

# NARNIA ADAPTED TO FILM: THE TRIUNE DANCE

Kyoko Yuasa on Narnian Intercessors

The adaptation of C.S. Lewis's *Narnia* books to film is often discussed with regard to the issue of fidelity, but the reinterpretation of the texts for the purpose of adaptation into film has not been extensively analyzed. *The Lion, the Witch, the Wardrobe* (*LWW*) was adapted to visual and audible media by director Andrew Adamson and released in 2005.<sup>1</sup> This paper will compare the different representations of "intercessors" in *LWW* and Adamson's adaptation in the recent Narnia movie of *LWW* and elucidate Lewis's Christian search for the dance of the Triune in art.

The term "intercessor" is not used by Lewis in *LWW* but is used in this paper to refer to both (a) the persona "I" and (b) the wardrobe which serve as intercessors between the reader and the story. The wardrobe is used in the novel as a transporter that brings the Pevensies to Narnia, but also as an intercessor in the film, drawing the viewers further into another world. The ultimate purpose of intercessors is to help us transcend and

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<sup>1</sup> *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Directed by Andrew Adamson. (Walden Media, 2001).

surrender ourselves to “any work of any art”<sup>2</sup> which, for Lewis, includes literature, the visual arts and music.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, the male pronoun will be used to denote the persona “I” as it is used in *LWW*. Although the implied gender is unclear, the persona appears to overlap with the narrator, the Professor, or perhaps with the author, who is male himself. Of the sixty-one parenthetical statements that occur in the novel, five of these include “I.” Of these five, one is offset with dashes, which can be interpreted as parenthetical.

Lewis’s narration of *LWW* begins with a frame story—a literary technique which serves as a companion piece to a story within a story—in which the Pevensies are transported from this world (a story) into another world (another story). Lewis adopts various literary approaches including not only the employment of a frame story but also the blurring of the roles of narrator, author, and character, and the intrusion of the narrator as the persona “I.” His use of a frame story reflects his perspective on the Gospel as a true myth.<sup>4</sup> After the night talk with Tolkien and Dyson in 1931, as is well known, Lewis believed that there is one Great Story transcending human stories of myth; then, he reached an understanding that a myth of gods, dead and risen, was

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (New York: Cambridge U.P., 1996), 19.

<sup>3</sup> For Lewis’s views of visual arts, and music, refer to *An Experiment in Criticism* (14-26); for literature, (141).

<sup>4</sup> Kyoko Yuasa, *C.S. Lewis and Christian Postmodernism: Word, Image, and Beyond* (Eugene: Winland Stock, 2016), 16-17.

historically completed in the gospel—the story of Jesus Christ who died and was risen 2000 years ago.<sup>5</sup>

Lewis perceives a similar “frame story” relationship between art and God as he consistently employs the same concept of self-transcendence. He defines faith as “a kind of dance”<sup>6</sup> of the Triune toward the union between Father God, Son Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. While dancing we may move beyond ourselves. Bruce L. Edwards finds Lewis’s “transcendental” dance of the Triune not only in faith, but also in the art of reading: “If Lewis were himself here to rescue reading and criticism from tendentiousness and solipsism, his case would be ultimately grounded on the *transcendental signified* which the Judeo-Christian tradition presents to us as the Triune God, the Great I Am who stands apart from history and beyond time and yet once inhabited human history to give it meaning and bring it redemption”<sup>7</sup> Instead of self-transcendence, we tend to confine ourselves within the prison of being content to be oneself.

Lewis believes literature heals the wound of individuality and beautifully describes the healing

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<sup>5</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis Volume I: Family Letters 1905-1931* (New York: Harper, 2007), 970.

