“Can you see?”: The Importance of Vision and the Eye Motif in Steven Spielberg’s *Minority Report*

*Minority Report* shows the audience a utopian vision of the future: A special police unit called ‘Pre-Crime,’ under the lead of Chief John Anderton, can foresee crimes with the help of so-called Pre-Cogs and prevent them before they are actually committed. The new crime prevention system seems to be impeccable until the chief himself has to experience what it means to be adjudged by an unreliable method. Vision is not only the basis for the plot but also appears in many components of the movie. While watching *Minority Report*, the eye motif forms one of the most important images (Friedman). It appears in various ways and builds up one of the leitmotifs in the film. In this chapter, I want to analyze the dominance and extensive interpretatory potential of the eye motif. I would argue that in a world depending on vision, blindness can be an advantage. “Sight is power” but this power is limited (Bakewell 102). *Minority Report* shows the “unreliability of human vision” and that the interpretation of future images can lead to false conclusions (107). Therefore, John Anderton has to lose sight in order to see (Friedman).

First, I will focus on the appearance of the eye motif in *Minority Report*, for example when and where it is actually occurring in the movie. In addition, I will provide some examples where vision and sight are also addressed in the dialogs. Then, I will turn to my two main points. They are both based on two quotes
which are essential for the movie. More precisely, I will discuss the statement of the blind drug dealer Lycon – “In the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king” – and how this quote applies to Anderton, and concentrate on the proposition of Mrs. Hineman, one of the Pre-Crime founders: “In order to see the light, you have to risk the dark.” I will then explain why everything depends on interpretation and give an example for the failure of the Pre-Crime system, before I end with my conclusion.

The Eye Motif as a Key Element in *Minority Report*

Eyes evidently play an important role in *Minority Report* since there are many scenes in the movie which deal directly or indirectly with eyes. Their steady appearance seems to hint towards a special message which is essential to the film. In the movie, there are many ways in which vision, sight, and eyes are referred to. There are references in the language as well as direct and indirect emphasis on eyes (Friedman).

In a scene at the beginning of the movie, for instance, the son of the future criminal Howard Marks cuts out a mask and, as Lester D. Friedman writes, “plunges a pair of scissors through the eyes of a cardboard picture of Abraham Lincoln.” Since the scene is primarily focusing on the conversation between Marks and his wife, the stabbing of the mask’s eyes is only an indirect reference to the motif. Yet it is important because it foreshadows the fact that the Pre-Cogs later provide a vision in which it looks as if Howard Marks is going to stab his wife and her lover with a pair of scissors (Friedman).

Another scene which contains a more direct reference to the eye-motif is the meeting of Anderton and the blind drug dealer Lycon, who lost his eyeballs. All that is left are two holes in his face, which he first covers with sunglasses (Bakewell 101). At first, the reason for his missing eyeballs remains in the dark. Yet, as Friedman points out in his article, it becomes clear that Lycon chose to be blind once the fact is revealed that eyes serve as identification marks.

In *Minority Report*, eyes have replaced the old personal identity cards. Friedman observes that every person is identified many times a day by retina scans, when leaving the subway, for example, or when entering a store. More than that, Geoff Bakewell adds, retina scans are also used to personalize advertisements and required to enter buildings. In addition to this, there are also so-called spyder scanners which work with heat flow sensors. They are used to locate and identify persons in buildings (104). This means a total control by the state and the usage of spyders makes it sheer impossible to avoid being located and identified by the authorities. Therefore, it is no wonder that Lycon does not have eyeballs anymore. According to Friedman, “[t]he drug dealer … has no eyes so he cannot be identified.”
With its excessive references to vision, *Minority Report* does not only make use of the eye-motif superficially but, in Friedman’s words, “fundamentally questions our sight: How does one see? What does one see? How do we understand what we see – or think we see?”

These questions are very important especially concerning the Pre-Crime system which depends on vision(s) and which is the basis for the movie. The Pre-Cogs can foresee murders before they actually occur. They have visions, which they transmit through pictures of the future crime. The Pre-Crime cops then have to arrange and interpret these pictures. They have to respond and act to what they have made up out of the pictures and right there is the problem of the system, as both Friedman and Bakewell have also noted (107). *Minority Report* presents a system which depends on visions of “unreliable guides” which leaves a lot of space for mistakes and doubts (Bakewell 110).

References to the Importance of Sight

The eye motif also occurs in the dialogs of the movie through what Friedman terms “a vast array of spoken references to … eyes.” Howard Marks, for instance, says that he is blind without his glasses when he returns to his house to get them and finds his wife together with another man. Here sight is connected with understanding. Marks is enabled to ‘see’ that his wife has been unfaithful to him. Things become clear for him and he recognizes that his wife has been cheating on him for a long time.

