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Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*: A Critical Investigation

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Abstract

The Moviegoer, Walker Percy's first book, is about a boy named Binx Bolling who wants to escape from his everyday life. This article is about how Walker Percy uses films to show that Binx is an unreliable narrator and a hopeless searcher who is stuck because he doesn't realize how much his life is like the films he watches. Binx leaves the world and the people in it because he fears that life's everydayness will be too much for him. Binx's exile means that he doesn't know anything about the world anymore, but he doesn't know how his lack of information makes him sad. He is so sure of his ways to avoid things, like licensing, repetition, and rotation, that they keep him from seeing his absolute hopelessness and inability to do anything in the face of everydayness.

Keywords- escape, unreliable, everydayness, exile, hopelessness

"Why has the South given birth to so many talented writers? When he received the National Book Award for *The Moviegoer*, Walker Percy was questioned. "Because we got beat" (Kazin, *The Secret of The South* 37). However, as Percy's stockbroker hero demonstrated in his quest to find the precise location required by the human mind, that was only half the solution. The Southern writer always understood himself as a part of history with a broad meaning, whether it was America the colossus, the juggernaut, the great melting pot into which he did not want to melt, or the process of "sin and error" (Kazin 37), as Southerners liked to say about slavery and more than slavery; or the simple accumulation of ancestry, history, and race superstition as second nature. The Southern

author believed that a power greater than himself had expressed who he was. His writing had an unintentional depth to it.

When the South finally had its worldliness to satirize, Faulkner lost his impact on Southern novelists. All modern images of the South had been of the poverty, differentness, and resistance with which a writer could identify; suddenly, there was a South of stockbrokers and corporation executives who could make a Walker Percy feel as marginal as a Negro or Jew. The commotion surrounding Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*, a sardonic, essentially philosophical novel about the spiritual solitude of a young stockbroker in the New Orleans suburb of Gentilly who eventually marries a tragically vulnerable young woman to whom he is distantly related, was in sharp contrast to Percy himself and the award in 1962. Percy's publisher had barely heard of the book. An obscure author from Covington, Louisiana, who was a medicine doctor but had never practiced, published *The Moviegoer* as his debut book. The book was not initially met with high hopes and was only published after four draughts. This charming and ancient region of the South was the target of a lean, sharply written, and subtly dramatic attack on the purely bourgeois way of life and thought. But despite the narrator's light-hearted banter, it turned into a melancholy and somehow heroic examination of the isolation of essential human views rather than only being a parody of the South's break with its traditions.

John Bickerson Boling, the story's narrator and protagonist, carefully boosts his salary each year and maintains a robotic relationship with one of his secretaries after another. However, he has grown fixated on the meaninglessness of everything he is only now starting to realize and on despair, whose unique quality, according to Kierkegaard, is that it is unconscious that it is despair. His father, a doctor, died in the war; as a result, Binx has a strong sense of fatherlessness and traditions that he is expected to uphold but cannot find or justify in the cosier ways of those around him. He is intrigued by the idea of viewing life in the privacy of his thoughts with the same unique, hallucinatory sense of discovery that he gives to the movies, where he spends many evenings. He has developed into a fascinated watcher of the human face and is training himself to maintain a steady gaze on even the most ordinary objects that cross his path. The process of looking, seeing, and discovering has allowed him to see a tiny crack in the wall of his sorrow. In a world where most people can't, he is a man who can see and listen. One could conclude that the excitement of conversion rules his actual existence. His life has a freshness to it. He is a spiritual voyeur who seeks the most intimate yet incomprehensible regions of the human heart. He can listen to Kate, a troubled girl who belittles him and has a solid attraction to death; their love is based on his ability to focus on Kate entirely. He is now the only man in the room who appears only interested in watching and being a spectator in the dark. The soul's physician and diagnostician receive his training in motion pictures. He has learned how to concentrate on the hidden human locations in the screen's magnified, beautifully lit, and concentrated figures.

The Moviegoer, essentially a clever search for faith in a world that seems virtually determined to undermine confidence, was not intended to be very successful. Going to the cinema was not the focus. It was a masterful novel about our cast-off state. However, Binx, the protagonist and narrator, had such a sour and implacable tone that to respond, one had to be sympathetic to the author's point of view rather than irritated with the lack of progress. In actuality, it was a book written by an outsider for outsiders. Due to their origins in the rural, impoverished, outdated, and defeated South, Southerners used to refer to themselves as outsiders in the context of the United States. However, as Binx demonstrates in each section describing his interactions with the affluent upper middle class in New Orleans, it is the South itself that now casts its citizens in the role of outsiders and generates sadness that doesn't recognize it as such.

