

Gattaca  
US 1997  
106 mins

Directed by **Andrew Niccol**  
Written by **Andrew Niccol**  
Edited by **Lisa Zeno Churgin**  
Original music by **Michael Nyman**  
Art Direction by **Sarah Knowles**  
Producers **Danny DeVito, Michael Shamberg, Stacey Sher**  
Co-producer **Gail Lyon**  
Associate producers **Georgia Kacandes, Joshua Levinson**

## Cast

**Ethan Hawke** Vincent Freeman; **Uma Thurman** Irene Cassini; **Gore Vidal** Director Josef; **Xander Berkeley** Dr. Lamar; **Jayne Brook** Marie Freeman; **Loren Dean** Anton Freeman; **Maya Rudolph** Delivery Nurse; **Una Damon** Head Nurse; **Elizabeth Dennehy** Preschool Teacher; **Blair Underwood** Geneticist; **Mason Gamble** Vincent Freeman - Boy; **Vincent Nielson** Anton Freeman - Boy; **Chad Christ** Vincent Freeman - Teen; **William Lee Scott** Anton Freeman - Teen; **Clarence Graham** Personnel Officer; **Ernest Borgnine** Caesar; **Tony Shalhoub** German; **Jude Law** Jerome Eugene Morrow; **Alan Arkin** Det. Hugo; **Carlton Bembry** Gattaca Hoover; **Cynthia Martells** Cavendish; **Grace Sullivan** Sequencing Customer; **Ken Marino** Sequencing Technician; **Gabrielle Reece** Gattaca Trainer; **Ryan Dorin** Twelve-Fingered Pianist; **Dean Norris** Cop on the Beat; **Steve Bessen** Blood Test Detective; **Russell Milton** Gattaca Detective; **George Marshall Ruge** Beaten Detective; **Lindsey Lee Ginter** Mission Commander; **Dan Griffin** Classmate; **Beverly Griffith** Anatomy Teacher; **David LeBell** Invalid

## bigpicture

# Gattaca



“They used to say that a child conceived in love has a greater chance of happiness,” says Vincent Freeman. “They don’t say that anymore.” When Vincent is born, in the ‘not-too-distant future’, a needle is plunged into his foot, his blood extracted and the genetic code computed. The results are not promising, and a job at the bottom of the pile is all that Vincent can hope for as a member of the new genetic underclass.

‘Gattaca’, ostensibly the name of the company for which Vincent works, is a play on the letters G, T, C and A, standing respectively for guanine, thymine, cytosine and adenine, the four nucleotides that make up our DNA, the repeated ‘letters’ of our genetic code. Gattaca is rich with references to the language of genetics: in passing himself off as someone else, Vincent is a ‘borrowed ladder’ or a *degenerate*; babies born without the lab’s help are ‘faith births’; the genetically secure are ‘made men’.

Its science still feels surprisingly relevant, but Gattaca is a very recognisable dystopia, one like *Logan’s Run* or even *THX 1138*, in which the manifestly perverse is the norm and authority holds all the cards. Evil might be found in corporations, but it’s up to the individual to show his own true value and prove that one man can be as good as any other.

Today, the mouth swabs of Gattaca are less science fiction than internet reality (you can get your DNA ‘tested’ from as little as £99 by ordering a kit online and posting off a genetic sample). Overt genetic discrimination is still illegal in most countries. But with genetic processes seemingly holding the key to potentially profitable advances in medical science, there are many places in which genetic inequities can still be found.

## The case of Henrietta Lacks

On 4 October 1951, a young black woman named Henrietta Lacks died of cervical cancer in Baltimore’s Johns Hopkins hospital. The mother of five children, Henrietta was 31 and, although poor, was remembered as being strikingly pretty. Apart from that, there seemed to be nothing special about her life.

But in death Henrietta was transformed. Cells removed from her body – without her family’s permission – were subsequently used by doctors to revolutionise medicine. By mixing them with special plasma, they succeeded in growing her tumour cells in the laboratory. It was the first time that a human cell line had survived outside the body.

# bigpicture

Big Picture is a series of screenings organised by Big Ideas which take place at The Paradise by way of Kensal Green. The film screening is followed by an open discussion around the ideas presented in the film.

[www.bigi.org.uk/bigpicture](http://www.bigi.org.uk/bigpicture)  
[www.theparadise.co.uk](http://www.theparadise.co.uk)

**Big Ideas** is a series of events, mostly held in pubs in London. Anyone is welcome to turn up.

Sessions generally start with a question. Someone who has some relevant expertise gives a very brief, informal talk. After that a discussion develops in a free and unstructured manner. It's not a lecture, and it's not a debate; it's a pub argument, but unlike any you've had before.

In case you were worried, Big Ideas isn't affiliated with any political, religious or other organisation, and we don't have any particular agenda.

Big Picture next month

## Wittgenstein



Derek Jarman's unorthodox biopic of the philosopher, scripted by Terry Eagleton.

Check [www.bigi.org.uk/bigpicture](http://www.bigi.org.uk/bigpicture) for date, details and tickets.

Since then, HeLa cells – named after Henrietta Lacks – have become a medical workhorse, benefiting hundreds of millions of patients thanks to their role in the development of polio vaccines, in vitro fertilisation techniques, genetics research, the understanding of cancers, and the manufacture of drugs for herpes, influenza and many other illnesses. More than 50 million tonnes of Henrietta's cells have been grown since she died, while their use is acknowledged in more than 60,000 scientific papers, with 10 new studies added to the list every day.

Yet Henrietta's body lies in an unmarked grave, while her children have revealed they did not learn for more than 20 years that their mother's cells were still alive and had been used to create an entire branch of medical science.

'Henrietta Lacks's cells were priceless, but her family can't afford a hospital'  
*The Observer*, 4 April 2010

### The judgement on BRCA1

A federal judge on Monday struck down patents on two genes linked to breast and ovarian cancer. The decision, if upheld, could throw into doubt the patents covering thousands of human genes and reshape the law of intellectual property

Genae Girard, one plaintiff, applauded the decision as "a big turning point for all women in the country that may have breast cancer that runs in their family."

United States District Court Judge Robert W. Sweet issued the 152-page decision, which invalidated seven patents related to the genes BRCA1 and BRCA2, whose mutations have been associated with cancer.

The American Civil Liberties Union and the Public Patent Foundation at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law in New York joined with individual patients and medical organizations to challenge the patents last May: they argued that genes, products of nature, fall outside of the realm of things that can be patented. The patents, they argued, stifle research and innovation and limit testing options.

Myriad Genetics, the company that holds the patents with the University of Utah Research Foundation, asked the court to dismiss the case, claiming that the work of isolating the DNA from the body transforms it and makes it patentable. Such patents, it said, have been granted for decades; the Supreme Court upheld patents on living organisms in 1980. In fact, many in the patent field had predicted the courts would throw out the suit.

Judge Sweet, however, ruled that the patents were "improperly granted" because they involved a "law of nature." He said that many critics of gene patents considered the idea that isolating a gene made it patentable "a 'lawyer's trick' that circumvents the prohibition on the direct patenting of the DNA in our bodies but which, in practice, reaches the same result."

The case could have far-reaching implications. About 20 percent of human genes have been patented, and multibillion-dollar industries have been built atop the intellectual property rights that the patents grant.

'Judge Invalidates Human Gene Patent'  
*New York Times*, March 29, 2010

*Programme notes by Danny Birchall*