

FILM REVIEW

Iris

Directed by:

Richard Eyre (2001). Miramax: 2001

Screenplay by Eyre and Charles Wood, based on *Elegy for Iris* and *Iris and Her Friends*, by John Bayley.

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A Wordy Past, a Stony Present: Reviewing *Iris*.

On the morning of the day I sit down to write this review, the *New York Times* publishes an op-ed, “The Age of Alzheimer’s,” by retired Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court Sandra Day O’Connor, Nobel laureate Stanley Prusiner, and Ken Dychtwald, a noted entrepreneur of matters gerontological (O’Connor et al, 2010).. The op-ed invokes a terrifying spectre: 79 million American baby-boomers on the verge of their mid-60s, more and more of them falling prey to a so-far unstoppable disease that robs victims of memory, judgment, and dignity, destroys their brains and their identities, and can lay their families to waste, all the while stealing trillions of dollars in revenues expended on their care and lost from their thwarted productivity.

But there’s hope. O’Connor, Prusiner and Dychtwald write in support of a bill before the U.S. Congress that would channel a 20 billion dollar investment over 10 years into Alzheimer’s research, in the hopes that it might, like typhoid or polio, become a “disease of the past.”

The impotence of current science and medicine is artfully underscored in *Iris*, Richard Eyre’s 2001 Oscar-nominated film version of John Bayley’s memoirs of his life with the extraordinary philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch. The movie is structured as a dual narrative. The story of Murdoch and Bayley as young dons in the Oxford of the early 1950s (admirably realized by Kate Winslett and Hugh Bonneville) skinny dipping and dancing, and even doing a bit of philosophy on the fly (“Trust the body,” she tells him) interpenetrates a story set in the mid-to-late 1990s, that begins with Murdoch’s struggling to finish *Jackson’s Dilemma*, her final novel, and ends with her mutely dancing alone in the soft sunlight that floods a nursing home corridor; this image dissolves

into a deathbed scene, Bayley’s hand resting on the face of his wife’s body.

In one of the film’s many striking moments, Judy Dench’s riveting version of the mature Murdoch falters on a word and image recognition test before a group of researchers, clinicians, and trainees. They applaud Dame Iris politely as they file out, leaving her with the senior scientist and her husband, Bayley (played with a sort of doddering resilience by Jim Broadbent, who somehow manages not to make it incredible that the man’s a distinguished literary critic who’s turned out a few novels himself.) Murdoch tells the researcher that she isn’t surprised by her performance, only frightened by it. Yet there are times, too, she remarks, when she feels no fear. “But that’s just as bad, because that’s it winning, isn’t it?” Murdoch asks. Bayley immediately breaks in: “N-no, it’s not. It won’t win.” Murdoch glances up at the scientist: “It will win,” he tells her. She thanks him for this kindness.

As the movie shows, science can reach through Murdoch’s skull. It can provide images of what remains of the brain she’s employed in writing twenty-six novels, in producing some striking works of philosophy, and in living a life that seems otherwise to have been quite dramatic. Now her brain has become like a besieged city; science can only watch as all the lights inexorably flicker out.

Is the Manhattan-style research project that Justice O’Connor and her colleagues demand indeed the only real hope that we aging boomers and our families have against Alzheimer’s disease? It might seem so. There are those who have pointed out other avenues, however—I have in mind, in general terms, the sort of approach Anne Basting has referred to as a “cultural cure” (Basting, 2009). Basting, among some other mavericks—such as Tom Kitwood (Baldwin and Capstick, 2007) or Steven Sabat and Rom Harré (e.g., Sabat and Harré, 1992) suggests that there are resources for responding effectively to Alzheimer’s that don’t wait

on scientific advancement. They insist that, while plaques and tangles may exist in brains, brains exist in people, and people in turn live in communities, in societies, and in cultures. What it is to undergo Alzheimer's is a function of how the cultural, the social, and the personal mediate the biological. If we can't, as yet, do very much about the biology, there's plenty to improve in our understandings of what we think, what we treasure, and how we act, as we influence neurodegeneration's specific impact in people's lives.

In this review, I pursue three questions, all of which revolve around the way in which the film might be seen as a part of, or response to, that thought. Does this depiction of the decay of a distinctively excellent mind, and a penetrating sensibility, provides any useful insight into what Alzheimer's does to us as persons and not simply as animate brains? Can the ambitions, accomplishments, or failures of the film in these respects be illuminated from the perspective of Murdoch's own creative achievements as a philosopher and artist? Finally, does the fact that Murdoch is not a fictional character, but a real person—a living person at the time of the publication of Bayley's first book, both renowned and reserved—prompt moral reservations about the film or about specific content?

A Cultural Second Front?

