Narnia as a Site of National Struggle: Marketing, Christianity, and National Purpose in The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe

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Cinema Journal, 48, Number 4, Summer 2009, pp. 59-76 (Article)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: 10.1353/cj.0.0145

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Narnia as a Site of National Struggle: Marketing, Christianity, and National Purpose in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

by JAMES RUSSELL

**Abstract:** This essay examines the niche marketing efforts used to promote the 2005 film *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* to Evangelical Christian audiences in the United States. Through reference to “culture wars” rhetoric, and broader claims to educational and evangelistic intent, the production company Walden Media’s promotional efforts sought to transform C. S. Lewis’s utopian Christian fantasy into a faith-affirming experience for Evangelical viewers, imbued with the power to alter national culture along Christian lines.

Shortly before the release of Disney and Walden Media’s Christmas blockbuster *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Andrew Adamson, 2005), Britain’s *Guardian* newspaper published an article by the journalist Polly Toynbee, entitled “Narnia represents everything that is most hateful about religion.” Toynbee claimed that “in Narnia [we see] the perfect, muscular Christianity—that warped, distorted neo-fascist strain that thinks might is proof of right” and this, Toynbee suggested, was the religious allegory that George W. Bush’s United States required—triumphant, self-congratulatory, intolerant, and unquestioningly faithful. She concluded by describing the film as “profundo manipulative... an arm twisting emotional call to believers that also invades children’s minds with Christian iconography.” For Toynbee *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* was literally a dangerous viewing experience, imbued with a

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2. Ibid.
pernicious evangelistic power to affect the minds of vulnerable younger viewers, and spread what, for her, was a “hateful” religious message.

Although Toynbee’s vehemently antireligious sentiment is relatively unusual in popular discourse, particularly in the United States, her assumptions regarding the film version of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* closely parallel the ways that it was promoted in positive terms to minority Christian groups in the United States. Over $5 million was spent on niche marketing which targeted Evangelical Christians, much of it suggesting that *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* was a potent evangelizing opportunity and a profound expression of principled Christian faith. What Toynbee found worrying was, in fact, presented to this small but significant audience group as *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*’s primary appeal, and promotional efforts worked to retrospectively shape the film’s popular meaning as an experience in which the Christian faith is both affirmed and disseminated. Consequently, the marketing of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* provides an interesting example of the ways that Hollywood has attempted to address the avowedly faithful audiences who appeared on the industry’s radar following the success of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004.

This essay seeks to situate the ways that marketing can both promote and create meaning. In attempting to target a niche audience of Evangelicals, the production company Walden Media sought to both emphasize and develop the Christian allegory at the core of C. S. Lewis’s original story—providing an interpretive framework that reshaped the potential meaning of the film narrative outside the “classical” confines of the narrative. The marketing campaign incorporated apocalyptic and utopian visions of national purpose, familiar to many Evangelical Christians and, in the process, suggested that *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* might act as a powerful corrective to a presumed moral “decay” in the social fabric of the nation. In this way, Walden’s children’s film was presented to niche groups of conservative Evangelical viewers as an experience which spoke to younger filmgoers and inculcated Christian values. The educational, edifying agenda stressed in promotional efforts repeatedly used the figure of an imaginary, generic child (and the conception of children as innocents who must be shaped into citizens) to discuss the future trajectory of the nation. Children occupy a privileged place in these kinds of political and cultural discourses because, as Henry Jenkins claims, “Childhood becomes an emblem for anxieties about the passing of

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4 Arguably, the marketing efforts surrounding Gibson’s film also worked to create a framework through which American Christians were invited to interpret the film as a ritualistic, faith-affirming experience. For a thorough overview of this process, see James Russell, *The Historical Epic and Contemporary Hollywood: From Dances with Wolves to Gladiator* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 190–198.

5 *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* seems to follow the “multidimensional . . . maximally classical” techniques outlined in David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 59–62. However, this essay will examine the ways in which the “obvious” storytelling of classical cinema can be reshaped by external factors such as marketing.

6 This essay is an attempt to help redress a paucity of academic interest in children’s films. See also Peter Krämer, “‘The Best Disney Film Disney Never Made’: Children’s Films and the Family Audience in American Cinema Since the 1960s,” in *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. Steve Neale (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 185–186.
time, the destruction of historical formations, or conversely, a vehicle for hopes for the future.”  

The malleable state of the child, as one being shaped for integration into a future version of adult society, “makes it a natural site at which parents and educators may enact adjustments to the immediate social and political problems as deferred solutions resolving in an imagined future,” in the words of Nicholas Sammond. In essence, children’s culture can be understood as a site at which visions of a future nation are determined, or at least debated. In this essay, I explain how such visions and assumptions were incorporated into the promotion of The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.

In the first section I place the film adaptation in a broader historical context by examining the earlier efforts to link Christian character and national purpose that had informed the writing of C. S. Lewis’s original Narnia stories. In the second section I discuss the company primarily responsible for the film’s adaptation, Walden Media, and I situate The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe within a project of corporate branding. In the third section I look in detail at the marketing itself, and relate this material to a discussion of the film among Evangelical groups. Finally, I tease out the interpretation suggested by the marketing and seek to read The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe as an evangelizing, faith-affirming experience.

