Race and World Memory in *Arrival*

To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize "how it really was." It means to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger.

Walter Benjamin

Introduction

Arrival (Villneuve USA/Canada 2016) has attracted persistent academic attention since its 2016 release, with the 'cerebral sf' (Canavan 491) most recently earning a 2018 section of the *Film-Philosophy* journal thanks to its sophisticated treatment of motherhood, time and temporality (Carruthers; Fleming and Brown). On this outing I wish to background the metaphysical, however, and instead enact a provocation by focusing on so-far neglected geopolitical issues linked to race and 'world memories' (Deleuze 2005b 113) operating within, and around, the film.

Motivated by *Arrival*'s own articulation of past colonial histories and memories with sf images of fixed futury, I first undertake an Afrofuturism-inspired investigation into the expressive form and content of a deeply felt scene that appears to erect a Manichean Black/White racial 'montage of history' (Benjamin 2005);[i] before being provoked by the wider narrative and its production context to zoom out and expand the range of ethnic considerations to include black people of non-African descent, and a range of other ethnicities and geopolitical actors (actually or virtually evoked by the narrative) including the contemporary Chinese.[ii] By such token I methodologically collapse together a form of focusing zoom and telescoping backtrack—as if enacting a form of academic 'dolly zoom' or '*Vertigo* effect.' Accordingly, while my initial critical race reading might betray troubling commonalities with colonial attitudes

pervading the 'broader sf megatext' (2007)—including *Arrival*'s negotiation of the

past and future through an implicit web of racial and ethnic hierarchies (Hall, Roberts

132) and a celebration of 'advanced' alien technologies and teleologies (see e.g.

Lavendar 2011, Reid 2009, Reider 2008, Bould 2007)[iii]—my subsequent

consideration of the film's contemporary production context help move us beyond

seeing the story as simply channelling the 'grim mood of horrified premediation'

impacting its pre-president Trump production period (Canavan 497), and instead

allows us to see the Hollywood film indexing zeitgeist perceptions of the (white)

West (con)ceding geopolitical control of the future to the Chinese.

Arrival

Adapted to the big screen from a Ted Chiang sf novella ('Story of Your Life' 1998),

Arrival charts the appearance on Earth of a dozen extra-terrestrial space ships piloted

by pairs of seven-limbed 'Heptapod' creatures. At the sole US contact site the

military gather and brief a small team of experts, who attempt to open communication

channels with the outlandish visitors. A crack duo composed of the star linguistic

professor Louise Banks (Amy Adams)—the film's focalizer—and the freethinking

theoretical physicist Ian Donnelly (Jeremy Renner) ostensibly lead the US team,

which enters the spaceship every 18 hours to face off with the aliens; to try and

discover who they are, where they come from, and what they want (to trade?).

By degrees, Banks begins making breakthroughs, establishing that the aliens employ

two de-linked communications streams: an audio system resembling speech (called

Heptapod A), and an independent semasiographic symbol system (called Heptapod

B). Learning to read and think in the latter—a non-linear a-temporal language—

allows Banks to begin perceiving time differently. Banks ultimately becomes haunted by memories of the future, where she has a child who dies of a rare cancer. On account of these new superhuman talents she is also able to appease the Chinese state's invasion-paranoia, by winning over its most powerful General (Tzi Ma). By such means Banks appears to save the aliens and the world form a nuclear catastrophe. Shortly thereafter, the Heptapods disappear through a U-bend in space-time from whence they came, leaving a transformed species and world behind in their wake.

For reasons that will soon become clear, it becomes fruitful to frame the above survey in terms of what Roland Barthes might call my narrative *stadium*: a Latin term linked to a general attitude or surveying posture we initially bring to an encounter with an image or film (Barthes 25). Seeing this as the baseline of typical contact, Barthes thereafter outlines a rarer form of encounter that constitutes a pricking or aggravation of our attention; this travelling not in the direction of the observer to the image, but rather from the image (in)to the observer. Barthes labels this the *punctum*; that something unexpected, unplanned, and slightly shocking, that 'shoots out […] like an arrow, and pierces me' (25-6).[iv] For me, *Arrival*'s punctum derives from a pointed scene featuring Banks in dialogue with the 'third tier' African-American character Colonel Weber (Forest Whitaker). Or at least, Weber appears to be semiotically coded as a third-tier character if his relative body size on the film's poster, and the billing position of Whittaker (the actor who plays him) are anything to go by (see Image 1).[v] Not an unusual trope, we might concede, if we approach Hollywood sf more generally as a historically 'white' genre or 'expressive form,' that although often appearing to be devoted to social extrapolation, can still often be observed (unconsciously)

perpetuating historical biases and hierarchies (see Kilgore 17, Lavender 2011 6, Reider, Bould, Dery).[vi]

