



PROJECT MUSE®

The One-Eyed Man is King: Oedipal Vision in Minority Report

Bakewell, Geoffrey W.

Arethusa, Volume 41, Number 1, Winter 2008, pp. 95-112 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/are.2008.0003



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/are/summary/v041/41.1bakewell.html>

**THE ONE-EYED MAN IS KING:
OEDIPAL VISION IN *MINORITY REPORT***

GEOFF BAKEWELL

I. INTRODUCTION

Steven Spielberg's 2002 film *Minority Report* is that *rara avis*, a virtuoso piece of cinematography that garnered both critical acclaim and huge box office receipts. Part of the film's attraction lies in its hybrid nature: it deftly straddles the disparate genres of mystery, thriller, drama, action flick, science fiction, and film noir. But another part of its appeal comes from its reliance on a classical predecessor, *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The film has several Sophoclean features that are largely absent from the spare 1956 short story by Philip K. Dick on which it is based (Dick 1987). Rather, these elements were introduced in the process of writing the screenplay and directing and producing the film.¹ And while neither the screenwriters (Jon Cohen and Scott Frank) nor Spielberg have so much as hinted at any indebtedness to the Greeks, the film nevertheless attests to the pervasive influence of classical myth.

Indeed, popular culture today has been so powerfully shaped by these time-honored stories that we tend to overlook them, taking their continued workings in our midst for granted.² But in *Minority Report*, the evidence is clear for those who have eyes to see. At the level of plot, we have a powerful

1 Cf. the "darkening" of the protagonist in John Ford's *The Searchers* noted by Day elsewhere in this issue.

2 Winkler in this issue discusses Oedipal themes in other films without overtly classical connections. Cf. O'Sullivan, also in this issue, who treats the cinematic uses of Pygmalion.

detective who reopens an unsolved homicide case and is himself subsequently accused of murder. With regard to theme, the film focuses intensely on the complex relationship between blindness, sight, and knowledge. And as for imagery, the film is all about eyes, continually drawing our attention to the mechanics of how we see. Taken together, these features urge us to re-evaluate the nature of the relationship between a work of art and its audience. In all these respects, *Minority Report* is a legitimate child of *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Yet despite its family resemblance, the film is not ὁμόσπορος (“of the same descent”) with its dramatic parent. On the contrary, it establishes a separate identity all its own by altering and rejecting crucial aspects of Sophocles’ play. To begin with, the film is certainly not a tragedy in any sense familiar to Aristotle. Second, its overall thrust is to undermine the authority of fate. As one character repeatedly insists: “You have a choice.”³ And finally, instead of validating the divine, *Minority Report* encourages us to put our trust in a most un-Sophoclean place: politics.

II. “EVERYBODY RUNS”: SIMILARITIES IN PLOT

Minority Report focuses on the savior of a community, John Anderton (Tom Cruise). As the head of a police unit named Precrime, he has effectively put an end to murder in Washington, D.C. in the year 2054. Anderton’s modus operandi is to interpret the visions of three clairvoyants (commonly known as “precogs”), anticipate and prevent impending murders, arrest the perpetrators-to-be, and place them in a state of suspended animation. Admired by his subordinates, who routinely call him “Chief,” he is enthusiastically supported by the residents of the capital, whose heartfelt testimonials appear on electronic billboards: “Precrime: It Works.” Anderton’s intense commitment to his profession derives in large part from personal experience. Several years earlier, his young son Sean was abducted and presumably murdered. Thus, from the very beginning, public and private are entwined for Anderton. Like Oedipus, he “takes on the suffering of the entire city as a personal belonging.”⁴

3 Agatha the precog. See below.

4 Seale 1982.216. See also *OT* 264–66: ἀνθ’ ὧν ἐγὼ τάδ’, ὥσπερ εἰ τοῦμοῦ πατρός, / ὑπερμαχοῦμαι, καὶ πᾶντ’ ἀφίξομαι / ζήτων τὸν αὐτόχειρα τοῦ φόνου λαβεῖν (“Because of this, I will fight as if on behalf of my own father, and I shall stop at nothing in seeking to arrest the killer”). The Greek text throughout is that of Dawe 1982; all translations are my own.

In the taut opening sequence, we see Anderton at work. The film begins with scenes of a future killer and his intended victims going about their routines on the fateful morning. Next we shift to a jumbled series of visions emanating from the precogs. Anderton then takes these images and manipulates them on a giant glass screen. He needs to assemble them into a coherent narrative, pinpoint the location of the crime, and lead his officers to the scene before it is too late.⁵ As crucial minutes tick by, Anderton's assistant Evanna (Jessica Capshaw) warns him: "Chief, we're catching up to the future." Just as time is about to run out, Anderton and his team burst into a bedroom and arrest Howard Marks (Arye Gross), a man apparently about to kill his wife and her lover *in flagrante delicto*.⁶ Marks vehemently maintains his innocence: "I wasn't going to do it! I wasn't going to hurt her! I just wanted to scare her!" Nevertheless, he is "haloed": an electrical device is placed around his temples and he is placed in suspended animation, bound for the containment facility where he will be warehoused indefinitely. Like *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Minority Report* thus opens with a protagonist at the height of his powers in "a world erected on his previous success" (Seale 1982.252).

