“Space is the Place for Me”: The Politics of Birth in Minority Report

Steven Spielberg’s 2002 Minority Report narrates two interrelated stories. The micro story concerns a family, a kidnapped son, the ensuing trauma, and the work of mourning that follows. The macro story concerns criminal justice, social stability, and hermeneutics at the level of the nation state. The problem for both stories is ontological and hermeneutic play—some play too much, some play too little. Sometimes play hurts, and sometimes the absence of play hurts. Anderton (Tom Cruise), following the disappearance of his son, has lost the ability to play and his obsession with criminal detection is an obvious response to private trauma. His public job as a police officer, much like ours, is to review film, fragments of memories taking the form of film in his case, and make spatially distraught images and sounds seamlessly cohere. Unfortunately, the trauma in his life leads him to shortchange the hermeneutic process to an excessive degree: he takes the unfinished, often contradictory and in-progress fragments of possible future murders and enforces unjust closures.

Family trauma is the origin of a work of mourning that, having left behind the private for the public, eliminates ontological and hermeneutic play as a means of safeguarding the public body. Spielberg’s film not only suggests that play is essential to our being, but that play, uncertainty, and (hermeneutic and ontological) spatiality are necessary for a just society. Much
of the above is treated in the extant literature, essays, for example, on “The Possibility of Error: Minority Report and the Gospel of Mark” (Aichelle), “Sophocles’s Oedipus the King and Spielberg’s Minority Report” (Brian Sutton), “The One-Eyed Man is King: Oedipal Vision in Minority Report” (Geoff Bakewell), and “‘Every Move You Make’: Bodies, Surveillance, and the Media” (Michael J. Shapiro). My argument, however, focuses on the manner in which trauma is juxtaposed with birth in this post-9/11 film. Family trauma is cynically utilized to bolster the state and its biopower, ignoring the “essence” of family as a figure for birth, as an ontological and hermeneutic opening.

The crucial traumatic scene begins in idyllic fashion: Anderton and his son are playing in a public pool [POOL IMAGE]. They talk about how long they can hold their breath under water. The boy uses a watch to time his father as Anderton moves away, submerging. Under water, Anderton’s vision is blurred; he cannot see his son above, but he smiles as he looks around at others. He emerges from the pool and his son has vanished. Anderton’s marriage dissolves soon after and he appears to devote his remaining energy to drugs—particularly an elite drug known as clarity—and to his police work. If he can’t locate his son, he will at least locate every killer in Washington, DC.

[HOME MOVIES] Alone in his flat—the year is 2054—Anderton gets high with clarity and watches home movies of his son and wife, Lara (Kathryn Morris), in what is an obvious ritual of re-member-ing. The videos are brief snapshots from the past. In terms of form, the holographic imaging is not realistic, but fragmentary, and blurred. It takes a bit of drug-induced clarity, apparently, for these shreds of a past life to have a genuine, or almost, genuine reality. What these fragments really convey to the viewer is Anderton’s own traumatized state. As opposed to the “atom[ic]” self which is the Cartesian individual (Nancy Inoperative Community
3-4, 45), whose identity is a concomitant creation of representation, what we glimpse here is an identity which finds itself outside of itself and in others. Through the holes, disjunctures, incoherencies of these images, we glimpse an identity that is not wholly present to itself. Ontologically, this identity is spatially exposed to the outside and to others. Of course, Anderton does not wish to be “exposed” in this way and devotes himself to the hermeneutic and representational mortaring of these cracks at home and at work.

[PRECIME IMAGE] Anderton is a cop, but not just any kind of cop. He works for Precrime, a police force which stops violent crime before it is committed. This science fiction premise is made possible by three people, the disabled children of clarity drug addicts, who, in the medical establishment’s attempt to cure them, develop a pre-cognitive ability. They have a prophetic “gift,” for which they are kept drugged and submerged in a cross-shaped pool [PRECOGS]. Their empathic visions and nightmares are then accessed and processed by a computer. When finally displayed, their visions are fragmentary and confusing, forcing detectives to rapidly search for names and locations in order to arrest would-be perpetrators. In short, the Pre-Cogs appear to merely register murders due to their communal empathic abilities; actual hermeneutic analysis of the images and sounds that they relay is done by Anderton whose trauma-induced remembering is recapitulated in a violent manner at the public level. [AGATHA IMAGE]

