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Racing Berlin: The Games of *Run Lola Run*

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Bracketed by a quotation from famed 1950s West German soccer coach S. Herberger and the word "Ende", the running length of the 1998 film *Run Lola Run*, directed by Tom Tykwer, is 9 minutes short of the official duration of a soccer match. Berlin has often been represented, in visual art and in cinematic imagery, as the modern metropolis: the Expressionist and Dadaist painters, Walter Ruttmann, Fritz Lang and Rainer Werner Fassbinder all depicted it as the modernising city. Since the '60s artists have staged artworks and performances in the public space of the city which critiqued the cold war order of that space, its institutions, and the hysterical attempt by the German government to erase a divided past after 1990. *Run Lola Run* depicts its setting, Berlin, as a cyberspace obstacle course or environment usually associated with interactive video and computer games. The eerie emptiness of the Berlin of *Run Lola Run* -- a fantasy projected onto a city which has been called the single biggest construction site in Europe -- is necessary to keep the protagonist Lola moving at high speed from the West to the East part of town and back again -- another fantasy which is only possible when the city is recast as a virtual environment. In *Run Lola Run* Berlin is represented as an idealised space of bodily and psychic mobility where the instantaneous technology of cyberspace is physically realised as a utopia of speed.

The setting of *Run Lola Run* is not a playing field but a playing level, to use the parlance of video game technology. Underscored by other filmic devices and technologies, *Run Lola Run* emulates the kinetics and structures of a virtual, quasi-interactive environment: the Berlin setting of the film is paradoxically rendered as an indeterminate, but also site specific, entertainment complex which hinges upon the high-speed functioning of multiple networks of auto-mobility. Urban mobility as circuitry is performed by the film's super-athletic Lola.

Lola is a cyber character; she recalls the 'cyberbabe' Lara Croft, heroine of the Sega Tomb Raider video game series. In Tomb Raider the Croft figure is controlled and manipulated by the interactive player to go through as many levels of play, or virtual environments, as possible. In order for the cyber figure to get to the next level of play she must successfully negotiate as many trap and puzzle mechanisms as possible. Speed in this interactive virtual game results from the skill of an experienced player who has practiced coordinating keyboard commands with figure movements and who is familiar with the obstacles the various environments can present. As is the case with Lara Croft, the figure of Lola in *Run Lola Run* reverses the traditional gender relations of the action/adventure game and of 'damsel in distress' narratives. *Run Lola Run* focusses on Lola's race to save her boyfriend from a certain death by

obtaining DM 100,000 and delivering it across town in twenty minutes. The film adds the element of the race to the game, a variable not included in Tomb Raider. Tykwer repeats Lola's trajectory from home to the location of her boyfriend Manni thrice in the film, each time ending her quest with a different outcome. As in a video game, Lola can therefore be killed as the game unwinds during one turn of play, and on the next attempt she, and also we as viewers or would-be interactive players, would have learned from her previous 'mistakes' and adjust her actions accordingly. The soundtrack of *Run Lola Run* underscores the speed and mobility of Berlin by means of the fast/slow/fast rhythm of the film, which proceeds primarily at the pace of techno music. This quick rhythm is syncopated with pauses in the forward-moving action brought on by Lola's superhuman screams or by the death of a protagonist. These events mark the end of one turn of 'play' and the restart of Lola's route.

