

EXTREME SURVEILLANCE AND PREVENTIVE JUSTICE: NARRATION AND SPECTACULARITY IN *MINORITY REPORT*

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SUMMARY

Through a compared analysis between the narrative of Philip K. Dick and the filmic imagery of Steven Spielberg, the present article explores the forms in which dominant ideas around surveillance and preventive justice are portrayed in *Minority Report*. The author examines the links between literary fiction and audiovisual representation, focusing on the notions of narrative and spectacularity in order to establish up to what point does the film adaptation interpret de innovative and challenging ideas that identify Dick's visionary science fiction writing.

KEY WORDS

Science Fiction, Crime, Extreme surveillance, Preventive justice, Civil rights, National security, Privacy, State control, Dystopia, Panopticon, Film adaptation, Philip K. Dick, Steven Spielberg, *Minority Report*

ARTICLE

Based on “The Minority Report” (1956), by Philip K. Dick, *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002) is, without a doubt, one of the film scripts that most highlights the ideas of surveillance of citizens and preventive justice.¹ Although it is undeniable that both ideas are taken from the original story by Dick, in the film they are highlighted and modified, to some extent thanks to the audiovisual narration that sustains and supports them. This is a relevant point since sometimes opinion has tended towards the idea that cinematographic, unlike literary, science fiction, strips this genre of the innovative and non-conformist ideas that characterise it, and that it lingers too long on the special effects, which, from this perspective, would slow down the narration and would add nothing to it.² This, this article seeks to explore the ways in which the dominant ideas of surveillance and preventive justice are shown in *Minority Report* and how their audiovisual representation, far from hindering, contribute to better illustrating the dominant ideas of the film.

Right from the start, *Minority Report* establishes audio-visually that it will be devoted to the representation, exploration and debate on surveillance and preventive justice. The opening sequence, which is around ten minutes in duration, is basic for the understanding of the premises present in the film, but also, and especially, in order to represent extremely efficaciously the ways in which a society is constructed which is dominated by, and, more importantly, which is accustomed to constant surveillance and monitoring.

Thus, during this opening sequence, we are presented with an ordinary man about to go to work; everything is “normal” —except that he sees a youth walking in the park and recognises him as being a habitual lurker, and the fact that his wife is looking particularly attractive that morning and refuses to cancel a work meeting to stay a while longer with him—. Through absentmindedness or due to suspicion, the man forgets his contact lenses and returns home minutes after leaving to find

¹ Of course, in terms of surveillance, we must not forget *THX 1138* (George Lucas, 1971), the film by Michael Radford based on George Orwell's *1984*, or *Enemy of the State* (Tony Scott, 1998). But the idea of preventive justice did not start to be greatly explored in the cinema until the fall of the Twin Towers, and so *Minority Report* is one of the first films to deal with it.

² To name just one, see Brooks Landon (1992; 1999). Susan Sontag, however, since 1966, has been of the opinion that science fiction films are distinguished by what she calls the “aesthetic of disaster”, and that they are not related with the society in which they appear. Although numerous films exist which appear to support such hypotheses (we think, among others, of *ID4*, *The Day after Tomorrow*, and *Armageddon*), this is not the case of the generality of science fiction films, in which, contrarily, while major use is made of all kinds of special effects, the films' narrative and underlying ideologies will be those which completely dominate the cinematographic spectacle. As example of this we can mention the classics *Blade Runner*, *Starship Troopers*, *Robocop*, and the complete *Alien* saga.

his wife in the arms of the lurker-lover. The reaction is directly passionate: the man, using the scissors that were used previously to cut up newspapers for a piece of his son's schoolwork, is about to kill his wife and lover. The murder is interrupted by the arrival of the "Precrime" squad, whose job is to stop crime from happening.³

Simultaneously to this scene, we see the protagonist of the film, John Anderton (Tom Cruise), receiving the images provided by the trio of "precogs" (precogniscent beings), capable of predicting crimes prior to being committed. These images are directly extracted from the mind of the precogs by means of a complex mechanism and are received at the Precrime operations centre, directed by Anderton. But the system does not put them in order, so Anderton works like the conductor of an orchestra—which is supported by the soundtrack which presents Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*—, both as a reader and a narrator, who chooses, extracts and gives order, sequence and meaning to images that do not possess such properties intrinsically.⁴

Evidently, my summary of the start of *Minority Report* is quite austere: the audiovisual efficacy in the conveyance of narrative and ideological content is insuperable. In just a few minutes, the viewer is presented with the film's dominant issues: extreme surveillance and preventive justice.

