

## DVD Review: Coppola's 'Tetro' Arrives With a Wealth of Special Features

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CHICAGO – It's been thirty-five years since Francis Ford Coppola wrote an original screenplay for one of his pictures, and though "Tetro" is certainly not in the same league as his last singular written work (1974's "The Conversation"), it is still the most cinematically exciting, hauntingly beautiful, and achingly personal film he's made in decades.

The low-budget, intimate "Tetro" is easily his best work since 1986's "Peggy Sue Got Married," and it shares some striking similarities with his 1983 drama "Rumble Fish." That film was about a troubled kid (Matt Dillon) who strained to live up to the formidable reputation of his older brother (Mickey Rourke). "Tetro" is also about the dysfunctional relationship between two brothers, and Coppola originally intended to cast Dillon as the older sibling (the role eventually went to controversial indie filmmaker Vincent Gallo). Like "Fish," "Tetro" is shot in a richly nostalgic yet sharply crisp black and white evocative of the Elia Kazan/Marlon Brando classics that influenced Coppola.



DVD Rating: **4.0/5.0**

As Tetro, the brooding would-be playwright with a tormented past and self-created name, Gallo has the freshness and unpredictability, but not the razor-sharp chops, of a young Brando. He's fittingly enigmatic, but the film belongs to seventeen-year-old newcomer Alden Ehrenreich as his younger brother Bennie, who has a striking handsomeness and natural screen presence reminiscent of Emile Hirsch. Though the film is set in a modern world of laptops and cell phones, much of the imagery (gorgeously lensed by Mihai Malaimare, Jr.) seems to belong in a period piece. When Bennie shows up at Tetro's apartment in Buenos Aires, he's dressed as if he just returned from the Navy, until it's revealed that he's merely a waiter on a cruise line.

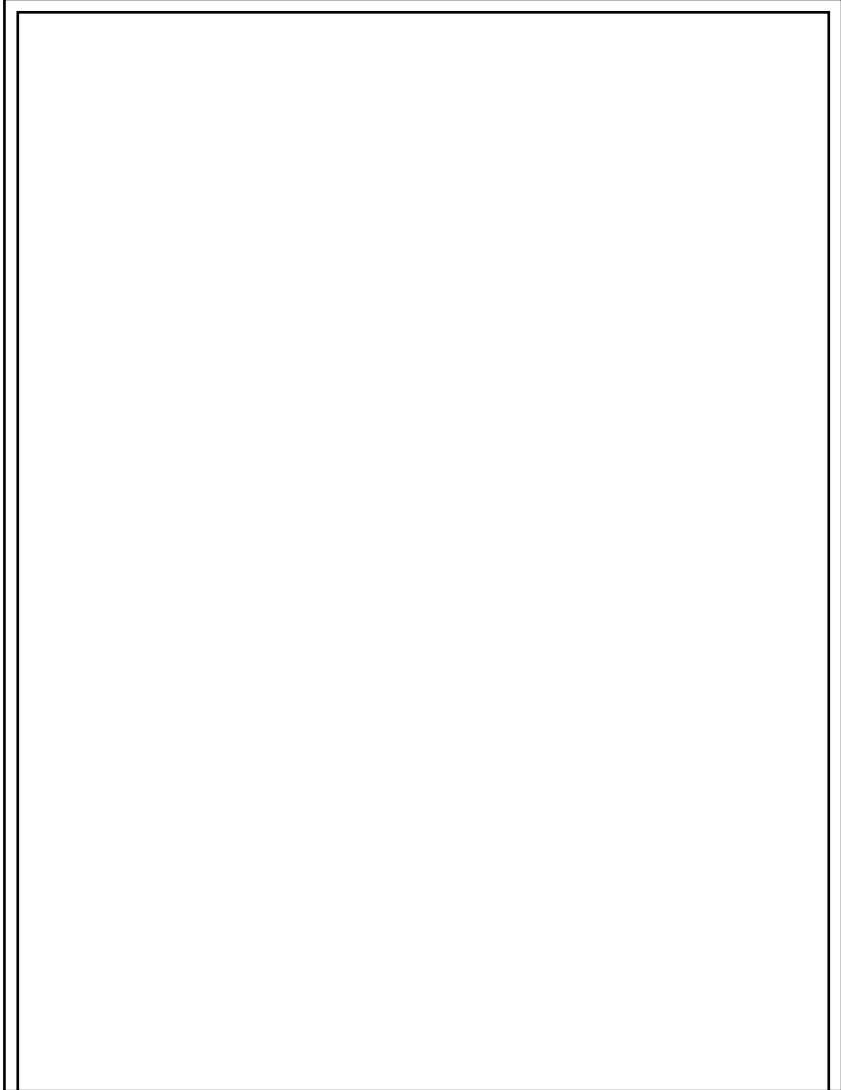
Bennie is desperate to reconnect with his long-absent brother, and learn about the family history that Tetro is hellbent on forgetting. As Bennie inches closer to his anticipated reunion, he steps over a fallen banner in the street that states "you can't go back." A pretentious flourish? Perhaps, but it also poetically illustrates Coppola's belief that the gravitational power of family is unavoidable, and past betrayals may have operatic implications in the future. When Tetro first saw Bennie's reflection through his door, his reaction was probably identical to that of Michael Corleone: "Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in."



