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Doodles on the Walls of the Cave : An Interpretation of Four Popular Novels

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DOODLES ON THE WALLS OF THE CAVE

AN INTERPRETATION OF FOUR POPULAR NOVELS

BY

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This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Arts, and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this thesis does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

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Fiction writers are, I hope to show, thoughtful interpreters of the world. But instead of producing interpretations--instead of doing research or criticisms--they doodle on the walls of the cave. They make art objects which must themselves be interpreted.

--Annie Dillard, 1982

CHAPTER I

Introduction

There are many possible influences which shape the culture or the way of life of a society. One of the strongest of these influences has been the movies. Movies and moviegoing have been a part of American culture for more than eighty-five years, but the movies as a way of life in America perhaps reached its peak in the period from 1945-1955. This was the post World War II era when there were as many as 90,000,000 paid admissions per week from a population of 150,000,000. By the end of this decade, attendance had dropped to 42,000,000 due mainly to the increasing availability and popularity of television.[1]

Over the years sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, anthropologists, moral theologians, historians and people from a variety of other disciplines have researched different aspects of the movies. Popular literature also reflects the influence of movies and moviegoing on society. This thesis will discuss four novels written about the period from 1945-1955 in which the main character is a moviegoer: Bijou by David Madden, The Last Picture Show by Larry McMurtry, A Confederacy of Dunces by John Kennedy Toole, and The Moviegoer by Walker Percy.

Fictional characters are obviously not real people; they are usually types or composite personalities which the author

fabricates from his/her observations of real people. As Annie Dillard says in her book, Living by Fiction, literature "presents a model interpreted out of the real world."[2] The author selects what he/she needs from reality to fabricate his/her models. The fact that the novel is a fabrication makes the result different from a scientific study, but does not necessarily lessen the value of the literary approach. The novelist observes the same world as the researcher. The difference in the result of these observations is similar to learning about the Civil War from Gone With the Wind instead of a history book. The characters in the four novels to be discussed in this thesis provide the reader with models from which he/she can learn something about the function of movies and moviegoing in the decade 1945 to 1955.

Chapter II is about David Madden's book, Bijou, which tells the story of one year in the life of thirteen year old Lucius Hutchfield, a movie-mad usher in the Bijou Theater in Tennessee in 1946. The discussion of this book appears first because it takes place at the beginning of the decade and also because Lucius' motives for going to the movies are the least complex of the four characters. Lucius is totally movie-made. Not finding any role models in his family, which consists of a drunken father, an overworked mother and two

brothers who spend most of their time in reform school, Lucius looks to the screen for everything from how to dress and talk, to how to think.

Chapter III also concerns teenage moviegoers. The teenagers in Larry McMurtry's book, The Last Picture Show, live in a small Texas town, an environment quite different from the urban setting of Bijou. There are twenty-eight theaters in Cherokee for Lucius to choose from; there is only one in Thalia, Texas. The Last Picture Show takes place in 1950 when television is beginning to make an impact on the movie industry. The book covers one year and ends, as the title suggests, with the closing of the theater. For the teenagers of Thalia, the picture show is a means to escape the boredom of small town life. For a few hours a week, they can find out what the world is like outside Thalia. The function of movies as escape is more complex, however, than the all-consuming role movies play in Lucius' life. Lucius has no personality separate from the one he derives from his screen idols. For him reality and fantasy are so intertwined that one is indistinguishable from the other. The teenagers of Thalia do have an identity outside the theater. They are constantly trying to reconcile the way things happen in the movies with what happens in Thalia. Believing that what they see on the screen is the way life

should be, they are disappointed and confused when reality fails to live up to fantasy.

The moviegoer in Chapter IV is Ignatius Reilly, Toole's thirty year old mediaevalist who lives with his mother in New Orleans in 1954. In contrast to the teenage moviegoers, Ignatius does not imitate what he sees on the screen nor does he use the movies to escape reality. His motives for going to the movies are more complex than those of either Lucius or the teenagers of Thalia. He does not try to find the world of the screen on the streets of New Orleans; he finds the streets of New Orleans on the screen. To Ignatius the movies are an extension of a society that he despises because it has ridiculed and rejected him. When his attempts to reform the real world fail, he retreats to the only place he feels safe and in control--the movie theater.

Chapter V will discuss Walker Percy's moviegoer, Binx Bolling. Like Ignatius, Binx is a thirty year old resident of New Orleans. Binx has many reasons for going to the movies. He is a grown up Lucius Hutchfield; he imitates the gestures, facial expressions and emotions he sees on the screen. Like the teenagers of Thalia, he uses the movies to escape from the "everydayness" of his life, and like Ignatius he is disturbed about the society in which he lives. The function of the movies

in Binx's life, however, is more complex than in the lives of any of the other characters. Binx is looking for an identity that goes beyond merely imitating movie stars; he wants to know who he really is. In a sense, he "tries on" these other personalities to see if they fit. He wants to escape the boredom of his everyday life, but he wants to find a solution to that boredom that will last longer than a movie. He is critical of society but, unlike Ignatius, he looks for a way to find his place in it rather than change it.

A knowledge of the factual background from which a work of fiction is derived is helpful in understanding the novelist's interpretation of society. A brief look at the social/cultural/political milieu in which these fictional moviegoers lived, including mention of some of the movies and movie stars of the decade, will acquaint the reader with the real world from which the novelists designed their models.

The end of World War II in the summer of 1945 brought changes to nearly every segment of society as Americans made the transition from war to peace. Movies were no exception. Audiences had grown tired of the propaganda war movies, but they liked the action and excitement of this type of film. To satisfy this new taste, Hollywood introduced the crime melodrama featuring such stars as John Garfield, Richard

Widmark, Humphrey Bogart, Alan Ladd, and Peter Lorre. Many of the films Lucius Hutchfield sees in Bijou are of this genre.

By the late forties, the liberalism of the Roosevelt years was disappearing and conformity became the order of the day. Congressional committees began investigating everything, including the movies, for evidence of Communist infiltration. The House Un-American Activities Committee sent the "Hollywood ten" to jail for refusing to testify about their alleged Communist party affiliations. The film industry then published its own blacklist of individuals who would not be employed because of suspected Communist activities.

Although several advances were made in the technical aspects of film production, the films that the moviegoers in The Last Picture Show, A Confederacy of Dunces, and The Moviegoer see, reflect the inhibiting influence of the political climate of the early fifties. As Jack Ellis points out,

> Meaningful statements about contemporary American society were sometimes made, but, in general, the integrity, assurance, and purposefulness that had begun to mark the work of a few American film makers coming out of the war years was missing in the second half of the first decade after the war. 3

McMurtry makes specific mention of only three movies in The Last Picture Show: a musical with Ginger Rogers, a western, and a comedy with Jerry Lewis. Most film critics agree that some of the best Musicals and Westerns Hollywood

has ever produced come from this era--An American in Paris, Singin' In the Rain, Shane, High Noon. This is perhaps because directors, looking for apolitical themes to avoid recrimination by the Communist witch hunters, decided to concentrate their best efforts on relatively safe genres. Comic films were also considered safe, but reflecting the humorlessness of the times, are some of the worst ever made. Even the best of the lot, the comedy team of Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, are described as having their "wacky personalities drowned in predictable overplotted situations."[4]

The musicals Ignatius Reilly sees in A Confederacy of Dunces are not the ones the critics consider the best of the decade. Toole does not mention specific titles in his book, but Ignatius talks of seeing a "teen-age beach musical" with a "singing sequence on surfboard," a description that fits many of the insipid fifties' B musicals. Ignatius also describes the movie screen glowing in "bright, wide technicolor." In an effort to compete with the growing television industry, Hollywood introduced several technical gimmicks in the early fifties. There was an almost total conversion to technicolor; the wide screen Ignatius refers to is what the industry called Cinemascope, first used for The Robe in 1953.

