Pergamon

Film

Gattaca: defacing the future

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A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and our language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably [1].

Can an image create a future? Can a word create a future? Most emphatically, 'yes', I would say. Moreover, not only can words and images create a future, they are the only means of future creation. They are that important because they are that close to our creation of meaning. Thus, it makes perfect sense to look to word and image in its most voluminous form—film—to see suggestions of what some of the future(s) might be.

This is not an analysis in the standard sense of a film review. My only comments lie with the creation of future(s) in language and for present purposes, perhaps even more so, in image. There is one important point to be made about one particular word right here at the outset, though. One of the most important criticisms in future studies is that we treat the future as an inevitable manifesting of itself—something that happens 'out there', beyond our control or influence. Consequently, there is only one future, as though it is already written in the script of a God, and we are playing it out on stage. This attitude is reflected in language insofar as we consider it standard to use definite, rather than indefinite articles; that is, to say *the* future, just as we say *the* present and *the* past. In fact, we do have some say in the future(s). It is not some sort of intentionally-guided say that we have, however. And it is certainly not some sort of happy control of destiny. It is more of a structural influence. That influence is an influence whereby we create an atmosphere of possibilities. That

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atmosphere is created through words and images. And insofar as that atmosphere is one of enabling and constraining discourse, it should remain open to multiple futures, and to futures which resist dominant futures. To accomplish this, we need to attend to small tasks such as the individual words that we use to keep open the possibility of multiple futures. Consequently, I have adopted the somewhat clumsy convention of using the word 'future(s)', where grammar would usually call for the singular, so as to indicate that more than one future is in word, image and in deed possible.

The narrative of *Gattaca* is in some ways quite simple—in a world where human cloning is possible, a class system of clones and not-clones has developed. Clones with particular characteristics qualify for space travel. A non-clone has a dream, but no social chance for space travel. To subvert the system, he organises a variety of tricks in identifying his genetic code in order to try to pass undetected for a clone, and travel in space.

From the story of *Gattaca* we see how language will control the meaning of what has already been discussed elsewhere—the material distinctions that could be made between those who are clones and who are not. *Gattaca* uses the terms 'valids' and 'in-valids' (which also gives us some insight into our own contemporary use of the latter term) to describe clones and non-clones. Employers in such a world are not interested in an invalid when they can employ a perfect individual—a clone. We do not need the film *Gattaca* to know that employers, through systems set up by insurance companies, already practice that brand of discrimination.

There are words, there are images, and there are words about images. One of these words about images is 'vision'. In its more literal sense, 'vision' usually means something to do with sight from the eye. But in its more figurative sense, it means that we are understanding; more pointedly, that we are understanding the future. That is what it is to have a vision of the future. Appropriately, I found in the first of the BBC's paper version of *Tomorrow's World*, a monthly publication with the same title as the television programme, that "Writer-director Andrew Niccol's vision compellingly warns what a brave new world based on human genetics could be like" [2]. What can we make of this sense of 'vision'? In saying that Niccol was providing us with a vision of what the future *could* look like, the author suggests that other futures would be possible. If we however go back to the words 'compellingly warns', we find that the author is not only making a suggestion about a possible future among many other equally possible ones, but rather is suggesting that the one that Niccol sees is in fact a likely one—hence the warning. This observation is only slightly limiting compared to others, however.

A far more limiting sense of future(s) is not in what is explicitly seen or said by Niccol or his film, but in what is implicitly carried along. This reminds me of the fable of the little boy who is challenged to smuggle anything of his choice past the king's guards. He first takes a wagonload of sand, in the centre of which is his toy bear. The guard laughs at such an obvious attempt, and duly notes the hidden bear. The boy then tries the same tactic with a toy cat hidden in sand. The guard again is amused. This happens five times and the guard duly records the hidden toys each time. In the end, the boy demonstrates his success by pointing out to the guard that although the guard saw and recorded the hidden toys, he failed to record the sand

and the wagon which each time were left inside the palace grounds and replaced with new ones. What wagons and sand are getting past our watchful vision of the future while remaining mindful of the hidden toys that are the moral lessons of cloning?

This query begins to be answered in the same review by concluding with evidence of *one* future, even though we were told that it was only a possible one (suggesting that there could be more). The review concludes with a promise that acts as evidence for the inevitability of one future: "By the year 2000 scientists believe they will have mapped all 100 000 human genes" [2] (p. 9). This parting comment compellingly suggests that we need be concerned about the implications of cloning because we will soon have mapped all of our genes. The connection between the mapping and cloning is enthymematically left out. This compelling suggestion leaves little room for an image or vision of the future that is not in some way enmeshed with cloning—the one inevitable future. The sand and the wagon in *Gattaca* are the common suspicious political categories—white westerners in a technologically-driven lifestyle, fuelled by market capitalism, spiced with a romantic love story to keep things 'human'. We should unpack these symbols as they slip past us, however, and not be caught in moralising about the obvious only.

