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Our Greatest Weapon: The Rhetoric of Invasion in Arrival and Independence Day

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Abstract

Inside of every alien invasion story is a central 'us vs. them' mentality that carries the thematic and moral weight of the story. Because of this, alien invasion films can be viewed through a postcolonial lens that reveals the destructive implications of colonialism, including a fear of the foreign and the figure of the white savior. Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996) and Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival* (2016) are no exception to this. Although both films are about aliens coming to Earth, the perspectives they follow in telling the story, their depictions of the military and scientists, their commentary on the role of communication, and the outcomes of the conflict make the films inverted reflections of each other. With the excessive patriotic rhetoric and imagery of *Independence Day* and *Arrival*'s commentary on communication and militarism, the language of these films are seemingly opposed to each other, but both ultimately reveal the importance of that language in negotiating conflict and either challenging or conforming to the simplistic 'us vs. them' binary present in both of the films.

Keywords

science fiction, postcolonialism, film, alien invasion

Disciplines

Communication | Film and Media Studies | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Rhetoric and Composition

Comments

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German 260

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Our Greatest Weapon: The Rhetoric of Invasion in *Arrival* and *Independence Day*

Behind every great work of science fiction is a central “What if?” question. In alien invasion movies, the most obvious question to set up the plot is, “What if aliens came to Earth?” That is the central question in Roland Emmerich’s *Independence Day* (1996), and it is the initial question of Denis Villeneuve’s *Arrival* (2016). Because of science fiction’s ability to disarm an audience through its—sometimes literally—out-of-this-world scenarios and fantastical creatures and technology, it is the perfect genre for questioning the accepted norms of society and for asking more philosophical questions, like “What makes us human?” but often in a way that feels more organic and non-pretentious. In particular, alien invasion films, like *Independence Day* and *Arrival*, offer a chance to examine the destructive implications of colonialism that continue today. Viewing alien invasion films through a postcolonial lens reveals a dangerous trend of the fear of the foreign and the figure of the white savior. The points of similarities in these two films—the presence of the US military, the role of the scientist, and the simplistic binary of oppositions introduced through references to games—are also simultaneously the aspects of the films that make them the most different from each other. A postcolonial reading of these two films exposes alien invasion films as inextricably linked to colonialism and imperialism, especially in the rhetoric used in the films and the immediate, violent reaction that people, and specifically figures of authority, show towards anything foreign. Whereas *Independence Day* validates that fear and upholds violence as the necessary reaction to it, *Arrival* presents violence as a failure and communication as the only pathway to understanding and peace.

Released twenty years apart, *Independence Day* and *Arrival* are inverted reflections of each other. They present a similar basic plot through different perspectives and with different outcomes. Both are, at their simplest, about aliens coming to Earth, and in both, the US military plays a key role. *Independence Day* is a classic 90s action blockbuster that depicts American patriotism to a degree that borders on parody. In *Independence Day*, the world is saved through the resilience, courage, and strength of the American people and the military. In the third act, David Levinson (Jeff Goldblum), a satellite technician, identifies a computer virus that he and Captain Steven Hiller (Will Smith), a fighter pilot, upload into the alien mothership, which disarms the forcefields and allows the US Air Force, including ex-pilot President Whitmore (Bill Pullman) to destroy the ships.

In contrast, *Arrival* takes almost the opposite approach to its storyline by leaning hard into its philosophical aspects and becoming more of a drama that just happens to include aliens than a simple alien invasion action movie. *Arrival* is centered on themes of communication, language, and science with linguist Louise Banks (Amy Adams) as its central protagonist and physicist Ian Donnelly (Jeremy Renner) as her partner in researching the aliens, called heptapods. The heptapods gift humanity their nonlinear language, which allows whoever learns it to experience time nonlinearly. Like in *Independence Day*, the military leaders around the world prepare for war with the heptapods, but war is prevented when Louise uses the gift and her new knowledge of the future to convince the leader of the Chinese military, General Shang, to not attack. Although this is one of the plots of the film, *Arrival*, in the end, isn't just about aliens but also the relationship Louise has with her yet-to-be-born daughter and her accepting and embracing the life she already knows will be filled with joy and grief. Although *Arrival* deals with themes of militarism and tries to answer the question "What if aliens came to Earth?"

realistically, the personal perspective and philosophical leanings of the film suggest a parallel question for the film, “If you could see your future, would you change things?” With this comes the theme of choice that also plays into how the film depicts the government’s response to the heptapods. The balance between the two questions in *Arrival* makes it a unique piece of science fiction.

