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The joy of watching the film *Arrival* with Whitehead and O'Donohue

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Abstract

This paper offers a discussion of the film *Arrival* that is situated in the perspective of philosophers Alfred North Whitehead and John O'Donohue. The themes discussed include language, communication, context, time, and reality and includes a speculative perspective that the philosophers may have contributed to interpretation of the film's meaning. It concludes with a view of the relevance of the film in light of current technology advances in artificial intelligence and with the authors own reflection on how this film is relevant to her current research inquiry on the topic of joy

Keywords: Arrival, language, time, consciousness, reality, Whitehead, O'Donohue, artificial intelligence, joy.

The joy of watching the film *Arrival* with Whitehead and O'Donohue

Much has been written about the film *Arrival* (2016) since it was released, and to frame my discussion of the film that is relevant to what I'm observing in the high-tech industry and my academic research, I invited the perspectives of two of my favorite philosophers to join me in the watch party. The first invited is the perspective of philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead, with whom I am newly acquainted but thus far have found his ideas on process philosophy to bring a new and imaginative expansiveness to my current thinking, much like a threshold concept. The second I invited is the perspective of a philosopher, theologian, and poet John O'Donohue, whom I have been familiar with for many years, and whose work on the ideas of belonging and connection was inspired largely by Hegel and Meister Eckhart. You may be wondering why I invited these two philosophers who typically would not be situated within the same discussion to be a part of my exploration of the film *Arrival*. It is because I see similar and complementary ideas in their work, and given the gravity of thought and determination of heart that both philosophers demonstrate through their writing, I thought them to be very worthy and welcomed perspectives through which to examine the film *Arrival*.

To provide structure for this discussion, I will lightly examine the film's themes in terms of language and connections, time and reality, and the use of symbolism to land its abstract ideas in the most comprehensible way. *Arrival*, as a work of fiction, is a beautiful blend of philosophy and storytelling to bring the abstract into the concrete so that we can look at our world and our work in new ways. In that light, I will also discuss how the ideas from this film are relevant to the field of high-tech which is where I have the most familiarity, and how these ideas can advise further research. I will summarize with some personal reflections from watching this film from the context of my current research pursuits on the topic of joy because this film offers a unique perspective of the concept of joy when the constraints of time are subtracted and the benefits of

knowing are added to human experience. Before jumping into observations, I'll first summarize the film *Arrival* for context.

Arrival Storyline

Arrival was directed by Denis Villeneuve; the screenplay was written by Eric Heisserer and is based on the short story “*Story of Your Life*” by Ted Chiang (1998). The music for the film was by Johann Johannsson. The plot of the story follows Louise Banks (played by Amy Adams), who is a linguist hired by the US Army to communicate with aliens who have arrived and hovered on Earth in twelve mysterious spacecraft distributed around the globe. While working with physicist Ian Donnelly (played by Jeremy Renner) she ultimately learns the aliens’ language, which alters her conscious perception of reality and allows her to recall the future in the same way that we remember the past. She sees that she will have a daughter named Hannah (who will die) with her husband Ian Donnelly who will eventually leave her, but she chooses to embrace her destiny in each moment along with her whole life experience with both joys and sorrows. She also helps prevent a global war by using her knowledge from her future to address hostilities between leaders and governments due to misinterpretations of what the aliens were trying to communicate about their intent. Louise was able to determine that the aliens had come to Earth to bring the *gift* of language and time, while other countries had misinterpreted the aliens’ statement to be referring to a *weapon*. It was a miscommunication of context. The story is primarily about how language shapes our structures of consciousness, our perception of reality, and how communication and connection can bridge the gaps between different species and cultures. It is also about the power of choice, and the consequences of knowing the future, and challenges our ideas about the nature of time, memory, and free will. This film is complex in ideology, and rich in symbolism as we will explore.

Language and Connections

The first observation noted is the influence of language on perceived reality and the power of connection. This film is primarily about how our language determines our reality, and that is conveyed through two primary storylines. The first storyline is how Louise's reality was permanently altered as she learned and understood the language of the aliens. Her reality became, like the aliens, a four-dimensional experience that was not bounded by time as it is in the human three-dimensional and linear experience. I'll say more about the aspect of time later. This idea of the power of language caused me to consider the importance of how language influences our lives and our culture today, especially in the wake of an artificial intelligence (AI) emergence that is based on large language models and is now producing the current generation of generative AI. In looking to philosophy to help process my thoughts, I found that Whitehead (1938) in a lecture on expression noted:

Its final conclusion respecting human nature, is that the mentality of mankind and the language of mankind created each other. If we like to assume the rise of language as a given fact, then it is not going too far to say that the souls of men are the gift from language to mankind. The account of the sixth day should be written, He gave them speech, and they became souls. (p. 40-41)

