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## Tár

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# Tár

## Abstract

This is a film review of *Tár* (2022), directed by Todd Field.

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## Author Notes

Sherry Coman is the Director of the Centre for Spirituality and Media at Martin Luther University College in Waterloo, Ontario, where she also teaches courses in film, media and spirituality and also in gender justice. An ordained deacon in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, she is also a writer, educator and story editor with more than thirty years of experience in theatre and film. She works privately as a development consultant with writers and artists in film, fiction and digital media and is the curator and creator of online devotional projects.



***Tár* (2022), dir. Todd Field**

**Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Na6gA1RehsU>**

There is a holy moment which occurs about one third of the way into Todd Field's, *Tár*. The film chronicles the rock-star-like fame of Lydia Tár, conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, as she prepares to record Mahler's elusive Fifth Symphony. Lydia has just returned to her vast concrete-chic flat in Berlin after a trip to New York where she has met with her principal donor, held an extensive master class at Juilliard, and been interviewed by the New Yorker's Adam Gopnik. As she enters her home, turning off light switches and remarking aloud how they are keeping the utilities companies in business (before she has even said hello), she finds her partner Sharon in an agitated state, suffering from heart palpitations and unable to find her medication. After Tár has brought her a pill, she takes her in a gentle embrace, and says, "Let's slow this down to sixty beats a minute." Rocking her gently, Tár listens as Sharon tells her that she's worried about

their child. Once they are in an embrace, the camera never moves, nor do we have more than one view. We stay there with them until Sharon finds that she is better, listening to the slow crooning of Neal Hefti's *L'il Darling*.

It is one of the few times in the film's two hour and forty-minute length that we feel a genuine compassion and fondness for Lydia (whom everyone just calls Tár), despite that in the space of a few minutes, she has already told Sharon three substantial lies. The moment is holy because it exists in its own time and space without contributing substantially to the narrative or revealing much in the way of character. Instead we are allowed to just be with the couple, both as a witness to the tenderness and their intimacy, and also just a little bit as if we are watching intrusively. In a film that is about how abusive transactional relationships form, the scene is a respite and an anchoring, while visually and emotionally foregrounding a number of the film's essential uncomfortable themes. Lesser directors would have cut around in the scene for reactions and clarity. Instead what we are given is a steady, gentle, almost *voyeuristic* point of view.

Time is holy in Tár. In the interview sequence with Adam Gopnik, Lydia describes how a conductor controls the flow of time, including allowing time to stop altogether. Each hand has a performative function, she tells us, working together and also independently of each other. Together they represent the soul of the conductor. She says, "The *reality* is that from the very beginning... I know precisely what time it is, and the exact moment we will arrive at our destination together."<sup>1</sup> Time and space are therefore in the zone of the sacred for this artist and for the film.

Holiness, however, should not be confused with religion and its references, which also populate this film and participate in its underlying currents. The adopted Syrian daughter that Sharon is speaking of, eight-year-old Petra, is as Sharon later says, the "only relationship you've ever had that wasn't [transactional]."<sup>2</sup> Tár dedicates her new composition to Petra, whose capacity

to love her famous mother is limitless, even as it is never cloying or cute. Petra is the one source of unconditional love both given and received by Tár. Petra is an anagram of “Pater” (father); Petra offers Tár a divine-like love that enfolds her, and remains wholly innocent. Lydia is moved when she sees that Petra has lined up her stuffies in an orchestra formation, with a pencil ready to act as a baton. When her daughter is anxious, Lydia holds Petra’s foot (at her request) through a long night, falling asleep in the position.

