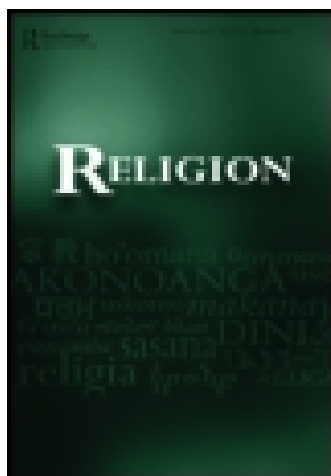


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Susan Raine^a

^a Department of Sociology, MacEwan University, Rm 6-392, City Centre Campus, 10700-104 Ave, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T5J 4S2

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Astounding history: L. Ron Hubbard's Scientology space opera

Susan Raine*

Department of Sociology, MacEwan University, Rm 6-392, City Centre Campus, 10700-104 Ave, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T5J 4S2

L. Ron Hubbard created in Scientology an immense landscape of alternative worlds, realities, and possibilities. Scientology cosmology, mythology, and eschatology are inescapably linked to galactic events and Hubbard's retelling of human history is replete with science-fiction tropes – many of which found popularity in the early science-fiction tradition to which he belonged. In his therapeutic and religious teachings, Hubbard proposed a complex narrative that re-defined the essence of self and society in relation to the cosmos. For Scientologists, the fantastic becomes mundane as they position themselves within a vast and heavy quest to reshape themselves, the rest of humanity, and, for some, the entire universe. Understood within the science-fiction context from which Scientology emerged, one can better understand the grand nature of Hubbard's proposals as belonging to a specific tradition within the genre – namely, *space opera*. Consequently, this article analyses Hubbard's propositions using space-opera concepts, and argues that Hubbard re-defined a unique tradition in the course of creating a new reality.

KEYWORDS scientology; science fiction (FS); space opera; identity; alternative religions

Introduction

As in the pulp science-fiction writings of his youth, L. Ron Hubbard created in Scientology – and in its forerunner, Dianetics – an immense and fantastic landscape of alternative worlds, realities, and possibilities. This creative process was a lifelong project for Hubbard – one that incorporated an astounding quantity of output. In the course of his unearthing of proposals and building of ideologies and histories, Hubbard incorporated a myriad of influences ranging from psychology, science, pseudo-science, science fiction, the occult, and more, resulting in what Hugh Urban (2011) aptly describes as a *bricolage* of ideas woven together to form a new movement. Critically, this multi-faceted creation becomes the singular truth for many of Scientology's devoted followers, especially, one might argue, for those who achieve the most advanced levels of Scientology training – OT and beyond.

*Email: raines4@macewan.ca

Scientology cosmology, mythology, and eschatology are inescapably linked to extraterrestrial action¹ and Hubbard's retelling of cosmic history is replete with science-fiction tropes – many of which found popularity in the early science-fiction tradition of which he was a part. Science-fiction (SF) influences contribute to – within the broader network of Hubbard's ideas – a complex set of narratives and ideologies that not only are eccentric in nature, but also are deeply compelling because of the postulations and promises that they make. For Scientologists, the fantastic becomes mundane as they position themselves within a vast and heavy quest to reshape themselves, the rest of humanity, and, for some, the entire universe. Accordingly, Hubbard's belief system – one that includes formative SF ideas involving alien species, new technologies, and psychologies – reworked human identity in the tradition of classic SF narratives. Indeed, this latter outcome often is a central theme in SF literature, where future Earth and off-Earth societies are characterized by humans and/or other beings that possess different – and typically advanced – ways of existing.

When Hubbard assigned the level of OTIII in Scientology, he effectively created a new universe in which Scientologists could relocate their histories, problems, identities, and deepest understandings of the very nature of self. Everything that Hubbard had previously taught them about the 'real' nature of human existence laid the groundwork for this, the most secret of Scientology's revelations: the 'truth' about the origins of human identity. This new explanation of the essence of self in relation to the cosmos illustrates the epitome of Hubbard's creative speculations within the vast and complex set of ideologies that is Scientology. Understood within the science-fiction context from which both Dianetics and Scientology emerged, one can better understand the grand nature of Hubbard's imaginings of cosmic human identity and society as belonging to a specific tradition within the science-fiction genre – namely, *space opera*. Consequently, this article provides the appropriate SF context – and specifically the proper *space-opera* context – to *some* of Hubbard's central concepts and ideas. Of course, given the wide range of practices and beliefs that Dianetics and Scientology incorporate, my use of a space-opera analysis speaks to a specific range of Hubbard's ideas. Moreover, given the enormity of his body of work, this article – like other academic works on particular facets of the group – can accommodate only a portion of the concepts that Hubbard built around space-opera influences.

The history of *space opera* within the SF tradition is a fascinating one and the genre provides an excellent tool with which to explain and analyze many of Hubbard's ideas. Strangely, it seems that most, if not all, articles, books, and so forth that remark upon or discuss the idea of space opera in Scientology either do so without reference to what space opera *is*, or, alternatively, rely on *Hubbard's* definition of the term², thus overlooking its origins in, and importance to, the SF literary genre. (And, as a SF writer, Hubbard wrote and published many space-opera stories in the 1930s through to the 1950s – and then again in the 1980s.) As this article

¹'Extraterrestrial' refers to any being or object not from Earth. Size, complexity, and so forth are not necessarily determining factors, although intelligence sometimes is a referent (*The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* 2013a). Accordingly, not only are phenomena such as meteorites extra-terrestrial, but so too are Scientology figures and concepts including the warlord, Xenu, and entities such as thetans.

²Whilst they do not address the SF origins of space opera, both Rothstein (2009) and Gruenschloss (2009) provide additional context to their works by elaborating on Hubbard's definition of it.

illustrates, in the same way that Hubbard changed the meaning of other words and phrases (Raine and Kent 2006, 610), so too he re-defined the concept of space opera to suit his nascent ideas. In order to grasp fully the significance of space opera – both in its original and re-defined context – to Hubbard’s cultivation of Scientology, one must then turn to the science-fiction literature. Furthermore, to situate appropriately Hubbard’s Scientology space opera and his fusion of religion with SF, it is important to consider the connections between religion and SF more broadly. Such an examination allows for a deeper understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of both and reveals that, contrary to expectation, the two have multiple motifs in common. Hubbard’s evolving creativity from SF author to creator of an alternative religious movement is, then, not as divergent in ideology and practice as one might initially suppose. The following section outlines briefly some of these linkages before moving on to a fuller discussion of the space-opera tradition.

Science fiction and religion: light years apart?

Throughout the development of the SF genre, authors frequently have presented religion as a superstitious, uncivilized practice, associated mostly with alien ‘Others,’ whereby ‘superstition is defeated by explanation; the immaterial is tamed by manifestation’ (Mendlesohn 2003, 265). Typically, when religion is practiced by humans, it is presented as merely a phase in human development (Mendlesohn 2003, 265). Science fiction is not disinterested in religion though: indeed, it seems that SF has, in some manner or another, ‘*always* been preoccupied with religion, even if only as its antagonist’ (Pels 2013, 214).

Although early 20th-century SF shunned religious approaches to understanding the world, this body of work did initiate a deep interest in the transcendent – the ultimate future of humanity was, and still is, of great concern to many SF storylines (Mendlesohn 2003, 264). Moreover, as the genre developed, one can observe how SF depictions of religion are sometimes influenced to lesser or greater degree by dominant religious-political discourses during particular periods in American history³ as well as by the religious affiliation (or lack thereof) of the authors (Mendlesohn 2003). Certainly, SF portrayals of religion frequently are negative (Engler 2008, 111; McKee 2007, 15; Mendlesohn 2003, 264, 269; Pels 2013, 216–217) although positive representations of religion do also exist (see Mendlesohn 2003).

