Sample Film Reviews/Critical Analyses for *Gattaca*

What to do with these reviews: **Read** both reviews and **annotate** them. Note where they are doing the following:

1. **introducing** the film’s story,
2. discussing the film’s **cultural and historical context** (what was going on in the society that produced the film, what other works it relates to/comments on, maybe something about the historical development of the ideas in the film)
3. discussing the film’s **enduring human concerns (**issues that are universal and timeless), which will probably overlap with #4 and #5 below
4. discussing a **theme** that is significant to the film
5. **analyzing** the film’s meaning: saying what it means and why
6. **evaluating** the film
7. giving a **personal response** to the film

*NY Times* FILM REVIEW Gattaca

The Next Bigotry: Privilege by Genetic Perfection

By JANET MASLIN October 24, 1997

Imagine an Orwellian story presented with a cool, eerie precision like Peter Greenaway's and you have some sense of ''Gattaca,'' a handsome and fully imagined work of cautionary futuristic fiction. Its subject is bigotry, though the races and sexes appear to enjoy equal freedom, which is to say not much. The film's world revolves around strict conformity at places like the Gattaca Corporation, where employees wear somber uniforms and stern, serious expressions -- except for one man with a discreetly worried look: Vincent Freeman (Ethan Hawke), Gattaca's house imposter.

Vincent has already tried conventional means of working his way to the top at Gattaca, but in his case a janitor's job is the limit. That is because Vincent came into the world in what is now the conventional manner but could, in an age of genetic engineering, become obsolete. The film envisions a culture of unapologetic discrimination, with genetically Valid individuals spared defects like baldness, alcoholism and attention deficit disorder and given great privilege. The others, called In-Valids, are relegated to menial work. ''They don't care where you were born,'' someone says about this arrangement. ''Just how.''

''Gattaca,'' an impressively fine-tuned first feature from Andrew Niccol, has been cleverly marketed for weeks with advertisements offering genetically select babies, slick images that fit all too smoothly into today's culture of perfectionist striving. The film is set in ''the not-too-distant future,'' and indeed it succeeds as a scarily apt extension of present-day attitudes. But beyond the ingenuity of its premise, ''Gattaca'' also holds interest with its obsessive attention to detail. The filmmakers gave thought to such matters as whether automobiles of the future would need license plates (no, just microchips) and deftly set Gattaca's headquarters in Frank Lloyd Wright's Marin County Civic Center. The building becomes a perfect reflection of the film's spare, controlled state of mind.

Surreptitiously battling the powers that be is Vincent, who has concocted an elaborate subterfuge. He is in collusion with Eugene, a onetime star swimmer played by Jude Law, who makes the most sensational major movie debut (he appeared in a small film called ''Shopping'') since Edward Norton walked off with ''Primal Fear.'' Eugene is the perfect genetic specimen that Vincent, who has a heart defect, is not. ''You could go anywhere,'' Vincent is told, ''with this guy's helix tucked under your arm.''

Eugene has been crippled in an accident, which effectively cuts short all opportunity for him in this brave new world. So a gene-broker of sorts (Tony Shalhoub) works out a deal whereby Vincent can use Eugene's genetic samples to get past Gattaca's daily security checks. The film renders this process with fascinating precision, showing how nail cuttings, fingerprints, blood and urine samples, even hairs and dandruff, can be methodically switched. The film's extremely handsome look offsets the physicality of these details with test tubes and steel surfaces and seductive, otherworldly lighting in shades like radium green.

Vincent is in genetic disguise because he dreams of being one of Gattaca's astronauts, who in a film like this wear dark business suits rather than space gear. He wants to go to Titan, Saturn's largest moon, and is only days away from a possible trip there when a crisis intervenes. A Gattaca executive is killed and a stray eyelash is found at the murder scene. This is a film where the wrong eyelash could mean complete disaster.

Uma Thurman, who grows more bewitching with each new role, plays the colleague so suspicious of Vincent that she sends a hair from his comb for an identity check. (He has, of course, left Eugene's hair on his comb. At Gattaca, a man can't be too careful.) The film treats Ms. Thurman as a model of composed, corporate perfection, though it also finds a way for her to run through an alley in a silver lame evening gown.

Meanwhile, the large and well-used cast features Alan Arkin as a detective, Loren Dean as his superior officer, Gore Vidal and Ernest Borgnine as Gattaca officials, and Xander Berkeley as the most powerful man in the building. He's the scientist in charge of daily urinalysis when the staff arrives at work.