This is achieved, first of all, through the incursion of the precogs into people's lives—rather, into their private sphere—, which highlights that in the society portrayed in *Minority Report* there is no place for privacy; although the precogs are incapable of entering people's minds—the last stronghold of privacy—, they *can*, via the precogniscent faculties they possess, get into their future, into their houses and into their chambers. Such intimate moments as the cries of a man upon discovering his wife with a lover, or a couple's e amorous fling, and even the sudden decision to kill the lovers, are now discovered by the precogs and revealed to a body of justice whose authority is questionable to

³ In this scene, great care is also taken to highlight the excessive use of police force and the way in which it explodes violently in such a private place as the master bedroom. By this I do not mean that the future wife murderer should not be arrested, rather that, obviously, the police deployment—in terms of quality and quantity, consisting of two helicopters and the police chief himself—is seen as being excessive in the apprehension of a cheated husband. That is to say, a whole squad, similar to those of the SWAT is to arrest a single person, not a group of terrorists or a killing machine like Terminator.

⁴ According to Friedman, "the Pre-Cogs function as authors—or at least transmitters or channellers— of the text, the images as the physical text itself and Anderton as its reader, the one called upon to fashion the disjointed images into a coherent story, identify the scene and prevent the crime. Because the meaning of these narratives inevitably shifts from reader to reader, as Spielberg demonstrates throughout the film, governmental actions based on those constructed patterns rest on a shaky foundation of interpretive selections" (Friedman, 2002: s/d). To my mind, Anderton is far more of a narrator than a reader in that, in the way of the former he makes a selection on the basis of the raw materials provided by the "authors", the precogs.

say the least. This takes on yet more preponderance when seen in the light that these events are reconstructed, as I have mentioned previously, by a kind of narrator.

So, due to the fact that the images extracted from the minds of the precogs are presented jumbled up and without any priorities of relevance, Anderton has to organise them so that they make some sense, selecting and discarding parts, and, therefore, telling a kind of story which, in addition to being a construction, is prior to the events themselves. Although the film takes care to make the real events of the scene of the man who discovers his wife with a lover consistent with the ones presented by the precogs, at the same time it highlights that Anderton interprets them and that, therefore, said interpretation may be mistaken.

On the other hand, based on this sequence we obtain information on the whole universe of *Minority Report*: we find out the date and place where the action takes place (Washington, D.C., 2054); we know that a police system has been implemented there that is linked to the legal system, since emphasis is given to the presence by teleconference of two judges/witnesses that will observe the case and decide whether it is lawful or not to pursue the precriminal;⁵ we are allowed to see that there are three precogs that foresee the offence and that their prediction takes the audiovisual form of the direct extraction of their mental images and sounds, which leads to a sophisticated mechanical system that launches little wooden balls —that presumably cannot be falsified given the grain of the wood— with the name of the criminal and of the victim or victims. Using these balls, which are colour coded (red for crimes of passion, coffee coloured for premeditated crimes), we know that there are now practically no premeditated crimes —the precogs' predictions cannot be escaped—, only crimes of passion.⁶ Once the judges/witnesses approve the persecution and capture of the criminal, the police force is deployed heading to the place where the crime was committed. It is undeniable, of

⁵ For Cooper, "No one habituated to the Anglo-American legal system could fail to recognize the travesty of justice. Precrime not only dispenses with the jury and mocks judicial supervision; it also denies the accused the opportunity to confront his accuser. That is, those parties who in a proper trial could be recognized as defendant (the jealous husband) and plaintiff ('the people' represented by a prosecutor) here occupy different spaces, which we are also to understand as different temporalities. This situation makes accusation indistinct from evidence and defines the accused as a murderer in advance of a judgment" (Cooper, 2003/2004: 30-1).

