

# Arrival: An Analysis Through The Lens Of Sci-Fi Convention

By Isaac Basque-Rice



Arrival is a 2016 science-fiction drama film by director Denis Villeneuve and writer Eric Heisserer, based off the novella Story of Your Life by Ted Chiang. The film follows linguist Louise Banks (Amy Adams) who, after her daughter dies at the age of twelve from an incurable illness, is called by the U.S. military to decipher the mysterious language of a group of alien beings (known as Heptapods after their seven legged appearance) who have arrived on earth for an undetermined reason.

The film received both critical and commercial success. Over the full period of its run in theatres (416 days) it earned 432.74% of its original budget (\$203 million on a \$47 million budget), of which roughly equal amounts were earned domestically (in the U.S.) and overseas (Box Office Mojo, n.d.).

The film currently sits at 94% on Rotten Tomatoes with 429 reviews, and an audience score of 82% from over 50,000 ratings. The critics consensus reads:

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*Arrival delivers a must-see experience for fans of thinking person's sci-fi that anchors its heady themes with genuinely affecting emotion and a terrific performance from Amy Adams*

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Peter Bradshaw's review of the film for The Guardian (Bradshaw, 2016) states:

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*Denis Villeneuve's thrilling sci-fi epic [...] is daring, clever and touched with skin-crawling strangeness.*

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And, perhaps more appropriately, Dan Jolin's review of the film for Empire Magazine (Jolin, 2016) says:

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*Like all the best sci-fi, Arrival has something pertinent to say about today's world; particularly about the importance of communication.*

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To this end, the question now becomes "how does Villeneuve use the conventions of science fiction (and, indeed, how does he break those conventions in some circumstances) in order to make a salient point about the nature of language and the importance of communication?" The answer comprises the remainder of this essay.

The film, as with all good sci fi, uses the presence of the paranormal, in this case the extra-terrestrial, to make a point about human nature. The eponymous *Arrival* of the aliens sets into motion a series of in-world events, people off-screen looting, rioting, joining cults, committing mass suicide, and later in the film, preparing for all out assaults on the aliens.

The point of this, admittedly small section of film, seems to be to frame the nature of humanity as it encounters the unknown and unknowable, the sort of primal panic that sets in, an idea which is a hallmark of all good sci-fi (Tommy-Lee Jones' famous Men in Black quote, "A person is smart. People are dumb, panicky dangerous animals" immediately springs to mind).

Further to the point, however, and the thing that is the main conceit of the film, is a concept that in linguistics is known as the "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis", a concept that Banks summarises as "The language you speak [determining] how you think". This idea, also known as "linguistic relativism", can most strikingly be seen in language relating to colour, where in English we view the colours "red" and "pink" as being distinct, really they are both simply shades of the same colour. Russian, in contrast, has different words for light blue (голубой, goluboy) and dark blue (синий, siniy), and as such see those as different colours, but red and pink as the same. (Scott, 2013)

Villeneuve plays with this idea quite well. In his film, instead of there simply being different words for the same concept, the alien language (of which each character resembles a different kind of coffee stain) presents a set of information all together, where human language contains a series of words going from one direction to another in a linear fashion, the Heptapods' language is designed to be taken circularly and all at once.

The effect this has on Banks is profound, her coming to learn and understand this language over the length of the movie results in a full change of mindset, from linearity (where one event follows the next), to circularity, where Banks begins to take in the total contents of her life, past, present, and future, and accept them as being immutable.

It is, of course, though the conventions of the genre that such a message could be faithfully portrayed on screen. The alien nature of the language and those who converse in it, combined with the impenetrability of the language itself and the effect it has on the psyche. The latter seems to be somewhat of a marriage between the grandness and incomprehensibility of Lovecraft's beloved cosmic horror genre with the time altering dimensionality and, in some ways, unreliable narration of Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*.

Where the film differs from traditional science fiction convention is also of great interest. Futuristic technology and setting are all but absent from this film. The technology that is used, at least by humans, is what one would consider extremely standard, Monitoring and recording equipment, a scissor lift to raise the team to the underside of the ship, etc. And the film primarily takes place in an utterly nondescript field.

The effect this has on the viewer is, at the very least, one of relatability. The viewer naturally sees themselves in Banks' position through virtue of the fact that the setting is one that is most likely extremely familiar to a western audience. This achieves the goal of sci fi excellently, this goal being to use the lens of the abnormal and the impossible to focus on the human condition.

Another overriding theme in Science Fiction is that of conflict. The film initially appears to be heading down this road of conflict when one of the symbols the Heptapods offer seems to be saying "offer weapon". Preceding the climax of the film the 12 nations in which the Heptapods have landed have been working together to decipher the language, however upon the mention of a weapon, they immediately disconnect and prepare for all-out war.

It is only later that, upon Banks requesting for the Heptapods to show her what they are offering, does she realise that in fact they (and, indeed, Chiang, Heisserer, and Villeneuve) are attempting to show humanity how they are all a part of a greater whole, and as such were not attempting to sow division but instead create unity through the imparting of their language.

Through initially presenting the idea of conflict and then subsequently presenting unity, the film excellently breaks narrative convention and subverts the viewers' expectations of what this kind of "first contact" movie is, to deliver an extremely salient point about harmony

In conclusion, Denis Villeneuve's film presents complex ideas around language and the human condition and, indeed, how the two relate, through utilising the science fiction conventions of first contact with extra-terrestrial beings, the manipulation of time, and indeed the concept of human (and the possibility of inter-species) conflict, whilst also subverting some conventions such as the usage of advanced technology. The effect this has on the viewer is profound and the film cannot possibly be recommended enough.

## References

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