Interestingly, whilst religion and SF are usually regarded as entirely opposite in nature to one another, some researchers and authors recognize several common features between them (see Engler 2008; McKee 2007). Whilst characterized by rationalist discourses, science-fiction narratives do mirror the functional aspects of religion in a number of ways. For example, they offer ideas about the nature of humanity (Engler 2008, 108; Herrick 2008, 23), they provide prophetic glimpses into our future (Herrick 2008, 23; McKee 2007, xiv), and they explore the nature of salvation (Herrick 2008, 23). In this latter regard, SF often presents messiah-like figures who guide humans to a better future and society (McKee 2007, 128). In many ways, religion and SF both look for answers to similar questions: *who are we?*, *where did we come from?*, *what lies ahead of us?*, and, *what are the consequences*

³Because Hubbard was an American SF writer and Scientology emerged first in the United States, this article focuses mostly on an American context.

of our actions? Consequently, SF and religion often *do* the same thing in terms of the provision of myths, theodicies, and other meaning-making systems. The functions are similar, but the setting is different. Peter Pels articulates this parallel well when he comments, ‘the sacralizations of science and technology of SF have reinvented “religion” to fit the secular experiences of modern people’ (Pels 2013, 214). Religion and science fiction are not entirely the same – especially when one moves beyond functional understandings – but neither are they quite so far apart – in some regards at least – as one might imagine.

As this article elucidates, both Hubbard’s SF and his religious endeavors reveal these aforementioned similarities. Indeed, this article proposes that Scientology can be understood, in part, at least *as* a SF narrative. Hubbard’s space opera compels individuals to be agents of social change both on Earth and in the cosmos. Hence Scientologists, like many protagonists in SF novels, are driven by the assumption that they bring about progress⁴ within their own and other cultures that they encounter.

Thus, in Scientology, the functional nature of religion and of SF exist simultaneously. This unique dynamic demonstrates what Engler proposes: that religion and SF both attend to the ‘same linkage between human action and social and cosmic order’ (Engler 2008, 116). Scientology as religion and Scientology as SF narrative assume human ingenuity and ‘progress’ as positive agents in a galactic context.

This article acknowledges the ways that SF informs Hubbard’s religion especially when one observes the many ways that Scientology *as* religion and *as* SF offers a complex narrative on the relationship between our human past, present, and future. To begin my exploration of Hubbard’s space opera, I provide a brief overview of the broader history of science fiction. This process allows for an inclusive look at the genre, the culture that it spawned, and an appreciation of the extent to which the early SF culture influenced Hubbard’s ideas.

Early science-fiction culture: laying the foundations for Hubbard’s space opera

Science fiction as a type of writing and cultural influence emerged in the 19th century with the works of authors such as Jules Verne and H.G. Wells.⁵ By the 1920s and 1930s it became a named genre, when writer, inventor, and magazine publisher Hugo Gernsback (1884–1967) popularized the term *science fiction* (Bould and Vint 2011, 1; Cheng 2012, 7). In 1926, he published the first magazine dedicated entirely to it – namely, *Amazing Stories* (Bould and Vint 2011, 1; Carter 1977, 4), thus establishing the basis for what would become a popular fiction genre. Indeed, magazines dedicated to SF stories were key contributors to the establishment of science fiction as a unique new literary form (Attebery 2003, 32).⁶ Numerous definitions of SF exist, but most of them encompass the idea that

⁴John Rieder (2005) contends that the problematic notion of progress ‘links science fiction to colonialism’ (Rieder 2005, 374). Colonialism is a key theme in SF (see Rieder 2005; Seed 2010).

⁵Gernsback popularized the term but author William Wilson was the first to use it (Bould and Vint 2011, 1). Paul Kincaid suggests that no single piece of work represents the sole origin of SF literature (Kincaid 2005, 41).

⁶The growth of a science-fiction subculture indicated the popularity of the new genre. Clubs, debates, and conventions became a part of fan culture, and by 1932 fans had their own magazine publication (del Rey 1979, 71).

writers use the state of science and technology of any given time as a platform to develop ideas about the future, usually within the context of this and/or other worlds and galaxies.⁷ Paul Carter's definition is useful in this regard: 'Science fiction is an imaginative extrapolation from the known to the unknown. In a technological era, future technology becomes one of the more spectacular unknowns' (Carter 1977, 4).

Early 20th-century pulp⁸ SF stories appealed not only to readers who enjoyed them purely for their creativity but also to many other readers who had scientific credentials and who enjoyed debating the nature of the scientific proposals made therein (Carter 1977, 17). Indeed, Gernsback actively promoted stories by writers who were also scientists, and he encouraged non-scientist authors to make sure that their work was scientifically grounded in some measure (Westfahl 1998, 44). He posited that published works of fiction afforded the opportunity not only to publicize real science but to provide inspiration to future scientists too (Brake and Hook 2008, 90; see also Cheng 2012, 85). At this time, the importance of science was becoming increasingly recognized: the products of scientific invention and technology had the ability to change society – often in ways that seemed drawn from the pages of science fiction (Bould and Vint 2011, 61). Thus, in some ways, science and science fiction were becoming more alike.⁹

In his early career¹⁰, Hubbard was a prolific writer of science fiction, westerns, and adventure stories, many of which appeared in the popular pulp publications of the era. Moreover, Hubbard's form of psychotherapy, Dianetics, and his alternative religious system, Scientology, emerged during a boom in the popularity of SF writing in the United States. When Hubbard introduced Dianetics, he did so in *Astounding Science Fiction*, the leading magazine of its kind during this period.

The editor of *Astounding* at the time, John W. Campbell (1910–1971), became a key figure in SF in the 1940s – the 'Golden Era' of the genre. Upon becoming editor of the magazine in 1938, Campbell quickly began to publish submissions from authors who incorporated themes of immense scientific and technological advancements – including those that proposed that such shifts would facilitate greater *spiritual* experiences and insights. Furthermore, Campbell became an active proponent of the idea that new technologies and engineering advances could be applied to the creation of new thought technologies (Berger 1989, 124–125). Psychology, science, and parapsychology (e.g., telekinesis and telepathy) came together in many of the writings of this period. Campbell and other like-minded editors specifically gave a platform to writers incorporating these

⁷Defining 'science fiction' remains a site of contestation within the genre (Gunn 2005, 5).

⁸The term 'pulp' originated from the poor quality of the paper on which such fiction was published. Pulp fiction more broadly was criticized as one of the lowest forms of fiction. It was, however, extremely popular, and as later research illustrates, some of the early criticism of it derived from pulp fiction's association with working- or lower-class readership (Cheng 2012, 21). Berger notes, however, that *Astounding Science Fiction* (in which Hubbard published many stories and first introduced Dianetics) attracted a middle- to upper-middle-class readership (Berger 1989, 137).

⁹Mark L. Brake and Reverend Neil Hook's (2008) book, *Different Engines: How Science Drives Fiction and Fiction Drives Science* explores the fascinating reciprocal relationship between the SF genre and actual scientific developments.

