The Aesthetic Theory of L. Ron Hubbard and the Freewinds as a Mobile Holy Land

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CESNUR 2017 - Jerusalem
A Unique Relationship

- Scientology’s founder, L. Ron Hubbard (1911-1986), offered a systematic theory of aesthetics, which is proposed in courses continuously offered to artists. Scientology’s influence on artists is organized, in a way that finds few parallels in other contemporary religions.
Scientology and the Visual Arts

- In order to further explore this relationship, I will discuss
  1. Hubbard’s theory of aesthetics
  2. Artists who are Scientologists (also based on personal interviews in Europe and the U.S.)
1. Hubbard’s Theory of Aesthetics

Image: Scientology’s new Flag Building (2013) in Clearwater, Florida, with its statues
A Gnostic Narrative

- At the beginning there were the «thetans», pure spirits who created MEST (matter, energy, space, and time), largely for their own pleasure. Unfortunately, incarnating and reincarnating in human bodies, the thetans came to forget that they had created the world, and to believe that they were the effect rather than the cause of physical universe.
Two Parts of the Mind

- The analytical mind observes and stores data, and uses them to take decisions and promote survival. The reactive mind records mental images at times of unconsciousness, incidents, or pain, and stores these images as «engrams». They are awakened and reactivated when similar circumstances occur, creating all sorts of problems.
The ARC Triangle

- **Affinity** is the positive emotional relationship we establish with others. **Reality** is the agreement we reach with others about how things are. Through **communication**, we construct and share reality and are able to generate affinity.
L. Ron Hubbard and the Arts

Hubbard was familiar with the artistic milieu as a successful writer of fiction. In 1951, he dealt with the arts in *Science of Survival*. He returned often to the subject, particularly in 17 articles included in technical bulletins from 1965 to 1984, which form the backbone of the 1991 book *Art*.

Ron Hubbard, portrait by Scientologist artist Peter Green
In *Science of Survival*, Hubbard wrote that above the analytical mind there are many more mind levels. The first is the aesthetic mind. In gifted artists, it can keep working even when the analytical mind is disturbed and the reactive mind is causing its usual damage.
Roman art, Hubbard wrote, was «fairly good». Revolting «against Roman disregard for human life», Christians refused everything Roman. The Catholic Church «recovered early and began to appreciate the artist». But «Puritanism and Calvinism» regarded artists as «moral lepers». Paradoxically, artists believed they should conform to this image in order to be regarded as real artists.

Left: Roman statue of Livia (58-29 B.C.), wife of Emperor Augustus (63 B.C. - 14 A.D.)
In Science of Survival, Hubbard taught that «a culture is only great as its dreams, and its dreams are dreamed by artists». A totalitarian society «inhibits, suppresses, or regiments its artists» and is therefore «doomed».
Hubbard’s Aesthetics

Hubbard noted that art was «the less codified of human endeavors and therefore the most misunderstood». In fact, art is communication. When the thetan understands himself as the cause rather than the effect of the physical reality, he perceives the world in a new way. If s/he masters the appropriate technique, s/he is also able to produce art with a very high communication potential.
Hubbard mentioned in a bulletin of July 29, 1973 his discussions with «the late Hubert Mathieu». Although some who wrote about Hubbard were unable to identify him, Mathieu (1897-1954, right) was a distinguished South Dakota illustrator and artist, who worked for magazines Hubbard was familiar with.
Based inter alia on the ideas of Mathieu, Hubbard came to the conclusion that in the arts communication (the end) is more important than technique (the means). But technique is not unimportant. Artists who are well-trained are able to communicate in different styles, including the non-figurative - and the audience understands intuitively that they are real artists.

Left: illustration by H. Mathieu for a short story by John Erskine (1879-1951), Liberty Magazine, February 24, 1934
Interacting with the Audience

The audience, however, should be invited to «contribute part of the meaning». This is precisely the difference between fine art and mere illustration, where little is left to the audience’s own contribution.

Right: L. Ron Hubbard, 1987
Integration and Mood Lines

Communication is actually achieved through integration, or combination into an integral whole of elements such as perspective, lines, colors, and rhythm. Hubbard emphasized «mood lines», i.e. abstract line forms that influence the audience’s emotional response. Vertical lines communicate drama and inspiration, horizontal lines, happiness and calm, and so on.

Left: Mood lines, from Hubbard’s Art
There are several systems of mood lines described in manuals for artists. Scientology uses the one developed by visionary landscape architect John Ormsbee Simonds (1913-2005, above). Simonds’ theory of form was influenced by Zen Buddhism and by Anthroposophical theories he was exposed to through his mentor at Harvard, Marcel Breuer (1902-1981), formerly of the Bauhaus.
Another common tool Hubbard recommended to artists was the color wheel. Like many esoteric authors and Theosophists – as well as market researchers –, Hubbard believed that colors correspond to specific emotional states.
2. Artists and Scientology

Gottfried Helnwein exhibition at the Modernism Gallery, San Francisco
A Controversial Subject

