

Document A

Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (1960)

This morning I got a note from my aunt asking me to come for lunch. I know what this means. Since I go there every Sunday for dinner and today is Wednesday, it can mean only one thing: she wants to have one of her serious talks. It will be extremely grave, either a piece of bad news about her stepdaughter Kate or else a serious talk about me, about the future and what I ought to do. It is enough to scare the wits out of anyone, yet I confess I do not find the prospect altogether unpleasant.

I remember when my older brother Scott died of pneumonia. I was eight years old. My aunt had charge of me and she took me for a walk behind the hospital. It was an interesting street. On one side were the power plant and blowers and incinerators of the hospital, all humming and blowing out a hot meaty smell. On the other side was a row of Negro houses. Children and old folks and dogs sat on the porches watching us. I noticed with pleasure that Aunt Emily seemed to have all the time in the world and was willing to talk about anything I wanted to talk about. Something extraordinary had happened all right. We walked slowly in step. "Jack," she said, squeezing me tight and smiling at the negro shacks, "you and I have always been good buddies, haven't we?" "Yes ma'am." My heart gave a big pump and the back of my neck prickled like a dog's. "I've got bad news for you, son." She squeezed me tighter than ever. "Scotty is dead. Now it's all up to you. It's going to be difficult for you but I know you're going to act like a soldier." This was true. I could easily act like a soldier. Was that all I had to do?

It reminds me of a movie I saw last month out by Lake Pontchartrain. Linda and I went out to a theater in a new suburb. It was evident somebody had miscalculated, for the suburb had quit growing and here was the theater, a pink stucco cube, sitting out in a field all by itself. A strong wind whipped the waves against the seawall; even inside you could hear the racket. The movie was about a man who lost his memory in an accident and as a result lost everything: his family, his friends, his money. He found himself a stranger in a strange city. Here he had to make a fresh start, find a new place to live, a new job, a new girl. It was supposed to be a tragedy, his losing all this, and he seemed to suffer a great deal. On the other hand, things were not so bad after all. In no time he found a very picturesque place to live, a houseboat on the river, and a very handsome girl, the local librarian.

After the movie Linda and I stood under the marquee and talked to the manager, or rather listened to him tell his troubles: the theater was almost empty, which was pleasant for me but not for him. It was a fine night and I felt very good. Overhead the blackest sky I ever saw; a black wind pushed the lake toward us. The waves jumped over the seawall and spattered the street. The manager had to yell to be heard while from the sidewalk speaker directly over his head came the twittering conversation of the amnesiac and the librarian. It was the part where they are going through the newspaper files in search of some clue to his identity (he has a vague recollection of an accident). Linda stood by unhappily. She was unhappy for the same reason I was happy—because we were at a neighborhood theater out in the sticks and without a car (I have a car but I prefer to ride buses and streetcars). Her idea of happiness is to drive downtown and have supper at the Blue Room of the Roosevelt Hotel. This I am obliged to do from time to time. It is worth it, however. On these occasions Linda becomes as exalted as I am now. Her eyes glow, her lips becomes moist, and when we dance she brushes her fine long legs against mine. She actually loves me at these times—and not as

45 a reward for being taken to the Blue Room. She loves me because she feels exalted in this romantic place and not in a movie out in the sticks.

But all this is history. Linda and I have parted company. I have a new secretary, a girl named Sharon Kincaid.

50 For the past four years now I have been living uneventfully in Gentilly, a middle class suburb of New Orleans. Except for the banana plants in the patios and the curlicues of iron on the Walgreen drugstore one would never guess it was part of New Orleans. Most of the houses are either old-style California bungalows or new-style Daytona cottages. But this is what I like about it. I can't stand the old world atmosphere of the French Quarter or the genteel charm of the Garden District. I lived in the Quarter for two years, but in the end I got
55 tired of Birmingham businessmen smirking around Bourbon Street and the homosexuals and patio connoisseurs on Royal Street. My uncle and aunt live in a gracious house in the Garden District and are very kind to me. But whenever I try to live there, I find myself first in a rage during which I develop strong opinions on a variety of subjects and write letters to editors, then in a depression during which I lie rigid as a stick for hours staring straight up at the
60 plaster medallion in the ceiling of my bedroom.

Life in Gentilly is very peaceful. I manage a small branch office of my uncle's brokerage firm. My home is the basement apartment of a raised bungalow belonging to Mrs Schexnaydre, the widow of a fireman. I am a model tenant and a model citizen and take
65 pleasure in doing all that is expected of me. My wallet is full of identity cards, library cards, credit cards. Last year I purchased a flat olive-drab strongbox, very smooth and heavily built with double walls for fire protection, in which I placed my birth certificate, college diploma, honorable discharge, G.I. insurance, a few stock certificates, and my inheritance: a deed to ten acres of a defunct duck club down in St Bernard Parish, the only relic of my father's many
70 enthusiasms. It is a pleasure to carry out the duties of a citizen and to receive in return a receipt or a neat styrene card with one's name on it certifying, so to speak, one's right to exist. What satisfaction I take in appearing the first day to get my auto tag and brake sticker! I subscribe to Consumer Reports and as a consequence I own a first-class television set, an all but silent air conditioner and a very long lasting deodorant. My armpits never stink. I pay
75 attention to all spot announcements on the radio about mental health, the seven signs of cancer, and safe driving—though, as I say, I usually prefer to ride the bus. Yesterday a favorite of mine, William Holden, delivered a radio announcement on litterbugs. "Let's face it," said Holden. "Nobody can do anything about it—but you and me." This is true. I have been careful ever since.

