RUNNING THE CITY

Urban Marathon as (Story)telling

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ABSTRACT • Starting from Arjun Appadurai's notion that "We need to think ourselves beyond the nation" (Appadurai 1998), I will consider how this operation of "thinking beyond" has been symbolically and practically reflected in the experience of the city marathons a conscious or unconscious appropriation of an urban space that does not belong to the runner and that is progressively resignified through the very act of running through it. This act generates a narrative, a kind of story telling whose main characteristic is that of enacting the journey from the space of the former colony to the space of the postcolony (Appadurai 1998), also raising issues related to the impact of globalization on the practice of sports.

KEYWORDS • Abebe Bikila, Fred Lebov, Olympic Games, Marathon, Banksy

1. Hip hop in Gaza

Parkour in Gaza was issued and made available on the web in 2015, soon after Banksy's famous video *Make this year the year YOU discover a new destination* invaded it.[1] In response to the controversial artist's ironic commercial for a brand-new type of tour in an area where no tourists are admitted, a parkour team born and bred in the territory develops a similar video, with the explicit purpose of showing what real life is like in the Gaza strip and how street art may be conceived as a form of resistance.

http://www.theguardian.com/cities/video/2015/mar/10/banksy-parkour-gaza-shadia-mansour-video

Following the music of Shadia Mansour, the most famous female hip-hop artist from Palestine, 10 boys led by Abdallah Al Qassab jump, somersault, dance and run through the ruins left behind by the repeated bombings of the area. They volunteer to take Banksy – and any Western visitor with him – on an unusual tour through the war-ravaged, occupied territory, shown as it is, though ironically presented as picturesque and fascinating sights to see. The boys address Banksy directly, at the beginning of the video, declaring that "they are very available to show you around"; and they succeed in creating a very special text, desperate and yet full of hope, crudely realistic and yet brimming with the pride of being a Palestinian.

The ground-breaking aspect of the text, and what makes it all the more effective, is that the latest hit in the realm of sport – parkour: part run, part athletic performance and part dance – is exploited to produce a new type of psychogeography: an emotional journey through a space that needs to be reappropriated.

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[1] The video is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3e2dShY8jIo.

The short home-made video – slightly more than two minutes – is impressive in itself, built up as it is on the clash between the cheerful vitality of the dancing gang and the landscape of ruins, a jarring gap culminating in the last few frames, which feature a few boys somersaulting while several bombs go off on the edge of the horizon. The performance becomes even more disquieting when framed within the endless Palestinian struggle to get back a land that used to be their home and no longer is.

While reflecting on what he defines as a form of "nationalism without a nation" (Appadurai 1998: 188), Appadurai mentions the case of Palestine, positing it as an example of how dubious and blurred the relationship between identity and territory has become in times of global nomadism:

> Even in those cases where territory seems to be a fundamental issue, such as in Palestine, it could be argued that debates about land and territory are in fact functional spin offs of arguments that are substantially about power, justice, and self-determination. In a world of people on the move, of global commodization and states incapable of delivering basic rights even to their majority ethnic populations, territorial sovereignty is an increasingly difficult justification for those nation states that are increasingly dependent on foreign labour, expertise, arms or soldiers. (Appadurai 1998: 21)

In other words, the spatialized syntax of the Gaza Strip makes for a number of social, political, and cultural peculiarities marking Palestine as a special case: the living conditions in the occupied territories in particular show with unarguable evidence the many complexities (and unfair proceedings) of the colonial occupation in late-modern times, a process that results from "a concatenation of multiple powers: disciplinary, biopolitical, and necropolitical" (Mbembe 2003: 29). It is precisely for this reason that *Parkour in Gaza* is so well suited to my argument here.

