

# What Price Security?—A Review of Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report*

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Do you believe your dreams will come true? Would you believe another person's dreams? In 2054, we will not only believe in the predictive power of dreams, we will rest a whole crime-prevention strategy on it. This is the premise of *Minority Report*, a summer science fiction offering from director Steven Spielberg with actor Tom Cruise in the role of the detective involved in running the program. He and his colleagues collate the dream material of the "precogs": three genetically modified individuals who can "see" future homicides in their dreams before they occur. Armed with this knowledge, the "pre-crime" unit can arrest the would-be murderers before they act, and hold them in "containment." The death penalty has been abolished. The system seems to work; there has been no homicide in Washington, D.C., in the past six years. Pre-crime is just about to go national.

Is this beginning to sound professionally familiar? Since the 1970s, psychiatry has become preoccupied with the identification and prediction of future danger—especially the prediction of violence by persons who have mental disorders. There is a nice metaphor in the film in which people convicted of a pre-crime are kept in some sort of suspended animation, or containment. Of course, one can argue that sentencing the violent psychopath has long been seen as containment only, with little or no treatment offered. Psychiatrists are invited to give expert testimony about future risk in relation to commitment and sentencing. In parallel, the "science" of risk assessment has developed, so that psychologists be-

come the contemporary precogs, using specially devised instruments to anticipate violence before it happens. The use of the Hare Psychopathy Checklist (PCL-R) as predictor of future violence is a case in point.<sup>1</sup>

The film is painstakingly made to create a visual depiction of the dystopian future. There was a three-day brainstorming session with 23 leading futurists to get an authentic depiction of a not-too-distant future in which people still use cars (although they run vertically along skyscrapers). The retail chains of today can be easily recognized. The film's palette is deliberately kept blue but soulless, the film stock treated through a special bleach-bypass process to blanch the flesh tones from just the faces. The graininess of the film adds to the heaviness that goes with its theme but also imparts a texture, so that the viewer can almost feel the film with his or her fingers. All this creates a more classic *film noir* look. Spielberg himself said that he "wanted to create the world and then just take it for granted."<sup>2</sup> However, the film shows things we are facing now: retinal scanning, facial recognition, and the ever-growing intrusiveness that allows everyone who matters to know everything about buying habits, our fantasies, and us. In the film the advertisements call out to us by name, the wrong name as it turns out, because Tom Cruise's "new eyes" belonged to someone else. The whole matter of the eyes-and-vision metaphor is perhaps Stanley Kubrick's influence from *A Clockwork Orange*.

In 2002 things are no better on this side of the Atlantic. The British Government has a new mental health bill in parliament that justifies detention solely on the grounds of perceived risk. The possible wrong (and harm) that is done by involuntary detention is justified by harm avoidance, not by its benefit

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to persons who have mental disorders. Of course, it can be argued that it is good for such persons not to be violent toward other people; thus, stopping them before they commit violence is a benefit to them. However, this is not an argument that we normally apply to other people.

This brings us back again to *Minority Report*. Adapted (in two attempts) from a 31-page short story by Philip K. Dick, first published in 1956 in *Fantastic Universe*,<sup>3</sup> *Minority Report* is a chilly story of psychedelic science fiction, of governmental paranoia and grand delusions. One of the most interesting ideas in the film is that the dreams of the precogs arise from the perceived intentions of the murderer. The film is quite specific: normally, precogs get about four days' warning of a homicidal intention. This means that a sudden passionate impulse to kill creates an emergency for the detectives. The film opens with just such a crisis. There are only minutes to prevent a murder. In the same way, forensic psychiatry struggles with the fact that a significant proportion of homicidal violence by persons who have mental disorders does not arise from predictable rational intentions, but from random, impulsive unpredictable affect of rage and fear. The police of 2054 A.D. in the film cannot only predict a homicide (rape and other crimes are not included because "taking a life is different"), but they have judicial authority to arrest suspects (or perpetrators) who are blissfully unaware of the heinous crime they are going to commit hours or days hence. Precogs not only "see" planned homicides, but are also apparently able to "see" homicidal intentions that are not yet conscious, as if unconscious intentions can be read in the minds of others. It is not clear why or how the perpetrators are not aware of their intentions. Perhaps it is because their intentions are not fully formed or because they are as yet unacceptable to contemplate. Whatever the reason, the precogs have a special power to see the future, much like their present-day counterparts.

And indeed, where are we all going to be if it becomes a crime to have violent intentions? The film depicts huge numbers of people detained (or in the film "contained") on the grounds that they wanted to do something violent. Of course, the fact that a person wants to do something is no guarantee that he or she will do it. All sorts of variables may intervene: both internal and external. The person may think better of it (the film does not say what would happen if a would-be murderer changes his or her mind) or

may be run over by a bus. Of course, the fact that the precrime unit operates to stop something from happening means that we never know whether it would have happened or not. At the moment of truth, the identified murderer may decide not to follow through with his or her homicidal intent. Think how hard Lady Macbeth had to work to make Macbeth kill the king.