<sup>6</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1996), 176.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce L. Edwards, *A Rhetoric of Reading: C.S. Lewis’s Defense of Western Literacy* (Provo: Brigham Young UP, 1986), 110.

process in faith in terms of his literary experience: “But in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see.”<sup>8</sup>

Lewis was extremely wary of the facile adaption of literature into film, stating that “I’m, as you know, rather allergic to films.”<sup>9</sup> However, it does not necessarily follow that he rejected film entirely. After watching *King Solomon’s Mines* (released in 1937), he shared his ideas regarding the adaptation of literature to film in his essay “On Stories” (originally orally presented in 1940 and published in 1947). Lewis was not at first completely content about how the film maker altered the end of the book, but at the same time he accepted the alteration because the film maker’s change made the work better as a film. Lewis states: “Perhaps the scene in the original was not 'cinematic' and the man was right, by the canons of his own art, in altering it.”<sup>10</sup>

In his reading of the novel *King Solomon’s Mines*, it was not the fact of danger that impressed Lewis, but rather the sense of danger: of “the *quality* of

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<sup>8</sup> Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 141.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis, *The Collected Letters*, 776.

<sup>10</sup> C.S. Lewis, *On Stories: And Other Essays on Literature* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1982), 7.

unexpectedness” in which the protagonists had no option but to await death in a cave. Regarding the film adaptation, however, Lewis believed that the filmmaker may have been right to infuse the same scene with danger, including a volcanic eruption and an earthquake, because, “Perhaps the scene in the original was not ‘cinematic’ and the man was right, by canons of his own art, in altering it.”<sup>11</sup> Here, Lewis was careful to include the word “perhaps.” He seems to imply that he should not be considered an authority on the “the canons of cinematic art.”<sup>12</sup> Although filmmaking is not an art form with which he is familiar, he may have recognized that literature and film require different approaches.

Godawa regards C.S. Lewis’s *Narnia* books-to-film as a work that reflects the filmmakers’ worldview. He never fails to see the value of lots of elements that contribute to the whole of a movie such as cinematography, music, acting and others. But as the space is limited, he especially focuses on the worldview of the director Adamson, but three screenwriters, and expresses how they reflected their Christian views on the film of LWW:

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<sup>11</sup>Lewis, *On Stories.*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> This thought was suggested to me by Daniel Asperheim, a novelist, researcher, and EFL teacher in an e-mail sent to me on 25 March 2019

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The most well-known example of substitutionary atonement in film is now *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, adapted by Andrew Adamson, Ann Peacock, Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely from the classic children's series by C.S. Lewis. When the White Witch demands Edmund's life due to the Deep Magic that demanded such punishment for treachery, Aslan appeals to a deeper magic and takes Edmund's place. Aslan is then tortured and killed at the stone altar (a metaphor of a mocked Christ on the cross). But Aslan's substitutionary sacrifice is what frees them all and leads to the children being crowned with glory at the end (see Col 2:13-15).<sup>13</sup>

As Wright's article was written earlier than Godawa's book, we cannot know his response to Godawa. We can presume that he may agree with Godawa in that film is a different medium from literature, but may not agree 100% in how Adamson adapted *LWW*, as Godawa states that the director relies more on his first encounter with *LWW* than with "how Lewis wrote the story."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Brian Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom & Discernment*. 2nd ed. (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 2009), 213.

<sup>14</sup> Greg and Jenn Wright, "C.S. Lewis and the Media: Cinematic and Stage Treatments of C.S. Lewis's Life and Works," in *C.S. Lewis: Life, Works, and Legacy Vol. 4: Scholar, Teacher and Public*, Ed. Bruce L. Edwards (Westport: Praeger, 2007) 270

## LWW: the Novel

As mentioned earlier, “intercessor” is used in this paper to mean both the persona “I” and the wardrobe in the novel, while in the film it includes not only the wardrobe but also visual and audible effects including camera shooting and sound effect. It is not certain if the persona “I” is the narrator or not. Analysis of the three major occurrences of the persona “I” will demonstrate that the vagueness of the persona’s identity serves as a good device for ushering the reader into the narrative, as below:

(1) The persona “I” in the conversation.

