Manichaeism and the Movies: Flannery O’Connor and the Roman Catholic Response to Film and Television at Midcentury

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Flannery O’Connor and Film: “Marked for Life”

It was a story Flannery O’Connor told again and again. She told it at a party she attended with Robie Macauley while a student at the University of Iowa in 1947, by way of introduction to Robert Lowell and other fellow writers at Yaddo in 1948, and countless other times in similar situations; she told it to reporters for the Milledgeville, Georgia, Union Recorder and The Atlanta Journal and Constitution Magazine in 1952 and 1959, respectively; and she told it directly to readers in an essay first published as “Living with a Peacock” in Holiday magazine in 1961 and later reprinted under her preferred title, “The King of the Birds,” in Mystery and Manners.¹ It is not, as one might expect, a story about her beloved peafowl, but about a rather more humble animal—a Cochin bantam chicken, buff colored and capable of walking backward as well as forward—that belonged to O’Connor when she was a girl. The chicken’s modest achievement was written up in a local paper and later made the subject of a lighthearted newsreel, “Do You Reverse?,” by Pathé.² In it, five-year-old O’Connor briefly appears, holding what is billed as the world’s only backward-walking chicken. The second half of the newsreel is given over to trick photography, with ducks, cows, and horses all going in reverse.

The experience, O’Connor later wrote, “marked me for life” (MM 4). While she often put a self-deprecating spin on the story—“I was just there to assist the chicken but it was the high point of my life. Everything since has been anticlimax,” she told the

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² The newsreel is available on the British Pathé Web site at www.britishpathe.com/video/do-you-reverse-1/.

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Atlanta paper—the number of times she offered this anecdote to friends, acquaintances, and readers suggests that it was indeed a formative moment. In adulthood it would provide her with the closest thing she had to an explanation for why she raised peacocks and peahens (since people never tired of wondering), and also with a way of announcing her own contrarian and backward-looking sense of self as a writer who often claimed to feel more at home in the twelfth century than the twentieth. But we may discern in it too an awareness of film, and of the transformative power of moving images, from her earliest days. In this article, I wish to show that as a mature writer O’Connor was acutely aware of both film and television, and to suggest that she saw both new media as stemming from and colluding with a “Manichaean spirit of the times” against which her own fiction was consciously and consistently attempting to rebel.

O’Connor’s use of the word Manichaeism, it should be noted, is not what is traditionally meant by the term. She is less interested in identifying contemporary manifestations of historical Manichaeism than in reframing Manichaeism as a figurative device, a kind of shorthand for everything in American society and culture at midcentury that ran counter to her own incarnational ethos. Campbell’s condensed soup might be considered Manichaean in O’Connor’s idiosyncratic usage, for the way in which it occludes the materiality and the work of making soup. Certainly, the new gadget for peeling potatoes being hawked on the streets of Taulkingham in Wise Blood is open to the charge, offering as it does a chance for buyers to peel potatoes without using their hands or a knife, or even really handling a potato, or in any way acknowledging that effort and matter and material things should be involved: “the potato went into the box and then in a second, backed out the other side, white.” At the heart of her contemporary Manichaean heresy, then, is an insistence on stripping the sensible, perceptible, material world of any significance, and especially of religious significance, just as the Manicheans of the third century stripped matter of all positive attributes, reserving goodness for a separate sphere of spirit and light. Because O’Connor’s Manichaeism is a secular as well as a religious phenomenon, her modern-day Manichaean may be a believer or a nonbeliever; he or she is primarily defined by a preference for abstraction over instantiation and convenience over craft.

As a devout Catholic, O’Connor railed against such attempts to separate meaning from matter, and sensibility from belief. Instead, she followed Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s view of human history as a gradual and literal union of the spiritual and the physical through the unfolding of a single event, namely “the Incarnation, realized, in each individual, through the Eucharist,” from Old Testament times through to the end of time. Several critics have shown how O’Connor’s fiction attempts to do the same, by

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merging what she called mystery and manners. But little has been said about the ways in which she saw film and television working against this goal—by widening the gap between material and spiritual matters in the mind of the American reading and viewing public—even as she found these two media rhetorically useful in articulating her own stance as a regional, religious writer, and acknowledged that she was not immune to their charms.

Film and television are considered together in this article because phenomenologically they produce a similar effect on readers’ and viewers’ modes of perception and apprehension. While there are important differences between film and TV—relating, for instance, to public versus private viewing; to tint, with color sets remaining out of economic reach for many viewers until the early seventies; and to scale, with the cinema screen depicting human heads as big as boulders and the television screen, at least during O’Connor’s lifetime, populated by actors roughly the size of paper dolls—these differences pale in comparison to the contrast between the page and the screen. Regardless of whether content is piped into or projected onto a screen, it is not fixed and unchanging, and nor is it inextricably and obviously bound to form, as it is in the ink and pulp of a printed book. For this reason, film and television are among those postwar technologies that N. Katherine Hayles has identified as contributing to the rise of “virtuality” in the twentieth century—that is, the erroneous belief that information exists as pattern rather than presence, and thus that it can move from one material form to another unchanged and also exist wholly independently of matter. By separating meaning from materiality in this way, film and television—to reframe Hayles’ argument in O’Connor’s terms—may also be seen as contributing to the rise of modern-day Manichaeism.

“The Ultimate Reaches of Reality”: Where Media and Metaphysics Meet

Film as a medium appears relatively infrequently in O’Connor’s fiction: it crops up twice in the stories, and is given a more sustained treatment in Wise Blood, a novel whose setting along with a fair amount of its plot centers on movies, movie advertisements, and a movie theater. As will be seen later in this article, Wise Blood even directly lifts

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7 N. Kathleen Hayles, How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 13, 19.

