Distance athlete's æffect on urban rhythm

How do ultrarunners run in automatized cities?

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Context and rationale

Millions run nowadays. Some endure, some don't. Some die, of exercise-associated hyponatremia [EAH], for instance. While running is seldom a high risk activity, ultrarunning 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 kind of learning that becomes vital: that is, of life or death.

Running as a trend arises half a century ago. As a custom it's inserted in a world of shortages and excesses: social worlds of dormant bodies in an economic system in which desk jobs, and unemployment, prevail as well as 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 ultrarunner becomes a centrifugal force of bodily fluids, and a center of centripetal forces that seeks for nourishment. In sum, *a social body as a machine of singularization* that goes beyond the standarized solutions provided to all. The individual and collective bodies may face the challenge of affecting, or not, their ability and desire to act.

Ultrarunning 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, to mention but a few. 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 a exploitation of natural and tourist sites that oscilates 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 millenniums. Today: how does the city –and ultrarunners— think, make and find non-occupied paths in such an overflowed system?

Ultrarunners 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.

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 standarized/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. Fieldwork will be auto-ethnographic, through training which may be a potential source for bias, but reveals the speaker's interests, perspectives and preconceptions; contrastable with other references (HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON, 2007: 124). Another resource is observant participation at ultrarunning events. Several specific ultra-distance races are held yearly all over the world, just to mention some: 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

The approach here is *exploratory*, seeking for *sensitizing concepts* as guiding points for analysis and to collect information (HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON, 2007: 163-4). Ultrarunners are the case study. Ultrarunning involves different unfoldings for participants, both inwards and outwards: At a intimate-personal level, ultra-running entails a certain loneliness: being

outdoor, ultrarunning involves many hours, even 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 in the open.

On racing events from a qualitative approach, there is scarce material (When so, they're done only through surveys or measurement based.) An insider perspective gives minimal interference to gather data to be triangulated (HOLLOWAY etal, 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 be worked 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 instead of driving over all ecosystems. How do specific objects and conducts shape urban landscapes? Brighenti (2009) asks: Can cities be something else than a mere containment of controlled flows? And he suggests (2009: 64) that walls (or roads in our case), can be boundaries when they striate space into fixed compartments of places of circulation, but can also be connectors of smooth space when they open to the world and to infinite paths. Our hipothesis:

Can we consider roads, paths in general, and other technological artifacts as enablers that shape human experience and social relationships? How do human experiences and social relationships [among the ultrarunner's social world] 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. 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-rythms. 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 under which the city is subjected and how it creates effects upon *all 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-Latourean-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* 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", according to Parr (2010: 13). Deleuze & Guattari (2010: 527) signal 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.

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 forces that enables subsequent processes in human society.

Materiality and Body

An apprentice in ultrarunning may not know how to move during several hours, what to drink/eat, when to resist, stretch, or rest and sleep. There is a 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 a "passivity actively sought" (HENNION, 2007. 100-1). However, how to direct awareness?

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

$$(affect) \rightarrow desire \rightarrow effects \rightarrow (changes?)$$

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

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