The two elder Pevensie siblings are talking with the Professor, the owner of the manor house who is hosting the four children during their evacuation. Peter and Susan are anxious about their little sister Lucy, who claims to have journeyed to another world. To their surprise, the Professor appears to agree with Lucy. In the Professor’s speech, the persona “I” suddenly appears within the parentheses: “If there really is a door in this house that leads to some other world (and I should warn you that this is a very strange house, and even I know very little about it)—.”<sup>15</sup>

The voice lends itself to various identifications. First, it may be taken as that of the Professor. If it is the Professor, the antecedent to the pronoun “you” could be either Peter and Susan or the reader. It is the narrator (which may or may not be C.S. Lewis himself), “you” may refer to the reader.

(2) The persona “I” in the background description

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<sup>15</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: Harper, 1980) 52

This occurs during the cheerful dinner scene at the Beavers' home. The narrator, in the background description, explains that the children drank milk, while the parenthetical content relates that "Mr. Beaver stuck to beer."<sup>16</sup> The content may be related in the voice of the narrator or possibly that of a third person, addressing the reader. The marked content allows the secret to be shared between the voice and reader. The ambiguous identity of the voice, who this paper refers to as the persona "I," clearly functions as a bridge that spans the gap in the reader's imagination, and draws them closer and deeper into the story.

(3) The persona "I" framed with dashes.

Mr. Beaver caught a trout out of the hole in the ice of the pool, opened it with his knife, and cleaned it outside. Mrs. Beaver fried it and served it to the children. The Pevensies were satisfied with the delicacy of the freshly caught fish, except Edmund who was too traumatized by the Turkish Delight to taste "good ordinary food"<sup>17</sup>: "all the children thought—and I agree with them—that there's nothing to beat good freshwater fish if you eat it when it has been alive half an hour ago and has come out of the pan half a minute ago."<sup>18</sup>

Here, the persona "I" appears to constitute a blend of multiple voices, either the narrator or the author of the story, or a character addressing either a "you" character or the reader. They indicate their agreement with the children, who find cooked freshwater fish tastiest to eat straight out of the pan. It is not in *LWW* that the persona "I" directly addresses a

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 81.

character in the story, but among the seven books of the Narniad, this happens in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*: “‘Why,’ said I, ‘was it so sad?’ ‘Sad!! No,’ said Lucy.”<sup>19</sup> Here, the persona “I” acts as both narrator and character, and this ambiguity blurs the boundary between fiction and reality.<sup>20</sup>

### LWW: the Film

In Adamson’s film, there is no character who corresponds exactly to the persona “I” to connect the reader to the story. However, the wardrobe, seems to function as a character. In the novel, the wardrobe is mentioned five times and serves as a magical transporter that connects this world to another; in the film, the same piece of furniture appears six times and functions not only as a magical transporter but also as intercessor.

In the film, the camera projects a long shot of the empty room and presents a picture of a large piece of furniture covered with a white linen cloth. The filmmakers highlight certain physical features of the wardrobe by intentionally hiding it and spending more time on the depiction of Lucy’s approach.

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<sup>19</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: Harper, 1980), 265.

<sup>20</sup> I discussed the persona “I” not only in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* but also in *The Space Trilogy* in my 2016 book *C.S. Lewis and Christian Postmodernism* and also in my presentation for the 2009 Perelandra Project at Oxford University, “Perelandra: the Postmodern Concept of the Persona I.”

Next, the camera changes to a different viewpoint, as it moves from Lucy to the top of the wardrobe. It captures the linen's fall from above as she pulls it down. The linen falls in slow motion which allows greater visibility and adds more mystery. The slowly falling linen covers the whole screen, intentionally hiding that which is behind the cloth. The whole screen is temporarily blank. Both Lucy and the audience are in the dark. From the linen, neither Lucy nor the viewers can predict the type of story that is about to unfold, though there is a small hint in the screenshot, a premonitory indication that a story of resurrection may unfold in the wardrobe, as the linen may remind some movie-goers of Jesus's linen, cast off after His resurrection. Therefore, the filmmakers may have intended a biblical connection in the linen that is cast off the wardrobe.