⁶ To a certain extent, the balls remind one of the lottery in which numbered spheres that make up a winning number are extracted from an artefact. The implications of such similarity of images leads us to think, once again, that from the conception of the film what is being questioned is how, in effect, committing an offence or not, is a matter that depends, at least partially, on chance. This gathers importance, furthermore, if we think that in such a highly technological world as that of *Minority Report*, a few wooden balls on which the names of the criminal and the victim are engraved are noteworthy due to their being quite out of place.

course, that at this point there is a huge deployment of special effects, but it is also clear that basic information is contributed for the construction of the story: the running of Precrime, the physical environment, the efficiency of the police, the impossibility of hiding from justice. Likewise, it is interesting to note that the film introduces the judges, stressing that there is a legal process that supports or rejects the remarks of the police.⁷ This emphasises the fact that we are up against a police-legal system in which arbitrary decisions are not taken. (Although, on the other hand, the whole film deals with questioning the system.)

But the misinterpretations I mention above and which, obviously, have repercussions on our vision of the legal system of Precrime, are to be highlighted in a sequence close to the end of the film during Anderton's flight. In it, the images projected by the precogs and interpreted both by Anderton—in the first place and prior to fleeing—and by the rest of the Precrime investigators, point to the idea that Anderton kills the alleged kidnapper of his son, a man named Leo Crow (Mike Binder). But once we see this scene "live"—that is to say, without the mediation of the precogs, or of an Precrime interpreter-narrator—it becomes patent that Anderton chooses not to kill the man and that his death is an accident caused by the struggle between the two, or that the "kidnapper" himself pulls the trigger. The Precrime agency, in any case, unaware of the information possessed by the viewer, continues to pursue Anderton until he is caught, in a suitable display of the reliability of the system.

The audiovisual narration of the film is a deciding factor to *show* the viewer how the system of preventive justice is not just clearly fallible, but also unjust. Thus, in merely audiovisual terms, the viewer *sees* and *hears* how Anderton *does not* kill Leo Crow and even so is hunted by the police.⁸ Clearly, this will contribute to the idea formed by the viewer of the Precrime system being, if not adverse, at least inquisitive. On the other hand, this very sequence highlights in audiovisual terms that the task of the Precrime investigators is, at a fundamental level, *interpretative*, which emphasises the possibility that it might be erroneous. Moreover, this scene also manages to put the viewer in the same situation of interpretative doubt as the members of Precrime themselves, since as we see the scene "live", we also realise that "all is not as it seems" and that the film is deliberately playing on this notion, which makes us question our own judgement.

⁷ Although, as is obvious and as Cooper's previously cited comments stress, this system is badly founded.

⁸ This sequence, furthermore, highlights the idea of determinism against freewill—present throughout the film—, since Anderton *chooses* not to kill Leo Crow. I shall, however, not deal with this discussion in this article due to restricted space. Suffice to say that, as the film unravels, freewill is configured as one of the determining reasons to bring down the entire Precrime system.

Another part of the film that highlights how the images transmitted by the precogs can be misinterpreted is the part which discovers the murder of the mother of Agatha, Ann Lively (Jessica Harper), by the creator of Precrime, Lamar Burgess (Max von Sydow). Here, we see how the police technicians discarded images as they considered them mere echoes, waste from the prediction of the crime. Emphasis is given to how the interpreters *did not* observe that in a previous sequence the waves caused by the breeze on a lake were going in one direction, and in a second sequence they were going in the opposite direction. In this way, the interpretative task of discarding or including certain images in the construction of a narrative becomes clear. At the same time, it is important to highlight that this revelation occurs in visual terms, which are backed up by Anderton's verbal narration, and not the other way around —the visual supporting verbal narration—. This would seem to confirm, on the one hand, that the spectacular and merely audiovisual are as important for the narration as the literary narration itself; on the other, in terms of ideology and culture, that neither preventive justice nor constant surveillance over citizens really result in a more just or less violent society.

Evidently, in the course of the film narration, this reason becomes more and more highlighted, in such a way that it becomes gradually more obvious how the government —with the mediation of Precrime— seems to hold total control of the citizens. Previously I have referred to Anderton's flight. At the beginning, Anderton escapes in his vehicle, but control of it is taken over by Precrime in order to take the protagonist to police premises. That is to say, in this futuristic society in which everything is under surveillance, even our command over vehicles is lost as it is in the hands of the powers of the government.

