

Lucy Bolton (2019) *Contemporary Cinema and the Philosophy of Iris Murdoch*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 238 pp.

In her introduction to *Contemporary Cinema and the Philosophy of Iris Murdoch*, Lucy Bolton begins her dialogue with the philosopher through one precious and impressive resource: an unearthed essay written by Murdoch on the *art of the cinema*, resurrected from the British *Vogue* archive, first published in 1956. This act in itself is emblematic of Bolton's tenacity as a researcher whose investment in Murdoch leads her to re-investigate archival material found at Kingston University's Murdoch archives, as well as much beyond this. Drawing on the revelatory contents of the *Vogue* essay, as well careful examination of much of Murdoch's entire body of work (which is no small feat), Bolton asserts a "Murdochian" film experience, engaging with a wide range of contemporary films in order to put forth a case for a new, and vividly fleshed out, form of ethical spectatorship. As a contribution to the field of film-philosophical enquiry, especially ethical thinking, this book is outstanding and will be important reading for those whose interests lie in philosophy and film. However, I firmly believe that this book honours more than its title suggests. For, Bolton is an accomplished writer *and* thinker, and the creative and theoretical analyses here are of a cadence I can only describe as an imaginative moral work in its own right.

I was first made aware of Bolton's research on Murdoch at the 2015 *Film-Philosophy* conference at the University of Oxford. At the time, Bolton was already established as a key thinker in film-philosophical discourse, well known for her monograph on the French feminist thinking of Luce Irigaray (Bolton 2011). With this in mind, Bolton's encounter with Murdoch makes sense; while entirely different subjects, an implicit constellation of female thought is enmeshed in her address of Murdoch, especially her analysis of female consciousness and embodiment through *Stories We Tell* (Sarah Polley, Canada, 2012), *Margaret* (Kenneth Lonergan, USA, 2011), *Birth* (Jonathan Glazer, UK/France/Germany/USA, 2004), *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, UK/Switzerland, 2013) and *Clouds of Sils Maria* (Olivier Assayas, France/Germany/Switzerland, 2014). While Bolton's writings on Irigaray sought to address, invariably, the moral and intersubjective nature of film viewing, the contours of this work are realigned through Murdoch with a deepening desire to show, to envision, film as a philosophical object that might just reveal to us stark new ways in which to be in the world. Bolton's conference paper offered up an analysis of *Blue Jasmine* (Woody Allen, USA, 2013), focusing on "how the moral philosophy of Murdoch, in particular her thoughts on the moral value of art, suggests how experiencing film can be a matter of exercising

and interrogating personal moral vision” (Bolton 2015). Building on this research, the first part of Bolton’s book delves further into the Murdoch archives in order to analyse cinema as a “hall of reflection” (p. 27), with special emphasis on Murdoch’s conception of art:

And here in the presence of art, and, I suggest, the engagement with a film world, we can understand what Murdoch means when she says that “A great work of art gives one a sense of space, as if one had been invited into some large hall of reflection”.

Cinema as a large hall of reflection is a suitably spacious, yet constrained, and visually resonant metaphor for the moving images and affective sounds on the cinema screen. (p. 27)

In dialogue with Murdoch’s analysis of art and the specificity of cinema, especially the close-up, Bolton writes on Murdoch’s concept of “loving attention” and how this might ultimately conjure a certain rigour of vision, an evaluation and progression of morality which might, in turn, “constitute a significant intervention in film aesthetics and ethics and open out a new way of conceptualising film’s moral and ethical possibilities” (p. 25). This theoretical model of Murdochian insight, which might operate within a prism of thought in seemingly similar ways to the work of Stanley Cavell and Stephen Mulhall, is better understood as a turn towards the kind of generative and compassionate engagement with film as art object and the epistemological framework at the heart of film phenomenological writing (Vivian Sobchack, Laura U. Marks), important to Bolton’s earlier writings on Irigaray, and here reaffirmed as a definite and appropriate departure from classical and modern film theory.

Bolton’s Murdochian approach considers how the specificity of cinema shows us differing moral worlds and our progression through those worlds as lived experience; one of her most striking engagements with Murdoch concerns the cinematic representation of the human face and Murdoch’s compelling claim: “If cinema could do nothing but present faces it would have enough material to be a major art form” (p. 21). Bolton’s Murdochian rethinking of the filming of the face in close-up is one of her most defining contributions to film theory, significantly reconfiguring the thought of Mary Ann Doane, Walter Benjamin and Jean Epstein. Here, Bolton also encompasses Murdoch’s notion of “loving attention”, as well as unsettling, provocative film viewing that simply wrestles us out of indifference – a puncturing of known existence. In a fascinating analysis of *Birth*, for example, she writes:

the scene focuses our close, and patient, attention on this particular face [Nicole Kidman’s Anna], evidencing the complex emotions that she is

experiencing in light of her extraordinary circumstances (a boy has appeared in her life claiming to be her dead husband in some way, and is convincingly accurate about intimate details). This close-up compels our attention, and draws us in to her consciousness and the complexity of her emotions as she begins to wonder if the boy's story could possibly be true... the Murdochian resonances with emotion and attention are clear. (p. 32)

Bolton makes apparent the differences between Murdoch's interest in the human face and its meaning, rather than its Benjaminian *aura*, its mechanical reproduction. This sequence in *Birth* is precisely Murdochian because it challenges our thought (p. 32) and propels us toward an ethically ambivalent state of consciousness. Thus, we have to learn how to respond and in so doing learn from the moral world presented.

Existential and theological questions are posed in response to Murdoch and cinema as Bolton unravels her Murdochian film-philosophy, with subsections dedicated to analyses entitled "The Unconsoled Love of the Good: *I've Loved you So Long*" (p. 120) and "The Realism of Compassion: *We Need to Talk About Kevin*" (p.124). Most movingly, Bolton's treatment of *Stories We Tell*, which follows the seemingly straightforward attempt to examine her family history by filmmaker Sarah Polley, accesses Murdoch's thought in ways that parallel the film's ability to conduct and mediate mental activity, or "imaginative activity" that is predicated on our curiosity to examine the truth and the status of the images we are shown, as well as the emotions that they evoke. This activity in turn makes apparent a kind of engaged, ethical appreciation of film. Indeed, as Polley continues to change the direction of her story, with the truth altering through a kind of rippling effect, we are reminded by Bolton of the Murdochian progression of thought as a voyaging across a moral universe.

While it is clear that Bolton's focus is on an interior landscape rather than any literal geographical location, I would have been interested in further analyses of Murdoch and spatiality, perhaps in relation to Patrick Keiller or Joanna Hogg. However, my concluding thoughts are how this work affects a reading of film in the wake of our now very uncertain times. How might such moral work serve this particular period in history? One passage in Bolton's book, in which she reflects on Murdoch's focus on form, as well as her "sharp focus on objects" (p. 12), certainly bears a different meaning in today's context of a global pandemic. Murdoch writes: "I am tempted to say that cinema is an art of indoors. Few outdoor shots linger in my memory except as reminders of other landscapes" (p.12). We are all growing ever more familiar with the indoors, as we are told to remain in our homes. Therefore the art of the cinema, according to

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Murdoch, seems especially appropriate at this moment in time. Bolton's work inspires further viewings of the films she discusses, but perhaps its chief quality is that it not only raises questions about spectatorship now altered by the Murdochian vision she embellishes, but it also prompts a great deal of questioning about oneself as a viewer, as well as about the conditions of contemporary culture.

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