

In favor of a police-state? Not quite ...

Minority Report, directed by Steven Spielberg

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Minority Report, directed by Steven Spielberg, screenplay by Scott Frank and Jon Cohen, based on a short story by Philip K. Dick

Minority Report is the latest film directed by Steven Spielberg. In the year 2054 murder has been eliminated in Washington DC through the use of a team of psychics who infallibly foresee killings. The would-be murderers are apprehended before they commit their crimes and sent to cryogenic freezing units. When the leading figure in the "Pre-Crime Unit," John Anderton (Tom Cruise), is named as the future killer of a man he does not know, he sets out to unravel the mystery, with his own police force hot on his trail. Anderton's own son was abducted and presumably murdered some years before, an event that also shattered his marriage.

Spielberg is one of the more gifted members of a generation of studio filmmakers whose output in general has been exceedingly poor and forgettable. He has the undoubted ability to narrate a drama effectively, to hold the spectator's attention and to develop a theme. His themes, however, tend to revolve around the concerns of his generation of upper middle class Americans. It is surely notable that in a filmmaking career spanning thirty tumultuous years, Spielberg, whose personal wealth reportedly exceeds \$2 billion, has not once weighed in tellingly on the state of American society.

Minority Report, based on a 1956 short story by science fiction writer Philip K. Dick, has intriguing and entertaining elements. No expense has been spared. The filmmakers have thought up all manner of ingenious devices, combining the retrograde and the futuristic, to create the world of 2054. However, as is nearly always the case in contemporary science fiction, the imagination has only been set to work on "things," not relations between people, not social life.

There are absurdities in *Minority Report* which reveal a great deal about the social assumptions and prejudices of its creators. The American society of half a century from now is presented as generally prosperous and content, insofar as one is able to determine, but crime and murder (and drug use) persist. Why? Is there no connection between poverty and violent behavior, or, more generally, between social reality and crime? The filmmakers are either adapting to themselves to the right-wing argument that crime is essentially causeless (rooted in Man's fallen state) or, probably more to the point, indicating their lack of interest in its causes and a concern merely with the means of avoiding its consequences.

The discovery that the psychics do not always agree, that there are suppressed "minority reports," suggesting other possible outcomes, is the turning point in Spielberg's film. The Pre-Crime Unit may, in fact, be seizing and incarcerating those who were never going to commit any offenses. Anderton finds out for himself the complex relationship between the apparently inevitable and the actual manner in which

events play themselves out.

One can only respond: thank heavens for small mercies. Steven Spielberg and company do not, in the end, come down on the side of preemptively locking up everyone who is a potential criminal. A great day for democracy indeed!

It was apparently a close call, however. When Spielberg was first considering the film project, he told *Time*, he "'had much more of a popcorn movie in mind until I began to think about the ramifications of arresting people without due process.' The director says it was his friend Doris Kearns Goodwin, the historian, who alerted him to the constitutional problems of Precrime. 'She said, "This would be a wonderful thing," recalls Spielberg, "but what about the Bill of Rights?"'"

Spielberg and Goodwin are not the only ones who find the idea appealing. Critic David Edelstein in *Slate* writes: "The movie presents us with a classic totalitarian trade-off, upgraded by technology and the paranormal: Would you surrender a slew of civil liberties for a world without crime? Assuming that the right people were always jailed for the right reasons, I'd think about it long and hard."

The assumption of all the above, of course, is that the state is a disinterested body, guided by fundamentally honorable motives, whose only concern is the welfare of its citizens. The notion that the state might represent distinct social interests, that it might be in the business of repressing the population for distinct political purposes—these are entirely foreign concepts to Spielberg and friends, who are, after all, a generally satisfied lot.

This is not to say that the film offers no critique of the future world, or by implication, the present one. Spielberg is not a fool, nor simply a propagandist for the existing state of things. (After all, *Schindler's List* had its moments.) The sight of helmeted, black-outfitted police crashing through windows and ceilings to apprehend individuals whose only crime is harboring violent thoughts is menacing and ominous—as are the images of mechanical spiders, who detect human presence, invading and searching an apartment building. However, *Minority Report* is largely carried along by other concerns and social impulses.

Corporate saturation of American life, aided by technology, has reached such a point in 2054 that electronic billboards recognize the consumer (by his or her eyes) and deliver a personalized message. ("Good afternoon, Mr. Yakamoto. How did you like that three-pack of tank tops you bought last time you were in?") On Internetnews.com Pamela Parker comments: "Imagine getting splashed by an animated digital billboard advertising Aquafina. Or having an ad in the subway say, '[Your name here], you look like you could use a Guinness,' just as you're coming home after a bad day at work. At one point in the

movie the Tom Cruise character, on the run, is confronted by an American Express ad that says, 'It looks like you need an escape, and Blue can take you there.'... Identification of consumers happens via retinal scans, which are presumably matched with names in a global database."

