EDUCATIONAL THEORY

WALKER PERCY'S *THE MOVIEGOER*: ON THE EXISTENTIAL NOVEL AS EDUCATIONAL TEXT

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Abstract. In this essay, Kip Kline and Kathleen Knight Abowitz use Walker Percy's novel *The Moviegoer* to examine the existential plight of young Americans today who, as they turn the broad and long corner from youth to adulthood, are engaged in a search for self-knowledge and identity construction. They are particularly interested in the young adult as "college student," engaged in the work of postsecondary education, autonomous from but often still very closely connected to their family of origin in a culture saturated by late-capitalist consumerism and commercial media. Kline and Knight Abowitz interpret this novel in order to examine a malaise specific to our current historical moment that may characterize how young people experience institutions such as U.S. colleges and universities as well as the institution of the contemporary American family. They also wish to show that particular themes in existentialism, which can be teased out in novels such as *The Moviegoer*, can assist our analysis of the contemporary malaise of the college student and provide theorists, educators, and advocates with possible ways of responding to it.

Key Words. existentialism; late capitalism; hyperdetermined identity; Jean Baudrillard; philosophy of higher education

In the post–World War II mood of existentialism that was born in Europe and found significant expression in U.S. culture, American novelist Walker Percy wrote his first novel, *The Moviegoer*, published in 1961.[1] In protagonist John Bickerson Bolling, Binx for short, Percy created an enduring, though now temporally obscured, source of wisdom about the inner life and existential dilemmas of young adults in advancing capitalist societies. Walker was a "nonpracticing physician and self-taught philosopher in early middle age" at the time he wrote the novel, which deals with "the search for authenticity in a scripted, stylized, mediated world."[2] Of the novel, one critic has recently written,

> Binx Bolling is late coming of age, but Percy's novel of Binx's coming of age was ahead of its time. With its slack and offhand protagonist, its present-tense narration, its effortless mix of informal speech, images from popular culture, and frank ruminations on the meaning of life, *The Moviegoer* is, in my estimation, the first work of what we call contemporary American

1. Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (New York: Vintage, 1998). This work will be cited in the text as *TM* for all subsequent references.

2. Paul Elie, "We Still Live within the Mediated, Alienated World of 'The Moviegoer,'" *New Yorker*, January 2, 2019.

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> fiction, the earliest novel to render a set of circumstances and an outlook that still feel recognizably ours.[3]

An enthusiast sums up the work of Binx's creator by saying, "He knew something that you did, but weren't able to articulate. He was letting you in on your secret."[4]

There is a sense in which Binx is letting us in on an American secret — a secret of young adults that drives their search for meaning in the postwar, mass consumerist era, an epoch in which it seems "everyone is dead" (*TM*, 86). Through the character of Binx Bolling, Percy puts us in touch with the kind of estrangement from ourselves that starts us on an existential search that was acutely familiar to young adults in 1960s America, although in different formulations, and that is still very much with us today. Binx is a young, college-educated man of Southern white middle-class stock, a Korean War veteran now existing in the new suburban landscape, a successful stockbroker on the verge of entering his thirties, a lapsed Catholic, a playboy. His quest to avoid what he calls the "malaise" continues to resonate with dilemmas of meaning, identity, and responsibility that are still felt today.

Our primary aim in this essay is to offer a reading of the novel *The Moviegoer* that examines how its philosophical themes of existentialism are worked out in the tale of Binx Bolling at a significant juncture of his life, as he is about to enter his thirties. The novel's existential themes, revealed through Binx's struggles, offer a window into the mid-twentieth-century quests for meaning among young adults, as seen from the perspective of our current era, where questions of authenticity, anxiety, lack of faith, freedom, and personal responsibility are all around us. We interpret this novel in order to provide some additional perspective on these struggles within contemporary postcapitalist societies such as the United States. To be clear, our analysis is not, strictly speaking, one of systematic existential philosophy. By almost any account, *The Moviegoer* is an existential novel. It certainly can be and has been analyzed through a specifically Kierkegaardian lens.[5] But our treatment of the book is broader. We understand its most pressing themes to be existential in a wide sense, but we analyze the novel using insights from existential philosophy as well from the postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard,

3. Ibid.

4. Doug Marlette, "I Was Binx Bolling," *Garden and Gun* (Summer 2007), 42–47.

5. See, for example, David Crowe, "Kierkegaardian Misreadings of Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*," *Christianity and Literature* 64, no. 2 (2015): 187–204.

