The Cinema of Walker Percy:
A Film Theory Analysis of Moviegoing, Everydayness
And the Search in *The Moviegoer*

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Abstract

Walker Percy’s first novel, *The Moviegoer*, is a story about the protagonist Binx Bolling’s search to avoid everydayness. This thesis focuses on Percy’s use of moviegoing to establish Binx as an unreliable narrator and disillusioned searcher trapped by an unawareness of how his life resembles the movies he watches. Binx exiles himself from the world and the people in it out of fear that he may be overcome by the overwhelming presence of everydayness. The consequence of his exile is that Binx loses his ability to know anything about the world, but he is unaware of how his lack of knowledge is causing his despair. He is so confident in his methods of avoidance, such as certification, repetition, and rotation that they blind him from recognizing his true despair, his powerlessness to act under the reality of everydayness. Through three initial moviegoing events Percy shows that the search, despite its aims to avoid despair, is the actual harbinger of despair; Stanley Cavell’s theory of film as philosophy helps to elucidate Percy’s use of these moviegoing events to show that Binx’s initial despair is precisely his unawareness of his despair.

Binx’s search comes to a halt because of a train ride to Chicago, when he is confronted with, but accepts, the presence of everydayness. As his search falls apart and Binx learns to see and acknowledge everydayness, he gradually understands the true nature of his despair and the reason for his unhappiness – losing the ability to act and react, and gaining only the ability to observe. Binx admits that he knows nothing but how the world is full of shit, but in his decision to marry Kate Cutrer, Binx discovers a potential future existence of happiness, void of despair. The film
theory of Gilles Deleuze about the split between classical and modern cinema provides a unique insight about Percy's writing; the novel can be read as an example of Deleuzian modern cinema, making Binx's transition and freedom from despair sublime but indubitable. Binx is in despair because he refuses to acknowledge the everydayness of the modern cinema; he is in despair when he accepts the modern cinema because he becomes a Deleuzian pure seer who can only observe everydayness and cannot act; and finally he transcends everydayness and inhabits the world of everydayness: a sublime conversion.

Percy's theory of moviegoing is illuminated by Deleuze and Cavell's film theories where this aspect of the novel is easily overlooked. This thesis aims to establish the importance that Percy assigns to the movies and moviegoing for understanding Binx's eventual conversion as an embrace and an inhabitation of everydayness. Percy's novel is not merely an example of a character's inspired conversion; it is an example of an author's use of moviegoing and the cinema to present a transcendental theory of everydayness and human existence.
**Introduction**

Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer* is a tale about a Southern gentleman named John Bickerson “Binx” Bolling who embarks on a wandering search to escape the grip of everydayness and despair. Without his search, Binx is sure that he will forever be prisoner to everydayness, yet his search consistently leads to revelations that he is already and currently so imprisoned. For much of the novel, Percy’s Binx is an unreliable narrator, a man who is confidently aware of the force of everydayness, its causes, its consequences, and its characteristics, yet who cannot escape everydayness, and furthermore, who perpetrates it with shortsighted methods of avoidance. The world that Percy creates is one that Binx presumes to understand and be able to manage through his search, though the misguided nature of the search consistently reaffirms Binx’s misplaced confidence and reappplies the “grip of everydayness.”

Percy titles the novel, *The Moviegoer*, referring to Binx’s propensity for watching movies throughout the story. The title also refers to Binx’s significant role as an observer of not only the movies, but of the world and his existence in the world. Binx’s role as an observer, or moviegoer, changes in the novel and the significance of his transformation is paramount to understanding the story. Binx is initially a poor moviegoer; a poor moviegoer is a searcher and an observer, but he or she only sees everydayness as normal movements and is in despair. A good moviegoer abandons his or her search when everydayness overwhelms the search, and he or she is left to embrace the abnormality of movements, of everydayness. Most importantly, the good moviegoer inhabits the world, and does not merely
embrace the presence of everydayness. Thus, the good moviegoer is free from
despair. By the end of the novel, Percy transforms Binx into a keen and competent
moviegoer,¹ a thoughtful observer free to make sense of the world and his role in
such a world by embracing the everydayness that he once feared and avoided. Percy
establishes the potential for transformation by introducing Binx as a poor
moviegoer, an unreliable narrator and observer who in reality fails to see his search
as the exact harbinger of despair and unhappiness. Binx’s despair as a bad
moviegoer is extrinsically related to his understanding of everydayness defined by
his and the world’s movements. Only when Binx understands everydayness by its
inevitable and inescapable presence is he empowered by the freedom of becoming a
good moviegoer.

Stanley Cavell and Gilles Deleuze, both of whom wrote after the publication
of The Moviegoer, provide theories of film that elucidate the nuances of Binx’s
transition from a poor moviegoer to a proficient one. Cavell’s theory equating film to
philosophy in his book The Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of
Remarriage demonstrates the potential of each moviegoing experience to teach Binx
about the failings of the search, but Binx misleads himself by exercising blind
methods of avoidance such as certification, repetition, and rotation. The movies are
mirrors that Binx’s search leaves him incapable of looking into, but they show that it
is the search that facilitates despair, and it is the abandonment of the search that

Walsh Cambridge, (Cambridge UP, 2006) for a philosophical elaboration of this
concept in the form of Søren Kierkegaard’s “Knight of Faith,” which Percy was
familiar with before writing The Moviegoer. The Kierkegaardian term implies a
background of philosophical literacy that Percy’s readers do not need to have in
order to understand Binx’s conversion.
leads to happiness. A reading of Cavell’s theory onto the moviegoing scenes in the novel illuminates Percy’s attempts to prefigure Binx’s transition by focusing on the fallibility of Binx’s moviegoing, marking Binx as the bad moviegoer.

Deleuze’s theory distinguishing time and movement in film illuminates the subtleties of Binx’s conversion at the end of the novel when The Moviegoer is viewed in terms of Deleuze’s distinction between the pre-World War II classical cinema and the post-war modern cinema. Binx’s search is comparable to Deleuzian classical cinema, in that the normalcy of his movements separates time into distinct segments and thereby leads Binx to believe that he can anticipate the future and appreciate the past. According to Deleuze, prioritizing normal movements forces the world into abstraction, so the consequence of Binx’s normal movements is that his world too becomes abstracted, rendering him unable to connect with the world and find meaning in everydayness. Deleuze helps us to see that as poor moviegoer, Binx tries to avoid the depressing, direct presence of everydayness in the world by isolating everydayness through normal movements. Binx’s conversion into a competent moviegoer embodies the Deleuzian reversal in modern cinema, where the directness of time frees the individual from the normalcy of movements, and one can truly observe and perceive the world. The transition is Binx’s acknowledgement that his search and its normal movements must be abandoned to consequently find true happiness and meaning in the inevitable everydayness he perceives. Binx embraces everydayness as Deleuze argues a modern film embraces time, freeing him from the despair of normal movements that try to avoid everydayness.
The story of everydayness, despair, the search, and its abandonment takes place over one week in New Orleans ending on Ash Wednesday and Binx’s thirtieth birthday when Binx’s conversion is complete. Considering Percy’s efforts to make Binx appear as an unreliable narrator up until the point of transition, the abandonment of the search is strikingly unexplained, or at least understated, in the text. For this reason, Binx’s transition at the end of the novel has been called surprising or unconvincing by many of Percy’s critics, not to mention the issue of the religiousness of his conversion. It is my argument that not only is Binx’s conversion a convincingly religious transformation, it is plainly foreshadowed by Percy’s use of Binx’s incessant habit of moviegoing. By focusing the analysis of Binx’s character on his moviegoing habits and the filmic nature of the search using Cavell and Deleuze’s theories, Binx’s conversion at the end of the book is neither surprising nor is it unconvincing. Percy models Binx’s search after the movies that Binx watches, and his conversion and abandonment of the search at the end of the novel follows the distinct pattern that Binx identifies in movies:

The movies are onto the search, but 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 just as well be dead.

Binx, too, will abandon his search, marry a local girl who is his cousin Kate Cutrer, set about being nice to his younger half-brothers and –sisters, buy a house in the

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2 For the notion of Binx’s conversion as surprising, see Martin Luschei, *The Sovereign Wayfarer; Walker Percy’s Diagnosis of the Malaise*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1972); for the conversion as unconvincing see John Edward Hardy, *The Fiction of Walker Percy*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1987).

neighborhood, and go off to medical school. An investigation of Binx’s moviegoing will reveal that at first, Binx is a poor moviegoer, and that his conversion is not a turn towards despair; rather, the change signals that Binx has learned to be a good moviegoer and observer and he is freed from despair.

Binx is a stockbroker who works for his uncle by marriage, Jules Cutrer. He has been living in New Orleans with a woman named Mrs. Shexnaydre on a street called Elysian Fields since he returned from fighting in the Korean War, where he was shot and seriously injured. Binx’s daily life in Gentilly, his neighborhood in New Orleans, is shaken when he awakes to the idea that he must embark on a search, an idea that first came to him during the war when he was wounded and lay in a ditch. His search takes him around New Orleans and the surrounding countryside, watching movies, gallivanting quasi-romantically with his secretary Sharon, making money as a stockbroker, all the while making detached, sometimes absurd and even funny, observations about the world he moves through. The point of his search is to avoid the unhappiness of everydayness and despair, conditions that describe the loss of his identity, his self. Binx’s Aunt Emily, his father’s sister and the lone living representative of that Bolling generation, has taken charge of Binx since his father and brother died when he was a child. She is a Southern elite who wishes for Binx to resume the Bolling tradition of greatness by pursuing research or going to medical school. She tells Binx that by his thirtieth birthday he must decide what he is to do with his life. Lonnie, Binx’s half-brother, is a pious Catholic who Binx senses a deep connection with. He is an example of the good moviegoer because his religious faith
frees him from the depressing everydayness of being crippled and restricted to a wheelchair. He is calm where Binx is troubled.

While Binx is in New Orleans, he is at times stimulated and satisfied by his search, and at other times he is unhappy, although he does not relate his unhappiness to the search. Once Binx leaves for Chicago by train on a business trip with Kate, a shift occurs the way he interacts with the world, although the transition is not easy and involves relapses to his searching methods. Kate, who is suicidal and depressed, becomes the object of his affection, movies no longer import satisfaction or pleasure, and he begins to regret his search and his life in New Orleans. When he returns, he rebuffs Aunt Emily’s wishes that he will turn out to be great like the other Bollings of her generation, and he becomes ordinary in her eyes. He does, however, agree to go to medical school, which pleases his great aunt. Binx and Kate are married and they settle down in the neighborhood in a house next to Emily and Jules. In an Epilogue one year removed from the rest of the action of The Moviegoer, Lonnie dies and Binx comforts Lonnie’s brothers and sisters, as well as Kate who is still troubled. Binx’s life is very ordinary. He admits that the search has been abandoned. He has become a good moviegoer because the search no longer prevents him from embracing the inevitability and ever-presence of everydayness,

Percy’s story follows the same trajectory that Binx identifies in the movies, morphing The Moviegoer into an experience much like a movie itself. Confronted with Binx’s movie, the reader is implicated as a moviegoer with the same predicament of observation that Binx confronts. Percy thus opens the novel to three possible readings: One can assume, like Binx does as an unreliable narrator, that the
abandonment of the search leads to so much despair that one “might just as well be
dead,” in which case Binx does not convert, but reverts to what one can only be
death and despair. The assumption is that Binx’s transition mimics that which he
falsely identifies in the movies, and such an assumption signifies poor moviegoing
on the part of the reader. A poor moviegoer is one who does not recognize or reflect
upon one’s own experience or one’s own philosophy while watching a movie. It is
like being a poor reader of a text in the sense that one does not recognize features of
the reading experience. One may also assume that the end to Binx’s movie indicates
his capitulation to Aunt Emily’s wishes. Her plan, for him to go to medical school,
settle down and do great things with his life, signifies an abandonment of the search,
but it leaves Binx in a tradition of normal movements, albeit elite or great normalcy,
which denies that Binx has made any transition at all. While it seems that Binx’s
abandonment of his search fulfills Aunt Emily’s requirements, his disavowal of her
values in a crucial conversation at the end of the novel affirms that his
transformation is a rebuff of Emily's ideals and not an acceptance.

