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Public advocacy by the Roman Catholic Church and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in the twenty-first century

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**PUBLIC ADVOCACY BY THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH
AND THE UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC
BISHOPS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

by

Michele L. Cannella

**Bachelor of Arts
University of Nevada, Reno
2005**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for**

**Master of Arts Degree in Communication Studies
Department of Communication Studies
Greenspun College of Urban Affairs**

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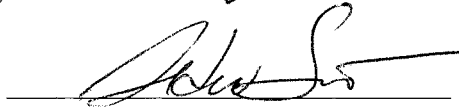
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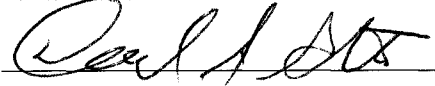
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ABSTRACT

Public Advocacy by the Roman Catholic Church and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in the Twenty-First Century

by

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The Roman Catholic Church has engaged in moral criticism throughout history and continues to do so today through movie reviews published by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). The history of the Roman Catholic Church's censorship of moral content includes controlling the amount and type of media available. This rhetorical analysis of both the USCCB and *New York Times* movie reviews for the top ten grossing movies of 2006 discusses rhetoric as an expression of meaning that emerges through a texts' historical and cultural situation. Both sets of reviews are found on the Internet and this analysis argues that they contribute to the Roman Catholic Church's ongoing attempts to influence morality in the absence of moral criticism in popular culture media.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	1
Religious Communication	2
Texts and Method	5
Chapter Outline.....	9
CHAPTER 2 THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN CONTEXT.....	15
Censorship by the Roman Catholic Church.....	18
The First Amendment and Public Advocacy.....	24
The USCCB as Advocate.....	29
CHAPTER 3 MOVIE REVIEW ANALYSIS.....	39
<i>New York Times</i> Secular Standards.....	42
USCCB Moral Standards.....	50
Conclusion	56
CHAPTER 4 <i>THE DA VINCI CODE</i> ANALYSIS ..	64
<i>The Da Vinci Code</i> Controversy.....	66
<i>New York Times</i> Review of <i>The Da Vinci Code</i>	68
USCCB Review of <i>The Da Vinci Code</i>	75
Conclusion	82
CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	90
Religious Communication	91
Hermeneutics	92
Homiletics	94
Future Research	96
APPENDIX 1 2006 GROSS SALES CHART	99
APPENDIX 2 Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest (2006) <i>The New York Times</i>	100
APPENDIX 3 Night at the Museum (2006) <i>The New York Times</i>	102
APPENDIX 4 Cars (2006) <i>The New York Times</i>	104
APPENDIX 5 X-Men: The Last Stand (2006) <i>The New York Times</i>	107
APPENDIX 6 The Da Vinci Code (2006) <i>The New York Times</i>	109

APPENDIX 7	Superman Returns (2006) <i>The New York Times</i>	112
APPENDIX 8	Happy Feet (2006) <i>The New York Times</i>	115
APPENDIX 9	Ice Age: The Meltdown (2006) <i>The New York Times</i>	117
APPENDIX 10	Casino Royale (2006) <i>The New York Times</i>	118
APPENDIX 11	The Pursuit of Happyness (2006) <i>The New York Times</i>	121
APPENDIX 12	Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest (2006) USCCB... ..	123
APPENDIX 13	Night at the Museum (2006) USCCB.....	125
APPENDIX 14	Cars (2006) USCCB.....	126
APPENDIX 15	X-Men: The Last Stand (2006) USCCB.....	127
APPENDIX 16	The Da Vinci Code (2006) USCCB.....	129
APPENDIX 17	Superman Returns (2006) USCCB.....	132
APPENDIX 18	Happy Feet (2006) USCCB.....	134
APPENDIX 19	Ice Age: The Meltdown (2006) USCCB	136
APPENDIX 20	Casino Royale (2006) USCCB	138
APPENDIX 21	The Pursuit of Happyness (2006) USCCB	140
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....		141
VITA.....		149

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, religions have sought to spread their message to those who had not heard it. People expect missionary work and preaching to look a certain way and take on a certain form; a missionary in an impoverished country teaching children about religious beliefs. People also expect to hear sermons at a religious service; however, the advent of the Internet allowed religious organizations to move online to preach. Religious groups have the opportunity to connect with people in their homes and workplaces through the Internet. The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) is one group that transcends the walls of a church building and reaches out to people through this new medium. The hierarchy of the RCC supports this move online and uses its Internet sites to inform and teach not only their followers, but anyone who clicks on their websites.¹

The RCC's use of the Internet to teach can be seen in the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) website.² The website contains movie reviews listed alongside links to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,³ the Bible, daily scriptures, evangelicalism, and web pages about family, life, and marriage issues. The RCC uses the movie reviews as a subtle opportunity to advocate its standards of morality in a public place. This thesis explores those movie reviews and how they advocate Christian messages to the general public.

In this introduction I give a brief overview of religious communication, including how it relates to the rhetorical tradition and hermeneutics during the RCC's history of public advocacy. Once these theoretical concepts are explained, I describe the USCCB movie reviews used in this analysis and explain the methodology of my analysis. Finally, I outline the chapters of this project, breaking down the conceptual framework of each.

Religious Communication

This section includes a brief discussion of the rhetorical tradition and how it relates to religious communication. Rhetorical criticism is a legitimate means of analysis for locating meaning in religious texts, and so this section starts with a discussion of the relationship between rhetoric and religion. It then moves to hermeneutics and its definition, evolution, and application in this project.

Rhetorical Tradition

Rhetoric has been defined in numerous ways and served many scholars in their analysis of texts. Historically, scholars approached rhetoric as oratory. Critics such as Herbert Wichelns, Ernest Wraga, Wayland Parrish, and Lloyd Bitzer discuss rhetoric as it relates to public speeches. Wichelns presents a methodological approach to critiquing speeches, while Wraga expands that idea to include the effect of rhetoric on our social and intellectual history.⁴ Parrish and Bitzer offer different views of rhetorical criticism, including the idea that speeches should be evaluated for their quality, not the effect they have on an audience.⁵ These rhetorical approaches span the history of rhetorical criticism through oratory.

The definition of rhetoric evolved from a conversation about public speech into one that included Kenneth Burke's concept of rhetorical action. Burke discusses thoughts, motivation and language as rhetorical action⁶ where rhetorical critics study language for its ability to convey content. Rhetorical studies have since progressed even further, analyzing narratives, metaphors, ideology and going so far as to claim everything is rhetorical.⁷ One definition of rhetoric points out that the situation affects the nature of the discourse created within it.⁸ Another definition of rhetoric describes the situation as a material element that is necessary to theorize about a text.⁹ This emphasizes that words themselves are as important as any other element of the setting when determining meaning in a situation. Meaning then lies in all action, not just speech. Rhetoric, therefore, considers meaning inherent in human practices that articulate a culture; thus its environment and its people are also rhetorical.¹⁰ This project incorporates Burke's idea of rhetorical action, defining rhetoric as an expression of meaning that emerges through a text's historical and cultural situation.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the practice of seeking the deep meaning of a text grounded in a common idea or experience. This term loosely applies to any reference to interpretation, including critical theory, deconstruction and poststructuralism. According to Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rainbow, hermeneutics generally "attempts to preserve meaning by locating it in the social practices and literary texts which man produces."¹¹ Hermeneutics is concerned with determining meaning in a text in relation to the cultural and social situation in which the text was created. Michel Foucault describes this cultural and social situation as an "open-logical space in which a certain discourse occurs."¹² That is to say

there is a place where discourse occurs and reveals underlying historical meaning through shared cultural practices.

In religious communication, hermeneutics is concerned with determining possible interpretations of a text in reference to the sacred scriptures while allowing for what C. Jan Swearingen calls “multiple, simultaneous, and coexisting meanings.”¹³ Theologians make these determinations for the RCC constructing meaning from a single text in order to pass it on from generation to generation.¹⁴ These clerics then use *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* as a doctrine providing the official interpretation of the sacred scriptures for all Roman Catholics to follow.¹⁵ The *Catechism’s* principles help followers determine a “true” interpretation from a “false” one in all areas of their lives, reinforcing the RCC’s definitions of morality. If Roman Catholics use the *Catechism* as a moral guide to interpret texts, then the traditions of the RCC will continue to be reinforced and practiced in the modern world.¹⁶

Hermeneutics allows individual applications of a text such as the *Catechism* to relate to both present and future human experiences. No matter what values people ascribe to, they can translate the meaning of morality they draw from the *Catechism* to fit their life. Modern hermeneutics treats meaning as intrinsic, not transferable from one person to another.¹⁷ Francis Florenza states that the goal of creating a message, such as those within the *Catechism*, is to allow people to derive similar meanings of that text. However, since no meaning fits identically into each person’s individual life experiences the individual’s subjectivity becomes a factor in their interpretation. Categories within modern hermeneutics, including situatedness, highlight the importance of the interpreter in the creation of a text’s meaning.¹⁸

Situatedness is an approach favored by Hans-Georg Gadamer who disapproved of the possibility of creating an objective history in which interpreters try to forget their own history and traditions and immerse themselves in those of the text they are examining.¹⁹ He claims, instead, that we are born into a particular situation of socialization that stamps our minds, leaving us unable to avoid our learned thinking and behavior. While our interpretive efforts are constantly inclusive of our personal, historical, and traditional situations, we have the ability to recognize ourselves within these mental constrictions. Gadamer argues that we can apply our personal understanding of tradition to a situation or text once we admit that each of us exists in a shared concrete hermeneutical situation affecting our joint experiences.²⁰ Therefore, if the reviewers of the USCCB movie reviews all share a common understanding of the RCC's doctrinal beliefs, based on their interpretation of the *Catechism's* moral teachings, they are free to interpret new messages, such as those in the films they analyze, as they determine them to affect the morality of Roman Catholic's lives. This brings the process of using a religious hermeneutical approach of interpreting Sacred Scripture into a more manageable document, the *Catechism*, and explains the RCC's guidelines of morality through which the USCCB reviewers draw from their own understanding of those guidelines to analyze films.

Texts and Process

This section includes a brief overview of the USCCB and a description of its website. Specifically, it will explain the movie reviews section of the USCCB website and the content that appears in the reviews themselves. Next there is a discussion of the rating

systems used by the USCCB and the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA).

Finally, there is an explanation of the choice of texts and the process used to conduct my analysis.

Texts

The USCCB is a group of Bishops and laypeople representing the RCC in the United States and Virgin Islands. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) as it is currently constructed is a combination of two groups that formed in 1966: the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) and the United States Catholic Conference (USCC). The USCCB is a civil, nonprofit organization comprised of approximately 350 lay people, priests, and deacons. The mission of the organization is presented on their websites' main page and claims, "the USCCB is an assembly of the Catholic Church hierarchy who work together to unify, coordinate, promote and carry on Catholic activities in the United States; to organize and conduct religious, charitable and social welfare work at home and abroad; to aid in education; and to care for immigrants."²¹ The USCCB attempts to provide as much information as it can to further outreach programs and education.

One way the USCCB spreads current moral information is through the link for the movie review page located among eleven other links across the top of the home page.²² The movie review home page contains the links for the ten types of reviews that the office for film and broadcasting produces: Upcoming Television; Movies in Wide Release; Movies in Limited Release; Movies Coming Soon; New on DVD/Video; Family Video Reviews; Theater; Archived Movie Reviews; Top 10 Movie List (1965-2006); and Vatican Top 45 List. The description provided on the movie review home page states,

The Office for Film and Broadcasting is responsible for reviewing and rating theatrical motion pictures, previewing and evaluating television programming as well as providing the Catholic public with information about the role of the entertainment and news media in influencing societal and personal values. In recognition of the importance of the videocassette player in the American home, the Office has prepared a volume of capsule reviews assessing the moral and entertainment values of more than 8,000 movies available on television or video. The office also sponsored a "Faith on Film" festival to commemorate the jubilee.²³

The goal of the Office for Film and Broadcasting is to relate information about morality to Roman Catholics through their movie reviews.

I examined the movie reviews written for the top ten grossing movies from 2006.²⁴ The reviews for these movies can be found in the USCCB archived movie reviews section that is set up alphabetically.²⁵ The individual movie reviews are presented with a picture from the movie, as well as a brief abstract of the review. The reviews range from one to three pages. They provide readers with a description of the plot of the movies and note the tone of the movies, the type and amount of violence or menace, the approval or disapproval of the message of the movie, the types of character relations, and the appropriateness of the language used. The examination is of a text, a movie review, which has already analyzed another text, the movie. This is essentially what a homily does. It teaches the lessons of morality that Roman Catholics should follow in their day to day lives in order to be a good Christian.

The USCCB created and adapted a rating system throughout the years to help in its efforts to protect children from movies with adult content.²⁶ Today, the authors of the reviews evaluate the movie with one of the following ratings according to artistic merit and moral suitability: A-I –general patronage; A-II –adults and adolescents; A-III –adults; L –limited adult audience, films whose problematic content many adults would find troubling, L replaces the previous classification of A-IV; and O –morally offensive.²⁷ These ratings are assigned to the movies rated by the USCCB, in addition to the rating given by the Motion Picture Association of America: G -general audiences, all ages admitted; PG –Parental Guidance Suggested, some material may not be suitable for children; PG-13 –Parents Strongly Cautioned, some material may be inappropriate for children under 13; R –Restricted, under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian; and NC-17 –No one 17 and under admitted.²⁸ The MPAA ratings are used in mass media publications and the movie industry abides by their ratings. Movie consumers have more access to, and are more familiar with, the MPAA ratings. The USCCB ratings are found on its website and in at least one Roman Catholic publication.²⁹ Unlike the MPAA ratings, the USCCB ratings are non-binding in a legal sense, but nevertheless important references for Roman Catholics to make moral choices. The USCCB code articulates the moral principles that the RCC seeks to teach in reference to one medium, movies.

Process

The ten reviews I analyzed were selected based on box office success in 2006. The success of these films demonstrates interest in the movies being reviewed and provides evidence that the movies reached a large number of people. Since the reviews are

published on the USCCB website, an officially sanctioned representative of the RCC in the United States, and written by Roman Catholic laymen, there is an understanding of the *Catechism* permeating the reviews. The reviews function to instill or reinforce a belief in movie patrons as to the moral quality of the film they are seeing and also influence those who may not subscribe to those views already, but nonetheless read the reviews. The USCCB ultimately acts as a moral advocate recommending a film based on its moral quality.

Chapter Outline

This thesis is broken down into four additional chapters. The second chapter provides a history of the RCC's advocacy campaigns. This chapter begins with a discussion of the RCC's ability to control and censor information in Medieval times. Moving through history to the inception of the First Amendment in the United States, the conversation turns to the RCC's loss of absolute authority and its shift to advocating their morality through various organizations and campaigns. This chapter explores the RCC's history of using persuasive techniques, setting the stage for a discussion of the USCCB movie reviews and their place in this history of the RCC's public advocacy attempts.

Chapter three moves into the analysis of the *New York Times* and USCCB movie reviews for nine of the top ten films used in this project. The *New York Times* reviews establish a secular context for discussing differences found in the themes and language used to describe a film. The USCCB differs from the *New York Times* reviews in its expression of moral considerations within the film reviews. The chapter ends with a

discussion of these differences as well as the USCCB reviews' place within the RCC's goals of advocating morality.

Chapter four examines both the *New York Times* and USCCB reviews for *The Da Vinci Code*, the tenth film from the data set. This film results in a unique review from both sources, and involves a discussion of not only the RCC's views of morality, but a defense of its doctrine. This film's reviews express different themes by the USCCB than those focused on in the other nine reviews and advocate a different message.

Finally, the conclusion discusses what this analysis tells us about the RCC's public advocacy. Additionally it discusses how this analysis expands our understanding of hermeneutics, homiletics, and media literacy. The last chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of this analysis and suggestions for future research.

Notes

1 Todd S. Frobish, "The Virtual Vatican: A Case Study Regarding Online Ethos," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 29, (2006): 38-69.

2 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, n.d., <http://www.usccb.org/> (accessed May 12, 2007).

3 Catechism of the Catholic Church (New York, DoubleDay, 1994).

4 Herbert A. Wichelns, "The Literary Criticism of Oratory," in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*. Strata College, PA: Strata Publishing, Inc., 2000; Ernest J. Wraga, "Public Address: A Study in Social and Intellectual History," in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*. Strata College, PA: Strata Publishing, Inc., 2000.

5 Wayland Maxfield Parrish, "The Study of Speeches," in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*. Strata College, PA: Strata Publishing, Inc., 2000; Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*. Strata College, PA: Strata Publishing, Inc., 2000.

6 *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. Carl R. Burgchardt (Pennsylvania: Strata Publishing, Inc., 2000), 207.

7 Ibid.

8 Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*. Strata College, PA: Strata Publishing, Inc., 2000.

9 Carole Blair, "Contemporary U.S Memorial Sites as Exemplars of Rhetoric's Materiality," 18.

10 Nathan Stormer, "Articulation: A Working Paper on Rhetoric and Taxis," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90, no. 3 (2004): 257-284.

11 Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, "Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics" (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), xv.

12 Ibid., 51.

13 C. Jan Swearingen, "Homiletics and Hermeneutics: The Rhetorical Spaces in Between," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 28, no. 2 (2005): 29; Francis Schussler Florenza, "The Conflict of Hermeneutical Traditions and Christian Theology," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 27, no.1 (2003): 3-31.

14 John L. Pauley, II, "Metaphors in Reformation Era Hermeneutic and Theory: Common Roots, Different Extensions," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 17, (1994): 61-62.

15 The Catechism of the Catholic Church

16 The term tradition is referring to the teachings passed down over generations from those members of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church that followers continue to subscribe to today.

17 A. Roger Gobbel and Thomas E. Ridenhour, "Religious Communication and The Nature of Meaning," *Religious Communication Today* 4, (1981): 21-26.

18 Florenza, Conflict of Hermeneutical Traditions. Preunderstanding is a concept presented by Heidegger that was later developed into situatedness by Gadamer.

19 Nirmala Pillay, "The significance of Gadamer's hermeneutics for cross-cultural understanding," *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 21, no. 4 (2002): 330-344; Dilthey argues that it is unnecessary to try to step outside of our historical experiences since it is through life and lived experiences that we are able to express meaning.

20 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gadamer in Conversation*, ed. Richard E. Palmer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 36-60.

21 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Welcome page, <http://www.usccb.org/> (accessed June 4, 2007).

22 The eleven links on the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops include: USCCB Home, Topics, News, Readings, Movies, Bible, Catechism, Bishops, Dioceses, Departments, and Publications.

23 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Office for Film and Broadcasting" Welcome address, <http://www.usccb.org/movies/> (accessed June 4, 2007).

24 *Box Office Mojo*, "2006 Domestic Grosses", <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=2006> (accessed June 4, 2007). The top ten top grossing movies from this list are analyzed in this paper. They are Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest- \$423,315,812; Night at the Museum- \$250,822,780; Cars- \$244,082,982; X-Men: The Last Stand- \$234,362,462; The Da Vinci Code- \$217,536,138; Superman Returns- \$200,081,192; Happy Feet- \$198,000,317; Ice Age: The Meltdown- \$195,330,621; Casino Royale- \$167,445,960; and The Pursuit of Happyness- \$163,566,459.

25 Two movies, "The Da Vinci Code" and "The Pursuit of Happyness" were not found in this master list of archived movie reviews. They were found through a search on the site.

26 Black, The Catholic Crusade.

27 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Archived Movie Reviews," <http://www.usccb.org/movies/movieall.shtml> (accessed June 4, 2007).

28 *Motion Pictures Association*, "Ratings," http://www.mpaa.org/FilmRat_Ratings.asp (accessed June 4, 2007).

29 USCCB Office for Film and Broadcasting Receptionist, interview by author, phone call, August 14, 2007. Through a phone call I was told that the movie reviews are posted on the USCCB website, as well as, in *The Catholic News*.

CHAPTER 2

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN CONTEXT

The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) has a long history of presenting messages of Roman Catholic morality to the world community. Historically the RCC used censorship as a means of social control exercising its power to dictate the production of moral forms of media and art. Sir Thomas More's restrictive proclamation of 1530 that banned fourteen books and the introduction of printing to England in 1476 exemplify the historical problems and opportunities of controlling messages expressed in print.¹ Both of these events occurred when church and state were one authority. The first ensured the beliefs and ideals of the RCC would surpass and survive over others. The second, however, allowed for individuals to create and express personal views through a mass medium that was not controlled by the RCC. As a result, the RCC needed to craft its messages carefully and determine clearer guidelines for faithful members of the church to follow.

The RCC's involvement in censoring was construed by Andrew Hadfield as, "scrutinizing," "criticizing," "condemning," "commissioning," "repressing," "forbidding," and "suppressing" art.² More specifically, censorship ranged from overt direction and the commissioning of particular artists to create works defined by the RCC's standards to commentary by various religious organizations within the RCC condemning particular works of art. In Medieval times the church could determine what

citizens would be exposed to because church and state were one authority. The desire to control citizens from influences outside the RCC was based on the RCC's determination that contradictory beliefs would negatively affect the religious practices of followers. David Loades argues that when subjects in the sixteenth century began to develop more independent ideas, censorship became the RCC's solution to "protect society from its own disruptive instincts."³ The RCC utilized various methods of censoring in order to save its followers from the moral harm they might suffer if left on their own. This type of censorship and others like it sought to control behavior and reinforce the status quo.

Although direct censoring activities by the RCC are easy to trace historically, instances of covert, subtle forms of advocacy are more common now. The RCC can no longer censor material because it lacks the authority to enforce a media ban. The RCC faces opposition when it tries to direct the practices and beliefs of American society as a whole because of their lack of complete control of media content and the spread of ideas. The ratification of the Bill of Rights in 1789 permitted the freedom of speech forcing the RCC to advocate specific moral messages through various mediums in order to impact followers' beliefs in the United States.

In early American history, the RCC did not face the same issues regarding First Amendment freedoms as it does today, despite the desire to influence individuals' beliefs. American citizens could not easily access media that would disseminate messages to a wide audience as they are able to today. However, by the 1960's, protests began when Americans acted out against what they believed to be direct attempts at censoring media content.⁴ During the 1970's, America witnessed a turnaround in the desire to control media messages and cries rang out to protect children from objectionable material.⁵ By

this time, the RCC's efforts in the United States to control the morality in media content had taken a softer, subtler form. While the government offered some protection for children from media,⁶ it was not enough in the eyes of the RCC which continued its moral advocacy through the freedom afforded to the church under the First Amendment.

Americans enjoy the First Amendment freedom to say what they want, so long as they do no harm; however, problems arise when certain groups deem material harmful.⁷ In recent history, the RCC took a seemingly confusing stance regarding the *Harry Potter* book series. Pope Benedict XVI criticized *Harry Potter* for "subtle seductions, which act unnoticed, and by this deeply distort Christianity in the soul before it can grow properly."⁸ Nevertheless, *Harry Potter* was later approved by the RCC as acceptable to read and watch.⁹ The RCC's unclear stance does not suit the legal right Roman Catholic Americans have to produce any sort of speech act through the lens of any religious belief they desire.¹⁰ The RCC's moral advocacy contributes to an ongoing discussion of appropriate moral boundaries for American citizens.

Modern media allow individuals to express their beliefs about social issues without the same level of control experienced historically. The existence of a text creates an opportunity for addressing social concerns. If we really do accept what we see (or read) as truth, then our beliefs are determined by the texts we encounter. The elements of advocacy that this chapter addresses include a discussion of information and art disseminated to the mass public by the RCC and its commissioning of certain works in an attempt to influence individuals' perceptions of reality. The rest of this chapter articulates an overview of the history of censorship and its transformation into public advocacy in contemporary American society. First, the chapter addresses the actions of the RCC to

control the production of art in Medieval times. After this discussion of historical censorship practices, I examine more specific examples of Christian art used as a means of social control. I then provide a more detailed look at public advocacy in America beginning with the inception of the First Amendment. Next this chapter includes a discussion of the Legion of Decency and the impact of modern media, the Internet, on current trends in the RCC's public advocacy campaigns. Finally, I place the USCCB movie reviews in the long line of persuasive strategies the RCC engaged in to exert control over the messages the public is exposed to.

Censorship by the Roman Catholic Church

The RCC has a long history of influencing texts distributed to the public dating back to Medieval times. The pope, cardinals, and bishops interpreted sacred scripture in order to determine meaning in secular and religious texts and make decisions about how to disseminate that information. With the hierarchy of the RCC engaging in these decisions, religious power rested in the hands of a limited, yet influential group. According to Oliver Trager, the RCC's cultural censorship "dominated Europe until the Reformation, although its determination to suppress heresy derived as much from a desire to maintain its political power as to propagate true belief."¹¹ The RCC's censoring activities included controlling all media where information could reach followers and non-followers in order to maintain the RCC's religious and political power. The authority of the RCC resulted from its control over both church and state issues during the Medieval period. With the power to influence virtually every cultural decision made during this time, the RCC was able to create specific messages that it approved of and suppress those with which it did

not agree. These censorship actions shaped individual and cultural practices throughout Medieval history, most especially through the production and social commentary surrounding art.