Percy's book, The Moviegoer, mentions specific movies

and movie stars chosen, for the most part, from the lesser known films of the decade. Binx Bolling says he is "quite happy in a movie, even a bad movie," and bad movies are generally what he sees, reflecting the opinion of most critics that

> The fifteen years following World War II may have been the least exciting, least imaginative, least innovative years in the art of American film since Griffith founded that art in 1908. Although some 4,000 films were made in those years--many of them good ones--the American film lacked the unifying direction and purpose of its two previous major decades. 5

Despite the fact that most film historians agree that this was not the golden age of film from the standpoint of quality, more people went to the movies than ever before or since, so many that sociologists call this the movie generation. Social psychologist Robert Marcus describes it as

> the generation now in its thirties and forties that grew up--so most of us uneasily admit--in the movies. Not film as art in any self-conscious sense, but the commercial products of Hollywood, formed a level of our psychics with which most of us in our maturity have to live. 6

The authors of the four novels to be discussed in this thesis are members of the movie generation and three of the four are habitual, if not obsessive moviegoers. From their experiences, and observations of this decade, they have fabricated models of moviegoers. From these models, it is possible to discover what some of the reasons were that made moviegoing such a popular pastime, to determine what, as Marcus says,

"it is in ourselves that made us fill so many a Saturday afternoon of our childhood and perhaps too many evenings of our adult life--with trashy films."[7]

NOTES

Chapter I

[1] Gordon Stulberg, "Hollywood Transition," Saturday Review, 28 Dec. 1968, p. 20.

[2] Annie Dillard, Living By Fiction (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), p. 59.

[3] Jack Ellis, A History of Film (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979), p. 261.

[4] Gerald Mast, A Short History of the Movies (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 271.

[5] Ellis, p. 279.

[6] Robert Marcus, "Moviegoing and Amer: an Culture," Journal of Popular Culture, 3, No. 4 (1970), p. 755.

[7] Marcus, p. 757.

CHAPTER II

Lucius Hutchfield: The Moviegoer As Imitator

The function of the movies in the life of David Madden's character, thirteen year old Lucius Hutchfield, is aptly described in this quotation from I.C. Jarvie's book, Towards A Sociology of the Cinema: "The inside of a cinema became a home away from home for my generation, the central focus of our interests, values, images, fantasies--even intellectual efforts."[1] It also describes Madden who, from the age of four until he was fifteen, saw three movies a week, usually twice each.[2] Lucius, the youngest moviegoer of the four characters to be discussed, depends on the movies for every aspect of life--"values, images, fantasies, even intellectual efforts." This dependence is partially explained by the absence of what is usually considered a normal home life. Lucius is the most stable element in his family that consists of an over-worked mother who is continually changing jobs, houses, and lovers; a drunken but likeable father who is trying to get his wife to take him back; and two brothers who spend most of their time in and out of reform school. Lucius finds in the movies role models and values one normally gets from home and family.

Lucius' mother is concerned about her children but has little time to devote to them. She seems relieved when Lucius'

brothers are sent to reform school; she will at least know where they are. She always knows where Lucius is--at the movies. Except for the few hours he is at school, Lucius spends his time either working at the theater, watching a movie, or in his "sanctuary" in the basement of the theater writing stories based on the movies he sees.

Lucius' obsession with the movies is also related to his age. Numerous theories have been advanced about the effect of movies on the adolescent and why adolescents account for the largest single age group to attend movies regularly. Lucius serves as an example of many of the more popular hypotheses. Psychologist A. J. Brodbeck, for instance, suggests that moviegoing is a problem solving activity for young people. He says that movies teach the adolescent the norms and customs of his society as well as aid in the development of his own ideas, opinions, reactions, and attitudes toward other people.

> The fantasy material which appears on the movie screen can be regarded as experimental experience without real life restrictions. The adolescent can see different movies as alternatives, selected scenarios which can be thought or imagined through as part of a trial-and-error process of finding a solution. 3

Lucius does this repeatedly throughout the book. When faced with a difficult situation, he recalls a movie or a movie star that has been involved in a similar situation and he assumes

the star's personality and tries to follow the film scenario. For example, when a group of boys from the junior high school he attends, Bonny Kate, call him names in the theater, Lucius "turns and strikes an Alan Ladd stance. 'I'll see you at Bonny Kate.'"[4]

After a fight with his girlfriend La Rue, he remembers "Alan Ladd in The Glass Key, telling off Veronica Lake" and tells La Rue, "You think you're too good for me" (p. 73). Both of these are lines taken from movie dialogue. In school, "Aware that Loraine was looking at him, wondering what he was writing, maybe thinking it was another love letter, Lucius tried to look like Cornel Wilde writing 'The Polonaise,' with George Sand, hovering near, smoking her thin cigar" (p. 102).

When Lucius and Loraine are locked in an abandoned tile factory, "Lucius panicked, then the rage he used to feel when Nazis hanged or shot the Jews or hostages in The Moon is Down or Hotel Berlin or Hitler's Children broke through the panic, and he made a ferocious pulling assault and the door slid open" (p. 145). Lucius gets lost in a cave that adjoins the basement of the Bijou Theater. To calm himself he invokes his "patron saint" Alan Ladd in a litany-like recital of Ladd's movies.

> Alan Ladd in This Gun for Hire. Alan Ladd in The Glass Key. And Now Tomorrow, starring Alan Ladd. The Blue Dahlia. Lucky Jordan starring

> Alan Ladd. Alan in China. Salty O'Rourke, starring Alan Ladd. O.S.S. (p. 167).

Throughout the book Lucius uses movies to help him find solutions to difficult problems.

In their book, Movies, A Psychological Study, Wofenstein and Leites describe another way movies affect the male adolescent.

> Numerous young men, for instance, may be developing out of experience and fantasy, out of disconnected impressions and feelings, the image of their ideal girl. A new type of movie heroine appears and the image comes to life; they see how the girl who fits their half-formulated wishes looks and talks and how she behaves with her man. 5

As with everything else in his life, Lucius' image of the ideal girl comes from the movies. He engages in a great deal of adolescent sexual activity, but he separates the "good girls" he knows from the "bad girls" according to categories defined by his movie goddesses.

> The more Lucius gazed at Raine in Miss Cline's American history, the more she looked like Veronica Lake. He mingled the pure body of Raine with the pure body of Veronica. His memory unconsciously and his willful vision deliberately superimposed the faces, but never the bodies, of the goddesses upon the girls he worshipped. The goddesses and the girls he loved were pure, and his vile fantasies never desecrated them. But when he thought of screwing Della Snow, he sometimes saw the bodies of Claire Trevor in Dead End, who had syphilis or Adele Jergens or Dolores Moran or Evelyn Ambers or Jean Parker or Marie Windson, for the girls in the low-grade movies were less sacrosanct. He associated the starlets and stars of these movies with the cheap theaters where he saw them and where he hoped to pick up tough girls. The cheap costumes and sets

> and the bad acting made the girls seem more real and so more vulnerable to his sexual hunger (p.116).

Even more important in Lucius' life than his sexual activities is his writing. When asked if he wants to be a writer when he grows up, he replies, "A writer is what I am" (p. 353). Lucius writes everything--love letters, short stories, plays. He keeps a diary, a ledger and even writes what he calls a "night ritual" that details plans for his dreams. The movies are a part of all his writing. In his love letters, he sometimes compares the girl he is writing to, to a movie star, or borrows lines from a movie to include in the text.

> He closed the Screen Romances that carried the story of Love Letters with Joseph Cotten and Jennifer Jones. He'd read it soon after Beverly gave him her magazines, and one of the love letters struck him as the most beautiful thing he'd ever read. He adapted the passage into the last paragraph of his letter to Raine (p. 251).

The movies are a source of inspiration for all of Lucius' short stories. He has trouble finishing most of these stories. "Most of the stories broke off where his teachers, Miss Kuntz the most vigilant, had swooped down on him, ripped the page on which he was writing" (p. 86). But even when he writes outside of school, he seldom gets past the title; he writes "hundreds of titles and lists of characters, casting movie stars in the parts" (p. 86). His plots are usually a combination of several movies.

The pen names Lucius chooses reflect the movies and the stars that inspire the story. He sees A Song To Remember with Cornel Wilde and writes a story he calls "Great Moments in Music", which he signs Cidney Cornel Hutchfield. Several western stories are signed Tennessee Hutchfield; his "tough guy" series is by Ladd Hutchfield.