Friedman also hints at an even more interesting, short statement by Pre-Crime director Lamar Burgess: “The eyes of the nation are upon us.” Burgess wants Pre-Crime to become the national security program and therefore cannot risk that there are any mistakes, flaws or scandals connected with Pre-Crime (Friedman). He knows that Pre-Crime is under permanent observation and that the government focuses on his company. This puts a lot of pressure on Burgess because when people know they are watched they try to avoid mistakes and carefully think their actions through. In this context, then, “sight is power” (Bakewell 102). Sight is an instrument of putting people under pressure. The one who is watching is more powerful than the one who is being watched. Western society makes an enormous usage of this phenomenon. People like to watch others – for example in TV shows like *Big Brother* which enable the viewer to take the role of a voyeur. Watching others is always a form of power because it deals with the value of knowing more about a person than is desired by them.

The title of this chapter alludes to Pre-Cog Agatha’s “physical as well as metaphysical question” “Can you see?” which – as Friedman notes – “she asks Ander-ton several times throughout the film.” Agatha wants him to see that Anne was her mother and imitates her drowning when “she slides back into her own pool” (Bakewell 102). Of course, the Chief has eyes but he does not understand that
Agatha leads him to the murderer of her mother and that she basically warns him of Burgess and the future events (102). At this point, Anderton almost appears to lack vision, a fact that comes literally true during the movie. Several times, Anderton is basically shown one-eyed. As Bakewell explains, the spectator cannot really see the second eye because “features of Anderton’s face are shrouded in darkness” (107).

“In the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king” is a sentence from the blind drug dealer Lycon whose eyeballs have been completely removed from the orbits. He says it at the end of his conversation with Anderton. In this scene, Anderton is searching for his drug ‘neuroin’ and says that he is seeking for some ‘clarity.’ It is revealed that the Pre-Crime cop Anderton, a man of the law, uses drugs. Moreover, he thinks that this drug will ‘clarify’ things even though drugs are usually taken to experience a distorted perception of the environment. Naturally, drugs have a similar effect as narcotics and reduce clear sight. Drugs are taken to escape the real world, to experience a state of trance, or, in some cases to provoke visions.

Even though Anderton is able to see, he seeks clarity from a blind man (Bakewell 102). Therefore, “sight is power” but power is limited as Bakewell argues (102). Anderton is capable of seeing but this does not “guarantee” that he actually understands. This makes him unlike the blind Lycon, who may actually have insight as he understands much quicker and maybe more than the seeing Anderton (103). In this context, Lycon demonstrates that although he may be (physically) blind in this moment, Anderton is also blind because, according to Bakewell, “even a sighted king may be partially blind” (102). Therefore he indicates that “the one-eyed man” actually is the king – king in the land of the blind because he may have the ability to see like a two-eyed man but also to understand and interpret things like a blind man.

In addition, Lycon’s quote is a prediction of what will happen to Anderton in the future because according to Bakewell he will become “a one-eyed man twice” (102, 104). The first time he becomes one-eyed is after the operation, when “he lifts the bandage over one eye just enough to let the spyder shine its brilliant light into his new orb” before the time of recovery is up (104). He does so in order to let a spyder scan his newly replaced eye preventing arrest by his former colleagues. This blindness, then, is voluntarily and it saves him from greater evil (104). The second time Anderton becomes one-eyed is when he drops one of his removed eyeballs – which he carries in a plastic bag – while trying to enter the Pre-Cog Temple in the Pre-Crime unit (104). Bakewell states that once more “the destruction of the protagonist’s sight is voluntary” and will lead him later to a greater vision because he can see more clearly each time he reduces his sight (104). He can enter the Pre-Crime department, get to the Pre-Cog Agatha, and find Leo Crow whom he thinks to be his son’s kidnapper, and the story takes its course. This would not have been possible had Anderton kept his original eyes and not
followed Mrs. Hineman’s advice: “In order to see the light, you have to risk the
dark” as the Pre-Crime founding member tells him when he visits her in her
greenhouse. With this sentence she implies that Anderton has to get his own eye-
balls removed before he will be able to move on and enter the Pre-Crime unit to
find his own minority report (Bakewell 103). But why does she make this sugges-
tion?

In 2054, everywhere in Washington, D.C. retina scans are performed to iden-
tify people. This makes it impossible for Anderton to enter the Pre-Crime unit
because he would already have been detected on his way to the building. There-
fore, he decides to have the suggested eye operation (Bakewell 103).

The eye surgery is undertaken by the surgeon and former criminal Dr. Eddie,
who had been arrested by Anderton some years before (Friedman). Still, Anderton
depends on him because there is no other way “to pass undetected through the
ubiquitous retinal scans” (Friedman) than removing his own eyeballs. According
to Bakewell, the eye operation itself means a change of identity for Anderton. He
changes from a police officer and much respected authority in the beginning to an
inferior position because of his eyes. Anderton becomes “Mr. Yakamoto” and as
an Asian he belongs to a minority group in Washington, D.C. (Bakewell 106;
Friedman). The change of his identity is permanent, because the identity, as said
before, depends on the eyes. Anderton’s social rank is now lowered and he will
never again become the John Anderton he has been before. Therefore, I would
argue, his whole perspective changes and he sees his society and Pre-Crime in a
completely new way. Or, as Friedman writes:

Though he survives, Anderton never looks at the world in the same way:
the veil of certainty which surrounded his faith in the Pre-Cogs has been
ripped away, replaced by a tattered and uncertain cloth which reveals the
world as a more ambiguous and less trustworthy place.

