

Murdoch and *Margaret*: Learning a Moral Life

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Abstract:

Reading the moral philosophy of Iris Murdoch alongside film enables us to see Murdoch's notions of practical moral good in action. For Murdoch, moral philosophy can be seen as "a more systematic and reflective extension of what ordinary moral agents are continually doing". Murdoch can help us further by her consideration of the value of a moral fable: does a morally important fable always imply universal rules? And how do we decide whether a fable is morally important? By bringing Murdoch and *Margaret* (Kenneth Lonergan, 2011) together in an exploration of the moral decision making of the film's protagonist and our assessment of her choices, we can learn more about the idea of film as a morally important fable rather than a fable that is purely decorative.

Keywords: Iris Murdoch; *Margaret*; Lonergan; morality.

Iris Murdoch is primarily concerned with questions of moral philosophy and what it is to be good. Murdoch is known more widely as a novelist, and in popular culture as a woman who suffered from Alzheimer's Disease as recorded in her husband John Bayley's memoirs and embodied by Kate Winslet and Judi Dench in Richard Eyre's film *Iris* from 2001 (Bolton, 2015). But Murdoch was also a philosopher, thinking about concepts such as attention, vision and the inner life. These modes of

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thinking were not fashionable at the University of Oxford in the 1940s and 50s, with its linguistic analytic philosophers such as G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell, and indeed Murdoch's metaphysics were also not taken up by as many future generations of philosophers as might have been expected.¹ Because of this, as well as other factors the consideration of which are outside the remit of this article, Murdoch has often been seen as somewhat of an outsider, with her philosophical credentials called into question. There are, however, a few monographs that examine specific aspects of Murdoch's thinking (Antonaccio, 2000; Laverty, 2007; Widdows, 2005) and a couple of edited collections that analyse her philosophical work (Broakes, 2012; Rowe & Horner, 2010), and which demonstrate the impact and significance of her thinking in relation to debates in ethics and moral philosophy. The majority of the studies of her philosophy consider her novels as integral to Murdoch's philosophical worldview, and examine how philosophical and conceptual themes feature in the narratives and character arcs of these stories. It is evident that these fictional worlds and events enable Murdoch to demonstrate her concern with the particularity of moral life rather than the abstract linguistic puzzles and universal moral models which occupied her contemporaries in the British analytic scene. Murdoch's philosophical writings, however, merit understanding as a body of work in themselves, without needing to draw on the novels as ballast or exemplification. As texts, these philosophical writings are rigorous and exacting, profoundly humane and meticulously argued, and – of exciting relevance and potential for film philosophers – full of visual metaphors. The concept of attention, and the language of vision and the patient regard of art, are central to Murdoch's discussion of how art can fulfil a role in the development of an individual moral vision. This article will demonstrate how Murdoch's philosophical concepts and language resonate with film; in particular how the discussion of the complexity of moral issues in everyday life can enrich our understanding of the moral obstacle course that is Kenneth Lonergan's film *Margaret* (2011).

Murdoch's moral philosophy is concerned with the individual and with individual consciousness. She is opposed to the idea that morality is something that can be decided upon in isolation from the real world and the real people in it. For Murdoch, moral philosophy can be seen as “a more systematic and reflective extension of what ordinary moral agents

1. Justin Broakes considers reasons for this in his introduction (2014, pp. 17–21).

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are continually doing” (1956/1997, p. 83). This is similar to the view of philosophical thinking expressed by Stanley Cavell in “The Thought of Movies” (1995), where he writes about philosophy:

I understand it as a willingness to think not about something other than what ordinary human beings think about, but rather to learn to think undistractedly about things that ordinary human beings cannot help thinking about, or anyway cannot help having occur to them, sometimes in fantasy, sometimes as a flash across a landscape. (p. 17)

Cavell considers these things to include “whether good or bad are relative” (p. 17), and that “such thoughts are instances of that characteristic human willingness to allow questions for itself which it cannot answer with satisfaction” (p. 17). These things and thoughts are the concern of Murdoch in the deliberation of her moral humanism, and of protagonist Lisa, played by Anna Paquin, in *Margaret*, as she traverses a moral minefield which challenges her adolescent moral certainties and exposes the need for the consideration of others in the construction of a moral life. Cavell’s call for thinking undistractedly is met in some way, and exceeded in others, by Murdoch’s proposed approach of “loving attention”, which Lonergan’s film compels us to pay to Lisa’s moral conflicts.

