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News**

Mouthpiece

Future under the microscope

THIS summer a trip to the cinema may morph into an educational glimpse into the not-so-distant future.

The science-fiction horror film *Splice* tells the story of genetic engineers Clive and Elsa, who cross ethical and legal boundaries in creating Dren, a creature with both human and animal genetic material.

Aside from the entertainment value, *Splice* offers viewers the opportunity to think again about a controversial issue that affects us all. The science fiction of the film has, on a small scale, already become reality in the UK. In 2005, the House of Commons science and technology committee affirmed that scientists could legally combine human and animal cells.

So, today in labs across the UK, scientists pursue government-sanctioned research on animal-human embryos. The law currently requires that these inter-species embryos are destroyed after 14 days, but someday this restriction could be loosened if another committee finds such changes expedient.

Splice raises several questions; does Dren have inherent human dignity? After all, she

Sci-fi movie raises serious questions about genetic tests, says

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looks and acts like a human in many ways. What rights could Dren claim, and what laws protect her – animal or human? Perhaps the most basic question is this: Is it ethical to create human-nonhuman creatures, even if they are destroyed at the embryonic stage? In the film, Elsa claims that because ‘millions of people are suffering and dying’, her experiment is worthwhile. But it may be that venturing into the dark unknown of the inter-species future raises more problems than it solves.

In Scotland today, the scenarios posed by *Splice* remain fictional, but today’s fiction is often tomorrow’s reality. So, both the public and lawmakers would do well to see *Splice*, if not for the special effects, then for an easy primer on a very relevant issue in science.

■ *Dr Calum MacKellar is director of research for the Scottish Council on Human Bioethics*