The social, political and ethical implications from this narrative are not all that subtle. They moralise in a way that suggests that if we go the route of cloning, this is the bad stuff that will happen. Far more subtle is the sense of one inevitable sci-fi *type* of future which a film like *Gattaca* suggests by portraying only it: white, technologically-based, sterile, and (should we be surprised), in some ways identifiable with the present, such as the use of cars and contact lenses and the love story that helps to carry the protagonist along to his one inevitable destiny. (Did anyone ever really believe he would not make it to the space ship?) The image of the disenfranchised in *Gattaca* comes poignantly through Ernest Borgnine as a cleaner. Is this a cleaner or is this Ernest Borgnine? If this is as bad as it gets (being an aging Ernest Borgnine), how bad could it be?

The sterility of the stainless steel surfaces and broad, institutionally-lighted indoor landscapes, with hard heels marching on hard floors which shine and reflect the light, help to remind the audience of the sterility of the social meaning of the system as well. But it does not point out the sterility of any one future. Singularity is a more sterile concept then vacuumed floors and hair-free computer keypads.

And there is Americana—the protagonist came into the world in those heady days of love-making in the backseat of a big American car on the beach. And the progeny of that celebration will beat the sterile system and rise, metaphorically and physically, into the outer space of his dreams.

Images of *a* past—Nazi eugenics—which foretell of *a* future, are on hand as well. Uma Thurman, as the heroine, is none-the-less one of *them*, and with her blond-sculptured features, and uniform-like business suits, suggests more than a little stereotyping. The confused supplier of DNA material to the protagonist meets his end in the flames of an incinerator. In addition, the menacing police force, with its penchant for identification of impersonators, provides the social backdrop of a technological police state. The twist which makes this the sci-fi American future

instead of the Nazi past, is the working of capital in the launching of the dreamt-for rocket voyage, and the murder of one of the industry captains involved in the launches. This is not a police state, its a private industry-policed state.

As a stylistic ideology, the realism of the film also serves to focus us on the one set of moral issues around cloning. The success of this image-style is reflected in the advertising campaign that accompanied the film's American release. In the advert, a perfect baby was pictured with the text "Children made to order". "Only a tiny PG-13 and even smaller Sony Pictures logo suggested that they were not genuine. Calling an accompanying phone line, 1-888-BEST-DNA, prospective parents were promised the chance to 'engineer your offspring'. It was disconnected after the American Society for Reproductive Medicine appealed to Sony to change the ads" [3] (p. 15).

One might think that given that they were present for all of the reminders that this was a construct, the actors might have more of an opportunity to move outside of the realism. Instead, they propagated it, even off the movie set. One of the actors, Jude Law, when talking of the making of the film, said the following: "The Chicago Bulls were in the basketball play-offs with the Knicks, and we realised that the Bulls were valid, while the Knicks were in-valid: they were varying heights, and they would win games through their guts, sweat and blood, while the Bulls were these godly geniuses who only had to breathe to win…" [3] (p. 14).

The limiting and constraining notion of a vision is also experienced with 'prediction'. In general, the word 'prediction' suggests that one can say something *pre* or before something happens. Of course predictions can be wrong, but once they are made, we are constrained by their very existence to treat the future as a fulfilment or unfulfilment of the prediction. In this way, the prediction, fulfilled or not, is the axis around which we interpret the meaning of the future. Even if the prediction is unfulfilled, it has served to form the discourse we have about the events as they unfold. This is particularly dangerous not for the obvious issues which a prediction talks about (the toys in the sand), but for the context of the issues (the sand) and the vehicle which carries them along (the wagon), all of which slip by us, observed and with affect, but unrecorded for conscious purposes. In the specific case of *Gattaca*, this phenomenon can be noticed in the reviews themselves: "In a few decades, will our genetically modified grandchildren tune into Andrew Niccol's vintage 1998 sci-fi film, 'Gattaca', and giggle at its naivety, or wonder at its prescience?" [3] (p. 12).

The possibility for our grandchildren's behaviour—giggling or wonderment—is impliedly based upon whether we 'got it right' or 'got it wrong'. What if it is simply a non-issue, or one issue among many? More importantly, what is the implied 'it' involved in getting it right or wrong? The 'it' is the 'fact' of what the future will be—floating out there in a pre-determined destiny of reality, waiting to manifest itself and thereby move from the present to the future; to make predictions right or wrong, and to make prescience into science.

Thus, *Gattaca* does provide us with words and images that are only so slightly fanciful that they are indeed disturbing. But the film is also a Trojan horse of sorts, for in its overt moral criticism of capital, scientism and a technologised social future,

it relieves us from feeling the need to go further with criticism. That further criticism lies with the covert suggestion that there will be one, inevitable future—a technologically-based, American looking, capital driven, white middle-class future—and our only input will be to fine tune those categories, including the moral spin. To break from those limiting categories, and from the assumption that there is one inevitable future already written into destiny, we need first to create the possibility that there may be multiple futures. That possibility is created in the words and images of the present(s).

References

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[2] 2020 vision. Tomorrow's World, April 1998:25–33.
[3] Charity T. Cell shock (interview of Andrew Niccol). Time Out, 11–18 March 1998;No. 1438:12–15.