Tykwer visually contrasts Lola's linear mobility and her physical and mental capacity for speed with her boyfriend Manni's centripetal fixity, a marker of his helplessness, throughout the film. Manni, a bagman-in-training for a local mafioso, has to make his desperate phone calls from a single phone booth in the borough of Charlottenburg after he bungles a hand-off of payment money by forgetting it on the U-Bahn (the subway). In a black and white flashback sequence, viewers learn about Manni's ill-fated trip to the Polish border with a shipment of stolen cars. In contrast to his earlier mobility, Manni becomes entrapped in the phone booth as a result of his ineptitude. A spiral store sign close to the phone booth symbolizes Manni's entrapment. Tykwer contrasts this circular form with the lines and grids Lola transverses throughout the film. Where at first Lola is also immobilised after her moped is stolen by an 'unbelievably fast' thief, her quasi-cybernetic thought process soon restores her movement. Tykwer visualizes Lola's frantic thinking in a series of photographic portraits which indicates her consideration of who she can contact to supply a large sum of money. Lola not only moves but thinks with the fast, even pace of a computer working through a database. Tykwer then repeats overhead shots of gridded pavement which Lola follows as she runs through the filmic frame. The grid, emblem of modernity and structure of the metropolis, the semiconductor, and the puzzles of a virtual environment, is necessary for mobility and speed, and is performed by the figure of Lola. The grid is also apparent in the trajectories of traffic of speeding bikes, subway trains, and airplanes passing overhead, which all parallel Lola's movements in the film. The city/virtual environment is thus an idealised nexus of local, national and global lines of mobility and communication.

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Tykwer emphasised the arbitrariness of the setting of *Run Lola Run*, insisting it could easily have been set in any other urban centre such as

New York City or Beijing. At no point does the film make explicit that the space of action is Berlin; in fact the setting of the film is far less significant than the filmic self-reflexivity Tykwer explores in *Run Lola Run*. Berlin becomes a postmodernist filmic text in which earlier films by Lang, Schlöndorff, von Sternberg and Wenders are cited in intertextual fashion. It is not by chance that the protagonist of *Run Lola Run* shares the name of Marlene Dietrich's legendary character in von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel*. The running, late-20th-century Lola reconnects with and gains power from the originary Lola Lola as ur-Star of German cinema. The high overhead shots of *Run Lola Run* technologically exceed those used by Lang in *M* in 1931 but still quote his filmic text; the spiral form, placed in a shop window in *M*, becomes a central image of *Run Lola Run* in marking the immobile spot that Manni occupies. Repeated several times in the film, Lola's scream bends events, characters and chance to her will and slows the relentless pace of the narrative. This vocal punctuation recalls the equally willful vocalisations of Oskar Matzerath in Schlöndorff's *Tin Drum* (1979).

Tykwer's radical expansions and compressions of time in *Run Lola Run* rely on the temporal exploitation of the filmic medium. The film stretches 20 minutes of 'real time' in the lives of its two protagonists into the 84 minutes of the film. Tykwer also distills the lives of the film's incidental or secondary characters into a few still images and a few seconds of filmic time in the 'und dann...' [and then...] sequences of all three episodes. For example, Lola's momentary encounter with an employee of her father's bank spins off into two completely different life stories for this woman, both of which are told through four or five staged 'snapshots' which are edited together into a rapid sequence. The higher-speed photography of the snapshot keeps up the frenetic pace of *Run Lola Run* and causes the narrative to move forward even faster, if only for a few seconds.

Tykwer also celebrates the technology of 35 mm film in juxtaposing it to the fuzzy imprecision of video in *Run Lola Run*. The viewer not only notes how scenes shot on video are less visually beautiful than the 35 mm scenes which feature Lola or Manni, but also that they seem to move at a snail's pace. For example, the video-shot scene in Lola's banker-father's office also represents the boredom of his well-paid but stagnant life; another video sequence visually parallels the slow, shuffling movement of the homeless man Norbert as he discovers Manni's forgotten moneybag on the U-Bahn. Comically, he breaks into a run when he realises what he's found. Where Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire* made beautiful cinematographic use of Berlin landmarks like the Siegessäule in black and white 35 mm, Tykwer relegates black and white to flashback sequences within the narrative and rejects the relatively meandering contemplation of Wenders's film in favour of the linear dynamism of urban space in *Run Lola Run*.

