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Humanities Fiction:
Translation and ‘Transplanetary’ in Ted Chiang’s
“The Story of Your Life” and Denis Villeneuve’s *Arrival*

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Abstract

One of the more interesting science fiction movies of recent years, at least to Humanities academics, is Denis Villeneuve’s 2016 alien-invasion movie, *Arrival*. It is a film which not only features a Professor of Linguistics as its heroine, but the plot of which is organised around the critical global importance of a multi-million dollar translation project. This essay compares the film with the original novella upon which it was based – Ted Chiang’s “Story of Your Life” (1998) – to examine the role translation plays in both, with the aim of placing this in the context of the crisis in the Humanities which has marked universities over the last few years, and can be linked to a more general crisis in liberal values. While founded upon a time-honoured science fiction scenario the movie also clearly articulates the sense of global peril which is typical of much of the cultural production of our current times, manifested in fears about ecological catastrophe, terrorist attacks, and the anthropocene, etc. Another of its crisis-points is also ‘very 2016’: its ability to use science fiction tropes to express an anxiety about how liberal values are in danger of being overtaken by a self-interested, forceful, intolerant kind of politics. *Arrival* is as much a work of ‘hu-fi’ as it is ‘sci-fi’, that is, ‘Humanities fiction’, a film which uses Chiang’s original novella to convey a message about the restorative potential of ‘Humanities values’ in the face of a new global threat.

Keywords: the crisis in the Humanities, translation, transcultural translation, transnationalism, planetarity, transplanetary post-2016, Ted Chiang, science fiction, liberalism

The 'Black Swan Fallacy' and the Crisis in the Humanities

Those literary studies scholars who, like me, work with texts in translation but are chiefly concerned with their form or themes within them will no doubt also occasionally have experienced the confusion that can arise when chasing down specific translations. When I was writing a previous book (Nicol) I chose as an epigraph one of my favourite quotations from Borges, one that had often occurred to me over the years while teaching and reading:

Sometimes I suspect that good readers are even blacker and rarer swans than good writers...Reading, obviously, is an activity which comes after that of writing; it is more modest, more unobtrusive, more intellectual.
(13)

It comes from his Preface to his 1935 book, *A Universal History of Infamy*, translated by Norman Thomas di Giovanni for the 1972 Penguin edition (Borges). To ensure the references were as up-to-date as possible so students could find them and read further I turned to Andrew Hurley's more recent translation of all of Borges's work, which had appeared in the late 1990s. But I couldn't find the reference to blacker and rarer swans anywhere.

What we find in Hurley's 1998 translation of *A Universal History of Iniquity* (note the change of title) is: "I sometimes think that good readers are poets as singular, and as awesome, as great authors themselves" (Borges, *A Universal History of Iniquity* 3). When we turn to the original Spanish of Borges's text we do in fact find something closer to Thomas's translation than Hurley's: "*A veces creo que los buenos lectores son cisnes aun más tenebrosos y singulares que los buenos autores*" (Borges, *Historia universal de la infamia*). Most importantly we find the metaphor of the swan. Borges refers to a 'blacker' swan, but rather than using the conventional Spanish term for black swans, 'cisnes negros', Borges chooses a more poetic, suggestive, rendering of 'black': "*tenebrous*". This is a term which is difficult to translate exactly to English, but has connotations of 'gloominess' and portent, something

ominous. At this point we understand why Hurley chose the word “awesome”, though he has removed the reference to the black swan entirely.

Chasing the translations in this way is a revealing process. It shows most immediately that what Andrew Hurley has done in his translation of Borges’s Preface is to remove the poetic from an original poetic voice, taken away in fact what is distinctively *Borgesian* from his rendering of Borges. But a consequence of this comparison, which is more pertinent to this essay, is the fact that the choices literary translators make underline the vital intercultural dimension of translation. All acts of translation – not just the translation of literature – require more than simply the ability to understand two languages. Translation is not about straightforwardly transmitting meaning from one language into another (a recognition at the heart of controversies about the advent of automated translation technology which are currently dominant in Translation Studies) (Cronin). It always involves the dimension of mediation, and a sensitivity about the broader society and culture of the language to be translated. Good translators have to be connoisseurs of society and culture, as translation is a communication between two people whose language is shaped by different traditions, customs, and cultures.

