

# Essay on the film "Minority Report"

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## 1 Introduction

"Minority Report" is a film set in 2054, in the Washington metropolitan area, and follows John Anderton, who is the chief of the Precrime department. The Precrime Department is a specialised police department that apprehends criminals using foreknowledge provided by 3 psychics, called "Precogs" or "Precognitives". They are Arthur, Dashiell and Agatha Lively, with Agatha being the strongest of the three.

In my opinion, the film's setting can be considered a dystopia, especially for someone like me who is a massive privacy advocate and holds the individual's freedom in high regard. There are a lot of problems with how technology is being used in the film, and it is very concerning that we are seeing some of it play out in the real world as well.

Let's get into the issues brought up in "Minority Report".

## 2 Right to counsel

Let's start with one of the first things depicted in the film. In the opening scene of the film, the judges are invited by John Anderton to witness the investigation as it progresses so that the judges can convict and sentence the would-be murderer immediately once he has been caught.



Figure 1: The judges witnessing and previewing the precognition.

This means there is no lengthy trial process that the would-be murderer would have to go through to defend himself in the court of law, as we see John Anderton immediately putting the "halo" on the would-be murderer Howard Marks and sending him straight to the panopticon prison for murder.

This process is due to the absolute belief and trust that Precrime is infallible and can never be wrong. In such a situation, there is no need for a would-be murderer to defend himself, since he definitely would have murdered the person if he had not been stopped, as the precognition is always 100% accurate. There is no such thing as doubt, reasonable or unreasonable since everything is definite, so there is no need for a trial, and hence, there is no need for a right to counsel. A trial is only needed for a fallible justice system that has doubt, so prosecutors will need to prove that the murderer has actually murdered the person he is accused of murder beyond reasonable doubt. On the other hand, the murderer will try to prove that he did not murder the person beyond reasonable doubt, or create sufficient amounts of reasonable doubt so that the prosecutors cannot prove that he murdered the person beyond reasonable doubt, acquitting himself of the murder.

While the absence of the right to counsel seems like a human rights violation, the trust and belief in Precrime being infallible negates the right to counsel. However, it is shown later in the film that Precrime is not infallible and has flaws, making the absence of the right to counsel a human rights violation. Since Precrime is not infallible, there could be no trial and the would-be murderer could be acquitted immediately. This is especially so for crimes of passion, as the murder is not premeditated. Since Precrime has prevented the murder, there is no evidence for a trial to prove that the murderer has murdered the victim beyond reasonable doubt. The fact that there is reasonable doubt in Precrime means that would-be murderers who commit crimes of passion are immediately acquitted, since the murder did not take place, resulting in no evidence for a trial. However, for premeditated murders, they can still be trialled and convicted of attempting to murder, which would be laughably easy to do thanks to the massive amount of information the "Precogs" provide the detectives with.

### 3 Right to privacy

The right to privacy usually consists of legal restraints on governmental and private actions that threaten the privacy of individuals (Warren & Brandeis, 1890). In the film, there are a lot of actions taken by the government, private companies, and the Precrime department that violates the individual's right to privacy.

#### 3.1 Personalised advertising

One of the most obvious ways that private companies in the film violate the individual's privacy is the ridiculously personalised advertising in public spaces. The fact that the screens have speakers that name the person that they are advertising to is not only embarrassing, but also reveals private and possibly sensitive information to other people in the surrounding area without the person's consent.



Figure 2: A Guinness advertisement that calls out to John by his name, and tells him, "You can use a Guinness right about now."

However, the film only shows John Anderton being advertised to in such a way, and we don't hear the personalised advertisements targeted at other people, so it is possible that the advertisements can only be heard by the person that the advertisement is targeted to.

This does not change how intrusive and invasive the personalised advertisements are. The fact that all of your purchases are tied to your identity in the film is a privacy nightmare as there is no doubt that your purchase history is being sold and shared with other companies to improve the quality of personalised advertising. Private companies are also accountable to the law of the country or state that they are operating in, which means the government have easy access to all of this information to track and survey you.



