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The third eye

News and Commentary from the Weird World of the Media

By Pat Reeder

Okay, I'll admit it: My wife and I are the only two people left in America who have yet to see *Independence Day*, or as Hollywood has inexplicably abbreviated it, "ID4" (What will the sequel be called? "ID5?").

God knows, it's not that we are uninterested in either UFOs or the Apocalypse, both of which have been the basis for countless hours of light entertainment. It's just that every clip I've seen of this movie strikes me as being so loud, obnoxious and idiotic, I have the feeling that the only way I could possibly derive any entertainment from it would be if there were silhouettes of little robots in the corner, cracking wise about the cardboard characters, B-movie plot and boneheaded dialogue.

Fortunately, thanks to the monolithic hype machine that is the modern mass media, it is no longer necessary to actually see a hit movie to know absolutely everything that is in it (I even heard a caller to a radio show give away the ending). Thus I have been able to converse with people about this film quite easily without ever once having to subject myself to it. And frankly, I believe I have derived more entertainment from the peripheral "ID4" hoopla than I could ever hope to get from the fi- (sorry, I almost called it a "film") - movie itself. I don't think I'm alone, either, judging from the gigantic boost it has given to the cottage industry that is "The Roswell Incident."

Just one month before "ID4" came out, ABC reported that UFO tourism accounted for over one-fifth of Roswell's, New Mexico's economic base. By now, I would wager that five-fifths is closer to the mark. Thanks to the way the movie weaves its alien invasion plot around the Roswell crashed saucer myth, it became a virtual commercial for tourists to come view the New Mexican desert and imagine that something actually happened there in 1947, other than the crashing of a spy balloon. Naturally, the older books on Roswell began flying off the shelves, and new ones are being cranked out to meet the demand (many of them containing all-new eyewitness accounts by the very same people who gave entirely different eyewitness accounts to the authors of the earlier books - but perhaps their memories are just improving with the passing decades).

Of course, it's also provided a field day for the entertainment media, with every studio rushing to get an "ID4" clone into

theaters, the repackaging of Showtime's ridiculous "Roswell" TV movie (starring actual space alien Kyle MacLachlan) on video, the blatant attempt by NBC to hitch their Roswell-inspired miniseries *Dark Skies* to "ID4's" success, and a new flurry of UFO fever on all the crackpot tabloid shows. My favorite of these was the *Hard Copy* report on the man who noticed that the area around the "face" on Mars corresponded exactly to his road map of a small English town, which proves beyond any doubt that Mars has really confusing intersections.

But "ID4" was such a pop culture monster, the brouhaha extended beyond the entertainment press and spilled over into the realm of genuine journalism. And so, we had a flurry of "special reports" and "think pieces" about UFO mania, its history, psychological ramifications, etc. (One commentator even said Roswell has now become Generation X's touchstone myth, in the same way baby boomers obsessed over JFK assassination theories). Both *Time* and *Newsweek* offered cover stories in the same week, officially making the slimy "ID4" aliens the Bruce Springsteens of the '90s. *Time's* story concentrated more on the mainstreaming of science-fiction as entertainment ("It's not just for geeks anymore!"), while the superior *Newsweek* story by Rick Marin looked at the growing belief in the paranormal which underlies the genre's popularity. *Newsweek* even commissioned a scary poll which found that 48% of Americans believe UFOs are real, the same number believe there is a government UFO cover-up, 29% think we've made contact with aliens, and 40% believe in the supernatural in general. When I read stats like that, I just want to kick myself for not becoming a con man.

Marin notes that these people are not all on the lunatic fringe: Many are responsible professionals, seemingly rational and well-educated, but they hired an exorcist to cleanse their condos before they moved in and stacked the bookshelves with the works of Deepak Chopra. Marin explores various paranormal claims, examines the rising belief in superstition in light of the alienation of modern society and the approaching millennium, and looks at how the glorification of the paranormal in the mass media encourages people to use fantasy to explain their problems and justify their actions. He also examines the psychological damage caused by untrained hypnotists dredging up "recovered memories" of alien abductions, and in a lengthy sidebar piece, the sorry nature of the evidence for all this stuff is presented by James Randi, Ray Hymen, Joe Nickell and other skeptics (for this piece alone, I forgive *Newsweek* for that whole *Primary Colors* flap).