Christian inspired art originated as a method for teaching the mysteries of faith through scripture-based signs. Since print was not a feasible alternative and different individuals' desired to spread messages of faith through art, the RCC and political officials often destroyed or condemned works of art of which they did not approve. Christian art enjoyed full freedom as an expression of faith under the Edict of Milan in 313 B.C.¹² For the first time, Constantine, Emperor of the West, and Licinius, Emperor of the East, encouraged and funded the creation of Christian art and exemplified the power of church/state authority.¹³ Within Constantine's empire and elsewhere, the RCC relied on painting and sculpture as well as elements of art in word and sound to teach Gospel messages because teaching people Bible stories orally was not enough.¹⁴ For example, Richard Gross discusses the stained glass of medieval times "as a vehicle for God's call to conversion and as a lens through which this call can be more fully understood...and answered."¹⁵ The pictorial representation of the word of God served to further the belief and participation of followers since not all were literate and printing was not advanced enough to provide every believer with a personal copy of the word.¹⁶

Dating from approximately the fourth through the sixteenth centuries, the production of Christian art increased dramatically, but the forms varied based on the artists' beliefs and location. The East produced icons that they viewed as a sacrament because of the meaning and conviction attributed to worshiping them. Western artists varied more in their styles and viewpoints based on the specific cultural world they lived in. Styles such

as the Romanesque and Gothic emerged during this time in the West, along with a conversation about architectural considerations and what Pope John Paul II described as “tensions peculiar to the experience of God, the mystery both ‘awesome’ and ‘alluring.’”¹⁷ Cultural art expressed the Gospel message in a way that allowed this new church art to shape the beliefs of its followers. This change in the design of art attests to the importance of creating icons to which different groups of people can relate.

The abundance of art created during the Middle Ages under the approval of the RCC included icons. The term icon in the Greek language, means “image, representation, and portrait.”¹⁸ In Byzantium the icon took on a more specific meaning “as a portable portrait of Christ,” so that the icon possessed the quality of divine grace.¹⁹ The sacred experience created by the materiality of the icon functioned like other elements used in liturgy, such as the Eucharist chalice.²⁰ The emphasis on icons as “portable” representations of Christ was enough to fuel icon destruction by unsupportive governments around the world during the Iconoclasm Era, from 730 to 843. Governmental critics, afraid of the power of these icons, briefly convinced RCC officials of their heretical nature and gained the RCC’s support in outlawing and destroying icons.²¹ Officials stopped Christians from using icons in their worship because they represented something tangible. Since officials could not control an intangible belief, purging icons allowed critics to take action toward removing icons.

Concerned over controversy regarding icons, in 787 the Council at Nicaea made important decisions for faith and culture, and established rules for the appropriate use of icons. At the Council, the RCC decided that the Incarnation of Christ “coming into the world of visible realities,” made it acceptable to use images and icons in their worship.²²

The RCC explained that since people worshiped an image for what it represents, rather than its physical characteristics, there is no harm in having icons.²³ After the RCC's decision at the Council at Nicaea, icon purging began to diminish.

Pope John Paul II explained that moving beyond the Iconoclasm era, Humanism and the Renaissance came into existence around the fourteenth century, bringing about the beginning of the RCC's interest in "everything human, in the world, and in the reality of history."²⁴ The new emphasis on human reality affected the style of humanist and renaissance artists greatly. This time period witnessed the creation of the Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo and the Triune God by Raphael. According to Pope John Paul II, at this time, sacred art "[rose] to new heights of aesthetic and religious experience."²⁵ Art assisted the faithful in their religious experience and the RCC continued to maintain a great appreciation for the value of art.²⁶ The RCC's appreciation rested on knowing that the Church guided its production and display in a manner consistent with its teachings and beliefs. This also speaks to the control that the RCC practiced through dialogue with artists about the works they created and the meaning associated with those works. For many artists, the works they produced that were commissioned and funded by the RCC were their only source of income. While the RCC could never truly determine the ultimate meaning of a piece of art to those who saw it, it could, during this time, decide whether a piece would exist at all.

To avoid direction from the RCC, many artists began to stray away from creating religious art. Despite this distancing, Pope John Paul II explains that the RCC maintained, "true art has a close affinity with the world of faith, so that even in situations where culture and the Church are far apart, art remains a kind of bridge to religious

experience.”²⁷ This demonstrates the RCC’s belief that art naturally possesses a voice that conveys the mystery of religious beliefs, whether intentional or not. Even within secular art, the RCC believes that religious influences are present during the creation of the artwork because the RCC believes that God is present in individuals regardless of their beliefs. Due to the inherently religious tone the RCC sees in art, the Church concerned itself with forming an alliance with artists.²⁸ If the RCC helped shape the artists’ work, it could guide the religious messages being disseminated to the general public. Once again, the RCC concerned itself with determining the output of artists so that those who would see the work would only receive the messages approved of by the RCC.

From 1962-1965, Vatican II highlighted the need for literature and art to enrich the experiences of human life by emphasizing the importance of the RCC’s involvement with artists. Regarding the discourse at the Second Vatican Council, Pope John Paul II commented in retrospect:

the Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* recalled the historic friendliness of the Church towards art and, referring more specifically to sacred art, the “summit” of religious art, did not hesitate to consider artists as having “a noble ministry” when their works reflect in some way the infinite beauty of God and raise people’s minds to him.²⁹

Here the RCC took a stand on the importance and prestige that art holds in the eyes of the RCC’s faith to create a positive view of their past censorship activities and current advocacy of particular moral beliefs. According to Pope John Paul II, art created to convey history and theology exists in order to fulfill the job Christ left to the RCC.³⁰ In

this sense, the RCC needs those artists capable of translating the deep messages of God through traditional forms of art, literary and figurative images, music, and architecture to produce work in conjunction with Roman Catholic beliefs and the guidance of the RCC's hierarchy. Pope John Paul II reached out to artists in his "Letter to Artists," and reminded them that "beyond functional considerations, the close alliance that has always existed between the Gospel and art means that you are invited to use your creative intuition to enter into the heart of the mystery of the Incarnate God and at the same time into the mystery of man."³¹ Here the Pope called upon artists to recognize the influence of God in their creative inspirations and to dedicate the work of art to Him. The Pope also attempted to shape the art created by narrowing in on the Gospel and the visual expression of its message.

This overview of the progression of censorship throughout the RCC's history paves the way for a conversation about more recent instances of its public advocacy for morality within media. The advocacy the RCC practices involves commissioning particular art as well as pointing out existing art that the RCC finds inappropriate. Understanding the history of censorship based on the inseparable power and authority of church and state acting as one force conveys the omnipresence of its influence in the daily lives of people in Medieval time. Whether direct or covert, the practice of controlling ideas and information resulting from and disseminated through art continues to exist and impact people. More often than not, we remain unaware of the influence morally persuasive messages have on our daily lives and belief systems; however, some key historical instances help us understand the power of public advocacy. Moving the focus to American culture, social advocacy and persuasive practices influence everything

from the food we eat, to the clothing we wear, church we attend, candidates we vote for, and the movies we watch.

The First Amendment and Public Advocacy

The freedoms granted to American citizens by the First Amendment create barriers for the RCC limiting its authority in enforcing the RCC's moral beliefs. In a pluralistic democracy like the United States, the right to speak and practice religion exist so individual religions continue to push their particular interpretations of secular texts based on the messages they want their followers to receive. This guidance, whether termed advocacy or not, takes on the qualities of mentoring religious followers, thus impacting the beliefs and actions of members of the public. When an individual or organization presents a personal opinion, it must not interfere with all other individual or organizational rights to protection from harmful material. Since the establishment of the First Amendment, Americans have struggled with what it means to uphold one person's right to free speech and free expression while protecting other people from objectionable material.

Art as public expression existed as, and remains, the subject of scrutiny in political, religious, and social arenas. In the United States, the discussion of art, mass media and the culture they are embedded within revolves around what Oliver Trager describes as "the constitutional right of free speech artists...to express themselves versus society's moves to limit that expression."³² The debate over who has more of a right, the person making a statement or the person needing to be protected from that statement, continues to spark controversy. Questions arise as to who is entitled to make decisions determining

the moral quality of art and what criteria we use to judge it. According to the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."³³ This rules out a national censoring body, leaving the government unable to fully control media content, creating the possibility for public debate over definitions of moral content. With minimal governmental involvement in media production, the RCC felt strongly enough about its position on the quality of media content to create various campaigns intended to advocate the suppression of certain ideas and behaviors it found objectionable.³⁴

In recent history, various non-governmental groups established definitions of obscenity in order to maintain moral standards their organization deemed appropriate.³⁵ Pressure asserted by these groups regarding the content of various media can be more effective than formal nationally enforced censoring attempts. Since individuals in the United States resist direct governmental control, local and specialized pressure groups, such as the RCC, may have more of an impact when advocating material.³⁶ Of importance in this transition from one centralized definition of morality to multiple definitions is how the RCC carries on its advocacy actions in new media formats. Concerned with the rise in art production through new media, the RCC in the United States addressed the moral quality of movies and advocates for some while condemning others based on the films' adherence to the moral standards taught by the RCC.

Since 1913, when the first instance of regulating film content occurred in the United States, concerns about the moral content of movies have been common.³⁷ Films produced

for entertainment provide viewers with an escape from their own lives, allowing them to immerse themselves in whatever story they choose. Fearing the consequences of immersion into a story with an immoral message, some Roman Catholics view movies with skepticism.³⁸ Despite the prevalence of religious views expressed through radio and television programs,³⁹ early attempts at advocacy sought simple and direct solutions for any moral, political, social or philosophical issues found in movies. When this did not prevent producers from creating “morally questionable” material, a few Roman Catholic priests and laymen engaged in a more concerted effort to influence film content.⁴⁰

In the early 1930’s, the Legion of Decency, a Roman Catholic organization, began its service. The founders of the group included, Father Daniel Lord, S.J., professor of dramatics at St. Louis University and editor of *Queen’s Work*, with the help of Martin Quigley, a lay Roman Catholic who owned and published the journal *Exhibitors Herald*, Joseph Breen, an active Irish Roman Catholic journalist, Father Fitz-George Dinneen, S.J., a Chicago priest, and Father Wilfred Parsons, editor of the Jesuit publication *America*, who all took part in drafting a moral code for the movies.⁴¹ Everyone involved in the creation of the code wanted entertainment films to depict the costs of deviant behavior, whether criminal or sexual, in addition to reinforcing the idea that the cornerstones of an orderly society are the church, the government, and the family.⁴² The Legion of Decency attempted to enforce this moral code in Hollywood and had a significant impact on the content of films since it carried the persuasive authority of the RCC.⁴³ People took the Legion’s actions seriously, since the Legion presented a unified religious standpoint on the issues of appropriate moral content in films. This meant that

the Legion began to gain authority on issues related to morality in movies and would be able to impact the perceptions of a wider audience.

The origins of the Legion reside in a speech made by Monsignor Amleto Giovanni Cicognani, apostolic delegate to the United States, in which he announced that “Catholics are called by God, the Pope, the Bishops, and the priests to a united and vigorous campaign for the purification of the cinema, which has become a deadly menace to morals.”⁴⁴ This directive made immorality in the movies an issue for the United States bishops. Taking the order to address the declining morality of films seriously, the bishops formed the Episcopal Committee on Motion Pictures (ECMP) in 1933 as a subgroup instructed to coordinate the efforts of the Legion of Decency.⁴⁵ At its inception, the ECMP accepted guidance from Martin Quigley to create a three-part plan that included creating pressure groups, boycotting offensive films, and supporting self-regulation of and conformity to the Production Code created by Father Lord and his colleagues. With Roman Catholic dioceses across the country, along with groups such as the International Federation of Catholic Alumnae (IFCA) mounting a campaign against the movies, Hollywood responded adversely by pushing the limits of film content. Over the next few decades a battle ensued between producers and the Legion over film content, during which the Legion’s ability to affect the box office results for a film proved its most important weapon.⁴⁶ The Legion officials involved in film production held a lot of power with regard to film content since producers ultimately needed their approval for ticket sales.

Over time it seemed that the power of the Legion rested in the hands of too few people and its work began to cause controversy. In 1957 American representatives from

the Legion and the IFCA attended the Office Catholique International du Cinéma (OCIC), an international Roman Catholic conference dedicated to the study of cinema as an international form of communication.⁴⁷ At the conference, Pope Pius XII encouraged Roman Catholics to appreciate the cinema. Internationally, members of the OCIC conference saw the Legion's actions in condemning movies as too negative. Soon after the conference, the Pope issued a papal encyclical, *Miranda Prorsus* (On Entertainment Media),⁴⁸ in which he stated the necessity of studying cinema as a modern instrument leading people to salvation.

With the Pope's encouragement of film study in mind, more Americans began to question the authority and ability of the Legion to enforce its decisions. The Legion consisted of many Roman Catholic laypersons whose personal opinions of morality about a particular film became more apparent once a widely representative group began to review the films. Since the Legion presented no consensus over the appropriateness of film content, by the mid-1960's many Roman Catholics no longer paid attention to the Legion's judgments.⁴⁹ Fearing its lack of influence, the Legion tried to implement a nationwide rating system. The organization tried to assign ratings to movies to allow for adult themes without the possibility of children viewing them; however, Hollywood refused to adopt this program.

In November, 1969, in an attempt to soften the Legion's image among Roman Catholics and the movie-going public, the group changed its name and officially became the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures (NCOMP). Since many Roman Catholics lost faith in the Legion's actions, this name change provided a fresh start for the group to continue influencing films to promote Roman Catholic conceptions of morality.

While some remembered the Legion's past aggressive tactics, most Americans, including Roman Catholics, began to see cinema as a medium to study and appreciate for its artistic quality.⁵⁰

The lessons that movies teach and the moral issues raised within them remain a concern today, even though the NCOMP does not seek to overtly condemn movies in the same way the Legion did. The RCC influences perceptions of movie content making it clear what is inappropriate for Roman Catholics; however, most Roman Catholics view works of art, cinema and literature as materials to study and learn from. Given the human tendency to give in to physical and intellectual temptations, Ted Jelen claims, "it is by no means certain that truth will prevail in the marketplace of ideas [and] because of [this] limitation of human reason, the RCC assumes its primary role as teacher."⁵¹ While the RCC hierarchy maintains the authority to determine right, wrong, good and evil for its followers, its role remains the hermeneutical practice of teaching Roman Catholics in order to help them develop individual consciences to make better-informed decisions.⁵²

The USCCB as Advocate

The USCCB does not indicate whether the RCC engages in moral advocacy. However, if the USCCB no longer condemns art through its movie reviews, yet continues to present moral messages in a public forum, they act as moral advocates and affect individuals who may not know of the Roman Catholic beliefs woven into the movie reviews. The USCCB makes subtle moral judgments in its movie reviews, and this subtle guidance toward practices and beliefs that fall in line with those of the RCC, again place these movie reviews in line with the RCC's history of advocating specific moral codes.

Historically, the RCC reached out to the world community through any form of communication available to it, and with its ability to connect the RCC to significantly more people around the world, the Internet is no exception.

The RCC employs the Internet to spread the word of God. Modern religious themes that show up in virtual expressions on the Internet include access to basic information, evangelization and catechesis, spiritual growth, and building communities.⁵³ Most religious organizations today create websites where people can go to find desired information. The Vatican, for example, has used the web since early in cyberspace history,⁵⁴ and the papacies of Pope Pius XI, Pope Pius XII , and Pope John Paul II illustrate an openness to the potential of technology to sustain their following, bring in new membership and address critics.⁵⁵ These popes, in particular, advocated the usefulness of technology in spreading the message of the RCC.

Today, the Vatican and the USCCB have Internet websites where they continue their missionary endeavors from the comfort of their Rome and New York offices. Missionary endeavors include controlling what information will appear on the website, the style of the layout, and how much dialogue users can engage in with the creators of the website as well as with other users. It remains just as important to the RCC today as when it originated, to spread its message anywhere someone can hear it. However, with texts such as the movie reviews, they craft their messages more carefully and subtly so that readers who stumble across their website are not offended by an overly religious tone.

In this new Internet environment, the opportunity exists to build legitimacy and authority by offering doctrine and teachings at the click of a button.⁵⁶ This ability to access information about the practices and beliefs of the RCC, as well as about clergy and

popular culture, allows the USCCB to make the RCC more accessible to Roman Catholics and non-Roman Catholics, furthering its evangelization and advocacy efforts. Despite the website's appeal to the tradition of the RCC through its inclusion of the Bible, *Catechism*, and Roman Catholic teachings, the move to an online text is a major development in the practice of the RCC. The site presents itself as equally valuing the messages expressed in all of these categories, leading to the determination that the USCCB creates the messages of the movie reviews with the same hermeneutical care as it does its understanding of the *Catechism*.⁵⁷ The USCCB does not exclusively link the *Catechism* and morality in the movie reviews; however, the link between the two is a logical extension since both the *Catechism* and movie reviews are presented on the website, the movie reviews function as agents teaching the message of the *Catechism*. At the same time, websites like those of the Vatican and USCCB offer increasing amounts of information in the form of doctrine and applications of doctrine in one place, making it easier for people to access. The convenience this offers when trying to reach out to people remains unmatched in any other written and spoken form of evangelism.⁵⁸

Preachers face unique situations when attempting to reach a desired audience with their messages. For many non-religious individuals, the Internet provides an environment that makes them more comfortable than walking into a church.⁵⁹ Also, for those individuals who did not grow up in a church the Internet exists as a tool used to research different faiths.⁶⁰ The intersection of religion and popular culture created on the web highlights an important phenomenon of spiritual growth and building communities of the past two decades. Understanding the implications for increased membership and enhanced spiritual growth for followers, the RCC provides specific material on approved

websites that lead to this goal. The publication and dissemination of the USCCB movie reviews written as a form of social criticism exemplifies the RCC's moral advocacy in today's world.

The USCCB movie reviews reveal one of the persuasive means used by the RCC to teach its moral message. These reviews function as tools to spread the beliefs of the RCC to those who may or may not seek it. Acting as a homily, these reviews send a message to readers informing them of how to live a moral life and which practices engaged in within a particular film are acceptable for them to witness and mimic. While discussions abound in social contexts over the move away from traditional religious practices, the move toward Internet religious advocacy takes center stage. The USCCB website functions under the RCC's authority and the information found on it, if an individual followed it, would lead to a good Christian life.

The media rich environment which we live in today allows the USCCB to present messages in movie reviews that encourage a Roman Catholic interpretation of popular movies. This chapter showed that the USCCB movie reviews subtly convey religious teachings, falling in line with the RCC's practice of advocating moral interpretations of popular culture messages. The next two chapters explain the themes presented in both the *New York Times* and USCCB movie reviews and how they impact readers' perceptions of standards of film quality.

Notes

1 David Loades, *Politics, Censorship, and the English Reformation*, (Pinter Publishers, New York, 1991): 96.

2 *Literature and Censorship in Renaissance England*, ed. Andrew Hadfield, (Palgrave, New York, 2001). This discussion of art includes visual art and all forms of creating it, literature, and drama.

3 Loades, *Politics, Censorship, and the English Reformation*, 96- 97.

4 *Ibid.*, 13-25.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Oliver Trager, *The Arts & Media in America: Freedom or Censorship* (New York, Facts on File, 1991): 150. One governmental response to this cry came through court cases and mandates requiring various conditions passed on the media to make messages and programs appropriate for the wider public audience. For example, the U.S. Supreme Court decision in the case of *Miller v. California* (1973), established a definition of obscenity:

The “average person,” taking contemporary community standards, would find a work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient (sexually arousing) interest; the work depicts or describes sexual conduct in a patently offensive manner; the work taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value. The Supreme Court further defined patently offensive representations or descriptions of intimate sexual acts, normal or perverted, actual or simulated, or patently offensive sexual or excretory representations. For the most part, this definition of obscenity deals with pornography, however it does create awareness of media content at the national, state and local levels.

7 Ibid.

8 “Pope Opposes Harry Potter Novels- Signed Letters from Cardinal Ratzinger Now Online,” July 13, 2005, <http://www.lifesite.net/ldn/2005/jul/05071301.html> (accessed December 10, 2007).

9 Associated Press, “Vatican Gives Thumbs Up to Harry Potter Series,” February 3, 2003, http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/1044293369274_12/?hub=Entertainment (Accessed December 10, 2007).

10 Mike Massie, “The Golden Compass- A Movie Pulse Review,” December 8, 2007, <http://www.sliceofscifi.com/2007/12/08/the-golden-compass-a-movie-pulse-review/> (Accessed December 10, 2007). According to Mike Massie, the RCC disapproved of the movie, *The Golden Compass*, because the Magisterium- a group in the movie- resembled the hierarchy of the RCC too closely for the comfort of RCC officials.

11 Trager, *The Arts and Media*, 150.

12 Pope John Paul II, “Letter to Artists,” *The Origins*, April 4, 1999, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists_en.html (Retrieved, September 10, 2007); United Methodist Women in Mission, “The Edict of Milan,” <http://gbgm-umc.org/UMW/Bible/milan.stm> (Retrieved December 10, 2007).

13 Ibid., Constantine funded the creation of old Saint Peter’s Basilica and the Basilica of Saint John Lateran.

14 Richard Gross, “Stained Glass as a Vehicle for Spiritual Growth,” *The Stained Glass Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2006): 254.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., The Gregorian Chant became another representation of scripture used in the liturgical celebration. Created by Gregory the Great, this music became the “music of the Church’s faith.” With this incorporation of the sacred mysteries into the arts, the beautiful and the RCC’s version of the true became linked as a means for elevating the soul in worship. Information now expressed through melody added to the visual and oratorical means already available.

17 Pope John Paul II, “Letter to Artists,” *The Middle Ages*.

18 Bisera V. Pentcheva, “The Performative Icon,” *Art Bulletin* 88, no. 4 (2006): 631.

19 Ibid., In the ninth century, the icon was “the imprint (in Greek, *typos*) of Christ’s visible characteristics (appearance) on matter.”

20 Ibid., “As wine pours from the cup, sight, touch, and sound transform into smell and taste. Taste itself becomes the seal or affirmation of participatory knowledge of God.”

21 Loades, Politics, Censorship, and the English Reformation.

22 Pope John Paul II, “Letter to Artists,” *The Origins*.

23 Ibid.

24 Pope John Paul II, “Letter to Artists,” *Humanism and the Renaissance*.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Pope John Paul II, “Letter to Artists,” *Towards a renewed dialogue*.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., *In the spirit of the Second Vatican Council*.

30 Ibid., *The Church Needs Art*.

31 Ibid., *An appeal to artists*.

32 Trager, *Arts & Media in America*, 1.

33 Ibid., 150.

34 This is in reference to The List of Forbidden Books, The Legion of Decency, and other historical campaigns by the Catholic Church to censor information and art.

35 Trager, *Arts and Media in America*. While the list of groups and organizations is long, some of the organizations include The American Civil Liberties Union, Federal Communications Commission, American Booksellers Association Inc., Fort Wayne Books, and Southland Corporation.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., 2. The first act of censorship occurred in 1913, “when the state of Ohio passed a statute to establish a board of censors to precensor all films proposed for showing in the state.”

38 Gregory D. Black. *The Catholic Crusade Against the Movies, 1940-1975*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

39 Brad Schultz, “The Economic Response of Religious Television Stations to Digital Implementation,” *Journal of Communication and Religion* 28, no. 2 (2005): 307-325. Televangelism and Radio Broadcasting have had an impact on the history of religion and media; however, their history does not directly contribute to this analysis.

40 Black, *The Catholic Crusade*.

41 Ibid., 10-13. *Queen's Work* was a publication that preached morality and ethics to Catholic youth. Martin Quigley's journal quickly merged with *Moving Picture World* to become *Motion Picture Herald*.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., 21.

45 The Legion created a subgroup with a different name in order to continue asserting power over film content through various avenues.

46 Ibid., 177-244.

47 Ibid., 177.

48 Pope Pius XII, "Miranda Prorsus," Pope Pius XII Encyclical Page, August 14, 2007. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_08091957_miranda-prorsus_en.html (Retrieved September 10, 2007).

49 Black, *The Catholic Crusade*.

50 Ibid.

51 Ted G. Jelen, "Catholicism, Conscience, and Censorship, in *Religion and Mass Media: Audiences and Adaptations*, ed. Daniel A. Stout and J. M. Buddenbaum (Thousand Oaks, CA: 1996), 39-50.

52 Ibid.

53 Eric Stoltz, "An Internet Strategy for Local Churches: Harnessing the Web for mission," *America*, 2001.

54 Todd Frobish, "The Virtual Vatican: A Case Study Regarding Online Ethos," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 29, (2006): 45.

55 Frobish, *The Virtual Vatican*. Also Pope Pius XII, "Miranda Prorsus," Pope Pius XII Encyclical Page, August 14, 2007.

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_08091957_miranda-prorsus_en.html. Also, Pope John Paul II was involved in creating the website for the 'Year of Great Jubilee.'

56 Frobish, *The Virtual Vatican*, 49.

57 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, <http://www.usccb.org/> For those that do not understand the traditions of the Catholic Church, the way in which information and icons on a website appear similar, puts on equal footing things that do not command equality under the traditions of the church. For example, on the USCCB's website, movie reviews hold as much prestige as the *Catechism* on the site's homepage.

58 Stoltz, *An Internet Strategy*, 18.

59 Jelen, *Catholicism*, 43-44. Ted Jelen states that when He chooses to, "God appeals to people in the language and environment most familiar to them."