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connecting our textual reading to themes of identity formation in the present era of late capitalism.[6]

The Moviegoer emerged in an existentialist cultural moment. The birth of the atomic age and the Cold War spurred cultural questions related to dread, absurdity, and anxiety, as old traditions and institutions seemed to be in decay. Existentialism in Europe, seen in the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir, was a powerful influence in the United States. "Nearly everyone, it seemed, coming of age in 1950s and 1960s America danced to the song of French existentialism," writes George Cotkin in *Existential America*.[7] The mood was seen in movies and novels as well as philosophical and nonfiction writings of the era, reflecting and fueling the cultural, civil rights, and moral revolutions that were all underway. An existential novel like *The Moviegoer* is an important educational text for examining the zeitgeist of this mid-twentieth-century period.

Yet as we show through our reading, the novel remains potent in our own time. Its themes of the existential plights that reside in life choices still hold relevance for today's emerging generations, turning what is often an increasingly broad and long corner from youth to adult. Where Binx had sports cars, television, and telephones as his defining technologies, our generation grapples with the freedoms and anxieties of smart phones, YouTube, TikTok, and lives lived through social media platforms.[8] Where Binx had the anxieties of the Cold War, today's young adults literally feel the heat of climate change. While the conditions have shifted, the existentialist mood lingers as today's new generations construct their identities and life paths.

The Moviegoer has much to say about the ways in which the construction and maintenance of an identity are limited and, we argue, hyperdetermined by the current sociopolitical and economic milieu. While the novel does not speak to all forms or manifestations of malaise, a critical reading of it can be used to generate ideas about setting the conditions for contemporary young adults, subjects whom Amanda Keddie calls "children of the market," to engage in a search for self that is perhaps less determined than Binx's.[9] Like Binx, younger adults face the threat of being assigned precoded identities that may not represent meaningful choices or paths for their future — a phenomenon that is often reinscribed by educational institutions. In this essay, we imagine how educators might have a hand in reshaping conditions that allow for a more open search for identity.

Novels are a useful canvas for exploring philosophical themes, but not because they simplistically present heroic role models or archetypal characters; antiheroes such as Binx provide fantastic opportunities for self- and social examination. The

6. Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London: Sage, 1988).

7. George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 1.

8. Andrew Hausiaux, "Existentialism and Instagram," *Phi Delta Kappan* 101, no. 4 (2019): 48–51.

9. Amanda Keddie, "Children of the Market: Performativity, Neoliberal Responsibilisation and the Construction of Student Identities," *Oxford Review of Education* 42, no. 1 (2016): 109.

novel is a textual form well-suited for energizing public debate around educational issues, allowing philosophers of education in particular the canvas for expressing arguments that challenge the moral, social, and political norms of contemporary educational practices of families, cultural spaces, and educational institutions of all types. Art forms, including literary texts, were mistrusted by the ancient philosophers for their ability to stir emotion and imagination. Yet, as Alan Goldman notes, the novel's literary value "depends on this perfect union of form and content, grasped through imagination, feeling, and thought operating together."[10] Both the increasing threat of scientism in our contemporary institutions and the ubiquity of concern over "fake news" in our current sociopolitical landscape can result in a casting of doubt on the efficacy or appropriateness of fiction in providing useful arguments about matters of the world. We argue, however, that in this era of endless flows of information at dizzying speeds, a widening of the lens that fiction provides is precisely what we need. Specifically in educational philosophy, novels have offered philosophers unique, compelling canvases for interpretation and argumentation in the continental, pragmatist, and postmodern traditions.[11] In general, the novel provides particularity that can situate the broad, abstract themes of philosophy for more general audiences and, in the case of *The Moviegoer,* for wider conversations about the existential dilemmas of youth and young adults since the mid-twentieth century.

This is an important time to revisit existentialist fiction as a source of insight and wisdom relative to identity and human freedom. Young adults face many existential threats, some perhaps even more pressing than the identity threats we explore here. But they often do face particular kinds of pressure regarding identity that are unique to their age and stage of life. And though these threats are distinct today, they also have something in common with the plight of young people coming into adulthood during the mid-twentieth century, the context for Binx's story. Steven Mintz, Thomas Hine, and others remind us that childhood, adolescence, and youth are all constructed notions with shifting meanings across historical eras in America.[12] In *The Moviegoer,* the protagonist is a young adult negotiating the direction of his life at such a pivotal moment. The character and story of Binx Bolling, while the product of another era, is uniquely suited to our existential exploration of young adult subject positions in our present culture. Through this exploration, we argue that the idea of the malaise, a concept introduced by the

10. Alan H. Goldman, *Philosophy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2013), 3, DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199674459.001.0001.

