

A POINTLESS ARTICLE

How to make headway in the Culture Wars

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During his life-time, C.S. Lewis often generated controversy. Now, more than forty years after he died, he is set to generate even more. With the release of the feature film version of his classic fairy-tale *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* a whole new flank has been opened in the culture wars. This, at any rate, is the view of John J. Miller in a recent article in the *National Review*. Miller writes:

“Lewis's famous tale not only stands on the threshold of blockbuster success, but also holds the potential to become the next great battleground in the culture wars . . . The Narnia movie may not deserve to generate controversy, but there can be no doubt that it will, especially from the quarters that objected to Mel Gibson's interpreting the story of the crucifixion. Watch for [Philip] Pullman to go on a new round of opportunistic Lewis-bashing, the *New York Times* to print hand-wringing articles about Narnian theocracy, and the ACLU to threaten litigation against public-school teachers who read the book to their students or encourage them to see the movie. When Florida governor Jeb Bush chose *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* as the centerpiece of a statewide reading program, a columnist for the *Palm Beach Post* pounced. Frank Cerabino complained about "this cabal of Christian commerce" and added, "We're opening up the public schools to some backdoor catechism lessons" . . . The attacks will begin from the moment movie reviewers — not an especially conservative group of people — file their first dispatches. The entire assault may prove relentless.”

Miller's prediction is probably correct. But what will be the correct response to such an assault? Is the best and only response self-defence? Should Christians defend films with a Christian message on the basis that they provide a needed counterblast against films that have no Christian message or an anti-Christian message? Should churches block-book cinema theaters so that *Narnia*, like *The Passion*, wins out at the box office? After all, no one can argue with commercial success, can they? We know what an arms race is like: is this going to be an *arts* race? Will Americans judge the

state of their culture each year according to which film has made the biggest hit on its opening weekend?

Or should we not rather step back from this battleground for a moment and ask what the terms of engagement really are? Not every attack needs to be met with self-defence. Sometimes the attack is designed not chiefly to hurt but to *provoke*, to suck one into an unnecessary and sapping war of attrition. Hitting back is sometimes the very thing that the antagonist wants. The first rule of warfare is 'Know your enemy' and so it is worth asking what it is that motivates the hostility that Miller predicts.

Of course, there are many different motivating factors that drive people to hate *The Passion* or *Narnia*, and some of them have the deepest spiritual and moral significance. But the factor I want to consider here is not, first and foremost, a spiritual or moral factor. It is an aesthetic factor. It has to do with beauty, with art, with taste. I want to suggest that those who object to films with a Christian message have lost their aesthetic faculty and that they want Christians to lose the same thing. (Perhaps the Christians were the first to lose it: but that's another article!) It is for this reason that these attacks must be ignored, not reacted to. The objectors must be forced onto other, firmer turf where the grass of aesthetic response still grows or else we will get bogged down trying to tackle them on the quicksand of utilitarianism.

In thinking about the aesthetic dimension to films we are helped by what Lewis himself wrote in his marvellously ripe and simple late work, *An Experiment in Criticism*. In this work Lewis sets out to discover what makes a book good. (Culture warriors may wish to substitute the word 'film' for 'book'.) He concludes that what makes a book good is whether it invites or permits or compels good reading. And what is good reading? Good reading is reading which does not *use* the book, but *receives* it. Using a book (or a film) means interpreting it so that it serves some pre-existing agenda, turning it to account, making it do things for you. On the other hand, receiving a book (or a film) means surrendering to it, allowing it to work whatever degree of authority it can attain and paying respect to it on at least two levels, not just as 'something said' – that is, something with a social or political or religious *message*, - but also as 'something made' – that is, a work of *art*, a work of beauty. As a work of art, the book (or film) may be received as a carefully constructed object, a skilful blending of imagery and allusion and characterisation, of pacing and balance, of repetition and variation, of sharp-focussed foreground events and mistier background

perspectives, not to mention all the other qualities that a genuine artist will deploy in the making of this object. It is these qualities that we mean when we talk about a book's beauty, as distinct from its message. The message might be bad, but the book could still have beauty of a kind.

I do not wish to suggest that beauty can be ultimately *separated* from goodness. Beauty, to be sure, has a moral dimension just as it has a spiritual dimension. Nevertheless, beauty - although inseparable from goodness, - can be distinguished from goodness. The beauty of a thing is not precisely identical with its goodness or its truth.

Lewis wrote *An Experiment in Criticism* after he had moved from Oxford University to Cambridge University to become its first Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature. The English school at Cambridge in those years was dominated by a figure called F.R. Leavis. *An Experiment in Criticism* never mentions Leavis by name, but he and his followers appear in Lewis's book as 'the Vigilant Critics'. The Vigilant Critics are readers who, in Lewis's view, are incapable of really and truly reading books because they are always either intent on putting books to *use* or else interested in receiving them only as something said, not also as something made. He writes:

'[The Vigilants] labour to promote the sort of literary experience that they think good; but their conception of what is good in literature makes a seamless whole with their total conception of the good life . . . Nothing is for them a matter of taste. They admit no such realm of experience as the aesthetic. There is for them no specifically literary good. A work, or a single passage, cannot for them be good in any sense unless it is good simply, unless it reveals attitudes which are essential elements in the good life.'