(Image 1)

In what follows, we can explore how this scene's intense psycho-mechanics[vii]—including its heightened emotional content, performative force, striking visual design, and haunting historical allusions—encode or express an excess of raced meanings that gradually transform our reading of the larger film.

Black and White sf

Weber serves to introduce Banks and Donnelly to each other, and then as a team to the aliens. He thereafter becomes a facilitator and go-between, who manages their mission and reports their findings to his military superiors. His narrative role becomes most significant as tensions and anxieties mount on account of perceived dangers the military suspect the aliens pose to humanity. The intuitive Banks appears less fazed

however, and characteristically pushes the limits of her brief during her contact sessions. For example, her first breakthrough is made because she uses a whiteboard and pen to begin teaching the aliens how to read and understand English, something the military strongly recommended against. We shortly thereafter find Colonel Weber challenging her decisions in the temporary cleansing tent where Banks and Donnelley decontaminate, under the shadow of the huge black alien disc. In the interior shot, Weber faces off with the maverick Arts and Humanities professor, who stands facing him in full shot, with her back to the camera, pulling on an over-shirt (Image 2).

(Image 2)

During their following verbal skirmish Whitaker's affective performance conveys that Banks has gotten the Colonel into trouble with his superiors. Banks stands her ground though, with her arms casually folded as the following dialogue unfolds:

Weber: (*intensely*) Everything you do in there, I have to explain to a room full of men whose first *and* last question is: "How can this be used against us?" […]
Banks: Kangaroo.

Although Banks shortly thereafter informs Donnelley that this is an apocryphal story, their exchange constitutes the sharp end of the cine-splinter I want to forensically examine here. Before getting to why, though, I want to take time to unpack how the scene's dynamic and affective psycho-mechanics, or accompanying visual signatures, help infuse this exchange with an excess of symbolic and sensational meaning.

The visual arrangements used to block out the tense dialogue as it unfolds through a conventional shot-reverse-shot here become stylistically significant for example. Perhaps unremarkably, after Weber's framing in long-shot it becomes Banks—or Adams, the Academy award winning star—who is initially framed in an intimate medium frontal shot (Image 3). The enlightened Banks has here recently showered, endowing her skin with the cleansed natural 'glow' of the cinematic white woman (Dyer 1997 122). An overhead light source delicately picks out her damp red hair and facial features, subtly recalling a longer history of Christian artistic codes that grant her character a 'position of moral superiority' (130). Her shot's bright lighting also refracts throughout the anterior chamber, which remains kinetically charged with various dynamic bodies, dressed from hood-to-toe in white. These snowy figures are in turn off-set by the warm orange hues of the military biohazard suits, which are

pegged up behind Banks' shoulder—strategically outlining and flattering the star's reddish hair.

(Image 3)

Considering the stereotypical/phenotypical Northern European and Celtic markers and pigmentations bound up in Adams' star profile, it becomes interesting to observe how her auburn hair and glowing white-blue skin each find complimentary palette matches in her costume and background; as if they are found educing from the star actor/linguist's body. Linked to such, we might briefly consider the following information offered on the peculiar fan website www.ethniccelebs.com, which precisely delineates Adams' ethnicity as being: 'English, 5/32 Danish, 1/16th Swiss-German, 1/32 Norwegian, remote Irish, Scottish, and Welsh' (2010). A lengthy list considering, as Hall reminds us, 'Western Europe did not have, until recently, any ethnicity at all. Or, didn't recognise it had any' (1992 22). Banks/Adams' (apparently) make-up free iridescent skin here floats above a loose civilian costume woven of soft cottons: including a pastel coloured plaid shirt composed of white, light blue, and

pink, worn atop a white-grey under-shirt. Details that by virtue imply the *mise-en-scène* is visually amplifying or reinforcing Adams/Bank's otherwise 'invisible' racial profile.