However, though I share Appadurai's position on the increasing irrelevance of territorial belonging in contemporary global times, I also think that, in terms of national and international perception, the Palestinian reality still appears and is perceived as troubled to the end by the feeling of the Palestinians having been pushed out and robbed of their own land. The otherwise theoretical notions of spatialization of identity and territorialization of power acquire the flavour of highly pragmatic and sorrowful experiences that are not only inbuilt in the Palestinian consciousness, but also familiar to the national and international audience. They form that kind of background knowledge from which a text such as *Parkour in Gaza* draws its most articulate meanings. The configuration of space (bombed houses, ravaged land, ruins, undrinkable water and unfriendly surroundings) effectively recapitulates on the organization of power in the occupied territory and its impact on individual and collective identity. All in all, given the time and space references in the text, the two key-notions of contemporary colonial occupation easily surface by themselves, and are impossible to ignore.

In this context, parkour is not merely a sport, an athletic performance originally blending acrobatics and efficiency in overcoming unpredictable environmental obstacles so as to choose the quickest path in an urban site, but also, and more significantly, becomes a method for reappropriating the city, a psychogeographical practice where land and identity become related not through a logical pattern but by means of the emotional echoes raised by the landscape in the body of the person traversing it.

If it is true that, as Fanon shows, "colonial occupation entails first and foremost a division of space into compartments" (Fanon 1991: 39), the Gaza Parkour Team featuring in this video seems devised to overcome any barrier and tell a different story.

2. Of marathons and the city

Here is the first point I am interested in. Since sport originated, and is still widely perceived, as popular entertainment resulting from physical performance, the stories it tells are deeply rooted in the popular consciousness of the community: a network of shared meanings that, as Raymond Williams implied in his critical work, represent the collective identity of a nation seen in the process of developing. They are often related to the political struggles, resistance fight, phases of transition, and in short the history of a community.

The connection between sport and postcolonial issues follows as a fairly natural consequence. Many researchers have already commented on the relevance of sporting performances in redeeming and/or remoulding national identity at the end of the colonial process.[2] What I want to do here is slightly different: I'm reflecting on sport in a different perspective, i.e. primarily as storytelling, the gradual unfolding of a narrative developed through unusual though codified signs. I would like to show how the athletic performance produces a narrative, that turns out to be a double-sided weapon: it offers the opportunity for the subaltern's voice to be heard but it may, in turn, be exploited by hegemonic power, through the process described by Stuart Hall in his "encoding, decoding model".

It is of course relevant to note what Mbembe writes about this when he states that "The colonial state derives its fundamental claim of sovereignty and legitimacy from the authority of its own particular narrative of history and identity" (Mbembe 2003: 27). What happens then when the same story is told in different ways and from different postcolonial perspectives? In what ways can sports icons become, at one and the same time, tools for promoting the new identities emerging from the postcolonial process and instruments in the hands of the former colonial powers?[3]

To try and provide a provisional answer to these questions, sport should be considered as a specific kind of narrative, by choice and at the beginning popular, collective, spontaneously triggered by the figure of the athlete. The mythopoetic process enveloping the figures of great athletes once they reach enormous popularity and become icons takes place over time and involves different, often conflicting agents. On the one hand, it springs up naturally when the athletic performance exceeds all expectations in a public and often popular context. Within this frame, storytelling – the flourishing of stories concerning the winning athlete – often becomes a way to recover the narrative of the colonized nation, proposing a revision of national identity in the light of the athlete's success.

On the other hand, sporting icons are soon made into market commodities that undergo the same rules as any economic exchange, by themselves stated and supported by the hegemonic power.

We may therefore organize the process into two steps, the first one being the moment when a number of popular narratives concerning the winning athlete develop spontaneously and are spread by word of mouth, and the second marked by the media taking hold of the

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[2] Quite recently, the online academic journal "Altre Modernità" devoted a monographic issue to the interaction between sport practice & national identity. The issue, edited by P. Caponi & N. Vallorani, was entitled *Gaming Identity. Sport and Cultures, the Local and the Global* (14, 2015, http://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/AMonline/issue/view/866).