8 See the newsreel footage of concentration camps that Mrs. Shortley remembers in “The Displaced Person” and the General’s recollections of a grand “preemy” in “A Late Encounter with the Enemy,” both in A Good Man is Hard to Find (New York: Harcourt, 1981). The “preemy” is a thinly veiled portrait of the real-life Gone With the Wind premiere that took place in Atlanta while O’Connor, aged fourteen, and her parents were living there, in 1939 (Gooch, A Life, 179).
elements from the plot of and real-life publicity campaign for *Mighty Joe Young*, which premiered in New York City while O’Connor was living there in the summer of 1949. Although few, these representations of film are carefully aligned with her larger project of unmasking as false the modern-day Manichaean worldview. While television does not appear at all in her fiction, aside from a lone mention of a “television aerial” in “The Displaced Person,” it is clear from O’Connor’s life and correspondence that she paid attention to the small screen as well as the big screen. She appeared on NBC in 1955, as a guest on Harvey Breit’s *Galley Proof*—an experience she called “mildly ghastly”—and presumably noticed when the station adopted a peacock for its logo the following year. Breit’s program was one of two instances in which O’Connor allowed her work to be dramatized on television. In 1962, she received a television set as a gift, and by late the following year had derived enough amusement from it to tell her friend Maryat Lee, “You should get you a television. I heartily recommend them.” Her late letters contain occasional reports on her viewing habits; commercials are recounted with particular relish.

Although O’Connor’s interest in and fondness for television was surely due, at least in part, to her worsening lupus and consequent difficulty in pursuing other leisure activities such as reading and painting, her letters on television provide a useful supplement to the fiction, by making explicit ideas that are implied—embodied in characters and actions rather than baldly stated—in her stories and in *Wise Blood*. Works by Walter Benjamin, Walker Percy, and Marshall McLuhan can also illuminate and help explicate the views on film and television expressed, sometimes quite subtly, in O’Connor’s fiction. She read and admired Percy and McLuhan, both fellow Roman Catholics. While there is no evidence that she read Benjamin, the two seem to have arrived independently at some of the same conclusions about film. That they should have done so is less surprising than it might initially appear, when one considers that O’Connor and

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10 O’Connor, “The Displaced Person,” in *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, 255.
12 The first part of “The Life You Save May be Your Own” was dramatized on *Galley Proof* on 31 May 1955, “up to the point where the old woman says she’ll give $17.50 if Mr. Shiftlet will marry the idiot daughter” (letter to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, June 10, 1955, in *Habit of Being*, 85). O’Connor later sold TV rights to the same story, and an adaptation produced by the Schlitz Playhouse of Stars and starring Gene Kelly aired on March 1, 1957.
14 See her references to television coverage of local politics, stock-car racing, educational programming, and the aftermath of President John J. Kennedy’s assassination in *Habit of Being*, 483, 523, 531, 550, 443.
Benjamin shared an intense interest in fiction, the visual arts, and spirituality as three technologies for mediating subjective experience, and that both used their thinking about various media to work out idiosyncratic and deeply felt convictions about religion (messianic Judaism in Benjamin’s case). Both also believed strongly in the value and communicability of human experience. Like Benjamin, O’Connor felt that the sort of experience upon which storytellers have long drawn was under serious assault in the twentieth century, partly due to a changing media landscape, and that for both moral and fictional purposes its significance must be restored.\(^{15}\)

But first, any attempt to work out O’Connor’s position on screen media must begin with a recapitulation of her understanding of fiction as an incarnational art, and of how storytelling and reading ought to function under ideal conditions. In “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in South Fiction,” she claims that “all novelists are fundamentally seekers and describers of the real,” and that “the realism of each novelist will depend on his view of the ultimate reaches of reality” (MM 40–41). In this formulation, fiction is inseparable from metaphysics, in that it cannot avoid taking a stance on the nature of existence. To say that the objects of experience constitute the only reality, in other words, as much realism does, is still to make a judgment on the subject. O’Connor’s conception of reality goes further: for her, what exists lies both within and beyond the realm of sensory experience. In her essays and talks, she repeatedly uses the terms “concrete reality” and “ultimate reality” to distinguish between these two aspects of existence. Her self-appointed task as a Catholic writer, as we have seen, is to unite them by creating an image that will “connect or combine or embody two points,” one point in concrete reality and the other “not visible to the naked eye” but as real to her “as the one everybody sees” (MM 42).

The fact that O’Connor believes that points in concrete and ultimate reality can be aligned or conflated in this way comes with two important corollaries. First, it means that concrete reality is good, according to Catholic thinkers stretching back to St. Augustine, because it constitutes a pouring forth of God “physically into the world of things” (MM 157). This is not to say that evil does not exist: O’Connor insists that it does, but also that an awareness of the created world’s essential goodness is necessary in order to accurately recognize evil where it appears. For this reason, it pays to devote close attention to her depictions of nature. Her fiction has been criticized for offering satire and grotesquerie without any normative counter, but very often a positive standard can be found in her descriptions of the natural world when it is not available in any human form. Second, the ability to map concrete reality onto ultimate reality means that for O’Connor concrete reality is legible, because at its depths every object in the created world—whether person, animal, plant, or cloud—reflects the image of its maker (MM 157). So that, for instance, the truth of the Resurrection can be read in the splendor of a peacock’s tail-feathers, and the existence of grace in the mean trees

sparkling in “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” Nature thus lends itself to allegory, even functions as a kind of bible, if only one knows how to read and interpret it.

When attempting to explain her method of reading and interpreting concrete reality—as O’Connor does over and over in Mystery and Manners, for an audience she assumed would be unfamiliar with, if not actually hostile to, her beliefs—she repeatedly emphasizes depth, profundity, and penetration. Metaphysical truths are found not on the surface of the created world but at its depths, and the process of accessing them is difficult in proportion to the worth of the meaning to be acquired. In her copy of Victor White’s Soul and Psyche: An Enquiry into the Relationship of Psychotherapy and Religion, O’Connor marked the following passage: “Nothing is more certain than that the richer is any reality, the higher in the scale of being, and the more precious our knowledge of it, the more in part obscure and inexhaustible, the less immediately transferable, is our knowledge of that reality.” Truths about the nature and workings of ultimate reality are by necessity the most “precious” and least “immediately transferable” kinds of knowledge. They require time for sustained concentration, intellectual effort (not necessarily the same thing as high intelligence), and curiosity—three things, as we shall see, that her fiction encourages, but that film and television tend to forestall.