Marin sums up his piece with a quote from Boston paranormal investigator John Horrigan, who says, ". . . If all these claims are hoaxing and lying, we've got a serious pathology affecting this country." Marin adds, "He's right. We do."

TV news programs also hopped on the bandwagon. *Nightline* devoted a show to the subject "Are We Alone?" It featured the requisite visit to Roswell, with an accounting of the crashed saucer tale that was skeptical in tone, but which didn't include much of the evidence that refutes it. But having provided the audience with a little sizzle, they quickly moved on to the steak and spent the rest of the show talking to real astronomers about the SETI project (I'm still waiting for the UFO buffs to explain why the government would spend so much money trying to pick out a faint alien radio signal as proof of extraterrestrial life when they have a flying saucer parked in Area 51).

Dateline NBC, having already run a feature on how all the special effects in "ID4" were accomplished (see, I even know what happened behind the scenes without ever having to see the movie), devoted a segment to Roswell. Like *Nightline*, NBC apparently felt the whole crashed saucer story was too ridiculous to dignify with serious scientific refutation, so they just treated it as a tongue-in-cheek human interest feature about Roswell's milking of its unlikely economic bonanza for all it's worth and then some. The story dwelled with great bemusement on the cheesy tourist trap atmosphere that has sprouted in Roswell, such as the three "crashed saucer" museums, the chubby tourists taking snapshots of their sullen kids beside the cardboard space alien cut-outs, the alien dolls on half-price special during the big Outer Space Sale at the local five-and-dime, and the cuddly kabuki aliens who wander around waving and hugging tourists, just like Mickey Mouse at Disneyland, only naked.

Amusing as all this was to a connoisseur of kitsch such as myself, my favorite part was when a rancher took the reporter out to some scrubby New Mexico countryside to show him where the saucer allegedly crashed (little flags had been set in the ground to mark important spots, such as "point of impact" and "place where little alien creature lay injured"). The guide, naturally, would much prefer to be tending his cattle, but darn it, he is constantly pestered by tourists to give them tours of the crash site for \$15 a head. He said that some of them get teary-eyed as they think of the poor little alien, dying so far from home (They must've been real basket cases when E.T. was in the theaters).

These people would have good reason to cry if they subscribed to Phil Klass's *Skeptic UFO Newsletter*, for he recently reported that one of the "star witnesses" to the Roswell Incident, the late Jim Ragsdale, claimed in 1993 that the saucer crashed 35 miles north of Roswell, then claimed in 1995 that it crashed 53 miles west of Roswell. It was the latter patch of gravel that the gullible tourists were forking over 15 simoleons to contemplate.

Roswell has become such a boom town, even *Forbes* magazine sent a reporter to look into its economic surge. He interviewed everyone who lived near the alleged impact site, and not one of them ever heard of a crashed flying saucer, nor had they ever been contacted by the International UFO Museum to verify Ragsdale's claim before they published it. But *Forbes* did turn up a great quote from 82-year-old Dorothy Epps, whose family has lived within half a mile of the "crash site" since 1909. Quoth the lady: "It's all a hoax." But a damned lucrative one.

Now, a few news items to pad out the rest of this space.

Phil Klass's *UFO* newsletter notes that just two weeks after the *Alien Autopsy* special premiered on the Fox Network, Argentine TV channel 9 aired what appeared to be an excerpt. Suddenly, the narrator walked into the "autopsy room," the film turned from black-and-white to color, and the "doctors" took off their hoods and revealed that it was a hoax. This was followed by a report on how a company called Memoria Footage Ltd. duplicated the autopsy film in just ten days, using an "alien" made of modeling clay. Amazingly, it looked just like the real alien in Fox's show!

