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Unlocking the mystery

by John Blanton

For some months a slick creationist video has been making the rounds and stirring up talk. Produced by Illustra Media, *Unlocking the Mystery of Life* (UML) seeks to promote the notion of *intelligent design* (ID) at a popular level. From the Illustra Media Web site:

"Unlocking the Mystery of Life" is the story of contemporary scientists who are advancing a powerful, but controversial, idea—the theory of “intelligent design.” It is a theory based upon compelling biochemical evidence.¹

Last year Illustra Media made the 58-minute video available to PBS stations with the hope of better educating the American public. Furthermore, the Discovery Institute (DI), whose Center for Science and Culture is the main promoter of ID, announced last year that the New York Department of Education’s WNYE television station planned to broadcast UML on 6 July.

Andrea Bottaro, Assistant Professor of Medicine at the University of Rochester Medical Center, issued a note to the station with a number of cautions.

UML presents itself as a well-crafted, purely scientific documentary, while it is factually misleading in many respects, and its main purpose is propaganda for a pseudo-scientific movement known as Intelligent Design Creationism. UML has its (strategically concealed) origins close to religious fundamentalist and Creationist circles, and displays a pattern of poor scholarship, including misrepresentation/omission of key scientific evidence. Ultimately, these result in a misleading picture of the facts and of current scientific knowledge, as well as of the ultimate goals of the documentary itself.²

In an attachment to the letter, Dr. Bottaro pointed out that UML appeared to be the one and only production of Illustra Media. In fact, Illustra Media seemed to be the same as another entity called Discovery Media Productions, whose main focus was religion, not science. The previous productions of that concern had included the titles “Heaven and Hell” and “The End Times.”

EVENTS CALENDAR

February Program

Saturday, February 14, at
2:00 p.m.
2900 Live Oak Street
Dallas

Unlocking the Mystery of Life

A presentation of a hot, new creationist video

Here’s what the producers have to say:

Unlocking the Mystery of Life" is the story of contemporary scientists who are advancing a powerful, but controversial, idea—the theory of “intelligent design.”

We shall see!

Social Dinner

Our social dinner will be
February 28 at 7:00 p.m.

Check the NTS web site or
phone the hot line
(214-335-9248) for more
information.

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Why they created a separate production name to produce a supposedly scientific video was not immediately made clear. However, a Web search for Discovery Media Productions turned up the domain name **discoverymedia.org**. Going to that address revealed a page with the message “This site is no longer available!”

Nothing on the Illustra Media Web site indicates any connection with Discovery Media Productions. Neither does anything reveal a connection with the Discovery Institute. However, the DI seems to be all over *Unlocking the Mystery of Life*.

For example, the video starts with the tale of a conference convened by University of California at Berkley Professor Phillip Johnson in 1993. This “group of scientists and philosophers” “came from major academic centers, including Cambridge, Munich, and the University of Chicago.” All the participants shown on the video are now associated with the DI in some way, and the object of the meeting was to question traditional Darwinist explanations of evolution. All of the speakers in the remainder of the video seem to have a DI association, as well.



Unlocking the Mystery of Life: Creationist DVD for sale by Illustra Media. From the Illustra Media Web site at <http://www.illustramedia.com/>

For example Stephen C. Meyer is listed on the DI Web site as Program Director for the DI’s Center for Science and Culture. Jonathan Wells, Michael Behe, and William Dembski are listed as Senior Fellows. Dean Kenyon, Scott Minnich, and Paul Nelson are listed as Fellows. Jed Macosko is not currently listed on the Web site, but he has previously been listed as a DI Fellow. Phillip Johnson is not currently listed, but his association with the DI has been long and is well- known.

Writing credits include Stephen C. Meyer, and other credits acknowledge the cooperation of Stephen Dilley and Bruce Chapman of the Discovery Institute. The credits mention various sources for video content, including the California Department of Fish and Game, NASA, and the Richardson, Texas-based Foundation for Thought and Ethics (FTE). FTE is the producer of the famous ID book *Of Pandas and People*.

Significantly missing from the video are the many world-class scientists currently doing work in the very topics addressed.

Dr. Bottaro pointed out in his note to WNYE that the description of the speakers in UML seems to be a slight stretch of their actual resumes.

