

What Does Minority Report Tell Us About Geopolitical Imagination?

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LUKE CORDEN, SEP 26 2012

Minority Report: What Does This Film Tell Us About Geopolitical Imagination?

Minority Report is an exploration of competing binaries, particularly the moral implications present in the security/justice binary. This essay explores this binary from its two perspectives as a window through which to view the moral geopolitical imagination of post 9/11 America under the policies of the Bush Doctrine. *Minority Report*, it shall be argued, can be viewed as metaphorical representation Bentham's Panopticon and by tracing John Anderton's journey through the film it is possible to view the security/justice binary both from outside and from within the Panopticon. The essay concludes by arguing that *Minority Report* represents a challenge to the dominant narratives of the Bush administration.

Outside the Panopticon

Minority Report (MR) is a futuristic film about pre-emptive justice. Set in Washington DC in the year 2054 we encounter our 'hero' John Anderton (Tom Cruise) as the Chief Inspector of the Department of Pre-Crime (DPC). Pre-crime itself is a division of the police department that, as the name suggests, is responsible for solving crimes before they are committed. This paradoxical feat is achieved with the help of three precognitive human beings (precogs). These precogs have the ability to see future murders, and by downloading their fragmented visions onto specialised computers the pre-crime unit is then able to piece together the chain of events leading to the murder, effectively stopping the crime before it happens. The system is so effective that when a premeditated murder is actually detected a shocked Anderton remarks, "amazing there's someone within two hundred miles actually dumb enough to still do that?" (Huiskamp, 2004:399) Thereby inferring that the citizens under the jurisdiction of DPC are aware of the constant possibility of observation by the precogs, in effect, as Weber (2005) writes, societies unconscious minds have been securitised. As with the Panopticon the threat of observation is working as a deterrent (Gutting, 2005:82).

The opening sequence of the film captures the pre-crime procedure from start to finish. We see Chief Inspector Anderton piece together a murder sequence just in time to prevent it happening, apprehend the would-be murderer, and send him off to containment. The would-be murderer has been pre-judged and pre-sentenced in the knowledge that the precogs' visions constitute a singular vision and the narrative constructed by pre-crime's Anderton is therefore infallible.

As enforcer/protector Anderton is the all-seeing eye that interprets the unconscious visions of the precogs and uses them to secure/protect society accordingly. In this role it is possible to posit society as the prison, setting up another binary between security/freedom with the DPC acting as the central control tower. Whilst the pre-crime procedure is explained the viewer also receives the moral justifications for the process. The viewer is informed via a massive advertising campaign that during the six years it has been in operation pre-crime has seen its once epidemic murder rate fall to zero (Huiskamp, 2004:392).

Moreover if the 'facts' aren't enough to give advocacy to the project we are given, through Lamarr Burgess (Max von Sydow), the director of pre-crime and himself a father figure to Anderton, the emotive conviction of Anderton himself:

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My father once said to me that you don't choose the things you believe in, they choose you. There's a reason you're here, John. Had pre-crime been in place just six months earlier, the loss you and Lara suffered would have been prevented [...] When you speak of your absolute belief in pre-crime, they know it's a belief born of pain and not politics (Huiskamp, 2004:392).

Anderton then, from his position of control, is able to try and make amends for the trauma and the consequences (the breakdown of his family unit) of a father losing his son 'in such a public place.' [1] In much the same way Edkins (2003:227) suggests that the U.S. needed to reassert its sovereignty by showing a paternal control after the very public trauma of 9/11, and as (Huiskamp, 2004:409) explicitly suggests:

Bush seemed clearly stunned that such a thing could happen to the United States—all the more traumatic given that it occurred on "his watch." Like MR's Anderton, then, the traumatic new sense of vulnerability all US citizens felt was compounded by a nagging sense of guilt, or personal failure.

If the loss of liberty can secure against this happening to others then that, for Anderton and the Bush administration is an acceptable loss. It is clear that in the early stages of the film that Security supersedes Justice. However, this superiority is based on the infallibility of the data retrieved from the precogs. Data, which once retrieved and coordinated becomes the only possible narrative.

There is here a stark analogue between the policies and moral justifications for pre-emption in the Bush Doctrine and the workings of, and moral justifications given for, pre-crime. Weber (2005:483) elaborates:

The Bush Doctrine of Pre-emption and *Minority Report's* Department of pre-crime not only institutionally re-order US relationships to justice and security. They also remap what Michael Shapiro calls 'moral geographies', 'a set of silent ethical assertions that pre-organize explicit ethico-political discourses' and what John Agnew calls the 'modern geopolitical imagination', which consists of structuring 'practices based on a set of understandings about the way the world works.

Zedner (2007 cited in Krahn *et al* 2010) argues that the legitimacy of "pre-crime" represents a broader cultural shift; she writes:

We are on the cusp of a shift from a post- to a pre-crime society, a society in which the possibility of forestalling risks competes with and even takes precedence over responding to wrongs done.