At this point, there are two traumatic events grounding all of this hermeneutic work: the loss of Anderton’s son and the traumatic disability of the Pre-Cogs. These two traumas imply a third: Since Anderton uses clarity to heal and remember his own loss, it is fair to draw a parallel between his experience and that of the original drug addicts who abuse clarity. In other words, the film suggests that the people who used clarity might, like Anderton, have been looking for
clarity. But, tellingly, the result of their pursuit of hermeneutic closure is disaster, the disabled children known as Pre-Cogs in the film. The medical establishment, then, in its attempt to fix the children and make them cohere to the ableist norms of society, disables them even further. Arguably, then, the children have been processed through two rationalizing orders, that of the family and then of the medical establishment. But that is not the end of the process. While the police do not want to fix the children, they do want to harness the “cosmic joke” which is their disability and use it as a means to make sense of social reality, simplify it, and save lives. The police imprison the disabled in Precrime, in other words, for the purposes of criminal monitoring in an ableist society. This same movement from trauma, to clarity (desire for hermeneutic closure), and then to wrecked bodies and lives is recapitulated both at the familial and the national level. One can only expect the resultant trauma to lead to a repetition of the same cycle.

[Burgess image] Eventually, we discover that Burgess (Max Von Sydow), the director of Precrime, murdered Agatha’s mother so that he can have full access to Agatha’s Pre-Cognitive ability, rightly realizing that if he is going to stop murder in society, he will need her on his team. Despite this act of murder, and even in the process of framing Anderton for murder, it is clear in his reference to Anderton as “son” in the final scene that Burgess, is motivated, or troubled, by the concept of family. Near the end of the film—as he has seemingly won, Precrime is going national—he is given a gift, a pistol with five gold-plated bullets. He says:

Revolver like this one were given to generals at the end of the Civil War by their troops. The cylinders were loaded with five gold-plated bullets—to symbolize the end of the destruction and death that had ripped the country apart for five years.
The Civil War is commonly described in terms as a familial conflict—due not only to the fact that nationalism is often metaphorically linked to family, but also to the manner in which the war split families apart. Burgess, in other words, sees the nation as a family and his actions are a response to the traumatic experience of familiar war which was the civil war.

In Anderton and in Burgess (who admits to privately and publically capitalizing on Anderton’s pain), we see two related examples of violent hermeneutic closure that require an extreme violation of family interiority. In Anderton’s case, left on his own, his own ego-centered hermeneutics would have had minimal effect on the larger world; and, perhaps, had he been left alone by Burgess, he would have healed in an appropriate non-violent manner. In Burgess’ case, family trauma—his political capitalization on Anderton’s trauma and his own paternal attitude toward the nation—grounds social transformation. Allied with this assimilation of family, in the film we have one of the most fully realized examples of biopower. Human bodies, the Pre-Cogs, become cogs in a machine, not to mention the hundreds or thousands of “murderers” who are similarly put on ice in Precrime’s “containment” center. Our most powerful sense, sight, is harnessed by retinal scan technology so that business can shout out commodity suggestions as individuals walk through a mall, or so that the police can follow an individual through a subway system.

Within the 9/11 context, this family trauma which gets telescoped to the level of the nation is suggestive, if not prophetic. The film, tellingly, opens with a family scene and a young boy memorizing the Gettysburg address, Lincoln’s famous speech addressing the traumatic deaths of Union and Confederate men and women in the pursuit of “liberty” and “equality.” The speech ends in the following manner: [Gettysburg slide]
[. . .] we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth. (my emphasis)

If nothing else, the film operates as a critique of the nation, as a critique for how easily this “new birth” (which is, in the film, appropriately managed by family) is so easily lost as death is capitalized upon and used as a rationalization for the exercise of yet more power. The film warns us of the dangers of taking private, family tragedy into public spaces, building, in other words, national campaigns against violence which, then, reproduce another cycle of trauma, clarity, and yet more trauma in the pursuit of clarity. The cycle certainly alerts us to biopower’s relation to hermeneutics and how, as seen above, such closure leads to a spiral into disability, violence, and control of the body—all of which occur, arguably, in an attempt to return to a illusory state of being.