Murdoch argues that facts in relation to moral concepts are decided upon within the framework of the individual consciousness of the moral being. So “morality is bound up with our deepest conceptual attitudes and sensibilities about the world, which determine the facts from the very beginning” (Antonaccio, 2000, p. 38). As Murdoch writes, “we differ not only because we select different objects out of the same world, but because we see different worlds” (1956/1997, p. 82). And seeing our moral world – the world of values which define our choices – is “the prime task of the individual moral agent” (Blum, 2014, p. 307). The idea of seeing different worlds, and the ways in which Murdoch describes this, offer a link to the way in which films can offer visions of worlds in which moral journeys take place. Not simply their narrative arcs, but as transformative moral experiences: for the characters within the diegesis, clearly, but also for us as we experience the film; and, more than simply inviting us to observe similarities with our own lives, film can really provoke and stimulate our moral thinking. As Thomas Wartenberg says, film can “allow us to see the complexity of our moral lives in a manner that allows us to more fully grasp morally significant aspects of it” (2007, p. 98). This is the approach developed by Robert Sinnerbrink, in that he proposes we view film as a “medium of ethical

experience, with a transformative potential to sharpen our moral perception, challenge our beliefs through experiential means, and thus enhance our understanding of moral-social complexity” (2016, p. 4). As the “major art” that Murdoch (1956/2016) considers it can be, film enables the loving attention and the individual moral work that Murdoch calls for. In this article, I will explore the resonance between film and Murdoch’s thoughts in one particular paper from 1956, “Vision and Choice in Morality”, drawing upon Murdoch’s analysis of moral vision in my analysis of the moral agency of Lisa in *Margaret*, and extend this to consider the relationship that we have with the film world and with the wider world in which we live.

Lisa, Lonergan, and Margaret

Margaret was filmed in 2005, but not released until 2011 due to “a brutal and bitter editing process” (Lovell, 2012), and various disputes between Lonergan, the studio, Fox Searchlight, and the producers (Gardner, 2014). It was originally written by Lonergan as a three-hour film, cut into three versions (including one by Martin Scorsese), and finally allowed into cinemas as a two and a half hour cut in 2011, with the final and the extended cut becoming available on DVD in 2012. The film’s post-production difficulties have become notorious, not least because Scorsese became involved as financier, Lonergan’s supporter and potential witness. For Lonergan, it was his long anticipated follow up to *You Can Count on Me* (2000), which had explored the depressing consistency of disappointing family dynamics in an insightful award-winning drama. Lonergan’s third film as writer and director is *Manchester by the Sea* (2017), which met with awards season success and critical acclaim. Lonergan is a highly regarded and not very prolific filmmaker, and *Margaret* is considered by some critics – and apparently Scorsese – to be a masterpiece (Gardner, 2014; Emerson, 2012; Lovell, 2012). Not many people found it an easy ride. Joel Lovell of the *New York Times* described it as “a big, messy, problematic film” (2012). Peter Bradshaw of *The Guardian* called it “a sprawling neurotic nightmare of urban catastrophe” (2011). Many critics and bloggers refer to the film as being operatic, and this impression is justifiably founded on the highly charged emotions of the central character, Lisa, and the soundtrack arias from *La Traviata* and *Don Giovanni*. At one point, a bereaved, exhausted and furious character confronts Lisa with the reality that, “this isn’t an opera: and we are not supporting characters in the fascinating story of your own life!”

Lisa wrestles with the dramas and demands of being a teenager with divorced parents, living in New York City and going to an exclusive high

school where she is seen engaging with fellow eloquent and intelligent classmates in debates about contemporary global politics and the role of America in a post-9/11 world. Her absentee father (played by Lonergan himself) is promising a horse riding holiday, and Lisa is determined to have a cowboy hat to wear on the trip. Her hunt for suitable headgear leads her to seek the attention of a bus driver, driving a bus, who is wearing such a hat. As their flirtatious banter plays out, a woman on a pedestrian crossing is hit by the bus. Lisa holds the injured woman during the last minutes of her life, coming face-to-face with the imminence and immediacy of death. The rest of the film is concerned with how Lisa resumes life after this incident: the decisions she makes to tell certain untruths, her pursuit of particular people in order to resolve her confused and conflicted feelings, and the volatile, self-centred maelstrom of emotion that surrounds her. The film explores Lisa's attempts to make good choices, and the reasons why her choices might be considered to be bad.

