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Woody Wendling

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The Chronicles of Narnia: The Exhibition *Using C.S. Lewis to Promote Science and the Movies*

Woody Wendling

The Chronicles of Narnia: The Exhibition is a touring exhibit of scenes, props, and costumes from the first two Narnia movies. *The Exhibition* has appeared in science museums throughout the United States. It is natural to link Narnia and science, as C.S. Lewis also wrote science fiction (the Ransom space trilogy) and critiqued scientism. *The Exhibition* begins with Lewis artifacts on loan from the Marion E. Wade Center. The awe-inspiring experience of entering Narnia through the wardrobe is surely the highlight of *The Exhibition*. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe (LWW)* section features the wardrobe and the witch, but not the lion. The *LWW* section gives prominence to Jadis's deep magic, but completely omits the deeper magic of Aslan's death (on Edmund's behalf) and resurrection. *Narnia: The Exhibition* catches C.S. Lewis's environmental vision, but misses his supernatural vision. It captures Lewis's ecology, but leaves out his theology.

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The Chronicles of Narnia: The Exhibition -- Using C.S. Lewis to Promote Science and the Movies

Woody Wendling, Temple University

Abstract

The Chronicles of Narnia: The Exhibition is a touring exhibit of scenes, props, and costumes from the first two Narnia movies combined with displays on scientific subjects. *The Exhibition* has appeared in science museums throughout the United States. It is natural to link Narnia and science, as C.S. Lewis also wrote science fiction (the Ransom space trilogy) and critiqued scientism. *The Exhibition* begins with Lewis artifacts on loan from the Marion E. Wade Center. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe (LWW)* section features the wardrobe and the witch, but not the lion. The awe-inspiring experience of entering Narnia through the wardrobe is surely the highlight of *The Exhibition*. The *LWW* section gives prominence to Jadis's deep magic, but completely omits the deeper magic of Aslan's death (on Edmund's behalf) and resurrection. In the *Prince Caspian* section, it is instead a minor character in the movie, the minotaur Asterius, who "gives his life to save the Pevensie children, Prince Caspian and others" in Miraz's castle. C.S. Lewis wrote, "You don't see Nature till you believe in the Supernatural." *The Exhibition* catches C.S. Lewis's environmental vision, but misses his supernatural vision. It captures Lewis's ecology, but leaves out his theology.

Introduction

The Chronicles of Narnia: The Exhibition is a touring exhibit of scenes, properties, and costumes from the first two Narnia movies (*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and *Prince Caspian*) combined with displays on scientific subjects such as weather ("Snowball Earth" and the Ice Ages), petrified fossils, time, archaeology, the physics of catapults and arches, the environment, and ecology. *The Exhibition* has appeared in science museums throughout the United States (Phoenix, Philadelphia, Kansas City, and Houston) and is scheduled for future presentations in Huntsville, Alabama, and Louisville, Kentucky.^{1,2} If it appears in a museum near you, *The Exhibition* is surely worth a visit. It is suitable for both adults and children.

Scientism

It is natural to link Narnia and science, and C.S. Lewis also wrote science fiction (the Ransom trilogy: *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*) and critiqued scientism. *Scientism* does not refer "to the marvelous discoveries and technological fruits of science" nor "to the careful and painstaking empirical methods by which scientists seek to establish facts and their causes."³ Scientism refers instead to the "misapplication of scientific method."⁴ Scientism has been categorized as a "unique combination of atheism, materialistic philosophy, evolutionism, hostility to religion, and doctrinaire adherence to the universal validity of the scientific method..."³ Scientism became the "gospel" for the famous 19th Century Darwinist Thomas Huxley, the science fiction writer H.G. Wells (1866-1946), and popular modern authors such as Carl Sagan (1934-1996) and Stephen J. Gould (1941-2002).³

C.S. Lewis the Writer

The Exhibition begins with Lewis artifacts on loan from the Marion E. Wade Center, such as a copy of George MacDonald's *Phantastes* from C.S. Lewis's personal library, his original letter to Susan Salzberg ("pictures come into my head," "I write them down"), and his pipe. C.S. Lewis is thus described as an author: "Lewis' career as a writer flourished, gaining worldwide acclaim for his religious and non-fiction books as well as his works of literary criticism." There was no mention that Lewis was a *Christian* writer, indeed the foremost Christian apologist of the 20th Century, nor that *The Chronicles of Narnia* can be interpreted as having a Christian meaning. Lewis's books specifically mentioned were *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933), *The Screwtape Letters* (1942), and *The Great Divorce* (1945), but not *Mere Christianity*. Both C.S. Lewis and his wife, Helen Joy Gresham (nee Davidman), came to Christ through the same "long and difficult road", from atheism to agnosticism to theism and then to Christianity.⁵

The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe

The awe-inspiring experience of entering Narnia through the wardrobe is surely a highlight of *The Exhibition*. The door of the wardrobe opens to reveal the forest, the lamppost, and falling snow. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* section features the wardrobe and the witch, but not the lion. Jadis, the White Witch, has a prominent place in *The Exhibition*. *The Exhibition* displays her ability to run her enemies into stone, her icy throne, costumes, crowns (in various stages of melting), sword, dagger, Turkish Delight, goblet, and sleigh. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* section of *The Exhibition* ends with the frozen waterfall (a scene in the movie but not in the book). The stone table (where the White Witch kills Aslan) was included as an element in the early planning stages of *The Exhibition*, but was dropped before the exhibit reached final development.⁶

