

On the run

by [Daniel C. Richardson](#) in the [November 3, 1999](#) issue

*Endurance* (1999), directed by Leslie Woodhead

*Run Lola Run* (1998), directed by Tom Tykwer

Like many people in my Chicago neighborhood, I like to run. Every evening my neighbors and I jog through the streets, our paths criss-crossing as we peek around corners and avoid cars, bicycles and other obstacles. Why do we run? Cultural critics might say that running reflects our collective self-obsession or our collective overachievement complex. We run to look good or because we hope that running will keep us fit and able to accomplish more. But I think there is something more significant at work—something two recent films can help us understand.

*Endurance*, a documentary, explores Ethiopian Olympian Haile Gebrselassie's obsession with and love for running. *Run Lola Run* is a German feature about a young woman's race through the streets of Berlin to save the life of a man she loves. Both films bend and reshape their genres and offer refreshingly original points of view.

Directed by veteran British documentary filmmaker Leslie Woodhead, *Endurance* tells the story of Gebrselassie's road to the 1996 Atlanta Olympics. Supplementing the documentary footage of his training in the grasslands of Africa and of the 10,000 meter race in Atlanta are scenes from Gebrselassie's personal life—scenes that are not so much acted as reenacted by Gebrselassie and his friends and family. While some of these reenactments by nonactors are understandably stiff, they blend smoothly with the "real" segments to form a stirring portrait of one man's love—even need—for running.

There is a rightness about the images that show Gebrselassie striding across the hilly terrain of Ethiopia. Those wide-open spaces seem to demand to be crossed. We watch his race in the Olympic games—perhaps already knowing the outcome—wanting him to survive, to overcome, to endure. Watching the film makes us aware of the deep connection between running and life.

The energy of *Run Lola Run* is a good contrast to the steady calm of *Endurance*. Stitched together with quick edits and a pulsing techno soundtrack, it is a prime example of MTV culture (not an oxymoron) at its best. Written and directed by a young German filmmaker, Tom Tykwer, the film shows Lola (Franka Potente) attempting to save her boyfriend, Manni (Moritz Bleibtreu), from certain death at the hands of Berlin gangsters. Dim but likable, Manni has lost 100,000 marks that he is supposed to deliver to his drug-dealing boss. He leaves the money on a subway train and fears that in 20 minutes, when he is found empty-handed, he will be killed. When he frantically calls Lola to tell her of his fate, she does not lose a step, but begins to run through Berlin in an effort to save him.

She fails, and finds that Manni has begun a poorly executed robbery which eventually ends in Lola's death. Then comes the most curious aspect of the film. It starts over. Lola gets another chance to save Manni (and herself). Again she fails. But the third time is the charm, and all live happily ever after.

It would be a stretch to call this film a probing look at our understanding of time and space, or a deep exploration of metaphysical questions. Whether the three episodes are intended as three possibilities or three realities is, finally, unimportant. What counts is the sense of excitement they create. We find ourselves running with Lola, urging her to make the right decisions, hoping that her choices will not trigger a disastrous succession of events. Tykwer's brilliant visual language convinces us that love, filmmaking and, indeed, running can and should be fun.