[3] Needless to say that there are plenty of sport narratives grounded on the issue of athletic performance as social and ethnic redemption. Alan Sillitoe provides a beautiful literary apologue of this kind in his *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1959), and filmic texts developed around these issues feed a constantly implemented reservoir and must often be counted as blockbusters.

mythopoetic process and adapting it to the needs of the market. Stuart Hall's reflections on how television communication works comes in handy here. It is certainly true that in this case

> Production, here, constructs the message (…) Of course, the production process is not without its 'discursive' aspect: it, too, is framed throughout by meanings and ideas: knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, historically defined technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience and so on frame the constitution of the programme through this production structure" . (Hall 1980: 92)

The encoded message that is handed to the audience in the form of meaningful discourse primarily results from the spontaneous mythopoetic process but is remoulded according to the needs and purposes of media communication. The audience decoding of this remoulded message may substantially differ from the media-driven "meaning structures" (Hall 1980: 93). Sporting narrative proves, on the whole, to be particularly affected by this semiotic process, so studying it is definitely a priority when dealing with athletic performance and the way it is transformed into stories. Of course, it depends on the sport we are dealing with. My choice to concentrate on the city marathon results from some specific characteristics of this athletic performance, and this brings us back to the example we started from: Parkour in Gaza. Though not specifically labelled as city marathon, parkour shares with it at least one basic feature: it is marked by an intention to reappropriate a space that belongs to someone else, and often, in the case I will deal with, to a community where the runner is clearly perceived as a foreigner, a stranger, an Other. And this is definitely a postcolonial issue.

One of the most famous city marathons all over the world is the one that takes place annually in New York. A few people know that the marathon arose out of a project by a first-generation Jewish immigrant from Transylvania. Fred Lebow, whose original name was Fischl Lebowitz, actually transformed a local city run held on the streets of the Bronx into an international event bringing the runners to Central Park where the first New York City Marathon was held in 1970. The whole story is told in a documentary film (*Run for Your Life*, 2008) and on a constantly updated website (http://www.fredlebowmovie.com/). And the narrative is basically about the amazing abilities – including marketing abilities – that allowed Lebow to triple the number of the runners in one year, exploiting his flair for showmanship and also emphasizing the popularity of running as a social activity. Even the scandals that he had to face for leveraging any opportunity to increase the marathon's success were eventually a minor problem: Lebow had already become the icon of the successful Jewish immigrant, and a paradigm of the proverbial self-made man. The film in particular – *Run for Your Life* – is a documented but at the same time fictionalized report: successful storytelling for the newly arrived in the American Dreamland.[4]

Though the figure of Fred Lebow is not directly related to athletic performance, his story is meaningful for our purposes. His success and the solidity of his legacy amply show what I would call the social and cultural effect of a city marathon. A "poor" sport in itself, not requiring any particular equipment or outfit, the marathon is open to everybody, provided she or he can run; it therefore creates an intensely democratic context, though limited in time to the duration of the marathon itself. It also allows a psychogeographic contact with space, it shares with Guy Debord's notion of *dérive* the fact of being a necessarily collective journey experienced in a highly individual way. Finally it is a sports event impressing its mark – again temporarily – on the city, overturning the relationship between *architectures and people* and reinforcing the idea that without its city dwellers the city simply does not exist. It may appear

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[4] The film's trailer is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=adn628NSY-c.

perfect – as it does in Piero della Francesca's painting *La città ideale* (1480–1490) – but it simply does not exist.

So, the questions I would like to answer through my next case study are: how does the practice of marathon involve the body and the city? What happens when a body is foreign or migrant or alien to the urban space it moves through? How do different loyalties interlace in producing the image of an *other* identity in a space that is designated as the space of a community?

This leads us to the case of Abebe Bikila in Rome.

3. Abebe Bikila: spotting the narrative threads

When Abebe Bikila, the Ethiopian athlete, won the Rome 1960 marathon, he was comparatively old for this sport (24) and had never run outside his homeland. A last-minute addition to the Ethiopian Olympic team, he was a member of the Imperial bodyguard in Addis Ababa, and mostly known as a good swimmer, an excellent horse rider and a reasonably good Guna hockey player.