Throughout the sequence of Anderton's flight, the above is underlined: not only does the government have control of the vehicles, but it also knows at practically any given moment where each person is. Thus, once Anderton manages to flee the car, the iris-reading devices located at all underground stations provide the police with his whereabouts.

To this end, it is worthwhile examining the sequence in which Precrime is looking for Anderton in the *sprawl*—an expanse, a belt located near the misery that agglomerates society's less favoured classes—. In this sequence, the police use a kind of robotic spider that read people's minds. As they are released in a building in which there are a lot of people, the spiders enter all of the apartments and rooms to obtain people's eye data and, in this way, confirm or discard their identity

and, therefore, whether Anderton is present there. Three incursions into people's private lives are significant in this section: the spiders momentarily interrupt a man who is in the middle of defecating, a couple who are having sexual intercourse and another having an argument. What matters here is that all of these people allow the spiders to read their irises —they stop what they are doing for an instant— and pick up from where they left off immediately after, once their irises have been inspected. This part of the film very cleverly shows audiovisually how extreme, permanent surveillance has been assumed and accepted by the population. This is achieved not just through the use of the spiders that compile data of people's eyes but also through the clever choice of the activities the people are performing when interrupted for their eye scan.

In this way, private activities such as the discovery of marital infidelity —with which the film begins—, couples fighting, sexual relations and defecation, become public activities. But this is not all; these activities are subject to the Panopticon —not just to the original design by Jeremy Bentham, but also the far more disturbing of Orwell in *1984*, or of George Lucas in *THX 1138*— which observes, registers and, necessarily, judges. This latter point —judgement— is particularly relevant in *Minority Report* as it is a film that is precisely based on questioning the administration of a certain kind of justice.

On the other hand, this leads us to observing how surveillance occurs not just in the governmental sphere, but it is also carried out in private spheres. This surveillance from the civil sector becomes clear in two scenes. First, when Anderton is on the underground escaping from his pursuers, his photo is shown at different angles —side profile, head on, slightly to one side— in the papers, under the headline "Precrime hunts its own", efficaciously and succinctly showing how it is practically impossible to hide in a world that is subjected to permanent surveillance. Second, this time with the precog Agatha (Samantha Morton), again during the escape and after Anderton has undergone surgery to replace his whole eyeballs, to escape surveillance, it becomes clear how the shops at shopping centres have the same surveillance technology as the authorities and address each potential customer by name, and so now Anderton is "Mr. Yakamoto".⁹

By now, we must be asking ourselves why eyes and sight are so emphasised in *Minority Report* and what for. In fact, critics such as Lester D. Friedman (2003) have already researched the

⁹ As Kammerer points out, in *Minority Report* we can see "the futuristic and dystopian tale of total surveillance in a society, in which it can no longer be decided if the state institutions or private organizations, capitalist enterprises have the greater powers of control" (Kammerer, 2004: 468).

permanent presence of this argument in the film, both on the literary and the metaphorical level. But what I would like to highlight here is how the great eye that sees all in *Minority Report*, the eye of the government, the precrime police and its unseen allies in private enterprise, while being totally assumed by the population, is not observed by the latter. That is to say, it is an eye that watches but is not watched. This eye will finally be uncovered as an unjust, scarcely reliable invader, but only at the end of the film and only by the person who once worked for it. This is notable because it is only when the observer becomes the observed that the inviability of a system based on extreme, permanent surveillance is fully revealed. This premise is precisely demonstrated, moreover, in principally audiovisual terms, in the aforementioned scene in which Anderton discovers Lamar Burgess as the murderer of Agatha's mother. And this is so because during this sequence, images are projected onto a screen and are transmitted by the precog Agatha to those attending the celebrations of the expansion of Precrime throughout the United States. That is to say, by making the images that were previously only seen by Precrime police accessible to the public in general, the positions of observer-observed are reversed and Precrime loses its position of privilege of observer, interpreter and judge.

Thus it becomes clear how in *Minority Report* the incursion of special effects and purely audiovisual narrative not only contributes to the general development of the filmscript, but also helps to highlight and question just how suitable and useful the administration of a precriminal justice system and the constant surveillance of citizens is.

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