

What's It About? Reflections on Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run*

Barrie Wilson
Professor, Religious Studies, York University, Toronto

Introduction

Turning points. Choices. Circumstances. Chance. What determines our behaviour and our destiny? That's what this film series concerns. What governs our actions? Do we? Are we in control of our lives through the decisions we make?

Run Lola Run is an excellent place to begin for it raises many of the issues we will examine in the course of this film series. *Run Lola Run* was directed by Tom Tykwer¹ who also wrote the script and composed much of the music. Released in 1998, it stars Franka Potente as Lola and Moritz Bleibtreu as Manni. Franka also had a hand in composing some of the background lyrics along with Tom Tykwer. More recently Tom Tykwer has directed *Paris, Je T'Aime* (2006) as well as *Perfume: the Story of a Murderer* (2006).

Run Lola Run presents a life-threatening situation with three alternate endings. This may delight, intrigue, annoy or just frustrate us as we try to make sense of it all. Lola receives a frantic phone call from her boyfriend, Manni. He appears to be in training as a drug-runner. Manni is hysterical and he immediately blames Lola for not showing up in time. She explains that her moped had been stolen. Frantically he reveals that because she had failed to show up at the rendezvous after he received one hundred thousand Deutschmarks for the drugs, he had had to walk with the bag full of money to the subway. Then he becomes unnerved by the presence of two guards and he leaves the subway train without the bag which a homeless person then retrieves. But in 20 minutes, he'll meet the criminals for whom he's working and he needs one hundred thousand Deutschmarks or else he'll be killed. Lola assures him that she'll think of something and be there, in front of die Spirale.

Tykwer then offers three alternate possibilities as to how Lola tries to resolve the crisis. In each scenario, she encounters the same people along the way. Because her timing varies, however, their futures, and hers, differ dramatically. It's not just what a difference a day makes but what a difference mere seconds make to everyone's life. So, what's it about?

1. It's About Timing that is, The Difference A Moment In Time Makes

Is he perhaps saying that we all have alternate futures depending upon our choices and the circumstances with which we are confronted? In this case, circumstances alter timing; timing affects choices; and choices result in different consequences. We face different turning points in our lives depending upon circumstances with which we are confronted.

Tykwer identifies several kinds of factors play a role in the eventual outcome of people's futures. Choice, decision and the will to act are only one set of influences. But there is also chance (as betting on the number 20 in the casino); unexpected obstacles or malevolent evil (such as the person on the stairs with the dog who trips Lola); disappointments that evoke a strong reaction (as in the second scenario when her father refuses to aid Lola provoking her to take the security officer's gun to force her father to provide the cash); and unexpected kindness (when the casino teller gives her 100 Deutschmarks when she is a bit short). So perhaps factors other than human free will are at play.

Our choices, circumstances and the timing of our actions also affect others. As the extremely rapid flash-forwards indicate, our actions are connected with those of others whom we encounter in life. On this view, every action on our part, however minute, impinges on other people and they, on ours.

Lola's actions -- whether in the first scenario or a few seconds later as in the second version, or a few seconds earlier as in the third scenario -- make a different impact on others around her. There are remarkably different futures for each of the persons she encounters. We see this with respect to the woman pushing the baby in the carriage, for the boy on the bike, the tramp and the woman in the hallway in the bank. These flash forwards are handled in a fleeting manner. In the first scenario, the woman on the street pushing a carriage will have her baby taken away from her and she'll end up stealing another person's child; in the third scenario, she develops a strong religious faith eventually becoming a Jehovah's Witness. Indeed, Lola's actions, timed slightly differently have radically different outcomes for Lola herself, for Manni and for her father. In one scenario, Lola is killed. In another, Manni dies. In two scenarios, her father is killed. So the film shows that some events, even insignificant ones, can have a profound impact upon people's lives.