In this respect, Borges’s reference to the black swan is especially appropriate, for its meaning in cultural usage points to the value of intercultural or transnational understanding. The term ‘black swan’ entered circulation in the early modern period because Europeans were unaware of another culture unlike theirs. The earliest reference is the Roman poet Juvenal’s statement that “a good person is as rare as a black swan” (“*rara avis in terris nigroque simillima cygno*”) and this phrase was apparently common in Europe given the belief that swans were always, invariably, white. Evoking the idea of a black swan was therefore akin to a reference to a flying pig or a unicorn. Yet in 1697 this changed when the Dutch explorer Willem de Vlamingh discovered black swans in Western Australia. From then on the term black swan came to signify something else: how risky it is to rule something out as impossible. Philosophers such as J.S. Mill, Bertrand Russell, and Karl Popper subsequently used the phrase “the black swan fallacy” to refer to the

dangers of repeated incorrect and untested observations encouraging an erroneous conclusion. Given his characteristic erudition and hyper-awareness of intellectual history, Borges's "*cisnes tenebrosos*" reference in his 1935 Preface is clearly an allusion both to Juvenal in particular and to the philosophical idea of the black swan fallacy more broadly.

The relevance of this concept to thinkers has continued into our current period. In 2007 the Lebanese-American writer, statistician and risk analyst Nassim Nicholas Taleb published his book *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (Taleb) which is about the impact of a range of dramatic and unexpected 'outlier' events – e.g. in the stock market, Pompeii, Harry Potter etc. – and how we then seek to simplify and rationalize them retrospectively. Our society, Taleb contends, exploits risk. The surprising outcome of the 2016 UK referendum on Brexit, for example, might be explained partly as the result of the massive financial gains to be made by people gambling money on the unexpected outcome. Taleb's book also addresses research funding in an academic context, countering the common argument that science funding should be balanced in favour of projects that benefit society directly rather than 'pure' or 'blue skies' research. Taleb argues that in fact, precisely because of unpredictability, society will benefit from undirected research.

Taleb is not referring to humanities research in his book, but there seems to me an obvious relevance of his insight here to an attitude to humanities research funding that is current in the UK at the moment. The dwindling amount of government funding available to arts and humanities projects is increasingly being pushed in a direction away from a 'general' or 'standard' kind of application where projects are funded purely on their intellectual merits and their value to an academic field and towards projects which demonstrate how humanities research can make a practical difference to human beings and society. It is a profoundly utilitarian model. An example is the UK government funding body The Arts and Humanities Research Council's (AHRC) involvement in the UK's Global Challenges Research Fund, a scheme which provides substantial funding "to support cutting-edge research that addresses the challenges faced by developing countries" (Innovation). In practice this means adapting humanities research to make a material difference to people in a country

which appears on a list of Official Development Assistance (ODA) countries, as defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, eligible to receive “government aid that promotes and specifically targets the economic development and welfare of developing countries” (Development).

There are a number of worthwhile and valuable projects funded by this scheme which fit the brief to use humanities research to make a difference and solve ‘real-world’ problems. But not everyone’s research in the humanities naturally lends itself to this kind of ‘applied’ work. The concentration of government research funding in this kind of area contributes to the widespread sense in academia that the value of the humanities is repeatedly under question – and this is why it needs to be justified by schemes like this which compare humanities research with research in science and technology which has an obvious direct benefit to society. It is difficult not to link this to the bashing that the arts and humanities takes in the wider society and culture at large. This is a world in which – to repeat the British politician Michael Gove’s notorious phrase – “people in this country have had enough of experts” (Mance). It is a world where the President of the most powerful and supposedly most advanced nation on earth can say, in a *60 Minutes* interview on CBS that he is sceptical about climate change (Holden).

