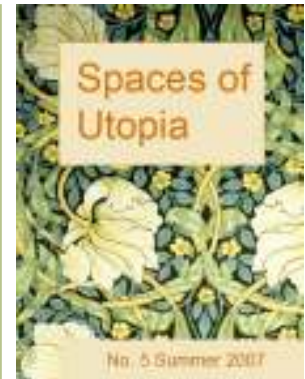


The Body as Utopia:

Gattaca, by Andrew Niccol (1997)

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A recent reality show on a Dutch TV channel raised an international uproar both among patients in search of organ donors and the medic community. The show, aired by the youth-oriented and often controversial Dutch TV-channel BNN, was called *The Big Donor Show*. At first sight, the show was meant to present several kidney patients trying to prove which of them most needed a kidney transplant from a donor supposedly ill with terminal cancer. As if the idea was not controversial enough, the show then turned out to be a hoax because while the potential recipients were real kidney patients, the donor was a perfectly healthy actress. All of them knew about the farce. Apart from the ethics involved, it seems clear that the show was just another turn of the screw in the maelstrom of reality shows in search of an audience. Laurens Drillich, BNN's chairman, later declared in a press release: "We wanted to make a statement. That worked. In the past seven days there has been more debate about organ donation than in the last seven years".¹ Whether the show actually had positive repercussions on the number of donors in the Netherlands, which allegedly was its main purpose, or actually scandalized away potential donors because of its

trivial format is yet to be seen. Even Prime Minister Jan-Peter Balkenende's contradictory reactions before and after the show appeared on TV seem to suggest that, despite the sought-for controversy of the format, the issue of organ donation is far from being an easy one, and that each country, each hospital and even each individual faces the matter differently.

The history of organ transplants began in 1954 when the American surgeon Joseph Murray successfully performed the first kidney transplant from an adult to his twin. Since then, transplant experimentation has included natural, artificial, and even animal organs. The perennial human fear of death, the ongoing search for happiness, the need to recapture the perfection of the body after the loss of Paradise, the Promethean challenge of medicine against disease, the improvement of surgical methods which often are only reserved to a few, or simple human curiosity are but a few factors which justify the ongoing research in the field. It is no secret that, much like Victor Frankenstein's messianic (i.e., utopian) impulse, transplant research is a thriving discipline. However, recent discoveries in genetics, the practical advent of clonation, and present-day research with core cells might soon relegate transplants to vintage medical treatises. That is precisely the starting point of this discussion, which will focus on *Gattaca*, a film directed by Andrew Niccol in 1997.

Set in "the not too distant future" [*sic*] *Gattaca* presents a world which is preparing to send manned spacecraft to the moons of Saturn. The Gattaca Aerospace Corporation is the conglomerate in charge of the task. Its name comes from the initials of one the most repeated sequences of bases in the human genome formed by Adenine, Thymine, Cytosine, and Guanine. The name, cryptic enough at the beginning, proves fully justified as the film

progresses and the spectator becomes entangled in the obsessive role assigned to genetic identity. Human beings of that time are not procreated, but produced through a careful selection of physical and intellectual features, a process which literally offers children *à la carte*. Prospective parents can thus choose sex, eye or skin colour. But technoscience also allows parents to eliminate negative features such as the propensity to alcoholism, depression or congenital heart defects. However, a number of people conceived in the traditional way still remain. They are referred to as *in-valids* or *sons of God*, and although class discrimination in the Marxist sense of the term does not exist, from the beginning of the film it becomes clear that a new social scale based on genetic “validity” has been established. *In-valids* are basically relegated to menial jobs on the grounds of their imperfect and therefore limited abilities, which produces a *de facto* scientific segregation based on genetics.

Vincent (Ethan Hawke) is an *in-valid* who works at the Gattaca Corporation as a cleaner. His dream is to join one of the expeditions about to take off for Titan, something which his genetic imperfection obviously prevents. Vincent is the genetic outcome of a traditional birth, the result of a genetic lottery which determined that he would have a propensity to cardiopathies and whose life expectancy would probably not go beyond thirty-three years. In other words, he is the dramatic result of a natural conception which convinced his parents to have a second child according to the new “natural” way. Through a mysterious go-between, he meets the former swimmer – now paraplegic – Jerome Morrow (Jude Law). Jerome has been in a wheelchair ever since he attempted suicide as he could not cope with coming second in a swimming event. Jerome is willing to sell Vincent his identity and all the elements which

make up for it: blood samples, urine, hair, dead skin cells and so on. Vincent then manages to cheat the system and is accepted into the astronaut training programme. Thanks to the genetic material provided by Jerome, Vincent is considered one of the most apt candidates. Unfortunately, one week before the launching, a murder is committed and he becomes a major suspect when one of his own eyelashes is found at the scene of the crime. Finally, with the help of a doctor who chooses to ignore Vincent's genetic fraud and with the acquiescence of Irene (Uma Thurman), who also feels frustrated for not being able to travel into space, he manages to depart for Titan. Vincent's brother, Anton, now a policeman in charge of the murder case, recognizes him and notices the fraud but also decides to let him go, astonished at his *in-valid* brother's endurance and will.

