

ANALYSIS

The Moviegoer (1961)



Walker Percy

(1916-1990)

"*The Moviegoer* is set in New Orleans; the narrator, Binx Bolling, manages a small branch office of his uncle's brokerage firm. The special quality of fantasy of the novel is the narrator's interest in motion pictures and their stars: 'It is their peculiar reality which astounds me.' He is considered a genius of some kind by his aunt, though he admits that 'actually I'm not very smart.' Through college and beyond, high hopes have been entertained of him; his aunt wants him to go to medical school. Unable to cope with the actual world, he frequently settles for the cinematic one; there are degrees of authenticity (for example, a movie like *Panic in the Streets* with Richard Widmark was filmed in New Orleans and thus reaches a kind of ultimate in authenticity). His behavior is modeled upon that of movie stars; toward his society, 'I keep a Gregory Peckish sort of distance.'

Bolling's worst problem is to 'fit in'; the film world seems to give a greater sense of security and correctness than any other. Memories of films are more vivid than those of past experiences. Bolling has a special fondness for what he calls 'a repetition,' which he describes as 'the re-enactment of past experience toward the end of isolating the time segment which has lapsed in order that it, the lapsed time, can be savored of itself and without the usual adulterations of events that clog time like peanuts in brittle.' Thus a repetition is a 'clean' recurrence, free of extraneous mixtures and adhesions. For example, the two settings of *The Ox-Bow Incident* are fourteen years apart, but they click perfectly: 'There we sat, I in the same seat I think, and afterwards came out into the smell of privet. Camphor berries popped underfoot on the same section of broken pavement.'

Bolling's real problem is to put together segments of his experience. He suffers badly from insomnia, and hasn't really lose consciousness since he was a child. He lives in a condition of suspended consciousness and he tries to maneuver the parts of himself into some reasonable, or at least tolerable, pattern. He feels a sympathetic conjunction with Jews, for example: 'We share the same exile,' except that Jews are 'more at home than I am. I accept my exile.' Searching for signs of life in the world, when he feels bad, he goes to the library to read controversial periodicals, because hatred of liberals for conservatives and vice versa 'strikes me as one of the few signs of life remaining in the world. This is another thing about the world which is upsidedown: all the friendly and likable people seem dead to me; only the haters seem alive.' So the world of the screen, perforce, takes over; Marshal Dillon of *Gunsmoke*, for example, is a hero: 'This is no ordinary marshal. He is also a humanist.' 'It ain't nothing but a stinking Indian,' says one of the killers. 'You're wrong,' says the marshal. 'It is a human being'...

Bolling's struggle to identify, to admire 'right conduct' and despise chicanery, is linked to a sense of the 'malaise' which, he thinks, the world is suffering. 'The malaise is the pain of loss. The world is lost to you, the world and the people in it, and there remains only you and the world and you no more able to be in the world than Banquo's ghost.' The 'malaise' happens to you suddenly, and when it does, it needs to be fought off. In his MG sports car, he is immune to the malaise; as he and his lovely 'drum majorette of a secretary' travel toward the Gulf, the malaise holds off. On the way, an accident with a westbound green Ford, and Bolling is now 'in solid' with Sharon, as well as Bill Holden ever was in the films. 'The world is a dream, broken in occasionally by Howard Johnson restaurants, motels and the children's carnival.

A visit to his mother is followed by speculation upon the meaning of God. 'Sometimes when she mentions God, it strikes me that my mother uses him as but one of the devices that come to hand in an outrageous man's world, to be put to work like all the rest in the one enterprise she has any use for: the canny management of the shocks of life. It is a bargain struck at the very beginning in which she settled for a general belittlement of everything, the good and the bad.' Instead of these locutions, Bolling depends upon the filmed world, which is marked by repetitions and rotations: 'A rotation I define as the experiencing of the new beyond the expectation of the experiencing of the new.' In other words, a lucky shot, a world suddenly opening up when one doesn't expect it. The trouble is that 'when I awake in the grip of everydayness. Everydayness is the enemy.... Now nothing breaks it--but disaster. Only once in my life was the grip of everydayness broken: When I lay bleeding in a ditch.'

It is obvious that *The Moviegoer* is an up-to-date, refurbished Baudelairean portrayal of *ennui*, *despair*, and the abyss. It is a comic fantasy, but throughout the narrator is fighting to individualize himself, fighting against the clichés of ambition, devoutness, order, and discretion, which he has heard all his life and which have no real meaning for him. Beginning with Chapter Four the novel takes a new turn: Bolling, fearful that his cousin Kate will commit suicide, agrees to travel with her to Chicago; he offers to marry her, but she calls the idea an 'ingenious little scheme.' The prospect of suicide, she says, is the 'only thing that keeps me alive.' She wants to believe in someone completely, then to do his bidding. Bolling engages in an imaginary conversation with Rory Calhoun about his good intentions and his failure. But before the malice sets in, in Chicago, he rushes to a movie house, 'an Aztec mortuary of funeral urns and glyphs, thronged with the spirit-presence of another day, William Powell and George Brent and Patsy Kelly and Charley Chase, the best friends of my childhood,' to see a movie, *The Young Philadelphians*, with Paul Newman, 'an idealistic young fellow who is disillusioned and becomes cynical and calculating. But in the end he recovers his ideals.' That was it about the movies; in the end, they recapture their ideals, and the memory of their conversions can be recaptured by seeing the movie again, in rerun.

Back in New Orleans, Bolling is severely scolded by his aunt for the Chicago adventure. Her lecture to him is a parody of rationally 'good advice.' The 'other generations,' trying to understand Bolling, comes out with the words only, and semi-slogans. They have listened to music together, read the *Crito*, had intelligent conversation about goodness and truth and nobility. But where has she failed him?

I am silent.

'Tell me where I have failed you.'

'You haven't.'

But their friendship is over; the gap between them will never be closed, and her brisk smile marks a close to her mistaken ambitions for him.

On his thirtieth birthday, Bolling meditates upon 'my dark pilgrimage on this earth and knowing less than I ever knew before, having learned only to recognize merde when I see it...' All persons are humanists, and 'ninety-either percent believe in God, and men are dead, dead, dead; and the malaise has settled like a fall-out...' The Epilogue cheats a bit. He and Kate are married, he is to start in medical school in the fall, and his aunt is fond of him again. But this is not really a part of the novel, which is concerned with the false labels and definitions the 'humanists' have used and the agonies caused by his not subscribing to their purposes; and, finally, his having run to the movies to find a way of closing the abyss. In the end, he conducts a steady monologue with Rory Calhoun concerning the virtues of his case. But he is unable to

sustain it, and must go to the protection of his aunt's precise good will and the institution of marriage and science.

The Moviegoer is a remarkable use of the man who uses the cinema world as a counter to the real one. The two worlds do have points of contact, but ultimately the one is unable to make up for the deficiencies of the other, especially since the movie world often has the same inadequacies, blown up."

Frederick J. Hoffman
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1

"As a way of suggesting the remarkable achievement of Walker Percy's first novel, *The Moviegoer*, I want to discuss three paradoxes in its hero, Binx Bolling. All three paradoxes arise from speculation about the nature of the relationship between the fictive Binx and the fiction that contains him. My intent, in exploring them, is to cast light on some of the shadowy improbabilities and complexities of both the character Binx and the novel he 'writes.'

The first paradox is that Binx is in his society but not of it. He is at once a typical insider and a classic outsider. As an insider, he lives in his natal city, works in a family business, spends a good deal of time with friends and family connections and has no enemies. He has, in short, as fixed a position in his society as it seems possible to have. Yet, he finds himself a man almost without identity. Alienated from his culture, he feels that his most fortunate circumstance is that he regains the ability to see his life as a stranger might, freshly and from the outside. How can he be both insider and outsider? An examination of his paradoxical status will clarify the evolution of his character and, in turn, cast light upon the peculiarly tentative opening of Percy's novel.

Second, the narrator Binx is so single-mindedly concerned with himself and his personal response to events that virtually all the other major characters at one time or another accuse him of being selfish or narcissistic. Yet his narrative, Percy's novel, has been widely recognized as the best of this century about New Orleans and as one of the major post-World War II books about the South. How could such a solipsistic narrator write a central fiction about the culture of a city and a region?

The third paradox takes us directly into the heart of the book. Much of the action deals with Binx's 'search' for 'clues' to the mystery of existence. Whenever he is able, he seeks these clues in the world around him. And he always carries a notebook with him to jot down his thoughts. Yet, except for a brief remark about the relation of science to romanticism, he only uses that notebook once, to record an experience that comes to him at three in the morning. He writes:

REMEMBER TOMORROW

Starting point for search:

It no longer avails to start with creatures and prove God.

Yet it is impossible to rule God out.

The only possible starting point: the strange fact of one's own invincible apathy--that if the proofs were proved and God presented himself, nothing would be changed. Here is the strangest fact of all.

Abraham saw signs of God and believed. Now the only sign is that all the signs in the world make no difference. Is this God's ironic revenge?

But I am onto him.

If 'all the signs in the world make no difference,' then what is the point of his search for clues?

As these paradoxes suggest, Binx Bolling is a complex, enigmatic figure in a complex work. To make sense of him, it is helpful to examine the evolution of the character in the opening pages; for there Percy deliberately keeps beginning the book over again. Each of the first three paragraphs records a separate

narrative: in the first, the opening situation arrives with the Wednesday mail, and it triggers two separate memories for Binx in the next two paragraphs. To complicate matters further, the Binx who gets the mail has just undergone a profound change. He has just become aware of what he calls 'the search' that morning. That sudden fresh awareness creates the heightened sensitivity of the opening paragraphs (and the rest of the book) and serves as the true initiating moment of the action. But it is a memory of a still earlier moment of perception that serves to trigger that initiating moment, and the earlier moment thus serves as yet another beginning itself.

Binx, as he reveals himself in the first three paragraphs, is a fiercely introspective, analytical man with an obsessive habit of interpretation. When he receives a note from his aunt asking him to come to lunch, he comments: 'I know what this means.' Since he eats regularly with her on Sundays and the note arrives on Wednesday, 'it can only mean one thing.' Binx knows that she wants to have a serious talk with him about his future or about her stepdaughter Kate, whose fiancé was killed in a car wreck. Here we see that Binx's sensitivity allows him to interpret events with an almost Jamesian subtlety. And further, his sensitivity includes a frankness and curiosity about his own emotions: he discovers that he is actually looking forward to the forthcoming charged encounter.

This discovery triggers the second narrative, his memory of the death of his brother, Scott, when Binx was eight. His aunt Emily had taken him for a walk on the street outside the hospital, and she seemed for once entirely willing to walk at Binx's rate and talk about whatever he wanted to talk about. He interpreted her behavior: 'Something extraordinary had happened all right.' Finally she told him his brother had died. She told him that she knew he would bear up and act like a soldier. As a child, he wondered: 'I could easily act like a soldier. Was that all I had to do?' This childhood memory triggers a second memory of a movie Binx saw a month before out by Lake Ponchartrain. It was a film about a man with amnesia who was faced with the problem of making a fresh start in life. But it ended happily, Hollywood-style: 'In no time he found a very picturesque place to live, a houseboat on the river, and a very handsome girl, the local librarian'

As the reader soon learns, the two memories function as a commentary of Binx's present predicament. The movie exemplifies how it is to live in the world, his aunt's advice suggests how, living in the world, one must face death or loss. Both answers are false because they counsel forms of forgetfulness toward the mystery of human existence, a forgetfulness that Binx knows to be a form of death. But the answers define themselves as the ways to live in the world; thus they are endorsed by that civilization which itself seems organized to deny or suppress any sense of the wonder of life. Hence, Binx, who is acutely aware of that mystery and searches for clues to the significance of his own life, is unable to rest easy with any of the answers conventionally presented by his society.

After the opening paragraphs, Binx sketches in the broad outlines of his present existence. It reveals a man living an ordinary life on the surface, but one deeply alienated from any sense of purpose and painfully conscious of that alienation. He is consciously pursuing what he ironically calls his Little Way. Like Camus' Meursault, he seems intent on getting through his life with deliberately reduced expectations. For the past four years he has been living 'uneventfully' in 'peaceful' Genteelly, an ordinary, middle-class suburb or New Orleans which he prefers to the gaudy quaintness of the famous French Quarter or the quiet elegance of the Garden District. His job is as banal as his surroundings: he manages a branch office of his uncle's brokerage firm. Like Meursault, Binx has no close friends and likes to spend time in the company of pretty women; he regularly seduces his secretaries, though the practice seems more a hobby than a series of grand love affairs. In the end, each of his secretaries and he 'were so sick of each other' that they were delighted to part. His existence, then, may seem everyday, but it is really just empty. That is why Binx goes to movies so frequently and obsessively that he may reasonably be designated 'the moviegoer' and this novel named *The Moviegoer*.

His obsession betrays his own inadequacy; for all the truly memorable moments of Binx's life seem to have come from movies more real than his own life. Percy has found the perfect metaphor for the alienated man in our culture; for anyone who feels his own life circumscribed may find it expanded by vicarious participation in the glamour and grandeur of a movie plot, but must also feel that moment of psychic uncertainty and disappointment at the end of a film when he returns to his humdrum self like a rubberband snapping back from the screen.

But it is crucial to remember that Binx did not always live in this fashion. Like Meursault in *The Stranger*, Binx at certain points drops hints of his former life, which was completely at variance with the unambitious, banal behavior of his present existence. It was a life built on longing. Sexual longing seems to have typified a more generalized longing for whatever was beyond his grasp. Binx explains that sex is 'longed after and dreamed of the first twenty years of one's life, not practiced but not quite prohibited; simply longed after, longed after as a fruit not really forbidden but mock-forbidden and therefore secretly prized.' Binx is now thirty; but until 'Ten years ago I pursued beauty and gave no thought to money.' Also, until ten years ago, Binx was ambitious; he explains, 'Once I thought of going into law or medicine or even pure science. I even dreamed of doing something great. But there is much to be said for giving up such grand ambitions and living the most ordinary life imaginable, a life without the old longings.'

Some event in the past was so monumental in its impact on him that it permanently deflected him from 'the old longings,' the ambitious attempt to make something of his life in a romantic and conventional way. That event occurred to him ten years before when he was wounded during the Korean War. At that instant, he 'woke up'; he began seeing reality as if for the first time as a child might, without the deadening blur of routine that Binx calls everydayness. 'I remembered the first time the search occurred to me. I came to myself under a chindolea bush.... My shoulder didn't hurt but it was pressed hard against the ground as if somebody sat on me. Six inches from my nose a dung beetle was scratching around under the leaves. As I watched, there awoke in my an immense curiosity. I was onto something. I vowed that if I ever got out of this fix, I would pursue the search.'

In a sense, the rest of the novel records his attempts to come to terms with the fact of this experience, to assess the consequences of his sudden full awareness of being alive in a precise, historical moment. This attempt is his search, and it is ultimately religious. Heidegger says in *An Introduction to Metaphysics* that the origin of philosophy lies in experiencing the question, 'Why are there essents ['existents' or 'things that are'] rather than Nothing?' And Binx's wartime experience raises precisely this question.