That's one plausible way of interpreting the film -- that it's about timing -- that our future and those of others we encounter in life are the result of a complex mix of personal choices, circumstances, chance and timing. Life, then, is essentially unpredictable and we are affected as much by others' actions as our own.

But there are other ways of understanding the film.

2. It's About Wish Fulfillment

A Freudian Approach

Perhaps the film is a dream sequence. The clue to this line of interpretation is twofold. The first has to do with the intimate scenes between the first and second scenarios. These are the segments filmed with a red hue where Lola and Manni are sharing confidences, about the nature of love and about death. Lola asks Manni if he loves her. He says, yes, but she wants to know how he can be sure. Successively, he says that he just does, that he thinks he loves her, and that his feelings say to him that

she's the best girl. She asks, who are your feelings? My heart, says Manni. And do you say to your heart, thanks for the information, she asks? And do you always act on your heart? In a later scene, Manni asks, what she would do if he died and she responds that she wouldn't let him die. He persists and wonders what she'd do after he has died.

These are fundamental questions about love and death and how we can trust what another person says, how we can be sure that they know what they really feel. These expressions of closeness yet uncertainty generate anxiety and through dream Lola may be trying to resolve this anxiety, especially assuring Manni's safety as well as her own well-being.

The second clue that this may be a dream has to do with the music. The lyrics express wishing--

*I wish I was a hunter
In search of different food
I wish I was a person
With unlimited breath
I wish I was a stranger
Who understands the sky
I wish I was a starship
When Saturn's flying by
I wish I was a princess
With armies at her hand
I wish I was a ruler
Who'd make them understand.*

These images all have to do with exercising power over situations. They disclose Lola's desire for mastery over some troubling problem.

As Lola and Manni roll over and fall asleep, Lola perhaps is dreaming -- how she loves Manni, how she hopes he loves her and what she'd do to prevent his death. These "what-if" dream sequences are her musing in her dream state. They represent possibilities, alternate ways of coping with a dreadful, anxiety-generating situation: what if Manni needed money within 20 minutes or else he dies. What if Manni's life were

threatened in this way? What could she do to prevent that from happening? Two scenarios don't work out, ending either in her death or Manni's. The turning points aren't right. Only the third one is successful as she finally figures out in her mind what needs to be done as circumstances present themselves. And so her anxiety is resolved. On this line of interpretation, the segueways are real; the three running scenarios are the dream sequences.

In his *Interpretation of Dreams* published in 1900,² Freud interpreted dreams as wish and wish fulfillment, that is, as attempts by the unconscious to resolve conflict. Indeed, he also describes dreams in this work as the “*royal road to the unconscious.*” Only in scenario three is Lola's wish fulfilled. She wishes she and Manni can be together, free of entanglements, and that she can prove her love for him by protecting him from death. True, her father is killed but there is no disclosure of his affair and non-paternity.

On this understanding, the three scenarios represent Lola's dream-work as her unconsciousness strives to create a scenario which results in happiness. Maybe Lola's unconscious also dimly recognizes the dysfunctionality of her parents – her father's obvious distance and her mother's alcoholic haze – although not recognizing their affairs. The dream sequences – the running – show us the psychological struggles with which Lola is engaged – her distancing herself from her parents preoccupied with their own problems and her bonding to Manni. Running is itself often an indicator of an underlying anxiety – running away from an unconscious threat, or, in this case, running towards trying to resolve an unconscious threat.

So, on this second line of interpretation, the action is a dream. *Run Lola Run* brings to consciousness Lola's struggle to resolve her anxieties, her ambivalence over her parents and her love for Manni and her desire to prevent his death. She does so successfully by working through in her dreams her wish to create a scenario in which happiness will be achieved.

