

Beautiful and Sublime:
The Aesthetics of Running in a Commodified World

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Acknowledgements: This paper is the fruit of a special topics course on the sublime and consumer culture, led by Dr. Wesley Shumar. The author is grateful to Dr. Shumar and the rest of the class, whose lively discussions and insights informed the development of this paper. The author would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers, whose thorough comments helped clarify and refine this paper.

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Abstract

In the United States, running as a leisure activity continues to grow in popularity. Healthism can explain some of this popularity, but it does not explain ultra-distance running. Motivations for running can be seen through the framework of the Kantian beautiful and the sublime. Beauty arises through extrinsic motivation (e.g., products, physique, competition) and relates to an economy of form, while the sublime arises through intrinsic motivation (e.g., life meaning) and relates to confronting the challenge of infinity. The commercial, casual and competitive aspects of distance running correspond to the beautiful, while its wilderness, serious, ultra-distance aspects correspond to the sublime. This framework is used to explain the resistance of ultrarunning to the would-be detrimental effects of commodification, as well as ultrarunning's "wild turn."

Keywords: ultrarunning, Kant, beautiful, sublime, commodification

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WALLY: Yes, but I mean, I would *never* give up my electric blanket, André, because New York is cold, our apartment is cold in the winter. It's a difficult environment. Our lives are tough enough as it is. I mean, I'm not trying to get rid of the few things that provide relief and comfort. On the contrary, I'm looking for *more* comfort, because the world is very abrasive.

—Wallace Shawn & André Gregory, *My Dinner with André*, 1981

Running has been a central human activity for at least two million years. “Considering all the evidence together, it is reasonable to hypothesize that *Homo* evolved to travel long distances by both walking and running” (Bramble & Lieberman 2004, 351). With the advent of agriculture, humans became increasingly sedentary and running began its transition from locomotive necessity to leisure activity. This progression culminated with the increasing urbanization and changes in transportation brought on by the Industrial Revolution (Popkin 1999). In Western society today, there is virtually no need to walk or run any appreciable distance. And yet, running is on the rise.

In the 1970's, running boomed in the United States, coeval and symbiotic with an ideological shift toward healthism, an ideology that positioned holistic self-care as the basis for achieving individual well-being (Crawford 1980). Running continues to grow in popularity: In the United States, running event participation grew 300 percent from 1990 to 2013 (Running USA 2015); worldwide, marathon participation grew 13 percent from 2009 to 2014 (Andersen 2015). The distances are growing, too: U.S. participation in ultramarathons (races longer than 26.2 miles) has grown about seven percent per year since 1980 (UltraRunning Magazine 2014).

Healthism explains the popularity of running to some extent; obesity, diabetes and related issues continue to loom, and distance running can be seen as a means of combating them. But healthism does not explain why some people choose to compete in races—or why some choose to run very long distances, far beyond a healthy jaunt. Research in sports psychology has uncovered a range of motivations for running, including psychological, physical, social and achievement-related factors (Masters, Ogles & Jolton 1993). Some evidence suggests that runners of different distances have different motivations: Hanson, Madaras, Dicke and Buckworth (2015), for instance, compared the motivations of half-marathoners, marathoners and ultrarunners, concluding that half-marathoners were relatively most motivated by health and weight concerns, marathoners by goal achievement and ultrarunners by life meaning.

As described in psychology, life meaning is a fundamental human need (Baumeister, 1992). In Baumeister's view, humans seek meaning in four ways: The first is *purpose*; we direct our actions in light of the possibilities, hopes and expectations of the future. The second is *efficacy*; we seek to view ourselves as able to make a difference in the world. The third is *value*; we need a basis for judging what is good and bad, and then we seek to view our own actions as good. The fourth is *self-worth*; we want to consider ourselves as valuable.

This psychological conceptualization of meaning is reflective of that developed by Heidegger ([1927] 2010), who described meaning as a present projection toward the future—

responding to unfolding possibilities. For Heidegger, a meaningful life is an authentic one—that is, living one’s own life rather than that of the anonymous “they” of society. This notion of life meaning has been extended by Dreyfus and Kelly (2011), who assert that finding meaning is a skill that can be cultivated. Seeing ultrarunning as a site for life meaning, then, is supported by Mueller’s (2012) conclusion that ultrarunners are motivated by cognitive factors such as skill-building.

