



GATTACA

Released: 1997 by Columbia Pictures
Produced by: Danny DeVito, Michael Shamberg, and
Stacey Sher

Screenplay: Andrew Niccol

Cinematography: Slawomir Idziak

Starring: Ethan Hawke, Uma Thurman, Alan Arkin,
Jude Law, Loren Dean

Music: Michael Nyman

Directed by: Andrew Niccol

Rated: **PG-13**

In a year filled with science fiction “blockbusters,” it’s a real treat to view a film with few pretensions to grandeur and more intent to tell a good story. *Gattaca* is just such a film, filling its scanty 112 minutes with a wealth of exposition.

Although the movie is about genetics, it is more a study of human nature than an excuse to break out the special effects. To often, we are given a *Jurassic Park*, instead of a film that illustrates the realities of genetic manipulation. *Gattaca* is a subtle film. It is so subtle, in fact, that it wasn’t until the end credits, where the letters A, C, G, and T were highlighted in blue, that I realized the title is spelled out using the letters of the four main nucleotides in DNA.

In the future described in *Gattaca*, the genetically altered deck each child is dealt at birth dictates human success. A “natural,” or a “God-child” is not destined for much of anything, due to the unfortunate imperfections contained in its genes. In such a future, people are monitored by means of blood, saliva, urine, skin, and hair samples. An underground has developed, where certain determined people try to get by on “borrowed ladders” (someone else’s DNA helix). These people are considered “degenerates,” or “in-valids.” Vincent Freeman (Ethan Hawke) is one of them, having cut himself off from his family, and taken on the persona of one Jerome Morrow (Jude Law). With his stolen identity, he hopes to achieve what his genes deny him—his dream of space travel.

The screenplay is literate, with overtones of Orwell’s 1984. New Zealander Andrew Niccol (doubling as writer/director) gives us a script that examines the effect that genetic manipulation might have on interpersonal relationships. Eschewing the grim, nihilistic approach, he offers us a world not so different from ours on the surface, but as defective as a bad gene splice at its core.

Visually, *Gattaca* is beautiful to behold. Cinematographer Idziak juxtaposes the sterility of ultramodern décor with breathtakingly beautiful natural settings. Director Niccol keeps Idziak’s focus tight, concentrating on the miniscule. This attention to detail gave me the impression I was watching a lot of the film through an electron microscope.

Acting-wise, there are a number of standout performances. Ethan Hawke delivers an Oscar-caliber performance, a study in low-key emoting. Jude Law is utterly convincing as well, capturing the sardonically defeatist attitude of his character perfectly. Uma Thurman masterfully portrays a ravishing, yet detached, woman of her time. All the supporting parts were equally well handled and believable.

Gattaca, although a small film, is so much more than the sum of its parts. It is a thinking-man's sci-fi film. Its message is a basic one. All the genetic manipulation in the world cannot imbue a person with the will to achieve—or excise the propensity to fail.