



# Beilo, James: *Ark Encounter: The Making of a Creationist Theme Park*

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Scholars have written extensively on the creationist movement in the United States. While Ronald Number's *The Creationists* provides what many consider the definitive historical account of the movement, various other treatments have focused on specific historical episodes or analyzed the movement through particular disciplinary lenses. What nearly all scholarly accounts have in common, however, is what James Bielo refers to as the "religion-science" analytic frame. This frame focuses on how creationists selectively contest and appropriate aspects of the symbolic and material cultures of modern science. While recognizing its obvious legitimacy, Bielo argues that this frame may be masking important aspects of creationist public culture. In *Ark Encounter: The Making of a Creationist Theme Park*, Bielo pursues an alternative analytic frame—one he dubs "religion-entertainment"—through an ethnographic account of the creative team designing a creationist theme park in Kentucky.

*Ark Encounter* opened in the summer of 2016 in Grant County, Kentucky. It was commissioned, designed, and is presently operated by the young Earth creationist organization, Answers in Genesis (who also operate the Creation Museum 45 miles away in Petersburg, Kentucky). The bulk of Bielo's research comes from more than three years spent with the four-member creative team between 2011 and 2014. The book is primarily organized around the different processes and strategies whereby the creative team harnessed the power of modern entertainment to engage various publics.

*Ark Encounter* begins with a brief primer on the modern creationist movement and then proceeds to set the context for understanding the religion-entertainment framework. Bielo argues, in chapter 2, that the park is best understood as part of the broader project of materializing the Bible—a way to immerse participants into an ancient past. Worldwide, Bielo locates around 400 sites engaged in similar

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endeavors and classifies them into four main types: biblical gardens (40%), creation museums (10%), biblical history museums (15%), and re-creations (30%).

The bulk of the book focuses on the work of the four-person creative team responsible for designing Ark Encounter. Chapter 3 introduces the reader to the production process. Bielo emphasizes that the product emerges through a process of “dialogic creativity” (borrowing the term from literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin). The final product emerges from the interplay of vocational skills, histories, and identities as opposed to a single dominant voice. In chapter 4 Bielo turns his attention to how the immersive goals of the theme park allow visitors to get “caught up” in an alternative history, lending a plausibility to the creationist account that the creative team believes might persuade skeptics and reinforce the faith of believers. Chapter 5 focuses on how the creative team constructed a creationist history in the theme park’s exhibits. The majority of the chapter describes the development of a special exhibit on dragons that weaves together Hollywood-influenced design with a creationist belief that humans lived alongside dinosaurs.

The final full chapter moves from the production to the product. Informed by 4 days in total spent at the Ark Encounter park, as well as interviews with members of a nearby congregation, Bielo argues that the final exhibit constitutes a walking “poetics of faith”. By this he means that visitors must actively fill in the gaps between a literal biblical past and the artistic imagination of the creative team’s vision. Doing so produces what Bielo refers to as the fundamentalist “gaze”—a way of seeing the world that reinforces the creationist worldview.

The book succeeds in arguing for the importance of moving beyond the “science-religion” frame. While acknowledging that such a frame still constitutes the core of what motivates creationist elites to produce various forms of public culture, a relentless focus on science overlooks other aspects of their cultural toolkit. Through his ethnographic work, Bielo makes a convincing case that the aesthetics, technologies, and professional standards of the modern entertainment industry play a big part in producing material that creationists hope to be seen as legitimate in the public sphere. In other words, creationist beliefs are not sufficient in and of themselves; they need to be packaged so they are compelling to various publics. Such packaging is not superfluous—it is an essential component of the creationist strategy for gaining moral authority in the public sphere.

It should also be said that the importance of assembling a compelling product is not lost on the author. The book is a pleasure to read. Bielo’s years of ethnographic research are presented in a way that allows the voices of the various members of the creative team to emerge on their own terms. While he freely admits that he does not share their worldview, his account is a sympathetic one. To the reader that finds much of creationist culture bizarre or absurd, *Ark Encounter* will serve as a first-rate guidebook to a foreign land.

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