In order to understand my contention that the body in *Gattaca* may be seen as a utopian space, this paper will specifically focus on three characters. In the first place, Vincent's parents; secondly, Vincent himself; and finally, Jerome.

Vincent's parents

The fact that Vincent's parents actually appear only once in the film does not diminish their relevance in the story. They appear for less than three minutes altogether and in retrospect mode. The most revealing sequence is Vincent's birth accompanied by his mother's screams of pain. Next, the focus is on his parents' absolute surprise on being told that their child has a strong risk of suffering cardiopathies and that his life expectancy is only thirty-three years. Finally, there is the way in which they approach a geneticist to conceive a *valid*

brother for Vincent and their unsophisticated request: "We were wondering if we should leave some things to chance".² Their resistance to use the new "natural" method to conceive children epitomizes a certain mistrust of technoscience, an almost religious awe which assumes that genetic uncertainty is part of mankind's written destiny as expressed in the Bible. Actually, it is only when they become aware of Vincent's hazardous future that they decide to resort to the new technology to conceive Vincent's brother.

Vincent

Vincent's ambition to travel to space is relatively difficult to account for. The story faintly suggests a certain frustration due to his condition as *in-valid*, his wounded pride for being considered an inferior being, his bitterness towards a system which has rediscovered the caste system, or a combination of all three. In any case, his decision to cheat the system is a vital challenge which tries to show the inviability of a social organization based on the segregation between those "scientifically pure" and those "imperfectly human". At the end of the film, Vincent manages to demonstrate that qualities such as perseverance and cunning may counterbalance blind technology.

Jerome

Jerome personifies yet another kind of frustration with the system. His disappointment and resentment stem from a crippled body, once meant to be perfect. Jerome blames the system for its inability to restore his glorious condition before he attempted suicide. Actually, he also blames the system for his failed suicide attempt, and for the reasons which led him to make such a

decision. All things considered then, Jerome is ready to cheat the system not because he thinks it is intrinsically evil, but because it cannot grant him what it had promised, namely, physical happiness and psychological peace.

Gattaca clearly recalls Huxley's *Brave New World*. The use of genetic niches – *valid*, *in-valid* – seems directly inspired in Huxley's classification by means of Greek letters. Unfortunately the film does not provide much information on life outside the *Gattaca* Corporation. At most, spectators are led to believe that life in the near future has become pretty standardized with individuals developing their activities within their allocated slot. No signs of collective rebellion or social unrest are perceived, though it seems clear that crime still exists. Perhaps one of the interesting features of the film is that it suggests that though collective happiness might have been achieved, individual happiness is far from being universal. A police force is required, murders still exist and so do informers, along with a certain *big-brotherish* feeling which pervades the whole atmosphere.

Much like *Brave New World*, *Gattaca* presents a world which revolves around genetic control, or rather eugenics. However, whereas in Huxley's novel social peace is achieved through pre-birth determining and post-birth conditioning, in *Gattaca* social peace looks vaguely universal, the only exception being the groups of remaining *in-valids*. The universalization of the system, it seems, would entail the complete extinction of *in-valids*, and consequently, widespread social happiness would appear as the final stage on the way towards utopia. In other words, the hypothetical perfection of individual bodies would eventually lead to the perfection of society. That is why at the *Gattaca* Corporation – and in the rest of the world, one must assume – there is

an obsession with body perfection. Curiously enough, in perfect *Gattaca* there is room for Darwinian principles and so, supposedly perfect individuals are still encouraged to strive for a higher degree of perfection, in a clear re-elaboration of the survival of the fittest principle. Yet, it is even more curious to notice that, unlike *Brave New World*, *Gattaca* pays no attention to the psychological happiness of the individual. No sleep-conditioning or soma seem necessary, a feature which might be understood as the conviction that human *unhappiness* (or at least a great part of it) is a consequence of body limitations. This interpretation, however, may sound flawed, as it plainly ignores the interface body-mind (or in other words, physicality *versus* spirituality).

Vincent, Jerome and Vincent's brother Anton all personify attitudes which denote an idealization of the body. Most often, their acts and psychological reactions are motivated by an urge to come to terms with their own body, a space which throughout the film becomes a physical battlefield. For Vincent, his obsession to travel to space may be seen as the desperate need to show that *in-valids* may go beyond the limits they have been set by the system. His battle is one to demonstrate that human will is stronger than genetic segregation, an idea which he will try to validate by achieving a physical goal reserved to perfect individuals. In the case of Vincent, he basically seeks revenge against a system that proclaims universal order, control and happiness, but which – like most utopias – is extremely sensitive to difference. Finally, Vincent's brother Anton is another peculiarity within this world. Conceived according to the new techniques, his standard body, however, is far from matching Vincent's physical achievements. Twice in the film it is shown that Vincent and Anton settle their differences by swimming into the ocean until one of them becomes exhausted

or too scared to continue. Shockingly enough (and contradicting the scientific expectations determined at birth), the *in-valid* brother saves his perfect brother's life on both occasions, thus proving that either there is something wrong with scientific predictions or that there are other components the genetic test was unable to detect. Perhaps the answer to this apparent contradiction can be found in Vincent's reply to his brother Anton when, tired and scared, he tries to find a logical explanation and Vincent replies: "You want to know how I did it? This is how I did it, Anton: I never saved anything for the swim back". It seems clear that Vincent is arguing for human will as an empowering force which may, if not substitute, at least make up for an inferior body.

