



A Matter of Life and Death: Cinematic Necropolitics in ‘Arrival’

by James Lawrence Slattery

0: A Beginning (which is also an end)

“The first is the real death of the biological body, after which there is usually another, the second, exemplified by the various rituals of mourning that take place in the symbolic.” (Copjec: 1994, 46)

In Denis Villeneuve’s 2016 film *Arrival*, the first death is the death of the child, and the second a multifaceted and intertwining array of harmonious symbolic entities. In the few years since its release, *Arrival* has inspired numerous critical responses that have analysed its methods of representation at the intersections of narrative, temporal structure, and linguist theme. This article engages with a variety of theoretical positions and specifically privileges psychoanalytic theory. Psychoanalysis grounds my analysis of death in *Arrival* because it is a theoretical discourse that has often been concerned with the subject of language and the subject in time specifically, providing great insight into how these two facets support one another in the understanding of the social subject.

When twelve extra-terrestrial pods appear around the world, Louise Banks (Amy Adams) is asked to head a team of linguists who are set the task of finding an answer to the question: What is their purpose on earth? Or as the poster indicates: Why are they here?

Arrival is immediately enticing in its polished aesthetic. Conventional mise-en-scène and rhythmic structure set an appealing tonality. If “excess implies a gap or lag in motivation” (Thompson: 1977, 57) then *Arrival* is a film with minimal excess. Its adherence to classical conventions include unswerving realistic portrayals and clear motivation in character, narrative and compositional elements such as consistent colour pallet, smooth, steady camera work that pans space and tracks Louise and efficient focus racking technique, all of which is stylistically established in the first ten minutes of the film. Even when the structure changes from a classically linear perpetuation, it never strays from a stable unity of form and narrative. It is perhaps, by using such entrenched models of cinematic seduction that the film lures the spectator into its more radical areas of address concerning non-linear syuzhet construction.

Arrival sits uncomfortably in strict generic categories, not because it undermines or satirizes them, but because it uses them to particularly smart effect, both including and rejecting a plethora of tropes. Because of the central event – the arrival of the pods – science-fiction is the most easily assignable genre. The combination of cinematic conventions and the present-day setting renders the film unusual because it lacks hyperbole and fantasy. Instead, its realist address situates it in a melodramatic field, an intelligent and complex endeavour made accessible and all the more compelling by its accomplished veneer and exquisitely executed conventional approach to filmmaking. The aliens and the pods resist exaggerated objecthood or personification, so far removed from

the silver flying saucers and silver saucer-eyed beings that are still so regular in depictions of life from other planets. Instead, the pods are dark, abstracted shapes, at once a looming presence yet ethereal, organic and womb-like in their rotund stature, dense yet lighter than air. When they appear, they do not “land”, but hover above the ground. These floating entities stain the landscape, their blackness carving a rupture and enacting a sight/site of an unexplainable “thing”

As the film opens the central protagonist Louise directs her speech to her child *and* the audience in a voice-over narration. The word “your” signals both an individual and collective address. (“I used to think this was the beginning of your story.”) The opening serves as a prologue, where we are compactly told of the life and death of Louise’s child Hannah (Jadyn Malone as 6-Year-Old, Abigail Pniowsky as 8-Year-Old and Julia Scarlett Dan as 12-Year-Old), who dies as a teenager. This scene serves to introduce an inescapable tonality that is drenched in melancholia and perpetuated throughout the film’s affect and narrative. Death is immediately rendered as a central notion, and Louise’s loss is ingrained in her being. It is this loss of the child, as related by the mother, that produces the film’s initial address.

Another instance of death’s iconographical presence I will discuss regarding narrative and *mise-en-scène* is the hybridized state-military presence that forms the base camp that surrounds and interrogates the pod at the Minnesota landing site. Clear military signifiers are emblemised by the camouflage uniform worn by Colonel Weber (Forest Whitaker) and other characters who form the official team set to uncover information about the aliens’ intent. It is this team that Louise is invited to be part of as a linguist. Fellow team leader Ian (Jeremy Renner) is a physicist, and holds an equal position to Louise. Throughout the film Louise and Ian grow closer and eventually, inevitably, create part of the film’s dynamic social centre.

But death does not begin and end here, wrapped up in the grasp of visual symbols embedded in plot points. Rather, these are only one register of death’s inscriptions, one field of incarnation of the life-death continuum. Death, and its harmony with life, ricochets across the film. It weaves into the temporal structuring of the filmic medium in a surprising manner. The death of the child and the military presence set up two areas of the text that infer separate yet interrelated relationships to death. It is this multiplicity concerning the central theme that leads me to use the more expansive term “necropolitics”, as opposed to “death” or “life/death”. Coined by Achille Mbembe (2003), “necropolitics” can incorporate, but is not limited to, the corporeal body, the deathly ramifications of organised, militarized conflict and the implicit relationship to the life/death continuum when re- and dis- regarding non-linear temporal structures, all of which are present throughout *Arrival*. As a complementary extension of Michel Foucault’s “biopower” and “biopolitics” (1998: 140, 141), “necropolitics” is notably taken up by Rosi Braidotti in her book *The Posthuman* (2013). Here, Braidotti uses the term to unpack the multiplicity of death in relation to its socio-political modes of register including famine, euthanasia, nuclear war and unmanned military technology such as drones (2013: 111, 123). Although *Arrival* does not enter such a range of specific encounters of death practices, it does release death from its monolithic emblem: the end of an individual life. *Arrival*’s depiction of a global, militarized communication network consistently displays conversations intent on conflict and warfare strategy. This aspect of

the narrative, alongside the persistent returning to the death of the child, creates both macro/de-humanised and micro/individual iterations of death.

