

How Would You Dress in Utopia? Raëliism and the Aesthetics of Genes: A Philosophical Analysis

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ABSTRACT: Please provide an abstract of approximately 150 words

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In *The Selfish Gene*, Richard Dawkins writes that the particularity of the gene is “that it does not grow senile. . . . It leaps from body to body in its own way and for its own ends, abandoning a succession of mortal bodies before they sink into senility and death” (Dawkins 1989: 34). The image of the leaping gene indicates a certain lightness and freedom from weight reserved for genes but not for cells, crystals, and molecules. While the biological body is “sinking” into history under the weight of bones, muscles, and flesh, the genes continue leaping. Once we see the body as an accumulation of genes, it is no longer cumbersome and heavy matter tied to ancestry, bloodlines, and parentage. The “gene body” has overcome the dead hand of the past and is always about to leap into the future.

While the heavy bodies of the past could still be evaluated in terms of ethics, the leaping gene body is more likely to be evaluated in terms of aesthetics. The gene body is full of spontaneity, creativity, and playfulness—subjects that traditional ethics has always viewed with a critical eye. In the end, this new body will become so aesthetic that it will be pure fashion; it will become a fashion statement. Both the Tattoo Renaissance and the increased use of other body modifications seen since the 1980s indicate this general trend. The genetic body develops in parallel with the simulated world of virtual reality, into which humans might be able to upload themselves one day, leaving their heavy, real bodies behind. In this

artificial world, human existence will be limited to the *aistetikos*, meaning that it will be a matter of mere sense perception.

In spite of such aesthetic implications, posthumanist theory has rarely approached the politics of the genetic body from the aesthetic perspective. Most of the time, posthumanism and transhumanism continue to think about genetics in terms of utility. It is believed that the driving force behind genetic engineering is the intention to make bodies more efficient and more capable. This is true in populist transhumanist discourses, for example, like those led by the Transhumanist Party in the US. The posthuman body is supposed to be “better,” healthier, and more functional. It can even repair itself on a genetic level. Consequently, critiques of the posthuman body refer to deficiencies in definitions of what is supposed to be good, healthy, and functional. In other words, such discourses are ethical in nature. The question of whether the new body might also be more beautiful is addressed occasionally but it remains secondary. Such descriptions appear mainly in works of science fiction; they are rarely seen as topics worthy of rigorous philosophical discussion. In principle, genetic engineering is thought to encompass the sophisticated development of prostheses—items which serve a reasonable purpose and do not inspire much thought in the way of aesthetics. Or do they? Nowadays, even eyeglasses are fashion items, a scenario which thirteenth-century monks and scholars (i.e., those who wore the first incarnations of glasses) probably could not predict.

We embrace the posthuman because we are weary of certain physical conditions—and this can also mean that we are weary of what our bodies look like. Natasha Vita-More from the Extropy Institute—a Californian anti-aging organization—says: “I love fashion. Our bodies will be the next fashion statement; we will design them in all sorts of interesting combinations of texture, colors, tones, and luminosity” (Winner 2005: 392). Genetic engineering is not only a medical process, but also a new and refreshing way of narrating and reproducing the story of one’s own body in aesthetic terms.

My starting point in this article on the aesthetics of genetics is the notion of a “freely” and “lightly” constructed body colliding with a category that has been central to the western aesthetic tradition: style. Style is a complex notion that has developed out of centuries-long discussions about the relationship between nature and civilization. Ethics must also be mentioned here—a realm in which nature and civilization are discussed. There are many reasons why ethics and aesthetics can be said to address the same questions. For instance, civilization restrains nature, which gives rise to several ethical considerations, but also concerns the formulation of the concept of style in aesthetics. Nature evolves freely, while style emerges at the moment when the free evolution of nature is restrained by human will. In this sense, style follows patterns similar to those found in morality and religion. All three areas—morality, religion, and style—are related to the struggle

and the pain necessary for the creation of a certain form of life. Style is linked to the human will to contradict the chaos of nature and to obtain an aesthetic form or order. It gives a certain shape to objects and is therefore always a combination of power and the restraint of power; there is always something that resists and something that is resisted. From this dialectical struggle between power and restraint can emerge art, rituals, and ways of life. One might say that style has a certain “lightness” because of this constellation. However, style is not necessarily as light as leaping genes. Style is free, but is also bound to rules that humans have invented in order to impose form upon randomness.

The Raélians

There exists a “happy positivism,” in which it is suggested that everything that can be done should be done, and that it should be done spontaneously and without restraint. The epistemological vision of the body as an accumulation of genes is linked to this happy positivism. To demonstrate this correspondence, I will proceed via an analysis of the creeds of the UFO religion named the Raëlian Movement. There are two main reasons for this choice: first, this religion has created the interesting concept of an artificial world beyond nature, where human existence is limited to the *aistetikos*; second, certain premises regarding style and fashion become manifest through the ways in which Raëlism connects genes with questions of style. The idea that the world has been “designed” by extraterrestrials pushes this cosmology toward the aesthetic. However, my purpose is not merely to analyze Raëlism; I also wish to point to the general cultural conception of genetics present in postmodern societies, of which this new religion is merely an indicator. In Raëlism, a happy positivism overcomes both nature and the restraining power of civilization or culture, and creates a new, posthuman world that also requires a new aesthetics. According to Anne Cathelin, “the Raëlian Movement and the outside (western, modern) world are two systems mirroring each other” (Cathelin 2004: 43). In other words, the Raélians do not invent, but synthesize and amplify, an ongoing postmodern civilizational trend.

I approach Raëlism by interpreting academic studies on Raël, as well as Raël’s writings and published interviews, and aspects of Raëlian websites. The strategy of examining Raëlism via the discipline of aesthetics is original. Similar to posthumanist theory, which has rarely approached the politics of the genetic body through the discipline of aesthetics, most authors writing on Raëlism (for example, Palmer and Sentes 2000; Helland 2007; Gallagher 2010; Machado 2010) concentrate on scientific and cosmological issues, tending to debate the latter in ethical terms. I, on the other hand, will explain that one of the principal driving forces in this religious movement is a particular conception of aesthetics that is linked strongly to a new epistemology of genes.

