

# FILM REVIEW: Arrival (Villenueve, 2016):USA

## Description

Viewed by Larry Gleeson during the Venice Film Festival.




Canadian Director Denis Villenueveâ??s (*Sicario, Prisoners, Incendies*) new science fiction drama, *Arrival,* is based on Ted Chiangâ??s â??Story of Your Life.â?• Alien ships have landed across the globe without explanation communicating only a Sanskrit word for war.

The film opens in a reflective voice-over coupled with powerful sound effects and strong camera work to create a feeling of pandemonium. Supersonic jets blaze across the screen as 12 unidentified flying

objects descend from the sky and land across the globe. The aliens attempt to communicate with written words and phrases in a never seen before language.  Dr. Louise Banks, a linguist played by Amy Adams (*Man of Steel, American Hustle, The Fighter*), is charged with communicating with the alien intelligence. Artist Martine Bertrand designed the aliens written language. The Sanskrit word for war is delivered to Louise at her university teaching office for translation. At first she balks. However, the opportunity to put to use all she has learned in a lifetime of study and academia and the mourning sheâ??s gone through over the loss of her daughter provides her the impetus to join the effort.

Initially, Dr. Banks appears anxious. However, she quickly is brought up to speed by the US military. Captain Marks, played by Mark Oâ??Brien, informs the team on what is known about the alien landings. One of the first translations the group deciphers is â??language is weapon.â?• Soon however, the process is stalled. Intelligence about the alien space ship reveals that their doors open every 18 hours granting an opportunity to board the craft. After dialogue and heated conversation, Dr. Banks is granted clearance to board the craft with the team. With the team in position to board the craft, Villenueve amps up the sound effects and music including some very heaving breathing from Dr. Banks as the team waits, attired in Cybex hazmat suits, for the alien ship to position itself to allow boarding. With the shipâ??s entry encapsulated in smoke combined with some abstract visuals and the surreal effect of slow motion the team boards the alien vessel.

In the end, Dr. Banks proves sheâ??s up for the task and begins the communication process with the aliens but not without difficulty. An interesting reference is made to the Sapir-Whorf theory that once a person starts to learn a language the person will start to dream and think in it. However, when the aliens begin writing a thought one hand begins the thought while the other hand ends it simultaneously. Louiseâ??s mind has difficulty comprehending this and she begins to experience highly vivid, visual flashbacks of her daughter. She begins to wonder why. Once the team members managed to board the ship and attempted to understand and communicate with the aliens they were enlightened with insight into their own human nature. In the end this appears to help Louise move on with her life finding closure to the cancer that took her daughterâ??s life.

Seemingly, a large part of the filmâ??s aesthetics is augmented and carried out by sounds. Dave Whitehead created the whirrs and clicks of the alien language while Supervising Sound Editor Sylvain Bellemare created the sounds the ships made when moving. Composer Johann Johannsson created the filmâ??s musical score.

Jeremy Renner (*The Hurt Locker, The Bourne Legacy, American Hustle*) plays Ian Donnelly, a physicist who attempts to solve the alien communication through mathematics. And is the sidekick to Adams Louise. Donnelly comes across as highly intelligent, energetic scientist who adds warmth and light to the teamâ??s dynamic. Forest Whitaker (*The Last King of Scotland, Lee Danielsâ?? The Butler*) plays Colonel Weber, Military Intelligence, whoâ??s responsible for coordinating the communication process. Weber needs Louise and Ian to succeed and itâ??s his job to see that they do. Weber pushes the two to do more and to get more from the aliens. Michael Stuhlbarg (*Boardwalk Empire, Men in Black III)* plays CIA Agent Halpern whoâ??s responsible for reporting to the government the teamâ??s actions.

*Arrival* is a well-constructed film with a stellar cast and talented crew. Notably, Amy Adams is superb as Dr. Louise Banks. The costuming provided by Costume Designer Renee April and the production design provided by Patrice Vermette were excellent as were Carlos Huanteâ??s alien visual effects. In addition, the sound design and musical score brilliantly augmented and sophisticatedly created the

atmospheric for the filmâ??s mis-en-scene.  Executive producer and screenwriter Eric Heisserer adapted the short story to screenplay. 21 Laps and Film Nation received production company credits along with producers Shawn Levy, Dan Cohen, Dan Levine and Aaron Ryder. Bradford Young served as Cinematographer capturing delicate moments with sensuality along with the massive â??rainy dayâ? • science fiction scenes.

*Arrival* is a must-see story about life and death and the reality between the two. It also speaks volumes on humility within the parameters high stakes, foreign communication . Highly recommended.

(Featured photo courtesy of ASAC Images/Biennale Cinema di Venezia)

**Category**

1. Venice International Film Festival

**Tags**

1. 21 Laps
2. 73rd Venice International Film Festival
3. Aaron Ryder
4. Amy Adams
5. Arrival
6. Carlos Huante
7. Cinema
8. Dave Whitehead
9. Denis Villenueve
10. Director
11. Eric Heisserer
12. Film
13. Film Festival
14. Filmmaking
15. FilmNation
16. Forest Whitaker
17. Jeremy Renner
18. Johann Johannsson
19. Mark O'Brien
20. Martine Bertrand
21. Michael Stuhlbarg
22. Patrice Vermette
23. Producer
24. Renee April
25. Sanskrit
26. Sapir-Whorf theory
27. Shawn Levy
28. Sylvain Bellemare
29. Ted Chiang
30. Writer

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