How many people did it take to put Marlboros In the Bedroom*?*

Sissy Spacek co-stars with a Marlboro in the critically-acclaimed "independent" film In the Bedroom. *If we're supposed to ignore repeated brand references, why are they in the movie at all?*

Widely praised for its artful depiction of family tragedy, Todd Field's *In the Bedroom* is equally remarkable for gratuitously promoting Marlboro brand cigarettes on screen and in dialogue. Why would a cash-strapped independent do a favor for Philip Morris, which made $10 billion off tobacco sales last year?

Product placement is no secret in the movie industry, but even savvy ticket-buyers aren't privy to the details.

So if the stars of *In the Bedroom* (Greenestreet/Good Machine/Miramax) chat about whether a "comfortable" new Subaru is a four-wheel-drive or an SUV, and the vehicle shows up in the next scene, all we can do is ask if somebody on the production made a deal.

And if a student hawking Kit Kat bars, shown in close-up, interrupts a ferocious scene between husband and wife, audiences can only wonder if it's paid advertising or a red herring.

But when star Sissy Spacek puffs the Marlboro brand on screen, and Miramax distributes a publicity still of her smoking, more serious questions arise.

▸ Did the gifted Sissy Spacek really need Marlboros to get into character as Ruth? As working-class Natalie, Marisa Tomei also smokes in one scene, but she's not required to endorse a brand.

▸ In "Killings," the taut 1970s short story that Todd Field expanded into this two-hour-plus feature film, author Andre Dubus noted Ruth smoking, but he saw no need to drop a brand name.

▸ A full generation later (the film is set in the late 1990s) the well-educated, upper-middle-class character played by Spacek would almost never smoke in reality. So much for naturalism.

▸ Smoldering, veiled, a Lady Macbeth filled with death wishes, whatever the writer-director had in mind, Spacek is much too skilled an artist to fall back on what Stella Adler called "cigarette acting."

Yet Ruth not only chain smokes, she broods over a Marlboro pack. In another crucial scene, she specifically asks a grocer for "Marlboro Lights."

Ruth's husband Matt (Tom Wilkinson), struggling to talk to Natalie, is interrupted once again—by a man off the street who demands a pack of "Marlboro Reds."

Is this sloppy writing, sophomoric symbolism, corruption or cluelessness?

Tobacco company files show they've offered hundreds of thousands of dollars to place their brands in movies and have long used stars to glamorize smoking.

Pressed by Congress, Big Tobacco said it halted Hollywood payola in 1989, yet on-screen smoking by lead actors has kept climbing. So long as no character sickens or dies from smoking, the giant tobacco companies don't care which characters smoke or what their "motivation" is. The marketing goal is simply to keep smoking visible.

Bottom line? *In the Bedroom* will dramatize smoking and glamorize the Marlboro brand by associating it with a star of Spacek's stature each time this "independent" labor of love hits a movie or video screen for decades to come.

With TV ads banned, Big Tobacco kills for this kind of promotional coup. The industry's 2001 death toll: 480,000 Americans, 4 million worldwide.

If filmmakers believe smoking is essential to tell a story, so be it. This isn't about censorship. But what a shame this otherwise admirable film poses moral questions it never intended. We urge U.S. filmmakers who portray smoking to:

1] ROLL ON-SCREEN CREDITS certifying that nobody on a production accepted *anything* of value from any tobacco company, its agents or fronts.

2] RUN STRONG ANTI-TOBACCO ADS IN FRONT OF SMOKING MOVIES. Put them on tapes and DVDs, too. Strong spots are proven to immunize audiences.

3] QUIT IDENTIFYING TOBACCO BRANDS in the background *or* in action. Brand names are unnecessary.

4] RATE EVERY SMOKING MOVIE "R." While this may identify smoking with maturity, it should give producers pause.

Get the whole story at SmokeFreeMovies.ucsf.edu

SMOKE FREE MOVIES

www.PublicMediaCenter.org