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The Third Eye

NEWS AND COMMENTARY FROM THE WEIRD WORLD OF THE MEDIA

By Pat Reeder

Journalists of the old school used to have a saying, “You can’t make this stuff up,” to help put over stories that seemed a bit hard to swallow. Well, here at the dawn of the new millennium, when a president’s approval ratings actually go up when he’s caught committing perjury, those in the media have learned that you not only can “make this stuff up,” but it can be immensely rewarding to do so, even if everything you’re saying is blatant and obvious pony poop.

First case in point: TNT’s recent “biopic,” Houdini. It was an impressive production physically, with fine performances, beautiful sets and costumes, authentic-looking magic props and posters, and one excellent speech from Houdini on why “the lowest form of life is a medium.” So what was wrong with it? Everything else.

If I tried to list all of the movie’s factual inaccuracies and outright fabrications, this newsletter would be longer than the Oxford English Dictionary. It actually made the Tony Curtis version look like a documentary. But worse than mere fact-fudging was the way the movie completely undermined and misrepresented everything Houdini fought for all his life. If you missed it, I’ll sum it up with the final scene: Houdini’s widow Bess holds a seance on the 10th anniversary of his death. Houdini returns from the grave, Bess sees his spirit, they hug and dance together...Hey, wait a minute! How did I manage to miss THIS story?! I’ve read at least three biographies of Houdini, and every one of them somehow overlooked this miraculously successful seance that proved the existence of life after death!

Well, I could go on ranting about this post-mortem slander, but I think I’ll leave that job to the eloquent Penn Jillette, who sent this message to the filmmakers via the Arizona Republic: “If you want to do your stupid little masturbatory ramblings about someone’s life, don’t take a true American hero and alter his point of view.”

Not that all of Houdini’s efforts were enough to quash the irrational belief in mediums. The dead are truly gone, but mediums will be with us forever, and the media love a medium. One newly prominent spirit conduit is John Edward, whose book “One Last Time” is selling so many copies, it makes me fear for the future of the republic. In the past month, he appeared on both The Roseanne Show and Entertainment Tonight, in both cases being greeted with awe and wonder for performing what looked to me to be a pretty obvious demonstration of cold and warm reading techniques. On Roseanne’s show, one audience member was amazed that Edward knew her father was dead (actually, he simply

asked, “Is your father passed on?” and she replied, “Yes”). Even worse credulity reigned on E.T., where the “reporter” declared that Edward had correctly divined the producer’s birthday. No, actually, what he said was, “What is January?” and she replied, “That’s my birthday.” ASTOUNDING!!!

I think I’ll skip Edwards’ book of wisdom from the spirits, but if he ever writes a book on how to get rich, I might consider buying a copy. Come to think of it, I already know how to get rich: by never overestimating the intelligence of the American public.

But just when you think the cynical exploitation of the public can’t get any worse, along comes the Fox Network to set a new world record. In December, Fox issued a press release revealing the shocking news — brace yourselves! — that their Alien Autopsy special was a hoax! As anyone with any knowledge of photo lighting and more brainpower than a grapefruit could tell, it was not filmed in 1947, as claimed, but shot quite recently on video and converted to film.

Now, here’s where the really cynical part comes in: after two years of milking this bogus footage for every nickel it could generate from TV specials, videos, T-shirts and coffee mugs, Fox finally decided to come clean. But they didn’t just hold a standard Clintonesque “I have sinned” press conference. Oh, no: there’s no money in THAT! Instead, they aired a new special, World’s Greatest Hoaxes: Secrets Finally Revealed, in which they made millions of dollars in new ad revenues by exposing the alien autopsy hoax (and several others) that they themselves had profitably perpetuated. But wait, it gets better! This new special was executive-produced by Robert Kiviat, the same man responsible for the original Alien Autopsy special! I knew that if you just gave the Fox Network enough time, they’d figure out a way to make money by exposing themselves on TV.

Incidentally, Kiviat (who describes his specials as having “a documentary spin,” a delightful new oxymoron to add to my collection) made sure that his latest special included examples of how easy it is to create hoax footage of UFOs, Bigfoot, etc., which should insure a steady supply of new Fox Network “documentary” specials well into the next millennium.

