

Book Reviews

Arrival

DAVID ROCHE. **Arrival**. University of Texas Press, 2024 (1st ed.). 201 p.

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In the book *Arrival*, David Roche provides several analyses throughout each chapter about the film of the same name. Throughout Roche's book, he provides his readers with several types of themes and insights for them to consider. This makes the film even more enjoyable as one starts to appreciate, in a deeper way, the concepts he discusses and the ways the film deviates from and yet reaffirms the established cinematic canon. Film enthusiasts, philosophers, and science fiction fans who enjoy engaging in deep dives into films they love and enjoy will all appreciate Roche's analysis of *Arrival*. This is because Roche's writing is straightforward and accessible and his insights poignant, illuminating, and contemplative, while ensuring they do not become encumbered in their various philosophical analyses.

Before looking at Roche's book, a quick review of the film will be helpful. In *Arrival*, aliens known as Heptapods land their ships at twelve separate locations around the earth, with the film primarily focusing on the ship that lands in Montana. Right away, the film introduces Dr. Louise Banks, played by Amy Adams, Ian Donnelly, played by Jeremy Renner, and Colonel Weber, played by Forest Whitaker. Roche argues that each character represents a distinct theme: Louise represents the humanities, Ian symbolizes the hard sciences, and Weber exemplifies the military. Throughout the film, Louise, Ian, and Weber attempt to discern if the Heptapods are invading planet earth or coming as friendly guests. At times, the audience witnesses a clash between Louise and Ian, Louise and Ian and Weber, and Louise and Weber, and then between Louise and herself. These clashes reflect the film's underlying tensions throughout the film between approaches informed by the humanities, hard sciences, and the military. It also examines the difficulty, and the necessity, of balancing the three while resisting more aggressive or cliché responses, such as immediately viewing the Heptapods as hostile invaders.

These tensions are examined in the thematic orientation of the book. In Chapter 1, "*Arrival* as Auteur Film Adaptation" Roche examines *Arrival* through a literary lens. Here, Roche orients the reader to the original author of the short story from which it is based, Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life." In Chapter 2, "*Arrival* as Hard Soft Science Fiction," Roche continues his literary analysis through examining how the film attempts to solve the difficulty of communication and the science of communication, and the tension between the two throughout the film. In Chapter 3, "*Arrival* as a Reflection on/of Communication" Roche moves from literary themes to exploring issues in the philosophy of language and issues in communication studies through noting *Arrival's* focus on Louise, a linguist, and not Ian, a

physicist. In Chapter 4, “*Arrival* as an Experience of Time” Roche moves from his focus on the philosophy of language to *Arrival*’s exploration of time through flashbacks and flash forwards. Roche notes that this device in particular harks to the puzzle or mind-game film, where *Arrival* tasks the audience with puzzling over the images and the flashes. In Chapter 5, “*Arrival* as an Experience of Space,” Roche analyzes *Arrival*’s exploration of boundaries of place both through the traditional landscape seen throughout the film, the counterintuitive design of the Heptapods’ spaceship, and the audience in the cinematic space. In Chapter 6, “*Arrival* as a Political and Ethical Experience” Roche’s final examination concerns *Arrival*’s ethical speculation and geopolitical commentary.

As a business, environmental, and AI ethicist, I find Roche’s Chapter 6, “*Arrival* as a Political and Ethical Experience” the most compelling and pedagogically rich. This is because it takes seriously political, societal, and ethical issues involved with each decision and response depicted in the film. In particular, throughout Chapter 6, Roche demonstrates the ways in which *Arrival* offers ethical speculation and geopolitical commentary. This makes his book an ideal teaching resource to explore the role technology and communication have in shaping real-world power dynamics.

In my courses, I often emphasize the tension between ethical consideration and legal obligations, breaking these down further into issues around competition, coordination, inclusivity, and politically-motivated decisions that impact consumers and businesses in unexpected ways. Roche highlights a similar tension in *Arrival* through underscoring the difference between the international response to the alien arrival and the American response. For example, in *Arrival*, the Heptapods write the word “weapon,” which provokes a strong reaction from each international team. Instead of continuing their collaboration, each team swiftly interprets the word as a potential threat, and then signs off and shuts down their communications. In response, Weber demands Louise and Ian find the answer to the Heptapods’ meaning and use of the word “weapon.” Louise cautions that without the proper cultural and linguistic contexts, critical miscommunications can happen. Thus, it is important that they take their time to understand if the Heptapods’ use of the word weapon simply means “tool” rather than connotes aggression, as it would if used by the military. Roche’s discussion shows how the film uses Louise to convey these ideas that following the status quo or legal obligation is not always the right or ethical choice. It may be the easier of the two, but it reflects a reactionary response rather than a measured one.

Roche points out that, unlike many films that center on an American perspective, portraying it as superior with the idea that might makes right, *Arrival* positions China as the key decision-maker. Once again, the audience sees the tension between science on one hand and the military and political leaders on the other. Roche calls attention to how Louise’s and Ian’s call for collaboration further highlights this tension and the complexities of international relations. This tension in the film can be used to highlight issues in business and AI ethics, where certain ethical standards or guidelines conflict with laws or standard business practices. This is despite the fact that these approaches are usually just

more measured, methodical ways to achieve the best outcomes. However, policymakers routinely dismiss these approaches because they are slower and more complex, much like Louise's approach in understanding the Heptapods.

This tension shows up again when agent Halpern comments to Louise and Ian that Russia and China's response to their own experts involves ensuring secrecy and non-collaboration, with a threat of potential violence. There, Roche suggests that *Arrival's* geopolitical backdrop shapes the narrative and emotional interest by emphasizing both the thematic and political relevance of their response. This is also relevant in both business and AI ethics. These elements can be used to emphasize throughout the semester that there is a difference between ethics and laws, and stress that laws are not always ethical. Thus, there remains an ongoing tension between ethical obligations and what is legally permissible.

Additionally, several scenes in *Arrival* are rich in pedagogical value, making Roche's book a useful resource to complement the teaching of these concepts. For example, the weapon scene serves as an impactful teaching moment on issues of communication and ethical decision-making. This scene relates to current societal and ethical issues, such as the "AI arms race" and rise of disinformation and misinformation, particularly with the increase in AI-generated images and videos, like Deepfakes, that appear authentic but are fake.

Similarly, a political philosophy course, such as one on ethics, politics, and technology could include a module focused on humanities-informed responses that contrast with standard political or military responses. The course could first show *Arrival* and then use Roche's book to examine its broader political and ethical implications, specifically, Chapters 3 and 6.

In closing, Roche's book exceeded my expectations. After reading his book, I rewatched *Arrival* with a deeper meaning and appreciation for the cinematic, thematic, and stylistic choices. I strongly believe that Roche's book offers valuable insights on a variety of themes that would interest both fans of alien-invasions films and academics. The accessible writing style also makes it a fantastic choice and resource for academic settings, whether for high school or university students.

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