He ran the marathon in the world-record time of 2 hours 15 minutes and 16.2 seconds. What made his performance legendary, however, was not the record in itself but the fact that he ran barefoot on the heavily cobble-stoned roads of Rome. The fact is that the shoe sponsor Adidas did not have the right size for the athlete, and the shoes nearest to his own size were so tight and uncomfortable that two hours before the marathon Bikila decided to run barefoot: after all, he was not used to wearing shoes when he trained at home. Also, Bikila's Finnish-Swedish trainer, Major Onni Niskanen, confirmed that it was not so unusual for an Ethiopian athlete to run barefoot, thus relating a bizarre decision to a definite national (and ethnic) belonging. The athlete, in fact, insisted that he was running anyway, even without shoes and even when his trainer suggested reconsidering his participation in the marathon, he stubbornly kept to his decision to run, presenting his choice as an attempt to demonstrate the strength and determination of Ethiopian people.

Later on, when he won the race, surprising everyone, what was in fact the result of an organizational problem (no available shoes for one of the runners) that determined his decision grounded the process of "iconizing" the runner in a very effective way, emphasizing his highly patriotic choice and his desire to "make history for Africa" (John Underwood 1965: 4) rather than the contingent necessity to avoid running in uncomfortable shoes that would have impaired his performance.

Quite obviously, what is at stake here is the complex theoretical discourse on how Otherness may be represented and is currently given a shape in Western contexts. Twenty years or so after it was proposed, Homi Bhabha's theory, that the image of the Other is substantially built up on Western expectations and on the process of exercising colonial power through discourse (Bhabha 1994b: 19), may easily be accepted and taken for granted, even though what is presented as the general attitude of Westerners needs further specification, according to which field we are referring to. In terms of sport and representation, I would stick to what Bhabha states about the possible outcome of what he calls the "subjectification of the Other", a process that has undergone some changes in recent times. Progressively, the subjectification of the Other has led to him/her being perceived "as sign, not symbol or stereotype disseminated in the codes" (Bhabha 1994b: 21).

This is the point I am interested in. It is my view that, in the process of the mutually exclusive acts of defining or rejecting the Other, Bikila becomes a sign – something more complex, semantically ambiguous and articulated than a stereotype – and he gives a new meaning to negative notions such as race, sub-human, beastly and the like when applied to

Otherness, and Ethiopian Otherness in particular. This sign develops through the narrative that fluently unfolds around his success at the Olympica marathon in Rome.

If we consider what happens in practice, the gradual articulation of the process of storytelling is very clear. The Olympic marathon in Rome was given full live coverage by Istituto Luce, which later edited the shooting so as to obtain a video of more or less seven minutes, i.e. storytelling in its most traditional form.[5] The video starts with the athletes beginning the run in a framework of beautiful Imperial landmarks, all reminiscent of the noble and powerful tradition mostly built on the ancient Roman conquest of the world but then replicated in the short colonial adventure of Fascism. The voice over – a reporter in charge of showing the progressive success of the unexpectedly brilliant Ethiopian runner – devotes the first couple of minutes to the beauties of the city. Bikila is presented only after about two minutes (1:51), and is presented as an outsider whose only peculiarity consists in running barefoot.

As in any good story, when the unexpected happens, suspense increases while the voice over becomes more and more excited by the prodigious talent of the Ethiopian runner. Several close-ups of Bikila's bare feet emphasize the conditions in which he is running, and his final victory is eventually the demonstration that anyone, even the wretched of the Earth, can have their moment of glory. The soundtrack is also fundamental in moulding the meaning of the short video. The music, suitably solemn, is accompanied by the public shouting and urging on the athletes, and these sounds are kept in the background.

On the whole, even though the video is far from sophisticated, the edited version of the live coverage shows how easily the simple report of an athletic performance, particularly if supported by the spontaneous reaction of the public, may be "fictionalized" into a tale of redemption, personal and collective, that is given sense by the social, political and historical references it triggers.

Narratively, the tale develops along three parallel threads: urban space as the space of a community; the figure of an alien moving through this space, therefore creating a discrepancy; the resolution of the discrepancy by moving the focus from the ethnic difference of the sportsman to the athletic wonders this body is capable of producing.

