

To Love and Not to Smother; Aliens, Love and Reproduction in Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival* (2016) and Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014)

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In two contemporary blockbuster Hollywood science fiction movies, a seemingly unexpected story of the radical other is told. As humans have almost extinguished life on earth in Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014) and worldly quarrels threaten to unleash a planetary war in Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival* (2016) we meet the alien that brings us closer to the other. They are different aliens, but what binds the two stories is that both movies, in their rendering of the alien, propagate a form of love that is given through the locus of the other, and comes into being as a force that is able to transcend human earthly categories of time and space. Beyond these categories and *with love*, the alien saves the world.

Now the benign alien is of course not new on the scene. As Derrick Bell pointed out in his 1999 article "The Power of Narrative", viewers growing up with *Star Trek* and the *X-files* are used to aliens coming in with attractive offers to human beings (315). While the figure of the alien received much critical scholarly attention, and is often analyzed as a trope for self/other within sexist and racist structures, analyses tend to speak less of love.¹ Although it is central to most any big Hollywood movie, in scholarly reactions to science fiction, especially as regards the portrayal of the alien other, love remains absent. This seems a striking absence, for it is especially in relation to this other that love becomes a force to be reckoned with. At least, this seems to be the case in both *Interstellar* and *Arrival*.

¹See for a feminist analysis of sexism in science fiction Barbara Creed's monograph, *The Monstrous Feminine*, 1993, or, for a more recent analysis of race in contemporary science fiction Adilifu Nama, *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film*, 2008.

While I read love as the central theme in both movies, love itself is all but clear in its presence. Throughout both movies, love is represented as a hidden force that needs to be discovered and acknowledged in order to save the world. In what follows, I focus on the quest for love in both movies, and show that both movies present an opposition, between a feminized form of love on the one hand and masculine, rationalist, imperialist tendencies on the other, through the figure of the alien. The gendered opposition that is uncovered in love, seems to follow a general scheme, where the feminine is able to communicate with the alien other and saves mankind from destruction, whereas the masculine reaction to the alien other is precisely the imperialist, destructive drive that threatens to ruin the world. Both movies seem to use normative gender roles to present relational thinking as something that is more easily accessed through the lens of the woman. In this feminized gaze, love is the key. And, strikingly, in both movies, *parental* love is the key.

With *Interstellar* the love between father Cooper, the main character, and daughter Murph, serves as the driving force for an intergalactic plot to save the world. Their world is plagued by droughts and storms of dust, and their earth is slowly running out of food. To save mankind, Cooper sets out on a mission in outer space to look for and colonize a new world on a new planet. Throughout this intergalactic space traveling drama, *Interstellar* presents a binary scheme, where love is voiced by the two female characters, while masculine scientific rationality, represented by various male characters, finds itself charged with expanding human territory in deep space, and fails to do so precisely by misunderstanding love. This binary is resolved within the plot by 'true', parental love, which ends up saving the world. In *Interstellar*, it is *reproductive love* which proves key to the preservation and expansion of mankind. Love reproduces the same.

In *Arrival*, we meet a different mode of parental love, and a different kind of imperialism. Both notions, it seems, are hard to escape when dealing with aliens. When aliens actually land on earth, linguist and protagonist Louise Banks is asked to communicate with them in order to find out their purpose on earth. Here, as I will show, parental love is not the key to empire, but the sacrifice needed to save the world from the dangers of imperialist reflexes. *Arrival* plays with more subtle themes about the conditions of communication, and the movie hinges on the idea that openness and vulnerability towards the other are necessary prerequisites for communication. Opposed to this we find

rational military force. In *Arrival*, the undoing of this opposition results in a far more disruptive way of saving the world. Here, love severs. Love cuts.

At first sight, love might not seem of central concern in *Arrival*. Since its release date in 2016, the movie has met with quite some scholarly attention. The movie was variously celebrated as a feminist movie by Sophie Mayer in 2017, as a story that portrayed the complexity of birth and the ethics of reproduction according to Anne Carruthers in her 2018 article in *Film Philosophy*, or, in Francesco Sticchi's 2018 analysis, a movie on affect and the relationality of language. Throughout these different themes, love exists on multiple levels that are carefully intertwined in the plot. It hides in the openness that protagonist Louise maintains in relation to the aliens, it is obviously romantic, as she falls for her colleague Ian Donnelly, or is experienced when she loses her daughter, which is the central traumatic event of the movie. As I shall argue, an analysis of love complicates the themes of sexism, reproduction and relationality of language. Love has its own story to tell.

In Hannah Wojciehowski's 2018 reading of *Arrival* in her article, "When the Future is Hard to Recall", she quotes Warren Buckland's notion of the 'puzzle film', to categorize the central traumatic event of the movie. In what Buckland calls puzzle films, the loss of a child is a recurring theme, along which a complex message is interwoven. According to Buckland, in these movies "[t]he arrangements of events are not simply interwoven, but entangled" (3). Wojciehowski points out how this type of narrative can be used as a 'mnemonic tool': it helps the viewer sort through complex information and later put the pieces together (57). However, her kind of narrative 'tool-oriented-analysis' seems to circumvent the question what message that could be. It seems to me that in this layered entanglement, a message on love is hidden.

