

Introduction

BY JAN HAROLD BRUNVAND

PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF ENGLISH, UNIVERSITY OF UTAH

Urban legends—as I wrote in American Folklore: An Encyclopedia (Garland, 1996)—are apocryphal contemporary stories, told as true but incorporating traditional motifs, and usually attributed to a friend of a friend. The term, adopted by folklorists in the 1970s, has become familiar to members of the public and journalists (who sometimes use the less accurate term “urban myth”) to refer to many of the odd, unverified, and “true” rumors and stories that circulate both orally and in the media. Despite this public awareness and the best efforts of scholars and investigative reporters to debunk them, such stories—both new and old—continue to be spread avidly, especially on the Internet. Thus, my own version of the last sentence of Scott Stine’s article that follows (which I use as a motto on my e-mail signature block), is “The truth never stands in the way of a good story.”

Many urban legends, as the writers of the following two essays recognize, are benign, silly, barely credible, and easily disproved; they are told more for entertainment than for any moralistic purpose, although there is often an implicit message or warning in them as well. But other modern legends are potentially dangerous, leading people to make decisions unwarranted by any facts. (I think particularly of legends about crime, many of which take the form of “bogus warnings.”) The two essays published here confront urban legends of this kind, showing how the baseless stories about organ-thefts and snuff films grew, spread, and to some degree affected public policy. It’s notable that neither of these writers is a professional folklorist; apparently, the lessons of folklore research in this fascinating area of modern tradition are spreading, just like the legends themselves.

The Snuff Film The Making of an Urban Legend

One of the most enduring, and little-recognized, urban legends about cinema is the “snuff film,” in which actresses are supposedly actually killed onscreen. Over the course of nearly a quarter century, the snuff film has transformed from grade-Z slasher film to hoax to anti-pornographers’ straw man to urban legend, and shows no sign of slowing down.

SCOTT AARON STINE

Urban legends are everywhere. For many of us, our lives are made more interesting by the mere presence of such guilty pleasures. For others, the legends are very real, and hold as much—if not more—power than fears that can be justified. They are a means for us to indulge even our most morbid inclinations by the simple act of relaying well-worn accounts that fall somewhere between

gossip and campfire tales. It can be rightfully said that they are the folklore of the industrial generation.

Many people unfamiliar with the concept of urban legends (or suburban myths, depending on the locale) have been responsible for disseminating and perpetuating such hardy tales. The baby alligator that is flushed down the toilet, only to survive and breed in the sewers beneath city streets. The nameless old woman who decides to dry off her beloved poodle by throwing it in the microwave for a few short minutes . . . with predictably nasty results. The nameless young woman who visits the tanning salon one too many times, and—after being unable to get rid of a noxious odor clinging to her person—discovers that her insides are rotting as a result of being cooked. These are but three of innumerable urban legends perpetuated by everyone from children too young to understand their significance to businesspeople gossiping around the water cooler during their breaks.

And, like living languages, urban legends change, both as a result of misinterpretation and through evolution, adapting to fit the environment of those cultivating them. Yet, despite their stubborn existence, no one can ever offer any proof other than it having happened to “a friend of a friend.” So widespread are these snippets of delusion, so ingrained in our culture, they are now looked upon as something more integral to our lives than mere idle gossip. Recognizing the importance of these tales, folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand began collecting them in their various forms, and authored five books on the subject between 1981 and 1993. He also wrote a nationally syndicated column that recounted such tales. Brunvand found that he had his hands full, though, as he probably spent just as much time writing about urban legends as he did debunking the claims of those “friends of a friend” stories.

Cinema and Urban Legends

Although an occasional nuisance to those aware of their erroneous nature, urban legends rarely have a dramatic effect on society. But what if such a tale grew to an unprecedented level

Scott Stine is a freelance writer and author of the forthcoming book The Gorehound's Guide to Splatter Films, due to be released in the fall of 1999 by Santa Monica Press. He is also the publisher of GICK!, an internationally distributed magazine devoted to horror, splatter, and exploitation films. His fiction (written under the pseudonym of "Reginald Bloom") has been published in such publications as Lethologica, Raw Media Mags, and Touchstone NW. An earlier version of this article originally appeared in Painful Excursions Volume 1, Number 10, 1996.



