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Genesis in Hyperreality: Legitimizing Disingenuous Controversy at the Creation Museum

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Abstract

This essay analyzes the argumentative structure of the “Answers in Genesis” ministry’s Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky. Founded by a \$27 million grant, the 70,000-square-foot museum appropriates the stylistic and authoritative signifiers of natural history museums, complete with technically proficient hyperreal displays and modern curatorial techniques. In this essay, we argue that the museum provides a culturally authoritative space in which Young Earth Creationists can visually craft the appearance that there is an ongoing scientific controversy over matters long settled in the scientific community (evolution), or what scholars call a disingenuous or manufactured controversy. We analyze the displays and layout as argumentative texts to explain how the museum negotiates its own purported status as a museum with its ideological mission to promulgate biblical literalism. The Creation Museum provides an exemplary case study in how the rhetoric of controversy is used to undermine existing scientific knowledge and legitimize pseudoscientific beliefs. This essay contributes to argumentation studies by explaining how religious fundamentalists simulate the structure of a contentious argument by adopting the material signifiers of expert authority to ground their claims.

Keywords: Creation Museum, disingenuous controversy, hyperreality, style, evolution

For approaching visitors, relatively little distinguishes the entrance to the Creation Museum from mainstream nature and science museums. The 70,000-square-foot museum

rests on 47 acres of farmland in Petersburg, Kentucky, within a 10-minute drive of the Cincinnati airport. The parking lot entrance is framed by metallic outlines of stegosaurus atop brown and white stone walls, and the museum's modern architecture is highlighted by a façade of cement columns framing floor-to-ceiling dark-tinted windows. On an average weekday, visitors can expect to see buses lined up to deliver groups of school children on field trips, retirees, and tourists who frequently pose before a copper-painted replica of a stegosaurus which greets visitors near the building's entrance. The lobby contains both a scale model of NASA's first planetarium projector as well as a Creation Museum press-a-penny machine. The main hall, an enormous three-story room, features a fossil replica of a mastodon skeleton and an animatronic sauropod in a lush primeval forest. Graphic designer Rothstein (2008) observes that the scene "seems like the kind of exhibit on Paleolithic life you might find at a natural history museum" (p. 97). Though the building retains the aesthetic markers of a natural history museum, a second glance reveals that this is a very different kind of museum. Just below the sauropod, an animatronic display depicts two children wearing animal skin garments who appear to be frolicking with two small dinosaurs. As visitors move beyond the lobby, they are directed to take heed of a sign inscribed with the museum's slogan: "Prepare to Believe."

Founded by a \$27 million grant from the Australian-based apologetics ministry, Answers in Genesis (AIG), the Creation Museum was established to counter the preponderance of scientific evidence for human evolution. Historically, apologetics is a strand of religious discourse which seeks to reconcile Christian faith with modernity by defending religious beliefs as scientific principles. AIG's uniquely sectarian uptake of apologetics leads them to posit that religious beliefs are, in fact, the only scientific principles. Identifying as Young Earth Creationists, AIG ministries believe in the "the insufficiency of mutation and natural selection in bringing about the development of all living kinds" and "a relatively recent inception of the earth" (La Follette as cited in Pennock, 2001b, p. 758-759). Therefore, Young Earth Creationists deem the Book of Genesis a literal scientific and historic account of the origins of life (Kitcher, 1983; Ruse, 2005). Young Earth Creationism is distinct from Intelligent Design (ID), or reformed creationism, which is premised on a more moderate and quasi-scientific belief system which accepts some features of evolutionary biology including natural selection and the common lineage of humans and apes (Pennock, 2001a; Sarkar, 2007). By and large, creationists have been unwilling to compromise with science and have sought to advance their beliefs in a variety of public forums, ranging from education to the press (Taylor, 1992; Taylor & Condit, 1988). With the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment as a substantive legal barrier to teaching Christianity in public schools, creationists have sought out other venues in which they might establish themselves as legitimate stakeholders in a public controversy over scientific theory (Duncan, 2009; Haarscher, 2009; Numbers, 2006). Now, creationists have begun to utilize the form and style of science and natural history to pursue an alternative approach to legitimize their worldviews and contest evolution. Mark Looy, Vice President of Ministry Relations for AIG, explains that the museum is an "evangelistic center" designed to present "the evidence that supports Genesis and shows them [visitors] that they don't need to compromise with the evolutionists" (Looy as cited in Asma, 2007, para. 24, 27). According to Looy,

the museum challenges visitors “with the question, why would an all-powerful, all-knowing God use something so cruel and wasteful as Darwinian evolution?” (as cited in Asma, 2007, para. 27).

Although it is likely that a majority of visitors share the museum’s religious perspective, the choice of the museum setting as the platform for advocating creationist beliefs is nonetheless noteworthy. Since the late 19th century, the public museum has become an important sign of cultural authority. Over the course of the last century, nature and science museums have become central sites for public awareness and understanding of evolution. According to Asma (2007), the “rhetorical mission” of flagship U.S. museums such as Chicago’s Field Museum, New York’s American Museum of Natural History, and the National Museum of Natural History “was to help average citizens to appreciate the general evolutionary history of the fossils, skeletons, and taxidermy on display” (para. 35). Conn (1998) suggests that the spectacular displays of dinosaur skeletons propelled the early growth of natural history museums. By one estimate, there were 300 nature and science museums in the United States by 2000 with approximately 115 million visitors per year (Franklin Institute, 1999). Over the past century, these museums have increasingly designed displays with schoolchildren in mind as their primary audience (Conn, 2010). Although only 32% of Americans believe that evolution is a valid scientific explanation for life as it exists today (Pew, 2009), public elementary education has increasingly turned to the museum to introduce students to the concept. By adopting the formal structure of the nature and science museum, including the display of dinosaur fossils, the Creation Museum provides a site where Young Earth Creationists can take their children to “see the dinosaurs” without compromising their beliefs. Moreover, the museum announces to visitors that creationists believe that there is still an ongoing and genuine debate among scientists about evolution in spite of prevailing scientific consensus.

