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Learning to Look: Lessons from Iris Murdoch

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INTRODUCTION

I am very grateful to Peggy Vandenberg and Deborah Mower for inviting me to give this symposium. I've long been interested in the work of Iris Murdoch, and this conference gives me the chance to explore applications of her work to moral development in the classroom. My presentation falls into four sections. First, I'll discuss central aspects of Murdoch's philosophy. Second, I'll introduce the notion of unselfing (from Murdoch) and the related idea of *askesis*—a Greek noun for 'practice,' 'exercise,' or 'training,' (from Pierre Hadot), as possible aims of classroom teaching and learning. Third, I'll consider specific uses of literature and film as adventures in attempted *askesis* and unselfing. Finally, I'll close with very brief reflections on a familiar Murdochian theme—morality and art—as a countercultural response to current trends in higher education.

MURDOCHIAN COMPLEXITIES²

Iris Murdoch is one of the few philosophers also to have been a novelist and to have had her life memorialized in a popular film (*Iris*, 2002). Yet her work has been relatively neglected by mainstream philosophers. There are several reasons for this. For one thing, Murdoch was a maverick, forcefully challenging the received philosophical wisdom of her day in trenchant critiques of behaviorism, existentialism, emotivism, prescriptivism, and ordinary language philosophy, and bringing an array of often novel influences, for example, the writings of Simone Weil, to bear on the development of her philosophical perspectives. For another thing, Murdoch's thought is just plain hard. It is dense and difficult, and resists pigeon-holing into the typical categories of moral philosophy. Whatever the explanation, there seems to be a recent resurgence of interest in her work. This is all to the good, for

Murdoch has much to offer. Indeed, many of her ideas seem perfectly suited to the theme of this conference: “The Art of Morality: Developing Moral Sensitivity Across the Curriculum.”

This is so for a number of reasons. For one thing, Murdoch departed from her contemporaries in the way she thought of ethics. In her day, and even later, some philosophers have thought ethics should be modeled on science. She, by contrast, thought ethics should be modeled on art. Second, unlike many of her contemporaries, she did not endorse the fact/value distinction, the idea that facts and values are separate and separable metaphysical kinds. She thought facts and values were inextricably intertwined; the world itself and even our consciousness of it, is permeated with values and cannot be intelligibly described in value-neutral terms. This is a difficult thought to grasp, and there is controversy about it in Murdoch scholarship, as well as more generally in philosophy. Finally, the philosopher Plato heavily influenced her thinking. His was by no means the only influence on her thought, but it was significant—so significant that we cannot understand Murdoch without adverting to his thinking.

Let us investigate each of these strands of Murdoch’s thought in more detail, starting with what I take to be the deepest influence, that of Plato. In his allegory of the cave, sketched in the *Republic*, Plato uses the metaphor of ascending from the darkness of a cave, where we dimly see images and shadows, into the dazzling light of the sun, which illuminates and allows us to see clearly and fully. The metaphor charts a cognitive progression: images are flawed and untrustworthy representations of objects in the world, and objects in the world, flawed and untrustworthy representations of the Forms, or Ideas. Forms or Ideas are the true and abiding reality, and our journey from images to Forms is illuminated by the Form of the Good, represented by the sun.

The allegory is rich in meaning. Not only is the progression a cognitive one, it is also moral. The Form of the Good, infusing both objects and cognitions with light, permeates being with value. The progression of consciousness from images to the Forms, made possible by the Form of the Good, is a moral progression wherein the agent comes to a fuller, more nuanced understanding of being, truth, and goodness. The Form of the Good is also beautiful, so we can add beauty to the list of those values made accessible to us by our progression into goodness. Why would or should we make this ascent? According to Plato, goodness attracts; the Form of the Good has a kind of magnetic appeal, pulling us up out of darkness and forward to it. Central to this

account is its teleological structure. The Form of the Good is the end or *telos* that attracts us and toward which we strive. The world and our experience of it are shaped in the light of its influence.

