Myth, Shadow Politics, and Perennial Philosophy in *Minority Report*


Reviewed by Cathleen Rountree

While watching the drama, the spectators become identified with the mythical happening being portrayed, which allow[s] them to participate briefly in the archetypal level of reality. —Edward F. Edinger, *The Eternal Drama*

The shadow personifies everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself . . . for instance, inferior traits of character and other incompatible tendencies. —C. G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*

The illegal we can do now; the unconstitutional will take a little longer. —Henry Kissinger, quoted in Christopher Hitchens, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger*

*Minority Report* is Steven Spielberg’s second cinematic journey and investigation into interior darkness and (after his portrayal of the dark psyche in *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*) into the future of humankind. It comes in the form of the atmospheric neo-noir/sci-fi/futuristic thriller which stars an intense Tom Cruise (who—at last—foregoes his boyish charm and artificial smile). This is the third Cruise film, in as many years, to deal with eyes
and seeing and vision. First there was Stanley Kubrick’s *Eyes Wide Shut* (2000)⁵, in which Cruise could not see beyond his privileged upper-middle-class existence; then there was Cameron Crowe’s *Vanilla Sky* (2001)⁶, in which Cruise’s character, David Ames, could not distinguish between realities of the present, past, and future—and the virtual. The metaphor of the necessity for inner sight is again present in *Minority Report*. Indeed, the film is obsessed with eyes and seeing. Cruise portrays a “Pre-Crime” fighter who is so blinded by his righteous, one-sided perspective that he eventually has his own pair of eyes exchanged on the black market for a different pair. This has the unanticipated affect of enabling him to “see” more clearly.

For a mythologist, the plucking out of one’s own eyes by a movie character leads inexorably to a reference to the Oedipus archetype. According to Jung, the Oedipus complex “was the first archetype Freud discovered. . . .”⁷ The Oedipus complex can be comprehended as a mythological and a psychological motif simultaneously. And *Minority Report* is as rife with mythology and psychology as it is with philosophy, politics, archetypes, and cinematic citations; all of which I will address herein.

**The Story-Line**

But, first, a recitation of the story-line in *Minority Report*. (Note: this analysis assumes that the reader has viewed the film and, thus, reveals the plot and resolutions.)

In the cold, glossy, national capital of Washington, D.C., circa 2054, the Justice Department has found a seemingly perfect means to prevent homicide in the D.C. area: a prophylactic pre-detection of criminals. The system uses three mutant psychics (or scientifically engineered prophets)—known as Pre-Cogs—connected to a computer, by which the agents of the Pre-Crime unit can see murders before they take place and arrest the would-be perpetrators. The Pre-Cogs—a holy trinity of precognition—float in a sort of sacred amniotic fluid of vitamins and life-sustaining nutrients that also controls their levels of serotonin—a liquid Prozac, as it were.

Considered a 21st-century-style Oracle at Delphi, they are Agatha (Christie?), Dashiell (Hammett?), and Arthur (C. Clark?). Chief John Anderton (Cruise) supervises the unit and reports to its director (and his mentor/father-figure) Lamar Burgess (Max
von Sydow). Agent Danny Witwer (Colin Farrell) is sent in by the FBI, which is considering nationalizing the system, to observe the process in action and to detect any flaws. (“They’re always human,” Witwer taunts as he watches Anderton.)

Privately, the divorced Anderton lives a shadow existence, taking the illegal drugs he buys from a mysterious homeless man in an urban Hades and incessantly watching holographic home movies of his son Sean, who was abducted, while under his father’s supervision, from a public swimming pool six years ago—only one year before the Pre-Crime unit was developed. One day the sole female Pre-Cog, Agatha, reveals a vision of a woman named Anne Lively being murdered, a seeming “echo” of an earlier, solved crime. Later, the Pre-Cogs name Anderton himself as the next perpetrator who will kill a man—as yet—unknown to him, named Leo Crow. Anderton becomes a fugitive hunted by his own organization.

