BRAIN, BIOLOGICAL ROBOTS AND ANDROIDS: PROPHECIES IN THE REALM OF SCIENCE FICTION AND RELIGION

CARLY MACHADO

Introduction

Today the brain occupies centre stage in all kinds of debates, inquiries, discussions and hopes concerning human beings, including the future development of the species and its potential for improvement. In the background, different social contexts and agents provide a variety of stages on which the brain plays a series of leading roles. In the popular science disseminated in the mass media, images of the brain are seen on numerous magazine covers and television shows on an enormous variety of topics. Talking about human behaviour and personality—normal or pathological—in the mass media today almost invariably means displaying coloured images of the brain as evidence of the human subject’s functioning and responses to every kind of situation. Flourishing around the borders of this popular science is a self-help literature that promotes brain ‘exercises’ as means to personal development, disease prevention and the overall enhancement of a person’s quality of life.

The popular science filling magazines, television shows and self-help books across the Western world draws from the scientific production of neuroscience and what Ehrenberg (2009) identifies as its ‘strong program’. By this the author means that neuroscience—whose influence extends far beyond its more obvious objectives, such as making progress in the treatment of neurological diseases—presents the general public with a project for developing a “neurobiology of the personality” (Ehrenberg 2009: 189) in which the individual and spirit are fully explicable (albeit not yet explained) by biology. This enables a powerful fusion between the social, cerebral and mental. Ehrenberg argues that the ‘strong program’ functions from three perspectives: theoretical, conceptually postulating the brain as the basis of the spirit; practical, clinically proposing a fusion between neurology and psychiatry; and social, where the brain is posited as a means of describing and understanding social behaviour and, as a consequence, as a category of identification—that is, a means of recognising a social agent and his or her profile.
This convergence of neuroscience’s ‘strong program’ with the mass media results in a super-potentialised brain with powers at the limit between the scientifically explained natural world and a supernatural world yet to be revealed, readily able to be embedded in a magical-religious dimension specific to modernity (Pels and Meyer 2003; Aupers and Houtman 2010). In the particular religious context of the Raelian Movement, the brain occupies this sacred central place, manifesting the transparent revelation of the essence of human behaviour projected in images of the organ, and a prophecy that contains an unbounded potential for the development and enhancement of human capacities. Hence, pursuing the idea of a magic specific to modernity as discussed by Pels and Meyer’s (2003) and Aupers and Houtman’s (2010) recent work on religions of modernity, we can identify the fashioning of diverse modern imaginaries around the construction of scientific evidence relating to the functioning of the brain and its potential—some of which are religious, confounding the secular expectation of a rigid opposition between modern science and the religious dimension.

However the magical-scientific message of the Raelian Movement, like that of other groups with techno-religious imaginaries (especially contemporary new religious movements), is not only directly informed by scientific publications properly speaking—indeed, on evidence, these play a minor role—but is primarily informed by the popular science disseminated in the mass media and by other cultural imaginaries fashioned by images of science in mainstream culture including, for example, science fiction. The sacredness conferred to the brain by Raelianism, focused here specifically, is built of elements taken from scientific publications on neuroscience (again, probably a comparatively minor source) and from the popular science found in magazines, on television and on the Internet (swamped by images and formulations of the brain) as well as images of the brain found in scientific fiction.

It is important here to make it clear that Raël, prophet and leader of the Raelian Movement, never related any aspect of his message to science fiction (sci-fi or SF), nor made any reference to his interest in this genre. On this topic, Susan Palmer, in her book on the Raelian movement, says: “I asked Raël in our December 1994 interview if he had read science fiction as a boy. He replied he had not but had been interested rather in poetry and philosophy” (2004: 33). However, analytically it is relevant to highlight that, born in France in 1946, Claude Vorilhon (birth name of Raël) was a boy during the 1950s and a teenager during the 1960s, two very important decades for sci-fi, especially on film. According to Bould