

# The transcendence of memory

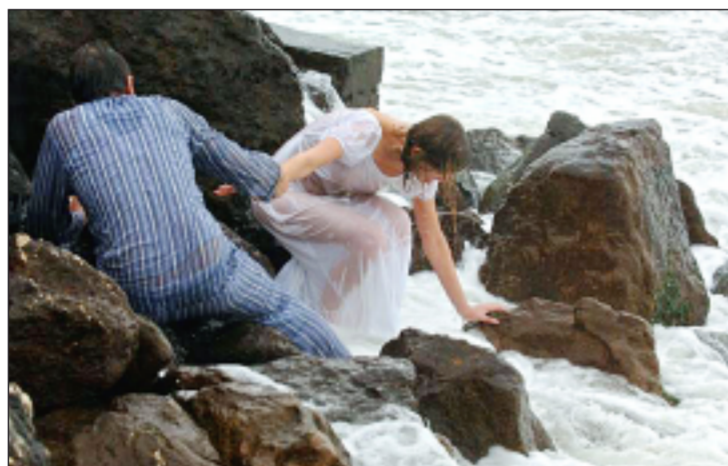
*Time swirls like wind-scattered leaves in Francis Ford Coppola's first feature film in a decade*

BY MANOHLA DARGIS  
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In recent years Francis Ford Coppola has been most famous for the wines he's made, for the legacy he's fiddled with — he released restored versions of two of his earlier films, *Apocalypse Now* and *The Outsiders* — and for the female director he sired. It has been 10 very long years since Sofia Coppola's father released a new feature, but now here he is with *Youth Without Youth*, a narratively ambitious, visually sumptuous surrealist enterprise in which he has tried to bend time and space together as neatly as the folds in an origami swan.

It is a complex assemblage (closer to phoenix than swan), and by turns bewitching, inspiring, enervating and confounding. The unlikely source material is a novella by Mircea Eliade, a prolific, Romanian-born historian of religion (1907 to 1986), who wrote about myth, ritual, yoga, shamanism and folklore and, among other pursuits, charted the divide between how time is experienced by so-called primitive man (cyclically) and his modern counterpart (linearly). For Dominic Matei (Tim Roth), the Romanian question mark at the center of Francis Ford Coppola's adaptation of the Eliade novella, time doesn't begin here and end there (despite the film's opening and closing credits); it swirls like wind-scattered leaves.

The story, well, how to encapsulate someone else's dream? In brief outline, it opens with Dominic, his body stooped and head crowned by a snowy tonsure, being struck by lightning while hurrying across



## Film Notes

### YOUTH WITHOUT YOUTH

DIRECTED BY:  
FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA

STARRING:  
TIM ROTH (DOMINIC MATEI), ALEXANDRA MARIA LARA (VERONICA/LAURA), BRUNO GANZ (PROFESSOR STANCIULESCU), ANDRE M. HENNICKE (DR JOSEF RUDOLF), MARCEL IURES (PROFESSOR TUCCI), ALEXANDRA PIRICI (WOMAN IN ROOM 6), ADRIAN PINTEA (PANDIT) AND FLORIN PIERSIC JR (DR GAVRILA)

RUNNING TIME:  
126 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:  
TODAY

a rainy Bucharest street in 1938. Subsequently hospitalized (Bruno Ganz helps care for him), Dominic loses his teeth, sprouts new ones and miraculously reverts to his physical prime, complete with a thick head of hair. Over the next few decades, through a

haze of elliptical, drifting scenes, he remembers an old love (Alexandra Maria Lara), romps with a femme fatale (Alexandra Pirici), settles in Switzerland, finds a new love (Lara), absorbs libraries of knowledge, travels to India, speaks in archaic



Alexandra Maria Lara, above, stars in *Youth Without Youth*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF AMERICAN ZETROPE

tongues and takes counsel from his intermittently visible double (Roth).

At one point in the original story Dominic asks — of himself and his double — “Will I ever succeed in demonstrating logically the reality of the exterior world?” His double assures him that the problem isn't the reality of the exterior world, “but the objective reality of the ‘double’ or the guardian angel.” The double may not exist empirically, but he exists nonetheless, perhaps as a projection of a madman or the dream of a dying man. (We never discover which.) Whatever the case, the precise nature of Dominic's double and the metaphysical questions it (he) inspires work well enough on the page, in part because the exterior world summoned up in the Eliade story is of course a projection of sorts — words on paper, nothing more.

It's another matter entirely when that world is translated to a movie screen, where Dominic's fantastical life — easy enough to absorb in written form — takes visible shape. Suddenly, instead of interesting nouns, adjectives and philosophical meditations on the divide between reality and unreality, there is Roth (or at least his representation), wearing early-20th-century clothing and pushing through a thicket of narrative complication. He looks somewhat baffled, though that may admittedly be my own projection. Coppola has created some strikingly beautiful images in *Youth Without Youth* — his framing remains impeccable, as does his sense of color, proportion and pictorial harmony — but too many of these lovely, mysterious visions have the aura of private reveries, dreams still locked inside the dreamer's head.

In part Coppola seems to be trying to put into visual terms Eliade's notion of personal “holy places.” In his book *The Sacred and the Profane* Eliade writes that our lives contain privileged areas — the scenes of first love, the first foreign city we visit when we're young — that reveal a reality beyond our ordinary existence. And because we experience different realities, thresholds — like those found between the street and the church — are of great importance. “The threshold is the limit,” he writes, “the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds — and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible.” He might as well be writing about the street and the movie theater.

Not long ago Coppola — whose greatest films have long been holy places for some of us — wrote that his adaptation of *Youth Without Youth* is “all about” consciousness. (“The reality in which we live is beyond our immediate perceptions.”) I think it's all about movies, the pre-eminent mind-machine of the modern age, and the desire of an older, established, long-dormant director to tap into creative (metaphoric) youth by exploring some of the same cinematic concerns that possessed modernist filmmakers like Antonioni. In this film Coppola blurs dreams and everyday life and suggests that through visual and narrative experimentation he has begun the search for new ways of making meaning, new holy places for him and for us. He may not have found them yet, but, then, he's just waking up.