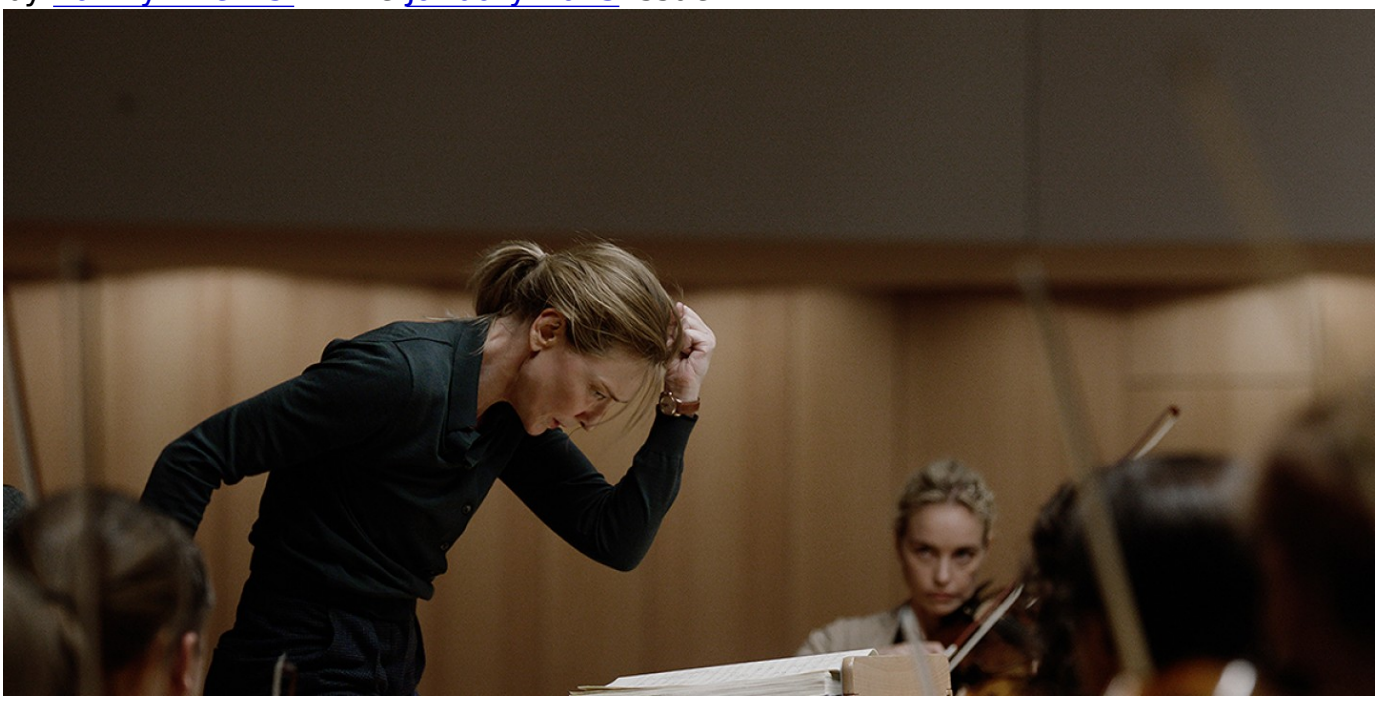
Judging Lydia Tár

Todd Field’s movie about a megalomaniacal musician is, like his earlier films, interested in moral ambiguity.

by Kathryn Reklis in the January 2023 issue



Cate Blanchett as fictional composer and conductor Lydia Tár. (Photo courtesy of Focus Features)

Early in the movie *Tár* (directed by Todd Field), Lydia Tár (Cate Blanchett) is holding forth about her art and life to a packed crowd at a *New Yorker* public talk. Lydia is a world-famous conductor and composer who has won all the awards (literally) and broken all the glass ceilings, and now thousands of people will pay to hear her talk about anything she wants. Answering a question about what, exactly, a conductor does, beyond just starting and stopping the music, she laughs and then pauses. Starting the music, she says, is itself far more than it seems. It is about controlling time—beginning the time of the music, but also slowing it down or rushing it along. Music is time, she says, and the conductor is the master of both.