At this point, the plot thickens. We learn Precrime has been so successful that it is being considered as the prototype for a national program, pending the outcome of a popular referendum. The Department of Justice has accordingly become interested in how exactly Precrime functions and has dispatched Danny Witwer (Colin Farrell) to examine its inner workings. While showing the eager Witwer around, Anderton has an encounter with the main precog Agatha (Samantha Morton). After the others have left the facility, Anderton lingers over the nutrient tank in which she floats seemingly oblivious to his presence. But suddenly she grabs him and reveals (via overhead projection) a series of images related to the drowning of a woman named Anne Lively some years ago. She urgently asks: "Can you see?" and clings to him for a moment before slumping back into the pool. Agatha's instigation leads Anderton to visit the containment facility, where

5 Anderton's efforts to make sense of the precogs' visions resemble those of Oedipus in solving both the riddle of the Sphinx and the killing of Laius.

6 Spielberg's emphasis on the marriage bed in this scene of adultery seems Sophoclean (e.g., *OT* 1242–47 and its reference to τὰ νυμφικὰ / λέχη). Ormand 1999.157 remarks that "just at the moment that [Deianeira and Jocasta] express a sense of incompleteness in their marriages, the play literally makes the description of their deaths (which take place on the marriage bed) incomplete." At the start of the film, the marriages of Sarah Marks (Ashley Crow) and Lara Anderton (Kathryn Morris) are likewise incomplete.

he discovers that Lively's killing has, in some senses, gone unsolved.⁷ The perpetrator haloed for the crime is a John Doe, a man who has never been satisfactorily identified. Moreover, electronic data files crucial to the case are strangely missing. Anderton therefore reopens the homicide investigation, searching for clues to identify an unknown killer who may still be at large. In his determination to get to the bottom of things, Anderton resembles the Theban king.⁸ And like Oedipus, he proceeds in a vaguely hostile environment. Despite his obvious intelligence, Anderton continually runs into obstacles: others apparently know more than he does and offer both resistance and ominous warnings. At one point, he compels Gideon (Tim Blake Nelson), the guard at the containment facility, to let him download data pertaining to Lively's murder. The sentinel concedes but cautions him: "Careful, Chief. You dig up the past, all you get is dirty."⁹

Before Anderton can make much progress with his investigation, however, fate intervenes. As he begins to assemble a new set of images relating to another impending murder, he finds something most startling: Agatha and the other two precogs are predicting that Anderton himself will be the murderer of a man named Leo Crow. Faced with this accusation, the Chief responds in a manner reminiscent of *Oedipus Tyrannus*. In the play, Tiresias accuses Oedipus of having murdered Laius. The king responds angrily, suspecting political intrigue behind the oracular facade: Creon must be lusting after the kingship (380–89). Anderton likewise believes he is being framed for political gain. His suspicions light on Witwer, the agent from Department of Justice who is a natural competitor for Anderton's job if Precrime goes national. The confrontation between the two men escalates, culminating in a fistfight at an automobile manufacturing plant, and Anderton subsequently escapes, eager to clear his name. The plot of *Minority Report* is thus eminently Sophoclean. Both Oedipus and Anderton are powerful men investigating a past killing, and both are themselves consequently accused of homicide. While Oedipus's crime lies in the past and Anderton's in the future, the dynamic in each case is the same: the pursuer becomes the pursued. Moreover, each protagonist's investigation becomes closely bound up with broader questions about his own

7 Sutton 2005.195 notes the similarity to the unsolved murder of Laius in *OT*.

8 E.g., *OT* 132: ἀλλ' ἐξ ὑπαρχῆς ἀθίς αὐτ' ἐγὼ φανῶ ("I shall make these things clear again starting from the very beginning").

9 Gideon's status as a warning figure is emphasized by his name and the organ piece he is playing when Anderton arrives (Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring"). Perhaps ironically, his music has less effect on the status quo than that of his Biblical namesake.

identity: the subject becomes an object in need of definition. As Martin Hall puts it: “On what we might call a ‘micro’ level, the question is whether or not [Anderton] is a murderer, and ‘who am I?’ on a ‘macro’ level.”¹⁰

Minority Report is also Sophoclean in that it portrays a man confronting the divine and trying to flee his fate. As a youth, Oedipus heard firsthand from the oracle that he was to kill his parents and abandoned Corinth.¹¹ In the film, the claim that Anderton will kill Crow arrives backed by similarly authoritative sources, the precogs. These genetically altered human beings are the offspring of mothers who used the mind-altering drug neuroin while pregnant.¹² Most such children died; these three survived, however, and are isolated from the general public. Widely revered as deities, they are housed in a complex known as “the Temple” and maintained in a dreamlike half-sleep. Like Oedipus before him, Anderton’s response to the divine pronouncement is flight. As he tells one of his former subordinates sent to arrest him: “Everybody runs.”