The three narrative threads are interlaced. The first dominates in the first part of the video, though the second is anticipated. In fact, what is perceived at once, right from the beginning of the video, is the notion of the city as the space of the community, overloaded with the memory of those who belong to it and moulded by its needs. Within this space – and contained by the safe limina of an urban topography interspersed with the marks of the western imperial history – an alien body is allowed to move freely provided he/she sticks to the rules of temporary democratic interaction stipulated by the marathon.

And here we come to the second narrative thread: being an alien in a semantically overloaded space.

The fact of Bikila being Ethiopian implies some considerations related to the fact of being an African in that particular niche of time and in a specific place. The urban landmarks evoke Italian colonial expansion that, though beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, became the hub of Italian national identity during fascism. Mussolini's obsessive desire for an Italian empire culminated in the Italian troops entering Addis Ababa on May 5, 1936. The conquest was soon accepted by the European nations and this was the start of a four-year domination that went under the name of the Italian East Africa Empire, a short-lived political entity that lasted until Haile Selassie came back to Ethiopia as emperor, triumphantly received on May 5, 1941.

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[5] The video is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Dppdcy1pyM.

Bikila runs the marathon in 1960, i.e. nineteen years after the end of the Italian colonial conquest. At a national level, subjection is still a fresh wound, collectively experienced and therefore doubtlessly present in Bikila's feelings about Italy. While running the marathon, he is moving through an urban space where the landmarks of imperial oppression are distinctly visible. He is the black man, the African, the stranger.

At this juncture, the third narrative thread is triggered, and the characteristics of the urban marathon as an Olympic sport come into play. Its primary aspect is that it creates a democratic space where national and ethnic identity is not forgotten though widely tolerated because this obeys the rules of the game. And in the Olympic context, the coexistence of several national and ethnic differences is not only to be expected but also encouraged. It is a fact, however, that Bikila is moving through an urban space where the signs of Ethiopian oppression are clearly to be seen. A few kilometres from the finish, Bikila sees the Obelisk of Axum, which invading Italian troops stole from Ethiopia during World War II (and only brought back to Ethiopia in 2008). At this point Bikila is neck & neck with the Moroccan, Rhadi. According to the reporter covering the event, when he saw the obelisk he surged forward, and Rhadi couldn't keep up. And eventually he won by producing an amazing athletic performance that brought his body to the foreground not primarily as ethnic but as a wonderful machine.

All of the three narrative threads are present at the end, when the unexpected victory is celebrated. The narrative structure appears very tight and effective and precisely because it is very simple it is bound to produce a definite effect on the public.

4. Mythopoiesis: the encoded and decoded run

It is of course impossible to know to what extent Bikila was subjectively aware of becoming the protagonist of a wonderful tale. What is relevant in our analysis, however, is that the mythopoetic process concerning the figure of the athlete begins here, when his national belonging and the national belonging of his public start interacting.

I think it is worth remembering that, in the urban marathon, the athletes directly engage with the urban landscape, in this way developing a relationship between individual body and collective space that is often multilayered and complex. This relationship is necessarily revised and remoulded as the marathon develops and the leading] group comes to be defined.

When Bikila eventually wins, all the features related to his Otherness – including his decision to run barefoot – become mythopoetic elements: though alien or maybe *because alien*, the body of the athlete is capable of wonders otherwise unthinkable. This allows the integration of the athlete in a context where national belonging does not hinder success but actually determines it. And we may say that Bikila is accepted because he comes to be seen as what we could define as a postnational identity, anticipating the kind of debate that Appadurai will introduce in the late 1980s, reflecting on the application of the notion of discourse within the combined fields of cultural studies, literary studies and postcolonial studies:

> We need to think ourselves beyond the nation. This is not to suggest that thought alone will carry us beyond the nation or that the nation is largely a thought or an imagined thing. Rather, it is to suggest that the role of intellectual practices is to identify the current crisis of the nation and in identifying it to provide part of the apparatus of recognition for postnational social forms. Although the idea that we are entering a postnational world seems to have received its first airing in literary studies, it is now a recurrent (if unselfconscious) theme in studies of postcolonialism, global politics, and international welfare policy. (Appadurai 1998: 158)

What appears irrefutable is that the first outcome of Bikila's astonishing victory is the repositioning of his belonging, acquired through the act of successfully competing with other athletes in a space that belongs to the former colonizers of his nation. When he starts the run, he is primarily Ethiopian and a marathon runner made "different" by the unusual decision to run barefoot. When he wins, he becomes an icon of how the body of an athlete – independently of his belonging – can be patiently moulded to obtain the best of all possible performances. This implies "the inscription upon bodily habit of disciplines of self-control and practices of group discipline, often tied up with the state and its interests" (Appadurai 1998: 148).

