

A mix of radicalism and banality

The film *The Princess and the Warrior* directed by Tom Tykwer

Bernd Rheinhardt
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In the past, German film director Tom Tykwer (born 1965) has demonstrated a distinctive talent for creating emotionally charged, highly evocative images in his films. In doing so, he has made free use of imagery normally found in video and advertising to exploit its strong association with rhythmic and musical themes. With *Run Lola Run* (1998) Tykwer found a form of cinematic expression that highlighted the advantages of precisely these technical aspects. This innovative film with its pulsating “techno” sound-track became an international success.

Nevertheless, it must be said that Tykwer's films suffer from the artificiality of the stories they tell. It is not that their basic themes lack interest. Young people suddenly begin to question the way they have been living their lives, they want to break out of their daily routine, they experience a certain weariness with the lives they lead. Feeling a desire for something more meaningful and fundamental, they seek something which will activate their sensibilities and deliver them from their seemingly trivial existence.

Although in reality such moods are vague and deep-seated reflections of concrete social developments, Tykwer portrays the unconscious as a mysterious, incomprehensible, autonomous power driving the individual through life. Consequently, Tykwer's films often evoke the sense of a dream, the fairy-tale romantic of a luminous transfiguration, to which ominous and excruciatingly long periods of music and sound contribute their own peculiar intensity. Such sound effects communicate the conviction that passivity and activity—judged against the background of eternity—are essentially the same.

Tykwer's frivolous attitude towards chance and

necessity in his films points to his inability to identify those principles of orderly development amidst the flow of social experience, and he thus promotes the view that the life of an individual—though framed within an “organised system”—is determined by sheer chance. He finds it fascinating and exciting to express this perspective on film. In *Run Lola Run* the viewer observes how a totally unpredictable outcome arises out of the slightest alteration in a chain of events. Such a perspective has nothing to do with the dynamics of real life which often lie concealed under the hum-drum appearance. Tykwer's viewpoint, however, does correspond to a feeling which is currently in vogue.

His film *The Princess and the Warrior* also involves characters caught up in a gigantic game where chance brings the protagonists into painful conflict, until they realise and submit to the role of fate in their lives. Although the film presents itself as a love story, there is no sense of a genuine form of development either on the part of the leading characters or between them. Sissi—the film's stolid, feminine leading role, who somehow always seems to be off-stage—is virtually relegated at times to the status of a marionette.

Sissi's existence up to the present has followed a regular course basically determined by the rhythms of her work in a psychiatric ward. Then suddenly her life starts to move in another direction. The trigger for this turn of events is provided by a traffic accident and her encounter with Bodo.

Clad in an army shirt, this young man—who causes the accident—moves in criminal circles, works as a pallbearer in a cemetery and seems to be continually on the run from the world and from himself. Prone to lose his temper easily, he undertakes close-combat training

in his free time and lives with his brother in a remote shack. He is tormented by recurring nightmares since his wife's tragic death for which he feels responsible.

Right after the accident, he hides under the tanker which has run over Sissi. As though trapped under some enormous bell and cut off from the noisy outside world, he is suddenly alone with her in a silent world that intensifies the actuality and significance of every breath taken. He hears Sissi groaning and struggling for air. As he prepares to cut a hole in her windpipe, Bodo knows that he is taking her life in his hands. At this moment, tears run down his face.

Bodo is overcome at this point by his emotions, for a moment no longer at war with himself, but in a state of deep peace. Sissi, on the other hand, as she recovers from the terrible accident, experiences a sense of deliverance and submits to it wholeheartedly. For Sissi, the whole incident melts into an experience of fascinating existential completeness.

From now on her life has changed. Released from hospital and convinced that she and Bodo are destined for each other, she sets about trying to find him. But Bodo does not want to come into contact with Sissi again. Since his wife's death, there is no place for love in his life. When Sissi suddenly appears at his door, he brutally pushes her away. However, the operation of chance—or is it the predestined union of two soul mates?—continues to bring them together until a catastrophic climax. After robbing a bank, both are hunted down by the police and finally jump hand in hand from the roof of the psychiatric ward.

Tom Tykwer refers to this jump as a “catharsis,” a sort of liberating ecstasy. Bodo and Sissi's longing for an all-consuming passionate love, for an ultimate emotion, intensifies into something approaching a divine transfiguration in which there is also place for a longing for death.

This theme of death has already appeared in Tykwer's other films. In *Die tödliche Maria* (*The Fatal Maria*), the leading character allows herself to fall from a high window. In *Winterschläfer* (*The Hibernator*), a skiing instructor skies intentionally over a precipice. While he is seen floating, at first in the distance and then in the depths of the valley, a stream of apparently celestial sounds can be heard by composer Arvo Pärt. The viewer experiences the suicide as something aesthetic and uplifting. Bodo and Sissi also float gently

downward in slow motion, and then quite suddenly—and miraculously!—a green lake appears out of nowhere to break their fall.

The power of their love has triumphed over reality. A kind of rebirth takes place. A new life begins and a new chance is offered. The new Bodo is freed from his tormented personality with all its nightmares and pangs of conscience. Determined to forget his past, he is finally able to devote himself to the more elevating aspects of earthly existence.

By the end of the film, the romantic quest for truth proves to be nothing more than the common, hum-drum longing for private happiness and security—in a house by the sea, far from the madding crowd. The courage to overcome life's conventions is revealed as nothing more than the courage to self-consciously embrace such conventions. The director comes to the defence of his characters by focusing his camera on the aspect of Sissi and Bodo's new life that remains radically unconventional. Their little house stands at the top of a high cliff on the edge of a steep precipice—living on the brink—but something, after all, which is not so unusual on certain holiday islands in the Mediterranean.

In the near future, when the not so elevating aspects of today's reality begin to disrupt their carefree existence, is it presumptuous to assume that “the princess and the warrior” will be among those who radically fight for the tranquillity of their souls bathed in a fog of candle-light, joss-sticks and meditation exercises—and with all the more intensity—as existing social conventions break apart?



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