Vincent Gallo and Alden Ehrenreich star in Francis Ford Coppola's *Tetro*.  
*Photo credit: Lionsgate Home Entertainment*

While the first two-thirds of “Tetro” are superb, the final act slowly falls apart, as Coppola reaches for grandiose dramatic twists, and instead ends up with a handful of forced clichés. Like Scorsese’s “Shutter Island,” “Tetro” works as less of a satisfying narrative than a hyper-stylized celebration of cinema itself, as Coppola pays blatant homage to several of his artistic heroes, both in theatre and film. Various fantasy sequences are visualized with bursts of surrealistic color and dance choreography modeled after Michael Powell (also a major influence on Scorsese).

Because of the film’s autobiographical elements, many viewers may be tempted to speculate on which character is meant to represent Coppola (I’d argue there’s a bit of him in everyone). Bennie looks up to Tetro in the same way Coppola looked up to his older brother; their father was an egotistical composer (as was Coppola’s), and Tetro’s therapist-turned-girlfriend (warmly played by Maribel Verdú) attempts to explain his erratic behavior with the poignant line, “He’s a genius without enough accomplishments.” The same line could arguably apply to Coppola himself, who made at least three of the all-time greatest films in the 1970s, before gradually sinking into oblivion with a string of disappointments. When Tetro tells an influential critic that her “opinion doesn’t matter” to him anymore, it reflects Coppola’s new goal to simply make films that he cares about, returning to the type of personal filmmaking he once championed.





Tetro was released on Blu-Ray and DVD on May 4th, 2010.

Photo credit: Lionsgate Home Entertainment

Just as "Tetro" harkens back to an earlier period in Coppola's career, the film's DVD release harkens back to the pre-Blu-Ray era of home entertainment. While the majority of new releases arrive on DVD with next to no special features, thus forcing true film buffs to purchase a Blu-Ray player, the DVD version of "Tetro" is loaded with extras, despite the fact that it's simultaneously being released on Blu-Ray. The film looks just glorious, and is presented in its 2.35:1 aspect ratio, accompanied by English and Spanish subtitles.

Each of the five behind-the-scenes featurettes are first-rate, providing a wealth of fascinating tidbits. Coppola discusses his collaboration with choreographer Ana María Stekelman, and the forty minutes of dance she created for the film, which worried the director's longtime editor Walter Murch. Malaimare, Jr. says that Coppola wanted the black and white cinematography to resemble still photographs, and the color flashbacks to be shot in the style of home movies (they were originally going to have a grainier texture, similar to the color montages in "Raging Bull"). The director's reliance on rehearsals proved to be a challenge for Gallo, who felt that it might dilute the spontaneity of his performance, yet much of his improvisation made the final cut. It was through rehearsals that Coppola realized the flaws in his last act, and enlisted his actors to help rewrite it. There's also an excellent interview with composer Osvaldo Golijov (who aimed to capture a "nostalgic optimism" in his music), a visit to the real psychiatric hospital used in the film (where patients participate in a live radio broadcast), the full "Fausta" performance from the film, and the complete end credits, which Coppola axed from the final cut (he still dislikes long credit rolls, and openly blames Lucas's "THX 1138" for starting the trend).

Yet despite all these goodies, the best extra by far is the audio commentary featuring the director and his young breakout star. Coppola and Ehrenreich recorded their tracks separately, and though their juxtaposition is somewhat jarring, the commentary is still a thoroughly rewarding listen. The filmmaker is rather candid about the story's connections to his personal life, and says that the film was born out of his teenage obsession with playwrights like Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams. He truly believes that "Tetro" is a return to the kind of filmmaking he had in mind when he founded American Zoetrope. On the basis of this promising feature, it looks like this Coppola kid has potential.

*'Tetro' is released by Lionsgate Home Entertainment and stars Vincent Gallo, Alden Ehrenreich, Maribel Verdú, Klaus Maria Brandauer, Carmen Maura, Rodrigo De la Serna, Leticia Brédice and Sofía Castiglione. It was written and directed by Francis Ford Coppola. It was released on May 4th, 2010. It is rated R.*



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