While the process of penetrating concrete reality in order to access ultimate reality is time-consuming and difficult, O’Connor insists that it is the best way, or rather the only way, to acquire such precious truths. “The beginning of human knowledge is through the senses,” she writes, “and you cannot appeal to the senses with abstractions” (MM 67). Hence the need, in her view, for Masses, sacraments, and other outward forms of belief, which engage the ears, hands, mouth, nose, and eyes. Only in the final stages of contemplative prayer—when years of habit and discipline have worn smooth the pathways though concrete reality and into ultimate reality—does she admit of any possibility of bypassing the senses (MM 176). Attempts “to approach the infinite directly without any mediation of matter” before that stage are doomed to fail, and even the most practiced meditator would still be forced to go through concrete reality if he or she were to write fiction, “because fiction is so very much an incarnational art” (MM 68).

What a Manichaean writer will do, by contrast, is “put down one intensely emotional or keenly perceptive sentence after another,” without taking the time to create living, breathing, smelling, speaking characters, and set them in motion (MM 68). A modern-day Manichaean reader similarly cannot be bothered with living, breathing characters and the things they do. He or she wants to reverse the process, to strip away flesh and blood and get straight at insights and ideas, A Manichaean reader asks what a story is about, when for O’Connor meaning cannot be distilled: a story is not “about” anything, other than the experience of reading it through, word by word. Her stance on the matter—owing much to New Critical ideas about literature, and particularly to Cleanth Brooks’ “heresy of paraphrase”—was vividly illustrated during her appearance on Galley Proof; After a stage dramatization of the first part of “The Life You Save May

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17 Kinney, Resources of Being, 28.
Be Your Own,” Breit asked whether O’Connor would like to tell the audience what happens in the rest of the story. “No, I certainly would not,” she replied. “I think there’s only one way to tell it and that’s the way it is told in the story.”

Like Brooks, O’Connor viewed a work of literature as “a simulacrum of reality,” “an experience rather than any mere statement about experience or any mere abstraction from experience.” But for the Manichaean reader, “a story is simply a problem to be solved, something which you can evaporate to get Instant Enlightenment” (MM 108). And if this reader “believes in grace at all,” she writes, he “sees it as something which can be separated from nature and served to him raw as Instant Uplift” (MM 108, 165). Here the connection between the modern-day Manichaean’s desire to condense and extract meaning from a story and the heresy of condensed soup becomes clearer: both provide a quicker, easier alternative to starting from scratch. And so an ostensible disdain for matter is revealed, in O’Connor’s reasoning, to be in fact a reluctance to engage with the messiness and confusion of embodiment. To return to an earlier example, we might say that the Manichaean reader wants to skip over the mean trees in order to see grace more quickly and easily. But in doing so, he will miss the very sparkle that could have pointed him to the metaphysical truth he was after: what initially looked like a shortcut is revealed to be a dead end.

It is in this idea of Manichaeism as a kind of shortcut—and specifically a shortcut to Instant Enlightenment and Instant Uplift—that interesting implications for film and television begin to emerge. The search for meaning and legibility in concrete reality involves an active, imaginative construction of ultimate reality. So, too, does reading. Ideally, the reader of “A Good Man is Hard to Find” will construct in his or her mind’s eye both the image of trees and the presence of grace: “The trees were full of silver-white sunlight and the meanest of them sparkled.” Note O’Connor’s evocation of color, her insistence on activating the reader’s sense of sight and perhaps a sense of motion in the word “sparkled,” as the Grandmother looks out the window of a moving car.

Film and television do not require this kind of active visualization on the part of the viewer, and for O’Connor they preclude thought rather than provoke it. Here, recourse to Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” will prove helpful. A painting for Benjamin, like the created world for O’Connor, “invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations.” But “before the movie frame,” Benjamin writes, “he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested.” The spectator’s train of associations, going all the way back to the First Cause in

18 Conversations with Flannery O’Connor, 6.
O’Connor’s case, is interrupted and derailed twenty-four times a second while watching a film. This rapid succession of images prevents viewers from generating new or independent thoughts and also from penetrating any one object at its depth. Moreover, even if one were to stop the film reel, what would likely be found at its depths is not the unique aura of creation but rather “the phony spell of a commodity,” to use another of Benjamin’s terms.23

The unrelenting pace of film and its tendency to replace thoughts with rapidly changing images may be seen in Mrs. Shortley’s confused recollection of the newsreel showing a pile of bodies at a concentration camp in “The Displaced Person”: “Before you could realize it was real and take it into your head, the picture changed and a hollow-sounding voice was saying, ‘Time marches on!’”24 Not only is any opportunity or incentive for deep, penetrating thought removed here, Mrs. Shortley actually seems to be left doubting the reality of the concrete world shown on screen. The image is there and gone “before you could realize it was real,” and the people that the newsreel depicts are flattened or distorted into unreality along with it. In addition to the speed at which information is presented onscreen, the seeming immateriality of the medium—which consists of “a hollow-sounding voice” and particles of light—also lends itself to the air of unreality in Mrs. Shortley’s mind.