(Image 4)

On the flip-side of Banks/Adams' 180-degree line we find the African-American Weber/Whitaker. On cutting to his first medium close-up we affectively *feel* that Banks's now-off-screen *mise-en-scène* is contrastingly brighter and livelier than the obscured *blackground* (see e.g Lavender 2011 6) of her tightly uniformed interlocutor (Image 4). Indeed, the visual signature of Weber's blocking is dominated by an overbearing darkness (associated with the military perspective more generally), buttressed by an absorbent palette of blacks and muted greens. There is but one miniscule source of electric lighting in his set-up, positioned mid frame, but mediated by several layers of plastic meniscus. In contradistinction to Banks' invigorated kinetic background, Weber/Whitaker's chthonic field is populated by a lone

statuesque (ethnically white) figure, entirely shrouded in mysterious noir shadows. The Colonel's gloomy singular-plural camouflaged uniform is also mimetically marked with a national flag, surname, and an impersonal Army logo: signalling his national belonging, patriarchal lineage, and rank within a de-individualizing disciplinary organisation.

Banks's intellectual partner (and later lover) Donnelly—played by Rener, whose own ethnic profile is elsewhere delineated as being 'German, English, Scottish, Swedish, Irish and Panamanian' (Wikipedia)—sits behind her in this scene. He is momentarily picked out strapping a timepiece onto his wrist (a meaningful prop), while eavesdropping on the ensuing power struggle. Importantly, he is framed against the same bright kinetic backdrop as Banks. To perhaps deliberately over endow or (mis)read the load bearing *mise-en-scène,* could we not say that the two white characters of European descent—with their comparatively expensive university educations and ivy league PhDs—both literally and symbolically share the same background here?

Connected to such, it is perceptible that an implicit brain/body divide emerges between the white and black characters: a division that can be crudely pegged onto an Althusserian divisions between the Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses respectively. For, while Banks and Donnelly are employed for their liberal and creative cerebral abilities (albeit, adding a gender spin to their respective scholastic 'choices,' Donnelly is an expert in abstract mathematics and the 'hard' sciences— associated with the languages of God or the universe—while Banks professes upon human languages, the 'soft' social sciences, arts and communications), in perpetuity

of a long historical legacy of black representation, Weber's career is tied to his body, actions and physicality. Weber is, after all, a conspicuously tall and broad tool of U.S military aggression, towering head and shoulders above the diminutive Banks. At the same time, Weber's army associations (re)assure viewers/Banks that he is a highly disciplined and docile body, who obeys hierarchical orders from an invisible white male status quo. In fact, Weber is here found running messages in-between two different white command chains: the repressive military powers and their creative ivy-league intelligence.

Collectively considered then, the characters, casting, costumes, framings, and blocking of Banks and Weber almost beg be organized along a series of dialectical Manichean binaries, defined in terms of: female/male; white/black; light/dark; kinetic/still; mind/body; disobedient/obedient; etc./etc. With this in mind, we might now begin tracing other raced vectors activated in and through the scene that oblige us to zigzag between *Arrival*'s wider narrative framework and the broader matrix of its production and consumption context.

Black skin, Other masks

Primed by *Arrival*'s unambiguous concerns with contact themes, we might continue our critical race reading by addressing the conditioning effects of an alien/coloniser's media. Here using the postcolonial writing of Frantz Fanon as our launch pad. For instance, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008) Fanon investigates a colonisation of the black psyche by a White ideology, which among other things arrives and operates through a dominating culture's language and technology. Of particular relevance to

Arrival's focus on the role of language in re-shaping perception (although there along a Sapir-Whorf line), in a chapter entitled 'The Fact of Blackness' Fanon unmasks how a range of loaded postulates and linguistic propositions slowly and subtly 'work their way into one's mind and shape one's view of the world of the group to which one belongs' (118). Of import here is the Manichean 'epidermal schema' (2008) associated with colonial-hegemony, which leads to different black bodies becoming perceived, or conceptually grouped together, in a manner that effectively obscures differences, or what we might call after Isiah Lavender, their blackground specificities (2011 6).