Finally, since I hate to start 1999 with nothing but triumphs for the forces of nonsense, I’ll let you cleanse your palates with this item: China’s Xinhua news agency reports that the State Forestry Administration has denied once and for all the existence of the Yeti in central China. Tourism bosses had been offering hefty rewards for the capture of a Bigfoot, dead or alive, but Forestry officials declared that they had conducted a number of scientific inquiries into Bigfoot sightings, and in every single case, the “Yeti” had turned out to be some other wild animal.

So what more can I say? The cover-up continues! Details tonight on Fox TV!

Turkish creationism news

by **Taner Edis**

[Skeptics list moderator Taner Edis has posted his translation excerpted from a column in the secularist newspaper Cumhuriyet, by Yakup Kepenek]:

Lately in our country, an environment recalling medieval battles between science and religion is being created. The debate does not keep confined to scientific institutions, but it is spread to all organizations by certain foundations and associations.

The debate concerns the famous theory of evolution. More accurately, certain dogmatic and reactionary segments called creationists and who do not accept change as scientific have begun a great attack on evolutionary theory, established by

Charles Darwin’s famous work *The Origin of Species*, and which was later accepted not only in the natural sciences but the social sciences like economics due to its explanatory power.

The free distribution to the public of anti-evolutionary books authored under aliases most everywhere is

lately being complemented by the scientifically valueless announcements of a foundation which calls itself scientific. And the attack is directed immediately against the area of education and those who work in it. They do not only want to constrict the horizons of children and young people; they want to eradicate the critical thinking habit which is the entry way for scientific thought.

Science is being attacked by a fatwa mentality. Not only the scientific research institutions of Turkey, but the general public also is being put under pressure by a fundamentalist attack disguised as science.

Curiously, against these attacks, there is no response to illuminate the public from unions and associations of university instructors. At ODTU [Middle Eastern Technical University] Prof. Dr. Aykut Kence and colleagues published a public announcement which attracted nearly two thousand signatures in a short time. They say: Evolutionary theory, which claims life on earth shares a common past, has shown that humans are bound by biological laws and are a part of nature like other types of living beings... and adds:

“Lately, there has been an intensive campaign which aims to prevent our young people, who will take on responsibility to help our country develop... and become a strong in the 21st century, from adopting scientific thinking as a system and approach problems scientifically.

“This campaign, which is a significant aspect of the fundamentalism which aims to take our country away from modernity, has also acquired the support of certain fundamentalist Christian groups known to be opposed to evolution and science... Their endeavors have been outlawed repeatedly in the USA, being found to violate the separation of church and state principle in the constitution... Islamicist and sectarian groups are now attempting to continue their work in Turkey under the guise of supporting Ataturk [secularist founder of Turkish republic] and science. In a time when our people, ... who have accepted Ataturk’s saying ‘Science is the truest guide in life,’ ... need science and scientific progress in the highest degree, it is vitally important that especially our young people should understand and accept science as a way of knowing.”

The announcement concludes by warning all scientists nurtured by the Republic and their organizations against this dishonest campaign.

—**Taner Edis**

Web news

By John Blanton

Elizabeth Joyce again

Ron Butler has provided us with the latest from Elizabeth Joyce:

Ms. Joyce has up a new page, entitled President Al Gore. Here she predicts that Clinton will resign and Al Gore will take the oath of office in January 1999.

Recall that previously (The Skeptic, December 1998) Ms. Joyce predicted that Bill would resign in January of 1998.

Ms. Joyce says that “A year ago (August 1997) my Guides came and foretold the events of 1998, which I immediately posted on my web-site...”

Ms. Joyce fudges (to put it kindly). In January of 1998, she predicted: “Bill Clinton... will either be assassinated or impeached. ...PRESIDENT GORE will give the State of the Union address as I don’t see President Clinton in office at the end of January 1998” and: “PRESIDENT GORE will take us to war with

Saddim Hussein, as I don't see President Clinton in office at the end of January 1998.”