11. Michael S. Katz, "On Becoming a Teacher: May Sarton's 'The Small Room,'" *Philosophy of Education*, ed. Susan Laird (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1997), 214–222; Peter Roberts, "Education and the Limits of Reason: Reading Dostoevsky," *Educational Theory* 62, no. 2 (2012): 203–223; and Aiden Curzon-Hobson, "Confronting the Absurd: An Educational Reading of Camus' *The Stranger*," *Educational Philosophy & Theory* 45, no. 4 (2013): 461–474.

12. Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* (New York: Harper, 1999); and Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

narrator, can be translated as an effect of the hyperdeterminacy of identity imposed by educational and familial institutions across the lifespan of youth.

The Search: Eluding the Malaise

A veteran of the Korean War, a bachelor stockbroker, a fraternity member, and a skeptical Catholic, Binx's narrative is one of searching, questioning, and reflecting on life's meaning and authentic ways of being in the world. Binx is a young adult who is a self-labeled "seeker," continually making attempts to avoid an unrelentingly, imminent malaise. Binx says, "The malaise is the pain of loss. The world is lost to you, the world and people in it, and there remains only you and the world and you are no more able to be in the world than Banquo's ghost" (*TM*, 120). Today's young adult might read the malaise through the perspectives of depression, anxiety, or similar mental health conditions that are increasingly common in their own time.

A complicated and often unpalatable antihero, Binx sometimes seeks to evade the malaise, and other times consciously seeks to make sense of it. He makes good money, lives in the sterile New Orleans' suburb of Gentilly, has flings with his secretaries, and drives a sports car. He also has complex relationships with his diverse, colorful Southern family members that inform his inner conflicts and search for meaning. The opening scene of the novel finds Binx attending to his Aunt Emily, the wealthy, intelligent and commanding matriarch of his dead father's aristocratic family: "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 her serious talks" (*TM*, 3). On his way to Aunt Emily's home, he confesses to the reader that "my peaceful existence in Gentilly has been complicated. This morning, for the first time in years, there occurred to me the possibility of a search" (*TM*, 10). Arriving at his aunt's home, he finds he is correct in his prediction of a "serious talk." On this day, Aunt Emily will speak of her wish that he enroll in medical school, following in his father's footsteps. Aunt Emily presses Binx to take up his proper place in his Louisiana white, middle-class world. This opening scene of the novel positions Binx, for readers, as a young adult in need of direction and management from his elders, on a correct life path. Simultaneously, the novel's opening positions him as a person struggling with despair, struggling with the search for existential meaning.

Like most young adults, Binx is very much connected and obligated to his family of origin but is also on his own in important ways, financially independent and in the world. (In today's times, he would likely be shouldering college debt.) He is a character in a liminal stage. One of the constant reminders of his youth is that he is addressed by others throughout the novel as a person in need of direction and, indeed, considers himself in need of direction and meaning. His father deceased and his mother remarried with another family to care for, Binx lacks a steady nuclear family but exists in a web of extended family relations that seek to mold him. As the book's opening passage signals, Binx is regularly subjected to the near unilateral conversations with his aunt during which she speaks to him less like an autonomous young man and more like a heteronomous adolescent in need of

her visualizations for his life, based in her sense of the family's traditions and standards. Throughout the novel, Binx seems wise and reflective in one moment, fickle and irresponsible in the next. At one point, he is expressing love and concern for his sick brother, and, at another, he seems to address imaginary movie star interlocutors. While he is often unlikable and rarely a sympathetic character to contemporary readers, he is nonetheless, in other moments, relatable.

The novel explores Binx's inner dialogue as he wrestles with choices about his future in the midst of his family pressing upon him the traditions or paths already laid out for him. He listens politely but seems unconnected (not unlike Banquo's ghost), mostly alone, wandering through his own life. He has moments of acute social observation, noticing the empty and shallow gestures we habitually perform. "People often ask me what is wrong with the world and also what I do in Gentilly, and I always try to give an answer . . . . I have noticed, however, that no one really wants to listen to an answer" (*TM*, 39). He forges his deepest connections with his devoutly religious, wheelchair-bound, young half-brother, Lonnie, and his psychologically unstable and depressive cousin, Kate.

As his family seeks to mold his future and secure his obligation, so does popular culture and its accompanying consumerism wield a powerful force. The novel's title importantly tells us that Binx goes to the movies, a site of constant fantasy and an omnipresent mediating force for him as he interprets the world. The movies, and the larger consumer culture they reference, are a primary way for Binx to evade the malaise, and a condition that readers of today's landscape can certainly understand.