Alien invasion films, by their very nature, deal with the questions of “who belongs, and who is ‘other,’” which is ultimately shaped by the impacts of colonialism (Aelabouni 2). *Independence Day* and *Arrival* are no exception to this. The fear of the foreign is not only present but encouraged in *Independence Day*. Aliens come to Earth and almost immediately destroy major cities in an attempt to exterminate humanity. During a pivotal scene, President Whitmore learns the aliens’ purpose on Earth through a telepathic conversation with one of them. When asked if peace can exist between their species, the alien responds, “No peace,” and when asked what the aliens want humanity to do, it responds, “Die” (1:31:00). Humanity, now faced with the threat of extermination, is only left with the choice between fighting the aliens or being killed. Susana Loza argues that films with monsters or aliens “utilize the figure of the alien to express and manage white fears of invasion, contamination, segregation, miscegenation, degeneration, and conquest” (qtd. in Aelabouni 7). The fear of invasion by the other is realized by the aggressive alien invasion in *Independence Day*. The ‘us vs. them’ mentality of films like *Independence Day* is made explicit when the only choice is to kill or be killed.

The othering in the film also plays on people’s fear of history repeating. In *Arrival*, Colonel Weber reminds Louise, “And remember what happened to the Aborigines. A more advanced race nearly wiped ‘em out” (40:30). The fear of the foreign is tied directly to a fear of destruction by “a more advanced race,” like in the history of humanity and colonization.

Similarly, in *Independence Day*, the aliens are said to have bodies that are “just as frail as ours,” but with their armor, forcefields, and spaceships, “you just have to get through their technology...which is far more advanced” (*Independence Day* 1:19:45). Much like colonizers on Earth, the aliens move from place to place, or in this case, from planet to planet, conquering and destroying everything. After being telepathically connected with the alien, Whitmore says, “I saw what they’re planning to do. They’re like locusts. They’re moving from planet to planet...After they’ve consumed every natural resource, they move on. And we’re next” (1:32:20). This is immediately followed by a general shooting and killing the alien. The fear of the other comes from the tradition of colonizing and conquering that has manufactured an opposition between different groups. As Frantz Fanon says, “The feeling of inferiority of the colonized is the correlative to the European’s feelings of superiority. Let us have the courage to say it outright: *It is the racist who creates his inferior*” (93). In other words, conflict and oppression are created by those who claim their superiority over others. It is the fear of being deemed inferior that drives powerful countries, in history and in films, to maintain the illusion of superiority. In *Independence Day* humanity, and specifically, the United States, defends its power and superiority by being unconquerable, even by the “more advanced race” of aliens. This comes through most notably through the film’s patriotic imagery and messaging.

Independence Day’s excessive patriotism fits with the trend in popular science fiction and its “focus on...contact between an ‘us’ and an alien ‘them’” that often “function[s] to construct and maintain ideologies of American empire” (Aelabouni 3). The destruction of iconic symbols of the United States early in the film, such as the White House, the Capitol Building, and the Statue of Liberty become representations of “a literal and figurative destruction of US freedom” (Edwards 61). The fight against the aliens, then, becomes a necessary act to defend America’s

freedom. Emmerich, as a German director, brings an outsider perspective to American patriotism. Frank Mehring explains that *Independence Day* figuratively destroys the ‘American dream’ in order to “reaffirm its allegedly unconquerable spirit” and so the film “brings into perspective the American founding myths by translating the promise of renewal, regeneration, and rebirth encoded in the Declaration of Independence into contemporary science fiction films” (2). The vision of America that Emmerich captures in *Independence Day* is the one that America itself has produced, projected, and promoted through cultural diplomacy and products, which from another perspective could be seen as “national self-delusion” (Mehring 2). From its title to the climax of the film, *Independence Day* is entrenched in patriotism and militarism to the extreme, which could be seen as a parody or critique or as a celebration or recreation of it.