¹⁰Aspects of Hubbard's career as a pulp writer and its influence upon the development of Dianetics and Scientology has been discussed elsewhere (for example, see Bainbridge [1987]; Bainbridge [2009]; Berger [1989]; Gruenschloss [2009]; Rothstein [2009]; Urban [2011]; Whitehead [1974]).

themes (Carter 1977, 159–160). In terms of early SF editorship, where Gernsback had demanded at least some grounding in scientific reality, Campbell eventually abandoned all such limitations and opened the door to ever more fantastic stories. Gernsback responded by criticizing Campbell's departure from the original and serious principles of science fiction. Indeed, Gernsback's criticism of Campbell casts him as the first 'vocal opponent' of the space-opera tradition (Westfahl 1994, 178).

Hubbard's Dianetics – a 'science of the mind' – paralleled these and other 'psychological technologies,' and mirrored Campbell's claims that such abilities had the potential to put an end to all the problems that our world faces (Berger 1989, 125). SF writers of this era envisioned human evolution resulting in 'the hypertrophy of the brain' due to substantial developments in mind technologies; conversely, they postulated that the human body would wither with disuse.¹¹ Hubbard even wrote a piece for *Marvel* comics about the common motif of enhanced human intelligence in science-fiction literature (Bainbridge 2009, 37). And, as Attebery (2003) notes, Hubbard's works of fiction and his Dianetic and Scientology writings revolve around the same premise: 'that the mind's untapped powers could transform ordinary humans into psychic supermen' (Attebery 2003, 40).

Initially, Campbell enthusiastically promoted Hubbard's *Dianetics* as a new scientific approach to healing¹², thus providing Hubbard's work with a level of prestige and appeal (Wallis 1976, 68).¹³ SF author Jack Williamson goes as far as to say that during his period of fascination for Dianetics, Campbell 'let it cripple *Astounding*' (Williamson 1985, 183). Interestingly, according to SF writer Barry N. Malzberg, Hubbard devised Dianetics *with* Campbell's help – not as a solo project (Berger 1989, 124). In terms of Dianetics's initial appeal, many early followers and converts were SF fans (Bainbridge 1987, 61; Berger 1989, 124), providing Hubbard with a pre-existing pool of prospective converts to Scientology – the 'scientific and technological religion' (Bainbridge 1987, 67).

Hubbard specifically promoted Dianetics as a scientific philosophy and therapy – partly because of the privileged position that science had come to occupy in society. Furthermore, early followers of Dianetics embraced the influence of science fiction because it 'blurr[ed] the distinction between the empirical and the desirable' (Wallis 1976, 67). Not all SF fans were enthused by Dianetics though. Many of them regarded it as preposterous (Carter 1977, 159) and wrote to *Astounding* claiming that Hubbard's psychotherapeutic thesis threatened to undermine the new – and tentative – respectability that SF had achieved. (This respect was due, in part, to the realization of atomic energy as well as other real-world achievements that science-fiction writing had previously speculated [Berger 1989,

¹¹This vision of superhuman ability was in direct contrast with the *physically* superior *Superman* that Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created in 1938 (Carter 1977, 145).

¹²*Astounding* also published 'Dianometry, an article in which Hubbard claimed to provide rigorous, scientific evidence of his new therapy. Del Rey considers the work "propaganda," published to encourage support for Dianetics' (del Rey 1979, 163).

¹³Later, Campbell, like some others in the SF community, began to distance themselves from Dianetics (Carter 1977, 158–159). Campbell and SF author Van Vogt became disenchanted with Hubbard's work when he proposed that auditors examine the past lives of clients (Whitehead 1974, 579).

125].)¹⁴ Hubbard published many SF stories as well as *Dianetics* during a highly creative and speculative period of fiction *and* of science.

In the next section, I discuss the concept of space opera more thoroughly. This concept, whilst lacking context and discussion in the literature on Scientology, is, by contrast, more fully understood with SF circles given its importance to the tradition. Still, as becomes apparent, the term is not without ambiguity and contestation.

Space opera

What is space opera then? Wilson 'Bob' Tucker (1914–2006), creator of the science-fiction fanzine, *Le Zombie*, originated the term space opera thus: 'Westerns are called "horse operas," the morning housewife tear-jerkers are called 'soap operas.' For the hacky, grinding, stinking, outworn space-ship yarn . . . we offer "space opera.'" (Tucker [1941] cited in Hartwell and Cramer 2006, 260; Westfahl 2003, 197). Much of the early pulp science fiction is a part of the space-opera tradition. One should note, however, that SF authors and scholars are not necessarily unified in their delineation of 'space opera' as a definitional category. Space opera as a genre has evolved, and, as such, is used to define different periods of SF work in different ways. Gary Westfahl notes that space opera receives little academic attention and for the most part lacks 'rigorous definition' (Westfahl 2003, 197) – an omission that Hartwell and Cramer (2006) do much to rectify. The precise starting point of the concept also is contested, although Westfahl identifies E. E. Smith's *Skyllark of Space* (1928) as the generally agreed-upon first popular space-opera work (Westfahl 2003, 198) – a claim that is, however, dependent on the definition that one uses.

Science-fiction writer Brian W. Aldiss explains that the key difference between science fiction generally and the sub-genre of space opera specifically is that the former is for 'real' and the latter for 'fun.' He proposes that: 'What space opera does is take a few light years and a pinch of reality and inflate thoroughly with melodrama, dreams, and a seasoning of screwy ideas.' Aldiss continues, 'space opera was heady, escapist stuff, charging on without much regard for logic or literacy' (Aldiss 1974, xi).¹⁵ From Aldiss's perspective, space opera does not always conform to the grounding in reality that science fiction does. Instead, it is a looser, freer tradition that allows for complete departures from the rational possibilities of science, allowing space-opera authors to create scenarios uninhibited by the norms of scientifically grounded proposals. For some members of the SF community this characteristic was problematic in that the lack of scientific grounding could lead to completely absurd and nonsensical stories. Westfahl (1994) confirms this concern, noting that space opera as a sub-genre can clearly be delineated from science fiction because its works 'fail to fulfill the genre's announced goals of scientific and literary excellence . . . they visibly do not even attempt to fulfill these goals'

¹⁴Prior to its real-world manifestation, science-fiction writers had imagined how nuclear energy could positively transform society. After the bombing of Hiroshima, however, the transformative role of nuclear technologies took on a very different meaning (Berger 1989, 134; Brake and Hook 2008, 106).

¹⁵Hartwell and Cramer find Aldiss's definition problematic, arguing that he redefined space opera to incorporate too many SF works, thus neutralizing more nuanced categories of SF (see Hartwell and Cramer 2006, 14–15).

(Westfahl 1994, 177). Moreover, historically: 'It is the most common, and least respected, form of science fiction' (Westfahl 2003, 197).

Drawing on Tucker's original definition of space opera, Westfahl (2003) identifies three elements typically present in this genre. First, space-opera stories usually require the presence of a spaceship so that space travel is possible. Second, space operas, are, at their core, 'exciting adventure stor[ies],' (Westfahl 2003, 197), and accordingly, are characterized by aliens, battles, and violence. Third, oftentimes space-opera stories become tedious, predictable, and ordinary – and usually they generate many sequels (Westfahl 2003, 197–198).