It becomes clear that Lydia thinks of herself as a master off stage as well as on, and the rest of the movie is an intimate portrait of the way she wields power—ruthlessly, meticulously, self-servingly—and the way it undoes her. The portrait is of a person who has willed herself into mastery through natural genius, unrelenting work, and manipulation of everyone around her for personal ends. As her wife says bitterly, all her relationships are transactional, valued only for what they will contribute to her success and self-importance. Like many powerful men before her, Lydia made some of these transactions with young women she seduced with the promise of professional success or the allure of proximity to greatness.

Field has only directed three films—*In the Bedroom* (2001) and *Little Children* (2006) before *Tár*—and each explores the subject of moral ambiguity. Each withholds a final judgment on its characters, while also asking viewers to think seriously about what it means to not know for sure how to judge something. Each interrogates how to make judgments or take action on the basis of imperfect knowledge and unsure wisdom.

Tár comes at a time of heightened judgment and moral outrage, and the film dives headfirst into the relationship between artistic and moral judgment and how we adjudicate the various wrongs of structural injustice. Are we supposed to feel pity for Lydia because she is a woman, and a lesbian, who struggled from lower class obscurity in a male-dominated world? Whose side are we on when she challenges a class of Juilliard students not to give up on all classical composers just because they were straight, White men? Would we overlook her manipulative behavior if she were a man, or do we judge her more harshly for it because she is a woman and a mother? Do we expect a certain amount of megalomania from great artists and then excoriate them for exhibiting it?

This last justification is clearly one Lydia herself relies on. Throughout the film she retreats from the incessant demands of her public life to the first apartment she rented when she moved to Berlin. As she paces alone we watch her transform random sounds into new music in acts that skirt the border between genius and mental breakdown. This small apartment is for Lydia a literal embodiment of her artistic freedom. That it is also where she launches new sexual dalliances is not at all beside the point. When she scoffs at the idea that we could or should neglect a great composer’s work because of their private sexual behavior, she is defending both the canon and her own eventual place in it.

Somehow the film manages to be clear-eyed about the monstrosity of Lydia's self-serving manipulation and her self-aggrandizing justifications but without simply standing in judgment of her. It does this, largely, through Field's own masterful control of time. We move from repetitive cycles— Lydia's daily run, her pacing composition, the same notes played over and over, the orchestra rehearsal room—to a new scene that might be days, weeks, or even months further in time, a decision being enacted or an event suddenly upon us. Time slows to a circadian rhythm and then rushes forward, the steady accumulation of decisions and actions catching up with Lydia—and with us—in a sudden arrival that feels both surprising and necessary.

Instead of offering us exposition or internal monologues, Field brings us into the flow of time of his characters, which is life itself. Only later—when we are discussing the film with friends—will we realize how much work we have already done supplying motives for or thinking alongside the characters, and how implicated we are in their own imperfect judgments.

This is another feature of Field's films: they demand and elicit discussion. In anticipation of *Tár*'s release, my husband and I rewatched *In the Bedroom*, which has been one of my favorite films for 20 years. We sat on our couch talking way past normal parental bedtime, reasoning through the motivations and judgments of the characters, feeling new devastation and new understanding at all the ways the characters destroy their lives through ignorance and love, debating just what we thought a scene meant and if it mattered who was right about it and whether or not a character could have known differently. I want everyone to see *Tár* simply so I can talk about it with them.

And this, in the end, is the real secret of judgment: it is never perfect or complete, and it only matters if it happens in communal discernment. Or as Lydia says to her Juilliard students: great music—great art—is about the question, and the answer that leads to a new question.