Dreyfus and Kelly (2011) highlight that a person cannot choose what is meaningful for them; rather, finding meaning entails self-discovery. Accordingly, Jones (2004, 41) writes that “most ultrarunners, in fact, don’t decide to become ultrarunners ... but instead become one as the result of a profound experience during a run.” But as running has been suggested to be a universal human pursuit (Bramble & Lieberman 2004; McDougall 2009), it may be a potential locus of meaning for virtually everyone.

The suggestion of Hanson et al. (2015) that ultrarunning provides meaning more than shorter distances is supported by phenomenological accounts of ultrarunners, such as those in Jamison’s (2003) essay collection:

- *Purpose*: “And after being up for 33 hours, all we really wanted to do was get some well-deserved rest and start dreaming about the next race” (44).
- *Efficacy*: “If there’s just one lesson that the 2001 Hardrock taught, it’s to never give up. I can do anything that I set my mind to, both on and off the trail” (156).
- *Value*: “Many times I have seen runners stop and help other runners. You don’t see that very often in shorter races” (35).
- *Self-worth*: “Immeasurable confidence and improved self-esteem are among the many gifts the sport has presented to me. Every event I run helps me find out who the real me is, and what she is made of” (251).

What makes ultrarunning, more than shorter distances, a locus for the exploration of life meaning? Several contributors in Jamison’s (2003) collection cite the community ethos of the sport and the perseverance it requires. In this paper, I attempt to systematize this discussion by framing running in terms of the experience of the Kantian beautiful and sublime: Whereas shorter distances respond to beauty-related, extrinsic motivations (e.g., weight loss), longer distances seem to be related to sublime-related, intrinsic motivations (e.g., meaning). This argument demonstrates how both concepts, in concert (rather than just one or the other, as has been the case in much prior research), offer a holistic view of motivations for athletic participation, and it helps explain why the force of commodification, which can be seen as a threat to the sublime, has not dampened the spirit of ultrarunning.

The Beautiful and the Sublime in Distance Running

The sublime has seen a resurgence in recent philosophical discourse, to the point that some scholars argue that it has lost all meaning or is irrelevant (Brady 2013); still, Brady argues that the sublime is a useful concept for examining aesthetic experiences of negative valence, such as terror, which cannot be addressed by the concept of beauty alone. Discussions regarding the beautiful and the sublime have largely been applied to physical objects—art objects and land formations, for instance—but recent scholarship in aesthetics suggests that such experiences are

embodied rather than external (Johnson 2007), inviting an aesthetic exploration of sport. Previous philosophical work on the sublime in extreme sports (Ilundáin-Agurruza 2007; Stranger 2011) has leveraged the embodied perspective, but these discussions have not engaged the concept of beauty. Thus, in this paper, I seek to emphasize the interplay between the beautiful and the sublime.

The Beautiful and the Sublime

Kant first discussed the beautiful and the sublime in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* ([1764] 2011). Here Kant described both the beautiful and the sublime as types of enjoyable feelings, but differentiated them in saying that, whereas the beautiful merely “charms,” the sublime “touches” (16). He further divided the sublime into three types: the terrifying sublime, which involves dread; the noble sublime, which involves quiet wonder; and the magnificent sublime, which involves overwhelming beauty.

Decades later, Kant developed a detailed account of the beautiful and the sublime within his theory of aesthetics in *Critique of Judgment* ([1790] 1987). For Kant, there are four types of aesthetic judgment: the agreeable, the good, the beautiful and the sublime. The agreeable is based purely on subjective taste, and the good on objective ethics. The beautiful and sublime, on the other hand, are subjectively universal. “Both kinds of judgment are singular ones that nonetheless proclaim themselves universally valid for all subjects” (Kant 1987, §23, 97). Braider (2010) further interprets the “universal” nature of these concepts by asserting that “we could not be the creatures we are and not feel (or at any rate not be capable of feeling) the call of the sublime” (para. 8).