Credit: Scott Stine

of acceptance that it actually had a substantial effect on the public? What if it became responsible for the dissemination of unsubstantiated claims that created a nationwide panic? What if such a tale was responsible for single-handedly creating a myth that would become a cinematic bogeyman for generations? Such, it seems, is the history of the snuff film.

Urban legends cover all facets of life, including cinema. And since two major themes underlying urban legends are sex and death, it seems only natural that the genre of the horror film is rife with lore. Being a convenient scapegoat for numerous societal woes since their conception, and being vilified on the same grounds as rock music and comic books, horror films are a perfect breeding ground for such urban legends. Stories abound, ranging from the innocuous (rumors still persist that *King Kong Vs. Godzilla* [1963] was released with two different endings, with Kong winning in the stateside release, whereas Godzilla triumphs in the Japanese version), to the downright macabre. (Many horror fans still think that such films as *Le Jobado de la Morgue* [1972], *Buio Omega* [1980], and *Der Todesking* [1990] utilize real corpses to supplement the staged effects, despite documentation to the contrary. Due to the inaccessibility of many foreign films—especially low budget productions such as these—it is easy to see how such rumors can persist.) Some of these legends remain fairly obscure, relegated to being spread word of mouth by naive, uninformed fans. Others persist outside the fan following, infiltrating mainstream America.

Of the latter variety, one of the more popular myths involves the film *The Texas Chain Saw [sic] Massacre* (1974). There is a lingering misconception that this low-budget production was indeed based on a real story as it so coyly claims in an opening statement. In truth, it is loosely—if not tenuously—based the exploits of one Edward Gein, a Wisconsin farmer who had a filthy habit of raiding graveyards and making lampshades out of their clientele. Evidence that he practiced cannibalism and necrophilia on occasion cannot be overlooked either, although a chainsaw was *not* involved. As for similarities between these crimes and Tobe Hooper's unrelenting horror film, they are far and few between. (Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* [1960] actually bears a much greater resemblance to the case, despite the fact that author Robert Bloch claims he knew nothing of Gein's heinous crimes before writing the novel that inspired the film.)

Despite the inevitable frustration with having to reiterate the facts to those who adhere to these misconceptions, one can find humor in the claims inspired by *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. It is essentially harmless and remains an excellent example of how gullible people can be, how they adapt their

reality to suit erroneous information offered to them as fact. It is also a testament to how our culture embellishes reality.

The myth of the snuff film, on the other hand, is a prime example of a cinematic urban legend. (The term "snuff" in reference to a specific genre of filmmaking where the actors are supposedly killed for the benefit of the viewer was coined by Ed Sanders in his book *The Family—The Story of Charles Manson's Dune Buggy Attack Battalion* [Panther Books, 1976]. The term was used to describe unsubstantiated claims that Manson and his followers may have been involved in perpetrating such crimes.) Twenty-four years later, many people who have heard of—but have never seen—the movie *Snuff* insists that it *does* contain actual footage of human death and mutilation. Even those individuals who do not recall the controversy have been affected by it, as belief in "snuff" films persist to this day. Many people attest to the existence of snuff films even though no one has ever actually *seen* one; authorities, it seems, also have nothing more concrete than vague rumors about the alleged production and distribution of snuff films as well. It is not at all surprising that most of the rumors concerning the existence of snuff films did not surface until *after* this film made headlines.

It is safe to say that anybody who has seen *Snuff* (which is obscure, but far from unavailable) knows how ludicrous these claims are, at least with respect to this specific production. Not only is the gore obviously fake, but the execution of the special effects is painfully inept. *Snuff* is nothing more than a grand marketing scheme that made a shameless little splatter film into one of the most profitable—and notorious—films ever conceived. The clever ad campaign was obviously tongue-in-cheek, but somehow millions of theater-goers were snagged by the notion "But what if it is real?" and it seems that their morbid curiosity got the best of them. Were the producers trying to exploit America's obsession with the macabre? Or did they simply view it as a clever dare to attract a few extra ticket sales? As it turns out, the latter seems closer to the truth. Whatever the motives, it worked, to the absolute joy of the promoters—and to the chagrin of those who would inevitably be confronted with the chore of debunking the hoax in the years to come.