Alternatively, the choice of the museum platform poses some challenges for advocates of creationism. Traditionally, a museum’s identity has rested upon its display of objects presented as material evidence of the natural and human history of our planet (Pearce, 1992). Although the Creation Museum is advertised as a tourist attraction on the basis of its museum status, it does not house an accessioned collection, a central criterion for being recognized as a museum by the American Association of Museums (American Association of Museums, 2000). As a matter of rhetorical strategy, the very act of naming the site a museum, rather than a religious center, frames AIG’s project within the technical sphere of natural history and draws its credibility from accepted practices of collection and display. As a matter of practicality, perhaps it is obvious that the imperative of drawing upon a collection cannot be fulfilled at the Creation Museum because physical remnants are not available as evidence for events described in the Book of Genesis such as the creation of Adam or the Great Flood. Consequently, the Creation Museum demonstrates the materiality of creationist thinking through its display of objects that are, by and large, created for the museum or manufactured recently. Although the Creation Museum adopts the aesthetics and stylization of nature and science museums, it rejects the foundational premises underlying scientific argument that human beings can understand the natural world through careful observation and reasoning (Pearce, 1992). By extension, the museum disregards the modernist assumptions upon which most nature and science museum displays

rest. The Creation Museum has thus faced criticism from the academic community for presenting religious explanations for human origins as scientifically valid (Asma, 2007; Byassee, 2008; Kahle, 2008; Krause, 2007; Shermer, 2009; Williams, 2008).

Despite criticisms, its revenues and high volume of visitors indicate that the museum has been fairly successful. The museum receives approximately 400,000 visitors annually, recording its one millionth on April 26, 2010 (Answers in Genesis, 2010). Between its 350 annual seminars, 50,000 magazine subscribers, 9,000 charter members donations, and tax-exempt status, the institution remains debt-free (Duncan, 2009; Rothstein, 2007). In addition to ticket sales, AIG generates \$5.6 million in gross annual revenue in merchandise sales from the museum gift shop. The success of the museum has also spurred a for-profit venture between AIG and Ark Encounter LLC to build a Noah's Ark themed amusement park just miles from the museum. The \$172 million cost will be defrayed by \$43.1 million in tax rebates under Kentucky's Tourist Development Act (Meador, 2011). AIG has garnered political, financial, and cultural capital by successfully tapping into the mass appeal of museums and profitability of a \$4 billion religious entertainment industry composed of evangelical Christian consumers (Ward, 2008).

The Creation Museum's popularity rests at least partially on visitors' knowledge of established museum conventions as both a source of credibility and its point of departure. Put differently, the stylistic appropriation of the natural history museum is designed to function as an authoritative sign of creationism's scientific veracity without providing visitors with evidence that creationism could withstand scientific scrutiny. The museum provides an unhindered and culturally authoritative space in which creationists can visually craft the appearance that there is an ongoing scientific controversy over matters long settled in the scientific community. In this essay, we analyze the displays and layout of the Creation Museum as argumentative texts to explain how the museum negotiates its own purported status as a museum with its ideological mission to promulgate support for a biblical explanation for the origins of life on earth. We argue that the museum designers engage in a series of argumentative and rhetorical strategies to position creationism within the sphere of legitimate controversy and establish the Creation Museum as a credible interlocutor within a scientific debate. Notably, we argue that the museum designers position themselves as legitimate stakeholders by adapting the very cultural signifiers that have led to greater public exposure to evolutionary theory (viz. the natural history museum).

It is paradoxical that creationism advocates have presented their debate over evolution within the context of a museum because, ultimately, the Creation Museum's argumentative structure seeks to discredit the very authority of those museums after which it seems to model itself. To explain how the museum establishes this perplexing authoritative stance, we draw attention to the ways in which the Creation Museum provides a pseudoscientific alternative to natural history by staging a *disingenuous* or *manufactured* controversy between evolution and creationism. In the past several years, argumentation scholars have complicated the study of public controversy by theorizing how some cases are entirely contrived or fabricated in order to cultivate doubt in the public, uncertainty, and inaction in such a way as to preserve a group's self-interest (Banning, 2009; Ceccarelli, 2011; Fritch, Palczewski, Farrell, & Short, 2006). Specifically, Ceccarelli (2011) notes that "a scientific controversy is 'manufactured' in the public sphere when an arguer announces that there

is an ongoing scientific debate in the technical sphere about a matter for which there is actually an overwhelming scientific consensus" (p. 196). The illusion of genuine debate then creates an imperative to hear "both sides" in the spirit of democratic values such as equality, free inquiry, and open deliberation. When controversies are staged to strategically produce uncertainty, they tend to foreclose debate, undermine the public's confidence in expertise, and forestall action on important policy issues.

We contend that the Creation Museum provides an exemplary case study in how the rhetoric of controversy is used to undermine existing scientific knowledge and legitimize pseudoscientific beliefs. This essay contributes to the existing scholarship in argumentation studies by explaining how advocates simulate the structure of a contentious argument by adopting the signifiers of expert authority to ground their claims. We identify two strategies by which advocates seek to delegitimize widely shared beliefs among experts within a particular field. First, they utilize technically proficient hyperreal displays as evidence that would not apply within a debate among experts. Second, they appropriate the signifiers of expertise to lend authority to their displays.

Unlike previous studies on manufactured controversies, this study attends not to the public controversy itself but instead to how the Creation Museum constructs the very appearance of scientific controversy and how authority is crafted stylistically within the materiality of the museum space. We analyze the Creation Museum as a space in which controversies over settled scientific questions take on new salience because they are carefully staged or simulated for patrons through technologically advanced displays. We argue that by appropriating the purely stylistic conventions of scientific inquiry and the modern natural history museum, the Creation Museum positions biblical narratives as scientifically valid evidence for creationist perspectives on the origins of human life. Our observations also elaborate on scholarship that has distinguished rational and narrative discourse to understand contemporary controversies over creationism. For instance, during the third SCA/AFA Conference on Argumentation, panelists Campbell (1983) and Hayes (1983) debated whether it is possible for creationists and biologists to find common ground since they do not share the same argument field. More recently, McClure (2009) has suggested that the persistence of creationist beliefs—even among some trained natural scientists—may be better understood in terms of the processes of narrative identification rather than by scientific reasoning. By explicating the museum's argumentative and rhetorical strategies, we provide insight into the ways in which fundamentalist movements have adapted their foundational narrative texts to the formal and aesthetic conventions of secular society to establish and expand their legitimacy in public culture.

The Materiality of Museum Arguments

The Creation Museum stands out from formally recognized museums by taking an explicitly argumentative stance; however, museum scholarship across the humanities has recognized the rhetorical and textual qualities of museums, including those of nature and science (e.g., Atwater & Herndon, 2003; Dickinson, Ott, & Aoki, 2005, 2006; Gallagher, 1999; Hasian, 2004; Katriel, 1994; King, 2006). Luke (2002) describes museums as "sites of finely

structured normative argument" that emerge out of ongoing struggles between individuals and groups "to establish what is real, to organize collective interests, and to gain command over what is regarded as having authority" (p. xxiv). Although museums of nature and science assert claims of objectivity, they are also purposefully motivated and implicitly convey ideological assumptions and ontological commitments (Asma, 2001; Lidchi, 1997).