This barest sketch of the allegory of the cave will help us to get some of Murdoch's key ideas into focus. Murdoch, like Plato, thought that value is transcendent, though she did not believe in a god. She did not believe that value is created through human choice, but is to be discovered. Value or goodness is part of the fabric of reality that extends beyond the human realm. We discover goodness through moral development, though, as we'll see, we also "build up" value. In Murdoch's view, we come to appreciate value and to have it in our lives through the progressive refinement of consciousness. That is, we encounter moral goodness, and cultivate it in ourselves, through the quality of our consciousness, especially through our attention to the world around us. Thus, cognition and attention, and not choice, are the primary modes in which we encounter and build value in our lives. This and other themes in Murdochian thought (for example, art as the model for morality) leads the Murdoch scholar Maria Antonaccio to claim that Murdoch develops an ethics of vision, as opposed to an ethics of choice (Antonaccio 2012a, p. 161). Key to this ethics of vision is the human capacity to "picture ourselves," and then come to resemble the picture (Antonaccio 2012a, p. 160). Through successive picturing, we draw ever closer to the transcendent good. Murdoch's ethics, Antonaccio (2012a, p. 166) writes, is the study of moral transformation.

The quality of consciousness is key to this outlook. What is the nature of cognition and attention through which we picture ourselves and by means of which moral transformation takes place? Of what are we conscious? For Murdoch, we are not conscious of neutral facts onto which we project values or which elicit subjective responses in us. She rejects Hume's fact/value distinction, just as she rejects his moral psychology, according to which beliefs and desires are separate and separable types of mental state. For her, the world is value-laden, colored by the effects of transcendent goodness, and consciousness—cognition and attention—are value-laden as well. Belief and desire are not readily separable, but, in the virtuous person at least, form a unitary whole. This is a complex and puzzling picture, for it makes sense to say that facts and values, as well as belief and desires, are distinct. It seems perfectly reasonable for me to say, for example, "That sweater is red," and to make the separate evaluative claim, "That sweater is odious." Odiousness does not seem "built into" the sweater's being red, but instead, seems to be a

subjective value that I project onto it, or as Hume would say, is a sentiment aroused in me at the sight of the sweater. Similarly, I can have numerous beliefs without accompanying desires. I can believe that someone is in need without thereby desiring to help that person, or feeling moved by her plight.

Murdoch rejects the Humean picture and takes a different view. Recall the allegory of the cave. It is only through seeing light, that is, encountering value, that we are able truly to see that which is around us. Light illuminates what is there, so that it looks different; we get a better perspective on what is really there (Antonaccio 2012b, p. 85). Think of the mundane example of walking into a dark room, where we see only dark shapes and shadows. When we switch on the light, we can see what is actually there—a chair, a sofa, etc. Similarly, moral value transforms our vision, allowing us to see more clearly the reality of others. Let us explore this theme through Murdoch's famous example of M and D:

A mother, whom I shall call M, feels hostility to her daughter-in-law, whom I shall call D. M finds D quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. D is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile. M does not like D's accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him. Let us assume for the purposes of the example that the mother, who is a very 'correct' person, behaves beautifully to the girl throughout, not allowing her real opinion to appear in any way. We might underline this aspect of the example by supposing that the young couple have emigrated or that D is now dead: the point being to ensure that whatever is in question as *happening* happens entirely in M's mind.

Thus much for M's first thoughts about D. Time passes, and it could be that M settles down with a hardened sense of grievance and a fixed picture of D, imprisoned (if I may use a question begging word) by the cliché: my poor son has married a silly vulgar girl. However, the M of the example is an intelligent well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just *attention* to an object, which confronts her. M tells herself: "I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may

be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again”
(Murdoch 1970, pp. 17-18; italics hers).

Several features of the example are important. For one thing, it is often noted that the transformation in looking is happening entirely in M’s mind. Her behavior toward D has always been impeccable, never betraying her hostility. As time passes, M begins to reflect. As a result of these thoughts, she pictures D differently, describing her in a different and more complimentary vocabulary. This transformation in the concepts used to describe D reveals that M has allowed her vision of D to be influenced by goodness. What blocks our ability to see the goodness of others, according to Murdoch, are the twin evils of neurosis and convention. M’s odyssey is described in terms suggestive primarily of the overcoming of neurosis (though we shouldn’t rule out the effects of convention): she identifies flaws in herself that prevented her from having a just view of D. In Murdoch’s terms, the overcoming of these flaws enabled M to attain a “loving gaze” toward D. In metaphysical terms, the loving gaze is a form of vision that is informed by the transcendent value of goodness. Our ascent to goodness allows us to slough off the factors, such as neurosis and the effects of convention, that occlude our moral vision, enabling us to form ever clearer pictures of ourselves and others. The loving picture of D that M achieves reflects a moral progression in M herself. Her change in vision reflects changes in attitudes. Antonaccio (2012b, chapters 5 and 6) calls this process “unselfing,” and argues that it has both renunciatory and constructive aspects.