He seeks out geneticist Dr. Iris Hineman, one of the developers of Pre-Crime, who tells him that occasionally one of the Pre-Cogs, usually Agatha, will have a “minority report,” which provides a different perspective on a crime from the other two. This report allows for the possibility that the identified murderer may have an alternative, innocent future. If Anderton’s foretold murder has a minority report he will be able to recover it only by accessing Agatha’s mind. In order to do this he must have a new, transplanted pair of eyes so as to evade the ubiquitous retinal scanners planted throughout the city. After successfully abducting Agatha (“Can you see?” she repeatedly asks him), he establishes that there is no minority report for his murder.

Anderton and Agatha find their way to the building where Agatha’s vision has shown the murder will take place, and frequently she reminds him that, because he has the ability to choose, he has the power to change his fate. As it turns out, Leo Crow has been set up to appear to be Sean’s abductor. Crow wants to die in order to claim insurance benefits for his family and, in a struggle, he forces Anderton to kill him involuntarily. Through his investigation, FBI Agent Witwer realizes that Anderton has been framed. He also examines Agatha’s vision of Anne Lively’s murder, and he establishes that the man they arrested as her killer was innocent. When he explains this to Burgess, Burgess kills him.
At the home of Anderton’s ex-wife, Lara (who, as a photographer, symbolically has the ability to “see”), Anderton is arrested by the Pre-Crime unit he had previously worked with, and placed in the Hall of Containment, a type of cryogenic suspended animation in a series of tubular cells that seem to go on forever and in which, like the nine levels of Dante’s *Inferno*, the prisoners re-live their crimes for the duration of their sentence. Naïve to the truth of the actual situation, Lara visits Burgess, but soon realizes that he was actually the murderer of Anne Lively. Anne, a reformed drug addict, was Agatha’s mother, and had tried to recover her daughter from the Pre-Crime system after her release from the rehab clinic. Lara rescues Anderton from the Hall of Containment and, looking like a shadow figure in his hooded sweatshirt, he exposes Burgess, who then—instead of harming Anderton, his symbolic son—kills himself. The Pre-Crime system is dismantled, the Pre-Cogs retire to a secret island where they can speed-read all day, and, in an ending that feels too pat (or shall I say Spielbergian?), Anderton reunites with his wife, who is now pregnant.

**Myth**

In developing his psychoanalytic theories, Freud looked to Greek myths and tragedies and found a resonant theme in *Oedipus*. The derivation of the “Oedipus Complex” became one of Freud’s most lasting contributions to the field of depth psychology. By its nature, the cinema acts out myths in simple, dramatic ways. A number of analogies can be drawn between *Minority Report* and the story of Oedipus.

Of course, the Pre-Cogs themselves are representative of the Oracle at Delphi, and, in fact, their inner sanctum is referred to as “the temple.” “Mend the city, make her safe,” the Oracle tells Oedipus. And it is Anderton, the Pre-Crime savior who, like a postmodern Seiji Ozawa (while listening to refrains of Bach, Haydn, Schubert, and Tchaikovsky), orchestrates the safety of the city by virtually “conducting” the future through hologram-projectors built into his gloves that project images onto a blank video screen.

Anderton unknowingly consults his unconscious. It is as if the first emerging awareness of the shadow leads to its projection. “In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king,” says the
homeless drug dealer who lives in a futuristic version of Hades and supplies Anderton with his illegal narcotic Neuroine. This murky, pessimistic Underworld represents what Edward F. Edinger in *The Eternal Drama* characterizes as the “theme of the diseased or barren land, which also appears in the beginning of the Grail legend . . . its psychological counterpart [is] a state of depression, a loss of energy, interest, and life-meaning, a neurotic condition requiring action. . .” (or, in the case of Anderton, the illegal narcotic Neuroine).