The Center for Science in the Public Interest continues its valiant efforts to suck every last drop of joy out of life. In the last month alone, having run out of natural foods to condemn, they attacked the fat substitute olestra and protested a proposal to use a non-caloric artificial sweetener called Sunett in diet soda. CSPI head Michael Jacobson, with characteristic shrillness, spurned a report by Proctor & Gamble that they had received one complaint of intestinal distress for every 3,000 bags of olestra snacks sold. He claimed P&G's study was unscientific, and that at least 200 people had called his olestra hotline to report suffering diarrhea. This does not take into account the following: (A) There is no proof the callers' diarrhea had anything to do with olestra; (B) since he didn't say how many bags were sold, 200 calls could very well be one for every 3,000 bags sold; (C) he's taking the callers' word that they really ate olestra and weren't just phoning because they discovered someone actually wanted to listen to them talk about their diarrhea (I'll bet this hotline is incredibly popular in retirement homes).

As for Sunett, Jacobson (who, for a self-proclaimed example of healthy living, looks remarkably like James Thurber did just before he died) claims allowing it in diet soda will expose millions of people to cancer. It's true some studies in the 1970s found that it can cause cancer in lab rats. But it has been used in thousands of products since (including Trident and Freedent gum, sugar-free Jell-O, and Canadian Diet Coke and Pepsi) with no ill effects. Its maker pointed out that in order to get the proportional amount of Sunett which the lab rats swallowed, a human would have to drink four million cans of diet soda a day, every day, for his entire life (or else chew a wad of Freedent gum the size of the Titanic). But logic has never phased the CSPI, and they aren't about to let it start now.

There is one thing I agree with Michael Jacobson on, and that is the need for stricter truth-in-labeling laws. For that reason, I am petitioning Congress to make the Center for Science in the Public Interest drop the word "science" from its name.

Finally, as we go to press, Bob Guccione is proclaiming that he has paid between \$50,000 and \$200,000 for top secret military photos taken of a space alien who crashed in the 1940s in (let's say it all together, shall we?) "Roswell, New Mexico!" I've yet to see the photos, but since they're running in the September *Penthouse*, I assume that the more naked the alien is, the more he paid for them. Guccione is so impressed with these shots, he's running rare TV commercials for the issue, and he declared that they are so earth-shattering, it's like having "a genuine photo of Jesus Christ hanging on the cross."

By the way, if you have one of those, Bob Guccione will pay you \$500,000 for it.

Healthy skepticism

By Tim Gorski, M.D.

A High-Dollar "Pigeon Drop" Scam By Mail

Send \$5 million to someone you've never heard of in Nigeria in return for 30% of \$28.6 million? That's was the deal offered to "The Medical Director" of Cooks' Fort Worth Children's Hospital in late May of this year. The story offered by one "Dr. Ralph Kosoh" was one of millions of dollars sitting in Nigerian government bank accounts from "over-invoicing of various contracts."

This, supposedly, has to be "transferred into a bank account provided by a foreign partner, because we are government workers and the Code of Conduct does not allow us to operate foreign accounts." The project had already been underway, the story continues, with a cool \$5 million already transferred, "but the provider of the account in Morocco is up to some mischief and refuses to comply with our earlier mutual agreement insisting that the total amount be paid into his nominated bank account before disbursement will take effect." So if only these dutiful Nigerian government officials can get that \$5 million back somehow, they'll resume pouring all that cash into someone else's bank account. Oh, but, "due to our sensitive positions we cannot afford a slip in this transaction, neither can we give out our identity," says "Dr. Kosoh."

This scheme is little more than a high-dollar mail fraud adaptation of the old "pigeon drop" swindle in which the confidence man offers to share a large sum of found money if the mark will put up a "good faith" bond. Nigeria, for reasons that are unclear, seems to be a hotbed of fraud of all kinds and U.S. authorities have already become aware of a variety of rip-offs, including many insurance fraud schemes, that have been perpetrated by Nigerian nationals. Information about this particular scam is now in the hands of law enforcement officials.