Could it be that language not only defines our reality but also calls our souls into being? If that is true, what kind of language is responsible for this? Is it analog language spoken from the mind and the heart? Is it written digitally encoded language that programs our thoughts and our reality? Or both? And, how does language evolve this way or have this kind of influence? O'Donohue (1999) once commented on the essence of language and consciousness noting:

Words form our minds, and we can only see ourselves and the world through the lenses of words. As they age over centuries, words ripen with nuance and deeper levels of meaning. The memory of a people lives in the rich landscape of its language. The destructive things done by them and to them live there too. (p. 253)

The idea that our language determines our reality is one that I see quite a lot of consistency across the works of Whitehead and O'Donohue even if their approaches are quite different. *Arrival* also embodies these ideas as the language of the aliens reflects their inner landscapes, and in giving language as a gift they shared their souls.

The second storyline centers around how Louise connects with those in her life. It explores the power of language for connection, and also the complexity of language and relationships. Easily one of my favorite scenes in the film is when Louise makes her first real connection with the aliens and says, “Now, that’s a proper introduction (Villeneuve, 2016, 46:25-52)”. It is her connection with the aliens that results in them giving her the gift of their language and time. She eventually understands that the reason they have landed on Earth is to give the gift of their language to humans because they would need humanity’s help in the future, and the gift would help to ensure human and alien survival. Louise understood their meaning because she had connected with them and understood their context for offering the gift. However, the Chinese linguists who had been trying to connect with the aliens were using the game Mahjong to make contact and learn their language. In that context, they interpreted the alien’s purpose as offering to use a weapon instead of a gift, and ultimately misunderstood the aliens’ intention. This caused the Chinese and multiple global societies to respond as if it were an act of war. This part of the storyline demonstrates that both context and connection are essential for communication and interpreting intent, and that intent is not only an individual phenomenon but a societal one. This

pivotal turn of a societal response to the aliens in *Arrival* is not a surprise as Whitehead (1959) observed, “The self-organization of society depends on commonly diffused symbols evoking commonly diffused ideas and at the same time indicating commonly understood actions. (p. 76). It is also safe to assume that the aliens’ presence alone created fear. O’Donohue (1997), when discussing how our vision colors our reality also noted that “to the fearful eye, all is threatening” (p. 63). It is easy to see how the misunderstanding in the film caused the reaction that it did.

Time and Reality

The fascinating result of language influencing time in *Arrival* is that through the gift of language, Louise was able to see her entire life outside of time. Not that her life became one solitary instant, but that all of the moments in her life story were dynamically available to her as a part of her knowing and being. Matt Segall (2016), a Whiteheadian scholar, frames a useful perspective of time in his article *Minding Time in an Archetypal Cosmos* where he describes time as Chronos (secular time), Kairos (seasonal time), and Aion (eternal time). This is interesting because, in the film *Arrival*, we see Louise living in Chronos time, reflecting on Kairos time, and experiencing Aion time. Whitehead (1979) offers a related view of language and time:

Language is expression from one’s past into one’s present. It is the reproduction in the present of sensa which have intimate association with the realities of the past. Thus the experience of the past is rendered distinct in the present, with a distinctness borrowed from the well-defined- sensa. In this way, an articulated memory is the gift of language, considered as an expression from oneself in the past to the oneself in the present. (p. 33)

This made me wonder what Whitehead would have thought of this film, and how he would have responded to the idea of future time in the same relative context as the past. What kind of gift could we expect for the oneself in the present from the expression of oneself in the future? In the

case of Louise, she experienced her future joys and her sorrows. At one point, she states: “Despite knowing the journey and where it leads, I embrace it. And I welcome every moment of it (Villeneuve, 2016, 01:46:25-41).” It appears in the end that she decided both were of value in her story because she moved forward in her relationships without intentionally changing them (although she did use her understanding of the future to intentionally alter her present by intervening on the world’s stage with the political response to the aliens). Whitehead also argued that physical time (what clocks measure) and psychological time (what humans experience) are different and that psychological time is perhaps more important to the human experience in general than physical time. Could this be why people can choose to endure suffering and savor joy? I eventually started to question the idea of time generally as Whitehead (1979) stated, “The future is merely real, without being actual; whereas the past is a nexus of actualities (p. 214).” What if this isn’t entirely true? What if the future is also a nexus of actualities *and* possibilities that we are just unconsciously aware of? The subject of time is where I see a very different perspective between Whitehead and O’Donohue. This is because O’Donohue’s (1997) ideas about time are more anchored in Celtic spirituality as he talks about physical time as being circular, and also discusses the idea that eternal time and memory exist within the soul. Perhaps to further explore the ideas of time in *Arrival*, I should have considered also inviting Henri Bergson and Albert Einstein to the *Arrival* watch party. Next time. One thing is clear, the notion of time is not an easy one to put into a nice tidy box, which is why I think that it is so fun to think about, and I will posit that is also why so many filmmakers explore its edges and play with its definitions.