In March, the first prediction vanished from her site and the second became: “PRESIDENT GORE will take us to war with Saddim [sic] Hussein, as I don't see President Clinton in office at the end of 1998.”

By 11-13-98, her site read: “Impeachment proceedings begin for Clinton the second week in September. He'll be out of office mid-November.”

Place your bets, gents. Elizabeth Joyce reminds us that there is always still time.

Homeopathy Web site

Marcello Truzzi truzzi@toast.net has forwarded this to us from Jacques Benveniste:

— Welcome to the DigiBio web site —

We are glad to announce the official launching of our long-awaited web site: <<http://www.digibio.com>> .

First you will find a brief and general description of who we are, what we do, our objectives, direction and research.

We then we present the concepts we derived from our results. You will note that our data interpretation does not violate any physical law or model and that it is less a revolution than an evolution.

Finally, we completed the important “Do-it-yourself” chapter in which we describe an experiment that independent laboratories will be able to conduct and reproduce.

In addition we put at your disposal raw scientific data that we gathered since 1984 so that everyone will have direct access to experimental protocols and results, plus our scientific interpretation.

We have also added some book references and you will note that we have strived to be as impartial as possible: some of the references are in agreement with our work, and some are not. In the near future we will add a comment or two for these references.

We hope your visit to our web site will be enjoyable and informative. Let's keep in touch, feel free to give us your feedback .

— Jacques Benveniste

— Didier Guillonnet

Check it out fellow Skeptics.

What's New — by Robert Park

ALIEN AUTOPSY: FOX NETWORK MAKES A SHOCKING REVELATION. Are you ready for this? It was a hoax! I can hear your gasp of disbelief. First aired in 1995, it was shown over and over. Who would have ever guessed that this fuzzy footage, shot from whatever angle would best obscure what was going on, would turn out to be a fake? Is the network chagrined at having been duped?

Hardly. Fox now boasts of using high-tech “NASA-type video enhancements” to expose “one of the biggest hoaxes of all time.” Lest you worry about loss of revenue from a program that scored high ratings every time it was shown, Fox will air a December 28 special exposing not only the Alien Autopsy film, but the Loch Ness monster and Bigfoot as well. Is this a formula for success?

You make money off a hoax, and then from exposing your own hoax.

SHOPPING TIP: MAGNETIC THERAPY KITS ARE HOT THIS YEAR. The largest department

store in DC is featuring the Thera:P 10-piece magnetic therapy kit in its Washington Post ads for only \$39.95. Inspired by the Loka Institute, WN decided to conduct research on this popular alternative therapy. According to the box, the 29 “Gold Standard” alternating wave-form bipolar magnets are 800+ gauss. “It is believed that alternating magnets offer greater penetration,” the box said. Can that be right? Alternating poles are usually meant to LIMIT the range, so you won’t accidentally ruin your credit cards. We measured the range of the field by sticking a Thera:P magnet on a refrigerator. Sheets of paper were then inserted between magnet and refrigerator till the magnet fell off. Ten sheets! That worked out to one millimeter. The field would not penetrate to the muscle.

Educational priorities

Bill Bennetta has posted this from the Las Vegas Sun:

Harter won’t reverse plans to move English teachers into trailer
LAS VEGAS (AP) - UNLV President Carol Harter says a letter of protest signed by 80 English instructors and students hasn’t prompted her to reverse plans to move the university’s composition crew to a double-wide trailer.

Harter said Monday she supported plans to move the majority of the first-year writing program’s teachers out of the campus’ historic Houssels House to make room for UNLV’s Consciousness Studies Program, which explores near-death experiences and otherworldly topics.

Forty-two part-time instructors and graduate teaching assistants, who have been sharing space with the three-member consciousness studies team, were expected by week’s end to occupy a trailer.

...

The campus is so starved for office space, Harter said, that the university may buy an 80,000-square-foot modular building for \$4 million.

Last week, Ken Hanlon, the university’s associate vice president for academic budgeting, said the Consciousness Studies Program was chosen as the Houssels House’s occupant in part because the university wanted to remain in good graces with its donors.

