

Minority Report: Openness and Providence

Movie Analysis by Brian Godawa

Minority Report, Steven Spielberg's latest foray into the dark world of sci-fi noir, is a visually rich narrative that explores the philosophical and moral dilemmas associated with predetermination and free will. The screenplay was written by Scott Frank and Jon Cohen from Philip K. Dick's short story about a "pre-crime unit" of cops in the future of 2054, who use the precognitive (foreseeing) visions of several individuals to stop crime before it happens.

The techno-future that Spielberg translates into film is cinematically powerful, yet nothing new in terms of most sci-fi. There's high speed cars, jet packs and retinal scanning for identity, all pretty much staples of the usual sci-fi vision of the future. Even the obnoxiously ubiquitous advertising that saturates their world, simultaneously humorous and dreadful, is certainly not groundbreaking. But this is not bad, because the purpose of *Minority Report* is not to draw attention to the special effects of a technotopia, but rather to do what good science fiction is supposed to do: examine the moral issues of today in terms of tomorrow. By seeing what we may become in the future, we can better address the issues right now that may lead to such dystopia. Ideas do have consequences.

The "precogs," as they are called, are three specially gifted individuals who have allowed themselves to be strapped up to computers, monitors and other space age equipment that enables the police force of Washington D.C. to record their impressions and even figure out who the victims and perpetrators of future crimes will be. Tom Cruise plays Detective John Anderton, who heads up the Pre-crime Unit, and who one day stumbles upon the precognition images of his own crime of murder. This comes just around the time when he discovers that the system is not quite so flawless as he had originally believed. It turns out that sometimes the precogs do not all have the same vision. Sometimes one of them may have a different vision that lends doubt on the veracity of the other two. This dissent is called a "minority report" that is quickly erased from the system so that investigators cannot use such minor discrepancies to block the progress of this utopian law enforcement.

After all, since the implementation of the Pre-crime unit in D.C., the murder rate of the city has plunged to zero. Can anyone argue with such proficiency? Yes they can. If any of these minority reports were right, then hundreds of innocent people have been put into

suspended animation (the criminal sentence in the future), which makes for an unreliable, unjust method of fighting crime. Anderton figures that he is one of those minority reports and goes on the run to prove his innocence and find the truth. As they say in the movie, “Everyone runs.” This is quite simply a chase movie, complete with all the death defying stunts and action sequences that go along with such a genre.

But *Minority Report* attempts so much more. It brings a spiritual angle into the story with calculated deliberation. And that angle is the issue of predetermination versus free will, as Anderton himself admits in the movie. A Detective from the U.S. Justice Department, Ed Witwer, played by Colin Farrel, shows up to investigate the effectiveness of the precogs and to search for the human error inherent in any such endeavor. He is sure there is such a weakness because as he says, these are humans and humans can be wrong. Witwer is already convinced that the future cannot be certain, therefore Pre-Crime is not foolproof. It turns out that Witwer is an ex-student of Fuller Theological Seminary who got out of religious training to fight crime. He brings up the inherently religious nature of the Pre-Crime usage of precognition when he points out that they call the room where the precogs are hosted, “the Temple,” a specifically religious term.¹ He also notes the history of precognition. He claims— and this is very important to understanding the theme of the movie— that people deified prophets and oracles in the past for their ability to foretell the future, in the same way that many are now deifying the precogs in their abilities (one person even falls down in worship at the foot of a precog). In fact, Witwer points out that it doesn’t matter how accurate oracles are, people make oracles out of others even if there aren’t any. Man is by nature religious and he constructs religious content to explain otherwise unexplained natural phenomena. This is decidedly demythologization.

Demythology is a modernist western prejudice of the naturalistic worldview. Naturalism assumes by faith that there is no transcendent spiritual aspect to reality. Everything has natural causes. All spiritual beliefs are simply ignorant misinterpretations of natural causes into spiritual forces; wish fulfillment. Demythology is the attempt to “purge” the “mythic” ignorance of a belief to discover the “true” natural cause. This is a continuation of a theme that Spielberg explored in much more detail in his rendition of Stanley Kubrik’s *A.I.*² This evolutionary worldview tries to redefine man as a being who “constructs” or “projects” his own meaning of God and spirit onto what is actually a meaningless universe of matter in motion. The belief in the afterlife is merely an extension of the evolutionary survival of the fittest. As the originator of the precogs tells Anderton, “When the chips are down, every creature is interested in only one thing: its own survival.”