Figure 3: The cereal box advertising to John.

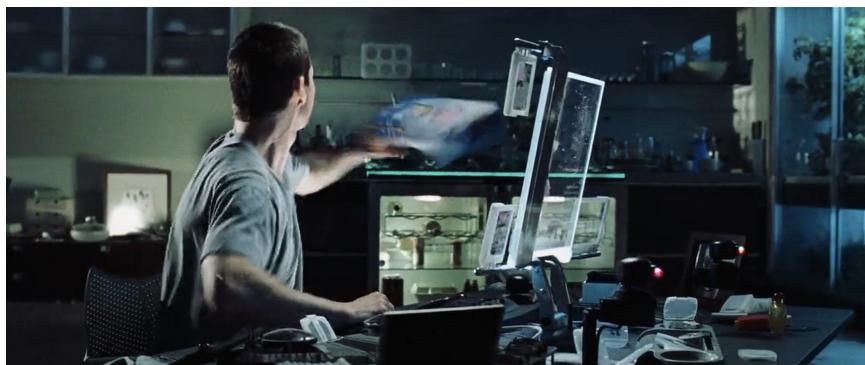


Figure 4: John throws the cereal box away after it continues to advertise to him. Honestly, I would do the same after experiencing such intrusive advertising.

The scene of the cereal box advertising to John, when he is trying to have a meal, shows how intrusive this kind of personalised advertising is. John cannot escape advertising even in his home, and even after he has already bought the product, shows that everything has been commodified and there are no sacred spaces.

We are already seeing personalised advertising in the real world, we just haven't gone to the extent depicted in the film. We currently do not have the level of physical tracking present in the real world with iris or face scanners, but we already have digital identifiers created and set by trackers. Most websites nowadays, except for open-source websites, are filled with trackers that set cookies to identify the user. These scripts are usually made by big advertising companies like Google, Microsoft and Facebook. Since most people live quite a large portion of their lives online, a lot of information is gleaned from tracking the user's browsing and search history.

Most website owners want to make money from people visiting their site, so they include these advertising scripts and trackers from these big advertising companies, which makes it possible for the tracker to keep a log of your browsing and search history to target advertising to you. This data is also sufficient to build a profile of you, which is then sold to data brokers who will sell that data to other companies, usually advertising companies, to better target advertising to you. For example, Google might sell your data to a data broker, and Facebook would buy that data so that they can tailor the advertising on their platform to your preferences and tastes.

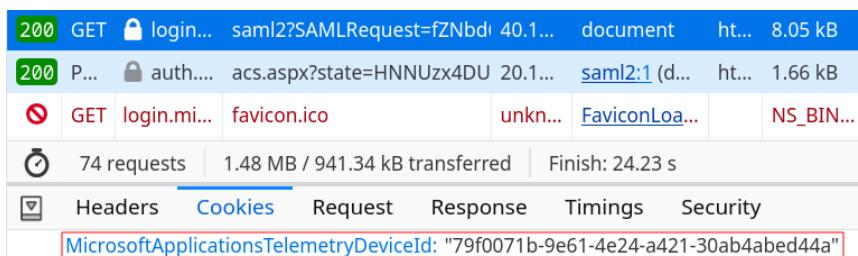


Figure 5: An example of a tracking cookie from Microsoft.

This kind of advertising has not only become digitally intrusive, with auto-playing video advertisements blocking content and assaulting your ears, it is also a way for private companies and the government to survey you without your consent and knowledge. Those cookie banners you see on websites are not considered informed consent since most people just accept them without reading anything. Most websites also automatically allow trackers by default, and the shady omnipresent "necessary cookies" could contain tracking cookies, and must be enabled, so people's data are still being collected and sold without their consent or knowledge. The worst part is that websites do not need to ensure that user cookie preferences are being followed, and can still set cookies as they wish, as the user would not know any better. Whatever option you choose on the cookie banner may not even matter at all, as it is up to the website developer to program their website to respect your cookie preferences. This is illegal under the EU's ePrivacy directive, better known as the EU's "cookie law" (EU, 2024), but it is difficult to enforce, so most sites would get away with doing such things.