Following the accident, Lisa is traumatised, but tries to carry on with life, going for a date at the cinema but unable to sit through the film. That same night her mother Joan (J. Smith Cameron), a stage actress, receives flowers from an admirer, and a romance begins which naturally occupies Joan's mental and physical attention. As Lisa walks along the street the next day, she is shown in slow motion, as if to convey how the world is a different place today and she is moving at a different pace. She resolutely pushes her way through a group of harassing boys, but a close-up shot of her face from the side, and of her head from behind, accompanied by the overture from *Lohengrin*, concentrates on her slowed passage through the same streets that she walked along yesterday, but now as an altered person.

As life goes on around her, Lisa's relationship with her mother becomes fraught and bad tempered. She arranges to lose her virginity to a classmate, and the encounter is unremarkable in terms of passion or pleasure but notable in that the boy ejaculates before he has put on the condom which he had promised to use. Seemingly unable to regain peace of mind, Lisa goes to visit Maretti (Mark Ruffalo), the driver of the bus that hit the pedestrian. Lisa has tracked him down and, despite having said initially to the police that the driver was not at fault, she is now seeking what she perceives to be a more honest account of the accident. In doing so, Lisa confronts the realities and complexities of the issues surrounding seeking acknowledgement from the bus driver about what she considers "really happened". The film has given us an experience of the lead-up to the accident that accords with her view. Lisa runs alongside the bus, trying to engage the driver's attention, and he responds to her and teases her,

repeatedly taking his eyes off the road in front of him. He does skip the red light. Their flirtatious encounter has resulted in the woman being killed. The death scene is traumatic and distressing to experience as a viewer. As Lisa holds the woman in her arms, we and Lisa realise that parts of the woman's body are left under the bus and in the middle of the road, that she has no chance of survival, but is not yet dead. We are confronted with a vision of the last moments of life, and they seem to take an age. The woman speaks: she asks if her eyes are open or closed; she mistakes Lisa for her daughter; she is filled with panic and confusion. The impact of the idea that one might not know if one's eyes are open or closed as one dies is profound and significant: we are confronted with the idea that we might not be able to know what is actually going on. Others may be more aware of our dwindling life than we are. The woman dies in her arms, and Lisa clings to her, unable to accept the passing away of the woman she is holding. Lonergan says of the scene:

That single incident drives the entire film and drives the entire journey of Anna Paquin's character, and it's a long film. And I knew that if that accident wasn't extremely awful – as awful as humanly possible – then there'd be no movie. You don't see any flashbacks of it. It's got to stay in your mind the way it stays in the character's mind. (2012)

Here the filmmaker describes a very acute instance of the necessity for an incident on-screen to have a lasting effect on the viewer. At this, the film succeeds. The impact of witnessing this death creates a gut-wrenching connection with the magnitude of Lisa's situation, and an appreciation of the intensity of her predicament, and that of the driver, at the scene of the accident. On the spot, when interviewed by the police, the urge to cover-up their innocent but reckless complicity in the accident is excruciatingly acute. Looks are exchanged between them. The dread and fear on the driver's face is there for us and Lisa to read. Was the light red or not? Was it the pedestrian's fault or the driver's? It hangs on Lisa's word as the police officer asks "was the traffic light red, yellow, or green?" Lisa replies, "I guess it was green."

Later in the film, when we set off on the journey with Lisa in her operatic bubble of personal quest and understanding, we believe that it might be a good idea for her to speak to him to help her ease this nightmarish guilt and pain she is suffering. Like Lisa, we also have not seen the driver since the day of the accident, and we hope that there might be some connection and consolation for them both. But as Lisa's journey progresses, the film conveys a shift in perspective: we enter the Italian district, we see a family preparing for a wedding to begin,

