

The Murdochian Moral Vision and the Art of Contemporary Cinema

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Bolton, Lucy. *Contemporary Cinema and the Philosophy of Iris Murdoch*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2019. 228 pages. ISBN 9781474416399. Pbk. £75.00.

Lucy Bolton's careful and inspiring comparative study connects Iris Murdoch's concepts to the philosophical debates of contemporary cinema. So far, Murdoch's oeuvre and life have been articulated in two filmic productions: the 1971 adaptation of her novel *A Severed Head* (1961) with Ian Holm, Richard Attenborough, and Claire Bloom in the leading roles; and *Iris* (2001), an Oscar-winning biography about Murdoch's own struggle with dementia. Apart from these two movies, neither film adaptations nor scholarly analysis has so far addressed the cinematic approaches of Murdoch's philosophy or novels. Nevertheless, both her fiction and her philosophy, with their concerns about the nature of art and the power of images over us and our moral choices, call for related scholarly and artistic interpretations, which Bolton's study successfully accomplishes. This, however, is a challenging task, since in many of her philosophical writings, Murdoch voices her suspicion of visual culture as a weapon of political tyranny, which can obstruct imagination and endanger the individual's inner life. With a thorough analysis of Murdoch's essay "On Cinema"—published in the August 1956 issue of the British *Vogue*—Bolton highlights the ways Murdoch became engaged with film as a visual art, whose formal principles are founded upon movement, vision, direction, and experience, whereas its momentary emotional impact upon us occurs through its presentation of human drama.

In "The Sublime and the Good" (1959), Iris Murdoch identifies love as the essence of both art and morals that altogether helps the individual to perceive the reality that is independent of his or her self-serving fantasy (215). For Murdoch, the understanding that this reality is different from the self is difficult, since all notions of the world are many times overshadowed by the self's own desires. To look at the world as a form of being that exists differently from the ego's fantasy of it, in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1989), Murdoch introduces the concept of "unselfing," the moral process "wherein the lover learns to see, and cherish and respect, what is not himself" (17). As Bolton emphasizes, movies challenge the viewer's assumptions about the world by presenting other realities and thereby making the audience reflect upon moral choices and relationships.

Following an extensive introduction to Murdoch's philosophy and her engagement with film theory, Bolton addresses Murdoch's theory on good and bad art, according to which the former can direct the viewer's gaze from the self to the other, while the latter traps the individual into his or her egotistic fantasy. Bolton argues that films are capable of both, and she explains the ways they may make us see the worlds they represent: for instance, with the close-up on the title character's face in *Jackie* (2016), the creation of distance in *Stories We Tell* (2012), and the ways of depicting a post-human world in *Under the Skin* (2013).

Bolton approaches cinematic productions as morally instructive fables that are capable of evoking our ethical experience of the world, presenting several scenes of reality where some moral journeys occur (53). While some movies make the audience look into other worlds by their special use of cinematography, in films such as *Margaret* (2011), *Blue Jasmine* (2013), and *Compliance* (2012), it is the narrative that overrides our assumptions about the characters and their actions that we would deem as ethically questionable. Bolton discusses the difficulties of moral life in *Margaret*, whereby Lisa, the movie's heroine, recognizes the complexities of moral circumstances that affect one's choices, actions, and relationships. This reflection on the world enables not only the film's characters but also the audience to develop a form of empathic insight into ethical problems. In Woody Allen's *Blue Jasmine*, the audience is challenged to question its view of the character with the narrative's flashbacks to her back-story and the bad choice that resulted in the death of her husband, the estrangement of her stepson, and her mental breakdown. In her analysis of *Compliance*—a true story based on a series of events in which a restaurant manager was convinced, by a mysterious caller claiming to be a police officer, to carry out illicit actions on her employee that included strip searching—Bolton argues that the film raises awareness of moral responsibility for the choices being made. The question is not only what one would do, but also how one would act differently from the characters under circumstances similar to the ones that the movie represents. What connects these films to Murdoch's philosophical views is that they provide the audience with a moral vision that enables them to reflect on the difficult moral choices the characters encounter and to look at them with a more empathetic eye, a notion that Murdoch explains in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* as the ultimate task of all art (140).

"Film and the Existential Hero(ine)" presents characters that all live with the conviction that they act in others' interest, yet they are either trapped within their own egoism or they make choices that can affect their reputation.