In the case of *Interstellar*, the movie was openly cast as an exceptional movie about love in reviews and popular media. According to David Denby in his review called "Love and Physics" that he wrote for *The New Yorker* in 2014, Christopher Nolan, "turned out to be a softie" (no page). In a *New York Times* review called "Love and Gravity", that also appeared in 2014, David Brooks went as far as to celebrate *Interstellar* as a 'cultural event', in that it opened thought on love as 'quantum entanglement', where similar particles react in similar ways, and thus are interconnected through space and time

(Brooks). Like *Arrival*, *Interstellar* fits the genre of the puzzle film that makes use of a narrative structure of entanglement to play with space and time, to 'leave a message'. The viewer puts the pieces of the puzzle together (or watches a Youtube clip where the ending is explained) and learns that 'love saves the world'. Considering these bold and ever bolder claims, it seems that love deserves a closer look.

Is not writing about blockbusters similar to writing about love? One wants to say it all, immediately, and yet one risks missing the point completely. For Julia Kristeva, the only possibility of talking about love is to talk about it in its singularity. To not be, as she aptly puts it in her *Tales of Love* written in 1941, "smothered to death beneath the hotchpotch of subterfuges and compromises of group or couple neuroses", but understand love as a crucible of contradictions and misunderstandings: an infinity of meaning (2). It is not uncommon for scholars and thinkers to talk in this vein of love and its occult ways. In his essay *Shattered Love*, that was originally published as *L'amour en éclats* in 1986 and appeared in 1990 in English translation, Jean-Luc Nancy places love at the heart of Western thinking, but makes it at the same time its unattainable impossibility. We are always beckoned to think about love, but only with an extreme reticence. He asks: "[has] not the impossibility of speaking about love been as violently recognized as has been the experience of love itself as the true source of the possibility of speaking in general?" (82). It is not that we cannot speak of it, but thinking about love, or even daring to think the thought "thinking is love" (84), calls for reticence because we are tempted to privilege certain loves and thoughts over others.

One of the ways to maintain reticence, for Nancy, means generosity: "...the generosity not to choose between loves" (83). Writing about blockbusters, the danger is thus not so much saying it all, defining love, but the true risk is privileging our reading, unifying our response to the movie in a doctrine, smothering the movie with our reading. My reading of these two movies will thus have to be generous. How then to be generous, when we talk about love?

Nancy expresses how speaking of love hides its very nature. He explains this situation as the intimate bond, in western philosophy, between love and thinking. Starting with Plato, love was always conceived of as a 'movement of being'. Nancy captures this in a general formula: "Love is the extreme movement, beyond the self, of a being reaching

completion” (86). Although he gives this ‘formula’ several different specific meanings (seven to be exact), for the purposes of the present inquiry it is enough to see, with Nancy, that love, as the movement of a being striving for completion, is always the living hypothesis of a dialectic (88) but is never actually expressed by it. Love, in short, is missed by thinking.

It is not that love is excluded from fundamental ontology; on the contrary, everything summons it thither ... Thus, one must rather say that love is missing from the very place where it is prescribed. Or better still, love is missing from the very place where this dialectical law operates - the law that we have recognized as the law of love. And there is nothing dialectical about this loss or this “lack”: it is not a contradiction, it is not made to be sublated or resorbed. Love remains absent from the heart of being.” (88-89)

Love hides in multiple ways. In western thinking, it is always hidden in a movement, a formula, a definition. And just so, these movies present us with a dialectic where the law of love operates. What are the dialectics in these two movies, and how do they unravel?

For Nancy, the Hegelian scheme, in which the subject becomes what he is by traversing the other, resembles love, and yet is not love (89). It is not a matter of “identity [...] [or] property” (90). The other is not made into the self, rather the other does not “stop to come from the outside”. The other remains the outside itself. “[I]t disjoins me” (97). Any full possession of love, of the other, will only be its loss. In romanticized love, we know this as complete Wertherian madness, or are confronted with a more subtle deflation in which the object of love loses its ‘otherness’. In the two movies this scheme is again present, be it in different ways. This is where the figure of the alien becomes interesting.

In my reading of love, I am mainly oriented around the particular narrative structure in which love is shaped. To uncover love in both narrative structures, I single out both formulae of love, with their masculine/feminine, rational/relational, love/imperialism dialectics, and the key figure of the alien. Why are they there? The alien is presented as a

being that is hiding something. (What is the alien hiding?) Love is presented as the answer to all world problems. (What is uncovered in a reading of love?) World problems are presented as a misunderstanding of love. (Who runs the world?) What remains to be seen is whether we can in fact be generous in our reading. Do these stories of love leave an absence, a not-to-be-sublated lack at their heart? Do they love or do they smother?