A typical entry from Lucius' diary (including examples of his poor spelling and punctuation), contains the title of at least one movie which is understandable since Lucius "counted the movies he'd seen in 1945. One hundred and twenty in five months" (p.43).

> Mon., September 9, 1946. This girl said, "You have the loveliest blue eyes." Al Jolson contest coming Wensday. Mrs. Hood came down to the Bijou from the Tivoli. She's real cute. Looks like Lili Palmer in Screen Romances story of Coak and Dagger. Dragonwick coming to the Tivoli (p. 99).
>
> Thurs. November 28, 1946. Three Wise Fools. We packed on Thanksgiving. Ate Dinner at Mammy's. Went by the house. Took Raine to see The Strange Love of Martha Ivers at the Venice with Elizabeth Scott, Van Heflin, Kirk Douglas, a new guy, and Barbara Stanwyck. Great.

About halfway through the novel, Lucius discovers books. The works of Thomas Wolfe are especially appealing to him. When he discovers that Wolfe kept a ledger from which he wrote Look Homeward Angel, Lucius no longer keeps a diary but records his thoughts in a ledger. The entries remain much the same, however, and continue to record his almost daily attendance at the movies.

> Ledger: Fuss with Loraine. Saw The Southerner

> with Zacharay Scott and Betty Field at the Hiawasee again. Tacked For Whom the Bell Tolls stills all over the walls of my sanctuary (p. 351).

> Ledger: Saw the Macomber Affair at Tivoli. Can't wait to see it at the Bijou. I'll Be Yours with Deanna Durbin and Tom Drake started today at the Bijou. Wrote essay "Adventure". Someday I will absorb every mood, action and theme of which adventure is the master. Meanwhile I have the inspiration to create my own adventures in endless stories. Lucius Hutchfield (p. 381).

The inspiration Lucius speaks of are the movies. They totally permeate his life, awake or asleep. His night rituals, his dream plans, always include a movie reference.

> Night Ritual: Lucius runs away from home because everybody says Sonny Hawn is looking for him, to beat his ass, and he climbs the mountain highway toward Oak Ridge, Clark Gable, his protector, a miniature figure on his left shoulder, Vivien Leigh, his goddess, on the right (p. 340).

Acceptance by one's peer group is particularly important in the life of an adolescent. As Jarvie says, "The development of a sense of self and of identity is achieved mainly in interactions within the peer group and what the peer group itself takes for its ideals of identity."[6] Lucius has many problems in his associations with his schoolmates and it is only when he gets a job as an usher at the Bijou Theater that he becomes part of a peer group from which he can derive some social identity. Lucius always regarded ushers as "servants of the gods"; he could hardly comprehend them as "real people" (p. 31). The job not only makes him a part of this elite group, it also

provides him with more opportunities to see movies since one of the fringe benefits of being an usher is a free pass to all the other theaters in Cherokee.

As mentioned previously, Lucius eventually discovers that there are other things in the world besides movies. One day he goes into a used book store to look for movie magazines. He discovers that he already has all the issues in the store so he starts looking first at the comic books, then the paperback books and finally comes to the hardcover books. Lucius had never read a single book in his life. He "had never realized until now that so many movies came from books" (p. 209). He buys several used books and soon his ledger records not only the movies he sees, but also lists the books and short stories he reads. It is interesting that Lucius often writes his stories in the cave that adjoins the Bijou but when he reads, he climbs up into the tower he has discovered at an old factory. This suggests that Lucius recognizes that his own writings are simply an extension of what he sees on the screen as the cave extends from the theater. The books he reads, however, are totally removed from the movies, as the tower rises high above the theater. Lucius' plots depend on the movies; many of the movies Lucius sees derive their plots from the books he reads.

Music also becomes a part of Lucius' life. One day he helps set up the stage of the Bijou for a civic symphony

concert and then ushers for the evening performance. He has his first experience with live classical music and is so fascinated by it that he buys a used phonograph and some records. "Playing the record, he began to feel as he did when handling the stills, or handling the used books in the River Bridge store or the new ones in Matthews" (p. 310).

Lucius' world is gradually expanding beyond the confines of the movie screen. He loses his job as an usher, and is expelled from school. These events symbolize an emancipation from the two confining institutions in his life. At the end of the book, Lucius runs away to Asheville, Tennessee, to explore the birthplace of his new idol, Thomas Wolfe.

There is something pathetic about Lucius' wanderings through the streets of Asheville, He finds Wolfe's house but is disappointed because he thought he'd find a crowd of admirers there. "Didn't those people driving by and walking on streets a block away know this was the place made famous by Thomas Wolfe's books?" (p. 485). Lucius expects authors to enjoy the same sort of adulation he has always given movie stars. He stops at a drugstore and looks through a movie magazine nearly ready to abandon his hero worship of Thomas Wolfe. When he sees an ad for an Alan Ladd movie and realizes that "he wasn't as thrilled as he once would have been," he decides to give Thomas Wolfe another chance (p. 485). He goes to the

public library and at last finds some recognition of the author in an exhibit of photographs and books about him. Lucius spends a couple hours looking and reading. He is so immersed in Wolfe that when he leaves the library and again starts walking the streets of Asheville, he sees "Tom walking toward me. Just as real as any of the people on the sidewalk" (p. 486).

Lucius has succeeded in freeing himself of Alan Ladd, but instead of developing a personality of his own, he has simply transferred his hero worship to a new model. He has come out of the cave and the theater but is now imprisoned in the tower.

Some critics have labeled Bijou as a nostalgia trip, a chronicle of 1946 movies, songs, bestsellers and news events. This is an accurate but incomplete analysis. Madden is basically a storyteller and he tells a very complete story of the year 1946. To those who remember it, it is indeed a nostalgia trip. It is like reading about your own adolescence. To those who are not of this generation, the book provides a vivid picture of growing up in post-war America. Moviegoing was very much a part of that era. If the reader cannot identify with Lucius Hutchfield, at least Bijou can provide a vicarious participation in the life of a member of the movie generation.

NOTES

Chapter II

[1] I. C. Jarvie, Towards a Sociology of the Cinema (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 3.

[2] David Madden, The Poetic Image in 6 Genres (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. 21.

[3] I. C. Jarvie, Movies As Social Criticism (Mutechen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1978), p. 21.

[4] David Madden, Bijou (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1974), p. 31. All further references to this work appear in the text.

[5] Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites, Movies, A Psychological Study (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1950), p. 13.

[6] Jarvie, Movies As Social Criticism, p. 37.

CHAPTER III

The Teenagers of Thalia: Moviegoers as Escapists

Larry McMurtry, the author of The Last Picture Show, is a member of the movie generation and an obsessive moviegoer. He describes a marathon movie viewing experience in New York City when he saw seventeen movies in a row. The only break he had was at 4 A.M. when the theaters closed. Not to be deprived, he went to his apartment and watched old movies on television until the theaters re-opened at 11 A.M.[1]

Charles Peavy in his book, Larry McMurtry, says, "The careers of few contemporary American novelists have been as intimately associated with motion pictures as that of Larry McMurtry."[2] McMurtry has written several film scripts and film criticism. Three of his novels have been adapted to the screen--Horseman, Pass By, Leaving Cheyenne, and The Last Picture Show. Hud, the movie version of Horseman, Pass By, and The Last Picture Show both won Academy Awards. Two other novels, Moving On and All My Friends Are Going To Be Strangers, have numerous references to movies and movie makers. This chapter will consider the characters in The Last Picture Show, a book in which movies and the local movie theater are not just referred to, but are central to the plot and the theme.

The setting for the book is Thalia, Texas. McMurtry knows the people of Thalia very well. He grew up in Archer City, a small West Texas town which is the model for Thalia. Life here is in sharp contrast to Lucius' hometown Cherokee, a city which Madden modeled after his own birthplace, Knoxville, Tennessee. For example, Cherokee had twenty-eight movie theaters, a civic symphony, a variety of restaurants, bookstores, and even a legitimate theater. "The only art form accessible to someone who's stuck out in the middle of West Texas is the movie."[3] With no live theater, no libraries, their "only contact with the world of imagination is the movie."[4] The time of this novel is 1950; television is just beginning to be available in Texas. It arrives in Thalia and ultimately causes the closing of the picture show.

