

# Run Lola Run

'Run Lola Run' is the third film from Tom Tykwer, and unlike many German films in recent years, it managed to find both critical and commercial success around the world. It's bold visual style and thumping pop soundtrack, combined with an innovative narrative make it a fresh, exciting text with a number of areas of great interest.



© Sony Classics

Set in Berlin, the film concentrates its attention on Lola (Franka Potente), as she tries desperately to find the 100,000 marks needed to save her boyfriend's life. The film opens with Manni (Moritz Bleibtreu) calling Lola to tell her of his terrible predicament. In flashback we see the events immediately leading up to the phone call. Manni, the courier for a black market car dealer, was supposed to have collected 100,000 marks and then taken it to his boss, Ronnie, who is clearly not a man to

let down. However, Lola was late picking Manni up and so he took the train. The crucial moment is when Manni inadvertently leaves the bag of money on the train, which gets taken by an old tramp. Knowing that without the money he is a dead man, Manni calls Lola pleading for her help. He explains that there is just twenty minutes before he is due to meet Ronnie. Lola promises that she can get the money and will meet Manni at twelve noon. And so the race begins, with Lola doing all she can to find the 100,000 marks that will save her boyfriend's life, her life and their love.

*'Cinema that interests me is cinema about openings, unresolved questions and experiments; cinema that explores the possibilities offered by narrative and by associations, without refusing chaos, chance, destiny or the unexpected.'* Tom Tykwer

## THE OPENING SEQUENCE

It is always useful to examine the opening sequence of a film for it tends to carry a great deal of information. Often it will reveal to the audience details of the lead characters, such as their class, where they are from, what they do and where the film takes place, as well as giving the audience an idea of what the film will be about. 'Run Lola Run' has an unusual opening sequence, as it does not include any of the main protagonists, it gives no clue as to the plot of the film, or where it is set. It contains a voice over from someone we do not hear from again, and begins with two quotes, one from the poet T.S. Elliot and another from a German football coach, Sepp Herberger.



© Bernd Spauke

## FILM ACTIVITIES

### › TASK A

Try to think about what these quotes mean in relation to the film and the way it is constructed. Do they give any clues as to how the film will turn out? How does our impression of the film alter from seeing these quotes?

Although the opening sequence does not give any details as to the narrative of 'Run Lola Run', it does refer to the themes of the film.

### › TASK B

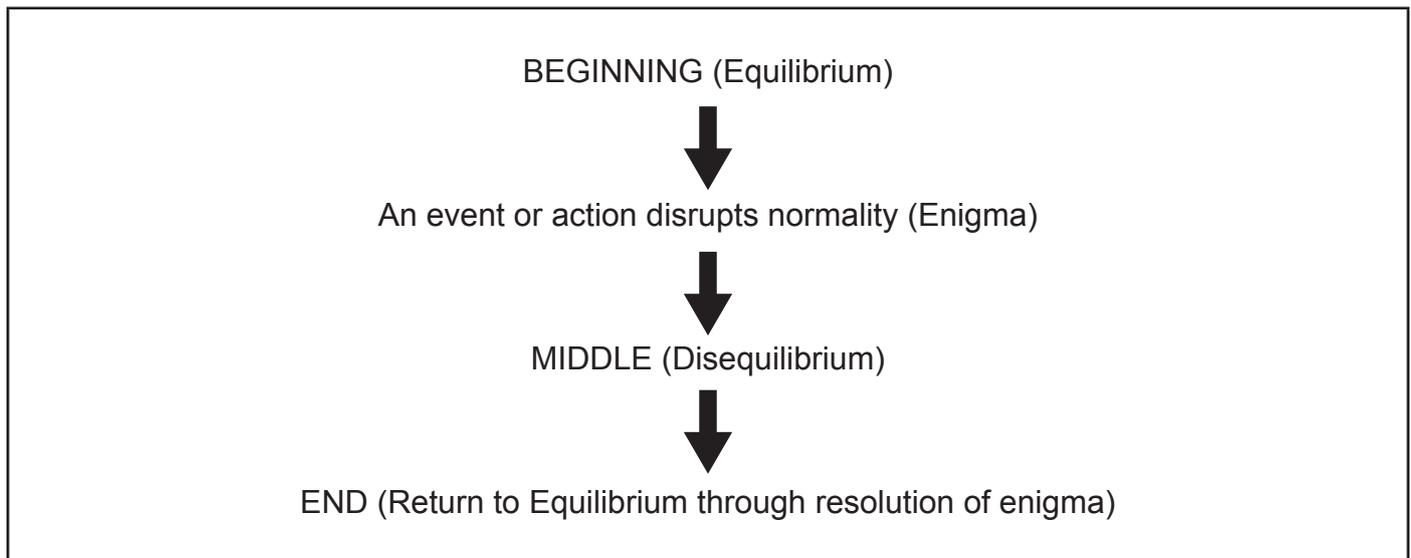
How does the opening sequence of 'Run Lola Run' relate to the rest of the film? What information is communicated in the opening sequence? Compare it to the opening sequence of a Hollywood film that you are familiar with. In what ways are they different?