On the lam, Anderton’s efforts at self-exoneration lead him to visit Iris Hineman (Lois Smith), a woman who cared for the precogs as children and helped create the Precrime system. Their exchange highlights the classical nature of Anderton’s dilemma:

ANDERTON: “I’m not a murderer. I’ve never even met the man I’m supposed to kill.”

HINEMAN: “And yet a chain of events has started. A chain that will lead inexorably to his death.”

ANDERTON: “Not if I stay away from him.”

HINEMAN: “How can you avoid a man you’ve never met?”

ANDERTON: “So you won’t help me?”

HINEMAN: “I can’t help you. No one can. The precogs are never wrong.”

10 Hall 2004.8. Seale 1982.252 addresses a similar point with regard to *OT*: “The rest of the play may rightly be regarded as the struggle to dismantle a vision, how Oedipus is seen and how he sees himself.”

11 Dodds 1983.182 rightly notes that the action of the play foregrounds Oedipus’s search for the truth, but the king’s attempt to avoid his fate nevertheless forms a crucial part of the background (*OT* 994–99).

12 Agatha bears a strong resemblance to Alia, the sister of Paul Muad’Dib in Frank Herbert’s *Dune*.

At one level, then, the framework of the film recalls the play's background: a man's efforts to avoid his divinely decreed fate are doomed to founder because of his limited knowledge. Unlike Sophocles, however, Spielberg dangles the possibility of escape before us.¹³ Immediately after Hineman notes the infallibility of the precogs, she adds a crucial qualifier: "But, occasionally, they do disagree."

It is this slight possibility of disagreement that gives the film its title. As Hineman goes on to explain, the fact that one of the precogs may occasionally see things differently than the other two creates an opening for *alternate* futures. To maintain public confidence in the infallibility of the Precrime system, the records of these dissenting visions are immediately destroyed. However, Hineman has secretly arranged for the original of any variant data stream, known as a "minority report," to be stored within the brain of the precog creating it. Anderton grasps at the slender chance that he himself may have a minority report: perhaps he is not destined to kill Leo Crow. The odds against him are daunting. As a wanted fugitive, he must make his way back to the heart of the Precrime facility, enter the Temple, download any minority report that Agatha may have pertaining to his case, and then escape.¹⁴ After a harrowing series of adventures, Anderton succeeds in doing just that. He abducts Agatha and manages to have the relevant data downloaded off-site. But to his dismay, he finds that he has no minority report after all: all three precogs agree that he is destined to kill Crow.

III. "CAN YOU SEE?": SIMILARITIES IN THEME

Scholars have long noted that *Oedipus Tyrannus* is "entirely concerned with the problem of vision" (Calame 1996.18). Sophocles' characters repeatedly use language relating to eyes and to the binary pairs darkness and light, blindness and sight. This emphasis finds particular expression in the exchange between Oedipus and Tiresias. Arriving in response to a royal summons, the blind prophet is led onstage by a guide (298). Nevertheless, he is determined to keep his knowledge about the king to himself. He tells Oedipus: ἐγὼ δ' οὐ μὴ ποτε, / τὰ λῶιστά γ' εἶπω, μὴ τὰ σ' ἐκρήνω κακὰ ("Not ever will I speak what would be best, lest I reveal your evils," 328–29).

13 Cf. Sutton 2005.196, who claims that *both* works "concede considerable power to fate but also leave room for free will."

14 According to Hineman, it is the most gifted of the precogs who tends to produce minority reports: as often, this is the female, namely Agatha.

Angered by Tiresias's refusal to speak, Oedipus insults him, saying that his blindness is not just physical but also intellectual: τυφλὸς τά τ' ὤτα τόν τε νοῦν τά τ' ὄμματ' εἶ ("Blind you are in ears and mind and eyes," 371). He follows this charge with another, that the prophet is acting in collusion with Creon. Thus accused, Tiresias seizes upon the proposition that there are multiple forms of blindness and thrusts it back in Oedipus's face. It is the king who does not see despite his functioning eyes: σὺ καὶ δεδορκὸς οὐ βλέπεις ἴν' εἶ κακοῦ, / οὐδ' ἔνθα ναίεις, οὐδ' ὅτων οἰκεῖς μέτα ("Although you have sight, yet you do not see the evil you are in, nor where you dwell, nor with whom," 413–14). And before departing, Tiresias cryptically prophesies approaching blindness for the killer of Laius: τυφλὸς γὰρ ἐκ δεδορκότητος / καὶ πτωχὸς ἀντὶ πλουσίου ξένην ἔπι / σκήπτρῳ προδεικνύς γαίαν ἐμπορεύσεται ("Blind instead of sighted, and poor instead of rich, he will journey to a foreign land feeling his way with a staff," 454–56).