**C. S. Lewis and Narnia.** C. S. Lewis’s The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe was published in 1950 and was the first in a series of seven children’s novels set in the fantasy world of Narnia. Most of these books were concerned with a group of British schoolchildren who, for various reasons, found themselves transported to Narnia, a land populated by talking animals and other creatures familiar from European folklore (satyrs, centaurs, etc.) but defined by Christian values—most clearly embodied in the figure of the lion “king” Aslan. At the climax of the first book, Aslan sacrifices himself in a battle for Narnia which results in the Satanic White Witch being vanquished, Aslan resurrected, and the British Pevensie children installed as Narnia’s rightful rulers. In later volumes, Aslan returns repeatedly as a moral guide, and throughout he functions as a Christ equivalent. As Lewis put it, “Aslan is an invention giving an imaginary answer to the question, What might Christ become like if there really were a world like Narnia and He chose to be incarnate and die and rise again in that world as He actually has done in ours?”

For most of his life, Lewis was a medieval literature specialist at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he worked alongside J. R. R. Tolkien (both were members of the literary group known as the “inkwells”). After a long period of atheism, he returned to Anglican Christianity at age 31, and in the 1930s and 1940s became something of a public spokesman for the Christian faith in Britain. Anthony Burgess described him as “the ideal persuader for the half convinced,” and in a series of books, essays, articles,

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and speeches, Lewis explored what he perceived as the British Christian character and pushed a gently evangelistic agenda in the process—by constantly stressing the value of Christianity as a framework for moral action, and by repeatedly reexamining his own reasons for conversion. Lewis’s status as the public face of British Christianity (and as the key voice of “Christian apologetics”) was confirmed during World War II, when he was asked by the BBC to deliver a series of radio addresses which considered the role of the Christian individual and the travails of a Christian nation at a time of war. In these talks Lewis focused on the values shared across denominations in Britain, which he called “an agreed, common, central or ‘mere’ Christianity,” and repeatedly characterized the war in Europe as a principled defence of the nation’s liberal Christian values. According to the Christian writer Kathleen Norris, the talks asked listeners to “see the religion with fresh eyes, as a radical faith whose adherents might be likened to an underground group gathering in a war zone, a place where evil seems to have the upper hand, to hear messages of hope from the other side.”

Lewis began work on the Narnia novels shortly after the end of the war, which loomed large in the narrative. (The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe begins with the Pevensie children being sent away from London during the Blitz.) On entering Narnia through an enchanted wardrobe, the Pevensies precipitate a battle between the forces of good, overseen by Aslan, and the forces of evil, led by the White Witch Jadis, who has seized control of the country, instigating a totalitarian regime in which Christmas (and Christian salvation) is forever delayed. As “sons of Adam” and “daughters of Eve,” the Pevensies discover that they are the rightful rulers of Narnia, and they begin a quest to unite with Aslan and defeat the White Witch. Along the way Edmund Pevensie is briefly tempted into the White Witch’s service by the promise of Turkish Delight, and, when the Pevensies are reunited, the children discover that Aslan must sacrifice himself to atone for Edmund’s treachery. Finally, when all seems lost, Aslan is reborn and leads the children and the “good” inhabitants of Narnia to victory. The White Witch is killed and the children assume their rightful place as rulers of a utopian Narnia, which closely resembles an idealized chivalric British past familiar from works such as Thomas Mallory’s Le Mort D’Arthur. After many years, the Pevensies rediscover the wardrobe, and when they pass through, they become children once again and find that no time has passed in Britain since their departure.

Although Lewis apparently did not consider the novel to be an exclusively Christian story, the figure of Aslan and the pivotal scenes of death and resurrection at the core of The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe were, in his words, nevertheless designed to “make it easier for children to accept Christianity when they met it later in life.” Furthermore, the depiction of Narnia united under a benevolent, implicitly Christian rule is clearly an idealized vision of a harmonious, utopian Christian nation.


Lewis, Mere Christianity, xi.

Kathleen Norris, foreword to Lewis, Mere Christianity, xix.

Subsequent books focus mainly on the Pevensie children and friends who are able to make the trip back to Narnia. The series concludes with The Last Battle, in which Aslan and the Pevensies struggle to repel an invasion from lands to the south of Narnia (although Lewis subsequently wrote a prequel, The Magician’s Nephew, published in 1955). In The Last Battle, the enemy is the savage, satanic nation of Calormene, whose inhabitants (Calormen) are presented as cruel, dark-skinned savages from a hot, arid, equatorial nation. Lewis is quite clear that the Calormen are lesser beings than the inhabitants of Narnia, and that their invasion is a disruption of the “natural” order. The only Calormene character to be saved at the end of the book is Emeth, who willingly accepts his subordinate status and consents to become Aslan’s servant. Remarkably, The Last Battle ends with Aslan destroying Narnia and the Calormen rather than tolerating a reordered national (and ethnic) hierarchy. “Worthy” characters, such as the Pevensies and their British companions, find themselves transported to “Aslan’s Country”—an idealized version of both Narnia and Britain (which are themselves shown to be intimately connected). In the final paragraph, Aslan explains to his British visitors that “there was a real railway accident . . . Your father and mother and all of you are dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning.” Aslan’s country is described as “the England within England, the real England [and] the real Narnia. And in that inner England, no good thing is destroyed.” The final paragraphs reveal that Lewis’s chivalric and nostalgic vision of an idealized British past is literally Heaven.