Real estate developer Robert Bigelow donated \$3.7 million to UNLV to create the program.
News from Hawaii

Vic Stenger has posted URLs for some of his coming publications:

“The Anthropic Coincidences: A Natural Explanation” to appear in Skeptical Intelligencer (UK).

<http://www.phys.hawaii.edu/vjs/www/avoid/intel.html>

“Has Science Found God?” to appear in Free Inquiry magazine.

<http://www.phys.hawaii.edu/vjs/www/avoid/found-fi.html>

“How to Make 6 Days Last 13 Billion Years” December Skeptical Briefs, regular column “Reality Check.”

<http://www.phys.hawaii.edu/vjs/www/briefs/genesis.html>

“Bioenergetic Fields.” To appear in The Scientific Review of Alternative Medicine.

<http://www.phys.hawaii.edu/vjs/www/alt/Biofield.html>

Other good stuff can be found by starting at

<http://www.phys.hawaii.edu/vjs/www/vjs.html>

News of the Weird

Chuck Shepherd edits a weekly column by this name. You can see it in The Met, which is available free at most pizza places and massage parlors. You can also check out Chuck's column on the Web at <http://www.nine.org/notw/notw.html>. Here is a sample:

Thoroughly Unshakable Belief

In May, the Catholic Diocese of Dodge City, Kan., eager to put into perspective a Lewis, Kan., woman's Virgin Mary plaque that she says weeps blood (and has drawn 10,000 visitors), commissioned DNA tests of the blood and found it to be that of the plaque's owner, Margarita Holguin Cazares. Undeterred in her beliefs, the editor of the local Edwards County Sentinel, Cathy Woolard, editorialized that the DNA tests actually make the scene even more miraculous, in that, obviously, God must have created blood that exactly matches Cazares's and put it on the plaque.

Here's more:

1994 — Firefighters in Canton, Ohio, rushed to the home of Lisa M. Ash, 24, in November to extinguish a fire. They pulled out of her oven a smoldering voodoo doll, made from cloth and twigs, that she said she was using to cast a spell against someone, based on advice she said she received from a telephone psychic line.

1995 — In a review of Diana Gazes' \$29-a-ticket psychic spoon-bending seminar in July, the San Francisco Chronicle reported that Gazes told the 100 attendees that their powers of concentration would "cause an alteration in the spin of the atoms" of the spoon. To achieve that, the student should grasp the spoon in both hands with thumbs underneath the smallest part of the handle and "apply some downward strength." (Not surprisingly, the Chronicle reported, spoons handled in that manner bend fairly easily.) As Gazes shouted "Bend! Bend!" the attendees leaped to their feet, one by one, waving spoons, shouting, "I bent!"

1996 — Elle magazine reported recently on the services of Eleni Santoro, a New York City "psychic house cleaner" who rehabilitates hard-to-unload real estate by neutralizing the evil auras and "balancing the energy" in the house at \$300 to \$2,500 a job. She specializes in homes in which there had been a death or in which the inhabitants fought a lot.

1996 — Real Estate News: In May, New York Times columnist Dan Barry reported a run on \$6.95 St. Joseph statues at the Long Island Catholic Supply store, attributed to a belief by many house sellers that an upside-down St. Joseph buried in the lawn will bring a quick and lucrative sale. The Long Island Board of Realtors told Barry that home sales have risen recently. And the Washington Post reported in April that home-buying Asians around Washington, D.C., have turned increasingly to a 3,000-year-old philosophy of feng shui to help them select stress-free houses that match their personal spirits in location, dimensions and design, and that among the non-Asian practitioners is Donald Trump.

1997 — In March, the president of a demolition company said he was about to hire a psychic to help explain the strange things being reported by his workers tearing down the old Troutman's department store building in Connellsville, Pa. He said doors were slamming without reason, tools disappeared and turned up in unlikely places, and stuck, locked doors spontaneously opened, among other things. At about the same time, employees at the San Francisco Bureau of Building Inspections brought in a Buddhist priest, a Catholic priest and a psychic to commune with the building after several workers and family members had recently been stricken with serious illnesses.