

Bill Rea ? Worse things than smoking

Peel Regional council, with very little fuss, recently voted to try and reduce how much young people are exposed to seeing smoking in the movies.

There are five points to the program councillors adopted, as recommended by the World Health Organization and the Ontario Coalition for Smoke-Free Movies. I agree with some of what's going on here, although I'm troubled by some of the provisions, and one in particular. It calls for making media productions depicting smoking to be ineligible for public subsidy. Considering some of the stuff they let kids watch these days, singling out tobacco references strikes me as being a little picky. And I'm not altogether sure the word 'censorship' is not applicable.

Just to be clear about a few things, I know there are people in our society who smoke, and the evidence is overwhelming that they should not. It's bad for the health of smokers and it's bad for the people close to them. It's also expensive. I don't know how people can afford to smoke, but that's their worry.

I used to smoke. I burned more than a pack of cigarettes per day all through my 20s, and to this day I can't understand where I found the money for it. And a deck of smokes is a lot more costly today than in my smoking time.

Although a lot of people smoke, their numbers are much smaller than they were some 30 years ago.

When I was interviewed for my first newspaper job, in the spring of 1984, the editor, aware that I smoked, went to some pains to stress that everyone the office also were puffers. He used my addiction to nicotine as an inducement tool. The man, I learned the hard way, was a better recruiter than he was an editor.

Today, I know very few smokers, and none where I work.

My own smoking days ended almost 20 years ago. In that time, I have smoked exactly one cigar. I received it from a man in the spring of 2004, not long after his wife gave birth to twin boys. I smoked it a couple of weeks later. I smoked it doing yard work outside while my wife was fuming inside, fearing that I was going to get back into the habit. I assured her that one cigar did not an addiction make, and history has recorded that, as usual, I was absolutely right.

So seeing smoking activity reduced, and even eventually eliminated, is okay with me.

But it is also a fact that tobacco is a legal product in this society, although it is regulated to an extent. You don't see smokes on displays in the stores the way you used to, and kids can't buy cigarettes the way they could when I was in my early teens. There have been a couple of times when kids have approached me, asking me to buy them cigarettes. I turn them down.

There are some points in the Region's new position with which I can agree in principle, although I have questions as to whether they would be appropriate. Requiring strong anti-smoking ads prior to movies that contain tobacco imagery makes some sense, although unless the Region is prepared to pay for those ads, I have to wonder if it has the authority or right to impose such requirements.

The Region is also calling for adult ratings for movies with tobacco imagery. To my mind, the Region is there to govern, not to be movie critics.

I think the main problem I have with all this involves the proverbial 'slippery slope.' At what point does trying to block images of tobacco from kids become censorship?

Besides, smoking can be seen on TV. Or do we start limiting what can be shown on the small screen on that basis? Think of some of the classic TV shows, like All in the Family, I Love Lucy, Get Smart, Perry Mason and lots of others. The principle characters in all those shows I cited (and many others) smoked. Even Fred Flintstone was depicted smoking the occasional cigar. When I was very little, my big hero was Popeye the Sailor, and the pipe hanging out of his mouth was a big part of the character. Would we ban the airing of episodes of the classic Batman TV show of the '60s that had the Penguin as the 'special guest villain' because he smoked (I once read the cigarettes in those episodes were merely there as props - Burgess Meredith was not a smoker).

I also have a hard time accepting that showing kids depictions of adults (or even young people) smoking is going to encourage people to take up the habit, especially when you consider some of the other things they're exposed to on the screen. Go to the movies or watch TV, and you are treated to a wide assortment of not-nice things, like violence, muggings, murders, etc. And a lot of this is geared to young people.

What kid didn't want to see the installments of the Star Wars series, and how many parents would have objected to their youngins seeing them? The films depicted violence, treachery, terrorism, mass slaughter of innocents, repression, torture and mutilation, among other unpleasant occurrences. But there was no smoking in the movies, so I guess everything was okay.

There was no smoking in the classic film The Wizard of Oz either, and some smart, legalistic type, who feels like being a pain in the neck, could make an argument that the film was essentially a musical how-to manual for bumping off witches.

Has anyone tried to get depictions of consuming alcohol kept out of pictures to discourage kids from taking up drinking? I'm not

aware of anyone being killed because someone had driven a car after having smoked too much.

The fact is I find watching people smoke on the screen rather bothersome. There was lots of smoking in the classic film Casablanca, arguably the greatest movie ever made. I sometimes wonder how much cigarette ash got on the fancy and expensive-looking white suits that Humphrey Bogart and Peter Lorre wore while they both had weeds in their kissers.

I watch Perry Mason reruns today, and think it's a little dumb for a smart guy like Mason to have a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. Interesting that William Talman, the actor who played Mason's rival Hamilton Burger in the series, also smoked, and gained posthumous attention when he made TV ads shortly before his death, in which he said he had lung cancer and urged people not to smoke.

Archie Bunker's cigars were often part of a plot element. Raymond Burr's cigarettes were there because they were so common at that time.

And that, I think, ties in with my main problem with this move by the Region. Tobacco was once a very major factor in the workings of western society, and it still is to an extent, whether we like it or not. I have no trouble with reality in our society being depicted in the arts, and that includes movies. But I do have a big problem with government trying to mess with that.

Movies are essentially an art, so let artists create and let government govern, and let the rest of us decide what's appropriate.

Good heavens! I sound like a libertarian

