

What is notable by its absence

Iris, directed by Richard Eyre, written by Eyre and Charles Wood, based on John Bayley's *Iris: A Memoir and Elegy for Iris*

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Iris is a dull and uninspired film focusing on the mental deterioration of British novelist Iris Murdoch, who suffered from Alzheimer's disease, from 1995 until her death four years later. The film is based on two memoirs by her husband of more than forty years, Oxford University professor and critic, John Bayley—*Iris: A Memoir* and *Elegy for Iris*. It unfolds in two inter-cut sections, covering the period during which Murdoch and Bayley first met, in the mid-1950s, and the years of her decline and death.

Unhappily, upon the conclusion of the film the spectator knows next to nothing about the essential facts of Murdoch's life, about her writing, about her ideas, about the character of her relationship with Bayley, nor about British society and artistic life during the years in question. One grasps merely that Bayley was made miserable by his wife's plight, which is very understandable, and that Alzheimer's is a terrible condition.

In other words, this is for the most part a systematic and mediocre withholding of information. The performers—Judi Dench and Jim Broadbent, Kate Winslet and Hugh Bonneville (as the older and younger couples, respectively)—are fine, more or less, but the film, directed by Richard Eyre, artistic director of Britain's National Theatre from 1988 to 1997, is frustrating and largely pointless.

We learn that Murdoch in 1954 (when the two met) was something of a free-thinker, with an extensive sexual history behind her, while Bayley was inexperienced and timid. She introduced him to sensual and sexual pleasure, but her continued liaisons caused him pain. He was generally awestruck by this apparently talented and intelligent woman. In a scene that could hardly be less subtle, the filmmakers have Bayley following Murdoch down a hill on a bicycle, exclaiming, "I can't catch up." He seems content to live in her shadow.

We hardly see anything of the older Murdoch, aside from a few snippets of public lectures, before she begins to lose her mental capacities. In short order, Murdoch is helpless and passive, uncommunicative, her memory apparently wiped clean. It is sad. Bayley is kind and patient, but her childlike (or worse) behavior occasionally sends him into a rage. She is finally sent to a nursing home, where she dies.

To be frank, this is pretty easy and conventional stuff. No doubt every moviegoer will feel something for Murdoch and for Bayley, who underwent a horrendous personal tragedy. However, Murdoch was not simply a woman who died under unhappy circumstances. She was a prominent writer (and philosopher) and public figure, with a complex history and definite, if shifting views. Her life was bound up with important problems of postwar life. To reveal so little about the novelist's life and times demonstrates once more the tendency of present-day artists to shy away from difficult social and intellectual issues.

There are intriguing aspects to Murdoch's life, all of them untreated and unmentioned in the film. Born in Dublin in 1919 to an Irish mother and English father, both Protestant, Murdoch moved with her family to

London in her childhood. Like many of her generation, she turned to the left politically as a student, under the impact of the Depression and the growing threat of fascism and war, to the Communist Party and the example of the Russian Revolution. Unhappily, like all those others, she turned in the direction of a thoroughly Stalinized party, which had abandoned socialist principles.

Murdoch was a CP member at Oxford at a time when the party's branch reportedly had some two hundred members. Among them was the future novelist, Kingsley Amis, three years her senior. One of her earliest relationships was formed with Frank Thompson, the brother of historian E.P. Thompson, a longtime Stalinist.

Murdoch seems to have been a Communist Party member from approximately 1938 to 1942, and then, again like many others, came under the influence of existentialist thought, while remaining generally left-wing in political beliefs for the time being. (Carey Seal in the *Yale Review of Books* writes of "the longevity and profundity of her [Murdoch's] attachment in the post-Party years to what she called a 'refurbished Marxism'—an anti-Stalinist Marxism alive to other philosophical traditions" and terms her "A House of Theory," published in the 1950s, a "landmark contribution to socialist political thought.")

Following the war Murdoch encountered philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (of whose ideas she wrote a critical study) and writer Raymond Queneau in Paris and pursued a relationship with the future Nobel Prize winner Elias Canetti, the supposed basis for a number of her characters. Her first published novel (of twenty-six), *Under the Net*, appeared in 1954.

It is impossible to discuss Murdoch seriously without taking up the question of postwar British fiction, which is beyond this critic's competence. A few words might be said, however. One commentator writes: "British fiction after 1945 looked moribund. In 1954 three new writers—William Golding, Kingsley Amis and Iris Murdoch—published first novels that changed the literary climate." This is telling, in its own way.

Murdoch's first novel was *Under the Net*, showing the influence of Sartre, philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and others. The story of a self-described "hack" writer and sponger in London, who makes various efforts to find a way for himself, the book is not artistically successful or intellectually convincing. Golding's contribution was *Lord of the Flies*, a despairing response to the events of the century and a notorious libel against mankind.

Probably the best of the three works was Amis's *Lucky Jim*, about a junior faculty member at a small university, who experiences one disaster after another. This may have been the high point for Amis, however, who became a caricature in later life, a "supreme clubman, boozer and blimp." His son, writer Martin Amis, has commented: "The thing about him and his contemporaries—these former Angry Young Men, all of whom tend to be right-wing now—is that while they weren't born into poverty, they

didn't have much money. Then they made some money, and they wanted to hang on to it. And they lived through a time when the left was very aggressive and when union power made life unpleasant." This might offer some insight into the nature of Murdoch's shift to the right as well, which was more drawn out and less spectacular than Amis's.