Minority Report displays a similar fascination with the intersection of the oracular and the ocular. Like Sophocles, Spielberg has his characters speak of eyes and vision, blindness and sight. Many of the essential elements of the interchange between Oedipus and Tiresias are repeated in the conversations Anderton has with three different characters: the drug dealer Lycon, the precog Agatha, and the scientist Iris Hineman. The first of these occurs when Anderton approaches Lycon (David Stifel) in a dismal urban neighborhood late at night. Darkness is everywhere, Anderton's face is wrapped in shadow, and Lycon's eyes are shielded by enormous sunglasses despite the hour. The detective has come to buy the drug neuroin for his own use and thus does not reveal his identity. When asked what he wants, he says: "I just need a little clarity." Lycon responds by saying: "True that. You want the customary, or the new and improved?" After they conclude the transaction and Anderton prepares to depart, Lycon says: "Sweet dreams, Chief." Realizing that his identity is, in fact, known, Anderton turns to face the dealer, who says: "Oh, don't worry none, your secret's safe with me." Lycon concludes their encounter with an enigmatic γνώμη and a gesture. He says that "in the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king." And he removes his sunglasses to reveal his empty eye sockets.¹⁵

The drug dealer's adage does many things. First, it suggests that blindness and sight are not absolutes but rather points on a continuum. Some people, like Anderton, have two eyes; others, like Lycon, have none; and

15 Friedman 2003.6 notes in passing the resemblance of Lycon to Tiresias.

still others, like the proverbial king, have one. Moreover, it puts forward the proposition that sight is power. *Ceteris paribus*, the more eyes one has, the better: the one-eyed man rules the blind. Third, the proverb calls attention to the limits of power and vision, as even a sighted king may be partially blind. Indeed, the entire scene with Lycon emphasizes this paradox. It is the man with eyes who arrives seeking clarity, and the man without them who offers it. Finally, the drug dealer's saying points to the future in a vague but menacing way. If Chief Anderton really is like the king among the blind, what will become of his other eye?

Not long after his meeting with Lycon, Anderton has his first encounter with Agatha in the Temple, during which she grabs him and asks: "Can you see?" Like Lycon's proverb, her question echoes in multiple registers. At the most basic level, she is asking whether Anderton can see the images relating to Anne Lively's murder that she is projecting overhead. Yet there is more at stake here: Agatha is also asking whether he can make sense of the welter of images in order to arrive at the truth of what actually happened. On yet a third plane, she seems to be asking whether Anderton notices any similarity between the victim and Agatha herself. A relationship between the two is suggested by the way Anne Lively drowns. As she sinks below the surface of the water, she moves her hand to cover her face. And as Agatha's consciousness fades and she slides back into her own pool, she makes the same gesture. Her question, "Can you see?" is a shorthand way of asking whether Anderton recognizes that Anne and Agatha are mother and daughter. And finally, Agatha's question is, ultimately, whether Anderton realizes that his fate is linked to hers. Can he see his own future, including the murder of Leo Crow that she will shortly predict? Anderton's encounter with Agatha thus takes up and expands upon a number of issues first broached by Lycon. The Chief clearly has eyes. But can he see beyond images to the meaning of things the way his visually impaired interlocutor does?¹⁶

We noted earlier that the encounter with Iris Hineman is crucial to the film's plot because it sends Anderton back to the Precrime unit in search of evidence that might exonerate him.¹⁷ It is now worth taking a second look at this encounter for the light it sheds on the manner of his return. After Hineman suggests that all Anderton needs to do is find a minority report for himself, he explodes:

16 Agatha's ability to see the future blinds her to the present in important ways.

17 Her first name Iris is significant in this regard. Like Lycon and Agatha, she, too, recognizes Anderton before he can identify himself: "This just isn't your week, is it Chief?"

ANDERTON: "You're insane, or you think I am. I'll get eyescanned a dozen times before I get within ten miles of Precrime. They'll pick me up."

HINEMAN: "Sometimes in order to see the light, you have to risk the dark. As a policeman—excuse me, a former policeman—I'm sure you know all sorts of people who could . . . help you out in this regard."

Anderton's remark refers to one of the central features of life in Washington in 2054, ubiquitous biometrical identification. The city literally runs on eye scans. People are required to gaze at electronic devices that examine the patterns of their irises in order to access government buildings or ride the Metro. When they enter stores, they are greeted by name by sophisticated electronic systems that know their histories as consumers. Even when they walk on sidewalks, they are scrutinized and subjected to personalized advertising pitches.¹⁸ Put simply, a person's eyes have become synonymous (and homonymous) with his identity.¹⁹ Hineman's oblique suggestion, exquisitely couched, is that Anderton "risk the dark" by having his eyes removed.²⁰ We have come full circle, arriving once again at issues first articulated two millennia ago in the encounter between Oedipus and Tiresias. There are many sorts of blindness; functioning eyes guarantee neither vision nor understanding; blindness may paradoxically lead to insight.

Anderton eventually follows the terrible route proposed by Hineman, employing a distinctly unhygienic underground surgeon (and sociopath) for the purpose. He voluntarily has his eyeballs completely removed and replaced by those of another man. However, he makes an unusual request of the insalubrious Dr. Eddie (Peter Stormare):

ANDERTON: "I wanna keep the old ones."

DR. EDDIE: "Why?"