After these narrative and signifying tropes are established, the pods are able to encompass a wider array of symbolic functions. Part one of this essay will look at how the physical persistence of the pods can work in tandem with the narrative necropolitical devices to perform a visual allegory of that which cannot be explained: love and death. This section will also be concerned with the way in which language becomes a central part of the narrative drive. As Louise is a linguist, her task is to learn how to communicate with the aliens. The main “twist” in the film is the revelation that in learning the aliens’ abstract language, time can be perceived differently. This pivotal understanding is enacted by the film not only at the level of the fabula, but is also used to understand the film’s structural transgression of linear time. Part two will consider how atemporal structuring encompasses and performs its own system of necropolitics, through the play of time.

1: Black Mass or Absent Centre?

{Black Suns / The Exterior Foreign Object}

Organic in their roundness, phallic in their stature and supernatural in their context, the pods at once enclose and resist meaning. In the case of the one that has landed in the USA, its blackness immediately sets it apart from the Minnesota landscape, alive with green grass and rolling clouds that lick the bottom half of its hovering form. Its darkness marks a shadow, it is an absence of light in the verdant environment. And with this absence of light, it can perform other, more allegorical, impressions of absence.

Louise is a linguist, an unpacker of meaning hidden and cast in language, in words, logos, speech. What does the inside of the mouth look like before it opens and pushes air around to make the sound we know as a word? This is what the pods look like – that foetal air in the mouth, that pre-language, and that which language cannot articulate. By becoming and holding the zone of which all action (literally) pivots, the pods constantly cinch our attention, and make tactile the absent centre of the orbiting activities.

The positioning of the child’s death and military signifiers at the level of montage and mise-en-scène determines my reading of the pods’ significance and their relation to narrative necropolitical tropes. Montage, especially between the preface scene and the proceeding “main body” of the film, purposefully (mis)leads spectators (Bordwell: 2006, 15). Due to the clean and mainstream aesthetics, we assume to be entering a conventional syuzhet and fabula structure: The daughter has died and we are now witnessing Louise in mourning. Throughout the film, the flashes to the daughter are aesthetically signalled by closer framing (often extreme close-up) and shallower depth of field, causing slight disorientation for Louise and the viewer. Although we are aware we are experiencing an event that is not occurring in the strictly diegetic present, the overall aesthetic coherence is not brutally ruptured. The film is aware that as spectators “[w]e automatically combine the juxtaposed elements and reduce them to a unity.” (Eisenstein: 1957:5). Louise is thus read as detached in her relation to the world due to the internalising of the lost love-object.

The pods' dark abstraction forms a "lacking centre" in the visual field, which, through their materialised objecthood, sublimate incomprehensible death. When the pods arrive, and Louise's flashes of the child begin, the pods seem to make mourning an externally recognisable lacuna. Although sublimation is usually understood as a transformative process of the sexual drive (Laplanche, Pontalis: 1973, 431-433) into a "socially valued objective" such as art (de Lauretis: 2008, 30), I maintain that the pods can be considered under the umbrella of this process. The specifics of this sublimation, however, are not strictly those of the drive. Instead it is Louise's melancholia that we perceive as the psychic internalising of the lost love-object (the child) that is sublimated into the objects of the pods. There are several instances throughout the film where Louise and the pod share the frame, with Louise in the foreground, usually in sharper focus, whilst the pods linger in the background, slightly out of focus. This focus racking enables the pod to take on an oneiric and more ambient presence in relation to Louise, like a thought-bubble (see figure 1 and 2). Notably, no other character is framed alongside the pod in this manner. In conjunction, because of the global nature of the overall arrival, the pods sublimate a more general fascination with death that becomes universal because death is an inherent part of our being.

The pods are unlike the silver, metal disks we are so used to seeing in the science-fiction genre, flying saucers that throw down light, like an intensified beam from the projector, to lift humans toward unknowable experience. Instead, they enact a similar objecthood of lack described by Julia Kristeva in her book *Black Sun: Melancholia and Depression*:

Within depression, if my existence is on the verge of collapsing, its lack of meaning is not tragic – it appears obvious to me, glaring and inescapable. [...] Where does this black sun come from? Out of what eerie galaxy do its invisible, lethargic rays reach me [...] (Kristeva: 1989, 3)

A nothingness that is neither repression nor simply the mark of the affect but condenses into a *black hole* – like invisible, crushing, cosmic antimatter[...] (Kristeva: 1989, 87)

As Kristeva's descriptions affirm, blackness has a resonance with the pictorial rendering of lack, of a lacking that is present in melancholia like that which (we as spectators first assume) Louise occupies. It is also worth noting that these two quotes from *Black Sun* also regard the cosmic or other-worldly nature of the somewhat unexplainable insistence of depression's grip. The pods' darkness and indeterminable presence allegorically link to Louise's melancholia as if manifesting the complex concept of death that we assume is dwelling inside her. As rotund and weighted – yet floating – incarnations, they perform a structure that, in its presence, can denote an absence. The pods become a (somewhat) necessary mode to articulate Louise's psychic space of bereavement – the incomprehensible yet real lack in her life.

In this strain of the narrative, death is located in the love-object that is the child. The combination of love and death located in the child's body means this excursion into death is marked with a specific register that dominates the film. If the allegorical role of the pods functions as sublimation, then they do so to make physical the intangibility of

both love and death, which are helictical in their bind. This binding is further unpacked when Louise enters the pod.

Figure 1



Figure 2



{New Visual Language / The Internal Creative Objects}

Once inside, the pods are shown to be cavernous and contain an illuminated rectangle that the crew walk towards. The environment appears clean, sanitised and synthetic. The group hesitantly move to the literal white light at the end of the tunnel, which is a glass screen made opaque by a white mist on the other side. The aliens make themselves seen to Louise, Ian and the rest of the team (as well as the viewer), by moving through the white mist towards the transparent barrier. It is here that their dark, ‘heptapod’ bodies are revealed. Communication develops after Louise takes off her protective suit, which looks like a “hazmat” in the same orange colour U.S. State prisoners are made to wear. Soon after Louise reveals herself, the aliens reveal their visual language, which appears as an inky substance that they shoot from their hand and arm-like limb.