His wartime moment of perception led to nothing, at least in Binx's eyes. While on the battlefield he vowed to pursue his search. But as soon as he returned home, he claims, he 'forgot all about it.' This claim is not quite true' except during an unsatisfactory hunting trip with war buddies, after the war he gave up all the old, romantic, ambitious, brave, idealized longings and opted for peaceful life in a nondescript suburb where he could 'pursue money and on the whole feel better.' He chose everydayness with a vengeance, but at least his existence has not been deluded by a desire for a 'meaningful career'; he has not forgotten the search then so much as he has left himself open to it. His is an existence from which he can 'wake up' because it is essentially an uncommitted and undirected holding action, while a life spent in pursuit of the old longings would not have been. Precisely because his existence is nonexistence, it does not color or distort the world around him. Instead, it makes it possible for him to see the world and to wonder why it is there. Binx has had such a moment of waking and seeing and wondering on the morning in which his narrative begins. That initiating moment of vision then makes the book possible.

The night before, Binx has dreamed of the Korean War. When he awakens, he remembers 'the first time the search occurred' to him ten years before. As a result, 'this morning, for the first time in years,' he becomes aware of the possibility of the search and thus can begin to 'write' his book. He again sees about him as if for the first time. As he puts his belongings back in his pocket from where they rested on the bureau, they appear startlingly different: 'They looked both unfamiliar and at the same time full of clues.... What was unfamiliar about them was that I could see them. They might have belonged to someone else. A man can look at this little pile on his bureau for thirty years and never once see it. It is as invisible as his own hand. Once I saw it, however, the search became possible.'

Several things are noteworthy about Binx's experience. Most interestingly, Percy insists that it is *not* Binx's first sense of the possibility of the search that leads him to undertake it. Instead, it is the second one, years later, which was triggered by his memory of the first wartime moment of vision. In other words, it is not just his renewed awareness of the *thinness* of his world. (Presumably every child has a similar awareness of this glory of creation but gradually loses it, as Wordsworth says, 'into the light of common day.') Rather, Percy emphasizes the importance to Binx of his *memory* of the earlier moment. It is his renewed sense of a self constituted through his own memory, not an identity mediated to him by society

(symbolized by his wallet full of 'identity cards, library cards, credit cards' or one mediated by an awareness of tradition (symbolized by Aunt Emily's speeches about family honor), that makes his quest possible.

Although a sense of self reconstituted through memory is necessary for Binx to begin his quest, his renewed ability to perceive the objects on his bureau as if for the first time is the enabling event. There is, interestingly, a term that precisely names what happens to him. It is *defamiliarization*, a word coined by the Russian Formalist literary critics to describe the recovery of reality that comes from the reading of fiction. Art defamiliarizes the world by permitting the viewer to see it momentarily through another's eyes, the eyes of the artist or writer. By slowing down the process whereby objects are perceived, fiction recovers them from the realm of habit and restores to the reader a sense of the quiddity of his world.

Percy makes an additional use of Binx's defamiliarized reality. It enables Binx to see the minutiae of his own life clearly and, thus, come to understand and ultimately change that life. Moreover, Binx reverses the Formalist insight that narrative creates a defamiliarized reality. In his case, the defamiliarized pile of 'clues' serves to create a heightened awareness of the implications of things. That awareness was first dramatized in the opening paragraph when Binx tells what Aunt Emily's note 'means.' It is demonstrated in the continued heightened consciousness that enables Binx to write the book.

The Moviegoer offers itself as a defamiliarized account of Binx's life. As he moves through its pages, he can see himself and his world as he would a stranger's. His consciousness is aware of and able to articulate the world around him much as a playgoer sees a play: he reads the details for significance. But there is one crucial difference. He is not simply watching a play or movie; he is living his life and must become more than a passive interpreter of details. Because he is aware of society's roles as roles, that is, fabrications, he must create his own role from an examination of his personal experience.

In other words, Binx is *in* a culture but not *of* it. For this reason, he is especially drawn to others who, he senses, mirror his situation. Thus he never tires of looking at the photograph sitting on Aunt Emily's mantelpiece which shows three male Bollings on tour in the Black Forest of Germany in the 1920s. Binx explains: 'For ten years I have looked at it on this mantelpiece and tried to understand it.' He knows that the two elder Bollings, Dr. Wills and Judge Anse, 'are serene in their identities. Each one coincides with himself.' They are completely defined by their hunting outfits and their public personalities. But the younger Bolling, who is also Binx's father, is different; he 'is not one of them.' Although he too is wearing an outfit that suggests a successful American hunting abroad, his expression undercuts the pose. 'He eyes are alight with an expression I can't identify; it is not far from what his elders might have called smart-alecky.... Again I search the eyes, each eye a stipple or two in a blurred oval. Beyond a doubt they are ironical.'

His father's eyes fascinate Binx because they suggest that he is aware that he is playing a role. The others are successful Americans on a hunt; they rest completely secure and unquestioning in roles provided for them by their culture. But his father's situation is like Binx's in the dark forest of his life; his culture has not fully integrated him into it. He is going along with the others, but he does so as an outsider, as one consciously acting a part. But, though the father seems, at least in the photograph, to share Binx's outsider status, he could offer Binx no answers about how to act in the world; for he was hardly in the world enough to take food into his own body. In fact, Binx's father carried off 'the grandest coup of all: to die.' He even died in Crete in the wine dark sea 'with a copy of *The Shropshire Lad* in his pocket.' Like his father, Binx is an outsider. But unlike his father he does not want to die romantically; nor does he want to settle down to everydayness like the amnesiac in the movie or to endure loss stoically like Aunt Emily's ideal soldier. He just wants to live with awareness and wonder. His only tools for doing so are his memory and his ability to see himself as a stranger to the world even while he is very much in the world.

Binx's best model then for being in but not of the world is not his father but those Jews who preserve their Jewishness in the midst of a Christian civilization. From the Wednesday when he becomes freshly aware of the search, Binx notes that he is acutely aware of Jews. Whenever he passes a Jew, the 'Geiger counter' in his head 'starts rattling away like a machine gun.' He says of Jews, 'We share the same exile' but adds that he is more Jewish, that is, more alienated, because he accepts exile. Nevertheless, he insists that

'Jews are my first real clue' because they are able to function and to create meaningful lives in spite of not being fully integrated into the society that contains them.

To understand Binx's dilemma is to grasp the dramatic necessity for the book's multiple beginnings. Critics have often remarked on the nonconclusive ending of *The Moviegoer* and indeed of all Percy's novels. But what has been much less noticed is the corresponding tentativeness of his beginnings. In *The Moviegoer*, Percy stages an elegant dance of at least five partial beginnings: the opening situation of receiving Aunt Emily's letter, the two memories it triggers, and the two initiating moments when Binx wakes from the everydayness and sees the wonder of life. These fresh starts and false starts comment on each other and finally enact a major theme: the necessity of seeing one's life as a series of fresh beginnings and the corresponding danger of lapses into the everydayness of habit.

2

But it is precisely if paradoxically Binx's alienation from his society that lets Percy make such a major interpretation of that society. To make clear why this is so, I want to consider *The Moviegoer* briefly in a tradition of southern and New Orleanian fiction. It is worth doing so because in his book Percy has solved a continuing problem of writing about New Orleans. The problem grows out of the overabundance of rich, absorbing detail which the city's diverse societies present to its authors. The richness of the surface (and its difference from the rest of the country) tempts the novelist to rest content with merely explaining that surface. Perhaps, for that reason, while the Upper South has produced many major writers, from Edgar Allan Poe to William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Thomas Wolfe, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and John Crowe Ransom, the Lower South has produced few.

Since the incidence of genius should presumably be the same in both areas or higher in the cultural centers, there must be a reason in the society of the coastal South to explain its relative dearth of major writers. If I may simplify a complex argument, the coastal cities, Charleston, Mobile and, above all, New Orleans, early developed quite distinctive customs from the rest of the United States. As a result, talented writers in these areas, such as William Gilmore Simms for Charleston and Lafcadio Hearn, George W. Cable, Grace King, and Lyle Saxon for New Orleans felt impelled to interpret the distinctive local cultures to the rest of the country. As a result, the coastal cities have, by and large, served as self-conscious settings for local-color writing. (Something similar could be said, I suspect, about the Los Angeles of the hard-boiled novelists and San Francisco of Herb Caen and the Beat writers.) The sheer differentness of the local scene has tended to block writers from probing very deeply into the human condition and producing major fiction. Whether or not this analysis is always correct, it is certainly true that it has to often seemed the special fate of New Orleans and southern Louisiana writers to be sidetracked into the picturesque bypath of local color.

Even if nineteenth-century writers about New Orleans spent much of their time explaining local customs to the world that lies beyond Lake Ponchartrain, it might still be argued that the increasing homogenization of American society has lessened the temptation toward local color. The extraordinarily high level of the writing in the columns of New Orleans newspapers, much of it local color, especially in the *States-Item*, suggests that the Crescent City's peculiar fascination still compels writers to identify with it and to interpret it to the rest of the world. In *The Moviegoer* something else has happened. Although much blurring has occurred, there are at least two sets of cultural codes operating in the city of Percy's novel. First, there are strong remnants of what is still recognizable as a distinctively southern culture, evident in such details as Aunt Emily's actions and speeches, in Mercer at least when he is acting as a loyal retainer, and in the whole intricate routine associated with Carnival. But this regional culture is in the process of dissolving, blending into the second, national culture.

This national culture is revealed in such details as the go-getter spirit of Eddie Lovell, the Mercer who likes to think of himself as 'a remarkable sort of fellow, a man who keeps himself well-informed in science and politics,' all the paraphernalia of a modern business society including credit cards, bonds, and stock brokerage houses, and the *Reader's Digest* which Mrs. Schexnaydre gives Binx each month. In addition, Binx is so nearly absorbed into movies, that that particular form of national culture threatens to subsume the New Orleans world he actually lives in. For the movies not only have their quasi-deities like William

Holden, but they carry special powers to transform reality by 'certifying' it through the heightened sense of place that comes to someone who sees his neighborhood on the screen. In short, though the mix of cultural codes in New Orleans has not remained precisely the same since the nineteenth century, it has remained a mix, offering an enduring temptation to the local color writer who would save the region from homogenization.

Faced with the intermingling of local and the (then scarcely emergent) national culture, the local colorists of the late nineteenth century, though differing among themselves in many ways, were alike in their fundamental stance toward their subject. They all wrote about local ways and peculiarities with a knowledge of other, more typical patterns of living. In other words, they saw the local patterns of action as picturesque, exotic, and arbitrary. They had a subject because the locals did not behave 'normally.'

But from the standpoint of Percy's outsider, who sees his own life and all the others around him as a stranger might, all the intermingled cultures of New Orleans, local and national, appear equally picturesque, equally exotic, equally arbitrary. He is compelled to interpret them all, not for the interests of a wider audience on the other side of Lake Ponchartrain, but for himself. And, moreover, there is no normative code of behavior available to juxtapose with local ways of perceiving and acting. He must evolve such a way of living for himself out of the raw material of his own life.

The New Orleans of the local colorists was indeed a maze of cultural codes, but a maze in which one could orient himself correctly by reference to relatively easily available ethical systems: Christianity, loyalty to family, belief in human brotherhood, or the ethical standards of northern magazine audiences. Such an orientation limited the local colorist's scope; it did not allow for tolerance or cross-cultural understanding and growth. But neither does the new New Orleans that Percy depicts. In Percy's world it is no longer possible to relate to a single ethical system, but it is also unnecessary, for the city is less a forum than a boutique. Multiple codes of behavior can easily coexist because they have lost their ethical underpinnings. In the banal life of a modern city like New Orleans such underpinnings are outdated. If then such a city, as a characterless agglomerate, can better tolerate variety, so Binx, as an amiable nonentity, can better observe, embrace, and even adopt a variety of patterns for living. Thus because he himself holds no burning commitments or sure affiliations, he can register those that others have.

Binx's solipsistic concern with his own emptiness and alienation then becomes the very quality that enables him to provide a significant portrait of New Orleans and the postmodern world. His vision of the city as a jumble of unrelated sets of behavior quietly conveys an interpretation of Western civilization dying because it has lost its purpose. Percy has transformed that love of exotic details for their own sake which blocked or limited the imagination of earlier writers about New Orleans. *The Moviegoer* shows that those details need not be evaded or ignored. They become significant 'clues' if one raises basic enough questions about human identity and purpose. In *The Moviegoer* Percy has reclaimed New Orleans as a valid subject for the imagination.

3

By choosing an epigraph from Kierkegaard for *The Moviegoer* ('the specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair'), Percy suggests that his hero should be viewed in a perspective of other 'existential' heroes. Camus' Meursault is one, but an equally strong presence in the novel is that of Kierkegaard's exemplum of faith, the biblical Abraham. The patriarch's story is important to the reader because it is important to Blix. In the one time he comments on his quest in writing, Binx explicitly compares his situation to Abraham's: 'Abraham saw signs of God and believed. Now the only sign is that all the signs in the world make no difference.' Binx is not merely saying that he finds conventional signs unconvincing, although that is part of what he is saying. He also writes that 'if the proofs were proved and God presented himself, nothing would be changed.'

Blix, it seems, is comparing his lot to Abraham's only to insist that his own situation is more difficult. For that reason, I want to explore what connections he may see between his story and the biblical one. The major dissimilarity between Abraham and Binx is the one Binx points out: immediate access to the Divine Will is not available to modern man. But there are two rough parallels between Binx's actions and Abraham's. Just as Abraham leaves his culture, so Binx rejects the false world view of his Aunt Emily,

which imperially seeks to define his life for him. But Abraham's most difficult decision was to follow God's will and sacrifice his son; he is spared from going through with the killing only because God sends a sign and he is adept at reading signs. A bachelor, Binx has no son, but he does have a cousin, Kate, who is drifting toward suicide, and a half-brother who does die of hepatitis at the conclusion of the book. Binx's problem is that he must learn to accept responsibility for Kate's life as well as his own and to accept the death of Lonnie. Instead of remaining a passive moviegoer, content to accept, with private ironies, the world offered him through his culture, he must become a skilled interpreter who creates meaning out of the jumble about him.

In the biblical account, the two parts of Abraham's story relevant here occur sequentially: first the rejection of society, then the demand for sacrifice. In Percy's novel, the parallels are intertwined, but it is possible to untangle them for the purposes of this discussion. It does not require a biblical scholar or a psychologist to realize that Abraham's moving away from the culture that reared him was a difficult action, even though the biblical narrative understates its painfulness. Similarly, Binx makes a difficult, interior journey away from the world view of Aunt Emily. Although her attitude toward life is one Binx must reject, Percy takes care to emphasize the seductive appeal of the world view she articulates.

With masterly economy, Percy suggests much of Aunt Emily's character in the first paragraph in the note she sends inviting Binx to lunch. Why a note? Why not a phone call? Obviously, because she sees herself as somewhat deliberately old-fashioned in her manners and, we might expect, her morals. Her final outburst to Binx confirms these hints: she explicitly categorizes herself as an elite member of society, a surviving member of the Old South aristocracy: 'I will also plead guilty to another charge. The charge is that people belonging to my class think they're better than other people. You're damn right we're better. We're better because we do not shirk our obligations either to ourselves or to others.'

Coupled with her belief in aristocracy is a historical pessimism. She sees her virtues growing scarcer in the modern world and stoically accepts their defeat: 'I am content to be fading out of the picture. Perhaps we are a biological sport. I am not sure. But one thing I am sure of: we live by our lights, we die by our lights, and whoever the high gods may be, we'll look them in the eye without apology.'