18 One of the film's funniest moments occurs when Anderton has been publicly identified as a future killer and is on the run from his own Precrime unit. As he uses a moving walkway, an electronic billboard exclaims, "John Anderton, you could use a Guinness right now."

19 The screenplay emphasizes this equation by using the clever neologistic verb "eyedent."

20 This is, in fact, the route already taken by the drug dealer Lycon.

ANDERTON: "Because my mother gave them to me. What do you care? They're no good to you on the secondary market anyway."

After completing the grisly surgery, Dr. Eddie warns Anderton that he must leave the bandages covering his eyes in place for a full twelve hours: if he fails to do so, he will go blind. He then sets a kitchen timer to mark the passage of time and departs. Unfortunately for Anderton, before the twelve hours are up, search units from Precrime close in on his hiding place and deploy mobile iris scanners (known as "spyders") to identify the occupants of the building. Despite his efforts to conceal himself, he is eventually found and forced to submit. He lifts the bandage over one eye just enough to let the spyder shine its brilliant light into his new orb. Although Anderton passes the test, the next camera shot emphasizes the heavy cost: the steady glow of the luminescent timer shows that the time is not yet up, implying that Anderton has now gone blind in one eye.²¹

Once he is able to remove the bandages, Anderton makes his way back to Precrime's headquarters. Adopting a painful facial disguise,²² he approaches the Temple complex via a back way, carrying his own original eyes in a plastic bag. However, as he reaches the door he fumbles and drops them. Both eyes roll back down the access ramp and tumble towards a slotted grate.²³ As one drops from sight, Anderton barely manages to grasp the other by its roots. His reason for retaining them becomes clear when he holds the remaining eye up to the iris scanner and thus gains access to the precogs.²⁴ He is now a one-eyed man twice over.

The removal of Anderton's eyes has clear parallels with Oedipus's self-mutilation. In each case, the destruction of the protagonist's sight is voluntary, and both Sophocles and Spielberg play up the gruesome dimensions of the act. In the play, a messenger recounts in gory detail the king's action and appearance (1276–79):

21 The earlier version (Scott Frank's) of the screenplay notes: "Anderton's eye starts to go milky as the color and iris disintegrate."

22 Anderton uses an enzyme that paralyzes his facial nerves and causes the surrounding tissue to puff and sag.

23 The scene is a morbid parody of the way the Precrime predictive apparatus identifies future killers and victims: wooden balls shaped like eyes are inscribed with the relevant names and roll down chutes into a rack.

24 This is the only major inconsistency in the film's plot. Why is Anderton still cleared for Temple access despite his outlaw status? Perhaps his backdoor approach is meant to imply that he jerry-rigged some such illicit access mechanism in the past.

φοίνια δ' ὁμοῦ
 γλῆναι γένει ἔτεγγον, οὐδ' ἀνίεσαν
 φόνου μυδώσας σταγόνας, ἀλλ' ὁμοῦ μέλας
 ὄμβρος χαλαζῆς θ' αἵματος σφ' ἐτέγγετο.

And at the same time, his crimson pupils were
 moistening his beard,
 nor were they releasing droplets seeping gore, but
 rather
 a dark shower of hail and blood was wetting them.

This description only enhances the horror of Oedipus's subsequent arrival through the main door of the scene building. As David Seale notes: "After the [messenger's] long and grisly tale of woe—and the constant warnings that we are on the verge of seeing it—the entry possesses an imagined aspect of horror which is fully matched by the actual physical impression. [Oedipus] stumbles on to the stage, groping in his blindness, with his mask, now blood-stained, showing the terrible self-mutilation" (1982.248). The chorus' response emphasizes the visual nature of the shock (1297–99):

ὦ δεινὸν ἰδεῖν πάθος ἀνθρώποις,
 ὦ δεινότατον πάντων ὅσ' ἐγὼ
 προσέκυρσ' ἤδη.

O frightful suffering for men to see,
 O most frightful of all things
 I have yet encountered.

Spielberg lavishes similar care on the scene in which Anderton's eyes are cut out. To begin with, Dr. Eddie surreptitiously injects him with a paralyzing anesthetic. Anderton's speech rapidly becomes slurred, and he is no longer capable of motion. His head is forcefully strapped into a metal restraining device, his eyelids propped open.²⁵ He has no choice but to watch, and neither do we, as the scalpel cuts into tissue and the first layers are peeled back. And again like Sophocles, Spielberg emphasizes the pitiful dependency

25 James 2002.15 and Friedman 2003.5 note the indebtedness of the scene to Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*.

that follows hard on the blinding.²⁶ When the surgeon departs, he leaves Anderton tethered to two ropes: one leads to the refrigerator, the other to the bathroom. The onetime Chief can no longer take care of even the most basic human necessities by himself. Indeed, in his blindness, he bites into disgustingly putrid food left in the refrigerator, and swallows swill in a vain effort to rinse out his mouth. Thus playwright and filmmaker alike emphasize the terrible nature of their central mutilations in visually arresting ways.

