

# MINORITY REPORT

## A REVIEW

by Robert Barnes

The year is 2054, three years after Spielberg's last futuristic *AI* ended. And sixty years after *The Fugitive*. And eighty years after *The French Connection*. But that is the past. The future still likes a good chase scene.

**Directed by:**  
Steven Spielberg  
**Based on the short story by:**  
Philip K. Dick  
**Screenplay by:**  
Scott Frank and Jon Cohen  
**Year/Runtime:**  
2002/ 140 minutes  
**Genre:**  
Science Fiction/  
Crime  
**MPAA:**  
Rated PG-13 for violence, brief language, some sexuality and drug content  
**Cast:**  
Tom Cruise: *Chief John Anderton*  
Colin Farrell: *Danny Witwer*  
Max von Sydow: *Director Lamar Burgess*  
Samantha Morton: *Agatha*  
Lois Smith: *Dr. Iris Hineman*  
Tim Blake Nelson: *Gideon*  
Steve Harris: *Jad*  
Kathryn Morris: *Lara Clarke*

By way of setting up the story, the murder rate in Washington, DC, has stood at zero for the last six years. This is thanks to the experimental police force "Precrime." Precrime uses three prophetic young adults ("Precogs") to foresee a murder before it takes place, arrive at the scene before it happens, and secure the pre-criminal for immediate transport to prison. When the nation considers implementing this system on a national scale, a federal investigation is launched to examine the system for strengths and weaknesses. Soon after, the chief of Precrime John Anderton (played by Tom Cruise) informs his superior of a possible glitch in the seemingly perfect system, he discovers that the Precogs have foreseen him as the next murderer. From then on, it is a somewhat predictable race (literally!) to the conclusion.

Those looking for a blow-by-blow exegesis of the script and a dutiful noting of every character, cameos, explanation of who Philip K. Dick is, and so on, may look elsewhere. A quick Internet search will bury you in such reviews. And if you plan to see *Minority Report*, be forewarned that this review will contain no regard for spoilers. My goal will be to analyze the philosophical and religious aspects, noting the imagery that is used to promote the spiritual aspect that has so often found a place in Spielberg's films.

One reviewer calls this movie another *Blade Runner* — false. This is no grungy ghetto flick. On a palate of purest suburbia ala *ET* and *AI*, Spielberg paints a shiny coating of technology, but not even a generous second coat can change the reality that humanity is corrupt. There is still poverty, still drug abuse, still those naughty "passions" that cannot be controlled or observed. And passionate people are on both sides of the gun (or whatever those things are they shoot people with—watch out for the aptly named "sick stick").

## WORLDVIEW

In this new world order, cops are still necessary, but they are as much priests as policemen. They receive oracles from the Precogs, interpret the oracles and determine how society ought to respond. In other words, just like priests they hold the real power. They are the interpreters of the prophetic word. They are judge, jury, and executioner. The future is unalterable and the Precogs are never wrong, which gives Precrime all the justification it needs to enforce its benevolent will. But there is a weakness: Precrime cops are still human, and humans are flawed. And lest we forget, Precogs are human too. In this case, the critical weakness initially appears to reside in the all-to-human Anderton. But his conscience is strong — he would never kill nor allow anyone else to do so on his watch. Nevertheless, that is exactly what happens. And this leads to a philosophical discovery.

Philosophically, the concepts of predestination are immediately important as the future is foreseen and accepted as unchangeable. For those who wrestle with such doctrines in the Bible, the majority finds comfort in this solidity: Whatever God says will happen will indeed happen. But this hard determinism is soon demonstrated to not be as ironclad as we thought, either in the real world or in *Minority Report*. As in Jeremiah 18, the pronouncements of the great Precogs are mysteriously intertwined with human decision. The future they see (and the prophecy examined carefully by Jeremiah) is not revealed exhaustively. There are “ifs” written into both the images seen by the Precogs and the prophets, most obviously seen in Jonah to Jeremiah, but inferred everywhere else. Moreover, the Precogs don’t always agree; sometimes the most “gifted” of them (Agatha, played by Samantha Morton) sees a different future, making her vision the “minority report.” The evolution of human thought seen in *Minority* is that we reject an autonomous philosophy as we discover more about the factors that determine our decisions. But after shifting to a highly deterministic worldview, the mature discover that choice still matters, both for good and for evil. As Agatha puts it, “You still have a choice.”

This muted mechanism is noted throughout the film, as people and objects, though their functions are clearly augmented by technology, are not swallowed by science. This is not a glorified “Borg” future; this is a future where technology has its place, and a host of presuppositions keep it there. The theme of keeping science in its place sees its climax in the final moments of the film, as the previously enslaved Precogs become “Freecogs”, living their days in pleasant isolation in a farmhouse far, far from Washington, DC. They are no longer cogs in a machine, but they are children reading stories and playing checkers. The simple life triumphs over even the darkest mechanistic nightmares, it seems.

Thus, the worldview that develops in *Minority Report* is that the enlightened receive the data science gives us about ourselves and our future, but they do so in a context where human behavior still has value and, therefore, human beings still have value in an increasingly mechanized world. And while some of the so-called advantages

of technology may have to be sacrificed in the short run, such is necessary to live in a free world that can enjoy technology as an improvement rather than imprisonment.

