

GATTACA - eugenics, the search for perfection and Karen Horney.
Mary Farrell

Several Dystopian movies and books have explored the concept of eugenics as an instrument of discrimination. The idea of filtering out undesirable inherited characteristics, the core of eugenic research, can easily be weaponised and used as a means of domination and tyranny.

The term "eugenics" was coined in by British explorer and natural scientist Francis Galton, from the word eu - good and genus - type, or stock. Galton was influenced by Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection, and advocated for a system that would allow "the more suitable races and blood strains a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable". "Social Darwinism", the popular theory in the late 19th century helped advance eugenics into serious scientific study in the early 1900s supported by scientific authorities and political leaders. Most of us associate eugenics with the Nazi regime and the appalling term "ethnic cleansing" - the eradication of an entire race of people seen by those in power as unfit to exist.

Karen Horney was a German psychoanalyst born in 1885, and working during the time of these flourishing and toxic ideas. She was a founding member of the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute. Sometimes called a "Neo Freudian" and sometimes "the first feminist psychoanalyst", Karen Horney disagreed with Freud's theory of penis envy and posited the theory of womb envy in men as they are unable to give birth, the ultimate act of creation. Rather than seeing neurosis as an illness, she explores its origins in neglectful, disciplinarian or rejecting parenting. Unmet basic needs cause anxiety in the growing child, which lead to neurotic coping strategies. In her words: "through a variety of adverse influences, a child may not be permitted to grow according to his individual needs and possibilities. Such unfavorable conditions are too manifold to list here. But, when summarized, they all boil down to the fact that the people in the environment are too wrapped up in their own neuroses to be able to love the child, or even to conceive of him as the particular individual he is; their attitudes toward him are determined by their own neurotic needs and responses. In simple words, they may be dominating, overprotective, intimidating, irritable, overexacting, overindulgent, erratic, partial to other siblings, hypocritical, indifferent, etc. It is never a matter of just a single factor, but always the whole constellation that exerts the untoward influence on a child's growth. As a result, the child does not develop a feeling of belonging, of "we", but instead a profound insecurity and vague apprehensiveness, for which I use the term basic anxiety. It is his feeling of being isolated and helpless in a world conceived as potentially hostile."

Her main work, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, published in 1950, explored the idea of veering between an ideal self and a despised self in the neurotic patient, hindering the actualization of the authentic self. There is a split between the fantasy self - the one we should be - and the real self, which fails continually and is therefore hated and deeply hurt by perceived or actual negative judgement by others and by our inner critic. Horney referred to this struggle as "The Tyranny of the Shoulds", debilitating and constantly frustrating the neurotic patient's search for glory.

In *Gattaca*, the 1996 debut feature film by New Zealander Andrew Niccol, we see this being played out quite graphically. To put it in context, the Human Genome Project had been initiated six years before in the USA, to study the sequence of our genome's DNA and to make linkage maps through which inherited traits and disease patterns can be tracked over generations. In the "not too distant future", the main character, Vincent, is born naturally, outside of the Eugenics programme, and from the drop of blood taken from him as a baby, is pronounced to have a future full of health issues that will result in a very short lifespan.

The movie's title is based on the letters GATC, which stand for guanine, adenine, thymine, and cytosine, the four nucleobases of DNA. In this society of the future, genetically engineered babies go on to become VALIDS, with an ideal physical and mental set of genes, allowed to enter professional careers.

Babies born naturally, with genetic flaws, are INVALIDS, destined only for menial work, denied self-actualization.

Vincent's parents go on to have a second baby, this time genetically engineered and deserving of his father's name, Anton. We see the two little boys competing in reckless swimming races - Vincent would always lose until, one day, as teenagers, the race results in Anton almost drowning and Vincent being able not only to win, but also to rescue his brother. The power and danger of the sea is a repeating theme of the movie.

The official motto of the Royal Airforce - "Per Ardua ad Astra", meaning through struggle to the stars - seems to describe another central theme of the *Gattaca*. There are three male characters, Vincent, invalid, struggling to become an astronaut and reach the stars; Anton his brother, born through the genetics programme and therefore valid, eventually becoming a senior police detective, and Jerome, once the shining example of the glory of genetic engineering, athletic, beautiful, intellectual and charismatic, but now literally broken and in a wheelchair.

We could see Vincent as the flawed and despised Real Self desperate to become the longed for Ideal Self, adept at escaping his disappointing and impoverished life and attaining his aspiration and beat all the odds, living under a regime of shoulds, stressed and frightened. Jerome is the once Ideal Self who can now only be despised because his back is broken. All he can do is help another despised human being become ideal, by providing his own body fluids and his *raison d'être* to Vincent.