When Anderton is accused by the Pre-Crime system of a future murder, he adamantly refuses to believe he is capable of homicide. (“And I the killer of those I never would,” says Oedipus.) The nature of Anderton’s blindness is paradoxical. To paraphrase the French philosopher, Michel Foucault, visibility is a trap. While he has his original eyes, Anderton remains psychologically blind to the truth about the morality of the Pre-Crime Department. Although Pre-Crime can see into the future, it fails to recognize the danger of this kind of vision. But when he consciously risks his eyesight, Anderton’s inner-sight becomes clear. Perhaps the most compelling aspect of Anderton’s character is that he is not a “superhero.” In fact, he is a true anti-hero: someone who, as a drug addict and the head of a fascist crime unit, is tortured by inner conflicts and personal defects.

Dr. Iris Hineman, the reluctant originator of the Pre-Crime scheme, functions as a “terrible” or “devouring” Mother. When Anderton scales the walls to her private estate in an effort to meet Dr. Hineman (the all-seeing “Iris”), he is entangled and his skin is slashed by lethal rope-like vines. Barely escaping, Anderton needs an antidote for the poisonous serum, which Dr. Hineman provides. Her greenhouse is full of serpentine hybrid plants that menacingly hiss and lunge at Anderton as he questions her about the origin of the Pre-Cogs. Hineman also can be seen as the Sphinx, who assumed a position on a rock outside of Thebes and strangled the inhabitants one by one when they were unable to answer her riddle.

In a twist on the Oedipal incest theme, the much older Dr. Hineman kisses Anderton full on the lips and then offers a “riddle” of her own, when she tells him about the existence of minority reports (alternate Pre-Cog visions of the future that are swiftly suppressed in order to avoid any questions about
the system’s accuracy of prediction) and that it is only Agatha, “always the most gifted of the three” (because she is female), who is aware of them.\textsuperscript{13} She, therefore, urges Anderton to abduct Agatha, like Persephone, to the underworld. Later, as Anderton releases the lever that controls the liquid in the Pre-Cog’s flotation tank, he and Agatha spiral down together into a swirl of unconsciousness. And, in the end, Anderton’s actions, like those of Oedipus, cause his “father”/Lamar’s death.

\textbf{Shadow Politics}

An extension of the mythic components in \textit{Minority Report} is the representation of what I shall refer to as contemporary “shadow politics.” As described by psychiatrist and Jungian analyst Harry A. Wilmer, \textit{Shadow} is the name of the archetype of the alter ego. The shadow is more or less synonymous with what Freud called “the unconscious.” “But it is more than that because it is both personal and non-personal, both I and not I.” He expounds by saying that the “Shadow is unconscious, therefore, we encounter our shadow in other people, things, and places where we project it.”\textsuperscript{14}

I am frequently surprised by the eerily prescient nature of movies, particularly blockbusters, and their ability to foreshadow a movement, fear, or fashion before or as it presents itself to the collective culture’s awareness. Could the box-office opening of \textit{Minority Report} (which was completed prior to 9/11) in the summer of 2002 have been any more timely than during the worldwide pursuit of suspected terrorists in the months after September 11, 2001? Did George W. Bush (living out his own Oedipal complex?) and his hawkish entourage have a sneak preview of \textit{Minority Report}? (Who are their Pre-Cogs?) The film and our current government (which also used the term “pre-crime” and “shadow government”) present us with a classic totalitarian trade-off: Should we surrender our civil liberties for a world free of criminals and terrorists? Philip K. Dick, the author of the eponymous 1956 short story upon which \textit{Minority Report} was based, thinks not. And he speaks for millions of American citizens in this line from his story, “If a system can survive only by imprisoning innocent people, then it deserves to be destroyed.”\textsuperscript{15}

For Anderton, whose own son was kidnapped before Pre-
Crime was instated, the system has become a religion, and he a fanatic, a futuristic “Dirty Harry,” who has a vigilante’s worldview and drive for personal revenge on these “cyber-criminals.” Or, in the words of America’s current cowboy president from Texas, the criminals/terrorists are “wanted—dead or alive.” So, how much freedom are we willing to sacrifice in order to feel secure at home? In the government’s claim to the “right of anticipatory self-defense,” for more than a year the Justice Department has detained hundreds of terrorist suspects on immigration and other charges (a prophylactic detention of criminals) and ignored requests for details on the identities or whereabouts of those in custody. We might well view Minority Report as Bush’s parallel to Clinton’s Wag the Dog (1997).^{16}

The concept of a “shadow government” was formally introduced (or was it leaked?) to us post-9/11 by the Bush Administration. Although Jungians were quick to see the depth psychological metaphor inherent in the term, the Republican governance inadvertently admitted its “dark” side by its eagerness to project “evil” onto other individuals and regimes. Indeed, with his “Axis of Evil” speech, the President himself (and the United States by extension) became the personification of the Shadow archetype.