At this moment and others, Aunt Emily sounds like a Roman aristocrat watching the barbarians sweep over his world. Her assumed historical identity is a powerful, seductive one, but there is something finally nihilistic in her vision. It rejects too much of reality, and Binx must reject it, but not before he has offered powerful testimony to its appeal. Earlier, during his initial conversation with Aunt Emily, she says of her relatives, 'We'll not see their like again. The age of the Catos is gone.' Binx comments in an aside on the power of her nostalgic imagination: 'This is absurd of course. Uncle Jules is not Cato....'

Aunt Emily offers Binx a neat if melodramatic historical myth by which he can have access to an identity defined as honorable by the myth. As a child, he can play soldier when his brother dies. As an adult, he can drop his nonsense about opening himself to the wonder, go to medical school, and become a member of the establishment. But Binx can't go along. The adoption of his 'Little Way' was a rejection of her attitude toward life, but she only saw it as a 'wanderjahr' from which he would mature. But he irreparably destroys her attempt to mold him into a mythic hero by going off to Chicago with Kate without consulting Aunt Emily and then having sexual relations with Kate. These two actions, irresponsible and hence inexcusable in his aunt's eyes, offer even to her transforming imagination proof that he rejects her seductive image of stoic elitism.

But if he must reject her world view, he does so with surprising tenderness. In her final outburst, she asks why he objects to her view. He is unable to explain his objections to her code of honor and the historical myth she lives by. He cannot explain his objection because he does not really replace her code and myth with a rival myth of human purpose. Instead of definitely condemning Aunt Emily's views, he merely finds them irrelevant to his own life. The map she presents does not help with the country of his life: he must do his own exploring.

In politely but firmly rejecting Aunt Emily's notions, Binx is saying *no* to a sense of identity derived from tradition. Through Binx's action, Percy begins his career as a novelist by laying to rest the ghost of

historical nostalgia, a spirit whose presence underlies most fiction and poetry of the southern Renaissance. And perhaps Percy is exorcising as well the presence of his cousin, William Alexander Percy (to whom the book is dedicated), whose own *Lanterns on the Levee* contains a potent expression of Aunt Emily's sense of aristocratic ethos. Like Abraham (and Huck Finn), both Percy and his hero head for the uncharted territories of life and fiction, each trusting his own instincts.

But God also asked of Abraham that he sacrifice his son. Abraham was saved from having to go through with this ordeal only after he had demonstrated his willingness to obey God's will in the matter. Even though Binx compares himself to Abraham, there is no single simple parallel to the patriarch's heavy obligation. None could be possible in a world without intimate access to Divine Will. But there are echoes of Abraham's dilemma in two of Binx's relationships, the one with his cousin Kate and the one with his half-brother Lonnie Smith.

Binx recognizes that Kate, unsettled by the death of her fiancé, is seriously disturbed in her mind and drifting toward suicide. A central question he has to face during the course of the novel is deciding his responsibility for her. From being a passive reader of *signs*, a moviegoer, at the start of the novel, he comes gradually to recognize that he must become more involved, that he must create the meaning of his life existentially by his own actions. His starting point, as he writes in his notebook, is his 'invincible apathy' to proofs of God's existence. Regardless of the 'proofs,' he still has to lead his own life, make his own decisions. Out of his apathy and disinterest in anything outside his felt experience comes the need for a leap of faith, a leap more demanding and outrageous than Abraham's since it involves obeisance to a hidden and silent God. Once Binx makes his leap of faith, he begins more actively to invest meaning into his own actions toward others.

The night after he compares himself to Abraham in his notebook, he takes Kate on a trip to Chicago. The trip seems inconclusive because Aunt Kate calls them back immediately and because, as Binx knows but Kate doesn't, traveling never changes anything. Nor does the mere act of sexual intercourse, which they perform on the way to Chicago: 'flesh poor flesh now at this moment summoned all at once to be all and everything, end all and be all, the last and only hope--quails and fails.' The failure of sex is akin to the failure of signs and solutions outside Binx to provide definitive answers to the problems. But Binx's faith does not fail. Though he does not believe in signs, as Abraham did, his faith like Abraham's is nonetheless strong enough to seek them. And out of that strength of faith itself a 'solution' does come: loving commitment to another human being.

The trip is a turning point because Binx accepts responsibility for Kate's life as well as his own. This new commitment occurs in a scene with overtones of a wedding ceremony. Kate tells him that she is a religious person. She explains what she means by a speech recalling Isaac's affirmation of total obedience to Abraham: 'What I want is to believe in someone completely and then do what he wants me to do. If God were to tell me: Kate, here is what I want you to do: [leave the train and spend her life speaking kindly to people in Jackson]...you think I would not do it?...I would.' They each drink ritually from the bottle of liquor; then she asks Binx if he will tell her what to do. He answers, 'Sure.'

She reiterates her request that he assume godlike responsibility for her life: 'You can do it because you are not religious. God is not religious. You are the unmoved mover. You don't need God or anyone else--no credit to you, unless it is a credit to be the most self-centered person alive. I don't know whether I love you, but I believe in you and I will do what you tell me.... Will you?' Again he answers, 'Sure,' and they kiss, ending this parodic wedding. Though both momentarily falter from their confidence at this point, they recover and it forms the basis on which they build a new life together. In the face of an absent or silent God, Binx accepts responsibility for Kate's life. In effect, he is an Abraham who is forced to become an imitator of God, not merely a faithful follower.

The seeker of signs has himself become one; Binx the searcher allows himself to become the object of Kate's search. The Binx-Kate relationship may have a final parallel to that of Abraham and Isaac. After God produces a sacrificial lamb to avert the killing of Isaac, the angel of the Lord promises Abraham that 'because thou had done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: that in blessing I will bless thee.' Binx acts to save Kate by offering his love and direction, but he never withholds from her the

onslaught of reality. He never pretends that her recovery will be easy or steady. In fact, his attempt is to bring her back to reality, not shield her from it. Because he does not without truth from her then, he is blessed with her love.

But if the felt presence of a hidden God forces this modern Abraham to become godlike in acting to save Kate, who can be saved, that same presence shapes Binx's acceptance of the death of his half-brother Lonnie, whose death from hepatitis cannot be averted. In the epilogue, Percy lets the death of Lonnie serve to reveal Binx's reaction to human mortality. Significantly, he reveals himself only in actions and speeches; the self-conscious narrator of most of the book disappears after Binx and Kate are married. His replacement by a less confessional Binx dramatizes the notion that, though total absorption in one's reactions may be the beginning of a search for significance, it is not the end. The way for Binx lies not in greater and greater narcissism but in a leap of faith and in acceptance of community with Kate.

In any event, the Binx of the final pages talks less about himself than about events. He becomes a relatively reticent, problematic figure. His two dramatized actions in the epilogue suggest what he has become: we see him compassionately directing Kate's life as he agreed to do and accepting the death of Lonnie. After talking with Lonnie, Binx discusses the fact of his death with Kate and Lonnie's brothers and sisters with a matter-of-fact frankness which provokes Kate to accuse him of being cold-blooded. But he also answers seriously the children's queries about how Lonnie will appear in heaven and offers, for diversion, to take them to an amusement park to ride the train.

The scene mirrors the death of his brother in the second paragraph of the novel, with Binx now in the role of comforter that Aunt Emily had earlier assumed for him. The book has come full circle. If Binx's story begins where he learns of death, not as an abstract idea but as a tragic event that occurs in one's own family, it ends when he transmits that severe knowledge to the next generation. But if he has come to the same situation as Aunt Emily's, then his journey has left him with a different consolation, one which measures the distance between his quest and hers. She told the young Binx to be a soldier; in other words, she urges him to face mortality with a historical myth, deliberately to play a role in a metaphysical drama without asking about a possible author or audience. Binx also counsels acceptance of death but in a way that prevents that acceptance from becoming either callous or a source of pride. When Therese asks if her brother is going to die, Binx replies: 'Yes. But he wouldn't want you to be sad. He told me to give you a kiss and tell you that he loved you.'

Binx's consolation points at the mystery of human life and death; it does not cover it up with a romantic distorting myth. In its unblinking look at death, it is palpably, painfully honest. This honesty, to summarize, enables Percy through Binx to set down a significant, convincing portrait of a civilization dying because it has lost the ability to convey a sense of purpose to people like Binx and Kate. Furthermore, it is Binx's honesty that causes him to undertake his search and articulate his findings. And it is Binx's unsparing honesty that accounts for the popularity of *The Moviegoer*, a popularity that attests to the convincingness of Binx's character and suggests that both his disaffection and his quest for faith are more widespread than might be suspected.

But that sense of honesty is a function of Walker Percy's skill as a novelist, not the fictional insights of his created hero. Percy's skill creates a Binx who breaks away from false answers not by rejecting the world but by seeing it, and this paradox underlies and explains the three paradoxical questions with which I began. Binx is both outsider and insider because he who would lose this world must find it. A self-absorbed writer, he writes a revealing book about New Orleans because he who gets away from the city can have it back. Skeptical of signs, he has the faith to go on looking for them because he who would find himself must lose himself.

Percy's imagination uses paradox not to provide a meretricious journalistic surface for his narrative but to explore the richness and contradictory forces at work in a single human life. His use of paradox enables him to convey in a convincing fashion the paradox of time itself in which each moment in a life is simultaneously the summation of all previous moments and a new start.

He concludes his novel with an emblematic image of Binx watching Kate that brings together many of the book's themes: 'I watch her walk toward St. Charles, cape jasmine held against the cheek, until my brothers and sisters call out behind me.' Watching his wife leave on a journey that may be fraught with terror for her and hearing the voices of his surviving brothers and sisters, the figure of Binx symbolizes the permanent human tensions involving life and death, the wide net of human obligations, and the continuing necessity for new beginnings. For all he has learned in the course of the novel, Binx must still improvise, create the rest of his life when the book ends. It is a measure of the power of Percy's novel that we recognize our own situation in Binx's. In writing *The Moviegoer* Walker Percy has become a local colorist of the human condition."

Max Webb

"Binx Bolling's New Orleans: Moviegoing, Southern Writing, and Father Abraham"
The Art of Walker Percy: Stratagems for Being
ed. Panthea Reid Broughton
(Louisiana State 1979) 1-23

"In his first published novel Walker Percy found his voice, and one of the joys of reading *The Moviegoer* emanates from the sound of Percy's laconic tone cutting a crisp swath through the magnolias. More exciting than his voice, though, is the vision, the sense of discovery one feels as Binx Bolling looks about him as if for the first time and *sees*. What Binx sees is molded and tinted by his moviegoing, which Percy astutely plays upon to explore his own existential themes. The film medium of course influences what Percy himself sees, and this particular novel provides an admirable ground for testing whether his moviegoer's world could be rendered in a medium other than verbal, whether film would serve his purpose as well as fiction.

Studying *The Moviegoer*, then, can reveal something about the potentialities and limitations of both film and fiction. Perception is central to both media. D. W. Griffith, the great pioneer of film art, echoed Joseph Conrad almost word for word in describing his supreme intention as being able 'to make you see.' There is a root difference, however, as George Bluestone notes in citing the coincidence, between the precept of the visual image in film and the concept of the mental image in fiction. Both media use tropes, what distinguishes the literary trope is its 'connotative luxuriance,' the 'packed symbolic thinking' contained in it, as against the 'enormously restricted nature of the film trope.

To speak of packed symbolic thinking in this context is to recall Percy's profound interest in symbol and language, and to work in the literary medium is to be struck by the connotative luxuriance of much of Percy's language. Given his care with words, it can be fascinating to examine the tropes he uses. One of the tropes recurring throughout *The Moviegoer*, by design or by chance, names a stock device of film art--the dissolve. And when we remember how as a medical student Percy marveled over the discovery of '*dis-order*' and '*dis-ease*,' we wonder what meaning the term 'dissolve' offered up for Walker Percy.

The novel's action...concludes the antithesis phase of a dialectic in Binx's life as his Little Way, a lifestyle constructed as a refuge--from his aunt's expectations in particular--gradually disintegrates, and Binx finds himself impelled into a synthesis phase. In the telling of the tale Percy adapts various techniques of film art, presenting his fictional world through fades and filters, superimpositions and intercuts, an occasional jump cut or zoom, and focusing effects both sharp and soft, along with tantalizingly nascent dissolves foreshadowing what is to be, or not to be. In this bag of filmic tricks the most important is the dissolve, for virtually the entire novel is structured as a lingering dissolve, a pleasantly painful transition between two phases of Binx Bolling's life. And as we watch one scene slowly fade out while another fades in over it, we realize that the dissolve is theme as well as technique in *The Moviegoer*.

In selecting the dissolve for analysis here, I am not merely toying with a metaphor appropriate to a book entitled *The Moviegoer*, but using the metaphor to yield up meaning. The dissolution of personality is a central theme of the novel. Early in the book we see the phenomenon in Mercer, Aunt Emily's black butler. "Mercer has dissolved somewhat in recent years," Binx tells us matter-of-factly, stressing the visual meaning of the word. Binx can see him more clearly than usual today, but Mercer is lost somewhere between his former role as Emily's faithful retainer and his new pretensions as an expert on current events. Emily, whose lens on life has an automatic focusing feature that transforms everything into sharp but flat

images, sees Mercer as the loyal retainer. But Mercer, like Binx, has a dialectic of his own. Ordinarily what obscures him from view is 'the devotion'--what in film might be a sort of rosy filter. But Binx can see through the filter: he and Mercer are not in the least devoted to each other. Binx sees in Mercer a man more sulky than devoted who takes kickbacks from servants and tradespeople, and it is he who waits on Mercer, rather than Mercer on him. Binx is uneasy lest Mercer too, as he threads his way between servility and presumption, catch a glimpse of himself between filters. Binx is more at ease with either of Mercer's self-delusions. He hates it when Mercer's 'vision of himself dissolves...his eyes get muddy and his face runs together behind his mustache.'

Although the dissolve trope is seldom used so conspicuously as in this arresting vignette of Mercer, the threat of dissolution of individual being pervades the entire novel. Various characters in *The Moviegoer* have dissolved themselves into roles. Eddie Lovell, for instance, projects the image of productive businessman and devoted husband. Binx meets Eddie following the episode in the Quarter with William Holden, whose aura leaves everything in his wake dimly lighted. Binx is vulnerable; the heightened technicolor of the movie star has paled to irony, yellowish and gray-tinged. Eddie appears, and ten minutes of his cogent talk leave Binx with no clue as to what has taken place: 'As I listen to Eddie speak plausibly and at length of one thing and another--business, his wife Nell, the old house they are redecorating--the fabric pulls together into one bright texture of investment, family projects, lovely old houses, little theater readings, and such.' The connotative luxuriance of the fabric metaphor offers a simple instance of the power of language. Although a montage sequence in a movie might replay the scene's constituent elements, it could not achieve the metaphor's rich layering of association.

Percy replaces the fabric image with a hard clear shot of Eddie in all his bustling and productive earnestness, suggesting how desperate Eddie is to keep his self-image from dissolving. Binx realizes: 'this is now one lives!' Evidently one lives by using activities as refuge from and cover for despair. Eddie's wife, Nell, does the same. Seeing her plaintive eagerness, Binx wonders why she talks as if she were dead: 'Another forty years to go and dead, dead, dead.' We can see this death not because it is filmically attainable but because it is realized through the generalizing and suggestive power of the word.