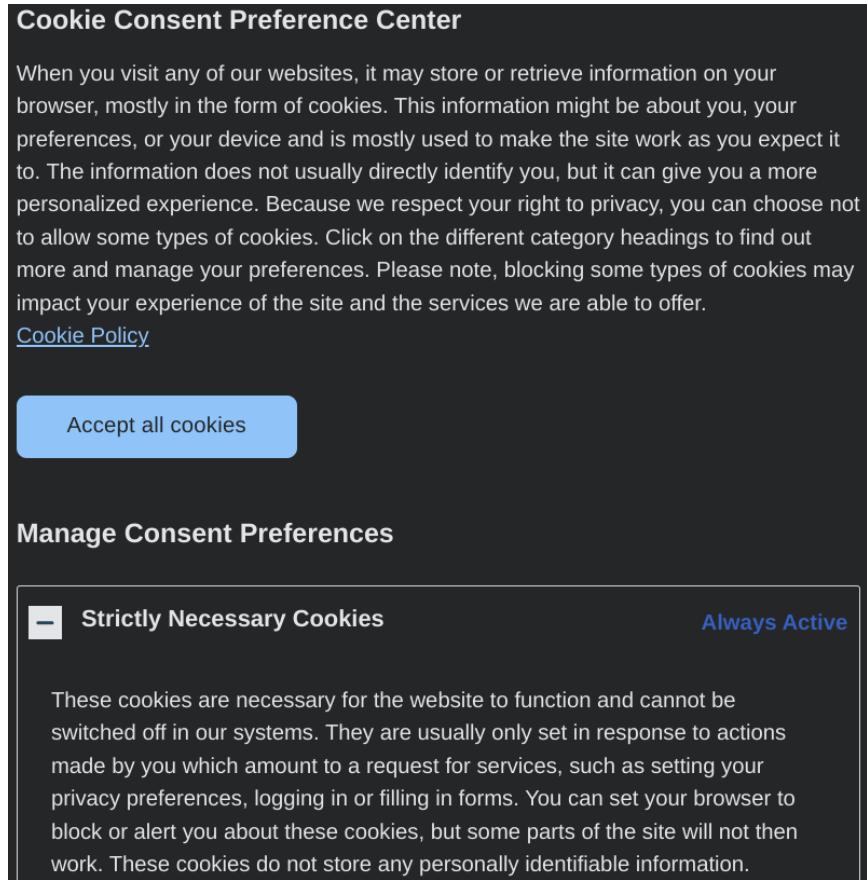


Figure 6: An example of a cookie banner, retrieved from StackOverflow. You can see that the "Accept all cookies option" is always displayed prominently to entice the user to click it, and the "strictly necessary cookies" is always active.

### 3.2 Government surveillance and tracking

In the film, government surveillance is akin to the surveillance done by an authoritarian regime like the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). With iris scanners everywhere to track people's every move, the government knows exactly where every citizen is. This amount of tracking and surveillance is arguably necessary for Precrime to be effective, as without it, it would be far more difficult to stop murders, especially crimes of passion.



Figure 7: The iris scanner on the train tracks people who take the train, which gives John's location away to the police department.

However, with the government holding such sensitive information about its citizens, it is prone to abuse, especially if the government changes. With such information, the government can easily target and persecute any dissenters to shut them up or make an example of them. Furthermore, the government may not be the only one with access to such sensitive information. Employees in the department who want to do something malicious can very easily do so. Malicious actors could also hack into government databases to gain access and use the information for harm.

Unfortunately, the reality is far worse than the depiction in the film. In the movie, the government is at least considered somewhat "benevolent" and does not abuse its power to silence dissenters and political rivals. This has happened far too often in reality, with the prime example being the CCP. The CCP has placed surveillance cameras equipped with facial recognition technology everywhere in China to track their citizens. As of August 2023, China has over 700 million surveillance cameras (Kaur, 2023), one camera for every two citizens. The CCP also places surveillance cameras in the homes of dissidents (Staff, 2013), likely without their knowledge, so that the CCP can track them anywhere, and in real-time. Of course, the CCP doesn't just track and survey these dissidents for nothing, they arrest these people when they speak up against the CCP. Wikipedia has a long list of detained and jailed Chinese dissidents (Wikipedia, 2024).