Alien, or Self/other

Although the figure of the alien travelled through many forms in cinematic history, its most common representation is that of the outsider. This does not mean, however, that the alien is always the distant, undetermined entity we might expect. In “Embracing the Alien”, an article from 1982 by film theorist John Rieder, he notes that in science fiction, the alien is often *not* presented as “the dangerous, exploited and suppressed other ...” (26). Often, a more intimate alien is portrayed in science fiction. In Barbara Creed’s 1993 monograph titled *The Monstrous Feminine, Film, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis*, she calls attention to the way in which the female reproductive body functioned as a prototype for many definitions of the monstrous in white male dominated western cinema. Think of the amoral primeval mother of *Aliens*, (1986) the woman as monstrous womb *The Brood* (1979) the castrating mother from *Psycho* (1960) the woman as bleeding wound in *Dressed to Kill* (1980) or the women as possessed body in *The Exorcist* (1973)’, (Creed 1, 11-12, 16-17). According to Creed, these monstrous femininities speak to us about male fears and the portrayal of the other. While Creed’s work stems from the nineties and includes movies from up until the nineteen-eighties, more recent cinema still fits her analysis well. *Alien: Covenant* (2017), for instance, returns to the theme of unnatural births, with men violently giving birth to deadly alien monsters. Overall, the Alien franchise, with a large repertoire of phallic aliens and many references to eggs, birth and monstrous reproduction, provided a rich source for feminist critique on the way in which the figure of the alien is used to project and codify male fears.

Monstrous reproduction, or the figure of the monstrous-as-doubling, is something that Elizabeth Grosz theorized in her text “Freaks” from 1991. Here she writes how:

One might ponder why it is the excess of bodily parts that we find more discomfoting than a shortage or diminution of limbs or organs. It may exhibit our fear of the immersion or loss of identity with another is greater or more pervasive than our fears of bodily incompleton. it is a horror at the possibility of our own imperfect duplication, a horror of submersion in an alien otherness, an incorporation in and by another. (36)

In her view, the theme of reproduction and doubling comes to stand for the fear of losing the self and dissolving into the other. Bearing obvious resemblances to the notion of the Freudian uncanny, that both Rieder and Grosz do not refer to in their work, both their intimate alien and the imperfect duplication point towards the structure of the self in relation to the construction of the alien.² Here, the Freudian notion proves more relevant than given account for in these texts, since it discusses the way in which fear is related to the unconscious structure of the self. In the essay that Freud wrote in 1919, the uncanny is nothing if not a blurring of categories, or “a disturbance of ego” (143). For Freud, the motif of the double brings the subject back to a phase in which “the ego had not yet clearly set itself off against the world outside and from others” (ibid.). We will return to the structure of the self later on, but for now the brief Freudian outing reveals, in short, how the other is part of the self.

Conspicuously, neither of the two aliens in *Interstellar* or *Arrival* is presented as a site for alienation, nor is the alien a scary monster that needs to be extinguished in order to save the world. Where in *Interstellar*, the mystified other turns out to be the self, *Arrival* plays with the theme of immersion and the diffusion of the self/other dichotomy, which is presented as a necessary prerequisite for communication and connectedness in the face of alterity. Both aliens are thus constructed in conversation with a notion of the self and also, both aliens are uncovered through what is presented as love. As we come closer to the aliens, we shall see what it means that in love, this self is crossed by the other.

²Creed explicitly refers to the uncanny, but limits herself to a description of the unconscious memory of the womb as the subjects “former home” (54).

Coded Love

Throughout *Interstellar*, references to the unknown and mystical nature of love are made by the female characters of the movie, most notably by Murph and Amelia Brand, who are both daughters of important male characters in the movie. As mankind is slowly dying on earth, ex-pilot Cooper and his daughter Murph end up at NASA, where they are introduced to prof. Brand and his daughter Amelia. They explain to them that gravitational anomalies appeared near Saturn, that hint at the existence of a wormhole through which other potential habitable worlds suddenly have been placed within their reach. To save mankind, a team of twelve brave astronauts (among which Cooper and Amelia Brand) sets out to colonize a new home in another galaxy. In what I consider to be one of the movie's key moments, and the most direct explication of the movie's underlying theme, Amelia Brand delivers a plea for transcendental love to her fellow crew members. In this speech, that we shall now look at a bit more closely, the movie's oppositional gender structure, as well as the tension between romantic love and a mystified notion of transcendental love is explained.

During their flight through space, Amelia Brand tries to convince her fellow crew members to set course for a different planet. Cooper however, has picked up on the subtle signs that show Amelia Brand to be in love with a colleague (by the last name of Wolf) who is on that planet, which convinces him that what she says is not to be trusted. Even so, Brand continues, and states that "maybe we've spent too long trying to figure all this out with theory" [01.27.30]. In response to that, Cooper says "You're a scientist Brand". "So listen to me", Brand urges him, "Love isn't something we invented." She gasps for air. "It is observable, powerful." She pauses for a second. "It has to mean something." Cooper responds: "Love has meaning yes, social utility social bonding, child rearing" whereupon Brand interrupts him, starting her plea in close-up:

We love people who have died. Where is the social utility in that? Maybe it means something more, something we cannot yet understand. Maybe it's some evidence, some artefact of a higher dimension that we can't consciously perceive. I am drawn across the universe to someone I have not seen in a decade who I know is probably

dead. Love is the one thing we are capable of perceiving that transcends dimensions of time and space. Maybe we should trust that even if we can't understand it yet. [01.27.50-01.28.36]

When she looks up with hopeful, tear-filled eyes, nobody says anything. She continues: "All right Cooper, yes". She shakes her head and squeezes her lips. "The tiniest possibility of seeing Wolf again excites me. That does not mean I am wrong." After a pause, Cooper responds and says "honestly Amelia, it might" [01.28.59].