The first, provisional end of the tale is therefore positive: in spite of his being a foreigner, poor and under-educated, he wins. The fact of his being Ethiopian (and therefore Other, colonized, Italian-colonized, supposedly subaltern) comes into play only as an element of surprise, and it grounds the mythopoetic process. The athlete's body becomes an icon that posits its abilities as an all-resolving tool to induce the white Italian public to forget he is Ethiopian, or to consider his being Ethiopian as an original flaw he has been able to overcome. At this juncture, the body is posited not as alien but as a "machine", whose performance is made into a spectacle, mobilizing the masses.

It is precisely then that Bikila becomes an example of how national and postnational issues interlace in some sports icons who have happened to become potent vehicles of meaning and have so transcended individual aspirations and desires to access a territory beyond space and time.

In the athlete's celebration after his victory, two aspects coexist, though they are not mutually inclusive: Bikila as the icon of a nation and Bikila as the universal example of the wonders/spectacle of the body. His body is alien. His unmistakable and visible Otherness calls into play issues concerning the much-debated problems of diversity and integration. These latter, however are narratively played not as a form of resistance to colonization and normalization, but as limits to overcome through athletic performance.

In other words, the spectacle of the Other neutralizes the political value of the athletic performance. The body of the Other is made into an object to be sold (practically and symbolically) and to introduce into the field of economic exchange (Hall 1997: 223–290).

Quite meaningfully, in more recent times, the figure of Abebe Bikila undergoes further elaboration that culminates in the making of a docufilm, *The Athlete* (2009, dir.: Davey Frankel & Rasselas Lakew). An Ethiopian-produced initiative, the film is intended as a homage to the profile of the athlete, and emerges as a celebratory biopic emphasizing the virtues of athletic training as a tool for emancipation.

Elijah Anderson, in his *Against the Wall: Poor, Young, Black, and Male*, states that "Black Men, particularly from the inner city, have an athleticized identity. This identity is not developed spontaneously through peer groups; it is passed down from older black men and propagated via media images and the racialization of such sports as basketball and football" (E. Anderson 2006: 148). Anderson refers primarily to basketball in the US context, but we may still apply the same kind of principle here. The act of practicing a sport is at the same time an ethnic mark and an individual, often very hard, choice.

Its subsequent cultural development is quite simple and obvious: public imagination takes hold of a historic profile, through a process of storytelling mostly led by the media and undergoing the usual moulding and remoulding that Stuart Hall explains through the above mentioned encoding and decoding model (Hall 1980). The sports performance is made into a narrative transforming the athlete into something of an example and allowing Westerners to identify a specific ethnic group, whilst at the same time transforming him into a *ubermensch*, who did what he did precisely because he was *different* from anybody else (stronger, more determined, braver, more intelligent …).

Such a profile also acquires a universal flavour, entering the imaginative tradition of sports culture, partly anticipating the intricate web of processes brought about by globalisation.

> The image, the imagined, the imaginary – these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: *the imagination as a social practice*. No longer mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is elsewhere), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete purposes and structures), no longer elite pastime (thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people), and no longer mere contemplation (irrelevant for new forms of desire and subjectivity), the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility. (Appadurai 1998: 31)

And this is where the representation of the athlete – any successful athlete – in film, literature and imagination in general comes into play. Sports, particularly if associated with a highly popular background both in terms of the athletes and in terms of the public (and public gatherings), anticipates that transformation of the imagination into an organized field of social practices that Appadurai identifies with one of the consequences of the new technologies. And this transformation takes place through the tools of storytelling. The narrative triggered by the athletic performance shows how different loyalties interlace in producing the image of a *different* identity in a familiar time and space context. The discrepancy gives birth to a "set of links between gender, fantasy, nation, and excitement" that "could not occur without a complex group of historical contingencies involving empire, patronage, media, and commerce" (Appadurai 1998: 111). The multifaceted interaction among these fields takes place through the process of storytelling.