Petra is being bullied, and Tár goes to try to solve the problem. In the car, they recite together the old poem, “Cock Robin,” an anonymous nursery rhyme that enumerates all the birds involved in an imagined funeral liturgy for Cock Robin, who was murdered. The final stanza goes, “All the birds of the air fell a-sighing and a-sobbing, when they heard the bell toll for poor Cock Robin.<sup>3</sup>” The rhythmic patter of the rhyme is played for fun in the moment, but it holds the tension of the dissipation that has already begun in Lydia’s life. Moments later, she will stare down her daughter’s bully and say, in German, “Remember this, God watches all of us.” The screenplay is careful to note that the bully is “terrified.”<sup>4</sup>

The innocent intimacy between Lydia and Petra stands in complete opposition to absolutely every other relationship Lydia has. With Sharon, her partner, she struggles to find that place of integrity; she loves her and wants to be good for her. But the lies stacked up against the partnership are legion, which Sharon seems to intuit but is incapable of addressing until much too late. Here, Cate Blanchett and Nina Hoss find a brilliant balance of tenderness and tension. The relationship is real, rooted in the habits of daily life and also about the work they do together in the orchestra, where Sharon is principal violinist. Although it evolves under her nose, Sharon doesn’t seem to see the signs of yet another crush of Lydia’s, or she sees it and doesn’t want to quite acknowledge what she sees.

One of the movie's greatest accomplishments is its careful identification of abuse with grooming, more than physical sexual activity. There is no sex in the film.<sup>5</sup> The quiet moment of intimacy with her partner to settle her heartbeat ends with a tender kiss, the only one in the film. Field seems to know that we can too easily form formulaic expectations of tropes of infidelity. Tár is seen grooming almost everyone in her life, from her former lover turned personal assistant Francesca (played with quiet depth by Noémie Merlant) to the new cellist she has her eye on (played by real-life cellist Sophie Kauer). Her addiction is to the grooming, not the sex itself. Lydia loves the power of "the little moves nearer," as Virginia Woolf once said about the process of falling in love. The little steps closer are what intoxicates.<sup>6</sup> Lydia has perfected the little steps: through lunches and private coaching, she slowly draws her new prey into her web.

Meanwhile, a cloud grows on Lydia's horizon that is threatening to become a devastating storm. A former protégée and lover named Krista, with whom Lydia seems to have been involved in a three-way relationship that included Francesca, is haunting her now at every turn. We never see Krista, except in shadowy silhouettes. Krista's unbalanced behavior has at some previous point scared Lydia, who in turn has sabotaged her potential career as a conductor. Shadows of Krista lurk literally everywhere, turning Field's film into an unexpected psychological thriller, especially after it becomes known that Krista has killed herself. The descent of Lydia is in some ways into what Krista has left behind, as one by one the pieces of her life start to topple. Before she kills herself, Krista stalks Lydia, in a desperate bid to understand why she has been rejected. Since Tár won't read her emails, Krista communicates in enigmatic maze drawings. Tár begins to see them everywhere. When she takes a gift left at her hotel by a stranger onto a flight with her, she goes into an airplane toilet to open it. When it turns out to be a first-edition of Vita Sackville-West's *Challenge*, she is at first impressed until she turns the page and sees the author's name crossed out

and replaced by a maze-like drawing. Frightened, she tears the page out of the book and tries to stuff the whole book into a tiny garbage slot.

The level of detail in Field's script is a tribute to the decade-plus that he spent writing it. The film has a number of references to lesbians, even without considering the lesbian cinema running in the background of its casting.<sup>7</sup> Sackville-West's novel is a straightened-up fictional account of her own relationship with Violet Trefusis (a Mayfair aristocrat rumored to be illegitimate royalty) which ended badly when both their husbands found them in France and dragged them home. The book is essentially about scandal and irresistible sexual attraction. Sackville-West and Trefusis had a role-playing relationship in real life in which Vita was the dominant traditionally cis-masculine figure in drag. Although equals in social status, Vita acted like a predator. Their relationship was passionately physical and obsessive; at times it was violent and dangerous. Vita had barely recovered from it and settled down when she found herself in love with—yes—Virginia Woolf. The book is a packed detail for its mere momentary close-up before being shredded by Tár. And it is just one of the many symbolic literary, cultural, and theological references that populate the film.<sup>8</sup>