The teenagers of Thalia have different reasons for going to the movies than Lucius. They are looking for something that can break the boredom of small town life and provide, if only for a few hours, relief from the stifling atmosphere of Thalia. They do imitate what they see on the screen, but not to the extent that it engulfs their whole personality. They share Lucius' interest in sex and movies, but since there is only one theater in Thalia and only two movies a week, sex occupies more of their leisure time than moviegoing. The function of the movies in their lives is more complex than for

Lucius. Movies define Lucius' whole life; he makes little distinction between fantasy and reality. These teenagers view the movies as the way things ought to be, and are constantly confused when reality is different from the movies.

McMurtry has included a representative from every social class in The Last Picture Show--the oil rich, the roughnecks, the religious fanatics, the love-starved women, the super-jocks--but it is the adolescents in the town whose lives are most directly affected by the movies. There is the feeling that the older people have resigned themselves to a life of monotony and boredom. They will not be bothered as much by the closing of the picture show as the teenagers; they have given up trying to escape and are content with survival.

Sonny Crawford, a high school senior, needs something to counteract the "bad feeling" he gets that is caused just by the "look of the town."[5] Sonny's mother is dead and his father is a drug addict, so he lives with his friend Duane, also a senior and an orphan, in a rooming house on the main street in Thalia. Sonny is going steady with Charlene Duggs, a girl he describes as a "mediocre date by any standards" (p. 10). The picture show is the only place to go on a date, but he doesn't actually take Charlene to the movies. Instead, after he gets bored watching people play pool, he goes to the theater.

As soon as his eyes adjusted, Sonny determined

> that Charlene Duggs was sitting about halfway down the aisle with her little sister Marlene. He walked down the aisle and tapped her on the shoulder, and the two girls scooted over a seat. After the feature had been playing for a few minutes Sonny and Charlene got up and moved back into one of the corners (p. 15).

This is the signal to begin serious necking. Sonny holds Charlene's hand and they "smooch a little, but not much. Sonny really wants to see the movie, and it is easy for him to hold his passion down" (p. 15). Besides, he has noticed that the posters outside the theater show Ginger Rogers in her slip and he wants to keep a close eye on the screen, so if she decides to take her clothes off, he won't miss it. He is bored with Charlene; he has long ago seen and felt everything she has. The movie at least offers the possibility of something new.

Charlene at first isn't interested in kissing either because she has just put a fresh stick of gum in her mouth and isn't going to take it out just to kiss Sonny. She doesn't often have enough money to buy gum. She changes her mind when she notices that Sonny looks a little like the movie's handsome male star, Steve Cochran. Lately, the only way Charlene's passion gets "worked up" is in the picture shows. She can escape the routine of "making out" with Sonny by pretending he is a movie star.

"The movies were Charlene's life, as she was fond of saying" (p. 15). She spends most of her time reading movie

magazines and even calls the stars by their first names as if they are all personal acquaintances. Whenever she gets any money she buys pictures of her favorite movie stars, June Allyson and Van Johnson, to put on her dresser like close relatives. She even starts sleeping with a picture of Van Johnson under her pillow when she and Sonny break up. Charlene succeeds in bringing her fantasy world out of the theater into her everyday life. She sees herself as a beautiful and shapely starlet. She writes "Look What Legs" on the back of a photograph of herself in a bathing suit, when the photograph shows "clearly that her legs are short and fat." She thinks of herself as possessing gazelle like slimness" (p. 20). Charlene's escape lasts longer than the few hours she spends in the theater each week.

Jacy Farrow is the spoiled teenage daughter of the only rich family in Thalia. Sonny and Duane are both in love with her but she is more in love with herself than anyone else. She is an attractive cheerleader whose fantasies are a bit different from Charlene's. Jacy is pretty so she doesn't need to fabricate a figure, but she is as bored as the rest of the adolescents. She goes to the movies to find her "own kind." She sees herself as considerably better than the rest of the teenagers in Thalia. Outside the theater she is a movie star playing the roles she has watched. One of her best performances is given in the back

seat of the school bus on the return trip from basketball games. There is a small orange bulb which she and Duane sit under so everyone can see the "show," but not too clearly.

> Courting with Duane when all the kids on the school bus could watch gave Jacy a real thrill, and made her feel like a movie star; she could bring beauty and passion into the poor kids' lives (p. 58).

Jacy provides her peers with a first hand escape experience as a missionary brings salvation to the pagans. In Jacy's bedroom alongside her white zipper Bible is a "pile of movie magazines most of them with Debbie Reynolds on the cover. Debbie Reynolds was Jacy's ideal" (p. 36). The comparison of Jacy to the movie image of Debbie Reynolds is just as ironic as Charlene's picture of herself as a slim starlet. Debbie Reynolds was one of the fifties' All-American girl types--sweet, cute, unselfish, always happy. Jacy watches Debbie on the screen and sees herself, but Lois Farrow, Jacy's mother, has a more accurate picture of her daughter. "Who you really love is your own pretty self and <u>what</u> you really love is knowing you're pretty" (p. 36).

Everything Jacy does is a theatrical performance. "Being in the public eye seems to heighten the quality" of all her actions (p. 76). Her most elaborate scenario is the temporary marriage she stages. She elopes with Sonny but leaves obvious clues so her parents will find her before the marriage is consummated. She is not interested in marriage, just the

excitement of an elopement. Jacy is finally punished for her selfish and shallow sexuality toward Sonny and Duane when she is herself seduced and discarded by Thalia's super-stud, Abilene.

The teenage boys in Thalia have also incorporated screen fantasies into their real lives. However, the girls seem to be more concerned with looking like movie stars; the boys with having actual experiences similar to those they see on the screen. When they fail in their attempts to achieve this, they are confused and unhappy. Duane, for instance, is deeply hurt when Jacy breaks up with him because he believes "you were supposed to get whoever you really loved. That's the way it worked in the movies" (p. 145). A gang of boys secures the services of a local whore for a group sex orgy and are disappointed because

> when they shine the flashlight on Jimmie Sue laying back in the pickup seat, they see how fat she is. The flashlight plays over her huge hams and flabby stomach. It wasn't exactly what they had expected, because they persisted in thinking about it is terms of pretty girls, movie stars like Elizabeth Taylor (p. 85).

Sex in Thalia doesn't measure up to sex on the silver screen.

The older characters in the book are only tangentially connected to the picture show. The theater is a kind of therapy for Sam, the owner, who buys the business after his two sons are accidentally killed and his wife dies. "He began to come out of it when he bought the picture show, people said. He got lots of comedies and serials and Westerns

and the kids came as often as they could talk their parents into letting them" (p. 4).

Lois, Jacy Farrow's mother, checks the street in front of the theater to make sure Jacy's car is parked there. She does not go to the movies but feels Jacy is better off in the theater than out necking in some dark alley with one of the local boys. This is ironic since Jacy does some of her most passionate lovemaking in the theater, coached by the movie stars. Lois has given up using the movies as escape. She finds relief from the boredom of Thalia by spending money, having illicit sexual relationships, and drinking.

Penny, a waitress at Sam's cafe, is the one person in town who thinks it is a good thing the theater is closing.

> Picture shows been gettin' more sinful all the time, if you ask me. Them movie stars lettin' their titties hang out--I never seen the like. The last time I went I told my old man he could just take me home, I wasn't sittin' still for that kind of goings on (p. 204).

But to the teenagers of Thalia, "life in a small town can be hell after the last picture show closes."[6] The closing of the theater in Thalia was repeated across the country as television competed for and won audiences that had once been moviegoers. By 1952, 6,000 theaters had closed and motion picture production had dropped from 400 pictures a year to fewer than 150.[7] As Old Lady Mosey who ran the theater in Thalia

said,

> We just can't make it. There wasn't fifteen people here tonight, and a good picture like this, Jerry Lewis. It's kid baseball in the summer and school in the winter. Television all the time. Nobody wants to come to shows no more (p. 198).

