



Between Hollywood and Godlywood

*The Case of
Walden Media*

Nathalie Dupont

With a Foreword by Terry Lindvall

Peter Lang

TERRY LINDVALL

Foreword

Nathalie Dupont's timely tome investigates the growing trend of conservative Christians engaged in the film industry. In particular, she chronicles the historical background of the movement from its resistance to cultural media through the focused vision of billionaire Philip Anschutz and Walden Media. Dupont's coining of the neologism of Godlywood playfully teases out the role that conservatives have devised in expressing their hopes and faith through the creative medium of film, much as Hollywood, Nollywood and Bollywood have established their own recognizable global styles.

Building upon the foundations of historical research on Protestant Christians involved in filmmaking enterprises, Dupont transports us into a new level of specific investigation, a case study of a remarkably successful production company. But along the journey she invites her readers to consider old and new questions, provoking us to think more broadly of the nature and scope of religious and moral cinema. How can a conservative film company, one stemming from a Protestant tradition of suspicion of images and tactically relying upon propositional or didactic approaches to communication (and evangelism), effectively sell one's product while maintaining the integrity of their soul?

She poses the conundrum of how Walden Media films could survive in a profit-oriented industry; and yet, it has thrived in attracting audiences and garnering a profitable market share, developing a loyal niche culture. Of increasing importance is the role of foreign markets on the sustainability of film production companies. Selling one's films in China and Europe can amplify the domestic success of a film; however, as overt religious propaganda can frustrate the exporting of a Walden Media product, filmmakers must adapt a cinematic soft sell, an indirect mode of communicating

one's themes and values. The fine line between films becoming mediated missionaries or functioning as open parables challenges those who want to communicate faith globally.

Featuring a case study of Walden's adaptation of British author C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Dupont demonstrated how the filmmakers maintained the faith-based spirit of their text while entertaining spectators with the Narnian adventures of the four children.

In contrast, the Georgia-based Sherwood Baptist Church's feature productions of films like *Facing the Giants* unabashedly stresses its evangelistic message. It preaches to the converted, even though it hopes to convert through its narrative. With strategies aimed at churches (and evangelism through those churches), the direct Christian messages do not disguise their purpose. Its celluloid sermons are unabashedly sermons.

The extension of such a religious niche of film production and exhibition among conservative Christians pops up with film festivals, award ceremonies and websites, consistent with the values of the films' producers. All lead to a parallel culture that superficially shadows the dominant Hollywood culture, spilling over into an exploitation of God's work. As this work points out, Hollywood itself has targeted this particular market group of conservative Christians, trying to outfox the sheep.

What is remarkable about Dupont's work is that it marshals the insights and impressions of a true outsider, geographical and ideological, as a professor in northern France, near Calais. Yet her research is anything but provincial as she looks astutely at this emerging trend like a stranger in a strange land, able to see details that its native citizenry frequently miss or ignore. Like a Thoreau coming from his garden into the city, she is perceptively attuned to nuances of faith and film, and the exploitation of them by a secular industry.

Of particular significance is her analysis of 'The Walden Touch', a nod to Midas, Disney and Pixar in their ability to turn dross into gold. The pressing question is whether Walden Media might be a bridge between the two worlds of Hollywood and Godlywood. Might they have found effective strategies to bridging the chasm between the secular and faith worlds, enabling God's people to make Mammon.

Two early productions of Walden, Andrew Davis's *Holes* (2003) and Wayne Wang's *Because of Winn Dixie* (2005) stand as templates for the gentle spirituality and family values of the studio, precursors of later productions by Andrew Adamson and Michael Apted in adapting other works of Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*.

The study probing marketing strategies, successes and compromises opens up provocative questions on the relationship of evangelical Christians to the media they consume. Wondering whether Walden can mediate between the two traditionally suspicious worlds of Hollywood and Godlywood, Dupont guides her readers through a careful and keenly observant tour. We see through fresh foreign eyes and the vision is remarkable and instructive. She has significantly added to the international exploration of faith-based film and raised new regions of research and reflection. It is as if she has taken us through another wardrobe, this one into Walden, opening up our eyes to renewed understanding. Like a lamppost standing in a cold, wintry wonderland, Dupont's work shines light on what seems to be a dead world, but we can see, if we watch carefully, that the snow is melting.