There is a rearguard action. Partly this can be found in some of the statements released by the AHRC itself, such as its insistence that among the social and economic benefits to the arts and cultural activity even though these also conform to a kind of utilitarian worldview:

Arts and cultural activity and engagement brings with it many direct and sometimes immediate benefits to the economy and society, [...] effects that include an openness, a space for experimentation and risk-taking at the personal, social and economic levels, an ability to reflect in a safer and less direct way on personal, community and societal challenges, and much else. (AHRC Value Statement)

There have also been some vigorous defences of the humanities by academics (Bate, Small). What I want to explore in this article is how this concern amongst academics about the valuable ‘black swan’ status of the humanities is also shared by sections of the public, as revealed by popular

culture. Outside the spheres of government and education, there is still a thirst for narratives which promise to teach us about the inspirational value of a realm beyond the utilitarian. In what follows I want to turn to one such example which validates this claim: a short story, Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life," and its film adaptation, *Arrival* (Villeneuve). Both texts represent a popular semi-conscious anxiety about the value of the humanities in general, and in translation as a particularly valuable discipline within the humanities.

Arrivals and Departures: Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life"

Chiang's novella "Story of Your Life" was published in 1998. In the notes Chiang published alongside the original novella, the story grew out of his "interest in the variational principles of physics," or the science of calculating the minimum or maximum expenditure required in order to find a solution. This interest was combined with his response to watching Paul Linke's one-man show – "Time Flies When You're Alive" (1992) – about his wife battling with breast cancer. "It occurred to me then that I might be able to use variational principles to tell a story about a person's response to the inevitable" (Chiang, "Story Notes: Story of Your Life" 333). In other words, "Story of Your Life" is about the inevitable death of its protagonist Dr Louise Banks's daughter and her way of coping with it. Without wishing to force the analogy with the black swan fallacy, Chiang's story is also about the paradox of coping with the inevitability of something which is at the same time entirely unexpected. Banks, who is also the narrator, is a linguist who is deployed by the army to try to facilitate communication between aliens – who are known as 'heptapods' because of their distinctive seven-limbed appearance – who have landed on earth.¹ She is narrating the story to her unborn daughter, who, as we begin to suspect as the story develops, will die tragically young.

The narrative is an exercise in what Kurt Vonnegut once called "remembering the future." Chiang quotes from Vonnegut's own Introduction to the 25th anniversary edition of *Slaughterhouse 5*, a novel which bears similarities to Chiang's novella:

Stephen Hawking ... found it tantalizing that we could not remember the future. But remembering the future is child's play for me now. I know what will become of my helpless, trusting babies because they are grown-ups now. I know how my closest friends will end up because so many of them are retired or dead now ... to Stephen Hawking and all others younger than myself I say, "Be patient. Your future will come to you and lie down at your feet like a dog who knows and loves you no matter what you are." (Chiang, "Story Notes" 334).

I take this to mean that our past remains present to us when it comes to evaluating how our present relates to our once future ambitions; we remember what we imagined in a future which is now present or past. Its relevance to Chiang's story is that it points to the connection between the two stories it tells, which are otherwise not linked. On the one hand there is the story of the arrival and departure of the aliens, and on the other, the arrival and departure of her daughter. The narrative is Banks's attempt to tell her daughter about what will happen as she grows up.

The first story, the one about communicating with the aliens, involves Banks and her collaborator on this project, the scientist, Dr Gary Donnelly, working to understand the alien's language. During the course of their work, they fall in love and – in an added emotional twist – it becomes apparent that the father of Banks's daughter will be Donnelly. The love story punctuates the main narrative focus on their translation project. Central to this is an enquiry into how linguistics works, especially how understanding an unfamiliar language requires learning the rules rather than collecting and combining individual words. Banks and Donnelly's key breakthrough is a recognition that the heptapods use separate languages for their speech and their writing, and that their written language is not 'glottographic', i.e. a graphic representation of speech sounds, but 'semasiographic', a form of writing which "conveys meaning without reference to speech. There's no correspondence between its components and any particular sounds" (Chiang, "Story of Your Life" 131). From this point on they are able to begin to assess what the heptapods' language can tell them about the species who have developed it. Where human beings think sequentially, and our language reflects this fact, they understand that the heptapods have a "simultaneous mode of consciousness" (Chiang, "Story of Your Life" 161). As Banks writes,

“We experienced events in an order, and perceived their relationship as cause and effect. They experienced all events at once, and perceived a purpose underlying them all” (Chiang, “Story of Your Life” 159).