A strange, unsettling, and uncategorisable kind of book was *The Moviegoer*. It was decorous in the sense of an old-fashioned comedy of manners; it was not quirky and did not overplay tone or event in any contemporary style. However, it was clearly and profoundly the expression of an internal conflict. In some fundamental ways, the author felt outside his society and like he was doing something wrong. New Orleans, the South, had come to symbolize an America in *The Moviegoer* Gentilly where people no longer knew how to look at anything and did not know how or what to look for. Only the faintest hints of their suffering were present in their daily lives. One individual would have gained sight (as if for the first time), but his chances of survival would have been extremely slim. Kate, his future fiancée, knows he cannot help her.

What occurs in *The Moviegoer*, *The Last Gentleman*, and *Love in the Ruins* is an inclination to view things fundamentally differently. *Love in the Ruins* projects the violence of Southern history—the violence one can feel in Greenville today, where stores advertise "Guns and Ammo" (Kazin 66) and where every truck driver seems to carry a rifle with him—into the future when the entire nation has gone insane with violence. It is not in *The Moviegoer* or *The Last Gentleman*, a far murkier book. But the protagonist of all three books feels as though he is in the grip of a severe disorder and, as a result, practices the art of gazing from a distance. Binx, in *The Moviegoer*, says, "I am more Jewish than the Jews I know. They are more at home than I am. I accept my exile" (Kazin 66). Binx is not actually where he appears to be happy. "What is generally considered to be the best of times is for me the worst of times, and that worst of times was one of the best" (Kazin 66).

The Moviegoer's unique ironic charm comes from the contrast between here and there, between the ordinary American world that cannot comprehend the fear it causes and the self-training to face despair. Binx does perceive things uniquely, similar to how people who at least turn their faces in the appropriate direction experience hallucinations, intense attention, and obsession on a movie screen. The Southern writer's trick is to continue to think the world has moral, historical, and philosophical significance. "I guess," adds Percy, "my main debt to Kierkegaard is the use of his tremendous philosophical and theological insight as a basis to build on" (Dewey, 228). On the other hand, he continues, "I was always put off by Kierkegaard's talk about inwardness, subjectivity, and the absurd—the leap into the absurd" (Dewey 291). These aspects of early nineteenth-century romanticism, which may be primarily responsible for Kierkegaard's rebelliousness and emphasis on the importance of personal experience, are not particularly appealing to Catholic novelists who prefer to deal with men in real situations, which is the fundamental tenet of Percy's novel. Regardless of the depth of Kierkegaard's criticisms of Hegel's attempt to rationalise the world or Kierkegaard's emphasis on the church's assurance of salvation obtained via the administration of consistent liturgy and sacraments, in the most significant early interviews, Percy supports Kierkegaardian interpretations of his work, which restrict and distort his themes. Both Camus and Sartre were interested in real life—courage at living as shown by the person's ability to choose between options without, ironically, the impersonal guarantee of organizations like the church. Of course, Percy promotes choosing between the church and the myriad utopias and other angelistic endeavors that men have created. In addition to this shared existentialist perspective with Sartre and Camus, specifically in *The Moviegoer*, Camus' *The Stranger* is referenced in both the alienation and conversion of Percy's moviegoer and the whims of Binx and Kate's love affair may be influenced by their liaison in *The Age of Reason*.

According to Percy's conception of art, the artist will interact with society rather than relocate to a place of art or an ivory tower. Percy uses the term to refer to the study of man in the broadest sense, to his existence, situation, and proposal, all aspects of anthropology. Art contributes to anthropology in this way. "The function of writers, novelists, and poets is probably the highest in the culture because their job is to make people understand themselves" (Tharpe, *Walker Percy* 9).