Hartwell and Cramer (2006) flesh out the history of space opera, identifying how the concept has been conceived of and applied at different times. They note that the first type/definition of space opera (as defined by Tucker) comprised 'subliterate' publications that do not receive any positive recognition today. They propose that the first definition of space opera was replaced by a second one that emerged during the 1960s and which allowed for a re-drawing of boundaries such that the category was misapplied to the 'good space stories' of E.E. Smith, Edmund Hamilton and others who were a part of SF's early 20th-century creative thrust (Hartwell and Cramer 2006, 10–11). Thus, the second definition incorporates the works of these influential writers along with the universally derided hack writers of the first definition. This new approach to defining space opera was borne out of the criticisms of some SF authors who reassessed the work of their predecessors in new terms (Hartwell and Cramer 2006, 10–12) as well as by authors who were a part of the 'New Wave' movement in SF that emerged both in the U. K. and the U.S. New Wave authors reacted against SF's madcap space-adventure past, and in doing so redefined prior SF novels. Favoring what they identified as a more sophisticated and cerebral approach to SF writing, they rejected what appeared to them to be the crude publications of the pulp era (Hartwell and Cramer 2006, 13–15). Hartwell and Cramer note also that prior to the 1970s – when the category of space opera started to take on new and positive meanings – very few SF writers specifically set out to *deliberately* write space opera (Hartwell and Cramer 2006, 10). In other words, the term, coined after much of the work that it is used to describe had been written already, is a retrospectively applied label.

One can identify space opera and its evolution through various stylistic and definitional phases (see Hartwell and Cramer 2006; Westfahl 2003) as part of the trajectory of a literary form. Space opera as a sub-genre of SF remained a derogatory term until the 1980s, by which time it had re-emerged, and, had been re-imagined – and re-defined for a third time. 'New space opera' is defined in positive terms, referring to well-crafted, extremely creative, large-scale science fiction that, while highly marketable, is also often critically well received. Indeed, many contemporary fans and even writers of space opera are unaware of the original, disparaging meaning of the concept. Today, authors such as Iain M. Banks¹⁶, David Brin, Alistair Reynolds, and Catherine Asaro write critically acclaimed space opera – works that are well written, elaborate, and often radical within their genre at a number of different levels (Hartwell and Cramer 2006, 17–18).

¹⁶A prolific writer and author of the *Culture* series of SF novels (published between 1987–2010), Iain M. Banks died in June 2013.

Turning now to Hubbard's definition of space opera, one can identify that it diverges from all of the others in a critical way: Hubbard claimed that space opera is not a fictional genre, but instead that it is *factual* – a true and complete account of human history. Although in an official Scientology dictionary (see Hubbard 1975), Hubbard simply inserted a Merriam-Webster dictionary definition that identified space opera as SF sub-genre, in all his other writings and lectures he clearly identifies it as *fact* rather than fiction. It is difficult to ascertain the initial point at which he makes this claim, but it is evident, however, from Hubbard's early lectures and writings that Hubbard had begun to propose space opera as truth by the early 1950s. Some online Scientology glossaries use Hubbard's re-definition of space opera:

space opera: of or relating to time periods on the whole track millions of years ago which concerned activities in this and other galaxies. Space opera has space travel, spaceships, spacemen, intergalactic travel, wars, conflicts, other beings, civilizations and societies, and other planets and galaxies. *It is not fiction and concerns actual incidents and things that occurred on the track.* (Scientology 2014, emphasis added)¹⁷

With this definition, Hubbard specifically identifies Scientology's version of human history as *being* space opera, a history of events that is located on the *whole track* – a central orienting Scientology concept that Hubbard used to define the entirety of human galactic history. Hubbard's identification of space opera as human reality speaks to the fascinating ways in which cultural products often inform one another. By integrating this concept from a tradition that was so beloved to him, Hubbard brought together two critically important spheres of his life – science fiction and his particular way of viewing human behavior. This integrative process is illustrative also of the complexity of the lens through which Hubbard viewed the world: space opera as reality (and, as we shall see, vice versa), is a part of a *myriad* of outlooks on the world that Hubbard developed. Disentangling Hubbard's *bricolage* (Urban 2011) is a complex process.

As this discussion demonstrates, *space opera* as a definitional category has been, and perhaps will continue to be, quite fluid in nature. The concept does not have universally agreed upon applications – although Hartwell and Cramer's (2006) discussion clarifies the concept's use. In this article I use space opera as a definitional *strategy*. Consequently, in my analysis of Scientology I draw on what might be considered a combination of Westfahl and Aldiss's classifications, along with Hartwell and Cramer's identification of the second space-opera definition. And, of course, Hubbard's own definition of space opera is integral to my analysis of Scientology narratives.

By examining some common features of space-opera stories, the following section consolidates further the linkages between Hubbard's work, the work of other space-opera authors and the development of Dianetics and Scientology. This overview allows me to draw on the characteristic features of the space-opera tradition as a means to supplement the more formal definitional category described above. As becomes evident, the space-opera stories of the era and the close-knit imaginative and creative community that spawned them ignited in

¹⁷Interestingly, the same definition of space opera that Rothstein (2009) cites is no longer available from the web address he accessed it from. Scientology sometimes modifies its websites to remove content.

Hubbard the artistic imaginings that would lead him to transcribe the history of his space-opera narrative into his incredibly multi-layered system of religious belief – Scientology.

Fantastic imaginings: the creation of evil empires and brave new worlds

Many early space-opera stories offered fantastic re-tellings of human history – a dominant motif that would emerge early in Hubbard’s Dianetic and Scientology writings. One of the most influential space-opera writers of the period, A. E. Van Vogt (1912–2000), published the novel *Slan* (1946), which *Astounding Science Fiction* had serialized in 1940. The story depicts an oppressed race of super-humans who overcome their evil persecutors through their superior knowledge of science and technology as well as their telepathic and advanced intellectual and physical abilities. In another of Van Vogt’s novels, *The World of Null-A* (1948), the protagonist is a man living in a utopian society where individuals with superior intelligence and mental control govern the rest of humanity. False memories, ‘extra bodies’ activated upon death, superior brain ability (*with proper training*), galactic societies, and aggressive interstellar empires all characterize this popular space opera. Many of Van Vogt’s specific ideas about psychological and mental training and superiority pre-date Hubbard’s but can be identified within Dianetics and Scientology (*The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* 2013b).¹⁸

The March 1945 issue of *Amazing Stories* published the first installment of space-opera writer Richard S. Shaver’s serial novel, *The Shaver Mysteries*. Shaver’s enormously popular series became controversial when Raymond Palmer, editor of the magazine, announced that it was not a work of fiction, but was instead a *true* account of human history and suffering – one that retold the creation of humanity by advanced alien beings and the subsequent control of the human race by evil underground dwellers (Bainbridge 1987, 64; see also Williamson 1985, 184). Both Shaver and Hubbard claimed that their re-tellings of human history emerged due to experiences that no other humans had been privy to. In Shaver’s case he claimed to be in telepathic contact with those still living underground (*Amazing Stories* 2013); by contrast, Hubbard claimed to have accessed the secrets to the universe during an anesthetic-induced near-death experience (Hubbard 1938; see Urban 2011, 37–39). Other writers, too, discussed human oppression, the nature of humanity and its hidden history in their fantastic SF tales. E.E. Smith’s, *Lensmen* series (1948–1954), for example, begins with six volumes ‘grandiosely entitled “The History of Civilization”’ in which Smith describes galactic battles between two races dating back approximately two thousand million years (Westfahl 2003, 200). The *Lensmen* series explored parapsychology, advanced technologies and intelligence, as well as elitism, domination, oppression, and propaganda in society.