The museum draws upon multiple layers of signification to establish its authority and legitimacy. As Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki (2005) suggest, such practices illuminate the material dimensions of rhetoric. By giving physical presence to the past, museums sustain broadly resonating mythologies and shared identities. Museums impart meaning to display objects through additional practices of classification and explanation in which verbal and visual discourse work together to construct particular biographies for museum objects (Bal, 1992; Haraway, 1984; Lidchi, 1997). Silverstone (1992) concludes that a variety of these systems or display logics structure museums as texts according to "a rhetoric which seeks to persuade the visitor that what is seen and read is important, beautiful, [and] true" (p. 37). In addition to the display and classification of objects, the materiality of museum rhetoric is constituted by the structured space of the museum. Bal (1992) writes that "the space of a museum presupposes a walking tour, an order in which the exhibits and panels are to be viewed and read" (p. 561). Thus, the linear or quasilinear structure of most museum installations guides visitors' experiences and elicits particular narrative frameworks that ascribe meaning to particular objects. As Silverstone (1992) observes, "visitors literally walk, or are propelled, through the stories which museums provide for them in their displays" (p. 37). Drawing from this literature, the focus of our analysis is to explain how the Creation Museum confers meaning to human life through its own practices of guiding visitors' experiences through the museum exhibits.

In addition to drawing upon conventions of museum arrangement and display, the Creation Museum draws upon the signifier of the museum setting itself to establish its own authenticity. This observation works from the public memory scholarship that has interpreted memory places including monuments, tours, and museums as unique "material vehicles" for shared memory (Dickinson, Blair, & Ott, 2010, p. 24). As Dickinson, Blair, and Ott (2010) explain, a memory place requires visitors to make special arrangements to experience it, and thus is a signifier in and of itself that commands attention as it claims "to represent, inspire, instruct, remind, admonish, exemplify, and/or offer the opportunity for affiliation and public identification" (p. 26). These scholars also note that the physical presence of other visitors is a unique feature of memory places that cultivate a sense of community. Indeed, much of our experience of visiting the Creation Museum involved our interest in observing and considering other visitors' reactions to displays. We attended the museum on a weekday in mid-March, as did several other families and couples. Often, we noticed parents explaining the museum information to their children or participating in one of several interactive displays with them. Although we do not know what other visitors thought about or whether they found the museum displays convincing, the presence of other visitors implicitly legitimizes the museum as shared cultural resource for understanding the origins of life on earth.

We explain how three interlocking arguments emerge out of the linear structure of the Creation Museum to validate the Genesis myth as a preferable explanatory framework for

understanding human origins. The Creation Museum is organized as a series of interconnected rooms organized sequentially, beginning with the Dig Room (explained below) and ending with the Dragon's Den bookstore that visitors must walk through in order to exit the museum. Each subsequent room expands upon material presented in previous rooms. Given the museum's explicitly argumentative stance, the museum constructs an argument chain in which claims from previous rooms provide support for subsequent claims. Further, the exchange between visual and verbal material in each room supports shifting display logics in subsequent rooms.

We organize our analysis of the museum into three sections based on the major argument themes that we observed as we walked through the museum. The first five rooms stage a disingenuous controversy by presenting the legitimacy and desirability of creationism as an alternative to evolution. The second series of rooms provides visitors with a walking tour of Genesis chapters I–XI, giving hyperreal presence to the creation myth by putting it in three-dimensional form. The last set of rooms reiterates the legitimacy of young earth creationism by establishing an aesthetic of scientific realism in line with creationist belief structures. Considered all together, the organizational layout of the museum encourages audiences to dismiss scientific appeals to the preponderance of evidence for evolutionary processes. By shifting the ground upon which display meanings rest, the museum's displays build an argumentative framework with dire implications for the future of public understanding and support of scientific research and reasoning.

Disingenuous Debate, Hyperreality, and Pseudoscience

What establishes the Creation Museum's status as a museum has little to do with the objects in its collection and everything to do with its style of presenting display objects. The Creation Museum adopts contemporary museum aesthetics by combining traditional natural history museum display techniques with postmodern interactive visitor experiences. Glass-encased fossil displays, life-sized dioramas, and room-sized panoramas replicate late 19th-century natural history museums, as do columns of written text that appear beside professionally crafted graphics, precise illustrations of extinct animals, and vivid photographs. Multimedia exhibits and interactive displays are placed throughout the museum as well, reflecting post-museum sensibilities that have proliferated in museums of science and technology in recent decades (Conn, 2010; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Johnson, 2008). Post-museums integrate contemporary marketing principles into traditionally educative displays and therefore view their visitors as "active consumers who seek entertainment and participatory involvement" (Johnson, 2008, p. 348). Rothstein (2008) notes that the Creation Museum's high production values reflect "the same sophisticated graphics, displays, and attitude of any large science museum" (p. 97). By borrowing from the aesthetics established by nature and science museums, the Creation Museum asserts its own authority to convey knowledge and tell stories about prehistory.

Crafting Disingenuous Controversy

In its first five rooms, the Creation Museum suggests that creationism and evolution are both equally weighted counterparts of a genuine scientific controversy. At the center of the

first room is a life-sized diorama of an archeological excavation featuring two mannequins kneeling at a dig site before a half-unearthed and indistinct skeleton. The diorama is framed by two large video screens in which two paleontologists resembling the mannequins present different accounts of the same fossil. Whereas Kim says that he believes the dinosaur died in a local flood millions of years ago, Joe uses the biblical account of Noah's flood to surmise that the dinosaur must only be 4,300 years old. Joe reminds visitors that "fossils don't come with tags on them . . . we never have enough clues, so our starting points usually lead us to different conclusions." This video introduces visitors to a recurring theme of the first third of the museum: differences between evolutionary theory and creationism are a matter of different "starting points"; both paleontologists employ the same techniques and examine the same evidence but creationists begin their inquiry with the Bible's Genesis narrative. Ostensibly, disagreements between evolutionary biologists and Young Earth Creationists are a matter of differences of perspective. From a creationist perspective, science can never produce belief or absolute certainty because its methods of inquiry are open to doubt and revision. Accordingly, only absolute faith in biblical principles can produce total belief.

This theme continues in the second room to the left of the Dig Site. The left wall of the entrance to the second room begins with a large placard that reads "Same Facts, but Different Views . . . Why?" This unnamed room displays a series of posters that contrast how evolutionists and creationists might interpret different natural phenomena. The following poster exhibits include: "Same Plants and Animals," "Same Universe," and "Same Apes and Humans." Divided down the middle, each poster presents graphics and text to demonstrate how different starting points lead creationists and evolutionists to different conclusions about the natural world. By positioning creationists' explanations alongside evolutionary biologists', the poster series suggests that religious certainties are as valid as inference-making and the scientific method.