Consumer culture helps Binx temporarily avoid his despair; contemporary readers will recognize this evasion, as these opportunities have been exponentially inflated in our own media-immersive time. As Binx's narrative illustrates, consumer culture turns out as often as not to be not so much escape as an impetus for a dive into despair. Consider Binx's reflection of a drive along the Gulf Coast with a former secretary named Marcia:

> The car itself is all-important, I have discovered. When I first moved to Gentilly, I bought a new Dodge sedan, a Red Ram Six. It was a comfortable, conservative and economical two-door sedan, just the thing it seemed to me, for a young Gentilly businessman. When I first slid under the wheel to drive it, it seemed that everything was in order — here was I, a healthy young man, a veteran with all his papers in order, a U.S. citizen driving a very good car. … Yet on my first trip to the Gulf Coast with Marcia, I discovered to my dismay that my fine new Dodge was a regular incubator of malaise. Though it was comfortable enough, though it ran like a clock, though we went spinning along in perfect comfort and with a perfect view of the scenery like the American couple in the Dodge ad, the malaise quickly became suffocating. We sat frozen in a gelid amiability. Our cheeks ached from smiling. … I longed to stop the car and bang my head against the curb. (*TM*, 121)

Throughout the novel, Binx alternates between seeking answers to, and side-stepping the malaise. His search is regularly punctuated by dalliances with his secretaries and going to the movies. The malaise he describes as narrator refers to an anxiety over being subsumed into an "everydayness" in which, not only excitement and a sense of being alive evaporate, but time and space also seem to disappear. He feels the encroachment of despair and deliberately makes moves designed to stave off becoming "an Anyone" and being "Anywhere" (*TM*, 69). He

craves uniqueness, consciousness, and authenticity. Moviegoing offers Binx not just the fantasy of consumer culture but also a way to fix himself in his own landscape, to be authentically in the world, if for only a while. He says of his moviegoing experience,

> If I did not talk to the theater owner or the ticket seller, I should be lost, cut loose metaphysically speaking. I should be seeing one copy of a film which might be shown anywhere and at any time. There is a danger of slipping clean out of space and time. It is possible to become a ghost and not know whether one is in downtown Loews in Denver or suburban Bijou in Jacksonville. So it was with me. (*TM*, 75)

Despite his strategies for eluding the malaise, there is something fundamental about the search that he tells us he is on in the novel's first pages. Binx's search is characterized by strategic existential moves, for which he has unique names. Terms like "certification," "rotation" and "repetition" are his unique labels for mental exercises he uses to find footholds of meaning in existence.[13] A certification happens, for instance, when a place becomes "someplace" by being in the movies (*TM*, 52). A repetition is "the reenactment of a 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" (*TM*, 79). A "rotation" is "the experiencing of the new beyond the expectation of the experiencing of the new" (*TM*, 144). All these things seem to have in common the ways in which Binx finds, in his "searching," an aspect of everyday life that can be taken apart, authentically "seen" or perceived, and then savored as fully experienced.

Binx's search for a relief from the malaise has multiple directions, varied paths. He speaks of his "vertical search," a past time when he "stood outside the universe and sought to understand it" through reading "fundamental" books, living in his room as "an Anyone living Anywhere" (*TM*, 69). He reads books such as Schrödinger's *What is Life?* and Einstein's *The Universe as I See it* in his vertical search, taking occasional walks as diversion from this intense life of the mind. At present, Binx tells us, he is on a "horizontal search" which is done outside his room as he wanders the neighborhood, but no longer as a diversion. Now, he says, "I wander seriously" (*TM*, 70). His wanderings take him through the worlds of movies, television, and celebrity culture. Binx confesses to his reader, "I subscribe to *Consumer Reports*, and as a result I won a first-class television set and a very long lasting deodorant. My armpits never stink" (*TM*, 7).

The search, for Binx, has a spiritual dimension. He "scribbles" a poem in the darkness of his room before bed one evening, allowing a skepticism and a nihilistic apathy at the heart of his malaise to be glimpsed. Called "Remember Tomorrow," it begins with the line, "Starting point for the search" and recounts the struggle to prove or believe in a God. Binx careens between his mother's provincial, devout

13. Percy's use of these terms, originally coined by Søren Kierkegaard, is one of the ways the novel borrowed from Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism. See Crowe, "Kierkegaardian Misreadings of Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*."

