional feminine image and the assumption that men are naturally – biologically – stronger and should dominate the weak, passive, and small women (Kagan and Morse 1988). To obtain this power structure, the female body ideal must be defined differently than the male one. But this is something Jane Fonda and her videos did not challenge. Instead, the videos present self-confident women who are at ease with their bodies. This leads to the misinterpretation that if you fulfil a certain body ideal, your life is going to be great. The sociologist Barry Glassner states that the “viewer of exercise videos mimics the images on the tape and strives to alter her or his appearance to resemble them” (Glassner 1989, 184). Women longing to have a body like Fonda’s try to copy her to get one. Glassner continues that the videos reverse the usual structure of representation. Because “rather than the image being a copy of the real, in the exercise video, the real strives to become a copy of the image” (Glassner 1989). This quote shows the main purpose of the aero-

bics videos: they stimulated real women to be a copy of the picture Jane Fonda created.

Other contemporaries have also dealt with the videos. Scholars with a feminist background could attribute little positive to the videos. In general, there have been only few academic debates about aerobics' profits – apart from fun and health benefits. One of the loudest voices in this debate was Pirkko Markula, who asked openly whether aerobics-exercising women were at all aware that they were oppressing themselves with their everyday sporting behaviour (Markula 1994, 237). In her opinion, they mistook an apparent self-empowerment with the emulation of predetermined ideals. In Markula's opinion, the selected exercises had a great influence. If you compare earlier videos of Fonda with later ones, you will notice a further development of the exercises. What started out as single exercises, which were repeated several times, can be described in later videos as a more complex choreography, which could be called dance aerobics. However, it is also fair to say that Fonda adapted the videos not only to the contemporary taste, but also the exercises according to the wishes of the audience. She furthermore developed the exercises and responded to criticism. It had often been critically reported that individual exercises were too stressful for the joints, which means that wear and tear could be observed. Fonda responded by developing low-impact videos that did not need jumps at all. As already mentioned, the further development of exercises or training courses did not increase the diversity of the bodies shown. It seems that Fonda had not taken seriously the increasingly urgent criticism. Not only feminists, but also women who went to aerobics classes or trained with the videos, were concerned that they could not bring their bodies into the shape of a body that was presented in the videos. While some accepted this, it was a frustrating and demotivating observation for others.

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## 5. Conclusion

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As the arguments put forward showed, there are no concise answers to our two initial questions. Although aerobics exercise had a huge influence on the common body ideals of the 1980s, their evolution was a process. This process was influenced by aerobics, but not concluded. It seems that the question of how female bodies were presented in the aerobics videos is easier to be answered. Not only the videos as a source and the discussions about them, but also the selected sequence can provide answers on what this representation of female bodies means for the current (female) body image, its limitations and ongoing changes. Based on the videos it becomes clear that the body ideal has changed, but not into a more open one, which includes a multitude of different bodies. The aerobic body is a further development of the thin, delicate, and very girlish body ideal. However, the fact that the tightness and youthfulness no longer



comes from a certain diet but from sport is only a modification, not a new body ideal. Even though Fonda's videos, guide books, and interviews talk about a different and more well-minded public view on women, she asks women to subordinate themselves to a body ideal, even though aerobics was meant to help break this spell. Fonda and others, who sold aerobics videos, had the opportunity to establish an inclusive body image by presenting different types of bodies. I argue that they were not able to do that because they themselves were too much caught in the spiral. Their bodies were the arguments that sold the videos. Especially Fonda as an actress was under the permanent pressure to look as best as possible to get new roles offered. In addition, three decades of eating disorders had not only affected her own physical appearance but also the perception of the bodies of other women. This shows, on the one hand, that aerobics exercise did not have the empowering potential to build up a mental strength that could move beyond the social notions of bodies. On the other hand, this also shows how difficult it is to have a lasting influence on debates and to be able to determine which body is desirable and which is not. In the 1980s, only a few could make themselves heard, to inquire whether a single body ideal is at all reasonable. Unfortunately, it was not the people who were in such an exposed situation as Jane Fonda, who could have changed something for the better.

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