Through his new eyes Anderton is finally able to find the solution to his problem
and, related to this, he also learns about the weaknesses of the Pre-Crime system.
He is able to enter the Pre-Crime headquarters and the Temple where he finds
Agatha. Realizing that he has no minority report, Anderton panics and holds on to
Agatha. He finally finds Leo Crow and for the first time his faith in Pre-Crime is
shattered because he notices a failure of accuracy in the prediction. Anderton
learns that Pre-Crime cops only get one fixed point of view and that what is really
happening could be understood in completely different ways if seen from a differ-
et angle (Friedman). Furthermore, he recognizes that the Pre-cogs’ individual
visions of a future event are edited to produce one coherent vision of the event.
This edited version is the one the Pre-Crime cops see. In this moment, he under-
stands that all he did in his time as a Pre-Crime cop was to invent future crimes.

Therefore, “functioning eyes” do not always “guarantee … understanding”
and insight (Bakewell 103). Anderton learns that the future is not predestined but
that one can always choose. Thus, when he is about to kill Leo Crow he decides
not to do so (Friedman). His temporary blindness, caused by the operation, has
served to open his eyes. He gets a deeper insight and begins to understand why
Pre-Crime is not the best solution for fighting high crime rates. In this context,
Anderton really has to go blind in order to see (Friedman).

**It Is all a Matter of Interpretation**

Vision always depends on interpretation. Pictures themselves can only show what
things look like but what they really are like is a matter of interpreting the images.
Therefore, it always depends on the person who interprets and evaluates the im-
ages and not only on the person who provides the visions. Friedman states:

> [T]he Pre-Cogs function as authors – or at least transmitters or channellers
> – of the text, the images as the physical text itself and Anderton as its
> reader, the one called upon to fashion the disjointed images into a coherent
> story, identify the scene and prevent the crime. (Friedman)

There are many scenes in *Minority Report* in which what John Anderton actually
sees is not shown very clearly. Mostly this lack of clear vision appears when An-
derton is standing in front of the board in his office and interprets the bits and
pieces of pictures he receives from the Pre-Cogs. While watching Anderton shuf-
fling the images on the translucent board, the spectator is also able to see what is
behind the board. Therefore, Anderton, too, can always see what is behind the
board and what is on the board at the same time. Images are overlapping and it
becomes basically impossible to focus entirely on just one impression.

Furthermore, the spectator receives a good view of Anderton’s position in
these scenes. Shown from various camera angles, he is standing in front of visual
fragments and has to solve a puzzle but is in fact seen through a screen of confus-
ing images – fragments he actually receives and sees. All of the cases he is solving
are not really depending on facts. Their solution is always connected to Ander-
ton’s point of view. In this case it applies that “we inevitably see what we have
been trained to understand and, sometimes, what we want to see” (Friedman).
No one will ever know if the Pre-Crime cops interpret the pictures right because no
one really knows if the future would have happened just as the Pre-Crime cops see
it. Clearly Pre-Crime workers have eyes, but are they really able to see the meaning
of the images?

Friedman points out that the best example for a “misinterpretation” is the case
of Anderton himself. The Crow murder shows that the cops always just see the
worst-case scenario. They come up with absolute horror stories but they do not
include “alternative visions” (Friedman). Furthermore, they are actually trained to
ignore certain things, for example “echoes,” which are supposed to be just a repe-
tition of earlier visions (Bakewell 110). In reality, however, there can actually be
two murders which just look alike but are not the same. Here the seeing persons are left in the dark. They just do not make use of their eyes but depend on what they are told by the authorities. As a result, they are basically blind because they simply rely on what others say and do not take a closer look at things or question them (103).

Furthermore, the Pre-Crime cops and the Pre-Cogs are not cooperating. In the movie, the workers never enter the Temple where the Pre-Cogs are. This further strengthens the idea that there is much room for “misinterpretations” (Friedman). Solutions are not drawn together with the Pre-Cogs, who provide the images, but only by the cops.

*Minority Report* clearly shows that the interpretation of visual material is precarious and that it can easily lead to false conclusions (Bakewell 111). “Sight is power” as it can be used to improve knowledge but power is limited (102). Therefore, sight is limited too. The ones who are seeing may not have the necessary insight blind people have (103). Therefore, blindness can be an advantage. Vision and interpretation have to be seen as two separate components and eyes are just the mediators that connect them.

Anderton is the best example to understand that sight and interpretation may not be linked as easily as one would think. He does not understand the failure of the Pre-Crime system until he has a new perspective through new eyes and becomes himself a victim of the system (106). He has to lose sight before he can discover that Pre-Crime is not impeccable and may not be the best solution in order to prevent crime. Furthermore, he learns that future visions may not always come true, because one can always have a choice (Friedman).

The use of the eye-motif makes way for various interpretations. Clearly the vision and the eye-motif are of great importance for *Minority Report* but there is more to it than one might think. It serves as a warning of total state control and inspection (Friedman). Furthermore, the eye-motif hints to the question of predestination. Can the future really be predestined if there are cops who stop a future murderer which will never happen in the end (Friedman)?
Works Cited