Here too Benjamin provides a helpful expansion and clarification of the phenomenon that O’Connor appears to be depicting. Quoting Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello on the film actor’s “inexplicable emptiness”—as against the stage actor’s solidity—he writes: “His body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noises caused by his moving about, in order to be changed into a mute image, flickering, an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence.”25 Not livelihoods but entire lives are diminished in this way by the newsreel footage in “The Displaced Person.” The concentration camp victims’ corporeality is further undermined by the fact that they are “all in a heap, their arms and legs tangled together, a head thrust in here, a head there, a foot, a knee, a part that should have been covered up sticking out, a hand raised clutching nothing”—a mass of undifferentiated limbs that speaks to both the horrors of war and the danger of failing to recognize the wholeness and worth of individuals.26 It may also suggest that the brief, fragmentary, and disjointed nature of a newsreel permits or furthers just such a violation of individual human dignity: an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence.

A further passage from Benjamin may help elucidate O’Connor’s views on film as a medium that lends itself to passive reception as well as reception in a state of distraction. “A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it,” Benjamin writes. “He enters into the work of art the way legend tells of the Chinese painter when he

viewed his finished painting. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art."

Numerous examples of distracted absorption can be found in O’Connor’s fiction, and indeed she might add that what is ingested wholly and unthinkingly is likely to be regurgitated in the same manner. Consider, for instance, the scene in Wise Blood in which Mrs. Hitchcock—her very name suggestive of film—encounters Hazel Motes on the train. Imagining him to be a soldier going home (like the young men she sees in newsreels, perhaps), she introduces herself with a line from The Wizard of Oz: “There’s no place like home” (WB 5). Mrs. Hitchcock takes in Enoch in an instant, effortlessly, in the preferred modern-day Manichaean style—but also totally wrongly, and she dispenses advice in the same manner. Motes may have an army duffel bag, but he is more accurately a reluctant soldier of God, running away from home as stubbornly and fearfully as Jonah ran from Ninevah. Here, then, is a different kind of shortcut. By parroting Judy Garland’s line, Mrs. Hitchcock avoids expending the mental effort that would be required to gauge and truly engage with a stranger on a train. Like the clichés that Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman bandy about in “Good Country People,” movie quotes provide an automatic response, if often an irrelevant and untrue one, to any situation. O’Connor makes clear that this too is a shortcut that leads nowhere: it is a chute straight into unmeaning.

“Sideline Researches Into the Vulgar”: Being in the New Media World, But Not of It

The understated nature of the train scene in Wise Blood—a reader could easily miss the Wizard of Oz allusion, and it isn’t clear whether Mrs. Hitchcock even realizes she is making one—hints at another characteristic of film and television: its insidiousness. No one ever got a sentence stuck in his or her head simply by sitting in a room where someone else was reading a book, and I imagine but a very few ever memorized a poem just by reading it. But twentieth- and twenty-first-century Americans walk around with hundreds of slogans, jingles, and movie lines in their heads, many of them put there without any conscious effort. Only the poorest kind of reality and the least valuable sort of knowledge, in O’Connor’s view, could be transferred in such an immediate and even inadvertent way, but once in, that knowledge is apparently inclined to stay. Dorothy’s words present themselves to Mrs. Hitchcock as her own thoughts; in “The Displaced Person,” onscreen images linger in Mrs. Shortley’s mind and, later, shape her false inner vision of a war of words, “all the dead dirty words, theirs and hers too, piled up like the naked bodies in the newsreel.”

O’Connor was aware of the way that content could be surreptitiously conveyed in an age of advertising and mass media. She read and recommended highly to a friend Marshall McLuhan’s The Mechanical Bride (1951), insisting that the book’s “packed style” had “to be read completely and slowly to be understood.” In it, McLuhan

29 Letter to “A.” [Betty Hester], September 8, 1956, in Habit of Being, 173.
argues that the proper response to the modern age—the first in human history “in which many thousands of the best-trained individual minds have made it a full-time business to get inside the collective public mind” in order to manipulate, exploit, and control prevailing attitudes and desires—is amusement.\textsuperscript{30} Like the sailor in Edgar Allan Poe’s “A Descent Into the Maelstrom” who saves himself from drowning “by studying the action of the whirlpool and by co-operating with it,” readers must observe with wry detachment “the very considerable currents and pressures set up around us today by the mechanical agencies of the press, radio, movies, and advertising.”\textsuperscript{31} Because to fight the waves of advertising would be to drown, as surely as to ignore them, McLuhan recommends that the public simply pay attention to ads, in order to keep an eye on the “drama which is intended to operate upon it unconsciously.”\textsuperscript{32} Merely raising the content and form of print advertisements to the level of consciousness, McLuhan says, is enough to reveal their essential absurdity and strip them of much of their power. Undertaking her own campaign of amusement—what she called her “sideline researches into the ways of the vulgar”—O’Connor sent comical print ads to friends and told them in letters which TV commercials she found entertaining.\textsuperscript{33} She took pleasure, for example, in a newspaper article about Roy Rogers’ horse attending church in California (“He was dressed fit to kill and looked like he was having a good time”), and in commercials for Tube Rose Snuff and “The Loan Arranger.”\textsuperscript{34} She felt that it was possible to be in the new media world, so to speak, but not of the new media world.

Crucial to this strategy of amusement for both O’Connor and McLuhan—what keeps it innocuous—is that the amused viewer or consumer possesses another set of values, extrinsic to media and consumer culture, against which to compare what he or she sees in advertisements and films. A sense of proportion, based on an understanding of the difference between what is and what should be, between the serious and the comic, and between truth and falsity, is essential for both writers; and for both, this restorative proportion finds its natural outlets in humor and religion. Viewers who lack an hors-texte outside of film, TV, and ads mistake a limited and mediated reality (whether it is onscreen reality or offscreen reality) for the whole of existence, and in doing so miss the most worthwhile part (ultimate reality). “To take mere worldly things in dead earnest,” writes McLuhan, “betokens a defect in awareness that is pitiable.”\textsuperscript{35} The best writers, according to O’Connor, must possess and transmit this kind of perspective to their readers: “to be great storytellers, we need something to measure ourselves against,

\textsuperscript{31} McLuhan, \textit{Mechanical Bride}, v.
\textsuperscript{32} McLuhan, \textit{Mechanical Bride}, v.
\textsuperscript{33} Letter to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, December 20, 1952, in \textit{Habit of Being}, 49.
\textsuperscript{34} Letter to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, December 20, 1952, and Ashley Brown, June 17, 1961, in \textit{Habit of Being}, 49, 443.
and this is what we conspicuously lack in this age. Men judge themselves now by what they find themselves doing."