80 In the evenings I usually watch television or go to the movies. Week-ends I often spend on the Gulf Coast. Our neighborhood theater in Gentilly has permanent lettering on the front of the marquee reading: Where Happiness Costs So Little. The fact is I am quite happy in a movie, even a bad movie. Other people, so I have read, treasure memorable moments in their lives: the time one climbed the Parthenon at sunrise, the summer night one met a lonely girl in Central Park and achieved with her a sweet and natural relationship, as they say in books. I
85 too once met a girl in Central Park, but it is not much to remember. What I remember is the time John Wayne killed three men with a carbine as he was falling to the dusty street in *Stagecoach*, and the time the kitten found Orson Welles in the doorway in *The Third Man*.

Document B

Louis Weinberg, "Motion Pictures as a Social Force", *Current History Magazine* (April, 1925)

In the thirty-one years which have passed since the World's Fair visitors enjoyed their peep-hole thrill, the business of making, distributing, and exhibiting motion pictures has become one of the largest in the United States, with an investment of more than \$1,000,000,000 and an army of more than 300,000 employees. As an art providing a new form of entertainment, the motion picture play leads in popularity; 17,900 film theatres seat 7,650,000, and have collected in paid admissions approximately \$900,000,000 in a single year. As a means of education the motion picture theatres constitute a people's university, bringing to theatergoers the sights and doings of the world, the drama of the past, the wonders of invention, science, art. Motion pictures are today finding a place in the study program of schools and colleges. Therefore, despite the fact that during the period of their evolution innumerable diatribes have been written against the "movies," those who are interested in contemporary life must reckon with them as one of the outstanding phenomena of modern times, an instrument which seems destined to take its place alongside the written alphabet and the printed word as among the modern world's most far-reaching social forces, its overcrowded cities setting the world's standards of living and of entertainment; standards which cannot be maintained without large scale production and large scale distribution.

It is in the nature of this high speed system that millions of the city workers, caught in the grind and the routine of their daily tasks, overwrought by the whirl of business deals, inhibiting the natural play of mind, muscle, mood, should seek escape in some medium of swift experience which brings visions of financial success, of free, unrestrained joy, of the thrills and dangers of outdoor adventures. It is also in the nature of our industrial order to stimulate in our rural population a desire for the luxuries, the pleasures, real or imaginary, to be found in the big city. Painting, sculpture, architecture, the old arts and the spoken drama, the opera, music, each had once served some age or people as a prime means for vicarious experience and release from dreams and longings. But these at their best can be found only in a few favored centres. Their polished perfection can reach only a very limited number. On the other hand, the simpler community dances and festivals have disappeared with the constant mixing and shifting of the present-day town and village population. In our own country the grouped folk arts never took strong roots. Before the advent of the motion picture, the lesser towns had to content themselves for their entertainment with the occasional visit of a barnstorming company, vaudeville troupe or lecturer. Innumerable villages, the centres of farming communities, were left practically untouched by any formal entertainment other than speeches, sermons and the music attending church services or patriotic celebrations.

The need of providing modern entertainment, as in providing the other needs of present-day life, was for some medium which would permit inexpensive duplication, nation-wide, even world-wide distribution. This need, so peculiar to our machine system, was met by the movies. The duplication of prints in motion pictures involves no loss in quality. The theatre in the smallest towns can show its audiences the exact reproduction of the original print. That at the present time the dwellers in the hinterland wish to share in the entertainment thrill of the metropolitan centres of the world is proved by the nation-wide demand for pictures based on plays which have seen production in the theatres of New York. Esthetes dwelling within ivory towers deplore this democratization of art. They insist that with the broadening of the appeal of a work of art come cheapness, coarseness. They seem to forget that the whole tendency of history has been toward the perfection of forms for the increasing carrying power of art; and that these new forms have each in turn been used for master works of broad human appeal. The written alphabet, the printed word and the public theatre each has tended to democratize the primitive art of story telling. Engraving, etching, lithography, the half-tone and the line-cut, each of these processes served to carry a single picture to a larger and larger circle. The new form of story telling through the printing of motion pictures is the only medium which can take the place in the modern world of the story telling media and the pictorial media of the past. They make it more than likely that the whole world will yet respond as one tribe to the picture stories presented by the bards of the future.

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Document C

**Edward Hopper, *New York Movie* (oil on canvas, 1939)
81,9 x 101,9 cm, Museum of Modern Art (New York)**