Arguably, the Narnia stories function as a site at which Lewis was able to address his own preoccupations, concerns, and anxieties regarding the contemporary state of Christianity, and his idealized fantasy land can be understood as a projection of his own desire for Christian national unity. As such, the Narnia stories function much like the forms of escapist utopian fantasy that, Richard Dyer has claimed, are integral to the appeal of popular cinema. In its drive toward escape, wish fulfillment, and ideal forms of existence, “entertainment offers the image of something better to escape into, or something we deeply want that our day-to-day lives don’t provide,” and, for Dyer, escapist entertainment works to resolve, in a fictional forum, deep-rooted and sometimes irresolvable social problems. In Narnia, the conflicts that characterize a supposedly Christian Britain are initially translated into allegorical fantasy (World War II becomes the war with the White Witch; postcolonial conflict becomes the war with Calormene) and these problems are then finally and totally resolved. Although Narnia is initially under a kind of fascist rule, it is ultimately redeemed, and redeemable, in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. Alternatively, The Last Battle provides what now looks like an uncomfortable allegory of post-colonial angst, in which a door can be metaphorically and literally closed on the complexities of a postcolonial world (just as it is closed on almost all of the characters deemed too “unworthy” to enter Aslan’s kingdom). Lewis’s final image of Heaven can therefore be understood as a retreat into

14 For the purposes of this discussion, it is worth noting that “Narnia” denotes a nation, rather than an entire world.
16 Ibid., 172.
an idealized past and an exclusive vision of nationalistic and religious certainty. The utopian, and therefore static, nature of Aslan’s heavenly country ensures that no more stories can be told, because there are no longer any conflicts requiring resolution. To maintain the utopian ideal, when Lewis returned to Narnia, he could only do so in the form of a prequel, *The Magician’s Nephew*.

Although Lewis’s support for social justice initiatives marked him as a relatively liberal figure in the 1950s and 1960s, his decision to cast his Christ-surrogate as a lion rather than a lamb, his repeated focus on images of apocalyptic warfare, his overt claims to evangelistic purpose, and his depiction of Christians as an oppressed minority fighting for survival have led some modern commentators to characterize him as a reactionary conservative figure. Toynbee’s critical view was one of several recent proclamations regarding the dangerous conservatism of Lewis’s work. In 2002, the children’s author Philip Pullman described the Narnia books as “blatantly racist . . . propaganda [and] monumentally disparaging of women.”

Furthermore, much of his published work outside of the Narnia series can now be understood in equally reactionary terms. In “On Living in an Atomic Age,” Lewis argued “what wars and the atomic bomb have done is remind us of the sort of world we are living in. And this reminder is, so far as it goes, a good thing.” In “Answers to Questions on Christianity,” Lewis claimed (of “primitive,” tribal societies) that “modern savages represent some decay in culture—you find them doing things which looked like they have a fairly civilised basis once, which they have forgotten.” In sum, Lewis defended the atom bomb and equated tribal cultures with debasement, while in the Narnia novels he offered a vision of Christian salvation as uncompromisingly exclusive, and he frequently proffered a highly combative vision of the Christian character.

Lewis’s faith was clearly forged and tested at a time of urgent international conflict, and it would be mistaken to categorize him, or his views, as unusually extreme or regressive. Supporting a nation’s right to wage war during World War II was morally scrupulous by nearly any standard. Furthermore, although he has recently been criticized by progressive intellectuals (especially in Britain), his books remain extremely popular with readers across the world, many of whom are unaware of, or uninterested in, their Christian subtext. For the vast majority, Lewis and Narnia are uncontroversial subjects; for others, the implicit references to Christianity actually form a key part of Lewis’s popular appeal. Since his death in 1967, Lewis’s work has sold particularly well in the United States. The Narnia books have become a staple at both Christian and regular bookstores and figure prominently in the list of all-time children’s bestsellers compiled by *Publisher’s Weekly* in 2001.

Numerous Lewis societies have also been founded across the United States.

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The evangelistic nature of Lewis’s work and the overt Christian content of the Narnia stories commend him to those Christians who view themselves as opposed to, or ignored by, mainstream media forums in the United States; and his visions of Christian morality often chime closely with the essentially conservative worldview shared by many Evangelical groups. Contemporary America remains a deeply Christian nation. James Davison Hunter has estimated that many of the hard-line views and habits associated with some Evangelicals are probably shared by approximately 10 percent of the American public, while other scholars have argued that the figure may be as high as 25 percent. Whatever their size, conservative Evangelical groups have become increasingly visible in public life, and at all levels of government, particularly since the election of George W. Bush. Evangelical attitudes include a belief that one must be “born again” through personal crisis, to become a “true” Christian; that one must follow the dictates of the Bible with considerable strictness; that the Second Coming of Christ will occur; that salvation will only be found by a tiny minority; and that one has a divinely inspired duty to spread the word of Christian salvation. In November 2005, *Time* magazine noted that Lewis’s “Most fascinating aspect [is] his posthumous migration from liberal to conservative icon. Today it is Evangelicals . . . eager for anyone, even a high church Anglican, to popularise basic Christian tenets . . . who hold most of the Lewis conferences and write most of the Lewis books.” If anything, as partisan divisions in American culture have hardened along political and spiritual lines since the 1960s, Lewis’s books have increasingly taken on the aura of canonical, academy-sanctioned classics of popular children’s literature for Evangelical readers, vastly preferable to more troubling works such as the recent *Harry Potter* novels, with their celebration of wizardry and witchcraft.

