

# Superman and the Marlboro woman

## The lungs of Lois Lane

PAUL MAGNUS, MB, BS

Since its release by Warner Communications in 1980, the film *Superman II* has been viewed by millions of children and teenagers around the world in theaters, on commercial television, and on video recorders. They have marveled at the high-tech adventures of the comic book hero who has fought for truth, justice, and the American way for nearly half a century. As expected Superman saves the day against assorted super-criminals. But in addition, Lois Lane, his romantic interest, plays a prominent role. On the one hand, she is a bright, independent, and daring reporter on *The Daily Planet*. On the other hand, she is sexy, romantic, and submissive to the muscular superhero.

Lois Lane, role model for millions of teenage girls and children, also smokes cigarettes, the product that kills more people than alcohol, other drugs, and automobiles combined. Moreover, in *Superman II* there are numerous images, both fleeting and lingering, of her brand of cigarettes—Marlboro—the world's number one seller, manufactured by Philip Morris, Inc, New York. Consider this scene: Lois Lane and Superman's alter ego, reporter Clark Kent, are hurrying through the offices of *The Daily Planet*. Lois has a cigarette in her mouth. They enter a room where she begins to squeeze some orange juice. There is a close-up of a cigarette dangling from her lips while she touts the benefits of vitamin C. As she stubs out her cigarette in a filthy ashtray, she talks of the "natural" quality of the orange juice.

This contrived scene—the camera zooms in on the ashtray just as Lois says "natural"—brings a healthy laugh from the adults in the audience. Without doubt, this was a deliberate, playful dig about the unnaturalness of cigarette smoking and Lois Lane's contradictory health priorities.

Yet, moments later, the camera focuses on Lois' Marlboro cigarette pack. What seemed to be a message that mocked smoking becomes confusing. How did a brand of cigarettes get in on the act? What comes to mind is the ironic imagery of the long-running advertising campaign for Virginia Slims cigarettes, also manufactured by Philip Morris. The advertisements feature two old-fashioned, sepia-tone photographs at the top of the page with a caption that pokes fun at the misfortunes of women who dared to smoke in the cruel male-dominated world at the turn of the century. The larger part of the advertisement, in full-color, features an attractive, smug, and inviting woman holding a cigarette, and the headline, "You've come a long way, baby." Could a bit of self-effacing humor by Lois Lane actually have been intended to accentuate the positive image of the woman who smokes?

Even those who do appreciate the cigarette-orange juice gibe may just as easily empathize with Lois. People seem to be giving smokers a hard time these days. It makes Lois Lane more vulnerable, endearing, and "womanly."

Questions also arise concerning other scenes in the film. In one scene Lois Lane drags on a cigarette; she is dressed in red and white, the colors of Marlboro. In another scene of a climactic battle with super-powered criminals (Figs), a truck with a bright red and white Marlboro logo is seen in the center of the screen. Superman is hurled into the truck, and he then fends off an attacker, with the cigarette brand logo in the background. The truck is then rammed by a bus hurled by one of the super-villains, burying Superman in the wreckage. After a worrisome pause, Superman emerges through the Marlboro logo. As an added touch, a taxi with a Marlboro advertisement appears in constant view in the background.

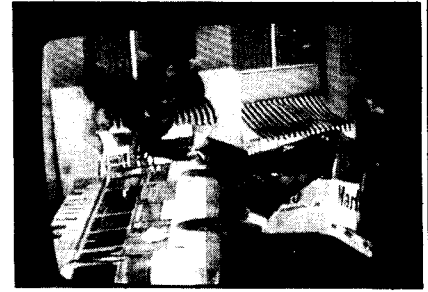
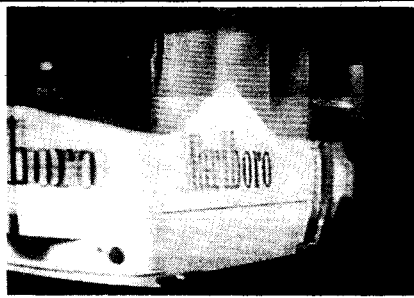
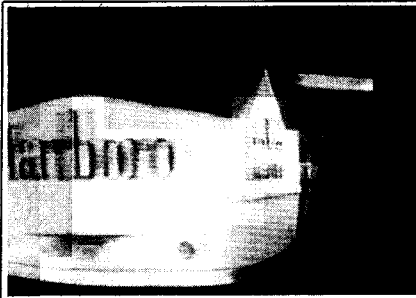
Marlboro is thus dramatically linked to both the superhero and the heroine. The pulling power of a clean-living universal legend is exploited by a commercial trick. Philip Morris has achieved an important recruiting message. For an undiscovered consideration, the moviemakers permitted repeated juxtapositions of a children's hero with a brand of cigarettes.

