



# ENGAGING BIOETHICS: “BIOTECH MEETS PRIMETIME TV”

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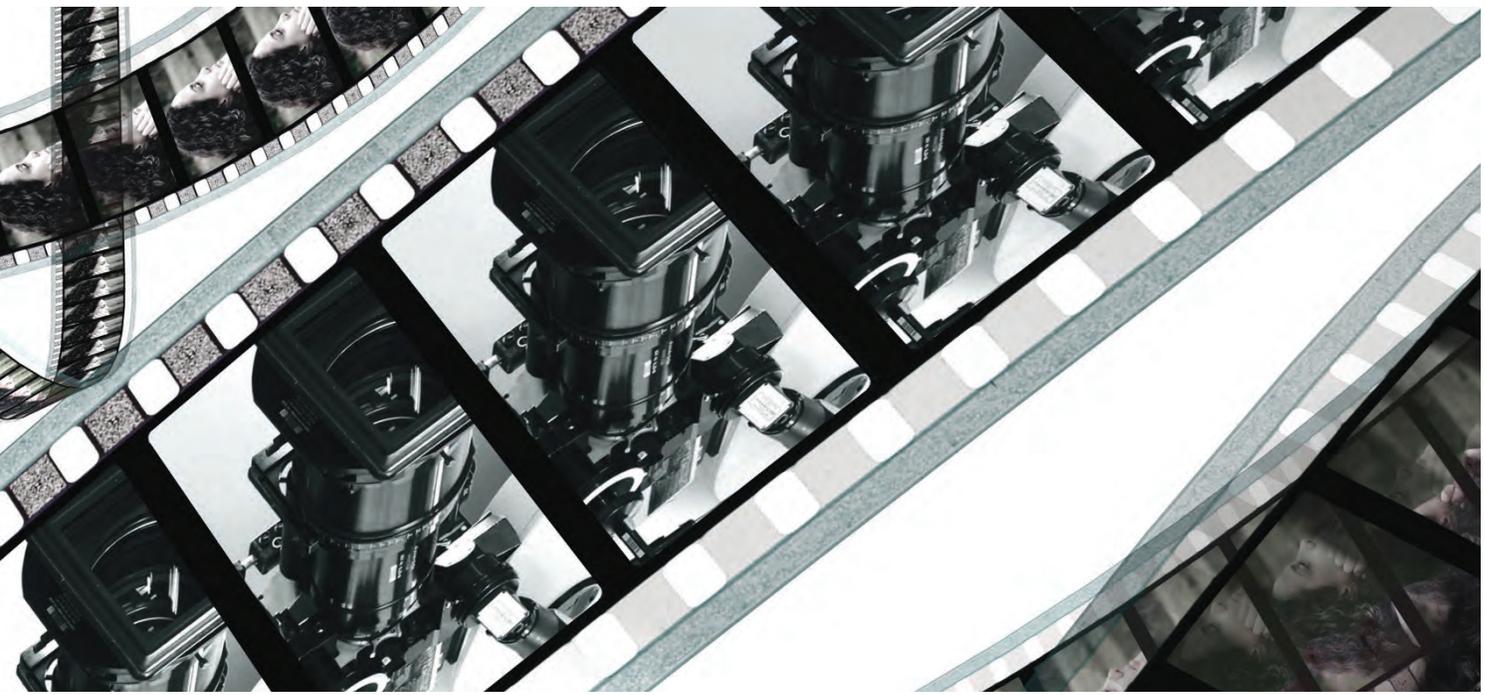
It is no secret that bioethical content has been the fodder for both film and television for quite some time. The mainstay of science fiction films for years has ranged from cyborgs (*Bicentennial Man*) and artificial intelligence (*AI, I Robot*) to bizarre human experimentation and research (*The X-Files: I Want to Believe*), such as genetic enhancement (*GATTACA*), organ farming (*The Island*), and cloning (*The 6th Day*) just to name a few more. Even the occasional drama has featured key bioethical dilemmas such as euthanasia (*Million Dollar Baby*) and just access to healthcare services (*John Q*) to the recent film depiction of savior siblings (*My Sister's Keeper*).<sup>1</sup> The silver screen has accessed these issues for years. Similar ventures in primetime television have met varied success. Medical dramas have highlighted key issues raised in clinical medicine. Pick your show of choice: *ER*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *House*, *Private Practice*,<sup>2</sup> or any of the numerous other medical dramas that have reigned in primetime television for years. The success of the medical drama is demonstrated through the proliferation of spinoffs and the creation of the genre of medical comedies as epitomized in *Scrubs*. Amidst the daytime plotlines of hypersexuality and human frailty, primetime viewers are exposed to such issues as informed consent, medical error, and the nature of the Hippocratic Oath. Not surprisingly these connections have been noted by savvy educators who use culture as one of the means by which they teach bioethics.

But primetime shows that focus on biotech issues have often met with less than stellar results. For an industry that values viewership, this lack of audience size has been the perennial fatal flaw for what has been perceived as overly sci-fi. Promising premises, such as the futuristic legal drama *Century City*, have fallen flat on the same audiences that drove the success of other legal dramas. Such single season shows were extremely forward looking in their ability to highlight rising concerns presented by biotechnology and other emerging technologies, but apparently failed to capture the imagination of the masses, or at the very least their Nielsen ratings. Alas, as with Nietzsche's *Madman*, they came before their time. Other shows with seemingly cult-like followings skirted these issues in a way that titillated the mind with scientific and technological possibilities alongside the paranormal and otherworldly visitations (*The X-Files* and *The 4400*).