Advanced intellectual and mental capacities were not merely the product of the glorious imaginations of space-opera writers though: some researchers were trying to actualize them. Van Vogt, Hubbard, and several other pulp SF writers including the celebrated author, Robert Heinlein, were followers of Alfred Korzybski (1879–1950) and his General Semantics movement. Korzybski founded this movement

¹⁸See Bainbridge (1987, 60–61) for further discussion of Van Vogt’s creative influence on Hubbard.

following the publication of his 1933 text, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*. In this book, Korzybski proposes a theoretical and practical system that when embraced can allegedly change human behavior in a way that greater *sanity* is achieved. In the preface to the third edition, published in 1947, he added: ‘We *need not* blind ourselves with the old dogma that “human nature cannot be changed,” for we find that it *can be changed*’ (Korzybski 1947, xxxv, emphasis in the original).

Like Korzybski, Hubbard proposed and then established a systematic approach to re-training the human mind so that it would be free from problems (‘aberrations’ in Scientology parlance) and could lead individuals to a state of sanity (a core goal for Scientologists). One can observe Korzybski’s influence on the issue of sanity in Dianetics, Scientology, and across SF culture more generally. The 1946 novel, *The Fairy Chessmen* by Lewis Padgett (to whom I return later), describes a world where ‘a war is won by driving the enemy insane’ (Berger 1989, 131). Similarly, Van Vogt’s *Recruiting Station* (1942) depicts a war between the sane and insane. Finally, cult SF writer Isaac Asimov – another figure whom Korzybski’s work influenced – and the author of countless influential and enduring books, focused on ‘direct emotional and mental control’ in much of his work (Berger 1989, 129).

The success of *Dianetics*, too, had a substantial impact on the close-knit SF writing community. When Van Vogt wrote *The Universe Maker* (1953) he derived the plot and terminology from *Dianetics*. A friend of Hubbard’s, Van Vogt, like Hubbard, would later consider the possibility of establishing a General Semantics Church. Instead, Van Vogt became head of the California chapter of Dianetics – giving up his highly successful career as a writer for several years in order to do so (del Ray 1979, 164; Williamson 1985, 186). Van Vogt’s commitment to Dianetics seems to have stemmed from his hope that Hubbard could make real the propositions about technology and mental advancement that Vogt wrote about in his fiction (Williamson 1985, 186). Other authors, too, actively adopted the language of Hubbard’s new therapeutic system in their science-fiction stories. Successful writers including James Blish and Theodore Sturgeon used Dianetic concepts in their novels – although they had them removed in later editions of their work (Berger 1989, 124, 139).

As this brief discussion illustrates, discoveries about the ‘true’ nature of humanity, advanced technological developments, extra-terrestrial influences, inter-galactic travel, cosmic battles, heroes and evil enemies, and, discussions about advanced mental capabilities all characterized space-opera stories and the SF culture of the time. Moreover, these space-opera narratives emerged within broader discourses of imperialism and colonization, themes that dominate, and, indeed, are integral to much SF (see Rieder 2005). And, of course, Hubbard’s own pulp tales incorporated these common themes from the period – themes that he would subsequently adapt for his claimed religious truth. As renowned SF author, Jack Williamson remarked: ‘The history of “scientology” reads like his own fantastic stories about a super-competent future medic, “Ole Doc Methuselah”’ (Williamson 1985, 185). In Hubbard’s Ole Doc Methuselah series (1947–1950), the hero is a ‘Soldier of Light’ – part of an elite brigade of such soldiers who travel through the universe rescuing enslaved populations from evil villains and empires. Many parallels exist between Hubbard’s elite Sea Org and the Doc’s organization (Urban 2011, 35–36). Similarly, in Hubbard’s 1942 novel, *The Invaders*, the main character belongs to a group called the Extra-territorial Scienticorps.

Aside from the obvious similarity in name, worth noting is the elite status that the Scienticorps holds in his novel – just as later Hubbard would posit the same superiority of Scientologists. Other stories of Hubbard's including *Strain* (1942), *The Slaver* (1942), *Space Can* (1942), *The Great Secret* (1943), *The Kingslayer* (1950), and *Beyond All Weapons* (1950), incorporate the characteristic themes of space opera, indicating the magnitude of the genre's influence to Hubbard's career. As illustrated, this relationship was reciprocal, as Hubbard, in return, contributed much to the genre.¹⁹

Following this discussion I elaborate more fully the extent to which space-opera narratives characterize the development of Scientology such that it can be understood as Hubbard's attempt to realize space opera in a real-world setting.

Hubbard's space-opera masterpiece: Scientology

Whilst Hubbard claimed his space-opera insights and adventures to be factual, I propose that Hubbard borrowed heavily from his pulp SF background to create a number of Scientology myths that draw on an unambiguously fictional genre. Indeed, Rothstein proposes that because of Hubbard's SF background and the evident influence it had on Scientology, that it may be redundant to draw a distinction between the two domains (Rothstein 2009, 374). Clearly, Hubbard employed strategies that he knew well as an author and as a member of a unique science-fiction culture. Consequently, he used his extensive expertise to create one of the most enduring space operas of all – Scientology. In this way, Hubbard crafted Scientology as an author's fantasy come true. As Urban has noted, the potential 'god-like power of the writer himself' emerged as a motif in Hubbard's (1940) *Typewriter in the Sky*. The central character in the story – a writer – is able to imagine and construct universes in which he can place his real-life friends – only to watch them follow the paths and destinies of the fictional characters therein (Urban 2011, 36). Likewise, with Scientology, Hubbard was able to construct an elaborate space-opera masterpiece in which he could direct his characters, settings, events, and outcomes according to a complex script that he revised, refined, and elaborated upon endlessly.

This section examines some of the space-opera motifs common to Scientology, including other populated planets and galaxies, advanced technologies, mental discipline, and control. (Due to the incredible number and variety of new ideas and concepts that Hubbard generated, this article can accommodate only a small cross-section of his ideas.) Because these concepts emerged in Hubbard's early writings and lectures, Scientologists are accustomed to them and accept them as reality long before they reach OTIII – the level at which Scientology discloses its most

¹⁹Bainbridge's research on the popularity of early SF authors indicates the relative status of Hubbard's work. Initially, Hubbard's work was quite popular, garnering 'slightly more than average enthusiasm' for his stories. Over time, he stands as 'passable,' (Bainbridge 1987, 63) but eventually Hubbard lost his popular following, to the extent that in the contemporary era, 'the science fiction subculture does not remember Hubbard fondly' (Bainbridge 1987, 67). Although Hubbard's work is not held in especially high regard (save for a few exceptions as discussed later), it does not fall into the category of 'hackwork' either. John P. Brennan's (1996) account of Hubbard's pulp career places his work as grammatically weak, in need of better editing, and relatively conventional in plotting for the period, although he also acknowledges Hubbard's better quality publications (Brennan 1996, 458).

secret ‘truth’ about humanity. So too are Scientologists comfortable with other alternative ideas including past lives and the concept of a vast cosmic human history much greater than that proposed by mainstream scientists and traditional religions. The sites of inspiration for Hubbard’s ultimate SF tale come together to make ‘real’ a space-opera existence that locates Scientologists within a vast cosmic narrative that identifies them as the sole purveyors of human truth.