60 Greg G. Armfield, Maria A. Dixon, and Debbie S. Dougherty, "Organizational Power and Religious Individuals' Media Use," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 29, (2006):421-444. In their study, Greg Armfield, Maria Dixon, and Debbie Dougherty lead us to believe that more non-believers than believers use religious sites,⁶⁰ which means that a good chance exists that those non-believers who read the USCCB movie reviews remain unaware of the origins of the influence provided by the RCC's beliefs.

CHAPTER 3

MOVIE REVIEW ANALYSIS

Advocacy by the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) continues into the twenty-first century, but the practice of advocating the RCC's message in order to influence individuals' attitudes and beliefs has become less direct and invasive over the past few decades. No longer do insiders from the Legion of Decency ban films or cause uproars during production. Although no longer known as this social activist organization, the Legion of Decency still exists in the form of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). It changed its name in an attempt to persuade individuals to take a moral stance on film content while distancing itself from its controversial reputation. The movie reviews written by the USCCB are the means used to influence church members about the moral quality of film content. While the USCCB reviews may not have the same direct control over the development and production of movies as the Legion once had, they remain important religious tools for determining the moral quality of a film. The movie reviews posted on the USCCB website subtly persuade, serving as hermeneutical tools for readers to use in order to build stronger commitments to living a Christian lifestyle.

The USCCB movie reviews comment on social and personal elements of film content that do not conform to the RCC's views of moral behavior. The USCCB reviews build upon the principles of the RCC in order to teach their beliefs through a non-traditional

medium. This approach exemplifies the RCC's message that in order to live a truly Christian life, individuals must live morally. The ability to distinguish between good acts and evil acts, in films or real life, is central to achieving a RCC approved lifestyle. The RCC defines a morally good act as

require[ing] the goodness of the object, of the end, and of the circumstances together. An evil end corrupts the action, even if the object is good in itself (such as praying and fasting "in order to be seen by men"). The *object of the choice* can by itself vitiate an act in its entirety. There are some concrete acts- such as fornication- that it is always wrong to choose, because choosing them entails a disorder of the will, that is, a moral evil. It is therefore an error to judge the morality of human acts by considering only the intention that inspires them or the circumstances (environment, social pressure, duress or emergency, etc.) which supply their context. There are acts which, in and of themselves, independently of circumstances and intentions, are always gravely illicit by reason of their object; such as blasphemy and perjury, murder and adultery. One may not do evil so that good will result from it.¹

The *Catechism's* definition of a morally good act states that the act alone is not the only consideration one must take when determining good and evil. The circumstances surrounding the act must also be examined for a complete understanding of the act committed to be judged fairly. The USCCB engages in this sort of rationalizing when critiquing similar instances of the same types of actions in different films. This definition of morally good acts relays the message that violence, marital inappropriateness, sexual

behavior, and some language choices, in and of themselves are unacceptable until all the circumstances surrounding them, whether on film or in real life, have been considered. The USCCB reviews comment on each film as a whole and ultimately determine the films' moral appropriateness for readers.

The USCCB reviews highlight the behaviors and actions that the RCC expects readers to engage in and those they should abstain from in order to live a Christian life. The USCCB puts the teachings of the RCC in context in a way that makes those teachings functional in the everyday lives of readers. Countless media such as television advertisements, billboards and radio commercials try to gain people's attention, resulting in a stimulus overload. People may not always distinguish the source of messages they receive and are influenced regardless of their awareness of these messages. The USCCB's movie reviews present a moral account of a film in a way that allows readers to determine the implications of the film's message for their own lives.

The *New York Times* and USCCB express different standards for film quality in their reviews. The *New York Times* places importance on artistic and aesthetic elements, while the USCCB makes moral considerations the focus of their reviews. In this chapter, the movie reviews for nine of the top ten grossing box-office movies in 2006 are used to exemplify these qualities. The tenth movie, *The Da Vinci Code*, which is rated number five on the box-office list, is analyzed in the next chapter for unique factors influencing the film reviews related to the controversy surrounding the film.²

The analysis in this chapter of the *New York Times* and USCCB movie reviews allows for assessment of a popular, secular interpretation and a religious source that exhibit markedly different standards for recommending a film. This comparison allows for an

understanding of the multiple messages created surrounding the same piece of entertainment and what those messages tell readers. This chapter begins with a discussion of the *New York Times* reviews and the artistic standards they use to evaluate a film. Building on this popular culture foundation, the chapter turns to an analysis of the USCCB reviews of the same films and the moral standards that they use to determine the quality of a film. This analysis describes good quality as an overall assessment based on overarching aesthetic themes in the *New York Times* reviews and moral themes in the USCCB reviews. This chapter highlights popular and religious concerns for film quality, illustrating how the USCCB movie reviews with the RCC's views of morality ultimately align with one another.

New York Times Secular Standards

The *New York Times* movie reviews focus on the content of films according to artistic quality standards. Examining the movie reviews written for the *New York Times* shows consistent language focusing attention on visual and special effects, director success, comparisons to other films in the same genre and from the same director or production company, character development and relationships. Four different reviewers, A.O. Scott, Stephen Holden, Manohla Dargis, and Jeanette Catsoulis, wrote these *New York Times* reviews from a secular, popular culture viewpoint. Word choices describing the themes highlighted above center around critical and artistic standards.

The topics addressed in the *New York Times* movie reviews vary slightly from review to review, but consistent patterns surface during the analysis of each of these reviews. The most common criticism in the reviews concerns the film's visual and special effects.

Visual effects involve the alterations made to the film after production, while special effects involve artificial effects that create an illusion in the film during production.³ For example, reviewer A. O. Scott credits *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*, “for [including] CGI [computer generated imagery]” because “such flights of visual fancy delight audiences.”⁴ According to Scott, visual effects are attractive for reviewers and audiences alike.

Night at the Museum receives credit, in its review by Stephen Holden, for small moments of good visual effects, including instances of “spectacle”⁵ revolving around unique character personalities. At the same time, Holden commended this film for its use of visual effects, he criticized it for what he claims to be an unacceptable current Hollywood philosophy that “coherence does not matter if enough stuff is thrown onto the screen.”⁶ With this criticism of overburdening a movie with visual effects, Holden insinuates that directors should uphold not only a higher quality of visual and special effects in films, but also an appropriate sense of how to display them.

Many moviegoers may not consciously pick out effects when discussing their opinions of a film; however, reviews like those in the *New York Times* guide the viewers focus toward the expensive look of the effects and stunt work.⁷ Three of the nine films discussed, *Cars*, *Happy Feet* and *Ice Age: The Meltdown*, are completely computer animated and exemplify this point. Animation films must contain a certain standard of graphic effects because the entire production consists of either drawn or computer generated images. Regardless of the production methods, reviewers rate animated films with the same quality standards as non-animated films, including an emphasis on execution and criticisms. For example, Jeanette Catsoulis refers to *Ice Age: The*

Meltdown as “uninspired.”⁸ This falls in line with commentary on visual effects in non-animated films and continues to stress the importance of visual effects for the evaluation made by the *New York Times* reviewers.

The success of visual and special effects rests not only on the graphic artists and stunt men who create them in films, but also on the directors who make the decisions about how to include them. A director’s job consists of synchronizing all components of a film’s production into a creative and artistic whole. They also communicate to actors how a scene should look and have a role in casting, script editing, shot selection, shot composition, and editing.⁹ In the *New York Times* reviews, directors receive a significant amount of attention for their role in the film since the end result rests on their decisions. Reviewer A. O. Scott comments about director’s inclusion of things such as providing “an appropriate sense of mischief.”¹⁰ Scott’s mention of an “appropriate sense of mischief” in *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest* tells readers that while there may be a level of mischievous behavior that will be too much in a film, reviewers accept some deviant behavior. Reviewers credit the director for knowing what mixture of mischievous behavior to include, insinuating that a certain level of violence is socially acceptable and an important element of a good film while also making the director the sole arbiter of what is appropriate.

Reviewers also measure director success in less visual effect centered ways. Reviewers critique the director’s influence stating, for example, that George Miller, the director of *Happy Feet* “showed persistence of vision”¹¹ because he stuck to his usual traits of deep, dark messages in a commercialized, animated film. The director received credit for this “persistence;” but his film also received criticism for being “politically

pointed and disturbing.”¹² This leaves readers with the impression that political messages create an emotional appeal that does not have a place in animated films, or even films at all, especially if it expresses a generally upsetting message. While *Happy Feet* was evaluated negatively for its incorporation of a politically driven plot that may arouse negative emotions, *Ice Age: The Meltdown* was critiqued as “uninspired.”¹³ Almost in direct contrast to being too emotional, labeling the film “uninspired” suggests that while a director’s ability to remain politically neutral is important, that director should avoid being dispassionate by not telling the same story over again by infusing some excitement or creativity into production. Seeking more action and creative thinking seems to contradict pulling political, and possibly passionate, arguments from film content. In either case, however, reviewers reflect fickle popular culture ideals and hold directors to high standards regardless.

The most straightforward critiques of a director’s success can be seen in the reviews of *Night at the Museum* where reviewer Stephen Holden criticized director Shawn Levy for subscribing to a Hollywood trend where directors seem to incoherently throw things together on the screen. Further criticizing Levy, Holden states that “almost in spite of itself, [this film] sets off occasional little bursts of cinematic magic.”¹⁴ Holden’s comment that the film achieved this magic “almost in spite of itself,” takes credit away from Levy. It discredits the director by implying that there is no coherence of vision presented in the film. The “little bursts” give the impression that the good moments of directing that do take place in the film are accidental and further distract from the films consistency. Finally, “cinematic magic” implies that the film contains certain well made, Hollywood worthy scenes; however, in the same sentence Holden criticizes Levy’s role

in the creation of this quality. The *New York Times* reviews discuss director success as an important component in determining the overall quality of a film. In addition to the director's role in each film, director success also depends on a director's past success in production of other films.

In *The New York Times* reviews a film's success in comparison to films in a similar genre surfaces as an additional theme when determining the film's overall quality. Many reviewers used previous films in the same genre as a starting point for the quality they expected from each of the film reviews used in this analysis. For example, A. O. Scott, in the review of *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*, states:

there's a catch, as there usually is. *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*, is not just a movie. It's a glistening, sushi-grade chunk of franchise entertainment, which means that maximal enjoyment of it comes with certain obligations. It is the second episode in what will be at least a trilogy...and full appreciation of its whirligig plot will depend on thorough acquaintance with the first *Pirates of the Caribbean* picture.¹⁵

Based on the film's place in the line up of a trilogy, the negative attention the Scott gives to the film impacts the implication that despite its "fun nature"¹⁶ the movie lacks quality.

This says that movies in a series may not be worth investing time in.

Manohla Dargis, in the review of *The Pursuit of Happyness* also includes direct comparisons to other films in the same genre. More specifically, this film compares different representations of American culture in film. After commending the director, Gabriele Muccino, for telling the story of the American dream with skill and artistry,¹⁷ the reviewer moves on to criticize "the film industry's usual skewed sense of economic

class.”¹⁸ The reviewer implies that the film industry alters images of American culture to sway opinions of the ideal average citizen.¹⁹ Dargis claims:

Money matters in *The Pursuit of Happyness*, as it does in life. But it matters more openly in this film than it does in most Hollywood stories that set their sights on the poor, largely because Chris’s pursuit of happiness eventually becomes interchangeable with his pursuit of money.²⁰

Reality then lies in a Hollywood based visual representation of an economic situation that many directors portray as significantly wealthier than the average American in a working class tax bracket. Despite the opportunity to discuss the moral implications of class differences, the *New York Times* review ignores this.

In addition to the comparisons to other films in the same genre, the *New York Times* compares films to others made by the same director or production company. In the *Cars* review, for example, reviewer Manohla Dargis focuses attention on previous commendable films created by Pixar studios that serve as better examples for future productions. While *Cars* received criticism for its own quality, Dargis found it important to recommend readers to see other Pixar films in the future.²¹ Here Dargis does not hold the entire company accountable for the quality of one particular film, insinuating that one bad film is not enough to write off an entire company. This also emphasizes the point that reviewers focus attention not merely on the current film when it belongs to a known line of movies from the same company.

Films must stand up to criticism about their own quality, as well as to criticism about how well they compare to past films produced by the same company. *Casino Royale*

contains an extensive background on the “Bond” film history. Both the director and the main character are thoroughly compared to their predecessors and both come out faring well. The reviewer, Manohla Dargis states, “every generation gets the Bond it deserves if not necessarily desires, and with his creased face and uneasy smile, Mr. Craig [James Bond] fits these grim times well.”²² Explaining that each generation will see the “Bond” character that they desire gives the impression that character development, especially as part of a popular and successful series results in favorable reviews. These examples support the *New York Times*’ theme of past success determining a current film’s success or failure. Overall, the reviews pay more attention to the director and production company’s ability to maintain standards of quality previously set on the big screen, than they do to character development and relationships within the films.

The final theme of character development and relationships found in the *New York Times* reviews receives less attention, as comments by reviewers are short and are not elaborated. It appears that while they may consider the presence of certain character types in a film important, the reviewers do not consider it an important determinant of their overall impact on the film’s success. If characters or their relationships are mentioned at all, it is in unadorned statements made by the reviewers. Reviewer A.O. Scott, in the review of *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest*, states, “Will’s long-lost father...adds a gelatinous morsel of father-son pathos to the stew of plots and subplots.”²³ The word “morsel” itself attests to the minimal amount of attention paid to character relationships in the film. There is no explanation of the relationship between Will and his long-lost father, or the implications of it. Comments such as this one, in the review of

Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest, attest to the brevity of the statements made by reviewers with regard to character relationships.²⁴

In his review of *Night at the Museum*, Stephen Holden claims that the “movie doesn’t even make a pretense of being interested in the scenes between Larry and Nick, the 10-year-old son whose respect he is losing.”²⁵ This statement criticizes the lack of attention to relationship expressed in the movie. Holden leads readers to believe that the film intentionally left character relationships aside in creating the film and therefore spends little time in the review doing the same thing.²⁶ This exclusion continues to highlight the insignificance of character relationships when critiquing the quality of films in the popular press.

The *New York Times* reviews express a consistent set of standards for determining a good quality film through an examination of visual and special effects, director success, comparisons to other films in the same genre and from the same director or production company, and character development and relationships. These emphasizes focus on artistic and aesthetic considerations when determining overall secular standards for film quality. While not necessarily negative, these reviews focus attention on more aesthetic concerns, such as dramatic effects. Leaving moral commentary out of their reviews, the *New York Times* reviewers, a popular source of film information, create a critical standard of film quality that vastly differs from the message expressed within the USCCB movie reviews. Unlike the *New York Times* reviews, the USCCB reviews focus on messages in films related to the RCC’s moral beliefs and behaviors associated with those beliefs instead of aesthetic concerns.

USCCB Moral Standards

Many components in the USCCB movie reviews differ from the *New York Times* reviews. The USCCB reviews pay attention to the amount and type of violence, sexual and rude language, marital appropriateness, and general sexuality in each film. Reviewers place a high importance upon acceptable content for children. While a film given an adult rating may not include in depth explanations and reasoning, those given children friendly ratings express a very clear concern that parents may need to consider issues with their children's welfare in mind. The USCCB's methods of rating films depend greatly on its consideration of their role as teachers within the RCC. Therefore, the writers of the USCCB reviews acknowledge themes and situations in films that the RCC deems appropriate and inappropriate to help guide individuals and parents when choosing entertainment. The following discussion of film reviews posted on the USCCB site represent the same films reviewed in the previous *New York Times* section. These reviews express the moral content the RCC finds appropriate based on its definition of a morally good act and the consideration of all the circumstances that surround a potentially evil act.

The first theme that receives attention in the USCCB reviews is the amount and type of violence contained in a film. The *Catechism* addresses violence as follows:

Those who renounce violence and bloodshed and, in order to safeguard human rights, make use of those means of defense available to the weakest, bear witness to evangelical charity, provided they do so without harming the rights and obligations of other men and societies. They bear

legitimate witness to the gravity of the physical and moral risks of
recourse to violence, with all its destruction and death.²⁷

The RCC views violence as acceptable in instances when it is used as a means to protect those individuals incapable of protecting themselves. At the same time, it warns those who choose to use it—even for this noble purpose—that they still face the consequences of the aftermath that arises when individuals use violence as a way to solve problems.

This expresses the RCC's belief that violence does not allow for witnessing the powerful love that non-violent behavior leads to. As expressed in the definition of a morally good act, the RCC allows for some acts of violence, however only when certain factors surround the situation. It appears that intentionality matters for the RCC when determining acceptability in using violent behavior, and shows the importance of considering the entire circumstance surrounding the violent behavior when deciding to define it as a morally evil act or not. Some films with violent content may still be acceptable overall to the USCCB; however, it makes it a point to emphasize the moral consequences of these acts. Focusing attention on the moral consequences of violence in a movie serves as criteria for determining acceptable instances of engaging in violent behavior, and ultimately acts as an important characteristic for determining overall film quality.

The USCCB review of *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*, claims the film contains an “outrageous swordfight” and “swashbuckling slapstick.”²⁸ The description offered here of an “outrageous” swordfight implies that the circumstances taking place are neither serious nor truly malicious and therefore not morally evil. In a separate paragraph the reviewer states that the film “contains recurring action-adventure violence

and peril, including a nongraphic throat cutting and off-screen executions.”²⁹ Again, descriptive words such as “non-graphic” and the fact that the execution happened “off-screen” indicates that while the USCCB does not condemn the film entirely because these actions occur out of sight, if the acts were visible it would be unacceptable based on the RCC’s operational definition of a morally evil action. The RCC promotes the message through these reviews that sometimes readers need to be aware of inappropriate behavior, even if it does not result in a recommendation to not view the film at all. The USCCB uses these explanations of violent content to determine the film’s overall quality since it does not express a truly evil moral act, but still represents behavior considered inappropriate through the lens of the RCC’s beliefs.³⁰

In the review of *X-Men: The Last Stand*, the USCCB reviewers go beyond commenting on the mere presence of violence to discuss the implications of violent behavior for young children and parental responsibilities to protect their children from receiving the wrong messages from a film. The reviewer states, “the violence, while highly stylized, is a bit more intense this time (bodies vaporized, etc.), but there is little actual blood. Nevertheless, some parents may argue that consequence-free carnage sends the wrong message.”³¹ The reviewer indicates the need for children to learn that the RCC determines violence an unacceptable behavior and that consequences exist when you engage in violent behaviors. The “mayhem” in the film, “preclude[s] recommendation for younger adolescents.”³² The USCCB found the film unfit for younger audiences and found it important to comment on the moral discussion parents must engage in with their children to be sure that they do not walk away with the wrong message, one that may counter the non-violence message promoted by the RCC. References to the behavior or

beliefs of “some parents,” in the review promotes the importance of parental involvement in determining whether to allow their child to see certain films that contain violent content. This particular review and its emphasis on the parental job of imparting moral guidance to children serves to showcase the USCCB’s attempts at reinforcing the RCC’s role as teacher, spreading its influence outside the traditional means available.

Beyond violent behaviors, the USCCB is concerned with the presence of both sexual and rude language in films. According to the *Catechism*, the RCC believes that “following Christ and united with him, Christians can strive to be ‘imitators of God as beloved children, and walk in love’ by conforming their thoughts, words and actions to the ‘mind...which is yours in Christ Jesus,’ and by following his example.”³³ The RCC believes that in order to live a Christian lifestyle, individuals must live the message of love exemplified by Jesus Christ while striving to imitate his lifestyle. The language used by characters in films must conform to the RCC’s ideal of living like Jesus Christ for the USCCB to grant it a favorable review and deem the content morally appropriate.

The reviews written by the USCCB give attention to this ideal by commenting on *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest*’s “lightly suggestive humor and innuendo” and “mildly rude expressions,”³⁴ *Casino Royale*’s instances of “crude language,”³⁵ *Superman Returns*’ “mildly crude expressions,”³⁶ *Happy Feet*’s “mildly rude humor,”³⁷ and *Ice Age: The Meltdown*’s “few crass expressions.”³⁸ The USCCB’s choice of words including “suggestive,” “rude,” “crude,” and “crass,” to describe inappropriate language in these films, implies that sexual and foul language will not help you in your journey toward becoming a good Christian. In order to live a Christian lifestyle, one must refrain from using these types of verbal expression as they do not move you further along

the path exemplified by Jesus Christ.³⁹ While the majority of the reviews include remarks making language an important determinant in deciding a film's rating, none of the comments elaborate on specific words used in the film, leaving an explanation for understanding what exactly defines inappropriate language in the films vague.

The USCCB remains vague to maintain its authority. Vague explanations of appropriate language also allow the USCCB flexibility when it comes to making determinations about the appropriateness of language use in new films. Without knowing specific words to avoid, individuals may view a movie unable to determine unacceptable language. This may ultimately lead to further referencing of the RCC's beliefs and strengthening of the Church's authority. By turning to the movie reviews posted by the USCCB, readers can make determinations about a film's appropriateness that they may have been unable to make on their own. Turning to the USCCB reviews results in a reinforcement of the RCC's ability to influence and affect the decisions and perceptions of the individuals who read the reviews.

The third theme that the USCCB reviews focus on is marital appropriateness. In the *Catechism*, the RCC defines marital appropriateness through its description of the love between a husband and wife:

Sexuality, by means of which a man and woman give themselves to one another through the acts which are proper and exclusive to spouses, is not something simply biological, but concerns the innermost being of the human person as such...The spouses' union achieves the twofold end of marriage: the good of the spouses themselves and the transmission of life.⁴⁰

The RCC intends any sexual act between a married couple to fulfill the purposes of conjugal fidelity and procreation.⁴¹ While not an issue in all the reviews, the USCCB critics point out those films that include encounters with the opposite sex that the RCC finds improper. Reviewers made comments that look down on “fathering a child out of wedlock”⁴² in *Superman Returns*, “adultery” (with no details provided)⁴³ in *Casino Royale* and “marital discord”⁴⁴ in *The Pursuit of Happyness*. These comments by the USCCB reference actions described in the *Catechism* as morally evil and emphasize that sexual actions outside marriage do not display the values the RCC wishes for followers to uphold. The reviewers comment on the inconsistencies with the RCC’s beliefs that the films exhibit, accentuating the inappropriateness of these behaviors.

The final theme that the USCCB reviews focus on is general sexuality. This category includes behaviors that do not interfere with a marriage but are nevertheless unacceptable behavior for individuals outside a marriage. Reviewers remarked that *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest* contained “lightly suggestive innuendo,”⁴⁵ *X-Men: The Last Stand* had a sexually suggestive encounter that leads the USCCB to exclude younger adolescents from the film’s rating,⁴⁶ and *Casino Royale* included “partial nudity and sexual situations.”⁴⁷ Similar to the word choice associated with marital appropriateness, these remarks tell readers that any actions defined as suggestive or involving nudity or sexuality in general are unacceptable. Regardless of the situation in a film, indecent sexual behavior appears a major concern. Whether the actions occur between unmarried individuals or married individuals who act outside their sacramental vows, the USCCB chastises the sexual actions in films that may lead to an un-Christian lifestyle and an unfavorable review.

The USCCB reviews express a consistent set of standards for determining the moral quality of a film through an examination of the amount and type of violence, both sexual and rude language, marital appropriateness, and general sexuality. These standards focus attention on morality and messages conveyed within a film rather than on aesthetic principles. The RCC's concern rests in its ability to teach individuals attitudes and behaviors that allow them to live the Christian lifestyle described to them in the *Catechism*.

Conclusion

The differences between the *New York Times* and USCCB movie reviews may create confusion for readers who read both reviews and remain unaware of their different standards for evaluating films. The *New York Times* reviewers may disapprove of a movie's graphic quality or choice of director because they do not meet current artistic standards. The reviewers for the *New York Times* emphasize that aesthetic qualities are important considerations for filmmakers in order to direct the content of future films. On the other hand, the USCCB ratings rest on a moral focus and attention to the message that individuals and families receive from the film. The RCC places importance on presenting followers with examples of proper expressions of various behaviors that will lead them to live a more Christian life. Not everyone understands the message of the *Catechism* on its own, nor does everyone reference it, so the USCCB movie reviews teach those messages through non-traditional means.

The texts of the USCCB reviews concentrate on moral standards in films and as such act as advocates of morality in film and society. The *New York Times* review's focus on

artistic criteria, and the absence of moral standards emphasizes the importance of aesthetics over moral considerations when determining film quality from a secular standpoint. The USCCB fills in the moral commentary through its reviews. The USCCB advocates lessons of morality that it believes will help individuals live a Christian life. These reviews serve as homilies laying the hermeneutical foundation of the Roman Catholic faith for anyone who reads the USCCB movie reviews. The USCCB uses this medium in order to reach audiences with its moral message so it can influence individuals' perceptions. Ultimately, readers can receive hermeneutical foundations from both sets of reviews since each presents readers with a defined set of values by which they recommend viewing.