Bearing in mind Narnia’s popularity with mainstream readers across the world, and its specific appeal to more marginal Christian groups in the United States, it was perhaps inevitable that a film adaptation would eventually emerge, capitalizing on the success of similar anglophile fantasy epics based on well-regarded children’s novels and filled with sequences of apocalyptic spectacle, such as the *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* films. Furthermore, the Christian connections of the Narnia story meant that the film could potentially be marketed to the audiences who helped to make Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* such a success in 2004. Despite relatively poor reviews and widespread claims that the film was anti-Semitic, *The Passion of the Christ*...
generated $370 million in domestic grosses and another $241 million overseas, rendering it the third-highest-grossing domestic release of 2004 and the twelfth-highest-grossing domestic release of all time.\footnote{27} Although The Passion was actually accessible and comprehensible only to those Christians who found its visual brutality spiritually meaningful (notably Catholics and conservatives across all denominations), it nevertheless managed to generate “blockbuster” revenues, and its success suggested that, if correctly addressed, Christian audiences might constitute a significant and lucrative moviegoing demographic. The remainder of this essay explores how Walden Media sought to address those Christian filmgoers with The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.

**Walden Media.** The rights to adapt Lewis’s Narnia novels were acquired by a relatively unknown production company, Walden Media, in 2003. Walden negotiated a distribution deal with the Disney Corporation, who provided most of the $180 million production budget. The actual production process seems to have been overseen by Walden, however, and the film’s release was used to boost the company’s profile. Throughout this process, Walden was presented as a principled alternative to other Hollywood producers, and The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe was positioned as the emblematic Walden release—an educational and edifying embodiment of the company’s moral purpose.

Walden Media was founded in 2001 by Boston teacher Michael Flaherty and the Miramax production executive Cary Granat, who had been president of Dimension Films and had overseen production of many key entries in the late-1990s teen slasher cycle, including Scream 2 (Wes Craven, 1997) and Halloween: H2O (Steve Miner, 1998). From the beginning, the pair stressed the educational value of Walden productions. On its Web site, Walden claims, “Like all educators, our goal is to instill lifelong enthusiasm for learning.” According to one recent press release, Walden Media specializes in entertainment that sparks the imagination and curiosity of kids, and provides parents and teachers with materials to continue the learning process.\footnote{28} Initially, Walden funded a pair of IMAX documentaries, Pulse: A Stomp Odyssey (Luke Cresswell and Steve McNicholas, 2002) and James Cameron’s Ghosts of the Abyss (2003). Since 2003, the company has specialized almost exclusively in film adaptations of well-regarded, popular children’s fiction. As well as The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe and its sequel Prince Caspian (Andrew Adamson, 2008), Walden releases include Holes (Andrew Davis, 2003), Around the World in 80 Days (Frank Coraci, 2004), Because of Winn-Dixie (Wayne Wang, 2005), Charlotte’s Web (Gary Winick, 2006), Bridge to Terabithia (Gabor Csupo, 2006), and a biopic of nineteenth-century anti-slavery campaigner William Wilberforce, entitled Amazing Grace (Michael Apted, 2006).

Although Walden’s releases are very different from the projects overseen by Granat at Miramax, Granat has not sought to present the establishment of Walden

\footnote{27} Figures from http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=passionofthechrist.htm (accessed May 28, 2009).

as a moment of moralistic epiphany that might resonate with born-again viewers (in sharp contrast to Mel Gibson’s publicity appearances during the marketing of *The Passion of the Christ*). Instead, the company has used broad claims of educational merit to promote its various movies, focusing specifically on the issue of literacy (hence the emphasis on literary adaptations). Furthermore, the company has specialized exclusively in the production of films targeted at child and family viewers. For Walden this is, in part, an exercise in branding. Following the success of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, production chief David Weil told the *San Diego Tribune*, “We’re trying to establish Walden as the ‘Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval’ kind of brand—if audiences see that name on a film, it will inspire instant trust and knowledge about the quality of the product.” Much like the Disney Corporation in earlier decades, Walden has sought to “make a name for itself by proffering products that are ostensibly an alternative to unsavoury popular media and a prophylactic against their negative effects.”

These efforts were bolstered in 2003 when the company became part of a larger media conglomerate, the Anschutz Entertainment Group, owned by billionaire entrepreneur Philip Anschutz. In 2006, Anschutz came in twenty-eighth on the *Forbes* list of richest Americans, with a personal fortune estimated at around $7.5 billion. Anschutz owns a diverse range of businesses, including oil and railroads, but his long-standing investment in sports teams has seen him slowly enter the entertainment market. In 2002 his conglomerate completed the purchase of a number of movie theater chains and merged them to form the Regal Entertainment Group, which is currently the largest exhibition chain in the United States. He also invested in a number of movies through Regal Productions, including the biopic *Ray* (Taylor Hackford, 2003), and in 2003, Anschutz was approached by Mel Gibson to help distribute *The Passion of the Christ* after Gibson’s deal with Fox collapsed. As well as providing screens for Gibson, Regal began selling blocks of movie tickets to churches, in a manner that helped to categorize Gibson’s film as a faith-affirming experience. Through his Icon production company, Gibson later sued Regal for charging these group bookings an extra $500 “worship fee” on top of the ticket price. Regal settled out of court.

