

# Arrival and the Other

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The conceptualization and presentation of the Other is a key element in Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival*. Throughout the film many cinematographic techniques and elements are used to convey just how separate and alien different characters and groups are from one another. Specific shots are used to emphasize both the differences which separate out the Other as well as the emotional strain on the characters. The mise-en-scène pays special attention to the different settings and their interaction both with the characters and each other. The sound design, while subtle, works to make the viewer uneasy and to connect this feeling to the Other. Light and darkness, as well as the environmental factors which affect them, are often dividers between two groups. While this emphasis seems obvious for a film whose narrative is focused on the interaction between humankind and extraterrestrials it is not always the aliens who are coded as the Other. Within humanity itself these same elements work to show that many groups, or even individuals, also treat their fellow man as this Other. It is no surprise that with the language of cinema used extensively to evoke these relationships the theme of otherness is central to the narrative of *Arrival*.

The concept of the Other in writing and discourse refers to persons not part of the culture or group. This concept is often used to create an “us versus them” comparison or juxtaposition in a work or simply to discourage empathy with an antagonistic threat. Every choice of how the movie is presented can push the viewer towards the desired interpretation.

The formal properties of a movie (camera movements, close-ups, slow motion, music and sound, and so forth) constitute a textual frame that provides indices and reading instructions to audiences. In positioning the spectator within the discourse of a movie, these technical and narrative features reduce the paradigm for possible articulations and push reception in a particular direction. (Pötzsch, p.77, 2011)

*Arrival* is focused on the sudden appearance of twelve huge extraterrestrial vessels at seemingly random points across the world. While each country approaches and attempts to communicate with these aliens in its own way the United States brings in a renowned linguist, Louise, to attempt to translate the alien language. As weeks go on international pressures rise and some countries claim the heptapods are attempting to turn humanity against itself. The situation is about to boil over into war against the heptapods when the linguist discovers why they are here and uses what she's learned to prevent catastrophe.

The shots used throughout *Arrival* are always focused on showing the differences between each group and how alien they seem to one another. When viewing the ships, nicknamed Shells, extreme long shots show just how massive they are and how their smooth and curved design does not blend in with the natural terrain or human construction around them. When entering the Shell and approaching to communicate with the heptapods long shots show how the construction dwarfs the humans within and emphasizes how out of place they are. Interestingly the film does not use many medium shots but tends to keep to close-ups. By keeping the frame nearly filled with a character it makes them seem more separate from others during conversation or interaction while evoking a sense of loneliness and claustrophobia. It's also worth noting that Villeneuve keeps every shot that isn't being used to show a difference in size or to set a scene at or near eye level. The eye-level camera helps the audience empathize with the characters and causes their anxiety in interacting with the Other to be more keenly felt.

Mise-en-scène keenly shows the differences between characters and their environment as well as juxtaposing the environments themselves. Nowhere is this more evident than the sequence of entering the Shell to first communicate. The shot is filled at the top with the Shell and the rest of the background is just empty sky while the lift gradually rises through this empty space to carry

the characters away. A close-up on the surface of the Shell, smooth but not perfectly so, follows a hand as it grazes across the lit outer surface and approaches the darkness of the open ship and upon reaching it is pulled back and away. A shot from inside the ship, above the characters, makes it seem like the bright grassy space below is just a small window in the blackness of the ship. They are entering a completely alien world. As the lift reaches its maximum height the characters float up as gravity itself twists at the threshold to the ship. Leaving the lift forces them to enter a different gravitational pull and now walk on what was a wall, the ship so alien that it doesn't even conform to what they perceive as up or down. The film makes continued use of hallways to evoke anxiety in the human camp. The hallways between the tents are always tightly framing the character the camera is following to give a sense of claustrophobia before the hallway suddenly bursts out into one of the large rooms. The anxiety and surprise, combined with how busy these tight spaces are, convey that the character is in a different world just as readily as the huge dark confines of the alien ship.

Sound is used to emphasize the differences between spaces and characters in both subtle and heavy-handed ways. Near the beginning of the film, in the helicopter ride to the camp, we have the first instance of the sound design focusing on what a character is hearing rather than what the viewer should hear from their vantage point. When the linguist, Louise, puts on the headset the sounds of the helicopter are immediately muffled while the voices of the Other characters come in crisp and clear. Hearing from her vantage point, while still witnessing the scene from the third person, emphasizes her experience as well as her separation. This is also used to great effect when she is in the environment suit by again muffling all outside noise but this time making her own sounds, her anxious heavy breathing, magnified; while in the suit she is separate from her environment and team, the disconnect contributing to seeing even them as the Other. *Arrival's*

non-diegetic score is reserved for making the distinction between the alien and the normal. In the sequence where they first board the Shell it hums quietly before suddenly swelling up in a sort of controlled cacophony as a new otherworldly feature of the craft is discovered before going quiet again. Upon reaching the communication chamber it does this again but now it regularly swells and recedes to keep the audience on edge.