An intriguing development of this past season's primetime lineup was the explicit focus of not just one but at least four shows on several different networks built around biotech and emerging technology issues. The lineup of drama, sci-fi thrillers included *Dollhouse*, *The Eleventh Hour*, and *Fringe*. An intriguing addition to the lineup was the research comedy *Better off Ted*. Each of these shows in their varying ways explored troubling and often horrific consequences of research unfettered by the concerns of ethical reflection.

For years many have noted the power of story and the importance of narrative to moral formation. For audiences lost on the seemingly antiseptic analysis of professional bioethicists, stories (and particularly fiction) have captured the imagination of the listener by inviting him or her to experience the perspective of the characters in their agony, virtue, and vice. To a generation that has to some degree lost the gift of the imagination, film and television offer an audio-visual interpretation of the power of story. As I have written elsewhere, “film has become the new text by which many around the globe now pose the crucial questions about life.”<sup>3</sup> While film may offer more programmatic visions or substantive development of the deeply rooted structures of our common humanity, television enculturates us on a weekly basis into the life and world of the characters that move in and out of the weekly episode. We are confronted in the span of an episode with the fast hitting realities (or projected realities) of life, caricatured and laid bare. What is left to the viewer is the shock and awe of what they have just witnessed and the hope, at least of some show creators, for the generation of conversation. In the words of the series creator for the show *Private Practice*, “We're telling stories . . . that will provide a lot of moral debate among our doctors and maybe debate at home when you watch.”<sup>4</sup> Water cooler buzz, dinner conversation piece, internet discussion forums; if a show makes you think beyond the initial viewing, chances are that you will come back and hopefully bring others with you.

So why raise this as a point of reflection? Has biotech finally arrived in the mainstream consciousness? One of the most vexing issues in our work on bioethics is communicating the issues to the average individual in a way that conveys the import of the questions at stake but also is understandable. Too many see these issues as someone else's problem, or perhaps more accurately problems for another day. Even



if the average person sees the perils of traditional bioethical issues, he or she often dismisses biotechnology and other emerging technologies as science fiction or rather the dilemma of the day for researchers and scientists in a lab. Rarely when we speak do we encounter throngs of audience members current on the latest biotech developments. But my concern is not just merely one for the general public.

If we are being honest could we name a news headline, let alone a journal article, for the latest on cybrid research, direct cell reprogramming, neural imaging, neuroenhancement, therapeutic cloning, human-computer interfaces, nanotechnology, cybernetics, synthetic biology, artificial life, and artificial intelligence (and these just scratch the surface)? Are we aware that there are several gaming devices in various stages of product development and release that offer neural imaging so as to eliminate the need for a joystick or any other type of external input device?<sup>5</sup> Would we be alarmed to find out that these are priced at \$200-\$300? What if I told you that you can get a variation of this playing on the theme of Star Wars Jedi Force training at ToysRUs for less than \$100? How closely do we follow research in DARPA's Defense Sciences Office for indications of the latest biotechnology or emerging technology research and applications? Surely, people with good intentions never would pursue the kind of research that yields issues raised by *Eleventh Hour* . . . would they? Really, how far down the road are the biotech issues raised in such overtly sci-fi action dramas as *Fringe*?

Intriguingly a significant portion of a 2008 issue of the *American Journal of Bioethics* examined the implications of television viewing habits for medical and nursing students.<sup>6</sup> The target article and open peer commentary discussed the role that television medical dramas may play to “influence the attitudes and behaviors of young professionals” as well as examined the “impressions of bioethical issues” among the students that had been raised by the television shows.<sup>7</sup> One peer commentator noted the pedagogical value of such shows as *Scrubs* for medical education, such as correcting the habit of physicians who frequently interrupt to keep their patients on track.<sup>8</sup>

What we can take from this conversation is that the media cuts both ways here. These shows can be a useful pedagogical device in exploring various applications and the subsequent implications of technologies that many have difficulty understanding when communicated in the abstract. When reading about cybrid protocols in the news one may not gather the same sense of urgency as when watching primetime television. There is a second issue though; the television-programming itself is not a neutral presenter. While their existence may not be predicated on the positive presentation of biotech (unless of course primary funding comes from such industry sponsors), the manner in which the materials are conveyed themselves shape our common perception of these issues. So far the presentation has generally been one of caution and concern. At some point we may no longer have that luxury.

<sup>1</sup> A recent book explores the relationship of bioethics and film. Sandra Shapshay, ed. *Bioethics at the Movies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009). There have been a number of other resources examining the relation of film and cultural studies/cultural engagement. Examples include: Craig Detweiler, *Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006); Robert K. Johnston, *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007); Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005); Gabriel McKee, *The Gospel according to Science Fiction: From the Twilight Zone to the Final Frontier* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Sandy Cohen, “Abortion, AIDS, Stem Cells: ‘Private Practice’ Brings Bioethical Issues to Primetime TV,” Associated Press September 30, 2008. Accessed May 18, 2009 at <http://www.aegis.org/NEWS/AP/2008/AP080964.html>

<sup>3</sup> Michael Sleasman, “Swords, Sandals, and Saviors: Visions of Hope in Ridley Scott’s *Gladiator*” in *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*, edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson, and Michael J. Sleasman (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 133.

<sup>4</sup> Cohen.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. [www.emotiv.com](http://www.emotiv.com) and [www.neurosky.com](http://www.neurosky.com).

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Czarny, Ruth Faden, Marie Nolan, Edwin Bodensiek, and Jeremy Sugarman, “Medical and Nursing Student’s Television Viewing Habits: Potential Implications for Bioethics” *American Journal of Bioethics* 8(12) 2008: 1-8.

<sup>7</sup> Czarny et al., 1.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Spike, “Television Viewing and Ethical Reasoning: Why Watching *Scrubs* Does a Better Job Than Most Bioethics Classes” *American Journal of Bioethics* 8(12) 2008: 11-13.