Though the beautiful and the sublime are similar—they involve a liking, and their judgment is reflective rather than logical or determinate (Kant 1987, §23, 97–98)—they differ in important ways. Beauty involves pure attraction, whereas the sublime arises from simultaneous attraction and repulsion. In this way, the beautiful engenders positive pleasure, whereas the sublime demands admiration and respect, and can thus be termed “negative pleasure” (Kant 1987, §23, 98). For Kant, the pleasure in beauty arises directly from the perception of the beautiful thing, but the pleasure in the sublime arises indirectly, only after the mental faculties have been momentarily arrested by an incomprehensible vastness.

All this considered, the main distinction between the beautiful and the sublime is one of form: Beauty arises from form, but sublimity from formlessness. Something is beautiful when its form seems to suit its purpose. Something is sublime when it is vast or incomprehensible—when, in sensing it, we sense infinity. Kant concludes that beauty is a quality of objects, something external. The sublime, on the other hand, is the purview of the mind: “For the beautiful in nature we must seek a basis outside ourselves, but for the sublime a basis merely within ourselves and in the way of thinking that introduces sublimity into our presentation of nature” (Kant 1987, §23, 100).

The beautiful and the sublime can be understood as kinds of aesthetic experiences. An account of aesthetic experience was given by Dewey ([1934] 2005; see also Ilundáin-Agurruza 2007), for whom “an experience” is something singular and meaningful, marked off from the banal procession of everyday life. The marking-off of something as an experience is part of human meaning-making. The above discussion considered aesthetic experiences arising from

external stimuli; this understanding has been extended by the theory of embodied aesthetics developed by Johnson (2007), which suggests that all meaning-making stems from the experience of the human body within its environment. Thus the beautiful and the sublime may arise not only through an external stimulus, be it a Romantic painting or a stormy sea, but also through a bodily stimulus, such as the act of running. This understanding allows for the exploration of running through the framework of the beautiful and the sublime. This view also supports the recent philosophical approach to sport that sees an ecological, embodied perspective as a way to overcome limitations of traditional, cognitivist models of athletic performance (Moe 2005).

Running: Now Beautiful, Now Sublime

Kantian aesthetics have previously been invoked with respect to sports, though initial discussions were centered around the experience of spectating. Platchias (2003) declares that “sport is art,” drawing parallels between seeing sports performances and beholding art objects. Similarly, Thomen (2010) describes the experience of the sublime in viewing extreme sports performances. More recently, Schmid (2013) articulates a Kantian theory of sports performance that took into account Kant’s aesthetic, moral and ethical perspectives. Schmid’s account of sporting aesthetics focuses mainly on how doing sports is an expression of beauty, but he says that sport can also be sublime “in the moral sense” inasmuch as it reveals “engaging and perfecting human rationality in contrast to seemingly infinite nature” (119), though he does not expound on this. Accordingly, this section details the interplay of the beautiful and the sublime in running.

Running As Beautiful. Running, the muscles contract and expand in graceful symphony, propelling the body forward through space. A steady progression, a rhythmic bobbing—each foot strikes the ground at just the right time, the arms swinging in pendular counterbalance. At its best, running is a delight. A runner can feel their body working, exercising its form. Running is beautiful.

In Kantian terms, running is beautiful because its form matches its purpose. As described above, runners may be motivated by concerns for health, weight loss, competition or personal achievement. While running, a runner may *feel* healthier, lighter, faster and accomplished. Between runs, these motivations may play into choosing food, planning training sessions, registering for races, shopping for equipment, posting social media updates, and other activities which allow runners to reflect on the beautiful aspects of their sport. The beauty in running can also be seen in the photographs—which abound—of runners before, during and after training sessions and races, and of the scenery and products with which the run took place.

Such reflections on external factors are clear examples of Kantian beauty. But even independent of any external purpose or goal beyond its own unfurling, running can be seen as an expression of the purpose of the body:

Thus there is, even in running, an idea the athlete is seeking to embody, a pure form of the act she is trying to bring about—and she thinks of this act not simply as fun or pleasurable but as right or fine. (Schmid 2013, 114)

The beautiful nature of running, in this sense, is not outwardly directed, but still it is limited in its reflective capacity to the positive pleasure of Kantian beauty.

Running As Sublime. But running is not always positively pleasurable. That is, running is beautiful, but sometimes it contains elements that the concept of beauty alone cannot explain. There's pain. There's shortness of breath. Soreness, aching. There's boredom. The longer the run, the more salient the non-beautiful: blackened toenails, blisters, muscular spasms, bloating, chafing, vomiting... These things are not beautiful; they're sublime.

