

Run Lola Run and the Web: Networks of Structuralist Possibilities

“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? [. . .] Countless questions in search of an answer... an answer that will give rise to the next question... and the next answer will give rise to the next question, and so on. But, in the end, isn't it always the same question?”

Policeman in Run Lola Run.

Have you ever had the impression of being in front of a web page when watching a movie? Have you ever found yourself trapped in a labyrinth of multiple simultaneous options? If not, watch Run Lola Run (1999) by Tom Tykwer, which is basically a celebration of the simultaneity of possibilities and the total annihilation of any original possibility. At a single glance, this may appear to be a frankly postmodern work due to its wide unfolding of greatly varied possibilities, reminiscent of the seemingly infinite avenues and resources of the internet. At the same time, it evokes a highly chaotic environment, as the multiplicity of possible pathways would appear to present no clear order or direction. However, a deeper analysis of the wide range of possibilities in both the movie and the internet does reveal, as the linguistic and anthropological structuralism of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss suggest, respectively, that all these options are in fact subordinated to a deep structure governed by difference. In both Run Lola Run and the worldwide web this structure is exemplified in the binary opposition of information providing instant gratification versus information which come neither fast nor gratifying enough.

In his Course in General Linguistics (1916) Saussure makes clear that language is a system of interrelated signs and that, apart from the diachronic studies of language, “the scope of linguistics should be: [. . .] to determine the forces that are permanently and universally at work in all languages, and to deduce the general laws to which all specific historical phenomena can be reduced” (6). On the other hand, Lévi-Strauss states in “The Structural Study of Myth” (1951) that “[. . .] human societies merely express, through their mythology, fundamental feelings common to the whole of mankind, [. . .]” (207). It is the “spirit of the nation” (Volksgeist) that Hegel had already formulated in The Phenomenology of Mind (1807). It is along these lines that I am organizing my reflections on Run Lola Run and the internet with the object of explaining the “general law” “common to the whole (of) mankind” that governs our “dot com” civilization.

Briefly, the synopsis of Run Lola Run is as follows: Lola receives a phone call from her boyfriend Manni at 11:40 am, who tells her that he is in trouble and needs 100,000 Deutsche marks before 12:00 pm, or he will probably die. Lola has only twenty minutes to come up with the money, and in the first moment following the phone call her mind flashes through various possibilities. She tries several of these possibilities -- three in particular -- through a series of flashbacks and retries until she finds the possibility (or link) that finally offers her the most gratifying solution. As Sam Adams points out in his review of Run Lola Run, “she does not quite make it the first time, and when she fails, the film resets itself and Lola is back at the beginning, getting Manni’s fateful phone call all over again. She tries again, she fails again. On to round three” (1).

These different links or possibilities correspond with what Mark Poster, in his article “Postmodern Virtualities”, calls “virtual realities”, which are no more than

“computer-generated ‘place(s)’ [. . .] viewed by the participant through ‘goggles’ [. . .]” (616). In fact, Lola sees these “virtual realities” through the ‘goggles’ of her imagination while agonizing on the floor following her pursuit of the first failed possibility. Indeed, using a device which evokes a striking similarity to “computer-generated places”, Tom Tykwer often depicts Lola as an animation in a cartoon world, running through different tunnels and environments encountering (and often destroying or avoiding) potential obstacles that would rob her of precious time. These scenes reminiscent of “virtual realities” set the stage for each alternative possibility that Lola pursues.

It is in this sense that Run Lola Run is an allegory of the deep structure of the internet. Like the multiplicity of hyperlinks in the web, the movie by Tom Tykwer unfolds a multiplicity of options to follow, with three possible scenarios each being followed to a different conclusion. At the same time, we are given a glimpse of how each of these scenarios impacts the lives of secondary, largely incidental characters in the movie, evoking similarity to the many sublinks encountered while navigating the internet. On this device, Sam Adams comments that “not only does the film shift into animation at regular intervals, but the story spins off at tangents, using a series of rapid-fire snapshots to show the future history of characters Lola passes on her journey” (19)¹. Clearly it is not just the World Wide Web which, as Mark Poster puts it, “allows [. . .] simultaneous transmission of text, images and sound, providing hypertext links as well” (621).