Although O’Connor did not live to see the publication of Understanding Media in 1964, the distinction McLuhan that draws in it between hot and cool media is useful. A hot medium is one that provides the reader, viewer, or listener with large amounts of sensory information; a cool medium provides comparatively little information. The less information given, the more that remains to be filled in by the audience: “Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience.” The hotter the medium, I would suggest, the more antithetical it is to O’Connor’s aims. By making fewer and fewer demands on the audience, hot media steer individuals away from deep, meaningful engagement with concrete reality, thereby blocking the path to ultimate reality. Recall Mrs. Watts, the prostitute that Hazel Motes visits, who is described as being “so well-adjusted that she didn’t have to think any more. Her eyes took in everything whole, like quicksand” (WB 56).

The “well-adjusted” brain that has no need for thought, will have no need for mystery either. For such individuals, all is clear at a glance, or appears to be so. In O’Connor’s stories, by contrast, meaning begins only “at a depth where adequate motivation and adequate psychology and the various determinations have been exhausted”; their interest lies “in what we don’t understand rather than what we do” (MM 41–42). Her goal as a writer, then, is to lead readers to one of those points of overlap between concrete and ultimate reality, and to hope that they will be adequately prepared to continue the journey. The knowledge she wishes to convey cannot be absorbed instantly and effortlessly like advertising jingles, or like meaning by the wishful Manichean mind, or like light by a camera, for “the lines of spiritual motion,” the workings of grace, are “invisible” (MM 113). Often it cannot be represented on the page at all, and thus only appears as a gap in the text—often as silence after a blow—rather than plentitude, a lack of information rather an abundance. Arguably, O’Connor means for every ending to be a beginning, with greater participation demanded from readers when they finish a work of her fiction than when they started.

A passage from Walker Percy’s The Moviegoer—a novel O’Connor read and liked, and which prompted her to begin a correspondence with Percy—shows how film and television can have the opposite effect. They dull the viewer’s curiosity, not just as relatively hot media, but in their choice of content. The “search” in this passage refers to Søren Kierkegaard Sickness Unto Death, in which each individual must learn to recognize and reconcile the finite and the infinite aspects of his or her own nature. A self who has not yet done so—who recognizes his earthly but not divine qualities, say, or the reverse, or who misunderstands the proportions of each—is said by

37 McLuhan, Understanding Media, 22–23. The idea that as media “heat up,” they aspire toward total information and zero participation provides one way of thinking about the rise of simultaneous viewing habits—for example, watching TV while surfing the Internet and texting—as screens offer increasingly high definition.
Kierkegaard to be in despair. Kierkegaard offers a taxonomy of several kinds of despair; Percy finds “the Despair which is Unconscious that it is Despair, or the Despairing Unconsciousness of having a Self and an Eternal Self” to be the one most relevant for Americans at the middle of the twentieth century:

The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk into the everydayness of his own life . . .

To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be on to something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair.

The movies are onto the search, but they screw it up. The search always ends in despair. They like to show a fellow coming to himself in a strange place—but what does he do? He takes up with the local librarian, sets about proving to the local children what a nice fellow he is, and settles down with a vengeance. In two weeks time he is so sunk in everydayness that he might just as well be dead.  

O’Connor too viewed the screen as a vehicle for the mundane and the anodyne, and thus as a force that would push Americans away from mystery and deeper into despair. Shortly after the TV rights to “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” had been sold, she shared news of Ronald Reagan’s rumored involvement with Betty Hester:

I don’t know if this means RR will be Mr. Shiflet or not. A staggering thought. Mr. Shiflet and the idiot daughter will no doubt go off in a Chrysler and live happily ever after. Anyway, on account of this, I am buying my mother a new refrigerator. While they make hash out of my story, she and me will make ice in the new refrigerator.  

In the event, Gene Kelly was cast as the male protagonist and the plot adapted in much the way O’Connor had predicted. Such a pat, sanitized ending reduces the story to “hash” because no longer are the characters “forced out to meet evil and grace” (MM 42). Like Percy, O’Connor wants characters, readers, and viewers alike to have to ask questions, to look for clues, to venture into the realm of infinite, eternal, ultimate reality. Hollywood, in its insistence on happy endings, is forever calling off the search. Not to worry, the movies seem to her to say, every question can be answered and every desire satisfied by some combination of science, society, and consumerism. The TV version of “The Life You Save May be Your Own” essentially suggests, to paraphrase Hazel Motes, that “nobody with a good car needs to be justified” (WB 109). Nor with a pretty librarian wife.

Here, then, is the shortcut to Instant Uplift. As with the other shortcuts, O’Connor finds it a dead end. Neither a car nor a pretty wife, nor the vicarious experience of both via the movies, is an effective substitute for grace. In her view, one’s Eternal Self will make demands whether or not one is aware it exists, and therefore even those who see no need for mystery or metaphysical truth in their lives still experience a desire for redemption. When O’Connor famously says that the tired reader—and “they are all tired”—needs to be “lifted up,” she is referring to nothing short of salvation: “There is something in us, as storytellers and as listeners to stories, that demands the

redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored” (MM 48). She is likely thinking here of the Greek word *egeiro* (to arouse, cause to rise; to awake, from sleep or the sleep of death), which is frequently translated in Douay-Rheims as “lifted up.” Examples of *egeiro* in the Gospel of Mark include several instances of healing and two of bodily resurrection, suggesting a link between the act of lifting up and the act of preserving the corporeal body—emphasizing the worth of matter—that would not have been lost on O’Connor. Of “an old lady in California” who wrote to complain that her heart had not been lifted up by O’Connor’s fiction, she said, “I think that if her heart had been in the right place, it would have been lifted up” (MM 47–48).