One might think that if cultural resources had any kind of answer for Alzheimer's, then Iris Murdoch would have been well placed to tap into them. This isn't simply because she was a thinker and artist of enormous accomplishment, but because her work seemed a kind of prolonged apprenticeship in how to stare into various abysses unflinchingly. The young library of novels she produced (to considerable critical acclaim, including the 1978 Booker Prize for *The Sea, the Sea*) repeatedly deal with what it might mean to live decently in the face of challenges that stem from characters' passions and anxieties.

As I'll expand on below, a sort of clear-eyed realism in attending to what truly threatens the effort to achieve decency is very much to the forefront of Murdoch's thought, and the film helps suggest just why achieving that kind of realism can be so enormously difficult—itself a characteristic Murdochian insight. Steven Sabat and Rom Harré tell a vivid story of a man with Alzheimer's disease whose son introduced him to a visitor as, "This is Henry; Henry was a lawyer." "I *am* a lawyer," is Henry's gentle correction (Sabat and Harré, 1992). Sabat and Harré's take on this story in effect is to portray the son as unwittingly cooperating with Alzheimer's, illustrating how reflexive, pernicious attitudes about the elderly dovetail with organic pathology to diminish selfhood. But in a passage in the film that might almost be a comment on Sabat and Harré's story, we see Bailey take Murdoch to the beach—to the sea, the sea—where he presses paper on her, and tells her friends that she's come up with the idea for a new novel. Rather than brave resistance, what Bayley does here seems utterly fantastic, a flight from reality, as we watch Murdoch wordlessly sit on the shore and place stones on torn sheets of paper, which are later shown swept up in the wind.

Murdoch wrote her novels out in longhand—in the film's earliest scenes we see her covering sheets with words, at first rapidly, then

more haltingly, until she's brought up short, writing and rewriting the single word "puzzled"—and the image of the blank paper flying off in the wind is a trifle heavy-handed. Stones—along with water, another prominent symbol in the film—are handled more subtly. We hear from Bayley that "words have meant everything to" Murdoch, and after she's diagnosed, he vows that he will help her keep working, help her keep the words coming. However we also see Murdoch's delight in the world's being "thingy," and hear her say that stolid stones—ostensibly as unlike words and sentences, those inherently intelligible objects, as could well be imagined—are yet worthy of a certain regard.

As nourishment for a contest with Alzheimer's, though, the regard for the dumb persistence of rocks and stones might seem pretty meager fare. If the film testifies at all to the power that our cultural resources—the funders of human expressivity—might have against Alzheimer's, it's not in anything that stems specifically from Murdoch's past as a mistress of language, but in something much more mundane: the sometimes dumb, sometimes articulate persistence of love—of Bayley's love for Murdoch and Murdoch's attempts to comfort him in his sufferings, even as she slips away from him, and he is haunted by his own vivid recollections of her many other lovers.

Whether Bayley's own critical mastery of Shakespeare, Tolstoy, or Austen helps him maintain his own equilibrium and his connection to his wife despite past and present pains and frustrations, the film provides little hint. There is, perhaps, just the suggestion that something of what sustains Bayley may be in fact a kind of satisfaction in the diminishing of another distance between them and hence a certain faint *schadenfreude*: her nimbler mind now slow moving, the history now inaccessible to her of the liaisons with the kind of charismatic, dark male "masters of thought" around which several of her novels pivot. There are certainly lacerating scenes where Bayley catches up his resentment of the past and his frustrations with the present, and hurls them at Murdoch, who comprehends only his pain and the need to do something to ease it. What finally prevails, though, is that she did not need to "keep the words coming" to still be loved or to love. The stronger theme is the reality of their decades-long marriage and the uncovering that it rests on something that may be more like stones than like words.

Iris the Movie and Murdoch the Thinker

The Sovereignty of Good, in my view Murdoch's greatest philosophical accomplishment, is one of the very few books about ethics that I would describe as a harrowing read (Murdoch, 1970). Its difficulty stems not so much from its conceptual complexity, but because it so convincingly gives one a whole new world of vices about which to worry—not merely the moral failures in our doings, or even in our omissions, but in how we deploy our imagination, how we form our private thoughts. As in her novels, but with explicit focus and motivation, Murdoch draws you in to her hostility to the "fat relentless ego," and the moral drag of our bent to wallow in consoling fantasies (Murdoch, 1970, p. 52). It might seem at least slightly ironic that a novelist should be so suspicious of fancy, but what she inveighed against was how we use our imagination to aggrandize ourselves, diminish others, and

ward off anything approaching a clear sight of our own inclination to the vicious.

Being a medium of motion and image, film has a hard time with the sort of dramas intellectuals play out in studies and lecture halls—even MRIs can't reveal where the action takes place. Despite her own work, Murdoch was suspicious about whether a philosophical novel could be rendered readable, and the challenges facing a philosophical film must be at least as tough (McGee, 1982).