Charles Peavy says that if The Last Picture Show is read strictly on a literal level, what the reader gets is a description of a "Peyton Place on the prairie." The book has many "scatological scenes that are explicit and often perverse in running the full gamut of small-town sexuality, including masturbation, exhibitionism, adultery, zoophilia, and group sex."[8] McMurtry did not intend to write a dirty book that teenagers could giggle over and adults would condemn, although unfortunately this was the response of many readers including his fellow Texans. The Last Picture Show describes the boredom of life in the small towns of America in the fifties. This boredom was relieved to some extent by the activities McMurtry describes in the book's "scatological scenes," and also to some degree by moviegoing. The people of Thalia, particularly the adolescents, escape into the fantasy world of the picture show in hopes that it will somehow make their own world more bearable. There is a real sense of loss when the picture show closes because it was what people used to "see beyond the town, and when that closes, what was beyond the town also closes."[9]

NOTES

Chapter III

[1] Charles Peavy, Larry McMurtry (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977), p. 91.

[2] Peavy, p. 87

[3] Peavy, "An Interview with Larry McMurtry," Collage, May 1967, p. 7.

[4] Peavy, "An Interview," p. 15.

[5] Larry McMurtry, The Last Picture Show (New York: The Dial Press, 1966), p. 10. All further references to this work appear in the text.

[6] Peavy, "Coming of Age in Texas: the Novels of Larry McMurtry," Western American Literature, 4 (Fall 1969), 171.

[7] Gordon Stulberg, "Hollywood in Transition," Saturday Review, 28 Dec. 1968, p. 20.

[8] Peavy, Larry McMurtry, p. 35.

[9] Peavy, Larry McMurtry, p. 183.

CHAPTER IV

Ignatius Reilly: The Moviegoer As Observer

The circumstances surrounding the publication of John Kennedy Toole's book, A Confederacy of Dunces, sound like a synopsis of a novel or perhaps a movie scenario. Toole wrote the book while he was a soldier stationed in Puerto Rico in 1962. In 1963, he went to New Orleans to teach and find a publisher for his book. In 1969, his novel still unpublished, Toole committed suicide. For the next seven years his mother Thelma took the novel from publisher to publisher. In 1976, she arrived at Walker Percy's office on the campus of the University of New Orleans and insisted that Percy read the "great book" her son had written. She had only one copy of the book, so by the time she showed it to Percy, the manuscript was badly smeared and nearly unreadable.

Percy describes his reaction to the manuscript in his forward to the book.

> And only one hope remained--that I could read a few pages and that they would be bad enough for me, in good conscience, to read no farther.
>
> In this case I read on. And on. First with the sinking feeling that it was not bad enough to quit, then with a prickle of interest, then a growing excitement and finally an incredulity; surely it was not possible that it was so good. 1

Percy was so impressed with the manuscript that he convinced the Louisiana State University Press, which normally

prints only scholarly works, to publish it. The book came out in the spring of 1980 and was an instant success. A Confederacy of Dunces sold over 45,000 hardcover copies, which is very unusual for a book published by an academic press. It was selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club; Grove Press bought the paperback rights and Twentieth Century Fox bought the movie rights. The paperback edition was number one on the New York Times trade paperback bestseller list for more than a month, and in 1981 it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize.[2]

Most critics have been lavish in their praise of the book. New York Times Book Review critic Alan Friedman calls it a "masterwork of comedy";[3] Richard Brown of the Times Literary Supplement commends the "clarity of its episodic architecture, its ability to rely effectively on dialogue for the evocation of scene and character."[4] Writing in the New Republic, Phelps Gay says that "the form of the novel represents a triumph all its own," with "every thread of the tale followed and resolved with clarity and comedy."[5] Monroe Spears says it is a "comic epic in the great tradition of Cervantes and Fielding with a suspenseful and elaborate plot skillfully managed and the little world of New Orleans encompassing the whole modern world."[6] Some critics contend that the plot is disorganized, the characters overdone, the humor old-fashioned.[7] But as Friedman concludes

> No attack can seriously damage a text as energetic, resourceful, and supple as this one. It resists the corrosion of our criticism. The novel astonishes with its inventiveness, it lives in the play of its voices. A Confederacy of Dunces is nothing less than a grand comic fugue. 8

A Confederacy of Dunces is the story of Ignatius Reilly who, as Walker Percy notes in his forward, is "without progenitor in any literature I know of--slob extraordinary, a mad Oliver Hardy, a fat Don Quixote, a perverse Thomas Aquinas rolled into one." He further describes Ignatius as an

> intellectual, idealogue, deadbeat, goof-off, glutton who should repel the reader with his gargantuan bloats, his thunderous contempt and one-man war against everybody--Freud, homosexuals, heterosexuals, Protestants and the assorted excesses of modern times. 9

Ignatius besides being all those things Percy mentions, is a moviegoer. He is older than the moviegoers discussed in Chapters II and III. "I am thirty," Ignatius says. "I dust a bit. In addition, I am at the moment writing a lengthy indictment against our century. When ~~by~~ my brain begins to reel from my literary labors, I make an occasional cheese dip."[10] And he goes to the movies. "I don't understand this compulsion of mine for seeing movies; it almost seems as if movies are 'in my blood'" (p. 272). It's not surprising that Ignatius feels an almost genetic connection to the movies considering that his mother traces his conception to

> that horrible night she and Mr. Reilly had gone

> to the Prytania to see Clark Gable and Jean Harlow in Red Dust. In the heat and confusion that had followed their return home, nice Mr. Reilly had tried one of his indirect approaches and Ignatius was conceived. Poor Mr. Reilly, he had not gone to another movie as long as he lived (p. 110).

Mr. Reilly had never gone to another movie, but his son goes "almost every night."

Ignatius goes to the movies for some of the same reasons as Lucius Hutchfield and the teenagers in The Last Picture Show. He looks for models as Lucius does, not to imitate but as examples of what he considers a decadent society. He seeks escape as do the teenagers of Thalia, not from boredom but from the ridicule and harassment of society. However, the function of the movies in Ignatius' life is much more complex than in the lives of the characters previously discussed. Movies define Ignatius' life in a less obvious but more intricate way than they do Lucius' movie-made existence. Ignatius seeks escape from the complexities of modern life with which he cannot cope, an escape more difficult to achieve than the relief from boredom the Texas teenagers seek.

Ignatius is a scrambled study of fantasy vs. reality, appearance vs. essence. He is a bundle of contradictions tied together by a great desire to "direct" society, but forced to accept the role of observer, of moviegoer. Outside the theater, he sees the world as so many movie frames which he tries to edit

to fit his scenario of what society should be. When he is unsuccessful in his attempts to reform what he considers a world ruled by the "gods of Chaos, Lunacy and Bad Taste," he retreats to his haven, the Prytania Theater, where he can shout and berate the celluloid decadents without fear of failure (p. 46).

In his role as director, Ignatius is involved in a number of riotous escapades as he champions the cause of "taste and decency, theology and geometry," against the depravity of modern society (p. 19). Percy's suggestion that Ignatius is a "fat Don Quixote" seems especially appropriate, for example, when Ignatius tries to organize the Blacks in the Levy Pants factory where he works, in a demonstration to demand better working conditions. He calls this his "Crusade for Moorish Dignity." When the time for the actual confrontation arrives, however, Ignatius loses his crusader zeal and assumes his director's role, becoming more interested in filming the event than its success.

> Ignatius flipped his camera into action and aimed at the banner and the workers. "Will all of you please wave your sticks and stones again?" The workers complied merrily. "A bit more violently now. Brandish these weapons fiercely. Make faces. Scream. Perhaps some of you could jump up and down, if you don't mind" (p. 158).

He even predicts the economic success of his production. "At some future date all of us may realize some additional revenues

from the rental of this film to student organizations and other similarly appalling societies" (p. 159).

Another scenario Ignatius directs is his "Save the World Through Degeneracy," or "Sodomites for Peace" campaign, in which he attempts to organize a group of gays into a peace movement. His description of what was to be the organizational meeting for the group, reads like a set of stage directions.