As an entrée into a description of unselfing, let’s recall the earlier claim that for Murdoch, ethics is not like science, but like art. We’re now better positioned to see how this is so. M is not involved in fact-finding; she is not investigating facts about D in the hope that she will discover some hitherto unknown bit of information that will change her perspective. Instead, M is engaged in something akin to self-creation or self-sculpting. Her changes are in herself—in her own attitudes toward D. In the process of sloughing off the negative attitudes toward D that caused her occluded vision, she is also building up more positive ones that enable her to see D with a loving gaze. How is this like art? Consider the process of sculpting. A good sculptor selects her object, then starts chipping away those bits that prevent the design from showing through. In many respects, the artist is guided by a vision of what the result will look like, but this vision is subject to revision as the artistic process gathers its own impetus. At some point, the sculpture which “needs to be

made” will guide the artistic process. The process itself is a progressive alternation between sloughing off and building up—taking away those bits of material that occlude the design and adding bits to the form that is taking shape. A more mundane example is that of writing a philosophy paper. We might start out with an idea for a paper in mind, even a structure, but good papers seem to have lives of their own in the sense that the ideas themselves often appear to dictate how they should go together. In Plato’s terms, we follow the *logos*—the meaning or thread of the argument as it unfolds. I view the process of unselfing to be like this. As our vision improves, we are able to see and work to overcome or discard those bits of ourselves that hold us back, while building up new aspects of our selves that support and facilitate progressive refinements of our consciousness. We can never fully see what our final selves will look like, but we seem pulled inexorably forward by picturing who we might become.

In the next section, I will continue describing the process of unselfing by considering how the use of film and literature in the classroom can motivate progressive refinements of vision and attention and the creation of concomitant pictures of the self.

UNSELFING AND ASKESIS

Murdoch was, of course, a novelist. As an author, she used her novels to capture nuances of moral meaning that were not amenable to expression in academic writing. As readers of novels and other genres, and as viewers of films, we can use these media in other ways, specifically, as aids in the process of ethical transformation, both of ourselves and of our students. How might this process work?

One of the puzzling features of the story of M and D is the question of why M should undertake her odyssey of self-transformation. Why has M become motivated to think about her feelings toward D after all these years? Murdoch leaves open the possibility that M does not become so motivated, but settles into a hardened sense of grievance. Surely many people go down that path, refusing to take on the hard reflection that might lead to change. What might prompt one otherwise? In the example of M, Murdoch almost casually suggests that D might have died. This suggestion is made in the context of stressing that M’s transformation is entirely inner. D’s death, could, of course, have been a factor catalyzing M to reconsider her relationship with D. Additionally, M has some things going for her: the M of the example is “. . . an intelligent well-

intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just attention to an object, which confronts her” (Murdoch 1970, p. 17).

The casual reference to D’s possible death offers a clue as to what might cause a person to undertake serious self-reflection: the occurrence of trauma. A painful divorce, the death of a loved one, a family tragedy, a career gone awry—these are the kinds of events that push people into therapy and can induce them to begin to reflect on who they are as persons. As teachers, we have an advantage: our students are a captive audience. They need not experience a painful event to prompt them to self-reflection. We can aid them to engage in the process of refining their attention in ways Murdoch advocates through the use of film and literature.

Let me be clear that I am not suggesting that we foist sets of values upon our students or that we force them to agree with our vision of what is going on in literature and films. Anyone who has taught college students knows that attempts to force a view are met with resistance and are ultimately self-defeating. Yet a crude understanding of Murdoch’s realism might lend itself to something like the forcing of a specific moral vision. After all, Murdoch thought the truth was there to be discovered, not created through human choice. Why would she not approve of “forcing” or “foisting” a moral vision upon someone? Antonaccio (2012b, p. 30, p. 43) responds by arguing that Murdoch endorses a ‘reflexive realism,’ according to which each person must make her own pilgrimage from appearance to reality. Like the ascent from the cave, the pilgrimage is very personal, and takes place through the medium of individual consciousness. Thus, we cannot force another to “see” with genuine moral vision. The best we can do is to try to guide her consciousness to a place where she can see for herself. She alone can make the journey of moral transformation.