The opening shot of the film, in particular, offers an interesting contradiction to the events that follow. The shot opens on the Apollo landing site and focuses on the American flag with a plaque that reads: “We came in Peace—for All Mankind,” which suggests that the “national myth of ‘America as a peaceful nation’ is thus in play literally from the first moments” (1:00, Riper 11). It also suggests that “Peace—for All Mankind” is peace at any cost, including the paradox of peace through violence. The construction of the myth of America reveals truths about culture and community, and as Roland Barthes argues, “myth has in fact a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something, and it imposes on us” (226). The myth of America, then, reflects real-world cultural attitudes, values, and identities. By existing in that space of the American myth, *Independence Day* is reflecting on its function and veracity through the fictional lens of science fiction. As Barthes says, “[M]yth *hides nothing*: its function is to distort, not to make disappear” (231). Viewing *Independence Day* as a critique on that myth transforms the film from a simple American action blockbuster about aliens to a deconstruction

of American identity and patriotism. Despite that, the potential commentary the film offers is largely lost on audiences, particularly American audiences, who “embraced and continues to enjoy *Independence Day* as an ultra-patriotic popcorn movie” and as a “highly appealing exercise in showing ‘this is why they all love us!’” (Mehring 7).

In Emmerich’s film, American patriotism is idealized and extended in President Whitmore’s now-iconic speech in which he calls for people—in the scene, only American citizens and military members—to redeclare the independence of all humanity, creating a new meaning for the American holiday *Independence Day* as not a holiday for America but rather the entire world:

Mankind. That word should have new meaning for all of us today. We can’t be consumed by our petty differences anymore. We will be united in our common interests. Perhaps it’s fate that today is the Fourth of July, and you will once again be fighting for our freedom...Not from tyranny, oppression, or persecution...but from annihilation. We are fighting for our right to live. To exist. And should we win the day, the Fourth of July will no longer be known as an American holiday, but as the day the world declared in one voice: “We will not go quietly into the night! We will not vanish without a fight! We’re going to live on! We’re going to survive! Today we celebrate our Independence Day!”
(1:48:00)

President Whitmore’s speech evokes a unified world guided by the founding principles and promises of America. The speech has echoes of ‘Manifest Destiny’ in it and of the image of the United States as “a beacon of hope and a democratic model for the whole world” (Mehring 4). In the film, the United States leads the attacks against the aliens while the rest of the world seems to wait to follow its lead. The reactions and actions of other countries are only shown in brief scenes and the military forces of the United Kingdom, Israel, and Iraq are all together on an airbase in the Iraqi Desert when they receive a message from the United States about planning a counter-offensive, to which a British soldier replies, “It’s about bloody time. What do they plan to do?” (1:50:00). The message is also sent to other government and military officials, who then

prepare to join the simultaneous attack against the aliens around the world. The scene is meant to be a representation of the world coming together against a common cause, but the implications behind it present Americans as saviors for the rest of the world, another common trope of the alien invasion genre.

Arrival, in particular, carries postcolonial implications and reverberations in the form of a white savior. Alien contact stories with their ties to colonialist themes, “have traditionally been written from hegemonic cultural perspectives: that of the white colonizer, on the one hand, and the human explorer of outer space (also likely to be white) on the other” (Aelabouni 2). In alien invasion films, a white savior is presented as a “border-guarding patriot” (Aelabouni 2). The traditional Christian white savior is challenged slightly in *Independence Day* with Captain Hiller, a black man, and David, a Jewish man, saving humanity through their ingenuity and courage. In *Arrival*, the white savior trope is present in the figure of Louise. In it, the white woman can be seen as an “active agent and soldier of American empire” and is the “front line of defense for (white) humanity” (Aelabouni 6). Louise singlehandedly prevents humanity from self-annihilation by going to war with the heptapods and presumably starting World War III. She does this by being the only one who is able to unlock the true gift of the heptapod’s language before any of the other countries and to use that gift to stop General Shang from declaring war. However, *Arrival* does not fit into the frame of a straightforward endorsement of imperialist tropes of American exceptionalism, in part because of the role of the scientist and in part because of its more nuanced depiction of the military, especially in comparison to *Independence Day*’s excessive militarism and patriotism.

In *Independence Day*, every hero figure is part of the military or has to participate in the military’s attack in order to achieve success or redemption. This is the case with Russell Casse, a

father, pilot, and Vietnam veteran, who has spent most of the film drunk and embarrassing his children but sacrifices himself in the final battle, destroying an entire alien ship and redeeming himself in the eyes of his children and the country. In order to get rid of the forcefields around the spaceships, David teams up with Captain Hiller to deliver the virus to the mothership. Even the president, disliked by the public for most of the film, earns the people's respect and becomes a hero when he joins the military in the final aerial attack on the aliens. The military's violent reaction is the only possible solution to the aliens invading and attacking Earth and to participate in it is the only heroic choice the characters have.