The Raëlian Movement¹ was founded in 1974 by Claude Vorilhon (b. 1946), who calls himself Raël and claims to have encountered extraterrestrials in 1973. Raël contends that the extraterrestrials, referred to as “Elohim,” took him to their planet, where he met his half-brothers Jesus, Buddha, and Mohammed.² Raël explains that here, he learned that the Elohim had created the Earth and human beings a long time ago, and that he had been selected to be their prophet on Earth.³ Raël states that all the facts presented by his religion are “confirmed and backed up by all the ancient religious writings, legends, traditions, as well as modern science” (*rael.org*).

A Religion of the Genes

An important point in Raëlism is that the Elohim are not gods. According to Raël, “Elohim” does not mean “god,” but “those who came from the sky” (Vorilhon 1974: 26), a point which Raël intends should be taken literally. The Elohim do not effectuate supernatural miracles like Jesus, but are engineers or “designers,” who have advanced knowledge in genetics. They do not create, but “design.” When the religious myth of creation is replaced with a scientific myth that is supposed to explain the unexplainable, science becomes a religion in its own right. The Raëlians believe that science should submit to the dynamism of religion. The connection between genetic engineering and metaphysical or religious questions is part of the Raëlian project to view science as “a supplement of revelation, since it is astutely presented as confirming previous parts of the revelation” (Bigliardi 2015b: 72). Bigliardi has declared this project “parasitic” because it benefits from the prestige associated with science, without actually being scientific. Under this logic, genetic engineering and cloning could be seen as religious activities—cloning could be practiced in order to attain eternal life. In Raëlism, genes are immortal because they leap from body to body; or, as Machado writes, “flesh, blood and

¹There has been significant controversy over the number of members that Raëlism has internationally (see Kambe 2012). Helland calls Raëlism the “largest contactee religion in the world” (Helland: 275).

²In the book *Intelligent Design* (formerly called *The Message Given by the ETs*), Raël reports: “I was sitting to the right of the Eloha whom I had met two years earlier, and to the left of the six other Elohim. Facing me sat a young bearded man, very handsome and very slim. He wore a mysterious smile and an expression filled with fraternal feeling. To his right was a man with a noble face sporting a black beard that was very thick and very long. To his left was a more corpulent man with an Asian face. He had a shaven head” (Vorilhon 2005: 161). Yahweh points out to Raël that these men are Jesus, Muhammad, and Buddha.

³To be as precise as possible, it should be stated that although Raël contends that the Elohim created everything that exists in the world, he does not pretend that the planet Earth was made by the Elohim. It does not appear that the Elohim are the originators of physical laws; they are temporal themselves, and the world/universe predates them.

soil are outdated and dispensable elements for a humanity whose basic ‘stuff’ is a code—DNA” (Machado 2010: 199).

Raël’s ideas also benefit from certain cultural tendencies in contemporary societies. Nelkin and Lindee (2004), amongst others, have shown that popular knowledge of genes is often far removed from the knowledge distributed by scientific sources (see also Botz-Bornstein 2006). In popular culture, the gene has come to be understood as a cultural object that is able to define individual identities, interpersonal relationships, and the order of nature. This means that genetic essentialism provides certitudes similar to those provided by religions. Within this paradigm, DNA would replace the soul (the fact that the DNA is not visible in real life is helpful here) and the DNA script could become an immortal text, similar to the Quran or the Bible. At the same time, the gene is individual enough to remain compatible with the individualism of modern western societies; every genetic profile is unique.

Raël’s approach implies a paradox. Raëlism spells out conventional creationist religious beliefs in purely secular and scientific terms, but, at the same time, it involves the deification of DNA. On the one hand, the “creators” (the Elohim) are desecrated because they are “merely” scientists; on the other hand, Raël participates in the “popular deification of DNA” (Sarkar 1998: 1) rampant in industrialized societies.

For the Raëlians, genetic modification is not against nature because, in their eyes, nature does not exist; everything that has been designed by the Elohim is artificial. The Raëlians will never be haunted by the Frankenstein syndrome, where scientists messing with nature are bound to encounter a nasty surprise. Cloning is an artificial process, but since humans have been *artificially* created, moral or aesthetic concerns indicating that cloning is against nature are invalid. On this point, the Raëlians differ from other “technosects” like the Extropians—a group which also believes that advances in science and technology will allow people to live indefinitely one day, but which is also taking part in a fight *against* the natural body, which is seen as decaying flesh. For the Extropians, nothing other than a belief in the mind and technology as being superior to the natural flesh will lead to immortality. In this sense, the Extropians still perpetuate a conventional Christian mind-body dichotomy that Raëlism has abandoned.

The Raëlian creed also differs from that of The Summit Lighthouse religion, which was founded in 1958 by Mark Prophet, who (similarly to Raël) claimed to be a Messenger of the Ascended Masters. Comparison with this sect makes the characteristics of Raëlism very clear. Prophet preached that highly advanced beings from space had used genetic engineering to create human life on Earth (he supported his claims through tablets from ancient Sumeria and Babylonia). However, Prophet was dissatisfied with the purely artificial character of this creation and believed that it needed to be opposed. The extraterrestrials had

created a mechanized man or a “counterfeit race of soulless human automatons programmed to the ways of death.” Prophet’s aim was to make this artificial material organic and natural because “the subconscious programming of the psyche by a monstrous mechanization concept destroys life’s naturally creative potential” (Prophet 1981: 11).

The Raëlian point of view cannot be said to correspond completely with generic Eco-Eastern-New-Age philosophies either. The latter are simply pro-nature concepts, in which “the West” tends to be reproached for seeing nature as an enemy and destroying it. This is no topic for the Raëlians, as they have invented their own nature, which is artificial. For the Raëlians, there is no God; only the Elohim, who created the world *artificially*. On *rael.org*, it is explained that:

the messages dictated to Raël explain how life on Earth is not the result of random evolution, nor the work of a supernatural “God.” It is a deliberate creation, using DNA, by a scientifically advanced people who made human beings literally in their image, what one can call “scientific creationism.”