> Cigarettes and cocktail glasses held like batons flew in the air. A small band of young men stood before the phonograph.... In the center of one knot of elegant guests a cowboy with a little riding crop flicked the crop at one of his fans, producing a response of exaggerated screaming and pleased giggling... (p. 335).

Both of these attempts to step "boldly into society" result in disaster (p. 146). Ignatius describes the Sodomites for Peace meeting as being like "the abortive Crusade for Moorish Dignity," saying he "had another debacle on his itching hands" (p. 347). So Ignatius retreats to the only place he feels secure and in command, the Prytania. Seated a "few rows from the screen his body filling the seat and protruding into the two adjoining ones," he can shout and admonish without fear of reprisal (p. 73).

Inside the theater, Ignatius satisfies a variety of needs. Rejected and ridiculed by society, he finds refuge in the confines of the theater. He has convinced himself that he is the only sane one in the world and that he is "surrounded

by a confederacy of dunces." He describes himself as "an anachronism," and says that "people realize this and resent it" (p. 78). Ignatius fantasizes that what people dislike about him is his mediaevalist interest in philosophy, theology and geometry and his insistence that society needs to be reformed. In reality, what society sees and resents is a thirty year old, overweight, unemployed, consumer of junk food, bad movies and inane television programs who wears a Mickey Mouse watch, drinks from a Shirley Temple mug and professes to be the epitome of culture and good taste.

In the darkness of the movie theater, Ignatius can be what he thinks he is, "an observer and a critic" (p. 69). No one can see that this voice that rants and raves about the excesses of modern society comes from an obese body who wears "voluminous trousers," moves in an elephantine fashion that "sends waves of flesh rippling beneath his clothes," and consumes several boxes of popcorn, candy and pop in the course of one movie (p. 19). The people who work at the theater have come to accept his bizarre behavior. Outside of an occasional, "'You'll have to do something,' the candy woman told the manager laconically. 'He's worse than ever tonight,'" the management leaves Ignatius alone (p. 76).

Ignatius professes to detest what he sees on the screen but he feels a compulsion to see every new film that

comes to the Prytania.

> Somehow I must be there on opening day. I can only imagine the film's latest horrors, its flaunting of vulgarity in the face of theology and geometry, taste and decency (p. 292).

In fact, he enjoys being shocked and stunned. He is willing to do anything including what he considers modern man's greatest perversion, work, just to get enough money to go to the movies. "So that his disbelieving eyes could drink in every blasphemous technicolored moment" (p. 308). "Drinking in" does not, however, usually describe a painful or unpleasant experience. Other comments Ignatius makes about his feeling towards various movies also indicate the contradiction between what he says and what he actually means or feels. There is a pleasure/pain emotion suggested by remarks about an "especially grueling, teen-age beach musical," during which he almost "collapsed watching the singing sequence on surfboard," or his description of a "new film featuring my favorite female star, whose recent musical excess stunned and overwhelmed me" (p. 252).

Besides satisfying Ignatius' need to get even with society for their treatment of him, the movies also satisfy Ignatius' sexual needs. Outside the theater his only successful sexual experience has been masturbation, and lately he hasn't even been able to succeed at that. His relationship with women is limited to his mother (whose tastes in clothes, friends, and entertainment he finds "appalling"), and a girl

named Myrna, a college acquaintance with whom he corresponds regularly. Myrna criticizes Ignatius' "impotent existence" and tells him what he needs is a "satisfying sexual encounter to purify his mind and body" (p. 99). Ignatius has always suspected Myrna of being "interested in him sexually," but she has "failed to 'make his blood rise,'" or anything else for that matter (p. 146). He is somewhat aroused by a photograph of a dancer at the Night of Joy bar. "Ignatius looked at the photograph once more, salivating slightly" (p. 347). It is the photograph, however, not the woman herself that excites him, the fantasy and not the reality.

Once again it is in the theater that Ignatius finds success. He becomes a voyeur deriving sexual pleasure from the "reels and reels of perversion" he watches through the keyhole of the camera lens. He protests that his "virginal mind is shocked by the filmed abortion" he sees. He watches a kissing scene with great interest but says, "They probably have halitosis. I hate to think of the obscene places that those mouths have doubtlessly been before!" (p. 76). He tries to give the impression that he despises such activity, but it is obvious that he thoroughly enjoys it. He needs his women larger than life so he can examine every inch in intimate detail.

She smiled in a huge close-up. Ignatius

> inspected her teeth for cavities and fillings. She extended one leg. Ignatius rapidly surveyed its contours for structural defects (p. 75).

The rest of this passage describes Ignatius' imagined copulation with the movie heroine.

> Rhythmically swinging back and forth on a trapeze, she began to sing about trying over and over again until you succeeded. Ignatius quivered as the philosophy of the lyrics became clear. Finally unable to contain himself any longer he shouts, "Oh good heavens!" as popcorn spilled down his trousers on to the floor of the theater (p. 75).

Pauline Kael's book, I Lost It at the Movies, could have been written by Ignatius, but Ignatius also finds something at the movies. What he finds is a forum for his scathing comments on society and a medium that provides immense sensual pleasure for an appetite that is equaled only by his love for food.

Toole's almost Joycean review of art, philosophy, history, religion and music as well as his comments on the ideologies and idiosyncracies of popular culture are seen against the background of Ignatius' struggles with the real and the unreal, what is and what appears to be, the world of the screen and the streets of New Orleans. This gargantuan voyeur relishes every moment he spends watching movies in spite of what he says. In the tradition of the Southern grotesque, Ignatius engages the reader's sympathies, allows an identification with many of his "causes," and yet prevents a total acceptance of him as a real person by his weird behavior.

Ignatius is an unusual moviegoer. Toole has fabricated him from an assortment of persons, not a single model. Of all the moviegoers discussed in this thesis, he is the least typical example of a member of the movie generation. The function of the movies in his life is not as much a result of the climate of the times as the others. He is a moviegoer whether he goes to movies or not. His whole life is an illusion; his huge body a close-up of the contradictions of modern society; his absurd behavior a comic comment on those who take life too seriously. Toole's ultimate joke is Ignatius' suggestion that his Journal, which contains his analysis of society's ills and recommendations for reform, has "wonderful film possibilities at the hands of a Walt Disney" (p. 412).

NOTES

Chapter IV

[1] Walker Percy, Foreward, A Confederacy of Dunces by John Kennedy Toole (New York: Grove Press, 1980), p. 11.

[2] Contemporary Authors (Detroit: Gale Research Co.), 104, 477.

[3] Alan Friedman, "A Sad and Funny Story," New York Times Book Review, 22 June 1980, p. 7.

[4] Richard Brown, "Tacky Vocation," The Times Literary Supplement, 18 July 1980, p. 672.

[5] Phelps, Gay, New Republic, 19 July 1980, p. 34.

[6] Monroe K. Spears, "A New Orleans Epic," The Lone Star Book Review, 2, No. 1 (June-July, 1980), 30.

[7] Contemporary Authors, p. 478.

[8] Friedman, p. 27.

[9] Percy, Foreward, p. 12.

[10] John Kennedy Toole, A Confederacy of Dunces (New York: Grove Press, 1980), p. 19. All further references to this work appear in the text.

CHAPTER V

Binx Bolling: The Moviegoer As Looker

In 1962, the National Book Award was given to an unknown Louisiana writer, Walker Percy for his first novel, The Moviegoer. Percy, then forty-six, was born in Birminghan, Alabama, and grew up in Greenville, Mississippi. He received an M.D. degree from Columbia University but contracted tuberculosis during his internship and was never able to practice medicine. It was while he was a patient in a TB sanitarium that Percy began to write. Except for occasional stints as guest lecturer or writer-in-residence appointments at the University of New Orleans, Walker Percy lives in Covington, a small town near New Orleans. He has subsequently written four more novels and numerous essays and articles.

Percy has several things in common with the authors of the other three works previously discussed: all were born in the South, got their undergraduate degrees from southern universities, and used the South as the setting for most of their fiction. There is no necessary significance to the Southern background of these authors; the most significant similarity for purposes of this thesis is that three of the four, Percy, McMurtry, and Madden, are avid moviegoers.