What the woman in California and other tired contemporary readers have forgotten is both “the price of restoration” and the reason why there is a need for it in the first place, which brings us to the final point about what it means for modern-day Manichaeans to devalue and try to avoid the material world. In their disdain for matter, they fail to understand that concrete reality is the realm in which the story of humanity—the Fall, the Incarnation, and the Resurrection—took place, and continues to take place. Along with evading the messiness and confusion of the physical world, the modern-day Manichaean also seeks to evade sin and death. And any form of redemption that attempts to remove sin and materiality from the equation, according to O’Connor, will necessarily be unsatisfying. It is no more possible to bypass sin and jump straight to redemption, or to bypass death and jump straight to new life, than it was to go around concrete reality rather than through it in order to get to the spiritual realm.

**The Marquee and the Moon: Manichaeism and the Movies in Wise Blood**

These two strands in O’Connor’s thinking, Manichaeism and the movies, are joined in *Wise Blood*. Both come in for heavy satire. As “a Christian *malgre lui*,” Hazel Motes is also a believer in the importance of the Incarnation, again despite himself. But because he spends so much of the novel running away from Christian truths, we must infer his understanding of O’Connor’s approved doctrine—the importance of the physical and the particular, the inevitability of sin—from his declarations to the contrary. Motes, in other words, is a man who doth protest too much: the vehemence of his claims reveals a struggle, and eventually a failure, to believe in his own assertions. Before his wise blood triumphs, however, Motes shows distinctly Manichaean tendencies in his “deep black wordless conviction that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin,” his desire “to be converted to nothing instead of evil,” and his preaching that “there was no Fall because there was nothing to fall from and no Redemption because there was no Fall and no Judgment because there wasn’t the first two” (WB 16, 18, 101). Hoover Shoats will take this elision of physicality and evil even further. With Original Sin out of the picture, he claims that every person is “born sweet and full of love” and all that’s needed is to bring

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41 Flannery O’Connor, preface to the second edition of *Wise Blood*. 
this “sweet nature out into the open where ever’body could enjoy it” (WB 150, 151). Even the phrase “out into the open” suggests a desire to do away with the uncontrollable and mortal body, which serves as a reminder of man’s first disobedience and the wages of sin.

Readers can also see modern-day Manichaeism at work in Motes’ repeated claims that place doesn’t matter. For O’Connor, it was critically important to recognize that not only did God take the form of man at a particular historical place and time, but that he continues to assume physical form wherever the Eucharist is to be found. There is a fundamental difference for her between God and goodness made manifest, and the evil that results from a lack of goodness, between a sacred space and a non-sacred one. For Motes, however, placelessness is key. “My church is the Church Without Christ,” he says. “If there’s no Christ, there’s no reason to have a set place to do it in” (WB 102). He initially boasts that he is going to preach his message to “whoever’ll listen at whatever place,” but later his vision of placelessness is circumscribed and ultimately reduced to solipsism: “Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to never was there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it. Where is there a place for you to be? No place . . . In yourself right now is all the place you’ve got” (WB 101, 165–66).

And yet, Motes does return to one particular place again and again in order to proselytize—the Odeon Theater. It is no accident that he gravitates there, for cinema and television are frequently portrayed as antithetical to a strong sense of place in O’Connor’s writing. In “A Late Encounter with the Enemy,” the General boasts that there “wasn’t a thing local” about the movie premiere he attended in Atlanta: “It was nothing local about it. Listen here. It was a nashnul event and they had me in it—up onto the stage.” At a Southern writers’ conference in 1957, O’Connor was dismayed that only one of the stories by young writers that she had been asked to read made use of local idiom, and that none contained “a distinctive sense of Southern life” (MM 103). Instead, “they were all television stories written in a television language for the television world.” While acknowledging that the characteristics of Southern life are not universally flattering, she insists that “somewhere is better than anywhere. And traditional manners, however unbalanced, are better than no manners at all” (MM 200). For her, to produce a setting that could describe Pittsburgh or Savannah with equal justice would be a failure of fictional realism; it would depict a site of placelessness, rather than a place, and for this reason would be useless as a guide to concrete reality, let alone ultimate reality. What is more, although for O’Connor the writer must operate “at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet,” screen media never quite touch down, as it were, from their plane of pixelated ideality, to a distinct position in time (MM 59). A film is the same regardless of which theater it happens to be shown in; a television event unfolds identically in living rooms in Pennsylvania and

42 O’Connor, “A Late Encounter with the Enemy,” in A Good Man is Hard to Find, 164.
Georgia. In this way, “the television world” functions for O’Connor as a kind of utopia: it may look like the perfect place, but is actually nowhere at all.

She was not alone in associating film and television with a sinister sort of fungibility or nondescriptness. Percy likewise emphasizes the importance of a strong sense of place in *The Moviegoer*, and laments that mass media, advertising, and the rise of characterless suburbs have aligned to make life “as an Anyone living Anywhere” the default state for many Americans (*TM* 69). Binx Bolling, the novel’s protagonist, only begins to live as a “Someone, Somewhere” when he starts to undertake the search in earnest. Then, he finds himself so attentive to the “genie-soul” of a place—“the peculiar smell of existence here”—that in every new city he goes to, he feels he “must meet and master” its genie-soul “first thing or be met and mastered” (*TM* 202). A trip to Chicago is unbearable until he finds a way to orient himself, and so is a trip to the movie theatre. A new space becomes tolerable only when Binx establishes a meaningful connection with something concrete, whether person or object, thus allowing him to grab hold of “a pinch of space-time stuff” and transforming an Anyplace into a Someplace (*TM* 201). Existentially adrift at the movie theater, he finds he has to talk to the theater owner or the ticket seller, or carve a mark in a wooden seat with his thumbnail, in order to stop himself from “being cut loose metaphysically speaking” and “slipping clean out of space and time” (*TM* 75). The meaningful unit of film for Binx then is not simply a movie—for example, *Holiday*—but a particular showing of that movie at a particular place on a particular day: *Holiday* at the Altamont theater during a layover in Cincinnati, where Mrs. Clara James was the ticket seller: “We still exchange Christmas cards. Mrs James is the only person I know in the entire state of Ohio” (*TM* 75). In this way Binx is able to situate both the film, and himself as viewer, in space and time.