we see the stars and stripes hanging from several houses, and we see the driver's house. When we arrive, we see a woman answer the door and we realise he has a wife. A glistening gold crucifix hangs over the wife's shoulder, dominating the doorway in which she stands. The operatic soundtrack ceases: instead we hear his children fighting, and Lisa is admitted into his home. As the expression on Maretti's face at the sight of Lisa is both flabbergasted and terrified, we realise what he has to lose, what he has been through, and what the ramifications for him might be – both in that family living room and in light of the wider institutions and networks that govern their lives: the law, his employers, his marriage, his family, his church. We, like Lisa, falter. We too have been seduced by her quest and her shifting perspective from cover-up to search for truth: but this has been Lisa-centric. We begin to realise that she cannot operate in a vacuum, or on her own uninterrupted trajectory of self-righteousness. Maretti has a very real stake in this drama too, arguably far more real and immediate than her moral one. As her desire to obtain recognition from him persists, his tone becomes angry: he wants her phone number; he has been dealing with the fallout for him and his life. He asserts the words of the tribunal, that the brakes worked in accordance with “the physical limits of the machine”, and that “there was no criminality found”. We start to think that perhaps she needs to leave him alone. Our appreciation of the rights and wrongs of this situation, which was already uneasy due to the circumstances of the accident, is now confounded. He is not the lone single unit free to flirt and think only of what Lisa wants him to. We now experience a concern for the driver's wellbeing, and that of his wife and children, and the moral quest for the “truth” about the accident to come out has become less clear. In his anger he shouts at her, “you're gonna go home and do your homework and who's gonna look after my family?” For Lisa, however, his refusal to go along with the version of events she now seeks to assert leads her to pursue the path of legal recourse by contacting the dead woman's family and friends, and encouraging proceedings to be brought against the bus company, with the aim of ensuring the bus driver loses his job. Lisa had a set idea of the right thing to do, to seek a more truthful account of the cause of the accident according to her view, and to get some acknowledgement from Maretti that her view of things is correct. However, this short sharp sequence slaps Lisa in the face with another person's life, and a set of reasons why he is not willing or able to go along with her wishes.

This is the way the film works: to discombobulate us, alongside Lisa. It challenges our expectations of the story world at the same time as it challenges Lisa's about the way in which her world works. Lonergan has

stated that he wanted to make a film about the way teenagers transition into an adult world, realising that life is about transience and death. The film is called *Margaret* after a poem called “Spring and Fall” by Gerard Manley Hopkins, which Lisa and her classmates study in class. The poem is about a young girl’s realisation that the passing of things is sad; in the poem this is the fall of leaves from a tree and the onset of autumn. The poet observes that the girl is realising the sadness of death and will come to understand mortality and loss:

Margaret, are you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leaves like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
Ah! as the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
And yet you will weep and know why.
Now no matter, child, the name:
Sorrow’s springs are the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

Lisa’s teacher John (Matthew Broderick) reads the poem to her class. Lisa does not seem to be following the poem in the book, unlike her classmate, and we cannot tell whether she is listening to her teacher’s reading, taking the words to heart and being moved by them, or is in a world of her own, pondering her meeting with Maretti and disclosures of her feelings of guilt to the dead woman’s friend. At the end of the poem, John asks the class, “Any thoughts?” There is no reply from the class, and John turns to Lisa and asks her specifically. As he says her name, with an upward intonation, Lisa looks up at him, eyes wet with tears, and the scene ends abruptly and cuts to a shot of a taxi which is taking Lisa to the police station in order for her to amend her statement to reflect what she now wants to say happened. The police are not impressed by this *volte-face*, and legal process, bureaucracy, and the inconvenience of others obstruct her path from now on.

The film, then, is partly the telling of Lisa’s existential lightning bolt and her realisation that the world around her is too tired or resistant to bother with her concern about the truth, as older hearts around her “come to such sights colder”, and do not even “spare a sigh”. But it also works as

an obstacle course of moral reasoning and analysis for us, and it is here where I turn to the philosophy of Iris Murdoch.

Murdoch and the Moral Fable

Philosophically concerned with goodness and the role of the inner life in conceptions of morality, Murdoch was writing philosophical texts from 1951 to 1997. She published the first book on Sartre in England in 1953 at the age of twenty-four. She frequently pitted herself against the British philosophical establishment, challenging the British empiricists such as Russell and Ryle, and pursuing Plato, inspired by Simone Weil.² In this article I am concentrating on a paper she gave to the Aristotelian Society and which was published in their proceedings in 1956, entitled “Vision and Choice in Morality”.³ Here, Murdoch is teasing out the position of her contemporary moral philosophers, or “the ‘current view’” as she calls it (p. 77), and where they locate the material for their moral philosophy, “observing where and in what way moral judgements may be involved, and then to consider the relations between the selected phenomena and the philosophical technique used to describe them.” (p. 76). Under objective models, “since [G.E.] Moore”, she finds that questions such as “what is my morality?” and “what is morality as such?” are addressed by descriptions of choices expressed in specific language. “On this view”, she says, “the moral life of the individual is a series of overt choices which take place in a series of specifiable situations” (p. 77): moral concepts are “roughly an objective definition of a certain area of activity plus a recommendation or prohibition” (p. 77). As Murdoch writes, “the charms of this view are obvious. It displays the moral agent as rational and responsible and also as free; he moves unhindered against a background of facts and can alter the descriptive meaning of his moral words at will” (p. 77). This is achieved through the linguistic method,