Yet the most important similarity between the two blindings is the fact that they are linked to a change in identity. According to Claude Calame, “Oedipus’ blinding of himself can be interpreted as the annihilation of an identity, or rather as its substitution” (1996.23–24). The loss of his eyes transforms Oedipus from a two-footed man to a three-footed one: the man who once stood on his own now needs a guide (Vernant 1983.197–98). And the ὑπίπολις (“first citizen”) slayer of the Sphinx has now become ἄπολις (“cityless”), an outcast from the city he himself saved.²⁷ But as foretold by Tiresias, Oedipus’s loss of his physical eyesight also comes with a compensation, namely increased knowledge about himself. As Seale notes, by his act, the king “makes an emblem of himself, he brings to light what was always there, his own blindness” (1982.247). And after doing so, he accepts his new identity and attendant destiny: ἀλλ’ ἢ μὲν ἡμῶν μοῖρ’ ὅπηπερ εἶσ’ ἴτω (“But our destiny, let it go wherever it will,” 1458). Anderton’s blinding likewise marks a major change in his identity. For one thing, his new irises identify him publicly as an Asian, Mr. Yakamoto. Ethnically speaking, he has migrated from the majority to a minority and must now look at the world through the eyes of another (Friedman 2003.6). Moreover, his ocular alterations bring him new knowledge. They permit him to return safely to Washington where he discovers the truth about himself: he has no minority report, and Leo Crow will die at his hands.

One of the most striking aspects of Sophocles’ art is the way his stagecraft reinforces the themes of his dramas. In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, he creates a vital link between “the image world of seeing and the ‘actual’ world of what is seen on-stage” (Seale 1982.22–23). Masks, entrances, stage movements, and exits all dramatize the issue of whether and how well various

26 Bernidaki-Aldous 1990.35: “But why is blindness so horrible? Certainly because it is darkness as we have seen. But there is an additional cause for alarm: the dependence which blindness imposes on its victim.”

27 The ὑπίπολις-ἄπολις contrast is drawn from *Antigone*’s Ode to Man (370). On the applicability of this ode to *Oedipus Tyrannus* and its protagonist, see Goldhill.1986.205–06.

characters can see. Spielberg makes similar use of cinematic techniques to emphasize the importance of vision and sight to *Minority Report*. The footage of most scenes has been subjected to a bleach bypass process that washes out much of the color and leaves cool blacks and whites. In addition, many scenes are shot with slow (ASA 800) film that produces particularly grainy images.²⁸ Spielberg also makes frequent use of “undiffused, low-key lighting” (Friedman 2003.2) to create a tremendous amount of light and shadow. For instance, at important points in the film, many of the features of Anderton’s face are shrouded in darkness.²⁹ Finally, Spielberg often employs extremely high or low camera angles that conspicuously call attention to the location of the presumed viewer. The cumulative effect is that of “a film hung up on the iconography of vision” (James 2002.13).

The treatment of vision in *Minority Report* and *Oedipus Tyrannus* has important implications for the relationship between a work of art and its audience. If a person as intelligent and apparently clear-sighted as Oedipus can be mistaken about something as crucial as his own identity, then so too can we. According to Simon Goldhill, “in its challenge to the security of the language of sight as a basis for knowledge or enquiry, the *Oedipus Tyrannus* seems to question also the security of the position of the audience or spectators in the theatre . . . [seeing and hearing] cannot be regarded as simple processes by the audiences of this text” (1986.220). In *Minority Report*, Agatha’s insistent question—“Can you see?”—likewise admits of wider application. For as spectators, our position is much like that of the man we watch, Chief Anderton: we are all attempting to make sense of a series of images projected before us on a screen. We, too, sort through jumbled pieces of the past (Anderton’s memories and holographic recordings), future (the precogs’ visions), and present in search of a narrative, a pattern. And by implication, the results of our search are equally subjective and arbitrary. Anderton learns that, in his years of work as a Precrime cop, he has undoubtedly haloed innocent people; we, for our part, discover that “we inevitably see what we have been trained to understand and, sometimes, what we want to see” (Friedman 2003.4). In their destabilizing emphasis on the unreliability of vision, *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Minority Report* problematize the relationship between a work of art and its audience.

28 Friedman 2003.2. Most of the urban scenes were treated with the bleach bypass process; by contrast, the scenes set in the Maryland countryside exhibit a range of warmer, brighter colors.

