



Ark Encounter: The Making of a Creationist Theme Park

James S. Bielo. 2018. New York: New York University Press. 225 pp., ISBN 978-1-4798-4324-4

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“Ark Encounter” is a creationist theme park in Kentucky, a “life-size” replica of Noah’s Ark, which aims to prove the biblical story true by materializing it in stunning detail. Opened in 2016, it is one of the most elaborate religious attractions in the US, and uses state-of-the-art entertainment technology and design to immerse visitors in a fundamentalist creationist worldview. James Bielo accompanied the design team during the planning phase, and in this book he delivers a fascinating account of his five years of field research and the unexpected turns and obstacles he met along the way. Religious theme parks, although not a recent phenomenon, are still provocative objects for study, partly because they transgress the frames of religion, entertainment and (commercial) consumerism. Creationism, on the other hand, as Bielo rightly points out, lacks scholarly treatment outside the analytical framework “religion-science.” A considerable part of Bielo’s book is consequently dedicated to broadening our gaze and positioning the creationist Ark within the larger contexts of cultural production, public religion (or religious publicity) and “materializing the Bible.” His thoughtful elaborations on these concepts are useful not only for scholars, but also aim to influence public discourse, as Bielo clarifies in his introduction when he directly addresses different types of anticipated readers: non-creationists and creationists alike. His tone and style meet this ambition, and the resulting study is an entertaining journey through time, space and perspectives.

The book begins with an ethnographic vignette in which he describes how he visited a preview of a promotional film for Ark Encounter together with the creative team. Bielo then presents different analytical frames for approaching the theme park. He points to the historical legitimacy of devotional consumption, before zooming out for a comparative listing of places which materialize the bible around the world, many of which he has visited in person. Coming from outside the US, I had to notice a

slightly biased perspective in this chapter, since although he announces a “global comparative analysis” (38), his focus remains strongly on the United States. His typology of sites which materialize the bible refers to the global list on the “Materializing the Bible” online database, but mainly sticks to US examples. As a backdrop for this book this is absolutely legitimate and sufficient, but could have been labeled a little bit more precisely. The following three chapters are based on empirical data from his encounters with the design team. In lively, multi-sensory and thick descriptions, Bielo draws an intimate portrait of the four designers who have produced most of the exhibits. In chapter 6, finally, readers move together with Bielo from backstage onto the stage and visit the newly opened theme park. And for the dedicated, the highly-readable appendix (“The Ark and the Anthropologist”) offers a “behind the scenes” insight into his fieldwork routine.

Bielo recapitulates and structures the recent discourse on material Christianity, while adding empirically grounded insights into the perspective of creationist cultural producers. His book is an empathic workplace anthropology, and an innovative contribution to the field of fundamentalism studies. To materialize the Bible poses a set of problems for cultural producers, especially when entertainment industry requirements must be in accord with the fundamentalist claim for scriptural authority. Bielo’s selected interview extracts and fieldnote snippets illustrate the designers’ navigation through this discrepancy and make their worldview comprehensible: “For us as creatives, [...] we’re never gonna go against what the plain written word is. [...] But, *imagine a world* where [...] only eight people are doing right, and everybody else is out there, absolute hedonism, doing whatever they want to do [...]. And, how do you pull that off in a theme park environment where you’re not going to offend anybody? It’s a tough task” (67, accentuation by JB).

By focusing on cultural producers, Bielo supports Matthew Engelke’s differentiation of “public religion” and “religious publicity,” in which the latter describes the effort to make the former an “achievement that is actively pursued, promoted and managed by socially positioned religious actors who are possessed by particular strategic aims” (27f.). Religion should not be taken for granted in public culture, but regarded as the result of an ongoing endeavor, which needs to be examined in all its varieties. The appropriation of the theme park medium by creationist fundamentalists has sparked reactions ranging from derision to concern among secular media and scholars, most of whom base their analysis on the final product, the park.

A great value of Bielo’s book is that by focusing on the creative processes of production, he overcomes the common attitudes of both seculars

and fundamentalist creationists to perceive the respective other as inside a “bubble” that prevents them from seeing the truth. Bielo’s protagonists are creationists, but primarily they are workers, concerned with the aesthetics of materializing the bible, inspired by places and artifacts of non-religious popular culture and striving to reach

Hollywood-standards with their professional design. And by shifting his analytical frame from the more common “religion-science” to “religion-entertainment”, Bielo brings the imperatives of consumer culture into the discourse about history-making, hinting at a long-neglected criterion: “whose past will be more fun?” (181).