My Scientology Movie: a perceptive mix of psychological drama and reality TV

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America is home to many bizarre religious movements. In Kentucky, there’s a stunning 155-metre long, all-wood replica Noah’s Ark, part of the Ark Encounter theme park. It was built for US$100 million by Creationists, Christians who take the biblical story of the Great Flood literally. In South Carolina, there are Pentecostal churches where people play with venomous snakes to the rhythms of bluesy gospel music and sometimes die from the bites. Each year in Lily Dale, a beautiful village in New York State, spiritualist mediums host outdoor summer séances, attracting thousands of visitors who come to hear messages from their dead loved ones.
And yet despite this flourishing and unusual scene, it is mainly the Church of Scientology that attracts the attention of outsiders. This religion, founded in the 1950s by a science fiction writer who championed the use of an electronic device which he said could read people’s emotional activity, has adherents in the thousands, including most famously Tom Cruise. Known for its vigorous proselyting, the Church of Scientology is notoriously sensitive to criticism and guards its operations and teachings closely.

A 2015 documentary, Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief, offered astonishing insights into the workings of the church. Former followers told of exploitation, intimidation and mind-control in Scientology’s inner sanctum. In particular, it painted a dark portrait of Scientology’s current leader, David Miscavige.

Louis Theroux’s My Scientology Movie (2015) also offers an account of Scientology but does so in a very different way. Theroux, a gentle and inquisitive journalist and filmmaker, had wanted to make a documentary about Scientology but was unable to gain the cooperation of anyone inside the Church. Rather than giving up, he enlisted the help of former senior Scientologist and whistle-blower Mark “Marty” Rathbun, a central figure in Going Clear, to script and then dramatise his experiences inside the Church.
The outcome is a perceptive and revealing film about Scientology’s methods and leadership. Rathbun and Theroux audition actors to play Miscavige and Tom Cruise, discuss Scientology at length as they drive around Los Angeles, and make return visits to Scientology’s Gold Base, a compound outside LA.

A combination of real-life chase, reality TV, psychological drama and straight documentary, all wonderfully filmed in sun-soaked California, it culminates with a stunning re-enactment of an alleged Miscavige rant at his followers.

Along the way Theroux and Rathbun are followed and filmed by Scientologists, a tactic known as “squirrel-busting”. Theroux turns his camera onto these people, gently but insistently peppering them with questions. As the squirrel-busters falter when the same tactics are applied to them, we are treated to some rare light moments, although the footage will not help Scientology’s image.

The film focuses on the figures of Marty Rathbun and David Miscavige, the man who succeeded founder and original leader L Ron Hubbard. Rathbun, Scientology’s best-known defector, comes across as an ambiguous figure. His account of Scientology drives much of the film, particularly the representations of Cruise and Miscavige. It is evident from the way he is pursued by the squirrel-busters that he has endured much haranguing.

When Theroux gently pushes Rathbun about his own complicity in the reported bullying, harassment and cultish activity that took place when he was a Scientologist, he is evasive, deflecting responsibility. At other times, Rathbun turns on Theroux, angry about things he has said, or decisions he has made. It is rare to see so many sides to a central character in a documentary.

Miscavige is a recluse, and as noted, would have nothing to do with the film, so Theroux relies mainly on Rathbun’s descriptions and archival film to guide actor Andrew Perez’s portrayal of Miscavige.
Perez is a revelation. We see him audition and then watch him as he quietly prepares for the role. His star turn comes in one scene when he completely loses himself to the character. If this is life-like, as Rathbun attests, then it is a devastating portrait of Miscavige and the brutal way he treats his followers.

Throughout the film, Theroux is unflappable and calm, even as the Scientologists raise the stakes or Rathbun turns on him. At times, he offers erudite commentary about the religion. He is fair too, and while Scientologists will disagree with his representation of them, one senses he never set out to make an anti-Scientology polemic. This is clear from the probing questions he puts to Rathbun.

My Scientology Movie is not a big picture account of the religion. It reveals little about Scientology’s complex and esoteric beliefs, or the lives of its ordinary followers. However, Theroux never treats Scientology as a wacky American curiosity.

Rather, his film, which gives rise to critical questions about the responsibility religious leaders have in the lives of their followers, and the outcomes when that is abused, makes for brave and clever filmmaking.

My Scientology Movie will be released Australia-wide on 8 September.