The conclusion that should be drawn from Binx’s transition is two-fold. First,
Binx’s understanding that his search has come to nothing and can no longer proceed
is Percy’s way of turning him from unreliable narrator to a reliable one, meaning he
has become a competent moviegoer. The movies, as they mirror Binx’s philosophy
and re-present it to him, succeed in unsettling Binx’s confidence in his methods of
avoidance. Second, in sacrificing his search to marry his cousin Kate and take up
medical school, he shows a profound reversal in his relationship with the world.

Binx no longer moves through the world using his search to isolate time and avoid everydayness; instead he is freed by the directness of time to move through the world by embracing everydayness, the ordinary, and the mundane.

**Binx Bolling: Searcher**

Binx’s search describes his relationship with the world in his time as an incompetent moviegoer. Yet the constant reappearance of despair during his search despite his overconfidence in its ability to ward off despair signifies the potential for his eventual transformation. The search, then, is a false method of avoidance. On a basic level, the search has no identifiable goal or end, and if Binx is to be believed, one must search forever to ward off despair. On another level, the search not only fails to prevent despair, it invites, cultivates, facilitates, and even creates despair. In the first chapter, on a bus ride through New Orleans, Binx launches into a long description of the search:

> What is the nature of the search? you ask. Really it is very simple, at least for a fellow like me; so simple that it is easily overlooked. The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. This morning, for example, I felt as if I had come to myself on a strange island. And what does such a castaway do? Why, he pokes around the neighborhood and he doesn’t miss a trick. To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair.\(^5\)

So begins Binx’s confident masquerade about despair, telling the reader in direct address that he is above despair because he searches. His philosophy about despair is that if one searches, one avoids despair, and if one abandons the search, like in the movies, or ignores the search, one is in despair. Binx applies this philosophy when

\(^5\) Ibid., 13.
he watches movies. When the main character begins in a strange place wandering about, Binx says the character is on a search like his own. When the character settles down and the search ends, Binx says he is in despair. His confidence in this dialectic between search and despair disallows the possibility that the abandonment of the search is progress towards escaping despair. Indeed, Binx’s search has no foreseeable end or goal. Binx believes that many Americans think that God is the object that lies at the end of the search, but he wants to separate himself from these masses. According to Binx, “98% of Americans believe in God and the remaining 2% are atheists and agnostics – which leaves not a single percentage point for a seeker...Truthfully, it is the fear of exposing my own ignorance which constrains me from mentioning the object of my search.”

The absence or opposite of a search is living in despair, yet the search has no goal because according to Binx, all Americans have already decided and none of them have the answer. His answer appears to be that one must search forever with no goal in sight other than to advance the search. The consequence of deciding on a goal or not searching at all is despair, and Binx does not want to be in despair. Although he is a moviegoer, he is confident that movies provide no answer. The main character abandons the search and lives happily ever after, but for Binx, the ending is despair. Percy repeats the use of moviegoing episodes and he encourages his readers to question Binx’s experiences in regard to his philosophy. Cavell’s theory of film as philosophy only helps to explain film’s proficiency at accomplishing the very task that Percy already assigns

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6 Ibid., 14.
it, which is to unsettle Binx’s convictions by re-presenting his own philosophy to him.

The search that Binx eventually abandons in *The Moviegoer* is not Binx’s first attempt at a search. His explanation of this prior scientific method of investigation helps to distinguish his current search, though the demise and shortcomings of the scientific search also prefigures the downfall of the more recent method. Binx labels the scientific method of inquiry a vertical search, and it ends – notably after a moviegoing episode – because it failed to stave off Binx’s despair:

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…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.7

The vertical search is terminated upon the premise that while its goals of understanding the universe in a scientific fashion have been reached, it failed to incorporate Binx in that realm of understanding. Binx’s self has been left out of the search, and this feeling of loss is definitively a feeling of despair. In a conversation with Kate after they see a movie together, the vertical search’s shortcoming as it relates to the self is differently phrased. The dangerous result of the vertical search is becoming “no one nowhere,”8 an individual with no place or meaning in the world. This loss of self that Binx associates with the vertical search is definitively important to his understanding of despair as it describes a feeling of despair that Binx labels

7 Ibid., 70.
8 Ibid., 83.
malaise. Malaise is the painful feeling of loss, and Binx’s loss of self due to the vertical search led him to abandon those methods in favor of another search, the one that defines the novel’s present narrative. This second search, what Binx calls the horizontal search, strives to reclaim the self. Malaise, however, as a symptom of failed searching, reappears forcibly as a result of Binx’s horizontal search.

The horizontal search is at once decidedly and purposefully different from the vertical search in its ambitions, although it is eerily similar in its shortcomings. The horizontal search seeks to define the self as someone, somewhere, which describes its appeal to Binx following his frustration with the vertical search. Binx explains the diametrically opposed horizontal search following his description of the vertical search’s shortcomings:

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.10

Binx aims to reverse the aim of the vertical search by looking for meaning in everydayness within his own wanderings, instead of looking for meaning in books, without serious wanderings. The searches are thus opposed, and Binx, in embarking upon a search that reclaims the self, gains confidence that he has found the right methods to avoid despair and find meaning. However, the episodes of despair and malaise that Binx encounters and describes during the novel result directly from the very methods that were supposed to avoid them. Instead of despair stemming from

9 Ibid., 120.
10 Ibid., 70.
Binx’s loss of self, despair results from the horizontal search’s inability to do exactly what the vertical search *did*, which was to make sense of the universe.

Binx applies the methods of the horizontal search – certification, repetition, and rotation – during moviegoing episodes where he achieves an understanding of who he is at a specific place and moment in time, which temporarily prevents malaise in the loss of self. Certification achieves an understanding of the self by using a signifier, like a movie and its setting, to make a place, like a neighborhood, real to Binx. Without certification, a person risks being any one anywhere, but with certification, Binx feels like a specific person in a place that truly exists. Repetition also achieves an understanding of the self, however it uses an experience in the past coupled with an almost identical experience in the present to nullify the elapsed time and everydayness between those experiences. The result is a clearer understanding that the self from the past is the same self from the present and that the everydayness in between must have been insignificant. Rotation effectively achieves the same sensation that repetition does, although it uses a future experience to nullify the supposed negativity of everydayness. A rotation occurs when a current experience leads Binx to anticipate a future positive or exciting experience, which comforts him that his current self will be the same self in the future. Through these exercises, Binx manages to retain an understanding of the significant self in past, present, and future moments in time. Deleuze’s argument about normal movements and the subordination of time is extremely relevant in understanding the dangers of certification, repetition, and rotation. Binx’s methods, which involve him *doing* something to subordinate and avoid everydayness and in
turn define the self, resemble Deleuzian normal movements that subordinate time and abstract the world. Deleuze claims that normal movements subordinate time because they cut up time into rational sequences. The alternative, abnormal movements do not make sense as moments on a rational timeline because, in essence, they are irrational. Normal movements were negated by the Holocaust when situations arose that did not make rational sense.¹¹

Certification, repetition, and rotation summon an altogether different type of malaise than the scientific researches of the vertical search, but the result is malaise and despair all the same. The alternative to knowing the universe albeit losing the self and being anyone anywhere, is knowing the self and becoming someone somewhere, yet losing the universe to abstraction. Certification, repetition, and rotation create for Binx a meaningful image of the self in the face of time and everydayness, however the malaise he experiences results from the loss of another entity, the universe that science helped him understand: “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.”¹² Binx believes each moviegoing episode to be a success in avoiding the malaise of losing the self, yet despair strikes after each event because he has lost any connections to his world. Percy purposefully couples the events of certification, repetition, and rotation with moments of despair to show that Binx’s search is misguided.

¹¹ See Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 2: The Time Image, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1989), or see the chapter in this thesis title Percy and Deleuze.
¹² Percy, The Moviegoer, 120.
Binx: Poor Moviegoer

The title of Walker Percy's novel is *The Moviegoer*, and Binx’s character is largely defined by the moviegoing events in the story. Four such moviegoing events take place within the one-week story, and Percy uses the first three events to classify Binx as a poor moviegoer. Each moviegoing episode embodies Binx’s philosophy of the search and despair and everydayness. He maintains at the outset of the story that movies are examples of the search in action, but each movie ends in the abandonment of the search and thus ends in despair. However, the conclusion of Binx’s own story shows that freedom from the search does not necessarily result in despair. Instead, the abandonment of the search is necessary to inhabit the world and not merely view it through observation and abstraction. Further, moviegoing events provide Binx with opportunities to see the shortcomings of his own philosophy. Cavell’s theory of film as philosophy helps to clarify Percy’s use of moviegoing as philosophical mirror for Binx. A poor moviegoer, on the most elementary level, is unable to see the movies as they represent his or her philosophy. Binx refuses to allow that the movies he sees involve him in any conversation about his own search.

Binx’s failure to see his philosophy questioned in the movies is largely due to his overconfidence about the ability of his methods of moviegoing to solidify his identity in place and time. Binx deploys the methods of certification, repetition, and rotation to root the self in experience. Temporarily, those methods effectively achieve for Binx what he desires, which is to subordinate the presence of
everydayness long enough to give meaning to the self. His shortsightedness, his bad moviegoing, is rather defined by his inability to recognize that his methods, despite their short-term success, do not eliminate despair from his life. The methods themselves are the harbingers of despair in that they abstract the world – cutting up time and everydayness into Deleuzian normal movements. Eventually, Binx will realize the reality and imminence of everydayness, and his consequent acceptance of that fact – even though acceptance remains quite difficult for Binx – leads to the death of his search and the birth of the good moviegoer.