Recommended Reading On Low Fat Dieting, Em Fields, Herbs

The November/December 1995 *Nutrition Forum* newsletter carries a lengthy article on the subject of low fat dieting - 20 grams or less daily - by Gabe Mirkin, M.D., who learned at age 22 when he was a medical student that his cholesterol was over 300. Mirkin explodes a number of popular myths such as that chicken is superior to beef, fructose is better than glucose, low-fat milk is to be preferred, shellfish are bad for one's cholesterol, and others. In fact, dark chicken meat has as much fat as beef, fructose is converted into glucose in the liver, 2% milk is high-fat, shellfish have much less cholesterol than once thought, much of which is dehydrocholesterol which does not raise serum cholesterol, and so forth. This article would be a good handout for patients interested in or who need to reduce fat in their diet.

Another excellent article, this one on "Electromagnetic Field Exposure and Cancer: A Review of Epidemiologic Evidence," appears in the American Cancer Society's January/February *CA - A Cancer Journal For Clinicians* [46(1):29 1996]. The author, Dr. Clark W. Heath, Jr., does a very good job of surveying the present status of research into a subject which many patients may ask about.

Included is a discussion of the issues involved in studying and assessing E-M fields and their effects, as well as tables summarizing relevant published data and a discussion of concerns about high-voltage power lines and indoor wiring, household appliances, and occupational and paternal exposure. Heath concludes by observing that the evidence for a cancer risk from E-M fields, while suggestive insofar as brain cancer and leukemia is concerned, are nevertheless "weak, inconsistent, and inconclusive." Yet despite this state of affairs, "public concern has led to costly litigation, to delays in the installation and operation of electrical transmission equipment, and to a tendency for property values to decrease at locations adjoining high- voltage transmission lines," acknowledges the author.

Finally, Consumers Union's *Consumer Reports* magazine published an article entitled "Herbal Roulette" in its November 1995 issue. The piece accurately describes the current "anything goes" situation with respect to the regulation of such products, though without crediting its architect, Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah). The misconceptions of many are

illustrated by a pharmacist being quoted as saying "if it is sold over-the-counter, it is FDA-approved." The false claims, deceptive advertising, and poor quality control which are endemic in the herbal and "nutritional" supplement industry are discussed. An insert deals with ginseng, one of the most heavily promoted of such remedies, and imparts the information that the manufacturers of Ginsanar have refused to release the "evidence" which they say proves the worth of its product.

For more reliable information about herbal remedies, patients should be directed to the works of the recognized authority Varro Tyler, Ph.D., the author of *The New Honest Herbal* and *Herbs of Choice*.

Heads I Win, Tails You Lose!

The National Council Against Health Fraud reports receiving complaints of gastrointestinal and nonspecific neurological symptoms from individuals taking blue-green algae "nutritional supplements." [NCAHF *Newsletter*, March/April 1996] Promoters of the products are typically unconcerned about these effects. In fact, they often advise users who experience these and other symptoms that their troubles are only signs of the "detoxification" which the products are bringing about and reflect how badly their health had deteriorated before beginning the preparations. That is, if someone takes such supplements and feels better, it is proof of their health benefits. But if someone takes them and feels worse, it is again proof of the claimed health benefits!

Acupuncture's Downside

A study by Norwegian researchers which appeared in *The Lancet* [345:1576, 1995] revealed that 12% of 1135 randomly selected doctors and 31% of 197 acupuncturists reported experience with adverse effects of acupuncture. The most common problems reported by the physicians were infection, injury, and increased pain. The acupuncturists, by contrast, reported that well over half of the complications they saw were patients fainting during treatment. Lesser numbers experienced nausea and vomiting and increased pain. The study authors suggested that adverse effects of acupuncture are probably under-reported by patients and are more frequent than the usually-cited "occasional."

This information is provided by the Dallas/Fort Worth Council Against Health Fraud. For further information, or to report instances of suspected quackery and health fraud, please contact the Council's President, Tim Gorski, M.D., at (817) 792-2000 or write P.O.B. 202577, Arlington, TX 76006.