Karen Horney writes "any person subjected to a tyrannical regime will resort to a means of trying to circumvent its dictates. He is forced into a duplicity, which, in the case of external tyranny may be entirely conscious. In the case of inner tyranny, which in itself is unconscious, the subsequent duplicity can only have the character of unconscious self-deceptive pretences. All these devices prevent the upsurge of self hate which otherwise would follow a realization of failure, therefore they have great subjective value. But they also make for a diffuse impairment of the sense of truth; thereby they factually contribute both to an alienation from the self and to the great autonomy of the pride system. The demands on self thus assume a crucial position in the structure of neurosis. They constitute the individual's attempt to actualize his idealized image. They increase his alienation from his authentic self, forcing him into a falsification of his spontaneous feelings and beliefs and engendering a diffuse unconscious dishonesty. The realization of his inability to comply with the tyranny of the shoulds unleashes his self hate. In a way, all forms of self hate are

sanctions for unfulfilled shoulds - which is merely another way of saying that he would have no self hate if he could only become a superhuman being.”

Jerome is full of bitterness and self hate, hiding his broken body in his laboratory of an apartment and hardly venturing out. He abuses alcohol and seems utterly miserable. His only purpose is to help Vincent to become a success - a twin who has to look like him, bleed and pass urine like him, with his fingerprint and his stature. Vincent has to go through painful leg extension surgery to achieve this. We learn Jerome was once a champion swimmer, destined for Olympic gold, but falling short and only achieving silver. Because of this perceived failure, he ran out in front of a car and ended up as a paraplegic.

Karen Horney quotes the German poet Christian Morgenstern, who concisely expressed the nature of self-hate in his poem *Entwicklungsschmerzen* (“ Growing Pains”):

“ I shall succumb, destroyed by myself
I who am two - what I could be and what I am
And in the end one will annihilate the other.
The Would-be is like a prancing steed (I am fettered to his tail),
Is like a wheel to which I am is bound,
Is like a fury
whose fingers twine Into his victim’s hair,
Is like a vampire
That sits upon his heart and sucks and sucks.”

The poet says that we may hate ourselves with an enervating and tormenting hatred—a hatred so destructive that we are helpless against it and may psychologically destroy ourselves. And he says that we do not hate ourselves because we are worthless but because we are driven to reach beyond ourselves. The hatred, he says, results from the discrepancy between what I would be and what I am. There is not only a split, but a cruel and murderous battle.

The battle between Vincent and his brother Anton conveys the compulsive need to win. For a long time, Anton is absent from Vincent’s life, but reappears as a senior detective in the bizarre murder case at the astronaut training facility. After Vincent eludes Anton successfully, there is a confrontation during which Anton threatens to expose him. They agree to settle things by another swimming race.

The ocean is dangerous and frightening, with crashing waves and threatening areas of seaweed, and the final race between the two men culminates in Vincent’s claim that he was able to win because he “never saved anything for the way back”. Throughout the film water and the sea symbolises nature, and humanity’s desire to conquer nature. The director of *Gattaca* addresses this issue from the start of the film by quoting psychiatrist Willard Gaylin, who once stated, “I not only think that we will tamper with Mother Nature, but that Mother wants us to.”

We could see the swimming races as Vincent’s compulsion to triumph over Nature - the ocean and the stars - a victory worth dying for.

The ocean surges around his love making with the beautiful Irene, in her amazing glass house, which seems to be built in the sea. In this scene, Vincent has lowered his guard and is vulnerable. The next morning, he scrubs himself raw in the waves, getting rid of any trace

of his own identity and his connection with Irene, so that once again, he can put on the valid identity of Jerome.

We could see the three men as split off parts of a whole. The broken self esteem and suicidal bitterness of the self hating loser is represented in Jerome. Anton is seemingly functional - a successful but forgettable man who, despite his genetic advantages, is ultimately defeated by Vincent, the symbol of compulsion and dehumanization, but also aspiration and extreme self discipline - qualities that are still worshipped in our culture.

I'd like to finish with a final quote from Karen Horney's "Neurosis and Self Growth":

"Self-idealization inevitably grows into a more comprehensive drive which I suggest calling by a name appropriate to its nature and its dimensions: the search for glory. Self-idealization remains its nuclear part. The other elements in it, all of them always present, though in varying degrees of strength and awareness in each individual case, are the need for perfection, neurotic ambition, and the need for vindictive triumph.

Among the drives toward actualizing the idealized self, the need for perfection is the most radical one. It aims at nothing less than molding the whole personality into the idealized self. Like Pygmalion in Bernard Shaw's version, the neurotic aims not only at retouching but at remodeling himself into his special kind of perfection prescribed by the specific features of his idealized image. He tries to achieve this goal by a complicated system of shoulds and taboos. The most obvious and the most extrovert among the elements of the search for glory is neurotic ambition, the drive toward external success."