The cinematic Pre-Crime government created in Minority Report is in many ways equivalent to the current U.S. “shadow government.” The archetype of Shadow can be seen in Ander ton’s (Bush’s) alter ego. Chief Anderton represents a hero, but, because of his own loss, he has sublimated his hatred and rage by projecting it onto the Other, “the criminals” who are arrested for merely thinking of committing a crime (or, in the case of Bush, because “He tried to kill my dad”).^{17} The movie’s citizens have been convinced by the Pre-Crime government that, “that which keeps us safe also keeps us free”—an eerie reverberation of our own government’s rhetoric.^{18} Henry Kissinger’s ethos, “The illegal we can do now; the unconstitutional will take a little longer,” seems perfectly in place in the current administration.^{19} What’s curious is that Dick wrote Minority Report in 1954, the film version was made in 2002, and the story takes place in 2054. We can’t help but wonder how the movie will further anticipate the future.

The feeling tone of Minority Report is one of psychologi-
cal claustrophobia and paranoia. The oppression by commerce and the governmental intrusion into psychological space is the ultimate invasion (“Pre-Crime: It Works!!!” shout billboards in the movie as a form of brainwashing). This is made all the more abhorrent to us as viewers because we recognize the insidious consumerism and product placement portrayed in the film as a system that currently exists (and rapidly multiplies) in our everyday life: When returning customers log on to Amazon.com, and other online shopping services, they are addressed by their names. Through layers of electronic surveillance, we already live in a form of panopticon (Jeremy Bentham’s design for a circular prison that allows the centralized warden to see all inmates at all times, which is discussed by Michel Foucault in his 1977 text, *Discipline and Punish*). Both the governmental agencies and the advertising industry have insinuated themselves into the very infrastructure of politico-economic society. And this concept is perfectly illustrated in *Minority Report* by the Hall of Containment, in which the warden sits high up in his “panopticon” and plays Bach on a Wurlitzer Organ in order to aurally pacify the prisoners.

**Film History**

Steven Spielberg’s numerous cinematic references in *Minority Report* are worth noting, I believe, because they serve as a sort of reverse Rorschach of the twentieth century’s most popular art form for the masses. Movies have been instrumental in bringing us to the time and place that *Minority Report* illustrates. Spielberg’s passion for film history is immediately evident, and both obvious and sly allusions are common. The city that Anderton frequents, the skid row area as well as the skyscrapers, is reminiscent of Fritz Lang’s 1926 *Metropolis*. The Big Sleep (1946) and Chinatown (1974) contribute their noir overtones. *Blade Runner* (1982), an earlier adaptation of another Philip K. Dick short story, “Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?” contributes a Gothic atmosphere. The presence of Max von Sydow is a nod to Ingmar Bergman, the Swedish filmmaker who relentlessly explored the archeology of the psyche. And perhaps the film’s most beautifully evocative image shows Anderton and Agatha, heads seemingly attached to the same body in a Janus-like pose—each resting his/her head on the other’s shoulder as
they gaze in opposite directions, as if looking into two distant and distinct futures and fates. This pose is an exact replica of one of cinema’s most extraordinary: Bergman’s 1966 film, *Persona*, in which Liv Ullman, as an actress recovering from a nervous breakdown, and Bibi Andersson, her nurse, transpose personalities. Perhaps it is at this moment in *Minority Report*, through a symbiosis with Agatha, that Anderton exchanges his Pre-Crime behaviorist tendencies for a set of more humanistic values.

