



Sometimes you need the help of the Universe: 'Run Lola Run'



HERE IS NO GETTING AWAY from the fact that humans are a meaning-making species. While some insist that German writer-director Tom Tykwer intended the three outcomes of Lola's search for money to be random events illustrating the meaninglessness of life, others claim the film explores the primacy of destiny. I have a different understanding again of *Run Lola Run* (1998), reading it as an urban version of a folk-tale model, the Rule of Three story. Consequently, I see the film as an illustration of the idea that the universe offers us

the possibility of happiness, but we have to be together enough to trust the offer when, and if, we see it.

Tykwer's gambit of telling the same story three times with minor variations is analogous to *The Three Little Pigs* and *The Three Billy-Goats Gruff*. The boss (Heino Ferch), to whom Lola's (Franka Potente) boyfriend Manni (Moritz Bleibtreu) must give the DM100,000 he has lost by midday, plays the same structural role in this tale as the Wolf or the Troll. The boss, the beast or the

monster are handy narrative devices to create suspense. It is simple but it works. Tension increases with each sally at the task: building a house, crossing the bridge – and in the film, getting the money. Countless children have listened to the folk stories, relishing the repetition, thrilled by the Wolf's huffing and puffing and the Troll's rumbling and grumbling, all the while absolutely sure that the final outcome will be a triumph for the weaker, innocent side. Children know from the opening words of these stories, 'There once were three lit-

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the pigs/billy-goats gruff' that the universe is on the side of THREE.

The Rule of Three

THE three pigs or goats in the folk tales represent the three basic elements of human activity: willing, thinking and feeling. The development of willing, feeling and thinking characterize particular phases in early human development. Will, which is experienced first through limb

and finally, there is thinking – the capacity to move away from the physical and emotional self to notice the outer world.

Noticing requires adjusting discrepancies between this outer world and the inner world and often manifests in idealism or iconoclasm and theorizing. The three elements are not separate, but each one defines a major characteristic of the phases of childhood, adolescence and early adulthood.

down the chimney, suggesting that the three aspects have to be under the same roof and working together before the danger can be confronted and conquered. *The Three Billy-Goats Gruff* suggests that the none of the three elements can be pushed or truncated, that they unfold each in their own time and reach the right balance in the third billy-goat. He has the capacity to overcome obstacles and find fulfillment in a new paddock. In both of these tales, neither the Wolf nor the Troll is de-

finement. The first brother is usually physically daring, the second clever, and the third, who is deemed a simpleton because of his sympathetic nature, wins the Princess's hand. Usually these stories end with each of the brothers being awarded one of the princess's numerous siblings and they all live together in the castle. The dominance of the third brother, who one day will be king, suggests that both willing and thinking must be guided by feeling to maintain the castle in a happy-ever-after condition. The castle, in these stories, is a metaphor for the whole human being.

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activity – grasping, reaching, stretching, rolling and crawling – becomes walking, running, jumping, skipping and mastery of the body. Feeling develops most strongly in romantic yearning and first love;

The third sequence in *The Three Little Pigs* brings them altogether under the same roof, mutually contributing to the defeat of the Wolf. Together they build the fire to prevent the wolf from coming

stroyed but is instead driven away, back to the forest or the cave under the bridge.

Quest stories featuring three brothers, for instance, *The Golden Bird*, are a further re-

The major difference between these folk tales and *Run Lola Run* is the existence of only one Lola. However, this is not necessarily an objection to using the same interpretative framework, as Lola is a willing, feeling and thinking entity. The Lola we are presented with in the opening sequence, with her compact and sturdy form, her grip on the phone, her single-minded focus, her



flaming aura of hair and her scream that shatters glass, is an embodiment of will. She brings to mind the steely Lady Macbeth as she pours her will through the telephone, trying to instil strength in her pale mate, whose limbs are knocking beneath him. As soon as she decides on a course of action she sets off on a marathon run to save him. Her Doc Martens pound the footpath, her arms with balled fists are chest high and her red hair burns against the grey walls and pavements of the town. The diminutive figure of Lola running across a bridge, viewed in close-up breathing fiercely or from overhead as a tiny spot of red, has become an iconic figure representing 'the will to find a way'.

Tykwer claims that Lola's great passion is the motivating force of the film,¹ and this makes sense if we understand passion as the engagement of will with feeling. In the opening sequence Lola's feelings are a secondary concern as she is plunged straight into crisis mode. Manni, terri-

fied of reprisal, is accusatory: 'I always said that some day you wouldn't know what to do.' To prove herself, she has to come up with a solution. Even more importantly, she has to validate both her love and love itself. Manni reminds her that she believes love can do anything and takes melancholy delight in pointing out that her love can't save him. The emphasis in the dialogue is on doing, action: what Lola can do to save Manni. 'I'll get the money somehow', she promises. While the 'somehow' turns out to be getting it from her father (Herbert Knaup), Lola excludes her mother (Ute Lobosch) from her dilemma.

