

CITY LIGHTS

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Trapped

Maybe you haven't noticed, but local trips to the movies are getting expensive.

After shelling out \$5 for a ticket, \$1.75 for candy, and an incredible \$2.75 for a large soda, you're hit up for yet more money—in one of the few places people can generally avoid being solicited.

The plug comes even before the ads.

Last week's showing of *Total Recall* at the Senator featured a blinding Coca-Cola spot featuring New Kids on the Block. By now, we expect advertisements in theaters even though a primary reason we visit the cinema at all is to evade the crass commercialism of television.

Now there's a new obstacle, a new postponement before we can watch the film.

When everyone is seated, the projector begins rolling, and the cast of *Married...With Children* flickers on the screen.

The house lights remain on to illuminate the aggravated stares of theatergoers too sensitive to make appropriately belligerent comments.

A hapless, ingratiating narrator interrupts the actors to discuss the Will Rogers Institute, which allegedly aids AIDS victims, alcoholics and the like.

As soon as the lengthy spot concludes, tentative U.A. employees materialize, holding red cans with money slits in the plastic lids.

We know how to deal with other solicitation situations:

When someone comes to your door to sell candy, it's entirely justifiable to say "No." After all, it's your property.

It's *expected* that the church's collection plate will come your way.

When you're panhandled downtown, you can simply ignore the beggar.

But in a movie theater, with the lights on, you're trapped. There's nowhere you can go. All are instantly aware of every coin that drops—or doesn't drop—into the can.

And you *paid* to get yourself into this situation?

The problem isn't that the Institute is an unworthy charity. Like hundreds of other charities, at first glance Will Rogers sounds like a reasonable organization to give money to.

But charities requesting donations are usually accessible for questions. In a theater, Will Rogers only exists onscreen.

No literature is available. No representatives are around. The U.A. employees aren't allowed to discuss the Institute, much less distribute financial statements.

All we have is the narrator's word that the Institute helps anyone at all. We don't know if our 50 cents just goes to buy more red cans and produce more promotional spots.

I had wanted to talk to the lower-echelon U.A. employees.

Certainly the least pleasant part of their jobs must be walking up aisles, sheepishly calling "Donations? Donations?" as moviegoers hide shamefaced in their popcorn or, pressured by the presence of someone important, drop change or small bills in the imminent red can.

But United Artists isn't talking. Management at each Chico theater give an immediate "no comment" response to questions.

How long have the promotional spots been running here? What's U.A. policy? How do customers feel about them? How about employees?

"We're not allowed to comment on anything," says Brett Gillespie, manager of Senator Theatre.

Rather than continue its current assault on customers—who may stop visiting cinemas showing the spots—the theater industry should consider a campaign featuring, say, posters and donation boxes in the lobbies.

Certainly moviegoers would find that preferable—and far more appropriate. □