Catholicism and his paternal family's empty cultural religious observances. In the poem he scribbles in the dark, Binx concludes:

> The only possible starting point: the strange fact of one's own invincible apathy — that if the proofs were proved and God presented himself, nothing would be changed. Here is the strangest fact of all.
>
> Abraham saw signs of God and believed. Now the only sign is that all the signs in the world make no difference. Is this God's ironic revenge? But I am onto him. (*TM*, 146)

Binx's searches are attempts at avoiding death and the death-like traps of inauthentic, meaningless living that he feels looming as he makes the crossing from youth to adult in his life. As Binx's poem tells us, his search is distinctly Kierkegaardian, and Percy drew from his reading of the Christian existentialist in writing his novels.[14] Indeed, Binx can be understood as having taken a Kierkegaardian "leap of faith" at the conclusion of the novel. For Kierkegaard, a leap of faith was an act of relating oneself to "the absolute paradox" of the belief in God, knowing full well upon reasoned reflection that faith may likely prove absurd.[15] In the book's concluding pages, Binx seemingly makes such a leap: he leaps into the arms of his family's traditions of stoical men. The end of the book finds him, once again, summoned in to be reprimanded on his poor conduct, and his future, by Aunt Emily. This lecture happens on his birthday, as he reflects later:

> 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, … 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 … on this my thirtieth birthday, I know nothing and there is nothing to do but fall prey to desire. (*TM*, 228)

In the book's epilogue, Binx tells the reader that he is now attending medical school, has married, and settled down into the exact life his aunt wanted for him at the novel's beginning. The search is over; he succumbs to his Aunt Emily's vision for his life. Is this Sartrean "bad faith" — a false idol to help escape death through the comforts of conformity? While various critics debate this point, in our view, the reader is left to judge.[16] Although many of them deal with a range of material threats that do not touch Binx's life, most twenty-something readers of today would recognize his condition — his angst over an uncertain future. Certainly, young adults of our own era would understand Binx's choice to conform, albeit reluctantly, to the hyperdetermined path set by set by familial, economic, and social norms.

14. Bradley R. Dewey, "Walker Percy Talks about Kierkegaard: An Annotated Interview," *Journal of Religion* 54, no. 3 (1974): 273–298.

15. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, vol. 6 of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).

16. Cotkin, *Existential America*, 87.

The Hyperdetermination of Identity as Elusion of the Malaise

As Philip Simmons argues, Binx's search for consumerist relief from the malaise reveals a profound fear, one which is recognizable in contemporary times: "The coolness in his void, its complacent willingness to remain at the level of phenomena, is informed by an absurdist, existentialist fear of the void beneath the phenomenal surface."[17] Binx is, in David Crowe's words, "existentially curious in a half-conscious way, but mostly anxious, busily contriving methods for avoiding thoughts of his actual mortal predicament."[18] In this sense, he experiences a kind of anxiety that is readily familiar in the twenty-first century, even if the specific, associated artifacts might be different.

As we look back half a century, we can see that Binx represents the beginning of new generations of young adults targeted by consumerist cultures of capitalism and the economic pressures of global capitalism, a trend that would only become more aggressive and target younger and younger audiences into the late twentieth century and beyond. *The Moviegoer* "stands in the company of those novels and stories that document the malaise of the Eisenhower years, works that in various ways address the theme of spiritual poverty amid material prosperity."[19] Indeed, the Eisenhower years marked the beginning of a new era for the existentialist dilemmas described in the novel. The contemporary homogenization and consumerism in mass culture has now "so completely engulfed" our society as to be nearly like water to a fish — unable to be detected yet omnipresent.[20] Binx is on the cusp of this new epoch of the consumer subject; today, that subjectivity is formed not in twenty-nine-year-olds but in the womb. Twenty-first century children have known no other world but one in which identity and consumption often are indistinguishable; where personal identity is curated electronically and virtually; where individual human beings willingly turn themselves into "brands" and "influencers" in the service of other "brands." Children and educational institutions are implicated in this epoch. Keddie notes that the era

> utilises business-derived concepts of measurement, evaluation and comparison to represent school effectiveness and has reduced students (as well as teachers and schools) to "auditable commodities," so they may be efficiently held to account and assessed against quantifiable standards of "success." Students in today's classrooms … [are] crafting their identities and making sense of their educational and employment experiences and choices within the context of neoliberal imperatives. Given that these imperatives have been hegemonic in shaping social relations in contexts such as England [and North America] for approximately thirty years, they are seen by the current generation of students as natural or normal.[21]

17. Philip E. Simmons, "Toward the Postmodern Historical Imagination: Mass Culture in Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* and Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine*," *Contemporary Literature* 33, no. 4 (1992): 608.