The understandings and assumptions in these two cases are predicated on the absolute certainty of a future threat. As such, Anderton in his early role, as protector/enforcer can be viewed as sympathetic towards the geopolitical imagination of the Bush administration.

Inside the Panopticon

In his second role, as criminal/threat, Anderton experiences the Panopticon from the viewpoint of the prisoner, or more generally – the civilian. It is here with the constant retina scans, digital newspapers, (showing rolling news), and personally tailored advertisements that the biometrics in MR confer more with reality (Weber, 2005:491).

The securing of identity through biometrics has been "touted as a key prong in the 'war on terror'" (Gilbert, 2010:226). States not only utilize biometrics to control borders but are frequently "turning their biometric gaze inwards to secure their domestic populations" (ibid). Biometric profiling allows states to categorise and assess people as risks. However there are problems with this biometric system of categorisation, two of which stand out. Firstly, biometrics are not infallible, the unbiased mechanical gaze has at best a one per cent rate of *false matches* a percentage that will grow proportionally with the size of the databases it consults. Moreover, the databases are not value free as they are put together with the aid of security professionals who must, by definition, have their own agendas (Gilbert, 2010:233).

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Secondly, not only data, but also speed plays an important part in the securitisation associated with biometrics, especially in the 'war on terror.' The assumed (and advertised) accuracy of biometrics, and the need for quick responses to "future threats, reconfigures the democratic process, favouring strong administrative practices over the slower procedures of law" (Aradau & Van Munster 2007 cited in Gilbert 2010:238). From this perspective it is possible to see the reasoning for the curtailing of civil liberties and implementation of such practices as extraordinary rendition.

Both of these aspects are encountered in MR. Firstly, we see the necessity of speed portrayed in the opening sequences where Anderton pieces together the crime and manages to stop it just in time. This is followed by the immediate containment of the pre-judged/pre-categorised perpetrator. As Weber (2005:488) argues, it is not difficult to see the parallels between film and reality, certainly in the case of US citizen Jose Padilla. [2]

Secondly, it is whilst inside the Panopticon that Anderton learns the truth behind the operation of pre-crime. The precogs sometimes have different visions, (this inconsistency in the precogs is comparable to the one per cent *false match* found in real biometrics), and as such would destroy the legitimacy of pre-crime, for if there are other possible futures, the DPC is unjustifiable. Simply put, if there is more than one possible perspective the centrality of the observer, in this case the Panopticon of pre-crime, is fallible. Freidman (2003), explains this proposition adeptly:

A dire warning lies at the heart of the film: because human beings create and control the necessary machines, as well as the system that employs them, no safeguards can infallibly shield citizens from violence. Even more importantly, all mechanisms, however sophisticated and refined, remain open to human interpretation and, by virtue of that fact, such devices are inherently susceptible to corruption and misuse.

On realising pre-crimes fallibility Anderton's quest for justice becomes paramount, and in the final stages of the film the security/justice binary is reassessed. For all the good pre-crime has done, the murders it has prevented we learn that it was predicated on lies, but more important is the knowledge that it is fallible and thus unjust. Burgess relents on his moral conviction that security is the superior consideration and asks forgiveness before committing suicide. Morality in the form of Justice prevails.

In conclusion, this essay has argued that Anderton, at different times, represents the different moral considerations in the security/justice binary set out. In examining *Minority Report's* treatment of security and justice parallels have been drawn with the Bush Doctrine and more broadly the increased security measures U.S. citizens have been subjected to. The moral dilemmas portrayed throughout the *Minority Report* mirror the geopolitical and ethico-political position of the Bush administration and also offer a strong critique to the measures undertaken by the administration. The final verdict cast by *Minority Report* is representative of America's geopolitical imagining of itself, promoting liberties and justice above security, and can be read as a moral challenge to the securitisation of the unconscious created by the Bush administration's Panopticon.

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[1] Anderton's son was abducted (and possibly murdered) whilst in his care at a seemingly safe municipal swimming pool. As the plot develops we see Anderton consumed by guilt and consequently reliving his past experiences with his son and now ex-wife under the influence of illegal narcotics. It is this tragedy that compounds his belief in pre-crime and strengthens his moral conviction. Pre-crime allows Anderton to reassert his power as a father, securing citizens in his jurisdiction from future tragedy.

[2] Weber draws the follow clear parallel: "The Bush administration extended the scope of its pre-emptive justice measures from deeds to (pre)thoughts. The US Justice Department did so domestically by claiming that US citizen Jose Padilla (also know as Abdulla al-Muharjir) was involved in the initial stages of a plan to explode a dirty bomb somewhere in the United States, labelling him an 'enemy combatant' which enabled his transfer from the criminal justice system to the military justice system, and holding him indefinitely without charge since May 2002. Defending the Bush administration's handling of Padilla, Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz explained, 'there was not an actual plan. We stopped this man in the initial planning stages', meaning that a conviction in criminal court would have been virtually impossible to attain. Padilla, then, is being held for what the Bush administration thinks he thought, not for what the Bush administration can prove he was about to do, much less did." (Weber ,2005:488).

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