Both in the web and in Run Lola Run everything seems to be a chaos of possibilities with little apparent organization. In the first possible ending of the movie Lola lays dying, whereas in the second scenario it is instead her boyfriend Manni. Lola would, of course, prefer neither of these outcomes, and utters the word “stop!” moments

before her own death in the first round, which resets the movie to the opening scene, allowing an exploration of other possibilities. In the second scenario Manni is the one who lays dying as he states a clear “no”, causing the movie to again revert and allowing the third possible link or ending, in which neither of them dies. These responses of Lola and Manni may appear as acts of autonomous human beings reacting to a situation according to their own will. However, in truth the only real ending of the movie was the first one. The rest are a product of Lola’s imagination, representing what could have been had other paths been followed, and Lola, always running, is just a puppet of the basic structure to which she is subordinated: is the information that this possibility provides fast and gratifying enough?

This is the structure governing the system. Thus, as Tom Tykwer offers multiple endings, all of which are possible if not real, to Run Lola Run, the clock serves as a constant reminder that Lola has only twenty minutes to get the 100,000 marks. In that twenty minutes the third path would have resulted in the most satisfactory and efficient ending of the movie according to the present cybernetic culture: it has a happy ending, with Manni successfully resolving his problem on his own, and Lola acquiring the money anyway. This begs the question: what of the many other possibilities or links that could have been pursued in the movie? What other information would they have provided us? Tom Tykwer offers the answers to these questions for only three of the possible scenarios with his digressive snapshots summarizing the future lives of several secondary characters in the movie. In truth, the insight provided by such digression is irrelevant in cybernetic culture. Once a satisfactory outcome or the desired goal is achieved, no more

exploration is necessary; other information not ultimately a part of the most gratifying and efficient pathway is disregarded.

In this sense, Run Lola Run is like a web page full of links. The main character, Lola, chooses the “links” she supposes to be the most efficient and likely to achieve her purpose of finding the 100,000 marks. When she does not like the ending that her selections have taken her to, she backs up and makes another choice, following another “link”, just as we do while navigating the internet. If Saussure defined language as a system of signs governed by difference, Run Lola Run is the system, whereas Lola’s different options are the signs characterized by a binary code composed of that information which is timely and gratifying enough opposed to that information which is not. Applying Saussure’s theory to the web, we see the internet as a system and the web pages as the signs, which fulfill the following main functions: 1) self-publishing; 2) research; 3) communicating with others (most significantly via chatting and email).

Critics such as Mark Handley and Jon Crowcroft in The World Wide Web define the internet as “[. . .] a great tangled web of information” (31). Daniel Barrett states in Net Research: Finding Information Online that “the Internet is a jumble of facts, opinions, stories, conversations, arguments, artwork, mistakes, trivia, and one-of-a-kind knowledge. There’s little organization or consistency” (1). Moreover, he adds that “the internet isn’t conveniently organized. It’s too big, and it’s constantly being modified by thousands of people who don’t know each other” (23). While this latter assertion is correct, in truth there exists a deep structure which drives these three functions of the web, despite the appearance of little organization that these and other critics find in the internet. This structure is evident as a network of instant, gratifying information which, in

the case of function 1) and function 3), is reduced on many occasions to the structure of what I call fast love. To this regard Mark Poster quotes Howard Rheingold, who states “[. . .] I and thousands of other cybernauts know that what we are looking for [. . .] is not just information but instant access to ongoing relationships with a large number of other people” (qtd. in Poster 619). A deeper analysis of each of these three functions reveals these points more clearly:

The first function, self-publishing, responds to the need of presenting critical or personal (as is often the case with personal web pages) information in a rapid manner. In both cases, the publisher looks for recognition or fast love from the cybernaut who receives the information. On the one hand, creators of web pages with critical information look for, at the least, acknowledgement and validation (whether or not the viewer agrees with the ideas presented), and thus these web pages distill to nothing more than the basic imperative “look at me”, the naive question “am I good enough?” or, more simply, the plaintive “do you love me”? On the other hand, personal web pages contain a great amount of false information, since in the majority of cases the main motive of the page’s creator is not truth per se but rather the desire to present him- or herself in a likeable way, regardless of reality and perhaps at the expense of frank honesty. Clearly truth is not the basic structure governing the web system. Rather, instantly gratifying information and fast love are².

