

**Robin MITCHELL-BOYASK** “*Can you see?*” **Blindness and Insight in *Minority Report* and *Oedipus the King***

Greek myth has long been recognized as a source for science fiction, and the stories of Philip Dick have proven to be fertile ground for film, with first Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982), with its Iliadic rebellion by an android who suddenly becomes aware of the code by which he is programmed and thus “lives,” and then Stephen Spielberg’s *Minority Report* (2002), which weaves the Oedipus myth in general, and Sophocles’ version of it in particular, through its narrative as a fundamental intertext

*Minority Report* depicts Washington in 2054, now murder-free for the past six years thanks to the the Precrime Department, whose trio of Precogs developed the ability to foresee murders as a by-product of research on children of drug addicts. Lying in a tank of water, connected to a complex projection system, they periodically produce a stream of images and two wooden balls, which respectively name a victim and a murderer. John Anderton, the hero assembles these random images into a coherent picture, and the police then arrest the perpetrator as he is about to commit the crime, a seemingly flawless system until Anderton sees himself shooting a complete stranger 36 hours in the future. The film depicts his attempt to deal with to the knowledge of his future.

This film abundantly echoes Greek myth. The main Precog is Agatha, puckishly named after the mystery writer Christie, but an obviously Greek name. As the primary voice of the future she becomes the Pythia at Delphi, and her chamber is frequently referred to as “The Temple.” Anderton thus becomes Oedipus trying to decipher the riddles given to him first about the lives of others and then about himself; his extreme talent at this has made him largely responsible for ending the plague of death in Thebes/Washington. Anderton’s name, an unusual variation on Anderson, suggests its roots in the Greek *aner*, thus making him, like Oedipus, an everyman. Also like Oedipus, Anderton’s supremely confident exterior masks tormented doubts about himself and his identity, doubts that are manifest in his own drug addiction and dead son. But to discover the truth about himself and the Precrime Department, he, like Oedipus, risks destroying himself and Precrime. Also like Oedipus, his easy confidence quickly collapses into paranoia towards those who are trying to help him. The seeds of the current crisis were sown by his boss, the surrogate father figure (as Spielberg himself has designated him), Lamar Burgess, who had murdered Agatha’s mother to save Precrime, using a flaw in the Precog system to cover it up. Like Laius, Lamar would kill the son to save himself.

Richer and more interesting than the mere search for correspondences is examining the story’s use of vision as a metaphor, and its interest in the relationship between intent and act in determining human responsibility. Faced with a very skeletal story, screenwriter Joseph Cohen has said that he decided to use sight as the central theme of the drama, and indeed the script and camera work show this decision repeatedly. We constantly experience close-ups of eyes, and the cameras linger there repeatedly. The first words of the movie are “You know how blind I am without them,” spoken by the first would-be-murderer who returns to his house to retrieve his glasses. Agatha, each time she projects her mother’s death in view of Anderton, screams, “Can you see?” to him. Anderton himself, to avoid the constant public eye scans that would identify his location to Precrime, has his eyes removed and exchanged for others. Without losing his old eyes, he

cannot sneak back into The Temple and further interrogate the Pythia about her prophecy. This Oedipus also cannot see until he loses his own eyes. But he also continually faces the question of how his knowledge of the future affects his actions and whether that future can be changed. Does he, like Oedipus, cause his own future by running from it?