Running in Circles:
Forming in
Run Lola Run

t the Berlin International Film Festival's 'Talent Campus' event in 2003, both Tom Tykwer, director of *Run Lola Run* (1998) and Mathilde Bonnefoy, the film's editor, ran workshops. One insight they provided into their working processes was the screening of a 'teaser' trailer for *Run Lola Run*, shot and edited in the early stages of production. The trailer had to be created for early marketing purposes but both Tykwer and Bonnefoy came to view it as a pivotal resource in the ensuing stages of production.

Realizing that it successfully captured the 'feel' they wanted, they could now use it as a reference point for those elements that may not necessarily be captured in a script – such as style, rhythm, and mood – and as a concrete example of the role post-production elements like music and editing could play in the film.

Features of the trailer were its escalating pace, use of music, rhythmic editing – and the overall sense of energy that characterizes *Run Lola Run*.

According to Bonnefoy, what stood out was not that it was 'true to any particular scene or intention in the film', but that it was 'fast and associative, like the pure expression of a feeling'. The adoption of the teaser as a 'template' led the team to cut scenes from the original script that now went against the grain of the film's direction.

For Bonnefoy, this symbolized the transformation of the film from an 'intellectual' to an 'aesthetic' object. It is interesting that she never read

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Tykwer's script – instead she was given raw footage and worked only with this. Bonnefoy's attitude was that a script functions as a guide for the director – and for an editor, a collection of shots takes its place. For her, she said, shots were like words. Tykwer also pointed out that it was important for him to

the form of *Lola* – how the story is communicated, not just what happens *in* it – is essential to how it works and the resulting audience experience.

In their very useful book *Film Art: An Introduction*, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson discuss the 'form versus

pail. *Under this assumption, form becomes less important than whatever it is presumed to contain. We do not accept this assumption …*[2]

Bordwell and Thompson propose that all parts of a film function together and cue, or prompt, the audience to perceive it in a particular way.

acters, events and plot – and *stylistic* elements like sound, editing and cinematography. However, rather than privileging one over the other, they write of them functioning *together*. The way the audience experiences a film as a whole depends upon both narrative and stylistic elements.[3] With *Lola* the value of this approach to film analysis is clear. It is hard to separate 'story' from 'form' in *Lola* – in many ways, its form *is* its story.

The way the audience experiences a film as a whole depends upon both narrative and stylistic elements. With *Lola* the value of this approach to film analysis is clear. It is hard to separate 'story' from 'form' in *Lola* – in many ways, its form is its story

This Time It'll Work Out: Narrative Form in *Run Lola Run*

have his director of photography, editor and sound team involved from an early stage (with *Lola*, weeks before starting the film).[1]

These insights indicate the importance of more than just a script, or traditional elements of story like characters and events, in even the early development of *Run Lola Run*. They suggest that

content' question, which is relevant in this context:

Very often people assume that 'form' as a concept is the opposite of something called 'content'. This assumption applies that a poem or a musical piece or a film is like a jug: an external shape, the jug contains something that could just as easily be held in a cup or

The form/content division is comparable to another division commonly made, that between 'style' and 'substance', or 'style' and 'story'. Such divisions may be useful up to a point. Bordwell and Thompson, while not favouring a 'form' and 'content' division, do divide film form overall into two main areas – *narrative* form, involving story elements like char-

The defining feature of *Lola's* narrative structure is its treatment of time. The narrative has a 'multiform' plot (one based on multiple alternatives or multiple perspectives)[4] – the multiple alternatives in this instance are three ways the same twenty minutes could play out. In a break-neck setup a telephone conversation provides the film's basic situation. Lola's boyfriend Manni
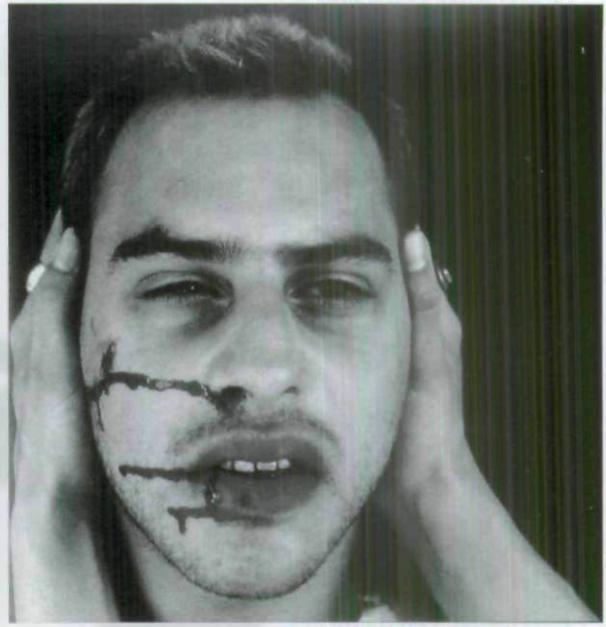
(Moritz Bleibtreu) is in trouble – he has lost 100,000 marks belonging to his gangster boss. Lola (Franka Potente) must find 100,000 marks and bring it to Manni within twenty minutes.