Steven Spielberg is no stranger to us in his telling of stories with moral dilemmas. His last offering, *AI*, talks about the morality of robotization of society and the problem of end justifying the means. The messages of *Schindler's List* and *Saving Private Ryan* need not be reiterated. They are ultimately traditional ones about personal morality. *Minority Report* also hits that rich vein, but hinges instead on the old debate between determinism and free will (or *in extremis* in this film about predeterminism and self-will). Each person makes his or her own choices. We should be punished for what we do, not what we intend. Preventive detention is rarely justified because so many harms and wrongs are done to innocent people to make the rest of us feel safe. In this sense, persons who have mental disorders have been like the canaries sent into a mine to detect fatal gases. If risk-assessment data can be successfully used to justify preventively detaining persons who have mental disorders on the grounds of preventing violence, then why should it not be extended to preventing violence by persons who do not have mental disorders, like those shown in the film?

Who will be on the next preventive-detention list? Here is another link with the film: perceived danger may be a product of our dreams, fantasies, and other types of less rational thought. In 2054, the precog's dreams of violence have some basis in reality, but in 2002, the content of our dreams of violence are likely to be based on what we most fear, and this may or may not be real. In the United States in the 1940s, fear of Japanese people led to preventive detention for innocent citizens. At the same time in Britain, German Jews fleeing Hitler were also detained on the grounds that they were German, and therefore possible spies—a horribly ironic twist to their predicament. At present, there are talks about detaining people of a particular ethnicity on the grounds that they may be terrorists. The reasoning owes more to Alice in Wonderland than the risk-assessment literature. Men of one persuasion committed a terrorist act; you are a man of that persuasion; therefore you are more

likely than others to . . . do what? Kill randomly? Blow up buildings? Psychologists call this fundamental attribution error.

Because, of course, all these things can be and are done by men of other persuasions. The plot of *Minority Report* hinges on this crucial issue: What if there is a flaw in the system? What if the precogs get it wrong? Especially, what happens if they do not agree with each other? The precrime initiative in 2054 assumes that the future is “out there” waiting to be discovered and stopped and that there is no doubt about what will happen. In reality, we create the future moment by moment in the here and now. As C. S. Lewis put it, the present is where time touches eternity.<sup>4</sup> The future is going to be a matter of interpretation of facts, rather than a simple reading. There is a nice moment in the film when a crime goes undetected because it is cleverly manipulated to read like a *déjà vu* or echo of the previous dream and is thus dismissed by the agents reading the data. When we perform a risk assessment with persons who have mental disorders, we do just this. We assemble the facts and then interpret them. Facts can always be interpreted another way, however, and then we will get a different version of the “truth.” This is the basis of the adversarial system in the criminal court, where the truth about past events is assessed, and it is equally true for future events. Different people see future risk differently, and in each case, there will be a majority and a minority report. The majority tends to rule, but this says nothing about truth. When we locked up all the Japanese, so that no Japanese person could commit an act of espionage or war, we did not prove that they were a real source of risk, only that they were a focus of our fear.

The film’s main message is that purchasing security at the expense of privacy (loosely constructed to mean liberty) or justice is too high a price to pay. Tom Cruise’s character heroically struggles with the destiny apparently determined for him by others. Our patients who have mental disorders are not heroes and have less capacity than most to protect themselves. Tom Cruise’s character in the film, Chief Anderton, is a flawed hero. He has had personal losses: a drug problem and a broken marriage. He is

visibly suffering, even when not running from his persecutors. Most of our patients have all that and more. Fear and stigma make them vulnerable, and it is hard not to think that we still exploit this vulnerability because we can. In a democracy, it is possible to pass laws that trample on privacy and civil liberties and deny due process to some in the name of some greater good. In an ethical world we have to stop and ask whether we are doing this just because we can or because we ought to. There will always be debates about how far we can go in the name of public safety. The relevance to us of this chilling film is that as medical professionals, we are being invited to manipulate the “evidence” of risk assessment, to give an uncertain process scientific validity for populist political purposes or to suppress the “minority report.” In the film Anderton did not even know of the existence of the minority report—least of all the one that existed on him. When Soviet psychiatry medicalized political dissent, U.S. and U.K. psychiatrists were rightly critical, but we now run the same risk.

The final point is about judging people by their intentions, which used to be God’s prerogative. Having murderous thoughts is something we all do. Acting on them is something that only a very few of us do. Most people who kill are not mentally ill, but have ordinary sinful motives. The film is not about persons who have mental disorders, but to quote Niemuller’s famous line about the man who does not act to protect the rights of others, “[A]nd when they came for me, there was no-one left to protest,” the film might as well have been about such persons. What will happen when my time comes? This is a brilliant movie, a must-see—the kind of movie that makes you feel better (in the end) by its mere existence. The tag line sums it up for us: “Everybody runs.”

### References

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