which provides a meaning for moral words which eschews earlier errors and construes these words as nearly as possible on the model of empirical terms, giving them definite factual criteria of application, and without reference to transcendent entities or states of consciousness. Morality can then be shown to be rational after its own fashion [...] (p. 78)

2. For an overview of Murdoch’s philosophical work and the complex reasons behind her influence and legacy, see Brookes (2014).

3. This paper, along with all of her most influential essays and shorter philosophical pieces, is reproduced in the collection *Existentialists and Mystics* assembled by Peter Conradi (1997).

For Murdoch, however, this objectivity is a problem. Murdoch is concerned with what she calls the “inner life”, and she asks what place this should have in a philosophical analysis of morality. She defines the “inner life” as meaning “in the sense of personal attitudes and visions which do not obviously take the form of choice-guiding arguments” (p. 80). When thinking about what a person “is like”, Murdoch argues,

we do not consider only their solutions to specifiable practical problems, we consider something more elusive which may be called their total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessment of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praiseworthy, what they think funny: in short the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation. (pp. 80–81)

This is a challenge to the behaviourists of the day, and to those who seek to impose rigid certainty in abstract, ignoring the particularities and specificities of human beings. Murdoch anticipates their objection as she investigates “what technique is suitable to the analysis of such material” (p. 81). She asks us to consider “moral being as self-reflection or complex attitudes to life which are continuously displayed and elaborated in overt and inward speech but are not separable temporarily into situations” (p. 81). A term like “good” cannot have the simple empirical meaning, Murdoch argues, as “red”; reducing it as such “is one result of assuming that moral philosophy can be made linguistic simply by putting “good” into inverted commas” (p. 82). There are more complex regions that lie outside of actions and choices, and we need to attend to these areas or visions, which we may not always be able to understand or appreciate immediately. These regions “may show openly or privately as difference of story or metaphor or as differences of moral vocabulary betokening different ranges and ramifications of moral concept” (p. 82). In this way, we can see how moral philosophy is “a more systematic and reflective extension of what ordinary moral agents are continually doing” (p. 83). This humane analysis allows for difference but also credits us all with a complexity of vision that takes into account our visual and metaphorical experiences, memories, impressions and desires. This leads to the question, in this film-philosophical context, of how the viewer of *Margaret* responds to, predicts, and processes Lisa’s journey in line with their/our own moral vision, informed as it is by our experiences, resentments, values, and ideals. Murdoch’s discussion, of how moral insight differs from moral performance, links clearly with Lisa’s situation in *Margaret*. Lisa comes to see how a moral life is far more complex than a judgement based on whether one traffic light was red or not. Even though

the ramifications of this may be far reaching, they differ for different people and they cannot be dictated by one objective act. It is not as simple as that her decision to lie was wrong and her decision to come clean is right. This is quite a difficult path to assert, as there is a familiar generic and cinematic quest for truth which is tightly bound up with objective behaviourist morality. But Lonergan's film world confounds such simplistic moral judgement, so that Lisa's moral maze can be seen as creating a filmic moral philosophy along the lines Murdoch describes: a vision of the self-reflection Lisa has to experience in order to come by her own vision of a moral world. This moral world is created by what happens to her and what she chooses to do, but far more than this, it is also affected by the behaviour, choices, problems, conversations and happenstances that circulate around her and spin off in different directions. The film conveys this through unfinished conversations, snippets of overheard dialogue, unresolved ambiguities and unsatisfactory non-conclusions. Whether it is a lawyer on his mobile phone discussing a bail application for a client, two elderly ladies discussing the benefit of having an ugly dog that nobody will steal, or the boy who is in love with Lisa, Darren (John Gallagher Jr.), breaking down in tears alone in his bedroom when she has abruptly ended their phone call, the film shows us snippets of the particularities of people's lives in their quotidian magnitude.