Although Anschutz’s involvement with Gibson was not without controversy, the arrangement demonstrated Anschutz’s commercial support for overtly Christian film projects and his company’s shrewd ability to exploit this audience sector. Since acquiring Walden in 2003, Anschutz has been increasingly keen to present himself as a devout, moralistic player in the media business. While founder Granat has described Walden as an essentially educational venture, Anschutz has gone much further in stressing the moral and spiritual value of Walden’s productions. During a rare lecture

31 These are terms used to describe Disney in Sammond, *Babes in Tomorrowland*, 2.
given in 2004 at Hillsdale College in Michigan, Anschutz described his agenda in the following terms:

My wife and I now have a number of grandchildren who are growing up surrounded by products of this culture, so four or five years ago I decided to stop cursing the darkness. We believe that gratuitous violence, use of drugs and smoking, sex and profanity will obscure the positive message we wish to impart and compromise the entertainment and commercial value of our projects. [Walden films will be] life affirming and carry moral messages. My friends think I’m a candidate for lobotomy, and my competitors think I’m naive or stupid, but you know what? I don’t care. If we can make some movies that have a positive effect on people’s lives and on our culture, that’s enough for me.33

Here Anschutz uses what we might term “culture wars” rhetoric and media effects discourse to stake a claim for his company’s moral legitimacy. His concern with the corrupting effects of popular entertainment echoes a familiar conservative critique of Hollywood, most famously made by Michael Medved in his 1992 bestseller Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values, which argued that “tens of millions of Americans now see the entertainment industry as an all-powerful enemy, an alien force that assaults our most cherished values and corrupts our children.”34 Medved suggested (with some compelling evidence) that many Americans believe that the media is corrupt and corrupting, that it does not reflect preferred or dominant national values, that most “mainstream” media is instead informed by the debased values of an atheistic cultural “elite,” and that the pernicious effects of such media need to be fought (hence the term “culture wars”).35 In Anschutz’s 2004 Hillsdale talk, Walden is presented as a prophylactic alternative to the corrupted mainstream that Medved decries, and Anschutz phrases his own involvement in terms of selfless benevolence and ideological commitment. The profit motive is sidelined in favor of broad visions of idealistic moral purpose, and Walden can therefore be classified as a partisan contestant in the culture wars.

Such claims of moral principle were likely to resonate particularly with Christians who have actively sought to establish their own “alternative sphere of popular culture reflecting conservative tastes and ideologies,” in the words of Henry Jenkins.36

35 For a comprehensive exploration of the assumptions at the core of “culture wars” discourse, see Hunter, Culture Wars, James Davison Hunter and Alan Wolfe, Is There a Culture War? A Dialogue on Values and American Public Life (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2006); and, for a more historical perspective, see William D. Romanowski, Pop Culture Wars: Religion and the Role of Entertainment in American Life (Downer’s Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1996).
According to Anschutz, Walden was a participant in a broader battle over the national character, and he used terms that would clearly render the Walden brand more appealing to Evangelical viewers (as well as to many viewers who share the negative conception of Hollywood outlined by Medved), while avoiding overt claims to religious purpose that might alienate more moderate, mainstream viewers. Neither Anschutz nor Walden’s founders have decisively classified the company as informed by, or catering exclusively to, Christian beliefs. Nevertheless, Walden’s adaptation of C. S. Lewis’s famous Christian allegory, Anschutz’s culture wars posturing, and the broader claims made to educational merit were collective features of branding exercises that targeted Christian viewers in the United States. The specific marketing efforts used to promote *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* to more hard-line Evangelical Christian communities worked to frame these general claims to moral purpose in overtly Christian terms, and even invited Christian viewers to read the film as an active outpouring of utopian, evangelistic sentiment.

**Selling Narnia.** The print and advertising budget for *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is estimated at around $80 million, of which approximately $5 million was spent on creating educational resources, and another $5 million was spent on creating religious outreach materials, while the majority of advertising was directed at a general audience. Educational efforts took a number of forms. Two months before the film’s release, in October 2005, Walden sponsored a multi-city exhibit tour, which visited libraries across the United States to “showcase statues, costumes, props and a preview of the movie trailer.” At these events, one press release noted, “assembled dignitaries will participate in a ‘read aloud’ program, and a series of educational activities.” In Florida, these assembled dignitaries included Governor Jeb Bush. Walden also sent promotional copies of the books and an educator’s guide to hundreds of schools across the country. Study guides have been a standard part of Hollywood’s promotional arsenal since the 1930s, when, as Richard Maltby has noted, they were one method “through which the bourgeois audience was encouraged to recognize Hollywood’s cultural respectability,” and the guide accompanying *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* was no different. Despite director Andrew Adamson’s introductory statement that “we worked closely from the earliest stage of production with Walden Media’s team of world class educators to create an array of the finest educational programs and materials,” and repeated claims to meet national educational standards, most of the

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37 I should stress that the suspicion of the media visible in culture wars rhetoric is by no means limited to Christian groups. Furthermore, a 2006 survey suggests that, although 90 percent of Americans profess some belief in God, only a handful belong to the more extreme Evangelical or fundamentalist movements. Anon., “In the World of Good and Evil,” *Economist*, September 16, 2006, 58.