18. Crowe, "Kierkegaardian Misreadings of Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*," 188.

19. Simmons, "Toward the Postmodern Historical Imagination," 605.

20. Ibid.

21. Keddie, "Children of the Market," 109.

Binx's world portrays the development of a youth consumer subjectivity on the rise; this aspect of what he calls malaise was in relative infancy when *The Moviegoer* was published in 1961. Interestingly, this was also the publication year of David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, which argued that modern citizens were obliged to produce a "personality" via consumer choices. He said that when we compose our "selves" as we align with brands constituted by a range of "inessential" coded differences, we engage in a "false personalization."[22] In the United States, the notion of "social character" changed dramatically after the age of production, according to Riesman. At this time in history, the U.S. was experiencing the beginning of a revolution that impacted the notion of identity — the revolution that marked the shift from a society of production to one of consumption.[23] After this revolution, we must manufacture our personality through our consumer choices. Just as Binx sought to evade the malaise by establishing himself as the owner of a red Dodge sedan, so do people today seek to establish themselves through consuming particular goods, services, and brands. Today's young adults have spent their lives differentiating themselves through active selections of particular products that inform their personalities and subjectivities. Riesman said, "In some groups — children as well as adults — discussion turns to the marginal differentiation between Cadillacs and Lincolns, so in other groups, discussion centers on Fords and Chevrolets. What matters in either case is the continual sniffing out of others' tastes. … "[24]

In a later stage of capitalism than Binx experienced, today we contend with the endless hyperreal images on ubiquitous screens through which consumer culture can be relayed, or sometimes evaded, questioned, or resisted. Binx wrestles with his own Southern, white, middle-class existence, that was in the 1960s still powerfully influenced by cultural traditions, narratives, or hierarchies of rank. But in late capitalism, those narratives and hierarchies are strongly challenged through images amassing and congealing into models. So, as images proliferate through endless screens — television and films with simulations of youth, advertisements aimed at the youth market, the prevalence of smartphones and their image-dependent social media applications that transport consumer models wherever the pockets and hands of people go — young people are offered precoded identity categories to which they can affiliate. While Riesman maintained a distinction between false and true personalization, others have rejected it in late capitalism, arguing that "to differentiate oneself is precisely to affiliate to a model … to relinquish any real difference, any singularity."[25]

Binx Bolling sought to fight off this evasion of the malaise through hyperdetermination of his career path, and, in the end, he chose the predetermined path set out

22. David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961), 261–273.

23. Ibid., 6.

24. Ibid., 74.

25. Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, 88.

for him by his family — even after he had already become successful in the stock brokerage business. Binx's contemporary counterparts today face the same malaise and its evasions; indeed, their institutional contexts increasingly offer them up, as preset, determined paths. These paths are a means to dodge the fear of their own futures. Having been schooled in a context of measurement; in quantifiable and commodified standards of success, they tend to succumb to or at least face the kind of life-trajectory pressure that Binx did. Today, so many young adults, are not so much on a "search" — for knowledge, for meaning, for self — but on a hunt for the careerist credentials that so many cultural narratives promise, a hunt fueled by parents seeking to evade their own anxiety about the possibility of their children failing to become winners in the global economy. And higher education institutions, absolutely dependent on increasing enrollments of their consumer-students in the face of state funding erasures, are quickly conforming.[26]

Pursuing the determined identity of a career path is a primary form of "synthetic individuality"[27] in contemporary times. Education is, more than ever, a training ground to win a career title: entrepreneur, nurse, engineer. These are prefabricated models of identity that can help allay fears related to economic, ecological, and social uncertainties that loom large for today's young people. These distinct, prefab career identities are encouraged by narratives in earlier and earlier stages of a young person's life, but overly differentiated in their construction. Nurses help others. Engineers build. Entrepreneurs create. Yet, as William Pawlett notes, "These differences, no matter how marked or dramatic they seem at the level of content, represent conformity at the level of form; that is, at the level of the code."[28] Difference, in the personalizing sense, is an industrial production that uses the artificial diversity of marginality to suggest singularity. Put in Binx's own existentialist vocabulary, everyone is subjected to being an Anyone, Anywhere. Yet at our current late stage of capitalism, this trick is masked by way of offering synthetic forms of difference. A key synthetic form available to young adults is that of career path, that magical plan that promises to remove the ambiguity and uncertainty young adults face in their late capitalist context.