The language I’m using, that of ‘pilgrimage’ and ‘journey,’ is common in religious idioms. Indeed, Murdoch tried to recover religious sensibilities and the notion of a transcendent good without God (see Antonaccio, 2012b, chapter 7). Though this aspect of her work is fascinating, more directly relevant to the use of literature and film in the classroom is Antonaccio’s (2012b, chapter 5) claim that Murdoch can be read as advocating habits of refining moral attention along lines similar to philosophers such as Pierre Hadot (1995). Hadot (1995) urges that philosophy is a form of spiritual exercise. According to Antonaccio (2012b, p. 127), Hadot (1995) uses the Greek noun *askesis* to mean ‘exercise,’ ‘practice,’ or ‘training,’ and distinguishes it from later Christian

uses of the term ‘ascetism’ that mean self-denial. Hadot’s (1995) insight, inspired by his reading of Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*, is that philosophy is a discipline for life.

I want to appropriate Antonaccio’s (2012b) notion of spiritual exercises and Hadot’s (1995) idea of *askesis* to suggest that classroom teaching and learning should include sustained and serious practice in the development and refinement of students’ capacities for attention. That is, they should learn how to look, how to see, how to attend to things in an open and reflective manner. In short, they should be exposed to practices that aim to inculcate good habits of mind. As a purely cognitive discipline by means of which students develop habits of careful attention and reading, *askesis* can be practiced in any classroom with any subject. As a discipline intended to refine moral attention and sensitivities, it can be practiced in numerous fields, and using literature and film can help. As I see it, unselfing can take place via *askesis*—the discipline of the practice of looking, seeing, and developing one’s attention can lead to changes in the self.

But the notion of unselfing, with its dual movements of renunciation and build-up, goes beyond the mere refinement of attention, even when moral attention and sensitivities are in play, to effect changes in the self. One might accede that the honing of moral attention and sensitivities is a legitimate goal of classroom practice, but question whether it’s the place of the college professor to aim for the “unselfing” of her students. Should we aim to change people’s lives? Isn’t this goal an expression of hubris? Three argument sketches suggest that “unselfing” is not an inappropriate goal of educators.

The first and most general is that the college years are ones of growth and transformation. They are a passage from the teen-aged years of high schoolers still under parental care to the time when young people are presumed able to enter society as functioning, autonomous adults. In other words, the college years are a phase in the life cycle during which unselfing should take place, as students mature into young adulthood. College is thus an important time during which students should be encouraged to think for themselves. Part of this thinking can and should unsettle the notions of identity they held in high school, which were not fully formed. It is far better that students should undertake the processes of learning, moral growth, and identity formation with competent and caring guidance than without. Consequently, there is a legitimate role for college professors in the process of aiding their students to “unself.” An important caveat to this argument sketch is that unselfing should not

consist only of renunciation, or the tearing down of undesired aspects of personality. Students, especially during the vulnerable college years, should be encouraged to identify and seek to develop their strengths. Again, literature and film can help to highlight both positive and negative personalities and behavior that students can use as models.

A second argument for a legitimate place for unselfing in the college years is suggested by the mission statements of many colleges and universities. Many of these statements profess that institutions are dedicated to excellence in education. Why should excellence not include excellence in being a person, including excellence in moral attention and sensitivity? People can be better or worse; why not strive (students and teachers) to be better? Recognition of this, I take it, would prompt professors to understand that they do not teach only chemistry or philosophy or accounting, but people. We teach people—who have lives that extend beyond the classroom. So I would say that taking seriously an ethics of unselfing is to acknowledge, first and foremost, an obligation to treat students as people in our care, to help them to strive for excellence in the ways of which they are capable, and to help them in their developmental journeys as people who can be better or worse, happy or unfulfilled, morally aware and engaged or morally oblivious. We have the ability to effect change for the good.

