The Snuff Film: The Making of an Urban Legend

Feature

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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.

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 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 Jorobado de la Morgue...
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 its 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 Texas Chain Saw 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.) [see Jacob Fisher letter below for a correction on this point]

Despite the inevitable frustration 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

Of the latter variety, one of the more popular myths involves the film The Texas Chain Saw Massacre. Of the latter variety, one of the more popular myths involves the film The Texas Chain Saw Massacre. [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.

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 exploitation fare. (Exploitation 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 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 *Snuffs* 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
Yet it is not only the claims of deceived individuals that help to perpetuate the myth; hoax that it was. fined for nothing more than mild obscenity charges when it proved to be the low-rent similar controversy in Great Britain in 1992, the owner of the confiscated "video nasty" newsmagazine 20/20. Instead of the film being confined to the pits of obscurity as—we be fake. The incident made headlines, though, and was even spotlighted on ABC's moonlighted as a video bootlegger; of course, the atrocities in the film were proven to in a subsequent movement to stop any kind of import distribution for the films" (Weisser 1997). The film was traced back to Chas Balun, a film reviewer who also (Japanese comic book) artist/writer Hideshi Hino. Hino is known in the U.S. for such Pig) eighteen 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 Snuffs 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, Snuffs 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, Chinkiku 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 newsmagazine 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 (Man Bites Dog) (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.

Letters:

September 24, 2003

In your web page entry on snuff films as an urban legend you comment:

“Alfred Hitchcock’s Psycho [1960] actually bears a much greater resemblance to the case [of Ed Gein], despite the fact that author Robert Bloch claims he knew nothing of Gein’s heinous crimes before writing the novel that inspired the film.”


It’s odd to have missed this, because part of what your entry on the snuff film legend points out is that the legend tends to find its origins in real crimes, such as those of Charles Manson (in addition to Ed Gein).

—J. F.

References

Scott Stine is a freelance writer and author of the forthcoming book *The Gorehound's Guide to Splatter Films*. 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.

For-profit snuff films are generally regarded as an urban legend, whose persistence demonstrates more about our anxieties than the reality of such films being made. Some filmed records of executions and murders exist but have not been made or released for commercial purposes. Beware if you watching some of below movies you should have strong stomach too, other than few, I never watch complete movies from below list. A so-called “snuff” movie involving the exploits of a cult leader leading a gang of bikers in a series of supposedly real killings on film. Directors: Michael Findlay, Horacio Fredriksson, Simon Nuchtern | Stars: Margarita Amuchástegui, Tina Austin, Ana Carro, Brian Cary. Votes: 1 368. The myth of the snuff film 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*. 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 fo