The RCC has a long history of controlling media content that these movie reviews fit in line with. Unlike more direct attempts in history, the USCCB movie reviews are more subtle and less directive. As seen in the word choices and ratings used in these reviews it appears that the RCC engages in advocating moral media content in order to increase the readers' awareness of acceptable moral boundaries. Temptations in today's world remain vast and varied so the RCC takes it upon themselves to share its beliefs through different media. Therefore, instead of leaving it in the hands of individuals to make faith decisions regarding every piece of media content they find, the USCCB presents movie reviews focused on moral messages. By focusing their reviews on the morality of a film, the RCC sets a standard for the hermeneutical determination of that film's message in the lives of each individual.

Nowhere in either the *New York Times* or USCCB reviews does it state what to do with the information they provide about films, leaving the contents open to interpretation

and inclusion in current belief systems of anyone reading them. Inevitably, individuals reading both sources' reviews will use both artistic and moral considerations to create an understanding of a film and a definition of what defines quality. The USCCB advocates moral messages that support the RCC's belief system, encouraging individuals to incorporate the messages from films into their hermeneutically based belief system. The USCCB uses each movie review as an opportunity to spread its moral message based on the teachings of the *Catechism* and the RCC's beliefs.

Notes

1 Catechism of the Catholic Church (New York, DoubleDay, 1994): 486-487, section 1755/56.

2 See Appendix 1

3 "Visual effects," (accessed January 21, 2008) <http://us.imdb.com/Glossary/>

4 A. O. Scott, *The New York Times*, "Reviews," *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*, <http://movies.nytimes.com/2006/07/07/movies/07pira.html> (accessed August 8, 2007). Appendix 2.4 & 2.9.

5 Stephen Holden, *The New York Times*, "Reviews," *Night at the Museum*, <http://movies.nytimes.com/2006/12/22/movies/22muse.html> (accessed August 8, 2007). Appendix 3.3.

6 Ibid.

7 Manohla Dargis, *The New York Times*, "Reviews," *X-Men: The Last Stand*, <http://movies.nytimes.com/2006/05/26/movies/26xmen.html> (accessed August 8, 2007). Appendix 5.5; Manohla Dargis, *The New York Times*, "Reviews," *Superman Returns*, <http://movies.nytimes.com/2006/06/27/movies/27supe.html> (accessed August 8, 2007). Appendix 7.2 & 7.4; Manohla Dargis, *The New York Times*, "Reviews," *Casino Royale*, <http://movies.nytimes.com/2006/11/17/movies/17roya.html> (accessed August 8, 2007). Appendix 10.1 & 10.9.

8 Jeanette Catsoulis, *The New York Times*, "Reviews," *Ice Age: The Meltdown*, <http://movies.nytimes.com/2006/03/31/movies/31ice.html> (accessed August 8, 2007). Appendix 9.3.

9 "Director" (accessed January 23, 2008) <http://www.imdb.com/Glossary/D>

10 Scott, *The New York Times*, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*.
Appendix 2.4; Reviews also mention creating "an underlying creepiness resting in the decision to exclude organic elements." Manohla Dargis, *The New York Times*, "Reviews," *Cars*, <http://movies.nytimes.com/2006/06/09/movies/09cars.html> (accessed August 8, 2007). Appendix 4.8; Dargis, *The New York Times*, *Superman Returns*. One review states that the director has a savior complex that mirrors Superman's character. Appendix 7.10.

11 Manohla Dargis, *The New York Times*, "Reviews," *Happy Feet*, <http://movies.nytimes.com/2006/11/17/movies/17feet.html> (accessed August 8, 2007). Appendix 8.2.

12 Ibid.

13 Catsoulis, *The New York Times*, *Ice Age: The Meltdown*. Appendix 9.3.

14 Holden, *The New York Times*, *Night at the Museum*. Appendix 3.4.

15 Scott, *The New York Times*, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*. Appendix 2.2.

16 Ibid.

17 Manohla Dargis, *The New York Times*, "Reviews," *The Pursuit of Happyness*, <http://movies.nytimes.com/2006/12/15/movies/15happ.html> (accessed August 8, 2007). Appendix 11.3.

18 Ibid., Appendix 11.4.

19 Ibid. In order to exemplify the skewed sense of the average American's reality, this reviewer claims that in films such as *Little Miss Sunshine*, directors distort images of the working class family.

20 Ibid.

21 Dargis, *The New York Times*, *Cars*. Appendix 4.11 & 4.12.

22 Dargis, *The New York Times*, *Casino Royale*. Appendix 10.3.

23 Scott, *The New York Times*, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*.

Appendix 2.6.

24 Dargis, *The New York Times*, *Cars*. Appendix 4.2. Another example of the brevity of statements can be seen in the *Cars* review where they state "Lightning McQueen...can win the race of a life only after he learns the value of friendship."

Holden, *The New York Times*, *Night at the Museum*. Appendix 3. 11. Also see the *Night at the Museum* review which spends three sentences (a large amount of attention by the *New York Times* standards) describing "when 'Night at the Museum' returns to Larry's personal life, it dies. The movie doesn't even make a pretense of being interested in the scenes between Larry and Nick, the 10-year-old son whose respect he is losing. And its cynical lack of concern for giving the characters human feelings is a grave drawback for a movie that wants to engage children."

25 Holden, *The New York Times*, *Night at the Museum*. Appendix 3.11.

26 While some reviews mention messages of friendship and love, they do not seem to emphasize the impact of these beyond some feel good qualities attributed to the film's narrative fidelity. Dargis, *The New York Times*, *Cars*. Appendix 4.

27 Catechism of the Catholic Church (New York, DoubleDay, 1994): 614-615, section 2306.

28 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Archived Movie Reviews," *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*,

<http://www.usccb.org/movies/p/piratesofthecaribbeandeadmanschest.shtml> (accessed June 4, 2007). Appendix 12.2 & 12.6.

29 Ibid., Appendix 12.10.

30 The rating for this film is A-II (adults and adolescents).

31 *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, "Archived Movie Reviews," *X-Men: The Last Stand*, <http://www.usccb.org/movies/x/xmenthelaststand.shtml> (accessed June 4, 2007). Appendix 15.7

32 Ibid.

33 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 471, section 1694.

34 *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*. Appendix 12.10.

35 See also *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, "Archived Movie Reviews," *Casino Royale*, <http://www.usccb.org/movies/c/casinoroyale.shtml> (accessed June 4, 2007). Appendix 20.9; *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, "Archived Movie Reviews," *X-Men: The Last Stand*. Appendix 15; *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, "Archived Movie Reviews," *The Pursuit of Happyness*, <http://www.usccb.org/movies/p/thepursuitofhappyness.shtml> (accessed June 4, 2007). Appendix 21.

36 *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, "Archived Movie Reviews," *Superman Returns*, <http://www.usccb.org/movies/s/supermanreturns.shtml> (accessed June 4, 2007). Appendix 17.15.

37 *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, "Archived Movie Reviews," *Happy Feet*, <http://www.usccb.org/movies/h/happyfeet.shtml> (accessed June 4, 2007). Appendix 18.10.

38 *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, "Archived Movie Reviews," *Ice Age: The Meltdown*, <http://www.usccb.org/movies/i/iceagethemeltdown.shtml> (accessed June 4, 2007). Appendix 19.11.

39 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York, Double Day, 1994): 471, section 1694.

40 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York, DoubleDay, 1994): 626, section 2361 & 2363.

41 *Ibid*, 627.

42 *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, *Superman Returns*. Appendix 17.11.

43 *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, *Casino Royale*. Appendix 20.9.

44 *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, *The Pursuit of Happyness*. Appendix 21.9.

45 *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*. Appendix 12.10.

46 *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, *X-Men: The Last Stand*. Appendix 15.9.

47 *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, *Casino Royale*. Appendix 20.9.

CHAPTER 4

THE DA VINCI CODE ANALYSIS

The USCCB and *New York Times* movie reviews discussed in the previous chapter exemplifies each organization's standards for film quality. Both organizations provide the public with a description of film quality based on very specific standards that advance their opinions to the public. The *New York Times* determines film quality based on aesthetic considerations, including visual and special effects. The USCCB reviews represent the beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), determining film quality based on its considerations of appropriate moral beliefs and behaviors portrayed in the films. Through their movie reviews, the USCCB advocates the RCC's beliefs through a widely used medium, the Internet.

The analysis of the reviews in the previous chapter highlights some key differences between the *New York Times* and the USCCB for determining the quality of a film. The former discusses visual and special effects, director success, comparisons to previous films from the same director or production company, and character development and relationships as important concepts in a film. These themes suggest that the *New York Times* uses artistic and aesthetically based criteria for determining film quality. In contrast, the USCCB reviews emphasize the amount and type of violence in a film, sexual and rude language, marital appropriateness, and general sexuality. These reviews emphasize how much a film represents or strays away from the RCC's views of morality.

The *New York Times* aesthetically centered reviews and the USCCB's moral focus contribute to a multifaceted understanding of movies.

After examining reviews of nine of the top-ten grossing films, my analysis turns to the fifth highest grossing film of 2006, *The Da Vinci Code*.¹ This film received unfavorable ratings by both the *New York Times* and the USCCB, but for very different reasons. The film, adapted from the fictional book by Dan Brown, is the story of a Harvard symbologist named Robert Langdon who is asked by the French police to help solve the mysterious murder of a museum curator. Joined by the curator's granddaughter, the main character explores riddles that uncover conspiracies about the RCC.² Both the *New York Times* and USCCB reviewers go into detail in their reviews about *The Da Vinci Code*'s quality, yet they focus on different standards than those addressed in the previous chapter. Their treatment of this film is significantly different from the other nine as it involves a controversy involving the RCC's doctrine, a topic of interest in both secular and religious press.

This chapter explores the controversy surrounding the film's production in order to establish a context for understanding the publicity *The Da Vinci Code* received prior to the release of the film. From there, I analyze *New York Times* reviewer A. O. Scott's discussion of the controversy surrounding the film and criticism of it. Following the analysis of the secular review, my analysis of the USCCB review for *The Da Vinci Code* examines the controversy from the RCC's perspective. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the significance of this review for understanding the public advocacy messages presented by the RCC through the USCCB sponsored movie review.

The Da Vinci Code Controversy

The controversy over *The Da Vinci Code* began with the publication of author Dan Brown's award-winning fictional novel. The book tells the story of Robert Langdon, a Harvard symbologist, who is called by the French police to solve a series of riddles surrounding the death of a museum curator. With the help of the curator's granddaughter, Langdon takes on a journey through Europe uncovering mysteries, supposedly hidden by the RCC. These mysteries include the historical members of the Priory of Sion, the religious relic the Priory hid for centuries, the operations of Opus Dei, and the involvement of Mary Magdalene in the life of Jesus Christ.³ *The Da Vinci Code* gained a lot of attention because of the first word written in the novel: "FACT."⁴ The RCC mounted a campaign attacking the book's credibility and disputed the book's assertion that the information presented was factual. At the same time, many supporters eagerly bought into the conspiracies addressed in the novel and contributed to the spread of misconceptions regarding the RCC's doctrine throughout the world.⁵ Dan Brown himself stated that the book was merely a novel despite anything written inside its cover, but both secular and religious media still hyped the controversy.⁶

In the secular press, *The Da Vinci Code*⁷ received praise for its "mind-boggling trickery," and "exotic settings, breathless chases, amazing escapes, and sudden plot reversals."⁸ These descriptions emphasize the secular media's fascination with this novel. Words like "exotic," "breathless" and "amazing" depict not only a positive view of the book, but encourage readers to perceive the content as significant and captivating. Upon the book's release, articles surfaced confronting issues raised in the novel, such as who Mary Magdalene was and the truth behind Opus Dei's organizational activities.⁹

If the book truly “captivated” audiences, then these questions have even more importance for the RCC’s image created in the novel. One image that concerned the RCC was author Dan Brown’s depiction of Opus Dei as a group that “brainwashes” members. Coupled with the headline on the first page of the novel “FACT,” this idea has been hard for Opus Dei to dispute. Within one year, the novel sold 7.35 million copies, resulting in discussions concerning the image of Roman Catholicism presented by Brown.¹⁰ Controversy swelled and the RCC responded to the allegations that they were covering up a centuries old conspiracy.

The RCC answered questions that arose over *The Da Vinci Code* by creating a website solely committed to teaching about the issues raised regarding Jesus and Christianity.¹¹ The U.S. Bishops’ Catholic Communication Campaign (CCC) created this website specifically to address the claims raised in Brown’s novel and continues to use it to address issues surrounding the film and Christianity in general. The CCC states on the opening page of their website that, “this web site is designed to provide information for anyone who wishes to inquire about Jesus Christ and Christian origins due to claims that appear in current popular media.” The CCC emphasizes this controversy and defending Roman Catholic doctrine through the same medium that hosts websites supporting the book’s claims.

The CCC uses their website to address claims made in *The Da Vinci Code* that are not supported by historical evidence. Articles on the website include topics such as “What’s wrong with *The Da Vinci Code*?”¹² and “What do you say to a *Da Vinci Code* believer?”¹³ In these articles, representatives of the RCC present answers to the doctrinal and historical questions brought up in Dan Brown’s book. Covering Mary Magdalene,

Opus Dei, Leonardo da Vinci, and Jesus, Amy Welborn states, “evidence is the word to keep in mind at every point.”¹⁴ She essentially calls people to remember that this book is a work of fiction and that claims made within it, whether they are labeled as “FACT” or not, are not necessarily true simply because they are well written.¹⁵ The RCC is concerned that readers of *The Da Vinci Code* may not be able to discern historical truth from fiction. This is not to say that the RCC doubts followers’ understanding of Roman Catholic doctrine; however, non-believers may not have as rich a background in the history of the RCC. Therefore, the website and articles found on it present a clear view of the RCC’s doctrine and their abhorrence of the misleading content presented in *The Da Vinci Code*. The context for the movie reviews of *The Da Vinci Code* produced by both the *New York Times* and the USCCB stems from this debate over supposedly factual representations made in Dan Brown’s bestselling novel, and whether the movie would continue to promote them.

New York Times Review of The Da Vinci Code

The *New York Times* movie review of *The Da Vinci Code* addresses some of the themes discussed in the previous chapter, but strays from those themes in significant ways. In this particular review, A. O. Scott pays attention to the controversy surrounding the film and book, similarities and differences between the book and film, the director’s success in creating a film with good aesthetic quality, and the quality of the characters. The controversy surrounding the film’s plot showed up in Scott’s comments. From the outset, Scott states that controversial topics are “good business...especially if religion is involved.”¹⁶ The statement that religious elements included in the film are “good

business” indicates that the publicity surrounding the production of this film boosted the awareness of the controversial material and resulted in increased ticket sales from consumers.

In this review, Scott focuses on the controversy of both the book and film created by the text. Comparing the media hype about *The Da Vinci Code* to recent religiously based films *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Scott reflects the tone of the religious and cultural debate surrounding this film’s production and release. He credits Columbia Pictures’ “ingenious marketing strategy...to encourage months of debate and speculation while not allowing anyone to see the picture until the very last minute.”¹⁷ The acknowledgement of Columbia Pictures’ marketing strategy of creating controversy prior to the release of a film to raise ticket sales attests to the production company’s ultimate goal of increasing sales. Despite negative comments about other features of the film, the controversy surrounding it creates a sense of mystery that moviegoers will only be able to resolve if they see the film.

Stemming from the controversy created in the media, this review presents differences between the book and the movie. Scott remarks that the film “took longer to watch than it took to read [the book],”¹⁸ indicating the film’s length is a negative aspect of its production. Also, the film is said to use better prose than the book, crediting the screenwriter, Akiva Goldsman, with creating his own “ripe dialogue.”¹⁹ The description of the dialogue in the film as “ripe” insinuates that it is colorful, vivid, and bold. One statement from the movie which Scott quotes in the review, “Your God does not forgive murderers. He burns them,” provides a clear look into the descriptive language used in the film. In addition to altering language choices, Scott states that Howard “defly

rearranged some elements of the plot unkinking a few over-elaborate twists and introducing others that keep the action moving along,” so that the film will flow better.²⁰ This change in the plot affords the director the chance to take some creative credit for the film since a majority of the content closely follows the book. Overall, the reviewer concludes, “Mr. Howard and Mr. Goldman handle the supposedly provocative material in Mr. Brown’s book with kid gloves.” These “kid gloves” supposedly create a more positive sentiment toward Roman Catholicism than the book, affording the director, production company, and actors the ability to claim the film and not an attack on the RCC’s doctrine.

Moving from the book-film controversy, this review discusses director success. The director, Ron Howard, receives criticism for creating a lengthy film, which Scott compares to Howard’s previous long film *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.²¹ Scott also points out that the action in the movie takes a while to get started since there are many characters to sort out and much background information to cover.²² This emphasizes the detailed nature of the film’s storyline as well as the importance of explaining the history behind the film’s content. Despite the negative emphasis placed on the length of the film, Howard and Goldsman receive credit for creating a new dialogue that incorporates more eloquent prose and makes the film better artistically. Further emphasizing the *New York Times*’ artistic quality standards, Howard is credited with creating “pleasures’ within this murder mystery.”²³ This gives readers the idea that despite its length and other problems, the film offers moments of.

Finally, Scott provides significant attention to the plot and characters that make up the film. After stating that the overview of the plot will be brief, the reviewer spends nine

paragraphs detailing the storyline and describing the mannerisms and effectiveness of all the major characters. Beginning with the main character, Robert Langdon, played by Tom Hanks, Scott states: "Mr. Hanks twists his mouth in what appears to be an expression of professional skepticism and otherwise coasts on his easy, subdued geniality."²⁴ This description of Hanks' expression of "professional skepticism," lends credit to Hanks' stance that the film is fiction, while at the same time making his character more credible as a symbologist who does not jump to rash conclusions. If Hanks' character appears more credible, then so does the film and the controversy surrounding it.

By appearing skeptical, Hanks' character comes across as less naïve and more educated than someone who may take the conspiracy statements at face value. Scott's statement that Hanks has an "easy, subdued geniality" creates a positive impression of the actor even if he is relying on this personality trait so much that he "coasts" and does not appear to act. Overall, the portrayal of Robert Langdon moviegoers are left with is of an easygoing, somewhat skeptical character whose portrayal may have been better if Hanks attempted to utilize his acting abilities more. Importantly, the character descriptions in this review receive a significant amount of attention although they are still centered around aesthetic qualities of the film and not the controversy surrounding the film.

Another character this review mentions is Audrey Tautou, who plays Sophie Neveu, a police cryptographer and the granddaughter of the museum curator whose death spawned the entire adventure. Scott describes Tautou as quick to become Langdon's partner in solving the mystery: "leaving [her] reservoirs of charm scrupulously untapped."²⁵ This comment implicitly credits the actress with acting abilities, despite stating that she does

not show those abilities in this film. Scott determines that an actor or actress' career is not made or broken by one film and it is important to consider their other films before writing them off. Despite Scott's implication to not judge Tautou before seeing more of her work, the reviewer still creates a mental picture of a tired, troubled character with a constant "look of worried fatigue."²⁶ While Scott appears to give Tautou a pass for her role in this film, he continues to emphasize the artistic standards for success that she and others do not meet.

An additional character discussed in the review is significant in that he is one who actually represents the RCC. The reviewer describes him as:

the albino monk, whose name is Silas and who may be the first character
in the history of motion pictures to speak Latin into a cellphone,
flagellates himself, smashes the floor of a church and kills a nun.²⁷

Connecting Silas to the RCC is an important claim that sets readers up to connect particular plot details implicating the RCC's involvement in hiding a centuries old conspiracy. The RCC's involvement in the conspiracy raises interest in the film and makes the character descriptions a focal point, advancing the controversy surrounding the film's description of the RCC's history and beliefs. Silas is portrayed as a member of Opus Dei and unlike other characters described by Scott, the focus remains on Silas' role in the film and not the actor who plays the character. Despite the brevity with which Silas is discussed in this review, the mere mention of his affiliations with the RCC and his controversial behavior within the film primes viewers to examine his role more critically, and continues to augment the importance and credibility of the controversial claims proffered by the story.

The controversy surrounding *The Da Vinci Code* permeates Scott's review beyond the previously defined artistic categories. While describing the 'important secrets' the museum curator was murdered to uncover, Scott states that if these secrets: "were ever revealed [they] might shake the foundations of Western Christianity, in particular the Roman Catholic Church."²⁸ This implies that the controversial material is true and not fiction as Howard and those involved with the film's production argue. The fact that the *New York Times* review approaches the controversy as potentially true impresses upon moviegoers that there is information about the RCC to be gained from the film's content. While trying to avoid a discussion of the controversy surrounding *The Da Vinci Code*, Scott provides numerous comments explicating the existence of problematic material.

The themes focused on in the *New York Times* review of *The Da Vinci Code* differ from those highlighted in the other nine reviews. The differences between the mostly aesthetic focus of the other reviews and the controversy-centered description of this film speak to the idea that Scott contributes to the media frenzy instead of focusing on what determines a film's success. Early on in the review, Scott states:

we have had a flood of think pieces on everything from Jesus and Mary Magdalene's prenuptial agreement to the secret recipes of Opus Dei, and vexed, urgent questions have been raised: Is Christianity a conspiracy? Is "The Da Vinci Code" a dangerous, anti-Christian hoax? What's up with Tom Hank's hair? Luckily I lack the learning to address the first two questions.²⁹

Despite this effort to appear uninvolved in and incapable of answering religious questions posed in the film, Scott spends a significant amount of time laying out the controversy

and comparing the film to the book. Therefore, while avoiding answering these questions, the reviewer still furthers the controversy surrounding the religious elements of the film.

Interestingly, after Scott states that he does not possess an understanding of the beliefs questioned in the film, he concludes that Howard settles on “an utterly safe set of conclusions about faith and its history.”³⁰ This indicates that despite all the media hype over the controversy, the film does not take creative liberties in its ultimate portrayal of the organizations who adamantly oppose their representation in the film. Scott claims that regardless of his lack of knowledge about the material presented in the film, the movie is “busy, trivial, and inoffensive.”³¹ This may be a similar for individuals who do not understand or practice the beliefs being questioned. To say that a film that misrepresents any organization’s practices is ‘trivial’ suggest that the controversy and thus the RCC’s defense of their doctrine are unimportant.

Scott makes his position clear that the film should not be taken as offensive through his indication that the content is “safe.”³² He does not “support any calls for boycotting or protesting this busy, trivial, inoffensive film. Which is not to say I’m recommending you go see it.”³³ Here Scott addresses the controversy swelling in the media and yet argues that viewers should take no offense to the material presented by not believing in its claims or the severity of the claims. Despite stating that the film does not present any objectionable material that should prevent a viewer from seeing it, Scott makes it clear that he still did not approve of the film overall. The negative review rests in the film’s lack of aesthetic quality. Without the inclusion of certain aesthetics the film would not receive a favorable review, regardless of the controversy surrounding it.

This review treats the religious controversy and film separately, deciding that despite all the media build up, *The Da Vinci Code* is not a good movie based on the *New York Times*' critical standards. Focusing attention on the controversy created by the book and film, the similarities and differences between the book and film, the director's success and the quality of characters, this review highlighted aesthetic qualities. Attempting to appear uninterested in the controversial components of the film, Scott created an awareness of these elements priming the audience to look for them. Criticizing the director and the actors for their roles in the film, the reviewer remained aesthetically centered by commenting on their delivery and personal characteristics that impeded their portrayal of the characters. Scott fails to mention the director and actor's contribution to the controversy the *New York Times* review, instead delivering a review that both adds to the media attention and provides readers with descriptive analysis of the film's success in achieving critical standards of quality.

USCCB Review of *The Da Vinci Code*

The USCCB review of *The Da Vinci Code* emphasizes themes consistent with those found in the other top-ten grossing films of 2006. As in the other reviews written by the USCCB, *The Da Vinci Code* received its rating for violent behavior, inappropriate language, and inappropriate sexual behaviors. However, unlike those films, this one received a rating of O (morally offensive) for seemingly similar activities to those discussed in chapter three. The reviewer states that the film has "violence including brutal murders, crude language, irreverent underpinning, rear male nudity, scenes of corporal mortification, a fleeting hint of prostitution, and a glimpse of ritualistic sex."³⁴

Interestingly, there is no mention of most of these themes in the rest of the review, but instead there is a focus on defending the “irreverent underpinning” that concerns doctrinal issues raised in the film. This suggests that there are messages within the film that have the potential to damage the foundation of Christianity and the beliefs of the RCC; concerns that seem more important to the USCCB than the morality of individual actions. The review focuses on critiquing the beliefs presented in the film and advocates the RCC’s beliefs by looking at the director’s decisions about what content to include, plot overview and character commentary, and addressing the doctrinal issues raised in the film- themes that are different than those in the other nine films.

Ron Howard receives mostly negative attention in this review over his decisions about what to include in the film and where he took creative control. The reviewer indicates that if the only important factors in evaluating a film were the artistic standards expressed in secular press, then this film stands up with others in the same category. The USCCB reviewer describes Howard’s adaptation of the book as “pretty much what everyone expected: a glossy, well-acted, mostly fast-moving thriller.”³⁵ The emphasis placed on aesthetic elements acknowledges the critical standards of the secular press even if the USCCB does not place importance on these parts of the film. The USCCB reviewer further described Howard’s role in delivering the “requisite shadowy suspense and chase sequences,”³⁶ indicating that it may not be a director’s talent, but an attention to detail that makes a quality mystery movie. “Requisite” implies that the film’s quality was not so much creative talent on Howard’s part, but the need to fulfill the criteria imposed on him by the film’s genre. While he made the film like other mystery films, the USCCB still supports an examination of film content along with the aesthetically driven elements.