Using her first name, his masculine authority suddenly allows Cooper to make the decisions on this spaceship where love is seen as a dangerous thing. In accordance with other science fiction heroines, and obvious mainstream gendered stereotypes – think of Ellen Ripley taking care of the cat in *Alien* – the female character of Amelia Brand comes to embody the caring aspects of humanity, while Cooper presents the masculine rational male figure. However, *Interstellar* does not stick that easy to mainstream gender roles, as the plot turns these positions around, and reveals that Amelia Brand is right. Love is then, quite literally, put to use as a force that transcends time and space, but more on that later.

The fear of losing the self, as the central theme of monstrous reproduction in Groz's analysis of nineties alien-movies takes a new route in *Interstellar*, where the mistrust of romantic love makes way for an emphasis on reliable reproductive love, in the trope of the family. It is Cooper's relation to his daughter that shall save the world. Their relationship is formed in the opening scenes of the movie, revolving around his dramatic upcoming departure. After we learn that the world is in a bad shape, a series of events leads to the first appearance of the alien in the ten-year-old's bedroom.

As the storms of dust grow worse and the situation on earth seems hardly bearable, strange things start to happen in Murph's bedroom. Books fall from the shelves without plausible cause, and the dust piles in non-natural ways on the floor, leaving what seems to be a pattern. She calls the cause of these occurrences her ghost. Her father does not believe in ghosts, and says it is gravity. Still, his own scientific explanations do not solve the mystery or keep him from wanting to unravel it. Murph tries Morse code to decipher the signs her ghost leaves her via the holes left in the bookshelves, and tries to do the same

with the dust. Her father interferes and hesitantly concludes “It is not a ghost, it’s gravity” [00.21.05] and, triumphantly: “It’s not Morse Murph, it’s binary” [00.21.41]. Cooper finds out that the code presents coordinates to NASA, where their intergalactic mission begins.

In setting up both the father-daughter relationship, the movie presents an opposition of codes with which to decipher a message. There is Murph, holding on to Morse: a character coding scheme of dots and dashes. And there is Cooper: sure of binary coded phenomena: a thing is, or a thing is not. Whereas Morse is a system of co-dependency and links (the duration of the dash is three times the duration of the dot), binary is about substance and lack. That is, binary yields a dialectic – driving the plot and sending Cooper off into space. Where binary simplification reveals an always bigger complexity, Morse is presented not as driver of the plot but as its resolution, as we shall see when looking at the finale of the film.

Before we do so, I want to point out how the use of code works to set up the opposition between love and rationality. When Cooper leaves Murph behind, she cries and yells and begs him to make him stay. Her deciphered Morse codes from the books in the bookshelves argue the same thing (STAY), but Cooper does not listen. In the chronological unfolding of the plot, both parental and romantic love have to yield to Cooper’s rational masculinity. First, the female voice of his daughter begs him to stay but he refuses. Second, in the scene on the spaceship, romantic love comes into play as a mystified something that might lead the way but is disregarded at first. In both instances this opposition plays with female relationality and masculine rationality, where the latter will eventually have to give way to the former. The seed is planted, and the viewer, who identifies with Cooper at this point, shall have to do something with love.

Within this dialectic, the alien other is first presented as a mystified something, referred to as the ‘they’ that placed the gateway to another galaxy. NASA does not know who, but “someone placed it there, and whoever they are, they appear to be looking out for us” [00.32.13]. When the plot is resolved, and it turns out that not just ‘someone’ but they themselves were the one sending the messages across time and space, the alien other is uncovered through Murph’s Morse (relational thinking). The alien in *Interstellar* is rather a version of the self, uncovered through the safety net of familial love.

Reproductive Movement

Coming back to Nancy, the place of the self in love is one of the ways in which Western philosophy has misunderstood love. Referencing Hegel, he states that the 'beyond the self' to which the self moves in love, is eventually "...the place of the same, where love fulfills itself, the place of the same in the other" (87). As we saw earlier, love for Nancy cannot be fulfilled, but remains that which is a promise. It is transcendence not in the meaning of a surpassing of the self, but as a disimplication of immanence. "Love does not stop [...] coming from the outside" (97). "This transcendence thus fulfils nothing: it cuts, it breaks, and it exposes so that there is no domain or instance of being where love would fulfil itself." (ibid).

