



## Dreams of the Future

### Tuesday, March 13, 2018

*Another late addition to my collection of Spielberg Film Society film reviews, this time written 16 years after the fact. I enjoyed *Minority Report* on first viewing in 2002, but I had a tough time covering the movie as a writing assignment, investigating its labyrinthine visual effects. Perhaps that's why it has taken me this long to record my thoughts on the film, while researching an upcoming new Cinefex Spielberg story, in LA 2018. It holds up as a terrific thriller, a thoughtful rumination on fate and love, and it packs a punch.*

#### *Dreams of the Future*

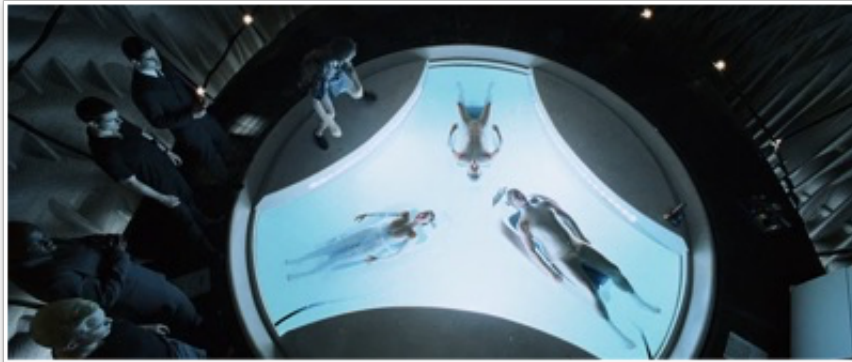
by Joe Fordham (March 2018)

*Minority Report* was Part Two of a Spielberg science fiction double-punch.

He had just finished perhaps his most secretive and mysterious production, the robot fable *A.I.*, and before the paint was dry on those visual effects, he launched directly into production of a second, quite different futuristic story, a hard-boiled adaptation of a Philip K. Dick dystopian sci-fi novella, a police procedural set in 2054 where citizens were found guilty for premeditating their crimes.

*Minority Report* had a long gestation that began with drafts in the 1990s, floated as a sequel to the Arnold Schwarzenegger *Total Recall* adaptation. It then gathered steam, fairly rapidly, filmed back-to-back with *A.I.* and appeared, almost exactly one year later, in the summer of 2002. I covered both films as Cinefex assignments, and *Minority Report* was a particularly tough one, a detailed, multi-layered show, with multiple strata.

First, there was the gritty, gun-metal-blue-hued, monochrome world of future Washington D.C., where ‘precrime’ police chief John Anderton (Tom Cruise) lived his life drained of joy,



tracking down criminals with murder on their minds. Next, were the dream-like precognitive visions, abstract soupy imagery hardwired from the brains of three pale, human ‘precogs’ cursed with divining powers that enable them to predict humanity’s urge to kill. Third was the

upper layer of glitzy, omnipresent advertising that beamed commercial messages into the retina of citizens in this technological world. It was complex.

The film had its critics, people who found fault in the mismatch of Philip Dick’s paranoid storytelling sensibilities with Spielberg’s rambunctious vision of the future. But what they missed was the bigger picture, that leapt far beyond the novella’s themes. In Dick’s story, published in 1956, Anderton is accused of murdering a man he has yet to meet and he elects to accept his fate to validate a process that has defined his life. In Spielberg’s film, with a screenplay by Scott Frank and Jon Cohen, Anderton was a Hitchcockian victim of circumstance, a drug-addicted cop whose life has been wrecked by the abduction of his young son, and who is subsequently played as a pawn to a larger conspiracy. Dick vaunts precrime as an inevitable future; Spielberg dismantles it.

What is surprising about Spielberg’s film, for a gritty futuristic neo-noir, is its puckish sense of humor. In a breathtaking opening sequence, the mechanics of precrime are dramatized in a breathless suspense sequence, intercutting a potential ‘red ball’ murder alert, with Anderton’s analysis and eleventh-hour apprehension of a poor suburban sap driven to slay his unfaithful wife. Anderton dismisses the greasy ‘twink from the Feds,’ Witwer (Colin Farrell), a former seminary student who has come to investigate him. “Everybody runs,” mutters John and, sure enough, Anderton finds that the hunter has become the hunted. Convinced that Witwer has set him up as a patsy, Anderton kicks out the roof of his maglev car, flees through the DC metro system, and runs out into an alley where he outwits five airborne cops, only to engage Witwer again, and an entourage of boom-



stick wielding feds, in a robotic auto-manufacturing plant. The sequence payoff is straight out of Hitchcock – an

un-filmed scene detailed in *Truffaut/Hitchcock* – with Witwer sealing Anderton inside a newly minted car, which Anderton then drives off the production line.



Anderton's descent into the underworld leads him to seek a new identity from a blackmarket surgeon (Peter Stormare), a sniveling wretch with a streaming head cold, who revels in torturing Anderton while surgically replacing the chief's eyeballs. Spielberg plays Anderton's slide into narcotic delirium by accompanying the scene with a malfunctioning wall-screen TV that plays blurry images of Sam Fuller's gangster classic *House of Bamboo*, and tortures the blindfolded Anderton with a rotten sandwich and curdled pint of milk.