Understood well is the centrality of the concept of the thetan to Scientology. According to Hubbard, thetans are the progenitors of their own universes – universes that preceded our own. Immortal, they have endured a cosmic eternity that has, through a series of events, rendered them without their prior god-like qualities (see Bromley 2009, 91; Kent 1999, 102–103). Hubbard claimed that each person on Earth *is* a thetan, in so much as thetans occupy each human body – their presence is analogous to the concept of spirit. Thetans shift from one person to another at the point of corporeal death (Hubbard 1950, 40–41, 44) and are responsible for the personality and core being of individuals (Hubbard 1952, 54). Problematically, the endless lifetimes that thetans experience causes a great deal of trauma for the individuals currently under occupation. The prior lives and memories (as well as implants) create irrationality, distress, and a block to one’s true abilities and potential (see Hubbard 1952 for his thesis on these and other issues). In Scientology, only auditing²⁰ (its version of therapy) is able to restore the thetan to the state of OT – that is, Operating Thetan, so that one can be free of mental and physical inhibitors and realize one’s full potential. In such cases, OTs can ‘exteriorize’ (leave their bodies) and can control all facets of their lives (Hubbard 1975, 151). Hubbard began discussing this transformative process in his 1950s lectures and claimed that he had exteriorized during his near-death experience (Atack 1990, 375).

Hubbard catalogued human and thetan history within his narratives in great detail. In *Scientology: A History of Man* (1952), Hubbard notes on the inside title page that the contents of the book are a ‘LIST AND DESCRIPTION OF THE PRINCIPAL INCIDENTS TO BE FOUND IN A HUMAN BEING.’ He continues in his foreword: ‘This is a cold-blooded and factual account of your last sixty trillion years’ (Hubbard 1952, 1). Hubbard’s revisionist history of human evolution represents what he termed the *whole track*. According to Hubbard, only a skilled Scientology auditor with correct training can access an individual’s many prior lives on the track – and only by using Scientology’s ‘scientific’ tool, an E-meter (Hubbard 1952, 4–10). Trained auditors can allegedly access information on a variety of phenomena, including space warfare, human evolution, genetic entities (GEs), implants, trauma, past lives, and so forth (Hubbard 1952). As cosmic entities, Scientologists learn to identify their own lives as part of a larger space drama, and therefore acknowledge the continuum of thetan past lives in this context. In *Have You Lived Before This Life?* Hubbard (1950) catalogued some of his followers’ claims of past life experiences. Of the 52 accounts presented, 17 claim to have experience of life on other planets (Bainbridge 1982, 197), and the specific content of many of these recovered memories, ‘read[s] very much like Hubbard’s own science fiction’ (Urban 2011, 72).

²⁰See, for example Raine (2009); Straus (1986); Urban (2011); Wallis, (1976); and Whitehead (1987) for accounts and discussions of the auditing process.

The whole track and the past lives recorded on it is an account, therefore, of all the events and experiences of individuals and of entire groups of peoples and civilizations: it is Hubbard's history of the universe. The concept of MEST, however, refers to the *nature* of the universe – the totality of matter, energy, space, and time. Hubbard described in detail the ways in which the MEST universe shapes our perceptions of reality (see Hubbard 1953). Moreover, Hubbard's lengthy taped and written expositions on his 'science' of the MEST universe and of the whole track offer us much of what we understand as the stuff of space opera.

A recurring event on the whole track is the forcible implantation (by a variety of alien entities at off-Earth locales) of false information (on a wide variety of topics) in thetans while they are 'between lives.' Hubbard described implants as a way to 'dispose of captured armies,' as 'a means to overwhelm the thetan,' to 'force obedience to behavior patterns,' to "'fit" a thetan to a colonization project' amongst many other objectives. Furthermore, implants are responsible for 'all varieties of illness, apathy, degradation, neurosis and insanity' (Hubbard 1963a). Within this cosmic tyranny, one's 'arrival on Earth,' Hubbard proposed, is marked by a very recent series of implants, 'the most notable' being the Darwinian Implant (Hubbard 1963b). Hubbard claimed that *all* people on Earth are implanted (Hubbard 1963a) and that implants have occurred over vast periods of time – for example the Gorilla Implants took place in 'meat-body societies' up to 319 trillion years ago (Hubbard 1963c).

Scientologists understand implants as elements of their space-opera history. As Bainbridge (1982) notes, Scientology 'promotes galactic civilization' (195), and, since thetans 'spend time in special interplanetary stations, being stripped of memories and deprived of power, before being inserted into a new body. . . people already are citizens of the galaxy' (197). Continued identity formation as a character in Hubbard's space-operatic rendering of history occurs in many ways, and accepting the concept of implants as the manipulation of human knowledge contributes to Scientologists' understanding of their oppressed state and no doubt further inspires them to overcome their beleaguered condition in order to uncover their own truths. Hubbard's version of the universe and of thetan history is vast, unwieldy, and at times incomprehensible, though. As Stephen Kent observed: 'Nowhere did Hubbard present a concise, coherent description about the formation and evolution of the universe and the thetans in it' (Kent 1999, 102).

Hubbard's array of evil empires and their inhabitants in this unwieldy space opera is quite extensive. He detailed several off-Earth populations, federations, empires, and colonial agendas. Arsclycus, for example, was an old and ever-expanding society, 'not built on a planet, it was just built in space.' People were brought to it and put to work as slaves there; each time they died, they arrived back again, sometimes for about 10,000 consecutive lifetimes. Eventually, Arsclycus blew up as it could not support its continuous growth (Hubbard 1952a). Another society, the malevolent Marcab Confederacy (of which the warlord, Xenu, is a part), is comprised of 'various planets united into a very vast civilization which has come forward up through the last 200,000 years, and is formed out of the fragments of earlier civilizations' (Hubbard 1975, 243). Part of another galactic society, the aggressive Helatrobos government was, according to Hubbard, responsible for

many implants that occurred between 52 and 38 trillion years ago – one of which was the ‘Heaven Implant’ (Hubbard 1963a).²¹

As is common to the space-opera tradition, most extraterrestrial beings in Scientology are malevolent. Scientologists understand *invader forces*, for example, as an ‘electronics people’ who evolved differently from humans due to the ‘heavy gravity planet’ on which they reside. According to Hubbard, invader forces have attempted to control the entire MEST universe. Just one of the five forces has yet to attempt to do so – and he suggested that this challenge will happen several million years from now (Hubbard 1975). Each invader force is physically different and Hubbard describes a typical member of the *fifth invader force* as perceiving itself as a ‘very strange insect-like creature with unthinkably horrible hands’ (Hubbard 1953, 132).

To bolster his own claims to truth regarding these and other space-opera matters, Hubbard declared that *all* science-fiction writers actually write about *factual* events on the whole track. By way of illustration, Hubbard asserted that one author by the name Padgett²² rewrote actual history as futuristic science fiction. He remarked: ‘I don’t know how long that boy was on the track or how many spirals but, boy, he’s sure writing ancient history. It’s all dated up in the future too’ (Hubbard 1952b; see also Hubbard 1952, 92). Hubbard stated explicitly that authors *cannot write science fiction* if ‘they haven’t been solidly on that track’ (Hubbard 1952b). When discussing his own work – specifically *Final BlackOut* (1940/1948) and the *Ole Doc Methuselah* (1947–1950) stories, Hubbard reiterated his claim that SF is our reality claiming that he wrote the stories ‘straight off the record. No fiction to them really’ (Hubbard 1952b).