The plot then enters its 'multiform' phase – it repeats this pivotal 'twenty minutes' three times in a row, each starting when Lola runs from her house. Each time, events play out differently. The first results in Lola's death, the second, Manni's death and the third – success.

While time is portrayed more or less chronologically *within* these repetitions of time, there is one exception that extends the multiform narrative. Lola, in her frantic escapade, coincides with a series of 'random' characters that appear in every repetition. After some of these chance meetings, the words 'AND THEN' announce a flash-forward – in a rapid still-image sequence we see the major events that happen next in the lives of these minor char-

acters. In each repetition, not only is the outcome different for Lola, but for them also.

This concern with presenting the outcomes of seemingly minor encounters reflects a central theme of the film: chance. In the three repetitions there are both similarities and differences in the way things play out. Lola always coincides with Mr Meier (Ludger Pistor), her father (Herbert Knaup)'s work colleague, as he emerges from his driveway, always arrives at her father's work while he is talking to his secret lover (Nina Petri), always runs down a particular street at the same time an ambulance almost collides with a pane of glass – and the 'bum' (Joachim Król), who has Manni's money, is always somewhere just around the corner. But small changes have a big impact, setting off different 'domino chains' of incidental moments.

Twice, Lola's run-in with Mr Meier causes him to have a crash and miss his meet-

ing with Lola's father – and Lola's arrival cuts off her father's conversation with his lover at slightly – but crucially – different moments. On the third repetition, Lola's exchange with Mr Meier means he *doesn't* crash. He makes it to the meeting and Lola arrives to find her father gone – she must seek the money elsewhere.

Even Lola's and Manni's deaths are quite random – not a result of one bad decision but of a collection of minor circumstances. In the second repetition, for instance, Lola brings the money on time – but the ambulance runs Manni over as he walks to meet her.

This is not just a story about whether Lola can find 100,000 marks in twenty minutes; it is also about the extent to which coincidence, chance and seemingly random encounters influence her fate. The film tells this story not only by setting up a dramatic situation but also by using a multiform

plot in which time repeats. It is thus the form of the story and not just the events that it presents that enables Lola to convey one of its main points.

Even the setup emphasizes chance: Manni's predicament stems in part from the chance theft of Lola's moped and his resulting run-in with 'the bum' on the train. In fact, this is the second setup of the film. Pre-credits, we see a more abstract scene. The camera tracks through a mass of people, occasionally settling on characters later revealed as our 'incidental' players, to finally reach the security guard (Armin Rohde) who says, 'The ball is round. The game lasts ninety minutes. All else is pure theory' as he tosses a soccer ball into the air.