Lighting is used throughout the film to show division or literal contrast to support the comparisons between groups and characters as well as illustrate the barriers between intended groups. While “barriers in film and other media constitute a discursive relation of exclusion,” (Pötzsch, p.91, 2011) Villeneuve is emphasizing each group excluding others without the audience being directed to exclude any. As already touched on the play of light and darkness is used when juxtaposing the Shell’s interior with the other human world. At the other end of this black hallway is a bright white light which is the window to the heptapods’ environment. The characters’ flashlight creates a pool of light around them, with darkness still encroaching all around, as they travel from the smaller and smaller light of their Earth towards the bright light of the heptapods. The two worlds are completely separated by darkness but the characters have made their decision to try and connect with this Other. The heptapods’ chamber is well-lit but is filled with roiling fog to emphasize their mystery and otherness even while presenting them as being a source of light or knowledge. When in the camp the major research and communications rooms are kept dim while the televisions, their sources of knowledge and connection to the outside world, are bright and prominent. In discussions the conference table is clearly lit and the participants can be seen but only those whose focus is in serving the outside world sit at the table. Louise and Ian report from the side of the room in the dimmer light. Connection and

communication are important, bright, but are still separate from the work that is being done. The outside world might be what they are working to preserve but it is separate and othered.

All of the cinematic techniques used to define the Other gradually see more use in dividing humans and turning them against one another. The biggest turning point is when Louise takes off her environment suit to make communication easier. In doing this she removes a layer separating her from the heptapods but at the same time it marks her as not being someone the soldiers entirely trust. While she works to introduce herself and Ian the camera keeps going back to the three soldiers, all in frame together, watching warily. They are a unified group and are unwilling to trust either the heptapods or Louise as she now seems tainted. The divide between the researchers and soldiers is pushed by the lighting in the camp. While the researchers work in dim light we frequently see the soldiers outside or in a well-lit bunk area. Light in this case is not indicating knowledge or civilization but the perceived right and wrong of the soldiers themselves: they are in the light, they see the truth of the heptapods, they can't trust those in their shadow. During heated moments the camera often shows a speaking character in a close-up, filling the frame, to denote their distrust and show how they are pushing others away and focusing on themselves or their own directives. As the subplot with the soldiers comes to a head and they gear up to hold their positions against the rest of the military the camera focuses on the weapons case that is pulled out and opened, gradually zooming in so only the weapons, case and hands grabbing for the assault rifles are visible. At that moment the soldiers aren't supposed to be seen as people but as hands wielding weapons against the heptapods and any humans who try to stop them. Much like in the film *District 9* these soldiers represent "arrogance and intolerance when confronted by the unknown other," (Janks, p.6, 2001).

The character most coded as the Other is Louise herself. In many ways, while she is set apart as an Other herself, she represents how as an audience “we not only identify ourselves with the hero that obliterates the Other; but also we somehow feel attracted by this Otherness,” (Marcos & Colón, p.14, 2016). From the beginning of the film we see her walking alone through a crowd, teaching at a distance from her students, not reacting like everyone else to the arrival of the Shells, going home and being alone. During this she speaks to her student and mother; one from across a room and the other over the phone in an intentionally short conversation. She is separate and different from everyone around her and the emptiness is shown with long shots of her either surrounded by a faceless mass of people or no one at all. The first character to directly address her, up close and personal, is the Colonel sent to recruit her. In their conversation it is clear that Louise is not motivated to serve her country but by curiosity towards this Other – she is indifferent and dismissive about the visit until the audio sample is played. The close-up on the recorder and then her face and reaction makes it her obvious focus. Beyond the Colonel, Ian and the heptapods Louise is usually shown to be alone unless the narrative demands she communicates with someone. She works in the dimmest part of the research room, is usually the only woman present in a scene and is even set apart by being the only red-haired character. Everything about her visual design and how she is shot pushes how she doesn’t belong and yet she is single-handedly responsible for bringing the world together. This othering is also part of her transformation as she comprehends the heptapod language which, when combined with the focus on her audio perspective and flashbacks, brings the audience along with her; as in *District 9* with Wikus “his transformation becomes our transformation,” (Janks, p.5, 2011).

“[T]he construction of the Otherness in current times should not be understood as an unchallenged notion,” (Marcos & Colón, p.14, 2016) but rather than attempting to avoid it

Villeneuve uses techniques to show how this Other exists for the characters themselves. Keeping to the extremes of long and close-up shots emphasized the space between people and cultures and their own self-centered focus. The drastic contrasts in the design of different environments, while focusing on the alien aspects of even humanity's constructs, was then heightened by framing to juxtapose the differences or surround characters in their otherness. Sound kept the audience as anxious as the characters and separated Louise's point of view, and thus the audience's, from the strict third-person perspective. Dark and light contributed to the contrast of the scene design and composition but neither was a clear indicator to the audience of a "right" or "wrong" side. As each of these saw less use with the heptapods they were used more often to show the increasing divisions within humanity. However Louise was consistently shown to be apart from nearly everyone and seen as the Other. By making thorough use of the concept of the Other and promoting it through cinematic techniques Villeneuve made the juxtaposition within the narrative self-evident to the viewer.



## References

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