The heptapods’ language points to the clearest parallel with the “telegraphic-schizophrenic” methods of the Tralfamadorians in Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse 5*. The books Vonnegut’s aliens produce are not linear ones in the manner of ‘Earthling’ ones, but a collection of ‘telegraphic’ clusters of symbols which make up “a brief, urgent message – describing a situation, a scene” which Tralfamadorians read “all at once, not one after the other.” The individual clusters do not relate to each other in any particular way but “when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep” (Vonnegut 64).

Rather alarmingly, it turns out that the heptapods already know the future. This means that if they are investigating humanity, in the way that scientists might do, it can only really be a rather sinister exercise in voyeuristic tourism: not geared towards discovering how humans function but determining *how* whatever they know happened to us happened, and to watch it happening. There is a scientific dimension to this, which it is Donnelly’s role in the plot to emphasize. Variable physics dictates that the endpoint must be understood at beginning of any journey. The key example, which Donnelly teaches Banks in the story, is the ‘least time’ principle in optics: the law that a beam of light is refracted when it shines through water rather than travelling in a straight line to demonstrate that light ‘calculates’ how it can get to its destination in the least time possible. Or to put it in terms more in alignment with Chiang’s story, this means light *knows* its future endpoint before it sets off. The heptapods’ reason for coming to earth must therefore relate to the key principle in physics of ‘extreme variance’ – the least or most possible time & reason for arrival decided on departure – not just in terms of calculating their physical journey through space to get to earth, but in terms of what finding out how the ending they already know it to come about. It makes it unnerving that they will not state why they have come because of course they *know* why: they know the ‘ending’ to our story. In terms of theoretical linguistics this means that the heptapods still had to enact or perform what was being said for it to happen: “Sure, heptapods already knew what would be said in any

conversation; but in order for their knowledge to be true, the conversation would have to take place” (Chiang, “Story of Your Life”). Reflecting on her memory of reading her young daughter “Goldilocks and the Three Bears” Banks compares this a child wanting to hear a story that they already know. We may know the ending to a story but this does not detract from the value in reading or listening to it.

The implication of this focus on the link between the aliens’s language and their nature is that it follows that human language reflects something equally profound about our species and how we think. In “Story of Your Life” this insight is about the consequences of our ability *not* to be able to predict the future in the way the heptapods can. Banks realises that it is precisely because we cannot predict the future that we are able to exercise freedom of choice. This is a virtue the heptapods don’t possess, for all their advances in knowledge. At this point the parallel between the two stories in Chiang’s novella, the two arrivals and departures, becomes movingly clear. Why is Banks telling her daughter the ‘story of your life’ when both of them already know the ending? It is to provide a kind of ‘narrative therapy’ which is also central to *Slaughterhouse 5*. Telling the story, in a way that parallels the functioning of the heptapods’ performative language, confirms that it is true. Narrating it is a way Banks can come to terms with what happened to her daughter and to her. But more optimistically it also underlines the value in having a freedom of choice. At the end of the story we come to what narrative theorists once termed the “epic situation” (Romberg), as Banks refers to the moment at which she tells (or more properly, though this is not highlighted, *writes*) the story, narrating to her absent – both unborn and dead – daughter “here on the patio in the moonlight” (Chiang, “Story of Your Life” 172). Reflecting on the two key events which changed her life, both of which were linked – meeting Donnelly and working with the heptapods – she concludes:

From the beginning I knew my destination, and I chose my route accordingly. But am I working toward an extreme of joy, or of pain? Will I achieve a minimum, or a maximum? These questions are in my mind when your father asks me, ‘Do you want to make a baby?’ And I smile and answer, ‘Yes,’ and I unwrap his arms from around me, and we hold hands

as we walk inside to make love, to make you. (Chiang, "Story of Your Life" 172)