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Tykwer emphasised the arbitrariness of the setting of *Run Lola Run*, insisting it could easily have been set in any other urban centre such as New York City or Beijing. Nevertheless he establishes the united Berlin as the specific setting of the film. While *Run Lola Run* does not explicitly indicate that the space of action is Berlin, viewers are clear of the setting: a repeated establishing shot of the Friedrichstrasse U-Bahn stop, a central commuting street near the Brandenburg Gate in the former East Berlin which has undergone extensive reconstruction since 1990, begins each episode of the film. The play between the locality of Berlin and its role as the universal modernist metropolis is a trope of German cinema famously deployed by Fritz Lang in *M*, where the setting is also never explicitly revealed but implied by means of the use of the Berlin dialect in the dialogue of the film¹. The soundtrack of *Run Lola Run* underscores the speed and mobility of Berlin by means of the fast/slow/fast rhythm of the film which proceeds primarily at the pace of techno music. Techno is also closely identified with the city of Berlin through its annual Techno Festival or “love parade”, which seems to grow larger with each passing year. Quick technorhythm is syncopated with pauses in the forward-moving action brought on by Lola's superhuman screams or by the death of a protagonist. Berlin is also made explicit as Tykwer often stages scenes at clearly-marked street intersections which identify particular locations or boroughs throughout east and west Berlin. The viewer notes that Lola escapes her father's bank during one episode and faces Unter den Linden; several scenes unfold on the banks of the river Spree; Lola sprints between the Altes Museum and the Berlin Cathedral. Manni's participation in a car-theft ring points to the Berlin-focussed activity of actual Eastern European and Russian crime syndicates; the film features an interlude at the Polish border where Manni delivers a shipment of stolen Mercedes to underworld buyers, which has to do with the actual geographic proximity of Berlin to Eastern European countries.

Finally *Run Lola Run* recalls the modernist procedure of wandering in the city, a nineteenth century practice originated by Charles Baudelaire which Walter Benjamin later applied to his native Berlin². Benjamin's essay "Berlin Chronicle", a sentimental account of the sites and architecture of his childhood, ties the activity of wandering to the city of Berlin. Both Baudelaire and Benjamin pointed to the crowd as a central element of wandering in the modern metropolis, as were the chance encounters the flaneur would experience there. Tykwer opens his film by moving the camera through a milling, aimless crowd and introduces those characters who will encounter Lola in her quest within it.

Yet the speed of purposeful mobility is demanded in the contemporary united and globalised Berlin; lines of action or direction must be chosen and followed and chance encounters become traps or interruptions. Chance

must therefore be minimised in the pursuit of urban speed, mobility, and communications access. In the globalised Berlin, Tykwer compresses chance encounters into individual snapshots of visual data which are viewed in quick succession by the viewer. Where artists such as Christo and Sophie Calle had investigated the initial chaos of German reunification in Berlin, *Run Lola Run* rejects the hyper-contemplative and past-obsessed mood demanded by Christo's wrapping of the Reichstag, or Calle's documentation of the artistic destructions of unification³. *Run Lola Run* recasts Berlin as a network of fast connections, lines of uninterrupted movement, and productive output. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that Tykwer's idealised and embodied representation of Berlin as Lola has been politically appropriated as a convenient icon by the city's status quo: an icon of the successful reconstruction and rewiring of a united Berlin into a fast global broadband digital telecommunications network⁴.

Footnotes

1 See Edward Dimendberg's excellent discussion of filmic representations of the metropolis in "From Berlin to Bunker Hill: Urban Space, Late Modernity, and Film Noir in Fritz Lang's and Joseph Losey's *M*." *Wide Angle* 19.4 (1997): 62-93.

2 This is despite the fact that the temporal parameters of the plot of *Run Lola Run* forbid the aimlessness central to *spazieren* (strolling). See Walter Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle", in *Reflections*. Ed. Peter Demetz. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. New York: Schocken, 1986. 3-60.

3 See Sophie Calle, *The Detachment*. London: G+B Arts International and Arndt & Partner Gallery, n.d.

4 The huge success of Tykwer's film in Germany spawned many red-hair-coiffed Lola imitators in the Berlin populace. The mayor of Berlin sported Lola-esque red hair in a poster which imitated the one for the film, but legal intercession put an end to this trendy political statement. Brian Pendreigh. "The Lolaness of the Long-Distance Runner." *The Guardian* 15 Oct. 1999. I've relied on William J. Mitchell's cultural history of the late 20th century 'rebuilding' of major cities into connection points in the global telecommunications network, *City of Bits: Space, Place, and the Infobahn*. Cambridge: MIT P, 1995.