

Distance athlete's æffect on urban rhythm
How do ultra-runners run in automatized cities?



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PhD Project

College of Social Sciences and
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January 2017

Context and rationale

Millions run nowadays. Some endure, some do not. Some risk their lives with exercise-associated hyponatremia [EAH]. While running is seldom a high risk activity, ultra-running can challenge people and poses the question of public, physical, and mental health. The issue raised here is that certain sport practices demand a more thorough type of health care, a type of learning that becomes vital: that is, of life or death.

Running as a trend arises in the 1960's and nowadays inserted in a world of shortages and excesses: *social worlds* (BECKER & PESSIN: 2006) of dormant bodies in an economic system in which desk jobs, and unemployment, prevail together with bodily passivity and mass consumption; social worlds of excesses in the search of vivid attention, fun, fatigue and the exploration of the limits of the body when activated. The body of the ultra-runner becomes a centrifugal force of bodily fluids, and a center of centripetal forces that seeks nourishment. 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.

Ultra-running has several unfoldings:

- On health and society: against obesity and depression, as a lucrative activity, as an apparatus of organization of social worlds that host a variety of events, for instance.
- On personal experience: as meditation, to experience the vitality of the body, to gaze at the green landscape in the city.
- On land resource: The use of urban and wild spaces require that they be managed in an agile, free, and articulate way. This also detonates in an exploitation of natural and tourist sites that oscillates between environmental care and decay.

In today's flawed auto-mobility system (SHELLER & URRY, 2006) car-traffic and other types of non-running traffic cross the runners' way breaking runners' momentum (ETTEMA, 2015: 17). But runners seem to form an independent flow from the rest of the city's circulation. And they need paths to move freely in a city. This has a huge dimension in which non-humans get into play since humans have customized spaces for millennia. Today: how does the city –and ultra-runners— think, make and find non-occupied paths in such an overstretched system?

Ultra-runners learn about technical resources and make them their own from different sources: nutritional, mechanic, motivational. Yet, each person uses, develops, 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.

Objectives

- GENERAL OBJECTIVE

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

- SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

- Considering how ultra-runners gain access to and handle information to go ultra.
- Reviewing running styles, footwear (& barefoot), gear: impact on injury/health.
- Considering the motivations: the mental and spiritual levels to run regardless of 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 ultra-runners 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

This is a proposal of qualitative research. Fieldwork will be auto-ethnographic, through training which may be a potential source for bias, but which reveals the participant's interests, perspectives and preconceptions; contrastable with other references (HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON, 2007: 124). Another resource is observant participation at ultra-running events. Numerous specific ultra-distance races are held yearly all over the world, such as the German Rennsteiglauf, the Chilean Rapa Nui in Easter Island, and the races for awareness against human trafficking: Muskathlon. As additional resource for the research, secondary material will be used as well: texts and videos.

Auto-ethnography

Ultra-runners are the case study. The approach here is *exploratory*, seeking *sensitizing concepts* as guiding points for analysis and for collecting information (HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON, 2007: 163-4).

Ultra-running involves different unfoldings for participants, both inwards and outwards:

- At an intimate-personal level, ultra-running entails a certain loneliness: being an outdoor activity, it involves many hours (days) amongst almost untouched nature.
- At a social-network-dependent level, ultra is an ultimately public activity: runners are exposed to permanent contact with other runners, non-runners, and non-humans.

On racing events from a qualitative approach, there is scarce material. When so, it is obtained from surveys or measurement based. An insider perspective gives minimal interference to gather data to be triangulated (HOLLOWAY et al, 2010: 75-6). The focus is on *collecting and constructing new variables* to build complex concepts: this adds nuance to the understanding of the phenomenon, and provides new questions to work on (BECKER, 2014: 13-14, 18).

Research question & conceptual approach

This project searches for unique patterns of mobility and ways of participating in the environment. How do specific objects and conducts shape urban landscapes? Brighenti (2009) asks: Can cities be something else than a mere containment of controlled flows? Following his text he suggests the question: Can we consider roads, paths in general, and other “technological artifacts as enablers that shape human experience and social relationships” (Brighenti 2009: 64)? The question reformulated backwards can consider the ultra world:

How do human experiences and social relationships [among the ultra-runner’s social world] shape pathways, views, resources and technologies?

Humans and non-humans merge to form a socio-technical assemblage, they hybridize. This two-sided view separates analytically what actually forms a network of dependences. Different currents of flow, of transportation, can be taken into account. Two prevail: those which favor movement, and those that are prone to collapsing. They could be called rhythms and anti-rhythms. People and objects create a full working network, and the city as a whole becomes a living being. The intention here is not (perhaps only slightly) to humanize a non-human, but to understand the influence the city is subjected to and how it creates effects upon *all its citizens*.

The research suggested here explores how urban life as a network may unfold: each atom of this “life of associations”, to use a Tardean-Latoureaux-ANT idea, can just decay, or rather propagate. The conceptual plan looks for development on the ideas of *affect, body, and materiality*.

Affect

Affect is most commonly cited as the potential for joy, expansion, and freedom. *Emotions are not the same as affections* (BRAIDOTTI, 2006: 148). *Affect*, as a concept, seeks the potentials in the mechanisms that move a system: Deleuze’s writings on affect and affection “enable a material, and therefore a political critique of capital and its operations”, according to Parr (2010: 13). Deleuze & Guattari (2010: 527) stress that things as different as monopoly and the specialization of most of the medical knowledge, the complication of the automobile engine, the gigantism of machines, do not correspond to any technological need, but rather to economic and political imperatives.

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, is a primary driving force that enables subsequent processes in human society.

Materiality and Body

An apprentice to ultra-running may not know how to move during several hours, what to drink and/or eat, when to endure, stretch, or rest and sleep. There is a continuous learning in how to feel our own body and even the city and its trails. Physical skills are developed but also an ability to perceive. Perceiving becomes an *actively sought passivity* (HENNION, 2007: 100-1). However, how to raise and direct awareness?

The case study of ultra-runners may highlight a number of variables that look to a different system of other horizons which are not based on consumption or production. If one could summarize a cycle of interests, the ultra-running world is expected to go around the following topics:

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

Cars and public transportation *circulate, overpopulate and congest*, controlling movement in favor of an economic and political order. Aside the critiques to the transportation system, there is a parallel consideration here of practices of slow mobility and de-growth. This work looks for escape mechanisms from the inertia of the productive system of machinic uselessness. The overarching pursue is how people move, beyond a mere transportation function, and how urban spaces can be circulated, expanding their uses.

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