This invasive commercialism is more a source of amusement in the film, however, than disgust or protest. In any event, Spielberg is critiquing what his film encourages. *Minority Report* practices "product placement" (the display of commercial brands in a film) at a high level, providing advertising for Lexus, Reebok, Nokia, The Gap, Guinness, American Express, Bulgari and Pepsi-Cola's Aquafina, among others.

This "product placement" does not come free of charge. Lexus reportedly paid \$5 million for the privilege of having a futuristic version of one of its automobiles appear in *Minority Report*. *Business Week* reports that "as part of the deal, the auto maker also delivered a shiny new \$62,000 Lexus SC 430 convertible to Spielberg." The magazine continues: "Why would Lexus put all that money into helping Spielberg design a pair of cars that will never be sold? Explains [Lexus marketing vice-president Mike] Wells: 'We wanted to show the world that Lexus as a brand will be standing tall in 50 years.'"

And there is more: "Lexus wasn't the only large advertiser to help Spielberg defray the costs of making his film, which is laden with special effects. Phonemaker Nokia spent an estimated \$2 million to design the futuristic handsets that Cruise and others use in the film, according to sources. Nokia also is running print and TV commercials to promote the film and its new 9290 Communicator, a \$599 phone released in May, 2002, that can send and receive images, sound, and video clips. In addition, Nokia is promoting *Minority Report* on its Web site, where users can see the phone it designed for the film."

What is one to say? How could a film produced with such a degree of collaboration between filmmakers and giant transnational corporations possibly be expected to provide a clear-sighted view of contemporary life? At a time, no less, when the pervasive criminality of the corporate boardroom, its looting of the American economy of trillions of dollars, has been exposed.

The views of Spielberg and his associates on crime, the police and democratic rights are conditioned by their social circumstances and connections. The garden variety Hollywood liberal, rich and complacent, would prefer, all things considered and if it did not prove too much of an inconvenience (or threaten his stock portfolio or career prospects), to live in a world where universal brotherhood reigned supreme. He does not view "democracy," however, in association with the right of the broad mass of the population to decent living standards and to be defended against the coercive power of the capitalist state. In fact, he never thinks of such a thing at all, as contemporary films make clear. On the contrary, under conditions of growing social inequality, the population at large is seen in a generally hostile manner, as a potential threat to his wealth and privileges.

All this directs today's studio filmmaker irresistibly toward the figure of the policeman, both because he is the defender of private property (and thus deeply fascinating on the conscious and unconscious levels to the wealthy) and because he can be made to represent, falsely, "blue-collar" America.

Minority Report provides us with a policeman's-eye view, filtered through layers of Hollywood liberal cotton-wadding, of the issue of the police-state.

In that sense, the filmmakers' decision in the end to come down

against "pre-crime," while not unimportant, hardly stands out as a compelling defense of basic democratic rights. One only has to read the ignorant and wrongheaded comments of co-screenwriter Scott Frank: "People can be against capital punishment until they lose a loved one. We can be completely civilized until the murder rate goes way up and we need to figure out how to bring in the troops. That's how dictatorships get started; it's always for the greater good."

Minority Report's general ambience reminds one of the discussions that took place in the liberal media following September 11 about the advisability of applying torture to terrorist suspects. The various commentators mulled over the idea of torturing prisoners, rolled it around on their tongues, so to speak, and generally concluded that, while tempting, it was probably not such a good idea. That such a discussion even takes place, whatever the immediate conclusions drawn, tells one everything about the given social milieu.

Planning for *Minority Report* began three years ago and filming in March 2001. In its own peculiar fashion, this provides further proof that the Bush administration's indefinite detention of individuals charged with no crime, the policy of making "preemptive arrests," was not merely a response to the terrorist attack on New York and Washington, but was something very much "in the air." It is a response, when viewed historically, to the increasingly untenable social contradictions of American society and the straining of these contradictions against the traditional forms of bourgeois democracy.

Much has been made in the media about the coincidence of *Minority Report's* opening and the incarceration of Jose Padilla, the alleged "dirty bomb" conspirator. The government claims the right to "anticipatory self-defense," a phrase worthy of Spielberg's "Pre-Crime Unit." The film director told the *New York Times* in June: "Right now, people are willing to give away a lot of their freedoms in order to feel safe. They're willing to give the F.B.I. and the C.I.A. far-reaching powers to, as George W. Bush often says, root out those individuals who are a danger to our way of living. I am on the president's side in this instance. I am willing to give up some of my personal freedoms in order to stop 9/11 from ever happening again. But the question is, Where do you draw the line? How much freedom are you willing to give up? That is what this movie is about."

Minority Report has to be seen in the context of the subservience and spinelessness of Hollywood liberalism, and American liberalism in general. Those who wonder out loud about the pros and cons of a police-state have already accepted such a regime in principle. The passionate defense of democratic rights, as we have noted more than once on the WWSWS, finds fewer and fewer partisans within the upper echelons of American society.



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