Pressures to conform to a preset career identity, of course, do solely come from formal institutions; the (shrinking) middle-class family stages this choice perfectly. Aunt Emily repeatedly articulates her own vision for Binx's life and attempts to pressure him into fulfilling it. She nudges him toward a career in medicine, science, or research (though he already has a successful career in business), and, beyond this, her speeches to him often include insinuations regarding the kind of person she thinks he ought to be. While families are often the places such insinuations begin, they are constantly reinforced in media and indeed in formal institutions, including educational institutions. As sincere as individual intentions of adults in

26. See Kerry Hannon, "Playing the Long Game," *New York Times,* sec. L, 6, November 4, 2018.

27. Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society,* 88.

28. William Pawlett, *Jean Baudrillard: Against Banality* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 153.

families may be, they can create internal conflict in young people who feel this kind of determinacy as an imposition. Many are indoctrinated into the landscape of this kind of identity imposition such that they are blind to its deleterious effects. That is, they are taught to welcome the imposition. Sometimes, however, it is met with hostility or indifference; at other times, it can be met with anxiety or depression. Such reactions can be pervasive when young people have a latent sense of the gaps in the adults' visions for their own lives. One is reminded here of Paul Willis's classic study of working-class teens in late-industrial England, *Learning to Labor*.[29] In it, he argues that the ideas adult personnel in the school had regarding the futures of a group of working-class boys, the self-appointed "lads," fell flat because the boys had some level of understanding that they would risk their entire cultural identities if they pursued those adult-constructed visions. Like the "lads," Binx experiences the identity conflict that accompanies this kind of hyperdeterminacy, even if his response to it is categorically different.

The consumer signs and hyperdeterminacy of identity for young adults are created by capitalist culture, racialized class and gender expectations, schooling and higher education's "achievement" strictures, and the general weight of parochial and familial traditions and values. As in Binx's life, a combination of these factors creates a world in which adults become stringently attached to their own ideas about young people's lives. In one sense there is little new about this; youth and adults have engaged in such struggles for many generations before capitalism became the lifeblood of culture. Tales as old as *Romeo and Juliet* show the explosions of parents' wishes confronting adolescent desires and plotting. Yet Binx's postwar identity narrative marks the start of a new age with this struggle; an era that comes to full fruition by the last third of the twentieth century, one in which parents are "helicopters" of surveillance (and, most recently, "lawnmowers" of any potential discomfort their children might face), in which consumption has primacy over production, where movies and celebrity infiltrate cultural productions of all kinds, and in which models of identity, constituted by images, precede reality.[30]

Hyperdeterminacy is a lamentable aspect of the existential plight of the young adult. It is a predictable if insufficient solution to the anxiety of our age, where youth become adults in a time of great economic and political uncertainty, ecological instability, and meticulously curated postmodern identities. Instead of creating bad faith solutions in hyperdetermined identities produced *for* youth by adults, we might create more humane educational institutions if we considered better conditions for "the search."

Creating Good Conditions for "The Search"

Binx spends much of *The Moviegoer* seeking solace in the movies, with girlfriends, or by otherwise consuming (fancy cars, for example). Today's youth exist

29. Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

30. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

in a world where the relationship between consumption and identity formation seems permanently fused — the logical end of the emergent youth consumer market in which Binx existed. Whether for Binx in an earlier stage of capitalism or for people today, these conditions can short-circuit any promising attempt at "the search." Good, or at least better, conditions for the search for self-knowledge and identity construction are rare in contemporary life. To try to offer such solutions would be an act of bad faith for an existential exploration such as this one. But we conclude here by describing both the difficult joys and the psychological, emotional, social, and intellectual challenges of the search at this moment in time and by imagining ways that this search might be facilitated and encouraged, thus prompting more young people to engage in it. Perhaps the right educational conditions could support the Binxes of today and discourage them from trying to escape knowledge of and responsibility for their human existence by instead inviting them into a consideration of those intractable, perennial questions.