The novel’s very first moviegoing event is a trip to a theater on Tchoupitoulas Street in New Orleans with Kate Cutrer to see a movie called *Panic in the Streets*, to which Binx applies the method of certification. Binx cares deeply about her cousin Kate is a depressive so he takes her to see *Panic in the Streets* so she can avoid seeing her current fiancée Walter Wade in a Mardi Gras parade. Binx is pleased with the movie because it was shot in New Orleans, and there is a scene in the film that shows the exact neighborhood of the theater on Tchoupitoulas Street, and the film therefore completes a 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.¹³

The certification makes the individual a meaningful self, a someone somewhere. It is strange that a person requires a movie to lend meaning to his or her neighborhood, but Binx is convinced of the usefulness of certification to his search. The success of

¹³ Ibid., 63.
the certification instills confidence in Binx, confidence that spills over into his relationship with his fellow moviegoer for the moment, Kate. She is familiar with Binx’s methods and acknowledges the certification herself, however she does not share the satisfying effect the certification has on Binx. The search is self-centered, and his observation of Kate’s reaction upon leaving the theater shows that while the certification helps him to reclaim the self, he loses his connection to Kate.

Binx includes Kate in his moviegoing because he desires a connection with her; however, because of his obsession with the methods of the search, he overlooks the certification’s role in distancing Kate. Binx brings Kate to the theater to help her avoid her fiancé. He knows Kate is struggling to deal with her own despair, and he wants to help her. However, the search, and the certification, do not improve Kate’s mood, and Binx’s confidence from the success of the certification lead him to blame her:

She sounds better but she is not. She is trapping herself, this time by being my buddy, best of all buddies and most privy to my little researches…. In her long nightmare, this our old friendship now itself falls victim to the grisly transmogrification by which she unfailingly turns everything she touches to horror. 14

The malaise in Binx, the temporary loss of his friendship to Kate, is plain for the reader to see. Binx is completely unaware of the true cause of Kate’s despair, and he blames it on her nature, “the grisly transmogrification by which she failingly turns everything she touches to horror.” The truth is that Kate’s playing along in his search has trapped her, but Binx thinks that Kate has trapped herself in Binx’s search. Binx is acutely aware of Kate’s sullen disposition, and he knows that their

14 Ibid., 63.
relationship has suffered a loss, yet it never occurs to Binx that his search is the cause. This being the very opening of Binx's movie, the first real exposure for the audience, the reader, to Binx's search, Percy lets Binx's overconfidence win out over his malaise, at least in Binx's own mind. The reader has not yet become familiar with Binx's idea of malaise, and may think nothing of the exchange between Kate and Binx, even accepting Binx's analysis of the situation perhaps. However, this movie, like all the other movies, clearly provides Binx a chance to investigate his search, to ask if certification completely staves off despair. At this stage, Percy makes Binx so blinded by his satisfaction in the search's methods that he fails to recognize the malaise of losing his friendship with Kate. Kate is part of the neighborhood that Binx says is certified – she even sits next to him in the theater where the certification happens – but he has no better understanding of his relationship to her than he did before the certification. Binx is temporarily above everydayness in that the certification has chopped the present moment up into an instant in which his self is defined. Meanwhile, his fellow moviegoer and his motivation for even going to see the movie, Kate, remains estranged. His failure is a failure to recognize what is going on around him, despite the relation of certification to his physical surroundings.

The next moviegoing episode embodies the repetition method, another key element of the search. Binx is once again pleased in his methods that he believes avoid despair, when in fact those very methods come to define it. Binx describes repetition as it relates to past and current experiences and the subsequent nullification of the elapsed time: "A repetition is 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 adulteration of events that clog time like peanuts in brittle.”15 This repetition involves a nameless western at a movie theater on Freret Street, a theater that Binx had been to fourteen years prior to see another western, the latter named *The Oxbow Incident*. Binx relates nothing about the films themselves, instead relying on the films’ genre, and the specific time of year of each screening, the specific theater, even the specific seat in the theater, to compare them. When the movie finishes, Binx thinks simply, “Nothing had changed. 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. A successful repetition.”16 First off, his notion that nothing in the world had changed is absurd; Binx’s own life changed drastically when he fought in the Korean War and almost died. Percy openly plants doubt about Binx’s confidence in the reader’s mind through the narration. The phenomenon itself, however, is satisfying to Binx because it renews the old viewing of *The Oxbow Incident* and it aligns the second viewing of the nameless western with the horizontal search. Binx’s self is not lost, but squarely situated in two precise moments in time and place, the two movies that constitute the repetition and the very theater in which they were seen. As with certification, repetition gives Binx a strong sense of self, and that alone makes the experience a success in terms of his horizontal search.

The event and method satisfy Binx, but the repetition experience nonetheless portrays Binx as an unreliable narrator whose confidence appears strongly misplaced. Binx is confident that his methods ward off despair when in fact they

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15 Ibid., 79-80.
16 Ibid., 79.
define it. Kate’s presence at the movie theater is important because of her depressive state, of which Binx is well aware. After the film, Binx and Kate wander to one of Binx’s favorite spots behind his old laboratory, and Kate tries to ask Binx about the repetition and the search. Binx responds in thought to Kate’s questions about the search: “I do not answer. She can only believe I am serious in her own fashion of being serious: as an antic sort of seriousness, which is not seriousness at all but despair masquerading as seriousness.”\(^{17}\) He does not want to answer her because he thinks that she will misunderstand his “seriousness,” or his search, for what he terms later on as a cultivated eccentricity, as if his seriousness was in fact just a very bizarre way of living out his everydayness or despair. Kate’s questions taint Binx’s search in the sense that her questions force him to think of himself and his actions from another perspective. Binx is confronted with doubt about his reliability as a narrator. After Kate presses him for answers he muses in parenthesis about how his search resembles an acquaintance of Kate’s who used to go around town collecting iron deer: “Am I irritable because, now that she mentions it, I do for a fact sound like Bobo and her goddamn iron deer?”\(^{18}\) Binx is afraid that his seriousness may in fact be a cultivated eccentricity, a masquerade for the condition he and Kate both share. Kate questions Binx’s methods, which annoys Binx who believes in the brilliance of the methods to avoid despair. Yet, Binx seems worried that his methods are indeed misguided and do not avoid despair. The opportunity arises for Binx to recognize the failure of repetition, but he ventures no further into his doubt.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 82.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 82.
Unlike after the first moviegoing episode when Binx fails to recognize the despair in the situation, after the repetition he becomes slightly more aware of the possibility that his search incites despair. Besides Kate making him feel childish or eccentric about the bizarreness of the search, Binx struggles with the shortcomings of the repetition on his own terms. The repetition avoids everydayness and despair by isolating two moments in time and it brings Binx the sensation that nothing changed between those two moments. While he reclaims the self through repetition, he momentarily struggles with how the repetition helps him to comprehend the continued existence of the theater and the theater seats:

How, then, tasted my own fourteen years since *The Oxbow Incident*? As usual it eluded me. There was this: a mockery about the old seats, their plywood split, their bottoms slashed, but enduring nevertheless as if they had waited to see what I had done with my fourteen years. There was this also: a secret sense of wonder about the enduring, about all the nights, the rainy summer nights at twelve and one and two o’clock when the seats endured alone in the empty theater. The enduring is something which must be accounted for. One cannot simply shrug it off.\(^{19}\)

Percy introduces this concept of enduring to make Binx look shortsighted in his method. The success of the repetition was in its isolation of time that lends meaning to Binx’s concept of self, which aligns it with the horizontal search. The events of the fourteen years between the two westerns are rendered irrelevant, preventing malaise in the form of loss of self because it places Binx in two distinct moments in time, once in the past and once in the future. The failure of the repetition is that instead of accounting for the seats in the movie theater that have endured like Binx has over the fourteen years, the repetition abstracts them, casts them into the “yard of smooth peanut brittle.” The seats have aged since he first sat in them, but the

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 80.
repetition obscures the events that caused their plywood to crack and their bottoms to be slashed. As Binx’s confidence erodes over the successfulness of his methods, the inherent malaise of losing the world – not being able to account for the enduring of the theater seats – becomes more and more imminent.

Binx is a poor moviegoer in the sense that he is an unreliable narrator, meaning simply that he cannot be trusted about the success of his methods in preventing malaise. As a result of the certification and repetition, Binx’s inability to make sense of the world and the people around him – despite his ability to make sense of his self – brings him close to realizing his despair, but he manages to remain unaware of the malaise. Binx’s unawareness should not, however, be mistaken for success in avoiding despair. He is still a poor moviegoer in the sense that movies only confirm his methods – certification, repetition – rather than put them into question. At this point in the novel he is too confident in his methods for his narration to reflect his despair.

Percy, however, uses moviegoing as a device to supersede and undermine Binx’s narration and unveil him as the poor moviegoer who cannot learn from the movies in front of him. Stanley Cavell’s film theory provides an excellent lens through which to view Percy’s use of movies as philosophical reflectors for Binx, a character who cannot see the movies properly. In the books, The Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage and The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film, Cavell argues that films be viewed as philosophical arguments. Cavell’s interest in and understanding of cinema arises from his concern with the skeptical dilemma as it is encapsulated in movies: “Film is a moving image
of skepticism: not only is there a reasonable possibility, it is a fact that there our
normal senses are satisfied of reality while reality does not exist – even, alarmingly,
because it does not exist, because viewing it is all it takes.”

Movies present the reality of the world in a way that humans can perceive it, yet the world is not fully accessible, and one’s perception of reality in a movie is therefore doubtful. The same dilemma exists in the world outside of movies, but Cavell argues that movies are unique in their presentation of the skeptical dilemma. Film is a moving image of skepticism because it does not bridge the gap between knowledge of the real and skepticism. Thus, it is wrong to assume that there is no reality in the image on screen; but it is equally wrong to assume that reality does exist completely on screen because the world off-screen remains unavailable.

The philosophical problem of cinema, for Cavell, is that of skepticism and knowledge. Because film provides both knowledge of reality and an awareness of the limits of knowledge, Cavell holds that the viewer can learn about his or her own condition of perception. The skepticism in film is overcome in that even in a world that does not exist, one can perceive of a possible other: the subject on screen. Cavell terms the overcoming of this barrier between what is reality and what one can know as acknowledgment. Thus, the moviegoer’s skepticism and detachment from the world is overcome when he or she acknowledges the overcoming of skepticism inherent in cinema; and in overcoming skepticism by acknowledging that skepticism

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can be overcome, a moviegoer can reconnect to the world and acknowledge the other.

Binx’s reluctance to associate the malaise of losing his connection to Kate and his failure to understand the enduring of the movie theater with his repetition can be seen as a resistance of this Cavellian acknowledgment. Binx is a poor moviegoer because he fails to see his perceptual condition – what he calls the search – questioned in the movies. He sees that the characters in films mirror his perceptual condition as they are onto the search, and so is he. Binx fails to acknowledge that when those characters inevitably abandon the search at the end of the film and settle down, they overcome his condition. He sees the abandonment of the search as a reversion because of his confidence in his philosophy, but his confidence marks him as a poor moviegoer in a Cavellian sense. Binx remains undisturbed by the movie conversions he sees, even though he admits that the character inevitably inhabits the world of the movie. When Binx fails to connect with his own world after the repetition, he ignores the reality of the conversions he witnessed. The movie is evidence that the search does not end in despair, but Binx ignores the signs in the movie, as well as in his own losses: of any connection to Kate and knowledge about the enduring of the theater.