Nonbeing, then, is like being in that it cannot be *shown*, as Marcel said, but only alluded to. A visual medium, with its constricted figurative power, is less richly able than a literary medium to capture the other of nonbeing, to see the 'thin gas of malaise.' The most imaginative camera work could not convey what Percy filters through Blix's consciousness, or his subtle tonal effects. Mood and tone here will elude the camera just as Camus' intricate concept of alienation, for instance, could not be captured in the film *The Stranger* merely by close-ups of Marcello Mastroianni's stolid and uncomprehending visage.

Neil and Eddie share a malady diagnosed by Percy after Kierkegaard and Marcel. Their individual being dissolves into the fabric they weave by a ceaseless activity they call living, a constant state of motion designed to elude awareness. Unlike people with stimulating hobbies, they are not even 'tranquilized in their despair,' but must maintain the neurotic pace they have set for themselves. That pace so effectively dissolves the potential selves of such characters that they offer apt instances of what Kierkegaard called the 'curtailed I'; they have simply failed to materialize their authentic selves.

The novel provides illustration of many such dissolutions, and of many dissolutions that, rather than dissolve the self, instead dissolve the world around one. Jules Cutrer easily dissolves his New Orleans into a 'friendly easy-going place of old-world charm and new-world business methods where kind white folks and carefree darkies have the good sense to behave pleasantly to one another.' And Jules is oblivious not only to social injustice in the City of Man, but also to his own daughter's crisis, assuming conveniently that 'nothing can really go wrong in his household' so long as Emily is mistress there.

Mrs. Smith, Binx's mother, whose lifestyle is totally different from that of Jules, shares with him a knack as common as her name for dissolving the world around her. Her principal accomplishment is 'the canny management of the shocks of life.' She sees life through a 'standard comic exaggeration,' as when she tells a 'malignant joke on Lonnie and God.' In the student days of her eldest son, Binx, she could easily dissolve him into 'Dick Rover, the serious-minded Rover Boy.' And though for years she 'has thrown it out as a kind of proverb that I should marry Kate Cutrer,' Binx acknowledges that in fact his mother has also

'made an emblem out of Kate and does not know her at all.' Mrs. Smith has managed the death of her first husband through the same canny ability to emblemize: 'My mother's recollection of my father,' Binx explains, 'is storied and of a piece. It is not him she remembers but an old emblem of him.' She dismisses the elder Bolling's long ruminative strolls along the levee, so apt an analogue for his son's horizontal search, as 'his famous walk.' And the grandest gesture of his life, his enlistment in the RCAF, she has subsumed under a visual image of him in uniform: 'And so--cute!'

Such a dissolve to an animated image is an emotional evasion, but less painful than contemplating the actual impact of her husband's gesture. 'Sure he was cute,' Binx reflects; he had found a way to 'do what he wanted to do and save old England doing it. And perhaps even carry off the grandest coup of all: to die.' When Binx attempts to communicate an experience of his own in Korea, his mother emblemizes the moment with a self-protective vagueness that resounds with unconscious irony: 'We'll never know what you boys went through.' 'No more heart's desire, thank you' has become her guide. Even her fondness for Binx is a 'fondness carefully guarded against the personal.' In this, he reflects, 'Strangely, my mother sounds more like my aunt than my aunt herself.' It is hardly coincidental that they both think Binx should go into research.

Aunt Emily is a master at dissolving the world and its inhabitants, and she knows better than to care too deeply. Her withering lecture on the topic of Binx's 'intimacy' with Kate reveals that she cannot empathize with stepdaughter or nephew. Emily has withdrawn into a wintry stoic kingdom where she can renounce the vulgar world. There she preserves her constricted self intact; from there she can dissolve others' selves. The novel's opening suggests Binx's fear of his aunt's expectations of him. 'I know what this means,' he says of her invitation to lunch; it foreshadows a talk, over lunch or on some early occasion, about what he 'ought to do.' What he ought to do is so clear and compelling, in Emily's eyes, that all he has to do is remember it. But Emily's 'ought' is Binx's annihilation. The Little Way he has ingeniously built for himself in Genteelly is a deliberate holding action against her solution, which is actually a *dis*-solution of Binx, since it would assimilate him into a role that does not suit him. He is not fitted for 'research,' which he has put behind him along with the vertical search, or for any of those togas with which Emily likes to outfit the Catos of her imagination.

Another kind of dissolution, a familiar Percyan form, is depicted in Binx's trip to Chicago through a repetition. Fleeing from his own repetition of a visit to Chicago twenty-five years earlier with his father, and from the 'genie-soul' of the city with its 'great thundering-lonesome Midwestern sky,' Binx takes Kate to see Harold Graebner, the old war buddy who saved his life in Korea. Harold is a simple, cheerful fellow who has grown rich. The bleak black and white of Chicago has gone to color by the time Binx and Kate leave the bus in Wilmette. They pass 'noble Midwestern girls with their clear eyes and splendid butts' and skip on 'like jaybirds in July.' Harold's handsome new house emerges in bright technicolor, filling the screen. There is a slow dissolve to the interior, the dissolve itself depicting the anywhere-ness of the city and suburb. Percy does not film the actual greeting and entry but bridges it with a recapitulation of the war and some thoughts about the common joy of making money. It is in keeping with Harold's state of being that we cannot tell whether his exclamations and 'baby-claw' gesturing are taking place in general or specifically, here and now.

Once inside, we find the screen reflecting a subtle confusion. No one knows quite what to say or whether to sit. 'This is great, Rollo,' says Harold, who is glad to see Binx again; but Binx sees too what Harold sees, and we watch with Binx as it comes over Harold powerfully: 'what a good thing it is to see a comrade with whom one has suffered much and endured much, but also what a wrenching thing.' Harold is overwhelmed by the repetition, the unexpected confrontation of a time past, 'a time so terrible and splendid in its arch-reality,' a heroic backdrop against which his present cheery affluence suddenly stands diminished. We get a dissolve to an earlier episode, a brief scene from what stark life-and-death time in Korea, a combat scene filmed in documentary black and white, and the dissolve back to Wilmette is to a pallid technicolor, faded like an old film, in which the hero wants to punish the man whose life he once saved for giving him as repayment a 'wrenching in the chest.' The vividness of past crisis has exposed the blurriness of Harold's domesticity.

What happens in this passage is interesting both technically and thematically. The screen clears and Harold's vision of himself dissolves, but in reproducing that sharp clear image from the past, Binx simultaneously drops his ironic posing and speaks in straightforward, candid sentences: 'I walked in and brought it with me, the wrenching in the chest. It would be better for him to be rid of it and me.'

Customarily Binx views the world through self-protective irony, a pale yellowish filter. This ironic pose accomplishes his distance and suggests his superiority to whatever he sees. But just as Harold's rosy filter is threatened by a clear sharp focus, so is Binx's yellow filter. And so it Binx's Little Way--'the worst kind of self-deception'--threatened by the search; for the search first of all is a completely undistorted way of seeing.

Metaphorically, the search may be described as a lens capable of an absolutely clear, sharp focus. The search enables Binx to see the pile of objects on his bureau, the familiar belongings emptied from his pockets. 'What was unfamiliar about them,' he remarks, 'was that I could see them.' And after he has seen him [them?], early in the novel, the search becomes possible for the first time in years. The movies are onto the search, Binx informs us, but they always 'screw it up' and end in despair. The failing comes not from any necessary limitations of the film medium but from the demands of that industrial tyrant the box office. Unlike the movie hero, Binx wants to avoid abandoning the search and ending in despair. But the search would obliterate the Little Way, and Binx also, throughout most of *The Moviegoer*, is reluctant to abandon its consolations. Binx's dialectic then moves between the Little Way and the search. Here the search works in two ways at once. Thematically, it functions as a moral focus for the narrative voice. Aesthetically, it functions as a visual motif which sharpens Binx's and the reader's view of the human dilemma.

Most of the characters in *The Moviegoer* seek to dissolve the individuality of themselves and of those around them; thus, like the romantic on the Scenicruiser buds, they can be moviegoers without going to the movies. Binx, on the other hand, wants to defend himself against dissolution. His Little Way, like the movie roles he plays so self-consciously, is ineffective and inauthentic, but it shows just how precarious his sense of self is. He talks to theater owners and ticket sellers to avoid the danger of 'slipping clean out of space and time.' His posturings as Tony or Rory or Gregory, to adapt Frost's view of a poem, are momentary stays against dissolution. Binx resorts to his ironic filter and to a dozen little stratagems to preserve what has yet to become his self. Beauty--his father's romanticism--to him is a whore. Money-making and love-making too are his formula, but his love affairs with Marcia and Linda and now Sharon, all filmed initially in vibrant color, have a way of fading as the long telephone silences begin.

The clear lens of the search surprises the viewer from time to time with nascent dissolves, tonal shifts that foretell the state of being to come, in the synthesis phase of Binx's dialectic. One such shift occurs early in the novel, following the lunch to which Emily invites Binx, where Kate is present, though off camera or on the periphery of a long shot. The lunch is filmed with mild irony, Binx warily fending off both Emily and Walter. When he goes to the basement to talk to Kate the filter is removed and the tone goes conspiratorially direct as Kate tells Binx he is worse than she is; she wonders how he got through a war alive. The two of them are in league, in some yet undefined way. Kate's voice, when she says she is sick of talking with Emily about Binx, suddenly takes on her 'objective' tone, a sort of 'droning scientific voice' that might be represented on film by some telescopic or foreshortening effect distancing her from herself as well as from her subject. That objective tone is a pose, like several that Binx adapts, intended to preserve the self against dissolution. But Binx and Kate do learn by the novel's end that posing as another cannot save the self.

It is noteworthy that of the novel's five sections and the epilogue, all but one close on Kate, reinforcing a theme with variations: Kate's 'long nightmare' turning whatever she touches to horror; Kate moaning and hugging herself; Kate 'dry-eyed and abstracted' at the 'strange city' of New Orleans in the soggy aftermath of Mardi Gras; Kate shredding the flesh of her thumb until it bleeds; Kate begging for reassurance that Binx will be thinking about her on the streetcar. Binx's tone with her is always serious, never ironic; for as Kierkegaard wrote, irony and humor are essentially different from the passion of faith, and where Kate is concerned, Binx acts in faith. Irony and humor, said Kierkegaard, belong in the sphere of the infinite resignation, which anyone is capable of attaining. The clear lens in *The Moviegoer*, which can solve rather than dissolve, is put on with faith.

The Knight of Faith is Lonnie. The one section of the novel that does not close on Kate, the section recounting the trip to the Gulf Coast with Sharon, leaves the emphasis on Binx's conversation with Lonnie. Sharon's emblemizing of Binx shares many a secret with Lonnie, who has 'the gift of believing that he can offer his sufferings in reparation for men's indifference to the pierced heart of Jesus Christ.' In Binx's conversation with Lonnie about Lonnie's habitual disposition, there is no tint of irony; the lens is absolutely clear. Binx and Lonnie are open to each other, with no filters intervening. The quality of their relationship prefigures the inner quality of Binx's life after he makes the great leap of faith in marrying Kate.

Percy suggests the quality of that life through one succinct scene in the epilogue. Binx opens the epilogue on what sounds like a mildly ironic note, talking about his 'thirtieth year to heaven, as the poet called it' and distinguishing 'ass-kicking' from edification. He italicizes *religion* as a peculiar word and 'something to be suspicious of,' but anyone who is onto Percy should be alert to the possibility that such remarks tend to throw us off. The preceding section has prepared the way for a radical transformation because it has brought Binx face to face with the despair of his life and shattered his Little Way. He has recognized Kate as Rachel and consecrated their relationship in a sort of Eucharist by kissing the blood from the shredded flesh of her thumb. There is only one thing to 'do,' he reflects: 'listen to people, see how they stick themselves into the world, hand them along a ways in their dark journey and be handed along, and for good and selfish reasons.'

At novel's end the fading image of Binx's Little Way dissolves to a new image that is not what it seems. Percy's method is highly elliptical, and readers have often been unable to follow Binx to his new habitation, the nature of which cannot be suggested by an spatial metaphor. The most accurate metaphor for this change may be a chemical one. Marcel once likened experience to a chemical solution's receptivity to varying degrees of saturation and suggested that our 'urgent inner need for transcendence might...coincide with an aspiration toward a purer and purer mode of experience.' In this aspiration we have a good image for the feeling of transcendence Percy captures in his closing pages, a feeling compounded of relief and exultation. The solution has become purer and less saturated.

Although many a perceptive reader has concluded that at the end of *The Moviegoer* Binx dissolves into familiar everydayness, he has instead become a true wayfarer. In the end the novel's substructure surfaces enough to give us definitive clues that Binx is now a man on the road to somewhere who hands people along and is handed along in turn. The change is an inner one. We see it in his patience with the emotionally crippled Kate and in his tenderness with his half-brothers and sisters, who have become brothers and sisters. The new life he is so reticent to speak of has been foreshadowed in the nascent dissolve earlier depicting his relationship with Lonnie, and it is confirmed by the tone which in the epilogue is never flippant or ironical. Tone and technique establish Binx's state of being as now authentically his own; he is at one with his existence. The lens through which he sees is there too for the reader who elects to use it--the clear lens of faith.

There is really no way to capture in film, it seems to me, the transformation disclosed between the lines of Percy's closing pages as this scene emerges in clear crisp images from the prolonged dissolve that has been the novel. Certainly the prospect of making a good film from *The Moviegoer* will be enormously challenging. It is for film-makers of course to test the possibilities of the film medium and expand them, and my judgments here as to what could and could not be filmed are intended to be provocative rather than presumptuous. My analysis here brings us back to the recognition that the literary medium has its own singular powers. George Bluestone is right: novel and film, 'overtly compatible, secretly hostile' by tradition, meet at a point like two intersecting lines and then diverge to points where 'what is peculiarly filmic and what is peculiarly novelistic cannot be converted without destroying an integral part of each.' A novel whose resources can be exhausted in the filming is not a novel in the fullest sense.

In *The Moviegoer* Walker Percy, a novelist with acute powers of observation, has produced a book rich in film-like visual effects. But as a novelist of consciousness and of ideas, realms in which film works under inherent disadvantages, he has also delivered us a *novel*--that recalcitrant if often lamented creature that ignores its proclaimed dissolution and the arrival of pallbearers and continues among the quick. Once again the ceremony has been delayed."

"Soren Kierkegaard saw human existence as a progression of stages he characterized as aesthetic, ethical, and religious. In each stage man attempts to answer what Kierkegaard saw as the two crucial questions of human existence: how to live and how to die. Each stage offers increasingly more adequate answers to the question of how to live. But only in the religious stage, Kierkegaard believed, does man really learn both how to live and how to die.

The influence of Kierkegaard on Percy need not be reviewed here. What I do want to point out in this essay is the way that Kierkegaard's three stages form a matrix in which Percy conceives character and event; for Percy presents the central conflict of each novel in terms of the protagonist's struggle to rise above the aesthetic to the ethical and to pass through the ethical to the religious mode of existence. Because these stages provide Percy with a basic structural framework in each novel (including the fourth, the Lancelot Lamar himself only moves from the aesthetic to the ethical). I hope by examining the significance of the stages in the first novel, to suggest something of how they function in the others as well.

In Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage man lives only for the outward pleasure of the moment; in other words, he lives in the realm of immediacy. According to Kierkegaard 'the immediate man helps himself in a different way: he wishes to be another.... For the immediate man does not recognize his self, he recognizes himself only by his dress...he recognizes that he has a self only by externals.' However, when externals no longer provide fulfillment, the aesthete may experience despair. If the individual is aware of his alienation from his real self and of the invalidity of the aesthetic mode, he may seek more authentic expressions of his identity.