'Hu-Fi': International Co-operation in *Arrival*

Chiang has rapidly become a celebrated science fiction writer, despite only a slim output to date of two collections of stories (Rothman). Appropriately enough, in his accompanying notes on "Story of Your Life" he specifically cites variational physics as the inspiration behind the narrative. The story, as I have suggested – and indeed as *all* science fiction ultimately is, as much as it is about other worlds and species on the surface – is deeply concerned with humanity, with what makes us human. Yet it is surprising that Chiang does not refer to an interest either in translation or intercultural communication, though this clearly also underpins the story. Perhaps equally surprising is that the adaptation of the story for mainstream release in Hollywood – an industry still very much in thrall to science fiction narratives – actually develops this humanities dimension further, and also links translation to the transnational.

Arrival (with a better title than the original) appeared in 2016, and was directed by Denis Villeneuve and starred Amy Adams as Banks and Jeremy Renner as Donnelly (now rechristened Ian). It turns Chiang's story into a familiar Hollywood science fiction 'invasion' movie reminiscent of *Independence Day* or *V*. The film begins when a fleet of huge alien spaceships, which resemble vast stone contact-lenses, appears over 12 nations on earth: the USA (Montana), Greenland, Venezuela, Sierra Leone, UK (Devon), Russia (Black Sea and Siberia), Sudan, Pakistan, Japan, China and the Indian Ocean. It is never clear just why it is these particular locations, though one of the characters speculates that these are the "places on earth with the lowest incidence of lightning strikes" (Villeneuve). Predictably enough this arrival induces widespread panic and sparks an initial international effort for humanity to work together to find a way to communicate with the aliens. Before long, the world descends into paranoia and the brink of a world war due to fears that other nations are colluding with the aliens or the bellicose impulse on the part of some nations to destroy the aliens because they must surely be aiming to colonise earth.

Besides the invasion and impending global catastrophe plot, the initial stages of the film dwell more on the university context and in particular humanities academia. While refreshingly avoiding stock depictions of its professor-protagonist as either an all-action Indiana Jones-like investigator, a *Dead Poets*-like inspirational teacher, or a *Beautiful Minds*-type genius, *Arrival* nonetheless is amusingly inaccurate to any academic viewer in its depiction of life in higher education. When the military comes calling Banks simply ups and leaves her office and is whisked to Montana without having to seek approval from her Head of Department nor worry about who is going to cover her teaching. However it does seem entirely plausible that when the world is thrown into chaos by the alien visitation at the beginning of the movie Banks should quietly retreat to her office and use the opportunity to catch up on her research.

Yet of more significance than the film's portrayal of the life of a humanities academic, there seems to be a genuine attempt to convey the value of the humanities in a more direct way than the original novella. At stake it would seem is the very legitimacy of the humanities, and in particular the crucial value of language learning. Reading from the Preface to her academic monograph, Donnelly the physicist quotes: "Language is the cornerstone of civilisation. It is the glue that holds a people together. It is the first weapon drawn in a conflict" (Villeneuve). He immediately offers an alternative: "Well, the cornerstone of civilisation isn't language, it's science. Science wants to find out things about the aliens such as 'are they capable of faster-than-light travel'" (Villeneuve). One way of reading the way the narrative subsequently unfolds, however, is that Donnelly comes to learn that she is right.

There is no doubt that the film is science fiction. It confirms to Robert Heinlein's famous structural analysis of the science fiction genre in that its conditions are 'different from here-and-now' and these are 'an essential part of the story. Its central 'problem' is "a human problem," and "one which is created by, or indispensably affected by, the new conditions" (Heinlein 17). Yet its interest is not simply in humanity nor the sciences but in *humanities*. We might even refer to the film as an example of a sub-genre of science fiction, ie. humanities-fiction, 'Hu-Fi': the fantasy it entertains is not fundamentally about the consequences of

the temporal conundrums suggested by laws of physics, as Chiang's original is, but in the potential of the humanities to solve problems.