The film, which seems contrived only when dealing with Vincent's family and which creates its own wrenching sense of brotherhood in the relationship between Vincent and bitter, melancholy Eugene, benefits from extraordinary off-camera talent. Michael Nyman, who composed music for ''The Piano'' and many Greenaway films, contributes a piercingly lovely score. The production designer Jan Roelfs, also a Greenaway regular, contributes backdrops of strange, unnerving beauty.

Evocatively muted costumes are from Colleen Atwood, whose memorable credits range from ''Little Women'' to ''Edward Scissorhands'' and who gives this film a polished elegance. The cinematography is by Slawomir Idziak, who brought a comparably rich, brooding look to Krzysztof Kieslowski's ''Double Life of Veronique'' and ''Three Colors: Blue.''

''Gattaca'' is rated PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned). It includes clinical scientific detail, one brief sexual situation and some violence in its final moments. Older children with a taste for science fiction should find it intriguing.

Credits: Directed and written by Andrew Niccol; director of photography, Slawomir Idziak; edited by Lisa Zeno Churgin; music by Michael Nyman; production designer, Jan Roelfs; costumes by Colleen Atwood; produced by Danny DeVito, Michael Shamberg and Stacey Sher; released by Columbia Pictures. Running time: 112 minutes. This film is rated PG-13.

WITH: Ethan Hawke (Vincent and Jerome), Uma Thurman (Irene), Gore Vidal (Director Josef), Xander Berkeley (Lamar), Jayne Brook (Marie), Ernest Borgnine (Caesar), Alan Arkin (Detective Hugo), Blair Underwood (Geneticist), Loren Dean (Anton), Jude Law (Jerome and Eugene), Tony Shalhoub (German) and Elias Koteas (Antonio).

<http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=990DE4DD103EF937A15753C1A961958260>

# Gattaca Review by |  [Roger Ebert](http://www.rogerebert.com/contributors/roger-ebert) October 24, 1997

What is genetic engineering, after all, but preemptive plastic surgery? Make the child perfect in the test tube, and save money later. Throw in perfect health, a high IQ and a long life-span, and you have the brave new world of “Gattaca,” in which the bioformed have inherited the earth, and babies who are born naturally get to be menial laborers.

This is one of the smartest and most provocative of science fiction films, a thriller with ideas. Its hero is a man who challenges the system. Vincent ([Ethan Hawke](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/ethan-hawke)) was born in the old-fashioned way, and his genetic tests show he has bad eyesight, heart problems and a life expectancy of about 30 years. He is an “In-Valid,” and works as a cleaner in a space center.

Vincent does not accept his fate. He never has. As a child, he had swimming contests with his brother Anton ([Loren Dean](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/loren-dean)), who has all the right scores but needs to be saved from drowning. Now Vincent dreams of becoming a crew member on an expedition to one of the moons of Saturn. Using an illegal DNA broker, he makes a deal with a man named Jerome ([Jude Law](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/jude-law)), who has the right genes but was paralyzed in an accident. Jerome will provide him with blood, urine samples and an identity. In a sense, they'll both go into space. “Gattaca” is the remarkable debut of a writer-director from New Zealand, [Andrew Niccol](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/andrew-niccol), whose film is intelligent and thrilling--a tricky combination--and also visually exciting. His most important set is a vast office where genetically superior computer programmers come to work every day, filing into their long rows of desks like the office slaves in King Vidor's “The Crowd” and Orson Welles' “The Trial.” (Why are “perfect” human societies so often depicted by ranks of automatons? Is it because human nature resides in our flaws?) Vincent, as “Jerome,” gets a job as a programmer, supplies false genetic samples and becomes a finalist for the space shot.

The tension comes in two ways. First, there's the danger that Vincent will be detected; the area is swept daily, and even an eyelash can betray him. Second, there's a murder; a director of the center, who questions the wisdom of the upcoming shot, is found dead, and a detective ([Alan Arkin](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/alan-arkin)) starts combing the personnel for suspects. Will a computer search sooner or later put together Vincent, the former janitor, with “Jerome,” the new programmer? Vincent becomes friendly with Irene ([Uma Thurman](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/uma-thurman)), who works in the center but has been passed over for a space shot because of low scores in some areas. They are attracted to one another, but romance in this world can be dangerous; after kissing a man, a woman is likely to have his saliva swabbed from her mouth so she can test his prospects. Other supporting characters include [Gore Vidal](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/gore-vidal), as a mission supervisor, and [Tony Shalhoub](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/tony-shalhoub) as the broker (“You could go anywhere with this guy's helix under your arm”).