The ethical stage involves an effort on the individual's part to 'divest himself of the inward determinants and express them in an outward way.' Discerning one's concrete existence is the problem the ethicist attempts to resolve. The ethical state may encompass responsibility to laws and rules, but Percy is primarily interested in that aspect of the ethical stage which concerns individual reality. He insists with Kierkegaard that 'The sole ethical interest is the interest in one's own reality.' For Percy's protagonists this frequently involves repetition or recollection, 'a backward movement' into the past in order to integrate one's past with the present, and in this to discern concrete actuality. Like the aesthetic stage, the ethical is inadequate but for different reasons. The ethical view does offer a synthesis of the external and the internal or the universal and the particular. But that synthesis is impermanent; it will not endure through time because it fails to suggest answers to the second of Percy and Kierkegaard's most important questions, how to die.

The difference between the religious and the ethical is that the ethical is based on a relationship between the universal (*i.e.*, the whole) and the particular (*i.e.*, the individual or the part); whereas the religious view is based on a particular (individual) relation between God and man. With the achievement of a religious view, ethical principles are subordinated but not necessarily annihilated. The religious sphere is a paradox involving complete resignation or surrender to God (*i.e.*, forfeiting universal or ethical views) followed by the leap of faith through which the universal is returned not by man but by God. Faith, as defined by Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*, 'is the paradox that inwardness is higher than outwardness.' It is finally through this life view that Percy's protagonists attain valid alternatives to alienation which enable them to function in a fragmented and empirically oriented society. They discover that the religious existence fuses existence in the finite world with transcendence to the infinite. Consequently the fragmented self exemplified in Binx of *The Moviegoer*, Will of *The Last Gentleman*, Dr. More of *Love in the Ruins*, and Lance in *Lancelot*, is reunified in varying degrees by the conclusions of the novels, enabling each to begin resolving subjectively the problem of how to live and how to die.

In *The Moviegoer* Walker Percy writes of a man, Binx Bolling, whose fragmented existence can only be reunified through a search for authenticity. Binx launches his search for options to alienation because he perceives the ineffectiveness of an everyday existence that stresses such finite entities as material possessions, professional achievement, traditional heritage, and social status. Emphasis on external or

secular pleasures fails to alleviate alienation because such options hold him in the finite, so that the infinite remains unacknowledged. Binx recognizes that 'the search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life.... To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair.' The search, then, is impossible if one is 'sunk in everydayness.'

The movies imply the pattern for the search. They depict individuals seeking consciousness and achieving awareness. But as Binx perceives, 'they screw it up. The search always ends in despair. They like to show a fellow coming to himself in a strange place, but what does he do? He takes up with the local librarian, sets about proving to the local children what a nice fellow he is, and settles down with a vengeance. In two weeks time he is so sunk in everydayness that he might as well be dead.' The movies betray their own power to present experience afresh, for they too only reconfirm the everydayness of human existence.

Nevertheless, the movies project a 'peculiar reality.' Because of the very size of his screen image, such an actor as William Holden seems larger and therefore more heroic than the rest of us. But that idealized image masks Holden's real identity. His screen image changes in each movie so that the selfhood of William Holden is never revealed. Awareness of Holden's idealized image and his inability to be anonymous attracts Binx to Holden, since in contrast Binx must struggle to prevent his own anonymity and the everydayness afflicting his existence.

The supporting characters with whom Binx comes in contact in the course of the novel provide proof that neither an aesthetic nor an ethical existence will overcome alienation. They also illustrate the fragmentation engulfing modern man and exemplify the odds Binx struggles to surmount. In Mercer, his Aunt Emily's butler, Binx sees one who in Kierkegaardian terms 'wishes to be another.' Consequently, Mercer 'does not recognize his self, he recognizes himself only by his dress...he recognizes that he has a self only by externals.' In Mercer, Binx sees the total reduction of a man to aesthetic or worldly alternatives.

Walter, Kate's fiancé when the narrative begins, reaffirms the insufficiency of the aesthetic view by measuring self-worth in terms of outward success. Walter's success requires certification through others rather than through himself. A houseboat adventure, undertaken with Binx after the Korean War, illustrates Walter's need of approval: 'Goddam, this is all right, isn't it? Isn't this a terrific set up, Binx?' In 'The Loss of the Creature' Percy states that such questions ask whether or not a person is 'having the acceptable experience.' They indicate that for people like Walter an experience is validated only through others' confirmation.

As Binx wades through more encounters with relatives and friends, he begins to see, as Percy intended, the need for a continued search. He sees in Jules, Emily's husband and Kate's father, modern man's perception of the ideal Christian. 'He [Jules] has made a great deal of money...he gives freely of himself and his money. He is an exemplary Catholic.' Outwardly, then, his life seems ideal, but as Binx adds with an element of satire, 'it is hard to know why he takes the trouble. For the world he lives in, The city of Man, is so pleasant that The City of God must hold little in store for him.'

Binx recognizes that these individuals have chosen to impersonate others rather than exist as themselves. The result of inauthentic transformations is despair, but as Kierkegaard suggests, 'In spite of the fact that a man is in despair he can perfectly well live in the temporal...life. What is called worldliness is made up of just such men, who...pawn themselves to the world....spiritually understood, they have no self, no self for whose sake they could venture everything.'

Through a romance with Sharon Kincaid, his secretary, Binx, however, attempts to achieve such worldliness. Yet his relationship with Sharon never seems quite real to Binx except when it realizes itself as a rotation, or 'the experiencing of the new.' Thus Binx deludes himself into thinking that a rotation will suppress his alienation. Doing so, he indeed 'pawns' himself to the world.

The gradual demise of his relationship with Sharon, however, modifies Binx's aesthetic delusions. Aesthetically satisfied following a rotation, Binx nevertheless remarks: 'I do not love her so wildly as I

loved her last night.' Once gratified, the aesthetic challenge ends and their relationship becomes routine, an everyday affair, wherein communication becomes increasingly difficult and the 'malaise settles on [them] like a fall-out.' Their car accident creates a crisis which momentarily disperses the malaise. And by its nature it intensifies reality; they become 'a thing to look at and witnesses gaze at us with heavy-lidded almost seductive expressions. But almost at once they are past and those who follow see nothing untoward we are restored to the anonymity of our little car space.' Through experience Binx perceives that ordeal and 'rotation' are only temporary alternatives to alienation, since the despair increases as the newness of the rotation diminishes.

Juxtaposed to his sensuous relationship with Sharon is Binx's more profound relationship with Kate. Partially because Kate herself is aware of the ineffectiveness of aesthetic choices, Binx feels no need to buoy up their friendship by transforming it into a series of rotations. And, because he recognizes and appreciates Kate's authentic rejection of everydayness, Binx does not try to deceive her. Unlike her step-mother, Emily, and her psychiatrist, Merle, who try to appease her to prevent despair, Binx is truthful and honest: 'I tell her the truth because I have not the wit to tell anything else.' The honesty Kate promotes in Binx helps him eventually to expect less of aesthetic choices and to renew the search instead. Yet, though Kate will not live in the aesthetic stage, she cannot seem to move easily into the ethical stage. Her consequent despair results from her inability to develop inwardly. Perhaps Kierkegaard's analysis of such a problem as a 'failure to appreciate that man is spirit' explains Kate's dilemma; for she can neither pawn herself to this world nor believe in another.

Percy juxtaposes Sharon and Kate to establish Binx's dilemma, to show how much he vacillates between aesthetic and ethical choices. He also juxtaposes Binx's mother, Mrs. Smith, with Aunt Emily to illustrate the various, encumbering aspects of the aesthetic and ethical spheres. Binx sees how his mother's 'election of the ordinary' devalues existence. For 'after Duval's death she wanted everything colloquial and easy, even God.' Her adherence to the ordinary makes living easy, but in actuality it diminishes life and diminishes her; for, as Kierkegaard asserts, 'only that man's life is wasted who lives on, so deceived by the joys of life or by its sorrows that he never became eternally and decisively conscious of himself as spirit.'

Instead of deflating the value of existence, Binx's Aunt Emily, on the other hand, inflates its value. Yet she too remains in the aesthetic sphere because ideas for her are roles she puts on. When Binx says, 'My aunt likes to say she is an Episcopalian by emotion, a Greek by nature and a Buddhist by choice,' the artificiality of the phrasing alone establishes that Aunt Emily specializes in inauthentic transformations. In her 'Lorenzo posture,' she can hardly be herself. Nevertheless, she is mistress of a household whose master thinks his daughter's nervous breakdown just 'the sort of normal mishap which befalls sensitive girls.' Myopically Jules cannot acknowledge Kate's flirtation with suicide because suicide has no place in his world. He can shift the entire responsibility for Kate's well-being onto Emily because Emily's sense of duty does have reality status in his world. Duty, for Emily, is a way of integrating the ideas of the past with the actualities of the present. When she achieves that integration, Emily Cutrer probably does pass beyond aesthetic posing and into ethical responsibility.

Binx makes that same passage but for him the ethical stage is a transitional one; there he, in Kierkegaard's terms, 'sees that he himself is meanwhile in the process of becoming.' That process is temporarily exemplified in the 'deliverances from alienation,' known as rotation and repetition. Binx's visit to Mrs. Smith's with Sharon and his trip to Chicago with Kate--both combined repetitions and rotations--are catalytic elements in reviving the search and achieving Kierkegaard's religious stage. Through them Binx perceives the fallacies and the ineffectiveness of the aesthetic sphere, and he recognizes the impermanence of the ethical options offered through repetition and rotation.

Binx's visit with his mother becomes a repetition, as Richard Lehan phrases it, a 'return to the past in search of self--a coming to terms with a haunted and guilt-laden world, a theme that abounds in southern fiction. Included within this repetition though is a rotation. Binx takes Sharon with his half-brother Lonnie and two half-sisters Therese and Mathilda to the drive-in movie to see *Fort Dobbs*. Conscious of the 'Southern night' around them, Binx and Lonnie share unexpected delight on hearing Clint Walker in a 'Western Desert' say to a saddle tramp 'in the softest easiest old Virginian voice: 'Mister, I don't believe I'd

do that if I was you.' The improbably mix of being in the South and hearing a westerner on film speak as if he were in the South is, to Binx and Lonnie, a 'good rotation.'

The visit with the Smiths is itself a repetition, of course, for Binx. He awakens at three in the morning "amid the smell of dreams and of the years come back and peopled and blown away again like smoke.' Binx, however, finds that 'good as it is, my old place is used up (places get used up by rotatory and repetitive use) and when I awake, I awake in the grip of everydayness. Everydayness is the enemy. No search is possible.' Binx has learned better than to trust rotation and repetition to defend him against the everydayness which is 'everywhere now'; nevertheless, he vows 'I'm a son of a bitch if I'll be defeated by the everydayness.' Clearly, if the means he has used to fend off everydayness no longer work, he must find other weapons. He seems to reason that if everydayness can destroy the search, perhaps the search can vanquish everydayness. Thus Binx writes in his notebook:

REMEMBER TOMORROW

Starting point for search:

It no longer avails to start with creatures and prove God.

Yet it is impossible to rule God out.

Binx knows that the objective empirical method, that is, starting 'with creatures to prove God,' only reduces God to the realm of the everyday. And yet it is necessary to search even while knowing that there can be no concrete verification of God's being. Binx is constitutionally prepared to do so; for his 'unbelief' has been 'invincible from the beginning.' Even as a child, he explains, 'I could never make head or tail of God. The proofs of God's existence may have been true for all I know, but it didn't make the slightest difference. If God himself had appeared to me, it would have changed nothing.' To Binx, 'proofs of God's existence' is an oxymoron; Divine Essence is by definition beyond mortal proof. Having intuitively understood that all his life, Binx is prepared to make what Kierkegaard calls 'the leap of faith.'

But the later trip to Chicago with Kate is a joint testing not of religious but of aesthetic and ethical choices. The train ride itself is a repetition for both of them. Kate remembers train rides to Baton Rouge to see football games, and when Binx first gets on the train he feels 'the last ten years of my life take on the shadowy aspect of a sojourn between train rides.' On the way to Chicago Binx and Kate try to experience a rotation within a repetition by making love for the first time. Kate's reasons for inviting Binx to make love to her, however, seem to have less to do with passion than with her theory that sex, 'a little thing,' is 'the real thing.' But her theorish bold 'carrying on' so frightens Binx that 'The burden was too great and flesh poor flesh, neither hallowed by sacrament nor despised by spirit (for despising is not the worst fate to overtake the flesh) but until this moment seen through and canceled, rendered null by the cold and fishy eye of the malaise--flesh poor flesh now at this moment summoned all at once to be all and everything, end all and be all, the last and only hope--quails and fails. At 'plain old monkey business' the pair 'did very badly and almost did not do at all.' The flesh fails (or almost fails) them because they have asked too much of it--that it be the real thing and make them real too. They discover, or rediscover, that sex alone, like rotation and repetition, cannot save them from everydayness.

Binx's uneasiness when he realizes how much Kate is expecting of their love-making is a repetition of a childhood reaction to his father's expectation that they be 'very special father and son.' Dr. Bolling took both Binx and Scott to Chicago twice; then after Scott's death he took Blix once. But, Binx remembers 'seeing in his [Binx's father's] eyes the terrible request, requiring from me his very life; I through a child's cool perversity or some atavistic recoil from an intimacy too intimate, turned him down, turned away, refused him what I knew I could not give.' As a child with his father in Chicago and years later with Kate on a train to Chicago, Binx's instincts fight against intimacy when it is called upon to provide more than a human relationship can.

But Binx's problem is that something must provide him an escape from everydayness. In Chicago he rediscovers that mere rotation and repetition will not suffice. The rotation of haphazardly charting a path across Chicago to Harold Graebner's house in Wilmette, and the repetitions of seeing Harold and of going to 'the mother and Urwomb of all moviehouses' do not imbue his life with being. The trip fails Binx and

Kate, not because Aunt Emily calls them home, but because they have expected it to do more for them than any mere journey could.

Later when Binx and Kate marry, their relationship is founded upon intersubjectivity which Percy defined in the essay 'Symbol, Consciousness, and Intersubjectivity' as 'that meeting of minds by which two selves take each other's meaning with reference to the same object beheld in common.' Intersubjectivity is a unification which allows each person to transcend his own separateness through sharing with and caring for the other. Bringing joy and meaning and completeness to two lives, such a relationship combines aesthetic enjoyment with ethical responsibility. In the epilogue to *The Moviegoer* Kate and Binx share an intimacy that Blix need not recoil from, as he did previously with his father after Scott's death and with Kate on the train. For his relationship with Kate, though demanding, asks of him nothing that he cannot give.

Blix's decision to attend medical school, though it may appear to be capitulation to Emily's aspirations, instead demonstrates a harmonious balance, a synthesis which establishes his authenticity and eternal validity. Having achieved the religious stage, finite concerns no longer confuse him. Kierkegaard explains, 'one can discover nothing of that aloof and superior nature whereby one recognizes the knight of the infinite. He takes delight in everything, and whenever one sees him taking part in a particular pleasure, he does it with the persistence which is the mark of the earthly man whose soul is absorbed in such things. He tends to his work. So when one looks at him one might suppose that he was a clerk who had lost his soul in an intricate system of book-keeping, so precise is he.'