The first of Percy's Southerners with a respectable family and outstanding names, Binkerson (Binx) Bolling, writes an episodic first-person account called *The Moviegoer*. Due in part to the narrator's steadfastness in expressing his many viewpoints, the book has a pretentious, edifying discourse feel. He spends much of his time watching films, even the poor ones, because he has no other interests but making money and wooing his secretaries. He is a typical materialistic American businessman, a savvy consumer, and a producer, with a focus on money and sex. But he discovers that he is out of tune. The story occurs during Mardi Gras week, a carnival of life, and concludes on Ash Wednesday, a day of repentance when the mark is applied to the flesh. Christians are enjoying their most opulent week of festivities shortly before the start of Lent. Binx turns 31 this week, the typical hero's age of adversity and adulthood. It is now appropriate for knights to embark on expeditions and experience hazy spiritual stirrings.

Binx begins the story by stating that he gets a note from his aunt, Aunt Emily, with an unexpected invitation to lunch on a Wednesday. Aunt Emily is a stern Southern noblewoman with some insight into what Binx should do with his squandered money and spending. She will want to talk about either his cousin Kate's mental health or his future because she is breaking her habit. The primary concerns of the story and the stated cause for Binx's retelling are Kate's health and his future. The remaining material is an ironic satire against American culture, particularly its emphasis on technology and the fallacy of scientific humanism in a morally

bankrupt society. Although Binx may be trying to portray himself as a genuine and willing product of culture, the story's tone is generally that of a distant sophisticate who despises the materialistic refinements he indulges.

Binx participates in a variation of the call for the hero to be active thanks to his search intuition. He experiences the *Schadenfreude*, the thrill and dread mixed—that frequently permeates Percy's characters. The problems are resolved in the action's epilogue. For better or worse, Binx and Kate have been married for a long time. Binx is currently enrolled in medical school, finally preparing for a career as his friends have urged him to do and training to contribute to society rather than withdraw.

Despite his subliminal awareness of his passive slumber, Binx is a creature that physically blends in with the crowd. Percy says, "Binx enjoys his alienation. He is happy in what Kierkegaard calls the aesthetic mode—he lives in a place like Gentilly to savor its ordinariness" (Tharpe 47). He takes pleasure in both using and criticizing Christianity. As the story progresses through the events of the week, it describes Kate's hazy issues, which were reportedly exacerbated in large part by the abrupt death of her fiancé in a car accident several years prior, as well as by the depression of a poor little affluent girl with nothing to do. Even though she has attempted social work and other good things, she lacks faith even after the action. However, Percy claims his goal was to "depict the rebellion of two young people against the shallowness and tastelessness of current life. The rebellion takes different forms. In Kate, it manifests through psychiatric symptoms: anxiety, suicidal tendencies, and the like. In Binx, it is a 'metaphysical' rebellion—a search for meaning which is the occasion of a rather antic life in a suburb of New Orleans" (Tharpe 48). In other words, he wants to expose the flaws in that cozy humanism, which no longer cares about either Christianity or individualism. According to him, the Southern nobility and other people who rely more on man than God practice the stoic view, which emphasises moral code without a belief in God, and the traditional Roman Catholic ease with morality and religion, on the other hand. And he adds a third theme: "The protagonist is in an existentialist predicament, alienated from both cultures" (Tharpe 48).

Binx suffers from a morbid world-weariness that he variably describes as malaise and everydayness. It is startlingly similar to that of the romantics. The illness is comparable to Baudelaire's ennui, Kierkegaard's sorrow, and whatever Meursault goes through in Camus. For individuals whose environment is so successful at meeting their physical wants that it encourages a man to be a content animal uninterested in either this world or the next, everydayness is the drag of an uneventful, unchallenging life. Malaise is the name of the disease of depression and despair, intensified by the awareness of a moral and metaphysical wasteland in which intellectuals claim to have outgrown the rituals and beliefs of organized religion and "believe in people... tolerance and understanding... the uniqueness and dignity of the individual" (Percy, *The Moviegoer* 109). These are the nonbelievers whom Will includes in his litany for the dead in *The Second Coming*. The disease deprives life of any semblance of adventure and purpose, and the values are mere impracticable abstractions. Precisely, however, individuality is lacking in the styrene society where all experience is packaged and wrapped, as Percy describes it in "The Loss of the Creature" (Tharpe 51), an essay in his collection of philosophical essays called *The Message in the Bottle*.