The idea of “scientific creationism” is peculiar and tricky, and needs to be explained in detail. Anybody suggesting that the Elohim created *nature* could: (1) be tempted by the Pantheistic idea that there is a God *in* nature, or (2) adopt an atheist-materialistic position, holding that the development of nature is entirely random. For the Raëlians, the theory of evolution represents such a random view. Raël (just like creationist critics of evolutionary theory) states that evolution is simply “random.”⁴ Based on premises that abandon the nature-civilization dichotomy, Raëlism counteracts creationism’s fight against evolutionism, as the idea that the world has been “intelligently” designed renders both creationism and evolutionism obsolete.

Natural vs. Artificial

The Raëlian strategy is original. Most religious figures, from the Jewish prophet to the televangelist, have tampered with the common conception of what is real. The Raëlians decided to tamper with our idea of what nature is. The cancellation of nature as an entity that stands in opposition to the artificial has far-reaching philosophical consequences. The intellectual history of what could be called “conventional humanity” (as opposed to the idea of humans being created by the Elohim) revolves around the distinction between nature and civilization. By declaring that nature does not exist and that everything is artificial, the Raëlians effectuate curious twists in epistemology and ethics, as well as aesthetics. Raëlian geneticists designing new human beings are not trying to overcome or even

⁴One could argue that the process of Darwinian natural selection implies the nonrandom selection of randomly occurring genetic mutations. But, from a creationist or “Raëlian scientific” perspective, this selection is still too random because it is not guided by a superior design.

improve nature; they are simply continuing the design process initiated by the Elohim. This idea runs counter to most classical thought on nature and the development of human civilization in western culture. First of all, in the Raëlian theory of artificial creation (scientific as well as artistic), creativity is exempt from the struggle of nature against civilization, a struggle that has been important in western (and, in particular, enlightenment) thought for centuries. Next, a new relationship is founded between the natural and the artificial, which stands in contrast to conventional western philosophical discourses on nature on several levels.

The different stages during which western thinkers have attempted to spell out reasonable links between the natural and the artificial need to be examined one by one. The ancient Greeks thought of *technè* not as the free creation of artificial objects but, rather, as an “artificial imitation of nature.” Technical inventions attempting to interfere with nature were not seen as merely artificial phenomena. Hans-Georg Gadamer has shown that the ancient Greeks saw the human capacity to produce an artificial nature as a “filling in” of “the space that nature, with its own creations, has left open.” He continues, “Finally, what should be created were not simply artificial phenomena” (Gadamer 1987: 269). In other words, the aim of “artificial” interventions was not to create an artificial world; instead, the idea was to reestablish the natural order, which had been thrown off balance. As we shall see below, this was particularly important in medical science.

For the Raëlians, everything is artificial; they even affirm that the more artificial an organism is, the more “natural” it is (*rael.org*, quoted in Palmer and Sentés 2000: 97). This is not only contrary to the ancient idea of *technè* complementing (but not subsuming) nature; it also unhinges another centuries-old philosophical discussion. By cancelling out nature as both a materialist *and* a pantheist phenomenon, the Raëlians overcome the tricky problem of discerning between the natural and the artificial. Plastic is artificial because the oil that it is made from has been processed to a point where it can no longer be seen as natural. Concrete is artificial, though it is still more natural than plastic. Genetically modified food can be seen as artificial, although the finished product is still close enough to the initial material to be recognized as natural. In western civilization, it is difficult to reach firm conclusions on this matter. Historically speaking, the natural vs. artificial discussion has been related mostly to distinctions between nature and civilization, focusing on ethical questions such as human desires and their limits. The difference between the artificial and the natural has also been debated repeatedly because of the fear that artificially created methods (as used in science, astronomy, or math, for instance) might not be apt to grasp nature “as it really is.” The artificial reality produced by math might not correspond with the natural reality that is “out there.” In this sense, Plato and Aristotle believed that physics was not fully mathematizable. Still, Johannes Kepler attempted to present the universe as a mathematically coherent system that he believed to

reflect nature. A little earlier, Leonardo da Vinci rendered the human body using mathematical figures (the square and the circle)—the question of whether this approach forced artificial criteria upon a natural phenomenon would be discussed by post-Renaissance philosophers for centuries. Many philosophers have also wondered whether human language really is about the world or whether it creates an artificial world of its own.

In the twentieth century, Ludwig Wittgenstein reinitiated these ideas by questioning the reality of the language of mathematics. Wittgenstein held that “mathematical propositions are not real propositions and that ‘mathematical truth’ is essentially non-referential and purely syntactical in nature” (Rodych 2008: 84). Such philosophies represent critiques of the artificial, which stands in opposition to the natural. The most recent discussions about the character of an artificial reality like Virtual Reality, then, represent the latest sequel in a long-lasting series of thoughts.

Enlightenment Thought and Reason

In contrast with what his samurai topknot suggests, Raël is not attracted particularly to eastern philosophy (although he began stylizing himself as “the Maitreya” at some point).⁵ His first book, *The Book Which Tells the Truth*, has no references to eastern thought, but focuses on the Bible. In *Intelligent Design* there are just three references to Buddhism. Similarly, Raël does not seem to be attracted to western mysticism. During the formative years of the Raëlian movement, Raël preferred to read work by French Enlightenment philosophers like Voltaire, Rousseau, and Fourier (Palmer 2004: 20). The elements of Enlightenment thought that appear to fascinate Raël in particular are the idea of freedom and the concept of a rationally constructed utopia. According to Bigliardi, Fourier’s social theories are reflected in Raël’s projections of the ideal Elohim society (Bigliardi 2016: 48). Raël’s ideas also have resemblances to the religiously tinged utopianism of Saint-Simon and the materialistic, mechanistic view of humans imagined by La Mettrie. These affinities with French Enlightenment and positivist thought on the one hand, and the sparseness of more substantial, Far-Eastern ideas on the other, are surprising, given that Raël’s beliefs about nature and the artificial would meet with much less opposition in non-western cultures. In Japan, there is a “high degree of trust in biotechnology,” for instance (Horres, Ölschleger, and Steineck 2006: 19), and in China, scientism is very popular. As Renzhong Qiu reports, Chinese scientists often posit that “science is not a double-edged sword, but a single-edged one” and that “all unsolved issues are caused by inadequate investment in science and technology and will be solved by more investment” (Qiu 2006: 53). In addition,

⁵*Matreiya* is the title of Raël’s book from 2003. According to Buddhist belief, the Maitreya will appear on Earth in the future to teach pure dharma, replacing the present Buddha.