Opening sequences give the audience an initial impression of characters and plot, thereby generating audience expectations. What were your expectations after viewing the opening sequence? Did the film meet these expectations?

## NARRATIVE STRUCTURE ENIGMAS, EQUILIBRIUM & DISEQUILIBRIUM

When looking at 'Run Lola Run' it is important to examine how the narrative is constructed and how it differs from mainstream texts. The traditional narrative model, and the model that is most common in mainstream Hollywood texts demands narrative closure. Films conventionally have a beginning, a middle and an end, and therefore the audience can easily follow the events of the film, and develop expectations of what will happen later on. The beginning will present the time, the setting and the key characters of the story, and portray their lives in a 'normal' situation. We will see how they live, what they do, their social standing, whether they're married, and will identify their key characteristics. This initial 'normality', or equilibrium, is then broken by some kind of event or action, known as an enigma. This takes the narrative into the 'middle' section, and the narrative drive is then to return to a state of normality. Traditionally, by the end of a film, normality must have been restored, and the reason for the disruption alleviated. This narrative closure can only occur when all the strands have been tied up, and all enigmas resolved. In 'Run Lola Run' the enigma is that Lola needs to get 100, 000 marks in twenty minutes, and so for narrative closure to take place we must discover whether or not she is successful.

Below is an outline of the Standard narrative model:



## FILM ACTIVITIES

### > TASK C

Make a list of all the enigmas that are posed in the course of 'Run Lola Run'. Are they all resolved by the film's conclusion?

### > TASK D

Think of a film you like and are familiar with. Make a flow chart breaking down the narrative into beginning, middle and end segments outlining the events of the story.

The majority of mainstream texts follow this pattern, and so narrative pleasure is taken in anticipating how the enigma will be resolved. Enjoyment lies in predicting what will happen next, what will happen in the end. There is pleasure too in following the route the story takes to reach its end.

The film starts by not really conveying any sense of normality or equilibrium. We are immediately thrust into the turbulence of the principle enigma, that of Manni losing the money and Lola having to help him get it back. It is interesting that we learn information at the same time as Lola, putting us in her position and therefore allowing us to empathise and identify with her. As Manni and Lola talk we discover what the situation is and how Manni came to lose the money. All of this is communicated through Manni's voice over and flashback sequences. As we learn more of what happened to Manni, we also learn a great deal about Lola, Manni, and their relationship. We find out that Manni is on the wrong side of the law, that they do not have a great deal of money, that Lola is a strong willed character whom Manni depends upon. She is set up as the vital character, and the one whose actions will resolve the enigma.

At this stage the narrative structure is very simple, and it continues as we would expect; Lola gets off the phone to Manni and sets about trying to find 100, 000 marks. We follow her through her journey and to the supermarket, where she meets Manni. Although she has not been able to get the money from her father, our expectations are for her and Manni to succeed, and so it is the case when they hold up the supermarket. However, our expectations are broken when Lola, the lead protagonist, gets shot by the police officer. This action does not correspond with the conventions of the traditional narrative, which would have the hero being successful. Although it does fulfil the conventions of narrative closure, because we find out what happens, it fails to attain a return to normality and equilibrium. Because of this the narrative pattern is not complete in the conventional way, and had that been the end of the film we would have been left with a new normality and a new equilibrium. In fact, the narrative begins again with Lola running out of her door for the second time with the same goal as before. This begins the process again, with our expectations perhaps even greater for Lola to succeed.

By retelling the same story three times, Tykwer is able to present three contrasting endings, and drastically defy our expectations. He also breaks the narrative conventions by altering the normality we are left with at each ending. However, the final ending does actually comply with our initial expectations of their success, and so closure and a return to normality does take place.

## ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES

With all narratives, be they in film, television, radio or print, there are alternative narratives. There is no one single way to tell a story, and there are endless possible outcomes. What Tykwer does with 'Run Lola Run' is offer three alternative narratives, each comprising the same story, but told in contrasting ways. He shows that it is possible to retell a story numerous times, and make each rendering compelling by just making subtle changes.



© Sony Classics

Each section of the film alters quite considerably from one another, as Lola gets closer and closer to attaining her goal. If we examine the first section and then compare it to the last we can see a number of details that reveal how Lola's character changes, and as a consequence so does the eventual outcome. Lola's determination to succeed, as well as her confidence in her own ability seem to be far greater in the final part of the film. This is shown in the way she evades the dog on the stairs and then growls back at him, whereas in the first part of the film she has to take evasive action and seems to be wary of the dog. Another important difference is the way she manages to miss the woman as she runs around the corner. In the first section she runs into the woman, whose future we then see as being tragic, with her children being taken away from her. Just as Lola's destiny alters in the third part, so does the woman's, whose future becomes one of salvation and living for God.

## FILM ACTIVITIES

› TASK E

Go back to the flow chart that you made about a film you like and see if you could retell the story by changing certain details. How does the narrative change?

› TASK F

In each part of the film the character's actions and destinies change a great deal. Below is a table listing the characters, and cataloguing how their actions alter in the three parts. Some of the details are missing; to focus on each of the characters in order to fill in the gaps.

	Part One	Part Two	Part Three
<b>Old Woman</b>	Becomes poor, has her child taken away and steals a baby.		Has a great religious faith and becomes devoted to the church.
<b>Nuns</b>		Lola runs between the nuns, some of which are wearing dark glasses	
<b>Man on Bike</b>	Lola ignores him. He gets beaten up, finds a woman he loves and gets married		
<b>Meyer</b>		Lola jumps onto and over his car, causing him to hit the middle of the tough guy's car.	
<b>The Tramp</b>			Lola does not see the tramp, but Manni does and gives chase on pursuit of the money
<b>Lola's Father and mistress</b>	Lola's father's mistress reveals that she is pregnant. Lola interrupts them and gets told her father is leaving.		
<b>Ambulance</b>		They decline Lola a lift and then crash through the glass that is being carried. Lola runs on past.	Lola gets a lift in the ambulance, where she helps save the life of a heart attack victim.
<b>Lola</b>		Lola robs the bank to get the money. She escapes successfully and meets Manni with the money.	
<b>Manni</b>	Manni robs the supermarket as Lola is late. They run from the police, and Lola gets shot.		

When you have completed this grid move some of the parts around, so what happens to the woman in part one gets swapped with part three. By moving these aspects around can you still create a cohesive narrative? Experiment with different sequences. Remember, there are endless narrative possibilities.

## HOW TIME IS CONTROLLED

Within 'Run Lola Run', time is manipulated a great deal, and this goes a long way toward generating the film's tension. The premise of the film is based upon the small amount of time that Lola has to find 100,000 marks. The fact that she only has twenty minutes immediately generates drama and excitement, a feeling enhanced with images of clocks slowly ticking round to twelve noon, continually reminding the audience of her race against time.

'Run Lola Run' is a rare film in as much as it is told virtually in real time. This means the twenty minutes of Lola's life are shown in virtually twenty minutes of screen time. Some films may last only 90 minutes, but in that time we will see the events of a character spanning an entire lifetime. This too increases the tension, as we feel as though we are with Lola constantly on her journey.

## FLASHBACKS

The early stages of the film rely heavily on the flashback sequences that reveal how Lola came to be late meeting Manni, and how Manni came to lose the bag of money. Combined with the dialogue of the two characters the scenes communicate a great deal of information, and carry more weight than if we had just heard the dialogue. The flashback sequence in which Manni leaves the bag on the train is extremely effective in communicating the feeling of disbelief, concern and powerlessness that both characters are feeling at that time.

The reason these flashback sequences are so necessary is that without them the audience would not be able to learn enough about the characters to really care for them. It is interesting that these are the only flashbacks used in the entire film.

## FILM ACTIVITIES

### > TASK G

What information is communicated through the flashback sequences? What do we learn about Manni and Lola?

## FLASH-FORWARDS

Among the most interesting aspects of 'Run Lola Run' are the flash-forwards, which are not at all common in mainstream texts. Whereas the flashbacks are used to communicate details of narrative importance, the flash-forwards do not add anything to the narrative at all. They do not deal with any of the principle characters, and so it could be argued that they serve no function to the film. However, although the flash-forwards do not actually move the narrative on at all, they do reinforce the predominant themes of the film. They represent the unpredictability of life, and how we are not necessarily in control of our lives. Just as Lola's destiny alters in each of the three stories, so to do those of the people she passes in the street. They, like Lola, are unaware of their destinies and seem powerless to prevent the inevitable.