### **3.3 Unwarranted police search**

In the film, the police seemingly have the power to enter people's homes and search their homes and scan their irises whenever they want, and there is seemingly nothing the people can do about it. This is not the case in most countries, as the police will need to either obtain a search warrant or receive your consent before they can legally enter your home. The fact that the residents do not protest or resist when the police spider robots enter their homes is mortifying, as it suggests that they have grown accustomed to the invasion of privacy by law enforcement. The only resident who protested the police intrusion into her home was complaining about the spider robots scaring her children, and said nothing about the police spider robots being able to access their home willy-nilly.



Figure 8: One of the police spider bots scanning an old man's irises when he is sitting on the toilet. This is a massive invasion of privacy.



Figure 9: The resident complaining about the spider robots terrifying her children.

#### 4 Ownership rights

Ownership is defined as the state of legal possession and control over property. The reasonable understanding of ownership is that you own whatever item you have purchased, and hence should be able to do as you please with the item you have purchased, without any restrictions. This also means that you should have full control over the item you have purchased and that nobody else should have that level of control without your permission, since you own the item. This understanding of ownership will be the definition of the concept of ownership and ownership rights for this section of the essay.

#### **4.1 Remote control of consumer products**

In the film, it seems like most cars on the road are driverless, and are fully autonomous. It also seems like these cars are controlled by a centralised system which oversees and controls all cars, as evidenced by the extremely fast and smooth traffic flow and the incredibly close evasive manoeuvres done by the cars in almost bumper-to-bumper traffic.

While this allows for a transport system that is highly efficient and optimised, such centralised control over all vehicles on the road means that the users of the car have absolutely no control over what their car does, and cannot do anything they please with the vehicle. These vehicles may not even be considered private vehicles, since they operate more like a public transport system, but everyone has a private space inside a vehicle. People just "purchase" a private space inside this public transport system, instead of owning the mode of transport, the car.

However, it seems people in the film indeed "own" the vehicle they drive, as evidenced by John being able to override the vehicle locator on his car. Page 62 of the script also states that John is driving his personal vehicle and not a police issue.

You.

ANDERTON  
You gonna tell on me?

WITWER  
Possession alone will cost you six months, not to mention your badge.

Anderton doesn't say anything.

WITWER  
I guess we won't be working together after all.

Witwer shakes his head. DING. The elevator arrives and the doors open.

WITWER  
Now put the gun down, John. I don't hear a Red Ball.

THE PRECRIME SIREN GOES OFF. Witwer looks at Anderton, all of a sudden no longer so sure of himself. Anderton smiles, then shoves him back into the elevator and jumps off as the DOORS CLOSE on a stunned Witwer.

EXT. D.C. STREETS - DAY

Racing past other cars, Anderton merges into traffic. He's driving his personal car, not a police-issue.

INT. ANDERTON'S CAR - DAY

Burgess appears on the windshield screen.

ANDERTON  
Just so you know, I've overridden the vehicle locator. I just wanted to talk to you before Justice --

BURGESS  
Justice already knows. Talk to me, John. Tell me what's happening?

ANDERTON  
This is all Witwer. He's setting me up.

BURGESS  
Stop. Just wait. Who's the victim?

Figure 10: Page 62 of the script of "Minority Report"

Despite John having disabled the vehicle locator, it seems like either the government or the vehicle manufacturer was able to lock the vehicle down and forcefully reroute the vehicle to any destination. This means that John does not have full control over his vehicle, and cannot do as he pleases with it. Hence, by the definition of ownership mentioned above, he does not truly own his vehicle.



Figure 11: John Anderton is locked out of his own car and the car is forcefully redirected to his office.