Buddhists tend to be more relaxed than Christians, when it comes to genetic manipulation and cloning. Bob Simpson writes,

in many parts of the world the idea of cloning does not inspire quite the same degree of horror. . . . the fundamental starting points of a Buddhist understanding of the human condition is that there is no self or soul which animates human existence and identity but rather the coming together of different elements some of which are physical and others which take the form of more abstract energies. Simpson 2009: 150

On this point, Jens Schlieter quotes Woo Suk Hwang, the leader of the South Korean cloning team: “I am a Buddhist, and I have no philosophical problem with cloning. And as you know, the basis of Buddhism is that life is recycled through reincarnation” (Schlieter 2006: 180). For Buddhists, then, although cloning is not the natural method of birth, it does not go against nature.

So, how can the Raëlian theory of an artificially created nature be connected with the Enlightenment philosophy that Raël puts forward as his preferred resource? Superficially speaking, there are some points of correspondence. First, there is Raël’s decision to purge his religion of blind belief, superstition, obscurantism, and mysticism. Indeed, this sounds very “enlightened.” The same might go for the rejection of the Christian view of God as the creator. However, the first problem appears here. Enlightenment thought has never been as radically anti-creationist as popular belief suggests. Until the end of the eighteenth century (i.e., roughly until the end of the Enlightenment period), “nearly every great scientist was preoccupied with religious problems, perceiving nature as the manifestation of the ‘grand clockmaker,’ God” (Pattberg 2007: 6). A third point that Raël might find attractive in Enlightenment thought is the separation of society from nature, through which the individual was made freer. A fourth point to mention here is the idea of basing everything on science, which is the most important Raëlian “Enlightenment” premise and thus needs to be examined in more detail. On the surface, this viewpoint may sound “enlightened,” but there are essential differences between the Raëlian and Enlightenment interpretations. The Raëlians base everything on science in order to connect human reason with an eternal, absolute reason. However, this “reason” cannot be equated with the understanding of the term prevalent in the history of western thought in general—especially the understanding that circulated during the Enlightenment period. Typically, science and reason have not been considered absolute. Enlightenment philosophers in particular were aware that reason, just like human institutions, is constructed according to relatively random situations. In other words, reason was rarely seen as a faithful reflection of abstract truths; rather, it was considered a rationalization of certain social customs. Such rationalizations could be *more* or *less* reasonable, and were critiqued accordingly. The concept that has taken hold in particular

since the Enlightenment is that reason and science are entities that are constantly *evolving*; in other words, scientific truths depend on the time and place, and are adapted continually. This represents a frontal clash with Raëlianism because its theory of artificial creation does not permit any moments of evolution—randomness is unacceptable in all domains and evolution exists neither in nature (in the form of genetic development), nor in the sciences that are supposed to examine this nature. Rather, nature has been designed intelligently and will be developed by a science that is guided by the same intelligence. Science has access, therefore, to an absolute truth that is independent of evolutionary development. This is in contrast with what science was believed to be in Enlightenment thought.

On a superficial level, one might confuse the Raëlian critique of atomism with the Romantic critique of Kantianism. If this were true, then Raël would share something with counter-Enlightenment currents. In the preface to the second edition to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant suggests that nature is “blind material” that can be discovered *as nature* only through the intellect (*Verstand*) (Kant 1974: 23). The idealist philosopher Friedrich Schelling criticized Kant, insisting that nature should be understood as an organic system, rather than as blind material (Schelling 1982: 6; English translation [1989]: 18). For Schelling, nature had its particular reason (*Naturvernunft*) and was able to organize itself. He called this process (way back in 1798) “evolution” (Schelling 1967: 336). The Raëlians do criticize atomism but, at the same time, they refuse to admit the existence of a Romantic “reason of nature.” They decide to attribute natural phenomena to an intelligent design. Therefore they do not share the Romantic, organic, “evolutionist” point of view.

It can be concluded here that Raël confuses Enlightenment thinking with positivism. His religion is similar, in fact, to Auguste Comte’s scientific, secular “Religion of Humanity” (1851: 54). This accords with Bigliardi’s argument that Comte’s reduction of science to technology and his simultaneous attempts to sacralize science are Raël’s “main influence in the conceptualization of science” (2016: 48). Comte, who worked for the above-mentioned Saint-Simon as a young secretary, strove to transform the power of scientific laws into a guiding, spiritual power for society. Despite this “despiritualized” conception of nature, however, Comte did not try to re-mystify nature by talking about extraterrestrials.

In sum, the Raëlians’ use of the word “genetic” is innovative, in a western philosophical context—and it is being used in this way more and more by non-Raëlians today. While “genetic” was once predominantly utilized in the sense of “merely genetic,” pointing to a situation of dynamic development that is not governed by fixed and eternal laws, for the Raëlians (and perhaps for contemporary popular bioethics in general), “genetic” means precisely the contrary: it means that things develop according to eternal truths and that genetic science is working with absolute principles.

Immanent vs. Transcendental

The Raëlian religion qua science manages to circumvent not only the dichotomy of natural vs. artificial, but also that of the transcendental vs. the immanent. Transcendence refers to a God existing independently of the material universe, while the immanent model sees God as being present in the physical world. If we do not believe in a transcendent God but are pantheists, we will still believe that nature is the creation of a god, and that this god is “in” nature. Regarding Raëlism, Sentes and Palmer write that new religious movements whose sources of revelation are extraterrestrial tend to “take their space age deities to be merely natural or immanent rather than supernatural or transcendent, precisely because they exist within the horizon of our postmodern condition, i.e., within the horizon of the death of God” (Palmer and Sentes 2000: 87). However, strictly speaking, Raëlism is not about immanence; immanence is based on a conception of nature that remains dependent on God as the creator of nature. By avoiding the idea of nature altogether, the Raëlians thus overcome both transcendence and immanence.