The aliens possess an aural language, but this is soon dismissed from the narrative drive. Instead, the aliens’ visual language takes precedence in narrative and mise-en-scène, articulated as circular signs that are photographically captured and catalogued by the team. The rectangular screen, which divides the humans from the aliens, functions as tableaux upon which the “writing” is inscribed and draws a visual parallel to the cinema screen upon which light is inscribed to form meaning. The cinematic structure of *Arrival* matches Louise’s understanding of the aliens’ language as her flashes of her daughter and her (simultaneous) ability to see the future only occur once she is introduced to the aliens’ language. I will continue this line of enquiry in part two.

A montage sequence condenses the progression of the language exchange between humans and aliens, swiftly indicating that a level of inter-species understanding has been reached. Louise’s relationship to language is a multifaceted tool for the narrative movement. It both situates her character and provides dialogues to help spectators understand certain linguistic phenomena and processes. Perhaps the most significant hint provided for us in relation to the revelation concerning the film’s atemporal linguistic structure occurs when Louise and Ian specifically discuss how learning a new language can cause one to think in different ways (the ‘Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis’ - Werner: 1997, 76-84). *Arrival* shifts spectatorial understandings of how the diegetic world is formally structured between initial and second viewings. By the end of the film, the overall plot has retroactively changed our perception of the syuzhet structure. In learning that Louise can see the future, the flash-backs of the daughter are recognised as flash-forwards and what at first appears to be a classical structure is reconfigured as atemporal. In this narrative revelation, we have the blending of multiple notions of being. Learning the aliens’ language reconfigures the speaker’s perception of time, and therefore also causes a metamorphosis of the concept of life and death as irreversible, linear and mutually exclusive states of being. In the film, language (like death) performs a structuring of the self in time. When the self-*within*-time is unleashed from a linear determination, traditional and linear concepts of life and death follow suit and are loosened from the dominant paradigm: death follows life. A web of relations between language, the self, time, life and death is succinctly yet amorously forged in *Arrival*’s structural embodying of the narrative. It is in this conceptual and formal crux that I see *Arrival* as making two of its central, interrelated claims: That life and death are not separate, and that love is transcendent.

Despite the film's rethinking of the life-death continuum, *Arrival* maintains a traditional aesthetic filmmaking strategy and ideological structure. The central paradigms of love and death organised by the child rest within the heterosexual "'production of a couple' motif" (Žižek: 2008, xvi) that underpins (almost) all mainstream cinema. *Arrival* achieves this hegemonic social formation in a mode sanitised of the erotic. The production of the heterosexual couple is sexually decaffeinated when compared to the majority of mainstream cinema, with less than a screen kiss to indicate a consummation. Not only does Hannah, the child, embody love and death out-of-time, she also appears as if from nowhere, that is – appears out of light. We never see the sexual or marital unification of Ian and Louise, or Louise during pregnancy. Anna Carruthers closely reads the (lack of) representation of Louise's pregnancy in her essay "Temporality, Reproduction and the Not-Yet in Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival*".

By focusing on pregnancy as a central thematic concern, Carruthers shows how reproduction is a "central theme" (2018:324) and yet "there is no indication that [Louise] has experienced pregnant embodiment" (324). This specific form of pregnant embodiment clearly encourages further nuances of the film's discussion concerning the borders of life and death, producing a body in limbo. Carruthers argues that Hannah "exists in the temporal space of the unborn: she is neither alive nor dead. Importantly, her life is shown in moving not static images; she is not embalmed in the photograph, nor is she shown as alive, but lifeless." Hannah – like her name – becomes a palindromic presence, moving back and forth in time. She is almost celestial in her corporeal transcendence made possible by shifting temporal and spatial inscriptions. She makes present love and death's transcendence.

{A Rival: Modern Warfare's Absent Centre}

If we recognise the pods as an absent-centre in military rhetoric, can *Arrival* be seen to pose notions concerning contemporary warfare's "lacking" motivations for its actions? The film offers opportunities to ask such questions, and though it does not didactically answer any of them, in searching the text we can conjure succinct, allegorical symbols that can aid us in figuring part of death's variant meanings, outside of the life/death binary dualism.

When viewed as the subject of the military intrigue, the pods are critically emblematic of the "absent centre" of industrialised conflict. The absence of material meaning is accentuated in the narrative by the aliens' unknown intent and origin. It is this unknowability that provides narrative drive through the desire to uncover their mysterious arrival, whilst also providing allegorical function derived from the unknown-as-absence. The desire to fill a gap (in knowledge) creates and perpetuates a narrative propelled towards satisfaction.

Military presence is made visible in several ways in *Arrival*, most obviously rendered by the military-state team who set up a camp at the base of the pod's location. The central militarised character is Colonel Weber, who provides part of the leadership of the team. It is Weber who first approaches Louise and subsequently gives her the role as the head of the linguists' unit. Along with several others, Weber is consistently shown wearing a camouflage uniform. Camouflage here functions as a simulacrum in regards to

its function. The environment within which the team is situated in is, of course, not the green and earthy hues for which the camouflage was originally intended – to visually bind bodies to their surroundings. Instead, the camouflage makes the wearer stand out. The military dress is thus disengaged from its “original function”, whilst maintaining its ability to signify violence and potential for armed combat. Camouflage, as opposed to other military dress (such as “service” or “parade” uniforms), shows that the team is ready for immanent battle. Viewing the (surrounding) site of the pod as potential “warzone” is further encouraged when Louise witnesses a body being carted off in a medical evacuation stretcher, reminiscent of the type of casualty one might see on a battlefield scene (see figure 3 and 4).