Again Murdoch helps us, as she moves on to consider the contrast – such as it may be – between art and morals. For Murdoch, “a moral agent may explore a situation imaginatively and in detail and frame a highly specific maxim to cover it, which may nevertheless be offered as a universal rule” (p. 87). So, an imagined tale and set of circumstances could lead to a conclusion and a judgement upon an action which could be offered as a universal rule. This would suggest that the experience of watching – or experiencing – a film such as *Margaret* could well be sufficiently universalisable to satisfy the more behaviourist moral philosophers among us. This is perhaps more applicable to the idea of natural justice so often at the heart of Hollywood westerns or thrillers: those who act unselfishly in certain recognisable circumstances are likely to prevail and be rewarded. However, some other films that suggest a significant moral dilemma as the fulcrum of the film, such as *The Box* (Richard Kelly, 2009), may turn out to be purely decorative in that the consequences of the moral choice play out as fantastic or exaggeratedly far-fetched.⁴

4. For a review that appreciates the lack of ethical complexity of *The Box* see Peter Bradshaw (2009).

Murdoch does not seek to underplay the requirement for judgements, choices and action. After all, she concedes, it could be argued that “one can meditate and explore the mysteriousness and inexhaustibility of the world, but meanwhile one has continually to make judgements on the basis of what one thinks one knows, and these, if moral, will claim to be universal” (p. 87). But Murdoch resists this desirability for universality. Not only is it unrealistic to expect the “universal rules” model to fit every particular circumstance, but Murdoch sees no point in trying to make it do so. And it is in the reflection and consideration of the backgrounds to our choices, that we can learn. Murdoch argues, “why should we blot out as irrelevant the different background of these choices” (p. 88), which may be made confidently or tentatively? In Murdoch’s view, attending to the details and inexhaustibility of them may well induce humility and an expression of love, rather than induce a paralysis of which to be afraid. And, she argues, due to the difficulties of describing in language the inexhaustible particularities that occur pursuant to this approach, that this attempt to understand needs to be done in ways other than in language. She considers the limitations of language when it comes to serving us creatively, and that “the task of moral philosophers has been to extend, as poets may extend, the limits of the language, and enable it to illuminate regions of reality which were formerly dark” (p. 90). The attempt to impose moral rules, she suggests, is a way of securing us against ambiguity, but not only is this not always achievable, it is also not necessarily desirable. Here is where parables and stories might be moral guides, but these too may be ambiguous or paradoxical. They might be open to continual reinterpretation, and provide sources of inspiration which highly specific rules could not give: it is in the story, with its ambiguities and paradoxes, that what we might call a moral way of thinking, or a moral vision, can be developed. Calling for “a fresh vision which may be derived from a ‘story’”, or “a sustaining concept which is able to deal with what is obstinately obscure”, and which “represents a mode of understanding”, Murdoch suggests that moral freedom “looks like a mode of reflection which we may have to achieve, and less like a capacity to vary our choices which we have by definition” (p. 95). The work Murdoch conducts in this essay is anti-establishment and anti-definitional; it is in many ways anti-linguistic and anti-behaviourist. It is at this point in her thinking, as she proposes a less rigid, more visual and pluralist perception of moral living, that Murdoch introduces a different philosophical approach:

This kind of imaginative exploration of the moral life is being practised by contemporary continental philosophers, often without special metaphysical

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pretensions; and there is no reason why such exploration should be combined with erroneous philosophical arguments. (pp. 97–98)⁵

Here Murdoch is departing from “the current view” and indicating a different way of conceptualising, philosophically, ethics and morals, in which they demand exploration and analysis, rather than “pure formula” (p. 98). Experiencing the long, tormented and disturbing three hours of *Margaret* creates, I suggest, a fresh vision derived from a story, but also from the very cinematic telling of that story. To return to the scene where Lisa visits Maretti, it is the sight of the wife and the sound of the children that convey the bus driver’s home situation in ways that force us to make the realisation that he has a lot at stake. The come-down from the set-up of Lisa’s operatic quest, accompanied by “Addio del passato” from *La Traviata*⁶ and images of post-9/11 New York, brings us sharply down to earth too: we do not expect him to deny things as starkly as he does. We gather from his conversation that there have been disciplinary proceedings and no finding of guilt. In the context of the film we are unnerved by this conversation that fails to deliver the atoning liberation Lisa craves, and proceed to be challenged at every turn by the quandaries and frustrations Lisa creates and confronts: befriending the dead woman’s family, seducing her teacher, fighting with her mother, let down again by her father. The web of individuals with their own inner lives and moral frameworks is complex and connected, and not all through the main narrative events. This complexity, as well as the film’s long duration and slow pace, afford unusually multi-layered engagement with events on-screen, and the truly traumatic early accident serves to sustain the attention required in order to suffer the moral discombobulation that the film inflicts.

