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The Libertarian Smokescreen

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It's no surprise that my last blog entry has been purposefully distorted. To fight the charges of Puritanism, I guess I have to haul out my pervert-atheist credentials and support for legal marijuana. Let me repeat: I believe that *nothing* should be taboo in movies meant for people over the age of 17. Felching. Necrophilia. Zoophilia. I don't care if in R-rated movies people eat cigarettes. And I don't care if you—the over-16 reader—smoke eight packs a day (as long as you don't do it near me). Around kids, though, I have other issues.

What no one I've read has acknowledged is that most of the cigarettes in films are there in return for big bucks. They're *ads*, folks. Companies have paid to put them in the hands of actors in order to influence you to buy and smoke them. I suspect that if you quizzed most of my critics you'd find they're sympathetic to Cato Institute Libertarians who don't believe government should have any role in protecting children from the enticements of unscrupulous corporations—who would have argued against banning tobacco ads from TV and radio on the grounds that without them we'd never have had, say, that splendid American archetype the Marlboro Man. (The actor who played him died of lung cancer, by the way.)

How many PG-13 movies would be artistically compromised if their studios weren't allowed to accept money from tobacco companies? *Good Night and Good Luck*, sure. It's a period film. But *Avatar*? I'd rather my kids have seen Sigourney Weaver come out of her pod and say, "I need to get laid" instead of demanding a cigarette.

Now, I admit, giving the MPAA more power is a big deal if you don't trust them. And I don't. But my quarrel with them isn't that they're hard on big corporations. They bend over backwards—they take it up the ass—for major studios. I hate them for their double standard when it comes to sex, for the way they hassle filmmakers into cutting frames to avoid an NC-17 when couplings get a little hot while giving hideously violent big-budget movies like *Angels and Demons* a PG-13. Trust me, the MPAA is too full of Republicans to want to demonize tobacco. On that one, they're on the side of the Cato Institute.

Finally, I don't see what's wrong with the "R" rating. Theaters play coming attractions for R movies. Video stores display them. Newspapers take ads for them. Kids can easily get access to them—which doesn't make me happy but it's a reality, just like kids having sex is a reality. But you do what you can. You stigmatize tobacco because it kills hundreds of thousands of people a year. Or at least you give it—ooh! puritanism! censorship!—an "R."

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3. [Should Jay Leno Be Worried About All of NBC's Pilots?](#) 26
4. [Matthew Goode on A Single Man's Oscar Shot: 'It Doesn't Seem to Be Getting a Push From the Weinsteins Too Much'](#) 24
5. [TMZ: Conan Out, Leno In at 11:30?](#) 24



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