A weakness of *The Exhibition* is that it gives prevalence to Jadis's deep magic, but omits the deeper magic of Aslan's death (on Edmund's behalf) and resurrection. In a sense, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* section of *The Exhibition* makes the two mistakes Lewis warns about in his preface to *The Screwtape Letters*: "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence" [frank materialism]. "The other is to believe, and to feel an unhealthy interest in them" [emphasis on the devilish Jadis rather than on the god-like Aslan].⁷

Science and the Supernatural

The question is, "How does a scientific exhibit handle Christ, God, and the supernatural? One approach would be that of the atheist: "There is no god." The natural and material world is all that there is. As Carl Sagan put it, "The cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be."⁸ A second approach is that of the agnostic: "God cannot be known," at least via the scientific method. A third approach, the one *The Exhibition* ultimately takes, is that of the secularist. Secularism is defined as "indifference to or rejection or exclusion of religion and religious considerations."⁹

A related question is, "How does a secular critic handle Narnia and Aslan?" Some, such as Laura Miller, take offense that the Narnia stories are organized around Christian legends and ideals, with the lion Aslan representing Christ.^{10,11}

The Exhibition plays down the myth of the dying god, who gives his life for the sake of humankind. In the *Prince Caspian* section, it is instead a minor character in the movie, the minotaur Asterius, who "gives his life to save the Pevensie children, Prince Caspian and others" in the battle of Miraz's castle. (The battle, added to the movie, is not in the book.) According to John 15:13, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." *The Exhibition* applies this principle to the Narnian "saint", Asterius, but not the Narnian Savior, Aslan.

The Science of Narnia: The Exhibition

In *An Experiment in Criticism* C.S. Lewis wrote that a work of art can be either "received" or "used." "When we 'receive' it we exert our senses and imagination and various other powers according to a pattern invented by the artist. When we 'use' it we treat it as assistance for our own activities."¹² One might say that *Narnia: The Exhibition* uses C.S. Lewis and *The Chronicles of Narnia* to promote the movies and science.

The display "Controlling Weather (A Dreadful Winter)" puts forth the "Snowball Earth" theory: "According to Paul F. Hoffmann and Daniel P. Schrag at Harvard University, 'many lines of evidence support a theory that the entire Earth was ice-covered for long periods 600-700 million years ago. Each glacial period lasted for millions of years and ended violently under extreme greenhouse conditions. These climate shocks triggered the evolution of multicellular animal life, and challenge long-held assumptions regarding the limits of global change.'" C.S. Lewis considered evolution to be a modern myth;¹³ however, he also considered Christianity to be a myth, albeit the one true myth. An important part of Lewis's conversion "was learning from his friends J.R.R. Tolkien and Hugo Dyson that Christianity was like the myths he loved, except that here it is a 'true myth.' The pagan myths were human myths; the Gospels are God's myth: the stories happen in actual human history."¹⁴

The display "It's About Time" discusses how time in Narnia progresses differently than in our world: "When C.S. Lewis was 17, he read Albert Einstein's groundbreaking book *Relativity: The Special and General Theory* which proved that time was not a universal constant. From then on, Lewis was intrigued by the concept that time could move at different rates in different places. This concept plays a key role in *The Chronicles of Narnia* as the passage of time in Narnia is independent of time on Earth." Einstein's book is highly mathematical;¹⁵ C.S. Lewis was not. He failed the math exams (Responsions) necessary to get accepted into Oxford. Lewis was allowed to attend Oxford after the first World War only because passing the exam was waived for men who had been in the service.¹⁶

The Exhibition does catch the environmental vision of C.S. Lewis. Lewis had a respect for nature that is reflected in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. As an example in *Prince Caspian*, Trufflehunter the badger laments, "the Humans came into the land, felling forests and defiling streams..."¹⁷ The recent book *Narnia and the Fields of Arbol*, by Matthew Dickerson and David O'Hara, explicates C.S. Lewis's environmental vision.¹⁸

Concluding Remarks

To quote the Professor in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, "I wonder what they *do* teach them at these schools."¹⁹ What does *The Exhibition* teach? The last visual display in the exhibit is a transient image of Aslan, speaking the words (if I remember

correctly), "Once a king or queen in Narnia, always a king or queen."²⁰ The last written display plaque, "Leaving Narnia," concludes: "Prince Caspian and the Pevensie children have shown that demonstrating virtue and making the right choices allows us to co-exist peacefully and live in harmony with Nature. As you leave Narnia and return to your own world, keep these ideas and important lessons with you as you continue on your own journey." The three important lessons of *Narnia: The Exhibition* might be summarized as (1) Love Narnia, (2) Love Neighbor, and (3) Love Nature.

What would C.S. Lewis say about *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Exhibition*? I think he would say he was being 'used' to promote science and the movies.¹²

C.S. Lewis wrote, "You don't see Nature till you believe in the Supernatural..."²¹ *The Exhibition* catches C.S. Lewis's environmental vision, but misses his supernatural vision. It captures Lewis's ecology, but leaves out his Christian theology.

Notes

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20. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
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