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## March of the Conservatives: Penguin Film as Political Fodder

By [JONATHAN MILLER](#)

On the conservative Web site [WorldNetDaily.com](#), an opponent of abortion wrote that the movie "verified the beauty of life and the rightness of protecting it."

At a conference for young Republicans, the editor of National Review urged participants to see the movie because it promoted monogamy. A widely circulated Christian magazine said it made "a strong case for intelligent design."

The movie is "[March of the Penguins](#)," and of all the reactions it has evoked, perhaps the most surprising is its appeal to conservatives. They are hardly its only audience; the film is the second highest grossing documentary of all time, behind "Fahrenheit 9/11."

But conservative groups have turned its stirring depiction of the mating ordeals of emperor penguins into an unexpected battle anthem in the culture wars.

"March of the Penguins," the conservative film critic and radio host Michael Medved said in an interview, is "the motion picture this summer that most passionately affirms traditional norms like monogamy, sacrifice and child rearing."

Speaking of audiences who feel that movies ignore or belittle such themes, he added: "This is the first movie they've enjoyed since 'The Passion of the Christ.' This is 'The Passion of the Penguins.' "

In part, the movie's appeal to conservatives may lie in its soft-pedaling of topics like evolution and global warming. The filmmakers say they did not consciously avoid those topics - indeed, they say they are strong believers in evolutionary theory - but they add that they wanted to create a film that would reach as many people as possible.

"It's obvious that global warming has an impact on the reproduction of the penguins," Luc Jacquet, the director, told National Geographic Online. "But much of public opinion appears insensitive to the dangers of global warming. We have to find other ways to communicate to people about it, not just lecture them."

In a subsequent interview for this article, he added, "My intention was to tell the story in the most simple and profound way and to leave it open to any reading."

Likewise, the only allusion to evolution in "March of the Penguins" is a line near the beginning, intoned in the English-language version by the narrator, Morgan Freeman: "For millions of years they have made their home on the darkest, driest, windiest and coldest continent on earth. And they've done so pretty much alone."

The movie goes on to follow the penguins as they trek back and forth over 70 miles of ice to their breeding ground and huddle together to protect their eggs in temperatures that average 70 degrees below zero Fahrenheit.

To Andrew Coffin, writing in the widely circulated Christian publication World Magazine, that is a winning argument for the theory that life is too complex to have arisen through random selection.

"That any one of these eggs survives is a remarkable feat - and, some might suppose, a strong case for intelligent design," he wrote. "It's sad that acknowledgment of a creator is absent in the examination of such strange and wonderful animals. But it's also a gap easily filled by family discussion after the film."

Rich Lowry, the editor of National Review, told the young conservatives' gathering last month: "You have to check out 'March of the Penguins.' It is an amazing movie. And I have to say, penguins are the really ideal example of monogamy. These things - the dedication of these birds is just amazing."

Other religious conservatives have seized on the movie as a parable of steadfast faith. In Sidney, Ohio, Ben Hunt, a minister at the 153 House Churches Network, has coordinated trips to the local theater to see the film. (He describes the organization as a Christian denomination with nine churches spread over Ohio and Minnesota.)

"Some of the circumstances they experienced seemed to parallel those of Christians," he said of the penguins. "The penguin is falling behind, is like some Christians falling behind. The path changes every year, yet they find their way, is like the Holy Spirit."

Mr. Hunt has provided a form on the Web site [lionsofgod.com](http://lionsofgod.com) that can be downloaded and taken to the film. "Please use the notebook, flashlight and pen provided," it says, "to write down what God speaks to you as He speaks it to you."

Not all conservatives find the movie a rebuke to Darwin's theory. "If an Intelligent Designer designed nature," the columnist George F. Will asked recently, "why did it decide to make breeding so tedious for those penguins?"

The American distributors of the film, Warner Independent Pictures and National Geographic Feature Films, insist that the movie is simply a tale about penguins and that any attempt to divine a deeper meaning is misguided.

"We did not have discussions of what should be in from a social, cultural or political perspective at all," said Adam Leipzig, president of National Geographic Feature Films. "We just wanted to make sure that it was accurate."

Or as Laura Kim, a vice president of Warner Independent, put it: "You know what? They're just birds."

Oh, but they have become so much more than that.

Richard A. Blake, co-director of the film studies program at Boston College and the author of "The Lutheran Milieu of the Films of Ingmar Bergman" said that like many films, "March of the Penguins" was open to a religious interpretation.

"You get a sense of these animals - following their natural instincts - are really exercising virtue that for humans would be quite admirable," he said. "I could see it as a statement on monogamy or condemnation of gay marriage or whatever the current agenda is."

Jordan Roberts, who wrote the narration for Mr. Freeman, said he was surprised that the movie had been adopted by opponents of evolution.

Though he acknowledged that "we didn't talk about the battle between evolution and creationism," he added, "I did say this has been going on for millions of years, so I did throw my hat into the ring in terms of the Bible."

As for global warming, Mr. Roberts said only, "I wish the film had more of that."

But to Mr. Medved, the talk show host, the avoidance of such issues was a strong point.

"I think the prime purpose of the movie is to touch people's hearts," he said. "It's very smart to avoid talking about intelligent design or global warming. Why bring it in?"

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