Hawke is a good choice for the lead, combining the restless dreams of a “Godchild” with the plausible exterior of a lab baby. The best scenes involve his relationship with the real Jerome, played by Law as smart, bitter, and delighted to be sticking it to the system that has grounded him. (He may be paralyzed from the waist down, but after all, as the movie observes, you don't need to walk in space.) His drama parallels Vincent's, because if either one is caught they'll both go down together.

Science fiction in the movies has recently specialized in alien invasions, but the best of the genre deals with ideas. At a time when we read about cloned sheep and tomatoes crossed with fish, the science in “Gattaca” is theoretically possible. When parents can order “perfect” babies, will they? Would you take your chances on a throw of the genetic dice, or order up the make and model you wanted? How many people are prepared to buy a car at random from the universe of all available cars? That's how many, I suspect, would opt to have natural children.

Everybody will live longer, look better and be healthier in the Gattacan world. But will it be as much fun? Will parents order children who are rebellious, ungainly, eccentric, creative, or a lot smarter than their parents are? There's a concert pianist in “Gattaca” who has 12 fingers. Don't you sometimes have the feeling you were born just in time?

<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/gattaca-1997>

**Here are a few mini-reviews from a blog set up by a philosophy professor**

I think it was a good sci-fi “what if?” story. This is probably where we are headed but I don’t think it will be any time too soon. [. . . .] The film deals with personal identity, discrimination, courage, the burden of perfection, sacrifice, pursuit of happiness, sibling rivalry, society and control, fate, and whether human nature and the human spirit can be defined or limited by DNA. Most importantly, to me, it deals with disappointed parents. We all disappoint our parents in some shape form or fashion, shame on me, but if you take out all my flaws and I’m still not what you expected, shame on you. — B.C.

I like this movie a lot, I saw it when I was younger but never fully understood it till seeing it a second time. It tries to setup this impossible notion of an imperfect man exceeding his genetic shortcomings but I think it isn’t as implausible as they make it out to seem. Jerome very well may have died at age thirty except neither his parents nor anybody else took into consideration his upbringing and what effect that would have on him. It bothered me so much that his parents acted like he was already dead as soon as the nurse read the blood test results. If Jerome had been an unhealthy kid and ate too much and didn’t exercise enough he probably would have become obese and had heart problems that lead to death. But just because we have certain predispositions doesn’t mean we can’t overcome them. Jerome had will power and fought against what everyone considered his fate, showing that there is more to us than just our genes. If our genes told everything we were capable of and determined our entire lives before we were born then not only would we not have any control over our lives also we would have no responsibility for our actions either. Genes get us started. They set the bare minimum of what we can accomplish but they can’t hold us back from exceeding more. Jerome had to fight every step of the way but proved that it is possible. -- Jazzman

Gattica raises issues of identity and genetic essentialism/determinism. Essentialism is the view that our genes determine our behavior and control the development of our capacities. As in the movie a person’s genetics are very private and can very well be used as a basis of discrimination, this is the central theme of the film. I enjoyed the film. The cunning acts between Vincent and Jerome only proves that anyone can be fooled because there are never enough fail safe triggers to catch everyone. There are people who will always be able to get away with amazing things just because the right standards are not applied to catch wrongdoers. The film raises other issues as, whether we should prevent genetic knowledge. Because we have the biological process to map out genetic information does not predict external or internal causes that provoke change. What science fails to realize is that just because someone is genetically designed to be perfect does not mean that their logic will be perfect. Most people feel that our future is going to be brighter because of genetic engineering. I personally think that we are playing with fire. There is always going to be someone to push the limits and experiment with things that were intended to be left alone. What if the human race became so genetically perfect? Will everyone be closely tied? What happens if a rare virus from who knows where appears, will it destroy the whole race? Man in his own rights is not a perfect creature. Why should we as a human race think that we can change the entire race through genetics when the whole thing started with Adam and Eve? --Hippy

<http://www.philfilms.utm.edu/1/gattaca.htm>