The sublime emerges in distance running, particularly in ultrarunning, because, across the span of those vast, comparatively slow, miles, the mind virtually cannot help but reflect on itself. Not all runs are sublime, surely, and not all runners experience the sublime. In part this is because, as Nancy (1993) writes, the sublime "offers." The ingredients are available, but the person has to grasp them in order to experience the sublime. Moreover, the experience of the sublime in running surely has to do with the runner's motivations. As noted above, extrinsic motivations are likely to lead to experiences of beauty. Conversely, intrinsic motivations may be more likely to unlock the sublime.

Kant (1987) described two types of sublime, referring to different types of overwhelming vastness, both of which can emerge in ultrarunning. The first, the *mathematical sublime*, overwhelms with a sense of inestimable size. This arises in ultrarunning when, for instance, an athlete considers the mileage being undertaken. One mile is comprehensible, and so is ten. Ten and ten more, likewise. But when an athlete tries to comprehend the experience of an entire ultramarathon, there comes a point when their powers of estimation simply fail. Even a seasoned ultrarunner cannot help but think, 25 miles into a 100-mile race: *Can I really keep running that long?* Indeed, confronting what is perceived as infinite distance requires "the mystique of an infinite endurance" (Montgomery 1989, 377). Kant's second type of sublime, the *dynamical sublime*, overwhelms with a sense of infinite power. In ultrarunning, the dynamical sublime emerges from the unknowns inherent to the sport. On one hand, the athlete is confident: They've put in the training, and they've prepared mentally; today, they've been eating "early and often," as the maxim goes, and they've been running conservatively. But on the other hand, anything can happen. Every tendonal twinge and muscular thump, every erratic heartbeat and minor discomfort is a possible harbinger of failure or injury. In Kant's (1987) words, the dynamical sublime demands respect; indeed, it's common wisdom in ultrarunning culture that one must "respect the distance."

Any running experience, it would seem, entails certain aspects of both the beautiful and the sublime. But on the whole, it seems that shorter-distance running responds more to motivations related to beauty, while ultra-distance running responds more to the sublime.

Ultrarunning and the Allure of the Sublime

Contemporary life reflects an obsession with safety, comfort and control. Breivik (2007) suggests that this aspect of modern society is mismatched with human nature; evolutionarily, our species developed in constant confrontation with risks and challenges. In a society that systematically minimizes risks and challenges, then, we are left unfulfilled. "This heritage is still alive and it predisposes us not only to take chances and risks, but to react positively to the challenges they involve" (Breivik 2007, 22).

Schopenhauer, in fact, said as much over a century ago when he predicted that in societies for whom life (however selectively) becomes a given, 'danger' must

correspondingly take on the status of a formal necessity, of an historical reminder. (Montgomery 1989, 377)

As a result, many of us actively seek out challenges and take risks that seem unnecessary. To be sure, we want safety in some areas of life—bridges, for instance, should not be on the verge of collapse. But we want there to be risks of a certain kind. Breivik calls these “relevant risks,” which “can be predicted, controlled, mastered and dealt with by me through the use of my skills” (2007, 19).

Our yearning for risk and challenge, coupled with an “urge to escape from the increasingly materialistic, paternalistic and utilitarian Western lifestyle” (Watson 2007, 98) may be what leads some athletes to ultrarunning. And, indeed, the presence of the very same risks and challenges also, in part, allows for sublime experiences. “The extreme is a wonderful way to enrich and concurrently experience some of the most complex yet basic emotions proper to life, and in intensities that are barred from our mundane lives” (Ilundáin-Agurreza 2007, 160).

We humans, then, are drawn to risks, and risks present opportunities for the sublime. As discussed above, humans are also drawn to meaning. Opportunities for meaning are also presented by the sublime, echoing Braider’s (2010) assertion that sensing the allure of the sublime is quintessentially human. To be sure, this is not unique to running. Indeed, for Weiss (1971), the fundamental reason athletes pursue sport is to become their best self. “Athletes are excellence in the guise of men” (Weiss, 17). Anderson (2001) discusses physical movement as a route to achieving discovering the Transcendentalist good life. Atherton (2007) writes about outdoor kinetic experiences as opportunities for self-reflection and personal growth.