The central dramatic premise and action of the film follows that of the novel. We see scenes in which Banks and Donnelly visit the heptapods in their ship to try to communicate with them, developing the means to learn their language and teach them English. As in the novella, they realise that heptapods language produces and is the product of a distinctive attitude to time, and the film makes clear that this attitude relates to Banks's personal tragedy as it has been clear from the outset that Banks's daughter has died or will die (the temporality of the film is deliberately, and movingly, unclear for most of it). But more than the original story, the film suggests as it unfolds it that the gift of the heptapods's language enables Banks to see what will happen in the future.

The film suggests that the heptapods's logogrammatic and semasiographic language is woven together with another familiar science fiction trope, by which what appears to be happening in the narrative at a global level parallels what is key to the protagonist's own life. It's a version of the classic 'paranoid' scenario where what seems to be operating on a vast scale is really about one person's hallucination, as if an internal psychodrama is being projected outwards onto the real world. When Banks starts experiencing vivid hallucinations after making proper contact with the aliens (upon removing her hazmat suit) it is unclear whether these are memories or premonitions about her daughter. But what becomes apparent is that learning the heptapods' language means becoming able to think like them, no longer perceiving of life in terms of beginnings or endings or forwards or backwards movement. The aliens are providing her with a way of exceeding her human sense of temporality. This has a personal resonance as it has been clear from the outset that Banks has suffered or will suffer a personal tragedy as her daughter has – or will – die. More so than the original novella, the temporality of the film is deliberately, and movingly, unclear for the most part. As the film unfolds it becomes clear that the heptapods are giving her a gift of their language to enable her to see what will happen in the future.

This contradictory temporality, like the emphasis on the personal 'paranoid' plot structure and the increased focus on the university context,

are dimensions of the novella which the film chooses to emphasize more. But the film takes the plot of the novella in an entirely new direction in its rendering of the co-ordinated international effort to communicate with the heptapods, of which Banks's and Donnelly's work is a part. In fact the film adds a distinctively transnational dimension to its adaptation of the story. Following the arrival of the 12 spaceships, the response is immediately global and co-operative as separate nations facing the same problem work together to find a solution. This actually helps clarify an important theoretical-definitional distinction when it comes to transnationalism as a concept used in cultural analysis across humanities disciplines in that it makes the difference between the *inter*-national and the *trans*-national clear. When things inevitably go wrong each nation is shown on the verge of chaos, with simulated 24-hour cable news sequences of crowds in Venezuela, Paris, London, etc., news chyrons about global financial markets experiencing a fall, or borders being closed and flights grounded. This chaos leads to differences between nations exposed by geopolitical crisis. The Chinese, under the nasty General Sheng (whose name is almost certainly an ironic in-joke about the author of the original novella), are shaping up for war. As one of the American generals puts it, "Whatever Shang does, at least four other nations will follow" (Villeneuve). A key development in the plot is when Shang and the Russians are mobilizing their forces, apparently after (mis-)interpreting the language of the heptapods by assuming that they have understood how humans play war games (your move, my move, etc.). What is depicted here are international differences rather than transnational shared collectives: as well as the gulf between the approach of the Chinese and the Russians to the heptapods it indicates a difference between the US and these nations.

Take away the alien dimension and this film is a comment on an international inability to 'speak the same language', to avoid conflict through effective communication. As one of the US military leaders (Agent Halpern) puts it, speculating that what the aliens are trying to do is what the Hungarians call '*szalámitaktika*', the process of dividing and conquering, "We're a world with no single leader. It's impossible to deal with just one of us" (Villeneuve). This is the opposite of the transnational

humanities dream. It leads to the cancelling of communication with the other nations due to the fear that one group may be ready to outdo the other: "Damn it! We need to be talking to each other!," Banks exclaims (Villeneuve).

In the end, this is precisely what the function of the aliens' arrival is: to get the different nations to talk to each other – and to them. Here is another key shift from Chiang's original story. In the original, the heptapods know the future and this leads to a kind of indifference on their part about the ending. What matters seems only that the narrative needs to be acted out performatively in order for it to be actualized. In the novella they simply leave when this is done, leaving the conclusion to the story to be about Banks's personal reflections on time and her trauma. In the film, by contrast, it turns out that the heptapods are facing their own apocalyptic scenario. This is why they are making use of their ability to know the future and to travel back in time. They tell Banks: "We help humanity. In three thousand years, we need humanity help" (Villeneuve). They have travelled back through time in order to give humanity the gift of their language so we can in turn save them when the time is right. It is not clear what exactly befalls the heptapods, but it seems that it is some kind of planetary catastrophe that will also, in time, affect humanity. Language is their gift – and conveying humanities values central to their project.