However, as Binx says, his ailment is a Western man's, or at least a Western intellectual's, incapacity to maintain body and soul together in harmony to the extent that he can function reasonably in the concrete world of objects and other people. He has had the experience of a vertical search, which climaxed when he read in an anonymous hotel room, *Chemistry of Life*, which asks, or answers, the ultimate question of what life is made of. The book, in a sense, poses or provides a response to the fundamental question of what life is comprised of. The world was accounted for, but Binx claims that he was left over as a specific individual man living somewhere after reading these and other works written by the scientific humanism movement. What was he to do with the rest of his life? The issue facing every one of Percy's characters is this: They tend to be in the worst mood around four in the afternoon.

With this experience in mind, Binx then began what he calls his horizontal search. Both terms are derived from Kierkegaard's "The Difference between a Genius and an Apostle" (Dewey 284), which provided Percy with a distinction that he later used to dramatize the significance of the priestly messenger bearing the Good News. The horizontal search is the attempt to live day to day in the real physical world of nature rather than in a world of dreams, utopias, or abstractions, where the challenge of life vanished as physical needs were gradually satisfied. It is the search for the man that combines existentialism and phenomenology. He will try to live each day in the

real world, where a guy is also a physical product of the world, like other men. He will avoid the abstract, the urge to deal with averages, statistics, packaged experience, and from becoming anyone or anywhere. Now, he says, he has begun to live. He searches for his origins and lives "solitary and in wonder" (42), wondering about the mysteries and marvels of the natural universe, fascinated by the diversity of creation and bored by humanistic verities.

In this book, going to the movies serves various purposes, most of which are fruitless. Although he doesn't provide any instances of films, he believes are incorrect, Binx claims that he enjoys even lousy films. Binx has claimed numerous times that he is impersonating a specific movie star, generally to woo Sharon. Generally speaking, watching films is related to ideas that Percy attributes to Kierkegaard in interviews. Binx attends at least four movies during the week—not a normal one for going to the movies—tastes a fifth (with Jane Powell) and watches a television drama with Dick Powell. He connects an idea that presumably lessens his estrangement with the movies, although he never explicitly states this.

The first movie he sees on Wednesday night after the depressing visit with Aunt Emily and Kate is *Panic in the Streets*, with Richard Widmark, one of those typically sensationalist horrors dealing with "cholera bacilli... gotten loose in the city" (63). The title and star are unimportant, as in most movies Binx mentions. But the movie is associated with a phenomenon of moviegoing: seeing the city on film allows the moviegoer "to live, for a time at least, as a person who is Somewhere and not Anywhere" (Percy 63). This is the last critical stage in overcoming alienation. The next film he watches revolves around a similar idea. On his way home to Gentilly on Thursday, Binx stops at a theatre where Jane Powell appears in a musical. He is not interested, but here he takes the trouble to talk about knowing the manager and the cashier and to explain that he tries to get some facts: "Before I see a movie, it is necessary for me to learn something about the theatre or the people who operate it" (Percy 74). "If I did not," he says, "I should be seeing one copy of a film that might show anywhere and at any time" (Percy 75). The notion of certification is partially made reasonable by all the rhetoric of trying to heal oneself. Still, other than the dry details provided in this lengthy paragraph, the subject needs to be further examined in the book. The theme is one of the main themes of the book's novel and its essays.

On Thursday, Binx watches a television movie at home a little later with Dick Powell in one of his serious parts. It is highly similar to an everyday film with a sentimental ending, but he doesn't confront the philosophical weight of it. After reading the item that Mrs Shexnaydre has cut out of Reader's Digest, he probably waits for Kate because he has nothing else to do. Later in the evening, he goes with Kate to see another movie, where he has what he calls "a successful repetition" (Percy 79). He mentions *The Oxbow Incident* and *All Quiet on the Western Front* as being associated with the idea that "All movies smell of a neighborhood and a season" (Percy 79), a phenomenological remark, presumably, that makes no real sense, though he gives examples. However, the purpose of this film is to define recurrence, which the director does in a very unclear manner, even though later allusions in interviews and earlier ones in *The Man on the Train* seem to give the word and notion their conventional meaning. He says, "Repetition is the re-enactment of experience towards the end of isolating the time segment that has lapsed so that it, the lapsed time, can be savored of itself without the usual adulteration of events that clog time like peanuts in brittle" (Percy 79–80).