Figure 3



Figure 4



In this context, Louise's flashes to her daughter take on the appearance of flashbacks associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), understood as compulsively returning to the site of trauma. Here, the relationship between the drive, loss and repetition is skillfully occupied in the brackets of time. On the one hand, Louise appears to be compulsively repeating images related to the traumatic loss of the love-object, which is read as melancholic. On the other hand, these images are part of the primary (first) encounter with the love-object whom is yet to be materialised. In this case, the repetition of loss is yet to occur. As spectators, we occupy an in-between space of these discourses. We both experience the images of the child as a repetition of loss *and* initial loss as our view of the child is bookended due to the preface scene. Desire for the child is situated in these paradigms. The desire for the repeated return of the love-object, despite and as part of its inevitable trauma, is contingent on the drive. Louise demonstrates the drive to repeat loss and recover loss through the prism of desire. Freud uses the example of (what we now term) PTSD in his theory of the death drive, initially laid out in his essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (Freud: 1955, 12) (de Lauretis: 2008, 74). Todd McGowan subsequently explains the drive in his book *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema*:

The pursuit of the lost object serves as an alibi for the repetition of loss and the satisfaction that this repetition provides. The desire for the lost object hides the drive to repeat its loss. The idea that the subject might find satisfaction in the repetition of loss appears bizarre at first glance. Obviously, people are consciously trying to succeed at what they do. [...] Though we take a fleeting pleasure in success, we can enjoy loss—and only loss—because it is only through loss that we emerge as desiring beings. The repetition of the loss that constitutes our subjectivity brings satisfaction because it returns us to our lost object, an object that ceases to exist once we have it. Subjects find their successes unsatisfying—even the most successful are constantly looking elsewhere—insofar as successfully having our

object has the effect of destroying it as a lost object and thus as desirable.
(McGowan: 2011, 11-12)

Due to the iconographical tropes of visual military signifiers and the narrative positioning of the militarised-state as somewhat hostile to the alien presence, *Arrival* enjoys being part of a military-science-fiction hybrid genre. This genre, which finds origins in the ‘Creature films’ of the fifties (Sobchack: 1987, 45), acquires significance following the Vietnam war, with James Cameron’s 1988 *Aliens* remaining the most prominent. *Aliens* has been widely regarded as a specifically post-Vietnam war film that uses the sci-fi genre as its vessel (Christopher: 1994, 53-54).

Arrival both confirms and rejects generic tropes present in *Aliens*. Whilst *Arrival* does not propose the military as “defeated by its own buffoonery” (Abbott: 1994, 23), it does pose them as lacking the nuanced understanding and patience required to complete valuable communication. The difference between the military approach (repeatedly personified by Weber) and Louise’s skill set is best demonstrated in a scene in which Louise defends her methods of communication with the aliens. After Weber criticises her methods of using “grade-school words” Louise breaks down the complexity in the question Weber desires to ask the aliens, namely: “What is your purpose on earth?”. This interaction succinctly implicates the military’s impatient attitude in contrast to Louise’s unaggressive approach.

What most prominently separates *Arrival* from other military sci-fi (including but not limited to *Aliens*), is its “humanising” of the aliens. As Jim Naureckas argues, *Aliens* uses an “Us vs. Them framework, [where] Us stands as the United States military and, by implication, the capitalist system it protects. Them stands for anything un-American, unfamiliar, alien.” (Naureckas: 1987, 1-4). *Arrival*, by contrast, allows for positive, communicative interaction with the aliens. One could argue that by the end, we can consider the relationship between Louise and the aliens a friendship.

Whilst *Arrival* focuses on often individual, interpersonal relationships, the global scattering of the alien pods encourages broader dialogues between humanity and nature. David Fleming and William Brown conclude their 2018 essay “Through a (First) Contact Lens Darkly: *Arrival*, Unreal Time and Chthulucinema” by reading the film in terms of the Anthropocene, the beyond (and before) an era of human beings, and thus widen the film’s political scope:

Arrival suggests humility before eternity and the unreality/anthropocentrism of A and B/chronological time. To try to halt time, or to privilege the human over and above time, would be to end everything. Meanwhile, to change with(in) time [...] would be ethically to accept the universe and the cosmic. That is, spiritually to come to terms with the future, which already has been, and to become worthy of events that are yet to come and yet which have already taken place. (2018: 361)

The conflictual, global presence of the military adds another thread into *Arrival*’s overall necropolitical fabric. Not only does it narratively situate military-state attitudes that seek to uphold an exercise of “othering”, but – in combination with my previous assertion which views the pods as symbolic “lack” – we can also see the pods as describing the “lack” or “absent centre” in contemporary militarised warfare and conflict.

The pods' inertia and abstraction - their stillness of movement, their incoherent language – resist the clarification of their intention. Thus, they become like a Rorschach test, reflecting the attitudes of those who attempt to communicate or interrogate them. Through interaction with the pods we witness the military assume conflict whilst Louise does not. The two distinct attitudes between characters are clearly materialised in a late scene when debating the aliens' (perceived) use of the word “weapon”.

The military form of communication is also presented as particularly stringent. Whereas Louise communicates directly with the aliens and tries to uncover their language, the global military network discusses (and later in-fights) in a way that is completely mediated through screens. At the camp, a large monitor houses video streams from every country where a pod has landed whilst breakout screens host individual conversations. The large, segmented monitor becomes the way in which we track the political information sharing or conflict. At the beginning, information is openly shared. As the fear of the aliens escalates, so too does privacy and secrecy in regards to information gathered by the various countries. State and military rhetoric concerning protection and using weaponry as a message increases. When China decides to cease cooperation with the aliens, Pakistan, Russia and Sudan follow and the film displays clear global political alliances. At the height of the global (human) conflict, all the screens on the main monitor start disconnecting – including “ours”, that is, the United States of America.