Yet in this general respect, *Iris* does rather well, given the limitations of the genre. In flashbacks inserted into the 1990s story line, we see the mature Murdoch in the fullness of her powers, offering, in beautifully measured cadences, a lecture about the importance of love and the struggle to be good. She conjures an image of the soul's direct acquaintance "perhaps even before birth" with the "pure forms" of the "moral concepts we hold in honor" that comes straight out of the *Meno*. Murdoch's signature Platonism is thus inserted directly into the film (perhaps a bit too vigorously—Murdoch used the idea of the soul's prenatal concourse with the Forms as a metaphor; the film makes it seem rather more literal), as is her persistent interest in the possibility of a spiritual attitude cultivated not toward God, but toward the transcendent that is also directly experienced: love and goodness (Widdows, 2005, p. 92-93).

So the part of Murdoch's thought that involves the human ability to love each other, to cherish other beings (including stones), and indeed, to love goodness itself, the uplifting part, makes it into the film in the few seconds we spend with her in the lecture hall, Bayley fondly beaming on. That sensibility is expressed elsewhere in the film, too: in Bayley's panic when Murdoch strays off, or bolts from a moving car; when an old friend (the interestingly named Janet Stone, a highly respected British photographer, herself mortally ill) plays with her in the shower, and seems to Murdoch to be an angel.

Yet what of the harrowing part of her vision, where moral critique pierces, MRI like, through the surface of our doings, into the most private content of our inner lives, where it does not expect to like what it will find? If any of that makes it into the film, it is shown, not said. In her exacting mood, Murdoch famously wrote, "Almost anything that consoles us is fake," and she certainly thought that the fake is to be despised and rejected (Murdoch, 1970 p. 59).

Does this film attempt the fraught task of consolation, and if so, is it fake? This question equally naturally generalizes: are there resources in art and the humanities—the realm of the imagination that is prone to shift into mere fantasy—that aren't at most aimed at consolation if not mere distraction in the face of Alzheimer's? Is there anything there that may without deceit strengthen people to face the prospect of their own slow dissolution of those inner lives, or the reality that, slow or fast, those lives will dissolve?

The tissue of attitudes and practices that Sabat and Harré (and, one imagines, thinkers such as Kitwood or Basting) might identify as cooperative with Alzheimer's can themselves be seen as failures to see reality squarely, of course. There is, for example, a kind of intellectual laziness in allowing one fact about a person, one aspect of her identity, to crowd out our appreciation of the way other features persist. Yet this point speaks chiefly, perhaps, to those who surround the person with Alzheimer's. What of the afflicted person herself?

There Murdoch's philosophy might be helpful in this rather serene sense: there is a value in one's thought having a footing in the world as it stands, rather than as we'd have it be; indifference to reality, preference for fantasy, suggests indifference to what's central about thought itself, and to ourselves as thinkers. People tend to appreciate this point abstractly: when faced with the choice as a philosophical hypothetical, most of us (most of my students, anyway) would elect to live in the real world with all its imperfections, rather than with our brains plugged into a machine programmed to feed us nothing but pleasant illusions. But whether Murdoch, as novelist or as philosopher, or as subject of movie or of memoir, provides any motivation for this preference for the real that is effective enough to help people resonate with it in the face of some of reality's horrors is unclear. And the deep tension here is that, whatever sort of value maintaining contact with reality has, it becomes just another value that Alzheimer's undermines. Whether there's anything in the movie or Murdoch's work that suggests, say, that Alzheimer's sufferers ought not to be spared hurt with comforting lies, also remains murky.

The Ethics of Depiction

How does one justify exposing—on the big screen, no less—some of the most intimate dimensions of an identifiable person's life? While Dench's performance testifies to Murdoch's dignity as she "sailed away into darkness," it might strike the viewer that Murdoch is also portrayed as straining under the burden of her own moral strictures: for example, she's shown as at least flirting with denial, which would seem a Murdochian deadly sin. However, most of the concern about the film (and the books for that matter) of which I've become aware doesn't revolve around the question of whether, or when, or how, depicting a real person's imperfect struggles with stringent moral ideals might itself be morally dubious. The chief concern seems to have been with puncturing Murdoch's privacy in general terms, and in so doing, showing her in ways that may seem degrading. The youthful Iris's exuberant promiscuity is made plain in the film, for instance. Any reservations about whether doing so was seemly, however, have been largely lost in the film's unsparing images of her elder self. What many have been most troubled by is that it is *Iris Murdoch* we see transfixed by the Teletubbies and urinating on the rug.