The second function, research, belongs solely to the structure of instantly gratifying information. There are millions of web resources within our immediate reach. The problem is, according to Daniel Barrett, that there is no clear organization or structure to the internet, and thus finding information online might not always be an easy

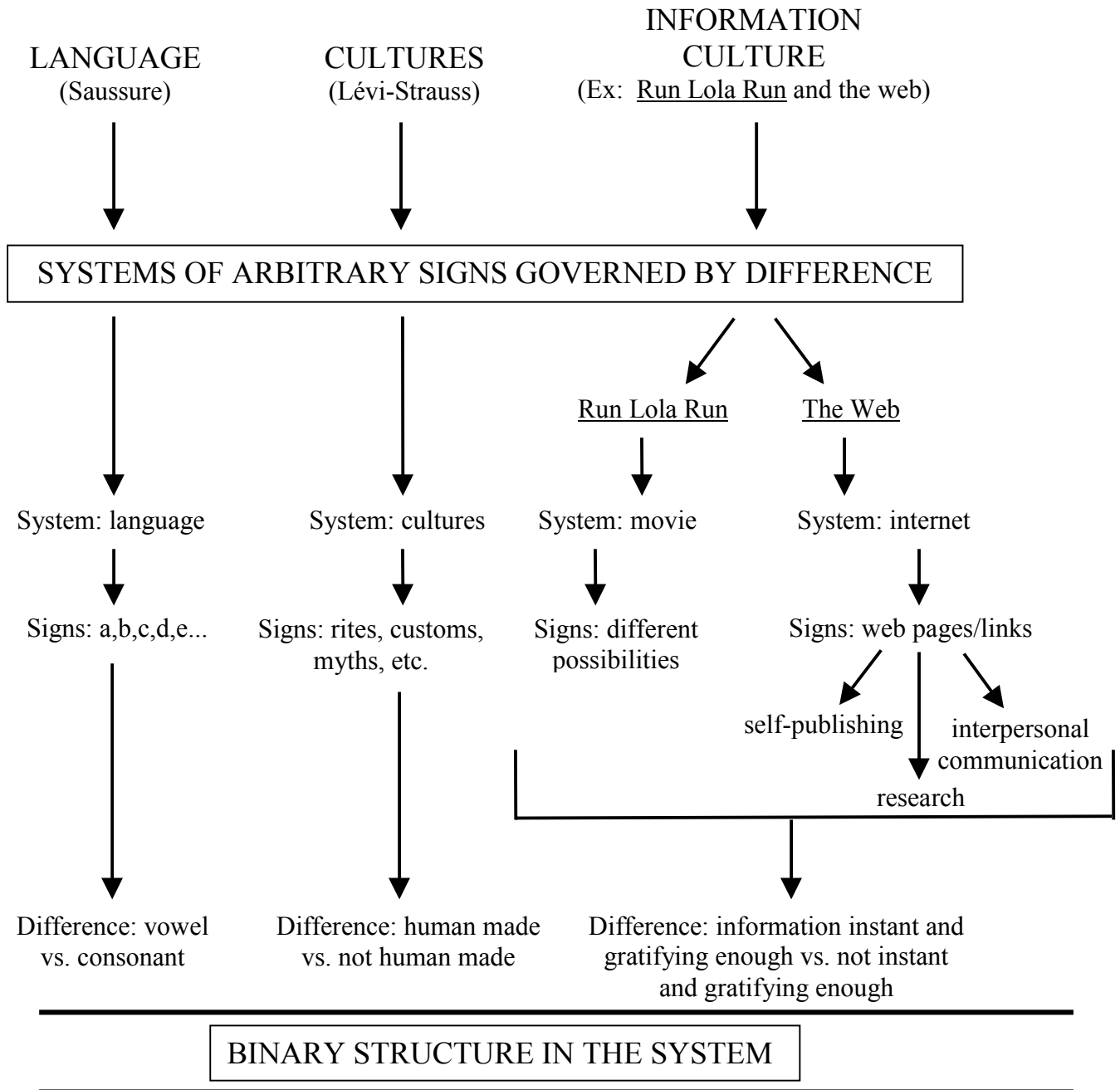
task. The author compares the internet with “[. . .] a huge collection of libraries scattered around the world”, each of them with “[. . .] its own method for organizing and accessing information” (30). Furthermore, “there’s no roadmap to get from one library to another” (30). Barrett continues on to discuss how “an organized view like Yahoo’s imposes order on the chaos and provides a structure for your search. But it’s not *the* structure” (23). It is true that Yahoo, as with many other web pages, imposes an interface that in reality is not the structure of the internet. But this does not mean that no structure exists. The structure of the internet is not a superficial one, but rather is a deep structure not explicitly displayable through dashes, sections, and letters as pages such as Yahoo might provide. It is a structure based upon gratifying information provided rapidly.