By distilling evolution and creationism to different "starting points," the museum presents visitors with a disingenuous or manufactured scientific controversy, a disagreement contrived to create the impression of two equally legitimate perspectives on an issue for which there is generally expert consensus (Banning, 2009; Ceccarelli, 2011; Fritch et al., 2006). Disingenuous controversy stands in contrast to Goodnight (1991) and Olson and Goodnight's (1994) definition of genuine controversy in which the presence of oppositional arguments destabilize entrenched positions and taken-for-granted norms. As Goodnight (2005) argues, public controversies over science often enable valuable interventions into scientific practices by channeling debate to more productive avenues for deliberation. Although disingenuous controversies retain the appearance of a spirited debate premised on liberal democratic values, they often function to stifle debate, contrive uncertainty, and obscure facts and information (Fritch et al., 2006). As Fritch et al. (2006) explain, "disingenuous controversy does not facilitate the open exchange of ideas, even in the face of uncertain outcomes, but, rather, calcifies beliefs and practices and stifles alternate perspectives" (p. 201). In fact, some controversies are intentionally crafted to suggest to the public that legitimate stakeholders have been excluded from important conversations for ideological reasons and that the opposition's suppressed knowledge might transform taken-for-granted assumptions. These contrived controversies create the impression that experts do not agree

on the facts and that more deliberation is required before any action is taken. Often, the goal is to undermine scientific research and its influence on public policy. Critics such as Banning (2009) and Ceccarelli (2011) find that many appositional arguments within the argumentative fields of global warming, HIV/AIDS, and Intelligent Design are artificially contrived to preserve the powerful interests of those who might be adversely affected by policy change.

When the different starting points framework is first introduced, the museum's conclusions appear to be refined from the outcome of a debate and the participation of the scientific community, rather than from AIG ministries alone. A closer examination of the museum's verbal and visual cues indicates that the museum seeks not to present two distinct but mutually legitimate perspectives but instead aims to delegitimize scientific authority. Although the Dig Room presents creationism as certain and authoritative, it portrays evolutionary biology as dubious and unreliable. The Dig Room video constructs a caricature of a scientist who is outmatched by his creationist counterpart. This counterpart, creation advocate Joe, presents his biblical version of paleontology with confidence and conviction by recounting the story of Noah's flood and concludes that since "the Flood, according to the Bible, was about 4,300 years ago . . . that's how old I believe this fossil to be." The video infers that Joe's "starting point" enables him to make claims with more certainty and authority.

In contrast, paleontologist Kim utilizes less sanguine language to couch his secular approach, explaining "Here's how I see it. . . . I think this dinosaur died over a hundred million years ago. It dried out in the sun for a long time, and later I think this specimen was covered by river sediment which was caused by a local flood. She's been lying here all this time, till we dug her up." Kim's qualifiers such as, "Here's how I see it" and "I think" express the language of personal opinion commonly associated with self-doubt and his pauses and stammers suggest a measure of hesitation. He neither uses the precise vocabulary of paleontology nor references the techniques that help him make his assessments. Here, the debate framework provides AIG curators the rhetorical advantage of appearing fair and intellectually honest even as they portray their opponents as amateurish and virtually incapable of mounting a coherent self-defense. This move also strategically positions creationists to win the debate by cultivating uncertainty and skepticism in science rather than contriving a plausible scientific defense of creationism. In this way, the video constructs and subsequently demolishes an evolution-supporting straw person.

Beyond depicting evolution adherents as straw persons within the debate, the museum refutes evolution by indicting the ability of the human mind to know truth independent of God's authority. The series of posters contrasting evolutionary and creationist explanations for natural phenomena is introduced by a significantly larger poster that describes the Bible as a source of unmitigated truth and understanding about the natural world. An introductory poster frames the exhibit by stating: "Philosophies and world religions that use human guesses rather than God's Word as a starting point are prone to misinterpret the facts around them because their starting point is arbitrary. . . . Individuals must choose God's Word as the starting point for all their reasoning." The poster concludes by indicting Enlightenment humanism that propelled the 18th-century scientific revolution and deposed the Church as the ultimate source of worldly authority. It states: "Broadly speaking,

'human reason' refers to 'autonomous reasoning'—the idea that the human mind can determine truth independently from God's revealed truth, the Bible. Reasoning is God's gift to humankind, but He has instructed us to use the Bible as our ultimate starting point (Proverbs 1:7) and also to reject speculations that contradict God's knowledge (2 Corinthians 10:5)." The disingenuous nature of the museum's staged controversy comes into focus as this poster reveals its opposition to rational discourse. Exalting biblical authority as the ultimate arbiter of truth leaves no space for viewing debate as an epistemic practice.

In the next room, the Biblical Authority Room, the museum forecloses disagreement by presenting God's authority as absolute and, thus, entirely *undebatable*. While science is characterized as faulty bedrock for belief, religious principles are exalted by the museum because faith provides absolute certainty in all convictions. Here, a series of questions appears on the main wall leading to the entrance of this room, including "Am I alone?" "Why do I suffer?" and "Is there hope?" The final question asks: "Do different starting points matter in our personal lives?" Large black and white photographs beneath the text humanize these questions by depicting individuals in turmoil. The photo montage includes an older man in a wheelchair with his head hung low, a young child sifting through the rubble of an apparent natural disaster, and a married couple arguing while their child cries into his hands. Positioned in the context of the disingenuous debate staged in the previous rooms, these posters infer that an evolutionary explanation for human origins is undesirable because it cannot provide answers or provide solace in the face of existential challenges. These posters appeal to fears about death and abandonment to amplify the stakes of the controversy. By suggesting that the value of evolutionary theory rests on its ability to give meaning to human existence, the museum conflates questions of fact about human origins with questions of values, presenting evolution as a failed quest for moral truths. This confusion appeals to visitors' motives for shared human purpose and channels these motives toward a visceral rejection of science.

The third room, titled "The Biblical Authority Room," is an L-shaped corridor that begins with an extended diorama, including life-like mannequins of biblical prophets from the Old Testament: Isaiah, Moses, and King David. On the opposite wall facing the exhibits is a television displaying people reading from the Book of Psalms. Above the television it reads: "The Prophets and Apostles agree about God's Word." As the corridor turns right, the left hand side of the wall includes a series of eight posters that details historical challenges to biblical authority from the biblical story of Satan in the Garden of Eden through the 18th-century Enlightenment. Each placard refutes those challenges by suggesting that any scientific or philosophical teaching that contradicts biblical literalism is a covert attempt to attack the word of God. For instance, the first poster explains: "The elevation of human reason above God's word is the essence of every attack on God's word." Sustained throughout this exhibit, this argument helps conflate scientific inquiry that challenges the Genesis narrative with any attack on the Bible's moral and social teachings.