The Origin of the Snuff Film

The film's origin dates back several years before its auspicious release in 1975. In 1971, filmmakers Michael and Roberta Findlay helmed a production in Argentina called *Slaughter*, a modest little film that was made for a little over thirty thousand dollars. Although various sources have cited it as an unfinished production, it did have a brief theatrical run. (*Slaughter* played no more than three theaters prior to October 1975; obviously, promotion was not their strong suit.) How this came about is uncertain; with the exception of an abrupt end—quite possibly snipped to accommodate the splashier finale tacked on years later—it is obviously a complete production.

Slaughter did its best to exploit the still-steaming remains of the Manson Family's involvement with the Tate/La Bianca murders, although much artistic license is taken. The film is generally more accessible than the Findlays' other films—*The Touch of Her Flesh* (1967), *A Thousand Pleasures* (1968), et al.—but this was not much of a stretch. Fans of their films—especially *A Thousand Pleasures*—will not only recognize some of the familiar faces (and voices, some of the dialogue being dubbed by those involved in the aforementioned film, the Findlays among them), but the overwhelmingly awkward dialogue as well. Unlike these other lowbrow productions, though, *Slaughter* was not destined to languish in the pits of obscurity. Far from it.

In 1972, Allan Shackleton, a research engineer-turned-film producer had bought the world distribution rights for *Slaughter* through his Monarch Releasing Corporation, a distribution house that specialized in sexploitation fare. (Sexploitation films are exploitation films which are overwhelmingly sexual in nature, but do not fall under the label of hardcore pornography.) He was still "scratching to recoup a shaky investment in a rotten film" (Lynch 1976) three years later when it caught the attention of someone who mistook the proceedings in his film as something more sinister than it was. Instead of setting the record straight, Mr. Shackleton played up on the false assumptions. Gambling on the three I's (implication, inference, and innuendo), he implied but did not explicitly assert that the atrocities in the film were authentic.

On December 1, 1975, Allan Shackleton sent out the first of several press releases aimed to pique the public's interest. Unfortunately for him, Michael Findlay caught sight of it and immediately realized that it was *his* film *Slaughter* (now retitled under the more succinct, monosyllabic moniker *Snuff*) that was behind the escalating furor. Findlay approached the distributor about contract renegotiations (as he was obviously not getting a big enough piece of the pie), but was unsuccessful in his pleas for more money. He did, however, almost succeed in exposing the entire scam during a crushing interview; Shackleton immediately paid him off, and he did not hear from Michael again.

Shackleton took the next step of distributing fake newspaper clippings that detailed the efforts of a fictional "Vincent Sheehan" and the retired attorney's crusade against the film through a newly formed organization called Citizens for Decency. Unbeknownst to him, though, there really *was* a group called Citizens for Decency, but this did little to deter the real organization from rallying behind Shackleton's fictional do-gooder. If anyone from the group had checked Sheehan's credentials, they evidently did not make it publicly known.

Amidst the national hysteria, critics everywhere were writing articles condemning the unreleased film, endorsing its authenticity sight unseen and giving it whatever credibility it had previously lacked. At this point, no one had actually seen the movie save for a few disgruntled theater-goers who had

happened to catch it during its short-term run as *Slaughter*. Even more ironic, the notorious finale that would give the film the weight it needed to guarantee it a place in the history

The snuff film controversy is suspiciously similar to the current trend to blame many of our societal woes on satanic cults.

books had not even been filmed yet.

The scene that punctuates the Findlays' all-but-forgotten film was shot for \$10,000 in a Manhattan loft by Simon Nocturn of August films during the course of a single day. This new footage featured a film crew (supposedly the selfsame individuals responsible for *Slaughter*) who wrap up their production by mutilating, dismembering, and eventually eviscerating the leading lady (who bears no resemblance to the previous actress). At the pinnacle of her bloody demise, the cameraman conveniently runs out of film, although the audio track continues to record their panicked voices even after everything has faded to black.

It then unofficially became cinematic history.

Hype, Hoax, and Hysteria

Snuff opened January 16, 1976, and was met by as many curiosity seekers as ardent protesters. Theaters were besieged by staunch feminists, egged by angry picketers, and unnerved by bomb threats. Instead of deterring would-be ticket buyers, though, the furor only fanned the flames of public interest. In the first week of its New York run, *Snuff* grossed \$66,000 and outsold such hits as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* for three weeks straight (Smith 1982).