The Trail Of The Chupacabras

By Danny Barnett

The March 21, 1996 edition of the *St. Petersburg (FL) Times* carried news of a bizarre crime that happened in Sweetwater, Florida, a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood south of Miami. The bodies of 69 farm animals - goats, geese, ducks, and chickens - were found strewn across the yards of two families. The macabre incident could have easily become yet another forgotten chapter in the continuing saga of alleged cattle mutilations, but many of the local residents were confident they knew who was responsible. Instead of bloodthirsty cultists or a malicious teen prankster, the culprit was said to be a strange creature with an oval head and bulging red eyes that *Times* reporter David Adams described as "part reptile, part insect, part UFO alien." Indeed, according to many people in Florida, Texas, Mexico, and especially Puerto Rico, this creature had been running rampant through their communities for years, killing farm animals and in many cases completely draining them of blood. The creature became known as the *Chupacabras*, which translates into English as "Goatsucker."

Soon after the Sweetwater incident, a publicity blitz was launched to warn people about the *Chupacabras*. *Christina*, a popular Spanish-language talk show seen throughout Latin America, presented a one-hour special dedicated to the *Chupacabras* "phenomenon." Y-100, an English-language radio station based in Miami, ran a week-long search for the *Chupacabras* and offered \$1,000 to anyone who could produce a photograph of the creature. They even sent one of their

own reporters into the Sweetwater woods dressed in a goat costume in a mock effort to find the Goatsucker themselves. *Chupacabras* T-shirts, pop songs, and even sandwiches were offered for sale by enterprising businesses who wanted to get a piece of the action. In almost no time at all, the *Chupacabras* had joined other legendary monsters such as Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, and the Yeti.

So what exactly is a *Chupacabras*? According to many accounts by those who claim to have seen this elusive creature, it has rough gray skin, an oval head, large red eyes, large fangs, and spikes that run down its head and back. It walks upright, stands around three feet tall, and is adept at jumping great distances due to powerful leg muscles. It can also fly, thanks to the spikes which act somewhat like wings. It is believed to have a tube-like projection that is contained in the mouth, which the *Chupacabras* supposedly uses to drain animal corpses of blood. The *Chupacabras* is considered to be intelligent and somewhat capable at avoiding detection. It is also widely believed that the *Chupacabras* is of extraterrestrial origin.

The popular version of the story is that the *Chupacabras* is probably a "pet" of some advanced alien race that managed to slip free of its restraints and is now romping through Latin America and the United States, constantly in search of animals to kill and blood to drink. Jorge Martin, publisher of the UFO research magazine *Evidencia*, claims that the aliens are drawn to Puerto Rico by the Arecibo Observatory, the world's largest radio-radar telescope and home base of the American SETI project, which was designed to seek out evidence of extraterrestrial life. Indeed, the Puerto Rican town of Canovanas is considered by many to be "ground zero" for the *Chupacabras* legend, where the creature is blamed for the deaths of over 100 animals. Jose Soto, mayor of Canovanas, has launched his own crusade to capture the *Chupacabras*, using caged goats as bait and conducting weekly hunts through the hills surrounding Canovanas with the help of local volunteers, some of them coming from the police and Civil Defense. "Whatever it is, it's highly intelligent," Soto stated on the *Christina* show. "Today it is attacking animals, but tomorrow it may attack people."

There have been some claims that the *Chupacabras* has attacked and even killed humans occasionally, but it appears that animals are still its primary target. However, some people claimed to have gotten some good looks at the Goatsucker. One claim was made by a seven year old boy named Espinoza (location unknown), who claimed that the *Chupacabras* actually sat on his chest while he was asleep in bed. Another sighting is claimed by Michael Negron, a college student who lives in Canovanas: "I was looking off the balcony one night, and I saw it step out of a bright light in the back yard. It was about 3 or 4 feet tall with skin like that of a dinosaur. It had bright red eyes the size of hens' eggs, long fangs and multi-colored spikes down its head and back." The *Chupacabras* then reportedly killed the family goat, disemboweling it and draining the blood from its neck.

If It Looks Like a Dog and Bites Like a Dog . . .