By bringing Murdoch and *Margaret* together in an exploration of the moral decision making of the film’s protagonist and our assessment of her choices, we can learn more about the idea of film as a morally important fable rather than a fable that is purely decorative. Vitaly, we do not have to learn a universalisable lesson from watching the film. Neither do we have to decide whether Lisa did – or did not do – the right thing at any one point. The film thwarts our attempts to identify “the right thing” on screen – it cannot be reduced to the red light – and instead creates a maelstrom of people making moral decisions both tentatively and confidently. Such decisions are made against a range of backgrounds,

5. Murdoch had published her book on Sartre in 1953, but was more heavily influenced by the work of Simone Weil, particularly Weil’s concept of attention and its role in ethical relationships.

6. Act III, Scene 4, “Farewell my dreams of the past”.

many of which are suggested, without being developed, serving to stress the multitude of moral agents with their own inner lives. As Lisa arrives at a state of distressed but reflective realisation of the uncertainties and brutalities of social living, then we – as distressed and hopefully reflective participants in the film’s moral philosophy – cannot help but recognise a moral fable that constitutes what Murdoch might call a philosophical picture of morality (p. 98). This picture leads us not to an assertion of a clear cut rule for what is the right thing to do in such a situation as Lisa finds herself. Far from it; the film shows us that it is in the areas around the action, the parts of people’s lives that this film illuminates, that moral work is being done, and moral visions are being changed. And this in turn can change our moral vision as spectators of Lisa’s world, and, in compelling our attention to her moral torment, can perhaps induce contemplation of our loss of moral fervour and outrage to resignation or apathy.

The type of picture that Murdoch considered film can present is suggested, tantalisingly, in her short essay on the cinema which she wrote in 1956 for British *Vogue*. In this, the only piece of writing with cinema as Murdoch’s sole subject, she writes how,

the film is, for better or worse, the medium which can most exactly reproduce the moment-to-moment vagaries of the human consciousness. [...] a film is as near to us as our own self-awareness, and comes over us with the inevitability of time itself. (1956/2016)

This reveals that Murdoch saw the potential for thinking about film in the way that film philosophers do, as a medium that relates to the way in which we think about the world in multifarious ways, and most particularly to our individual experience of the film world and its temporality. More particularly, and in a way that strongly suggests she would have considered a film like *Margaret* as a morally important fable, conveyed in a way that exceeds language and action, Murdoch writes about an aspect of film she notes as unique to the medium:

There is [...] one natural object with which the cinema is supremely concerned, and that is the human body, and more especially that ‘most interesting surface,’ the human face. Here we can find tragedy and comedy made minutely concrete in the movement of a muscle, and human character on display at the point where spirit and matter are most intensely fused. If cinema could do nothing but present faces it would have enough material to be a major art. (1956/2016)

In *Margaret*, the voices, gestures and stances of Lisa and her mother Joan are fraught with tension, anger and anxiety, but it is in the close-ups

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of their faces, which are frequent and prolonged, that we can see the pain wrought in the movements of their twitching, stressed muscles. Joan's face as she sits in the waiting room while her daughter is having an abortion, is a picture of pain, sorrow at the plight of others in the same room, and the processing of how she and Lisa have come to be where they are. And Lisa's face, in the film's closing sequence at the opera, as she moves from her more usual position of redoubtable combatant to a daughter who can cry and be comforted by her mother, the process of breakdown is laid bare for us to experience, in unrelenting temporal proximity, just as was the accident which prompted such a tumult of experience for us all. The film as a whole, therefore, is a Murdochian moral fable, compelling our attention and regard to the specificities of a complex moral vision; but it is on Lisa's face, agonisingly wrought in her moment-to-moment journey, that this moral work is evident.

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