

Distance athlete's effect on urban rhythm
How do ultrarunners run in automatized cities



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Context

Millions of persons run nowadays in different urban scenarios. And this does not imply that this attention and perception is always a given. In July of 2015, an athlete in Frankfurt finished an Ironman (a triathlon that takes 11 hours on average to complete). The participant died after being convalescent due to over hydration/hyponatremia. The issue raised here is that certain sport practices demand a more thorough type of health care, a kind of learning that becomes vital: that is, of life or death.

Running, however, generally contributes positive elements to fight against obesity, depression, to mention but a few. It is also used as a lucrative activity by an industry that produces sport supplies; thus generating an apparatus of organization that hosts a variety of events: short races, olympic marathon distance (42.195 k) and ultramarathons that go from 50 k up to the 246 k Spartathlon —and even races that can last 48 consecutive hours. While running is seldom a high risk activity, the latter challenges do pose the question of public physical (and mental!) health.

Runners experiment the activity in many different manners: as meditation in motion, to listen to music, to eliminate some cholesterol from blood, to experience the vitality of their body/mind, to clear their head and/or gaze at the green landscape anywhere in the city. “Just buy a good pair of shoes and you’re ready” say those who promote a less sedentary and quite cheap activity: one might be tempted to say (almost) for free.

The use of urban and wild spaces require that they be managed in an agile, free, and articulate way. This also detonates in a exploitation of natural and tourist resources that oscilates between environmental care and decay.

Runners & The City

Runners seem to form an independent flow from the rest of the city’s circulation, in leisure and traffic-free zones. On the other hand, however, car-traffic and other types of non-running traffic cross the runners’ way breaking runners’ momentum¹. Runners, need paths to move

¹ETTEMA, Dick. “Runnable Cities. How Does the Running Environment Influence Perceived Attractiveness, Restorativeness, and Running Frequency?” *Environment and Behavior*. Pp. 1-21. 2015. P. 17.

freely in a city. This has a huge dimension in which non-humans get into play. For each space that is used in the city one could follow a science studies method: to determine all the objects and people that come into action to deliver a single object. Humans have customized spaces for millennia.

In today's flawed auto-mobility system²: not only do cars (and drivers) burn fuels, and leave a lasting carbon footprint, but private vehicles can become quite impractical with the normalcy and abundance of traffic jams as well. LeCorbusier, in his Athens Letter (1933), settled the four main modern uses of urban space: inhabiting, working, circulating and recreating. Granted that this view has a somewhat non-layering of functionalities, and an oversimplification of uses; but it intended to take into account city livability for human beings. Today, how does the city "and ultrarunners" think, make and find non-occupied paths in such an overflowed system?

All in all, the physical environment is not used at all times in the same way. Social space has areas in which one acts among other people; and others, in which this presentation is left aside: this is what has for long been called the front and back regions of human conduct, also well known as front-stage and backstage³. So attention is shifted from one *stage* to the other, depending on which kind of public is present at each time.

²SHELLER, Mimi; URRY, John (eds.). "The new mobilities paradigm". In *Environment and Planning*, volume 38, pages 207-226, 2006.

³GOFFMAN in HANNERZ, Ulf. "The City as Theater: Tales of Goffmann". In *Exploring the city: inquiries toward an urban anthropology*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1980. P. 206.

Research topic and subject of analysis

The social and biological mechanics of running don't just work on autopilot. And however, several controversies appear: for some the practice appears natural, eternal, non-technological. The popular book *Born to Run* suggests that the Tarahamara run today in the same way they have been for the last four centuries.

Running as a trend arises half a century ago, together with sport gear and recommendations on the use of special shoes to that end. In a wider specter, these customs are inserted in a world of vast shortages and excesses. On the one hand, shortages of activity-involving options for the dormant body: in an economic system in which desk jobs prevail as well as bodily passivity and mass consumption. On the other hand, excesses in the search of vivid attention, fun, fatigue and the exploration of the limits of the body when activated. The body becomes a centrifugal force making it necessary to analyze the outcoming bodily fluids, the salinity of sweat, the color of urine indicative of hydration, and of feces that show the gastric processes. The body as the center of centripetal forces seeks for a nourishment that allows running for hundreds of kilometers, and the knowledge it will not die in the attempt. In sum, *a social body as a machine of singularization* that goes beyond the standardized solutions provided to all. The individual and collective bodies may face the challenge of affecting, or not, their ability and desire to act.

Running barefoot is yet another (minor) trend. Athletes, academics and even a small fraction of the industry looks for innovation with minimalist footwear: with low or no heel height —going back to basics. Is it really necessary to wear shoes? Some studies (Lieberman) suggest that certain barefoot movements can prevent injuries.

Runners learn technical resources and make them their own from different sources: nutritional, mechanic, motivational. Yet each person uses them, develops them, and tailors these resources to their own knowledge: they *singularize* them, they learn how to run in their own unique way. In this point, the experimentation of athletes becomes key. In a broader sense, the whole of the runners' world would also affect the urban rhythms, slowing them down and accelerating them, intervening in the physical city and the way spaces are used. To that purpose the goals of this research are as follows.