The main flaw in the whole system is, of course, that the Elohim are very much *like* gods. They are said to have created a world that *can* be called artificial, but which is still very much *like* the nature created by God. The Raëlian world is artificial, but not in the sense of atomistic-materialistic; it is coherent, and this coherence is provided by the concept of an original act of creation. The Raëlians will insist that the Elohim are not *supernatural* like God simply because nature does not exist. The world designed by the Elohim is purely materialistic, but still not random like the materialism suggested by the theory of evolution. Raëlism is a materialism guided by intelligent design. Is this merely a name change, then, or is this intelligent design really different from divine creation? When the natural is reduced to the artificial, the supernatural becomes the “superartificial.” Thus, it can be contended that, ultimately, secular creation with superartificial input is no different from divine creation.

Genetic Aesthetics

Raëlism functions, then, to brush away philosophical skepticism toward genetic science. Since human beings are presented as scientific and artificial in essence, any evaluation of the artificial from the point of view of nature is meaningless. What interests me most in this discussion is that the natural vs. artificial dichotomy has ramifications for the discipline of aesthetics; its elimination will have interesting consequences upon aesthetic expressions. Contrary to what many people might think, aesthetics and genetics are not entirely different realms: both are confronted with the problem of development—in nature first of all and then in culture. “Why did life evolve a dynamics in which living things are constantly exchanged? Why didn’t a stasis evolve in which living things remained more or

less constant?” asks Stanley Shostak (2002) in his book on cloning. Aestheticians ask the same questions when talking about art and style. Why do certain styles evolve but then change, not remaining constant?

One might suppose that genetics and aesthetics are different sciences because evolution in life is natural, while styles are artificial. However, this is precisely the problem that we are trying to analyze in the present context: is style artificial or natural? We could say that style is artificial, but it should *look* natural. An important element in philosophical discussions about style encapsulated in this formula—style constrains nature, but is also constrained by nature, as it must look natural. Seemingly, the Raëlians have resolved this paradox in the realm of aesthetics, a point which can be explained most clearly by examining the phenomenon of liberty.

Liberty

Liberty is a notion that is central to both ethics and aesthetics. The Raëlians want total liberty, shackled neither by models of creation, nor by models of evolution. In the context of the genetics current that has been popular since the 1990s, yet another dichotomy can be resolved here. Normally, a fascination with genes comes with a good deal of genetic determinism—the idea that genes determine our character, talent, and destiny. When everything is “genetic,” there is no freedom. However, the Raëlian concept of intelligent design, where human beings must continue artificial development, presents a non-deterministic version of genetics. This means that although genetics is elevated to a religious status, the genetic determinism that usually accompanies the deification of the DNA is no longer valid. Genetic design is rendered absolutely free and creative because the Elohim are designers, not gods. The result is a “have your cake and eat it” attitude that permits one to believe in both the absolute superartificial power of genes *and* the power to be free simultaneously.

At the bottom of this theory resides the paradoxical overlap of two systems. René Descartes separated the mind from matter and reduced biological life to a series of purely mechanical processes. This scientific philosophy was not concerned with the organic totality of living matter. It can be said that the “randomness” of evolution that the Raëlians abhor was initiated here. On the other hand, the Raëlians do not want to produce a holistic world view by admitting the existence of a creator or by developing pantheistic beliefs, either. As strange as it sounds, the Raëlians stick to the Cartesian perception of humans and nature being governed by the laws of physics. They do not attempt to reestablish nature as a complex and mystical entity; instead, they re-mystify both the artificial and the mechanical laws of the world of physics by attributing them to the intelligent design processes of the Elohim.

The Aesthetics of Genetic Freedom

What does all this mean for aesthetics? While creationists can invent a “divine beauty” in the form of an authorized concept, evolutionists can see style as a form that evolves—rather randomly—out of history. While, in the eyes of the Raélians, the former are simply inane, the latter can be challenged for other reasons. To elaborate, we can say that the idea of a “style developing out of history” contradicts Kant’s insight into aesthetics as a realm in which judgments are purely subjective. In such a case, judgments are *made* and not *found*. Aesthetic judgments are made via reason, which are formulated as rational rules made by subjects (see Section 20 of the *Critique of Judgment*, 1987). How can this be reconciled with the idea of a style that is not freely created, but evolves out of history as a curious mixture of creativity and historical necessity?

Art does not follow rules. And, more specifically, style does not follow the laws of nature. Here, the Raélians would agree with Kant. The difference is that art does not follow rules in Kant’s thinking because art is not determined by nature, while for the Raélians, nature simply does not exist. Raëlian positivism is more radical than conventional positivism, then, because it does not just deny transcendence; it asserts that nature as a yardstick is absent from all realms. While Jean-Jacques Rousseau could look for freedom from civilization in nature, there is no possibility of a return to nature for the Raélians. There is no nature to be *found*; everything is *made*. This is a situation of absolute freedom, both ethically and aesthetically—more absolute than anything that could be granted by nature.

The history of civilization is not a story of freedom, but quite the opposite—a story of rules and restraints. And the realm of aesthetics is no different; it has been governed, to a large extent, by rules issuing from certain canons (called “styles”) that attempt to restrain the flow of our creativity. These stylistic rules are not always spelled out *as rules*, of course, and they are not absolutely binding; but still, the existence of styles signifies that certain things should be done one way and not another. The aesthetic freedom proclaimed by the Raélians, on the other hand, is supposed to lead to expression without restraint. In aesthetics, this absolutely free stylistic expression is known as “kitsch.” Kitsch is the simple and trivial expression of aesthetic values that may be creative, but which lack critical seriousness and substance. Indeed, kitsch goes “against the rules” of what some people believe to be good taste.

The important point is that style is possible only as long as it is reflected against nature. When nature disappears, the absolute freedom that is granted can easily produce kitsch. Raëlian aesthetics (like its ethics and epistemology) is basically about superartificial design. Religions like Raëlism are bound to develop towards kitsch, even independently of any philosophical insights into aesthetics. Religion practiced without a proper historical background will, in all likelihood, become

a sort of synthetic mythology; very often, kitsch is introduced through myths. The kitsch specialist Gillo Dorfles (1969) has shown that, traditionally, myths are vast containers of kitsch in culture because they contain a lot of sentimentality, coarseness, and vulgarity. When mythology is separated from history (which is effectuated easily by turning the myth into a utopian tale), the absolute freedom obtained can turn the aesthetic language into the most kitsch-like gibberish.