In the novel, when the four children enter the empty room for the first time, Peter is unimpressed and soon leaves the room, saying "Nothing there!"<sup>21</sup> The wardrobe appears common and described as old, large, and incorporating a mirror. When the four return to investigate the wardrobe's interior upon Lucy's report, they find it to be "a perfectly ordinary wardrobe."<sup>22</sup>

Only Lucy is unwittingly drawn to the wardrobe by its invisible qualities. She is too curious to resist opening the wardrobe, and in the novel, is also fascinated by the smell and the feel of the fur coats inside. On her third visit to the wardrobe, she begins to wonder whether her first journey was

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<sup>21</sup> Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, 5.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

a dream. In the novel, there is no further description of the wardrobe, but the filmmakers used wind and light effects to convey Lucy's growing curiosity about the wardrobe to suggest its role as intercessor. In the film's depiction of her third visit, she is shown walking in the dark to the wardrobe holding a candle. The closer she comes to the wardrobe, the stronger the wind becomes. The candle's flame flickers. When she opens the wardrobe door, the wind inside the wardrobe blows through her hair and the flame is suddenly extinguished. The wind suggests another perspective on the story, similar to that of the persona "I."

In the film, after the candle's flame has gone out, Lucy also disappears from the screen. It is presumed that Lucy must have entered the wardrobe and possibly journeyed to Narnia. The linen that lies on the floor will make the audience want to follow her. However, the audience follows Edmund, the betrayer of his family. It is Edmund's perspective that the audience sees next. Through the use of these shots, the filmmakers probably wished to allow the audience to adopt the traitor's (i.e., Edmund's) perspective. At this stage, he is not depicted in the same shot as the linen, so this mode of representing him may be associated with something else, something that differs from what Lucy intuitively senses through the wardrobe.

The novel offers no description of the four children's transit from the room's door to the wardrobe; in the film, the wardrobe is shown in its entirety to emphasize its identity to the four and to the audience. When all the children have entered the wardrobe, the carvings on the wooden door are visible to the audience. The door-carvings have so far appeared with Lucy four times: (1) when Lucy opened the

wardrobe, (2) when she came back, (3) when the four checked Lucy's story, and (4) when Lucy entered the wardrobe alone again. As Peter opens the door more slowly than Lucy did, the details of the carved patterns are more easily visible to us.

Just a glance at the door will be insufficient to grasp what the carvings depict, so it may be difficult for the audience to determine exactly what Adamson, as director, wishes to communicate through the pictures on the carvings.<sup>23</sup> However, he comments that the carvings on the door are based on the story of the Tree of Life in *The Magician's Nephew* (*MN*) which tells the story of how Narnia was created by Aslan. The fruit of the Tree of Life provides the seed that became the tree whose wood was used in creating the wardrobe. Although films are targeted mainly at movie-goers, *LWW* in film must also have been made for the readers of Lewis's Narnia series. The filmmakers of *LWW*, however, seem to regard *MN* as the hidden story of the wardrobe. They have inconspicuously included references to *MN* to endorse the wardrobe as a touchstone of *LWW*, probably with the aim of presenting the wardrobe as the intercessor between story and reader.

In the original novel, the Professor appears twice: when he listens to Peter and Susan, who are anxious about Lucy, and when he responds to the four about their possible second visit to Narnia. In the film, however, there is greater focus on the Professor, as he appears four times. Most notably, he appears twice before and during the closing credits. When he

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<sup>23</sup> *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Directed by Adamson.

throws a cricket-ball back to the children, Peter catches it. The Pevensies run until they are mysteriously led to find the wardrobe as a hiding place. It feels as if they might have to run endlessly because “they seemed to find themselves being followed everywhere” (*LWW*, 57). In the film, the cricket ball is added to more visibly focus the conundrum. It can be thought that this cricket ball is interpreted by Adamson as the reason for all the children eventually entering the wardrobe.

Playing cricket with his siblings, Edmund hits the ball so hard, sending it through the air, that it breaks one of the stained-glass windows of the Professor’s house. The four escape into the wardrobe to evade the resultant feeling of guilt. Therefore, the ball may be considered a symbol of their sin.

Although this is a plausible connection that readers of Narnia can add to the film, the small round ball reminds the Narnian readers of something round in MN, “an apple of the Tree.” Digory (the young Professor) surrenders his wish to pluck it but, at the same time, surrenders himself to Aslan.