38 For details of the promotional budget, see Shore, “A Media Machine.”


40 Ibid.

suggested activities focused on the practice of filmmaking. One exercise introduced students to the history of the Blitz (in a fairly simplistic fashion), but the other activities asked students to think about costume design, scoring, special effects, staging, and the practicalities of literary adaptation. For the most part, educational and promotional efforts were conflated in the guide, which functioned more to suggest to audiences that the film had educational merit, rather than working to situate the film within a comprehensive educational program (to paraphrase Maltby, thereby encouraging audiences to recognize Walden’s cultural respectability).

Like many of the company’s publicity statements, the study guide avoided direct mention of the film’s Christian content, instead making the vague assertion that “our film celebrates the power and goodness of the imagination, and we hope that audiences of all ages will find it inspiring as well as entertaining.” However, Walden’s adoption of literacy programs to promote The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe had been framed in the context of a more clearly Christian ideological worldview by one of the company’s founders. In January 2007, Michael Flaherty gave a lecture at Hillsdale College, where he quoted statistics supposedly suggesting that “at the current rate of loss, literary reading as a leisure activity will virtually disappear in half a century [and] the decline in reading strongly correlates to a decline in cultural and civic participation. In today’s media saturated culture, this decline may be reversed at the movie theater.” Like Anschutz, Flaherty went on to categorize Walden as a would-be saviour of the nation’s intellectual and moral well-being. Flaherty discussed the “powerful conversion experience” depicted in Amazing Grace, he described Narnia as “the first kingdom where home schooling is required” (thereby drawing a link with Evangelical families who have rejected the public school system), and he concluded his talk with a prayer.

By suggesting that “cultural and civic participation” (that is, the bonds holding American society together) might “virtually disappear,” Flaherty presented a vision of a nation in apocalyptic decline, which might quite literally collapse at any moment, a conception which closely parallels the Evangelical worldview that the “end times” (the moment when the godly will ascend to Heaven in the Rapture, the Second Coming of Christ will occur, and the end of the world will follow) may be imminently approaching. Flaherty was also able to suggest that Walden was working to bring about an alternative idealistic, harmonious, and morally secure future—more in keeping with preferred Christian values, and more in line with the conservative Evangelical agenda since the 1970s. Consequently, Walden’s literacy agenda can be understood as a

43 Ibid., 14–15.
46 Ibid.
deferred, idealized solution to a current social problem, and the company was actively engaged in “the production of a future society through the dispersion of germs of social behaviour, belief and attitude in the medium of the as-yet-unculturated child.”

Although direct claims to evangelistic purpose were downplayed, the deferred ideal being offered by Flaherty would clearly resonate with Evangelical viewers, and similar visions of apocalyptic decline and utopian alternatives were overtly rendered in the faith-based outreach materials used to promote the film.

Before the release of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Walden contracted the specialist Evangelical marketing agency, Outreach Inc., to design and distribute a range of Christian promotional material. These included: a range of posters, doorhangers, and other paraphernalia; a pamphlet of endorsements from church leaders and faith groups; a series of suggested evangelistic exercises; group activities and theater trips; and an online resource of sermons delineating the film’s Christian message. While the paraphernalia may have worked simply to increase public awareness of the film, many of the other materials actively sought to classify *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* as an explicitly evangelistic experience.

The endorsements from respected Evangelical organizations positioned the film as a “suitable” viewing experience for Evangelical viewers, but they also stressed its evangelizing power. The Mission America Coalition urged “churches and ministries to take full advantage of the movie’s release by planning outreach opportunities in pulpits, classrooms and communities.” The National Association of Evangelicals expressed “hope that many churches will see the opportunity here to reach another part of their community.”

The Billy Graham Center declared, “We believe God will speak the Gospel of Jesus Christ through this film. We pray that God’s people will invite seeking friends to this film, and then tell them the rest of the story.” In each case, the endorsements implicitly assume that the film will spread the Christian message beyond the confines of the conservative Evangelical community.

Many of the other products were designed to perform a similar function. Physical objects such as doorhangers and posters literally spread “the good news” on the back of more conventional promotion. Sunday school activity packs linked Walden’s broader educational remit to specifically Christian educational goals, and other activity packs were produced for youth groups, families, young children, and even adult reading groups. A devotional guide invited Christian viewers to “walk with” the characters from the film, and “learn from them about our own quest for the Kingdom [of God].” Some of this material, such as the devotional guide, worked to establish a connection between the experience of filmgoing and ritual practice, thereby “proving” the spiritual value of the viewing experience. For the most part, however, *The Lion, the
Witch and the Wardrobe was sold less as a “faith experience,” with no specific religious meaning, and more as an evangelizing opportunity, which allowed Evangelical groups to disseminate their message of Christian salvation to the general community—in fact, to the “general audience,” which made up the majority of filmgoers. The sermons provided by Walden invariably sought to delineate the Christian message of the film, in a manner that might reveal its “true” meaning. In one entitled “Narnia: Lion of Judah,” the preacher stresses the connection between Aslan, described as “this Lion whose mane flows in the wind, and whose muscles bulge with superiority” and Jesus, concluding that “the Spirit of the Lion of Judah resides within as we travel through our Narnia. See the Lion coming to our rescue. He comes with judgment and righteousness. Our hope resides in His promise of deliverance.”52 Numerous other sermons with titles such as “Narnia: Always Winter, Never Christmas,” “Believing the Incredible,” and “Narnia: Encounter the Power” sought to perform a similar function.53 Although it is unclear whether or not these materials actually reached the “seekers” mentioned in so much of the outreach marketing, they nevertheless encouraged Evangelicals to believe that the film might work to spread the Christian message beyond the confines of their community by both reminding viewers of the defining moment of Christian sacrifice in allegorical terms and by working to establish an idealized Christian nation before the presumed Second Coming.