The last two rooms in the first third of the museum detail the personal and moral consequences of evolution. Graffiti Alley amplifies the stakes of the controversy by reframing opposition to creationism in terms of moral decline and abandonment of religion. This room presents a dimly lit re-creation of a city landscape in decay. Accompanied by loud police sirens and industrial music, a large graffiti message at the entrance of the room

reads: "Modern world abandons the Bible." A placard above the large graffiti message adds: "Scripture abandoned in the culture leads to . . . relative morality, hopelessness and meaninglessness." Faux-brick walls are plastered with news clippings about the Columbine shootings, restrictions on school prayer, abortion, gay marriage, stem cells, cloning, and euthanasia. The narrow alleyway ends at a large brick wall with a painted sign that reads: "Today man decides truth," with the word "truth" crossed out by a spray paint tag that reads: "whatever." Graffiti Alley infers that the secular religion of evolutionism is responsible for the rise of most, if not all, modern social problems. The room presents a dystopian-evangelical vision of a world sliding toward moral relativism. The next room extends this vision by presenting six small video screens of scenarios in which the loss of biblical authority leads to moral failings in the home, including drug use, pornography, abortion, and violence. The video exhibits conclude that creationism is the church's only defense against creeping secularism. All together, the verbal argument constructed in the first five rooms of the Creation Museum frames evolution as a set of cultural beliefs that threaten to supplant all religious values and destroy Christian faith. By this point, the ideal subject position of the visitor is that of a fundamentalist: skeptical of science, distrustful of human reason, unwilling to compromise, and unmotivated to acknowledge facts that do not cohere with her/his religious worldview.

Disingenuous Display Logics

The museum's staging of controversy in the first five rooms is articulated not only through verbal refutation but through disingenuous displays that deconstruct the role of objects as signifiers of transparent meaning. These displays further discredit scientific reasoning by challenging the ontological and epistemological assumptions that motivated evolution museum displays in the late 19th century. The modern museum's authority is grounded upon the veracity of the object as visual confirmation of reality. Conn (1998) describes the reliance on physical artifacts as "object-based epistemology" in which objects have meaning by virtue of existence prior to the museum itself (p. 4). As Lidchi (1997) explains, objects have *exalted status* in the museum because their physicality suggests a stable, unambiguous world, and provides "the most persistent and indissoluble connection museums have between the past and present" (p. 162). In addition to the implied status of the physical object or artifact, a museum's rhetoric of realism is articulated by the confluence of verbal and visual discourses that guides visitors' experiences of various exhibits. As verbal discourse comments on visual museum display materials, it implicitly endorses the authenticity of the visible object as representative of an ostensibly real past (Bal, 1992; Bennett, 2004; Haraway, 1984). The importance of verbal text within nature and science museum exhibits grew over the course of the late 19th and early 20th centuries as curators endeavored to explain evolutionary processes not discernable by direct observation. Bennett (2004) describes the system of labels in the evolution museum as a "filter" between visitors' sight and the objects of a collection designed to "nominate the visible that they made transparent" (p. 172). The display object itself implicitly naturalizes curators' verbal remarks as the rational order of things made visible by sight itself.

An analysis of the confluence between verbal and visual material of the Creation Museum suggests that its goal is not to guide understanding about human origins through

the display of natural artifacts but to evangelize religious principles in spite of the presence of artifacts that might contradict them. Despite its design layout that features a variety of natural phenomena, the Creation Museum does not endorse its objects as artifacts of the real. All of the fossils in the Creation Museum are replicas donated by private individuals. Additionally, all of the dioramas are composed of artificially constructed animals, mannequins, and recently manufactured items, as opposed to the taxidermy and skeleton displays typical of natural science museums. Even the paleontologists presented as Joe and Kim in the Dig Room video are actors paid by AIG (Rothstein, 2008). The Creation Museum's reliance on museum design aesthetics thus distracts from the ways in which it is not grounded in the veracity of its display objects or the authority of museum curators but upon the rhetoric of museum style itself as a sign of cultural authority. The museum's curious embrace of natural history museum aesthetics is a striking illustration of Brummett's (2008) concept of the rhetoric of style as "a system of signification grounded largely in image, aesthetics, and extrarational modes of thinking" (p. xiii).

A closer analysis of the Creation Museum's verbal commentary indicates that it does not seek to display artifacts that can connect visitors to a prehistoric past but to disassemble the logical structure that underpins the meaning and value of natural history museum displays. One way in which the Creation Museum disrupts conventional museum design logics is by denying objects' authority to convey knowledge about the past. The glass-encased replica of the Lucy fossil is a case in point. The display hangs on a wall to the left of the entrance to the Dig Room across from the diorama of Joe and Kim. A large placard posted next to the display case, titled "The evidence is in the *Present*," notes that the fossil is a cast of the *Australopithecus afarensis* specimen found in Harar, Ethiopia. A series of questions appear below this information: "But what happened in the *Past*?"; "When did the creature live?"; "What did the creature look like? (For example, how much hair did it have?); "How did the creature behave? (For example, could it walk like modern humans?); and "How was the creature related to other creatures? (For example, is it an ancestor of modern humans?)" . Such questions elide scientific conclusions that Lucy is a hominid skeleton estimated to have lived 3.2 million years ago. By asking questions instead of communicating these largely accepted conclusions, these placards ignore the existence of scientific knowledge.

The Dig Room includes similar glass displays of sapphires, caves, Trilobite tracks, and meteors. In each case, the placards refuse to acknowledge the vast amounts of scientific knowledge about each item. Instead they ask questions and provide answers based on the Bible. For example, a placard next to a replica of a dinosaur-bone fossil asks: "So, could this dinosaur fossil be millions of years old?" The answer appears in smaller font below, "No! The earth is just thousands of years old." The placard in front of the diorama of Joe and Kim asks: "What do we know about dinosaurs?" Text next to it repeats Joe's assertion that repeats in a loop on the video screens at opposite corners of the room: "Fossils don't come with tags on them" that tell us how old they are. Those who might question Joe's dating of the dinosaur's fossil at 4,300 years are discouraged from doing so by these written placards that remind visitors that objects cannot provide unmediated access to the past. If objects themselves do not provide transparent knowledge, who is to tell Joe he is wrong? Conversely, Joe's explanation of "starting points" instructs visitors that curators, who purport to confer knowledge on the object, have only particular and partial understanding

themselves. Although the image of Kim appears only in the Dig Room, Joe appears several times in other places of the museum as a voice of authority. Yet, his purpose in the Dig Room is to explain that scientists do not have unmitigated access to the truth.