In terms of her own influences, however, Lydia is most beholden to Leonard Bernstein, whose philosophy of music provides a woven thread of meaning—from the first time he is mentioned in the opening extended interview of Tár with Adam Gopnik, to the last-act moments of the film when Lydia is re-watching old VHS tapes of Bernstein's youth concerts after her life has completely fallen apart. The interview with Gopnik acts like the royal portal of a medieval cathedral, positioned as it is at the beginning. It hints at or sets up literally all of the themes that the film will embrace. During the conversation, there are several religious cultural references that rely on the listener having an intimacy with a range of vernacular religious idioms. When talking

about gender bias in the conducting industry, for instance, Tár describes the heavy lifting done by the women conductors who paved the way. She then says, “At that time, it was all gender spectacle. Fortunately, times change. The Pauline conversion is, if not complete, then evolving nicely.”<sup>9</sup> The “Pauline conversion” refers to the apostle Paul, who converted to following Jesus after a moment of reckoning on the road to Damascus, as described in Acts 9. Paul has been until this moment a predator of Jesus-followers, rounding them up and imprisoning and/or killing them. He then becomes a follower himself and a principal founder of the early church. Lydia is implying that a profound moment of reckoning, which temporarily disables the recipient, is what it takes to change direction. The line signals what she herself will be forced to do. Tár, however, remains blind to her opportunities for transformation. The ending of Tár makes clear that nothing will really change about Lydia, even as her own life continues to shatter.

During the interview with Gopnik, two Jewish theological or philosophical ideas are named by Tár in relation to Bernstein’s teaching. One is the principal of “teshuvah,” which derives from the days between Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashana, in which the faithful one repents from past behavior and commits to a revisioning, to a new way of being. Lydia brings up the term while talking about her preparation for the upcoming recording of Mahler’s Fifth Symphony. She says:

But Lenny believed in *teshuvah*, the Talmudic power to reach back in time and transform the significance of one’s past deeds. When he played the Adagietto at Robert Kennedy’s funeral it ran *twelve minutes*. He treated it as a mass, and if you listen to a recording of it you will no doubt feel the pathos and tragedy. That interpretation was very true for Mahler later in life, after the professional bottom dropped out and Alma had abandoned him for Gropius. But, as I said before, we are dealing with time. And this piece was *not* born into aching tragedy, it was born into young love.<sup>10</sup>

Lydia is explaining why her approach to Mahler will be different than one Bernstein might make, as it will be through the lens of young love, which was the place in life that Mahler was in at the time of composing the symphony. She tells the audience that given the choice between a



future perspective looking back (*teshuvah*), and being immersed in the composer's moment of creating, she chooses the present. In this case, she "chooses love." In the following scene at the interview reception, this forms the substance of flirtation between Lydia and a young woman, one that we later intuit has led to sex.

The other Jewish principle that Lydia mentions is "kavanah," an intention of emotional expression that is often associated with liturgy and ritual. Here, Lydia is naming a direct influence on her from Bernstein, understanding the composer's priorities. This strong perspective will be demonstrated in a master class at Juilliard in which Lydia harasses a young musician for not wanting to explore the work of Bach owing to his European heritage and misogyny. For Lydia, the composer's will is everything. She says in that scene:

Of course, siloing what's acceptable or not acceptable is a construct of many, if not most, symphony orchestras, who see it as their imperial right to *curate* for the cretins. So, slippery as it is, there's some merit in examining Max's allergy. *Can* classical music written by a bunch of straight, Austro-German, church-going white guys, exalt us individually, as well as collectively? And *who*, may I ask, gets to decide that? (She turns back to Max) What about Beethoven? Are you into him? Because for *meee*? As a U-Haul Lesbian? I'm not really sure about ol' Ludwig. But then I face him and find myself nose-to-nose with his magnitude and inevitability.<sup>11</sup>

Lydia is placing a priority on the output of the artist and their accomplishments in a way that puts her out of synch with contemporary sensibilities. She is unable to see that to a young eye, talent associated with abusive power reduces the achievement of the artist. She herself will eventually succumb to that reality. "You must stand in front of the public and God and obliterate yourself,"<sup>12</sup> she says to the young musician—but after he has already walked out on her.