In *Wise Blood*, Enoch Emery longs for exactly this kind of situatedness—that is, for a personal and especially physical connection to his environment that will allow him to be a Someone living Somewhere—though O’Connor, writing before Percy, would not have conceived of it in these terms. When Enoch lines up to meet Gonga, “Giant Jungle Monarch and a Great Star!,” he attempts, unsuccessfully, to have the kind of conversation with Gonga that Binx might have had with Mrs. James: “I attended the Rodemill Boys’ Bible Academy. I work at the city zoo. I seen two of your pictures. I’m only eighteen years old but I already work for the city. My daddy made me com . . .” (*WB* 182; ellipsis in original). Before he can finish, the actor in the gorilla suit—a gimmick lifted directly from the promotional campaign for *Mighty Joe Young*, which featured a man in an ape suit greeting patrons in front of the Criterion Theatre in Times Square—tells him, “You go to hell.” Enoch is stunned and disoriented by this cruel rebuke of his attempt at connection. The last we see of him, he has stolen and put on the ape

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44 The other part of Percy’s formulation—that is, being an “Anyone”—does not have an analogy in O’Connor’s writing. I suspect that it did not occur to O’Connor that persons as well as places could begin to be thought of as fungible and interchangeable; see her interest in the idea of *hapax legomenon*, with the uniqueness of a person’s name standing in for their uniqueness as an individual (Lake, *Incarnational Art*, 114).

costume in a final, desperate attempt to find someone willing to shake his hand in Taulkingham.

This is not the only parallel that might be drawn between Percy’s protagonist and O’Connor’s. Although Enoch is hardly a prototype for Binx Bolling, he too undertakes a Kierkegaardian search for a way out of despair. He is nothing if not “on to something,” albeit in a grotesque and tragically misguided way. Almost alone among the citizens of Taulkingham, Enoch possesses a desire for connection and communion, as we have seen. He is also distinguished by his preoccupation with physical things, and by his apparent understanding of the importance of mystery: “he knew that what he didn’t know was what mattered” (WB 131). He even instinctively attempts to connect the two, materiality and mystery, by means of the mummified dwarf who passes for an incarnation of Motes’ “new jesus.”

When the mummy is destroyed, Enoch heads, seemingly against his will, to the movie theater. There he encounters one vaguely Manichaean horror after another. The people onscreen are devoid of corporeality and rather than give him something to hold on to, the films leave him reeling and nearly falling from the balcony. By the end of the second feature, Enoch is forced to “grip the two arms of his seat to keep himself from falling over the rail in front of him” (WB 138–39). The third feature, Lonnie Comes Home Again, about an orangutan who saves children from a burning orphanage—as does the protagonist of Mighty Joe Young in the film’s climactic final scene—offers the same kind of unsatisfying redemption without cost that Hazel Motes is preaching and Hoover Shoats is selling on the sidewalk outside. As he watches, “Enoch kept hoping Lonnie would get burned up but he didn’t appear to get even hot. In the end a nice-looking girl gave him a medal. It was more than Enoch could stand” (WB 139). Nothing is gained when Lonnie saves the children because nothing was ever at stake. The flames are not real, and neither is the gratification meant to be derived from the film.

Lonnie’s painless heroism might be contrasted with the scene of painful reconciliation between Mr. Head and Nelson in “The Artificial Nigger” or indeed with any instance of grace in O’Connor’s oeuvre, for in the world of her stories “even the mercy of the Lord burns.” She claimed that violence was “strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work” (MM 112; emphasis added). Violence serves, in other words, as a reminder to her characters of their own limits, as created, dependent, and mortal beings. In The Moviegoer, Binx is awakened to the possibility of the search only after he is nearly killed in the Korean War (TM 10). In Lost in the Cosmos, Percy goes so far as to pose a thought experiment in which the “only cure for depression is suicide. This is not meant as a bad joke but as the serious proposal of suicide as a valid option. Unless the option is entertained seriously, its therapeutic value is lost. No threat is credible unless the threatener means it.”

46 Gooch, A Life, 179.
48 Walker Percy, Lost in the Cosmos (New York: Picador, 1983), 75.
For O’Connor and Percy, onscreen violence does not provide the same jarring return to “reality” and awareness of one’s morality, and it may actually make matters worse by introducing confusion about the nature of death. A letter from O’Connor written shortly after President Kennedy’s assassination illustrates how televised death might mislead young viewers:

We spent most of the weekend looking at the sad events on television. It made me wonder if children draw any line between history and fiction. Murder in the living room. We saw Oswald killed three times, twice in slow motion. What do they make of it? 49

Part of her unease stems from the potential for distortion introduced by a medium that allows events to be edited, rewound, replayed, and otherwise manipulated—a characteristic of film that Pathé would have made her aware of at an early age. I would also suggest that what O’Connor finds unsettling is the way in which the television set, even more so than the cinema screen, functions as a uniquely unreliable narrator. Truth and falsity, fact and fiction, comedy and tragedy, and everything in between, are all filtered through the same “information delivery system,” as they say in the electronic book trade. This variety in turns lends the television an aspect of omniscience, since ceded to the Internet; if the onscreen world can provide news, arts, and information, who would think to look elsewhere?