Percy advances Binx’s progression as an unreliable narrator and misguided searcher in a third moviegoing event, one that Binx labels a rotation. The rotation, much like the certification and the repetition, makes Binx happy because he believes it signifies the self. Rotation does the opposite of a repetition by anticipating a future experience relative to the present instead of a past one: “A rotation I define as the
experiencing of the new beyond the expectation of the experiencing of the new.”

The rotation therefore solidifies and lends meaning to the future self by eliminating future everydayness through anticipation of a new, satisfying experience. Binx still refuses to associate the resultant despair and malaise with the actual moviegoing event, nor does he abandon his search. However, unlike in his reaction to the prior two events, Binx is so disabled and shaken by his feelings of malaise after the rotation that he admits that his search has brought him no closer to avoiding despair and everydayness than he was the day he conceived of the search during the Korean War.

As part of Binx’s quasi-romantic pursuit of his secretary, Sharon Kincaid, he sets out with her for the Gulf Coast and his mother’s fishing camp. Binx and Sharon arrive at the fishing camp only to find that his mother and her new family, the Smiths, are already settled on vacation. Lonnie, Binx’s half-brother, is restricted to a wheelchair as a result of an unknown sickness, and his religiosity and his moviegoing make him Binx’s favorite of the Smith clan. Binx says about Lonnie, “Like me, he is a moviegoer. He will go see anything.” In reaction to Lonnie’s disappointment over potentially missing the showing of the movie Fort Dobbs at the Moonlite Drive-In, Binx intervenes with an offer to take Lonnie, the rest of the Smith children, and Sharon to the movie. Binx describes the setting, the atmosphere of the theater, the seating arrangements, the dark night surrounding him and his company. The film’s plot, however, is unimportant to the rotation just as the unnamed western was during the repetition. Instead, Lonnie’s reaction juxtaposed with Sharon’s is

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22 Percy, The Moviegoer, 144.
23 Ibid., 137.
what interests Binx and ultimately what prompts the rotation phenomenon. Binx summarizes the rotation through Lonnie’s and Sharon’s separate reactions to Fort Dobbs:

A good night: Lonnie happy (he looks around at me with the liveliest sense of the secret between us; the secret is that Sharon is not and never will be onto the little touches we see in the movie and, in the seeing, know that the other sees...), this ghost of a theater, a warm Southern night, the Western Desert and this fine big sweet piece, Sharon.24

The drive-in movie theater and the movie itself, Fort Dobbs, represent the part of the rotation that Binx would call the expected experiencing of the new, or in other words, the ordinary new. As a result of the plainly new moviegoing experience, Binx comes upon a rotation because of the reactions of Sharon and then Lonnie. During the movie, Binx judges that Sharon is happy because she is impressed with him, with his kindness and unselfishness towards Lonnie, and to Binx it indicates that she is ready to “put out.”25 Binx, as part of his life in Gentilly, has had what he calls “love affairs”26 with all of his secretaries, Marcia, Linda, and now Sharon. The relationships always end before they come to fruition, and the way that Binx groups them all into one category is one more instance of his unreliability and absurdity as a narrator. Binx’s methods categorize events or time, and so here too he categorizes and labels and objectifies women. This sense of objectification parallels what his methods do to everyday experience. He does, however, hold that before each relationship ends, his time with each girl gives him immeasurable happiness, and they are therefore part of the search: “They started off as love affairs anyway, fine

24 Ibid., 143.
25 Ibid., 143.
26 Ibid., 8.
careless raptures in which Marcia or Linda (but not yet Sharon) and I would go spinning along the Gulf Coast, lie embracing in a deserted cove of Ship Island, and hardly believe our good fortune, hardly believe that the world could contain such happiness."27 Therefore, the prospect of his relationship with Sharon advancing past flirtation is the first part of the rotation, a simple unexpected experiencing of the new beyond the ordinary newness of the theater. The rotation begins to distract Binx from the future banality of everydayness in the hope that soon he and Sharon will have satisfying, meaningful relations.

To clarify the effect of the rotation, Binx explains the dichotomy between expected and unexpected newness. “For example, taking one’s first trip to Taxco would not be a rotation, or no more than a very ordinary rotation; but getting lost on the way and discovering a hidden valley would be.”28 For the movies, Binx thinks rotation is a new, foreign moviegoing experience that creates a further expansion of the search by signifying or enabling another avenue of the search. Rotation expands Sharon’s role in Binx’s search as the next girl in a string of secretary love affairs because of an earlier part of the rotation, when Binx unexpectedly appears unselfish by bringing the crippled Lonnie to the movie. The original rotation is going to see *Fort Dobbs* at the Drive-In – the expected new experience. He expected the event to make Lonnie happy, but he did not expect to make Sharon happy.

More importantly, rotation is the most concrete example of how Binx misunderstands the movies’ impact on his philosophy. The same way a moviegoing rotation points Binx towards a future part of his search, movies, according to the

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27 Ibid., 8.
28 Ibid., 144.
Cavellian theory, engage Binx in a conversation about his search and despair. If all movies end in despair, then should a moviegoing rotation not indicate to Binx that his search would also end in despair? Binx’s confidence in his search allows him to use the rotatory emotion to anticipate the future successes of his search in abating despair, but his confidence is misplaced because just like it does in the movies, the search always leads to despair, or in the least, the abandonment of the search.

Binx’s happiness at the discovery and experience of the rotation is unmistakable. The moment is full of potential meaning for his idea of the self and it brings into focus his earlier musings on malaise and his confidence about the success of rotatory experience. Insofar as the drive-in movie and his stay at the fishing camp is the culmination of his vacation trip with Sharon to the Gulf, the final rotation brought on by *Fort Dobbs* is the culmination of a weekend-long rotation enacted by Binx with his secretary. On their way to the camp, Binx muses about the trip: “It was nevertheless with some apprehension that I set out with Sharon...Either very great happiness lay in store for us, or malaise past all conceiving.”29 His apprehension of the malaise is his motivation for the voyage, and the alternative to the malaise can only be happiness, according to Binx. The hope of rotation, of discovering something new, weighs on Binx’s mind, and it is not enough that Sharon is new, or the movie and movie theater are new. There must be something new beyond the expectation of the new. Yet if the rotation does occur (and Binx assures the reader that if it does, malaise will abate), is there still a possibility of despair?

29 Ibid., 124.
According to the trend in the moviegoing experiences, the reader can expect that an instance of despair cannot be far off for Binx.

Much like after the repetitive event with Kate when doubt occupies Binx’s mind about his search and casts uncertainty over his confidence in the repetition as satisfying experience, Binx awakes the morning after *Fort Dobbs* and the drive-in aware of the possibility of his current despair. The difference from the repetition, however, is that instead of Binx’s mind being occupied by questions about his search and malaise, this time his whole person is paralyzed by “the grip of everydayness.” In one of the most severe bouts of despair and anxiety over everydayness and his search, Binx awakens in the middle of the night after the rotation:

> But, good as it is, my old place is used up... and when I awake, I awake in the grip of everydayness. Everydayness is the enemy. No search is possible. Perhaps there was a time when everydayness was not too strong and one could break its grip by brute strength. Now nothing breaks it – but disaster. Only once in my life was the grip of everydayness broken: when I lay bleeding in a ditch.30

Binx’s happiness from the rotations of the movie theater, Sharon, and Lonnie does not last through the night. Percy shows that a focus on rotation is misguided because it is a method to avoid despair. The everydayness that the rotation tries to avoid is inevitable. Percy continuously provides Binx with opportunities to question his methods, but Binx ignores any connection between the movies and his life, so each movie leads him straight into despair. Binx finally becomes aware of his despair, but he remains unaware of its relation to moviegoing. Binx has a successful rotation, the second best of his life,31 yet he thinks to himself that he has only broken

\[30\] Ibid, 145.

\[31\] Ibid, 144.
the grip of everydayness once ever when he was shot in the Korean War and lay bleeding to death. His confident claims about the success of his methods are severely suspicious. This revelation further indicates that Binx recognizes the future death of his search from being overwhelmed by everydayness.

The actual drive-in movie does not cause Binx's breakdown the next morning. No other character is revealed to have a mental break the next day, and Binx does not reference *Fort Dobbs* during his crisis of everydayness. The juxtaposition of the two scenes, however, is Percy's capstone in creating an unreliable narrator, and undermining Binx's search through the device of his moviegoing. The movie, no matter what the plot, is a philosophical background against which Binx can consciously and unconsciously apply his philosophy of the search. His methods should avoid despair, but they produce despair. Binx enters a moviegoing event such as *Fort Dobbs* at the Moonlite with the expectation that: First, the movie, like all movies, will be onto the search but will end in despair and everydayness. Second, whether it is certification, repetition, or rotation, the moviegoing experience represents a consciously chosen or pursued facet of Binx's horizontal search, the nature of which is to wander seriously, to observe the things around him, avoid despair, everydayness, and malaise, and to not lose the self. His first assumption represents Binx's view that the movies are all onto the search, but not being onto the search is despair. He sees this philosophy in every movie, and therefore every movie engages him in a conversation about that philosophy. The second expectation that Binx brings to the moviegoing experience is much more troublesome because it has been proven, over the course of the first three movies in *The Moviegoer*, to be
false. The horizontal search does not prevent despair; on the contrary, the certification, repetition, and rotation have all led Binx directly to varying degrees of despair, malaise and everydayness. Binx refuses to accept this conclusion, or rather Percy prevents his protagonist from being able to see the truth about the horizontal search, - that it is in vain.

Binx’s task is to learn something about his philosophy of the search and despair from the movies he sees. Binx is not stupid; Percy’s writing indicates that Binx is beyond proficient in his faculties for thought, and Binx is a successful stockbroker. He is, however, stubbornly obsessed with his search. In the first moviegoing episode, the certification, his confidence in the search allows almost no room for doubt. Clearly, his failure to connect with Kate is a sign of malaise, as she is lost to him. Instead of reflecting on his philosophy, he dismisses the disconnection with Kate as her own fault. Further along, in the second moviegoing episode that he calls a repetition, Binx’s doubts about his search bubble to the surface, first as a result of the enduring of the movie theater chairs and then as a result of Kate’s goading, yet in the end, he dismisses his doubts in favor of “I don’t know,” and again, scapegoating Kate. Finally, the rotation is so successful in the third moviegoing event that Binx has no doubts about his philosophy. In fact, the nature of the rotation replaces reflection and doubt with more confidence and anticipation about the search. The morning after the rotation, not only is Binx’s mind encircled by doubt– he dismisses all possibility that the search has ever been successful in abating despair – but his body is physically locked in a position of rigidity due to his
despair. In short, Binx does not learn to heed Cavell’s advice; his assuredness in his methods prevents him from learning from the movies.