Kate does not fully understand Blix, but she realizes that he offers her stability. Part of what Binx deems as the job of a castaway like himself is to 'listen to people, see how they stick themselves to the world, hand them along a ways in their dark journey and be handed along.' The final scene shows Binx trying to hand Kate along on her journey, for he feels the necessity to help those along who may never attain the same passion, realizing that 'for the man who does not so much as reach faith life has tasks enough, and if one loves them sincerely, life will by no means be wasted, even though it never is comparable to the life of those who sensed and grasped the highest.' Also Binx is now honest with his brothers and sisters about their brother Lonnie's impending death. He refuses to hide the truth from the Smiths or to prescribe how they are to act after Lonnie's death. Clearly, Binx has learned how to live well in this world.

In the epilogue Binx has no inclination to speak of the search, but he seems to know now that the search for one sphere cannot be satisfied with answers from another. Binx does not speak, he says, because, 'For one thing, I have not the authority, as the great Danish philosopher declared, to speak of such matters in any other than the edifying.' Their religious significance is an individual matter beyond explanation or communication. Such an ultimate search into the religious sphere, Kierkegaard says, 'I make by myself, and what I gain is myself in my eternal consciousness, in blissful agreement with my love for the Eternal Being.' At the end of *The Moviegoer* Binx seems silently to have renewed his search. Thus he has become one of Kierkegaard's men of faith. Because he is such a believer, Binx can see Lonnie die and not be wrenched apart by grief. At the close of *The Moviegoer* Binx has learned both how to live and how to die.

Each Kierkegaardian mode of existence has its analogue in Percy's metaphor from 'The Message in the Bottle' of man as castaway on this island earth. The first includes people who have 'made do' on the island and are unaware that they are castaways. Most of the minor characters in Percy's novels are people who, in their adjustment to this world, remain in the aesthetic sphere. But the individual who knows he is a castaway, is dissatisfied with his island predicament, and searches for another way to live passes to the ethical stage. Most of the secondary characters in the novels exemplify this category. Percy's final category is reserved for the individual who knows he is a stranger, yet who wants, and searches, and lives in hope that a message from beyond the seas will come. Percy's protagonists are such individuals. To see Binx Bolling's progression in Kierkegaardian terms is to illumine the modal design of the three novels that may be described as Walker Percy's Kierkegaardian trilogy. It is also to suggest something of how, though Percy's fourth novel is radically different from his first three, *Lancelot* does make use of this same Kierkegaardian frame."

Janet Hobbs
"Binx Bolling and the Stages on Life's Way"
The Art of Walker Percy: Stratagems for Being

"John Bickerson 'Binx' Bolling, of New Orleans, the narrator of Walker Percy's first published novel, certainly lives up to the epithet which serves as title. During the eight days of the novel proper, he refers to twelve specific and several unidentified movies and to thirty-seven actors and eight actresses. During the same time, he goes to the movies no less than four times, including a drive-in on Saturday night. His appetite seems indiscriminate: he sees *Panic in the Streets*, with Richard Widmark, on Wednesday night, an unidentified western on Thursday night, *Fort Dobbs*, with Clint Walker, on Saturday night, and *The Young Philadelphians*, with Paul Newman, on the following Monday night. The reader soon accepts as true the confession that Binx makes early in his narration: 'The fact is I am quite happy in a movie, even a bad movie.'

It is not surprising that several commentators have spoken of the role of the movies in the novel. Despite considerable critical interest, though, there has been no extended study of moviegoing as the central theme. Such a study must begin with the realization that Binx has not always been an avid moviegoer: 'Until recent years, I read only "fundamental" books, that is, key books on key subjects, such as *War and Peace*, the novel of novels; *A Study of History*, the solution of the problem of time; Schrodinger's *What is Life?*, Einstein's *The Universe as I See It*, and such. During those years I stood outside the universe and sought to understand it. I lived in my room as an Anyone living Anywhere and read fundamental books and only for diversion took walks around the neighborhood and saw an occasional movie. Certainly it did not matter to me where I was when I read such a book as *The Expanding Universe*.

The greatest success of this enterprise, which I call my vertical search, came one night when I sat in a hotel room in Birmingham and read a book called *The Chemistry of Life*. When I finished it, it seemed to me that the main goals of my search were reached or were in principle reachable, whereupon I went out and saw a movie called *It Happened One Night* which was itself very good. A memorable night. The only difficulty was that though the universe had been disposed of, I myself was left over. There I lay in my hotel room with my search over yet still obliged to draw one breath and then the next. But now I have undertaken a different kind of search, a horizontal search. As a consequence, what takes place in my room is less important. What is important is what I shall find when I leave my room and wander in the neighborhood. Before, I wandered as a diversion. Now I wander seriously and sit and read as a diversion.'

The vertical search fails Binx because of the methodology employed by such 'fundamental' books as *The Expanding Universe* and *The Chemistry of Life*. Binx's experience of suffering alienation from his immediate world by virtue of his practice of the scientific method is very reminiscent of twentieth-century existential/phenomenological charges against the practitioners of objectivism. The methodology of scientific empiricism, using ever more elaborate complicated technology for the gathering of data, enables its practitioners to make ever broader and more penetrating generalizations about the nature of things. But scientific methodology, often thought these days to be the primary, indeed the only, apprehension of reality, actually considers a thing 'stripped of all instrumentality,' as Jean-Paul Sartre, one of Percy's formative influences, puts it, in *Being and Nothingness*. By 'instrumentality' Sartre means that a human being considers a thing originally as it relates to him as a tool, an instrument, a utensil, and then only secondarily as it is a composition of properties and characteristics. Thus science tempts its practitioners to reverse modes of apprehension, indeed finally to forget the specific existence of the thing, all the more to concentrate upon its objective qualities. Then a thing would have, in Sartre's words, 'purely external relations,' so that it would appear in exteriority as distant and separate as a star in the sky.

But, in the consideration of a thing, if instrumentality is left out, then man is left over, for it is, after all, man to whom the thing as instrument has referred. No doubt this exclusion of man from a binding relationship with the things which he sees accounts for the widespread feeling that Western man seems more and more alienated from his world even as he develops the technology to quantify it with greater and greater precision. Binx, as a reader of 'fundamental' books, learns to measure the immensities of space, but discovers himself to be 'left over,' as he says, or '*de trop*,' 'superfluous,' as Sartre puts it.

Even though denied by the scientific-empirical technique and its hoard of data, Binx accepts his 'exile.' All that he can establish is that he is not the object that fascinates him, the world, so he lives in Sartre's state of 'fascination': 'In fascination there is nothing more than a gigantic object in a desert world. Yet the fascinated intuition is in no way a *fusion* with the object. In fact, the condition necessary for the existence of fascination is that the object be raised in absolute relief on a background of emptiness; that is, I am precisely the immediate negation of the object and nothing but that.' Binx's search thus becomes 'horizontal,' as he begins to wander a '*desert world*' or 'a world without men,' a world of space, rather than place.

Obsessed by his fascination, which he calls 'wonder,' Binx moves to the middle class suburb of Genteelly, 'a desert if there ever was one,' says Percy in an interview. Out there, 'where the world is all sky,' Binx has 'lived ever since, solitary and in wonder, wondering day and night, never a moment without wonder.' What he likes about Genteelly, where he lives in an apartment 'as impersonal as a motel room,' is that his street, Elysian Fields, 'is very spacious and airy and seems truly to stretch out like a field under the sky.'

Out there he organizes his life around emptiness. He seeks the 'deserted playground' of a church across the street from his apartment for his evening ritual of studying the newspaper movie page for his night's outing. It does not matter to him, if the theater is nearly empty, though he does cultivate the acquaintance of theater employees, for their familiarity offers a boundary to his emptiness: 'If I did not talk to the theater owner or the ticker seller, I should be lost, cut loose metaphysically speaking. I should be seeing one copy of a film which might be shown anywhere and at any time.' With that anchor of the known, he can range in the deserts of his fancy as he does when he talk with the movie cashier about her son: 'He is stationed in Arizona and he hates the desert. I am sorry to hear that because I would like it out there very much.' Similarly, he can sit in his office, the sphere of the known, and read his one-book library, *Arabia Deserts*; hiding the book inside a Standard and Poor binder, Binx offers a telling action, for he is the outwardly successful businessman who really conceives of himself as a ghost wandering a deserted space. He stresses this identification when he reveals his response to *Fort Dobbs*, the movie that he sees at the drive-in, under the stars: 'in the movie we are in the desert. There under the black sky rides Clint Walker alone. He is a solitary sort and a wanderer.'

Percy does not make a random choice when he selects *It Happened One Night* as the movie for Binx to see just after he has disposed of the world by generalization, but finds himself left over in fact. The very title itself is significant: 'it,' the 'it' of the 'I/It' dichotomy, the overwhelming *en-soi*, did happen that night when Binx concluded that the material world was all and that he was nothing. Beyond the suggestiveness of the title, however, is a reference to that particular movie in an essay which Percy had written just about the time that he was writing *The Moviegoer*. In 'The Man on the Train: Three Existential Modes,' Percy discusses the problem that contemporary alienated man has with time. Simply stated, Percy's thesis is as follows: contemporary man all too often feels that his life is inauthentic, is immersed in 'everydayness.' In 'everydayness,' a term borrowed from Martin Heidegger's majestic *Being and Time*, man falls into a 'they-self' system, in which he accepts the standards of the public--the public media, the public institutions, the public worldview--in place of any reflective conception of himself. He listens to what 'they say'; he does what 'they do.' He deliberately hides within the swarming mass of society by doing nothing to distinguish himself from the average, the typical, the ordinary, the acceptable. If he has a vague apprehension that his life is actually without meaning and substance, then he casts about for an alternative.

The only real alternative would of course be to confront the unsatisfactoriness of the present, to struggle for authenticity by an acknowledgement of one's alienation, but it seems to be much more common that the sufferer looks to either the future or the past for the meaning that will transform the present. If he turns to the future, he values the rotation, the orientation toward the radically different future that enables the sufferer to ignore the dreary present. If he turns to the past, he attempts to discover the point at which his life got off the track, in the hope that he could go back to resume his life at that point. This pondering of the past is called repetition. Both of these terms, *rotation* and *repetition*, are familiar in existential literature.

In 'The Man on the Train' Percy uses *It Happened One Night* to illustrate rotation, which is alternately called 'zone crossing.' There is, to begin with, the subject/object split. If we accept the assertion that the

subject is nothing but that which observes, then we are left with the subject entirely dependent upon the object, which only overwhelms and bores. What, though, if the subject could vary the object that he observes? Then he would have novelty, would not be bored, could perhaps convince himself that in some new surrounding he would discover the possibility of being something himself. It is vitally important for the alienated man, then, to be able to cross zones, escape from one environment in order to pursue possibility in another, 'pass on impassible as a ghost.'

Zone crossing, then, is the kind of wandering that Binx decides to do, once he has discovered that the scientific method has excluded him from his world. He will of course view any new object as a part of the 'gigantic object in a desert world'; incapable of any 'fusion with the object,' he will apprehend his world as he views a movie. In *Being and Having*, Gabriel Marcel, another of Percy's influences, establishes a very similar metaphor. There are two modes of detachment: the one of the saint, the other of the spectator. The saint participates in the very core of reality by his indifference to the manifest appearance of the universe. The spectator is characterized by a curiosity, 'a form of lust' about the 'cinematographic' representation imposed on the universe by the scientific technique, and thus 'alienation' occurs. 'I am not watching a show,' Marcel promises to remind himself daily, but Binx Bolling deliberately chooses that behavior. In the novel, then, moviegoing characterizes the alienated man's fascinated gaze at a distant reality, stresses the sense of apartness that he feels.

Binx himself quite obviously understands moviegoing as a symbolic action that illustrates his relationship to the objective-empirical world. On occasion, as when he sees *Panic in the Streets*, he seeks the apparently reassuring--but ultimately deadly--confirmation of his own experience that a scientific formulation offers, this objective 'proof' of subjective apprehension Binx calls 'certification': 'Nowadays when a person lives somewhere, in a neighborhood, the place is not certified for him. More than likely he will live there sadly and the emptiness which is inside him will expand until it evacuates the entire neighborhood. But if he sees a movie which shows his very neighborhood, it becomes possible for him to live, for a time at least, as a person, who is Somewhere and not Anywhere.'

Generally, though, Binx seeks movies that present patterns of rotational behavior that he might emulate, as for example Fort Dobbs or an unnamed movie that he has recently seen: 'The movie was about a man who lost his memory in an accident and as a result lost everything: his family, his friends, his money. He found himself a stranger in a strange city. Here he had to make a fresh start, find a new place to live, a new job, a new girl.' Such movies stimulate the fantasies that Binx concocts for himself and a girl observed on a bus: 'If it were a movie, I would have only to wait. The bus would get lost or the city would be bombed and she and I would tend the wounded.'

The devising of zone crossings is now Binx's basic effort in life; by night he goes to the movies and by day he lusts after his secretary, Sharon, sexual novelty being the highest rotation. If all else than himself is the 'It,' to which he cannot really be joined, then seduction, laying hands upon a part of that 'It,' would be a delightful pretense that he can in fact touch his world. When they go off for the weekend to the Gulf Coast, he so fascinates her that she wants only to be touched: 'Sharon cleaves to me as if, in staying close, she might not see me,' Binx tells us, as he leads Sharon to his mother's supposedly deserted fishing camp. But the family is (surprise!) there, and, rather than the seduction, taking his half-siblings to the movies occupies Binx that night. He shows no disappointment, though, for he has already achieved his intention, in making Sharon acknowledge her availability to be touched. In fact, since rotation concerns anticipation rather than participation, possibility rather than actuality, then her potential seduction is preferable to the *fait accompli*: Binx is ever on the threshold, but does not have to suffer the inevitable disappointment that accompanies the failure to maintain transcendence through the sexual act.

Rather, Binx thinks that his being able to please his siblings, especially his afflicted brother Lonnie, and his seeing such an appropriate movie as *Fort Dobbs* are bonuses to an already enormously successful escape from his 'everydayness.' He sums up his exultation: 'A good night: Lonnie happy...this ghost of a theater, a warm Southern night, the Western Desert, and this fine big sweet piece, Sharon.' Then he draws his conclusion: 'A good rotation. A rotation I define as the experiencing of the new beyond the expectation of the experiencing of the new.'

Fort Dobbs must be a most rewarding experience for Binx, for it mirrors his image of himself, presents his life to him as a stylized performance, objectifies his subjectivity (which the subjectivity cannot do for itself, of course). Binx wants to live his life, in other words, as if it were a role in a Western movie. In 'The Man on the Train' Percy draws an existential meaning from that classic American genre: 'The I-It dichotomy is translated intact in the Western movie. Who is he, this Gary Cooper person who manages so well to betray nothing of himself whatsoever, who is he but I myself, the locus of pure possibility?'

As a moviegoer, Binx is aware that he must employ the appropriate gestures, if he is to impersonate a person of unrealized possibilities, act like the stranger in a Western movie. He assumes the role expected of him on any occasion. Mostly he patterns his behavior after movie stars, those creatures of 'resplendent reality,' as he characterizes them: 'Toward her I keep a Gregory Peckish sort of distance'; 'it comes back to me how the old Gable used to work at such jobs: he knew how to seem to work and how to seem to forget about women and still move in such a way as to please women: stand asweat with hands in his back pockets'; 'It is possible to stand at the window loosen my collar and rub the back of my neck like Dana Andrews.' On an occasion when 'everydayness' is vanquished by the novelty of an automobile accident, Binx is able to act like a romantic hero, and he exults: 'O Tony. O Rory. You never had it so good with direction. Not even you Bill Holden, my noble Will.' For once, Binx feels free of the 'malaise,' which he defines as 'the pain of loss.' The world is lost to you, the world and the people in it, and there remains only you and the world and you no more able to be in the world than Banquo's ghost.'

