A Perfect World

The 1997 film GATTACA is a science fiction film set in the “not-too-distant future”. This is a world where embryos are screened before they are implanted in their mothers to ensure perfect health and wellbeing. Each baby’s life expectancy and disease likelihood are tested and determined at birth. Society no longer discriminates on the basis of religion, race or gender, but on your genes.

Vincent, however, is a genetically imperfect (‘In-valid’) person in a genetically perfect world. He was born with a heart defect dooming him as likely to die aged about 30 and is myopic (short-sighted), meaning he can work as nothing more than a cleaner.

But Vincent dreams of travelling to Jupiter’s moon Titan, so he assumes the identity of Jerome, a crippled athlete, who has genes that will allow him to achieve his dream of space travel.

With Jerome’s identity, Vincent can work at the aerospace company Gattaca and pass their daily gene tests by using samples of Jerome’s hair, blood and urine. Things become more complicated, however, when the Titan mission controller is found murdered shortly before the launch. Vincent’s own DNA is found at the scene in one hair – as an Invalid he had no reason to be there, making him the prime suspect.

Will Vincent make it to Titan or be arrested for murder?

What to do:

By yourself, think about what this film has to say about:
(briefly write down your ideas so that you don’t forget them before discussion)

- Discrimination and prejudice
- The human desire for perfection and whether perfection makes us happy
- Whether genes alone can predict our paths in life
- What happens when someone wants a life other than that determined by their genes
- Whether knowing too much about our genes is a good or bad thing
Form groups of four or five people. Discuss and write down your answers to the following questions:

- What effects did genetic testing have on Vincent and Jerome’s lives? How are they different?
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- How accurate do you think testing at birth for life expectancy and disease susceptibility would be? Would there be any differences between the prediction and the actual outcomes? Why would they be different?
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- Is it fair to discriminate against people whose genes are not ‘perfect’? Is it already happening?
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- Who decides what constitutes perfection in the first place?
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- Compare your answers with the rest of the class.