- Artists such as Bia Wunderer (Horizon, right) were discriminated because of their association with Scientology, particularly in Germany. This made some artists reluctant to discuss their relationship with Scientology.
In Germany, of all places, artists were involved in Scientology since its beginnings. When he died in 2015, painter and sculptor Waki Zöllner (above), who had joined Scientology in 1968, was the German with more years of Scientology training.
Gottfried Helnwein

- The most famous international artist who took Scientology courses for several years, starting in 1972, was the Austrian-born Gottfried Helnwein. He was attacked by anti-cult critics, who even promoted a book against him (right). Helnwein became increasing reluctance to discuss his religious beliefs.
In 1975, Helnwein told Stuttgart’s Scientology magazine College that «Scientology has caused a consciousness explosion in me». In 1989, in an interview in Scientology’s Celebrity, Helnwein elaborated that Scientology offers to artists invaluable tools to survive in a world often hostile to them, but also gave him a «new viewpoint» and an understanding how «people would react to my art».
American novelist William Burroughs (1914-1997: photograph by Helnwein, left) took several Scientology courses between 1959 and 1968. Later, he rejected Scientology as an organization, while maintaining an appreciation for its «highly valuable techniques». In 1990, he wrote an essay (right) about Helnwein, calling him «a master of surprised recognition,» showing the viewer «what he knows but does not know that he knows». In this sense, «surprised recognition» may also describe the moment when a thetan «remembers» his true nature.
The World as the Thetan Sees It?

- Helnwein’s unique style and approach to reality - a «photorealism» where paintings often look as photographs (but aren’t) - derive from multiple sources. Ultimately, however, we can perhaps see in Helnwein’s works an attempt to depict the world as a thetan sees it, finally realizing s/he is its creator.
Helnwein’s Children

- Seen as it really is, the world is not always pleasant, and includes suppression and totalitarianism. Some of Helnwein’s most famous paintings include suffering children. Helnwein exposes there the society’s unacknowledged cruelty. But there is also hope. The artist is aware of Hubbard’s ideas about children as spiritual beings occupying young bodies. Armed with the technology, children can survive and defeat suppression.
Criticizing psychiatry’s abuses is a cause dear to Scientologists. In 1979, leading Austrian psychiatrist Heinrich Gross (1915-2005), who participated in the Nazi program for the euthanasia of mentally handicapped children, defended himself by stating that children were killed «in a humane way» with poison. Helnwein reacted with a famous watercolor, Lives unworthy of being lived (right), depicting a child «humanely» poisoned by Gross.
Helnwein also looked provocatively at Nazism and the Holocaust as an evil the German and Austrian society still refused to confront. In Epiphany I (1996), the child may or may not be a young Adolf Hitler (1889-1945). Helnwein wants the audience, as Hubbard suggested, to contribute part of the meaning and to understand by itself.
In 2013, Helnwein was honored by a great retrospective at Vienna’s Albertina, which attracted 250,000 visitors, a far cry from when the artist was discriminated as a Scientologist. While Helnwein became reserved on his relationship with Scientology, other artists declared it openly. Scientology through its Celebrity Centers also created a community of artists, knowing and meeting each other across different countries, continents, and styles.
Different Styles

Scientologist artists do not share a single style – as is true for artists who are Theosophists or Catholics. German-born Carl-W. Röhrig (1953-), currently residing in Switzerland, calls his art «fantastic realism» and is also influenced by fantasy literature, surrealism, and popular esotericism (see his successful deck of tarot cards). In my interviews with several of them, however, some common themes emerged.
1. Scientology Themes

- Röhrig is among the few Scientologist artists who included explicit references to Scientology doctrines in some of his paintings, including the Bridge (above), i.e. the journey to become free from the effects of the reactive mind. Röhrig (mural in Malmö, below) and other artists, including Pomm Hepner and Randy South, also contributed murals to churches of Scientology around the world.
California sculptor D. Yoshikawa Wright moved «from Western to more Eastern thought», rediscovering his roots (Vedic Hymn, left), and finally found in Scientology something, he says, that «merges East and West» (Space and Beingness, center). About his Sculptural Waterfalls (right), he comments that the stone represents the thetan, the water the physical universe as motion, and their relationship the rhythm, the dance of life.
Flag Building Sculptures

62 sculptures in the Grand Atrium of the new Flag Building in Clearwater, Florida, inaugurated in 2013, illustrates the fundamental concepts of Scientology. The fact that these concepts had to be explained to the artists, none of them a Scientist, is significant. Artists who are Scientologists normally are inspired by Scientology in their work, but prefer not to «preach» or illustrate it explicitly.
Art as Communication

Artists who went through Scientology’s Art course all insisted on art as communication. Winnipeg-born New York abstract artist Beatrice Findlay (December Fog Runners, 2015, left) told me that «art is communication, why the heck would you do it otherwise?». She also insisted that Hubbard «never said abstract art communicated less» and had a deep appreciation of music, a form of abstract communication par excellence.
3. Suppression