Percy's moviegoing began in the 1930's when he was a

student at the University of North Carolina. He describes his undergraduate days as spent "mostly rocking on the front porch of the SAE house in the morning and going to movies in the afternoon."[1] An article Percy wrote for a campus publication when he was a sophomore reveals his thorough knowledge of Hollywood's actors, actresses and movies. Called "The Movie Magazine: A Low Slick," the article describes the fan magazines of the 1930's. Percy points out that the average reader of film magazines "does not know acting from arm waving" and is only interested in the gossip stories about the screen personalities.[2] He is critical of the readers of these slick magazines but obviously well acquainted with the movie stars being gossiped about. It is interesting that Percy's own moviegoer, whom he wrote about some thirty years later, sees movie stars not as people but only as screen personalities.

Percy's moviegoing continued during his days as a medical student at Columbia University. In fact, he says that his desire to go to the movies was stronger then than before. He describes his moviegoing not as an escape but a chance to see "how people looked at the world, what they thought--just as a doctor does."[3]

In 1950, after he had completely recovered from TB and determined that he would not be able to practice medicine, Percy bought his present home in Covington. He was looking for

quiet and seclusion. He went to church regularly and visited relatives and friends, but his only other activity outside his home was going to the movies.

> In the nineteen forties and nineteen fifties, much more than today, I'd keep on going to the movies. Don't ask me for my reason; don't ask me why I go to the movies. I just like them. Of course they do get my mind going. 4

It is not unusual then that Percy's first novel is a story about a moviegoer. However, as Percy says, the book is more complicated than that. In fact, it is possible to read this book on a variety of levels depending on one's interest. The philosophically-oriented reader will find Binx Bolling following Kierkegaard's three steps to discover the meaning of life: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. The influence of the works of Heidegger and Marcel is also evident in the book.[5] The religiously-oriented reader can examine Percy's ideas on modern Christianity which are especially interesting in the light of Percy's conversion to Catholicism in 1947. On another level, the book may be read for its regional literature qualities. It is a good picture of the South, particularly the city of New Orleans. Aunt Emily serves as a symbol of a dying southern aristocracy struggling to keep some vestige of nobility alive in her nephew Binx. Binx's quest for identity and meaning fits the archetypal

pattern of the hero quest. The level of interest for this thesis, while necessarily including aspects of these other themes, is basically sociological. What does The Moviegoer tell the reader about society in the middle fifties through the character of Binx Bolling and his obsessive moviegoing? What is the function of the movies in Binx's life?

Binx uses the movies to satisfy some of the same needs as the moviegoers discussed previously. He is a grown up Lucius Hutchfield who, at age thirty, is still imitating the looks, gestures, and approach to life of the movie stars. Like the Texas teenagers, he seeks an escape from boredom, relief from what he calls "everydayness." He shares Ignatius' disgust of modern society, but rather than look for further evidence of decline, he searches for solutions on the screen. Ignatius is an observer, reinforcing conclusions he has already reached; Binx is a looker, searching for answers.

By 1955, the year The Moviegoer took place, television had become more than just a feature of bars, particularly in a city like New Orleans. Binx, however, still chooses to go to movies nearly every night. During the eight days that make up the novel, he goes to four movies, and refers to twelve specific and several unidentified movies as well as thirty-seven actors and eight actresses. He says he likes any movie, "even bad movies," and it is the bad movies and the second-rate

actors he chooses to imitate.

The Western is considered by many critics to be the best type of film produced during this decade. Binx could have seen such classics as High Noon with Gary Cooper or Shane with Alan Ladd. Instead he goes to Fort Dobbs with Clint Walker. He remembers seeing such films as The Third Man, The Oxbow Incident, and Gone With the Wind, but the films he goes to now are not of that quality. The movies and the stars he talks about seem to match the "malaise," the "everydayness" he finds himself surrounded by.

Another example of this apparent acceptance of the mediocre is seen in Binx's choice of male movie stars for models for his love-making activities. His choice of Rory Calhoun for a "patron saint" in preference to Clark Gable, Cary Grant or Burt Lancaster, suggests that perhaps he feels less intimidated by what might be considered a more achievable model. He is an example of what Aunt Emily means when she comments that "ours is the only civilization that has enshrined mediocrity as its national ideal."[6]

Binx's personality exhibits some of the same contradictions found in Ignatius. Binx is the ultimate conformist who "takes pleasure in doing all that is expected of me" (p. 13). He once thought of going into law or medicine but found "there

is much to be said for giving up such grand ambitions and living the most ordinary life possible" (p. 15). This is what he says, yet he is extremely unhappy and bored with the ordinary life he leads and looks to the movies and the movie stars for help in breaking out of this humdrum existence. He wants to be a "somebody who is going somewhere" so he tries out various movie stars' personalities in the hope that one of them will give him a clue to what and who he is.

Besides seeing himself as various movie stars, Binx makes constant comparisons of other people and situations to movie plots and characters hoping to make them more interesting and exciting. His business friend, Eddie Lovell, has eyes that are attractively "everted in a Charles Boyer pout" (p. 22). Aunt Emily's servant, Mercer, has a dignified "Adolph Menjou mustache" (p. 25). Harold, an old war buddy, he characterizes as an "unlikely hero, I don't mean he is a modest little fellow like Audie Murphy--Audie Murphy is a hero and looks like a hero" (p. 168). He can't remember Harold's wife's name, but he remembers that she looks a little like Veronica Lake.

Everything that happens or has happened to Binx, he sees in relation to a movie star or a particular movie.

> Other people, so I have read, treasure memorable moments in their lives: the time one climbed the Parthenon at sunrise. What I remember is the time John Wayne killed three men with a carbine

> as he was falling to the dusty street in Stage-coach and the time the kitten found Orson Welles in the doorway in The Third Man (p. 14).

He remembers "William Powell, George Brent and Patsy Kelly and Charley Chase, the best friends of my childhood" (p. 168). He recalls the death of his older brother by saying, "It reminds me of a movie I saw last month" (p. 11). He even talks about an injury he receives in a car accident as a "decent wound, as decent as any inflicted on Rory Calhoun or Tony Curtis" (p. 104). The moviegoer is a pathetic figure, who like Lucius, recites a litany to the movie stars rather than the saints when confronted with a difficult situation: "O Tony, O Rory, Bill Holden, my noble Will. O ye morning stars together" (p. 104). He is incapable of independent emotions, judgments or friendships. The pathos of his condition is heightened by the fact that he is aware that there must be something better.

Binx is a Jekyll/Hyde personality. By day he conforms to what is expected of him; by night he goes to the movies to look for an identity that will free him from that conformity, not recognizing that what he sees on the screen represents another kind of conformity. The stars he sees and imitates are caught in stereotypical roles as confining as his own everyday existence. He is a part of this society, living in what he calls "the very century of merde, the great shithouse of scientific humanism where needs are satisfied, everyone

becomes an anyone" (p. 180). He is at the same time an insider and an outsider. He alternates between despair and hope. Some days he chooses everydayness because it is simpler to "pursue money and on the whole feel better" (p. 156). He is willing to settle for "the little Way, not the big search for the big happiness but the sad little happiness of drinks and kisses, a good little car and a warm deep thigh" (p. 111). Other times he frantically searches for that which will give him a unique personality. His search has led him to the movies but what he has become is a veritable Frankenstein of bits and fragments of the many screen personalities he imitates. He tries to construct a new person from what he sees on the screen but for the most part he finds only frustration.

Finally, towards the end of the book, Binx has an experience that offers great possibilities for breaking the malaise, the monotony of his everyday life, and perhaps for allowing him to take that final step toward establishing who he is and what he should do. He and his fiancée, Kate, take a train trip to Chicago for a business convention. He recalls that is is "ten years since I last enjoyed the peculiar gnosis of trains" (p. 147). He anticipates that this will be his moment of truth. To him the train is "an 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" (p. 147). It is a "unique voyage through space-time" (p. 152). Binx hopes that on this voyage he will finally solve his dilemma. Lately he has not been able to maintain his dual role of conformist and seeker. He is having more and more difficulty returning to his Jekyll personality. "In the past few days my life has gone to seed. I no longer eat and sleep regularly and my fingernails are dirty. The search has spoiled the pleasure of my tidy and ingenious life in Gentilly" (p. 152).