The controversy finally caught the attention of the legal system, forcing the film to carry a disclaimer that clearly stated that no one was harmed during the production of said film. Reluctantly, Shackleton went along with it but eventually recounted his admittance, reverting to his statement that the public should be left to decide *Snuff's* authenticity for themselves. Years later, Shackleton finally fessed up (sans coercion), but by that time no one wanted to listen—to him or anyone else it seemed. Not only had the notoriety of the film snowballed to unprecedented proportions, but it had become accepted “fact” that snuff films were a real national scourge and no amount of debunking would change the public's opinion.

The incidental showing of *Slaughter* that sparked Shackleton's decision to play up the sordid implications of the snuff myth led to Detective Joseph Horman's claims that the New York Police Department had “reliable sources attesting to the circulation of snuff films,” which he erroneously referred to as “slasher” films. Apparently, he said, interested individuals were paying \$200 apiece—some sources cite a mere \$150—

for private screenings of an eight-reel, 8mm production which was rumored to have been filmed in Argentina. This unverified account could easily be traced back to *Slaughter*, although it had been greatly embellished by the time it had reached the authorities. This single rumor became the only evidence on which the entire *Snuff* hoax—and the snuff movie scare—was rooted.

The Los Angeles Police Department did an investigation into the phenomenon and admitted that they could not find even the *slightest* evidence that snuff films actually existed. They later denied this statement, saying that no investigation was ever initiated by them, possibly in an attempt to defend themselves against the harassment of a public who believed otherwise. Reporters who actually followed up on the rumors (as opposed to simply accepting the authenticity of the films on hearsay) came up empty handed as well. Still, the majority of the population was convinced that snuff films were a multi-million dollar black market racket. It was only after *Snuff* had run its course and the lack of evidence of snuff films became apparent that the hysteria died down and some people began doubting their convictions. Unfortunately, the notion had become so ingrained in our culture that, for future generations and those too young to understand its significance, snuff films would transgress the line from hoax to urban legend.

Twenty-four years later, the myth remains.

To this day, anti-pornography campaigners use *Snuff* and snuff films in general as artillery to defend their moralistic crusades. Many hardline feminists use snuff films as an example of patriarchal suppression. Such books as *The Age of Sex Crime* by Jane Caputi, *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* by Gloria Steinem, and *Take Back the Night—Women on Pornography* by Laura Lederer make the assumption that snuff films are a given in this day and age; some even go so far as to suppose that snuff films are the logical conclusion for those individuals jaded by more traditional forms of pornography. Even Linda Lovelace, star of the groundbreaking adult film *Deep Throat* (1972), testified to the U.S. Attorney General's Commission on Organized Crime that “women acting in porn films were being murdered on camera or after filming when they were deemed of no further use” (Kerekes 1995). (Many, though, don't take her claims very seriously, as she previously spent many years trying to vilify the adult film industry.) Unfortunately, the decision on the part of some hardline feminists to rely on hearsay only exposes their ignorance of the facts or purposeful dissemination of long-debunked propaganda. Those individuals willing to cross the line and try to dispel the myth find themselves avoiding the slings and arrows of their detractors.

The snuff film controversy is suspiciously similar to the current trend to blame many of our societal woes on satanic cults and their sexual and psychological abuse of children; one

cannot discount the possibility that there may be isolated incidents of both real snuff films and satanic ritual abuse, but—so far—there is no substantial proof as to the existence of either.

Despite the sometimes chastising tone of this article toward the man responsible for *Snuff's* conception, Shackleton should be commended for his ingenuity and his success at riling up a sometimes lax populace. (Especially in the 1970s, a decade known for its lack of political correctness.) Had he actually claimed the authenticity of the film like so many government authorities, angry citizens-turned-activists, and (especially) the media, he would have been no better. When it gets right down to it, his worst crime is being opportunistic.

In a perfect world, no one would have taken his inferences with anything more than a grain of salt, and if they had, the illusion would have been quickly dispelled on an individual and community level. Unfortunately, though, *Snuff's* shameless promotion created a wave of hysteria that latched onto a culture's deep-rooted ignorance and flourished in a media-driven society quick to publicize the sordid and sensational. Furthermore, our society's cathartic interest in the macabre—in our fascination with all things concerning death—only strengthened the hysteria's roots.