In his 2018 article “From Spinoza to Contemporary Linguists: Pragmatic Ethics in Denis Villeneuve’s *Arrival*”, Francesco Sticchi discusses language’s always relational character, and how it produces both connection and conflict:

In Arrival, we can see how the process of mutual comprehension is bounded by expectations, roles, and notions of cultural belonging, which frame and categorize communication, but also prevent different characters from going beyond a specific perspective on the events. Language, therefore, is revealed in all its ambiguity; as Louise wrote in the preface of her book, language is the foundation of civilization, the glue that holds a people together, but it is also the first weapon deployed in a conflict. The signs we emit can connect us, but can also express conflict, negation, separation.(2018:61)

Whilst the visual black mass of the alien pods function as a mirror that darkly reflects varying intentions, Sticchi highlights how *Arrival* communicates a range of narrative and affective meanings through the theme of language with attention given to how language is used and interpreted by military bodies, and how empathy and apathy are subsequently promoted both between characters and for the film viewer. Sticchi argues that Louise and the military body approach language in differing ways, and this tension forms an important part of the film’s narrative drive.

Because, from what we are to understand as spectators, the state-military conflict is based on assumptions and fear (no violence is actually enacted by the pods), the military is then posed as violent in nature. By having the “absent centre” pods as a dominant visual motif, the film can be seen to argue that conflict arises for reasons other than threat. The absent centre becomes a void that can be filled with fictions of an enemy and fabricated causes. In an era of hyperbolic, but unfounded or paranoid, causes for war

Arrival serves a useful, allegorical critique. However, alongside this political critique, the film decidedly lands on an optimistic point in regards to the global and militarised stakes. Though the personal bereavement remains perpetually saddening, the ethical message of the aliens is that which demonstrates how working collaboratively through information sharing is a better and more fruitful (and within this film – realistic) outcome. Once Louise has all the pieces (signs) of the aliens’ language, Ian determines that they make up one part of twelve, the most prominent catalyst for the encouragement of all countries putting up their information in order to gain the overall complete language. Ian makes his assertion by identifying the signs’ spatial presence in relation to the gaps between the signs. In this instance, absence becomes as pertinent as presence. If we take this, in conjunction with the wider symbolic lack allegorised by the pods, we can again return to the way in which *Arrival* relays “lack” as a force of its cinematic fabric. McGowan argues that lack or “loss” is what structures connections:

What we have in common is what we don’t have rather than anything we do. Though their experiences differ infinitely, all subjects share a basis in loss. Even though a fundamental loss isolates us within our subjectivity, it also provides the only possible basis for connection. Loss is our common constitutive event. The repetition of the drive continually reacquaints us with this event and thus facilitates an ethical relationship to others in which the subject is obligated through the shared structuring loss. (McGowan: 2011, 15)

If we take this argument, *Arrival* imagines a global unity in the service of new temporal language precisely through material (the language data) and larger allegorical (pods as sublimated, melancholic lack) loss.

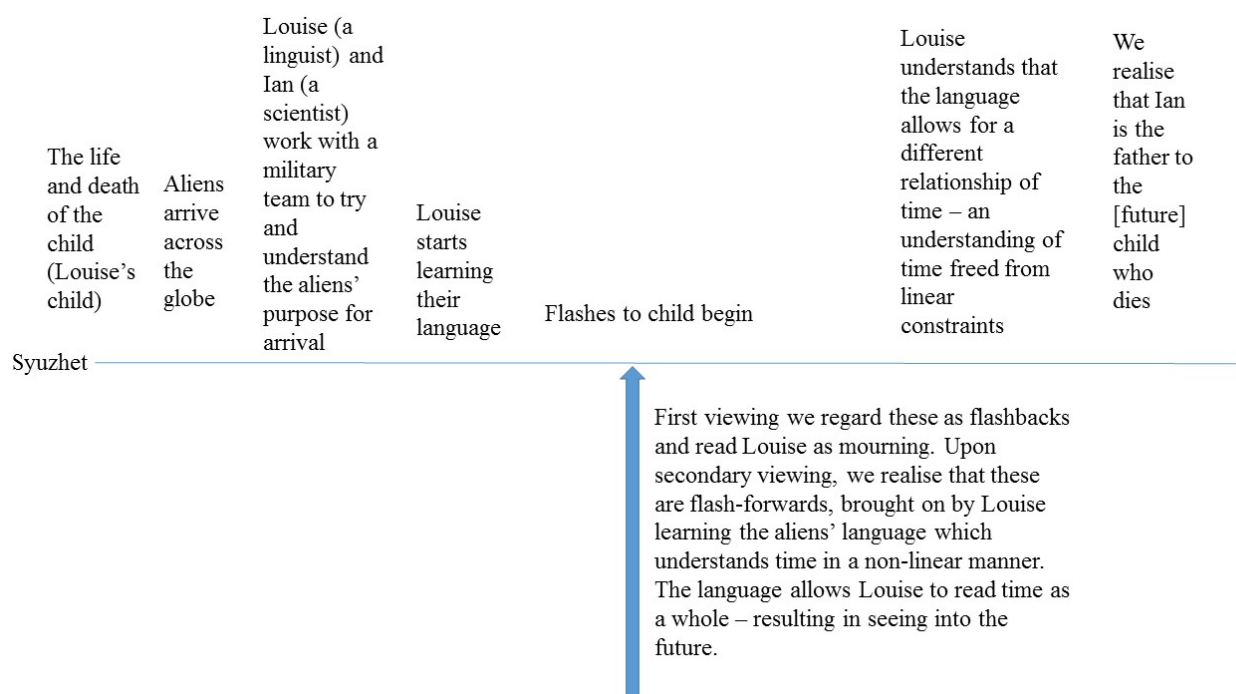
2: Cinematic Time Machine(s)

{From Anachronic Syuzhet to Atemporal Fabula}

The cinema is a time machine. Or – the cinema is a language written in light and time, with the ability to transport us in and out of distinct spatial and temporal settings, unhinged from linearity. *Arrival* contains several aspects which can be regarded as self-referential in regards to the cinematic medium. The first, as previously mentioned, is the rectangular “screen” through which the aliens’ linguistic writings are shown to the humans. Another moment of self-referentiality can be located in Louise’s choice to continue into a future where she is already aware of the outcome, much like an actor following a script in a movie. Instead of deviating, Louise sticks to the “script”. In the way the narrative path is temporally confused due to Louise’s ability to rethink time, so too films are often shot out of sequence to their final projection, coherently (re)constructed in the editing room.