The trip to the drive-in theatre to see Fort Dobbs with Lonnie, Sharon, and some of the younger kids seems to have been a significant episode. Rotation is defined by Binx in this place. Possibly more to the point, Sharon is the final in a long line of sexual or aesthetic rotations; this is both their first date and their last time seeing a movie together. He claims that this encounter exceeded his expectations. Lonnie is happy, Clint Walker is amazingly Western and lonesome, and he has the ideal linguistic gesture. Sharon is like a girl in a movie who will consent to her boyfriend having sex with her since he is gentle with kids. Only when Binx watched a different movie, not while having sex with Sharon or Linda, did he have a more similar sensation. Nothing about knowing movie theatre owners or cashiers is mentioned here; everything here is meant to describe rotation.

A hint of the meaning of moviegoing appears in the account of the young romantic on the bus who "is a moviegoer, though, of course, he does not go to the movies" (Percy 216). That is to say; it is clear that he is a foolish child who lacks social skills. If he's lucky, he'll act like someone else all the time. If he's unlucky, he'll perpetually act foolish, unsure of what to do next, unable to play a part, and lacking a persona to act as. A

moviegoer's awareness of the cavity beneath him, which develops in large part because he has withdrawn into the abstract, orderly, but undemanding world of scientific humanism, is likely to grow more intense the more frequently he attends movies.

The novel's main issue, which is presented very early in the monologue and addressed only in the epilogue, is almost completely hidden by Binx's inordinate concern with his preconceptions, feelings, and definitions. Only gradually does *The Moviegoer* reveal the contrast between love and sex that occupies Percy throughout his whole body of work in the form of Binx's banal statements about unfulfilled sexual longings. Excessive concern with the sickly and sexless Kate and relatively short exaggerated episodes with Sharon, as well as narrative serenity, conceal or fail to reveal Binx's falling prey to "desire" (Percy 228). Naturally, he describes his history of affairs and discusses his devotion to the flesh. The joy that Tom More has and that Will Barrett laments over is hunted down in his description of the girl on the bus with Prince Val Bangs, who is wrapped in cellophane like a gift from the world. Binx says his desire for Sharon is like a "sorrow in my heart" (Percy 68). He anticipates Sutter's idea that sex is the only mode of re-entry into the concrete world. When Binx's mother says her father liked pretty girls, "Till his dying day," Binx says, "Does it last that long?" (Percy 155).

But once the significance of this topic is understood, Kate's position, which otherwise occupies long, tedious sections of the story and is ambiguous and educational, becomes evident. On one level, Kate resembles a Tennessee Williams character, notably Carol Cutrere from *Battle of the Angels*, as a stressed heroine typical of Southern literature. She presents as a split schizophrenic, sometimes calm and effective and other times so ill that she is almost helpless, even though the characterization is largely meaningless. Her association with the subdued theme of lady and whore foreshadows Kitty in *The Last Gentleman*, who alternates between being naive and brave; Doris in *Love in the Ruins*; and Margot in *Lancelot*. She believes she should indulge with Binx on the train, evidently in large part because she believes he wants to have sex with her. Kate herself may come to something *ex nihilo* as she chooses marriage, leaps to faith, and accepts "shared consciousness" (Tharpe 58), an ideal in intersubjectivity that Percy discussed in, among other places, the essay, *The Symbolic Structure of Interpersonal Process*.

The subject of *The Moviegoer* is so strongly linked to hopelessness—the hazy desire for emigration or death. Therefore, Binx's marriage is the most important event in the book, not because he commits himself to Kate or because of that experience alone, as he has loved her for a while, but rather because he forgoes sex out of love or at the very least enters into marriage and embraces the obligations of that institution. However, Binx is not hostile because of desire. Percy preaches about sexual morality through alienation. And the book's conclusion is just as important as the conclusions of the other novels. Here is a potential solution to Kate and Binx's desperation: Although Binx may begin his adventure with a variety of hopes, the finish is joyful.

Despite its many flaws, this novel succeeds in the sense that it is almost not a failure. Nevertheless, it was written, regardless of Percy's thoughts on didacticism and art, to illustrate concepts primarily found in the 1956 essay *The Man on the Train*, which addresses the issue of alienation. In *The Man on the Train*, he makes a strong case that repetition and rotation, a primary (and presumably lifelike) method, might help art counteract alienation. He uses Kafka's writing to successfully illustrate how the suffering artist might use communication to end his separation by establishing an intimate, subjective bond between the author and the reader.

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