One might also say the telephone conversation is the film's setup – introducing the central dramatic situation – and the first scene with the crowd is a *thematic* setup that introduces the central
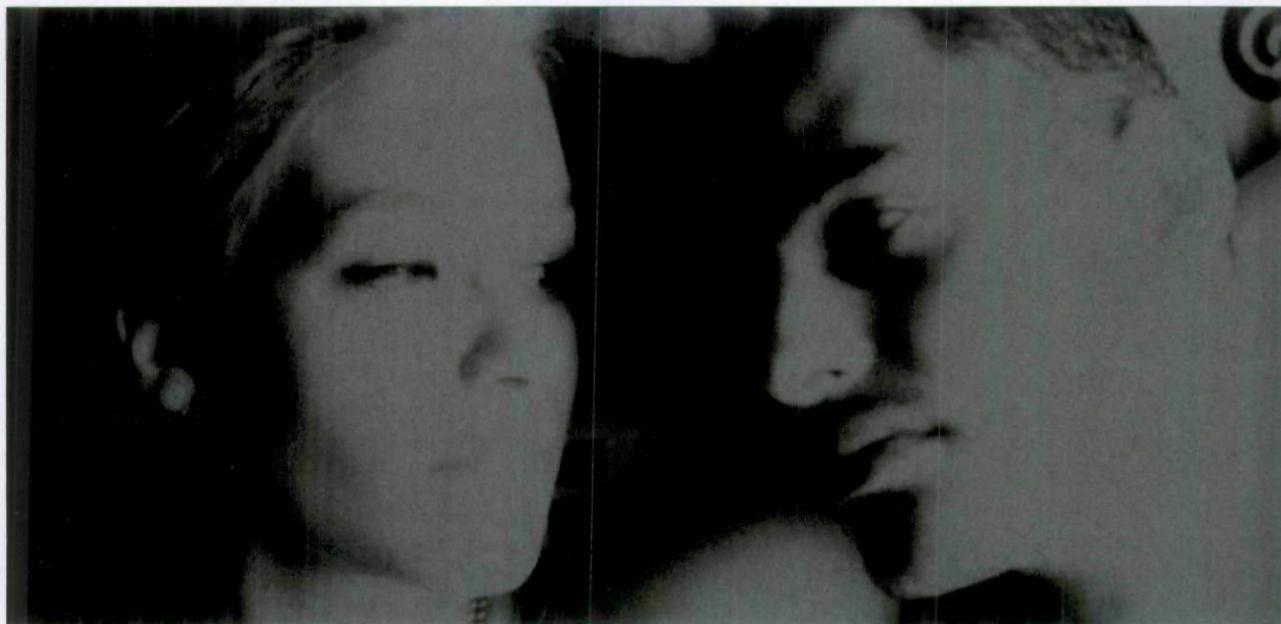
idea of chance. The soccer metaphor suggests that beyond the basics of players, field, timeframe and rules, *anything* could happen. *Lola*'s 'ball game' is established in the dramatic setup. The field – Berlin; the players – Lola, Manni and a large supporting cast; the game – to find 100,000 marks in twenty minutes. As the multiform plot goes on to show – anything can happen.

At first glance the use of a multiform narrative seems contrary to the 'traditional' story arc found in many films, often called the Three-Act Structure. Acts One, Two and Three correspond to the idea of a beginning, middle and end, or setup, development and resolution. While *Lola* has a very clear setup/beginning, it then appears to offer not a single middle and end, but three of each. Nonetheless, many features of 'classic' cinematic narrative are present. A disruption or problem (Manni is in trouble) is introduced to the world of a central charac-

ter (Lola). This triggers the resulting action, giving the central character a goal (Lola must get Manni the money in time). The 'development' revolves around Lola's progress towards this goal and the many obstacles she encounters. The story structure creates rising tension that eventually builds to a climax – and the resolution of the opening problem.

Tykwer himself believes his film is only structurally 'new' 'from the outside' – that it 'continues to work according to the structural principles, which were the mainstay of classicists'. In particular, he hopes the emotional journey in the film will be a continual, rather than repetitive, one – that the rising tension and audience engagement that 'classic' structure strives for are present in *Lola*:

Lola *is a continual journey for me, and the most important thing is that the audience feels that Lola has really experienced the different possibilities that we show in the*

film. Not only the last twenty minutes. And that the audience goes with the emotion of the film … wanting that at the end, she is rewarded for everything she has had to go through …[6]

In this light, we could say that *Lola*'s structure contains not three middles and ends – but one middle where time happens to repeat as the protagonist faces the many obstacles to her goal.