The cameo appearance of Cameron Crowe, who spots the errant Anderton on the subway, can be seen as a nod to the multi-layers of realities in *Vanilla Sky*, a film directed by Crowe and starring Cruise. In *Dark Passage* (1947) Humphrey Bogart (who is being pursued by the authorities for a murder he didn’t commit) undergoes plastic surgery in order to change his identity. In *Minority Report* Anderton injects himself with a substance that temporarily disfigures his face, enabling him to sneak into the Pre-Crime compound unrecognized and abduct Agatha. Of course, Cruise was also disfigured in *Vanilla Sky*.

Judging from the frequency of its use, the theme of the Lost Boy (Anderton’s missing son Sean in *Minority Report*) is a major one for Spielberg and one that he has cannibalized from his own body of work. Throughout his career the Lost Boy has been a primary character: *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestial*, *Empire of the Sun*, *Hook*, *Always*, the above-mentioned *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, and most recently *Catch Me If You Can*. Although less obvious, cases can also be made for *The Sugarland Express*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Indiana Jones*, and *Saving Private Ryan*.

The flight of the probing camera lens (once again, an all-seeing “eye”) above and into apartment buildings in *Minority Report* echoes the voyeuristic perspective in Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954) and Wim Wenders’s *Wings of Desire* (1988). The androgynous Pre-Crime officers remind us of those in Lucas’s *THX-1138*. The concept of *Minority Report*’s Hall of Containment seems a replica of the Wachowski Brothers’ infinite display of pre-birth chambers in *The Matrix*. There is also the scene in *Minority Report* when Anderton is in the filthy apartment of the renegade eye surgeon, Dr. Solomon Eddie, who will perform the eye transplant in his makeshift medical setup. This scene once again recalls Bogart’s *Dark Passage*, in which his doctor
was also suspect and in which a spooky dream sequence made this viewer queasy. During the operation, Anderton’s eyelids are splayed open by a contraption instantly reminiscent of the one that tortured Alex in Kubrick’s *Clockwork Orange* (1971).

Samantha Morton’s character, Agatha, could be a direct descendant of Renée Marie Falconetti who played the lead character in Carl Dreyer’s 1928 *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. Although physically weak from prolonged suspension in the Pre-Cog’s flotation tank, one senses Joan’s warrior-like quality in Agatha, as well as her martyrdom. Other movie influences include: Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* (1985) (minus the surrealist humor), and *12 Monkeys* (1995), Volker Schlondorff’s *Handmaiden’s Tale* (1990), Robert Aldrich’s *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), and the 1974 Warren Beatty vehicle directed by Alan J. Pakula, *The Parallax View*. And, finally, anyone who has seen *L.A. Confidential* (1997) will easily “pre”—identify the villain.

**Perennial Philosophy**

In the end, the script, written by Jon Cohen and Scott Frank, remains true to the philosophizing nature of Philip K. Dick’s work—he has called himself a “fictionalizing philosopher”—and his attempt to intuit the influence of a metaphysical realm beyond the sensory world.

The perennial question of Fate versus Free Will is one of the most important issues addressed by *Minority Report*. My Roman Catholic up-bringing intimately familiarized me with the question of freedom versus determinism from a very young age. As with many questions, the Church never satisfactorily explained its reasons for fostering both positions, and this truly catholic conundrum has remained for me a lifelong source of exploration and consequence. What is fate or predestination and how do they (or do they) interface with free will? Aristotelian logic stated that the future has been predetermined by the rules of logic; so the question is: can I change the future from what it is going to be, or from what it might have been?

“Is it now?” Agatha repeatedly asks Anderton as they rush to “catch up to the future” and track down Leo Crow, the man Anderton has been accused of murdering in the future. “You can choose,” Agatha tells him as he stands, gun in hand, facing his destiny. Would knowing the future provoke us to act any
differently than not knowing it? And where do fate and free will intersect? According to what Dick called the “prophylactic Pre-crime structure,” as soon as precognitive information is obtained, it cancels itself out.\textsuperscript{50} It’s like new physics in which the observer affects/changes the observed. So when a potential murder is “seen” taking place, interception by the Pre-Crime police prevents it. In Spielberg’s \textit{Minority Report}, even as Anderton \textit{tries} to choose an action different from the one that has been envisioned, he can’t. And Agatha, like a pleading guardian angel, is unable to stop what seems to be destiny: that Leo Crow lies dead (even if involuntarily) by the hand of former-Chief John Anderton.