Finally, many religious institutions, such as my own—a Jesuit university—profess to offer transformative education and to create life-long learners. Education in these terms is not always an indoctrination into certain values. In the Jesuit tradition, at least, transformative education reflects the view that learning changes the person. Part of this change is, and should be, moral growth. As I and many colleagues understand this, the aim is not to foist a set of values onto students, but to empower them to make their own thoughtful, autonomous, and informed choices about the values they adopt. Part of this empowerment is to provide them with multiple perspectives—to expose them to the richness and variety of views, moral and otherwise, to be discovered through education, and to guide them in the sense of helping them find their own way through this exciting terrain. If our enthusiasm for learning is infectious, we might plant the seed of life-long learning in them. One important way of doing this, I believe, is through the use of *askesis*—the inculcation of habits of attention in students, leading, ideally, to their unselfing—to the process of reflection by means of which they identify and overcome negative traits, habits, and actions, and build more positive ones in their place. With any luck, students will begin to see

many occasions for learning—through literature, film, art, and so on—as means of educating and transforming themselves.

The foregoing argument sketches show that there is a legitimate place for *askesis* and unselfing in higher education. The kind of teacher-student interaction I am suggesting is avowedly counter cultural in the sense that it cuts against the grain of current trends in higher education. Today we see higher education under attack. Budget cuts threaten colleges and universities across the nation; armies of adjuncts replace tenured and tenure-track faculty; on-line education is becoming more prevalent; and for-profit institutions are increasingly familiar. Higher education, in my view, is tending to become a constellation of information delivery systems, in which education is viewed as the fast and efficient delivery of information—facts, figures, formulas, and algorithms—to students for use in the professions. It is a truism that colleges and universities have become “corporatized” according to business models. Higher education, I fear, is going the way of health care provision.

Proposing a robust model of teacher-student interaction premised on the value of *askesis* and unselfing counters these trends, calling to mind the deeper value of education as personal formation. Let us turn to some adventures with literature and film in the classroom that might have had an impact on the personal formation of students.

LITERATURE, FILM, AND MORAL SENSITIVITIES

Let me confess at the outset that I have not used literature or film extensively in the classroom, and I have never deliberately used it as part of the process of unselfing. I have, however, used both media in attempts to develop students’ habits of attention, and to explore nuances of good and evil often missed in philosophical texts. I’ll mention three “adventures” with literature and film in the classroom, two of which I regard as moderately successful and one which was a flop.

The flop was the use of Herman Melville’s novella *Billy Budd* in a philosophy of law class, and I attribute its failure to my rigidity with respect to the students’ encounter with the text. I specifically wanted them to identify natural law and positivist positions in a speech in the work, and directed them to read the text too narrowly. *Billy Budd*, as I’m sure you’ll remember, is an incredibly rich psychological portrait of good and evil, redolent with male homoerotic desire. Questions of the use and misuse of the rule of law abound. But my problem was attempting to

force them to focus their attention on a specific issue, thereby alerting them in advance to the fact that there was something I wanted them to find. Their engagement with the text was reduced to searching for the “right answer,” or to “guess what’s in the teacher’s mind.” The processes of *askesis* and unselfing provide corrective guidance. If I were to use *Billy Budd* again today, I would follow cues given by Murdoch, and allow students to engage with the work freely, guiding them from time to time in their responses and interpretations. In this way, I wouldn’t force a mode of attention upon them, but would let the text speak to them directly. They would then be able to engage with the messages in the text through the medium of their own consciousness, letting it speak to them and guide their attention in ways suitable to their individual experiences. The moral of the story, for me, is that reading is as much an individual experience as anything else, and too didactic an approach can spoil students’ reading experiences. Their own consciousness, shaped by their own life experiences, is the natural starting point for any journey of development we seek to help them with.

My second story is of a more successful use of film in the classroom. The class was medical ethics, and the film was a documentary by Bill Moyers about physician-assisted suicide. The film took us through three case studies. One was a woman with terminal cancer in Oregon who had made arrangements for physician-assisted suicide; a second, a man with Lou Gehrig’s disease, living in Virginia, who did not have that option; and a third, a man dying of liver failure in a hospital in Kentucky, again, without the option of physician-assisted suicide. Moyers did sensitive interviews with patients (where possible), families, and physicians. In this course, I did have a specific goal related to unselfing. The class was populated by pre-professional students, including a number of pre-meds who seemed focused only on getting into medical school and nothing else. Sensitivity to patients and the quality of care seemed miles away from their world views. In addition, many were conservative Catholics, rejecting out of hand the possibility of physician-assisted suicide as contradictory to their religious beliefs. In many cases, it seemed to me, these beliefs had not been subjected to critical scrutiny, nor the plight of terminally ill patients and their families truly appreciated.