The reviewer's focus on Howard's decisions about what to include in the film took a positive turn. The reviewer credited Howard with "softening the book's heretical edge,"³⁷ indicating that while the book is still extremely critical of the RCC, the film made an effort to cut out some of those components. Despite this, a few lines later the reviewer criticizes Howard for being "irresponsible" by not changing the name of Opus Dei to further fictionalize the story. While it appears from this review that Howard created a film that fits some of the critical standards of the secular media, the USCCB reviewer found no evidence that Howard stopped contributing to a further spread of the misinformation presented in the book. The reviewer ends the review with a quote from the film that "some people fear what they don't understand," in order to drive home the message that "it seems others make movies about [what they don't understand]."³⁸ This addresses non-Roman Catholics who do not understand Roman Catholic doctrine, and particularly Ron Howard who attacked the RCC's beliefs; something of which he does not fully comprehend despite the controversy surrounding this story. This final strike against director Ron Howard emphasizes the USCCB's attempt to argue that the film is nothing but a highly misrepresented account of the RCC's history, practices and beliefs.

The overview of the characters and plot provided in this review provides insight into the problems the USCCB reviewer has with the film. The reviewer treats the character descriptions differently than the *New York Times* in that they address how the characters furthered the controversy, instead of how the actors performed their roles. The reviewer briefly mentions the characters and their role in the film, as well as the murder that spawned the whole adventure. They then explain that the two main characters "gradually piece together the motives for the killing, which would seem to implicate the Catholic

Church in a centuries-old conspiracy.”³⁹ The phrasing “would seem” implies that the reviewer disagrees with the propositions made in the film and implicitly reaffirms the RCC’s doctrine through specific guidance about what to disregard. The USCCB reviewer indicates that readers should disregard all information presented as “FACT” about the RCC’s history and its practices because they are depicted incorrectly. The character descriptions in this review are therefore devoted to exposing issues the RCC has with the plot details.

The reviewer focuses attention on multiple areas of the RCC’s doctrine that they claim are misrepresented in the film. One of the misrepresented concepts is the activity that comprised Jesus’ day to day life. According to the *Catechism*: “During the greater part of his life Jesus shared the condition of the vast majority of human beings; a daily life spent without evident greatness, a life of a manual labor. His religious life was that of a Jew obedient to the law of God, a life in the community.”⁴⁰ This explains the RCC’s view of the pieces of time in Jesus’ life that are not recorded and included in the stories of the Bible. They believe that he lived an average, day-to-day life and was a faithful Jew. The *Catechism* also states that “from this whole period it is revealed to us that Jesus was ‘obedient’ to his parents,”⁴¹ which does not mention or insinuate anything about Jesus taking a wife or having a family of his own as Brown asserts in *The Da Vinci Code*. This means that the RCC finds the insinuations made in the novel and film are false at best, heretical at worst.

The USCCB reviewer addresses these concerns by attacking specific “egregious assertions...that cut to the core of Christian doctrine.”⁴² The adjective ‘egregious’ implies that the statements are blatantly wrong and offensive to the basic beliefs of Christians.

The switch from discussing morally centered content in films to defending the basic beliefs of Christian doctrine indicates that it is imperative to the RCC to maintain the foundation upon which those moral beliefs have been built. While the USCCB makes statements denying the credibility of the assertions made in both the novel and film, the reviewers treat the controversy as real. The time and effort spent by the RCC defending claims made against the RCC's doctrine undermines the idea that it is a work of fiction and adds fuel to the media frenzy.

The USCCB review also counters creative connections made in the novel and film. The reviewer asserts that "if Brown had attempted to resurrect some of the darker chapters in church history, unflattering or not, that might have been fair game."⁴³ It is acceptable then, according to the USCCB, to cover the RCC's history; however it must present a fair and accurate representation of doctrine. It would be acceptable for Brown or Howard to debate actions taken by the RCC; however throughout history the foundations that Christianity rests upon are not open for discussion. If the story of Jesus were changed, it would mean that the hermeneutical foundation of Christianity would no longer stand as it has for centuries. The USCCB reviewer determines that "there is no truth"⁴⁴ in this film, based on the RCC's doctrine. Additionally, the USCCB reviewer disagrees with the idea expressed in the film that when it comes to the life and work of Jesus, "what matters is what you believe."⁴⁵ The RCC's beliefs are built upon a foundation that followers must consider before addressing controversial material presented to them in everyday life. This hermeneutical structure ensures that the RCC's beliefs are passed down through the generations in a manner approved of by the RCC.

Additionally, Howard's attempt to ease the RCC's opposition to discussing sensitive Christian history was not sufficient according to the USCCB reviewer. Despite Howard's use of the word "theories," instead of "fact" when discussing sensitive Christian history, the USCCB reviewer states that the "unfounded claims" in Brown's novel are "baldly bogus [and] dead wrong."⁴⁶ Describing the statements made in the novel as "unfounded" reinforces the RCC's view that there is a foundation upon which beliefs are built and the claims made in the book are not supported by the doctrine of the RCC. "Bogus" insinuates that the claims are not only incorrect, but also border on trickery. This gives the impression that the USCCB believes that the novel deceives readers with information that is blatantly incorrect.

The reviewer shifts focus away from Howard to discuss religious claims made in the film in general. Despite attempting to appear unconcerned with specific claims made in the film, the reviewer indicates that the issues include, "the origins of Christianity, early views of Jesus' divine nature and his relationship with Mary Magdalene, the church's alleged suppression of women, the selection of the four Gospels, later Gnostic texts, the Council of Nicea, the emperor Constantine, the Knights Templar, and Leonardo himself."⁴⁷ These examples all speak to the USCCB's feeling that Christian doctrine is in need of defense from the suggestions presented as fact in the novel and film because people may mistake them for truth. Additionally, the USCCB review pinpoints the "sensationalized portrayal of Opus Dei—whose admirable mandate is to serve God to the fullest in one's everyday activities" as a specific example of an error made within the novel and film. The USCCB uses words such as "sensationalized" in the review to create the impression that the film creates an exaggerated account of Opus Dei. The emphasis

given to defending the “admirable” actions of Opus Dei indicates that the USCCB finds this particular detail to be an important concern that should be defended. The reviewer makes it clear that Opus Dei’s activities are considered commendable and the mockery of them and other religious claims in the film is unacceptable.

Many of the beliefs called into question seem to be what the USCCB stated earlier was “fair game.” The reviewer addresses the concerns raised over doctrinal items stating, “speculative fantasy is one thing, insensitivity to people’s basic beliefs is another.”⁴⁸ This indicates that the RCC feels that their most basic beliefs are under attack. The reviewer implies that if the film was merely “fantasy” it would be more acceptable. This again indicates that the RCC finds the matters addressed in the film to be doctrinal and not fiction. The USCCB reviewer’s description of the film as “insensitive” gives off a very personal feeling of attack to all Roman Catholics. Based on the response by the RCC and USCCB the topics discussed before are off limits for discussion because they comprise the basic beliefs that all Roman Catholics must share.

The themes discussed in this review are not consistent with those in other films. This review discusses the director’s decisions about what content to include, plot overview and character commentary, and the doctrinal issues raised in the film that the RCC finds morally offensive due to the film’s disregard of the RCC’s basic beliefs. The reviewer depicts a controversial film that completely disregards the sanctity of Roman Catholic beliefs, holding Dan Brown and Ron Howard equally responsible. The review’s focus on the plot’s appearance of truth shows the importance of defending Christian doctrine over using the moral criteria the reviewers used in the other nine films discussed. The shift in themes addressed by the reviewer conveys the message that moral appropriateness may

be important, however without a foundation upon which to add moral understandings of everyday situations those teachings become useless.

Conclusion

The *New York Times* and USCCB reviews of *The Da Vinci Code* explore themes centered around the controversial claims made in the novel that carried over into the film. Both sources attribute their ratings according to different standards than the previously identified standards for determining quality. The *New York Times* review focuses on explaining the controversy created by the information in the book, comparing the book and film, the director's success and the quality of the characters in the film. The emphasis on these themes implies that the controversial nature of the film is an important component of its success; however it may not directly relate to the standards for overall quality of the film content. The focus of the USCCB review differs significantly from the others analyzed in the previous chapter, extending beyond moral appropriateness to defending the RCC's doctrine.

The controversy created by Dan Brown's novel resulted in a media frenzy from secular sources. The secular press expanded commentary on the assertions made in the novel that implicated the RCC for covering up significant historical information. The film's production company added to the attack of the RCC's beliefs by creating even more publicity surrounding the film's release in order to boost ticket sales from inquisitive viewers. Despite its contribution to the amount of media attention this film received, the *New York Times* review determined that all the hype surrounding the film did not equate with good quality, therefore giving the film an overall unfavorable review

for its poor aesthetic execution. The controversy apparently did not trump the implications of a lack of aesthetic quality in the film when it came to reviewing and recommending the film.

The *New York Times* reviewer also claimed to be uninterested in the religious questions that arose in the film, but the focus of the review suggests otherwise. The mere mention of the controversy and specific questions raised in the film primes viewers to look for those issues while watching. The reviewer also devoted significantly more attention to character descriptions than in the reviews of other films; however these descriptions still revolve around aesthetically based criteria. There is no discussion of the characters' personalities or behaviors beyond a judgment of acting abilities.

In the reviews of the other nine films discussed, the *New York Times* maintained a strictly aesthetic focus for film quality. The reviewers attribute quality to aesthetic standards, such as examining visual and special effects and director success. The difference between those reviews and the review of *The Da Vinci Code* highlights the importance of the religious controversy surrounding the film's plot creating a need to address the issues raised. While the *New York Times* review continues to value aesthetics in its review of *The Da Vinci Code*, the emphasis placed on the discussion of the controversial material signifies the importance of the issue when determining film quality.

Amid these controversial discussions in popular media, the RCC's response through various press releases focused on the inaccuracy and offensiveness of Brown's statements that carried over into the film. The switch from discussing moral appropriateness regarding violence and personal relationships found in the other nine reviews, to

defending doctrinal beliefs that arise in *The Da Vinci Code* is significant. The moral teachings of the RCC in the USCCB movie reviews are important because contesting the foundation upon which the RCC's beliefs are built has the potential to weaken the RCC's authority. In the nine reviews discussed in the previous chapters, the reviewers focused on the inappropriate uses of violence, sexual behavior and innuendo, marital appropriateness and inappropriate language choices. These examples provide readers with current, real life situations through which to compare their own behavior and level of morality.

The USCCB movie reviews function as homiletic tools teaching individuals how to act morally in their day-to-day lives. The review of *The Da Vinci Code* differs from the homiletic nature of other reviews when it presents a defense of Christian doctrine. Stating at one point that certain religious topics are fair game makes the reviewer and the RCC appear open-minded about controversial religious topics; however, after listing the topics addressed in the film it seems that only topics that do not question the RCC's doctrine qualify for discussion under the RCC's authority. The USCCB reviews, whether addressing moral messages or defending Christian doctrine advocate for an interpretation of the content found in films based in the RCC's doctrine.

The advocacy efforts of the RCC within the USCCB movie reviews teach readers the message of the *Catechism* through a newer media. The homiletic approach of teaching morality to varied audiences is an important component of the evangelism engaged in by the RCC across the world. The USCCB review of *The Da Vinci Code* stresses the importance of the RCC's doctrine and its significance in the lives of Christians. The other nine reviews written by the USCCB focus attention on moral material that impacts daily

life and they are built upon the hermeneutical foundation established by the RCC that is addressed in the review of *The Da Vinci Code*. Both messages are essential for readers to fully understand the RCC's position on what defines Christianity and how individuals can live a truly Christian life.

Notes

- 1 *Box Office Mojo*, "2006 Domestic Grosses",
<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=2006> (accessed June 4, 2007). Also see Appendix 1.
- 2 Dan Brown, "The Da Vinci Code," *Plot*,
http://www.danbrown.com/novels/davinci_code/plot.html (accessed March 2, 2008).
- 3 Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*. (New York, DoubleDay, 2003).
- 4 *Ibid.*, 1.
- 5 Bob Minzeshimer, "'Code' deciphers interest in religious history," *USA Today*, December 11, 2003.
- 6 Dan Brown, "The Da Vinci Code: Common Questions,"
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- 7 Here references are to *The Da Vinci Code* novel. The film follows the plotline of the book closely but controversy over the contents of the novel began with the book.
- 8 Janet Maslin, "Spinning a Thriller From the Louvre," *New York Times*, March 17, 2003; David Mehegan, "Thriller Instinct," *Boston Globe*, May 8, 2004.
- 9 David Van Biema, "Mary Magealene Saint or Sinner," *TIME*, August 11, 2003. In his article addressing issues raised about Mary Magdalene, David Van Biema says that Brown has "woven Magdalene intricately," into the story adding to other works refuting her status as a reformed prostitute.; Paul Moses, "Fact, Fiction and Opus Dei," *Newsday*, August 26, 2003.
- 10 Mehegan, "Thriller Instinct."

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13 Amy Welborn, "What do you say to a *Da Vinci Code* believer?" Catholic
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<http://www.jesusdecoded.com/truthbetold2.php?page=100> (accessed March 1, 2008).

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15 Ibid.

16 A. O. Scott, *The New York Times*, "Reviews," *The Da Vinci Code*,
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Appendix 6.1.

17 Ibid., Appendix 6.2.

18 Ibid., Appendix 6.3.

19 Ibid., Appendix 6.5

20 Ibid., Appendix 6.6.

21 Ibid., Appendix 6.3.

22 Ibid., Appendix 6.

23 Ibid., Appendix 6.6.

24 Ibid. Appendix 6.12.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

- 27 Ibid. Appendix 6.9.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid., Appendix 6.2
- 30 Ibid., Appendix 6.17.
- 31 Ibid., Appendix 6.18.
- 32 Ibid., Appendix 6.17.
- 33 Ibid., Appendix 6.18.
- 34 *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, “Archived Movie Reviews,” *The Da Vinci Code*, <http://www.usccb.org/movies/d/thedavincicode.shtml> (accessed June 4, 2007). Appendix 16.19.
- 35 Ibid., Appendix 16.1.
- 36 Ibid., Appendix 16.5
- 37 Ibid., Appendix 16.10.
- 38 Ibid., Appendix 16.17
- 39 USCCB, *The Da Vinci Code*. Appendix 16.3.
- 40 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York, DoubleDay, 1994): 149, section 532.
- 41 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* , 149, section 532.
- 42 USCCB, *The Da Vinci Code*. Appendix 16.13.
- 43 Ibid., Appendix 16.12.
- 44 Ibid., Appendix 16.11.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Ibid., Appendix 16.9.

47 Ibid., Appendix 16.9.

48 Ibid., Appendix 16.13.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) has a rich history of influence over both secular and sacred matters. The RCC enforced its beliefs exercising the power they had including direct censorship practices in Medieval times to control all information to which individual's were exposed. This complete control allowed no question over what was acceptable; however, the RCC's influence changed with the separation of church and state, when the RCC's ability to impact both religious and secular content morphed from directly censoring material to advocating certain moral standards.

The inception of the First Amendment in American society separated government and religion, forcing the RCC to use subtler forms of persuasion to influence individual's beliefs and decisions. These subtle persuasive acts took the form of campaigns advocating the moral beliefs of the RCC through the criticism of objectionable ideas and behaviors. The USCCB movie reviews are an example of one of the RCC's campaigns showing how the RCC utilizes popular media and technology to teach its message of morality. The popular culture themes discussed in the *New York Times* movie reviews contrast with the USCCB reviews' attention to moral concepts. The RCC determined these elements important for living a Christian life. Their application of the *Catechism* to real life and popular culture led to an explanation of important elements of practicing the faith.

The meaning that the USCCB expresses in its movie reviews comes to light within the context of the RCC's history of advocacy and when compared to the current popular standards of quality expressed in the *New York Times* reviews. The concept of rhetoric used in this analysis shows the importance of understanding the historical actions taken by the RCC to influence media. This makes the concept of moral advocacy within the USCCB movie reviews easier to understand. Equally important to a rhetorical analysis of the USCCB movie reviews is their comparison to a current popular source, the *New York Times*, which offers readers different standards for determining film quality. This approach allows for the incorporation of culture into the analysis of the texts. Examining the USCCB reviews in light of historical and cultural situations contributes to our understanding of religious communication, hermeneutics and homiletics.

Religious Communication

The RCC continues its actions advocating for particular interpretations of texts to this day. While they do not have authority in the United States to censor media, they still influence people's beliefs and perceptions of media messages. The RCC attempts to impart its moral beliefs to a wider audience through different advocacy campaigns. The Legion of Decency attempted to control film content and for a long period many Roman Catholics accepted the Legion's moral authority, abiding by its evaluation of films. The Legion eventually lost its authority and used alternative methods to convey their judgments of films.

The USCCB movie reviews were an attempt to soften the image of the organization while continuing to influence public messages. The reviews written for this website

convey moral interpretations of film content. They express the views of the RCC regarding specific behaviors including violence, inappropriate language and sexual appropriateness. In contrast to the *New York Times*, these reviews convey information about how to live a good Christian life. The reviews continue the RCC's control of media messages through its attention to morality and criticism of moral behavior in popular films.

The moral messages that the USCCB conveys create an association with the beliefs of the RCC within a new media. While the RCC still uses traditional authority derived from the *Catechism* to discuss popular culture, the presence of the movie reviews on the Internet creates new possibilities for evangelism that continue the RCC's history of using popular media to advocate morality. This analysis shows that the RCC advocates moral messages through modern technology continuing its centuries-old efforts to influence public messages and moral interpretations.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the practice of finding deep meaning in a sacred text in order to encourage a shared set of beliefs. The RCC uses its hermeneutical approach to determine the deep meaning of the Sacred Scriptures that they translate into the *Catechism*. The *Catechism* serves as a doctrine that followers are expected to use as a baseline for their faith and moral decisions they make. The movie reviews further serve as a guide to assist individuals in determining the morality of film content. Roman Catholics use these moral guidelines, derived from a religious hermeneutical understanding of the Sacred

Scriptures, to evaluate new media messages everyday and incorporate them into their lives in a spiritually meaningful way.

Individuals have the capability to receive information from multiple sources. This means that individuals receive information through multiple filters delivered through new technologies, such as the Internet. The RCC presents moral interpretations of texts in the same general medium (the Internet) as secular interpretations. The USCCB website presents basic information about the RCC's beliefs and messages. The availability of this information on the USCCB site provides an opportunity for Roman Catholics to develop an understanding of Roman Catholic doctrine as it relates to their daily social life. This analysis of the USCCB movie reviews fits within the discussion of hermeneutics in a significant way—the movie reviews are applications of the RCC's hermeneutical interpretations of Sacred Scripture within a modern media that allows readers to develop a more complete understanding of new information they encounter.

Within the RCC's history of advocacy, the USCCB's movie reviews contribute to the encouraged *Catechism*-based standard of beliefs for Roman Catholics to follow. The *Catechism* establishes guidelines for people to follow when encountering new media. The nine USCCB movie reviews discussed in Chapter Three serve as examples of the emphasis placed on critiquing behaviors regarding morality and faith in order to guide Roman Catholics. This tells readers that these are important issues that deserve special religious consideration. The focus given to moral living derived from the *Catechism* points to the fact that there is an even deeper meaning from which these guidelines come.

The USCCB analysis of *The Da Vinci Code* exemplifies the RCC's belief in the importance of maintaining a strong religious foundation when dealing with information

from multiple sources. The USCCB reviewer devoted significant attention to defending Christian doctrine challenged by the film, making the controversy appear more real while also highlighting the importance of these doctrinal issues to the RCC. Their response to *The Da Vinci Code* stresses the significance of having a unified, clearly defined foundation for followers to build their faith.

Homiletics

It is apparent that these reviews contribute to the understanding that homiletic practices transmit doctrinal and moral messages in various forms and have the potential to reach countless individuals. The moral content that the USCCB reviews focus on supports an acceptance of the RCC's doctrine and provides an example of acceptable ways to live a faithful life. The USCCB reviewers focus on specific moral content and behavior that the RCC finds unacceptable for living a Christian life. Specifically, the nine USCCB reviews discussed in Chapter Three focused on violent content, language, and sexual appropriateness where the reviewers emphasize modern examples of appropriate and inappropriate Christian behavior. The review of *The Da Vinci Code* differs in its focus, shifting from morality in everyday life, to overtly defending Christian doctrine. This still allows the movie reviews to fit within the criteria of a homily since the reviewers present an interpretation of the film that reinforces the importance of living a moral life.

The *New York Times* reviews are a privileged, more widely referenced source for film reviews than the USCCB.¹ These two competing sources create a balanced assessment of a film from an aesthetic and moral standpoint, as long as individuals consult both sources

for every film. The problem is that more people read the *New York Times* reviews, creating an imbalance in readers' perceptions of film quality. The lack of moral discussions in the *New York Times* reviews speaks to what the RCC believes is declining morality in American society. If individuals consult a source that only provides them with aesthetically based criteria to judge a film that contains moral issues and controversial material, then it is not surprising that American culture appears to be more amoral today than in the past. An individual's ability to access multiple sources of information about a film is one reason why the RCC uses new forms of homilies like the movie reviews to maintain a presence in popular culture and advocate on behalf of their conception of morality. In order to explain the RCC's stance on the material presented in the film, the USCCB used a homiletic movie review to reach out to a diverse audience.

The *Catechism* serves as the instrument used to analyze the morality of film content. The link for this document sits near the link for the movie reviews, which is important because the *Catechism* serves as an explanation of the RCC's beliefs. Logos exists in the reviews through the link between the *Catechism* and the USCCB movie reviews. The writers of the USCCB reviews use the *Catechism* to inform the moral commentary they make about films. The logic of the USCCB reviews rests in their consistent application of moral teachings to content displaying violence, inappropriate language, marital appropriateness and general sexuality as defined in the *Catechism*. The reviewers' connections of film content to the RCC's disapproval of certain behaviors convey a logical approach for both teaching the RCC's beliefs and commenting on popular culture artifacts.

Previous Roman Catholic homiletic styles referenced a preacher presenting the Gospel message through different approaches.² These reviews fit within the RCC's tradition of homiletics as a method for expressing the beliefs of the RCC in a way that relates to individuals' daily lives while still allowing people to choose how the message will fit for them. At the same time, they are a new form of homiletics that the RCC uses to reach new audiences with its faith messages.

Future Research

This study contributes to an understanding of the theoretical concepts of religious communication, hermeneutics, and homiletics. Additionally, this analysis adds to the discussion of religious messages in popular culture and the technology used to express those messages. Future research might begin by examining the standards used by the *New York Times* in comparison to other major secular sources to see if they utilize the same aesthetic standards for film quality. Along the same lines, the USCCB may not be the only religious source producing movie reviews, and researching other Roman Catholic, religious, or popular culture sources and its approach to reviewing film content might prove informative. Even though this analysis covered these potential contributing factors to the study of hermeneutics, there are many others. An examination of the standards used by various sources to critique films in movie reviews may provide more insight into the moral situation in American society. A study of other sources might also reveal whether the spread of moral messages by religious organizations is a common practice, or a unique homiletic form used only by the RCC.

This study found one example of a unique form of homily and an in depth analysis of other ways in which homilies occur outside a church setting might provide useful information for the study of transmitting religious messages. This kind of technology-based homily presented on the Internet has the potential to reach infinitely more people than traditional modes of delivery. A study of how this type of homily works might encourage religious groups to explore new homiletic methods. These homiletic forms also raise questions as to the material presented in homilies within an actual church service. An examination of the content of those homilies would reveal how they have changed and adapted to using new technologies and how they discuss popular culture themes in an attempt to reinforce specific interpretations of morality and doctrine.

The attention the RCC gives to popular culture is important in light of its history of attempting to control culture. Specifically, with regard to films, the RCC adapted to technology instead of controlling it. One avenue that could be taken based on religious groups using technology as a tool to assist evangelism efforts is evident in *The Da Vinci Code*. Researchers could look at how religious groups criticize popular culture versus how popular culture now looks critically at religious groups. The overall contributions this analysis makes to religious communication, hermeneutics and homiletics would be further solidified with additional research in any of these forms.

Notes

¹ Annys Shin, "Newspaper Circulation Continues to Decline," *Washington Post*, May 3, 2005, sec E03. According to the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* "reported weekday circulation of 1,136,433 and Sunday circulation of 1,680,582." This attests to the popularity of the paper.

² Catholic Encyclopedia: Homily. Retrieved 6/17/2007.

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07448a.htm> ; J. Calvin Callaghan, "How Long Should A Sermon Be?," *Today's Speech* 12, no. 1 (1964): 10-11, 35.

APPENDIX 1

2006 GROSS SALES CHART

Movie Titles	2006 Box-Office (Gross) Sales
Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest	\$423, 315, 812
Night at the Museum	\$250, 822, 780
Cars	\$244, 082, 982
X-Men: The Last Stand	\$234, 362, 462
The Da Vinci Code	\$217, 536, 138
Superman Returns	\$200, 081, 192
Happy Feet	\$198, 000, 317
Ice Age: The Meltdown	\$195, 330, 621
Casino Royale	\$167, 445, 960
The Pursuit of Happyness	\$163, 566, 459

APPENDIX 2

Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest (2006) *The New York Times*

1 AT first glance, it seems like a pretty good deal. You put down your money — still less than \$10 in most cities — and in return you get two and a half hours of spirited swashbuckling, with an all-star three-way battle of the cheekbones (Orlando Bloom vs. Keira Knightley vs. Johnny Depp) and some extra-slimy computer-generated imagery thrown in at no additional cost.