But the scene flips from gross-out humor into one of its most harrowing and poignant scenes. Anderton slumps on his bed, waiting for his new eyes to take, and his drug-addled memories take him back to the moment that he lost his son. It is the film's only use of full color, a riotous blast of Technicolor hues, as Anderton larks about at public poolside with his little boy, Sean, who is dressed in vivid red swimming trunks. One moment he's there, Anderton dips into the pool, and the next he is gone. With this deceptively simple graphic, Spielberg lets us know everything is about Sean.



The film takes many serpentine twists, with stunning set pieces that capriciously sketch in details of this nightmare world and tease the audience with suspense. While Anderton hunkers in his hotel room, waiting for his new eyes to heal, he evades a battalion of

skittering robotic precrime 'spyders' that invade in the seedy tenement. The scuttling, spindly-legged mechanical beasts are revealed in a vertiginous ceiling-mounted shot that jibs up a staircase and gazes down on tenement inhabitants like rats in a maze. It is a bravura tour-de-force of cinema, taking in a kaleidoscope of sad, ridiculous and sexually graphic vignettes where technology intrudes on the private lives of citizens. John Williams' score scampers and skitters with the spyders and then holds its breath as one nasty little robot peeks under a door and – *blip!* – hears a tiny bubble burst in a bathtub where Anderton is hiding his heat-signature in a tub of ice water.

Anderton is fierce and resourceful. He learns the tragic origins of precrime and possible method of clearing his name by visiting Dr. Iris Hineman (Lois Smith) – the eccentric, elderly precrime founder. Hineman putters in her greenhouse of genetically-altered plants and advises Anderton, now a crumpled wreck of a man, to find the minority report that might



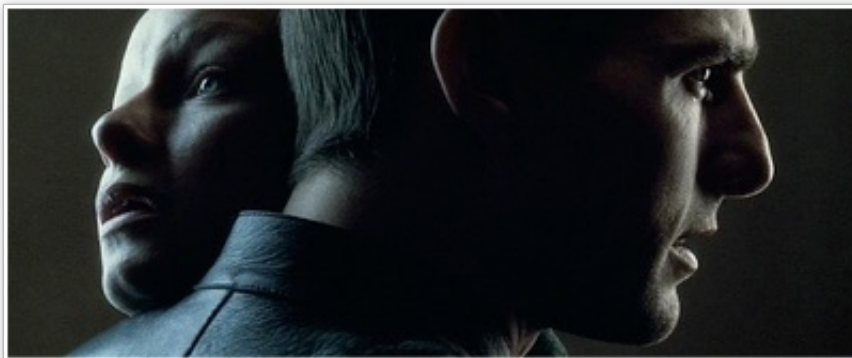
save him by kidnapping the most talented of the precogs. “The female, of course,” Hineman disdainfully notes, as if any Spielberg protagonist would not know that.

Spielberg films the precog Agatha (Samantha Morton) with the same reverence that he showed to his earlier cinematic extraterrestrials, Puck and E.T.. Agatha is a

terrified, tender creature. “Is it now?” she asks Anderton, staring shivering at the city flowing past the window of Anderton’s stolen car. She has only ever known the inside of the ‘temple’ where she floats with her fellow hive minds, Arthur and Dashiell. The religiosity of the precogs is another witty theme, cited early on by Witwer, who is in the habit of kissing his talisman crucifix necklace in moments of duress. “The priests have the power,” he notes, comparing the precogs to the oracles of old. Spielberg bathes Agatha in unearthly light. Her clairvoyance appears to quite literally radiate around her. And, as Anderton’s attempts to access her submerged memories in a sleazy virtual reality arcade, she slumps in his arms like Christ in Michelangelo’s *Pietà*.



Perhaps one of the film’s most enigmatic images is a moment where Anderton leads Agatha into a downtown hotel where all the puzzle pieces start to fall into place, and he knows, in 12 minutes, the murder will occur. Spielberg swings his camera from an over the



shoulder two-shot favoring Agatha to a double-headed closeup, Agatha in Anderton’s arms, their bodies intersecting, she facing left, he facing right, like a double-faced Janus. “You can choose,” she implores, begging him to turn back.

But Anderton pushes on to

what he sees as his own destiny. Fate, an old lady with a pipe, laughs at him from across the lobby. It is compelling because we are now caught up in the flow as the film’s themes come together. Anderton’s showdown with his murder victim, Leo Crow (Mike Binder), is a shattering denouement where his fate is seemingly, tragically, eternally sealed.

Viewed 16 years later, the film seems culturally prescient. The production’s think-tank of science-advisors was dead-on with its prediction of omnipresent, custom-gearred, social-media marketing. *Lincoln*, long in the works even back in 2002, is also glimpsed in a future ripple during the first precrime raid where the Great Emancipator’s face is a cardboard cutout in the hands of a little boy who uses scissors disturbingly to pierce the president’s eye. Tim Blake Nelson, soon to star in *Lincoln*, also has a memorable cameo as Gideon,

guardian of a mausoleum of chemically entombed precrime victims. And Anderton's tour of the virtual reality immersion pod parlor foreshadows *Ready Player One*.

But the core of the film – and a highlight of John Williams' score – is a heartbreaking piece titled 'Sean by Agatha.'

Here, for a brief interlude, Anderton and his estranged wife (Kathryn Morris), are suddenly caught unaware by this strange, gentle precog that they have invited into their former home. Agatha takes them through the life their son never lived. "The dead don't die," she tells them. And it is this that makes Anderton stop running to face his real fate. A powerfully human vision of the future.



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