The film was a powerful one. Two of the three case studies were especially riveting. The Oregon woman who had chosen physician-assisted suicide did not die as she had planned. She had two daughters, both of whom wanted to be with her when she died. One lived some

distance away, and the two daughters decided to wait for her to come, thereby missing the legal window of opportunity within which suicide could have been done. Moyers' interview with the daughters after their mother's death was especially moving, as both cried and expressed guilt and regret that they had not acceded to their mother's wishes. The daughter whose trip caused the delay was especially moving. Both women were young—just a few years older than my students.

The second case, of the man with Lou Gehrig's disease, was gripping too, as Moyers charted his inevitable decline. Wheelchair-bound when first encountered in the film, Moyers documented how his wife and other caretakers had to see to his every need, feeding him, clothing him, shaving him, and so on. The man, a farmer, and his family expressed strong religious beliefs against physician-assisted suicide, and the patient himself often stated his desire to live until he died a natural death. Yet the film showed the progressive strain on the family, especially the wife, as the efforts to provide care intensified and costs increased. Eventually, they stood to lose their farm.

My aim was to watch the film with the students and then have discussion. Discussion was impossible, however. At the film's end, the students sat silently with sorrowful faces. Some were in tears. My attempts at discussion during the next class period met with tepid responses. Was this venture compromised by the lack of discussion? Perhaps. Ideally, we would have analyzed the film together. However, I hope that my goal of unselfing was at least partially met, for that goal consisted in large part of urging my pre-professional students to *feel with* patients, to enter emotionally into their situations and their plights. I wanted to find a way for them to *empathize* with the fear and suffering of patients and their families. I thought this was an important moral aspect of their professional development. Training in medical school, I feared, was likely to block the empathic mechanisms that would allow them to feel with patients—perhaps necessarily so—but the blockage would constitute a loss to their humanity. At some point in their careers, they needed to be brought face to face with the fact that patients are people—flesh and blood, living people, with situations and ideas that differ from those of their health care providers. I hoped that nurturing the humanity of the potential providers would be one way of countering the increasing inhumanity of health care systems.

In my third use of literature and film, I went all out and used nothing but these two media in the classroom. This was in an Honors Program course I taught entitled, "A Philosophical Look at Vampires:

Portrayals of Good and Evil in Vampire Fiction and Film.” As most popular culture buffs know, interest in vampires is on the rise. In fact, a new generation of vampires has burst upon the contemporary scene, namely, beautiful, good, morally decent vampires with whom we can relate and empathize. We might even want to be like them. Such positive portrayals are recent developments.

My course was a partial historical survey of vampire fiction and film in the west. It started with some predecessors of the title character of Bram Stoker’s novel *Dracula*, and explored contemporary vampire fiction in novels by Anne Rice, Stephen King, and a series of short stories found in *The Penguin Book of Vampire Stories*. Many philosophical themes (for example, the nature of death and immortality) are explored in vampire fiction, and our class touched on all of them. My primary interest, as the course title suggests, was in portrayals of good and evil. I was not interested in unselfing, *per se*, but did want to expand students’ sensitivities about how we perceive good and evil and how it is portrayed in works of film and fiction in a specific, and very popular, genre. I wanted to prompt reflection on good and evil as presented in that genre not only because it is interesting and fun, but also because it is frequently consumed, especially by young people, without a second thought. Here I want to discuss three classic vampire films: the 1922 silent classic, *Nosferatu*, directed by F. W. Murnau and starring Max Schreck as the vampire; Tod Browning’s 1931 *Dracula*, starring Bela Lugosi; and Francis Ford Coppola’s film, *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*, starring Gary Oldman and Winona Ryder.

Though my primary aim was to explore the development of depictions of good and evil, it became clear that my students did not know how to look at films. I now want to discuss still photos from these films to highlight important themes and aspects I wanted the students to notice and appreciate. Consider, for example, the first photo, of *Nosferatu* at the bedside of his victim.



The first thing to notice is his sheer “otherness.” He is not like us—his face, eyes, ears, teeth and hands are the hands of a creature that is not human. The message here is that evil is not like us—it is wholly and purely other. The second important aspect of the photo is the play of light and darkness. Dramatic contrasts of light and dark are evident throughout Murnau’s silent film, in which visual depictions convey images laden with meaning for the astute viewer. Finally, a subtle message is communicated through the rosary hanging on the wall behind Nosferatu—he often appears juxtaposed with religious symbols of goodness.