This contradictory movement, the museum's denial of transparent meaning and universal knowledge about natural phenomena alongside its insistence on biblical truth, is intrinsic to the museum's disingenuous structure. These exchanges between verbal and visual displays early in the museum function not only to discredit evolutionary scientists but to cast doubt upon the process by which ordinary people are invited to understand evolutionary principles through observation of natural artifacts in the museum.

The Creation Museum also disrupts conventional museum logics by suggesting that biblical meaning exists *a priori* of artifacts from the natural world. Fossils and photographs of natural phenomena are presented as objects to be examined for their sacred meaning. For instance, the children's entrance to the museum displays a dimly lit rock that becomes visible by blacklight. The text underneath reads: just as plain looking rocks can become beautiful under special light, so ordinary people can do great things when God's light shines through them." Displays such as this one resist the curatorial objectives of late-modern natural history museums in which fossils and skeletons were selected for their typicality; that is, a chosen object stood in metonymically for the broader species it was supposed to represent (Asma, 2001) and for a larger context or set of contexts from which the object was accessioned (Haraway, 1984). In the Creation Museum, objects are not authorized to contribute to the museum's metanarratives; instead, the Bible's metanarrative gives meaning to the natural world. By giving objects sacred meaning, objects function metaphorically rather than metonymically. Displays that give meaning to visual objects as evidence of God's creation are visual iterations of question begging; the objects presented inevitably lead to the same conclusions that are arrived at *a priori* of scientific investigation. As the following section elaborates, the museum's insistence on biblical authority is the focus of the next third of the museum in which audiences are guided through a walking tour of the book of Genesis.

Genesis in Hyperreality

Following the museum's staging of disingenuous controversy, the museum simulates the Genesis narrative in a series of seven rooms which chronicle the alliterative "Seven Cs": creation, corruption, catastrophe, confusion, Christ, cross, and consummation. These rooms convey a departure from the design aesthetics of the previous rooms and thereby affirm the curators' dismissal of objects from the natural world as resources for understanding the origins of life on earth.

These rooms depict a variety of events central to the Genesis narrative beginning with Adam naming animals in paradise and ending with Jesus Christ's crucifixion. Computer-generated imaging (CGI) technologies, found in many contemporary science museums, simulate the laws of physics that ostensibly governed the mythic world of Genesis. For example, a large flat screen television at the entrance to the Seven Cs rooms visualizes the process in which millions of golden particles whirl around one another and converge to create an adult Adam, who stares in awe at his muscular hands and the world around him. In the room depicting Noah's Ark, four flat screen televisions arranged to form a large

square present a series of scenes depicting the Great Flood. The first scene simulates an image of catastrophic waves engulfing the earth from the vantage point of outer space. The following scene presents an image of what the waves might look like from the perspectives of communities about to be consumed by the flood.

Although it presents a defense of premodern belief structures, the museum's use of CGI technology embraces the postmodern condition of what Eco (1986) refers to as hyperreality in which the fantasy structures and virtual worlds promulgated by media and visual technologies become indistinguishable from the materiality of the real. Eco observes that "the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake; where the boundaries between game and illusion are blurred" (p. 8). In hyperreal culture, the authenticity of museum objects is signified by their verisimilitude—their likeness to, quality, or perfected simulation of reality. Put differently, "the fact that it seems real is real, and the thing is real even if, like Alice in Wonderland, it never existed" (Eco, 1986, p. 16). Hyperreality is also exemplified by Baudrillard's (1983) conception of *simulacra* as the simulation of something nonexistent, or the principle that "the sign and the real are equivalent" (p. 11). Embracing hyperreality frees curators from the imperative to prove their objects' authenticity and enables them to destabilize the metonymic relationship between the traditional display object of natural history and the distant past. Instead, authenticity lies in dazzling and masterful technological productions of simulacra. The exhibits' visual realism provides concordance between the visitor's present physical realities and fantastical imagination. Though devoid of any material referent, hyperreal displays enable biblical myths to take on a greater quality of intuitive realness than any scientific display.

In addition to its use of CGI technologies, the museum also uses animatronics found in many contemporary theme parks such as Disneyland and Universal Studios, Florida. It is perhaps not surprising that this portion of the museum was created by Universal Studios' designer Patrick Marsh, who is most well known for also creating the theme park's Jaws and King Kong attractions (Rothstein, 2008). Animatronics of life-sized biblical characters and roaring dinosaurs illustrate the museum's effort to give visitors access to a biblical vision of the past. The Disneyfication of these exhibits amplifies the authority of the Creation Museum by embedding simulated fantastical realities within the aesthetic conventions of museum displays. That is, the museum continues to draw upon museum display conventions but replaces ostensibly meaningless natural-world objects with simulacra based on the Bible. The life-like quality of virtual simulations and the tangibility of majestic creatures and biblical characters purport to be more authoritative than the traditionally accessioned collections of natural history museums.

Perhaps because of the significance of the Flood in creationist geochronology, curators devote particular attention to Noah's Ark. The figure of Noah is brought to life in two exhibits that simulate the Ark's construction and living conditions, respectively. The technological mastery of these exhibits is remarkable: Noah is imbued with human affect and individuality, including complex physical features and detailed bodily movements; his speech patterns, facial expressions, and bodily gestures are in near-perfect sync with his eye, mouth, and head movements; and his hair, skin tone, and musculature closely imitate real human features. Other features of Noah's visage enable the biblical figure to interface

and speak with visitors across a vast chasm of mythical time, and in a language and manner comprehensible to contemporary visitors. His vaguely Middle-Eastern-style tunic is meant to authenticate his biblical time period, and his English accent is an ambiguous mixture of Hebrew, Arabic, and American English.