Murdoch's writing, while lively and imaginative, has serious, even fatal weaknesses. Linda Kuehl, in *Modern Fiction Studies*, notes that Murdoch tends to produce "types" rather than characters. Hers are "novels of ideas" in the worst sense of the term. In *Under the Net*, for example, the author creates a large number of characters—writers, movie stars, philosophers, left-wing politicians—not one of whom truly comes to life. They represent philosophical and social principles. Fiction involves the dissolving of ideas and feelings into dramatic situations and characterizations that are charged with meaning. One does not feel much the wiser after reading *Under the Net*, not about England in the 1950s, not about the human condition, not about much of anything except perhaps Murdoch's ideological concerns.

Kuehl writes: "In each successive novel there emerges a pattern of predictable and predetermined types.... Though she produces many people, each is tightly controlled in a super-imposed design, each is rigidly cast in a classical Murdochian role." In 1973 Lawrence Graver in the *New York Times Book Review* commented: "Despite the inventiveness of the situations and the brilliance of the design, Miss Murdoch's philosophy has recently seemed to do little more than make her people theoretically interesting." Along the same lines, the novelist Joyce Carol Oates, an admirer of Murdoch, observes that her novels are "structures in which ideas, not things, and certainly not human beings flourish."

And not very interesting ideas. Murdoch arrived at a form of neo-Platonism, which may something to do with the creation of types ("ideal forms") in her novels, arguing that the Christian conception of God be replaced with a neo-Platonic notion of the Good and for the reintegration of metaphysics and ethics. She was engaged, in the words of one commentator, in "a ceaseless quest for the nature of goodness," or, in the words of another, "how one might live morally." And so forth. Love was another theme, "the quest for a passion beyond any center of self."

One doesn't want to be overly offensive, but this banal and insipid mix seems largely the manner in which one layer of the British middle class, formerly left-wing and now relatively content, essentially accommodated itself to the status quo—while leaving itself room for moral disquiet and rumination—in the reactionary and stagnant postwar decades. Even *Under the Net*, at the time of whose writing Murdoch was still ostensibly a left-winger (by now in the Labour Party), has no air of protest about it. The portions of Murdoch's lectures included in Eyre's film are impossibly smug and pious, the preaching of morality from the Olympian heights of a university sinecure.

Trotsky's words inevitably come to mind: "Moralists of the Anglo-Saxon type, in so far as they do not confine themselves to rationalist utilitarianism, the ethics of bourgeois bookkeeping, appear conscious or unconscious students of Viscount Shaftesbury, who at the beginning of the 18th century deduced moral judgments from a special 'moral sense' supposedly once and for all given to man. Supra-class morality inevitably leads to the acknowledgment of a special substance, of a 'moral sense', 'conscience', some kind of absolute which is nothing more than the philosophic-cowardly pseudonym for god" (*Their Morals and Ours*).

In any event, by the late 1970s and early 1980s Murdoch had swung sharply to the right. By 1981 she had no difficulty in reconciling her philosophy that the essence of both "art and morals" is "love" with the desire, according to an acquaintance, that British coal miners, who were causing difficulties for Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, "should be put up against a wall and shot." Murdoch apparently voted for Thatcher and the Tories throughout the 1980s, claiming that the Labour Party had been taken over by "extremists."

Her generally sycophantic biographer, Peter Conradi, notes that in 1979 Murdoch regretted the fairly sympathetic portrayal of the Irish nationalist cause she had given in *The Red and the Green* (1965). She wrote in her journal: "It is the Stone Age ferocity of the native Irish Catholics in the north which brings these atrocious deeds about." In 1983, this quester after all things "good" wrote to a friend defending the right-wing, anti-Catholic bigot Ian Paisley, who, according to Murdoch, "sincerely condemns violence and did not intend to incite the Protestant terrorists. That he is emotional and angry is not surprising, after 12-15 years of murderous IRA activity. All this business is deep in my soul I'm afraid." Conradi notes that "No occasion is recorded on which she allowed that the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland had, in 1968, distinct and legitimate grievances."

None of this history renders illegitimate the project of dramatizing Murdoch's battle with Alzheimer's disease, but it argues for a far richer and more substantial treatment of her life and dilemmas. In the end, it is patronizing and demeaning to the novelist herself. She engaged herself, for better or worse, in significant struggles. I will be told indignantly that the film is "not about that," it is about her illness and her relationship with Bayley. This begs the question. Whether one likes it or not, the truth of their 43 years together is bound up with the central problems and issues of those four decades.

One of the more sensitive questions which the filmmakers largely avoid is whether there is any connection between Murdoch's life, which had its particular evolution, and the manner of her decline and death. Alzheimer's is a physiological condition, in which specific brain cells deteriorate, causing irreparable damage to a sufferer's memory, thinking and behavior. Research, however, has indicated the existence of environmental and psychosocial factors, including, not surprisingly, stress and depression. It is perhaps suggestive, for example, that age-adjusted statistics show that men, who apparently have a more difficult time adjusting to the aging process than women and commit suicide at a far higher rate, also experience Alzheimer's more than women.

Two moments in the film might have led somewhere, if they had been explored. First, there is the comment by Murdoch herself, when she begins to sense that something is wrong with her. She wonders out loud whether a person going mad is aware of the fact. Later, after the disease has fully enveloped her and she has turned entirely inward, Bayley comments that this is what she has always wanted. One is tempted to respond: please, tell us more. The filmmakers, however, prefer not to probe the possibility that there could have been anything about Murdoch's experience of the world that might have predisposed her to take off, as it were.



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