The Child in the World

IN the three animals and three brothers stories, mothers are mentioned only as sending off their children to make their own way in the world. This detail indicates that when the story begins the characters are be-

coming independent enough to test their egos against the world, that same world from which children are protected by their close connection with their mother during infancy. *Run Lola Run* suggests a birth and infancy experience, as viewers are thrust into the house, along a passage and into the dark enclosed space of Lola's room. In response to a summons from outside, Lola hurtles from both her room and the family apartment. A seamless change to animation signals the transition from inner to outer worlds as Lola encounters the dog and boy at the head of the spiral staircase then rushes headlong down to emerge, again seamlessly, from a real house and into sunshine. Just as the folk-tale mother is not concerned to part with her children, neither is Lola's mother interested in her daughter's departure. Her lack of connection with her daughter is spelled out by her passive posture, her absorption in the telephone call and her static role in each sequence.

However, Lola's father is an important figure in each retelling. In the Rule of Three story there are usually no fathers. The father is present, however, as the image of the independent adult the children hope to become. Lola's dependence on her father for a solution to her problem in all three sequences tells us that she hasn't yet achieved ego-consciousness. In the first sequence, her Papa is not only impervious to her pleas for help but informs her that he is leaving the family and that she is another man's child. His negative reaction is in part a response to her failure to see him an independent person with needs of his own. Dominated by her fear of the consequences of failing Manni, Lola sees her father as only a means of gratifying her needs. He reflects her own attitude back to her by seeing her as a burden. Although the sequence ends in Lola's 'death', the naïve deployment of instant karma (having fired a gun reluctantly at a security guard, Lola is killed by a policeman who reluctantly fires

his) signals there will be further chances.

Lola tries again, but in the second sequence she abandons emotional pressure for physical coercion. As a means of adhering to the folk-tale structure, Lola seems to remember her previous failure to procure money from her father and arrives at his office in an angry mood. She also seems to have learned a little. We watch her remember how

her relationship with her father, Lola rushes away to seek her lover. However, her relationship with Manni is violently severed in turn.

Breaking the Wheel of Karma

FINALLY, on the third reprise Lola uses a different capacity. Leaving the apartment, she en-

On this occasion there is no confrontation as she arrives at his office building in time to see him driving away with Mr Meier (Ludger Pister), and it is what Lola does *not* do next that reveals a fundamental change in her.

She does not scream and shatter the windscreen of the departing car. Instead she resumes running and makes a commitment to be open. She will wait and see what

in balance. One must be neither hot (the will) nor cold (the mind) but appropriately 'cool'. Only then will we be open to possibilities, to potential and to the goodwill in the universe that waits for us to tap into it. When we are in balance, that is, sensing *in* ourselves and *out* into the world, the universe offers us chances if we have the will to grasp them. This theme is reprised in Manni's story, as he becomes aware of what is passing him by and pursues it. Ironically, they swap places: Manni starts running and Lola stakes all on a reckless action.

Their choices are right at that moment. However, when one game is finished, a new game begins, and despite the feeling that happiness is 'in the bag' at the close of the film, Lola and Manni are entering a new phase with its own conflicts and problems. Time will gobble Lola up, as suggested by the deliberate representation of the stages of girl, woman and crone, but if she is 'together' and 'cool' she stands a chance of wringing enjoyment out of every phase of life. Alongside that, everything else is pure theory – apart from the Rule of Three.

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Endnote

¹ http://www.indiewire.com/people/int_Tykwere_Tom_010625.html

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to slip the catch on a gun, or rather, her fingers remember while Lola herself seems surprised. Forcing her father at gunpoint to steal from his own bank is not only a way of making him bend to her will but also of repudiating her relationship with him. Her father's mix of expressions as he sits waiting for the clerk to return from downstairs with the money clearly indicates she has burnt her bridges. In addition, his posture recalls the passivity of Lola's mother, implying that he too has been sidelined as an active influence in Lola's life. Once she has achieved her goal, Lola throws the gun down, but – as the second outcome suggests – although Lola evades the law she can't evade karma. Having violently severed

counters the dog and the boy as before, but this time she leaps up and over them. She both anticipates their attack and thinks of a way to defeat them, showing a new alertness and playfulness, although she tosses a growl over her shoulder at the dog to show she hasn't surrendered her feisty nature. In the previous sequences Lola has been intensely serious and the jokiness in this incident immediately suggests she has made the move away from self-absorption towards detachment. The change in Lola seems random, as it must seem to each of us as we experience each phase in a universal pattern of growth uniquely. Despite her newfound buoyancy, Lola's solution is still to run to her Papa.

the universe brings and as a test of decision she shuts her eyes. When a massive truck comes to screeching halt within a centimetre of her tiny figure, she stops, opens her eyes and for the first time looks at the world around her as separate from herself, separate from her needs. When the casino sign beckons, she puts her trust in it and in the casino she directs her energy towards to changing the course of events herself.

The message is to be open to unexpected solutions and that *feeling* while exerting pressure on events is the right state of being. To achieve this, a person has to be 'together', literally; the human activities of willing, feeling and thinking have to be

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