Jerome's case is more pathetic as his vision of the body as utopia was turned into a dystopia when he only managed to win the silver medal. Again, we must allow room for elements other than the body; and again we must consider human will as a leading force able to modify the course of human events. In this case, though, given the perfect condition that is theoretically enjoyed by *valid* individuals, it must be concluded that the only process Jerome can aspire to is the destruction of the presumed utopia represented by his body. Therefore, he attempts suicide. After the unsuccessful attempt, he too becomes an *in-valid* (i.e., paraplegic); but what is worse, he enters a vicious circle of unhappiness, alcohol and sex from which the only escape will be the projection of his own body utopia onto somebody else's utopia (i.e., Vincent's).

Finally, Anton's decision to ignore Vincent's fraud may be seen as yet another example of body idealization. Brought up in and by a system where body perfection is the norm, where *in-valids* are considered scientifically inferior, and trained as a police officer, the only way for Anton to come to terms with his

disgust is by projecting his confusion onto his brother Vincent. Thus, in what may be seen as an act of generosity, he looks aside whilst his brother cheats the system. All in all, this is yet another acknowledgement that the *Gattaca* world is far from being perfect.

Gattaca raises many questions and deals with many thought-provoking issues. Perhaps one of the most challenging ones is the overlapping between the physical and social body. In this sense, the notion that perfect individual bodies will eventually bring about a perfect society is not to be dismissed. Actually, the very opening of the film immediately recalls some of the principles of the Transhumanist movement. Officially begun in the nineteen-eighties by the Oxford philosopher Nick Bostrom, Transhumanism

promotes an interdisciplinary approach to understanding and evaluating the opportunities for enhancing the human condition and the human organism opened up by the advancement of technology.

(...)

Transhumanists view human nature as a work-in-progress, a half-baked beginning that we can learn to remold in desirable ways. Current humanity need not be the endpoint of evolution. Transhumanists hope that by responsible use of science, technology, and other rational means we shall eventually manage to become posthuman, beings with vastly greater capacities than present human beings have.³

Transhumanists (transitional humanists) see themselves as a logical evolution from humanists and as the logical stage prior to posthumans. They defend technoscience as the obvious vehicle to reach the posthuman condition, though they are not necessarily optimistic about the results of the indiscriminate use of technoscience. They even admit that a certain genetic divide may develop. Much like the Amish communities reject certain technological advances, some transhumanists even talk about a *Humanish* community which will reject body enhancement technology, which in turn may produce a society

where genetically modified individuals live along with the *Humanish*. This situation is precisely the leitmotiv in *Gattaca*. Vincent's parents are presented as a weird couple who inexplicably decide to engender a child in the traditional way. The use of irony to describe their decision is revealing, as when Vincent (as narrator) says: "I was conceived in the Riviera, not the French Riviera. The Detroit variety" (meaning his father's Buick Riviera); or when recalling his father's attempt to sell the car he says: "My father got a good price. After all, the only accident he'd ever had in that car was me." But irony becomes cynicism when Vincent (again as narrator) explains that discrimination is not a matter of skin colour or social class any more because now "there is a science for that."

That sort of remark suggests that Vincent – much like his parents – harbours serious doubts about the goodness of the new situation. Science is indirectly considered guilty of the process of de-humanization which has led to the genetic divide. However, Vincent does not choose to destroy the system. His attitude is much less heroic. One might even say that it is far more selfish: he basically wants to prove to himself that he is *valid* enough to do whatever a *valid* individual does. It might be argued that in so doing, and considering the help he obtains from other people, the system is doomed and that it will eventually implode. Unfortunately, his trip to Titan is a rather limited attempt to escape a social reality he does not like. The film ends with some apparently optimistic remarks:

We came from the stars so they say, now it's time to go back. If I was conceived today, I would not get beyond eight cells, and yet here I am. In a way they were right, I don't have the heart for this world. The question is, why am I having so much trouble dying?

It is doubtful that a group of well-trained *Gattacans* will admit an alien element in their structure once they find out about the fraud. But even more disheartening is the notion that the doctors may actually be right and his life may well terminate before he arrives in Titan. Therefore, if his body utopia comes to an end and, likewise, the Gattaca pseudo-utopia, what are we left with? Possibly nothing more – and nothing less – than the human will which took him that far. Not a bad prospect, after all.

Notes

¹ <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1627591,00.html> (accessed on June 11, 2007).

² *Gattaca*, by Andrew Niccol. Script. www.script-o-rama.com (accessed on July 3, 2007). All references from the film are based on this website.

³ <http://www.transhumanism.org/index.php/WTA/more/transhumanist-values> (accessed on July 8, 2007).