Beyond the functioning of language Fanon also identifies a range of other micro-affects that help (re)shape subaltern perceptions. Most apt here is Fanon's exploration of black men watching Hollywood films, specifically *Tarzan* movies, in different psycho-social contexts. In the Antilles, for instance, black viewers enjoying the film are *de facto* positioned on the side of the feral Lord Greystoke, as he aggressively dominates 'savage' Zulus and 'Negroes'. However, when the same viewer watches a *Tarzan* film in a European context the film's otherwise unmarked formal structures, which support White Man identification, suddenly become exposed. As in this setting the black viewer swiftly becomes aware of being perceived as the self-same as the white man's on-screen 'Negro' opponents. Or indeed, any other hypervisible black character-type—such as a Bushman captured in a colonial documentary reel—which white audiences are presented with. As Fanon puts it, the accumulative effect of such racialized surveillance and ordering systems result in black men coming to perceive themselves through a reductive and homogenizing Eurocentric lens that renders them 'at once Antillean, Bushman, and Zulu' (118).

Similar forms of representational repression and cinematic condensing have also been unmasked by Hall and Dyer, revealing the otherwise imperceptible normalizing ideological substratum of 'whiteness' that always-already (pre)mediates the reality of Hollywood's mimetic utterances (Dyer 1988; Hall 30). Among other things, to help make these invisible mechanisms visible, Dyer advocates employing John O'Thompson's screen actor 'commutation test' (1978): A invaluable mind-experiment method where readers/viewers imaginatively substitute one performer for another, to help draw out the implicit semiotic meanings, or sets of signs and signifying features, that casting (or indeed caste-ing) bring to a given film.[ix] And while I would encourage readers to undertake their own commutation test thinking with regard to the above cine-splinter, we might intercept this method to investigate one further micro-detail embedded within *Arrival en passant* that seemingly helps diffuse a dominant white perspective—here related to the naming of the aliens.

Deliberate: In Chiang's text the aliens are named Flapper and Raspberry, but in the big-screen adaptation Banks and Donnelley christen them 'Abbott and Costello.' On the one hand this renaming was likely felt to retain a sense of the aliens being a non-threatening pair, while also adding a winsome postmodern allusion to Abbott and Costello's own humorous cinematic escapades with monsters and aliens. OK—but critically 'ethnoscaping' (see e.g. Lavender 2007) this same gesture helps us detect the aliens also becoming discreetly superimposed or racially montaged with a white-American duo of European ethnic descent. Meaning that the white US team are caught employing the alien communication window as a form of ethnic 'looking glass' (the name of the alien communication devices in Chiang's novella), through

which they (and the film's viewers by extension) perceive the alien *race* as being ethnically akin to them (albeit a nostalgia-inflected 1940s and 1950s version of white US culture). In seeking support for this reading consider briefly what contrasting meanings emerge if—through an Afrofuturist or Chicanafuturist (see e.g. Ramírez) inflected commutation model—the aliens are instead comedically named Amos and Andy, or Cheech and Chong.

Acknowledgment of the massive differences seemingly small benign words make to a film's larger nexus of meanings provokes us to now revisit and reflect upon the sharp end of the cine-splinter, and to hone in on the devilish details of Banks's Australian anecdote; which on closer inspection reveals itself to have a forked tip. For first and foremost it appears significant that Banks (whose surname recalls that of Sir Joseph Banks, the naturalist who was part of Captain Cook's crew and is presumably the curious white character in her apocryphal story) offers Weber a geographical example of European first contact drawn from the (geographical) global south. What is more, it becomes troubling that she, and then he, utilises the term 'aboriginal' during the exchange. Why?

This latter detail pricks because the term aboriginal traces its etymological roots back to Latin, where it is an amalgam of *ab* (meaning 'from') and *origo* (meaning 'origins, or beginning'). In point of fact, the term *aboriginal* was historically appended by Europeans to many of the different peoples they encountered during their colonial endeavours; who they invariably perceived to be less technologically advanced, or more culturally—and later evolutionary—primitive than themselves. This colonising and ordering of the world through might and language is clearly aligned along a

power-knowledge axis. A fact that recasts the term's use in 1770 when first applied to the unknown (but soon to be decimated) peoples of (what was to the British colonisers' Royal Science minds) *Terra Australis Incognita* (the Unknown Southern Land).