We can hear the same echo in the Triune dance of surrendering ourselves, the same value that Lewis perceived in art and faith. To Digory, a dancer of the Triune, the Lion gives permission to take another apple from the Tree. He takes it out of his pocket and gives it to his sick mother. Likewise, the adult dancer of the Triune, the Professor, takes the cricket-ball and gives it to the children. As the small apple reflects his surrender and love of Aslan, his small round ball in the film may represent his love and forgiveness for the children who feel guilty for having damaged part of his house.

At the very end of the film, the Professor tosses the cricket-ball to Peter, who is representative of the four. Since the closing credits begin immediately afterward, it looks as though the film has ended. However, during the closing credits, the Professor and Lucy appear again in the dark. He walks away from the room with the wardrobe, holding her hand. The film truly ends when the door opens by itself, a light shining from within, and a lion's roar is heard. Here, we may see a full connection between the Pevensies' world and the world through the wardrobe (for example, the lion covering the wardrobe, the carvings on the wardrobe door, and the Professor depicted on the carvings), which all serve as intercessors. There is no close up of young Digory at the end credit, but as I mentioned before, if you carefully watch the wardrobe, there is the close up of the Tree in the carvings at several points in the film.

Adamson endeavored to represent the wardrobe as closely as possible to its description in the book, but enhanced certain details of the wardrobe for dramatic effect, such as masking it with a linen cloth. He deviated from the original version of *LWW* by adding the story of the young Professor and redefining him as someone whose image is sculpted in the relief decorating his wardrobe. On the contrary, the alteration actually closely reflects the original whole Narnia Series despite this change while also making it possible for the filmmakers to present a different possible identity for the persona "I."

Adamson, thus, evaluates MN as Lewis's special affection to the Tree of Life, and expresses his respect to the author by using all three adaptations of literature. Many film critics have categorized film adaptations of literature into

three main modes, each labeled differently by divergent film theorists: Giannetti classified them into “loose” “faithful” and “literal”<sup>24</sup>; Cahir into “radical” “traditional” and “literal.”<sup>25</sup> The three modes mean similar practices: “loose” or “radical” translation for taking only an idea or a character from a literary source, and making the film a more fully independent work; “faithful” or “traditional” for keeping as close to the spirit of the original as possible and remodeling part of it in ways that the filmmakers see as necessary; and “literal” for aligning details to the letter of the book, a practice usually restricted to plays. Adamson “loosely” adapts MN and adds its story to LWW, “literally” reproducing the wardrobe as a mystic transporter (the furniture is made of wood produced from the seed of the fruit of the Tree), and “faithfully” uses the wardrobe as intercessor as the persona “I” and as the server between the reader and the story.

## Conclusion

Lewis is delighted by what he perceives as the greatest pleasure of literature found in the synthesis of both the artist’s opinion and the form. He states that “The matter inside the poet wants the Form: in submitting to the Form it becomes really original, really the origin of great work.”<sup>26</sup> Adamson, who tries to find harmony between matter and form, appears

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<sup>24</sup> Louis Giannetti, *Understanding Movies*. 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Toronto: Pearson Prentice Hall, 1996), 387.

<sup>25</sup> Linda Costanzo Cahir, *Literature Into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006), 16.

<sup>26</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Preface to Paradise Lost* (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), 3.

to be of the same mind as Lewis. Both novelists and filmmakers face similar challenges regarding how they may express their ideas using their own chosen media.

Both literature and film allow us to experience transcendental adventures when we surrender ourselves to the artistic bond of matter and form. In the novel *LWW*, the reader's perspective is a literary reflection created by the persona "I," who speaks to the reader. In the film, viewers see and hear similar effects echoing across different media, particularly through the depictions of the wardrobe. As Lewis says, "I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do."<sup>27</sup> This bond is, for Lewis, equivalent to lively and dramatic incarnation, a divine unity in flesh. Analysis of *LWW* through the lens of intercessors has elucidated the value of surrendering ourselves to the triune dance in both the novel and film.

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