Binx’s philosophy, that the search and despair are mutually exclusive, is flawed because the search leads to despair in both the movies and Binx’s life. The conclusion, which leads Binx to his conversion at the end of the book and the abandonment of his search, is that while the search may end in the movies, the consequence is not necessarily despair. After these three initial episodes, Binx cannot, or refuses to see that there is an alternative to both the vertical search and the horizontal search. Yet, if the vertical search leads to despair because the self is lost, and the horizontal search clearly leads to despair because the world, the objects and the people in it, are lost, then neither is the correct path out of despair. As Binx’s own search comes to a close, he realizes that if both the vertical search and horizontal search fail him, there must be an alternative where one loses neither the self nor the world. The fact is, the movies have been showing Binx all along that the alternative is too abandon the search and settle down “with a vengeance,” even if that means living in everydayness.

The Abandonment of the Search and the Conversion

Percy juxtaposes one final moviegoing episode with the previous three events in the novel in order to mark the culmination of Binx’s search as it is facilitated by the moviegoing methods of avoidance. Percy marks the steps of Binx’s conversion by his character’s confrontations with and acknowledgments of

32 Ibid., 13.
everydayness upon taking leave of New Orleans for Chicago. The final moviegoing event, which takes place with Kate in Chicago, signifies the defeat of Binx’s philosophy that the movies provide pleasure and that the abandonment of the search in the movies necessitates despair. He acknowledges the foreboding potential of the movie theater to destroy his previously held notions about the movies and he realizes and accepts the immediacy of the malaise that follows the event. While Binx’s conversion is not formed or realized in the final moviegoing episode, he recognizes the striking evidence of the failure of his search to prevent despair and malaise that the movies have always provided. Percy moves Binx through the familiar territory of moviegoing to show that Binx has changed; Binx can no longer pretend that the movies provide him satisfaction and reaffirm his convictions that the lack of a search equals despair. Binx is left with a movie that discredits his philosophy and the uncomforting reality of his own despair and malaise.

Percy creates a moviegoing scenario that resembles the earlier ones in form, although Binx’s reaction to the elements of the theater – the movie itself, Kate’s company, and the resultant malaise – contrasts altogether with his responses to the earlier moviegoing accounts. Upon entering the movie theater, Binx is taken by the theater’s foreboding scenery:

Back to the Loop where we dive into the mother and Urwomb of all moviehouses – an Aztec mortuary of funeral urns and glyphs, thronged with the spirit-presences of another day, William Powell and George Brent and Patsy Kelly and Charley Chase, the best friends of my childhood – and see a movie called *The Young Philadelphians*. Kate holds my hand tightly in the dark.33

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33 Ibid., 211.
Although prior to this event Binx found comfort in the physical spaces of the theaters in New Orleans, the theater as a space in Chicago unsettles him. Space and setting had significance in certification, repetition, and rotation, however the setting of the Chicago theater leads Binx to imagine the dead spirits of his beloved movie actors. For the first time Binx attributes death and despair with the physical experience of a movie, whereas before despair was only a product of the abandonment of the search within the movie.

Binx’s assumption that all movies are onto the search, yet unequivocally end in despair when the main character abandons the search vanishes from his description of *The Young Philadelphians*. He does not pass judgment, positive or negative, on Paul Newman’s character’s transition in the film, but his mention of the conversion is revealing of the change in Binx’s observations: “Paul Newman is an idealistic young fellow who is disillusioned and becomes cynical and calculating. But in the end he recovers his ideals.” Binx’s description of Newman’s life is eerily similar to his own life, yet he withholds any prescription of despair or death for Newman’s character that “recovers his ideals.” Newman’s ghost does not join Binx’s other idols as their dead spirits float around the theater, nor does Binx complain about the silliness of the film or its despair. His lack of negative commentary, while it does not affirm Binx’s conversion into a good moviegoer, still indicates Binx’s definitive openness to the story’s conclusion. He may not have decided upon an explicitly positive judgment of the plot and Newman’s character, but his lack of negativity and judgment is a sign of his progress as a moviegoer.

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34 Ibid., 211.
Percy’s inclusion of Kate in the Chicago moviegoing episode is representative of the continuity between all of the moviegoing episodes, however Binx’s thoughts about his relationship to Kate following this final moviegoing event are atypical for Binx, the poor moviegoer. Kate’s post-movie depression previously led Binx to disassociate any feeling of malaise about his connection to Kate with the moviegoing event itself. However, Percy marks the change in Binx’s awareness of his surroundings through Binx’s acknowledgment of the movie’s negative effect on his relationship to Kate: “Outside, a new note of has crept into the wind, a black williwaw sound straight from the terrible wastes to the north. ‘Oh oh oh,’ wails Kate as we creep home to the hotel, sunk into ourselves and with no stomach even for hand-holding. ‘Something is going to happen.’”\(^{35}\) Certification makes Binx a completely unaware and drastically poor moviegoer who blames the momentary disintegration of his relationship to Kate on her mood and her despairing nature. Structurally, Binx’s account of the Chicago moviegoing event resembles the certification event, beginning with a description of the moviegoing event and following with Binx’s reaction as it involves Kate. During the viewing of *The Young Philadelphians*, Binx and Kate hold hands tightly in the dark; afterwards, they cannot continue the physical embrace. Kate voices the malaise as she wails about premonitions of future events, but, more importantly, Binx succinctly and effectively acknowledges the malaise. His *transition* is far from complete because he still fails to fuse his self with a relationship to Kate; yet, upon the abandonment of the search and those methods of distraction such as certification, he can now *see* and

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 211.
understand that his failure is his own malaise, as he thinks to himself, “...we creep home to the hotel, sunk into ourselves.” He loses his bond with Kate as he always does when they see a movie together; however, when he is unimpeded and undistracted by the search, Binx can recognize that the loss is a feeling of malaise of his own. In Binx’s dissatisfaction with the moviegoing experience, Percy shows that the lack or absence of the search frees Binx to be a better moviegoer – better fit to observe his own life as he sees Paul Newman’s in The Young Philadelphians.

The continuity of the moviegoing episodes allows Percy to give Binx and the reader alike a familiar backdrop against which to judge Binx’s receptiveness and reactions to the movies he experiences. The final moviegoing event, then, represents a change in Binx’s attitude and awareness in a setting that accords with the earlier scenarios of the novel. Binx’s change in attitude allows him to observe his own life with a different sentimentality, much the same way Paul Newman’s character was disillusioned but manages to reclaim his ideals. Percy chooses Chicago as the location for the final moviegoing event where Binx’s attitude regarding movies changes because Chicago is not New Orleans. In fact, Percy uses the train ride Binx takes from New Orleans to Chicago to literally displace Binx and physically remove him from his search and thus force the abandonment of the search. Binx does not rely on the search in the final moviegoing event because he is physically incapable of continuing the search outside of New Orleans.

The search is spatially located specifically in New Orleans, the suburbs and neighborhoods of New Orleans that Binx wanders, and his mother’s fishing camp and the Gulf Coast. When Uncle Jules, Kate’s father and Binx’s boss, tells Binx that he
is to go to Chicago for a stock-brokers conference, Binx reacts in fear and anxiousness: “Oh sons of all bitches and great beast of Chicago lying in wait. There goes my life in Gentilly, my Little Way, my secret existence among the happy shades in Elysian Fields.”\(^{36}\) Binx’s fear of traveling to Chicago is especially revealing of one limitation of his search. His “Little Way,” his search, is tied to the place of New Orleans, and displacement, traveling to Chicago, is detrimental to the search. Binx believes that a searcher always starts in a foreign or strange place, but he never indicates that a searcher can *leave* that place. Binx knows that, because he can leave his strange island and come back, he is not truly in exile. Binx calls himself a castaway that has awoken on a strange island.\(^{37}\) Binx is right to fear that leaving New Orleans will destroy his exile and his search, yet he truly fears being unarmed when he is confronted by everydayness:

> Me, it is my fortune and misfortune to know how...if a man travels lightly to a hundred strange cities and cares nothing for the risk he takes, he may find himself No one and Nowhere...What will it mean to go moseying down Michigan Avenue in the neighborhood of five million strangers, each shooting out his own personal ray? How can I deal with five million personal rays?\(^{38}\)

Binx is gripped by the fear of going to Chicago and becoming no one anywhere and he is reminded of the convictions of his horizontal search. The goal of the horizontal search is to acquire a meaningful ideal of the self, yet the prospect of being surrounded by five million unaccounted for strangers in Chicago seriously jeopardizes Binx’s ideals. The millions of strangers in New Orleans can be accounted for as they become abstracted by the localized methods of the search. Binx treats his

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 99.  
\(^{37}\) Ibid., 13.  
\(^{38}\) Ibid., 99.
own family members like strangers. Aunt Emily takes special issue with Binx’s estrangement and he will have to deal with her expectations and frustrations when he returns from Chicago. Binx thinks he avoids the everydayness of New Orleans and its people as certification, repetition, and rotation obscure the world and focus on himself in his own exile. Percy has already shown that Binx is mistaken and despair exists in his life in New Orleans, yet Binx has remained convinced of the success of his search in warding off everydayness. Except for the one time Binx is stricken by a rare moment of clarity at his mother’s fishing camp, he is confident that he is someone somewhere; as long as he is in New Orleans, he is confident that he is in exile on a strange island, free to wander about because he thinks he knows his situation. The trip to Chicago breaks Binx’s illusion in that it confronts him with everydayness that he cannot account for using the established methods of his search. Recognition of his disillusionment is integral to Binx’s ability to embrace everydayness by inhabiting the strange island on which he was previously exiled, and so become the good moviegoer. He is still an observer and in that sense, is still a stranger, a wanderer, but he is no longer exiled in his strangeness.

Binx’s fears about leaving New Orleans are validated immediately upon boarding the train to Chicago with Kate, who spontaneously decides to accompany him. The horizontal search seeks to solidify the self in time and place, to resist the malaise from the loss of self forced by the vertical search, by wandering and observing and ignoring the everydayness of the universe. Upon entering the train, Binx calls upon the familiar feeling of loss and puzzlement from the repetition of the moviegoing event on Freret Street: “the last ten years of my life take on the shadowy
aspect of a sojourn between train rides." This sensation of the repetition incites a familiar awareness of doubt in Binx about the meaning of his life over the last ten years during his exile in Gentilly. The immediacy with which Percy calls into question the search is a foreboding indicator of the effect the train has on Binx. It has not yet left the station, but just the physical space of the train has begun to haunt Binx over the ineffectiveness of his search back home. He searches, but finds no meaning for his own life after ten years.