Binx's nighttime disguises seem obvious enough, especially since he frequently tells us whom he is impersonating. But he adopts a daytime disguise that he does not acknowledge; this identity purports to be genuine: 'I am a model tenant and a model citizen and take pleasure in doing all that is expected of me. My wallet is full of identity cards, library cards, credit cards.... It is a pleasure to carry out the duties of a citizen and to receive in return a receipt or a neat styrene card with one's name on it certifying, so to speak, one's right to exist. What satisfaction I take in appearing the first day to get my auto tag and brake sticker! I subscribe to *Consumer Reports* and as a consequence I own a first-class television set, an all but silent air conditioner and a very long lasting deodorant. My armpits never stink. I pay attention to all spot announcements on the radio about mental health, the seven signs of cancer, and safe driving...'

Such slavish adherence to the model behavior of the consumer. Binx would have us believe that the advertising industry and the communications media invented him! He is making himself into a mechanical man: just as much as Sartre's waiter, he is playing at being what he says he is. Describing a waiter who is elegantly excessive in acting like a waiter, Sartre explains such posturing as the waiter's expression, to the sufficiently perceptive, of his contempt for his own role. There is more to him than just being a waiter; that *more* is his consciousness. He is conscious of himself as a waiter, hence is superior to his actuality, transcends his factual nature. Binx is, in other words, engaged in a pattern of bad faith.

Binx wants to live, then, as a consumer of new products and sensory experiences, but never to chance an authentic emotion. The most that he can tolerate is an occasional bout of the malaise, a weak nausea that signals a revulsion against a confining, threatening world. Yet it is precisely through emotions, even nausea, that Binx could gain reentry to the world denied him by the objectifying media. For it must be an emotion that makes an 'I' aware of his facticity, that is, the fact that he exists as an actuality.

Take the emotion of fear, which Heidegger uses as an example in *Being and Time*. Binx acknowledges that in Korea, in combat, while lying wounded, he felt in touch with things and made a vow to search for a meaning for his life, if he lived. *Being and Time* would explain his behavior thus: Fear is one of the avenues through which Dasein, the 'I,' comes to itself or finds itself. Dasein becomes open to the disclosure that it dwells in an existence in whose creation it had no part, that it dwells within a confine that is both limiting and limited, and that what it confronts in that confine is of vital significance to it, so that it must be responsible for itself, despite its lack of control over its origin. Fear, then, is an outstanding example of one of the states-of-mind, that ontological characteristic by which Dasein is made aware of the actuality of its placement in the world.

In Korea, Binx had, by virtue of his fear, become aware of himself as a fact. But at the same time, he had vowed a search; hence he possessed not only the mode of the actual but also the mode of the possible.

Indeed, the mere knowledge that Dasein knows that a search is possible is proof that *a priori* it knows that it is bound not only to the actual but also to the possible--hence revelation and resolution are partners in our life. Binx lost his resolution when he came home, though, for he chose the wrong kind of search, became immersed in everydayness, experienced 'fallenness,' yet another characteristic that is innate in the human experience.

On the morning of the opening of the novel Binx acknowledges that for the first time in years he had dreamed of Korea, 'woke with the taste of it in my mouth, the queasy-quince taste of 1951 and the Orient.' That taste, as he later acknowledges, is fear. Hence Binx has experienced *Befindlichkeit*, the finding of himself in a concrete placement, the strategy of introduction that Percy has repeatedly stated he employs. 'Opened' to experience, shocked by a catastrophe into a stunned wakefulness, Binx really looks at his world 'this morning when I got up, I dressed as usual and began as usual to put by belongings into my pockets: wallet, notebook (for writing down occasional thoughts, pencil, keys, handkerchief, pocked slide rule (for calculating percentage returns on principal). They looked both unfamiliar and at the same time full of clues. I looked in the center of the room and gazed at the little pile, sighting through a hole made by thumb and forefinger. What was unfamiliar about them was that I could see them. They might have belonged to someone else. A man can look at this little pile on his bureau for thirty years and never once see it. It is as invisible as his own hand. Once I saw it, however, the search became possible.

The significance of the various objects of Binx's sight is that all are tools, implements, each of which has a specific function for him. In most cases the function is self-evident, the wallet holds his money and cards of identity, for example, but with two tools there are several possible functions to be considered, so Binx specifies (by parenthesis) their personal use. *His* notebook is for jotting down 'occasional thoughts'; *his* slide rule is for the calculation of percentages. Moreover, the objects were not first perceived as indifferent things unrelated in space, then discovered to have supernumerary characteristics of specific identity, but rather were perceived as a complex of related functions, related to a unique individual. What Binx has discovered is Heidegger's tool complex, which Sartre adopts as the 'relation of instrumentality,' the primordial apprehension of being-in-the-world. Through his perception, Binx has realized a system of tasks that refer only to him, that represent his future; he has found himself centered in a world, even as he stands in the center of the room.

Thus Binx experiences the Sartrean 'upsurge' of reflection. The complex of tools has referred to a single tool which uses all the other tools. But his existence has not been established in or by an empty world; rather Binx is also the single subject who sees his objectivity while knowing that he is still a subjectivity. Thus he reflects upon a relationship that transcends the subject/object split; he is in a world by virtue of his body, no longer just in an environment as a 'ghost in a machine' viewing from afar the 'cinematographic representation' that he is not.

We should not, however, expect too much from Binx's upsurge of reflection. It is true that he has placed himself in his unique history after dwelling in public, that is to say, timeless, time. We should not, though, expect a basic change in his behavior, for the original reflective Binx may now be aware of himself, but he determines to remain that self by continuing his impersonation. He thinks that he can succeed in this performance because no one else is involved; the genuine reflective revolution is for-others, must be perceived by the Other. Perhaps the only change we may observe will lie not in Binx's behavior (which we know only through his not entirely trustworthy revelation), but in his narration: he should become more ironic as he expresses the essence of consciousness (reflection), which is negation: 'In irony a man annihilates what he posits within one and the same act; he leads us to believe in order not to be believed; he affirms to deny and denies to affirm; he creates a positive object but it has no being other than its nothingness.'

Outwardly, then, Binx will continue his wandering and wondering. Inwardly, he begins a rather halfhearted search for a meaning for his life. The recognition of one's concrete placement leads to a sensitivity to the factors that determined that placement, one's 'thrownness,' *Geworfenheit*, as Heidegger calls it. Binx begins to probe his family history, in an effort to account for his own life. On Wednesday, at his aunt's house, he studies the photographs of his father and other male relatives and questions his aunt

about them. All he can conclude is that the older Bollings were 'serene in their identities,' while his father's eyes betray a trait that Binx knows all too well: 'Beyond a doubt they are ironical.'

On Thursday night Binx goes to a movie on the chance that it might enable him to achieve a repetition, noticing that a western is playing at the same theater in which he had seen *The Oxbow Incident* fourteen years before, Binx returns to it, to achieve what he avows is 'a successful repetition': 'the re-enactment of past experience toward the end of isolating the time segment which has lapsed in order that it, can be savored of itself and without the usual adulteration of events that clog time like peanuts in brittle.' Perhaps Binx regards the experience as a success because it evoked nostalgia, which he later identifies as 'the characteristic mood of repetition,' but any meaning inherent in the experience, he had to admit, 'eluded' him. Binx seems unwilling, really, to confront that life fourteen years ago, to admit that it was as fraught with everydayness as the present. In 'The Man on the Train' Percy distinguishes between two forms of repetition. 'The aesthetic repetition captures the savor of repetition without surrendering the self as a locus of experience and possibility,' he notes, while the existential repetition is a 'passionate quest in which the incident serves as a thread in the labyrinth to be followed at any cost.' All Binx seems to experience here is the savoring of the moment, while withholding any real involvement of himself in determining to change his life. His choice of a western seems proof that he is at heart interested foremost in possibility, not actuality.

On Friday Binx devises what would at first seem to be a sincere repetition. He wishes to explore the history of the duck club, 'the only relic' of his father that he still possesses; he would seem to want 'to stand before the house of one's childhood,' as Percy describes repetition in 'The Man on the Train.' But it turns out that the whole trip to St. Bernard Parish, where the club is located, is merely a part of Binx's impersonating Clark Gable in order to fascinate Sharon. Once he gets there, he contents himself to contemplate the money that he will realize from the real estate and to appreciate the very basic sense of ready-to-hand reality displayed by Mr. Sartalamaccia, the builder of a housing development: 'I take pleasure in watching him run a thumb over the sawn edges of the sheathing.' The conclusion of the outing emphasizes Binx's outer/inner duplicity: 'I go home as the old Gable, asweat and with no thought for her and sick to death with desire.' That 'sick to death' is a nicely couched allusion to Kierkegaard's despair, the malady that really dominates Binx's private life, fueling his desire.

The weekend is dedicated to Sharon's seduction. When that achievement is frustrated, Binx seems to direct his interest to repetition, for he attempts on Sunday morning to discover from his mother something about that fellow sufferer, his dead father. But his mother has adopted a way of seeing 'life, past and present, in terms of a standard comic exaggeration; one reduces all events to the routine--beyond that, one goes to church and fishing. With his exhaustion of both the rotational and the repetitional capacities of the weekend, Binx, not surprisingly, is overwhelmed by the malaise on the trip back to town.

At that point in the novel, Binx becomes, literally, the man on the train. He is obliged to attend a convention in Chicago, so he and Kate, who invites herself along, take the *Sieur Iberville* on Sunday night. Such a jaunt is suffused with expectancy; like Thomas Wolfe before him, Binx knows 'the peculiar gnosis of trains,' recognizes the train as an 'eminence from which there is revealed both the sorry litter of the past and the future bright and simple as can be' and also as a vehicle that facilitates zone crossing, 'one's privileged progress through the world.'

The success of rotation depends, though, upon the moviegoer's continued seclusion of himself in 'unrisked possibility' or his ability to embody the stylized behavior of the stars whom he impersonates, that is, really act with gestural perfection. On the train Binx is caught in a situation in which he would like to display for Kate the sexual prowess of Clark Gable in his role as Rhet Butler. His failure is dismal, as he confesses to another of his ideals, Rory Calhoun.

But Kate, rather than fault him for his impotence, his failure to live up to his impersonation, accepts him in his reduced humanity and takes care of him. Having the night before confessed that she regarded him as the 'unmoved mover,' Kate demonstrates her faith in him as he is, and as a consequence Binx is serene in his own identity for once in his life. Thus he is free of the sexual desire that has haunted him for years as the symbol of possibility: 'What an experience, Rory, to be free of it for once. Rassled out. What a sickness

it is, Rory, this latter-day post-Christian sex. To be pagan it would be one thing, an easement taken easily in a rosy old pagan world; to be Christian it would be another thing, fornication forbidden and not even to be thought of in the new life, and I can see that it need not be thought of if there were such a life. But to be neither pagan nor Christian but this: oh this is a sickness, Rory.'

Because of the love for him exhibited by Kate's taking care of him, Binx feels more of a communion, more at ease than ever before in his life. *The Young Philadelphians* (its very title suggesting agape, not eros), the movie that Binx and Kate go to see in Chicago, mirrors Binx's new found tranquility and optimism:

Kate holds my hand tightly in the dark.

Paul Newman is an idealistic young fellow who is disillusioned and becomes cynical and calculating. But in the end he recovers his ideals.

Such happy endings occur only in the movies, though. Both Kate and Binx emerge from the theater with a foreboding, which is fulfilled by a call from Aunt Emily, who condemns Binx's feckless behavior with Kate. Once again Binx becomes the man on the train (except that, no trains being scheduled, he is actually the man on the bus). Despite the prospect of the interview with his aunt, Binx is in reasonably good spirits. He reads *Arabia Deserts* and enjoys the sights--and watches over the sleeping Kate. His mixed activities suggest the two directions his life may take: a return to his ghostly wandering or an acceptance of the care-relation.

Part of the trip is occupied by Binx's observation of two fellow passengers, each of whom personifies an extreme of human behavior. There is, first, a romantic, a young college graduate so captivated by the ideal that he will find it extremely difficult ever to settle for the actual. Binx concludes that the romantic is 'a moviegoer, though of course he does not go to the movies,' that is, that the boy has excluded himself from the world by his very way of looking at it. There is, second, a salesman, who lives in a world of total actuality, who creates his world by the things he can touch: 'he gives me a sample of his product, a simple ell of tempered and blued steel honed to a two-edged blade. Balancing it in his hand, he tests its heft and temper. The hand knows the blade, practices its own metaphysic of the goodness of the steel.' He does not suffer any alienation at all, Binx knows, but neither does he possess any sense of the difference between himself and his environment: 'Businessmen are our only metaphysicians, but the trouble is, they are one-track metaphysicians.'

When Binx stands before his aunt, he has achieved a degree of confidence that he has never before felt. But her contempt for his behavior brutally erodes the faith in himself that Kate's love had given him; Aunt Emily's last question, particularly, demonstrates her judgment: 'What do you think is the purpose of life--to go to the movies and dally with every girl that comes along?' Binx rejects that interpretation of his character, but he can offer nothing to contradict it. Thus he stumbles off, to relapse into the very behavior his aunt had described. Thinking that Kate has seen the wisdom of her stepmother's view and therefore cast him adrift, Binx is desperate to find a woman, merge his nothingness in the only kind of being that he can enter. He calls Sharon, appealing to his guardian angel for help: 'I've got to find her, Rory.' Failing to contact her, he frantically settles for her roommate Joyce, whom he tries to fascinate by impersonating Marlon Brando. At that moment, on the verge of falling back into his most alienated form, he spies Kate, who has not betrayed him after all. They renew their intention to marry, and Binx dares to hope: 'Is it possible that it is not too late?'

The Epilogue offers evidence of a year's success. Binx has entered medical school; thus he undertakes a genuine repetition, for he dares to resume the way of life which fatally alienated his father and which had excluded him from his own world for all of his adult life. He has remained faithful to caring for Kate, who seems to feel that she exists only because he constantly thinks of her. He mentions no movies that he has seen, nor does he affect the behavior of any movie star. Binx Bolling has come out of the movies, to chance acting himself."

Lewis A. Lawson
"Moviegoing in *The Moviegoer*"
Walker Percy: Art and Ethics
(U Mississippi 1980) 26-40

"Percy's first published novel at age forty-five, *The Moviegoer*, [was] a National Book Award winner of 1961, deliberately patterned after the intense, philosophical novels of ideas by Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus that Percy had discovered during his convalescence from tuberculosis. Binx Bolling, a young stockbroker from New Orleans, is the prototypical Percy protagonist, a brooding, alienated thinker, whose despair at the emptiness of modern life sets him on the 'search' for God--and true transcendence."