2 But there's a catch, as there usually is. "Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest" is not just a movie. It's a glistening, sushi-grade chunk of franchise entertainment, which means that maximal enjoyment of it comes with certain obligations. It is the second episode in what will be at least a trilogy — the third installment is scheduled for release next summer — and full appreciation of its whirligig plot will depend on thorough acquaintance with the first "Pirates of the Caribbean" picture, conveniently available for purchase on DVD. And since "Dead Man's Chest" brazenly dispenses with the convention of an ending — it's pretty much all middle — you will, by virtue of buying that ticket, have committed yourself to buying another one a year from now if you're the least bit curious about how the whole thing turns out. By then, chances are good that you will have forgotten most of what happened in "Dead Man's Chest," so you'll have another disc to add to the shopping cart.

3 The question is: Is it worth it? The same thought probably crosses the minds of Disney theme-park vacationers as they endure endless lines for the ride on which the movies are based, but the notion is quickly banished because nobody likes to feel like a sucker. By a rational calculation of time and money — yours and the untold millions invested by Disney, the producer Jerry Bruckheimer and others — the answer is probably no. But hey, this isn't about that, right? It's about fun. You're there to have fun. Fun for the family. Fun for the kids. Fun for everyone. So shut up and have fun.

4 And you probably will, even if it's hard to shake the feeling that you've been bullied into it. Gore Verbinski, the director, has an appropriate sense of mischief, as a well as a gift, nearly equaling those of Peter Jackson and Steven Spielberg, for integrating CGI seamlessly into his cinematic compositions. What is curious about the recent crop of high-tech blockbusters is how seriously they take themselves, and unlike, say, "Superman Returns," "Dead Man's Chest" cannot be called pretentious. It makes no claims to being about good and evil, the difficulty of saving the world in the modern era, or the inner lives of any of its characters.

5 Instead, it sends Elizabeth Swann (Ms. Knightley) and Will Turner (Mr. Bloom), their wedding day ruined in an opening sequence that seems to pay tribute to the old Guns N' Roses "November Rain" video, on a search for the pirate captain Jack Sparrow (Mr. Depp). Jack, as usual, finds himself in all kinds of trouble, pursued not only by agents of the British crown, but also by an undead, squid-faced mariner, the famous Davy Jones,

who commands a ghoulish crew of half-human, half-aquatic creatures. These sailors are like the cast of "SpongeBob SquarePants" — or the menu at a seafood restaurant — come to life: Night of the Living Bouillabaisse.

6 One of them, played by Stellan Skarsgard with a starfish embedded in his face, is Will's long-lost father, a development that adds a gelatinous morsel of father-son pathos to the stew of plots and subplots cooked up by the screenwriters, Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio. Davy Jones himself, meanwhile, speaks in the sinister whisper of Bill Nighy, though it is his swaying mass of facial tentacles that most viewers will remember.

7 And there are other memorable bits and pieces, visual highlights of a movie with no particular interest in coherence, economy or feeling. Ms. Knightley is, once again, a vision of imperial British pluckiness, with an intriguing dash of romantic recklessness that surfaces toward the end. Mr. Bloom, as is his custom, leaps about, trying to overcome his incurable blandness, and is upstaged by special effects, musical cues, octopus tentacles and pieces of wood. Naomie Harris turns up for a few scenes of hammy voodoo, and Mackenzie Crook and David Bailie contribute some proletarian slapstick. Most of the other members of the first movie's cast show up again, sometimes in surprising circumstances.

8 The franchise, of course, belongs to Jack Sparrow, and to Mr. Depp. Because this is a sequel, the role is no longer the splendid surprise it was in 2003, when "The Curse of the Black Pearl" charmed audiences and disarmed critics on its way to the third-best domestic box-office gross of the year. But the best parts of "Dead Man's Chest" confirm Jack Sparrow as the most viable Disney cartoon character in quite some time, though his anarchic insouciance has more in common with the work of Chuck Jones or Tex Avery. Mr. Verbinski, for his part, grasps the kinship between today's computer-assisted filmmaking and the hand-drawn animation of old, which lies in the freedom to revise the laws of physics at will. Two sequences in particular stand out, and would stand alone nicely as shorts: I will always think of them as "Fruit Kebab" and "Runaway Hamster Wheel."

9 But the easy delight that such flights of visual fancy inspires is crowded and blocked by all the other stuff going on in this long, ungainly movie, which for all its busy, buzzing parts, is incapable of standing on its own. It batters you with novelty and works so hard to top itself that exhaustion sets in long before the second hour is over. By next summer, I suppose, we'll all be rested and ready for more.

10 "Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest" is rated PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned). It has some violent action scenes, and a few moments of gruesome creepy-crawly movie horror.

APPENDIX 3

Night at the Museum (2006) *The New York Times*

1 In “Night at the Museum,” gigantism rules. This season’s answer to “Dr. Seuss’ How the Grinch Stole Christmas,” it’s an overstuffed grab bag in which lumps of coal are glued together with melted candy.

2 Yes, the bag does hold some clever robotic toys, but many are broken. If you were to line up the niftiest thingamajigs created for this tale of a would-be inventor-turned-night-watchman, you might have something resembling “ ‘Jumanji’ Meets ‘The Wizard of Oz’ With a Dash of ‘Home Alone.’ ” But the fable arrives smothered in an uneasy blend of wisecracks and pallid inspirational blather.

3 A self-described action-adventure comedy, “Night at the Museum” is exactly that: it wants to be all things to all people under a certain age. Shawn Levy (“Cheaper by the Dozen,” the “Pink Panther” remake), who directed from Robert Ben Garant and Thomas Lennon’s adaptation of a book by Milan Trenc, subscribes enthusiastically to the current Hollywood philosophy that coherence doesn’t matter if enough stuff is thrown onto the screen. Contributing to the bulk is a score (by Alan Silvestri) that rivals the “Star Wars” soundtracks in pounding grandiosity.

4 It’s fair to say that “Night at the Museum” is better than the insufferable Jim Carrey “Grinch,” a landmark of holiday film excess. It knows how to build excitement by steadily accelerating the pace and widening the spectacle. Almost in spite of itself, it sets off occasional little bursts of cinematic magic.

5 The movie begins as a droopy family comedy about the divorced, unemployed Larry Daley (Ben Stiller, ably going through the motions), who is so down and out he may have to move from Manhattan to (gasp!) Queens. It quickly builds to a C.G.I. extravaganza unleashed in the halls of the American Museum of Natural History in New York. There (where the movie wasn’t actually filmed, except for exteriors), its hapless protagonist takes a job as the museum’s night watchman.

6 Larry, oblivious to the strange looks on the faces of the three guards he’s replacing — Cecil (Dick Van Dyke), Gus (Mickey Rooney) and Reginald (Bill Cobbs) — has no idea what’s awaiting him. No sooner have they departed, handing him the keys with strict instructions that nothing leave the museum, than the place stirs to life. In no time Larry is playing frightened ringmaster to a rampaging circus of exhibits that have come to life through the magic of a priceless Egyptian tablet.

7 A Tyrannosaurus rex hops off its pedestal and like a famished zombie begins clumping after Larry, who discovers that if he throws it a bone, it fetches like a dog. Cute. A stone head from Easter Island demands bubble gum. And a cheeky monkey named Dexter steals Larry’s keys, tears up his instructions and engages him in a face-slapping routine.

8 At first it seems as though the menacing wild animals (both prehistoric and contemporary) will be Larry's nemeses. But "Night at the Museum" squeezes the most juice from its historical figures, some life-sized, others miniature, some in dioramas and others on pedestals. The most amusing image is of Mr. Stiller, wide-eyed and floppy-eared, besieged by bands of tiny, finger-sized warriors furiously hurling spears and darts at him.

9 Of the historical figures, Robin Williams's Teddy Roosevelt is the noisiest. Once this statue steps off his equestrian roost, he behaves like a bossy, slogan-dispensing drill instructor, whipping Larry into moral shape. But beneath his bluster, the facsimile of the 26th president is an emotional basket case, who admits in a weak moment that he is a synthetic product manufactured in Poughkeepsie. For most of the film, he pines silently after Sacajawea (Mizuo Peck), the famous Indian tracker locked inside the glass case of a Lewis and Clark diorama.

10 Profitable screen time is devoted to the continuing territorial squabble between tiny figurines of Octavius (Steve Coogan), the Roman general, and Jedediah (Owen Wilson, uncredited), a rootin'-tootin' American cowboy. Bizarrely, the movie gives their dispute a gay subtext. In a slip of the tongue, Octavius addresses Larry as Mary, and Jedediah, quoting from "Brokeback Mountain," tells Octavius, "I can't quit you." I guess it means that nowadays such smidgens of "South Park" humor are thrown into family movies to make everybody feel terribly knowing.

11 But when "Night at the Museum" returns to Larry's personal life, it dies. The movie doesn't even make a pretense of being interested in the scenes between Larry and Nick (Jake Cherry), the 10-year-old son whose respect he is losing. And its cynical lack of concern for giving the characters human feelings is a grave drawback for a movie that wants to engage children.

12 "Night at the Museum" is rated PG (Parental guidance suggested). It has some strong language and mild innuendo.

APPENDIX 4

Cars (2006) The New York Times

1 THE temptation to write about "Cars" using automotive metaphors may be unwise, but it's also irresistible. You could say, for instance, that the film — the first directed by the Pixar guru John Lasseter since the company's 1999 hit "Toy Story 2" — tools along at an easy clip, rather like a Volvo station wagon en route to another family vacation. At no point does it spin out of control, much less venture off-road. Instead, the film just putt, putt, putts along, a shining model of technological progress and consumer safety. But, as Ed (Big Daddy) Roth might say, chrome don't get you home and neither does 3D animation.

2 Mr. Roth was the creator of a delightfully unappetizing cartoon rodent called Rat Fink, a kind of anti-Mickey Mouse mascot for the hot-rod set. Given Pixar's carefully cultivated — and, for the most part, justified — reputation as a modestly maverick outfit, it would be nice to think that a decal of Rat Fink adorns the computers of at least a couple of the film's many, many animators. But both in its ingratiating vibe and bland execution, "Cars" is nothing if not totally, disappointingly new-age Disney, the story of a little cherry-red race car, Lightning McQueen (voiced by Owen Wilson), who can win the race of life only after he learns the value of friendship and the curvy appeal of Porsche Carrera (Bonnie Hunt).

3 Right off we know we're not in Kansas anymore or, for that matter, Monstropolis, home to the critters from "Monsters, Inc." or suburban Metroville, where the superheroic family in "The Incredibles" lives. The film opens at an enormous speedway, where some dozen candy-colored race cars, including Lightning McQueen, are whooshing around a track as thousands upon thousands of similarly polychromic jalopies cheer, wave flags and do the wave.

4 Welcome to Weirdsville, Cartoonland, where automobiles race — and rule — in a world that, save for a thicket of tall pines and an occasional scrubby bush, is freakishly absent any organic matter. Here, even the bugs singeing their wings on the porch light look like itty-bitty Volkswagen beetles.

5 That sounds like a slap and a tickle, and for a while it's both. As written by Mr. Lasseter, who shares screenwriting credit with Dan Fogelman, Joe Ranft, Kiel Murray, Phil Lorin and (whew) Jorgen Klubien, the film hinges on a premise older than the 1951 Hudson Hornet named Doc (Paul Newman), who gives the story its requisite geezer wisdom. After taking a wrong turn on his way to a race, McQueen lands in Radiator Springs, a town that time and the freeway forgot. There, on a derelict lick of asphalt, he meets a pileup of metal and ethnic clichés, including a tow truck with a deep-fried accent (Larry the Cable Guy as Mater) and a lowrider that apparently hopped in from East L.A. (Cheech Marin as Ramone).

6 This ethnic and cultural profiling is pretty much par for the animated film course, hence Jenifer Lewis, as a two-tone 1950's ride with big fins called Flo, provides the only identifiable "black" voice. Less wince-inducing are Luigi (Tony Shalhoub), a banana-yellow Italian-accented Fiat that runs the local tire store; Sarge (Paul Dooley), a World War II jeep as memorable and colorful as dung; and Fillmore (George Carlin), a VW bus who extols the virtues of organic fuel, mutters about conspiracies and raises the Stars and Stripes to the guitar squeals of Jimi Hendrix.

7 Given the film's regrettably retro attitude toward all things automotive (not a hybrid in sight!), it's no surprise that Fillmore, this desert outpost's most credible resident, is also its designated kook.

8 An animated fable about happy cars might have made sense before gas hit three bucks a gallon, but even an earlier sticker date couldn't shake the story's underlying creepiness, which comes down to the fact that there's nothing alive here: nada, zip. In this respect, the film can't help but bring to mind James Cameron's dystopic masterpiece, "The Terminator," which hinges on the violent war of the machine world on its human masters. To watch McQueen and the other cars motor along the film's highways and byways without running into or over a single creature is to realize that, in his cheerful way, Mr. Lasseter has done Mr. Cameron one better: instead of blowing the living world into smithereens, these machines have just gassed it with carbon monoxide.

9 Rendering plausible human forms remains one of 3D animation's biggest hurdles, something that Pixar directors like Andrew Stanton ("Finding Nemo") have readily admitted. As if realizing that they can't (yet) compete with nature, Pixar filmmakers tend to avoid the human form or create caricatures that, by virtue of their very exaggeration (think of the middle-age spread bedeviling Mr. Incredible's wife), are wonderfully lifelike.

10 With his machine world, however, Mr. Lasseter appears to have tried to do an end run around the vexing problem of the human body with cars that might as well have come out of a Chevron advertisement. Even stranger, the film turns Detroit's paving over of America into an occasion for some nostalgic historical revisionism. Surreal isn't the word.

11 Over the last two decades Pixar has invigorated American mainstream animation with charming stories and sterling technique, reaching a company best with the consecutively released "Monsters, Inc.," "Finding Nemo" and "The Incredibles." The age of Pixar may not be as golden as that of 1930's and 40's Disney, but it's an estimable run, especially since each new Pixar feature has reached deeper and higher in thematic and aesthetic preoccupations.

12 Like classic Disney, Pixar films are invariably traditionalist, with stories of familial and social retrenchment, but they're also witty and playful, fresh in both graphic and written line. One clunker won't shut down or even threaten the factory line, but here's

hoping that as this onetime scrapper becomes increasingly entrenched and establishment, it keeps its geeks-and-freaks flag flying.

13 "Cars" is rated G (General audiences). Everything is clean but the fossil fuel.

APPENDIX 5

X-Men: The Last Stand (2006) *The New York Times*

1 Halle Berry, Hugh Jackman and Ian McKellen, all of whom star in the generically serviceable "X-Men: The Last Stand," are three reasons that the film's director, Brett Ratner, has now walked the same red carpet as Federico Fellini and Clint Eastwood. Does this mean that we must now speak of "le cinéma de Brett Ratner"? Nah.

2 Manufactured from almost the finest materials available (more on that later), "The Last Stand" is the third and presumably last film about the powerful Marvel Comics mutants who walk and often fight among us, some on our behalf, some not. The first films in the series — "X-Men" and "X2" — were directed by Bryan Singer, who abstained from a third go-round to direct one of the season's other big releases, "Superman Returns." Mr. Ratner, whose previous films include "Rush Hour" and its sequel, isn't as competent behind the camera as Mr. Singer, but such niceties can be irrelevant when it comes to industrial products like these.

3 Once again Ms. Berry plays Storm, a weather woman who conjures meteorological mischief by raising her arms, while Mr. Jackman returns as Wolverine, a guy with an enviable immune system and a trigger temper. These good mutants, along with Xavier (Patrick Stewart), the headmaster at a mutant school whose graduates include Rogue (Anna Paquin) and Cyclops (James Marsden), battle against the bad mutants led by Magneto (Sir Ian).

4 Magneto's minions include Mystique (Rebecca Romijn), dipped in deep blue and very mean, along with a human flamethrower named Pyro (Aaron Stanford). New to the cast are Kelsey Grammer as Dr. Henry McCoy, a beastly gentleman covered in blue fuzz, and Ben Foster as Warren Worthington III, born with a silver spoon in his mouth and wings on his back.

5 As might be expected, "The Last Stand" pretty much looks and plays like the first films, though perhaps with more noise and babe action and a little less glum. The story this time partly turns on a new cure for the mutant gene, which pushes the series' gay metaphor without developing it in any interesting way.

6 After the cure is announced, there are mutant protests, government missteps and mutant self-affirmations. Magneto pulls one way, Xavier another, as news of the discovery stirs up fear and panic among the, er, mutant community. By the time Warren Worthington III soars over the Golden Gate Bridge, his white wings extended and evoking seraphic visions of "Angels in America," the metaphor of the persecuted minority has all but left the realm of the figurative.

7 The cure, however, is just another excuse for the mutants to mix it up, which they do in both impressive and tedious fashion. The special effects look expensive, certainly, though if you've seen Storm gather dark clouds once, you've seen her do it a thousand times, no

matter Ms. Berry's attempts to make it seem like a third film was a smart idea. Mostly, as so often with these types of empty entertainments, you are left to wonder why companies that hire so many fine actors to run around under latex and foam and have the best technological wizardry money can buy seem to spend so little attention to the screenplay. The credited writers here are Simon Kinberg and Zak Penn, who, like the director, are simply not mutant enough to fly.

8 "X-Men: The Last Stand" is rated PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned). Several central characters die; a few are pulverized.

APPENDIX 6

The Da Vinci Code (2006) *The New York Times*

1 CANNES, France, May 17 — It seems you can't open a movie these days without provoking some kind of culture war skirmish, at least in the conflict-hungry media. Recent history — "The Passion of the Christ," "The Chronicles of Narnia" — suggests that such controversy, especially if religion is involved, can be very good business. "The Da Vinci Code," Ron Howard's adaptation of Dan Brown's best-selling primer on how not to write an English sentence, arrives trailing more than its share of theological and historical disputation.

2 The arguments about the movie and the book that inspired it have not been going on for millennia — it only feels that way — but part of Columbia Pictures' ingenious marketing strategy has been to encourage months of debate and speculation while not allowing anyone to see the picture until the very last minute. Thus we have had a flood of think pieces on everything from Jesus and Mary Magdalene's prenuptial agreement to the secret recipes of Opus Dei, and vexed, urgent questions have been raised: Is Christianity a conspiracy? Is "The Da Vinci Code" a dangerous, anti-Christian hoax? What's up with Tom Hanks's hair?

3 Luckily I lack the learning to address the first two questions. As for the third, well, it's long, and so is the movie. "The Da Vinci Code," which opened the Cannes Film Festival on Wednesday, is one of the few screen versions of a book that may take longer to watch than to read. (Curiously enough Mr. Howard accomplished a similar feat with "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" a few years back.)

4 To their credit the director and his screenwriter, Akiva Goldsman (who collaborated with Mr. Howard on "Cinderella Man" and "A Beautiful Mind"), have streamlined Mr. Brown's story and refrained from trying to capture his, um, prose style. "Almost inconceivably, the gun into which she was now staring was clutched in the pale hand of an enormous albino with long white hair." Such language — note the exquisite "almost" and the fastidious tucking of the "which" after the preposition — can live only on the page.

5 To be fair, though, Mr. Goldsman conjures up some pretty ripe dialogue all on his own. "Your God does not forgive murderers," Audrey Tautou hisses to Paul Bettany (who play a less than enormous, short-haired albino). "He burns them!"

6 Theology aside, this remark can serve as a reminder that "The Da Vinci Code" is above all a murder mystery. And as such, once it gets going, Mr. Howard's movie has its pleasures. He and Mr. Goldsman have deftly rearranged some elements of the plot (I'm going to be careful here not to spoil anything), unkinking a few over-elaborate twists and introducing others that keep the action moving along.

7 Hans Zimmer's appropriately overwrought score, pop-romantic with some liturgical decoration, glides us through scenes that might otherwise be talky and inert. The movie does, however, take a while to accelerate, popping the clutch and leaving rubber on the road as it tries to establish who is who, what they're doing and why.

8 Briefly stated: An old man (Jean-Pierre Marielle) is killed after hours in the Louvre, shot in the stomach, almost inconceivably, by a hooded assailant. Meanwhile Robert Langdon (Mr. Hanks), a professor of religious symbology at Harvard, is delivering a lecture and signing books for fans. He is summoned to the crime scene by Bezu Fache (Jean Reno), a French policeman who seems very grouchy, perhaps because his department has cut back on its shaving cream budget.

9 Soon Langdon is joined by Sophie Neveu, a police cryptographer and also — Bezu Fache! — the murder victim's granddaughter. Grandpa, it seems, knew some very important secrets, which if they were ever revealed might shake the foundations of Western Christianity, in particular the Roman Catholic Church, one of whose bishops, the portly Aringarosa (Alfred Molina) is at this very moment flying on an airplane. Meanwhile the albino monk, whose name is Silas and who may be the first character in the history of motion pictures to speak Latin into a cellphone, flagellates himself, smashes the floor of a church and kills a nun.

10 A chase, as Bezu's American colleagues might put it, ensues. It skids through the nighttime streets of Paris and eventually to London the next morning, with side trips to a Roman castle and a chateau in the French countryside. Along the way the film pauses to admire various knickknacks and art works, and to flash back, in desaturated color, to traumatic events in the childhoods of various characters (Langdon falls down a well; Sophie's parents are killed in a car accident; Silas stabs his abusive father).

11 There are also glances further back into history, to Constantine's conversion, to the suppression of the Knights Templar and to that time in London when people walked around wearing powdered wigs.

12 Through it all Mr. Hanks and Ms. Tautou stand around looking puzzled, leaving their reservoirs of charm scrupulously untapped. Mr. Hanks twists his mouth in what appears to be an expression of professorial skepticism and otherwise coasts on his easy, subdued geniality. Ms. Tautou, determined to ensure that her name will never again come up in an Internet search for the word "gamine," affects a look of worried fatigue.

13 In spite of some talk (a good deal less than in the book) about the divine feminine, chalices and blades, and the spiritual power of sexual connection, not even a glimmer of eroticism flickers between the two stars. Perhaps it's just as well. When a cryptographer and a symbologist get together, it usually ends in tears.

14 But thank the deity of your choice for Ian McKellen, who shows up just in time to give "The Da Vinci Code" a jolt of mischievous life. He plays a wealthy and eccentric British scholar named Leigh Teabing. (I will give Mr. Brown this much: he's good at

names. If I ever have twins or French poodles, I'm calling them Bezu and Teabing for sure.)

15 Hobbling around on two canes, growling at his manservant, Remy (Jean-Yves Berteloot), Teabing is twinkly and avuncular one moment, barking mad the next. Sir Ian, rattling on about Italian paintings and medieval statues, seems to be having the time of his life, and his high spirits serve as something of a rebuke to the filmmakers, who should be having and providing a lot more fun.

16 Teabing, who strolls out of English detective fiction by way of a Tintin comic, is a marvelously absurd creature, and Sir Ian, in the best tradition of British actors slumming and hamming through American movies, gives a performance in which high conviction is indistinguishable from high camp. A little more of this — a more acute sense of its own ridiculousness — would have given "The Da Vinci Code" some of the lightness of an old-fashioned, jet-setting Euro-thriller.

17 But of course movies of that ilk rarely deal with issues like the divinity of Jesus or the search for the Holy Grail. In the cinema such matters are best left to Monty Python. In any case Mr. Howard and Mr. Goldsman handle the supposedly provocative material in Mr. Brown's book with kid gloves, settling on an utterly safe set of conclusions about faith and its history, presented with the usual dull sententiousness.

18 So I certainly can't support any calls for boycotting or protesting this busy, trivial, inoffensive film. Which is not to say I'm recommending you go see it.

19 "The Da Vinci Code" is rated PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned). It has some violent killings and a few profanities.

APPENDIX 7

Superman Returns (2006) *The New York Times*

1 Jesus of Nazareth spent 40 days in the desert. By comparison, Superman of Hollywood languished almost 20 years in development hell. Those years apparently raised the bar fearsomely high. Last seen larking about on the big screen in the 1987 dud "Superman IV," the Man of Steel has been resurrected in a leaden new film not only to fight for truth, justice and the American way, but also to give Mel Gibson's passion a run for his box-office money. Where once the superhero flew up, up and away, he now flies down, down, down, sent from above to save mankind from its sins and what looked like another bumper summer.

2 The super-size (more than two and a half hours) "Superman Returns" was written by Michael Dougherty and Dan Harris, working off a story hatched by them and the director, Bryan Singer, after what appears to have been repeat viewings of Richard Donner's "Superman." Released in 1978, that film ushered Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's original comic creation into the blockbuster age with frothy wit and a cast that included Marlon Brando in a creamy scoop of white hair and Gene Hackman in clover. Christopher Reeve, of course, wore the cape and tights, while Margot Kidder did a fine approximation of the young Katharine Hepburn at her most coltish. Valerie Perrine and Ned Beatty added some laughs, while Glenn Ford supplied a pinch of gravitas.