It has been said above that art does not follow the laws of nature. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who was very much interested in the evolution of natural forms, has attempted to describe the artistic process through which nature is transformed into style. In “Simple Imitation of Nature, Manner, Style” (1982), Goethe gives the example of a painter imitating nature, who, at some point,

will be annoyed at spelling out the letters of nature literally and will invent a way or a language for himself in order to express the things that he has grasped with his soul in his own manner. . . . Then, he will redraft these appearances [of nature] more thoughtfully or in a lighter fashion, or he will reproduce them more soberly or more fleetingly. Goethe 1982: 115, my trans.

Goethe explains that the painter’s approach is supposed to find a certain “manner,” which is not yet “style.” Style will be obtained only later through the painstaking study of the objects of nature, which continues until the artist knows “the qualities of objects and the ways that they exist, and is able to assess the entire range of shapes [*Gestalten*], to put them side by side, and to imitate them. This will be style of the highest degree” (Goethe 1982: 119). The key point here is that nature has not simply been discarded or overcome in order to reach the echelons of art and style; on the contrary, the imitation of nature, the search for manner, and the production of style are all parts of the same process. Goethe believes that simple imitation always operates in the “forecourt of style,” which means that any artist who “omits to observe nature and to think of nature will move away from the foundation of art. The more he moves away from simple imitation and style, the more his manner will become empty and insignificant” (Goethe 1982: 119). The conclusion is that nature needs to be observed and contemplated—and, in the first place, it needs to *exist*. Style cannot be created without looking at nature. Only the “serene imitation” of nature, in which thinking, comparing, separating, and generalizing are conducted constantly, will be worthy of access to the “shrine of style” (Goethe 1982: 119).

The Raëlians attempt to create style without reflecting it against nature. In some ways, therefore, they resemble the suprematists. Suprematism was an art movement that focused on basic geometric forms, which developed in Russia in around 1920, being founded by Kazimir Malevich. The suprematists wanted to abolish nature in order to make art absolute and self-sufficient, “like nature.” When art *is* nature, the artificial becomes a new natural. This idea has been explained in

very precise terms by Piet Mondrian, who developed a similar abstract art outside Russia and is often seen as a para-suprematist. Mondrian writes: “We must tend towards universal representation and detachment from the pressure of nature. Then we shall no longer have need of paintings and statues, because we shall be living within art. Art will disappear from life in the measure in which life itself is in balance” (Mondrian, “Plastic Art and Pure Art,” in Benevolo 1971: 409).

The Raélians and the suprematists both desire the perfect interpenetration of life and art. The suprematist conception of art, however, was not that of a superartificial creation; the suprematists did not believe that the world was created by extraterrestrial designers. Rather, they held that scientific and artistic reason should overlap. In this sense, Mondrian did not want to create a second nature, but an artificial life penetrated by art and style. The Raélians, on the other hand, want to create a new nature altogether.

Raël and Style

Raël is a guru who designs his own clothes, shows an interest in fashion designers, and calls the official Raël website a “Message from the Designers” (*rael.org*). The strong link with design is no coincidence. The Elohim do not create; they “design.” Design here is the religious activity *par excellence*. The Elohim are not genetic engineers, but genetic designers. What is the difference between engineering and design? Designers do not become lost in detail; they tend to master the “whole picture” of a thing. In some ways, this makes them similar to creators. Engineers make production of a designed object possible, in terms of technique; designers imagine products freely. Designers are thus freer than engineers. The designer draws, while the engineer merely orchestrates technical materialization. Design is creative, while engineering is mainly an activity of calculation. The aesthetic is linked with the realm of design—a point which cannot have escaped Raël. In French (Raël’s birth language), the designer is a “styliste,” which links the term “design” with the concept of style. Designers are not merely engineers in a random process of evolution; rather, they are a hybrid of the creator and the engineer. Significantly, top-level fashion designers are called “créateurs” in French.

As we have seen, DNA has a religious dimension, and the design that produces this DNA is no less religious. In conventional terms, design is a matter of style. What can be said about Raëlism and style? It has been explained above that style clashes with the idea of absolute liberty. In spite of this, style seems to be very important to Raël; he is a self-confessed admirer of Karl Lagerfeld and Gianni Versace, and the fashion designer Courrèges once helped him to retrieve a lost manuscript from a French publishing house (Palmer 2004: 36). There is a strong link between Raël and fashion, which is not confined solely to the outlandish outfits worn by him and the members of his religious group. Raël has said that

“fashion is not some superficial matter. Fashion has deep roots that shape the society” (interview in Widdicombe 2003). Moreover, he adds that “fashion and creativity will help create a more peaceful and tolerant society where differences are not only accepted but promoted” (*raelianews.org*).

How do you dress when you believe that the world is artificial, good, and entirely unrestrained? Unsurprisingly, it is the concept of liberty that receives most attention, where Raël’s fashion policies are concerned. Liberty means being non-conformist; being oneself. The psychological freedom obtained through the liberty granted by Raëlian cosmology must be replicated in the realm of fashion. A business suit is not desirable because such a “straitjacket has the same effect on your mind” (Widdicombe 2003). Indeed, Raël calls the business suit “the ugliest man’s fashion in history” (*raelianews.org*). Raëlian clothes are supposed to contradict “the politically correct, sexually correct, religiously correct and, if I can say, fashionably correct.” The clothes worn by Raëlian men and women are free, in the sense of being detached from contemporary fashion trends. They are full of fantasy and seem to come from another world, which is Raël’s vision of the “fashionably incorrect.” Detachment from the fashion system is also the logical consequence of Raëlism for yet another reason: apart from natural languages,



Raël wearing his standard uniform

fashion is arguably the most evolutionary phenomenon that culture can offer, and thus must be avoided.

Anti-fashion fantasies include the wearing of body paint, feathers, bunny ears, and angel wings. Wigs in artificial colors are also very popular among Raélians. Elements from Japanese kawaii fashion tend to be used by Asian members, who often apply them in an exaggerated manner. In general, shiny fabrics and glitter dominate the picture, although white is an important color, too. Raël himself, along with many female members, dresses in white—probably because of the purity effect. The female membership has been divided into two groups: the white and the pink angels. Paradoxically, when it comes to women, purity is combined with a relatively direct eroticism: nudity, see-through blouses, and cloths attached loosely around the waist (instead of skirts) are typical.