Hochstetler and Hopsicker (2012), in a study on self awakening in runners and cyclists, warn that the sublime experience is not automatic. Again, the sublime can only “offer” (Nancy 1993). In order to experience the sublime, the athletes pursue their sport in a devoted fashion over an extended period of time, brushing up against risk, overcoming challenges and meeting discomfort. Hochstetler and Hopsicker encapsulate this in the term “strenuous mood,” after William James, referring to the act of intentionally undergoing difficulty in order to grow.

In maintaining a strenuous mood, athletes can discover meaning far beyond transitory reflection: Csikszentmihalyi (1982), for instance, writes about rock climbers for whom the universe of climbing came to constitute a reality more meaningful than the reality of everyday life. This reflects my own experience after running my first 100-mile race. For weeks afterward I felt displaced: For me, the act of running on the trail had become the real world. Even a week after the race, my life in the city was but an uncomfortable illusion, assuaged only when I registered for my next race.

Though many athletic endeavors seem to allow for meaning-making by way of the sublime, it seems that ultrarunning facilitates the sublime offering particularly well—perhaps more than other sports. As David and Lehecka (2012) conclude, in ultrarunning, struggle and endurance is viewed as a gateway to self-discovery that is accomplished by going into a realm that today’s modern society is constructed to actively avoid. Within ultra comes a kind of purity of existence in that moment, where all of the things that can plague us every day are stripped away and focus is turned toward just keeping moving forward. (David & Lehecka 2012, “Conclusions,” para. 1)

It may be the case, as Mueller (2012) suggests, that the demographics of ultrarunning—the sport a high proportion of ultrarunners have graduate degrees—make the search for and articulation of meaning within the sport more salient. In this case, there would be no need for the sublime, as the sublime is not the only route to meaning. However, as described above, the experience of ultrarunning is saturated with sublime potential.

It would seem, then, that there is something about the activity of ultrarunning itself that occasions sublime meaning-making. Evidence for this is found in Jones' (2004) discussion of ultrarunners' encounters with Absolute Unitary Being. On Jones' account, ultrarunners experience Absolute Unitary Being more often than marathoners, cyclists and other endurance athletes for several reasons: Running activates the adrenal glands, is high-impact, and uses both upper-body and lower-body muscles. Additionally, the comparatively slower pace of ultrarunning requires slow, rhythmic breathing. This combination saturates the body's sympathetic-trophotropic and parasympathetic-trophotropic systems; when such a state is sustained for more than four hours,

the hypothalamus, amygdala, and hippocampus cease to be able to process and receive input properly. The orientation, emotion, arousal, and visual areas of the brain cease to function normally, creating an experience in the ultrarunner of pure connection with everything, a loss of time, and a complete state of peace and knowing. (Jones 2004, 45)

Though Jones does not invoke the concept of the sublime, his description of Absolute Unitary Being is striking in its resemblance to the sublime experience, which Brady (2013, 199) defines as “a form of illuminating aesthetic experience which can feed into the development of self-knowledge” (Brady 2013, 199). Moreover, Jones shows that ultrarunning is physiologically different from shorter-distance running, which is faster and more stochastic, and from cycling, which is lower impact, uses only the lower body and includes periods of rest (e.g., coasting downhill). This helps explain why the sublime seems more prevalent in ultrarunning than other athletic pursuits; it also invites consideration of yet-unconsidered sports, such as swimming.

So far, I have suggested that the sublime in running—most easily grasped in ultrarunning—speaks to fundamental human needs for both life meaning and risk. This discussion has shown that the sublime in ultrarunning emerges from the discomfort, strenuousness, unpredictability and riskiness. The nature of modern society seeks to minimize some of these aspects, which are generally seen as undesirable. This would seem to pose a threat to ultrarunning as a channel for the sublime—and, transitively, for self-discovery and life meaning. In the next section, I explore the extent to which commodification, an encapsulation of these societal forces, impinges on the beautiful and the sublime to be found in running.

Commodification and the Aesthetics of Running

Commodification has sprinted to the furthest reaches of contemporary society. In this section, I discuss the trajectory of commodification within the framework of the beautiful and the sublime, particularly in running. I argue that commodification emphasizes the beautiful at the expense of the sublime. This is because, in the Kantian framework, material objects cannot be sublime—they can only be beautiful. Thus, despite the growing commodification of the running industry,

running does not seem to be at risk of sublime evisceration, for the sublime is not found in any running-related commodity, but rather in the experience of running itself.