Since *Interstellar* refers rather literally to the notion of transcendental love, it seems all too silly to critique the movie on the status of its blockbuster depiction of fictional materialized philosophical notions. However, what I aim to point out is how it mobilizes a notion of love, hidden in the figure of the alien, in order to maintain a smothering version of the self. This happens in the finale of the movie, where Amelia Brand's revelation of a love that cannot be understood, but is nevertheless a driving force able to transcend space and time, appears rather literally, as Cooper ends up at the other side of a black hole.

In this final sequence of events, it turns out that the love he shares with his daughter is, in fact, "quantifiable" according to Cooper. At the other side of the black hole, their father-daughter love forms the basis for a sort of ideational place where he can communicate with earth. He is trapped in an infinite joint of cubicles, that he soon recognizes as 'the other side' of the bookshelves in his daughter's bedroom. In that space, time is represented as a physical dimension that Cooper can fly within, and where gravity can be meddled with as the language to communicate through space-time, and used to send a message and save the people on earth. It is one of filmmaker Christopher Nolan's recurring tricks, as he tends to materialize philosophical problems in his movies more often (think of *Inception*, 2010). Turning now to a description of these scenes, I point out how love is put to use in *Interstellar*.

As Cooper sees Murph he seems to be brought back to the moment where he left her in her bedroom and he starts to cry. After this first emotional encounter, he finds out

that the robot called TARS, who went with him on the mission, is also 'there'. TARS then explains that 'they' saved Cooper in 'their' fifth dimension. "Who the hell is they...", Cooper responds. "...and why would they want to help us?" [02.27.06] The robot does not know. What it does know is that 'they' constructed this "three-dimensional space inside their five-dimensional reality" to allow Cooper to understand [02.27.14]. Still being five-dimensionally puzzled, Cooper does not get what is going on and urges the robot to explain. TARS does not know either, and says "'they' didn't bring us here to change the past" [02.28.24]. Now the pieces all fit together. It is not possible to change the past, and Cooper understands that "they did not brought us here at all, we brought ourselves" [02.28.40]. A future civilization that has evolved past the three dimensions has built the five-dimensional reality in order to help humans send a message across time and space. "Love TARS, Love, it's just like Brand said, my connection with Murph, it is quantifiable. It is the key!" [02.30.30], Cooper yells enthusiastically from another dimension. This force of love is something that they do not understand yet, but that proved much more suitable to save the world than scientific rationality. The puzzle pieces of the puzzle film now fit together, and it is revealed that not the radical other, but their own force of love, channeled through gravity and able to transcend space and time, is the alien that saves mankind from famine and destruction. They themselves save themselves.

In *Interstellar's* Sci-fi-realist rendering of love's dialectic, the result is empire. Now possessing the data that they needed to save human civilization on earth, mankind is able to flee from a planet that no longer nourishes it and colonize a 'new earth'. Even the future is colonized: the protagonists speculate that 'they' (themselves) are the future civilization that evolved and put the potential worlds within their reach. The movie follows a movement of reproductive love that functions to maintain mankind. While this love is presented as a counterforce to the masculine, rationalist, imperialist impulse, it eventually comes to the fore as the very thing that maintains it. Human agency is reasserted and transcendence is mastered.

Is this what we call love? In Judith Butler's reading of Freud's notion of love published in *The Force of Nonviolence*, which appeared in 2020, she explores love's relation to destruction and self-preservation. Looking at Freud's political philosophy, she discusses the ways in which there are destructive tendencies at work within the self, and

describes how they can be 'checked' (162-164). Because of the structure of the self "a countervailing force is needed, one that pursues self-preservation and, more generally, the preservation of life" (164).³ She then asks, "is that force to be called love, or is it mania?" (ibid).

Where in *Interstellar*, love is clearly presented as the counterforce to destruction, Freud remained ambivalent on whether love contains or opposes destructiveness (162).

But Mania, evidenced in the manic desire to live, is a cipher that presents us with another possibility. [...] Mania overestimates the power of the subject and loses touch with reality. And yet, where do we find the psychic resources for taking leave of reality as it is currently established and naturalized? The unrealism of mania suggests a refusal to accept the status quo, and it draws upon, and intensifies, a desire to live [...] (170).

As Cooper is trapped at the other side of the wormhole, he cries out to Murph, unable to process that he might never see her again. His manic drive sends a message, unreal as it is, but, in Butler's words, mania introduces this unrealistic desire to "exist and persist" (171). Where love holds the potential to both establish, but also to destroy social bonds, mania comes in as an unrealistic drive to keep them.

In Butler's reading of Freud, she looks for the political potential of these concepts and stresses that mania is not simply a "model for action", since in itself, it is a dangerous form of destruction (170-171). Without further going into the specifics of these dangers, we can see, with *Interstellar*, what this entails. Where love is presented as the counterforce to destruction of the world, we see that it's manic pursues a preservation of the self.

³Here, Butler reads Freud's text, *The Ego and the Id*, SE vol.19,1923. Freud's structure of the self is made up of the ego checked by super-ego that would turn against itself were it to check itself. See: Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, p. 163.

