

New on Video

NEW YORK (CNS) — The following video reviews are from the Office for Film & Broadcasting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

'BONHOEFFER'

Documentary about the conflicted life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the courageous Lutheran theologian executed by the Nazis for his involvement in plots to assassinate Adolf Hitler. The USCCB classification is A-II — adults and adolescents. Not rated by the Motion Picture Association of America.

'DUPLEX'

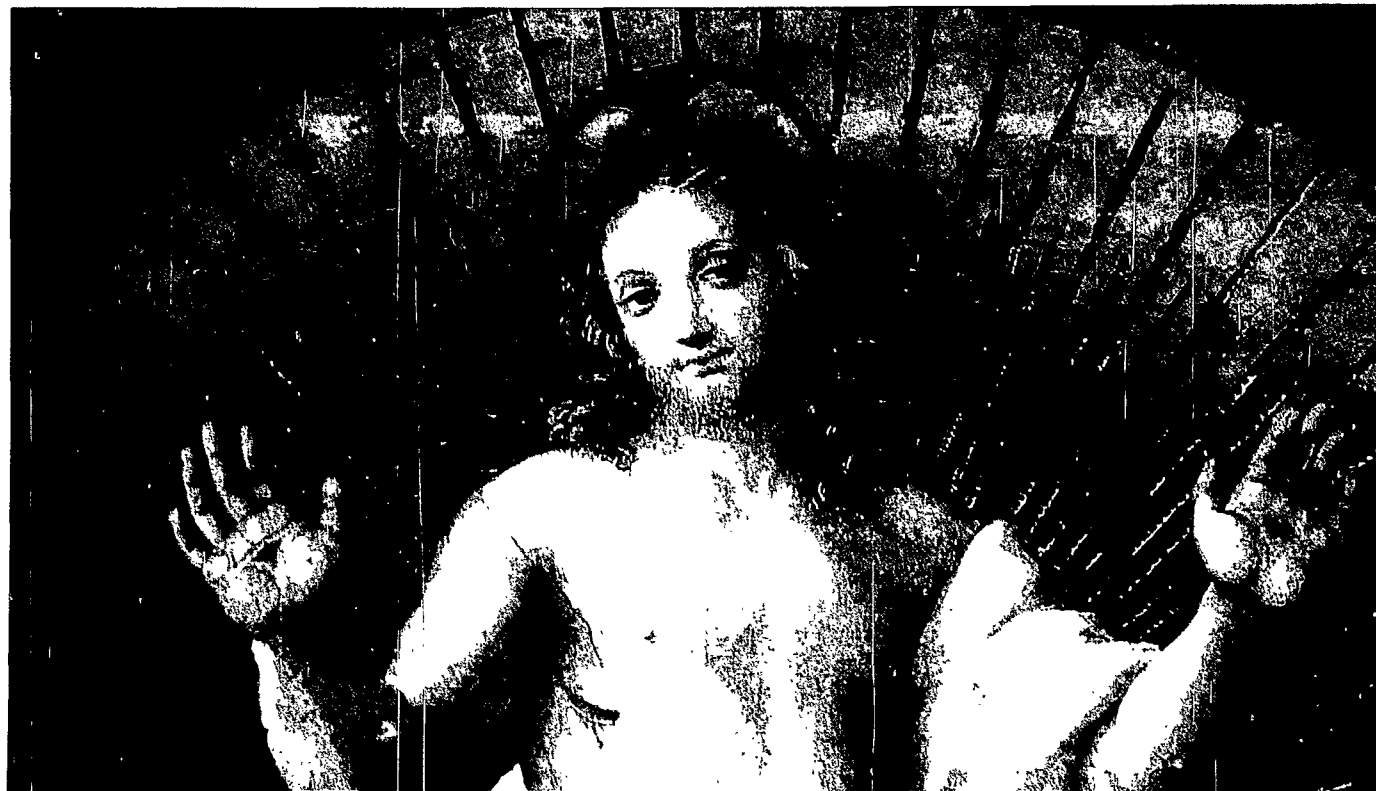
A young New York couple (Ben Stiller and Drew Barrymore) move into a picture-perfect townhouse, only to discover that it comes equipped with a chronically intrusive elderly tenant, whom they contemplate bumping off. A murder plot, an implied sexual encounter, vulgar humor and sporadic crude language. The USCCB classification is A-III — adults. The MPAA rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