Symbols, Metaphors, and Music

This notion of an altered view of time is not an easy one to pull off in a film. *Arrival* does a good job of this in terms of storyline, and it is greatly enhanced through the use of symbols, metaphors, and music. Perhaps this is because ideas such as the nature of time are abstract, and filmmakers find that symbols or sound are most effective for illuminating their abstract ideas. For example, in all of the major scenes, there appears to be a gigantic white canvas that connects them as we see a large whiteboard in Louise's classroom, large white walls in her home, and a large opaque white wall that separates Louise from the aliens. This seems to be symbolic of our stories creating a comprehensive and cohesive picture that demonstrates the connected relationship of events, or in Whitehead's (1979) view, the philosophy of process where everything is interconnected and a part of a whole. The use of large stone-like spacecraft that hang silently in space is also metaphoric of time. As O'Donohue (2010) reminds us, "Wrapped in stillness, stone continues to transfigure and praise the silence of time (p. 159)." I think that Whitehead might have agreed with O'Donohue on that point. In what is a comedic shift, Louise and Ian name the aliens Abbott and Costello, which is a nod to the storyline where the aliens are misunderstood because of the context and use of the words *gift* and *weapon*, much like a very dangerous version of the infamous Abbott and Costello "who's on first" skit. There was also extensive use of circles in this film which subtly reinforced the idea of the cyclical nature of time and reality. The alien language was visually in a circle, much of the over-land air footage was shot in a circular motion, and even the theme music was a progression of the circle of fifths. Further, in the blurring of the concepts of beginning and ending, Louise's daughter's name is Hannah, which is a palindrome, also indicating no clear beginning or end. This certainly lands the film as notable among the richly metaphoric pop sagas.

Why is the film *Arrival* relevant now?

This film is ironically one that seemed to envision the future when it was first produced because the issues that it raised are even more relevant now, and likely will be in the coming years. On the topic of language and reality, it is currently large language models that are on the verge of calling into being artificial intelligences remarkably similar in pattern to how Whitehead expressed the relationship between language and soul. And, many of these artificial intelligences are currently constructing their languages to communicate with each other, and to represent themselves and their own, unique inner landscape which is much like the ideas expressed by O'Donohue. It all leaves me wondering about what will happen to human languages. O'Donohue (1999) observed that "When you destroy a people's language through colonization or through the more subtle, toxic colonization of consumerism, you fracture their belonging and leave them in limbo (p. 253)." Could it be possible that AI, as trained by humans, would be the next colonizer? The film *Arrival* hints that the mere presence of aliens brings a threat similar to colonization, but could that be a metaphor for understanding that the threat of colonization has already ravaged our society and we now may be looking at a new one? Or, is AI a gift that helps humans flourish as discussed by Eric Horvitz (2023) and leading AI futurists in the *AI Anthology* where they explore how the large language models of AI can change the nature of how humans relate to each other and technology? Or, beyond that, how does the language of AI change our conscious experience as the language of the aliens in *Arrival* changes the conscious experience of Louise? The relevance of the new questions raised in *Arrival* seems as timely today as the questions it raised when I first watched it years ago.

My final reflections as a film watcher

As I pondered the themes of language and connections, and reality and time, I thought this about my field of study which is joy, and wondered what happens to our perception of joy

when we subtract the constraints of time and add the benefits of knowing to the human experience. I have also begun to think that joy is a universal language because it requires no translation and exists inside and outside of time however we chose to define time. Joy calls our souls into being, and wakes up our souls when we've lost our way and our passion for being. Joy is there in the midst of ecstasy and is also waiting on the edge of sorrow. Joy leaves an indelible mark on our past and memories, and casts a beacon of hope for our future potentialities even when we know that the future will undoubtedly be a mixed bag destined to include untold grief and loss. Joy is the essence of the landscape of reality that we perceive as the present. Ultimately, this film causes me to wonder what influence language has on our structures of consciousness as discussed by Combs (2009), and the essence of joy in that context.

It is safe to say that all films can cause one to examine the philosophical ideas and structures of consciousness behind them because they are an expression of the life and philosophies of the filmmaker. In that light, I consider film, fiction, poetry, and artistic expression to be invaluable to the work and discourse of research.

While we will never really know what it would be like to watch the film *Arrival* with Whitehead and O'Donohou, or what each of them would think about the film specifically, there is a lot of evidence that they both would have had valuable perspectives on the themes in the film that I think would have made watching this film with either of them a sheer delight. Watching *Arrival* while hearing Whitehead in my head and O'Donohue in my heart helped me to develop a better understanding of the ideas in the film and to glimpse the timelessness and essence of joy in a new way. I'll definitely be inviting philosophers to watch parties more often.

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