

Actor Vincent Gallo plays the title character, Tetro. (Inset) Francis Ford Coppola examines family ties in his latest film.

ON FILM

In “Tetro,” Coppola seeks the shadows

by Maria Garcia

Few narrative filmmakers have explored the dark side of *la famiglia* as completely as Francis Ford Coppola. That fact has not endeared the Detroit-born director to his fellow Italian Americans. “Tetro,” his latest feature, may heal the rift. Coppola calls it autobiographical, although not a literal recounting of his family’s history. “Tetro” contains parallels to the filmmaker’s life, but what really distinguishes it from his previous films is that it’s an intimate exploration of a troubled family.

“Tetro” marks a return for Coppola to writing and directing; it is a modest, independent venture, with scaled-down characters, not unlike the films he made as a young man. At 70, the five-time Oscar winner entertains the possibility that dysfunctional families can be healed: In “Tetro,” the suffering of Coppola’s protagonists is illustrated in psychological terms, not manifested by outward violence among family members, as it was, for instance, in the “Godfather” trilogy. In fact, protagonist Tetro has internalized his painful past and become despondent—his name is the Italian word for “gloomy” and a shortened version of the family name, Tetrocini, “the gloomy ones.”

Vincent Gallo plays the title character, an unsuccessful writer who went abroad over a decade ago, after his father, composer Carlo Tetrocini (Klaus Maria Brandauer) seduced the girl he loved. That perfidious act, which later robbed Tetro of his creativity, represents only part of the family secret he harbors. *Il segreto*—a spoiler we can’t reveal here—is what led Tetro to sever ties with his family, and it is what now threatens his relationship with younger brother Bennie (newcomer Alden Ehrenreich). Bennie, who was too young to understand the reasons for Tetro’s departure, feels that his brother abandoned him.

Tetro and Bennie are fugitives of Carlo Tetrocini’s all-consuming narcissism. At one point, Tetro tells Bennie: “In this family, love is a quick stab to the heart.” While Coppola has said that his own father, Carmine, was a sanguine presence in his life, the elder Coppola, like Carlo Tetrocini, was a composer. He scored several of his son’s films and won an Oscar for “Godfather II.” Principal photography for “Tetro” took place in Argentina, where the movie is also set; it is the Coppola family’s ancestral home.

“Tetro” opens with Bennie’s visit to his brother’s Buenos Aires apartment. Tetro, hobbled by a broken leg—a metaphor for his psychic state—is at first indifferent to Bennie’s arrival, and then openly hostile. Only the loving intervention of Tetro’s live-in girlfriend Miranda (Maribel Verdú) softens Tetro’s resolve, and leads the brothers to begin a tenuous reacquaintance. To Bennie’s frustration, Tetro refuses to discuss the past or his reasons for leaving the family, even after Bennie tells him he has also rejected his father’s influence.

Through the course of the black and white film, we learn that Tetro and his mother were involved in a car accident in which only Tetro survived. These glimpses of the past, from Tetro’s point of view, are in color and in a different aspect ratio—the image is square and appears smaller than the “present.” Also in flashback, we witness the many treacherous acts of Carlo Tetrocini, who destroyed his brother’s family as well as his own. Coppola chose color for his protagonist’s memories because the past is more vivid for Tetro: As we age, we understand more fully how the experiences of our youth shaped our lives. Color also repre- ➤





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sents the many choices of youth, and black and white the comparably limited scope of maturity.

Spurred by a desire to uncover the family history, Bennie rifles through Tetro's papers and finds his novel, a fictionalized version of his life story. In secret, Bennie turns the novel into a play and then invites Tetro to see it. Tetro is infuriated and at first repudiates his brother for plagiarism. Bennie, whose motive is ambiguous—is he ambitious or is his intention to lead his brother to rediscover his talent?—nevertheless usurps Tetro when he gains recognition from a critic who once praised Tetro as a promising young writer. Bennie

seduction of Tetro's girlfriend is essentially an incestuous act—she would have become his daughter-in-law—as well as a terrible abuse of male power. It can also be seen as revenge for the accident: Tetro was driving when his mother was killed. In “Rumble Fish,” the elder brother (Mickey Rourke) literally gives his life to free the younger one (Matt Dillon), and in this film, Tetro runs away in the hopes that Bennie will never learn of Carlo's villainy. One wonders, then, what necessary sacrifices were made by Coppola's brother August, to whom “Rumble Fish” was dedicated, to ensure his younger brother's happiness.

reveals the family secret, a distraught Bennie runs across a wide boulevard and, like the moth which opened the movie, he's mesmerized by the light, this time of oncoming cars. Tetro's advice: Avoid the light.

With that line, Francis Ford Coppola could be talking to himself: “Tetro” was released with very little fanfare in May, in a few cities on the two coasts. Its premier was at the San Francisco Film Festival, rather than the more prestigious Cannes Film Festival, in keeping with Coppola's renewed identity as an indie filmmaker. “Tetro” is wonderfully scored by Argentinian composer Osvaldo Golijov, who also wrote the music for Coppola's “Youth Without Youth” (2007). Production designer Sebastián Orgambide, a relative unknown, does a spectacular job in black and white and in color. Walter Murch, a famous picture and sound editor, and a longtime collaborator of Coppola's, mixed the soundtrack and edited the film. From a technical standpoint, “Tetro” is perfect.

Coppola's script, however, is melodramatic and the dialogue is often contrived. Audiences may find the performances dull—while Spanish actress Maribel Verdú is excellent, Gallo is too brooding and Ehrenreich is uneven. What is unusual about “Tetro” is its relatively static camera, which adds an old-fashioned look to the film, and which perfectly reflects, as it should in every movie, the emotional state of the main characters. Fans of “Rumble Fish,” and those who appreciate the other movies Coppola wrote and directed, such as “The Conversation (1974)” and “One From the Heart” (1982), will like “Tetro.”

On some level, “Tetro” is about creativity, the kind that seeks fame and ventures too close to the light, like Carlo Tetrocini's, and the sort that dwells in shadow, like Tetro's. Coppola, who basked in the spotlight for decades, is now back to the shadows, to meaningful work that heals the spirit. He is also like Bennie—rediscovering and reshaping the “smaller” movies of his younger days. ▲



Actor Alden Ehrenreich plays Bennie, Tetro's younger brother.

credits his elder brother as a coplaywright and then, in the operatic denouement, learns the terrible secret of his progeny which Tetro heroically tried to conceal from him. Tetro's past abandonment of Bennie was inspired by a desire to protect him—Tetro knows that a family's sins, in this case those of Carlo Tetrocini, rain on each succeeding generation.

In many ways, “Tetro” is a return to Coppola's 1983 film “Rumble Fish”: They're both black and white films about brothers who, in one way or another, lack paternity. “Tetro” also echoes Coppola's iconic films in the sense that a son's loss of innocence is the direct result of his father's transgressions. The elder Tetrocini's

“Tetro,” like all of Coppola's work, is multi-layered, one theme always in subtle play with another, all brilliantly articulated by cinematic metaphor. The film's leitmotiv is light: The opening shot is of a bright incandescent bulb around which a moth flutters. In Coppola's high definition black and white cinematography, beautifully rendered by Mihai Malaimare Jr. (“Youth Without Youth”), dramatic shafts of light create the shadows from which Tetro first emerges and into which he sometimes disappears. In flashback, just before the accident in which Tetro's mother dies, there is the blinding light of an oncoming truck. Near the end of the film, after Tetro