- Most of those I interviewed stated that modern society is often disturbed by artists and tries to suppress them, singling out psychiatry as a main culprit. The Trick Cyclist by Randy South (right) depicts well-known psychiatrists and «was created to draw attention to the evil practice of psychiatry.»
All artists I interviewed share an appreciation of Helnwein, although they may be very far away from both his art and his persona. Some address the theme of suffering children with obvious Helnweinian undertones. The youngest son of L. Ron Hubbard, Arthur Conway Hubbard (1958-: Sean, 2002, left: the blood is the artist’s), became himself a painter and studied under Helnwein.
Pollution

- Pollution as a form of global suppression and Scientology’s mission to put an end to it were also mentioned in the interviews. Ecological disasters are a main theme for Röhrig (Rainforest Destruction, left)
Endangered Edens

- Landscapes and cultures in developing countries are also in danger of being suppressed. This is a main theme in the work of Swiss Scientologist artist Claude Sandoz (Tropical Eden, below). Exhibitions of Sandoz’s works took place in different Swiss museums
Sandoz has a special love for the Caribbean island of Saint Lucia, as evidenced by *Ixora II* (Elvira Bach and Her Children) (1997-98), a homage to fellow painter Elvira Bach.
4. «Commercial Art» Re-Evaluated

Some of those who took Scientology’s Art course were «commercial» artists. The course told them that this is not a shame and hailed success as healthy. «I do not believe in starving artists», says Barry Shereshevsky (right). They believe that the boundary between commercial and fine art is not clear-cut. Some of them were encouraged to also engage in fine arts.
Veteran Scientologist artist Peter Green understood through Scientology that commercial artists are not "coin-operated artists" but have their own way of communicating and presenting a message. Green manifested this approach in his iconic posters, such as the one of Jimi Hendrix (1942-1970).
Some (but not all) Scientologist artists took an interest in popular esoteric discourse. Röhrig uses the Tarots as well as the Zodiac (Virgo, left). He explains he doesn’t believe in the content of astrology or Tarot – «they are effects and as a Scientologist you try to be cause» –, but they provide a widely shared language and are «a very good tool to communicate».
Multiple Influences

- Pomm Hepner was exposed to Anthroposophy by studying at a Steiner school. Glass artist Marlene Rose (Brilliant Gold Buddha Burst, right) is part of the community of Scientologist artists living in the area of Flag, in Florida. Her frequent references to the Buddha are perhaps connected with parallels between Scientology and Buddhism noted by various scholars and by Hubbard himself.
6. A New Perception

«We were one hundred students doing the same [Scientology] course. Suddenly, the room took the most beautiful characteristics. Everything became magical. I became more me. The room did not change but how I perceived it changed» (Susana Diaz-Rivera, Mexican Scientologist painter)

Image: Diaz-Rivera’s contribution to the exhibition Dialogue on Death at the Diocesan Museum of Gubbio, Italy, 2015. All the words in the painting are by L. Ron Hubbard
Several artists reported how the «static» experience, which in Scientology language means realizing your nature as a thetan, completely changed how they perceive the world. Then, «art is about duplicating what you perceive. Perception is communication» (D. Yoshikawa Wright, left)
In a study of Scientology’s sacred geography, Mikael Rothstein noted that it is «dynamic,» since some of its most significant sanctuaries are «moveable»: they are ships, such as the iconic Freewinds, the only place where the highest Scientology courses, OTVIII, are offered.*

I, however, disagree with Rothstein’s main argument that Scientology’s core buildings and ships are aimed only at the movement’s self-aggrandizement and promotion. They clearly serve specifically religious purposes. They are sacred spaces and holy lands, where members report significant religious experiences they would not have elsewhere.
Aesthetic Experiences

- Very much like a Buddhist temple or a Catholic cathedral, the Freewinds also offers an aesthetic experience as a Gesamtkunstwerk, whose coherence can be appreciated also by a non-Scientologist but whose ultimate meaning - as a glimpse of the world as an operating thetan might see it - may be fully grasped only by members.
Art Within Art

Just as a cathedral communicates through its architecture but may also contain significant paintings and sculptures, the Freewinds and other buildings increasingly display works by Scientologist artists, including some who graduated as OTVIII on the ship. They serve as a showcase for a religion that, as happened to others, is only gradually becoming aware itself of how many artists it includes among its members.
In 2008, the Los Angeles magazine Angeles described the circle of young artists including Mercedes Helnwein and Vanessa Prager (In Thin Air, 2015, left) as the «first generation of casual Scientologists», whose religious affiliation caused less controversies. Scholars can perhaps in turn start discussing the worldview and multiple influences of Scientology independently of the usual legal and other controversies.
In conclusion

- Scientology offers to artists a number of suggestions, aimed at “putting them back in the driver’s seat” (Peter Green) of their lives, exposing the myth of the dysfunctional, starving artist.

- Scientology also creates and cultivates a community of artists, and does more than offering practical advice. By interiorizing the gnostic narrative of the thetan, artists learn to perceive the physical universe in a different way. Then, they try to share this perception through communication, inviting the audience to enhance their works with further meanings.

Image: Yoshikawa Wright, Infinity Column
Thank you for your attention