Repeatedly they tell the humans that "many become one." They are urging the different nations to work together and recognise that each of the 11 countries (there are two heptapod locations in Russia) "are part of a larger whole." Only by working together can they crack the code. As Shang puts it, "Humanity must be protected" (Villeneuve), but the solution is working together and not conflict. From a humanities perspective the benign aliens represent the value of respecting otherness, embracing difference, and assuming benign intent from what we do not know. In this film's code of meanings adhering to these values is the opposite of the military temperament. Where the humanities is transnational, the military represents the *national* or international: groups of aligned nationalities all acting in their national interest.

Transnationalism, Planetarity, and Translation

The two most significant new contexts *Arrival* adds to the “Story of Your Life,” then, are a concern with transnationalism and with the dangers of an impending ecological catastrophe. In this respect the film conforms to what Paul Jay argues is typical about transnational works of literature in tracing a ‘transnational turn’ in literary studies (Jay). Transnational works evidence a convergence of theories of the transnational with the preoccupations of artistic practice – a not untypical confluence of criticism and practice in these post-postmodern times. Although a concern with the values of respecting otherness and ‘working together’ is typical of Hollywood sentimentality, there nevertheless seems something worthwhile about the film’s perspective on transnationalism.

Following the colonialist oppressions of the Nineteenth Century and the re-drawing of national maps following World War II by the nations who ended up victorious, there was an increased recognition of national specificity, national value, and the ethical imperative that each nation and its people should be respected as equals. The humanities discourse of postcolonialism was driven by this impulse. The last decade has, however, seen a decline in the prominence of postcolonialism and its replacement in some spheres, or at least the taking-up of some of its concerns, by the discourse of transnationalism. Transnationalism in this sense is about addressing the corresponding dangers which arise from the insistence on national distinctiveness, and demonstrating that national identity and political and artistic expression is in fact the product of a ‘trans’-nationalism rather than any coherent national identity: the national is in fact the transnational, they are equivalents, for any national identity is shaped by transnational factors. There is no ‘pure’ example of national identity for the national is always already a combination of nations.

To be more precise we might say that even more pertinent than the transnational in relation to *Arrival* would be its sense of ‘planetarity’, to use the term coined by Amy Elias and Christian Moraru. The authors seek to ditch the term ‘global’ because it cannot be divested its connotations of “economic, political, and technical administration” (xvii). By contrast the

term ‘planetary’ places the emphasis on the (re)turn to ethical interconnectedness which the authors call ‘relationality’. Unlike *global* films or novels (or ‘cosmopolitan’ ones), *planetary* ones are propelled by on “new models of transnationality, internationality, or multinationality,” and focus on “our moment [...] measuring time, space, and culture [...] on the planet at large” (Elias and Moraru vii). This emphasis on the planet does not simply involve concentrating on specific human activities and their consequences on a global scale, according to Elias and Moraru, but placing the emphasis on the status of the human being on a planet which is continually changing (or continually ‘turning’). To switch emphasis from globality to planetarity has the effect of introducing a de-territorializing perspective on the global, opening up different configurations of space and mobility, people and place, in a range of points across the globe.

The movie version of *Arrival* does not provide any specificity about the nature of the planetary threat which the heptapods warn about. Yet it is clear from the film’s emphasis on the nations both working together and their relationship almost fracturing that what is valuable are – to quote again from Elias and Moraru – “new models of transnationality, internationality, or multinationality,” and a concern with “our moment [...] measuring time, space, and culture [...] on the planet at large” (xvii, vii). The film might, in this respect, be considered a pop-culture version of the kind of more complex and finely-nuanced literary texts dealt with in Elias and Moraru’s book. We might even go further and suggest that *Arrival* is not just about planetarity but *transplanetarity* – not just new models of international cross-fertilization but interplanetary ones too.