3 As nutritious as a box of Cracker Jack and just as yummy, "Superman" was at once a goof and a self-conscious bid at modern mythmaking. Years later, what resonates aren't Mr. Donner's action scenes, which look crude compared with what he would do later in the "Lethal Weapon" series, but how fluidly he changes tones from the iconic (as when the supertoddler lifts a truck off his Earth father) to the playful (as when the souped-up adult realizes that the closetlike phone booth is a thing of the past). Mr. Reeve worked the tonal changes with similar ease, delivering a superhero whose earnestness was strategically offset by his fumbling, bumbling, all-too-human twin, who was just the ticket for the post-Watergate, pre-Indiana Jones moment.

4 Mr. Singer's Superman, played by Brandon Routh, is a hero of rather different emotional colors, most muted. Like Christopher Nolan's "Batman Begins," Mr. Singer's effort reworks the legend against a vaguely modern, timeless backdrop that blends the thematically old with the technologically new. The story opens with some necrophiliac wizardry and Brando newly arisen as Superman's extraterrestrial father. Well represented even from beyond, the dead actor receives billing for his spectral turn, squeezed between Eva Marie Saint, who plays Superman's earth mother, and Tristan Lake Leabu, who plays Lois Lane's young son. The Daily Planet's star reporter is in turn played by Kate Bosworth, whose glum mien and curtain of brown hair suggests that blondes really do have more fun.

5 Lois, however, doesn't enter the picture until after the filmmakers have laid the story's Oedipal foundation, which finds two men saying goodbye to the much older women who will, intentionally or not, shape their destinies. In one corner, Lex Luthor (Kevin Spacey taking up the role played by Mr. Hackman) bids cold adieu to the crone who will make him fantastically rich; in another, Superman again digs a fiery trough into the Kent family farm upon crash landing. This time, it's the grown man who brings tears to his mother's eyes and who stares at the sinking Kansas (actually Australian) sun, weighing his responsibility to humankind after a five-year hiatus crossing the galaxies to visit his original home.

6 It's too bad that Mr. Singer and his colleagues don't really do anything substantial with the good-guy-bad-guy routine. Superman may be a super-creation, but it's his villains rather than his dual identity that have usually given him a kick. Unlike his brooding and angst-ridden rivals in the superhero game, his alter ego is only as interesting as the comic book artist or the actor adding shades of gray to Clark Kent's business suit. Part of the charm of Mr. Reeve's interpretation was that a guy this impossibly handsome, who literally towers over everyone in the office, could hide behind a slouch and oversize eyeglasses. It was absurd, but then so too was the idea that a powerful extraterrestrial would hang around Earth to take the kind of abuse perennially heaped on his human half.

7 That identity allowed Superman to walk among us, but mostly it allowed him and, by proxy, generations of geeks both creating and consuming the character, to engage ritualistically in a sadomasochistic relationship with Lois Lane. A variation on the high school homecoming queen who sails past the shy guy in glasses on her way to a back-seat tumble with the captain of the football team, this trouble-seeking reporter has always brought out what is most human, vulnerable and identifiable in Superman. He gives her headlines; she gives him a broken, or at least bruised, heart. In "Superman II," which was directed by Richard Lester (and an uncredited Mr. Donner), she gave him a bit more, too, thereby transforming the world's most powerful virgin into a one-night stud.

8 Near the end of the second film, Superman, realizing that he and Lois have no future, wipes away their boudoir encounter with an amnesia-producing kiss. Mr. Singer expends much more time and many more resources to do pretty much the same, erasing part of the past to create what is essentially a new and considerably more sober sequel to the first two films, one that shakes the earthiness off Superman and returns him to the status of a savior. There's always been a hint of Jesus (and Moses) to the character, from the omnipotence of his father to a costume that, with its swaths of red and blue, evokes the colors worn by the Virgin Mary in numerous Renaissance paintings. It's a hint that proves impossible not to take.

9 Intentionally or not, the Jesus angle also helps deflect speculation about just how straight this Superman flies. Given how securely Lois remains out of the romantic picture in "Superman Returns," now saddled with both a kid and a fiancé (James Marsden), it's no surprise that some have speculated that Superman is gay. The speculation speaks more to our social panic than anything in the film, which, much like the overwhelming majority of American action movies produced since the 1980's, mostly involves what

academics call homosocial relations. In other words, when it comes to Hollywood, boys will be boys and play with their toys, whether they're sleeping with one another or not, leaving women to weep, worry and wait to be rescued.

10 Every era gets the superhero it deserves, or at least the one filmmakers think we want. For Mr. Singer that means a Superman who fights his foes in a scene that visually echoes the garden betrayal in "The Passion of the Christ" and even hangs in the air much as Jesus did on the cross. It's hard to see what the point is beyond the usual grandiosity that comes whenever B-movie material is pumped up with ambition and money. As he proved with his first two installments of "The X-Men" franchise, Mr. Singer likes to make important pop entertainments that trumpet their seriousness as loudly as they deploy their bangs. It's hard not to think that Superman isn't the only one here with a savior complex.

11 "Superman Returns" is rated PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned). Mild action and no blood.

APPENDIX 8

Happy Feet (2006) *The New York Times*

1 The feet in the title of George Miller's new film shuffle and stomp with glorious syncopation, but it would be a stretch to call them happy. Small and webbed and clawed, the appendages belong to an animated emperor penguin named Mumble (Elijah Wood) who, through the wizardry of computer animation, gets his terpsichorean moves from the brilliant tap-dancer Savion Glover. Like Mr. Glover and Eleanor Powell, Mumble was born to dance. There's a song in his heart if not in his diaphragm, but, strangely, a lot of his tippity tappiting has the urgent pulse of an S O S.

2 Much like Mr. Miller's excellent "Babe: Pig in the City" and his dystopian "Mad Max" trilogy, "Happy Feet" presents a vision of the world seen through a glass darkly. One of the most underrated films of the 1990s, "Pig in the City" was a terrible commercial disappointment, an animal-farm noir that hewed closer in apocalyptic tone and feel to the "Mad Max" films than to its sunnier, much-beloved predecessor, "Babe." "Happy Feet" is Mr. Miller's first film in eight long years, and while compromised by the uplift and affirmation that mainstream animation regurgitates like a mommy penguin, it also shows a remarkable persistence of vision. Even in a story about singing-and-dancing fat and feather, Mr. Miller can't help but go dark and deep.

3 It takes him a while to get there. First, he must unleash Robin Williams, who gives wacky, at times uneasy voice to several characters, including that of a charming Adélie penguin named Ramon, who sounds more East Los Angeles than Anywhere Antarctica. Having been shunned by the other emperor penguins because he can't sing, Mumble joins a flock of smaller, stubbier Adélie penguins who, when not collecting pebbles, do stand-up. Mr. Williams, who these days is better heard than seen, also pours on the molasses as an Rockhopper penguin called Lovelace, who sounds a lot like the singer Barry White, which means he's one of the few so-called black voices in a world that sounds otherwise white as deep winter.

4 That doesn't mean that Mr. Williams isn't funny, only that it's discomfiting that so many children's films depend on voices that are funny only because they exploit ethnic and racial stereotypes. Because penguins look pretty much alike, most of the principals deliver distinctive vocal performances. Nicole Kidman recycles her baby-breathy Marilyn Monroe shtick for Mumble's mother, Norma Jean, while Hugo Weaving sticks a Scottish burr in his throat to play an elder penguin named Noah. For Mumble's father, Memphis, Hugh Jackman throws his voice into the deep-fryer and comes up with something that's a little bit country, a little bit rock 'n' roll. Everyone sounds pretty white except when they're lip-synching (beak-synching?) the funk and R&B standards on the film's playlist.

5 "Happy Feet" is far from the only animated film to lean on stereotype for its comedy: "Over the Hedge" and "Cars" do the same, among many other animated features, as does, of course, "Borat." I bring this up only because Mr. Miller brings an unusual depth of

feeling to his work as well as a distinct moral worldview. "Happy Feet" is a familiar story about a wee outsider forced to struggle against the usual odds and misguided adults to discover his inner penguin. Yet tucked inside this nominally feel-good jukebox musical with its crooning and swooning critters is a piercingly sad story about the devastation being visited on the natural world. The tapping we hear, as it turns out, is drilling holes in our hearts.

6 For the most part, the screenplay — written by Mr. Miller, Warren Coleman, John Collee and Judy Morris — traces a familiar arc. Not long after he happens upon the flock of Adélie penguins, Mumble discovers that alien creatures (guess who?) are scooping all the fish out of the ocean. Determined to right this wrong, he and three others set off on a voyage that includes sweeping images of mountains that recall Mr. Wood's high-altitude trekking in "The Lord of the Rings" and brings the travelers face to face with elephant seals with astonishing photorealistic tusklike protuberances. What makes the seals especially beautiful isn't the almost tactile detail of their crinkles and grooves; it's that, unlike Mumble and his vaguely anthropomorphized face, they look insistently and gloriously like animals.

7 Beauty announces itself quietly in "Happy Feet," whether in the discreetly shifting shades of white that seem to turn the snow into a living, breathing organism, or in the articulated lines of penguin chicks that make each ball of downy fluff a very specific ball of downy fluff. All this beauty makes it easy to understand why Mumble might want to tap his feet with joy. It also explains why Mr. Miller, after doing an extremely credible approximation of the wonderful world of Walt Disney, plunges his hapless hero into a nightmare worthy of Samuel Fuller's "Shock Corridor." As politically pointed as it is disturbing, it is a view of hell as seen through the eyes and ears of creatures we foolishly, tragically call dumb.

8 "Happy Feet" is rated PG (Parental guidance suggested). There are a few scenes of peril that might frighten young children, but it's the adults who will probably need the hankies.

APPENDIX 9

Ice Age: The Meltdown (2006) *The New York Times*

1 It's the end of the Ice Age (one of them, anyway), and global warming is front and center. Not that the tots will notice: they'll be much too busy wondering if Manny (voiced drearily by Ray Romano), the woolly mammoth who lost his family in the first movie, will hook up with a cute mammoth who's convinced that she's a possum.

2 But in "Ice Age: The Meltdown," dissolving glaciers do more than encourage mammoths to mate. They also inspire some decidedly biblical imagery from the director, Carlos Saldanha, who herds the animals to salvation in a giant, arklike boat. Viewing it from afar, you'll swear that the structure is illuminated by a beam of light from above.

3 But this sequel's most visible issue is creative exhaustion. The animation is uninspired (with so much ice, the creatures need to be twice as good-looking), and the story is humdrum. (The saber-toothed tiger learns to swim!) Scrat, the squirrel-rat hybrid featured prominently in the trailers, is given an extended shtick with his still-elusive acorn — an irritating device that serves only to chop the film into tidy, bite-size sections. Science also takes a hit this time, as two massive, coelacanthlike fish are unfrozen and turn out to be twice as lively as the rest of the cast. Next time, they should have their own movie.

4 "Ice Age: The Meltdown" is rated PG (Parental guidance suggested) for mild language and innuendo.

APPENDIX 10

Casino Royale (2006) *The New York Times*

1 The latest James Bond vehicle — call him Bond, Bond 6.0 — finds the British spy leaner, meaner and a whole lot darker. Now played by an attractive bit of blond rough named Daniel Craig, Pierce Brosnan having been permanently kicked to the kerb, Her Majesty's favorite bad boy arrives on screens with the usual complement of cool toys, smooth rides, bosomy women and high expectations. He shoots, he scores, in bed and out, taking down the bad and the beautiful as he strides purposefully into the 21st century.

2 It's about time. The likable Mr. Brosnan was always more persuasive playing Bond as a metaphoric rather than an actual lady-killer, with the sort of polished affect and blow-dried good looks that these days tend to work better either on television or against the grain. Two of his best performances have been almost aggressively anti-Bond turns, first in John Boorman's adaptation of the John le Carré novel "The Tailor of Panama," in which he played a dissolute spy, and, more recently, in "The Matador," a comedy in which he played a hit man with a sizable gut and alarmingly tight bikini underwear. Mr. Brosnan did not demolish the memory of his Bond years with that pot, but he came admirably close.

3 Every generation gets the Bond it deserves if not necessarily desires, and with his creased face and uneasy smile, Mr. Craig fits these grim times well. As if to underscore the idea that this new Bond marks a decisive break with the contemporary iterations, "Casino Royale" opens with a black-and-white sequence that finds the spy making his first government-sanctioned kills. The inky blood soon gives way to full-blown color, but not until Bond has killed one man with his hands after a violent struggle and fatally shot a second. "Made you feel it, did he?" someone asks Bond of his first victim. Bond doesn't answer. From the way the director, Martin Campbell, stages the action though, it's clear that he wants to make sure we do feel it.

4 "Casino Royale" introduced Bond to the world in 1953. A year later it was made into a television drama with the American actor Barry Nelson as Jimmy Bond; the following decade, it was a ham-fisted spoof with David Niven as the spy and a very funny Peter Sellers as a card shark. For reasons that are too boring to repeat, when Ian Fleming sold the film rights to Bond, "Casino Royale" was not part of the deal. As a consequence the producers who held most of the rights decided to take their cue from news reports about misfired missiles, placing their bets on "Dr. No" and its missile-mad villain. The first big-screen Bond, it hit in October 1962, the same month that Fleming's fan John F. Kennedy took the Cuban missile crisis public.

5 The Vatican later condemned "Dr. No" as a dangerous mixture of violence, vulgarity, sadism and sex.

6 Ka-ching! The film was a success, as was its relatively unknown star, Sean Connery, who balanced those descriptive notes beautifully, particularly in the first film and its even better follow-up, "From Russia With Love."

7 In time Mr. Connery's conception of the character softened, as did the series itself, and both Roger Moore and Mr. Brosnan portrayed the spy as something of a gentleman playboy. That probably helps explain why some Bond fanatics have objected so violently to Mr. Craig, who fits Fleming's description of the character as appearing "ironical, brutal and cold" better than any actor since Mr. Connery. Mr. Craig's Bond looks as if he has renewed his license to kill.

8 Like a lot of action films, the Bond franchise has always used comedy to blunt the violence and bring in big audiences. And, much like the franchise's increasingly bloated action sequences, which always seem to involve thousands of uniformed extras scurrying around sets the size of Rhode Island, the humor eventually leached the series of its excitement, its sense of risk. Mr. Brosnan certainly looked the part when he suited up for "GoldenEye" in 1995, but by then John Woo and Quentin Tarantino had so thoroughly rearranged the DNA of the modern action film as to knock 007 back to zero. By the time the last Bond landed in 2002, Matt Damon was rearranging the genre's elementary particles anew in "The Bourne Identity."

9 "Casino Royale" doesn't play as dirty as the Bourne films, but the whole thing moves far lower to the ground than any of the newer Bond flicks. Here what pops off the screen aren't the exploding orange fireballs that have long been a staple of the Bond films and have been taken to new pyrotechnic levels by Hollywood producers like Jerry Bruckheimer, but some sensational stunt work and a core seriousness. Successful franchises are always serious business, yet this is the first Bond film in a long while that feels as if it were made by people who realize they have to fight for audiences' attention, not just bank on it. You see Mr. Craig sweating (and very nice sweat it is too); you sense the filmmakers doing the same.

10 The characteristically tangled shenanigans — as if it mattered — involve a villainous free agent named Le Chiffre (the excellent Danish actor Mads Mikkelsen), who wheels and deals using money temporarily borrowed from his equally venal clients. It's the sort of risky global business that allows the story to jump from the Bahamas to Montenegro and other stops in between as Bond jumps from plot point to plot point, occasionally taking time out to talk into his cellphone or bed another man's wife. Mr. Craig, whose previous credits include "Munich" and "The Mother," walks the walk and talks the talk, and he keeps the film going even during the interminable high-stakes card game that nearly shuts it down.

11 If Mr. Campbell and his team haven't reinvented the Bond film with this 21st edition, they have shaken (and stirred) it a little, chipping away some of the ritualized gentility that turned it into a waxworks. They have also surrounded Mr. Craig with estimable supporting players, including the French actress Eva Green, whose talent is actually larger than her breasts.

12 Like Mr. Mikkelsen, who makes weeping blood into a fine spectator sport, Ms. Green brings conviction to the film, as do Jeffrey Wright and Isaach de Bankolé. Judi Dench is back as M, of course, with her stiff lip and cunning. But even she can't steal the show from Mr. Craig, though a human projectile by the name of Sébastien Foucan, who leads a merry and thrilling chase across Madagascar, almost does.

13 "Casino Royale" is rated PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned). The sex is demure, the violence less so.

APPENDIX 11

The Pursuit of Happyness (2006) *The New York Times*

1 A fairy tale in realist drag, “The Pursuit of Happyness” is the kind of entertainment that goes down smoothly until it gets stuck in your craw. Inspired by a true story, as they like to say in Hollywood, the film traces the fleeting ups and frightening downs of Chris Gardner, whose efforts to keep his family from sinking into poverty evolve into a life-and-death struggle of social Darwinian proportions. It’s the early 1980s, and while Ronald Reagan is delivering the bad economic news on television, Chris is about to prove you don’t need an army to fight the war on poverty, just big smiles and smarts, and really sturdy shoes. (It also helps that the star playing him is as innately sympathetic as Will Smith.)

2 Given how often Chris breaks into a run on the streets of San Francisco, it’s a good thing his shoes are well built; his lungs, too. Written by Steven Conrad and directed by Gabriele Muccino, “The Pursuit of Happyness” recounts how Chris, plagued by some bad luck, a few stupid moves and a shrew for a wife, Linda (Thandie Newton), loses his apartment and, with his 5-year-old, Christopher (Jaden Christopher Syre Smith, Mr. Smith’s own beautiful son), joins the ranks of the homeless, if not the hopeless. Evicted from the mainstream and bounced from shelter to shelter, Chris holds firm to his dignity, resolve, faith, love and independence. His optimism sweeps through the film like a searchlight, scattering clouds and dark thoughts to the wind.

3 It’s the same old bootstraps story, an American dream artfully told, skillfully sold. To that calculated end, the filmmaking is seamless, unadorned, transparent, the better to serve Mr. Smith’s warm expressiveness. That warmth feels truthful, as does the walk-up apartment Chris’s family lives in at the start of the film, which looks like the real paycheck-to-paycheck deal. As does the day care center, which is so crummy it can’t even get happiness right (hence the title).

4 This is no small thing, considering the film industry’s usual skewed sense of economic class, a perspective encapsulated by the insider who described the middle-class family in “Little Miss Sunshine” to me as working class, perhaps because the mother drives a gently distressed Miata rather than next year’s Mercedes.

5 Money matters in “The Pursuit of Happyness,” as it does in life. But it matters more openly in this film than it does in most Hollywood stories that set their sights on the poor, largely because Chris’s pursuit of happiness eventually becomes interchangeable with his pursuit of money. He doesn’t want just a better, more secure life for himself and his child; either by scripted design or by the example of the real Chris Gardner, he seems to yearn for a life of luxury, stadium box seats and the kind of sports car he stops to admire in one scene. His desires aren’t just upwardly mobile; they’re materialistically unbound. Instead of a nice starter home, he (and the filmmakers) ogles mansions. It’s no wonder he hopes to become a stockbroker.

6 That may sound like a punch line, at least to some ears, but it's the holy grail in "The Pursuit of Happyness." A self-starter, Chris has sunk all of the family's money into costly medical scanners that he tries to sell to doctors and hospitals. But the machines are overpriced, and the sure thing he banked on has landed them in debt. Forced to work two shifts at a dead-end job, Linda angrily smolders and then rages at Chris, which seems reasonable since he has gambled all of their savings on an exceptionally foolish enterprise. (And, unlike her, he hasn't signed up for overtime.) But this is a film about father love, not mother love, and Linda soon leaves the picture in a cloud of cigarette smoke and a storm of tears.

7 Chris and the filmmakers seem happy to see her go, but life only gets tougher once she and her paychecks disappear. Much of the film involves Chris's subsequent efforts to keep himself and his child housed and fed while he is enrolled in an unpaid internship program at a powerful stock brokerage firm. Bright and ferociously determined, Chris easily slides into this fantastical world of shouting men, ringing phones, gleaming surfaces and benevolent bosses. He goes along to get along, and when one of his bosses asks for money to pay for a cab, he quickly opens his wallet. Chris himself stiffes another working man for some money because that wallet is so light. But this is a film about him, not the other guy.

8 How you respond to this man's moving story may depend on whether you find Mr. Smith's and his son's performances so overwhelmingly winning that you buy the idea that poverty is a function of bad luck and bad choices, and success the result of heroic toil and dreams. Both performances are certainly likable in the extreme, though Mr. Smith shined brighter and was given much more to do when he played the title character in Michael Mann's underrated "Ali." That film proves an interesting comparison with this one, not in filmmaking terms, but in its vision of what it means to be a black man struggling in America. In one, a black man fights his way to the top with his fists; in the other, he gets there with a smile.

9 "The Pursuit of Happyness" is rated PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned). It includes mild adult language and some parental fighting.

APPENDIX 12

Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest (2006) USCCB

1 Director Gore Verbinski, the man who put the jolly back in the Jolly Roger with 2003's sleeper hit, "Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl," delivers more of the same rip-roaring fun in "Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest" (Disney).

2 For a sequel, the new movie matches -- if not tops -- the original as first-rate popcorn entertainment with all the right ingredients: action-adventure, spectacle, screwball comedy and a bit of romance. It even has an outrageous three-way swordfight on a runaway mill wheel. But most importantly, it has Johnny Depp, who once again steals the show as the mascaraed and rum-sotted rogue Capt. Jack Sparrow. (His screen entrance is one of the more hilarious in recent memory.)

3 Sparrow finds himself back in a sea of supernatural trouble as he tries to wiggle his way out of a Faustian pact with the fabled Davy Jones (Bill Nighy), the squid-faced captain of the Flying Dutchman ghost ship, who rules the deep and gives new meaning to the term "octo-puss."

4 Orlando Bloom and Keira Knightley return as Will Turner and his bonnie bride-to-be, Elizabeth Swann, who before they tie the knot are arrested by the nefarious British bureaucrat and pirate hunter Lord Cutler Beckett (Tom Hollander), who presses them into tracking down Sparrow and swiping his magic compass.

5 They all end up questing after the same object: Jones' legendary locker, the content of which will give its possessor control of the briny main.

6 Amid the swashbuckling slapstick there are some slightly darker moments and scary supernatural elements that, while mostly harmless, preclude giving the film an A-I classification. There are also a few scenes involving a tentacled sea monster known as the Kraken -- a computer-generated cousin of the giant squid in Disney's "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea" -- that may be too intense for the wee ones.

7 The story and characters have about as much flesh as a peg leg, but the skeletal plot is kept afloat by several riotous set pieces pulled off as before with flair by Verbinski, imaginative effects and makeup, and some solid supporting performances by Nighy and a barnacled Stellan Skarsgård as Bootstrap Bill, Will's long-lost father. There are also funny turns by Lee Arenberg and Mackenzie Crook as a pair of bungling buccaneers.

8 "Dead Man's Chest" is a bit too long. But while it plows many of the same comic waters as the original -- and granted, the idea based on a Disney theme-park attraction is stretched thin -- its good-natured goofiness demonstrates that there is still enough wind in the franchise's sails to justify the third installment set up by the cliffhanger ending.

9 If crustacean-limbed ghost crews and comical cannibals don't shiver your timbers, you may want to think twice about dropping your anchor, but if you liked the first movie this pirates' life is for ye, matey.

10 The film contains recurring action-adventure violence and peril, including a nongraphic throat cutting and off-screen executions, a fleeting gruesome image, some intense sequences and frightening supernatural effects, voodoo hokum, lightly suggestive humor and innuendo, and a mildly rude expression. The USCCB Office for Film & Broadcasting classification is A-II -- adults and adolescents. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 -- parents strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

APPENDIX 13

Night at the Museum (2006) USCCB

1 "Night at the Museum" (Fox) is a lightweight but diverting comedy-fantasy about Larry Daley (Ben Stiller), an impractical dreamer and perennial loser who takes a job as night watchman at New York's Museum of Natural History only to learn to his amazement that the dinosaur bones, stuffed animals, mummies and diorama characters all come to life after closing time.

2 The statue of Theodore Roosevelt (Robin Williams), a cowboy (Owen Wilson), a Roman soldier (Steve Coogan), an Indian maiden (Mizuo Peck) and others join the pachyderms, lions and a mischievous monkey named Dexter in leading Larry on a whirlwind adventure of slapstick and mayhem. Larry must keep order, as the disapproving (and dimwitted) museum president, Dr. McPhee (Ricky Gervais), will notice if anything is amiss.

3 At first, Larry is overwhelmed by the sheer anarchy of the creatures' nocturnal activities, but eventually he's able to restore order and earns back the respect of his young son, Nick (Jake Cherry), as well as win the appreciation of the pretty museum docent, Rebecca (Carla Gugino), whom he befriends.

4 Director Shawn Levy's film -- and Robert Ben Garant and Thomas Lennon's script -- could be much funnier. A loony confrontation where Larry pep-talks Attila the Hun (Patrick Gallagher) about the love he apparently lacked as a child briefly demonstrates how witty the entire film might have been. Nonetheless, the effects are pretty terrific, Stiller is appealing, and old-timers such as Dick Van Dyke, Mickey Rooney and Bill Cobbs as the feisty daytime guards, and Stiller's mom, Anne Meara, as an employment counselor, add to the fun of this entertaining family film. Oh, and there's the standard, but always worthy, message about proving yourself against impossible odds.