Only Behe, Minnich, Kenyon, and Macosko qualify as “bona fide scientists” by their education, employment and publications. Kenyon has previously done significant scientific research, although he no longer publishes. He was most recently co-author of the *Pandas* book. Macosko is described in UML as “Molecular Biologist, UC Berkeley,” but his association with Berkeley seems to be limited to his UC Berkeley degree and his work there as a postdoctoral trainee. He has never been listed on the UC Berkeley faculty and is not currently at the University. Some ID Web sites show him teaching chemistry at the religious La Sierra University in California, though at the time Dr. Bottaro wrote to WNYE Macosko was not listed on that university’s faculty.

Others in the video are treated generously, as well. Dembski is listed as a mathematician at Baylor, although his only affiliation with Baylor in the past has not been with that university’s mathematics department. He was previously head of the Institute for Faith and Learning, but that’s a whole issue in itself. Dembski’s scholarly publications, except for a mathematics paper, had been related to theology, apologetics, and philosophy.

Wells is listed as a biologist, and he does have a Ph.D. in Developmental Biology from UC Berkeley, having decided to get a science degree in order to combat Darwinism. Wells’ publication record in his chosen field of science seems to be completely void, indicating his main interests lie outside of science. I am not counting his book *Icons of Evolution*, which would not pass muster as a work of science in any review.

Even Phillip Johnson was a law professor at UC Berkeley and has never claimed to be a scientist. This is not mentioned in the video.

Even the most cursory inspection of the cast of UML prompts the conclusion that one is watching a cadre of creationist cronies sitting around knocking Darwinism.

Neither did Bottaro find much good about the “science” in UML.

The fundamental question is whether ULM conforms to basic scientific standards of adherence to evidence and facts. In this, it fails at several levels. First of all, throughout the documentary mainstream scientific views, supported by the overwhelming majority of scientists, are not even independently presented.³

Bottaro particularly notes the discussion of Origins of Life (OoL) science in the video. Kenyon had proposed some ideas on OoL when he was still doing research back in the 1960s. The video points out these early explanations have now been demonstrated by Kenyon and colleagues to be inadequate. What UML does not emphasize is that mainstream science

(Darwinists) long ago replaced Kenyon’s early theories with ones better supported by the evidence. And this was before the ID “scientists” had a go at it.

It is lapses such as this that give UML more the appearance of an appeal for accommodation than a presentation of any real science.

All of this is not to say the video is not worth a look. In fact, I have my very own copy. It is a first rate production, and I agree with this aspect of the reviews posted on Illustra’s Web site. Here are some:

"The science is solid and the computer animations are superb. Unlocking is a great film." (Philip S. Skell, Ph.D., Member, National Academy of Sciences Professor of Chemistry, Emeritus, Pennsylvania State University)

Outstanding computer animations. Some of the best I’ve ever seen. I am a cell biologist and I want to congratulate you." (Marvin J. Fritzler, Ph.D., M.D., Professor of Molecular Biology, University of Calgary)

"It is tremendous! I really enjoyed it." (Bijan Nemati, Ph.D., Senior Engineer, Jet Propulsion Laboratory, NASA)

"Unlocking the Mystery of Life is a fascinating documentary. Visually stunning. Everything about it was just top notch." (Art Battson, Executive Producer, University of California TV, Director of Instructional Resources University of California, Santa Barbara)⁴

I could not help noticing that the positive reviews tended to bear on UML’s graphics and production quality and less on its “science,” Dr. Skell, notwithstanding.

“See Unlocking the Mystery of Life on PBS” says the blurb on the Illustra Media Web site—giving us some hope of being able to view it for free. They go on:

Program managers at individual PBS stations now have the opportunity to use *Unlocking the Mystery of Life* for the next three years. They may incorporate it into the station’s broadcast schedule at their discretion. We at Illustra Media believe that the PBS viewing audience will respond positively to *Unlocking the Mystery of Life* and encourage their local stations, verbally and financially, to air this important program.⁵

Unfortunately, the page that accompanies this fails to list any stations showing the video, either in the past or currently scheduled. One wonders, then, what would a station manager say on the occasion of such a showing? “Tonight we offer you an opportunity to peer into another world—a beautiful world of magic and mystery. A world where any dream can come true—if you are willing to wish hard enough and sincerely enough. It’s the fantastic world of creationism.” Well, we can dream.

But wait! You can have your own copy of UML courtesy of The NTS and Amazon.com. Use the following link to go straight to the item:

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/B00007KLDW/thenorthtexaske>

Or, you can go to our video page and browse for more:

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/merchandise/video.htm>

We will also be discussing UML and the story behind it at the February meeting. We may not be able to show the entire video (it's a whole hour out of your life), but at least you will be able to get a free preview. See the February schedule in this newsletter or on the NTS Web site.