There's something reminiscent of *Lear* in this reaction: "A sight most pitiful in the meanest wretch/Past speaking of in a King." But *Lear* emerged from Shakespeare's imagination, and the pity and horror he evokes is different from that we feel for Murdoch. Shattering though witnessing the play can be, there is a sense in which the audience, like the actors, experience, not pity for a fallen king, but a kind of (powerful) simulation of emotion, for a (powerful) simulation of a person. Does it matter that the person Judy Dench represents is not the central character of a fiction, nor even a fictionalized version of a person, but a real individual, our contemporary only lately dead, whose very distinctiveness as a person attracts a certain kind of attention to her story—so exalted an intellect, so refined a sense of the beautiful, to fall so very low? Do we demean Murdoch in our very pity for her? Does the film connect with something unsavory in our own characters, a furtive fascination by the great being brought down?

The most obvious response, at least as such worries bear on Murdoch herself, is one that Bayley has made: Iris is no longer around to feel any sting, to resent or otherwise feel badly about how she's been presented to others. She'd been dead for roughly two years by the time the film came out, and even the written work that preceded the movie—Bayley's books, an article he wrote for *The New Yorker*—were published only after she had lost the ability to understand that her story had been shared, or to form responses to her unveiling (Bayley, 1998, 1999, 2000). But as the philosopher and short story writer Felicia Nimue Ackerman wrote in a letter to the *New York Times*, "By that reasoning, one can justify any betrayal of a dead or demented loved one. Does Mr. Bayley really think betrayal is acceptable provided that the betrayed can never find out about it" (Ackerman, 2001)?

Yet you don't have to think that the dead and demented are beyond being wronged to think that "betrayal" may be an overly harsh word here. Accepting, at least for sake of argument, Ackerman's suggestion that we can behave badly to individuals even if those individuals can never find out about what we've done, suggests that some wrongdoing needn't involve anyone's feelings. Some kinds of wrongdoing, however, may centrally involve feelings, and hence, the ability to feel. Revelations about one's television preferences or bladder related accidents may be embarrassing, and we have reason not to embarrass people, but it is not clear at all that one can embarrass the dead, even if we can still wrong them in some ways. Embarrassment can, of course be an attitude that reflects one's sense that one has done wrong. But more often, it concerns a sense that one has done something ridiculous or otherwise unfitting. (Shame is the reactive attitude that better fits wrongdoing.) Surely, no one could think Murdoch's behavior when demented was shameful.

Perhaps much the same might be said about her affairs: there's no evidence she thought her behavior wrong, though clearly she regarded it as personal. Showing Murdoch wavering on what seem to be a matter of core ethical commitments, on the other hand, seems the right kind of thing to count as exposure verging on invasion and betrayal—exposing what there is good reason to conceal. Yet moments when Murdoch herself seems trying to evade acknowledging what's happening are few and far between; what the film underscores is a brave and resolute Murdoch. If we're too scrupulous here, not merely this film but biography itself seems implicated.

Perhaps the moral category to be worried about here is not the stark "forbidden/permitted" distinction, into whose register the notion of betrayal fits. The question may be more one of what is seemly or even tasteful. And there, I think, the matter hinges on the manner of the revelation, the point of revealing it, and perhaps the nature of audience reception. A film such as *Iris* might be made for good and sufficient reasons, might make a respectable effort to realize its goals, and might regard its subject with due respect—in fact, I think all this is true about the film. The onus is then on what viewers make of it: whether they respond in a way that respects the character of what's being presented to them, or whether they take it as a form of more-or-less refined gossip. Perhaps the idea that viewers have a moral reason to respond to films in some ways rather than others itself seems a bit invasive of privacy; it is surely in keeping with how Iris Murdoch saw the moral life.

A Disease of (our Relationship with) the Past?

Justice O'Connor and her colleagues cast the fight against Alzheimer's as a matter of money and medicine. I'm sure none of them would deny how important it is to care creatively and effectively for Alzheimer's sufferers, whether they be those undergoing the disease process, or their families—but, I expect, they would regard such things as important precisely because science and medicine have yet to make Alzheimer's like polio—a disease of the past.

As Basting, Kitwood, Sabat, and Harré insist, we shouldn't regard ourselves as merely marking time until the cures come along: there are other powerful ways open to us to respond to how this disease distorts us. Watching *Iris* might remind us of what lies at the base of such power and such distortion. It isn't merely forgetfulness that can disorder our relationship with the past, nor only retentive recollection that can get it right. This film shows us a tragedy whose particular poignancy is compounded out of the past of two of the many millions who suffer with the disease. It glances at forms of resentment and bitterness that testify to the past's pernicious hold on the present. But its attention rests on how old love can assert itself, even when its inherent drive toward reciprocity is frustrated, when its present pleasures fade. What *Iris* puts squarely before us is how a certain couple's odd history makes their difficult present intelligible, sustainable, and even salutary.

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