Even today, there are rumors of "snuff" sightings, sometimes instigated by the filmmakers themselves. The most recent example involves a Japanese series of gory shot-on-video productions released under the collective title of *Za Ginipiggu* (*Guinea Pig*), several of the installments having been directed by the infamous *manga* (Japanese comic book) artist/writer Hideshi Hino. Hino is known in the U.S. for such comic book graphic novels as *Panorama of Hell* and *Hell Baby*. (The first film in the series was even accompanied by the disclaimer "The producers received this video. There was no accompanying information. We are researching name, age, and other information about the girl and her three killers." Sound familiar?) Apparently, someone was showing a copy of the third installment, *Chiniku No Hana* (1990), at a Hollywood party circa 1991 where it caught the eye of actor Charlie Sheen. Convinced he had seen an actual snuff film, he immediately contacted the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) and—before they could substantiate the claims—he "got involved in a subsequent movement to stop any kind of import distribution for the films" (Weisser and Weisser 1997). The film was traced back to Chas Balun, a film reviewer who also moonlighted as a video bootlegger; of course, the atrocities in the film were proven to be fake. The incident made headlines, though, and was even spotlighted on ABC's news-magazine *20/20*. Instead of the film being confined to the pits of obscurity as—we can assume—Mr. Sheen had hoped, the furor only fueled the fire of interest in this no-budget splatter film, giving it a cult status it did not deserve. This same film sparked similar controversy in Great Britain in 1992, the owner of the confiscated "video nasty" fined for nothing more than mild obscenity charges when it proved to be the low-rent

hoax that it was.

Yet it is not only the claims of deceived individuals that help to perpetuate the myth; every time that snuff films are even mentioned in modern fiction and cinema, they are giving credence to the rumors, playing on the reader's or viewer's assumptions that they are real to begin with. Not only have snuff films become a common staple in many sordid crime novels written in the last twenty years (even by such respected mystery writers as Rex Miller and Andrew Vachss), they have become popular subjects for innumerable exploitation and horror films. *The Last House on Dead End Street* (1977), *Effects* (1979), *Holocausto Canibal* (1979), *Video Violence . . . When Renting Is Not Enough* (1986), *The Art of Dying* (1991), *Midnight 2—Death, Sex and Videotape* (1993), and even the exemplary productions *C'Est Arrivé Près de Chez Vous* (1992), *Mute Witness* (1994), and *8mm* (1999) are just a few of the countless titles that milk the urban legend for all it's worth. Even if the existence of actual snuff films should be validated at a later date, it is safe to say that there are more films *about* snuff films than there are actual snuff films in existence.

Of course, this issue begs the question: Should novelists and screenwriters avoid the subject altogether because it helps to perpetuate the myth? No, and why should they? Writers deal with fiction, and the suspension of disbelief is an integral part of any good novel or film. Putting any sort of disclaimer on each and every piece of entertainment that chooses to exploit this and other myths is a ludicrous notion; people should not have to be told that what they are reading or viewing has no basis in fact, as the label of "fiction" already establishes this.

The media, on the other hand, have a responsibility to the public, not so much with the dissemination of information, but with the dissemination of facts. Unfortunately, fanciful stories and hearsay are usually more interesting than cold reality and facts, as urban legends have shown beyond any shadow of a doubt.

References

- Brunvand, Jan Harold. 1990. *Curses! Broiled Again!* New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc.
- Kerekes, David, and David Slater. 1995. *Killing for Culture*. San Francisco: Creation Books.
- Lynch, Jay. 1976. The facts about the snuff-film rumors. *Oui* 7:69-70, 86, 117-118.
- McCarthy, John. 1984. *Splatter Movies*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Meyers, Richard. 1983. *For One Week Only*. New Jersey: New Century Publishers, Inc.
- Palmerini, Luca M., and Gaetano Mistretta. 1996. *Spaghetti Nightmares*. Florida: Fantasma Books.
- Sanders, Ed. 1976. *The Family—The Story of Charles Manson's Dune Buggy Attack Battalion*. London: Panther Books.
- Smith, Jack. 1982. Snuff myth—The bloody truth about on-screen sex slayings. *Escapade* 8:22-25, 92-94.
- Vale, V., and Andrea Juno. 1986. *Re/Search #10—Incredibly Strange Films*. San Francisco: Re/Search Publications.
- Weisser, Thomas, and Yuko Mihara Weisser. 1997. *Japanese Cinema Encyclopedia*. Florida: Vital Books. □