## SYMBOLISM

One of the supporting characters (a hotshot federal agent played by Colin Farrell) spent three years at Fuller (a Presbyterian seminary – and Presbyterians are famous for their doctrine of predestination) and wears a St. Christopher badge (a Roman Catholic device, subtly implying his role as inquisitor). That must mean this is a Christian movie, right? The men and women endowed with practically supernatural detective powers are straightforwardly understood as a priesthood rather than police force, but this is no Catholic priest. The religious metaphors flowing from this film are primarily from the Greek mythos and not from Judeo-Christian sources. That does not mean there are not compatible themes here, worthy of use in a Sunday sermon — this tale is rich with such illustrations. But a Messiah figure, a John the Baptist or a Mary (as in *The Matrix*)? No. Consider the apparent Greek Mythos connections:

- The father figure to Anderton (Lamar Burgess, played in a likely Oscar-nominated role by Max Von Sydow) kills the mother of his Precog “children” as a 2052 (2054?) Zeus.
- Anderton leaves his wife (she says she left him) for mixed reasons (as Ulysses left Penelope) only to return to find his world almost destroyed, but through trickery, raw power, and help from his friends, eventual reincorporation into his work and family.
- An Achlys-type figure in the bizarre doctor, Dr. Solomon Eddie (Peter Stormare) and his creepy nurse who help Anderton change faces during his flight from the law. Also Achlys figure (the misery and ugliness factors particularly) in the drug dealer we meet early in the film who remains associated with the doctor and nurse.<sup>1</sup>
- Anderton visits the retired Dr. Hineman (now botanist) who was the accidental scientific “mother” of the Precog technology. This wise woman, like Hera, a lover of families and morality. Like Hera, she is drawn to the number three (such as the Precog system that will only work with three), and she seeks a champion in Anderton to take revenge on those who would spoil her past work (i.e. the current Precrime administration that perverts the truth in its pursuit of justice).<sup>2</sup>
- Anderton is a Greek heroic figure in that he is the topic of an oracle. His selection by one of the Precogs (a demigod figure) to be her champion sets him apart from other mortals. Anderton’s father figure dies mysteriously and for a time, apparently by Anderton’s hand; he is a Perseus-figure who flees the Gorgons with Athena and Hermes aiding him, and so forth. His journey follows the Greek classic separation, initiation, and incorporation pattern.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.theoi.com/Khaos/Hybris.htm#Akhlys>

<sup>2</sup> One story about Hera that highlights this connection says this: “The sanctuary [of Hera fifteen stades from Mykenai, Argos] itself is on a lower part of Euboia. Euboia is the name they give to the hill here, saying that Asterion the river had three daughters, Euboia, Prosymna, and Akraia, and that they were nurses of Hera ... This Asterion flows above the Heraion, and falling into a cleft disappears. On its banks grows a plant, which also is called asterion. They offer the plant itself to Hera, and from its leaves weave her garlands.” —*Pausanias* 2.17.1-2. Quoted from <http://www.theoi.com/Okeanos/Inakhos.html>

Perhaps there are others. Perhaps I'm stretching it. But do not neglect this aspect of this movie or any other. Often, as reviews like Jim Jordan have shown, some of the richest portions are hidden there.<sup>3</sup>

## ETHICS

Anderton is driven by ethics. He is consumed by the sense that there is right and wrong, and murder is wrong. His guilt over playing an unwitting part in the disappearance/murder of his son cannot exist in a world without morality. His zeal to protect victims of violent crime flows from his good conscience. But he does have a little problem (drug abuse) that began just after his son's disappearance that everyone (except himself and the federal "inquisitor") justifies and attempts to hide. Why else would he purposely leave his drug paraphernalia out in the open, apparently intending to be caught, hoping to be caught? In any event, it is his desire for the ethical resolution of one of Precrime's earliest murders that starts the proverbial snowball rolling.

On the other hand, the villain of this world (Anderton's superior Lamar Burgess) is a pragmatist. He kills innocent people, enslaves innocent Precogs, and creates a criminal system that likely punishes innocent people. Just like Mr. Spock in *Star Trek II*, he's a good utilitarian, believing that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. Lamar Burgess is a rare breed, but gratefully a dying breed. In our future, men with his kind of power and ethics are dangerous, and in the end no one but his wife grieves his loss.

How are the guilty punished in the future? Capital punishment is, in *Minority Report*, a thing of the barbaric past. We see thousands of people encased in chambers, a living death where all those in hell wear "halos." The terminal nature of capital punishment is decried as we see Anderton's character unjustly given the ultimate punishment, but then is freed (the logic of the movie breaks down most seriously at this point) to demonstrate his innocence. All those who were convicted by Precrime are pardoned at the end because it is better, the film argues, that the guilty (or not, as is revealed by Anderton and Lamar's anti-prophetic choices) go free than one innocent person is punished unjustly.

How are the ethics of the right to privacy handled in the future? There is no right to privacy. Period. Mechanical spiders break into homes and crawl over lovers, fighting spouses and screaming children, scanning their retinas. Everywhere you go (except in the "sprawl," where people are evidently too poor for consumerism) you are constantly scanned and identified and reminded of your need to purchase more and more Lexus products.

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<sup>3</sup> Will not second-guessing myself on some of these connections, it is significant that the Greeks basically invented the parts that form the basis of most modern screenwriting and playwriting forms. It can be difficult, therefore, to determine whether what we are seeing is intentionally Greek or accidentally similar to Greek.

## THE LAST WORD

It is rare to see a film as filled with computer animation and special effects (over 420 scenes are “doctored”) proceed so patiently and gently. The scenes with John and Agatha are intimate, alarming, creative; all because Spielberg chooses to let scenes develop slowly rather than bring in another team of programmers and new ultra-digital cameras. This patience (while somewhat inconsistently demonstrated in other modern movies) finds a perfect home in a thinking man’s rock-em sock-em action flick.

*Minority Report* is not the perfect film for the whole family. But older teens and up should be able to benefit from the myriad of ethical and philosophical questions raised by this topshelf action movie. Check it out.