In *Arrival*, we begin at the end, which is also the beginning, which is also a repeated block of narrative that comes to be shattered and scattered throughout. It is made lively in cinematic light, it is the resurrection of past and future and present moments, it is haunting in the flickering of past time, deathly but not dead weight. Light as shining air, reflective and absorbing. *Arrival* uses anachronic structure in a poignant manner, which produces several strands of meaning. Unlike other films that play with temporal structure,

Arrival does not jump in and out of time to (only) create a type of retardation, to produce compelling narrative (though it does do this). Instead, the film harmoniously fuses narrative and structure to articulate a subversive cinematic play that results in a reconceptualization of traditional understanding of the life-death continuum. The main way it materialises the Möbius contact between narrative and structure is by structurally embodying a primary narrative aspect to tell the overall story. This primary narrative aspect, for structure, becomes Louise learning the aliens' language. The language, as we (diegetically) learn by the end of the film, allows those who understand it to comprehend time as non-linear (as mentioned in part one). Part of the poetry enacted by *Arrival* is that the "reveal" in the fabula retroactively reveals the meaning of the syuzhet. That is, the movements in space and time become increasingly confusing. At first we perceive the jumps to be Louise's memories of the lost child, though this assumption becomes increasingly jarred. On second viewing of the film we can better comprehend, on a basic level, that the flashes experienced by Louise are of the future and only begin occurring once contact with the aliens has been made. Below is a diagram showing the plot points in relation to the syuzhet timeline (the horizontal line) and the retroactive implications of the temporal-language (the vertical arrow):



The film knowingly plays with our temporal expectations of the cinema, grounded in conventional techniques. By placing the condensed narrative of the daughter's life before the commencement of the film's main body, we assume this has already happened. We subsequently read Louise as mourning, detached from the world by sadness. It is due to this structuring that we rationally regard Louise's flashes of the daughter as specifically flash backs. Other recent sci-fi films have similarly played with spatial and temporal relationships such as Christopher Nolan's film *Interstellar* (2014). *Interstellar* too uses the cinema to explore time as malleable, a place that can bend and be somewhat lassoed

by humans. It is discussed as a potential place, “the past might be a canyon they can climb into and the future a mountain they can climb up”. Death is partially reconfigured as time is slowed down for those who travel to other planets - Cooper (Matthew McConaughey) and Brand (Ann Hathaway) - but not for Cooper’s daughter Murphy (MacKenzie Foy, Jessica Chastin and Ellen Burstyn) who remains on earth. The imprint of time is materialised in the character’s altering aging processes, which result in Murphy growing to be much older than her father. Despite the reconfiguration in the biological and familial life line(s), mortality and the life-death continuum remain linear and death is ultimately still that which follows life.

Christopher Nolan has used non-linear construction in several of his other films – *Memento* (2000), *Inception* (2010) – but, as with *Interstellar*, the fabula resists the looping set up by the syuzhet. By this I mean, although the syuzhet disrupts linear time (*Memento*) and/or the rate of time’s passage (*Inception*), it does not ultimately rethink time as non-linear as all characters remain tethered to a traditional linear fabula. This remains true for other examples of atemporal cinema which can include Nicolas Roeg’s *Bad Timing* (1980), Quentin Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *Jackie Brown* (1997), Gaspar Noé’s *Irreversible* (2002), Sidney Lumet’s *Before the Devil Knows Your Dead* (2007) and Gus Van Sant’s *Elephant* (2003) to name a few. In all these examples, except for *Irreversible*, linearity is fragmented in order to (re)tell a narrative from different character perspectives. By allowing spectators to witness an event (or events) from a multiplicity of viewpoints, one can potentially experience a more complete understanding of the central narrative. However, *Memento* and *Irreversible* differ from this fragmented arrangement of action. Instead, these two films use reverse chronology, meaning that the fabula and syuzhet have a relationship opposite than that of classical linearity. The films use this technique to different effect, especially when considered in regards to the spectator. In *Memento*, the spectator has a more privileged perspective and understanding than the central character who cannot remember events that have just happened, allowing them to be easily manipulated by others. In *Irreversible*, the characters have far more information than the spectator. When viewing *Irreversible*, violence initially appears to lack motivation. The characters’ motivation is revealed to us after events have happened (in the syuzhet), as reasoning is foregrounded earlier (in the fabula), and the two are hinged in opposite directions.

Although these examples use atemporality as a (mostly) enjoyable retardation technique, we can still connect a linearity of time out of the fragments. In comparison, I see the most prominent intertextual resonance with *Arrival* to be found in the films of Andrey Tarkovsky, not in terms of affective style but rather in regards to the way in which time takes on a mode of materiality. This almost-tactile relationship over time is perhaps poetically enshrined in Tarkovsky’s phrasing concerning “sculpting time”, in his book of that title.

Just as a sculptor takes a lump of marble, and, inwardly conscious of the features of his finished piece, removes everything that is not part of it – so the film-maker, from a ‘lump of time’ made up of an enormous, solid cluster of living facts, cuts off and discards whatever he does not need, leaving only what is to be an element of the finished film[.] (Tarkovsky:1986. 63-4)

The objecthood here ascribed to time by Tarkovsky resonates in his films, particularly *Solaris* (1972), *Mirror* (1975) and *Stalker* (1979). In *Solaris* and *Stalker*, the unconscious desires of both past (*Solaris*) and future (*Stalker*) are made tactile and “real” in their hallucinatory power. Memory and fantasy are (potentially) able to find tactility in the present. *Mirror*, on the other hand, which most clearly resonates with *Arrival*, sees time as non-linear and narrative as atemporal. Memories of the past and ghosts of the present blend in a combination of temporal zones that seem to simultaneously occupy a singular spatial zone, the childhood home. Both mother and wife, who are purposefully interchangeable and are both played by Margarita Terekhova, make the reality of present and the reality of past and memory indistinguishable.

