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English Composition

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The 2016 movie *Arrival* directed by Denis Villeneuve changed many aspects of the original 1998 novella *Story of Your Life* by Ted Chiang. Some parts were changed to appeal to a wider audience and others were changed because the original couldn’t be conveyed effectively on the screen.

The original novella is narrated in the first person by Dr. Louise Banks, a linguist who is asked by the military to help translate the language of aliens that have recently come to earth. The aliens have a nonlinear language and as Louise gains an increasing understanding of it, she begins to remember events of her life that have not happened yet, which seems to be similar to the way that the aliens see the world. *Arrival* also follows Dr. Banks along a similar storyline.

In both stories Louise will have a daughter who she knows will die young. In the movie Louise giving birth to this child is framed as a choice that Louise makes. In the novella there is more of a philosophical question of if this is a choice. Louise talks about how experiencing time the way that she does changes her. It makes her feel almost compelled to see the events of the future play out the way she knows they will. The story discusses certain concepts in physics for which the outcome appears to be the result of some goal of minimizing or maximizing a physical quantity. This is juxtaposed with the reader’s every day experience of cause an effect. Louise relates her new experience of time to this; she says, “by viewing events over a period of time, one recognized that there was a requirement that had to be satisfied, a goal of minimizing or maximizing” (129). She ponders on what this means for the idea of free will but does not feel a dilemma like she appears to in the movie.

The movie also suggests that her husband leaves her because he finds out that she knew all along that their daughter would die, whereas in the book we know that he does not find out that she knew because Louise says that she does not tell anyone that she knows the future. Both of these emotional experiences, her daughter dieing and her husband leaving her, are treated as matter of fact by the narration and without much emotion even though it is Louise doing the narration. She seems to care about, but is at peace with, these events.

In contrast to the aliens in *Story of Your Life*, the aliens in *Arrival* are much more alien. In the movie the aliens are enormous creatures shrouded in mist that seem to have mysterious powers, such as their ability to expel some sort of ink that hangs in the air and can display words in their language. In the novella their size is not known because the characters are seeing them through something analogous to a video call and can only know their size relative to their environment. The aliens also are not in an empty environment filled with mist and instead Louise talks about seeing them entering and exiting through a door, they communicate in their written language using something that seems similar to a computer, and she even sees them eating. Louise also describes conversations with them in more depth than is shown in the movie. This all works together makes the aliens in *Story of Your Life* feel much more human than those in *Arrival*.

The novella is much more explicit in it’s discussion of it’s metaphysical ideas. In the narration Louise talks about how her knowledge of the events over time allows her to see that there are constraints on events that need to be satisfied and knowing the future seems to have “evoked a sense of urgency, a sense of obligation to act precisely as she knew she would” (131). She also describes a time that she reaches up to take a bowl off a shelf and she says that it “didn’t feel like something I was forced to do. Instead it seemed just as urgent as my rushing to catch the bowl when it falls on you: an instinct that I felt right in following.” (132). The movie on the other hand doesn’t dive into these ideas at all and barely does more than imply the ways in which seeing the future works.

*Story of Your Life* even goes into some detail about mathematic concepts underlying it’s conception of foresight, while the closest that *Arrival* comes to talking about academic ideas is that it bases the change in Louise’s perception of time on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the idea that speaking a language effects the ways that you think. The novella mentions the calculus of variations and even explains Fermat’s principle of least time, which says that light will always take the path between two points which minimizes the time it spends traveling between those points and is the reason that light refracts in different mediums.

There is one scene in *Arrival* that is lifted almost word for word from *Story of Your Life*. In the scene, Louise’s daughter asks her for a word that refers to a situation in which both sides of an interaction can have a positive outcome. Louise can’t remember the word and her daughter says that her father would know (124). A few pages later, the physicist that Louise has been working with says the phrase, “non-zero-sum game”, and the narrative returns to the point that the scene where her daughter asked about the word ended and Louise says “non-zero-sum game” (127). This scene in particular is useful for both mediums, because it illustrates Louise’s experience with time using a short phrase that many people have heard before. Because the phrase is short and memorable, it is easy to convey in both without losing the audience’s attention. It also uses a simple question to keep the first part of the scene in the their minds while waiting for the second part.

*Arrival* follows the same general plot and has similar themes to *Story of Your Life* but the way that the two are presented to the audience is vastly different. *Story of Your Life* is a dense, low stakes, story that some readers may have difficulty understanding, and while *Arrival* is still cerebral it can be enjoyed without understanding some of the more complex ideas that it presents, and as such is likely more palatable for most people.

Works Cited

Chiang, Ted. “Story of Your Life.” *Stories of Your Life and Others*, Reissue, Vintage, 2010.

Villeneuve, Denis. *Arrival*. Paramount Pictures, 2016.