Talking to the Other

Now moving to *Arrival*, when the aliens actually land on earth and a confrontation is due, we are presented with a different constellation. Here, love is much more explicitly figured in terms of communication and openness towards the other as a condition for it. Love needs to be communicated differently, and, as we shall see, reproductive love pays the price.

Shortly after the opening sequence we meet Louise Banks, a prominent linguist. When alien ships arrive on earth, an army official named colonel Weber shows up in her office, asking her to translate a squeaking and rumbling sound from an MP3-player. A shocked Dr. Banks realizes that this is Alien language. She stutters and asks “how many?” “How many what?” The colonel responds. “How many [she pauses] speaking?” “Two”, he says. [00.12.34] As Dr. Banks is trying to come up with a framework with which to understand Alien-communication, colonel Weber wants quick answers, and asks her how she would approach translating it. When she answers that she would need to see them and interact with them, the colonel sees that as a sign that she is trying to get a glance at the aliens, and he won't allow such tourism to his serious business.

When she cannot help him on the spot, the colonel threatens to approach another linguist. As he walks out of her office, Dr. Banks calls after the colonel and asks him whether he will approach Prof. Denvers from Berkely next. When it turns out he is: “before you commit to him, ask him the Sanskrit word for war, and its translation.” [00.14.05] In what appears to be the same night, colonel Weber lands on dr. Banks' lawn with a helicopter. As she opens the door he says “Gavisti. He says it means an argument. What do you say it means?” “A desire for more cows”, Dr. Banks responds [00.14.50]. With this, she is hired to translate Alien-language.

Where the Berkeley professor merely translated Gavisti's sign, Dr. Banks's is a motivational translation: desire for more is what usually leads to war. She approaches the word as a signifier in the symbolic structure of a language. In the helicopter, the interplay between different positions and their respective languages continues. Louise Banks meets Ian Donnelly, a theoretical physicist who has read her book and challenges her by saying

that the cornerstone to civilization is not language but science. He continues his introduction by stating he has set up a list of questions for the aliens, starting with binary sequences. "How about we just talk to them before we start throwing math problems at them?" [00.17.19] Again, Dr. Banks' approach to language is one of dialogue. For communication to exist, an affective reality must be shared. That is what she sets out to teach the men who cannot deal with aliens. Again, like in *Interstellar*, where the male character flaunts his binary knowledge, the female lead advocates contextual knowledge.

In her 2017 reading of *Arrival* titled "Girl Power: Back to the Future of Feminist Science Fiction with *Into the Forest and Arrival*", Sophie Mayer considers *Arrival* a 'not-unsatisfying comeback' of girl power in science fiction, but comments on the ending as gender normative. Like in *Interstellar*, the feminized character is the one to propagate love, and the viewer is left to assume the implicit masculine perspective, who needs to be taught that love works in mysterious ways. However, different from in *Interstellar*, in *Arrival*, the male-female dichotomy results in the eventual sacrifice of reproductive love with the loss of Louise's daughter; a sacrifice which is at the core of the movie. Before we get there, I shall first review the movie's references to communication and its prerequisites in the face of the alien other.

Immersion and Contamination

In the opening sequence, we are presented with many references to circularity, and learn that Louise had a daughter, who died at the age of about eighteen. After this sequence, we learn that aliens have landed on earth, but have yet to learn how these events are connected. They will be through the process introduced in the movie as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, mentioned in the movie by Louise's colleague Ian Donnely. This theory, which held general acceptance in real-life psychology until the 1970s, states that language either determines or constitutively influences the way you think, or that intuition is shaped by language.⁴ In *Arrival*, the aliens possess a non-linear relation to time, and when Louise

⁴On how language shapes thought see: Skerrett, Delaney Michael. "Can the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis Save the Planet? Lessons from Cross cultural Psychology for Critical Language Policy." *Current Issues in Language Planning* vol. 11, no. 4, 2010, pp. 331-40. Especially page 332.

learns to communicate with them, her experience of temporality changes accordingly. When Louise starts to make progress in the alien language, Ian asks her whether she dreams in their language, for he has read that if you immerse yourself in another language “you can actually rewire your brain”. This immersion in the other shall occur quite literally later on in the movie, as a miniature version of the alien’s oblong main vessel appears, in which Louise is able to communicate freely.

Throughout *Arrival*, the idea is presented that openness and vulnerability are a necessary prerequisite for communication in the face of otherness. Where in real-life linguistics, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has served to celebrate linguistic diversity, as it would enable a wider range of solutions to many different problems (Skerret 332), in *Arrival*, the consequences for Louise’s immersion are stained with fear of contamination by too much otherness, and it is hinted at to be the cause of the loss of her daughter.

As Louise and Ian enter the facility that has been set up around the alien’s landing space, the war of positions between different types of thinking continues. Seven UFO’s have landed on different places on earth and Colonel Weber is clear on their priorities: “what do they want, where are they from?”[00.17.05]. Inside the alien’s vessel, which they call ‘the Shell’, there is a chamber which is filled with oxygen for two hours, allowing contact with the aliens. After that, the oxygen is drained from the room, and it takes eighteen hours for it to return. This fact is immediately interpreted differently by the various characters/positions involved. The CIA agent notes how the aliens could suffocate them if they want to, Ian the physicist thinks it is an interesting fact, the colonel needs answers as soon as possible, and Louise Banks seems to think it is a way in which the aliens apparently try to find a space for communication.