The second photo, of Nosferatu in an archway, reinforces these themes. We see his creepy vampire-like otherness, light and dark are used in dramatic visual contrasts, and the archway itself is reminiscent of churches and religious architecture.



A third photo, of Nosferatu on the deck of the ship that conveyed him from his home in Transylvania to Bremen, the city of his victim, is an amazing glimpse of the vampire by day. The vampire's claw-like hands are replicated in the ropes that coil around the mast to his left (the right in the viewer's perspective on the photo), as he stands framed by the ship's sparse rigging. The rigging itself, with its crossed ropes, calls to mind the religious figure of the cross—an image that is widely replicated in the background of the vampire in images throughout the film.



Finally, we see the shadow of the vampire at night, creeping up the stairs to the bedroom of his victim. The vampire's otherness, light and shadow, and the angular lines of the banisters on the staircase all reinforce common visual themes at play in the film's cinematography.

In *Nosferatu* (1922), we have a portrait of the vampire as purely evil, and purely other. In 1931, with the appearance of Bela Lugosi in Tod Browning's *Dracula*, we have a more complex interpretation of the figure and character of the vampire.



In this first picture of Bela Lugosi as Count Dracula, we see, again, the interplay of light and darkness. Unlike *Nosferatu*, however, the vampire is more like us—more human. His intense gaze, highlighted by a slant of light falling across the middle of his face, exerts a hypnotic fascination. Here the count is attired in his traditional cape and high-collared shirt. In the next photo, we see that Dracula is so much like us that he “passes” in civilized society.



Here is Dracula in the drawing room, having given his card to the butler and been announced as a new neighbor on a visit. He is dashing, debonair, urbane, sophisticated, and correct, polished in his manners. He

is invited and welcomed into our homes, our drawing rooms, trusted as we introduce him to our wives and daughters. He is one of us. Evil is no longer other, but is recognized as being like us—so much like us that we cannot now discern good from evil until it is (almost) too late. Evil, in human form, is now among us.



Evil is so much like us, or perhaps, in us, that it is only through the special services of an expert that we can unmask and expunge it. Here the vampire is being “outed” by the vampire hunter, Professor Van Helsing. Van Helsing is a scientist—a man of specialized knowledge—who has been brought in to identify and fight Count Dracula. He unmasks him in the drawing room, by inviting Dracula to look at a small mirror. The vampire, of course, has no reflection, and is thus revealed for what he is in the very drawing room he has infiltrated. And so the struggle begins.



Though there is, of course, more to the story of Browning’s *Dracula* than can be told here, a moment of truth occurs when Dracula orders Van Helsing to “come here,” holding out his hand in a gesture of drawing him closer. A struggle of wills ensues in which Van Helsing momentarily staggers forward, drawn by the powerful attraction of evil.

Evil, in the guise of the urbane and sophisticated, has an attraction for us, and in that attraction lies its power. It appeals to something in us. The evil which was depicted as wholly other in the figure of Nosferatu has become one of us in Browning's Count Dracula, and the Count, it seems, is able to appeal to our inmost being. Evil is not only among us, it also reaches inside us, touching something in our very hearts and souls. Van Helsing, in a show of strength of will acknowledged even by Dracula, resists the lure of evil, and chases the vampire from the drawing room by brandishing a cross. Here the contradiction is evident—the scientist, the man of reason, uses religion, the descendent of magic and superstition—to expel the vampire.

Tod Browning's *Dracula* of 1931 is an important step in the evolution of the character of the vampire. In Francis Ford Coppola's film, *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), we have yet another stage—the depiction of the vampire as a sympathetic figure in a love story. (The film, *Bram Stoker's Dracula* bears scant resemblance to Bram Stoker's novel, *Dracula*.) Gary Oldman portrays the vampire and Winona Ryder, his true love. Here a backstory explains how a prince came to be a vampire. The story of the prince who fought for the Church and was wronged is narrated at the beginning of the film by Anthony Hopkins, who stars as Van Helsing, the vampire hunter.



Gary Oldman, as the prince, fought valiantly for the Church against Muslim invaders. Through treachery and deceit, his princess, played by Winona Ryder, comes to believe he is dead, and hurls herself to her death from a castle window into a river far below. Because her death is a suicide, she is denied burial on sanctified ground by the Church. The prince declares the Church his enemy, and is destined to become a vampire—the “undead”—neither dead nor alive. Here he is centuries

later as the vampire, licking blood from a straight razor used by his guest from England.