29 This is especially true during his encounter with Lycon.

IV. ΤΙ ΔΕΙ ΜΕ ΧΟΠΕΥΕΙΝ; (“WHY SHOULD I DANCE?”)

Minority Report resembles *Oedipus Tyrannus* in plot, theme, and metatheatrical implication. Despite these similarities, the film nevertheless constitutes a radical reworking of its predecessor. First of all, there is the question of genre. Sophocles' work is a tragedy par excellence in which Oedipus's ignorance of his past and his investigative zeal team up to produce his own fall, blindness, and exile.³⁰ Nowhere in the play is there the slightest hint of redemption. By contrast, *Minority Report* does not conclude with Anderton's arrest and incarceration. Rather, Spielberg has him released, establish his innocence, and bring down his enemies. Even Anderton's personal suffering is relatively minimal. In the play, Oedipus's family and friends are steadily stripped away. He begins surrounded by the citizens of Thebes and supported by Jocasta; by the end she is dead, he has been abandoned, and he is forcibly separated from his children. Anderton, by contrast, moves in the opposite direction. He is reunited with his estranged wife Lara, and as the film closes, we see them expecting another child who will narrow the gap left by Sean's abduction.³¹ What is more, Anderton has one more functioning eye than Oedipus, and retains much of his sight. *Minority Report* thus follows the conventions for cinematic heroes, not Aristotle's.³² Like Spielberg's other films, this one hews closely to Hollywood's norms: a basically good man is true to himself, encounters imposing obstacles, and, despite some close scrapes, emerges triumphant. In its conventional-ity, *Minority Report* is akin to another Spielberg film, *Saving Private Ryan*. Allowing for differences between genres, that film has a similarly sentimental, moralizing core. Underneath the brutally realistic cinematography, “good men kill bad men, to our applause, and die to our sorrow, for a just cause” (Menand 2002.254). At its heart, *Minority Report* is just as sentimental: the main difference is that this film comes wrapped in noir.³³

Another fundamental difference between *Minority Report* and *Oedipus Tyrannus* lies in the results of the investigations they detail. While

30 Ar. *Poetics* 1453a11.

31 Not for Spielberg the Oedipus of Devereux 1973.36, who interprets Oedipus's self-blinding as a form of self-castration. On the contrary, the nuclear family occupies a central thematic place in Spielberg's oeuvre.

32 As set forth in *Poetics* 1453a.

33 On the relationship of *Minority Report* to film noir, see Friedman 2003.2. The DOJ agent Witwer is, in some senses, a double for Anderton; his demise while searching for the truth thus comprises a substitute death of the sort common to the genre.

Oedipus is found to be the killer of Laius, Anderton's involvement with Leo Crow (Mark Binder) is far more complicated. Although the precogs visualized his death as a premeditated murder, in reality things work out differently. After initially beating Crow, whom he suspects of abducting and killing his son, Anderton heeds Agatha's admonition that he has a choice. He fights down his anger and begins to arrest Crow and read him his rights. At that point, he discovers that Crow is not the real criminal but a man who has been hired to play the part. The impostor, like Anderton, is a family man, and has agreed to die in exchange for assistance for his needy dependents; if he lives, they will receive nothing. Crow then grabs the gun in Anderton's hand, and in the ensuing struggle, manages to shoot himself. From an ancient point of view, Anderton is undoubtedly involved in the killing and thus tainted by *miasma* (Bernidaki-Aldous 1990.21). But from Spielberg's and our perspective, he is innocent, and the distinction crucial.

The fact that the precogs were mistaken about Anderton's intentions toward Crow points to a significant theological difference between *Minority Report* and its Sophoclean predecessor. For all that the play focuses on Oedipus's investigative efforts, it is also a referendum on the authority of Delphi. As the chorus famously puts it (898–910),

οὐκέτι τὸν ἄθικτον εἶμι
 γᾶς ἐπ' ὀμφαλὸν σέβων,
 οὐδ' ἐς τὸν Ἀβαίσι ναόν,
 οὐδὲ τὰν Ὀλυμπίαν,
 εἰ μὴ τάδε χειρόδεκτα
 πᾶσιν ἀρμόσει βροτοῖς.

...

φθίνοντα γὰρ Λαΐου παλαίφατα
 θέσφατ' ἐξαιροῦσιν ἤδη
 κούδαμοῦ τιμαῖς Ἀπόλλων ἐμφανής·
 ἔρρει δὲ τὰ θεῖα.

No longer will I go worshipful
 to the sacred navel of the world,
 nor to the temple at Abai,
 nor Olympia unless these [prophecies]
 will join together as an example
 for all mortals to point to.

...

For they are already removing
 the ancient, waning prophecies of Laius,
 and nowhere is Apollo visibly honored.
 The things of the gods are dying.

In the end, Oedipus's efforts only confirm the veracity of the oracle: as predicted, he has murdered his father and married his mother.³⁴ By contrast, *Minority Report* undermines the authority of those who would predict the future. The precogs' difficulty in reading human intent, their susceptibility to double images of events (known as "echoes"), and their occasional disagreements make them unreliable guides to what is to come. As a result, the Precrime unit is shut down. The precogs are removed from the Temple and established in an idyllic cottage on the Chesapeake Bay, where they spend their days reading books before a cozy fire. Theologically speaking, *Minority Report* has more in common with resistant readings of *Oedipus Tyrannus* than with the play itself.³⁵

The collapse of oracular authority leaves a profound vacuum that Spielberg attempts to fill in a most un-Sophoclean way. As we saw earlier, Anderton was innocent of the murder of Crow. But who set him up? The villain proves to be Lamar Burgess, Iris Hineman's collaborator in the invention of Precrime. This apparently avuncular mentor used a trusting Anderton to his own advantage. He hoped to parlay the Chief's grief and energy into a national mandate for Precrime, do away with him, and then have himself appointed as Director. Hence Anderton's big mistake lay not in suspecting a political conspiracy but rather in suspecting the wrong person. But whom can we rely on, if not men who seem to love us like sons?³⁶ The opening and closing sequences suggest an answer. We should trust no one individual but rather the American political system itself.³⁷ At the start of the film, we see Howard Marks's young son at the breakfast table, using a pair of scissors to cut out a cardboard mask of Abraham Lincoln's face. As

34 Peradotto 1992.11 notes: "The *OT* is designed to induce us to disauthorize our scientific and rational σοφίαι because of and in favor of an authority disbelief in which we have suspended in order to realize the literary transaction."