3. It's About Life as a Game that is Repeated Over and Over Again A Game Theory Approach

Another way of looking at the film is that life is like a game we play over and over again. Some years ago, the Canadian-born psychiatrist Eric Berne introduced us to the notion of 'games,' 'scripts,' and 'transactional analysis' as a framework for understanding interpersonal relationships. In *Games People Play*³ and other books, he developed over one hundred ways in which we interact with other people, depending on which part of the ego we are activating -- whether the Parent, the Child or the Adult. He assigned these games memorable names -- "*See What You Made Me Do,*" "*Yes But,*" "*I'm Only Trying to Help You,*" and "*If It Weren't For You, I'd...*" Berne suggested that some of us unconsciously adopt a pattern of behaviour and repeat it in our dealings with other people, living it again and again a pattern of action that meets our psychological needs.

The clue to this line of interpretation is that there are parallels between this film and games or scripts. There are game references throughout. One of the initial enigmatic comments is the saying in the preface, "*after the game is before the game,*" and the film commences with a soccer ball kicked high into the sky. Games, moreover, can be played again and again. We may have been beaten in one game of tennis and so we challenge our opponent to another match. Lola starts the game over again when the previous one results in an outcome she wants to change.

Lola learns things from one scenario to another, just as we do as we play a favourite game over and over again. In one scenario, for instance, she does not know how to shoot a gun. Later on, she does. In the second scenario she is tripped by the boy and dog on the stairs; in the third version she has learned to avoid them and all the

other people in her path which helps her navigate successfully. This makes all the difference.

There is movement within the scenarios. In the first one, she is the child, seeking a savior-like solution from her father and she accepts, childlike, her callous dismissal. In the second scenario she is still the child, still seeking a savior, but this time his dismissive behaviour provokes her into action, taking the gun from the security officer and forcing him to provide the cash. In the third scenario, however, she is the adult. She knows what to do, avoiding the obstacles and seeking alternatives when she discovers that her father had just left for a luncheon appointment.

In the adult phase of maturation, Lola takes control, effects a successful outcome that results in the death of her father without her ever knowing he was having an affair or that he was not her biological father. She impresses Manni. Even the thief who stole her moped ends up dead. In this third scenario, she has finally discovered the adult within.

So maybe the film is about the games we play in our daily lives, as we refine and perfect our individual scripts, over and over again. We learn mechanisms for coping with circumstances and confidence for dealing with crises. We exert ourselves as we gain skill in mastering our approach to life, our game.

So far, we have three lines of interpretation – that it's about timing, wish fulfillment or our lives as a repetitive game.

4. It's About Ignorance of Life's Fundamental Questions A Gnostic Approach

Perhaps the film presents a commentary on our ignorance who we really are and where we are headed. The clue to this reading is that the film not only has three

endings but also *two* beginnings. *Run Lola Run* does not actually begin with the situation Lola faces. There is an elaborate “preface” or “preamble” before we hear of Manni’s frantic call.

In the first beginning, we are introduced to a quotation from T.S. Eliot – “*We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.*”⁴ This suggests that we will learn something as we see the film and then be able to come back to the starting point with greater insight. We then hear the sound of a clock ticking loudly and rapidly. We see a rather gruesome pendulum and hear it swishing back and forth. The jaws of the creature above the clock open up and we are swept quickly into its mouth, sucked into the black hole of time. We emerge into an indistinct vista, a helter-skelter scene of people moving frantically about, in different directions. The camera pauses in front of several of them whom we later on meet in the film. A voice-over comes on who says “*Man...probably the most mysterious species on our planet. A mystery of unanswered questions: Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? How do we know what we think we know?*”

These four fundamental questions -- *Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? How do we know what we think we know?*” -- parallel a Gnostic Christian text discovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1948. The document is called *The Book of Thomas or the Secret Sayings of the Savior*.⁵ In this important work of Gnostic Christianity, the disciple Thomas is depicted as coming to the Savior. The Savior tells him, “*Since it is said that you are my twin and my true friend, examine yourself and understand who you are, how you live and what will become of you.*” Then the Savior goes on to challenge Thomas to examine the basis for real knowledge.