References

- 1 <http://www.illustramedia.com/>
- 2 http://www.ncseweb.org/resources/articles/2730_bottaro39s_letter_to_wnye_7_8_2003.asp
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 <http://www.illustramedia.com/reviewpage.htm>
- 5 <http://www.illustramedia.com/PBSpage.htm>

Web news

We post news items of interest to skeptics on our Skeptical News page. We don't do a lot of skeptical filtering on the Skeptical News. We just let skeptics figure out the lay of the land for themselves. Here are a few recent postings of interest:

Scholars debate significance of "Dickens Code"

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-01-27.htm#dickens>

You may have heard of *The Bible Code*, but what is the *Dickens Code*? It looks like more fun for us.

The perennially popular works of the noted author Charles Dickens, who wrote such classics as *A Tale of Two Cities* and *A Christmas Carol*, are receiving a new focus with the publication of an article asserting that the works of Charles Dickens may bear hidden significance.

"Our statistical analysis conclusively demonstrates that the works of Dickens contain hidden descriptions of key events in English history," said author Jeremy

Newton, who published his findings in the Winter 2003 issue of the scholarly journal *The Dickensian*. "I must say, the mention of Queen Elisabeth's corgis was rather unexpected."

Michael Drosnin's book *The Bible Code* provides the basis for searching fat blocks of text for prophetic significance. The technique is to feed the text into a computer with instructions to pick out letters separated by fixed intervals. More often than you would suspect, these strings reveal amazing coherences.

For example, a prediction of Tony Blair's 2001 election victory, with margin of victory, was picked up from *Great Expectations*. The text of the Magna Carta was found in *Oliver Twist*, and *A Tale of Two Cities* predicted the Battle of Britain. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* produced an alphabetic list of Queen Elisabeth II's corgis, in case anybody wanted to know. Finally, *Barnaby Rudge* provides us with the perfectly useless recipe for Yorkshire pudding.

My prediction: The Dickens Code will die a horrible and well-deserved death.

Source:

<http://www.watleyreview.com/2004/011304-3.html>

200 turn out for debate on origins in Darby

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-01-27.htm#darby>

The innocuous headline is the opening bell to yet another school creationism controversy.

Ella Springer wants the Darby, Montana, high school to give "students a choice when it comes to evolutionary science." Hint: one of the choices might be intelligent design (ID). A proposed curriculum change would have students "assess evidence for and against theories" in science class. Apparently the theory of evolution came readily to mind. So far no others have been named.

Source:

<Http://www.missoulia.com/articles/2004/01/27/news/mtregional/news07.txt>

Georgia takes on 'evolution'

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-02-03.htm#georgia>

Georgia's schools superintendent, Kathy Cox thinks students will have a problem with evolution. Not the subject of evolution but the word, itself.

...Cox called it "a buzz word that causes a lot of negative reaction." She added that people often associate it with "that monkeys-to-man sort of thing."

Still, Ms. Cox, who was elected to the post in 2002, said the concept would be taught, as well as "emerging models of change" that challenge Darwin's theories. "Galileo was not considered reputable when he came out with his theory," she said.

Nobody mentioned whether she considered "intelligent design" disreputable or controversial.

More disturbing, education officials are backing away from ideas about the age of the Earth and natural selection of species. For example, a phrase in the curriculum referring to the "long history of the Earth," was changed to just "history of the Earth." It would appear somebody has problems with the word "long." The Georgia Education Department also omitted references to the common ancestry of species.

"The structure of a building can affect a person's mood," the measure says, "which can influence a person's behavior, which, in turn, can determine the success of a person's personal and professional relationships."

Georgia educators consider this whole thing an effort to bolster creationism.

"They've taken away a major component of biology and acted as if it doesn't exist," said David Bechler, who heads the biology department at Valdosta State University. "By doing this, we're leaving the public shortchanged of the knowledge they should have."

Much of the state's 800-page curriculum was adopted verbatim from the "Standards for Excellence in Education," an academic framework produced by the Council for Basic Education, a nonprofit group.

But when it came to science, the Georgia Education Department omitted large chunks of material, including references to Earth's age and the concept that all organisms on Earth are related through common ancestry. "Evolution" was replaced with "changes over time," and in another phrase that referred to the "long history of the Earth," the authors removed the word "long." Many proponents of creationism say Cox has a history

of public support for teaching Christian philosophy in the public schools.

The guidelines were adopted by a panel of educators and will be officially adopted in 90 days.