Objectives

- GENERAL OBJECTIVE

Researching into how ultrarunners learn to manage resources/knowledge and take risks that the majority ignores. Runners of ultramarathon are not superhumans: they develop a know-how and find interest in the methods of running to an extreme extent.

- SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

- Considering how ultrarunners have access to and handle information to go ultra.
- Reviewing running styles, gear (& barefoot): their relationship to injury/health.
- Considering the motivations: the mental and spiritual levels to run beyond health.
- Seeking athletes' paths as an opposition to standardized/massive urban rhythms, placing general (im)mobility as a limitation to the body and social development.
- Attending to how ultrarunners cope with the cities and spaces they go through. Runners and their surroundings are conditioned by the trends of massive behaviour, but athlete's behaviour reshape production as well.

Materials and methods

The proposal is of qualitative research. Ultrarunners are the case study. First hand material will be collected from fieldwork: the general training method of ultrarunners shall be experimented; and observant participation of at least one specific competition. On the other side, the research will nurture from an additional resource to be studied: secondary material in texts written by participants and journalists of ultramarathon races, as well as videos.

Auto-ethnography

The plan of work is to set ideas for further development on *affect, body, and materiality*. These *sensitizing concepts* “rather than restrictive prescriptions” shall be guiding points to suggest directions where to look at, as germs of analysis on how and where to collect information⁴. The approach here is first *exploratory*, rather than explanatory. The intention is to gather data, concepts, and a series of insights from in-field work.

Ultra-running has tension in the way it connects participants with outside worlds:

- On one side, ultra-running entails a certain loneliness. Being outdoor, ultrarunning involves many hours, even days amongst almost untouched nature.
- On the other side, it is an ultimately public activity: runners are exposed to permanent contact with other runners, non-runners, and non humans in the open.

The *in situ* work is intended to grasp these two areas (intimate-personal; and social-network-dependent) in ultra-running: the first, during training; and the second, during specific ultra-running events.

Training, is to be dealt with through auto-ethnography, not as a biographical account, but as a means to grasp the main topics developed. Of course, auto-ethnography may work with a potential source for bias, but at the same time provides both the most inner side view

⁴HAMMERSLEY and ATKINSON. *Ethnography: principles in practice*. 3rd ed. London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2007. P. 164 ("Sensitizing concepts" is Blumer's), 163.

possible, and reveals the speaker's interests, perspectives and preconceptions; to which one can always add contrast with other references to compare and find common ground⁵.

On racing events, there is very little material in academic research on events from a qualitative approach. There is scarce material, and when so, only done through surveys or measurement based. Hence, the importance of an ethnographic approach: to prioritize the insider perspective highlighting the experiential, an active immersion in the field during a reasonable amount of time, minimal interference to gather data to be triangulated⁶. The focus is not on measuring variables, but rather on *collecting and constructing new variables* to build up ever more complex concepts: this adds nuance to the understanding of the phenomenon, and provides new questions to be worked on⁷.

Conceptual approach

This project searches for unique patterns of mobility and participating in the environment instead of driving over all ecosystems. Deleuze & Guattari (2010: 527) signaled that things as different as monopoly and the specialization of most of the medical knowledge, the complication of the automobile motor, the gigantism of machines, do not correspond to any technological need, but rather to economic and political imperatives. Certain objects and conducts build and shape urban landscapes: blocking and constraining transit of people, of resources, and even being a blockage for ideas and customs.

Roads can function as boundaries when they striate space into fixed compartments of places of circulation, but roads can also be connectors of smooth space that open to the world and to infinite paths (Brighenti, 2009: 64). Different currents of flow, of transportation, can be taken into account. Two prevail: those which favor movement, and those that tend to collapse. They could be called rhythms and anti-rhythms. In this way, humans create an environment: getting physically involved with the surroundings. This area of interaction, the *Umwelt* (Goffman, Von Uexküll), can move, expand and contract.

These perceptions, shared and negotiated, make up to a pluralism of views and reactions: the city becomes a site of permanent undergoing changes. The city constantly creates its own character: people and objects create a full working network, and the city as a whole becomes

⁵HAMMERSLEY and ATKINSON. *Ethnography: principles in practice*. 3rd ed. London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2007. P.124.

⁶HOLLOWAY, Imma; BROWN, Lorraine; and SHIPWAY, Richard. "Meaning not measurement: Using ethnography to bring a deeper understanding to the participant experience of festivals and events". *International Journal of Event and Festival Management*. Vol. 1 No 1, 2010. Pp. 75-76.

⁷BECKER, Howard S. *What About Mozart? What About Murder? Reasoning From Cases*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2014. Pp. 13-14, 18.

a living being. The intention here is not (perhaps only slightly) to humanize a non-human, but to understand the influence under which the city is subjected and how it creates effects.

Affect

The research suggested here intends to explore the capabilities in a side of urban life and seek how it may unfold: it is a search that goes to several components of a network and tries to see how the latter may render multiple layers of possible outcomes. Each atom of this “life of associations”, to use a Tardean-Latoureaux-ANT idea, can just decay, or rather propagate.