As the train pulls away from New Orleans, Binx and Kate make their way to the aptly named observation car, where Binx literally observes the people inside the train and the world passing by outside the window. The train incites a profound change in the way Binx observes the things around him, although instead of fear, the change evokes his excitement. Notably, Binx develops a keen interest in watching the passing landscapes as they go by, as well as his businessman neighbor who is reading a copy of a newspaper. Binx’s excitement in the observation car peaks upon his discovery of a unique phenomenon of observation. He observes everything around him, every particle of everydayness, yet at this moment on the train everything has meaning and significance:

As the train rocks along on its unique voyage through space-time, thousands of tiny thing-events bombard us like cosmic particles. Lying in a ditch outside is a scrap of newspaper with the date May 3, 1954. My Geiger counter clicks away like a teletype. But no one else seems to notice. Everyone is buried in his magazine. Kate is shaking like a leaf because she longs to be an anyone who is anywhere and she cannot.40

39 Ibid., 184.
40 Ibid., 190.
Having abandoned the vertical search of science years ago, Binx’s scientifically tinged description of this encounter with everydayness in the observation car is a shock. The abstraction of the universe was an acceptable consequence for Binx upon the abandonment of the vertical search of science for the horizontal search of serious wandering. Meanwhile, sitting in the observation car of a train that initially frightened him, Binx absorbs the “thing-events” of the universe with a sharp degree of specificity. Although the train is moving at speed, Binx perceives the date of a newspaper clipping lying outside in a ditch, which is an almost unfathomable feat. He accounts for the multitude of events that are occurring simultaneously around him as if they are scientific particles that can be counted with a scientific instrument like a “Geiger counter.” Furthermore, although he has identified other people currently awake in the observation car, Binx claims that nobody but he notices the immediacy of everydayness. He still maintains the exclusivity of a searcher, although not in the horizontal sense of the search because he can account for the universe around him. Binx juxtaposes his comfort and excitement with Kate’s physical affliction due to her inability “to be an anyone who is anywhere,” in the exact same circumstances. Are we to understand that Binx has taken account of a multitude of unintelligible occurrences, yet feels like someone, somewhere?

As Binx drifts in and out of consciousness due to a sleep-deprived state, Percy gives the reader a glimpse of the almost perfect marriage between the horizontal and vertical searches, where neither the world nor the self is left.

41 Ibid., 189-190. Moments before describing this phenomenon of observation, Binx recounts a hallucination about an old couple methodically experimenting with fornication and foreplay as research for their book on marriage called, Technique in Marriage.
unaccounted. This passage hints at what it means to be the good moviegoer, an observer who takes notice of everydayness as it confronts him or her, yet retains a meaningful notion of the self. There is no pain of loss, no malaise, and therefore no despair. The train, however, remains in constant movement, and so Binx is refused the opportunity to settle down and inhabit the world of everydayness. Percy allows Binx a glimpse at the union between vertical and horizontal search because it is simply that, a fleeting glimpse; Binx cannot live on a train, he must return to New Orleans to become a good moviegoer.

Binx will not become a good moviegoer until he settles down in New Orleans, comes to terms with his Aunt Emily, and marries Kate because a good moviegoer must inhabit the everydayness that he or she observes. He cannot remain a detached or exiled stranger to those he cares about; he must attach himself into the world. Keen observation does not suffice without action to become a good moviegoer. Indeed, as the train approaches Chicago, Binx loses any satisfaction that he garners in the observation car when Percy puts him and Kate together in the intimate environment of Binx’s room. He and Kate, after a lengthy talk about the possibility of marrying, attempt to make love. Binx describes the attempt as a dramatic failure in an apostrophe, a monologue directly addressed to the movie star Rory Calhoun:

No Rory...We did very badly and almost did not do at all...The burden was too great and flesh poor flesh, neither hallowed by sacrament nor despised by spirit...but until this moment seen through and canceled, rendered null and void 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.42

42 Ibid., 200.
Binx’s failed attempt at intimacy with Kate is Percy’s final signal during the train ride that Binx’s search has been left behind in New Orleans. Binx and Kate face a dilemma on the train that culminates in their inability to have relations, which is a conflict of malaise. Binx’s desire to have sex with Kate stems from his fears of becoming anyone, anywhere, thus he relies on his memories of Rory’s sexual encounters to lend his own encounter significance. The apostrophe to Rory signals Binx’s unpreparedness to truly become intimate with Kate; he relies on a method of certification through the memory of film in order to be intimate with Kate, but the method fails him. Meanwhile, Percy reveals that Kate’s motivations are the opposite; she wants to have sex with Binx as an escape from being someone, somewhere.

They both care for each other, but as they grasp unsuccessfully at physical satisfaction, they also neglect their own emotional satisfaction. Binx fails to perform like Rory Calhoun, or any other hero for that matter, so he feels insignificant. Because Binx departs from New Orleans and his search, he can step back and acknowledge that he wants to marry Kate to help her with her depression. However, a connection to Kate still represents an obstacle, as it would not correspond with Binx’s searching attitude. They fail at intimacy because Binx still does not know how to proceed without his search. His displacement from New Orleans dispels any possibility of the search and provides Binx with a glimpse of advancement and progress. He can marry Kate, but he must believe that to do so is a capitulation neither to despair nor Aunt Emily. Binx’s physical distance from New Orleans forces him to confront everydayness and Kate without the trappings of the search. To
become a converted moviegoer Binx must formally abandon the search in New Orleans, his former place of exile.

Binx’s transition commences once he returns to his former place of exile. In New Orleans, he must embrace everydayness in a way that lets him inhabit his strange island. He has learned the lesson from the movies; Paul Newman’s marriage at the end of *The Young Philadelphians* is a sign of satisfying habitation of everydayness, and not capitulation to everydayness. He realizes that the search is misleading him, inviting unto him the very condition of despair he wants to avoid. Thus he abandons his search just as Newman does, albeit with a tiny shred of insecurity about how to proceed:

Now in the thirty-first year of my dark pilgrimage on this earth and knowing less than I ever knew before, having learned only to recognize merde when I see it, having inherited no more from my father than a good nose for merde, for every species of shit that flies – my only talent – smelling merde from every quarter, living in fact in the very century of merde, the great shithouse of scientific humanism where needs are satisfied, everyone becomes an anyone, a warm and creative person, and prospers like a dung beetle, and one hundred percent of people are humanists and ninety-eight percent believe in God, and men are dead, dead, dead; and the malaise has settled like a fall-out and what people really fear is not that the bomb will fall but that the bomb will not fall – on this my thirtieth birthday, I know nothing and there is nothing to do but fall prey to desire. Nothing remains but desire, and desire comes howling down Elysian Fields like a mistral. My search has been abandoned.43

Binx’s rant finally acknowledges the failings of the search. He knows nothing, only that his search has led him to believe that the whole world of everydayness and the people in it are worthless. While abandoning the search in New Orleans is crucial to Binx’s transition, he is still not ready to proceed because he still has no faith in everydayness, no appreciation for the “merde” as he calls it. Binx is left to his desire

43 Ibid., 228.
for connection, and he waits for Kate, the main object of his desire, to appear. The culmination of Binx’s desire to connect in the world of *merde*, the satisfaction of the desire, determines his conversion.

Percy reintroduces Aunt Emily in this final stage of Binx’s story because her influence complicates Binx’s progress from bad moviegoer to good moviegoer. In fact, Aunt Emily’s derision of Binx for taking the suicidal Kate to Chicago inspires Binx’s passionate dismissal of his search and declaration that the world has gone to shit. Her anger, stemming from Binx’s role in Kate’s unannounced trip to Chicago, culminates with her scolding Binx for not caring about anyone, for being a stranger to his family, and for being common. Aunt Emily is disappointed that Binx will not live up to her expectations for him, which was to become a great man reminiscent of the previous men in the Bolling family. Instead, Binx has become a stranger and a common man, a reality that Binx has known all along. Emily contrasts the Binx’s or the common man’s world of merde and everydayness, and her world of greatness and heritage: “‘Ours is the only civilization in history which has enshrined mediocrity as its national ideal...More than anything I wanted to pass on to you the one heritage of the men of our family, a certain quality of spirit, a gaiety, a sense of duty, a nobility worn lightly, a sweetness, a gentleness with women...’”44 Binx has always been a part of the common man’s world, albeit an exiled part, a stranger to that world. Emily thinks her world of nobility has always been an option for Binx, but he is too concerned with everydayness. To accept Emily’s expectations would be to ignore the existence of the common man’s world, and Binx, while he has been

44 Ibid., 223-224.
unaware of his own despair, has always been aware of everydayness. Emily’s world is not an option for Binx.

Binx’s transition from bad to good moviegoer indicates a transition from being a victim to the world of everydayness to inhabiting the world of everydayness. He makes the transition possible by resisting Aunt Emily’s attempts to drag him back into her world. Binx must shut the door to his aunt’s ideals in order to see the potential for his own progress. Emily urges Binx to affirm his love for her old world ideals such as truth, beauty and nobility: “Don’t you love these things? Don’t you live by them?” In Binx’s simple, negative response, he refuses Emily’s ideals, which allows Binx to focus his progress on inhabiting the world of everydayness. Emily’s despair over Binx’s decision actually forces him to think of a way forward, a way to progress. By dismissing his aunt’s ideals, Binx affirms the alternative that the world is one of mediocrity and of merde. His search has only taught him how to observe that mediocrity and merde – it has prevented him from inhabiting it, leaving him to wander aimlessly in exile in a world full of shit.

The solution that Binx has absorbed from the movies is the abandonment of the search and the desire to fit into the world he has just chosen. The conversion is finally actualized when Binx chooses to marry Kate, a decision so complete in its totality that it affirms Binx as an observer and active participant in the world of everydayness. Percy, through Aunt Emily, places one last obstacle in front of Binx that he must navigate in order to complete the conversion. Aunt Emily plants the idea in Binx’s head that he has betrayed Kate’s trust, and that all that is left for him

45 Ibid., 226.
to do is “go to the movies and dally with every girl that comes along…” When Kate does not show up to meet him on Ash Wednesday, Binx worries that she has been influenced by Emily, so he calls Sharon, his ex-secretary, and speaks with her roommate. As he comes closer and closer to falling back into the role of a wanderer who just fills his time with movies and girls, only one thing reminds Binx of the direct presence of everydayness: a whirling ocean wave, a children’s playground accessory. Binx flirts with the girl on the phone, named Joyce, and he tries to set up a date, but the sound of the ocean wave spinning – “iii-oorrr iii-oorrr” – continues to remind him of the constant presence of everydayness. Binx catches himself impersonating Marlon Brando while he flirts with Joyce, and it disgusts him. Binx formerly appealed to memories of Rory Calhoun on the train to Chicago, yet now he finds using Brando’s example from the movies in his own life abhorrent. Kate arrives just in time to interrupt Binx’s phone call and he has a revelation:

A watery sunlight breaks through the smoke and the Chef and turns the sky yellow. Elysian Fields glistens like a vat of sulfur; the playground looks as if it alone had survived the end of the world...Is it possible that - For a long time I have secretly hoped with Kate and my aunt and Sam Yerger and many other people that only after the end could the few who survive creep out of their holes and discover themselves to be themselves and live as merrily as children among the viny ruins. Is it possible that - it is not too late?

Binx admits that, like the stoic characters of the story such as Kate and Emily, he has wished for the end of the world of mediocrity and everydayness in the hopes that its passing would bring about a time when everyone could be themselves. He too has been waiting for the bomb to fall, but in his dismissal of Emily’s world of nobility,

46 Ibid., 226.
47 Ibid., 230.
48 Ibid., 231.
Binx reaffirms the existence of the world of everydayness. Percy mirrors Kate’s arrival at the playground with imagery of sunlight, and like a ray of sunlight in the dark, Binx is inspired that it might not be too late to inhabit the world of everydayness. In marrying Kate, Binx sees the potential for the dark world of everydayness to be brightened; instead of clouded by the merde he observes, the world and Binx are enlightened by Kate’s arrival at the playground.