The characters involved in the flash-forwards are also clearly seen during the opening sequence. From seeing them in the opening we would expect them to feature more heavily in the remainder of the film.

It is important not to underestimate the value of the flash-forwards in 'Run Lola Run', for although they each only last for a brief moment and do not deal with either Lola or Manni, we are somehow made to care for the characters they portray. We have no knowledge of their backgrounds yet the quick sequence of still images presents to us their lives, and generates an emotional response from the audience, be it laughter or sadness.

## FILM ACTIVITIES

### > TASK H

Think about the flash-forwards used in the film. How do they relate to the rest of the film? What feelings did they provoke in you?

## LOLA'S CHARACTER

Lola is the key character in the film as it is her actions alone that dictate the events of the story. On her shoulders rests the fortune of Manni, her boyfriend. This is one way in which 'Run Lola Run' differs from the traditional mainstream text, which would normally have the male protagonist as the lead, whose actions are designed to save or protect the female character. This is certainly not the case here, as Lola is the dominant character, acting independently, with her boyfriend being completely reliant upon her. She is, without question, the hero of the film, and almost adopts the position of superhero. Her flash of red hair is unmistakable, and indicates that she is a woman of purpose and independence, who will not be dictated to. Her clothes echo past images of masculine heroes, particularly Bruce Willis's character in the Die Hard franchise, while her speed, agility and poise with a weapon are reminiscent of Neo (Keanu Reeves) from 'The Matrix', another post-modern hero. Lola is represented as being superhuman, but she does not always succeed in her task and is far from being an idyllic character. Rather, she is a hero of her time; streetwise, independent, strong, coming from a dysfunctional family in which her father is prepared to desert Lola and her mother, while her mother is apparently a drunk. It would appear that the only person she has to rely upon is herself.

Lola is on the edge of a society that does not have much regard for her. This is particularly apparent when she enters the casino and is dismissed as not being at all appropriate for that setting. She represents the young of Germany, as they bid to forge their own path, separate to that of the older generations. Lola's power to influence her surroundings is clearly represented in the film, and it is this that gives her the ability to alter the world and therefore change the society in which she lives. On numerous occasions Lola is able to smash glass by screaming, an action that shows her control and desire to change her environment. The scene in the casino also represents Lola's power to control her destiny. She seems able to will the ball into the number twenty as she

plays roulette, the ultimate game of chance and gamble. Although she is comfortable in her inner city dwelling, the fact that she can destroy represents a dismantling of traditions and values. Also, the way the story gets retold in a bid to eventually come to the desired conclusion, develops the notion of wanting to start again and rectify mistakes.

## FILM ACTIVITIES

> **TASK I**

Think about common female stereotypes that can be found in mainstream cinema. How is Lola’s character similar/different to these stereotypes? Compare Lola’s character with that of another popular female role that you are familiar with. In this example we use Kate Winslet’s portrayal of Rose in Titanic. Look at the various character traits and see how they differ from one another.

In comparing the two characters think about what they represent, the image they create about women, and which character has the greater dimensions.

	Lola	Rose
Sensitive		
Tough		
Intellectual		
A Fighter		
Romantic		
A Rebel		
A Loner		
Secretive		
Friendly		
A Thinker		
Moralistic		

## VISUAL STYLE

As was stated when analysing the narrative structure, 'Run Lola Run' is not a piece of cinema that follows the conventions of mainstream Hollywood. When looking at the visual style of the film this becomes even more apparent.

The traditional Hollywood text uses continuity editing to disguise the cuts in a scene. Conventions such as the 180 degree rule maintain a narrative space, and present a plausible setting for the action. The intention of continuity editing is to make all the cuts invisible, and therefore prevent the audience from having their attention taken away from the narrative. The filmmaker's prime concern is for the audience to follow and understand the narrative, and so the style becomes secondary to the content. When viewing 'Run Lola Run' it is impossible to ignore the visual style because it does not always adhere to the conventions of continuity editing.

