

# Flawed, but fascinating and relevant

Noah Page  
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March of the Penguins, *directed and written by Luc Jacquet*

French biologist Luc Jacquet's debut film, *Marche de l'empereur*, has been released in the United States under the English-language title of *March of the Penguins* and it constitutes something of a curiosity in North American theaters.

The film is a documentary, so given market imperatives it already has two strikes against it. Fewer theaters book documentaries, so fewer people have a chance to see them, or even hear about them. Also, its late-June release in the midst of the "summer blockbuster" season, when there isn't even a pretense of seriousness to be found in American theaters, marginalizes the film even further.

And yet, Jacquet's film has found an audience. After screenings at two film festivals, *March of the Penguins* opened "limited release," meaning—in this instance—that it appeared on 132 screens July 29-31. By comparison, one finds *Wedding Crashers*, the hot box office draw of the moment, on 2,925 screens three weeks after its July 15 opening. Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* appeared on 3,724 screens the first weekend of August. Meanwhile, Warner Bros. booked *The Dukes of Hazzard* on 3,785 screens for its Aug. 5-7 premiere weekend.

It's in the face of this marketing juggernaut, intended to build audiences for films that have little or nothing to do with reality, that *March of the Penguins* waddled into the top 10 for box office receipts July 29-31, according to industry figures posted by the Internet Movie Database. The film has taken in \$16.7 million since its release in mid-July, powered in part by a \$4 million gross the last week of July. On Friday, it expanded to 1,500 screens.

Jacquet, a biologist by training, and a crew of four spent more than a year in Antarctica to document a colony of Emperor penguins for the French laboratory Dumont d'Urville in the Terre Adelie territory.

The emperors are magnificent creatures. At nearly 4 feet tall and weighing as much as 70 pounds, they are the largest of 17 species of penguins. They do not fly; they swim and, as the film aptly illustrates, they walk. In the

spring, the adult penguins, fattened from feeding beneath the ice at the shore, set out on a 70-mile walk to their inland breeding ground. They do it, apparently, to steer clear of their coastline predators—leopard seals, killer whales and some species of gull—and so they can find thicker ice that won't melt during the summer.

Once inland, an elaborate process of mate-selection and breeding begins. Then, after an egg is hatched, it is passed off to the father while the females walk back to shore so they can feed.

All this plays out, as the film constantly reminds us with the spectacular vistas of ice and snow, in the harshest region on the planet. During July's Austral winter, inland temperatures drop to 85 degrees Fahrenheit below zero, and the wind chill can push the mercury down to more than 100 degrees below zero. Even for a penguin, that is almost unbearably cold. One of the most striking images in the film is that of hundreds of male penguins—each with an egg tucked beneath the thick fold of skin that hangs over their feet—huddled tightly together to shield the eggs and themselves from a storm.

In the original French version, the producers assigned voices to the penguins, intended to vocalize their presumed thoughts. Mercifully, that track was dropped in the English-language version, which is narrated by the American actor Morgan Freeman.

The film has merits and features material that is undeniably endearing. One would have to have a heart of gristle to not feel something watching the parents of *any* species playing with their young, feathered or otherwise. Or, at the other extreme of familial experience, a mother discovering that her babe has died.

Although one runs a certain risk assigning human qualities to animals—and that's a risk the film takes a bit too eagerly and carelessly—one might at least say this: at a purely emotional level, Jacquet's depiction of a year in the life of Antarctica's Emperor penguins appeals directly to our better, humane instincts. Given the rancidity and cynicism that is so pervasive in film and other forms of popular entertainment, this may be a small thing, but it is

something.

One is obliged to look closer than that, however, even if the filmmakers do not.

Every bit as remarkable as what the film shows is what it does *not* say: what Jacquet and his crew have captured on film and made available to audiences around the world is a vibrant illustration of Darwinian science.

The political and intellectual climate in the United States—which is to say, the official line endorsed by the Bush administration, by right-wing Christians, by the charlatans at FOX News and even by elements of the Democratic Party—is one that is essentially *hostile* to the scientific conceptions that are illustrated with such power in *March of the Penguins*. Indeed, hostile not only to the conceptions one sees in Jacquet’s film, but toward science itself!

Examples abound, from school boards and museums around the country that use “intelligent design” as a way to crowbar religion into supposed educational institutions to the recent case of Terri Schiavo. In the twenty-first century’s first decade, the United States is a nation where even the most tepid calls for rational thought and modest inquiries into social life are greeted with the rhetorical equivalent of artillery fire.

For instance, a sociology professor who recently gave an interview with syndicated right-wing radio host Lars Larson suggested that perhaps there was a need for understanding the history and politics of Islamic nations. The host later dismissed her as irrational, bellowed indignantly that the public was paying her salary, and that when all was said and done, the most he needed to know was where “they” are so “we can go kill them.”

It is in the midst of this cultural and intellectual climate—the degradation of which Larson’s disgusting remark encapsulates—that *March of the Penguins* has found a growing and receptive audience. Perhaps it is unwise to read too much into that, but it’s a healthy and encouraging sign.

But at this point, we arrive at another contradictory element: the film is doing well both in spite of and possibly even *because* of a clear intent by the filmmakers and distributors to downplay the evolutionary science that is central to the film. *March of the Penguins* isn’t being pitched as just another nature film; it’s a “chick flick.”

The film’s tagline promises, and Freeman’s narration warmly affirms, that even in this, the coldest place on earth, “love finds a way.”

Witness the remarks of Adam Leipzig, of National Geographic Films, which financed the movie: “What I

hope,” he says in the *Houston Chronicle*, “is that we get nominated for the best love scene at the MTV Movie Awards.” He expands on this idea in the *Los Angeles Times*: “Far more than a nature documentary,” he’s quoted as saying in the July 6 edition, “this is a comedy, a drama, and an incredible romance.” One industry executive who booked the film into seven theaters, including LA’s Westside Pavilion, describes it as “a date movie.”

Film critics, meanwhile, who do offer the pretense of seriousness, but generally are lacking in that department, are both praising the film and marveling at how it has defied industry expectations: a documentary about penguins released during the summer! More significantly, few have bothered to address the objective reality at work in Antarctica and which is presumably the subject of study by the French Institute for Polar Research, which hired Jacquet. *Chicago Sun-Times* film critic Roger Ebert, to his credit, is among the few who says what is: these magnificent penguins, he writes in his July 8 review, are “Darwinism embodied.”

Not knowing Jacquet’s mind, it’s impossible to say whether the warm fuzzies marching alongside the penguins represent a conscious and deliberate choice by the filmmakers to marginalize the science, or whether the film fell prey to industry distributors who were terrified of marketing anything other than “a chick flick” next to *Batman* and *War of the Worlds*.

And that’s not to say, too, that a movie brimming with explanations of scientific theory would have made for better film. As it is, Jacquet’s minimalist approach actually works at one level. There’s something to be said for simply observing nature’s exquisite beauty—particularly when the environment is so fantastically different from regions where people live.

Whatever flaws it may contain—and whatever the reason for those flaws—the film is a riveting look at a fascinating species. If *March of the Penguins* has the effect of fostering an appreciation for science or inspiring young people to pursue it, then more power to it.



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