Lola's use of both a multiform plot and a 'classic' story arc suggests a central contradiction. Where the multiform plot primarily reflects the idea of coincidence and chance, the classic narrative is concerned with an active protagonist as 'causal agent' – somebody who is the primary cause and centre of events, rather than one 'incidental' element among many others of equal weight[7]. Tykwer considers this conundrum in an interview:

Everything is influenced by

the smallest situation. It's a very controversial thought. If everything is important, nothing is important. But on the other hand, I don't believe that. You have to challenge coincidence, and there is a path to take. All odds are against Lola, and at the end, it shows it's not by chance that she changes fate, it's really her passionate, possessive desire to change the system that she is stuck in. And the system is time.[8]

Run Lola Run's form places the will of the individual against the power of coincidence. Although it gives a strong showing to both, ultimately things land on Lola's side. Repetition three takes on a mystical tone. It seems Lola is not so much beating chance as cutting a deal with it, as she runs, eyes shut, silently pleading: *Come on. Help me please. Just this once. I'll just keep running ok? I'm waiting … I'm waiting … I'm waiting …*

These words – and a near collision with a truck – find

her at the casino steps, where she wins her 100,000 marks simply by wanting it enough – and through the power of her desperate, glass-shattering scream as the roulette ball rounds the table.

The Sound of Lola's Footsteps: Stylistic Form in Run Lola Run

Lola 's narrative form – and not just the events within it – communicates its story and themes. At the same time, stylistic form operates to both create and support the story.

If, as Tykwer hopes, we ultimately experience Lola as a continuum, flowing from beginning to end, rather than as three alternatives, what further elements of form enable this to happen?

As well as its multiform narrative, a defining feature of Lola is that 'fast and associative' nature that Bonnefoy mentioned – 'like the pure expression of a feeling.' This 'feeling' is a large part of what makes Lola not just an exploration of chance but a dynamic expression of the energy of its central character and the power of her need. Stylistic elements of sound and image – in particular music, motion and editing – are vital influences.

It is easy when identifying central ideas and themes in a cinematic story to restrict ourselves to intellectual and narrative-based concepts – but themes and ideas based on image, motion and sound can coexist with these at the centre of a work. It is interesting that Tykwer's starting point for Lola was a simple image:

It was a woman running ... I think the idea of making a dynamic film is a basic desire among filmmakers ... Film has to do with dynamics, with explosiveness. A running human brings everything together: explosive dynamics and emotions, because in this movement, the human is highly expressive – whether it is desperation, joy or whatever ... There is also an element of childish enthusiasm for this most simple of all cinema images: a person in motion.[9]

Motion is vital in Lola – the film's main feeling is of relentless motion and speed. Its central, recurring image is of Lola running. Bonnefoy's editing is another fundamental influence on the overall

– not to match 'reality' but to create emphasis, tension and contrast in the story. For example, when Lola runs, the film might cut from her running in Location A to her running in Location B. This is a condensation of time, with the period in which we assume she got from A to B is cut out. At times this type of condensation is used to fast-track the narrative. Yet, there are also often cuts between multiple angles of Lola running and even occasional slow motion to add emphasis to this essential image in the film.

Fast edits give us a feeling of rhythm and speed – even when time is being 'expanded'. For example, the film emphasizes Lola screaming

Perhaps most fundamental to Lola's 'rhythm' is its music, a near-constant presence. Music performs two particularly important functions.

Firstly, it creates rhythm and structure that we respond to mostly at a subconscious level. For instance, although the music does not come from inside the story world, if it is building to a climax we feel that the same must be happening in the story. Music has its own pace – if the music is fast, this adds to the feeling of time moving quickly and moving forward. Each time Lola sets out running there is high octane, fast-tempo music in full swing. In her encounters with other characters, this tends to

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sense of energy – and a vital component of the film's treatment of time.

The narrative structure is based on the same twenty minutes (in story time) repeating three times. The time each twenty-minute repetition takes on screen is in fact slightly less – between 15 and 18 minutes. Within these intervals, editing is used to condense and expand time

'The bag!' on the phone to Manni by repeating this image from different angles. Although it's a repetition, we feel as though we are moving forward in time: the fast cuts give the impression of speed, of a visual 'beat'. In contrast, more contemplative moments tend to use longer shots, creating a feeling closer to 'real time' – and of stillness.

drop back a little, but it remains in the background, maintaining a sense of urgency. The moments without music tend to feel contemplative, serious, still.

Secondly, music works at an emotional level, connecting us with the feelings of characters or situations. Desperate music over a shot of a character running gives us a clue to not only how she is

feeling but also what our re-action to this should be. The change in music in the third repetition is a good example: the 'mystical' eastern tone that appears suggests things are different, that Lola may now be able to influence chance.

