

Representing Spacetime: Cinematic Ekphrasis in *Arrival* (2016)

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Most analyses of *Arrival* (Denis Villeneuve, 2016) have, so far, explored the role of language and/or time in the film (e.g. Kind 2017, Carruthers 2017). While both perspectives address one of the film's main motifs, neither encompasses its thematic complexity. *Arrival* follows linguistics professor Louise Banks (Amy Adams), who is recruited to establish communication with some aliens that have landed on our planet. Through her gradual acquisition of their language, Louise becomes increasingly aware of their non-linear temporality. However, the focus on time and language overlooks the current conception of cinema as a spatial rather than a textual system (Shiel 4-6). Moreover, and most importantly, it does not consider the film's attempt to formally reproduce the workings of space and time as a composite entity in a manner that echoes Einstein's postulates of relativity theory (1905).

In this paper, I contend that the representation of spacetime in *Arrival* constitutes an example of cinematic ekphrasis. This approach is rooted on Elleström's definition of ekphrasis as "medial transformation" (34) as well as Cariboni Killander, Lutas and Strukelj's attempts to "broaden" the term's scope (10). Following these perspectives, I argue that the film transmediates the physical phenomenon of spacetime through a formal reproduction of its dynamics in the narrative structure of the syuzhet. This ekphrastic transformation results in an effective description of the spacetime continuum to an audience that thus experiences an otherwise too abstract reality.

The interaction between space and time put forth in relativity theory is indeed complex and extremely hard to apprehend since we are bounded by our perception of both. However, and due to the cinema's inherent ability to reproduce spatiotemporal sensation, its cinematic ekphrasis manages to successfully embody spacetime. The paper uses and contrasts different theoretical, sociological and cinematic approaches to ekphrasis, time and space as methodological framework, and offers a formal-aesthetic analysis of some key scenes and an in-depth examination of the narrative form of the film (Bordwell 1985). My ultimate aim is to show how the notions of spacetime affect and inform *Arrival's* discourse at all levels — content, form and aesthetic look —, achieving an overall thematic coherence that is able to fully convey the intricacies of spacetime.

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Keywords

Ekphrasis, Cinematic Representation, Spacetime, Principle of Relativity, Narrative Form

Bionote

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