Source:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/30/education/30GEOR.html>

California measure would align building rules with feng shui

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-02-03.htm#feng>

California is seeking to combat its \$14 billion deficit and is exploring novel approaches.

So it may be appropriate timing that in this most Asian of mainland American regions, State Assemblyman Leland Y. Yee, Democrat of San Francisco, has introduced a resolution that urges the California Building Standards Commission to adopt standards that would aid feng shui, the ancient Chinese practice of promoting health, harmony and prosperity through the environment.

Feng shui is the curious notion that there is a magical qi (or chi) energy that flows through all things and can be directed positively through the proper alignment and positioning of architectural features. Examples of such features might include doors, windows, furniture, or even an entire building.

"The structure of a building can affect a person's mood," the measure says, "which can influence a person's behavior, which, in turn, can determine the success of a person's personal and professional relationships."

[State Assemblyman Leland Y. Yee, Democrat of San Francisco] said: "We need to allow the expression of one's culture. That's why people come to California."

Arnold, this one's for you.

Source:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/30/national/30FENG.html>

Girl 'sees' broken bones

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-02-03.htm#bones>

Natasha Demkina can see medical conditions inside people using only her eyes (no x-rays). A local tabloid has brought her to Britain from Russia for a first hand look. The paper reports:

We flew her 1,500 miles to London to demonstrate her extraordinary powers on *Sun* reporter Briony Warden, who suffered multiple injuries when she was knocked down by a car in October last year.

After Briony removed a leg brace to conceal any signs of her injury, the teenage Russian was able to identify Briony's injuries.

"The most astonishing moment was when she saw the injuries to my left leg.

"Both the tibia and fibula bones—the two below the knee—are broken. I was amazed as she identified the two separate breaks and told me I had problems bending my knee joint.

Natasha pointed out other injuries, besides, plus an asymmetrical pelvic area, of which Briony may not have been aware.

Natasha is famous in Saransk, 400 miles east of Moscow, where people line up outside the family flat, waiting for their diagnosis.

Source:

<http://www.thesun.co.uk/article/0,,5-2004040384,00.html>

Adventures in alternative medicine

[Http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-01-22.htm#alternative](http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-01-22.htm#alternative)

From *Psychology Today*:

Summary: Six people take the natural path to better health. Discusses their treatments for ailments such as cancer, repetitive-strain injuries and allergies.

- Carrie Putrello, 34 is "the fighter."

While taking chemotherapy treatments, Putrello avoided sugar, white flour, and processed foods. She drank water and tea exclusively. She doesn't consider this to be alternative health, but she credits her regimen to the lack of nausea and weight loss during her cancer treatment. She also mentions visualization, another fringe medical concept.

- Dan Marano is the skeptic.

His lymph nodes were tennis ball-size in 1997. He declined medical advice to treat the condition with steroids and reached, instead for Andrew Weil's *Spontaneous Healing*. He had previously mocked "new age" practices, but he decided to give them a try. Regarding his traditional medical doctors, Marano said "I felt like a slab of meat on their cold table."

He went for breathing and cardiovascular exercises and grape-seed extract, cyrillic acid, and a combination of plant extracts called hoxsey.

Marano's sarcoidosis, and autoimmune disorder cleared up in three months, a fact doctors attribute to their earlier treatment. Marano has not given up on "Western" medicine. Apparently he likes to keep it handy. "I advocate an integrated approach," he says.

Similar stories are reported on Amy Lynch "the dabbler," Dorothy Compeau "the devotee," Josie Glausiusz "the non-believer," and Soliman Eid "the success story."

Source:

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/htdocs/prod/PTOArticle/pto-20040122-000001.asp>

Deep rift over creationism grows from book about Grand Canyon

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-01-16.htm#canyon>

Looking at the Grand Canyon, you would think it was 5 to 6 millions years old. In fact, some pretty good scientists think it's

"For years, as a Colorado River guide I told people how the Grand Canyon was formed over the evolutionary time scale of millions of years. Then I met the Lord. Now, I have a different view of the canyon..." — Tom Vail

that old, as well. But these scientists never bothered to visit the book stores at the Grand Canyon National Park.