Binx ends his phone flirtation with Joyce by asking her if he may bring his fiancée Kate. Kate’s presence at the playground gives Binx hope that he can live in the world of mediocrity because he sees marriage as the end to his exile from the world. Binx can still wander around New Orleans as if it is a strange island, but his marriage to Kate infuses his wandering with meaning that is both separate and attached to his idea of the self. Without the search he risks losing all meaning, all knowledge other than the presence of everydayness. The prospect of attaching himself to Kate reveals the path towards habitation instead of capitulation from the abandonment of his search. When Kate asks Binx what his plans are when he returns to face Aunt Emily, Binx’s confidence from the earlier stages of the novel resurfaces, although in a much different tone: “There is only one thing I can do: 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.”

The poor moviegoer avoids the world of everydayness, but is unaware of its inescapability. Aunt Emily and the rest of the Bollings ignore the world of everydayness, and they pass it off as mediocrity and commonness, although their

49 Ibid., 233.
world is coming to a marked end. The converted, good moviegoer is free – unlike the other two types – to inhabit the present world of the common man, of mediocrity and everydayness. Binx tried to avoid living in the world by exiling himself in his search, but Percy showed him to be unreliable, mistaken: a poor moviegoer. Aunt Emily tries to ignore the world of mediocrity in her disdain for commonness, but her world is disappearing. Once Binx has abandoned his search he is left to face the world he once feared and avoided, but he has found confidence in marrying Kate, and in his newfound freedom, his conversion is complete. The marriage will not prevent Binx from observing everydayness as he always has, but it will help both Kate and Binx overcome their despair and malaise.

Gilles Deleuze and Walker Percy

Walker Percy, in Binx’s conversion from poor moviegoer to good moviegoer, creates a main character particularly reminiscent of the characters that Binx himself observes in the movies. Gilles Deleuze, a French philosopher who began writing film theory in the early- to mid-1980s, argues that post-Holocaust cinema underwent a conversion in his book *Cinema 2: The Time-Image.* His theory about the distinction between classical and modern cinema helps to describe and highlight the significance of Binx’s transition, which is truly the climax of *The Moviegoer.* While Deleuze does not mention Walker Percy or Binx Bolling in his work, his theory of how and why the Nazi Holocaust incited a fundamental change in world cinema is particularly applicable for the change that Binx Bolling makes in his own movie-like

50 See Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image.*
story. To apply Deleuze’s film theory to *The Moviegoer* is to cast the work of Percy as a literary example of modern cinema, and further, to understand Binx’s conversion from poor moviegoer to good moviegoer in terms of postmodern film theory.

Deleuze’s primary concern is with terms he calls the movement-image and the time-image, and how the irrationality and inexplicability of the Holocaust changed the way one is to look for meaning and knowledge in the world. Deleuze argues that the classical cinema prioritizes the movement-image – any image of a movement in the world. The structure of classical cinema is engineered through rational cuts and edits between each movement-image. Each shot in any film consists of an image of a movement, and the classical cinema connects that shot through a rational linkage to another movement-image: “The so-called classical cinema works above all through linkage of images, and subordinates cuts to this linkage. On the mathematical analogy, the cuts which divide up two series of images are rational, in the sense that they constitute either the final image of the first series, or the first image of the second.” The classical cinema forms an intentional, rational system of continuity that is intended to make consecutive shots constitutive and commensurable. The stories that result from the classical cinema are as intelligible and smooth as possible. Deleuze, referring to a mathematical analogy, argues that the classical cinema practically assigns numbers to each movement that break time into a rational order of time cells. Deleuze argues that the classical cinema uses *normal* movement-images that break time up into individual number

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51 Generally, the period of Hollywood filmmaking and film production up until and during the 1940s.
52 Ibid., 213.
segments to subordinate time and present time indirectly to the viewer: "It is still necessary for movement to be normal: movement can only subordinate time, and make it into a number that indirectly measures it, if it fulfils conditions of normality." The classical cinema consists of normal movements that subordinate time, cut time up into commensurable segments. Thus normal movement-images in cinema necessitate further normal movement-images in the form of rational actions and reactions.

Deleuze argues that the irrationality of the Holocaust fundamentally challenges the normalcy of the movement-image and the rational linkages between these normal movements in classical cinema. The rise of a new, modern cinema was a reaction to the disintegration of the normal movement-image. The atrocities of the Second World War left humans with little capacity to act and react rationally, which became reflected in pure optical and sound situations and a new breed of movie characters: “The fact is that, in Europe, the post-war period has greatly increased the situations which we no longer know how to react to, in spaces which we no longer know how to describe...[I]n these any-spaces-whatever a new race of characters was stirring, kind of mutant: they saw rather than acted, they were seers.” The new seers that arose marked the arrival of a modern cinema that reflected the inability to act, react, and know rationally. The modern cinema reverses the relationship between movement-image and time-image, so that the normal movement-image is subordinate to the time-image. Deleuze argues that the creation of a modern cinema represents a reversal of the relationship between

53 Ibid., 36.
54 Ibid., xi.
movement-image and time-image in classical cinema; namely, the time-image takes precedence and priority over the movement-image, which frees time from being understood indirectly as a chronology of numbered cells. When the time-image subordinates the movement-image, as Deleuze argues it does in modern cinema, it rejects the normality of the movement-image in favor of its abnormality or aberrance. Abnormal movement-images present time directly because they resist the commensurable linkages of the classical cinema that enable continuity: “If normal movement subordinates the time of which it gives us an indirect representation, aberrant movement speaks up for an anteriority of time that it presents to us directly, on the basis of disproportionate scales, the dissipation of centres and the false continuity of the images themselves.”\(^{55}\) The aberrant movement-image of the modern cinema encapsulates the reality of the post-war world in which that cinema arises. Characters of the modern cinema and modern moviegoers alike are no longer actors, but pure seers of aberrant movement.

*Percy's The Moviegoer* is an example of modern cinema where the presence of everydayness is overwhelming and undeniable. Binx is someone who fears the reality everydayness and the actions he takes to avoid this reality puts him in despair. The Deleuzian split between classical and modern cinema helps illuminate Binx’s evolution into a seer who accepts the everydayness of the world. Further, once Binx becomes a pure seer, his transition into the good moviegoer is not complete because while he has learned to observe and accept everydayness, he is still in despair. Deleuze argues that the split between classical and modern cinema

\(^{55}\) Ibid., 37.
replaces characters’ abilities to act and react in the irrational post-war world with an ability only to see and observe. Binx’s conversion must take an additional step past pure observation and acceptance into inhabitance for him to shake off the grip of everydayness that leads him to despair. Thus, Deleuze’s film theory not only helps us understand Binx’s acceptance of everydayness, it opens the door for Binx to become more than a pure seer: a good moviegoer who inhabits as well as he sees. Binx’s relationship with everydayness is mirrored in Deleuze’s description of the direct presentation of time and aberrant movements. Deleuze links the ideas of everydayness and time in describing the break between the classical and the modern cinemas: “[A]berrant movement became the most everyday kind, everydayness itself, and it is no longer time that depends on movement, but the opposite.”\(^5\) Binx’s confrontations with everydayness in the novel are confrontations with aberrant movements that should indicate to him that he is in the modern cinema. His initial despair, then, stems from his inability to account for everydayness because his search uses methods that obscure everydayness, and resemble Deleuzian normal movements.

The repetition episode when Binx chooses to attend a western at a move theater on Freret Street is a prime example of how a comparison of his actions to Deleuzian modern cinema helps to broaden one’s understanding of Binx’s poor moviegoing. The repetition avoids the presence of everydayness by erasing the multitude of events that have occurred during the elapsed time of the repetition: “A

\(^5\) Ibid., 39. Although Percy and Deleuze are hardly interacting in their works, I take Deleuze’s statement about everydayness and aberrant movement to be the basis upon which such a connection between the two is valid.
repetition is the re-enactment of past experience towards 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 adulteration of events that clog time like peanuts in brittle.⁵⁷ Binx declares the repetition on Freret Street a success, but he struggles to find any knowledge or meaning from the experience, especially in terms of the lapsed time segment. Repetition as a means of avoidance of everydayness is futile because everydayness endures both in the present and the past.

A world defined by the enduring presence of everydayness is an example of Deleuzian modern cinema, yet Binx acts as if that presence is avoidable. Repetition fails because it is the type of normal movement that only works in classical cinema, but Binx’s world is the modern cinema. He is unable to make sense of the enduring of the theater after the repetition event because the enduring is evidence of aberrant movement or everydayness. Binx is not only a poor reader of the movies that he sees; he is a poor reader of his own movie in which everydayness is unavoidable. Deleuze explains that the classical cinema, as it relies on normal movements, refuses to recognize aberrant movements, and it thereby obscures the everydayness of the world. Binx’s despair – lack of knowledge and understanding concerning the “enduring” of the theater – is a result of treating the repetition as a success despite the overwhelming presence of everydayness. His despair is his unawareness. Binx is unable to see the failure of repetition because he is unwilling to accept that everydayness is unavoidable. His dissatisfaction and despair are not the result of everydayness itself, but the result of trying and failing to avoid

⁵⁷ Percy, The Moviegoer, 80.
everydayness.

Binx ceases to avoid everydayness on the train ride to Chicago when, without his search, he is directly confronted by the reality of everydayness. He becomes a seer who is unable to act, although we realize that Binx is still in despair when his and Kate’s attempt at intimacy fails. For Deleuze, the Holocaust represented the break between classical and modern cinema because it was a catastrophic event that forced humans to recognize that they could not react rationally to the situations they now found themselves in. On the train, Binx’s clarity of observation and his failed intimacy with Kate break his illusion of rational continuity like the Holocaust forced the reversal between classical and modern cinema. Binx admits that trains facilitate a particularly unique sensation due to their unification of time: “...ten years since I last enjoyed the particular gnosis of trains, stood on the eminence from which there is revealed both the sorry litter of the past and the future bright and simple as can be, and the going itself, one’s privileged progress through the world.”

The unification of past and future in the present moment on the train allows Binx an intimacy with everydayness that his search had previously prohibited, as evidenced by his later clairvoyance on the observation car. The train grants Binx an ability to see, although later it prevents his ability to act when he and Kate struggle at intimacy. Deleuze’s understanding of the Holocaust as a break between classical and modern cinema signifies Binx’s failed intimacy with Kate as crucial in his understanding of his world as modern cinema. Once he gains the ability to see on the observation car, he loses the ability to act and make love to Kate. He fails to act

58 Ibid., 184.
because he can only see and observe, but the failure still leaves Binx in despair. This moment of despair is altogether different because Binx is no longer unaware of the presence of everydayness. This moment on the train reveals a type of despair directly related to the reality of everydayness and is thus different from the earlier stages of despair; in gaining the ability to see everydayness in the world, Binx loses his ability, and the illusion of his ability, to act and react to situations. Such caused the break between classical and modern cinema, making Binx’s trip to Chicago the precise moment when he acknowledges for the first time that he is indeed in the modern cinema.