Ultimately, the mainstream appeal of The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, and the non-specific, indirect nature of its Christian allegory, became the key selling point for conservative Evangelicals. Through niche promotional efforts, Walden suggested that The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe might guide unwitting viewers toward the Christian faith at an almost unconscious level. Rather than reaffirming separation from mainstream culture, these efforts invited Evangelical viewers to perceive the film as the epitome of evangelistic endeavor and to enter into a negotiated relationship with mainstream culture. Culture wars rhetoric often abounds with images of national disconnect and presents the United States as a place riven by bitter political and spiritual divisions, which “frequently seem abstract to people only until a part of their own lives intersects with an issue of the culture wars . . . [when] all of a sudden what had long been confined to the abstract becomes very real.”54 According to commentators on the culture wars, “soft” political issues, including abortion, gay rights, and, particularly, the role of the media, are often thought to incur more public concern and discord than “hard” economic and international policy issues.55 Nevertheless, Walden’s promotional efforts used such rhetoric to co-opt hard-line conservative Christian groups who might view themselves as opposed to mainstream media culture into a general audience.

53 Outreach has made over two hundred Narnia-related sermons available for download at www.sermoncentral.com/.
54 Hunter, Culture Wars, xi.
Walden’s elevated standing among Evangelical viewers was signalled shortly after the film’s release when the highly influential Evangelical group Focus on the Family decided to relax their boycott of Disney products, explaining that:

We continue to have some reservations about Disney, but remain cautiously optimistic that the tide is turning toward a more family-friendly atmosphere. In 2005, Disney co-produced a big-budget film based on the Christian literary classic *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis. This release brought a Christian worldview to faith-based and secular audiences alike.  

Focus on the Family was one of many right-wing religious groups that had boycotted Disney in the late 1990s, primarily in response to the company’s policy of offering partner benefits to its gay and lesbian employees and allowing gay groups to hold events at its theme parks. Ending the boycott was a sign that Walden had contributed to a shift in the relationship between Evangelicals and the mainstream media. For Disney, Walden pointed the way forward in terms of marketing to Evangelical groups, while for Christian groups, Walden had effectively redeemed the supposed “sins” of the Disney Corporation by pointing the company in a more evangelistic direction. Redeeming the nation’s most powerful producer of children’s media could be taken as yet another example of Walden’s morally principled attempt to “correct” the national character along more recognizably Christian lines.

Just as C. S. Lewis’s original stories had become increasingly concerned with Britishness and the role of Britain in the wider world, so Walden’s film was presented in similar terms—as an expression of, and solution to, the perceived crisis of national character suggested by culture wars rhetoric. The nationally specific elements of the Narnia stories were therefore transposed across temporal and national borders, and according to Walden’s promotional efforts, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* was as much a movie for, and about, contemporary America as it was an escapist fantasy. Furthermore, if audiences were asked to understand the film as a much-needed intervention in American culture, they were also invited to read the film itself in related terms—as a Christian allegory to be interpreted, but also as an allegory of national redemption with considerable relevance to modern America.

**From Aslan to Anschutz.** When the Pevensie children enter Narnia, they find themselves in a nation riven by bitter internal discord. Narnia has become an ‘occupied territory’ in which a handful of freedom fighters seek to resist and overturn the White Witch’s malign forces. A key feature of the White Witch’s rule is a strict control of both public speech and private thought. The inhabitants of Narnia are, according to the fawn Tumnus, given orders, including, “If any of us ever find a human wandering


57 A comprehensive account of the boycott can be found in Janet Wasko, *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2001), 214.

58 More recently, Walden has formed a partnership with Fox, which will distribute most of their movies outside of the Narnia franchise. The establishment of Fox-Walden is a telling indicator of Walden’s growing status as a conservative media producer.
in the woods, we’re supposed to turn it over to her!” Later, when Tumnus has been arrested for disobeying these orders, the children discover a note pinned to the wall of his home, which reads, “The Faun Tumnus is hereby charged with High Treason against Her Imperial Majesty, Jadis, Queen of Narnia, for comforting her enemies and fraternizing with humans. Signed Maugrim, Captain of the Secret Police. Long Live the Queen.” While the White Witch maintains her rule partly through manipulation of Narnia’s “media,” such as it is, and partly through the interventions of the secret police who work to keep the populace “on message,” the land itself is trapped in the unending sterility of winter—a signal that the country is either dead or dying. However, the arrival of the children initiates a change in the weather and a return to the “fertility” of spring and summer, because, as Father Christmas puts it, “the hope that you have brought, Your Majesties, is finally starting to weaken the witch’s power.” Narnia’s slide into apocalyptic decline is arrested, and the fact that Christmas arrives is a clear sign that Christian salvation has become available to the people of Narnia.

