

A future in crime?

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [July 31, 2002](#) issue

Despite its state-of-the-art computer graphics and eye-catching special effects, *Minority Report* is basically a chase movie built on a question—one that Charles Dickens explored in *A Christmas Carol*. Dickens's Ebenezer Scrooge asks the visiting spirits if his foretold future of loneliness and gloom is how things "will" be, or how they "might" be. In Dickens, the answer is that Scrooge can change the late-night prophecy. (Why else would the spirits be visiting him, he correctly surmises.) In *Minority Report*, the answer is a bit cloudier, which makes the tale a lot more frightening.

The story plays out in Washington, D.C., in the year 2054, where murder has become obsolete thanks to a new crime-fighting method labeled "Pre-Crime." With the help of three "Pre-Cogs," who are able to foresee murders before they happen and make their terrifying visions available to the police, it is possible for investigators to grab the killers-to-be before the fateful blow is struck.

The Pre-Cogs, we discover, are the children of drug-addicted mothers, born with a peculiar brain damage that turns them into soothsayers.

Tom Cruise plays John Anderton, chief of D.C.'s Pre-Crime Unit, whose stated mission is to make Pre-Crime the template for law enforcement around the nation. His passion stems from the fact that his six-year old son, Sean, was kidnaped (and probably murdered) six years earlier. Divorced and lonely, the weight of this tragedy still weighs so heavily on him (he was with Sean when the boy was abducted) that he needs late-night runs through dangerous neighborhoods and the steady inhalation of illegal drugs to keep him going.

To make things worse, Anderton must deal with a federal agent, Danny Witwer (Irish actor Colin Farrell), who is angling to take over his job if and when Pre-Crime goes national. (In an aside, Witwer remarks that he studied at Fuller Theological Seminary before becoming a cop. His belief that the Pre-Cogs are quasi-religious figures, modern-day oracles, convinces him that he is better suited to the job than the godless and godforsaken Anderton.)

The first 30 minutes of the film showcase director Steven Spielberg at his action-driven best, as he mixes the necessary exposition and visual storytelling to hook and reel us in. The top-notch direction continues once Anderton discovers that he has been tabbed by the Pre-Cogs as a murderer. This leads to a long "catch me if you can" sequence through the bowels of the city, which includes scenes of the Mag-Lev, the magnetically enhanced superhighway; Mall City, where eye-scans allow advertisements to address shoppers by name; the filthy operating room of a doctor specializing in eye-replacement; and the Hall of Containment, where the Pre-Crime criminals-to-be are kept in a state of suspended animation (and where Gideon, the keeper of containment, warns Anderton that "when you dig up the past, all you get is dirty").

Despite his prior belief in the infallibility of Pre-Crime, Anderton is convinced he will not commit the predicted murder (he doesn't even know the person he's supposedly going to kill). When the foretold confrontation finally takes place, the film's philosophical query—do people have free will or are they compelled to act out their destiny?—is answered, and the movie is over.

At least it should be, but instead of closing the book on a film that is not only taut and entertaining but that—in the post-9-11 era of law enforcement—carries a pertinent political message, the filmmakers drag it out, inserting a series of clumsy complications that lead to the "ultimate bad guy." By the end, when we see Anderton and his wife reunited (she is pregnant with their child) and the Pre-Cogs happily living in Maine, we get the same sense of being snookered that we got in the film version of *Our Town* when Emily's vision from the grave turns out to have been a dream.

The concluding segments mar an otherwise skillful and intelligent film, and suggest that Spielberg's audience-pleasing instincts will keep him from inheriting the mantle of Stanley Kubrick, who understood early on in his storied career that the most profound endings aren't always happy.