Raël designed his own all-white clothes a long time ago, after his first visit to the Elohim planet. A Montreal tailor makes all his clothes from Raël's own sketches. Bigliardi finds that there is “something naïve, dilettante, yet at the same time brazenly attractive” about Raël's style (Bigliardi 2015a). The whiteness of Raël's official costume could be said to be evocative of the Pope (he has also claimed to be a “new pope”). Raël's standard uniform consists of a white turtleneck shirt and a double-breasted jacket, the shoulders and sides of which are heavily padded. There is a ribbed, shawl-like collar attached to the jacket. The ensemble seems to be a cross between a samurai costume and a space suit. The triangular shape of the jacket's midsection brings to mind a lifejacket worn over a shirt. The stiff padding across the shoulders also gives the appearance of wings. The bottom of the jacket seems to be inspired by a formal frock coat. Additionally, Raël's chest is always weighted with heavy medallions. Other high-level Raélians also tend to wear costumes derived from formal clothes, such as oversized cocktail jackets in metallic colors. In general, Raël's style is an odd hybrid of the futuristic and the retro, the formal and the informal—a condition which reflects the entire Raëlian ideology. Aside from channeling the *Star Wars*-esque, white space-suit aesthetic (which could also be classified as a 1970s retro look), Raël has also been seen wearing items including 1980s-style karate-type suits and 1970s Reebok sneakers. Where can we find such clothes apart from at Raëlian conventions? These fashions can be compared with those sported by avatars on computer games such as Second Life, which Jude Elund describes as follows:

Hairstyles are often long and flowing, and the clothing adorned is commonly graceful and glamorous, although some avatars are more distinctly sexual in their attire. There is a noticeable display of female avatars in ball gowns and long flowing dresses which perhaps points to the notion of Second Life as a realm of fantasy play; it is possible that these avatars are reproducing virtually their “owners” version of a princess fairytale, searching for their Prince Charming in a mystical land. Elund 2015: 78

Raël and the Question of Refinement

So, we must ask once more, how do you dress when you believe that the world is artificial, good, and entirely unrestrained? On one hand, it is certain that you will try to express your liberty. Raël hopes that “original and crazy shapes will return in men’s fashion as they used to be for the major part of human history” (*raelianews.org*). On the other hand, there is the question of style. The words “style” and “refinement” definitely do not come to mind initially when looking at Raëlian fashion, which is carnivalesque and more like a disguise than what we normally consider as clothing. True, rustic hippy style is rare—although an orientaling tendency exists, which could be associated with hippy aesthetics. But refinement? Raëlian fashion vocabulary tends to be direct, literal, exaggerated, and glaring. It is very much in line with Natasha Vita-More’s enthusiastic statement that our bodies will be designed “in all sorts of interesting combinations of texture, colors, tones, and luminosity” (see above and Winner 2005: 392).

In spite of this, the idea of aesthetic refinement seems to be extremely important to the Raëlians. The Elohim are said to be very refined and feminine themselves; allegedly, “the most feminine woman on Earth is only 10 percent as feminine as the Elohim” (Palmer 2004: 140). Raël insists that refinement is not just aesthetic; it also determines our way of thinking:

The more a human being refines his gestures, the more he refines his words and his thoughts. One cannot have a refined, subtle and sharp thought if one has a brutal attitude. Both are linked. To refine one’s thought automatically refines one’s way to move and to refine one’s way to move automatically refines one’s way to think. Our spirit and our body are one. *Rael.org*

One member of the group even goes a step further, linking refinement with ethics: “If every human being on Earth had for only concern [*sic*] how he or she can bring more beauty and refinement to his environment, there wouldn’t be any bomb exploding anywhere for sure” (*raelianews.org*). The idea that ethical problems can be solved by the power of aesthetics via refinement is an underlying strain in Raëlian ideology.

This insistence on refinement comes as something of a surprise. First, as mentioned previously, the Raëlian clothing style does not appear to be refined; it is very much determined by kitsch. Second, refinement is a term that indicates selection and comes close, therefore, to restraint—something which Raëlians normally abhor. In refined food, most of the original (natural) matter has been discarded. “Freedom food” is the opposite of refined food: it is natural and rustic. How can this insistence on refinement be reconciled with the “anything goes” attitude of Raëlian “happy positivism,” in which “all decisions are immediate, made in an instant,” and Raëlians “must make that decision to be happy all the time now, instantly” (Palmer 2004: 112)?



There is a strong association between Raëlian aesthetics and kitsch.

The main problem is that refinement—contrary to its original meaning—does not signify a refinement of *nature* here because, of course, nature does not exist. What is it, then, that this refinement is refining? In Raëlianism, refinement does not signify the restriction of nature; consequently, refinement cannot be experienced as a restrictive condition. Once those things seen as negative (i.e., God, transcendence, the soul, nature, and the supernatural) have been declared non-existent, the items that remain are supposed to be absolutely good, and *no further restrictions are necessary*. So, science, sex, the future, extraterrestrials, liberty, life, play, speed, and even divorce are all free and open (Raël says that “a Raëlian divorce is always done in a fun way”). When everything is artificial, everything is good.

Why would refinement still be needed, then? Everything is good but, apparently, it can still be improved through refinement. In a religion that has no space for hatred, suspicion, guilt, or jealousy, there is still room for refinement, which is understood as the highest form of artificiality. One must remember that, in Raëlian ontology, things are better when they are artificial.

How can refinement be defined more concretely in this context? In Raëlianism, it is explained mostly as a moment of feminization. In some ways, Raëlianism comes close to replicating holistic approaches to environmentalism here, in which cosmology is combined with a post-secular form of feminist spirituality. However, on a more basic level, the reduction of refinement to feminization—especially when it is enacted in combination with the idea of refinement as the equivalent

of artificiality—is not plausible at all. The Elohim are “feminine and refined” and, as one Raëlian explains, femininity improves the less-refined condition of machismo: “The angels cultivate good feminine qualities, like being gentle, delicate, and refined. These qualities are manifested in the way we walk, eat, our odors, and other small everyday details” (Palmer 2004: 144). The problem is that style and refinement cannot be created simply by converting the masculine into the feminine; what would await us most probably would be a kitsch-like expression of femininity. Style always maintains a tense relationship with both the artificial and the natural, and the same can be said regarding masculinity. Does natural masculinity need to be refined by turning it into a more artificial femininity? If the Raëlians think that refinement can be defined as a femininity that is purely artificial, then they are committing an injustice against the concept of refinement. The problem is that the Raëlian definition of the feminine is positivist: it is supposed to be measurable and it does not exist as a relative value. It does not flow hermeneutically out of a relationship with its counterpart, the masculine. Curiously, the founder of positivism, Auguste Comte, also believed that the feminine embodies the positive as it triumphs over sentiment and morality (see Chambliss 1954: 424).

