

Our opinion

Silly PC moves making enemies out of friends

by Darren MacDonald

Ever hear of a movie called *Heaven's Gate*? Most people never saw it, but most people have heard about it. It was a film released in 1980 that cost nearly \$40 million to produce. Even in the age of the *Terminator* and *Batman* films, that's a lot of money. The director, Michael Cimino, was the hotshot movie mogul of the period since his previous film, *The Deer Hunter*, had been a huge success with both critics and fans. So MGM gave him full artistic control of *Heaven's Gate*, allowing him to spend piles of money to realize his 'vision.'

Well, his 'vision' turned out to be a three hour western, with a baffling plot line, poor cinematography and long, boring scenes during which the movie's characters stare into the distance. Out of the \$40 million MGM spent on the picture, they took in less than \$400,000 during *Heaven's Gate's* initial release. The film was quickly pulled, edited down to two hours, given an explanatory voice over and re-released. But it was too late. MGM went bankrupt, and Michael Cimino never really recovered.

Heaven's Gate has since become a symbol of the danger of giving too much power to well-intentioned but inexperienced people. Like a kid in the candy store, the young director ending up making everyone sick.

Michael Cimino's disaster was on my mind last weekend as I read my *Globe and Mail*. Buried in the back pages was a story entitled "Warning stickers considered for movies and videos." It seems that Ontario's censors—the Film 'Review' Board—is considering warning us when a video release is "sexist" or "racist" by placing politically correct warning labels on them.

Dorothy Christian, a native who has been nominated to become the next head of the censor board, has come out in favour of the idea. The idea, Christian says, is to provide consumers with more 'information' about what they're viewing.

Hold on a minute. The only 'information' the board should be providing are recommendations about what movies are suitable for specific age groups—children, teenagers and adults. While those kinds of decisions are also debatable—for example, the censor's tolerance of violence over sex—they are a reasonable imposition. But sexism? Who knows for sure what's sexist? Put four people in a room, show them a movie, and you'll get four different opinions. For example, is June Cleaver cooking supper for Ward, Wally and the Beaver sexist? After all, they can cook for themselves. Is every single cowboy and Indian movie made before *Dances with Wolves* racist? After all, natives were anything but the murderous savages these movies portray them as.

I have no problem with governments telling me I must be a certain age to watch a movie. Children have rights, but adult

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Factoids appeal mostly to politicians, scaremongers

I thought I'd drop a new word on you today. Actually, it's not brand new, but it is young. No more than a teenager. Spawned, as near as anyone can figure, in a festering slime bog within spitting distance of Washington's capital hill, back in the mid-1970s.

The word is *factoid*. It's so new that a lot of dictionaries don't yet list it. But if you find one that does, it'll say something like:

fact-oid (fak'oid) n.
something fictitious or unsubstantiated that is presented as fact because of constant repetition.

Yup, that's the factoid alright. You hear all kinds of factoids in sports—you know the ones I mean.

You're watching a duller-than-average Blue Jays game on TV. No score, bottom of the third, Kelly Gruber's at the plate. Suddenly the colour commentator murmurs "Y'know Don, it's interesting to realize that over his career, Gruber's got himself on base 87.5 per cent of the time when facing a left-handed pitcher chewing tobacco in the second half of the third inning..."

Scaremongers love to throw factoids around too. "Canadians," someone will intone ominously, "drink enough beer each year to fill 312 Olympic swimming pools."

Or "If all the cigarettes smoked from 1979 to 1992 by North American females between the ages of 13 and 63 were laid end-to-end, they would reach from Vancouver to St. John's and back to Trois Rivieres, Quebec."

The factoid has great appeal to public relations flacks, politicians and hog-lazy journalists. For one thing, it usually provides a colourful visual image (can't you just picture some bean counter from the Dominion Bureau of Statistics carefully laying out a trail of Rothmans from Vancouver to Newfoundland and



Arthur Black

half-way back again?)
For another thing, the factoid is almost always original. What other idiot would waste his time converting cigarettes into kilometres or beer bottles into swimming pools?

But the most delicious attribute of the factoid is that it is virtually uncheckable. You think anybody's going to sit down and *verify* Kelly Gruber's lifetime at-bats against cuds-chewing left-handers? Or how many bottles of Molson's Ex it takes to fill 312 swimming pools?
Not likely.

But not impossible either. Last year, a Pittsburgh public relations firm issued a press release claiming that the average American, in the course of a 73.5 year lifetime, spends seven full years in the bathroom.

The *New York Times* duly reported this 'statistic'. As did the *Wall Street Journal, USA Today*, and who knows how many lesser journals. Only one publication—*Spy Magazine*—said "Say what?" and embarked on a little factoid-checking. The folks at *Spy* calculated that the average American would have to spend two hours, 20 minutes in the little room *every day*, seven days a week. Which is a tad ridiculous. Even for those of us who like to read in there.

Ah, but that's the problem when you start tossing figures around as arguments. Many's the sailor who's drowned in a stream only six inches deep—on average.

Eventually, statistics merely mystify and confuse. The wife of Senator Robert Taft said "The only statistic I can remember is that if all the people who go to sleep in church were laid end to end, they would be a lot more comfortable."

Or as Dorothy Parker once observed at a Hollywood party: "if all the girls attending were laid end to end, I wouldn't be surprised."