Soon the alarm bell rings, and the team is allowed first entrance to the alien space. Even though the aliens landed on earth, inside the Shell human earthly laws no longer apply. The team of humans wrap themselves in suits fit to enter outer-space, hoping to factor out all radiation or other possible alien contamination. In the first encounter, two contours seem to arise out of a heavy mist. They are about the height of three big humans,

On how intuition shapes language see: Grelland, Hans Herlof. "The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis and the Meaning of Quantum Mechanics." *AIP Conference Proceedings*, vol. 810, no.1, 2006, pp. 325-29. Especially page 326.

and share a similarity with a giant squid. They have seven 'legs', prompting the humans to come up with the Greek *Heptapod* as a classification for this foreign life-form. At the second meeting in the Shell, Louise writes the word 'HUMAN' on a whiteboard. The camera shifts to her perspective, and we see a distorted image of her view from behind the suit as she insistently whispers "human" to try and convey its meaning [00.37.36]. With the sound of a heavy rumble the Heptapod responds, and Louise flinches. They lift up one of their 'legs' and as they do, an ink-like substance is produced and takes a circular shape. This is a first attempt at communication. However, the emphasis on the inconvenience of the space-suits, the heavy breathing and the silliness with which the humans point to themselves from behind their orange suits creates the suggestion that behind these many layers, communication is not possible. The suits can hardly be a barrier to the aliens, who cannot know whether humans always look like orange clunky creatures, but they bother Louise. In their next visit, she takes it off and stands before the radical other in all her vulnerability, risking what is said to be possible contamination [00.54.17]. As she presses her hand on the alien-glass, again the Heptapod mimics her gesture. "Now this is a proper introduction", Louise says. [00.46.50]

Her bravery towards the alien seems to suggest that a certain exposure and vulnerability is necessary for basic communication. On top of this, the following scenes emphasize the thread of contamination in a military voice over. As the team has left the Shell, the heavy murmur that has until now been reserved for the alien's space continues on earth. While the army protocols call for Louise to proceed into decontamination-camp, she gasps for air and sinks to the ground as images of a young girl start to appear. She seems to be the same girl as the one in the opening scenes, and it is her first reappearance in the movie's narrative after the first scenes. As strange as she still is to us, so she also seems to be for Louise. The alien seems to have left the Shell and entered Louise's world.

The meeting of the other that happens in *Arrival* is not one that 'maintains the self'. As Nancy frames it in his essay,

[T]he other comes and cuts across me, because it immediately leaves for the other, it does not return to itself, because it leaves only to come again. This crossing breaks the heart: this is not necessarily bloody or tragic, it is beyond the opposition between the tragic and serenity or gaiety. The break is nothing more than a touch, but the touch is not less deep than a wound (98).

For Nancy, as for Louise, “love arrives, it comes, or else it is not love” (ibid). Love breaks, but it might break softly, because in love, the self is touched. As Louise comes closer to the alien, we learn the consequences of the alien-touch in *Arrival*.

When global tension around the alien presence increases, and the military pushes Louise to ask the final question, “What is your purpose on earth?”, the alien’s answer is: “offer weapon”. [01.06.56] Louise explains that nobody knows if they understand the difference between a weapon and a tool and urges to talk to the aliens to clarify the situation. However, the CIA agent cites imperialist history to show how an invading force tends to strategically divide and conquer. In the next shot, China and Russia seem to have come to the same conclusion and stopped sharing their information. At this point events turn quickly. Despite the warning that it’s not safe, Ian and Louise go back into the Shell. However, two soldiers who have grown too afraid of the aliens have placed a bomb in the Shell. Not knowing this, Louise and Ian go back into the shell. They encourage her to come closer, and as she touches the place on the barrier with the alien touching the other side, a heavy whale-like murmur converses through her, and while it does, we see warmly lit images of a baby girl [01.14.20]. Now she is able to write with the ink-like substance coming from the alien.

Through the alien’s touch, Louise fully understands their language and is able to completely access their experience of time, transcending notions of presence, future and past. Dwelling in all three together, she knows how things will turn out, and uses this insight to stop an attack that could possibly destroy the world. The alien did not try to divide and conquer, but deliberately divided the message into twelve parts to force the different worldly powers to work together. Love arrived, but it is Louise who pays the price for her radical openness. When the puzzle pieces fit together, the viewer is now able to

connect the opening sequence to the landing of the aliens that brought with them a circular understanding of time. To end with the beginning, we shall now look at these scenes more closely.

