> ultra <

1. Runners & The City

The total number of runners moving through any space seems to be an independent flow from the rest of the city's circulation. This is true in the sense that green spaces are mainly designed for leisure and as traffic-free zones. On the other hand, however, it is not quite true that runners are independent of other flows because car-traffic and other types of non-running traffic cross the runners’ way and, hence, make them stop: breaking runners' momentum[[1]](#footnote-2). Runners, just as all others, depend on getting available paths as they go. This has two major implications:

* The need for paths to move freely in a city
* No two objects/people can be in the same place at the same time

The need for paths to circulate in

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. The generic city as a civilized construction always has a set of layers upon which it has been built: be it an arid, rocky, or damp or even forest-like, or any other kind of environment there are ways of setting in. Humans have customized spaces for millenniums. Only the past couple of centuries, at the most, have taken into account the use of delimited areas of public space for new purposes such as leisure.

The need to share space

True as it may be, this last point seems to be overlooked in today's flawed auto-mobility system[[2]](#footnote-3): 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; however, it was intended to take into account its livability for human beings, hence prioritizing the housing and green areas on urban planning. Also, communication/transportation was the least considered element, in a period where automobile expansion numbers (an *overpopulation* of non-humans, so to speak) had only just recently begun. In the XXIst century, this seems to be a much more critical issue, where these old proposed functions have, at least generally speaking, nearly collapsed. How do runners find non-occupied paths in such an overflowed system?

The need to share times of use

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 backstage[[3]](#footnote-4). So attention is shifted from one situation to the other. It could be arguable that, of the classic functions presented by LeCorbusier, three of them are to be pursued as part of social and even animal life: working, sleeping and wandering. Transportation, even if exaggerating and stretching the argument a bit too far, as a means to an end has no real function. It seems that all time lost in traffic is time in the backstage with no actual point. However, runners do seek to transport themselves, but with a whole other meaning, closer to leisure in their free time (even *serious leisure*), or even the mental-rest aspect of sleep time.

2. Auto-ethnography

The plan of work proposed here sets axis on which to develop future ideas, these axis being: materiality, affect and the body. 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 information. Data finding also relies on the researcher's agenda: "What sorts of patterns one is looking for depends, of course, on research focus and theoretical orientation". Benefits of in-field immersion include not only direct access in general but additionally access to non-structured conversations in which "[unusual participant terms] may stress theoretically important or interesting phenomena". In the same vein, concepts may also be, alternatively, "observer-identified"[[4]](#footnote-5).

The axial concepts are not be used as fixed tautologies to give a taken-for-granted understanding of behaviors. The approach here is first *exploratory*, before than explanatory. The deeper understanding of behaviors and use of tools, resources and knowledge in general shall come later, during research. The intention is first to gather data, concepts, and a series of insights from in-field work.

Ultra-running has a certain tension in the way it connects participants with people from the outside social worlds.

* On one side, it is a very public activity, runners are exposed to permanent contact with other runners (and non-runners as well) in the open, and races depend on a wide amount of actors, both participating and non-race related: in sum a very wide orchestrated and coordinated social activity.
* On the other side, ultra-running entails a certain *Loneliness of the long distance runner[[5]](#footnote-6)*. Running ultra distances may well be among the most *outdoor* activities or sports. It involves several hours, even days sometimes "out in the blue", amongst the almost untouched nature and wild green spaces afar from city in country-side races. And in training season, even in city context: the silent early night-to-dawn moment (from 4 to 6 am) is when nearly no normal person is going about, and birds have not even began to chirp. In the same coin with lonely spaces, running has many many solitary moments in which runners get to collect themselves and revolve in their thoughts, the bareness of the surroundings, and at many flowing times: to just not think in anything and be in the moment.

The *in situ* work is intended to grasp these two areas (intimate-personal; and social-network-dependent) in ultra-running: the 1st, during training; and the 2nd, during specific ultra-running events.

1. The first aspect, training, is to be tackled through auto-ethnography, not as a biographical account, but as means to grasp the main topics that are dealt with. Many of the available material on ultra-running in text and video documentary depict narratives from the sole perspective of runners, in 1st person, and how they prepare their practices with various ways of running and post exercise cool downs and stretching as well as general nutrition and rest time. The researcher may well take a similar approach without being an outsider of common practice in this social world.

Gertrude Kurath (1960) recommended ethnographers to "learn the movements" and Adrienne Kaeppler (1978) proposed that ethnographers learn certain movements and to receive instructions of what is done "incorrectly", or "differently" with a methodology that would allow to understand better. [José Bizerril has argued that the practical formation of the researcher has its advantages.] This knowledge allows an access to aspects of the research topic that otherwise would pass unnoticed if only done with a distant approach based on observation and interview. [the vivential dimension makes it possible to get entry to the experience and] "to the psico-physic and -why not say so-, to the spiritual states that that this experience triggers[[6]](#footnote-7).

Of course auto-ethnography may work with a potential source for bias, but at the same time provides both the most inner side view possible, and reveals the teller's interests, perspectives and presuppositions; to which one can always add contrast with other references to compare and find the most reliable common ground[[7]](#footnote-8).

1. On the second aspect, on racing events, there is very little material in academic research on events from a qualitative approach. There are scarce material, and when so, only done through surveys or measurement based. Hence the importance to move forward. Some of the key features of an *ethnographic approach* are taken into account in the present 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 triangulated[[8]](#footnote-9). And not to focus 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 material to suggest new questions and aspects to be worked on[[9]](#footnote-10).

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