Affect opens up how far an entity can reach to the infinite of possibilities to be developed. Affect can be on one extreme the potential for sadness, but most commonly cited as the contrary potential for joy, expansion, and freedom to do what is desired and desirable. Emotions boil on the surface of city activity. But even when emotions are needed for a qualitative detection of lively experiences and themes, *emotions are not the same as affections* repeat Deleuzian texts and their reader⁸. *Affect* seeks the potentials in the mechanisms that move a system:

[Deleuze’s writings on affect and affection] enable a material, and therefore political critique of capital and its operations. [...] affective forces are depicted as reactive or active (following Nietzsche), tacit or performed. [...] affective power can be utilized to enable ability, authority, control and creativity⁹.

In this way, affections and desire can produce societal outcomes, be them productive for liberation or, on the other hand, even for alienating, controlling and impeding liberation. Desire, then, shows as a primary driving forces that allows for societal functioning, the prime trigger that enables subsequent processes in human society.

Materiality and Body

An apprentice in ultrarunning may not know how to move during several hours, when to resist, drink/eat, stretch, or when it is time to rest and sleep. There is a learning in how to feel our own body and even the city and its trails. All physical skills are developed by a training not only of the body but also of the ability to perceive. There is a learning of the senses on how to understand the environment or the objects we are confronted with. Perceiving, or tasting as Hennion mentions, is a “passivity actively sought”¹⁰. However, how to direct awareness?

⁸BRAIDOTTI, Rosi. *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*. Polity, Cambridge, 2006. P. 148.

⁹PARR, Adrian. *The Deleuze Dictionary* [2005]. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2010. P. 13.

¹⁰HENNION, Antoine. “Those Things That Hold Us Together: Taste and Sociology”. *Cultural Sociology* Volume 1(1): 97-114. 2007. Pp. 100-101.

What can one perceive if one does not know what to be aware of? [...] An inarticulate subject is someone who whatever the other says or acts always feels, acts and says the same thing. [Articulation, on the other hand, means the ability to] being affected by differences¹¹.

The case study of ultra-runners may highlight a number of variables that look to a perhaps different system that is not based on consumption or production, but to other horizons. If one could summarise a cycle of interests, that would run in the following steps:

(affect) -> desire -> effects -> (changes?)

On both ends of this transition, affects produce a machination at the desire level, and has material and corporeal effects upon the collective body. Objects, as well as affect and desire, have a weight in social relationships: a road contains a number of human work hours, crystalized in a specific, tangible object. Aside the critiques of the automobile systems, there is a parallel consideration of practices of slow mobility and de-growth. The mobility of running is not slow per se. Rather, speed is defined by different scales of technology: runners would be more of organic machines hybridized with “simple” technologies, such as shoes. Alike with “de-growth”. When everyday life is related to a green life style, a different sense and timing of growth can appear: like worms (runners desposal), fermentation (nourishment). Perhaps a new system may be devised: not quicker than automobiles, but one that may grow in a different sense and direction.

The overarching pursue in this work is on the ideas of how people move, beyond a mere transportation function, and how urban spaces can be circulated, expanding their uses. This work looks for escape mechanisms from the inertia of the productive system of machinic uselessness: cars and public transportation *circulate, overpopulate and congest*, controlling movement in favor of an economic and political order.

¹¹LATOUR, Bruno. “How to Talk About the Body? the Normative Dimension of Science Studies”. *Body & Society*. 2004. P. 210.

Research questions and workplan

Can freeways and cities be something else than a mere containment of controlled flows? Or more positively: *Can we consider roads, paths in general, and other technological artifacts as enablers that shape human experience and social relationships?* And in another direction: *How do human experiences and social relationships shape pathways, views, resources and technologies?* Humans and non humans merge to form a socio-technical assemblage, they hibridize. The double sided view separates analitically what actually forms a network of dependencies.

Field work allows for direct contact with the ultra world and for day to day updates on normal practices and non-structured interviews. The first-hand material is expected to be a strength of the proposal since the candidate is a long-time runner, with more than two decades of experience in several distances. Having already completed the marathon distance the candidate is highly likely to fulfill races of at least 50 kms. Longer distances (80, 100, 150) could and are expected to be attempted later on. Regardless of the kind of participation, be it by running or simply attending to events as observer: Several specific ultra-distance races are held yearly with different highlights: the german Rennsteiglauf with an average of 15000 participants, the chilean Rapa Nui trophy at the exotic Easter Island, and the important NGO that prepares races for awareness to fight against human trafficking: Muskathlon, both in South Africa and also crossing the border from Bulgaria into Greece.

The relevance of topics is not always obvious in a third party written description, or in conversation. To participate in the same training and competitions is to be part of the “same capsule of events” as other ultrarunners. What changes is not the events but rather their at-handedness, which allow for a closer possibility of involvement.

Two possible outcomes of the study involve: on the one hand, the chance to get in-depth insight on the technological analysis of these practices and events. On this matter, time for research at the Sciences Po would be a gain. The direction of the project would benefit from the perspective of considering the mechanical-chemical aspects of ultra in relation to scientific humanities. On the other hand, the second possibility should aim at spending time together with specific communities of ultrarunners.

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