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Tom Jacobs

The rich ambiguity of *Tár*, and why director Todd Field wouldn't have it any other way

Few contemporary films have been dissected as thoroughly, and debated as vigorously, as *Tár*. The Oscar-nominated 2022 drama, which traces the downfall of a brilliant, world-famous, emotionally abusive orchestra conductor, stubbornly refuses to judge its central character.

Is she a predator who finally gets caught, or an unfair victim of cancel culture? Is her fate at film's end a deserved punishment, or a moment of grace and renewal? And are all the strange plot twists actually happening, or products of her increasingly unhinged mind?

Don't expect director Todd Field to provide any answers when he engages in a Q&A with Tyler Morgenstern, assistant director of the Carsey-Wolf Center, Saturday, June 2, at UC Santa Barbara's Pollock Theater. He politely declines all invitations to interpret his work.

But do expect a lively discussion following the 2 p.m screening of the critically acclaimed film. *Tár* (the title is an anagram for art) is a great catalyst for conversation.

“The centerpiece of the film is the incredible performance by Cate Blanchett in the title role,” Morgenstern said. “I’m interested in how they worked together to create this character who feels so complete that, for a long time, people were convinced she was a real person, and this was a biopic of some kind.

“I’m also interested in this question of the persistence of the Global South in the film, and how it might change the way we think about abuse and exploitation. If we take this story of workplace abuse in the Global North and place it in a larger geopolitical frame, as I think Field is inviting us to do, it opens up wider questions about the nature of abuse, where it resides and how it plays out across different scales and intensities.”

If you saw the film but missed that particular thematic thread, join the club: It is largely absent from the voluminous online commentary and analysis. But Morgenstern argues it is in the film from literally beginning to end.

Disconcertingly, the movie opens with a quite lengthy title sequence. While name after name flashes onto the screen, the soundtrack features audio of a young, pre-fame-and-fortune Tár doing ethnomusicological research in the Amazon rain forest.

To emphasize that easily overlooked part of her origin story, Morgenstern (with the help of UCSB’s Christian Thomas) has arranged to display a photograph created for the film in the theater’s lobby during the event. Created by David Díaz Gonzalez, an affiliate of the Indigenous-focused Peruvian arts nonprofit Xapiri Ground, it features Blanchett in character, her face decorated with ceremonial markings suggestive of her time as a researcher in the Amazon.

The photo can be seen, fleetingly, in the film; it hangs on the wall of the second apartment she keeps as a work space. As a keepsake, it suggests Tár’s time in the rainforest played an important part of her life. More subtly, it raises a potential link between her abusive behavior in Berlin and the histories of exploitation that link the Global North and Global South. “We’re going to dive into that angle at the event,” Morgenstern said.

Global geopolitics aside, “putting the credits right up front basically forces us to recognize the amount of labor that goes into the making of a film,” Morgenstern said. “We then see a film about the kinds of abuse and exploitation that are enabled when one particularly powerful person comes to believe she has earned all of this

through sheer individual merit — not through the support and contribution of others. That’s a pretty strong statement!”

The fact Field made *Tár* a woman has been widely criticized. Conductor Marin Alsop called it a travesty to tar (as it were) female conductors in this way, when men are far more likely to engage in this sort of abusive behavior. Morgenstern said he understands the criticism, but also gets why Field made that counterintuitive choice.

“Having a male in the lead role would lead more people to see it exclusively as a #MeToo movie, which really localizes its analysis of power within a specific cultural context and historical moment,” he said. “By sidestepping that, he opens up a larger set of questions. I think it makes for a more interesting film. Elite institutions position and incentivize people to abuse their power in all kinds of ways. One’s particular identity does not necessarily guarantee insulation from those enticements.”

That’s exactly right, Field told the Current.

“We all know, or should know, how we feel about the men who hold and abuse power,” Field said. “(It’s) something we hear about, or experience first-hand from an early age. As Marin Alsop rightly points out, this is a narrative fact, but also a real obstacle if you want to examine the corrupting influence of power itself.

“Why do we feel compelled to dominate and rank those within our sphere of influence?” he continued. “What does the animal part of us gain by contaminating our better angels? The film revolves around hierarchy and how it corrupts any and all human beings involved with building and supporting the scaffolding of that structure.”

In the film’s final scenes (spoiler alert!), *Tár* is back in the Global South — specifically somewhere in Southeast Asia, where, having lost her prestigious European position, she is conducting a young orchestra in a video-game score. Some commentators see this as her ultimate humiliation; others point to it as the delayed fulfillment of a piece of wisdom she once received from Leonard Bernstein, that the sole purpose of making music is for other people’s enjoyment.

“I have not been able to come down on either side of that debate, partly because I think both sides require of the film certain things that it does not seem interested in doing,” Morgenstern said.

“I don’t think it sneers at the fact that vibrant music cultures have grown up around the video-game industry, so I don’t think the film sees her working at that space as simple debasement. But I’m also not convinced that it redeems her in any real way. That would send the film down the Eat Pray Love path, where the Global South becomes a place of redemption for a troubled white person.”

Rather, in his view, “It puts her in a position where she, as a kind of avatar for Western cultural authority, is dislodged from her very sealed world, and suddenly finds herself among a totally new set of cultural poles. I think that’s more of a question about the shifting ground of cultural power than it is a final statement about Tár herself.”

Of course, there is no right or wrong answer, to this or any of the other questions the film poses. The debate continues, which is terrific as far as Field is concerned. “The level of engagement, and sense of agency and ownership from the individual viewer is thrilling,” he said.

Morgenstern fully agrees. “One of my biggest pet peeves is when movies over-explain,” he said. “I admire films that allow for ambiguity.”

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Tár will be screened at 2 p.m. Saturday, June 3 in the Pollock Theater on the UC Santa Barbara campus. Admission is free, but reservations are recommended. For more information, go to <https://www.carseywolf.ucsb.edu/pollock-events/big-screen-tar/>.

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