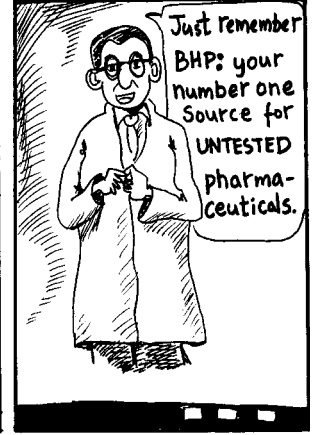
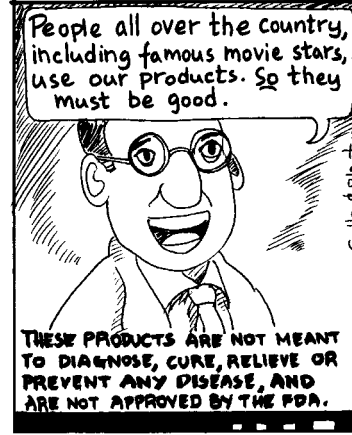
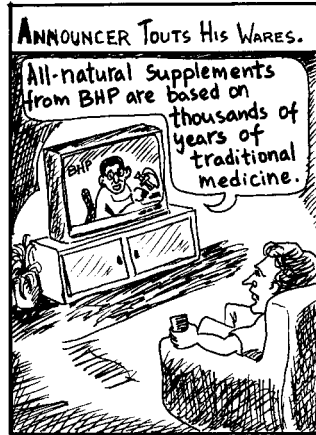
If they had they would have noticed the book *Grand Canyon: A Different View*. It's by veteran Colorado River guide Tom Vail. Vail wants us to know the Canyon was formed by the fabled flood of Noah, just a few thousand years ago. In the book Vail says "For years, as a Colorado River guide I told people how the Grand Canyon was formed over the evolutionary time scale of millions of years. Then I met the Lord. Now, I have a different view of the canyon, which according to a biblical time scale, can't possibly be more than a few thousand years old."

There are essays from "creation scientists" and other theologians.

Real scientists failed to grasp the humor of all this. Letters came in from the American Geological Institute and other sci-

Skeptic Ink

by Prasad Golla and John Blanton. © 2004. Free, non-commercial reuse permitted



ence organizations. They want the book out.

OK, to make peace with the scientists and some park employees, the book now resides in a section of the book stores relating to inspirational reading. As of the ninth of January the book was still available in the park, though temporarily sold out. Deputy Superintendent

Laura Ainsworth's musical show

parodying the anti-aging industry, *My Ship Has Sailed*, is returning to the stage **Sunday, Feb. 22, at Django** on the Parkway in Addison. It's in the Village on the Parkway shopping center on the SE corner of Beltline and the Tollway.

It's an early dinner show: Doors open at six, show starts at 7:00 p.m.

\$25.00 covers the show plus a buffet dinner by chef Peter Tarantino, plus the cover to the Retro '80s Dance Party that follows at 9:00, if you want to stay later. Groups of six or more get in for \$20 each. For info or reservations, phone 214-370-9917 or visit www.laurainsworth.com.

Kate Cannon expressed the desire to respect the views of the Park visitors, but she also stated the policy of providing scientifically correct information to visitors.

In a related matter, "[t]he Park Service last summer ordered the reinstatement of three plaques bearing Bible verses that were erected at Grand Canyon National Park in 1970 by a group called the Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary."

Grand Canyon Superintendent Joe Alston "called for their removal last summer after a complaint by the American Civil Liberties Union."

Park Service spokesman David Barna "said Park Service Deputy Director Donald Murphy overruled Alston because he and the agency's regional attorney were not sufficiently well-versed in constitutional law."

Source:

http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/nationworld/2001833017_canyon09.html

Georgia schools shouldn't drop 'evolution,' Carter says

[Http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-01-03.htm#carter](http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-01-03.htm#carter)

Former President Jimmy Carter weighed in on the Georgia evolution issue, saying it exposes the state to nation-

wide ridicule. At least it's not *world-wide* ridicule.

"As a Christian, a trained engineer and scientist, and a professor at Emory University, I am embarrassed by Superintendent Kathy Cox's attempt to censor and distort the education of Georgia's students." Mr. Carter, is from Plains, Georgia.

Ms. Cox is another Republican who seems to think the party line calls for defending biblical literalism. Her plan to ban the word "evolution" will call, instead, for the term "biological changes over time." Maybe what we really need is "elected official changes over time."

Mr. Carter, a Baptist, said that existing references to evolution in curriculum have done nothing to damage religion in the state.

"There can be no incompatibility between Christian faith and proven facts concerning geology, biology and astronomy," he said. "There is no need to teach that stars can fall out of the sky and land on a flat Earth in order to defend our religious faith."

Source:

<http://www.dallasnews.com/s/dws/news/nation/stories/013104dnnatevolution.13ae7.html>



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