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As we eventually learn, pre-cognition does not amount to a closure of meaning: the Pre-Cogs are not unerringly accurate. They are a hive mind (at least within the confines of Precrime), but rather than such a mind implying homogeneity and unity of response—which is the assumption that Anderton operates under—they disagree. Sometimes there is a “minority report” which differs from the majority opinion. Such a minority report implies that a “killer” may have an alternate future, opening a hole if you will in the seamless narrative that Precrime constructs. As such, minority reports have to be eliminated to ensure that Anderton’s hermeneutic detection is seamless, and so that he and the public do not recognize that there may be reasonable doubt as to the culpability of its “killers.”
[POOL SCENE] I would like to return to the pool scene as a tentative way to get a handle on how the film proposes another, less trauma-ridden, identity in the Pre-Cogs and in Anderton’s family, two groupings which are approximate in their being. Water is an obvious motif in the film; Agatha’s mother is drowned, the Pre-Cogs are kept in a pool in the Precrime facility, the kidnapping happens at a public pool. As opposed to the “individual,” water metaphorically suggests a more dynamic relationship between singularities. As community is traditionally conceptualized, it forms and patrols a rigorous border between the inside and the outside, between self and other. This rigorous patrolling requires incredible hermeneutic diligence as the “self” and “other” must be identified and placed on the right sides of the border, a mere line on a map; hermeneutics is clearly connected to representation in this process: as Anderton returns home at one point and before he enters his flat there is a lengthy pan across a series of family photos, pictures of his family before they were violently burst asunder. Anderton and Burgess both have an image, a representation, of their idea family or nation, and all of their work amounts to an attempt to get reality to cohere with their imagined representation. If the metaphor for human relation is water, such a patrolling of borders is fruitless.

[POOL IMAGE TWO] But what evidence do we have of some other way of existing apart from the “I” of the individual? Note how Anderton is playing with his son at this public pool. He is close to his son, then the son begins timing the father; Anderton pulls away, holding his breath and submerging, looking around at others as his son becomes more distant and blurred. As with all of the fragmented images in the film, one could say that the family unit at this moment is pulling apart, cleaving, like a ripped photograph, open to the outside and to the others. He is, in fact, both present with and absent from his son, and it is this play, this movement
toward and away from his son with others that Anderton incorrectly identifies as individualistic presence as he enforces hermeneutic and representational closure.

In a different context, Jean-Luc Nancy writes:

[. . .] what community reveals to me, in presenting me my birth and my death, is my existence outside myself. Which does not mean my existence reinvested in or by community, as if community were another subject that would sublate me, in a dialectical or communal mode. Community does not sublate the finitude it exposes. Community itself, in sum, is nothing but this exposition (*Inoperative Community* 26)

In terms of our discussion, Nancy is describing how “death” (trauma) is often capitalized upon to build community, to strengthen borders between the self and other. Nancy sees community as bound up in representations, lines on maps, that constantly lead to a lack of community as the other across the border is cut off, denied his or her singularity. [*FAMILY AND CHILD*] But his interest, which is also my interest here, is to signal another sort of “being-in-common” which does not “sublate” trauma, leading to violence and erasure of others. In my reading of the pool scene, I have attempted to show how permeable, how spacious, the relation is between Anderton and his son as a way of concretely gesturing toward the experience Nancy describes in which the representation of identity (which forms a family, a nation) is “interrupted” (47), allowing for the self to find itself outside of itself and with others in a playful and incoherent manner.

In the end, the prisoners—the “killers,” the Pre-cogs and Anderton—are freed. At first glance, the end appears ominously coherent and tidy. But as Anderton places his hand on the pregnant belly of Lara, the image is haunted by the past. The intimate image of Anderton’s new start is juxtaposed with a scene in a wilderness; [*WILDERNESS*] Agatha and the other Pre-cogs
have been resettled and are reading or otherwise occupied in a cozy, rustic house. They are


together but separate from the world. Space surrounds them. Read on its own, it could be readily


understood as a conservative dream of communion with its clearly demarcated lines between the

self and other. I prefer to read this image along side the image of Anderton and his wife: Agatha

and the others were used as biological weapons to bolster state biopower. Their spatial separation

suggests that family trauma will remain family trauma and not be used to ground national

regimes of violence; government will no longer survey other bodies in the hopes of hermeneutic

and social clarity, but it will allow for space, for uncertainty, for a certain amount of freedom.

Anderton and Lara’s child, currently afloat in amniotic fluid, will not be subjected to government

sponsored biopower as with the children of drug addicts. The child will have freedom, as Agatha

now has freedom.

While I have written nothing about birth, in a way, all I have written implicitly gestures

toward birth. What happens constantly in Minority Report is that options are foreclosed,

contaminated by individual and national actions. Children are threatened, as trauma, the desire

for clarity, or biopower reaches into the womb—note the constant images of water—and

harnesses, or predetermines the direction of the child, and always with the gravest hermeneutic

results. The emphasis has been on the denial of birth, the denial of that which births meaning,

and of that which allows meaning to present itself. The final image of Anderton and Lara

suggests that birth will remain birth, a radical space of becoming, and possibility. Their child will

not be used by power to erase complexity or unduly stabilize the hermeneutic circle, spiral, or

what-you-will, but will remain free to birth many futures.
Works Cited