So what do experts in the scientific community think of the *Chupacabras*? Back in Florida, zoologist Ron Magill, who serves as assistant curator of the Metro Dade Zoo, examined the bodies of the farm animals found dead in Sweetwater. His conclusion is that the animals were killed by a large dog, possibly weighing at least 50 pounds. The bite marks were "classic canine punctures of dogs," and none of the animals were drained of blood. To prove this, Magill stated, "I took a knife and cut into the carotid artery and blood came out of the carcass." At the scene of the animal slaughter, Magill also found footprints that were identified as a dog's footprints, and there was a hole dug under the garden fence that, according to Magill, was "a classic dog digging. You could see all the dirt pushed back and dog hair on the bottom of the fence." So why were so many animals killed without being eaten or drained of blood? Explains Magill: "Dogs don't kill for food, they kill for fun. It's a thrill." Magill should know; two years before the Sweetwater incident, dogs broke into Metro Dade Zoo and killed 15 antelopes in the same fashion that the farm animals were.

Magill's explanations, however, went nowhere with the local populace. One Sweetwater woman claimed to have confronted the *Chupacabras*, and the local media quickly forgot about Magill and played the woman's story on news programs repeatedly. Another guest on *Christina*, a Puerto Rican vet who is nicknamed "*Dr. Chupacabras*," has claimed that the fang-like punctures he has examined on alleged victims of the creature are "totally abnormal." This left Magill to make this statement about the *Chupacabras* craze: "It's mushroomed way out of proportion. I'm sitting here literally in shock."

The Espinoza boy who claimed that the *Chupacabras* sat on his chest while he slept appears to be telling a story similar

to that shared by many in the United States who claim that they were abducted by aliens, and some of those abduction stories involve the aliens sitting on their victims' chests. Many researchers claim that the alleged abduction victims were victims of a terrifying condition known as sleep paralysis, a condition where the subject is temporarily paralyzed during sleep and is subject to vivid sensory hallucinations, including the sensation of something pressing against the subject's chest. Although it cannot be said for certain, the Espinoza boy may have undergone sleep paralysis.

From Bookshelf to Legend

It should also be mentioned that one popular illustration of the *Chupacabras*, which was drawn by a history student from Princeton University, portrays the creature with an oval head with large eyes. The head bears a strong resemblance to the alien described by author Whitley Streiber, an alleged victim of alien abduction who described his ordeal in the book *Communion*. After Streiber's book was released, many others claimed to have been abducted by aliens with similar facial features, a detail that was apparently absent from all pre-Streiber claims of alien abduction. Before the Streiber alien, it was "little green men." Back in the Middle Ages, it was the dreaded incubus and succubus, demons who supposedly copulated with humans while they slept. But now the Streiber alien threatens to be displaced by the *Chupacabras*, at least in certain cultures, as the mysterious "bogeyman" who comes out of your closet to terrorize you as you sleep.

To some people, however, the *Chupacabras* is not just some phantom found in nightmares. It is a very real threat to their economic stability. Livestock has been killed, their mysterious deaths being blamed on the Goatsucker. When livestock dies, the ranchers who own them lose money, and their families risk going hungry. These ranchers simply want the killings to stop, and when the general media starts running stories about bizarre creatures that drain farm animals of blood, they cannot be faulted for being jumpy. These ranchers, as well as many who claim to have encountered the *Chupacabras*, are neither ignorant nor uneducated. But they may not have been exposed to the proper use of the scientific method in order to solve problems. In Puerto Rico, for example, pseudoscience runs rampant to this day, even in their institutions of higher education.

Etienne Rios, a Puerto Rican university student, had this to say: "It is certainly no surprise that fringe science is alive and well in Puerto Rico. The media there often report on weeping icons, UFO sightings and alleged alien abductions . . . Even insignificant and easy-to-dismiss claims are given inordinate amounts of coverage on local talk-shows, contributing to the public's belief that there must be something to them. The academic community is not exempt from such beliefs either." Rios remembered a time when his university sponsored a talk by American creationist Duane Gish, and when he dropped a psychology class after his professor planned a class trip to see a replica of the Shroud of Turin at a local mall, which the professor described as "empirical evidence of a miracle."

Popular myths, once started, are almost impossible to dispel, and it looks like the *Chupacabras* myth is here to stay for a long time. And the craze it has spawned has turned into a cash machine for enterprising merchants. There are now *Chupacabras* T-shirts, sandwiches, pop songs in Spanish, and even Web sites on the Internet. And the next generation may not be able to get away - there are rumors of an upcoming *Chupacabras video game*.