In a fascinating revelation, Hubbard identified E.E. Smith and his successful *Skylark* series as exemplifying such truth masquerading as fictitious space opera. Hubbard inferred that he had audited Smith and that in doing so he had attempted to get Smith to admit that his fiction novels actually are real history. Hubbard stated that when he asked Smith if he had ever been on a spaceship, the E-meter needle suggested that ‘yes,’ Smith had. He then asked of Smith: ‘What year were you a member of the Galactic Police Force Espionage Corps?’ Hubbard claimed that he continued by quizzing Smith about which piece of his fiction encompasses his galactic experiences and that Smith affirmed ‘*Skylark*’ (Hubbard 1952b).²³

Finally, the Xenu narrative (also known as ‘the wall of fire’ and ‘Incident II’) – which Rothstein describes as a ‘science-fiction inspired anthropogeny’ (Rothstein 2009, 367) is classic space opera. Upon completion of OTIII, Scientologists are informed that 75 million years ago, Xenu, the ruler of a Galactic Confederacy of 178 billion people, 26 stars, and 76 planets including Earth (then known as ‘Teegeeack’), conducted a horrendous act in order to solve the confederacy’s overpopulation problem. Xenu eliminated the excess populace when he transported it (via aeroplanes that looked like DC-8s) to Teegeeack. There, the confederacy placed the superfluous population inside volcanoes and then bombarded them with hydrogen-bomb explosions. The spirits of these individuals – thetans – then were

²¹See Kent (1999, 105–106) for a summary of Hubbard’s claims about implants regarding Christianity.

²²Hubbard likely was referring to Lewis Padgett, author of the previously mentioned *The Fairy Chessmen*. Padgett was, however, a pseudonym for the husband-and-wife writing team of Henry Kuttner and C.L. Moore (Bould and Vint 2011, 70). Thus, Padgett as an individual never existed.

²³I have found no independent evidence or verification of Hubbard or any other member of Scientology auditing Smith.

subjected to religious and technological implants for 36 days (priests and psychiatrists oversaw these implants, also known as the R6 implants). Then the thetans were sent on to either Hawaii or Los Palmas where they were clustered together. According to Hubbard, clusters of *body thetans* attach themselves to humans, causing many problems for them. The story of Xenu's conduct ends when he is captured six years later and imprisoned in a mountain where he still remains (as cited, for example, in Atack 1990, 31–32; Kent 1999, 103–104; Rothstein 2009).

This highly protected doctrine is the apex of Hubbard's space opera, manifesting as it does as the grandest revelation in his mounting narrative about human history. In keeping with Hubbard's love of SF, it seems likely that the Marvel Comics character, *Xemnu the Titan*, inspired Hubbard's figure of Xenu (also sometimes spelled 'Xemu'). Xemnu entered into Marvel's comic world in 1960 as an evil figure who tries to conquer Earth. Endowed with telepathic, telekinetic, and mind-control abilities, Xemnu also had the ability to take on new bodies if his current one is obliterated (Marvel 2013) – an ability akin to that of thetans. Hubbard's direct transportation of SF figures into his religious chronicle reveals once again his ability to work seamlessly between the two narrative forms. Not only did he borrow the structure, methods, and concepts of SF for his religion, but also he took the liberty of inserting identifiable figures. He worked E.E. Smith and other SF writers into his pseudo-history as well as the known fictional character of Xemnu.

Some key themes from the early tradition of space opera are important for understanding Hubbard's affection for it. Galactic empires, the tyranny of imperialism, and the establishment of confederacies are standard fare in space-opera writing and the ideas originated in the works of E. E. Smith. The high level of action in the group's founding narrative exemplifies the exciting events that characterize the outset of a space opera. In his original handwritten script, Hubbard himself defines the Xenu story as 'very space opera' (as cited in Rothstein 2009, 377) revealing what appears to be either a playful reference to the fictional genre, or his confirmation that the events he reveals are indeed what *he* identifies as truth. I propose that given Hubbard's confidence it likely is a paradoxical acknowledgement of both definitions.

Hubbard's marriage of the literary style of space opera with a religion and his use of 'science' in both, combined with his subversion of the generally expected forms of each, exemplifies the creative opportunities available due to a variety of cultural shifts of the period. Science, SF, and religion have, and continue to, cross paths such that as James A. Herrick notes: 'We are confronted with a bewilderingly vast and complex cultural territory that has not been adequately charted and where old boundary lines fail us' (Herrick 2008, 24). Hubbard created a cosmic narrative that blurs these conventional margins, and, in a somewhat hallucinatory manner, reflects each component back at the others, further subverting attempts to fully understand his rendering of each. Hubbard developed a truth that challenged and defied existing truths and that also managed to defy clear definition.

In addition to the already discussed characteristics of early space opera, another key feature stands out, one that seems likely to have held great appeal for Hubbard – that is, the dominance of heroic masculinity on a grand scale.²⁴ The next section

²⁴The exploits of heterosexual, white, men characterizes the majority of science fiction from this era. Such 'masculine adventure' remains a core theme in contemporary science fiction (Bould and Vint 2011, 46).

identifies the integral nature of this attribute to space opera and explores Hubbard's seamless utilization of it in his own narratives.

The hero of his space opera

Often acknowledged with founding the space-opera genre, Edmond Hamilton's series *Interstellar Patrol* (seven stories published between 1928 and 1930) embodies high adventure as the patrol engages in numerous galactic missions. In the stories, 'Hamilton emphasizes manly exploits and self-sacrificing heroics, and deploys rather than explains futuristic technologies' (Bould and Vint 2011, 46). With the establishment of Scientology, Hubbard instituted himself as the hero of his own space opera. With his claims to have been the first to break through what he called 'the wall of fire' (and survive) in order to uncover the secrets of humankind, Hubbard positioned himself as *the* heroic figure for contemporary humanity within the context of not just Earth, but the entire cosmos.

Hubbard wrote of a near-death experience whilst under anesthesia that brought him to a strange realm where he became privy to the true understanding of humanity and the universe (Hubbard 1938) – a reality that he would narrate in his works. He warned, however, that the material was so devastating that not only was he the first to survive this process in 'in 75,000,000 years,' (Wakefield cited in Rothstein 2009, 373) but also he claimed that the first few people who read his account of the experience either went completely insane or killed themselves (see Urban 2011, 39). This claim provided Hubbard with the rationale for his slow and hierarchal dissemination of knowledge as a means to ready Scientologists for the 'truth.'

The self-appointed and lofty goals to save humanity required specific means to do so. As one might expect of a sweeping space-opera narrative, Hubbard devised new technologies to solve cosmic problems. Scientology technology ('Standard Tech') was Hubbard's solution to the challenges of galactic oppression via devices such as implants. A full discussion of the myriad Scientology practices is beyond the scope of this article, but it is sufficient to say that Hubbard devised many procedures including auditing, training routines (TRs), Ethics conditions, Statistics, and Security Checks (Sec Checks)²⁵ as advanced mental, intellectual, and disciplinary measures akin to the mechanisms found in classic space-opera tales. Moreover, the E-Meter, also known as a lie-detector (Hubbard 1960, 23) is *the* central technology for Scientology. (Fittingly, the E-meter was designed by fellow SF writer, Volney Mathison [Urban 2011, 49]).

That Hubbard had discovered the mysteries of the universe and uncovered the true nature of human identity at great personal risk situates him, in Scientology narratives, as the ultimate hero – an inter-dimensional scientific liberator of sorts (see also Rothstein 2009, 376). He alone can help humanity face oppressive colonizing forces. Selflessly, he developed scientific and spiritual strategies to redress the problems plaguing us. This mighty man of science idea is rooted in early science fiction: the tradition lauded scientists as exceptional persons who are able to

²⁵ Although Sec Checks, for example, address an extensive set of topics in a Scientologist's life, some do speak to galactic conditions. Questions such as 'Did you come to Earth for evil purposes?' And 'Have you ever enslaved a population?' illustrate the larger galactic context of the person's life/lives (Hubbard 1961).

overcome the stifling nature of society in order to present magnificent new ideas and technologies (Berger 1989, 133).²⁶ Hubbard melds the concept of the religious savior to that of the SF superhero – and, as McKee observes: ‘There are inherent messianic qualities in the SF concept of the superhero – an individual with exceptional abilities who sacrifices part of his or her life for the greater good’ (McKee 2007, 143).