It is precisely storytelling that transforms the mere athletic performance into a social and cultural event, involving an individual body that undergoes a strict discipline (and therefore suffering an imposition of power, as Foucault maintains), that may eventually be made into an icon, bearing a specific national – or post/national – identity and mobilizing the masses.

When trying to trace a line between national and postnational implications with reference to the professional practice of sports, Appadurailists a number of examples, mostly drawn from the Olympic Games.

> The Olympic games of the past are full of incidents that reveal complex ways in which individuals situated within specific national and cultural trajectories imposed their imaginations on global audiences. In Seoul 1988, for instance, the defeated Korean boxer who sat in the ring for several hours to publicly proclaim his shame as a Korean and the Korean officials who swarmed into the ring to assault a New Zealand referee because what they thought was a biased decision was bringing their imagined lives to bear on the official Olympic narratives of fair play, good sportsmanship, and clean competition. (Appadurai 1998: 60)

What appears evident in this as in many other similar episodes is that the implications of national belonging by no means stop existing in a certain context and within the frame of a specific sporting context. I would suggest, instead, that some specific sporting contexts – most of them, in fact – might provide a workable model of affirmation of one's own belonging in a new community, fighting exclusion, claiming integration but at the same type keeping one's own culture. The whole process, when successful, amounts to the production-reaction of what Appadurai defines as a "community of sentiment", a group that begins to imagine and feel things together (Appadurai 1998: 8). Adapting Williams's famous definition of "community of feeling", Appadurai succeeds in picking up the most effective trigger in any storytelling related to the practice of sport: the ability to mobilize emotions as shared ground.

Now, the obvious risk that is always implied in the processes of media communication resides in the way in which "production, here, constructs the message" (Hall 1980: 92), which is "neither univocal nor uncontested" but obeys the "dominant cultural order" (Hall 1980: 98). It is quite clear, therefore, that Bikila as a sign undergoes a process intended to neutralize the possibly disturbing political implications of his victory and therefore fails to be dangerous. In practice, while it is true that the athlete's Olympic victory also brings about a historical repositioning of the Italian colonial enterprise in East Africa, this aspect of the narrative is always overshadowed by the athlete's celebration as an exception, thus reinforcing the impossibility of the story being told as a form of resistance. The possibility is there, but is not exploited to the full.

Even when Bikila's life becomes a biopic, the whole narrative develops around the many ways in which this extraordinary personality distances itself from the deprived national background he comes from. And ultimately, from birth to death, what emerges primarily from his parable is an inability to fully adapt to the Western, implicitly more civilized context.

For this reason, I would suggest that *The Athlete* as a film is not entirely successful and fails to capture the relevance of Bikila's success in terms of reflection on colonial and postcolonial issues. By transforming the athlete into a larger-than-life human being, the narrative also removes possible issues of resistance and political struggle that are necessarily implied in his being perceived as a sign of all that was unfair, violent and oppressive in the process of colonization. It also cancels any possible hope of exploiting the narrative as a tool for reconsidering aspects of the colonial process. To this purpose, paradoxically, the video resulting from the live coverage of the marathon is much more effective. There Bikila's march towards the finishing post of the marathon as told in the narratives springing from it and then shared by the public becomes a symbolic journey, related to what Appadurai states in his *Modernity at Large*:

> To widen the sense of what counts as discourse demands a corresponding widening of the sphere of the postcolony, to extend it beyond the geographical spaces of the former colonial world. In raising the issue of the postnational, I will suggest that the journey from the space of the former colony (a colourful space, a space of color) to the space of the postcolony is a journey that takes us into the heart of whiteness. (Appadurai 1998: 159)

And this is a story still to be told.

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