Shumar (2001) argues that in our modern consumer culture goods have lost their connection to any deeper meaning, becoming mere commodities—speaking to the beautiful, but not the sublime. An example of this appears in the process of commodification in the model airplane hobby, documented by Butsch (1984). At first, model airplanes were one-of-a-kind artifacts made at home through the creative use of everyday materials, and as such the hobby contributed to the formation of identity and meaning in the hobbyists' lives. Over time, though, the model airplane hobby came to be nothing more than the assemblage of mass-produced plastic kits. Thus the predominant object of the hobby became the purchasing of a produced commodity; this constituted the gradual de-skilling of hobbyists and a subsequent loss of the meaningfulness of the hobby.

Wearing and Wearing (1992) suggest that the same may happen for running: The sport, they say, once a simple physical activity, has been transformed into a multi-million dollar industry with many sectors.

The joy of jogging will be enhanced, the advertising suggests, by choosing the best from an array of coloured, cushioned, even computerized shoes, which tell you how far you have run, in what time, at what pace and how many calories you have consumed.

(Wearing & Wearing 1992, 3)

It should be noted that such gadgetry and apparel are not without purpose: They speak to the beauty in running, and they facilitate the achievement of goals related to personal appearance and competition. As appearance and competition are among the motivations of shorter-distance runners, these runners may find the beautiful commodities satisfactory. Even if the commodities are ultimately meaningless, these runners are not any worse off—even before, they may not have relied on running as a site for meaning-making in their lives.

That being the case for shorter-distance running, ultrarunning is somewhat more complex. Ultrarunning has long been characterized by its noncommercial nature (Edwards 1983). In recent years, the sport has begun to find commercial interest, as chronicled by David and Lehecka (2013): Prize money is beginning to appear in a few races, corporate sponsorships are not unheard of, and new events are proliferating. “The growth and transformation of ultrarunning is not a necessarily welcomed event for those who are part of the ‘old school’ of ultrarunning” (David & Lehecka 2013, “The Growth,” para. 10). As commodification begins to seep into the world of ultrarunning, some athletes are voicing concerns that the “purity” of the sport may be in danger (Runs 2014). Might the machinery of commodification have some purchase on the sublime spirit of ultrarunning?

Hearteningly, it does not seem that commodification *necessarily* inhibits the sublime. Eustis (2012) discusses the supposed commodification of guided wilderness adventures. On these trips, clients are guided through an experience of mediated fear and delight. This balance is meant to create a sublime experience, which is the draw of such adventures. Though the sublime experience is constructed and the tours are bought as commodities, their sublimeness is not curtailed in commodification. Eustis notes that this is because the purpose for these tour company is not only to make money, but also to instill a sense of wonder and respect for nature in the clientele. Stranger (2011) arrives at a similar conclusion in his discussion of the sublime in

surf culture. Stranger discusses the rampant commodification of surf culture over the years: sportization, artificial wave pools, using surf imagery to sell soda and cars, selling surf style to non-surfers. All the same, the sublime in surfing has survived commodification because it is rooted in “shared knowledge of embodied experience” (211).

The accounts of Eustis (2012) and Stranger (2011) suggest that the sublime can survive commodification if the centrality of the experience is preserved. For those who continue to *run*, the sublime will continue to *offer*.

To this end, a critical point in understanding ultrarunning is that, perhaps more than other sports—including shorter-distance running—ultrarunning emphasizes the experience of running more than anything else. With this understanding, David and Lehecka (2013) posit that ultrarunning will be able to continue to grow while retaining its roots. They cite that even as prize money and larger fields become commonplace, local, unofficial “fat ass” events continue to proliferate across the country. Runs (2014) agrees, saying,

Still, it is not a low budget that makes our sport pure. It is the care we put into our trails. It is our willingness to move across nature with old friends and new friends, suffering when we don't have to. Our sport's purity lies in the value we place on resilience, determination, and giving back. We are trail runners whether we pay hundreds of dollars for gear or just head out with homemade car-tire sandals. (Runs 2014, para. 15)

For David and Lehecka (2013), this continued authenticity will only be possible, though, if the essence of ultrarunning is maintained—that is, the centrality of the sublime experience. This involves, as described above, discomfort, strain, unpredictability and risk. As commodification attempts to eliminate these facets from society, even knocking at the door of ultrarunning, some have sought solace in the great outdoors. Indeed, the sport of ultrarunning has seen its own “wild turn” in recent decades, which may be, at least partly, in response to the forces of commodification.