Hubbard’s self-constructed identity as superhero and Renaissance man par excellence also manifests in the official biographies of Hubbard found in Scientology publications.²⁷ In these, we are presented with Hubbard as physicist, philosopher, engineer, naval commander, adventurer, and anthropologist among other roles. These accounts of greatness and ingenuity, alongside Hubbard’s claims to solving practically all human problems and obstacles to happiness, illustrate the extent to which Hubbard went on to craft a hyper-masculine ideal of himself within the vast expanse of the cosmos. Hubbard fashioned a heroic character for himself – a fearless and self-sacrificing figure destined to restore sanity, peace, ability, and self-actualization to all who followed him. Hubbard appears as the oracle. The leading man in Hubbard’s space opera is Hubbard himself.

Conclusion

From the pulp stories of his youth to *Battlefield Earth* (1982) and the *Mission Earth* series (1985–1987) later in his life, Hubbard began and ended his writing career as a science-fiction writer. This statement is hardly contentious unless one proposes, as this article does, that his SF career extended not just tangentially, but rather, quite extensively, into his career as a therapeutic and religious guru. This article contextualizes Hubbard’s early career in a manner that supports the claim that Scientology is, in part at least, a manifestation of Hubbard’s fertile imagination – an imagination that found creative recognition during the heyday of the early space-opera tradition. Hubbard designed Scientology *as* a space opera, transforming fiction into reality as a means to set out his elaborate ideas in a real-world setting. His science fiction as religion and religion as science fiction appealed to a science-savvy generation open to new forms of spirituality and speculation. The tapestry of science, SF, and religion that Scientology offers, affords a postmodern future to adherents, where technological and spiritual progress continue to provide the comfort of plausibility structures associated with traditional religions, but in a manner that appeals to an audience with a more secularized and rationalist set of sensibilities.

Scientology as space opera transcends any single definition. For Scientologists, it conforms to Hubbard’s definition – the truth of galactic and human history as laid out on the whole track. From a literary perspective, Scientology’s narratives are characterized by the elements of the second definitional approach to space opera (as identified by Hartwell and Cramer 2006 and as incorporated in Aldiss 1974

²⁶Hubbard frequently positioned his knowledge relative to contemporaneous science, once claiming for example that ‘Einstein evidently hasn’t got enough space opera on the track to know that you can exceed the speed of light ... I’ll have to give him a pass on one of the Martian Transport Lines’ (Hubbard 1953a).

²⁷See Christensen (2005) for a thoughtful analysis of Scientology’s hagiographic approach to Hubbard’s life and legacy.

and Westfahl's 1994 and 2003 discussions). The features of Scientology narratives mirror those of the many space-opera novels published during Hubbard's career as a pulp author. In some cases, the storylines reflect his own publications. The generation of space-opera sequels (Westfahl 2003, 197–198) emerged in Hubbard's carefully constructed dissemination of material, the endless creation of new levels of achievement, and continuous auditing. In this way, Hubbard created follow-on narratives from the original storyline. *The Bridge to Total Freedom*²⁸ is a never-ending tale that places Scientologists on a lengthy road to a final success that is always just another course away. A substantial transformation of identity occurs for Scientologists as they progress along the bridge and the transformative nature of self becomes more pronounced as Scientologists are exposed to more of the group's mythology and as they look to the future (one that is characterized by endless new lives) through this new identity. As part of Hubbard's space opera, Scientologists are key characters in the unfolding of this astounding history. Hubbard's lifelong passion for science-fiction writing manifested in his determination to make space opera a reality for all humans – to have us reconceptualize our lives, our histories, our very deepest understandings of self as part of a wonderful and terrifying cosmic theater. This tale, like all good space operas is both glorious and devastating: a story of a leader and his faithful followers battling the evil deeds of galactic devils against a backdrop of unforeseen possibilities and dastardly revelations.

Scientology is, of course, beyond reduction to a single thesis – and like other examinations of it, this article too, acknowledges the multiple layers of this complex belief system. As other scholars have illustrated, an array of socio-cultural influences and individual personal circumstances have contributed to the complex narratives of both Dianetics and Scientology. Moreover, academics have taken a variety of approaches to understanding, exploring, and critiquing Scientology and the myriad societal responses to this alternative religious movement.²⁹ Rothstein notes that Scientology's most secret narratives sometimes are construed as embodying the entire Scientology belief system (Rothstein 2009, 371). Certainly, Scientology is much more than merely its most secret myths. And yet, as we can also see, although Hubbard created an incredibly complex, multifaceted, and at times, incomprehensible system, he always returned to the central idea that we humans are not who or what we think we are. According to Hubbard, our very notions of self and identity are based on false information. Even the art of Scientology reflects the space-opera tradition, replete as it is with images of spaceships, figures in space suits, advanced technologies, exploding stars, far-flung galaxies, and other cosmic motifs. Ultimately, in Hubbard's space-operatic rendering of human history and the human condition, we are bound to the initial extra-terrestrial dimensions of our being. No matter what facet of Scientology we look at, this core problem exists and permeates Scientology Tech – even when it is not discussed explicitly.

²⁸*The Bridge to Total Freedom* is the name that Hubbard gave to the hierarchy of courses and levels of achievement that Scientologists progress through in their goals to attain salvation.

²⁹For example, see Bainbridge (1987); Beckford (1996); Beit-Hallahmi (2003); Berger, (1989); Bromley and Mitchell (1998); Coleman (2013); Frenschkowski (1999); Lane and Kent (2008); Lewis (2009a); Kent (1999, 2001); Manca (2012); Melton (2000); Raine (2009); Rothstein (2009); Urban (2011); Wallis (1976); and Whitehead (1974).

Finally, in an unusual turn of events, Hubbard promoted a version of Scientology's founding mythology in the form of a screenplay, *Revolt in the Stars*. The reincarnation of Hubbard's religion as space opera/space opera as religion, in another narrative form, is, perhaps, not surprising. His capacity to weave multiple tales in myriad forms was, as this article shows, quite extraordinary. Hubbard wrote the work in 1977 (Atack 1990, 248) – during a period in which space opera as a SF genre was undergoing its transformation from 'really bad SF' (Hartwell and Cramer 2006, 9) to 'reenter[ing] the serious discourse on contemporary SF' (Hartwell and Cramer 2006, 17). Unfortunately for Hubbard, however, none of the studios picked up the manuscript. Perhaps because *Revolt in the Stars* manifested the characteristics of the first incarnation of the pulp-fiction subgenre, it rendered it unpalatable to contemporary space-opera audiences. One of the puzzling aspects of Hubbard's attempts to sell this manuscript is that had he been successful, he would have made publicly available the core secrets of Scientology – although most certainly, he would have denied that this was the case.

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Susan Raine is an Assistant Professor in the Sociology Department at MacEwan University in Edmonton, Canada. Her research interests include the study of alternative religious movements; negotiation of identity and selfhood in religious movements; and science-fiction and UFO influences in the formation of new religions and spiritualities.

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