

Cigarettes in Cinema

by Dr. Harvey Kaltsas, Doctor of Oriental Medicine

Since life imitates art so often nowadays, what Hollywood needs is a good case of lung cancer, graphically portrayed in a film that is. It's galling for anyone concerned about public health to watch the stars of today chain smoking their way through scene after scene, without giving up even a little cough. Where is Ratso Rizzo from *Midnight Cowboy* when we really need him, coughing up phlegm from his grizzled face in the last stages of pulmonary distress?

Few people today realize that smoking depicted in movies in the 1920's and 30's shifted the way our entire country viewed the habit, making it glamorous and accepted. As a result, cigarette consumption per year soared from an average of 54 smoked for all men and women in 1900 to 151 in 1910 to 665 in 1920 to 1,485 in 1930 to 1,976 in 1940 to 3,552 in 1950 to a peak of 4,345 (11.9 per day) in 1963.

The Surgeon General's Report on Smoking in 1964 set off a downward trend so that by 1994 the average adult American was smoking only 2,493 per year. However, with the ban on TV advertising there's been a jump in subliminal tobacco product placement in movies and TV shows themselves.

Does anyone besides me notice a dramatic rise in cigarette smoking in the movies? At least in the 30's and 40's actors usually waited for post-coital moments before lighting up. Now almost any human interaction on screen seems to be an occasion for a Philip Morris product placement. Does anyone else wonder how such prolific puffing might affect our children's sense of what is hip and fashionable and their decisions about whether or not to smoke? The ability of actors to set trends and influence public opinion does not seem to be lost on those cigarette companies that actually pay big bucks to display prominently their little packs of poison in picture upon picture.

Yet actors, who so often risk box office drawing power in red state after red state by publically protesting the Bush Administration's many perceived crimes against humanity, rarely stand up to directors when asked to smoke in a scene. Why is that? Tobacco smoking in American cinema is like a tsunami rolling over the third world, encouraging an epidemic of nicotine addiction with long term results far more devastating than months of airstrikes in Iraq. But where is the moral outrage from members of the Screen Actors Guild, who periodically and predictably use Oscar night to preach to us about causes of far less import?

Dr. Hiroshi Nakajima, former director of the World Health Organization, calls the growing tobacco epidemic "a fire in the global village." In Greece, ranked # 1 in the world for tobacco use where 45% of the populace smokes, tobacco advertising has been banned on public billboards, on kiosks, and in movie theaters, but not in the films people watch in those theaters.

In Japan, tobacco advertising is banned on TV, radio, the internet, public transit, and outdoor advertising, yet 33% of the Japanese still smoke, ranking them # 2 in the world. Where do they get the idea? Occasionally people would draw smoke from long pipes in old Kurosawa films, but not like the pervasive cigarette smoking in movies today. Perhaps that's why 60.9% of Japanese men in their 20's now smoke. With product placement and smoking written into scripts, tobacco advertising has taken a subliminal, more insidious turn, and movies have become a prime purveyor of what's Kool.

China follows closely behind with fully 67% of its men smoking, but only 2% of women taking on those money making cancer sticks. Robert Thurman, Professor of Tibetan Studies at Columbia, has long and rightly railed against the Chinese occupation of Tibet and destruction of Tibetan culture and religion. Perhaps his daughter Uma is launching her own retaliatory strike against Chinese women by portraying strong, cigarette smoking females in her roles.

The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) has a voluntary rating code classifying films as G, PG, PG-13, R, and NC-17. Maybe it's time to set some new standards for cinema. How about classifying movies by the number of cigarettes that are smoked in them? I can see it now - "You're about to watch a no pack, one pack, two pack, three pack, or four pack feature presentation. Enjoy."

Dr. Kaltsas served as Chair of Florida's regulatory Board of Acupuncture and has testified before the U.S. Senate on health care issues.