About midway through the film, as Lydia makes the decision to follow her new object of desire into an abandoned building, the film appears to take a shift. The sequence includes many elements that don't quite make sense or add up: the abandoned building is filled with signs of squatting residents—despite the fact that Olga, her new protégée, has a good job in a major

orchestra and would not be living this way. Anxious to get out of what is literally an underworld of debris and flooding, Lydia falls and severely injures her face. For many viewers, this moment marks a turning point into a kind of surrealism that will characterize the remainder of the film and Tár's downfall. Lydia's gift for lying will help her navigate the coming days, but something has gone off the rails. The subtle nuance of these scenes eventually becomes bold counterpoint, like an intentional orchestral variation from the predominant melodic lines of a score. Has the film suddenly veered into a different genre? Audiences are divided and have written extensively about the possibility.<sup>13</sup>

Ultimately, *Tár* is not just about a predator, but about how one becomes a predator as the culmination of life experiences. Towards the end, the film gives us glimpses of the life that Lydia had as a young person, in which music may well have been her one happy place. Ultimately, music is and will always be her life. When her career is ruined, Lydia still continues to work. A gig is finally found for her: to conduct an orchestra in the Philippines, as they create a soundtrack for the video game, *Monster Hunter*. Although never named, the title finds other ways to convey its reality. Working now to a click-track, Lydia has lost control of time; she is required to be at the service of a different kind of spectacle. As a video screen is lowered, she nonetheless raises her arms and awaits a downbeat, her energy and passion, undeterred.

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<sup>1</sup> Todd Field, *Tár*. Found in Kate Aurthur, “Read Todd Field’s ‘Tár’ Screenplay (EXCLUSIVE).” [variety.com](https://variety.com/2023/film/news/tar-screenplay-todd-field-full-script-1235481317/), Jan. 9, 2023. Accessed at: <https://variety.com/2023/film/news/tar-screenplay-todd-field-full-script-1235481317/>

<sup>2</sup> Todd Field, *Tár* screenplay, p.81.

<sup>3</sup> Todd Field, *Tár* screenplay. p.29.

<sup>4</sup> Todd Field, *Tár* screenplay. p.29.

<sup>5</sup> There is a very brief one or two-second insert image of Lydia being held and caressed by Krista, late in the film. It is the only physical intimacy other than the dancing among Lydia and Sharon.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted by Vita Sackville-West in her diary. See *Love Letters: Virginia Woolf, Vita Sackville-West, Introduction by Alison Bechdel*. London: Random House (Vintage Classics), 2021. Kindle Edition.

<sup>7</sup> Blanchett previously played the title role in *Carol*; Noémie Merlant played the lead in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, as two examples.

<sup>8</sup> Although beyond the scope of this review, the topical references to the classical music world alone would require pages to itemize.

<sup>9</sup> Todd Field, *Tár* screenplay, p.6.

<sup>10</sup> Todd Field, *Tár* screenplay, p.9. For more on “teshuvah,” see “Teshuvah in Judaism: A Guide to Repentance,” on the website of Brandeis University. Accessed at: <https://www.brandeis.edu/jewish-experience/holidays-religious-traditions/2021/september/atonement-yom-kippur-mirsky.html>

<sup>11</sup> Todd Field, *Tár* screenplay, p.19.

<sup>12</sup> Todd Field, *Tár* screenplay, p.21.

<sup>13</sup> See Robert Pitman, “Tár Ending Explained (in Detail),” in Screen Rant, February 23, 2023. The article includes a section titled, “Was Tár’s Ending A Hallucination?”. Accessed at: <https://screenrant.com/tar-ending-explained/>