In conclusion, the concepts in \textit{Minority Report} are both timeless and timely, sacred and profane, complex and forthright, and we could do worse than to read Philip K. Dick and to view Steven Spielberg’s film looking for clues and possible insights to the many concerns of our current world predicament. “Better keep your eyes open,” Anderton informs young Witwer in Philip K. Dick’s short story. “It might happen to you at any time.”\textsuperscript{51} A warning eerily applicable to our own turn–of–the–millennium Zeitgeist.

\textbf{ENDNOTES}

\textsuperscript{1} Edward F. Edinger, \textit{The Eternal Drama}, Boston, Shambhala, 1994.
\textsuperscript{2} CW 9i, ¶513.
\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Vanilla Sky}, 2001, Screenplay by Alejandro Amen-bar and Mateo Gil, Directed by Cameron Crowe.
\textsuperscript{7} CW 10, ¶¶ 288–289.
\textsuperscript{9} \textit{Minority Report}.
\textsuperscript{10} Edinger, 128.
\textsuperscript{11} Sophocles, ln. 1191.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Minority Report}.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Wag the Dog}, 1997, Screenplay by Larry Beinhart and Hilary Henkin,
Directed by Barry Levinson.


18 *Minority Report.*


22 *The Big Sleep,* 1946, Screenplay by Raymond Chandler and William Faulkner, Directed by Howard Hawks.

23 *Chinatown,* 1974, Screenplay by Robert Towne, Directed by Roman Polanski.

24 New York, Del Rey/Ballantine, 1996.

25 *Persona,* 1966, Screenplay by Ingmar Bergman, Directed by Ingmar Bergman.

26 *Vanilla Sky.*

27 *Dark Passage,* 1947, Screenplay by Delmer Daves and David Goodis, Directed by Delmer Daves.

28 *Close Encounters of the Third Kind,* 1977, Screenplay by Steven Spielberg, Directed by Steven Spielberg.


30 *Empire of the Sun,* 1987, Screenplay by Tom Stoppard and Menno Meyjes, Directed by Steven Spielberg.


32 *Always,* 1989, Screenplay by Jerry Belson, Directed by Steven Spielberg.

33 *Catch Me If You Can,* 2002, Screenplay by Frank Abagnale, Jr., and Stan Redding, Directed by Steven Spielberg.

34 *Sugarland Express,* 1974, Screenplay by Steven Spielberg, Matthew Robbins and Hal Barwood, Directed by Steven Spielberg.


36 *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom,* 1984, Screenplay by Willard Huyck and Gloria Katz, Directed by Steven Spielberg.


38 *Rear Window,* 1954, Screenplay by John Michael Hayes, Directed by Alfred Hitchcock.

39 *Wings of Desire,* 1988, Screenplay by Wim Wenders and Peter Handke, Directed by Wim Wenders.

40 *Matrix,* 1999, Screenplay by Andy Wachowski and Larry Wachowski, Directed by Andy Wachowski and Larry Wachowski.

41 *Clockwork Orange,* 1971, Screenplay by Stanley Kubrick, Directed by Stanley Kubrick.

42 *Passion of Joan of Arc,* 1928, Screenplay by Carl Theodor Dreyer, Directed by Carl Theodor Dreyer.

43 *Brazil,* 1985, Screenplay by Charles McKeown, Terry Gilliam, Tom Stoppard, Directed by Terry Gilliam.

44 *12 Monkeys,* 1995, Screenplay by David Peoples and Janet Peoples, Directed by Terry Gilliam.

45 *Handmaiden’s Tale,* 1990, Screenplay by Harold Pinter, Directed by Volker Schlondorff.

46 *Kiss Me Deadly,* 1955, Screenplay by A.I. Bezzerides, Directed by Robert Aldrich.