For the most part, the film closely follows the plot of the novel. The Pevensie children encounter Aslan and the White Witch, Aslan dies to pay for Edmund’s betrayal and is then reborn, the White Witch is defeated in a climactic battle, and an ideal state is realized. Throughout the film Aslan guides the children, instilling in them the confidence to fight the White Witch, forgiving Edmund, and, finally, sacrificing himself to achieve a better nation. Furthermore, Aslan is also presented as an alluring spectacle in and of himself. The very act of seeing Aslan is, the film suggests, a special experience. When he finally appears (voiced by Liam Neeson), he emerges from his palatial tent before a hushed crowd of onlookers, whose awe seems to echo the awe audiences themselves are supposed to feel when confronted by such a lifelike computer-generated imagery. In the final scenes, the children are crowned as rulers of Narnia and the reborn Aslan departs, although the Pevensies and the audience are informed that he will return when needed. The children preside over a long and benign rule before returning to Britain. Much like Lewis’s original novel, the film concludes with a vision of a reshaped, utopian nation—a happy, fertile, and contented place, governed by “right thinking” and rightful rulers, which remains just within reach even after the children have departed.

The evangelistic tenor of Walden’s outreach marketing arguably invites viewers to read the battles to defend and liberate Narnia as equivalent to ongoing battles raging within the United States today. Like the United States (according to culture wars discourse), Narnia is a divided nation where the media is not to be trusted, but it is saved by a selfless act of Christian sacrifice, which in turn brings about a long-lasting Christian utopia, albeit of the most anti-modern, despotic kind. In this regard the film’s narrative closely resembles the story constructed by its marketing campaign. Like Aslan, Walden was presented to Christians as a company with clear moral scruples, acting selflessly in the best interests of the nation. Indeed, Aslan’s role in the film, as a cinematic wonder imbued with the power to “change” the world, suggests a strong allegorical correlation to the suggested power of the film itself. According to Anschutz, Walden was founded to combat an encroaching moral darkness rather than for the pursuit of profit, and in their publicity appearances, both founders and owner classified the “work” of the company in terms of principled moral sacrifice. Anschutz
literally claimed that he was potentially sacrificing his livelihood for a greater moral
good, while Michael Flaherty presented Walden as the purveyors of a utopian fu-
ture in which apocalyptic decline has been arrested by principled intervention. Aslan’s
Christian sacrifice redeems Narnia; and so might Walden, theoretically, redeem the
United States by restaging the central narrative of redemptive sacrifice at the core of
Christian belief.

The marketing efforts used to establish Walden’s brand identity and to promote
The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe employed culture wars rhetoric, the utopian (and
apocalyptic) sentiment of children’s culture discourse, and the language of evangelism
to position the company, and its film, as valuable, necessary, and powerful agents of
national transformation. At a thematic level, the film itself dealt with similar con-
cerns, and at its climax The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe presented viewers with a
vision of a functioning Christian utopia. In Narnia, the power to create this “ideal”
state lay firmly in the hands of the children who are guided by the self-sacrificing
Aslan. Walden’s combination of literacy and religious outreach programs made simi-
lar claims about the power of Walden Media in general, and The Lion, the Witch and the
Wardrobe in particular—that, by shaping contemporary children’s culture, Walden was
working to bring about a better, more Christian future. For Evangelical viewers ex-
posed to the outreach marketing, the very act of watching the film could be perceived
as a vital, faith-affirming experience. Such viewers were invited to read the film as an
explicitly Christian allegory and could be comforted, or energized, by the story’s uto-
popian possibilities, which actually played out a narrative of Christian triumph. At the
same time, mainstream audiences were invited to think whatever they wanted about
the film, as they had been about Lewis’s earlier stories—it was the job of Christian
audiences, Walden suggested, to develop the evangelistic potential of the film outside
the auditorium.

Richard Maltby has persuasively argued Hollywood “defers” responsibility for in-
terpreting its products onto viewers. However, marketing plays an important role in
shaping the preconceptions of filmgoers. In the case of The Lion, the Witch and the Ward-
robe, Walden’s marketing efforts were clearly designed to create an interpretive frame-
work for conservative Evangelical viewers. Walden used their promotional materials
to shape the cultural meaning and significance of the film for a small but signifi-
cant minority of viewers. For Polly Toynbee, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe was dan-
gerous for precisely the reasons that Walden insisted it was valuable, because she accepted
Walden’s claims, made explicitly in the outreach marketing, that it could influence
behavior, shape identity, and forge a new national culture. However, we should not as-
sume that audiences, especially child audiences, unproblematically accepted Walden’s
claims, because, as Henry Jenkins has noted, frequently “children resist, transform,
or redefine adult prerogatives.” Most of Walden’s marketing used the figure of the
malleable child as a vehicle for idealistic Christian sentiment, but we should be clear
that, although many of their promotional materials claimed to be for children, they ex-
plained adult preoccupations. Furthermore, the film and the marketing used childhood

60 Jenkins, “Childhood Innocence,” 27.
itself as a political battleground where future visions of the nation might be realized, but only through adult intervention. Regardless of whether or not the founders and filmmakers were motivated by sincere belief, or by a willingness to adeptly brand the studio in such terms, with *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* Walden managed to successfully offer Evangelicals a faith-afirming experience that reached far beyond the limits of the film narrative itself. At the same time, they were able to address a broader cross section of viewers who could, if they so desired, avoid the Christian aspects of the story entirely. Although Toynbee suggested that *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* was dangerously powerful, in reality the idea that the film might be able to effect any sort of social change was, as we have seen, the product of Walden’s careful promotional strategy.