

## **GATTACA: a Lacanian reading**

I would like to present an alternative interpretation of *Gattaca*, in terms of Lacanian psychoanalysis. This kept me up for the better part of last night, and I think helps to make sense of the swimming motif in the film that came up last night; but also of the various relationships between the men in the film, which I think might all be understood in terms of the Oedipus complex, but are expressed as different forms of sibling rivalry, the paradigm case being that between Vincent and his brother Anton.

### **1. Symbolic identity**

As opposed to ‘imaginary identification,’ in which the subject identifies with the other to produce the sense of oneness with them, symbolic identification is characterised by a sense of lack, and alienation from one’s identity. Symbolic identity is bestowed upon the subject by others: that is, by the father’s name, social expectations, and the place allotted the subject in relation to others.

Symbolic identity is also accompanied by a mandate, or a role and mode of behaviour that is expected to conform to the given identity. The subject either interpellates, or accepts, this role and identity, or rejects them, in which case all kinds of problems ensue. For instance, the Lacanian reading of *Hamlet* holds that Hamlet’s problem is basically a failure of interpellation: briefly, that he cannot negotiate the various mandates placed upon him by others. Many of Alfred Hitchcock’s films (for instance, *North by Northwest*, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*) are also based upon the possibility of failed interpellation, such that an identity and mandate is thrust upon the protagonist against his will. The drama unfolds as the protagonist attempts to negotiate his alien identity, as others’ expectations of him that attend it.

In the case of *Gattaca*, on the other hand, one’s symbolic identity is *supposed* to accord with the ‘real’ of the body: one’s genetic code. The knowledge apparatus by means of which society is ordered is the genetic categorisation. Vincent, the film’s protagonist is able to refuse the correlation between his symbolic identity and his body, by literally appropriating the body of another: the genetically superior Jerome Morrow. In this regard, his symbolic identity—by means of which he is recognised by others—becomes that of Jerome, and he thereby assumes Jerome’s mandate (ie. to do things that only the genetically privileged are allowed to do, such as become an astronaut).

In accordance with the classic psychoanalytic program, the point at which Vincent’s plan to pass himself off as Jerome trips up is where his ‘real’ body reasserts itself: Vincent becomes a wanted man when an errant eyelash is found near the scene of a murder at his place of work. It is important to note that Vincent is wanted by the police precisely because he is ‘in-valid,’ that is, does not belong to this place where only the genetically elite dwell. There is no concrete evidence against him that would connect him directly to the murder—as it happens, the murderer turns out to be an insider, in fact, the new director of missions. Vincent’s only crime is that he does not belong to the place that he occupies: he is an interloper, falsely recognised as Jerome Morrow.

### Doubles

The film elaborates this theme through the use of the figure of the double, which occupies many neurotic fantasies pertaining to the failure to interpellate one's symbolic identity. First, and most obviously, Jerome and Vincent are doubles, in that they share a symbolic identity—or more precisely, Jerome is effaced at the point where Vincent comes to take his identity. Jerome then occupies a social no-man's land, and comes to be reduced to the 'real' of his body: that is, to immanence. As Jerome puts this, he provides Vincent with his body, and Vincent provides him with his dream: which can be recast into existentialist terms as Jerome providing the facticity (being-in-itself), and Vincent the transcendence (being-for-itself), that would then complete the subject.

But no less important a 'double' is configured in Vincent's relation to his genetically 'enhanced' brother Anton, his more perfect counterpart, who also occupies his symbolic place, as given by the father's name. This is where the Oedipal complex is pertinent: Vincent is denied his due compensation for turning away from his wish for the mother (and his imaginary identification with her) when he is passed over as beneficiary of the father's name. Vincent's father (Anton Snr.) withholds the attribution his name from his first-born son, when Vincent is found to be genetically imperfect, and so in some sense unworthy of the name. The Oedipal rivalry is then deferred to the sibling relationship: Vincent and his brother Anton are continually compared, and Vincent is always seen to come up short. Moreover, given his symbolic identity (as genetically deficient, and unworthy of his father's name), he *cannot* be seen otherwise.

The third pair of doubles, then, is Anton and Jerome. When the sibling relationship between Vincent and Anton is severed, it is commenced again between Vincent and Jerome. In this respect, Jerome and Anton occupy the same 'place,' or meaning, in Vincent's symbolic network. Both are the bearers of the name to which he feels himself entitled, but is not permitted by society to own. We find the same rivalry between Vincent and Jerome as existed previously between Vincent and Anton. And in the end it is only by virtue of something unmeasurable and unrecognisable within him—perhaps his determination, or 'spirit'—that Vincent wins his struggles against them. Despite their genetic superiority to him, Anton and Jerome each come second to Vincent in achievement.

It is in respect of the figure of the double that *Gattaca* also becomes a film about love. When Irene is confronted with both 'Jeromes' she is sickened by Vincent's deception, and confused by the question of whom it was that she had loved: the real Vincent, or the symbolic identity he had taken up as 'Jerome.' This is a question that, according to Lacan, troubles all love relationships—and particularly heterosexual love, which is already mediated by the transference (the libidinal investment that one had already placed in one's opposite sex parent). In *Gattaca* love conquers all when Irene ceases to be beguiled by Vincent's symbolic identity, as the perfect Jerome, and comes instead to admire his 'spirit'—for instance, that he ran across the road for her when he was unable

to see the oncoming traffic. In my opinion, this is possibly the most far-fetched aspect of the film, notwithstanding its pretensions to scientific prophesy.

### Swimming

The swimming motif, which permeates the film, might also be read in the context of the double. The seemingly impossible occurs when Anton comes second to his brother in their ocean-swim game of chicken, and this appears to be a life defining moment for him (we are shown Anton using a swimming machine at one point in the film, presumably attempting to compensate for his earlier loss). Likewise, Jerome, who was born to win, carries with him a silver medal as a reminder of his defeat in competition. This was also a defining moment for him, to the extent, perhaps, that it was the catalyst for his failed suicide attempt (only propounding his sense of failure). Significantly, the image on his silver medal represents two men swimming, which mirrors the image of the two brothers alongside one another in the ocean.

As mentioned in discussion, the connection between swimming and the sperm's journey to the ovum may also be pertinent. And perhaps we can discern a message in Vincent's ultimate victory here: perhaps, in the course of evolution and procreation, it is not always the most perfect that triumphs. Imperfects exist, and perhaps they are *required* to secure the future diversity of the species. But here I depart from the Lacanian reading.