To his credit, Enoch is disappointed and repulsed by what he finds in the theater. He realizes afterwards that the movies were not part of his search, but a distraction from it, and leaves the Odeon newly open to the inconvenient demands made on him by his wise blood: “he was not thinking any more about escaping his duty… His resignation was perfect” (WB 139). Unfortunately, the next object that Enoch lays eyes on is Hazel Motes’ rat-colored car. Elsewhere in the novel, O’Connor suggests that a better place to direct his gaze would have been the heavens.

The narrator twice points out that no one in Taulkingham is “paying any attention to the sky” (WB 29). In the first instance, they are too busy being distracted by the blinking lights and loud capital letters of advertisements, and by the goods on display in plate glass windows. 50 In the second instance, residents are distracted not by the shops but by the Odeon: “The lights around the marquee were so bright that the moon, moving overhead with a small procession of clouds behind it, looked pale and insignificant” (WB 99–100). It is in front of the theater too that Motes tells passersby, “You needn’t to look at the sky because it’s not going to open up and show you no place behind it” (WB 165). For O’Connor of course his logic is all wrong: it is the cinema screen, not the sky, that acts as a veil and behind which lies “no place” (utopia). And for her, the way into understanding is never behind, but always through. Here is what the residents of Taulkingham would see if they looked up:

The black sky was underpinned with long silver streaks that looked like scaffolding and depth on depth behind it were thousands of stars that all seemed to be moving very slowly as if they were about some vast construction work that involved the whole order of the universe and would take all time to complete. (WB 33)

What the reader is offered a glimpse of, even if no one in Taulkinham sees it, is one of the most explicit examples of concrete reality connecting to, combining with, or embodying ultimate reality in all of O’Connor’s fiction, with the stars both reenacting the creation of the universe and anticipating an eschatology of universal communion and salvation.51

That such a sight could seem “pale and insignificant” next to a movie theater marquee is perhaps the greatest threat posed by cinema and television to O’Connor as a Catholic writer at the middle of the twentieth century. If the lure of the onscreen world is so strong that it threatens to eclipse concrete reality, viewers are left with no means to access ultimate reality. Worse, they may start to ascribe more significance to the onscreen world than the physical world or the world to come. In The Moviegoer, Percy implies that such a privileging of the onscreen world has indeed begun. So vivid and valuable do the movies seem in the novel, compared to the real lives of the moviegoing public, that the screen acts as a kind of quickening agent through a process Binx calls “certification.” Before certification, the moviegoer experiences his own neighborhood as sad and empty. But when he sees his neighborhood onscreen—as a backdrop in a film, say—it is imbued with new meaning. Only then does his own life seem real and only then does it become “possible for him to live, for a time at least, as a person who is Somewhere and not Anywhere” (TM 63). Percy later applied the concept of certification to television in Lost in the Cosmos, and would likely have expanded it to include social media as well had he lived into the twenty-first century.52

In another scene in The Moviegoer, a face-to-face encounter with a celebrity provides an alternative path to certification. A newlywed couple, honeymooning in New Orleans, are walking dully along and feeling vaguely oppressed by their own nondescriptness: “They are not really happy. He is afraid their honeymoon is too conventional, that they are just another honeymoon couple” (TM 15). When the young wife points out that William Holden—a film actor and the real-life best man at Ronald and Nancy Reagan’s wedding in 1952—is just ahead of them on the sidewalk, the husband is “more miserable than ever,” for “he can only contrast Holden’s resplendent reality with his own shadowy and precarious existence” (TM 16). But when he provides the movie star with a match, earning a brief conversation and a pat on the back, some of that resplendent reality becomes temporarily his: “The boy has done it! He has won title to his own existence, as plenary an existence now as Holden’s” (TM 16). As the actor turns down another street, “an aura of heightened reality moves with him and all who fall within it” (TM 16).

See Ralph C. Wood, Flannery O’Connor and the Christ-Haunted South (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 253; and note 45 above.

Percy, Lost in the Cosmos, 27.
O’Connor had her own experience as a minor celebrity just after the Schlitz Playhouse adaptation of “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” aired on television in March 1952. It did not agree with her. Whether the residents of Milledgeville seemed to see an aura of heightened reality around O’Connor is not recorded in her correspondence, but to her chagrin they did seem to find her newly interesting and relevant. “Several children have stopped me on the street and complimented me,” she wrote to Betty Hester. “Dogs who live in houses with television have paused to sniff me. The local city fathers think I am a credit now to the community. One old lady said, ‘That was a play that really made me think!’ I didn’t ask her what.”53 Other letters, too, find O’Connor much less sanguine about her brush with television fame as an adult than she was about her newsreel appearance as a child. Her frustration stems from the way in which her well intentioned neighbors have privileged onscreen reality over offscreen reality. Their comments imply that television rather than publication is what makes her a credit to Milledgeville, and that the pat adaptation of her story, in which Gene Kelly and Lucynell Crater ride off into the sunset in a Chrysler, is superior to the print version. The televised story could not have made the “old lady” think; it was deliberately altered to ensure that she wouldn’t have to. In this way, I would suggest a final distinction between what O’Connor and Percy set out as writers to do, and what Benjamin sees storytellers doing, and what it is that film and television do. Fiction for these three figures is a vehicle for transferring experience, screen media for replacing it. O’Connor and Percy aim to construct on the page a vision or model of a particular experience that the reader can use to recreate that experience for himself or herself. But the screen removes both the roadmap and the desire from the equation, by implying that the experience has already been as good as had in the act of viewing, and in fact was better than it would have been in real life. And so it is that this particular encounter with the vulgar ends in frustration. Readers who might have made their way to A Good Man is Hard to Find and through it to ultimate reality are now lost, wrongly confident that they already know everything there is to know about O’Connor’s story. “As for me,” she concludes her letter to Hester, “I stood the play a great deal better than I am standing the congratulations.”