In the first exhibit, a life-like Noah oversees the construction of the Ark. In the second exhibit, Noah explains the feasibility of housing dinosaurs aboard the ship. By speaking to visitors directly, the animatronic Noah simulates a first-hand primary account of biblical history. Sitting in his study aboard the Ark, Noah answers questions prompted by an interactive touch-screen available to visitors. Visitors are encouraged to ask Noah one of six frequently asked questions including "How did you fit the dinosaurs on the Ark?" Noah is jovial and engaging when he responds, "First of all, this Ark is huge!" Noah and other animatronics throughout the Seven Cs rooms give material presence to the ethereality of biblical narratives. In this way, the Creation Museum continues to trouble conventional museum's construction of authenticity. Eco (1986) writes that although visitors might realize that animatronics are robots, they "remain dumbfounded by their verisimilitude" as well as their ability to supply "a fantasy world more real than reality" (p. 45). Noah is the ultimate figure of biblical fantasy. Given the museum's insistence on biblical literalism, it is curious that Noah says anything at all. The Book of Genesis never describes Noah's speech; he merely follows God's commandments. The contradiction between the biblical Noah and the Creation Museum's animatronic Noah suggests that the latter figure is a *tabula rasa* through which curators project their contemporary fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible. The realism of Noah's robotic avatar consummates creationist fantasies of a hyperreal Noah. Through animatronics and CGI technology, myth becomes natural history, and natural history becomes myth.

Creationist Aesthetic Realism

At the conclusion of the Genesis simulation, the museum resumes its argument with science in a series of poster exhibits that counter evolutionary theory with supposedly new and emerging environmental models that work from the "starting point" of Noah's Flood. These rooms build on the ontological commitments of the previous museum displays by giving material presence to a variety of pseudoscientific models that are imagined to provide visible evidence for Young Earth Creationism. A video introducing the exhibits explains: "Scientists are developing a series of models to explain how the Flood and its aftermath could have shaped the world today." An adjacent placard reads: "Starting with the facts of God's Word and world, we fashion models to know God and see His truth." Thereafter, the posters provide detailed illustrations, artistic renderings, charts, time lines, aerial photographs, topographical maps, and ecological models. The models are provided with authoritative names such as the Austin Log Mat Model, Ecological Zonation Model, Breach Dam Model, Sulfur Dissolution Model, and the Vardiman Hypercane Model. Although the posters are saturated with scientific nomenclature, glossy high-resolution images, and professionally constructed graphs, they contain very little information. Unlike similar displays in science museums, they do not explain which scientists developed these new models or provide rudimentary details about how they did so. None of the displays acknowledge

that these models are the product of creationist think tanks (such as the Institute for Creation Research, the Discovery Institute, and AIG), not peer-reviewed research. These displays not only borrow from the credibility of scientific inquiry but also authorize scientific research under the condition that it prove that which is already believable within the creationist worldview.

The scientific veracity of these models is ultimately irrelevant to the exhibit's persuasive power, particularly in light of the museum's stance on inductive reasoning. Instead, these exhibits rely on the high production quality and aesthetic beauty of their visual presentation to bolster their position's appeal. While natural history museums are inherently aesthetic representations of science (Asma, 2001; Maser, 1996), these exhibits conflate aesthetic representations with the thing being represented (scientific explanation), so that the simple reproduction of scientific style literally becomes the substance of science. For instance, the room's largest illustration is a detailed, wall-sized panorama of a floating forest, a buoyant prehistoric ecosystem uprooted by Noah's flood but miraculously undisturbed as it circulated throughout the oceans' powerful cross currents. The image simulates the creationist "rafting theory" that suggests animals could have made their way to continents separated by vast oceans during the Great Flood. The appeal of the museum's scientific aesthetic is promulgated in what Haraway (1984) calls the "aesthetic stance of realism," a disposition in which "what is so painfully constructed appears effortlessly, spontaneously found, discovered, simply there if only one will look" (p. 34). Given the museum's previous denunciation of object-based epistemology, it is paradoxical that the images are common-sense appeals to the visitors' visual sensibilities that encourage them to trust their eyesight as exhibits unfold the science of creationism. However, the ability to visualize creationism in the scientific form imbues creationism with the qualities of science without engaging in the putatively dangerous activity of human reasoning. The models and images attain the status of "the real" precisely because curators have authorized them on the basis of their comportment with creationist principles. Although the rafting theory cannot be substantiated scientifically, the museum's convincing visual aesthetic helps curators frame the speculative and miraculous as realistic and plausible. Once authorized by belief, seeing may become believing.

As one's museum tour concludes, it comes full circle by returning to questions about the age of dinosaur fossils. The final attraction is the Dinosaur Den, an exhibit featuring detailed placards and replicas of some of the most popular dinosaurs. Replicas of the Triceratops and Tyrannosaurus Rex are accompanied by large placards with seemingly authoritative biometric information about the age and diet of dinosaurs that affirms biblical accounts. (According to these placards, the Tyrannosaurus Rex was a vegetarian before the sins of Adam, and all dinosaur fossils are 4,300 years old, the same age as the Great Flood).

Following the creationist models of the previous room, the Dinosaur Den also draws from previous display logics by engaging the aesthetics of realism to give material presence to creationist myths. In addition to asserting dinosaur fossils' relatively young age, the museum works from medieval legends to explain that dinosaurs might not have become extinct millions of years ago because they might have become dragons. Nearing the end of the Dinosaur Den one placard explains that "there are dragon legends all around the world that depict creatures that lived with humans. Many of the dragon descriptions,

carvings, and paintings fit with what we know about dinosaurs.” This speculation is confirmed in a short video presented in the last exhibit space in the museum, the Dragon Theatre. During the video, the actor who plays Joe returns to explain how dragon legends from around the world confirm the recent extinction of dinosaurs. Joe asks: “What could have inspired all these stories? Is the dragon simply the creation of a creative mind or could dragon legends be based in reality, possibly related to dinosaurs or other amazing reptiles we find in the historical record?” Mimicking the production values of an educational documentary, the video even features a brief interview with Kurt Wise, a Harvard-trained geologist. (His most recent affiliation as the Director of the Creation Research Center is never mentioned in the video or museum.) The mythical evidence presented in the Dragon Theatre relies on the same aesthetic cues as the previous exhibits. For instance, dinosaurs’ likenesses to mythical dragons is visualized by a detailed drawing of an ambiguous species of dinosaur transposed on top of an illustration of a dragon; ostensibly, the authority of the visual offers sufficient evidence that the two are related. Moreover, employing scientific aesthetics enables dragons to take on material, even hyperreal qualities. Because myth and fantasy have exalted status in the museum, they can be discussed in realistic, common-sense terms.

The Dragon Den’s fantastical tale of dinosaurs becoming medieval dragons is a fitting conclusion to the Creation Museum. By this point, the museum’s design logics have obliterated the distinction between fantasy and reality and between style and substance. The decision visitors are left with is not to determine which “starting point”—scientific observation or God’s word—leads to the most reasonable explanation for life on earth, nor is it to determine which theory—evolution or creationism—provides the most evidence for its claims. Instead, visitors are left to decide in which reality it is more desirable to live, a world of dispassionate facts that point toward the ultimate end of humanity or a world in which faith in God leads to adventure and ultimate salvation. Perhaps the final lesson of the museum is that, if creationism is more desirable and pleasing, the facts can be selected to consummate that world. Upon exiting the Dinosaur Den, Creation Museum visitors may now exit the museum not prepared to think, but “prepared to believe.”