The third function of communicating with others via the internet (mainly through email and chatting) is, like the first function, a link in the structure of both instantly gratifying information and fast love. When we send an email to a friend, a professor, a business person, a librarian, etc., we normally do so because we want to transmit and receive information as quickly and conveniently as possible. In the case of chatting, particularly in the “singles” chat rooms, there are the additional aspects pertaining to the structure of fast love. For example, questions such as “a/s/l?” (= age? sex? location?) are prevalent in chat rooms, which ask for personal information in a very immediate fashion, using only a few letters in the place of full words. Furthermore, if the answer to the question is not satisfactory, he or she does not even have to bother answering. The web confers an anonymity that allows the principles of politeness to be ignored and societal formalities to be dispensed with for the sake of instant gratification. If the chat inquirer has not found information that is satisfactory or pleasing, he or she may simply move on

to a different person with the same question: a/s/l? Each respondent does likewise: after presenting him- or herself to the initial inquirer and receiving no follow-up conversation, he or she moves on to the next person without giving it further thought. This is a perfect example of what I call searching for instantly gratifying information or fast love.

These three functions with their multiplicity of links can, at a single glance, give the impression of the web as a growing monster with infinite heads. However, this monster of the web and its signs are governed by a structure. It is a deep binary structure such as the one evident in Saussure's linguistics or in Lévi-Strauss' anthropological studies, a structure that contains signs defined by their opposition within the system³. The comparative chart on the following page illustrates this.

This chart illustrates the fact that the information culture, just as the linguistic and cultural systems of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss is governed by a binary structure formed by pairs defined by difference. Saussure focused on the language system, and Lévi-Strauss focused on the study of different cultures, particularly on their myths. Influenced by Saussure, Lévi-Strauss asserts (as reported by Mary Klages in "Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Structural Study of Myth") that "[. . .] myth is language, because myth has to be told in order to exist" (1). However, the emphasis placed on the visual in the present information culture obscures the fact that it is actually language that is the operative system, just as Saussure and Lévi-Strauss have stated. Although language occupies a great part of the movies and internet today, this system increasingly shares its protagonism with the visual image due to the rapidity and immediacy of the information conveyed. As instant gratification is the operative structure nowadays, images have



become more and more attractive in the communication culture, while also competing on many levels with and acting to undermine the linguistic element of this culture.

Regardless of the system, be it exclusively linguistic or not, the basic structure of the system is key in both Run Lola Run and the internet. In Tom Tykwer's movie, Lola's

different options are interrelated as signs having in common the same binary structure (information instant and gratifying enough versus information not sufficiently rapid and gratifying)⁴. In the same way, we see how in the web the functions of self-publishing, research, and communicating with others respond to the same binary structure. The third function in particular comes at the cost of language in many cases, due to the use of abbreviation slang, emoticons, and different images (i.e. pictures) in chat rooms.

Thus, contrary to the anti-structuralist arguments of Handley, Crowcroft, Barrett and others, the web (like Run Lola Run) does present an organization that corresponds with a deep structure. As Hans Bertens underscores in Literary Theory, “[. . .] we are only dealing with variants upon what is essentially an unchanging basic pattern” (64). In this sense, both Run Lola Run and the web are networks of structuralist possibilities. As the policeman states in the opening statement of the movie, in the end, it is always “the same question”, which in our present world governed by technology is this: is the information you provide instant and gratifying enough?

Notes

¹ In her review of the movie, Karina Montgomery relates these side stories to “the concept of ‘what if’”: “[. . .] this movie takes ‘what if’ to a new level [. . .] Run Lola Run [. . .] has the bonus of having all kinds of interesting side stories –they whisk by but still register- they are not important, they are only secondary to Lola’s run” (1).

² Lévi-Strauss points out in “The Structural Study of Myth” that truth is not the structure governing humanity’s myths either. What is important are the relationships established between the mythemes: “There is no single ‘true’ version of which all the others are but copies or distortions. Every version belongs to the myth” (218).

³ See General Linguistics Course by Saussure, and The Raw and the Cooked by Lévi-Strauss.

⁴ In order to carry out the representation of this search for instantly gratifying information, the director of Run Lola Run makes imperative use of the image in movement (ie, images of Lola constantly running) accompanied by music with rapid rhythm, to the detriment of words. The characters in the movie actually speak relatively little, with much of the story being covered by the initial narration and subsequent soundtrack. As Sam Adams puts it, “once Lola has started her everlasting sprint, the music runs almost without stopping for the next 70 minutes. Even when the volume drops to allow us to hear the film’s few exchanges of dialogue, an incessant tick-tick-tick keeps time underneath” (1).

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