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Arrival

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Arrival

Abstract

This is a film review of *Arrival* (2015), directed by Denis Villeneuve .

Author Notes

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Arrival

Directed by Denis Villeneuve

2015

USA

116 minutes

TIFF Gala Presentations

Trailer: <https://youtu.be/pICzgeHDwAQ>

Along with stories about prison, alien encounters provide one of the most common metaphors for movies to represent religious experiences, questions, and dilemmas. There are two main kinds of alien film (both of which, incidentally, have been made by Steven Spielberg): ones in which the visitors from outer space are hostile, as in *War of the Worlds* (2005), and ones in which they are friendly, as in *E.T.* (1982). There is a third, more rare, type of alien film (which has also been made by Spielberg): ones in which our attempt to understand the unknown becomes the explicit catalyst to better understand ourselves. Key

examples of this type include *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *Contact* (1997), and now *Arrival*. This is the most recent film from Québécois director Denis Villeneuve, whose previous works include the critically lauded *Prisoners* (2013) and *Sicario* (2015).

The main plot of *Arrival* is fairly simple: renowned linguist Dr. Louise Banks is recruited by the U.S. military to try to communicate with Heptapods From Beyond who have landed in one of 12 spaceships around the globe. The presentation of the aliens, and particularly their language, is extremely thoughtful and considered and one of the great strengths of *Arrival*. The military's central question for the aliens—"What is your purpose here?"—is also one that, the film clearly tells us, we should be asking ourselves. One of the ways in which it signals this point is through Banks' initial attempt to communicate with the heptapods. She shows them the word HUMAN and points to herself and the other members of the team in turn. She is trying to show them, that is, what being "human" means.

The film does not suggest any clear, definite answers to either the literal or existential questions of purpose and meaning. That is to say, just as we never quite learn why the aliens came, so are we never told exactly what being human is or should be about. In fact, ambiguity is a central feature of the film. This ambiguity is signaled visually by the low lighting in many scenes and by a cloudiness that forms the aliens' environment, which is also the main weather condition for the humans throughout the film. The world of *Arrival*, in other words, is often grey and murky.

Even still, the film does lead us in certain directions, most often intimated by Banks' experiences and reflections. Through her, the film suggests that meaning lies in part in pausing to consider the value of particular moments in one's life, moments of connection

with others. It also lies in the attempts to create the opportunities to have such moments, even if those attempts are not entirely successful. This is most poignantly the case in *Arrival* when such trying takes place under the shadow of death, whether others' or our own.

One of the intriguing ways in which *Arrival* suggests that we *not* try to construct a sense of meaning is by thinking about our lives and relationships in the way that we might experience *films*. We can see and interpret a film as an object but we do not actually interact with it at all. In Martin Buber's terms we have an "I-it" relation with films, not an "I-thou" one. The military similarly has an "I-it" relation with the aliens: they see and hear the heptapods through a glass barrier that is shaped exactly like a movie screen and, as with films, they think only about how to understand the messages they passively receive through the screen. It is Banks who realizes that interaction with the beings on the other side of the screen is the only way to come to any real understanding, and that understanding itself has to go both ways. The point is not just to know what *they* are all about; we must tell them about ourselves as well. A critical "I-thou" moment in this context, featured prominently in the film's trailer, has Banks placing her ungloved hand against the glass and one of the aliens suddenly, shockingly, doing the same. "Now that's a proper introduction," she says quietly.

In terms of meaning, the other problem with films is that they often have an essentially linear narrative, and *Arrival* suggests very strongly that we need to not think of our lives in this way. One of the central characters makes a self-isolating decision because he is told the ending to someone's story, and is unable to move past the notion of beginnings and endings in a traditional sense. In contrast, the film opens with Banks commenting on how she had previously understood her daughter's birth: "I used to think this was the

beginning of your story.” What she comes to realize, though, is that “memory doesn’t work like that”; that neither her own life, nor her daughter’s, is bound by time moving forward only. If you are open to them, moments from other points in your life can intrude upon, and impact, the meaning of what is happening to you now. *Arrival* gets this idea across through Banks’ experiences themselves, but also through its own structure. It may not be able to recreate the kind of interactive dynamic that Banks has with the aliens, but it can and does give us a non-linear narrative. And it does this with tremendous economy and grace, as we come to experience and understand this non-linearity just as Banks herself does. The structure of the movie, in other words, elegantly supports (and communicates) its content.