5 The film is being shown in Imax theaters as well as on conventional screens, and looks splendid when it's as big as the tyrannosaurus rex who gets the astonished Larry to play "fetch."

6 The film contains light slapstick violence. The USCCB Office for Film & Broadcasting classification is A-I -- general patronage. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG -- parental guidance suggested. Some material may not be suitable for children.

APPENDIX 14

Cars (2006) USCCB

1 Having already set the standard for computer-animated entertainment with movies such as "Toy Story," "Monsters, Inc." and "Finding Nemo," Pixar continues to raise the bar with "Cars"(Disney), a delightful, family-friendly film with a full tank of humor and emotion that is likely to leave its summer competition in the dust.

2 Directed by John Lasseter and Joe Ranft, the tale takes place in a world of anthropomorphic autos, centering on cocky racecar Lightning McQueen (voiced by Owen Wilson), a rookie hot rod with his headlights set on the prestigious Piston Cup and the fame it will bring. While en route cross-country to compete against two veteran speedsters (voiced by Michael Keaton and real-life racing legend Richard Petty), Lightning is unexpectedly detained in the neglected desert town of Radiator Springs, which, in its heyday, had been the jewel of the Route 66 crown.

3 Though revved up to burn rubber out of town, Lightning, through his growing friendship with its motley four-wheeled residents, has a change of heart about life in the fast lane, learning that "there's a whole lot more to racing than winning."

4 A top-shelf cast provides the characters with endearing personalities; they include: Bonnie Hunt as a pretty Porsche; Cheech Marin as a 1959 Impala with flair; Tony Shalhoub as a high-strung Italian Fiat; and George Carlin as a hippie 1960 VW bus who brews his own organic fuel and has a good-natured running feud with neighbor Sarge, a patriotic World War II jeep. Hollywood icon Paul Newman lends his gravelly muffler to Doc Hudson, an old-timer who guards a big secret under his vintage hood and who frowns his fender at Lightning's egotism. But a rusty, dimwitted tow truck with an engine of gold named Mater (voiced by comedian Larry the Cable Guy) steals the show, including a funny scene where, for kicks, he initiates Lightning into the car-equivalent of cow-tipping involving a field of easily spooked tractors.

5 Following past Pixar successes, the writing is sharp, while the vibrant visuals -- impressively rendered metallic surfaces, shiny tailfins, high-octane race sequences and lovely painted desertscapes -- take a backseat to solid storytelling.

6 Though lacking the epic sweep of "Finding Nemo" and the character depth of "The Incredibles," given our hectic world of fast food, express lanes and high-speed Internet access, the film's gentle message charmingly reminds us that on the highway of life it is important to slow down and appreciate the scenery.

7 The USCCB Office for Film & Broadcasting classification is A-I -- general patronage. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is G -- general audiences. All ages admitted.

APPENDIX 15

X-Men: The Last Stand (2006) USCCB

1 In "X-Men: The Last Stand" (20th Century Fox) -- the third film based on the popular Marvel comic-book series -- there are characters who zap laser blasts from their eyes, control the weather, manipulate metal and walk through walls. But the most remarkable feat displayed is director Brett Ratner's ability to inject enough human emotion into what is essentially one big special-effects X-travaganza to make the action-packed movie engaging as well as entertaining.

2 Taking up where the last film ended, "Last Stand" continues the saga of a band of humans whose mutated genetics give them extraordinary powers, which they use to battle their evil counterparts. The story line here focuses on telepath Jean Grey (Famke Janssen), who died at the climax of the second movie -- or so we were led to believe. As it turns out, she survived, reborn with her psychic prowess bordering on godlike. But the trauma of her near-death experience has also unleashed a dark, destructive and uncontrollable alter personality, giving her character a Jekyll-and-Hyde twist.

3 Suspicious of the mutants -- even those who promote peaceful coexistence -- the U.S. government announces it has developed a "cure" and institutes a policy of turning them into humdrum Homo sapiens. The news sparks a revolution, as the misanthropic Magneto (Ian McKellen) declares war on mankind, amassing an army of maddened mutants. Others, like the climate-commanding Storm (Halle Berry) and the curiously coifed fighting machine Wolverine (Hugh Jackman), side with Professor Charles Xavier (Patrick Stewart), who advocates a more lawful approach.

4 New characters include the erudite Dr. Henry McCoy aka "Beast" (Kelsey Grammer under heavy makeup), a furry blue mutant who, though allied with Xavier, sympathizes with those yearning to be "normal," humorously responding to Storm's protest against a cure by quipping, "You don't shed on the sofa." There's also Juggernaut (Vinnie Jones), a human bulldozer who takes up Magneto's cause, along with returning hotheaded Pyro (Aaron Stanford) and the shape-shifting Mystique (Rebecca Romijn). Among the more empathetic additions is the winged Angel (Ben Foster), the self-loathing son of the man leading the crusade to rid the world of mutants. (A flashback of him as a young boy trying to hide his "shame" is heartbreaking.)

5 Fans of the series who worried whether Ratner, who took over the reins from Bryan Singer, could deliver on the goods won't be disappointed. As for the action sequences, viewers get their money's worth, including an eye-popping centerpiece involving the Golden Gate Bridge.

6 But Ratner manages to keep the story focused on the relationships of the characters, though several of the secondary players are underdeveloped. Unlike many other series

that become stale, "Last Stand" maintains its freshness. With little back story provided, however, those who haven't seen the first two installments may be a little lost.

7 The violence, while highly stylized, is a bit more intense this time (bodies vaporized, etc.), but there is little actual blood. Nevertheless, some parents may argue that consequence-free carnage sends the wrong message. Still, this mayhem coupled with a brief, but sensual moment between Janssen and Jackman preclude recommendation for younger adolescents.

8 Part of the reason the series works so well is that, while the characters may be superhuman, the problems they face -- from intolerance to teen angst -- are identifiably human. The latter fuels the romance between Rogue (Anna Paquin) and her frosty beau, Iceman (Shawn Ashmore), complicated by newcomer Kitty Pryde (Ellen Page). Its comic-book conceit notwithstanding, the film's political subtext is clear in its commentary on such hot-button issues as minority (racial or sexual) rights, bioethics and terrorism, while exploring more timeless themes such as alienation and the use and abuse of power.

9 The movie's sensory-overload climax -- during which Jean Grey does to Alcatraz what Carrie did to her high school auditorium on prom night -- silly as it may be, does commendably affirm that love is the greatest power of all, a resolution that ends on a somewhat morally questionable note.

10 Despite the finality of the film's title, a teaser ending suggests that this is far from this franchise's last stand.

APPENDIX 16

The Da Vinci Code (2006) USCCB

1 The screen adaptation of Dan Brown's best-seller has arrived amid unprecedented secrecy and fanfare, and the resulting film is pretty much what everyone expected: a glossy, well-acted, mostly fast-moving thriller. Regrettably, however, just about all the spurious historical, artistic, and theological misstatements from the poorly researched book have been left intact.

2 For the few who may not be aware, "The Da Vinci Code" (Columbia) tells the story of Harvard "religious symbolologist" Robert Langdon (Tom Hanks) on the run from Capt. Bezu Fache (Jean Reno) of the French police after the grisly murder of Jacques Sauniere (Jean-Pierre Marielle), a curator of the Louvre museum, whose naked body is found spread-eagle, positioned like Leonardo's "Vitruvian Man." Before he died, Sauniere left additional clues, hidden in the surrounding works of art, including the Mona Lisa, on which he cryptically scrawled, "So Dark the Con of Man."

3 With Sauniere's granddaughter, Sophie Neveu (heavily accented French actress Audrey Tautou), a police cryptologist, in tow, Langdon gradually pieces together the motives for the killing, which would seem to implicate the Catholic Church in a centuries-old conspiracy (billed as "the greatest cover-up in human history").

4 Meanwhile, there's Silas (Paul Bettany), a crazed albino monk-assassin from Opus Dei, who, under the direction of his mentor and head of that Catholic institution, Bishop Aringarosa (Alfred Molina), is on the trail of a so-called "keystone" that contains a map revealing the location of the Holy Grail, which turns out to be not the cup of legend but something quite different. (In the film version, Bishop Aringarosa is more villain than dupe.)

5 Director Ron Howard delivers the requisite shadowy suspense and chase sequences through the Louvre and the streets of Paris, London, and Scotland -- much of it on location -- peppering the action with several flashback scenes to illustrate some of the backstory which might otherwise have made the film even more talky than it is. (These range from digital recreations of the Crusades and the Council of Nicea to glimpses of Silas' harsh upbringing.)

6 The convoluted plot may be confusing for those unfamiliar with the book. While the performances, including that of Sir Ian McKellen as Grail scholar Sir Leigh Teabing, won't disappoint fans of the novel, the underlying theology -- particularly as it questions Jesus' divinity and its fanciful pagan-flavored notions of "inherited" divinity -- not to mention, secondarily, the maligning of Opus Dei, is deeply abhorrent.

7 It is McKellen who, in a lengthy monologue, glibly explains to the initially skeptical Langdon and Sophie that "the greatest story ever told was all lies" and that Jesus wasn't

"the son of God ... or even the nephew." With a remarkably straight face, he also expounds on how the feminine-looking dinner guest in Leonardo's "Last Supper" painting is not the Apostle John, but rather Mary Magdalene.

8 As the plot plays out, villainies are revealed and some assumptions disproved, but none of Teabing's allegations are refuted.

9 We needn't regurgitate the litany of topics where Brown's story makes unfounded claims: the origins of Christianity, early views of Jesus' divine nature and his relationship to Mary Magdalene, the church's alleged suppression of women, the selection of the four Gospels, later gnostic texts, the Council of Nicea, the emperor Constantine, the Knights Templar, and Leonardo himself. Akiva Goldsman's script reins in some of Brown's more baldly bogus statements, couching them in the speculative language of "theories" rather than "facts," but still gets many of the latter dead wrong, including the reasons for the demise of the Templars.

10 In a further example of softening the book's heretical edge, Howard has Langdon question Teabing's contentions. Near the end, in a case of too little too late, Langdon -- who, we are told, was raised Catholic -- even admits to some vestigial faith.

11 The film invites audiences to "seek the truth." But the only truth would seem to be that there is no truth. "Why does it have to be human or divine? Maybe human is divine?" Langdon ruminates about Jesus, declaring that "what matters is what you believe."

12 If Brown had merely attempted to resurrect some of the darker chapters in church history, unflattering or not, that might have been fair game.

13 But these egregious assertions, gussied up in the trappings of a Robert Ludlum thriller, are different in that they cut to the core of Christian doctrine. Speculative fantasy is one thing, insensitivity to people's basic beliefs is another.

14 The sensationalized portrayal of Opus Dei --whose admirable mandate is to serve God to the fullest in one's everyday activities -- as a creepy secret society given to grotesque acts of self-mutilation and a hotbed of intrigue could almost be amusing if it weren't so deeply offensive, especially since many will mistake this caricature for truth.

15 Though Howard, Hanks and producer Brian Grazer have insisted the film is merely fiction, it does seem irresponsible of all parties involved not to have changed the name of Opus Dei in light of the obvious falsehoods, or even provided some kind of disclaimer.

16 The public loves conspiracy tales, especially when they involve powerful institutions, and the Catholic Church is a favorite target, even if the "bad guys" are shown not to be representative of the whole.

17 Sophie's line that "your God doesn't forgive murderers, he burns them" lacks even a rudimentary understanding of Christianity. Early on, Bishop Aringarosa remarks that some people fear what they don't understand. It seems others make movies about it.

18 Partly subtitled.

19 The film contains violence including brutal murders, crude language, irreverent underpinning, rear male nudity, scenes of corporal mortification, a fleeting hint of prostitution, and a glimpse of ritualistic sex. The USCCB Office for Film & Broadcasting classification is O -- morally offensive. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 -- parents strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

APPENDIX 17

Superman Returns (2006) USCCB

1 It's a bird. It's a plane. It's a winner. After 10 years on the drawing board, several stalled starts and a revolving door of writers, directors and leading men, the Man of Steel flies triumphantly back onto movie screens in "Superman Returns" (Warner Bros.).

2 Together with "Batman Begins" and the "Spiderman" and "X-Men" franchises, director Bryan Singer's visually elegant and emotionally complex film elevates the superhero genre from escapist entertainment to something approaching art.

3 Singer chose to build on the structure of Richard Donner's 1978 "Superman," incorporating John Williams' rousing theme music and snippets of Marlon Brando's performance as Jor-El -- Superman's birth father -- from that movie.

4 Relative unknown Brandon Routh fills the boots of the late Christopher Reeve as the costumed crimefighter, who returns to earth after five years of soul-searching in deep space.

5 Resuming his post at the newsroom of Metropolis' Daily Planet in the nerdy guise of Clark Kent, he finds that the world has moved on without him. Reporter Lois Lane (Kate Bosworth) -- the only woman who makes his heart beat faster than a speeding bullet -- is now engaged and raising a young son. (But who's the daddy?)

6 In his absence, she wrote a Pulitzer-winning editorial, "Why the World Doesn't Need Superman," to show just how over him she is. But her thesis proves shortsighted as Superman's return rekindles old feelings; not to mention arch-nemesis Lex Luthor (Kevin Spacey) is once again plotting mass destruction.

7 Singer gives audiences their money's worth of popcorn thrills, including an exhilarating, if intense and rather preposterous, scene in which Superman saves the passengers on a plummeting airplane. It's more than a special-effects extravaganza; Singer balances spectacle with quieter, artistically graceful moments of emotional drama and tender romance. Superman's body may be indestructible to everything but kryptonite, but his heart is just as breakable as the next guy's.

8 Routh, who not only looks like a young Reeve but channels his mannerisms and facial expressions, wears the red cape well. Conveying Boy Scout charm, idealized masculinity and vulnerability, his appealing performance reveals Superman's inner conflicts better than X-ray vision. Spacey has fun while ratcheting down the cartoon bluster of Gene Hackman -- Donner's Luther -- though he still borders on camp.

9 Some of the story elements are a bit vague and there are a few gaping holes in logic. But overall, fans of the superhero should rest assured that they are in good hands, as

Singer's affection for the Superman mythology is evident. (One change: He still fights for "truth and justice" but "the American way" is no longer part of the mission statement.) Noel Neill and Jack Larson -- Lois Lane and Jimmy Olsen from the 1950s TV series -- have cameos.

10 Heavily laying on Christian symbolism, some may feel the film's portrayal of Superman as a Christ-like messiah is inappropriate, though the hero's nobility and selflessness makes the allegorical parallels somewhat plausible: A father sends his "only son" down from the heavens to earth to save humanity by being a light "to show them the way."

11 The Christological allegory is undercut, however, by the suggestion that Superman may have fathered a child out of wedlock, an indiscretion that may ruffle even nonreligious fans of the iconic comic-book character.

12 Throughout the film, Superman wrestles with his dual nature, and even endures a Kryptonian Via Dolorosa, complete with a passion, death and resurrection.

13 Two of the more overtly Christian images involve a weakened Superman falling to earth, arms extended cruciform, and a striking tableau of him hovering in orbit omnisciently listening to the various prayers for help below ("You say the world doesn't need a savior," he tells Lois, "yet every day I hear people crying out for one.") At the close, Superman allays Lois' fear that he will again abandon earth with the reassurance that he will remain with them always. (Sound familiar?)

14 At its heart, "Superman Returns" explores the relevance of virtue in a contemporary culture that is at once both cynical about idealism and hungry for heroism.

15 The film contains some stylized action violence, including intense scenes of peril, a vicious beating, an implied past premarital encounter, and a few mildly crude expressions. The USCCB Office for Film & Broadcasting classification is A-II -- adults and adolescents. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 -- parents strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

APPENDIX 18

Happy Feet (2006) USCCB

1 You knew once those adorable Antarctic birds waddled off with an Oscar for "March of the Penguins," an animated penguin film couldn't be far behind. Set in the South Pole, director George Miller's entertaining, if at times surprisingly dark, fable "Happy Feet" (Warner Bros.) centers on Mumble (voiced by Elijah Wood), a young emperor penguin who has rhythm in his feet but whose singing voice is painful to the ears.

2 Unable to carry a tune, he can't find his "heartsong," the mating call unique to each emperor penguin. In real life, the species uses squawks and warbles, but here it's a jukebox mix of hip-hop, oldies and rock. Mumble's dad, Memphis (Hugh Jackman), belts out Elvis Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel" to woo wife Norma Jean (Nicole Kidman).

3 The odds are bleak for the misfit Mumble to ever win the affections of the much-courted Gloria (Brittany Murphy), who has the best set of pipes on the ice shelf. She thinks he's cute, but odd: He's always dancing (tap effects courtesy of Savion Glover), an eccentricity considered scandalous in penguin land.

4 When he tries to teach his peers some dance moves, he's banished from the flock by the self-righteous elder, Noah (Hugo Weaving), who blames him for evoking the wrath of the penguin god and causing the fish supply to dwindle.

5 Mumble sets out to prove Noah wrong and solve the riddle behind the food shortage. Tagging along are a quintet of smaller, party-loving Adelie penguins -- the Adelie Amigos -- led by Ramon (Robin Williams), who steals the show with his riotous Spanish rendition of Frank Sinatra's "My Way."

6 Visually, "Happy Feet" ranks among the best of the recent crowd of computer-animated movies, with a realism -- from Mumble's fluffy feathers to the astonishing glacial backdrops -- that is truly amazing. The assembled voice talent is equally terrific.

7 From a narrative standpoint, however, the script, which Miller co-wrote along with three others, crams too many weighty themes -- bigotry, intolerance, conformity and concern for the environment -- into the sweet but slender story.

8 Its cheery title and plush toy-ready characters don't prepare you for some ominous stretches, including a zoo scene and two intense sequences involving a ravenous leopard seal and killer whales. But don't worry, a movie named "Happy Feet" can't have a downer ending.

9 And while some parents may find the film's subtly subversive subtext troubling (the puritanical elders are portrayed as unenlightened for their religiously motivated rejection

of Mumble's "lifestyle"), the broader messages of love and self-acceptance should melt most objections.

10 The film contains some mildly rude humor and innuendo, as well as some menace and two frightening sequences that may upset very young viewers, but is probably OK for older children. The USCCB Office for Film & Broadcasting classification is A-II -- adults and adolescents. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG -- parental guidance suggested. Some material may not be suitable for children.

APPENDIX 19

Ice Age: The Meltdown (2006) USCCB

1 In "Ice Age: The Meltdown" (20th Century Fox), the story thins along with the ice. But in the thawing process, the laughs and zany charm remain intact.

2 A sequel to the 2002 computer-animated hit, the film reunites the voice talent of Ray Romano, Denis Leary and John Leguizamo as cranky mammoth Manny, sarcastic saber-toothed tiger Diego and wise-cracking sloth Sid, respectively. Along with the era's other woolly inhabitants, the three enjoy the defrosting ushered in by the changing climate -- a strange development since the Ice Age was just approaching at the end of the first movie.

3 But their fun in the sun is cut short by ominous news that the rising temperature will cause the surrounding glacial walls to burst, flooding their valley paradise. With only days before the impending cataclysm, the trio sets out for their only survival hope, an Ark-like tree bark on the far end of the valley.

4 Thinking he's the last of his species, Manny becomes depressed with extinction anxiety until he meets Ellie (voiced by Queen Latifah), a fellow pachyderm with a trunk load of identity issues.

5 Also lending their voices are Jay Leno as Fast Tony, an armadillo who is part doomsday prophet and part used-car salesman, and Seann William Scott and Josh Peck as Crash and Eddie, a hilarious tag team of prankster possums.

6 But the funniest scenes once again belong to the bug-eyed Scrat, a saber-toothed squirrel who, during breaks in the main action, continues his determined quest for that ever-elusive acorn.

7 "Meltdown" might be seen as a cautionary tale about global warming, but as before its paramount message concerns family and friendship.

8 Though obviously kid-friendly, there are several scenes involving a pair of vicious sea monsters -- frozen since dinosaur days -- that may frighten some tykes.

9 The crisp and lively computer animation is even better this time around, and director Carlos Saldanha thankfully avoids those pop-culture references that clutter most animated fare. A Busby Berkeley-flavored number involving vultures singing "Food, Glorious Food" is a hoot. But, for all its merits, much of the film feels like a retread and lacks the character and narrative development of the original.

10 Though whimsical fun, compared to its precursor, "Meltdown" is a bit of a step-down.

11 The film contains some scenes of menace that may be too intense for very young children, a few crass expressions, some innuendo and a mildly crude sight gag. The USCCB Office for Film & Broadcasting classification is A-I -- general patronage. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG -- parental guidance suggested. Some material may not be suitable for children.

APPENDIX 20

Casino Royale (2006) USCCB

1 Some secret agents like their martinis shaken; others, stirred. Likewise, reactions to "Casino Royale" (Columbia/MGM) -- the newest installment in the "James Bond" franchise -- will probably differ.

2 Some fans will applaud its harder-edged return to the grittiness of Ian Fleming's novels. Others may feel it's too dark and serious, and lacks the sense of campy fun of earlier films.

3 Both sides, however, will agree that from its brutal prologue -- shot in stylish black and white -- this is a different kind of Bond movie.

4 Based on Fleming's first novel (spoofed in a 1967 film of the same title starring Peter Sellers and Woody Allen), director Martin Campbell's addition to the series (the 21st overall) blends adrenaline-charged action sequences -- highlighted by a virtuoso chase scene through and above the streets of Madagascar -- and substantial character development to show the origins of the Bond mythology: how he started driving an Aston Martin and wearing tailored tuxedos, why he treats women as "disposable pleasures" and the genesis of his signature mixed-drink preference.

5 Making his debut as the iconic British superspy is Daniel Craig, arguably the best 007 since Sean Connery. Played with a combination of virility and vulnerability (with dashes of humor), Craig's Bond is less the sophisticated playboy -- though there is the usual womanizing -- and more a brash and brooding assassin.

6 His mission here: infiltrate a high-stakes card game organized by the shadowy Le Chiffre (Mads Mikkelsen), a banker to international terrorists. Eva Green plays Vesper Lynn, an alluring operative from the British Treasury who accompanies Bond to the titular casino and Judi Dench returns as Bond's boss, M.

7 While Bond exercises a "license to kill" in all his movies, the realism of the violence here is much heightened, making it more difficult, perhaps, for some to write it off as escapist entertainment. Also, whereas his more suave predecessors rarely, if ever, perspired and always had the upper hand in a pinch, Craig's rogue sweats buckets and is savagely beaten, including a scene in which Le Chiffre devises a particularly painful method of extracting information using a knotted length of rope. (Though on both scores, Campbell exhibits relative restraint.)

8 Upon promotion to 007 status, Bond drolly quips that "Double-O's have a very short life expectancy." But one suspects Craig may remain in Her Majesty's secret service for a long time.

9 The film contains recurring strong action violence, including an intense torture scene, adultery, partial nudity, sexual situations, and some mildly crude language. The USCCB Office for Film & Broadcasting classification is A-III -- adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 -- parents strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

APPENDIX 21

The Pursuit of Happyness (2006) USCCB

- 1 The Pursuit of Happyness (Columbia) is a heartwarming tale based on an incredible success story that aired on ABC's "20/20" a few years ago.
- 2 The ever-appealing Will Smith plays Chris Gardner, a struggling medical supply salesman in 1980s San Francisco who must sell two body-density scanners each month to make ends meet for his wife, Linda (Thandie Newton), and 5-year-old child Christopher (Smith's real-life son, Jaden Christopher Syre Smith). When the movie begins, he's way below that quota.
- 3 Always a whiz at math, Chris decides to pursue a new career path as a stockbroker, a pie-in-the-sky notion that sends hardworking, long-suffering Linda tearfully out the door for good, leaving him to raise young Christopher on his own.
- 4 He wins the confidence of brokerage executive Jay Twistle (Brian Howe) by demonstrating his proficiency with a Rubik's Cube, and secures a prestigious internship at Twistle's firm, though the six-month program pays nothing. Even though one of the interns will eventually be offered a permanent position, Chris has no guarantee he'll be the one chosen.
- 5 Along the way, Chris must deal with ever-increasing financial pressures, eviction and other vicissitudes. Eventually, he's reduced to spending nights with his son in a homeless shelter, and when that shelter is full, they sleep on the floor of public restrooms or on the subway.
- 6 Despite these episodes, director Gabriele Muccino never makes things too heavy or grittily realistic, but maintains an engaging, lightweight tone. Though overly long and occasionally repetitive in showing the succession of hard knocks Chris must endure, there's a lump-in-the-throat payoff.
- 7 The movie scores high on the inspirational message scale, with Chris, the ultimate loving father, demonstrating a commendable work ethic. At one point, extenuating circumstances force him to stiff a taxi driver, but otherwise Chris projects admirable decency.
- 8 And, in case you were wondering, the movie does not promote illiteracy. That misspelling of "happiness" is intentional and has a dramatic point.
- 9 The film contains a few instances of crude language and marital discord. The USCCB Office for Film & Broadcasting classification is A-II -- adults and adolescents. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 -- parents strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

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