## JUMP CUTS

One of the rules of continuity editing is the 30 degree rule which states that if you are going to cut to a shot of the same object or person as was in the previous shot, the angle must move at least thirty degrees. If the angle does not change by thirty degrees it is called a jump cut. Very rarely in mainstream cinema will a jump cut appear, for it makes the audience aware of the transition. However, in 'Run Lola Run' a number of jump cuts are used, particularly when showing Lola. An example of this can be seen when Lola is trying to think of whom to go to for the 100, 000 marks, and there are two or three shots of Lola shown in sequence where the camera has not changed its angle.

## FILM ACTIVITIES

### > TASK J

How do the jump cuts affect our impression of Lola? Do they make the audience feel closer to her?

## RECURRING MOTIFS

The iconography and motifs in a film are used to communicate information to the audience about characters and emotion without having to use dialogue. They act as a short hand for the filmmaker, and because audiences are experienced viewers of film and television, they can make sense of images very easily. Iconography is particularly important in genres such as westerns and science fiction, for they have common images that mean audiences can identify what sort of film they are watching. If you were to turn on your television and see a shot of a saloon with horses tied up outside you would immediately recognise the film as being a western.

## FILM ACTIVITIES

### > TASK K

What genres do you recognise in 'Run Lola Run'?

Motifs are images that appear throughout a film and carry with them meaning to do with the narrative. Among the motifs apparent in 'Run Lola Run' is the colour red, which is used frequently. Lola herself has red hair, which signifies that she is a powerful, charismatic character, who stands out from everybody else. The colour red has a number of meanings attached to it, such as danger, warning and love, and so it is clear that the filmmaker has chosen to use that particular colour for a reason.

Like the colour red, the number twenty constantly reappears throughout the film. Firstly, it is the amount of time that Lola has to save Manni, a fact which we are constantly reminded of by all the shots of clocks and watches. Tykwer never lets us forget that it is a race against time, and clocks themselves represent another recurring motif. The number twenty is also key in Lola being successful in the final stage, as it is the number she bets on in the game of roulette.

Glass constantly appears in 'Run Lola Run', and perhaps represents the fragility of life. Repeatedly we see Lola smash glass with her screaming, highlighting her panic and power, while the glass being carried across the street represents caution. Both the ambulance and Lola are in a race against time, but have to slow down or else crash into the glass.

## FILM ACTIVITIES

### > TASK K

On what other occasions does the colour red appear? What do you think the colour connotes? Can you find any other motifs that reappear throughout the film? What meanings would you attach to these motifs?

## USE OF VIDEO

The majority of the film is shot on 35mm, but the scenes that do not include either Lola or Manni are shot on video. This gives the scenes a very different look, and again takes the audiences attention away from the narrative and onto the visual style. When the film cuts from Lola running out of her building to her father's office it comes as great surprise to the audience. The rhythm of the film changes, the soundtrack stops very suddenly, and the appearance of the film alters due to the scene being shot on video. All of a sudden we are made to take notice of what is happening because it is the first time we have seen Lola's father and his mistress. Director Tom Tykwer said that he used video in the scenes that did not include Lola and Manni because he wanted them to seem less real than the rest of the film, almost as if they aren't a reality.

## 'RUN LOLA RUN' AS A NATURALISTIC TEXT

Through this section we have looked at how 'Run Lola Run' is different to the classical Hollywood films we are all familiar with. Most Hollywood films try to be naturalistic. They want the audience to believe wholeheartedly in the narrative, the characters, and the setting. By trying to replicate the real world and construct a false reality, Hollywood films convince the audience that what they are watching is plausible and 'realistic'. 'Run Lola Run' is highly stylised and uses a number of techniques not common in Hollywood films, such as animation, video, jump cuts, flash-forwards and the fact that the film retells the same story three times.

## FILM ACTIVITIES

### > TASK L

In what ways is 'Run Lola Run' naturalistic? Why do you think it breaks away from naturalistic conventions? Does the film's content compliment its style?

## TOM TYKWER

Born in 1965, Tom Tykwer started making films at the age of 11, using Super 8. His interest in films grew, and as he began making some of his own short films he worked on numerous productions as production assistant, assistant director and script reader. It was not until 1993 that he made his first feature film, 'Die totliche Maria' (Deadly Maria), which was named Best Film by the German Film Critics Association. Four years later Tykwer made his follow up film, 'Winterschlafer' (Wintersleepers). This too received a great deal of critical success, partly for the way it transgresses a number of genres, including film noir, melodrama, and action film. His greatest success came in 1998 with 'Run Lola Run', which was nominated for an Academy Award in the Foreign Language category. Tykwer has said that he wants to make films that "attempt to define the contradictions of existence and which experiment on both thematic and formal fronts".