Another recurring point that *Arrival* makes about how to be human involves colonialism. The film is not at all coy about the possible parallels between aliens arriving on earth and Europeans arriving in various other parts of the world for the first time. In trying to convince U.S. Colonel Weber that communication involving different languages is difficult and requires time and care, Banks tells him a story about the early British attempts to speak with Australian Aborigines. At one point the Aborigines said the word “kangaroo” and the British thought they were indicating the local, large marsupial. In fact, however, kangaroo meant, “I don’t understand.”¹ Weber takes Banks’ point and extends her deadline, but as he is leaving he reminds her that, in the Aborigines’ encounter with the British, they were almost entirely wiped out.

This same concern arises again when it appears that the aliens have given each of the human communities interacting with the 12 ships some of the information being sought,

¹ Not incidentally, Banks mentions to her physicist colleague that this story is historically untrue, even if its linguistic point is sound.

but not all of it. Banks believes that this is because the heptapods want them to cooperate with one another, which is necessary in order to put all of the pieces together. Weber is skeptical, however, worried that this is actually a tactic designed to conquer humanity by generating conflict among the Indigenous inhabitants of earth. He points out that this is what the British did in India and the Germans did in Rwanda. We never learn what the aliens' actual intent is, but we do see how people respond to their strategy: like Colonel Weber, they become extremely anxious. As soon as one of the communities stops transmitting what they have discovered, the others do the same. They isolate themselves from one another and from the truth. It is only when Banks takes an enormous risk, and convinces one of the other groups to pass along their knowledge before receiving anything in return, that everyone starts working together again.

The point, clearly, is that for all sorts of reasons we need to stop thinking just of ourselves. The only way forward is to treat others as we would like to be treated. Colonialism, and military brinkmanship, may attain short-term gains for one party but they are incredibly destructive for the others; and the long-term consequences generally harm everyone. *Arrival* emphatically makes the case that the opposite is also true: helping others helps everyone.

Aside from this implied support for the Golden Rule—and the possibly biblical (and ultimately unexplained) significance of 12 ships landing—there is virtually no direct reference to religion in this movie. The only one that I caught was a background news report about the members of a “Pentecostal cult” who killed themselves after the aliens arrived because of some kind of “prophecy.” This moment in the film struck me as an unnecessary and unfortunate repetition of mainstream stereotypes of fundamentalist

Christians as at best delusional and simple-minded, and at worst—see 2014’s *The Kingsman*—as hate-filled and deserving of death.

I have two other concerns about *Arrival*. The first is a minor plot quibble regarding an interesting idea about time that makes wonderful emotional sense in the film but no real logical sense. (I will only spoil this idea here slightly.) One of the characters gains the ability to perceive different points in time simultaneously. This means that something learned in the future becomes known in the past. In a key future scene, this character is given a piece of information that is suddenly then known by that character in the film’s “present.” But why would the character not in fact have known that piece of information all along? How is it that something learned in the future becomes known at a *specific* moment in the past? Wouldn’t someone who becomes aware of all times in their life at once know, at *that point*, everything they will ever learn?

My second concern involves gender. Much of *Arrival* is focused on Banks’ role as mother, on her decision to have a child and the relationship that the two share. In contrast, her male colleague, physicist Ian Donnelly, has no such entanglement. It is interesting to me that, in two of the most well known alien-encounter-as-meaning-of-life films, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *Contact*, there are similar gender dynamics. In the former, Roy Neary disconnects from his wife and children until they leave him and he eventually heads off towards the mysterious mountain from his visions, increasing the distance from his family. On the other hand, Jillian Guiler goes to the mountain to *find* her son, who has been taken by the aliens. In *Contact*, the alien encounter experienced by the protagonist, Dr. Eleanor Arroway, is inextricably tied to her relationship with her deceased father and with a former romantic partner.

Why is it, in other words, that in these films men who interact with aliens do so on their own, while for women their close relationships with other people are always part of the equation?

I don't want to overstate this concern about gender, a topic that in most ways *Arrival* handles very well. This is a film whose main character, refreshingly, is an incredibly accomplished, intelligent, and courageous woman. She is also never shown having to choose between being a scholar and being a mother; in fact, in many ways her career directly facilitates her having and raising a child. Moreover, Banks is not superhuman. Like many actual people who have jobs and/or children she experiences challenging days, and we see her irritation and impatience with her daughter in some moments, along with their shared joy and sense of connection in others.