Heightening the Sublime: Ultrarunning's Wild Turn

Nature is often discussed in the context of the sublime. Indeed, paradigm examples of sublime experiences include beholding expansive landscapes and witnessing cosmic weather effects.

Indeed, Watson (2007) concludes that for sublime experiences, risk taking is not enough, but rather a wilderness environment is needed.

The absence of spiritual and religious metaphors in the literature from high-risk sports that are not undertaken in wilderness environments, such as indoor extreme moto-cross, Formula One or motor racing, boxing and in-line ramp skating, perhaps goes some way to supporting this conjecture. (Watson 2007, 112)

As a counterpoint, ultrarunning seems to allow for the sublime even when it occurs in urban, track and other “non-natural” settings, calling into question the extent to which a wilderness environment is really requisite for the sublime.

All the same, there has been a distinctive “wild turn” in ultrarunning in recent years, which can be clearly seen in the history of the sport in the United States, as chronicled by Milroy (2012). Ultrarunning evolved from the so-called “pedestrianism” movement in the 1800s, in which independent eccentrics walked hundreds of miles along roads between far-flung cities. Walking became running, and eventually ultrarunning exploded in popularity. In 1970,

there were a total of 50 participants in ultramarathons; in 1979, there were over 2,000, and this trend has continued, unabated. Along with this growth came a turn toward trail running: In 1981, about 87 percent of ultramarathons were road races, but by 2006 the proportion had flipped, with 84 percent of ultramarathons held on trails. Today, trail running and ultrarunning are virtually synonymous.

The wild turn of ultrarunning seems to represent an effort to heighten the sublime experience of the sport: Though ultrarunning in all places can be sublime, ultrarunning in the wilderness can be *all the more* sublime. In support of this notion, Eustis (2012) emphasizes that Kant's conceptualization of the sublime did not see the sublime as a binary on-off opposition, but rather a continuum. "The power of the sublime increases or decreases according to an array of internal and external factors" (Eustis 2012, 25). Watson (2007) lists a number of factors that might be considered, including risk-taking, a non-competitive ethic, periods of isolation, varying degrees of suffering and discomfort and, of course, the wilderness.

Anderson (2001) describes how the commercialization of endurance sports takes the "wilderness" out of them and reduces the inherent risks—such as, for instance, running out of water. In a commercially-sponsored race, there are aid stations every few miles with food and water, so that participants do not need to worry about running out. This reduction of uncertainty may reduce the sublimity of the experience. In response, Anderson says, athletes have been seeking ways to increase the risk in their endeavors, principally by moving to trails and other untamed environments (see also Krein 2007). This seems to be exactly the trend at play in ultrarunning's wild turn.

Conclusion

Distance running is growing in cultural importance. In this paper, I have explored some of the reasons for this through the framework of the beautiful and the sublime. Whereas running can, particularly at shorter distances, appeal to a desire for beauty, ultrarunning seems to respond to a deep-seated human need for the sublime, which is tied to a need for life meaning. Indeed, ultrarunning has the capacity to change lives by giving athletes ways to find meaning in a chaotic world.

In a way, this aspect of ultrarunning represents the democratization of self-actualization. Long ago, Arnold ([1869] 2006) declared that relishing the sublime literature of high culture was the most open route to self-actualization. But, while reading the classics requires a substantial level of education and remains inaccessible to many, running is far more accessible. "There is about the marathon something that is liberating, allowing every runner to experience what was seen until only decades ago to be the domain of a super-fit elite" (Robinson 2007, 9).

Marketers, as ever, are not far behind. Every season brings new entrants to the (trail) running gear industry, new running-related films and even running-inspired casual athletic-wear. But the sublime spirit of running, it seems—and ultrarunning in particular—will continue to outrun the machinery of marketing so long as runners continue to run. As much as marketers attempt to package the sublime experience of running, it seems that they can only succeed in packaging beauty.

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