35 E.g., Peradotto 1992. See also Ahl 1991.265: "Oedipus' doom, like that of the Sphinx's generalized man, becomes the doom of all men through the poetic form of Sophocles' play as readers struggle to believe, and so often do believe, that Oedipus' guilt is proved."

36 At one point, Hineman advises Anderton: "You shouldn't trust anyone."

37 As Witwer notes of Precrime: "The system is perfect. If there's a flaw, it's human. It always is."

he cuts out the eye holes, he recites aloud the Gettysburg Address, which he is attempting to memorize for school: “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this, um, [prompted by his mother] continent a new nation, conceived in liberty . . .”³⁸ And just before the film ends, Burgess commits suicide against the backdrop of downtown Washington. The obelisk of the Washington monument is prominently illuminated, the Potomac River and Lincoln Memorial dimly visible in the distance. Spielberg’s answer is that, ultimately, our political system, not the divine, orders our lives and keeps us safe. To paraphrase the language of the film: “The American Constitution: It works.” It would be comforting to believe that all it takes is fidelity to our national ideals to ensure that “government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” But given *Minority Report*’s emphasis on the unreliability of human vision and the difficulty of interpreting images of the future projected on screens, we may perhaps be forgiven for having our doubts.³⁹

Creighton University

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ahl, Frederick. 1991. *Sophocles’ Oedipus: Evidence and Self-Conviction*. Ithaca.
- Bernidaki-Aldous, Eleftheria. 1990. *Blindness in a Culture of Light: Especially the Case of Oedipus at Colonus*. New York.
- Calame, Claude. 1996. “Vision, Blindness, and Mask: The Radicalization of the Emotions in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*,” in M. S. Silk, ed., *Tragedy and the Tragic*. Oxford. 17–37.
- Dawe, R. D. 1982. *Sophocles: Oedipus Rex*. Cambridge.
- Devereux, G. 1973. “The Self-Blinding of Oidipous in Sophokles: *Oidipous Tyrannos*,” *JHS* 93.36–49.

38 The importance of Lincoln for Spielberg is also evident in *Saving Private Ryan*, where a letter of the former President is read aloud by the Secretary of the Army.

39 Menand 2002.256 faults Spielberg for the generally conventional nature of his films, claiming: “Since Spielberg made the turn toward seriousness with *Schindler’s List*, he has been working in a kind of no-man’s-land between entertainment and art.” He further adds (256): “One ambition of art is to get people to think what they did not already think, or what they thought without really understanding, and the profound trouble with Spielberg as a filmmaker is that he does not allow his audiences to think at all.”

- Dick, Philip K. 1987. *The Minority Report and Other Classic Stories*. New York.
- Dodds, E. R. 1983. "On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*," in E. Segal, ed., *Greek Tragedy: Modern Essays in Criticism*. New York. 177–88.
- Friedman, Lester D. 2003. "Minority Report: A Dystopic Vision," *Senses of Cinema* 27 (July–August). http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/27/minority_report.html
- Goldhill, Simon. 1986. *Reading Greek Tragedy*. Cambridge.
- Hall, Martin. 2004. "Time and the Fragmented Subject in *Minority Report*," *Rhizomes* 8 (Spring 2004). <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue8/hall.html>
- Herbert, Frank. 1965. *Dune*. New York.
- James, N. 2002. "An Eye for an Eye," *Sight and Sound* 12.8 (August 1). 12–15.
- Menand, Louis. 2002. "Jerry Don't Surf," in Charles L. P. Silet, ed., *The Films of Steven Spielberg: Critical Essays*. Oxford. 251–56.
- Ormand, Kirk. 1999. *Exchange and the Maiden: Marriage in Sophoclean Tragedy*. Austin.
- Peradotto, John. 1992. "Disauthorizing Prophecy: The Ideological Mapping of *Oedipus Tyrannus*," *TAPA* 122.1–15.
- Seale, David. 1982. *Vision and Stagecraft in Sophocles*. Chicago.
- Sutton, Brian. 2005. "Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and Spielberg's *Minority Report*," *Explicator* 63.194–97.
- Vernant, Jean-Pierre. 1983. "Ambiguity and Reversal: On the Enigmatic Structure of the *Oedipus Rex*," in E. Segal, ed., *Greek Tragedy: Modern Essays in Criticism*. New York. 189–209.