Bruce L. Edwards
"Walker Percy"
Cyclopedia of World Authors II (1989)
ed. Frank N. Magill
(Salem 1989) 1174

"Binx Bolling comes out of the 1950s and with a somewhat different focus could have been a figure of the Beat movement. But he is attached to money, to making it, increasing it, and holding on to it; although his other sensibilities are in ways Beat. A Percy character does not surrender his bourgeois connections easily. He is a mental dropout, a young man (later twenties) who senses the malaise, personal and social, which lies at the heart of an affluent, energetic society. He is an Americanized Oblomov. The malaise he feels, which comes over him like a fog rolling over the countryside, is the adversary side of a rational society, a New Orleans that appears to work. Set into that malaise, as a real inmate of an inner, mad world, is Binx's cousin Kate Cutrer. Since her fiancé died in a fiery car crash on the eve of their marriage, this modern-day Miss Havisham has never been right, a young woman who moves from rationality to depressive in almost imperceptible swings of mood.

Surrounding Binx is the inauthentic: those of false sensibilities, those who lack perception, or live in the past. But authenticity is difficult to perceive or comprehend. Binx tries to find it in movies, where the search for the authentic is available to the viewer; but the movies make a mess of searches because they must resolve elements. Movies have to end. Nevertheless, they have a reality and an authenticity life lacks. Early in the novel, William Holden strolls down the French Quarter and is spotted. 'An aura of heightened reality moves with him and all who fall within it feel it.' Yet even that 'peculiar reality,' which in itself is astounding, is a cheat; it eases but does not displace the malaise.

Moviegoing fits into the temperament of a romantic: one whose expectations of life are in excess of what it ordinarily supports. Someone may be a moviegoer--as is a fellow Binx meets on the train--without going to the movies. Because he places a value upon life it cannot meet, the moviegoer is an appealing person. He may be aware of Kierkegaardian dread, but he has an idealist's demand. Binx's aunt, whose tradition is Southern chivalric, is not a moviegoer, despite certain superficial resemblances. She argues for a conventional view of behavior, something based on the statements of 'I'll Take My Stand.' This is, curiously, a South Percy was himself to hang on to in *Lancelot*, where his protagonist kills to protect it. But such values, based on gentility, chivalry, gaiety, and hatred of outsiders, cannot work for Binx; are, indeed, part of the malaise he suffers from.

The moviegoer cannot be certain of anything. He lives on the edge, a parapet-walker who peers into the abyss. The ordinary becomes, for him, threatening. Movies provide temporary respite; they heighten and lighten, and offer an alternative reality. Binx refers to *Panic in the Streets*, a movie filmed in New Orleans about a cholera threat. Anyone watching it in a New Orleans theater, as Binx and Kate do, can locate the very neighborhoods of the movie. This, Binx feels, 'certifies' the neighborhood, gives it a fixed reality. For that moment, for that glimpse of time and space, there is certainty.

Binx's sole reading is Doughty's *Arabia Deserta*, the only book in his library. That reading is part of his malaise, his own Arabian desert, defined as a sense of loss: 'The world is lost to you, the world and the people in it, and there remains only you and the world and you no more able to be in the world than Banquo's ghost.' The malaise makes one doubt one's existence, since, as in the existentialist's absurdist universe, the individual has lost all supports. One is like the denizens of Doughty's vast desert, lost amidst swirling sands, caught only by some inner purpose which becomes ever fainter as winds intensify.

The alternative to this, however temporary, is the movies. Percy's sense of the 1950s is quite apparent, in that only the temporary respite of moviegoing can relieve the emptiness of affluence. Binx repeats that his chief forte is making money, and he is good at it. And yet even that activity by contrast makes everything else seem so difficult. The movies are the single contemporary art form that can reach those who have entered the absurdist jungle. The marquees beckon, the movie 'certifies,' the performers pin down reality; all else is floating, evanescent, part of the swamplike malaise. Movies are part of the American collective unconscious, our primary shared experience.

Centered in that bog is Kate Cutrer. We can understand her appeal to Binx only because of his recoil from scientific humanism. It is the latter that has created 'the great shithouse' where 'needs are satisfied, everyone becomes an anyone, a warm and creative person, and prospers like a dung beetle...and men are dead, dead, dead.' The malaise settles like fallout, 'and what people really fear is not that the bomb will fall but that the bomb will not fall.' Binx perceives that within the world of malaise there is really very little sin, not because of lack of desire for it, but because 'nowadays one is hardly up to it.' The malaise reduces, minimizes. Without it, Binx could not find Kate so attractive; and we, as readers, cannot understand his desire to have her. She drinks, takes heavy doses of pills, cannot cope with even the most ordinary or trivial moments, is always on the edge of collapse, and yet she is precisely, it seems, what Binx wants.

The alternative to Kate is Binx's secretary and assistant, and because she is there, he romances her. Sharon is all life, vitality, responsive to situations and sensation. Percy's presentation of her is the first of several such in his fiction, and they are great triumphs. He catches their confidence in their bodies and health, their awareness of their attractiveness to a certain kind of man, and their ability to handle their own reactions. They are rational, finely toned creatures, not overly intelligent, but bright enough to understand the main chance and to work their way through life. They minimize disaster by foreseeing possibilities. And while they are calculating--Sharon understands Binx's strategies for getting her into bed--they are fun. Whereas Kate represents the darker side of Binx's need, Sharon represents the life side. With her, and her successors, he can fight the malaise; with Kate, indulge it, recognize its proximity. With Sharon, all the feeling he sees as bogus when observed by way of Kate are still real, *there*; but as his mother, the prophetess, perceives, Sharon is not for him.

There is, nevertheless, vitality for Binx on the trip he and his secretary take to his mother's fishing camp. Water, beaches, fresh fish, an open life, offer alternatives, pastoral simplified to basics, adversary of the urban shithouse. Here Binx meets his numerous half brothers and sisters, the result of his mother's remarriage. This world touches him, but like the relief of moviegoing, it is temporary. Sharon falls back into her life and marries an unlikely sort, a mystery to Binx, who desired her flesh but not her life.

Kate and Binx come together, as they must, since only they comprehend the malaise. Their marriage will be like their courtship, full of swinging moods. Kate will try to function--the novel ends on that note as she runs a simple errand--and he will enter the malaise full-on under her influence. They will confront it, unlike all those surrounding them who counsel happiness. Binx Bolling's 'search' remains unfocused. All he can do, as he moves across the 1950s, is to 'plant a foot in the right place as the opportunity presents itself--indeed askicking is properly distinguished from edification'."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 315-17

"As important and entertaining as his essays are, they would be largely unread were it not for his fiction. Much to the surprise of the author and his publisher, Percy's first novel, *The Moviegoer* (1961), won the 1962 National Book Award. Unsuccessfully trying to immerse himself in 'the most ordinary life imaginable, a life without the old longings,' Binx Bolling wakes up one day to 'the search,' 'what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life.' Even though he characterizes himself as a 'castaway,' alienated from his neighbors and their pursuits, he recognizes in Kierkegaardian fashion that 'To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair.' Despite some cumbersome cerebral baggage, the novel is both entertaining and provocative, and a harbinger of better things to come."

Mark Johnson

Fifty Southern Writers after 1900
eds. Joseph M. Flora and Robert Bain
(Greenwood 1987) 347

"Percy's first novel, *The Moviegoer* (1961), is at once the simplest and the most representative of the six that he published. It is the account of several crucial days in the life of Binx Bolling, a thirty-year-old New Orleans stockbroker whose sense of alienation has prompted him to take quarters in an unfashionable section of the city rather than live in the Garden District, where his Christian Stoic Aunt Emily maintains a proper family establishment. When summoned by his aunt, however, Bolling still goes to receive corrective admonitions and gratuitous advice, much of it apparently like the guidance the maturing Percy had once received from his Uncle Will. Another, more revealing manifestation of his urge to withdraw from a world that sickens him is his habitual recourse to moving pictures for images of a stable and more palatable if trivial world, hence the title of the book.

Yet Percy's Bolling is also a seeker, as indicated amusingly by his casual flirtations with the physically attractive but plebeian secretaries that he employs. The solution he eventually stumbles on derives from his innate capacity for love and self-sacrifice and in rapid sequence near the end manifests itself in a decision to comply with his aunt's earnest wish that he go to medical school, his concern for his dying half-brother whose Catholic piety he respects but does not share, his ready assumption of responsibility for his younger siblings, and his dedication in marriage to what may well be the lifelong rehabilitation of his aunt's stepdaughter Kate Cutrer, whose sickness with the world has already brought her past Binx's point of malaise to the brink of suicide.

All of Percy's other novels in a variety of ingenious ways and with more verve address themes developed or adumbrated in his first. All of them work from the same basic assumption, which Percy maintained privately as well as publicly: that the Western world, having acquiesced long ago in the division of mind from body, and both from soul, for the most part has not lost its ancient vision of wholeness. The rare few who still possess vestigial intimations of what a complete life might be have no alternative to an existence in despair but to become desperate seekers after something that is undefined and perhaps ineffable. All of Percy's principle characters are or have been such seekers, and for those in the know, most by one or more details call to mind Percy's own early malaise and the circumstances of his life."

J. A. Bryant Jr.
Twentieth-Century Southern Literature
(U Kentucky 1997) 234

Michael Hollister (2021)

“In *The Moviegoer*, which also appeared in 1961—and was given the National Book Award over *Catch-22*—there is an equivalent form of strangulation. Walker Percy’s is more undefined, what he calls a malaise. This malaise, which is not only existential angst, but Kierkegaard’s fear and trembling and even his sense of dread, is a peculiarly American ailment; it lies in the character, but also beyond. And it is unconnected to personal success or failure. Binx Bolling suffers from it while he is quite successful as a broker and quite attractive to women.

It is, we may say, the Catch-22 of life itself, and it seems associated with the fifties: *The Moviegoer* takes place in the fifties, Binx has fought and been wounded in the Korean War, and the novel was written and rewritten throughout that decade. The period which more than any other in history allowed American affluence to multiply also produced a sense of doom and disquiet that was a Catch-22 or malaise; and since it did not roar like apocalypse or Armageddon, it was even more prevailing. It is embedded, in the Heller novel, in the ‘city of death,’ Rome, which has at one stage been the city of life—women, booze, freedom from missions. For Percy, it is New Orleans, with its Elysian Fields and lovely-sounding areas. Behind all the loveliness, or the relief, there lies a mechanical principle which is typically American. It is not clearly defined as destiny or fate or even doom; nor is it directly connected to history, the weight of the past, as it is for the European. It is, rather, connected to the very success that American brings, to that destruction which lies so close to success....

Walker Percy is very possibly our most graceful and inventive instructor. His five novels to date demonstrate that he is, foremost, a teacher. However much he entertains—and he is witty and adroit—his primary function is to lead us into a deeper sense of ourselves, to make us perceive the nature of despair. In this respect, he is a litmus of reaction to contemporary American culture, the recorder of events by a man who refuses. We recall Melville’s *Bartleby*. Percy must simultaneously restrain the forces of apocalypse and remain loyal to protagonists who are inert, disaffected, wrong in the head, unable to act or lacking in the will to act. The main character in two of his novels is Will, who lacks what his name suggests. Yet even the man without will owes something to himself and to his society, especially when God is dead and society is secularized. Golf and golf course become for Percy the emblems of such secularity: pastoral spatiality given over to effete shepherds and shepherdesses. Somewhere there lies a balance of inner and outer; to locate it is Percy’s quest.

He makes certain all his protagonists have successful careers, or the potentiality of such success; for he wants them to have infinite choices. Careers, money, status, rich marriages—they have these, and yet they must remove themselves from climbing in order to descend. Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer* (1961), Will Barrett in *The Last Gentleman* (1966) and again in *The Second Coming* (1980), Thomas More in *Love Among the Ruins* (1971), and Lancelot in *Lancelot* (1977) are men of substance undermined by ruins. They, their personal and emotional lives, are in ruins; Will must be literally hoisted out to be saved. They are, all, more than Southern gentlemen, more than social or psychological misfits; they have been born too late or too soon, and their quest is for some ideological thread that can connect them to a center, however inadequate centers are. Binx depends on film for certification of reality; More must live in the shadow of his illustrious name; Lancelot is supported by modern novelties; and Will Barrett finds peace in a Trav-L-Aire camper, a complete environment which isolates him. When he reappears, fourteen years later, the camper is no longer adequate; only a pastoral greenhouse can help him survive. In common, they share the nausea of Roquentin in the Sartre novel, men out of phase, historically misplaced, emotionally dislocated, culturally discontinuous.

Binx Bolling comes out of the 1950s and with a somewhat different focus could have been a figure of the Beat movement. But he is attached to money, to making it, increasing it, and holding on to it; although his other sensibilities are in ways Beat. A Percy character does not surrender his bourgeois connections easily. He is a mental dropout, a young man (late twenties) who senses the malaise, personal and social, which lies at the heart of an affluent, energetic society.... The malaise he feels, which comes over him like a fog rolling over the countryside, is the adversary side of a rational society, a New Orleans that appears to work. Set into that malaise, as a real inmate of an inner mad world, is Binx’s cousin Kate Cutrer. Since her

fiancé died in a fiery car crash on the eve of their marriage, this modern-day Miss Havisham has never been right, a young woman who moves from rationality to depression in almost imperceptible swings of mood.

Surrounding Binx is the inauthentic: those of false sensibilities, those who lack perception, or live in the past. But authenticity is difficult to perceive or comprehend. Binx tries to find it in movies, where the search for the authentic is available to the viewer; but the movies made a mess of searches because they must resolve elements. Movies have to end. Nevertheless, they have a reality and an authenticity life lacks. Early in the novel, William Holden strolls down the French Quarter and is spotted. 'An aura of heightened reality moves with him and all who fall within it feel it.' Yet even that 'peculiar reality,' which in itself is astounding, is a cheat; it eases but does not displace the malaise.

Moviegoing fits into the temperament of a romantic: one whose expectations of life are in excess of what it ordinarily supports. Someone may be a moviegoer—as is a fellow Binx meets on the train—without going to the movies. Because he places a value on life it cannot meet, the moviegoer is an appealing person. He may be aware of Kierkegaardian dread, but he has an idealist's demand. Binx's aunt, whose tradition is Southern chivalric, is not a moviegoer, despite certain superficial resemblances. She argues for a conventional view of behavior, something based on the statements of *I'll Take My Stand* [1930]. This is, curiously, a South Percy was himself to hang on to in *Lancelot*, where his protagonist kills to protect it. But such values, based on gentility, chivalry, gaiety, and hatred of outsiders, cannot work for Binx; are, indeed, part of the malaise he suffers from.

The moviegoer cannot be certain of anything. He lives on the edge, a parapet-walker who peers into the abyss. The ordinary becomes, for him, threatening. Movies provide temporary respite; they heighten and lighten, and offer an alternative reality. Binx refers to *Panic in the Streets*, a movie filmed in New Orleans about a cholera threat. Anyone watching it in a New Orleans theater, as Binx and Kate do, can locate the very neighborhoods of the movie. This, Binx feels, 'certifies' the neighborhood, gives it a fixed reality. For that moment, for that glimpse of time and space, there is certainty.

Binx's sole reading is Doughty's *Arabia Deserta*, the only book in his library. That reading is part of his malaise, his own Arabian desert, defined as a sense of loss: 'The world is lost to you, the world and the people in it, and there remains only you and the world and you no more able to be in the world than Banquo's ghost.' The malaise makes one doubt one's existence, since, as in the existentialist's absurdist universe, the individual has lost all supports. One is like the denizens of Doughty's vast desert, lost amidst swirling sands, caught only by some inner purpose which becomes ever fainter as winds intensify.

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