Arrival is impressive in the way it blends the narrative and form, each propping up the other in a balancing act of time and space and light. Each informs the other, and each allows us to contemplate the border of life and death in fluid ways, blurring the traditional distinctive line between them. The cinema enacts resurrection and premonition, as well as scratching back and forth in time. We do not so much span many years, but rather, experience time’s multiplicity and its interweaving upon a singular plane. In contrast, films such as Tom Tykwer’s *Run Lola Run* (1998) and Eric Bress and J. Mackye Gruber’s *The Butterfly Effect* (2004) conceive of time as existing in a multiplicity separated by parallel or alternative paths in which characters retain agency through active choice-making to alter the course of history. Comparatively, *Arrival* resists ‘what-if?’ time-‘forking’ moments by presenting past, present and future as overlapping registers, all of which are and remain always-already. Interestingly, *The Butterfly Effect*, albeit in a different mode and tonality to *Arrival*, also shows characters move throughout time as a reaction to trauma. The science-fiction trope of aliens can also function to block trauma, as we see in Gregg Araki’s *Mysterious Skin* (2004). Of course, in these examples the trauma is not the loss of the child, but the child’s loss of self, which occurs through a set of violent encounters during pre-adolescence. In Shane Carruth’s *Primer* (2004), space and time are uncoupled as heterogeneous time ‘forks’ and are realised on a homogeneous spatial plane, creating literal repetitions of the corporeal self.

Because our situational understandings of the images of the daughter change as the film progresses, they come to be polyvalent in their resonance. I would argue, in this instance, that there is not a “real” or “authentic” way in which these images must be stabilised in the diegesis. Instead, their fluidity in situational meaning can break out into a more conceptual fluidity. In Louise’s mind, the snippets of the daughter’s image function as both analepsis and prolepsis, transforming from one to the other at the point of anagnorisis, as well as enacting a site/sight of compulsive return to trauma when framed by the militarised ambience. For the spectator, the images are ingrained in the perpetual present of cinematic time, an actuality happening on the screen. This latter point refers to filmic magic more generally by allowing for the presence of an image before our eyes, carved in temporal light, and made part of our being in experiential affect. Cinema is unlike any other medium in its intrinsic relationship to time (McGowan: 2011, 4-6). Only cinema can accomplish the simultaneous trapping and freeing of time, to experience in the now, resurrect or predict temporal moments, fixing a “real image of reality across time” (Mulvey, 2006: 10).

The cinema enables temporal fluctuations that embed the figure in two terms, in regards to the character and narrative (the daughter in *Arrival*) and the imprint of the “actual” body, the body that is/was carved and captured by light on that day the camera filmed. Mechanically the camera can “bring[s] back to life, in a perfect fossil form, anyone it has recorded, from great star to fleeting extra” (Mulvey: 2006, 18). This is distinct from the photograph, which captures and stills time. Whereas the cinema is lively in its temporality, the photograph is inert and stabilised in time. Between the still image and the moving image, life and death are tethered differently. The (re)animation of time in cinema resurrects an image. The photograph, on the other hand, although “like a living organism, [it] is born on the level of the sprouting silver grains” (Barthes: 1993, 93) it also performs “a kind of abrupt dive into literal Death” as the “*Life/Death* [...] paradigm is reduced to a simple click” (Barthes: 1993, 92). My point here is that *Arrival* does something special in comparison to most other atemporal films, something which concerns a rethinking of life and death in both narrative and structure. As symbolic and material entities, life and death are inevitably brought into question when time is reconceptualised.

When the consequence of the aliens’ language is fully realised, we understand (at least at the narrative level) that time is not linear but is always happening all at once. Thus, death is not the *end of* life but a simultaneous and always-present *partner to* life. Louise does not so much have flash forward or flash backward moments but instead is transported to an experience in another spatial and temporal zone. With this in mind, death is released from its traditional symbolic exchange, and allowed to flow into life harmoniously. Therefore, the spectator also is released from a framing of Hannah as part of a memory or premonition. Instead, we experience her in our presence, the presence of the light and time of ‘now’ in the cinema. This position, teamed with the argument that life and death are in constant fluctuation, underpins my reasoning for considering the pods as a sublimation of Louise’s melancholia *even though* the event of loss has “not yet happened” in the fabula construction during that earlier section of the film.

In *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Jean Baudrillard flamboyantly dissects the splitting of life and death in Christian rhetoric whereby concepts of after-life and death are held in ethical relation to one’s life on earth. The “soul”, whom only the “rich and powerful” possess, is understood in this discourse as an entity with the possibility of transcendence from the material body (Baudrillard: 1993, 128-129). An alternative relationship between life and death is addressed in the section “My Death is Everywhere, my Death Dreams”. Here we encounter a relationship that chimes with my reading of *Arrival*’s attitude which breaks with conventional understandings:

The irreversibility of biological death, its objective and punctual character, is a modern fact of science. It is specific to our culture. Every other culture says that death begins before death, that life goes on after life, and that it is impossible to distinguish life from death. Against the representation which sees in one the *term* of the other, we must try to see the radical *indeterminacy* of life and death, and the impossibility of their autonomy in the symbolic order. Death is not a due payment [*échéance*], it is a nuance of life; or, life is a nuance of death. (Baudrillard, 1993, 158-159)

Here Baudrillard articulates the idea that life and death are part of one another's fabric, a view that is made possible by the initial rejection of their conventionally sequential (one after the other) relationship.