Style over Substance: The Materiality of Disingenuous Controversy

In this essay we have analyzed how the Creation Museum draws its legitimacy as a scientific institution by appropriating the authoritative signifiers of scientific expertise to visually craft the appearance of ongoing debate over evolution between equally legitimate scientific experts when there is, in fact, an overwhelming scientific consensus. The Creation Museum is an example of how spaces for promulgating religious fundamentalism are enlarged by the adoption of the particular rhetoric of style associated with previously established institutions of scientific authority.

Our analysis has implications beyond the Creation Museum. The Creation Museum’s hyperreal displays and aesthetic of realism are examples of a broader strategy employed by Young Earth Creationists to promulgate support for creationism. Over the last two decades, creationists have adopted a variety of signifiers that convey cultural authority to legitimize their own explanations for natural phenomena. Although it is one of the largest,

the Creation Museum is one among 16 U.S.-based museums designed to promote creationism. According to a webpage devoted to creation museums, these include The Seven Wonders Museum in Silverlake, Washington; the Creation Discovery Museum in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida; and the Creation Evidence Museum in Abilene, Texas (“Creation Museums,” n.d.). The signifiers of expertise appear across a variety of creationist texts promoted by these museums. Additionally, creationist think tanks are continually refining their curricular materials to pattern them after those of professional science educators. New texts remove overtly religious overtones and include the same meticulously constructed and aesthetically pleasing pseudoscientific models presented within the Creation Museum. In 2007 the Discovery Institute introduced a “supplemental text book” entitled *Explore Evolution*, offering it as a resource for “teaching the controversy” in public school biology curriculum (Meyer et al., 2007). Matzke’s (2006) analysis of the textbook highlights its stylistic likeness to mainstream educational materials. Although the textbook is patterned after conventional science textbooks, it contains very little scientific information and provides a number of standard creationist talking points that suggests to students that there is still an ongoing controversy over evolution. This textbook illustrates how creationists appropriate the rhetoric and aesthetics of expertise to position themselves as legitimate resources for science education.

Creationist organizations also are marshaling the rhetorical potentials of place beyond the museum form to reinforce their own legitimacy as interpreters of natural history. At national landmarks across the United States, Christian ministries now offer their own hiking, rafting, and naturalist tours in which guides distribute creationist literature and provide pseudoscientific explanations for natural formations that comport with biblical narratives. At the Grand Canyon in Arizona, Canyon Ministries provides guided tours that adapt the rhetoric of the natural tourism industry to authorize their account of the canyon’s origins. Canyon Ministries (1999) writes that their tours are “designed to strengthen people’s faith in the Word of God and provide them with some of the scientific evidence that supports a young earth interpretation of the Grand Canyon” (para. 1). Like the Creation Museum, the tours defend their own interpretation (the Canyon was caused by the Great Flood) as equally plausible as geologists’ explanations that the canyon was formed over millions of years. By circulating their texts across a range of educational platforms, creationist organizations are reinforcing the appearance of two equally valid explanations for natural phenomena. Further, by providing alternatives to several mainstream resources for public education, these organizations are building public silos where audiences can get information about natural phenomena without having their worldviews challenged by scientific information.

Those concerned with the public’s understanding of science should consider the potential of creationist argument to undermine science from within by mimicking scientific argument’s form and by confusing the nature of scientific belief by comparing its degree of certainty to religious faith. To be sure, healthy and genuine skepticism of science is a necessary prophylactic against crimes committed in the name of Enlightenment rationality, but skepticism contrived as a strategic platform for fundamentalist viewpoints can have equally problematic consequences. As Banning (2009) and Ceccarelli (2011) observe, manufacturing scientific controversy and cultivating false impressions of symmetry between

scientists and their opponents has had a devastating influence on the public's esteem and support for important scientific endeavors. If the labor of the most intellectually gifted and forward-thinking minds of this generation is reduced to guesswork, then the public's collective capacity to solve the world's problems and understand the natural world will be greatly diminished.

The public is currently less educated about science and less supportive of evolutionary theory than it ever has been (Pew, 2009). A study funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation conducted in 34 countries found that the United States ranks 33rd in public acceptance of evolution (Miller, Scott, & Okamoto, 2006). While many factors account for the U.S. public's waning support for evolution, Than (2006) explains that "among the factors contributing to America's low score are poor understanding of biology, especially genetics, the politicization of science and the literal interpretation of the Bible by a small but vocal group of American Christians" (para. 2). Although it is not the sole source of public misinformation about science, the circulation of texts that promulgate a false controversy over evolution certainly impedes science education. The Creation Museum and other similar social texts make it possible for audiences to avoid scientific explanations for natural phenomena and even conflate religious perspectives with scientific facts.

This study also has implications for argumentation by highlighting the rhetorical function of style and the experience of place in the cultivation of disingenuous controversy. Our analysis shows how the space of disingenuous controversy exceeds the discursive realm to include material enactments in spaces of authority and expertise. In addition to bridging scholarship in the materiality of rhetoric and disingenuous controversy, this essay directs critics of argumentation to attend critically to the rhetoric of style and to material arrangements in public culture. Indeed, style has assumed a preeminent role in contemporary public life. Brummett (2008) observes that as contemporary politics and popular culture merge, "style today undergirds our persuasive relationships with one another" (p. 115). What is at stake as style increasingly becomes the substance of rhetoric? We believe that one answer is the ability to distinguish between strong and weak evidence within debates over natural resources and public policy.

In the conclusion to her analysis of the pseudocontroversy over global warming, Banning bemoans "trends in our national public discourse to frame all discourse as political, to erase the distinctions between fact and fiction, and to make knowledge . . . equal to that of opinion, to which everyone is entitled" (p. 298). The increasing importance placed on style in public culture contributes to the increasingly hazy boundary between fact and fiction as hyperreality makes fiction more desirable and compelling than facts about science and human social relationships. Although public culture has reduced knowledge to the crafting of opinion to which everyone may be equally entitled, those arguments that meet particular criteria for style may hold particular appeal despite their failure to meet standards for scientific evidence and reasoning. Thus, value may be found in distinguishing between hyperreality and an empirically verifiable set of facts, albeit discussed discursively. The distinction between style and substance might prove important in distinguishing between arguments that expand human potential and contribute to the vast reservoir of knowledge about our world and those which relegate human thought processes and modes of inquiry to a closed, anemic system of pleasing appearances.

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