Year 12 Visual Text Study – *Gattaca*

Exemplar Essay A

‘Gattaca’ by Andrew Niccols presents many interesting ideas to the viewer. One of the most thought provoking is the effect of widespread knowledge of the human genome on society. ‘Gattaca’ shows the power of this knowledge, but also its limitations. It shows that a genetic test will never be able to test for spirit and that this spirit is at least as powerful as someone’s genes.

‘Gattaca’ shows a world in ‘The not too distant future,’ where knowledge of the human genes has caused many changes. One of the most important of these changes is discrimination on the basis of genetic perfection. In ‘Gattaca’ this idea is shown in the character of Vincent. Vincent is born a ‘faith birth,’ he has not been genetically engineered. From birth the probable time and cause of his death are known. Vincent is born with a ‘probable lifespan of 30.2 years’ and a ‘99% probability of heart failure’.

At an early age, Vincent experiences ‘Genoism,’ discrimination based on genetic imperfection, when he is not accepted into kindergarten because the insurance would not cover any possible accident. From here, Vincent’s life is a series of rejections. He dreams of getting into space, but he is rejected from the space corporation, Gattaca, because his genetic quotient or GQ is too low. In the voice-over, Vincent says that no matter how good he was, he knew that he could not get in because, ‘My real resume was in my cells’. Thus, Vincent joins a new genetic underclass and works as a janitor. He says in the voice-over, ‘We now have discrimination down to a science’. Widespread knowledge of the human genome could too easily cause genetic discrimination. Insurance companies could refuse to insure those with a high chance of fatal disease. Companies, like Gattaca in ‘Gattaca’ could employ only those with a genetic code that is near to perfect.

Another major problem in a world like ‘Gattaca,’ where one can access ones genetic code just by going up to a booth and handing in a hair, or some skin cells, is that people could their DNA like a script of their life. They could stay in the bounds of its restrictions and not past its limits. This would be hugely disadvantageous to those who did this, as it would restrict them from doing many things, which they would have otherwise done, to no harm to themselves. In ‘Gattaca’ this is shown in the character of Irene. She has a heart problem like Vincent’s, only less severe, but she lets this rule her life. She lets it dash her dream of going into space. It takes Vincent to tell her that ‘It is possible’ for her to begin to push her boundaries. Our lives are not pre-determined. If we start to think that they are, we will begin to act like automatons, like many of the characters in ‘Gattaca’.

‘Gattaca’ shows genetic testing as a powerful tool, but it also shows that gentic tests cannot pick up human spirit and it shows that this spirit, or lack thereof, is really what determines people’s success. This is again shown in the life of Vincent. Even though he is born with a life expectancy of only 30.2 years and a 99% chance of heart failure, Vincent dreams of going into space. This dream gives him the spirit that eventually enables him to achieve his dream.

Vincent’s spirit is shown when he races his brother for the last time in a game of ‘Chicken,’ where they swim out to seas as far as they can. Usually Anton, his brother, easily wins, but on the last time they swim off Vincent wins and has to save his brother from drowning. He is able to do this because ‘I never saved anything for the swim back’. This victory gives Vincent the knowledge that he can achieve what he wants. In the voice-over he says: ‘It was the one moment in our lives that my brother was not a strong as he believed, and I was not as weak. It was the moment that made everything else possible’.

Vincent’s contacts a gene broker and is linked up with Jerome. Jerome is the opposite in every respect to Vincent. Where Vincent was born with nothing, Jerome had everything. However, where Vincent has spirit, Jerome lacks it. The importance of spirit is shown at the end of the film when Vincent achieves his goal of going into space and Jerome commits suicide.

‘Gattaca’ shows a world where the knowledge of the human genome has changed society forever. It shows the discrimination that inevitably results and other problems associated with it. But it also shows the power of the human spirit and how this cannot be tested for in genetic tests. It shows this spirit to be the most important thing in determining the success of a person.