Crossing of Love

As violins play a long slow tone, halt, and move onto the next, the camera shows a view from a house close to a lake. "I used to think this was the beginning of your story", a woman's voice narrates. After a pause she continues. "Memory is a strange thing. It doesn't work like I thought it did. We are so bound by time, by its order." The image shifts to a lighter view and we see a woman doting on her baby. The violins continue their sad tones, and the baby lies still and does not move. Someone, presumably dad, picks up the baby. The woman laughs, and cries "come back to me". She repeats those words three times. [00.00.00 – 00.02.30]

Next, the voice-over says "I remember moments in the middle" and we see a girl saying "I love you", followed by the same older girl, saying "I hate you!" The image shifts to a hospital hallway, where a frightened woman bursts out in tears after she receives news from a doctor. "Then this was the end" the voice-over says. The woman cries as she covers what we now believe is her daughter's body under a white sheet. She is aged about 18 years old and lies dead in the hospital bed, without hair. Again, the woman stutters the three words: come back to me. Then she walks away from the scene in a circular hospital hallway in a shot that seems to have no end. As the screen turns black, the voice-over states: "But now I'm not so sure I believe in beginnings and endings." [00.03.10 – 00.04.00]

Then, at the end of the movie, after the aliens leave earth, Ian and Louise linger at the military site that is about to be cleared out. In what is a sudden romantic gesture, Ian looks at her and says: "I have my head tilted up against the stars as long as I can remember. You know what surprised me most? It wasn't meeting them, it was meeting you." [01.48.40] As Louise now knows the future but is only just realizing so, she takes him in her arms and looks away. Flashbacks and flashforwards reveal that they get together, live in the house at the lake and get a baby. As we know from the beginning, the baby dies, something that Louise is now realizing. Thinking back of the many references to

contamination, it seems as though Louise was infected with too much alien. The cause of her daughter's death is referred to as a "rare disease" that was unstoppable [01.34.50]. The image of the daughter in the hospital, without hair, cites the treatment of cancer: of something growing inside her that couldn't be stopped. The disease is inevitably bound up, from beginning to end with Louise's opening up to the alien. It is their lingering presence, beyond the human experience of time, "despite knowing where the journey ends" she "embraces it all and welcomes every moment of it" [01.45.00]. She tried to simply enjoy the moments in the middle, to love and not to smother, and embrace the consequences.

Louise's immersion into the alien mimics the idea that in love, the self is touched. Where the movement of love in *Interstellar* followed reproductive love as a conservative trope, it maintained, and stabilized empire. In *Arrival*, love follows an ambivalent route. As in the opening sequence the 'I love you' is followed by 'I hate you', a counter-tendency exists in love.⁵ The movement travels beyond the self, and something is lost, or broken, *en éclats*, as Nancy writes. "something of the self is definitively lost [...] in the act of loving." (96). The break is not always painful, bloody or tragic, but it leaves a trace nevertheless. For Nancy, the trace is not only a broken one, but, what also arrives in love (pardon the pun), is joy.

To joy is not a fulfillment, and it is not even an event. Nonetheless, it happens, it arrives – and it arrives as it departs, it arrives in departing and it departs in the arrival, in the same beat of the heart (106).

Knowing that her daughter will die young before she is even born, Louise's love carries the charge of a break from the beginning. One that arrives, cuts across her, and arrives as it departs. Her love shall have to experience joy without fulfilment, it can never rest but will

⁵This counter-tendency is aptly described by Judith Butler's reading of Freud, as she discusses his concepts of Eros and Thanatos and states that "Thanatos drives those same units [within society] apart from one another as well as each unit apart from itself. So, in the very action that seeks to establish and build a social bond, a counter-tendency exists that just as readily seeks to take it apart: I love you, I hate you; I cannot live without you, I die if I continue to live with you." (*The Force of Nonviolence*, 161).

be, in Nancy's lyric turn of phrase, "serenity without rest" (106). "It is to be cut across without even being able to hold onto what 'to joy' makes happen" (ibid). Knowing this all, the film ends with a whispered "yes".

What cuts across, for Nancy, is the *singular being*. In the last part of his essay on love, that consists of a dialogue with Heidegger and Levinas, he returns to love as the 'heart of being'. Love is no ontological necessity (Levinas) and being-with (Heidegger) only takes place at the occurrence of being (105), where Nancy frames the crossing of the other as being constitutive of the occurrence. Absolute singularity is thus offered only in passing (108). The passing of the other, in love. As *Arrival* shows the alien exists, *Interstellar* mystifies the other, only to turn it into the self, thus not letting anything else cross the scene.

Returning to the question whether generosity could be maintained in reviewing the portrayal of love in both movies, it seems to be easier to be generous to someone who breaks. With *Interstellar*, I have shown how the movie presents us with many narrative complexities of love, but is eventually clear in its message. That makes it hard to maintain reticence, to not say its version of love is simply a version of the same, a smothering story that reveals love as empire's most trustworthy tool. Both fictional renderings of love use it as a force that is able to transcend space and time. In Nancy's words, "transcendence will thus be better named the crossing of love" (98).

Do these stories of love leave an absence, a not-to-be-sublated lack at their heart? In *Interstellar* the lack is filled by a new world. In *Arrival* this remains to be seen, and as it happens, it might be such a gap that is able to tell a story of love, not one that smothers.

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