{Linguistic Productions: Lack, Subjectivity, Desire}

Arrival plays with the temporal abilities of cinema by combining several modes of narrative and structure. Linguistics is gradually shown to be a theme that has operations in several of the strata of the cinematic form, not solely relegated to narrative. *Arrival's* linguistic elements include temporal language in structure, visual language in allegory, scriptural language in narrative and emotive language in affect. The cross-pollination of these segments of language, which overlap in the overall object of the film, also hark to wider theoretical stances concerning language's function in cultural production and production of subjectivity. Here I would like to stress a Lacanian position that accounts for this analysis.

When language is considered part of a symbolic order (Lévi-Strauss: 1951, 155-163), one integrates oneself at the cost of an inevitable 'splitting' (Evans:1996, 99-101 and 172-174 which explains Lacan's *Schema L*.) A significant moment in a child's recognition of a being in the world comes with successfully using the word "I". Here, one places oneself in language through a separation of one's self with the "rest" of the symbolic and material world. (*I exist in the world*). Although this order allows for connective opportunities through communicative interactions, its structural symbolic nature also inevitably results in a lack. We cannot *really* express ourselves because we are bound by the abstraction of the symbolic order constituted by linguistic signs. Thus, part of the construction of the self is always held in relation to the self constructed through this lack. We produce ourselves through lack, a lack that (re)produces us as desiring subjects. Anthony Wilden discusses relationships between lack and desire in language ("speech") in his chapter "Lacan and the Discourse of the Other" in the book *The Language of the Self*:

[...] Lacan views speech as a movement toward something, an attempt to fill the gaps without which speech could not be articulated. In other words, speech is as dependent upon the notion of *lack* as is the theory of desire. (Wilden: 1968, 164)

Arrival can be read through this Lacanian position. Part of the way the film structures lack is by implementing linguistics as a major central narrative and structural component. Through new semantic and psychic linguistic understanding, Louise is able to get closer to comprehending that which escapes language: the sublime object(s) of love and death articulated by the loss of the child. Language allows for an entry into that which it cannot express because its structure is built around lack. Joan Copjec relates Lacan's position as regarding the subject "not as an effect contained within language but as a surplus product of it, the excess that language appears to cut off. Lacan will say, in short, that is it this missing part – this additional nothing – that *causes* the subject; the subject is created *ex nihilo*" (Copjec: 1994, 53). Copjec brilliantly continues this argument, stating that:

Since signifiers are not transparent, they cannot demonstrate that they are not hiding something behind what they say-they cannot prove that they do not lie. Language can only present itself to the subject as a veil that cuts off from view a reality that is

other than what we can see. To say that the mechanisms of language acquire a certain organic elasticity [...] is to say that in stretching beyond, or delaying, determinate meaning, language produces always something more, something indeterminate, some question of meaning's reliability. It is this question that suspends the automatic attribution of existence to everything that is thought and instead raises the possibility of conceiving nonexistence: nothing. Signification gives rise inevitably to doubt, to the possibility of its own negation; it enables us to think the annihilation, the full scale destruction of our entire signified reality. (Copjec: 1994, 54-55)

Just as cinema creates meaning in the frame through what it contains *and* what it makes absent, so language is constituted in part by lack, as life is constituted (but not separate from) the ultimate lacking space of death. In Copjec's argument, this lack around which language structures itself enables the subject to reach beyond signification and towards annihilation – as Louise does by using linguistics to shatter temporal structures. It is in understanding that lack is not separate but an ingrained, inseparable part of the construction subjectivity that may encourage an understanding of the self that does not insist on asking and demanding one's self, others or artworks to fill us with the/an impossible object. There is enjoyment in the void. When coupled with a belief in potential anachronic lines, lack or loss can be regarded as part of an ongoing temporal flux, and death can be considered beyond a finality of life. There is life after death – we are in it now.

∞ An End (which is also a beginning)

Arrival makes visible aspects of language, time and the life-death continuum. I would like to stress here that these entities that I have included in my analysis are not singular or sturdy but interlocking. Though the languages of the icon, sign and symbol can – and possibly must – be partially separated into semantic and aestheticized islands to help unpack their conceptual inscriptions and resonance, they are, in the end, somewhat indistinguishable. I do not mean indistinguishable in regards to sameness, or being replications or repetitions of one another, but instead, part of a wider system and structure.

The Borromean knot is perhaps another useful tool of articulating relationships as conjoined and part of each other's being and meaning. Alongside the traditional Lacanian labels of the Borromean knot – Real, Imaginary, Symbolic and Sinthome (Evans:1996, 20) – the specifically and strictly cinematic diagram might be construed as Time, Light, Language and Affect (respectively). That is, if the cinema is a temporal (time), visual (light) medium (language), then affect becomes a binding element which crosses each inseparable entity and forges their unity. The Borromean knot materialises a set of inter-dependant relationships between the rings: “if you cut one of them, they are all freed” (Lacan: 1973, XII 9). However, the experience of the cinema includes not just the film but the eye that watches, the body that sits stilled as time washes over it, that carries the memory with it after the credits have rolled. This larger structure encompasses all the (broad) entities I have written about: life and death, time, desire, language *and* the spectator's engagement. When considered in this way, the elements of the film are less like jigsaw pieces that fit together to make a complete picture, and more like constantly

fluctuating flows, currents, forces and pulsations. The cinema creates a network of light streams to temporarily capture moments of these interactions, making them potentially graspable in the iconographic materiality of representation. It flattens an image, it stretches time, it condenses an experience, it opens an eye. As life is a gasp of time and space configured in consciousness, so the cinema is a gasp of time and space rendered in light. Here we re-watch a resurrection that we are perpetually part of, in the collapsing *and* instating of temporal boundaries. *Arrival* explores a variety of necropolitical strands whilst performing the magic of the filmic time-machine in its aesthetic choices and its fabula and syuzhet harmony which relate to one another like the two ‘sides’ of a Möbius strip – two sides that are also one side, like life and death.

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