The difficult joy of the search for Binx is its authenticity for him as a person; its reference to the "priority of experience" as a source of experiment and wonder.[31] So many of the questions we pose to the young, whether in the context of family, media, or even schooling, are scripted and can come across as inauthentic to their unique life experience; these are often questions that we already know the answers to and hope they will learn to parrot back to us. The single most asked question of any young adult in or preparing to attend postsecondary institutions in the United States is, "What will you major in?" This question is the assumptive first question that is supposed to indicate not where the students' curiosities lie but where their career path will be set. This singular focus on major and career (and its accompanying false promise of future earnings) eclipses larger concerns that are on the minds of young adults when they begin to construct selves beyond the conditions of childhood. What sort of person do I wish to become? What kind of family life might I have? What sorts of civic or community connections or commitments might I create in my adult life? How can I foster creativity and connection with others? How can I learn to better understand and get along with a wide array of people on the planet? What social problems would I like to help solve? All these questions are often silenced, ignored, and thereby diminished. These questions can be difficult, but the search's promise is not that it's always convenient, easy, or painless. For Binx, when the search is joyful, it is because he intuitively understands how much it matters, what's at stake in asking real questions and getting to questions that matter, while the difficulty of the search lies in its frustrations, failures, and human disappointments that we can never fully escape. The search is the topic of his narration in the novel and the great quest of his young life. Our contemporary expectations of and narratives about young people drain attention away from all the other existential questions that matter to them.

How do we create conditions for authentic questioning and quests for young adults? Educational philosopher René Arcilla offers a promising analysis of these

31. René V. Arcilla, *Mediumism* (Albany: State University of New York, 2010), 29.

questions. He argues that "existential learning names the project of responding to the realization we exist by learning how we should live with that condition, rather than denying or neglecting it."[32] In the chapter, "Counterconsumerism," he argues that, because consumerism is a primary diversion from existential learning — or what Binx might call "the search" — part of existential learning entails countering consumerism, that elixir of distraction which spawns endless signs designed to sell us prepackaged identities and lives. Arcilla states what Percy certainly knew, that "for those of us who are unwilling to stand anxious reflection, to subject ourselves to existential learning, the only happiness lies in distraction."[33]

Binx had a latent sense of and attraction to the kind of existential learning that Arcilla describes. Yet, in our reading of *The Moviegoer*, his "search" was short-circuited by an emergent consumer youth market and an overbearing grandparent, both of which offered him generic models of consumer subjectivity. New shiny objects and determined identities distract us and they promise individualism while they mask their seriality; the consumerism built into our cultural institutions, youth cultures, and many forms of family life are too infrequently challenged. And even when they are challenged (at least now if not during Binx's era), those challenges are so easily absorbed by the capitalist system. That is to say, we may have reached a point when we (committed educators, parents, and other caregivers) have to begin not only to commit to offering young people good conditions for "the search," but also to imagine new ways to accomplish that, which will necessitate new forms of "counterconsumerism" that are not as susceptible to neutralization in the late capitalist code.

One particular form of curricular or disciplinary challenge to consumerism's ideologies and habits is arts and humanities subjects of study. These areas of study, more marginalized than ever in today's higher education environments, are postsecondary education's most promising sites for revealing "our strangerhood," or "the questionable nature of everything that is."[34] Put another way, under the right conditions, arts and humanities education has the potential to contribute to imagining a new counterconsumerism for late capitalism. This is an argument toward protecting or enlarging students' curricular and co-curricular options to engage these topics within the college process. Rather than positioning these fields as opposed to the pursuit of a career, arts and humanities subjects can be seen as productive and meaningful extensions of the pursuit of profession — as this current higher education obsession will not be erased anytime soon.[35]

In bringing to light how one aspect of formal schooling curricula might provide clues for creating better conditions for our young people in the search, we

32. Ibid., 65.

33. Ibid., 69.

34. Ibid., 29.

35. See, for example, Kathleen Knight Abowitz, "The Interdependency of Vocational and Liberal Aims in Higher Education," *About Campus* 11, no. 2 (2006): 16–22.

should not be read as making the move, so predictable for educational theorists, toward schools-or-universities-as-panacea. Educational institutions are more problem than solution to the hyperdetermination of identity in the current era. It is best to avoid utopianism as well as too much hope for schooling to help create better conditions for what Arcilla calls existential learning. Sites outside of educational institutions may offer more hope for young adults to walk new paths — whether outside of or alongside formal college and university experiences — for these purposes. Affordable travel, externships, or volunteer opportunities might all provide good contexts for young adult searching.

Certainly, there is much cultural hostility to the idea that education should include contemplation of existential questions about meaning, purpose, or value; yet, as Binx Bolling's story reminds us, in each new generation there is no end to the hunger of youth for spaces to ask and answer these questions. We should perhaps look to young adults themselves to lead the way in finding and opening these spaces. In order to do this, we could begin to conceive of ways to meet the passion for questions of meaning and purpose not with the standard questions of mechanization and control, but with open-ended questions that might help guide young adults deeper into existential quests, to a place where they can, in turn, imagine new ways to push back on canned, consumer subjectivities.