What is Lewis saying here? Let us take two modern examples to aid our understanding.

First, let us consider the film version of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. It will be attacked by Vigilant Critics who object to its implicit conveyance of the Christian message. Since, to the Vigilant Critics, Christianity is not an essential element in the good life, they will write the film off as 'propaganda', a tool used by people who have a Christian agenda, who wish to force their Christianity on the rest of the world. They will not

be able to see anything in this film except a pot of message, a very regrettable message.

The second example is . . . the film version of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. This will be promoted by a *second* set of Vigilant Critics, - those who *support* its implicit conveyance of the Christian message. Since, to *these* Vigilant Critics, Christianity *is* as essential element in the good life, they will promote the film as a useful tool to aid evangelism and spread the good news of Christ to a world in great need of him.

Meanwhile, the film is reduced from its intended status as a work of art to the status of a mere instrument. To one set of Vigilants it will be viewed as a dangerous flame-thrower. To the other set it will be viewed as a handy megaphone. Whether it has any specifically filmic merits will be entirely overlooked. Every scene will be analysed and judged according to how well (or how badly) it does its job of conveying a message. The film will have become the cinematic equivalent of a tool. And a tool needn't be beautiful. It only needs to work.

When there is so much work to be done and a world to be won for Christ, it may be asked what could be more important than to work and to strain every sinew in the service of the Gospel. Yes, indeed. But what is the Gospel? It is not just a message, something to be said for a particular utilitarian purpose. It is also a life, something made by God, something to be received and enjoyed by us for its beauty, as well as for its goodness and its truth. If we ask *what is the point* of beauty, we are in danger of falling in with suspect company. It was Judas Iscariot, remember, who asked why the precious ointment was not sold and the money put to use. It is the servant, not the son, who thinks only in terms of utility, of how much money his work will get him from his Master, rather than how all his life contributes to a relationship with his Father. Work, however necessary, is not the end of life, only a means to an end, and the end we have in view includes beauty and sheer extravagant enjoyment. Six days God worked, but on the seventh day He rested and enjoyed what He had made.

In other words, it is part of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to make room for the aesthetic category. Pointless, useless beauty is essential to the good life lived under God. When one comes to think of it, pointlessness is almost the definition of beauty. For as long as something has a point we can describe it as useful, strong, effective, efficient, *et cetera*. But as soon as we observe

something that has no obvious point and is yet still pleasing, we resort to calling it beautiful. If books and films are not to degenerate into mere tactical manoeuvres in the culture wars, we must retain space for aesthetic assessment, for consideration of a film or a book not just as something said, but also as something made, - something potentially beautiful. Lewis again:

‘All criticism, no doubt, is influenced by the critic’s views on matters other than literature. But usually there has been some free play, some willingness to suspend disbelief (or belief) or even repugnance while we read the good expression of what, in general, we think bad. One could praise Ovid for keeping his pornography so free from the mawkish and the suffocating, while disapproving pornography as such. One could admit that Housman’s ‘Whatever brute and blackguard made the world’ hit off a recurrent point of view to a nicety, while seeing that in a cool hour, on any hypothesis about the actual universe, this point of view must be regarded as silly. One could, in a measure, enjoy – since it does ‘get the feeling’ – the scene from *Sons and Lovers* where the young pair copulating in the wood feel themselves to be ‘grains’ in a great ‘heave’ (of ‘Life’), while clearly judging, as if with some other part of the mind, that this sort of Bergsonian biolatry and the practical conclusion drawn from it are very muddled and perhaps pernicious. But the Vigilants, finding in every turn of expression the symptom of attitudes which it is a matter of life and death to accept or resist, do not allow themselves this liberty.’

And it is liberty that is at stake here. The outlook which Lewis espouses here frees us from the ever-turning treadmill of mere politics – mere propaganda - into the realm of art. Admittedly, it involves a certain loss of rigour, but then any life after prison must seem somewhat broad and latitudinarian to a jailbird. The gains are immeasurable, - literally, immeasurable. We move beyond the precise calculation of effect, the exact calibration of ‘the message’, and are released into a sabbath rest, an escape from that kind of incessant strenuous computation.

In this freedom, we can begin to enjoy books (and films) for their own sake rather than for an end to which they can be put. We become freemen, rather than slaves. As Lewis points out in *Studies in Words*:

‘Free study seeks nothing beyond itself and desires the activity of knowing for that activity’s own sake. That is what the man of radically servile

character – give him what fortune and leisure you please – will never understand. He will ask, ‘But what *use* is it?’

Americans today have more fortune and leisure than any people on earth. Will the land of the free and the home of the brave have sufficient bravery to be free, - to enjoy a world in which, in addition to work, there is art? Or will they retreat into a jailhouse of constant politicking? The non-Christian opponents of *Narnia* or *The Passion* do not waste time making aesthetic judgements about them: they simply write them off as ideologically suspect. Will Christians join them in this pseudo-Puritanism? Or will we be full-blooded Puritans, like the first generation of Puritans who rejoiced not in works but in grace, and so be prepared graciously to waste our time noticing the aesthetic merits even of *non-Christian* stories and films, even *anti-Christian* stories and films? It may seem pointless, but retaining the category of pointlessness is the very point at stake.