The vampire travels to England in the guise of an alluring foreigner.



There he finds and woos the woman who reincarnates his princess. His is not an attack by night, but a seduction in which the two fall in love, and she makes the deliberate decision to become a vampire like him and join him in undeath forever.



Both are hunted down by Van Helsing and her former fiancé. The film invites questions about who is good and who, evil. We can understand the prince who is wronged by the Church declaring it his enemy; we can sympathize with the lost soul of the vampire who wanders through centuries searching for his true love. When he finds her, we are not appalled, but, instead, are fascinated by his attempts to woo and win her. Adopting the perspective of her fiancé and Van Helsing, we question whether she has been brainwashed, seduced, and deluded through the powers of the vampire into making a choice she would not make were she in her right mind. The film portrays the vampire in morally ambiguous terms.

In examining these three films, we are able to see an evolution in how evil is portrayed in the figure of the vampire. In *Nosferatu* (1922), evil is purely other, grotesque and animal-like. In *Dracula* (1931), evil has become one of us, entering our homes and dwelling among us. In *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), it is unclear whether evil really is evil. The vampire is the sympathetic hero of a love story. Now, in 2012, we have morally good vampires, attractive and decent, whom we want to be like. Clearly, the character of the vampire is still a work in progress.

ART AND MORALITY

More could be said about vampire films and fiction and what changing portrayals of vampires might tell us about the cultures and mindsets from which these works arise. However, I want to close with a few reflections prompted by Murdoch's notion that morality is like art. In her work, this is a very rich idea, meant to counter the view that ethics is like science. In art, there is something there—a truth, if you will—to be discovered through creation. Similarly, we both discover and create

ourselves as moral beings as we attend to others and to ourselves through introspection. When we look intelligently at art (and here I include the “art” of popular culture, such as vampire films), we learn to focus and direct our gaze in ways that heighten sensitivities. We become more aware of the nuances of good and evil, of human weakness and strength, and one hopes, our attention becomes informed and guided by compassion. Murdoch, after all, thought that the moral refinement of attention resulted in a “loving” gaze, a gaze which scrutinized the world with kindness. In seeking to cultivate fineness of vision in our students, it seems to me that we should also seek to inculcate a kindly vision of a compassionate, charitable bent.

Charity is compatible with another theme we should stress to our students, which is that works of art do not spring up fully formed, nor does goodness come without trial and error. Like art, the morality of humanity is always a work in progress. We write a draft, we scrap it, we draft again, we revise, we reread, we keep at it, and eventually, we get a paper we’re satisfied with. Similarly, we try, we fail, we try again, we get better, we have a lapse, we pick ourselves up and start again. The important point is never to give up, never to bash ourselves so badly for failing that we lose heart, to remember that human life is a journey—that we are pilgrims, along with others, along a way.

This message, I believe, is countercultural in three important respects. First, the emphasis on compassion, especially toward our own and others’ mistakes, counters the harshly critical cast of much that we see in the news today, particularly in politics. Second, developing moral identity takes time. It is not done overnight. One has to work at it. Third, we need others to develop ourselves. Each of these themes—the stress on compassion and kindness, the need to continually work on oneself, and the need for others—runs counter to a rather ruthless current of individualism evident in our culture today. Part of the message of this current is that if you don’t succeed now, you’ll never succeed, and if you need to succeed by cutting corners or doing someone else down, do it. Murdoch provides a gentler alternative that highlights other values. Patient looking at others and at one’s self—her ethics of vision—can empower one to discover the talents and goodness of oneself as well as others. It can enable students (and others) to believe in themselves—in their own goodness and worth as persons, in their own talents and abilities, in their own place in the world. Part of the importance of being a teacher is that we are called to believe in young people before they are able to believe in themselves. Through *askesis* and unselfing, we can invite

students to discover and create morally good selves, and thereby overcome the fear and insecurity that often leads to selfish, ruthless attitudes and behavior. All of this is, of course, highly idealistic. But, then, what is Murdoch's ethical vision, if not the idealistic notion that, with patient attention, we can come to discover the good?

NOTES

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² This section draws on my review of Justin Broackes, ed., Iris Murdoch, *Philosopher: A Collection of Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), in *Ethics* (2012), vol. 123, no. 1, pp. 137-141.

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