In a sense, the train is like a movie theater--it is a relatively small, confined space, admittance is regulated, a certain amount of time is allotted for the journey. This time, however, Binx is no longer the looker, he is the star, but he finds he is not quite ready to play the role unassisted; he is still unsure of himself. He debates whether to try for a "Rhett/Scarlett" scenario or a "Debbie/Rory" approach and once again chooses mediocrity instead of excellence. He tries to make love to Kate as he thinks Rory Calhoun would, knowing perhaps that he can never achieve the style of Clark Gable. Kate is obviously not a Debbie Reynolds and Binx cannot even manage Rory's techniques. "We did badly and almost did not do at all" (p. 159). He is reduced to his own identity for once in his life, but to his surprise Kate is not disappointed in his lack of sexual prowess and is quite willing to accept him

as he is, stripped of all his disguises.

Binx and Kate go to one final movie in Chicago. "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-presence of another day" (p. 167). It is a farewell visit. Binx leaves the theater and leaves behind the ghosts of those "spirit-presences" he has depended on for so long. He returns to New Orleans with a degree of confidence he has never felt before.

Binx has one brief relapse when confronted by the anger of his Aunt Emily who is upset because he didn't tell her he was taking Kate to Chicago with him. He thinks Aunt Emily has convinced Kate to leave him and in a panic he calls Sharon, his most recent lover, desperately needing someone to be with. He once again calls on his patron saint for help, "I've got to find her, Rory" (p. 181). He discovers that Sharon is out of town so he decides to settle for her roommate, Joyce. Reverting to his former self, he tries to attract Joyce by imitating Marlon Brando. Just then Kate drives up and Binx realizes that she has not left him after all.

Binx's confidence is restored and the couple renew their intention to marry. Binx has promised Aunt Emily he will return and tell her what he plans to do with his life. Throughout the book, Aunt Emily has been encouraging him to do

something meaningful with his life" (p. 178). She has given him an ultimatum, forcing him to make a formal statement of his plans. "What do you think is the purpose of life--to go to the movies and dally with every girl that comes along?" (p. 179).

Binx is now ready to answer her. His search is over.

> 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 (p. 184).

The moviegoer has come out of the theater into the world. He is ready to start really looking at people and himself, not in the context of the movies and the movie stars they resemble, but for what they are and what they want to be. By doing this Binx now hopes to see where he fits in the world.

As mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, there are many levels at which one can read this book. However, any level of discussion must recognize that basically Binx is a moviegoer. Philosophically, he is a Christian existentialist concerned with life and the meaning of life; culturally, he is a Southerner rebelling against Aunt Emily's Southern stoicism. He fulfills all the requirements of the archetypal pattern of the hero quest as he seeks his place in the world, but he remains essentially a moviegoer from the movie generation. The frustrations and alternating moods of conformity and rebellion that he seeks to alleviate by losing himself in the movie world,

while certainly not confined to this decade, do make a valid statement of the cultural climate of the middle fifties. The boredom, the mediocrity, the malaise, the conformity that so disturb Binx are the same terms used by sociologists and cultural anthropologists to describe this era.

While not limited to those of us from the movie generation who remember Binx's movie heroes, the insights to be gained from The Moviegoer take on a unique meaning for those for whom

> The Hollywood film created a meretricious reality into which we could enter, which bothers us both for its meretriciousness and for its reality. We are Walker Percy's Moviegoer aware at last of our own reality because we have walked down the same street as William Holden. 7

Walker Percy has given the reader a glimpse of America in 1955 and some clues as to why so many of its citizens were, like Binx Bolling, moviegoers. It is a tribute to the genius of Walker Percy that this is not all there is to see.

NOTES

Chapter V

[1] Scott Byrd, "Mysteries and Movies: Walker Percy's College Articles and The Moviegoer," Mississippi Quarterly, 25 (1972), 167.

[2] Byrd, p. 174.

[3] Robert Coles, Walker Percy, An American Search (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1978), p. 63.

[4] Coles, p. 73.

[5] For a more complete analysis of the influence of these philosophers on Percy's writings see the following:

Panthea Broughton, The Art of Walker Percy: Stratagems for Being (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979).

Robert Coles, Walker Percy: An American Search (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1978).

Jac Tharpe, Walker Percy: Art and Ethics (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1980).

[6] Walker Percy, The Moviegoer (New York: Avon Books, 1960), p. 177. All further references to this book appear in the text.

[7] Robert D. Marcus, "Moviegoing and American Culture," Journal of Popular Culture, 3, No. 4 (1970), 755.

CHAPTER VI

Conclusion

Historian Henry Steele Commager says that, "imaginative literature could faithfully replace the documentary record of the contemporary scene."[1] While the four novels examined in this thesis do not qualify as replacements for the documentary record of the decade 1945-1955, they do provide some insights into an important element of that contemporary scene--moviegoing.

Nearly everyone went to the movies during this pre-television era but movies were more a part of the life of adolescents like Lucius Hutchfield and the teenagers of Thalia, and young adults like Binx Bolling, than the younger or older members of this generation.

Teenagers of today experience the same boredom, frustrations and growing pains as those described in Bijou and The Last Picture Show, but they have a choice of media to distract them and shape their fantasies--television, stereos and the ubiquitous video games. Teenagers of the movie generation basically had the choices described in these two novels, sex and the movies. Modern teenagers no longer idolize and imitate movie stars as Lucius and the teenagers of Thalia did, but moviegoing continues to be a popular form of entertainment for adolescents. It has had to adapt and change

to accommodate its audience. Bijou and The Last Picture Show therefore provide a record of the role movies played in the lives of teenagers of the movie generation.

The kinds of movies Ignatius Reilly sees and some of the references he makes to social and political problems obviously place him in the movie generation, but he is literally too big to be confined to any one decade. A Confederacy of Dunces is the story of a huge, comical moviegoer who comments on the over-indulgent, tasteless society of the early fifties exemplified in the films it produces. However, using the book to illustrate the theme of moviegoing in this decade, while valid, admittedly barely touches Toole's masterpiece. The book contributes to the documentary record of this era, but it has much to say to society in general. As critic Alan Friedman says, "Toole may write of kooks, but he thinks of men."[2] Ignatius may be a movie generation moviegoer, but as he himself says, he is an anachronism. He fits nowhere, yet he fits everywhere. There is a little of Ignatius in everyone.

The Moviegoer also goes beyond documenting the movie generation, but Binx is tied to the fifties more than Ignatius is. Percy provides names of specific films and stars from this decade that Binx imitates. The boredom, the "malaise," the "everydayness," that he so despises, while not unique to this civilization "that has enshrined mediocrity as its national

ideal," are words commonly used by historians to describe the decade. Whatever level of interpretation one gives this book starts with the fact that Binx is an habitual moviegoer whose life is intimately connected to the movies in a way that is seldom found in moviegoers today. Binx's identification with and imitation of screen personalities depends on a star system that no longer exists. It is possible to think of Ignatius without the label moviegoer; this label is essential to Binx.

Four novels cannot adequately describe the function of movies in a society, or even for one decade in the cultural history of that society. The "doodles on the walls of the cave" made by these four novelists, however, do present an accurate, if not complete, picture of this era and how movies affected the lives of some of the members of the movie generation. Alfred Hitchcock once said, "Movies are not a slice of life, but a slice of cake."[4] However you choose to look at this complex phenomenon, the fact that movies and moviegoing are established institutions in our society is undeniable. Moviegoing will continue to be researched, analyzed and observed by social scientists, psychologists and novelists as long as there is someone who admits with Ignatius Reilly, "I really don't understand this compulsion of mine for seeing movies."[5]

NOTES

Chapter VI

[1] Henry Steele Commager, The American Mind (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), p. 56.

[2] Alan Friedman, New York Times Book Review, 19 April 1981, p. 27.

[3] Jack Ellis, A History of Film (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979), p. 272.

[4] Gerald Mast, A Short History of the Movies (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 271.

[5] John Kennedy Toole, A Confederacy of Dunces (New York: Grove Press, 1980), p.292.

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