In contrast to *Independence Day*, the military and the US government is not as celebrated in *Arrival*. The traditional action heroes of Captain Hiller and President Whitmore are replaced by scientists Louise and Ian. *Independence Day*'s only scientist, Dr. Okun, is introduced over an hour into the film and is a "grotesque caricature of a scientist," which indicates the film's "preference for physicality over intellect" (Riper 111). Even the technician David, who finds the virus to weaken the aliens, does not become a hero of the story until his victory on the alien mothership alongside Captain Hiller. While Ian carries some of the same "socially awkward geek" characteristics as David, they are not as prominent and Ian is never made an action hero (Riper 132). Neither is Louise. Louise and Ian are not even treated as heroes within the story. The military leaders consider them "skilled but not...authoritative; they are valuable, but expendable" (Aelabouni 11). The military officials are constantly in opposition with Louise and her tactics in communicating with the aliens; they are impatient, quick to jump to the worst assumptions, and elusive with information that Louise needs to do her job. In order to save humanity from war, Louise has to defy the orders of the military, not join them, to be successful.

With this, the military figures in *Arrival* are not nearly as likable, transparent, or trustworthy as those in *Independence Day*.

One reason that *Independence Day* is able to comfortably exist as an easy popcorn flick is the simplicity with which it presents the conflict. It's notable that the blame for the ensuing violence in the film on the aliens, or the 'other' figures. President Whitmore, in his first interaction with an alien, tells it, "I know there is much we can learn from each other if we can negotiate a truce. We can find a way to coexist. Can there be a peace between us?" (1:31:00). The alien not only denies the peace offer but attacks the president, which results in the military executing it on the spot. This interaction has eliminated any troubling morality questions for the audience about fighting the aliens: "They could be obliterated without political, cultural, or moral consequences" (Riper 46). There is no question about what choice humans have to make in order to survive.

In *Arrival*, the choice is more complicated because the heptapods show no sign of violence or aggression towards humans. When the heptapods say that they have come to Earth to "offer weapon," the US military takes this to be a threat, either as a threat from the aliens or a challenge for humans to fight against themselves until there is only one remaining faction. As Agent Halpern tells Louise, "We have to consider that our visitors are prodding us to fight among ourselves until only one faction prevails... We're a world with no single leader. It's impossible to deal with just one of us" (1:08:00). The militaries choose the path of violence, despite the ambiguity of the situation, because faced with an advanced extraterrestrial threat, the outcome becomes the same binary presented in *Independence Day*: kill or be killed. The threat of conflict in *Arrival*, however, does not come from the aliens at all. In the end "the crisis Louise averts is not... caused by aliens; it is the human threat of self-annihilation as a result of

geopolitical posturing” (Aelabouni 11). While *Independence Day* puts the blame for the violence on the aliens, *Arrival* puts it firmly on the shoulders of people, particularly those in power who have a choice in their actions and reactions.

Both films also feature an analogy to a game that sets up the theme of simplistic binaries. In *Independence Day*, David compares the alien invasion to a game of chess: “It’s like in chess. First, you strategically position the pieces, then when the timing is right, you strike” (28:00). The Chinese government in *Arrival* takes a similar approach in communicating with the heptapods. They have been teaching their heptapods to communicate through the game Mahjong. As Louise explains, however, this is problematic for establishing any nuance in a conversation and instead only sets up oppositional forces: “Let’s say that I taught them chess instead of English. Every conversation would be a game, every idea expressed through opposition, victory, defeat” (1:04:30). While this simple binary serves the plot of *Independence Day* by establishing two clear sides of a conflict, *Arrival* presents this binary as destructive. The Chinese government’s Mahjong game presents them with a communication they translated as “use weapon,” which results in the Chinese government cutting off all communication with the other governments and declaring war on the heptapods. Like in *Independence Day*, the response to the heptapods’ message is simple because it is a threat presented as a simple binary between a “winner” and a “loser.” Louise prevents the war when she greys the line between that binary for General Shang. The weapon the heptapods wanted to give humanity was not a weapon at all but rather a tool or a gift. It was their language. By learning their language, time is no longer linear for Louise and she is able to experience the future and the past simultaneously. Louise uses this gift to recall a future conversation she has with General Shang and tell him the words of his dying wife: “War doesn’t make winners, only widows” (Heisserer 125). This recontextualizes the conflict from the binary

game where only one side can win to a decision between peace and war, and in war, there are no winners. Humanity, not the heptapods, are responsible for the consequences of that choice.