This hypothesis was confirmed by two sources associated with the film. According to one, the Lois Lane-orange juice scene was intended to be taken in the context of the first Superman movie, released in 1978. In a scene in that film, Superman used his x-ray vision to view Lois Lane's lungs, commenting that she really should not smoke. Taken in context, the message in the original scripts of both films was meant to discourage smoking, it was said. The Superman character has always shunned tobacco and alcohol. In England his picture has been lent to an anti-smoking campaign.

Then why have Lois Lane smoke in the first place, and why the repeated identification of Marlboro? Both sources acknowledged that the cigarette brand appearances were no accident. One source admitted that it was "most unfortunate."

It is possible that Philip Morris was not concerned with the message about smoking, as long as the viewer understood that when one smokes, one smokes Marlboro; and when there is a cigarette truck, it is a Marlboro truck. Yet not even tobacco wholesalers or Philip Morris representatives from several cities interviewed for this report could recall having seen similar Marlboro trucks. The lone exception was a public relations person for Philip Morris in New York, who insisted that such trucks exist in the United States. This person claimed that it was the moviemakers who approached Philip Morris for help with authentic background props, as is done in the movie business.

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Several minutes of this film include fleeting and lingering shots of the logo of Philip Morris' Marlboro cigarettes. (Photographs: Lisa Langer; Doc Archive)

The fact remains that many impressionable young people on the threshold of lighting up would not understand the joke on Lois Lane. They would see that she smokes, however, and are unlikely to recall the comment by Superman in the earlier movie.

The two decisive factors are that the enviable Lois does smoke and that she smokes Marlboro. They ensure that one overriding message will be perceived: women who smoke (Marlboro) succeed. Far from suffering from this habit, Lois is rewarded for it. And with her is born a new myth: the Marlboro woman, an image reinforced by a recent upsurge of advertising for Marlboro in such women's magazines as *Vogue*, *Woman's Day*, *Ms.*, *Working Woman*, and *Family Circle*. If the movie's effect were truly anti-smoking, it is unlikely that any cigarette company would have permitted its brand name to be singled out.

Film critic Hollis Alpert has claimed that the tide is turning against the on-screen smoking habits of heroes and heroines, and that Hollywood has "all but kicked the tobacco habit." ("Smoking no longer sexy in films, TV." *Cancer News* [American Cancer Society], Spring/Summer, 1981). Most people would probably believe that if anyone still smokes on the screen these days it is most likely to be the bad guy. But *Superman II* laid the foundation for just the opposite circumstance. How many thousands of girls, primed for smoking, will the movie have given that last nudge into a cigarette habit or pushed a bit closer? How many who are already hooked will be encouraged to continue? The uncomfortable reality that most adults refuse to confront is that today's children face a higher risk of death due to cigarette smoking than with other more sensationalized drugs. *Superman II* will not help.

*Logos of other products displayed in Superman II include Cutty Sark whiskey, Coca Cola, Kentucky Fried Chicken (RJ Reynolds), and Omni and Rich Lights cigarettes (Brown and Williamson). Various cigarette brands have been shown in recent films, including Animal House, The Goodbye Girl, Moonraker, and Educating Rita. In a similar skirting of the law tobacco company sponsorship is increasing on cable television and public broadcasting. Rock videos featuring such stars as Barbra Streisand frequently show dancers and singers with a drink and a cigarette.*

—Editor