Some might object that in the oral dialogue Banks anachronistically or retroactively applies the proper noun 'Aboriginal,' which started to be officially used to pigeonhole the continent's different peoples some nineteen years after her apocryphal tale. However, this label also retains a certain toxicity that troubles its use in a white linguistic expert's mouth. For, to parrot John McBain: 'Aboriginal is a non-Aboriginal word' (in Korff 2017). What is more, even if the term Aboriginal has been 'reclaimed' or 'reappropriated' within some Australian communities today, when used by white outsiders (such as Banks, or Adams by extension), it is still often met with distress and resentment, and has been linked with low self-esteem and mental health issues (ACTOSS 2016; Korff 2017). To reiterate, then, Banks's use of a troubled term with historical Othering, homogenising, and primitivising functions feels like a significant detail in a film heavily inflected with considerations of the language-thought continuum, and transformative contacts between races.

Of course, Weber's use of the label is troubling too, even if for other reasons; which we can here link to Fanon's arguments concerning the fact of blackness. For, while Weber/Whitaker's African-American heritage is not easily mapped onto or alongside that of the black indigenous peoples of Australia,[x] the scene's bold Black/White aesthetics virtually prime viewers to perceive Weber as being—to paraphrase Fanon—simultaneously African-American, Aboriginal and Zulu. Or at least,

reflexively speaking, it was the strident scene's Manichean excess that amplified my own discomfort with *Arrival*'s only significant black character delivering a sharp reminder to a white university professor that an apparently 'more advanced race' nearly wiped out Australia's black population (for more on defracted and revisioned Social Darwinism in colonial sf see Rieder 2008).

Outwith Australia, in the popular press and/or the popular imagination (where Weber likely draws his views about the superior white race), the complexities and specificities surrounding Britain's brutal colonial contacts with Australian indigenous cultures are less well known. Related to which, it remains troubling—especially considering Fanon's description of the colonising of the subaltern mind—to observe how a mainstream tendency to implicitly group together vastly different clusters of colonial survivors (of European overseas projects) persists; in order to set them up within a convenient and problematically enduring West/Rest binary. For example, a recent BBC article covering the seemingly perennial flashpoint tensions concerning the naming of Australia Day (a national holiday previously called 'Foundation Day' or 'First Landing' that commemorates the date in 1788 when Captain Arthur Philips raised a British ensign to take possession of *Terra Nullis* for the British crown) offhandedly reports that: 'Indigenous protests [have] continued to grow, mirroring similar movements surrounding days commemorating European colonisation, such as Thanksgiving in the US' (Verghis).[xi]

Although this remains a crude journalistic montage of global indigenous struggles, it does help emphasize that: colonial history/legacies are contested; there are enduring struggles to globally recognise/re-cognize various lost cultures' sovereignties; and on-

going struggles to articulate otherwise celebratory 'first contact' narratives with a

more befitting politics of loss and mourning. In light of such, to try to grasp a more

adequate postcolonial perspective upon Australia's contested contact (his)story to that

remediated by Weber, it helps to briefly consider the (English language) words of the

political activist Michael Mansell, who asserts:

> Australia Day is 26 January, a date whose only significance is to mark the
> coming to Australia of the white people in 1788. It's not a date that is
> particularly pleasing for Aborigines […] The British were armed to the teeth
> and from the moment they stepped foot on our country, the slaughter and
> dispossession of Aborigines began (in Korff 2018).

In Mansell's powerful words we can easily locate a much needed moral correction or

qualification to Weber's Hollywood statement. For although the

Aborigines/aborigines were indeed nearly wiped out, it is not here simply at the hands

of 'a more advanced race,' but rather at the arms of a more aggressive people, with

more (so-called) *advanced* and brutal weaponry/technology: a subtle but nonetheless

important distinction for our reading of the film.

