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Minority Report

Abstract

This is a review of *Minority Report* (2002).

Minority Report is clearly Spielberg's best, most thoughtful picture since *Schindler's List* and *Saving Private Ryan*. Based on a short story by science fiction writer Philip K. Dick, it is set in the Washington, D.C. of 2054 where for the past six years the police have been able to prevent murders through the use of a trio of "pre-cogs": pre-cognitive people who receive visions of future murders. The three, a woman and two men, are kept in a clover-leaf shaped pod filled with water and are tended by a somewhat neurotic technician whose sole qualification for the job seems to be that he is very nurturing. The pre-cogs fragmentary visions of future crimes are displayed onto computer screens and downloaded into the department's crime computer for analysis.

John Anderton (Tom Cruise) is the captain of the pre-cog unit, and it is he who manipulates the images through the not entirely convincing method of "conducting" the images on glass displays with cyber-gloves. Elements of doubt and interpretation are part of the process because accurate conclusions are dependent on the skill of the officer analyzing the "evidence," and also because the visions can have a "dissenting" component of only two pre-cogs predicting the same future, with the third filing a "minority report."

Anderton joined the force six years before, motivated by the unsolved kidnapping of his young son, and struggles with feelings of guilt, revenge and hatred. He has been separated from his wife for six months (can so many sixes be

coincidental?) and has become addicted to the drug "Clarity" for relief from his inner demons. In other words, he has sufficient "character motivation" for us to believe that he believes in what he is doing. Whether he will continue to "believe" is one of the questions the movie will raise.

Minority Report is a visual delight, but to this point it lacks a compelling catalyst to drive the narrative. The catalyst arrives in the form of Colin Farrell, a Brad Pitt look-alike who steals nearly every scene as Detective Ed Witwer, a Justice Department official suspicious of the pre-cog operation and who aggressively investigates it to test its fitness for nation-wide application. Even in his scenes with the charismatic Cruise, Farrell comes off as a strong foil and I think it has to do with his body language. Cruise stands or stares in conventional fashion in their confrontations, but Farrel slumps, looks sidelong, glances from beneath his eyebrows and adopts similar tropes in a manner that is convincing and highly personal. His is a discordant personality, dressed in a dark suit, scruffy-looking, like a Type-A Columbo who, ironically, is determined to find something wrong where nothing yet wrong exists, much like the work of the pre-cog unit itself.

The film's visual constructions of the future are for the most part convincing and far superior in integration to laughable efforts such as that seen in *Attack of the Clones*. But in the best of films, it is character not action that drives a viewer's

interest, and the movie rides the successful chemistry of the antagonism between Cruise and Farrell's characters.

Philosophically, the movie will intrigue both the religiously minded and non-religiously minded for its presentation of the free will vs. determinism debate (which will always be with us), whose resolution (not coincidentally, I think) depends on the identical arguments used to argue both sides of the current capital punishment controversy.

Politically, the movie can easily be read as coming heavily down on one side of that argument and it does so by venturing into surprising, theological grounds. The area where the pre-cogs are kept is referred to as "The Temple"; the police officers are called "priests" and "clergy"; the punishment chamber for the future murderers is called a kind of "hell"; and the "handcuffs" are an immobilizing headset which is referred to as a "halo." Moreover, there are three pre-cogs (constituting a kind of trinity) and the warden of the "death penalty" wing is called Gideon. Make of the last what you can. In the composition of these elements, the movie is clearly making a value judgment of epistemological systems and their believers. As a Christian, I conclude that it is not, shall we say, sympathetic to Christianity in its metaphysical or temporal forms, but viewers should decide for themselves.

Interestingly, it is the female, Agatha, that is the most accurate of the three pre-cogs, and whether it is coincidence or not, her name means "good" in Greek. Much like the character of Trinity breathes new life to Neo in *The Matrix*, it is she who guides Anderton to his spiritual awakening and recovery. Similarly, the characters of Morpheus and Neo in *The Matrix* are interchangeable, just as the male twins are interchangeable in *Minority Report*, predictably casting the woman as the nurturing, life-giving force. Furthermore, the pre-cogs were "created" by the chief-of-police (Max Von Sydow) and a woman scientist. Archetypers en guard.

While containing the inevitable Spielberg sentimentality, the film's conclusion argues for forgiveness over revenge, for mercy over justice, and for free will over determinism without being lugubrious. Literally and metaphorically, the film makes the argument that new eyes make for a new perspective and is a clever polemic which will both entertain and provoke the viewer to think about metaphysical, philosophical, and political issues which have been and always will be important to our culture and to our faith.

In his lesser films, Spielberg often took the opportunity of making sly digs at Christianity and it will be interesting to see if after the welcome hiatus of *Schindler's List* and *Saving Private Ryan*, in which Christianity was portrayed with some complexity and even sympathy, whether *Minority Report* augurs a return for him to the culture wars of our time. *A.I.* was a two-headed abomination as both art

and political polemic but with *Minority Report* he has a classic sci-fi hit that successfully crafts a powerful argument about contemporary issues.