Music is fundamental to the way the film bridges the moments when time 'rewinds'. There is a disjointed nature to these scenes, with a leap from Lola or Manny dying, to a scene of the pair talking in bed, and back again. Where we might stop to question this, the music emerges to pick us up and carry us on, kicking in with full force as Lola once again leaves her house.

Another stylistic technique that helps the viewer create connections between different parts of the film is Tykwer's use of different visual media. Flashbacks are in black-and-white. Flash-forwards use still-images. At the beginning of each repetition, as Lola runs downstairs, animation is used. Scenes containing Lola and Manni are shot on 35mm film, scenes without them on video, so that the visuals are richer when they are present. According to Tykwer, this is intended to create a contrast between them and the 'rest of the world', making their reality seem 'more real', more vivid and intense.[10]

These different visual media, then, help the viewer understand not only how scenes relate to each other through time but how they operate within the structure of the story – and even how we might relate to them at an emotional level. Although the differences are clear when

pointed out, or on repeat viewing, the initial effect on the audience may be largely subconscious. Nonetheless a system is created that provides cues or signposts for the audience as the film progresses.[11]

While stylistic form supports both the classic and multi-form elements in the film, ultimately it does seem to emphasize the emotional, 'classical' development of the story. It works to create a flow and shape for the *whole* film, not just each section – to transport the film, as Bonnefoy says, from intellectual to aesthetic object.

At this point it is worth noting Tykwer's concern that his use of form be understood as not simply an intellectual exercise or experiment, nor as an empty adoption of 'contemporary style'. In various interviews, he emphasizes his wish that viewing *Lola* will be a seamless, 'invisible' experience … that the audience will not consciously notice the form but instead take the journey with his lead character.[12] Rather than being applied 'on top of a story', then, Tykwer intends the stylistic elements in his film to work hand-in-hand with narrative elements – for all to have a function in communicating the story and its themes and creating an overall cinematic *experience*.

Conclusion

Lola's form, comprising of both narrative and stylistic elements, does not simply contain the story or content – to some extent it is the story. With any film it is important to remember that elements at all levels, be they sound, image or story,

work together. When analysing any film, it is valuable to think about how each element functions.

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Endnotes

1 Tom Tykwer, 'Post Production Workshop' and Mathilde Bonnefoy, 'The Power of Editing', Workshops at the Berlinale Talent Campus, Berlin, Germany, 2003. (For further information on this event see http://www.berlinale -talentcampus.de)

2 David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction,* third edition, McGraw Hill, New York, 1990, p.35.

3 ibid. pp.33-35.

4 The 'multiform' plot is perhaps most often named in relation to interactive works and video games; for instance, by Janet Murray, who defines it as 'a written or dramatic narrative that presents a single situation or plotline in multiple versions, versions that would be mutually exclusive in our ordinary experience'. [Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Free Press, New York, 1997, p. 30.] However, it is also a useful term in relation to films.

5 Tom Tykwer, 'Anything Runs', Interview, Tom-Tykwer.com, http://www. tomtykwer.com/03_ filmographie/34_lola_ rennt/index.shtml Accessed 6 December 2006.

6 ibid.

7 See Bordwell and Thompson, op. cit., pp.70-71 for further discussion of the protagonist as causal agent and 'classic' narrative.

8 Tom Tykwer, interview, in Ray Pride, 'Speed of Life', Filmmaker, Spring 1999, http://www. filmmakermagazine.com/ spring1999/speed_of_life. php Accessed 6 December 2006.

9 Tom Tykwer, 'Anything Runs', interview, loc. cit.

10 ibid.

11 Even the choice of actors, for a German audience at least, operates as a similar type of signpost. According to Tykwer: 'other people in different countries might not know but most of the supporting cast of the film are quite famous actors in Germany – the idea was … that all of them are possible lead actors so you always expect the film to say, OK, now we'll follow this character for the rest of the movie …' (Tom Tykwer, Director's Commentary, *Run Lola Run*, 1998, DVD, Sony Pictures Entertainment/Columbia Tristar Home Video Australia)

12 For instance, Tom Tykwer in Ray Pride, loc. cit.