Since the violence in *Independence Day* is presented as the only possible pathway for the characters, it is idealized and idolized in the action scenes. In *Arrival*, violence is not only just one possible pathway; it is clearly marked as the wrong path. At every turn, Louise is met with resistance from the government and military leaders on the base, and as Colonel Weber says, their “first and last question” when communicating with the heptapods is always “how can this be used against us?” (39:30). Even when the military is cooperating with Louise and supporting her research, behind the scenes they are preparing for possible retaliation from the heptapods. After the “offer weapon” message, all communication is cut off with the heptapods and the other countries. The message also inspires some rogue soldiers to plant a bomb in the heptapods’ chamber, which kills one of the heptapods. These soldiers have previously been shown talking to their families who are afraid that the aliens will kill them and everyone on the planet and listening to right-wing extremist talk show hosts, who believe that the government is acting too passive and that someone needs to take it into their own hands to fight back against the aliens. Violence in the film accomplishes nothing except to cut off any possibility of working together to solve the problem. This point is emphasized by the dying words of General Shang’s wife. Her words are not subtitled or spoken in the film and are only present in English in the script, however, her exact words are unnecessary for the film to convey the meaning of her words and the moment: war is not the answer to this conflict. With the prevention of war and the gifting of their language, the heptapods leave. Violence in *Arrival* is a sign of defeat, not victory.

The only possibilities for victory and peace in *Arrival* are communication and compromise. Language is at the heart of *Arrival*. Even the music and sound design represent

forms of communication in the film. During Ian's voiceover played over a montage of the discoveries they've made about the heptapods during the first month, the music is a series of tones and beeps reminiscent of morse code. The entire film is framed around Louise, a linguist's, perspective, with her speaking directly to her daughter, or at least her daughter's memory. It's important in the film that the conflict in *Arrival* is not the aliens but rather the conflict humans made with each other by their refusal to communicate and work together. When the heptapods present 1/12 of their language to Louise, Agent Halpern thinks that it's a test to get humans to fight among themselves until a leader emerges. Agent Halpern believes that it would be dangerous to share the information with their enemies, the other governments. Louise, on the other hand, believes that the heptapods only gave them one piece of the puzzle to encourage communication between the governments: "What better way to force us to work together for once?" (1:23:30). Louise is proven right by the end of the film. After General Shang calls off the attack, he immediately reopens all communication and begins to share all of the research they have gathered. The resolution to this part of the story is communication. It's notable that the most difficult communication in the film is not with the aliens, whose language no one on Earth can speak, but rather between people.

Independence Day and *Arrival* are vastly different films that hinge on the same basic starting point of an alien invasion but take the conflict, resolution, and themes in opposite directions. Even though their depictions of the military and violence are polar opposites, there is one aspect on which they both agree: the power of language. Louise's book opens with the line, "Language is the foundation of civilization. It is the glue that holds a people together, and it is the first weapon drawn in a conflict" (16:00). From declarations of war to declarations of peace, conflict is framed around language and communication. In both of these films, language has the

power to inspire fear or courage. In *Independence Day*, President Whitmore unites an entire country with his speech before the final fight and, indeed, the communication between President Whitmore and the alien, with the verbal and physical threat, was the end of a possible pathway to peace. In *Arrival*, language unites the entire world through the collective experience of the arrival of aliens. One of the heptapods tells Louise to use the “weapon” to stop the war, which is presented as a mistranslation with the real meaning being to use their language—and the ability that comes with it—to change General Shang’s mind. Despite being a mistranslation for weapon in the film, language in these films is in many ways the first and last weapon drawn in the conflicts. Amongst the bombastic violence of *Independence Day* and the worst-case-scenario attitude of the military in *Arrival*, language, with its power to incite violence, negotiate compromise, create peace, and influence perspectives, is the greatest weapon of these films.

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