Refinement and the Aesthetics of the Equilibrium

Western philosophy strongly opposes the concept of refinement as the highest degree of artificiality, often insisting that refinement actually represents the *right balance* between the artificial and the natural. This brings us back to the relationship between the artificial and the natural as seen in post-Socratic philosophy. It has already been said that, although style is not nature, it should look natural—it should never seem artificial and contrived. The problem with Raëlian aesthetics is that once nature disappears, the concept of “natural” equilibrium disappears, too. But that is precisely what style is. Goethe has shown that style cannot be produced in a situation where nature (against which style should always be reflected) does not exist. In the end, Raëlians have to resort to devices like feminization—shifting aesthetics toward a positivist feminine model is the only remaining option.

Equilibrium is the key word here. Its importance is perhaps more obvious in medical science than in aesthetics, but stylistic sensibilities depend on a feeling of balance. Additionally, medicine has been seen historically as a science able to reestablish the right (or natural) balance of elements. As shown above, ancient Greek philosophy held that artificial interventions should reestablish the natural, where it had been damaged. Imitating nature by producing an artificial *technè* meant filling in “the space that nature, with its own creations, has left open” (Gadamer 1987: 269). In this philosophy, the “art of healing” [*Heilkunst*] does not strive for the technical capacity to *do* certain things in the first place; instead, it

seeks knowledge about society, culture, and the world in order to “add” elements where nature permits. What is required is not engineering but a more artful activity that is similar to design.

In medical science, the sane and the pathological are qualities that can be discovered only as long as the researcher understands the sane as the natural and the pathological as the non-natural. This view is based on the Greek concept of nature which holds that “the whole is an arrangement that lets all movements existing in nature repeat themselves according to firm rules” (Gadamer 1987: 270). According to Gadamer, the medical doctor has to “get in tune with” (“sich einschwingen in,” 272) the natural rhythm of life. It is true that norms and structures are artificial qualities. Still medical art—the art that should (at least according to Gadamer) be practiced by philosophy—should try to find the “natural structure” of disturbed phenomena; it should try to reestablish the lost balance. Style can be found in the same way.

Normally, a world in which everything is artificial is governed not by designers but by engineers. Only engineers can adhere to the happy positivism believing that everything that can be done should be done and that it should be done spontaneously and without restraint. When the body is seen as an accumulation of genes, the creation of bodies is not a matter of design (which creates style), but of what has been called, more suitably, genetic engineering. Style is something personal, which means that it has to do with a certain conception of a person or self. The atomistic picture of the self as an accumulation of DNA information, on the other hand, fosters the engineer’s vision of the person. When the person is merely an accumulation of genes put together by engineers according to the laws of *technè*, it becomes impossible to talk about a personal style. Therefore, Palmer and Sentes write very aptly that, in Raëlism, “the individual human being is essentially the expression of his or her DNA and one’s ‘self’ or mind is nothing more, ultimately, than all the information stored in the person’s physical brain” (Palmer and Sentes 2012: 171). For Raël, science does not reestablish a natural equilibrium of “the person”; it is concerned mainly with “problem-solving” techniques. Feminization is an example of such a technique: it is supposed to solve the problem of machismo. However, the problem with machismo is not that the masculine is unrefined (meaning that it is too natural) and needs to be replaced with the more artificial feminine. Instead, machismo is an obsessive kind of masculinity; it is masculinity off balance. Therefore, the real *nature* of masculinity needs to be reinstated. The ancient “art of healing” would detect gaps in machismo and fill them in with elements that make the *nature* of masculinity more perfect. Raëlism moves away from this concept of design and comes closer, therefore, to engineering. On the other hand, Raélians hope to retrieve style by emphasizing the stylistic component of their mythology. They want to replace creationism

with “designism.” However, the Elohim *are* engineers; their apparent disregard for natural balance and emphasis on mere “doing” generate this impression.

Conclusion

Palmer’s interviews with Raélians show that many adhere to this religion because, on one hand, they find the existence of a creator unlikely but, on the other hand, they are disturbed by the vision of chaos emanating from the idea that creation is just a myth. Creation is unlikely but evolution is too random. We might wonder why Raël actually chose genetics as the driving force behind his religion. By choosing the world of genes, Raël tapped into what could be considered the most random phenomenon that nature can offer. Geneticists have mapped the human genome but have had enormous difficulties establishing the location and function of these genes. Genetics provides the opposite of an organic picture of nature; as Alex Rosenberg says, it is like a pile of phone books: “A stack of books with just numbers and without names or punctuation between them” (Rosenberg 2001: 282). The problem with this accumulation of numbers and words without punctuation is that it has no style. The mindless sequencing of genes is an activity carried out typically by engineers, rather than by designers. Quantitative analysis involves drawing maps, but there is no talk of the *grammar* of genes. A linguist would find it impossible to establish a grammar involving millions of elements connected in extremely complicated constellations. Moreover, since “genetic information” does not exist on a molecular basis but, rather, in “DNA sequences” or so-called “programs,” meaning is provided not only by structure, but also by function. In the aesthetics of genes, function, grammar, and style cannot be defined. Still, the Raélians seek style and refinement. Instead of designing a hermeneutic philosophy that depicts the organic whole of nature as a (possibly spiritual) phenomenon that can never be fully explained, however, the Raélians reduce the world to an artificially created entity that is rendered understandable via a tortuous description of the superartificial character of the artificial. In this realm of the totally artificial, there is no style, in the sense of a hermeneutic expression of individuality within a general context. Genetic aesthetics is impossible.

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