In Binx’s conversation with Aunt Emily about the world of mediocrity, Binx reveals that he has accepted the reality of everydayness by rebuffing Aunt Emily’s wishes that he follow in the footsteps of the Bolling family. He affirms his realization from the train that he exists in a world of mediocrity, and he rejects the world of action that Aunt Emily clings to. Although Binx becomes accepts the world of everydayness, he does not immediately become a good moviegoer because he is still in despair after the conversation over losing his ability to act. Deleuze argues that the pure seers of the modern cinema face a similar dilemma of despair. Aunt Emily scolds him for not being able to act and react in the normal, human way: “Your discovery, as best as I can determine, is that there is an alternative which no one has hit upon. It is that one finding oneself in one of life’s critical situations need not after all respond in one of the traditional ways. No. One may simply default. Pass... Why after all need one act humanly?”

59 Ibid., 220.
situations in the normal way, of choosing not to act or react to situations, but just to watch. Consequently, Binx is forced to reckon with this assigned identity of being someone who is able only to see and not act. He turns Emily’s values down and affirms his identity as one who sees, but does not act. On his thirtieth birthday the next day, Binx describes his resultant despair – only knowing how to see shit and merde in the world, but not knowing how to react to it: “I know nothing and there is nothing to do but fall prey to desire.” Binx finally recognizes and accepts that he exists in world of mediocrity and everydayness, in the modern cinema, however he remains unhappy and in despair. His poor moviegoing unawareness and habits of avoidance are completely abandoned, however he still lacks the consolation of an answer to his despair.

Deleuze describes the characters of the modern cinema as pure seers who do not know how to act or react because they only know how to see. From the moment of his conversation with Aunt Emily to his time on the playground at Elysian Fields, understanding Binx as a Deleuzian pure seer highlights the underlying cause of his despair; however, this understanding also reveals the true, yet subtle, meaning and potential of Binx’s conversion into a good moviegoer. Deleuze describes pure seers as characters who, like Binx, are in deep despair over the self and the world: “These are pure seers, who no longer exist except in the interval of movement, and do not even have the consolation of the sublime, which would connect them to matter or would gain control of the spirit for them. They are rather given over to something

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60 Ibid., 228.
intolerable which is simply their everydayness itself."61 Pure seers are victims of the intolerable everydayness they observe; their everydayness forbids them from acting and thus Deleuze argue they exist only in “the interval of movement,” meaning they have no ability to define themselves by their movements, their actions. Once Emily confronts Binx, and he agrees with her, about this exact passivity Deleuze identifies in pure seers of the modern cinema, he becomes a knowing victim of his own everydayness. Binx is concretely aware and accepting of his true despair, the despair of everydayness, for the first time in the novel.

Binx’s conversion to a good moviegoer is only actualized once he decides to marry Kate as the marriage represents Binx inhabiting his world by attaching himself meaningfully to it. Binx’s decision to marry Kate seems to confound the understanding of Binx as a Deleuzian pure seer who is unable to act because according to Deleuze, characters of the modern cinema cannot act. If Binx can act then he must have returned to the classical cinema, and his conversion is inconceivable, or at least unconvincing. However, within his definition of pure seers of the modern cinema, Deleuze cites a distinct, yet sublime, alternative to their despair: “…the consolation of the sublime, which would connect them to matter or would gain control of the spirit for them.”62 Pure seers lack any connection to the world or appreciation of the self because of their inability to act; they lack the “consolation of the sublime.” Binx, in his moment of great despair following the conversation with Aunt Emily, lacks such consolation, but in his marriage to Kate, he gains the consolation, ceases to be a pure seer, and becomes a good moviegoer.

61 Deleuze, Cinema 2, 41. Emphasis mine.
62 Ibid., 41.
Percy makes the decision to marry Kate the conclusion to Binx's movie and the key to Binx's transformation and his happiness. Relating Deleuze's theory about the split between classical and modern cinema to Binx's story has helped us understand Percy's novel as an example of modern cinema; a misguided and dissatisfied Binx lives in a world of everydayness, and when he realizes his unawareness, he becomes a dissatisfied pure seer who is unable to act. Binx only becomes happy and sheds his despair once he marries Kate, despite the presence of everydayness. Understanding Binx as a Deleuzian pure seer helps us to understand Binx's despair after meeting Aunt Emily and before deciding to marry Kate. Accordingly, understanding Binx's decision to marry Kate as his consolation of the sublime that lifts Binx's despair helps reveal Percy's philosophy of despair and everydayness in his work of literature.

Conclusion

Walker Percy's novel is not a film, but it certainly is cinematic on several distinct levels. Binx's story over one week in New Orleans mirrors his exact description of the movies he goes to see in the novel. He is a stranger who wanders around in a strange place, until he discontinues that search, and settles down in the very same strange neighborhood; he gets married, goes off to medical school, and buys a house next to Aunt Emily's. Deleuze's description of modern cinema, when applied to The Moviegoer, helps describe Binx's movie in terms of everydayness and despair. Furthermore, Binx is a moviegoer himself, meaning that he has the opportunity to observe movies like his own on screen; however, he fails to apply the
lessons about everydayness, the search, and despair that he sees in the movie to his own cinematic life until he is forced to abandon the search on his trip to Chicago.

Stanley Cavell and Gilles Deleuze’s theories of film have helped to understand the intricacies and significance of movies, moviegoing, and Binx’s own movie in Percy’s novel. In the essay, “An Elegy for Theory,” D.N. Rodowick connects the film theories of Deleuze and Cavell to enunciate the philosophical qualities of cinema; and further, to demonstrate how the cinema provides a philosophy of human transformation. Rodowick compares the two philosophers’ understanding of film as art:

That art may be considered philosophical expression is an important link between Deleuze and Cavell’s interest in film... Though in very different ways, both Deleuze and Cavell comprehend cinema as expressing ways of being in the world and of relating to the world. In this respect, cinema is already philosophy, and a philosophy intimately connected to our everyday life.

Each movie for Deleuze and Cavell is a philosophical argument about how humans exist in the world. Cinema presents and most significantly, overcomes philosophical problems of being and knowledge that parallel and question the everyday problems of its viewers.

This thesis shows that Percy’s novel can be understood in terms of Deleuze and Cavell’s analysis of film as philosophy so that Binx’s story and his transformation propose and explore philosophical questions about everyday human life in the same fashion as does film. The novel is structured like a movie, and the reader is thereby implicated as a moviegoer like Binx, with the responsibility to

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64 Ibid., 106.
observe how one’s own life and philosophy are mirrored in Binx’s life in *The Moviegoer*. Binx is a poor moviegoer when he fails to relate *seeing* his philosophy of despair and everydayness mirrored in the movies to *acknowledging* the reality of despair and everydayness as they are in the movies. Binx becomes a good moviegoer when he no longer even needs to go to the movies because he has finally acknowledged the solution to overcoming despair in his own world.

What are we to make of Binx’s conversion into a good moviegoer, a conversion that is definitively and purposefully unsettling? The ambiguity of Binx’s transformation is further evidence that Percy intended his novel to resemble a movie. In the movies Binx watches, the motivations behind each character’s conversion are unexplained. Percy leaves Binx’s conversion similarly unexplained and unelaborated and he ends the novel on the happy note of marriage and settling down. If Binx is the character of a movie, then the answer to Binx’s conversion lies in how Percy’s movie expresses ways of being in the world and of relating to the world. Binx’s conversion can be viewed as a transformation into the good moviegoer when Cavell and Deleuze’s theories help to understand Percy’s novel in terms of Binx’s relationship to the movies. Using film theory to understand the novel highlights Walker Percy’s own subtly crafted theory of how movies and moviegoing can define, question, unsettle, and ultimately change a person’s philosophy. Percy titles his novel *The Moviegoer* because his main character is a moviegoer throughout the story; even when he ceases to go to the movies, Binx is a moviegoer. Being a good moviegoer, as Percy builds Binx to be, entails understanding how one’s current ways of being in the world and relating to the world are cinematic, and transcending
the boundary of everydayness in order to inhabit that world through action. Cavell provides a fitting description of what I have termed the good moviegoer in the conclusion of his analysis of *It Happened One Night*, a 1934 Hollywood film that Binx also happens to have seen in the novel. Cavell describes the role of the viewer in perceiving the other, both on screen and in everyday life: “As finite, you cannot achieve reciprocity with the one in view by telling your story to the whole rest of the world. You have to act in order to make things happen, night and day; and to act from within the world, within your connection with others, forgoing the wish for a place outside from which to view and to direct your fate.”65 Cavell, writing some twenty years after Percy wrote *The Moviegoer*, describes the exact solution to Binx’s despair that motivates the conversion. Binx, the good moviegoer, has learned from viewing and becoming a stranger to the other that he must do something in order to achieve reciprocity with the one viewed; to become a better observer and a better person, he must act within his connection to others by marrying Kate, pleasing Aunt Emily by going to medical school, and comforting his half-siblings upon Lonnie’s death.

On the matter of his conversion, Binx stays uncharacteristically plain in the Epilogue to the novel. After describing his current situation with Kate, Emily, Lonnie and medical school, Binx acknowledges his transformation and his abandoned search:

As for my search, I have not the inclination to say much on the subject. For one thing, I have not the authority, as the great Danish philosopher declared, to speak of such matters in any way other than the edifying. For another thing, it is not open to me even to be edifying, since the time is later than his,

much too late to edify or do much of anything except plant a foot in the right place as the opportunity presents itself – if indeed asskicking is properly distinguished from edification.66

Binx refuses the reader any satisfaction regarding the nature of his conversion, attesting to Kierkegaard, the great Danish philosopher, for support in his silence. The invocation of Kierkegaard mirrors the novel’s epigraph, where Percy quoted the same Danish Christian existentialist philosopher’s views on despair. Most analyses of *The Moviegoer* focus on casting Percy’s novel as homage to Kierkegaard’s existential Christian philosophy; instead of the bad and good moviegoer, they compare Binx’s story and conversion with the Kierkegaardian Knight of Faith. When it comes to Binx’s conversion, the analysis focused on Kierkegaard is convincing for some, and unconvincing for others.

I take Binx’s rejection of edification in the Epilogue as a sign that using Cavell and Deleuze to understand his story is more appropriate for non-edification. My analysis does not prevent Binx’s conversion from being religious or Kierkegaardian, nor does it restrict other potential analyses of the motivations behind Binx’s conversion. In fact, critics of the Kierkegaardian analysis are relatively ambiguous on the role of moviegoing in the rest of the novel. Binx’s refusal to talk about the conversion so as not to instruct the reader of any moral or intellectual lessons is precisely the point that Percy makes throughout the novel about movies and moviegoers. Movies are philosophically significant to Percy; to an extent, they embody Binx’s search, and Binx’s story resembles the plots of the movies. They present the problems Binx has with despair and the search, but they do not explain

why or how the main character abandons the search. Binx is meant to apply his philosophy to the movies, but his philosophy denies the reality of the world and the movies; everydayness is everywhere and it is inescapable. Of course Binx refuses to edify about his search; Percy's theory of film as philosophy is being directed at the audience, his readers. Percy leaves it up to each individual reader to observe and question how and why Binx sticks himself into the world.