Performance and performativity are central to *Clouds of Sils Maria* (2014), in which its movie-star character (Juliette Binoche) pursues self-reflection in the course of real-life and film role-plays. The problem of acting morally right and in others' interest is in the foreground of the closing scenes of *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (2011), where a doctor is faced with the dilemma of whether he should reveal or conceal the truth of how a man was killed, following an autopsy. Self-serving attention is at the heart of *Graduation* (2016), where a middle-aged doctor tries to get his daughter's graduation results fixed by making questionable compromises.

Bolton deals with the concepts of love and goodness and the way they culminate in the individual's loving attention—Murdoch's concept that she borrows from Plato and Simone Weil—to suffering. She identifies goodness and love in Murdoch's philosophy as the individual's moral knowledge of the world, and the films under discussion seek to set out how this knowledge can be gained in our reality that is essentially intolerant, cruel, and indifferent to suffering. In *The Edge of Heaven* (2007), the film's complex narrative network sheds light on worlds where tolerance and openness to the social margins become questionable in the political, social, and personal spheres, all of which are strongly influenced by injustice and terrible coincidences. The unexpected intervention of death frees the movie's hero from the imprisonment of the ego and makes him look at the world with some tolerance and openness. In *I've Loved You So Long* (2008), Bolton illustrates how the prejudices of society and family collide with the individual's inner world in the story of a woman who, after her fifteen-year imprisonment for performing euthanasia on her fatally ill child, tries to overcome her melancholy over her own actions and her mental detachment from the outside world. Bolton describes the blind motherly love in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011) as well as the challenging process through which the audience can relate to Eva (Tilda Swinton) by gradually gaining more insights into her complex personality.

Murdoch's notion of the tragic and the comic is fundamental to her thinking as a philosopher and a novelist. Her novels portray both tragic and comic elements, free characters, and intricate sexual entanglements, reflecting her view that our human condition and our reality are a set of contingencies and, as such, are incomplete. "Film, Comedy and Tragedy" examines this issue, approaching the comic and the strange as a means of ridiculing totality in *The Death of Stalin* (2017) and as a mockery of upper-middle-class intellect in *Elle* (2016), whereas in *Manchester by the Sea* (2016), tragedy serves as a window to a reality that is filled with guilt and a series of traumatic events but also involves the possibility of reconciliation.

Murdoch's philosophy might be relevant to the relationship between women's stories and film, a rather challenging point, since Murdoch, although being in favor of women's liberation in terms of education, was highly critical of the emerging women's studies, arguing that since women's stories are primarily human stories, such separation obscures our view of the general human condition. Bolton contends that while Murdoch is arguably quite critical of women's studies, what allies her with feminism is her quest for the lived bodily and social experiences of both men and women. The films discussed in this chapter—*Certain Women* (2016), *The Unknown Girl* (2016), and *Girlhood* (2014)—feature women's stories whose lives are interwoven with ordinary, everyday events that they become part of as individuals, and whose femininity is tied to their bodily experience and to prescriptive social norms.

The concluding chapter reiterates the question of how Murdoch's philosophy contributes to film studies and film philosophy. The author powerfully connects Murdoch's notions on aesthetics and the philosopher as an artist to the aesthetics of cinema, on a metaphysical level, claiming that both philosophy and movies can reflect on the nature of virtue and goodness, and both might induce moral action. Moreover, both art and philosophy can be either corrupted by politics or become a reliable source for reflection on the current political situation. It is essential to note here that both "good" and "bad" are categories for Murdoch by which she indicates the moral functions of art. Thus, while a "bad" film manipulates our senses and distorts our perceptions of the world, a "good" film can widen our horizon of thinking and create tolerance and solidarity.

To recognize different people and their different social and subjective realities is especially important at the time of the #MeToo movement and various transforming notions of how to represent race, class, gender, and sexuality in movies. This gives evidence to Bolton's argument that contemporary cinema is a relevant model for Murdoch's views on the role of art, in that "two hours of experiencing an engaging, challenging film does indeed expose us to scenarios and worlds that are not our own, but which offer the opportunity to see stories and exchanges that might challenge and develop our thinking" (29). Bolton's work explores not only new territories of the potential interrelatedness of film theory and Murdoch's philosophical ideas, but also new approaches to and debates on how we think about the moral function of movies.

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