'MATCHSTICK MEN'

The life of an obsessive-compulsive con artist (Nicolas Cage) unravels when he learns he has a teenage daughter (Alison Lohman). A benign attitude toward larceny, some violence, some partial nudity, and recurring crude, profane language. The USCCB classification is A-III — adults. The MPAA rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

'PIECES OF APRIL'

Tender drama about a young woman (Katie Holmes) who tries to mend her relationship with her cancer-stricken mother by hosting Thanksgiving dinner, only to discover that her oven is not working. Some rough and crude language, some profanity, a scene involving marijuana, some images of nudity. The USCCB classification is A-III — adults. The MPAA rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.



Catholic Communication Campaign/CNS

A Raphael fresco featuring the risen Christ from the Vatican's "Sala della Segnatura" is among the artwork presented in "The Face: Jesus in Art."

Film explores Jesus in art

Gerri Pare/CNS

NEW YORK — Not to be missed is "The Face: Jesus in Art," to be rerun throughout April on varying dates and times on PBS affiliates nationwide.

With major funding from the Catholic Communication Campaign, which also helps support the work of the Office for Film & Broadcasting, the remarkable film tells the story of how art attempts to comprehend and touch the divine in depicting the human Christ.

Never less than visually stunning, "The Face" visits locations around the world as it examines artistic representations of Jesus through the ages. Indeed, the opening special-effects montage, starting with cosmic images that gradually morph into the eyes, then many faces of Christ, is simply beautiful to behold. This visual morphing technique is judiciously used to capture how Christ was seen in different cultures, centuries and periods of art.

Although there were no known depictions made of Christ during his life on earth — or even physical descriptions recorded — artists have always been drawn to the Savior as a subject for their art. In fact, Christ's image has appeared in the art of cultures worldwide for nearly two millennia.

The program poses the interesting question whether it is even proper for an artist to dare to portray God. It then moves chronologically from

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the earliest depictions in the third century up to contemporary artistic renderings in many lands.

The average viewer would never be able to visit many of these works of art, but here, accompanied by a glorious music track including vocals by Andrea Bocelli and informative narration by Mel Gibson, Patricia Neal and Edward Herrmann among others, one can experience both great art and spiritual uplift.

The paintings, sculptures, mosaics and frescoes of such masters as Leonardo da Vinci, Rembrandt and Michelangelo are predictably highlighted. However, so are lesser-known and little-seen works such as the extraordinary icons at the remote fourth-century monastery of St. Catherine's at Mount Sinai. In fact, the face of Jesus on one of these icons became the dominant image of Christ for centuries. The events of Christ's life are reviewed in the section entitled "The Gospel According to Giotto," using the breathtaking frescoes seen in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua.

Intriguingly, the program deals with rumors of portraits made during Christ's life and miraculous appearances, Veronica's veil and a likely forged document with an eyewitness description of Jesus, which proved very influential in subsequent artistic depictions.

Images of the crucifixion in another section, "The Suffering Christ," are somewhat gruesome, reflecting northern Europe's artistic obsession with suffering and death in the 14th and 15th centuries.

A different emphasis is on display in "The Beautiful Christ," which covers Renaissance Italy. In this era, physical beauty was paramount and Christ was depicted as a perfect creation, more beautiful than any human. Familiar as it is, it is still thrilling to see Michelangelo's striking "Last Judgment" so dramatically captured on film.

How the face of Jesus appeared in Asia, Africa and Latin America shows the importance of culture in relating to Christian images. Some may be surprised that at times the holy Trinity was depicted as three identical faces of Jesus on one head, called the triplet trinities. Although eventually suppressed, even condemned, such images continued to be painted into the 20th century.

Throughout, the narration explores and examines the history of Christ-centered art while fluid camerawork holds the viewer rapt.

A splendid blending of words and images with state-of-the-art cinematography, "The Face: Jesus in Art" is cause for celebration and is highly recommended.

Pare is director of the Office for Film & Broadcasting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.