What makes this all particularly significant is the year when the film was released, 2016. While academics should probably resist the temptation to ‘instantly historicize’, looking back on this year now it seems clear that it is likely to stand as a key landmark historical point in socio-political reality, perhaps as a turning-point to a new world order or matrix of social formations. After momentous political events in that year – especially the UK referendum on exiting the European Union and the election of Donald J. Trump as president of the United States – we are now certainly living in a world in which liberal values, perhaps even the values of the humanities themselves, are under threat in a more direct way

than they ever were in the 1990s or the intervening years. There is disturbing evidence that this is the result of a very transnational set of shadowy interconnections between billionaires and influential actors on the political far-right. In the university sphere, however, transnationalism remains synonymous with the liberal, tolerant, political underpinnings of the humanities. There is not the scope to explore this in detail here, but my assumption is that there is a deep seam of equivalence between the values of the humanities and those of liberalism, perhaps even neo-liberalism. Certainly it is striking that at the very time when the humanities was undergoing a transnational turn – throughout the current decade – politics in many Western and Latin American countries was turning just as surely towards a kind of strident nationalism marked by an emphasis on intolerance towards oppressed minority groups, whether refugees from conflict in Syria (across Europe), Central American migrants (in the US), or migrant Eastern Europeans (in the UK). The release of a fundamentally warm-hearted movie like *Arrival*, preaching international co-operation and the embrace of difference turns out to have been dramatically out of step with the socio-political mood which characterized its year of release and which has led increasingly in the years that have followed to a nationalist-inspired or nationalist-appeasing pattern of economic isolationism, immigration control, and more tightly-secured borders.

While founded upon a time-honoured science fiction scenario *Arrival* also clearly articulates the sense of global peril which is typical of much of the cultural production of our current times, manifested in fears about ecological catastrophe, terrorist attacks, and the anthropocene, etc. *Arrival* may be overly sentimental (the idea of aliens who promote the values of respecting otherness and embracing difference invites ironic comments about the fact that aliens turn out to be cosmopolitan liberals too), yet this is a movie which uses science fiction tropes to express an anxiety which now seems very ‘post 2016’, about how liberal values are in danger of being overtaken by a self-interested, forceful, intolerant kind of politics. It uses Chiang’s original novella to convey a message about the restorative potential of a concerted transnational, indeed transplanetary, feat of translation in the face of a new global threat.

Translation is of course at the heart of the humanities. By the kind of logic I have been sketching out in this essay, this means it is also an embodiment of liberalism, of the liberal conception of the 'human' – that is, open to otherness, believing in self-fulfillment, and the value of intercultural communication. Translation has always been crucial in allowing different groups of human being throughout the world, who speak different languages, to come together 'as one'. The basis of translation has always been the transnational foundation of modern existence. It is therefore, in essence, the opposite to the impulse we see in authoritarian regimes which seek to confine different human groups to specific demarcated nations or spaces within nations. This is what *Arrival* understands too. The collaborative human project in *Arrival* is about understanding otherness – a key humanities impulse. It is about embracing the otherness of another species, and trying to forge an intercultural relation with its representatives. The film depicts a collaborative project which brings together researchers from the humanities and the sciences (one which, to return to the conceit I indulged in earlier about viewing this film through a narrow academic lens, would amount to a highly successful and significant application for external funding which genuinely demonstrates the impact of humanities on real-world issues). In this respect it is utilitarian and functional. But at the same time, what the film really conveys by its concentration on the personal impact of Banks's encounter with the heptapods, is its faith in the more general but still powerful values in human interaction which is at the heart of the practice of translation.

Notes:

¹ Academic readers – or at least this academic reader – may wonder what kind of linguist Banks is, as her academic discipline is specified in neither short story nor film. Perhaps surprisingly, even though the story is about translation more than any other academic endeavour, even science, there is no answer to this question, other than a reference to 'field linguistics'. Dr Banks's specialism seems to be in theoretical linguistics, ie. specialising not in one particular language, but in the structure of all languages.

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