But this naturalist worldview poses a problem. If everything has a natural cause, then all actions are determined by the natural laws of the universe. Which would mean that man is not free. He is merely the puppet of those natural laws. The issue of determinism and free will arises with a vengeance. At the beginning, Anderton is a firm believer in the accuracy of the precog's impressions. He is a determinist. When Witwer, the "openness theologian," questions him about arresting people before they do a crime, he says, "It's not the future, if you stop it." Anderton replies, "The fact that you stopped it, doesn't change the fact that it was going to happen." This sophomoric justification on Anderton's part is already a capitulation to Witwer's belief in alternate futures. He admits he stops a future event, which intrinsically makes that event uncertain or merely possible, not *actually* future. When Anderton discovers the truth about all the missing minority reports, he has the proof that the future is not certain, but merely one of probability.

And this brings us to the major emphasis the movie places on "free will." Throughout the film, constant assertions of man's ability to "change the future" are made. Phrases like, "You can choose," "You still have a choice," "It's up to you," are peppered throughout the story to bring home the message that no matter how certain the future may seem, man can still freely choose against it. When Anderton faces the real culprit behind the set-up of his own crime, he challenges him by saying that if he kills Anderton, he will be imprisoned in suspended animation and therefore lose all the glory and fame he wanted from being a part of the Pre-Crime system. If he doesn't kill Anderton, then he proves that the Pre-Crime system is faulty because the future is not certain, and he will still lose all the glory and fame he wanted. Every possible choice the villain makes will result in a future where he loses. But he still has the choice. "It's over," says Anderton. "The only question you have to ask is what are you going to do now?" So it seems that the universe of *Minority Report* is one of mere quantum uncertainty. The future is open, one of probability and no matter how high the probability, only man's free choices make the difference of what will be and what will not be.

It is interesting to note however that in order to make this movie about hope being found in the uncertainty of the future, Spielberg and the writers had to spend an immense amount of intelligence and design in predetermining absolutely every future event that would happen in the story, every choice made by every character, every apparent "chance" occurrence. Even the happy ending itself was predetermined by the transcendent authors! The actors in this movie followed a foreordained script written by someone else with a transcendent

purpose or theme. Spielberg himself has often said, “If it ain’t on the page, it ain’t on the stage.” The authors and finishers (“gods”) of *Minority Report* denied all “alternate futures” other than the one they predestined to occur in order to express that there are “alternate futures.” In effect, they had to deny their theme in order to promote their theme. The point of the movie reduces to absurdity in its mere expression. It would have been a better, more self-consistent theme, and therefore movie, to assert that man can only find meaning, purpose and hope in recognizing that there is a personal purpose and hope controlling the universe beyond our petty pathetic and sinful choices.

Amateur theologians consider God’s providence as part and parcel of natural determinism, as *Minority Report* does with its religious references and overtones. But this is not the true case. In the Bible, God’s predetermination is transcendent of the natural order, not imminently within it. The director of natural law is not himself subject to those laws. God operates in such a way that He orchestrates and foreordains whatsoever comes to pass, yet man is responsible for what he does (Isaiah 10, Romans 9). Openness theologians, Arminians and other Pelagians and semi-Pelagians will no doubt love *Minority Report* for its attempt to assert man’s freedom in a universe of “alternate futures.” But this worldview, which at first seems to be an honorable attempt to assert man’s freedom, ultimately results in a horrible monstrosity of despair if looked at more closely. Without a transcendent purpose or goal (teleology) behind the imminent events of history, there can be no ultimate hope or meaning to anything at all. If God cannot determine the future, then we cannot be sure that he will indeed resurrect us into victory, because by definition, the future is not certain. We can only be certain of a happy ending if God has already written the script and is directing it from beginning (alpha) to end (omega).³

Brian Godawa is a screenwriter living in southern California. He wrote the screenplay for the feature film *To End All Wars*, starring Kiefer Sutherland and Robert Carlyle. He is the author of the book *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films With Wisdom and Discernment* (Intervarsity Press), and speaks at various churches on *How To Watch Movies* and other movie topics.

¹ In another expression of religious theme, a prison warden plays “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desire” on an organ to pass the time, and calls the prisoners his “flock.”

² See my book, *Hollywood Worldviews* (IVP), for an in depth discussion of demythology in the movies, and in particular, A.I.

³ For a more in-depth analysis of the nature of God’s sovereignty and man’s freedom, see my article, “Whatsoever Comes to Pass: A Personal Pilgrimage Toward God’s Sovereignty” on my website (www.godawa.com).