These four fundamental questions of human existence presuppose that we are ignorant of ourselves and blind to our true situation. For the Gnostics, this was the starting point of true knowledge, insight or gnosis. For them, understanding our selves

and realizing initially that we do not know what is true about our lives is the place to begin. We all live, the Gnostics contended, like Oedipus did, ignorant of our true identity, our origins and our destiny. What we think we know about our selves and our world is incorrect, for the truth lies hidden, concealed. We do not even know how we know what we think we know. More radically, for the Gnostics, many of us do not know that we do not know. They are timeless questions that the Gnostic Christians and the film raise.

Perhaps *Run Lola Run* is a commentary on these fundamental questions, that what we think we know represents false belief and that the attainment of true knowledge is attained only with struggle and a huge personal price.

Lola, for instance, does not know her origins. She does not know that she was not her father's biological child. She does not know her mother who is an alcoholic and is considering an affair. She does not know her father, his on-going affair or his desire to leave the family. She ignorantly thinks she can perhaps rely on her father to assist.

Her father doesn't know his daughter, doesn't know who she has been dating for over a year, doesn't know Manni. Moreover, he doesn't care a bit about her plight. He is focused on his own more pressing concerns and plans. Her mother does not know her plight or the reality of her marriage.

Manni doesn't know what to do and in his phone conversation simply lashes out at Lola, making his problem hers.

Interspersed throughout the film are segments about how we know what we think we know. Lola, for instance, asks Manni if he loves her. He answers her question awkwardly saying that his feelings love her, his heart tells him he loves her – as if he were the willing subject of some other power. Lola is clearly not impressed. Jutta Hansen, too, ponders her relationship with Lola's father. Will it ever change, she wonders. She asks, what am I doing here? How long will this go on? Should I grow old

waiting for a man who won't stand by me? And, finally, she asks, do you love me? When he says, "yes," she presses him to act. If you do love me, she says, then decide, act. You have to act sometime.

So perhaps the film is raising issues such as those advanced by the Gnostics -- that we do not know the truth about ourselves, who we are or what will become of us. So the true turning point starts with realization, the painful truth that what we think we know we do not. The film, however, isn't just negative, that is, it just doesn't indict our state of ignorance. Rather it shows Lola proceeding along the path of gnosis or understanding,⁶ as Lola confronts her situation -- and her self -- and works through the difficult paths of achieving insight into her situation.

Conclusion

We've examined four possible lines of interpretation -- that it's about timing (that is, the difference a moment in time makes to life's outcomes); it's about wish fulfillment (a Freudian approach); that it's about life as a game that is repeated over and over again (a Game Theory approach); and that it's about ignorance of life's fundamental questions, that we do not really know who we are or where we are going (a Gnostic approach).

One final comment and it again goes back to the first beginning. There a figure we later see as the security guard at the Deutsche Transfer Bank. He says, "*The ball is round. The game lasts 90 minutes. That's a fact. Everything else is pure theory.*" It's time now to hear your theory -- what do you make of this enigmatic film? -- which has three endings, two beginnings and now at least four interpretive approaches.

Endnotes

¹ See Tom Tykwer's home page at <http://www.tomtykwer.com/> for background information, films and current projects.

² *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1900. Originally published as *Die Traumdeutung*, 1899.

³ *Games People Play: the Psychology of Human Relations*, 1964.

⁴ T.S.Eliot, *Little Gidding*, V. In this poem, Eliot also writes (in the same section):
*"What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from."*

⁵ A translation of the *Book of Thomas* or the *Secret Sayings of the Savior* can be found in Marvin W. Meyer, *The Secret Teachings of Jesus: Four Gnostic Gospels*, 1984.

⁶ Like the Gnostics, the German philosopher-psychologist Wilhelm Dilthey in the late 1890's suggested *Verstehen* (understanding) as the methodology in all the humanities, including psychology.

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