Unfortunately, this is not just science fiction, as such remote control over consumer products are already implemented in the real world. Granted, our current technology does not allow companies or the government to reroute your vehicle, but some companies have incredible amounts of control over your vehicle. A prime example of such a company is Tesla. Tesla can pretty much do anything to a customer’s vehicle remotely. During Hurricane Irma, Tesla remotely extended the range of some Florida vehicles by unlocking the full battery capacity of the car so drivers could escape the hurricane (Liptak, 2017). There are a lot of negative examples as well, such as Tesla remotely disabling autopilot on a car that was purchased second-hand (Statt, 2020) and Tesla remotely reducing the range on a vehicle by 30% (Tangermann, 2022).

This does not just apply to physical goods like cars and is especially common with digital goods, like movies and games. An example is Sony removing purchased movies from customers’ libraries due to licensing issues, twice (Niemeyer, 2023; Porter, 2022). Most video games purchased through a gaming platform like Steam and Epic Games also carries the same risk, with the only exception being GOG.com as they provide you directly with the installer for the game without Digital Rights Management (DRM) software.

With an increasing number of companies looking towards subscription to earn a consistent stream of revenue from their customers, our ability to own items as consumers is gradually being eroded. Companies have far more control over the products we purchase now than ever before, and a lot of them are abusing it to earn more revenue, while making their services worse for customers. Roku TV recently updated its terms of service, forcing users to go through arbitration for any disputes with the company. Users who did not accept this change were locked out of using their TVs, that they purchased, through a software update (Harding, 2024). Ring, a security camera company owned by Amazon, was recently fined \$5.8 million for failing to protect their users' data. Employees and third-party contractors could view, download and transfer users' video data (Bartz, 2023). Tesla employees also admitted that they had access to the video feed of customers' cars and were sharing those videos (Stecklow et al., 2023).

## 5 Slavery and child labour



Figure 12: The scene where John says, "It helps if you don't think of them (the Precogs) as human."

At the beginning of the film, John states that it is better to not think of the Precogs as humans, which made me believe that the Precogs were some form of android that was developed to have precognition. John also seemed to think the Precogs were engineered as well, as he seeks Dr. Hineman wanting to fake a prevision, calling the Precogs her "invention". However, it is revealed by Dr. Hineman that the Precogs were children who suffered from brain damage because of their parents' use of the drug Neuroin, and developed precognition as a side effect of the damage.



Figure 13: Dr. Hineman telling John the truth about the Precogs.

This meant that the Precogs were essentially enslaved children that are forced to work for the Precrime police department, which means the government was actively participating in slavery and using child labour, which are crimes in the real world. This is made even more evident by the fact that Lamar Burgess kills Anne Lively, the mother of Agatha Lively, the strongest of the three Precogs, so he can keep Agatha for use in the Precrime program.

This is slavery and child labour, and in a pretty terrible form as well, as the Precogs are forced to watch the previsions of violent murders continuously, while they are stuck in a tank, unable to move, and hooked up to machines. All the while being pumped full of drugs and nutrients to keep them alive. Agatha may even be subjected to sexual abuse by the caretaker Wally.



Figure 14: The scene of Wally after getting Agatha back. His behaviour is pretty creepy, especially kissing her, considering that Agatha is still a child.

## 6 Conclusion

In summary, there are a lot of issues with the world depicted in "Minority Report", and the Precrime system isn't as justifiable as it seems at first. The many issues with surveillance and government control make me, as a person who values privacy and freedom, view it as a dystopia. The enslavement of children and forcing them to work for the greater good is also morally questionable.

Sadly, some issues brought up in the film are already happening in the real world, like government surveillance and control in countries like China, the erosion of ownership by companies, and not enough is being done to fight against it. Very few people truly value their privacy and freedom, and are happy with companies collecting and selling their data to the highest bidder, which I can understand, as privacy usually comes at the cost of inconvenience in a world where every single thing (digitally at least) is trying to track you. I fear it may be too late when people are finally fed up and start pushing back, only to find that nothing will change because these tech and advertising companies have complete control over everything and will persecute anyone who doesn't follow the status quo. Hopefully, we will never reach that point, but only time will tell.

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