Recognition of such might in turn encourage us to undertake something of a

scriptwriting 'commutation test' with Banks's story, to ask what happens if we

substitute the apocryphal aboriginal first-contact-cum-invasion tale, *and* Weber's quip

about 'a more advanced race' nearly wiping them out, with an analogous example

drawn from somewhere geopolitically closer to the US, or Weber/Whittaker by

extension. On first flush this raises the shadow of a suspicion that the Hollywood

film, or the American Banks, deliberately pushes this tall tale 'down under' in order

to ensure that more proximate—and therefore politically uncomfortable—examples of

European first-contact, enslavement and genocides (in West Africa and North America) remain beneath the surface.[xii] Or do they?

Competing interpretations: Weapon or Tool?

To my mind there are chiefly two credible, but possibly paradoxical, interpretations of the above cine-splinter. As is clear, the most apparent is that the scene operates as a(nother) toxic Hollywood shard, disclosing the unreflective continuance of hegemonic insensitiveness to lost world memories and racial histories (or else dilutes these by introducing a greater mythical alien race that renders distinctions between human ethnicities less exceptional). From such a vantage the foremost value of revisiting this sf sliver might reside in its ability to critically refresh and racially update what Walter Benjamin means when he maintains that all cultural documents are simultaneously records of barbarism: 'And just as it is itself not free from barbarism, neither is it free from the process of transmission, in which it falls from one set of hands into another' (2005). Here, *Arrival* simply/implicitly normalises and unconsciously transmits the ideological privileges and assumptions that white power is founded upon: Something a consciousness raising critique such as this might help to interrupt or stymie.

But while this reading is unquestionably part of the story, there is surely more to be said. At least, the conspicuously felt scene stuck with me, irritating and innervating my thoughts, needling me to re-consider it, gradually persuading me to entertain another (perhaps productive mis-)reading, wherein the cine-splinter becomes the cypher or key that unlocks and transforms the entire film from within. Certainly, on

reflection the embodied performances, Manichean *mise-en-scène,* and pointed dialogue seem to deliberately stand out; almost demanding to be felt and read along raced colonial lines. An idea that gains support from other embedded details, such as discussions of British colonial tactics to divide and conquer the peoples of India, and *Arrival*'s nesting contact site being located in the plains of Montana (sometimes called 'The Last Best Place'), a historically contested region where European diseases and trading inexorably reaped changed upon the languages, ways and economies of numerous indigenous populations.

Coupled to this, in an echo of Fanon, the newly contacted human race must now hybridize their minds, and learn to internalise a new alien language and world-view—especially if they desire any access to the future. Somewhat recast(e)ing Fanon's arguments from *Black Skin, White Masks* then, Banks' describes herself as having gained a new hybrid mode of thought and perception, which she later promulgates through her tellingly entitled pedagogical monograph *The Universal Language*. The white Banks thus becomes the first translator to serve the alien outsiders, smoothing communications between the future-oriented aliens and her own backward looking kind, courtesy of their knowledge-power tools.[xiii]

In the last analysis it is likely that it is Banks's own white privilege that ultimately blinds her to perceiving any dangers built into this first contact event. Once again the comical gesture of naming the aliens Abbott and Costello exposes her underlying assumption that the alien visitors are somewhat akin to friendly cinematic white men—rather than brutal historical White Man: The latter being something that the Chinese and Sudanese contact teams certainly fear and anticipate. In cultural

commutation terms, we can only ponder what different perspectives an 'Aborigine' or Algonquin-speaking team—with their alternative world memories and histories—could have brought to this latest first contact encounter. Banks by contrast fails to entertain the idea that it might be disempowering or dangerous to come into contact with an 'advanced' alien Other, or to begin adopting and thinking through their language (which they refer to as a 'weapon' throughout the film).

Tied to such, Banks's newfound abilities ultimately lead her to visions of a fixed future, which she (and humanity by extension) becomes helpless to guide or steer.[xiv] What is more, it is conspicuous that her own future flashes are marked by loss and death. We know that her daughter is destined to die of a rare cancer, for example, a disease we cannot but help suspect derives from Banks's transformative contact with the aliens, especially her entry into their dense gaseous atmosphere without a protective suit. Whatever the case, her genetic lineage is ostensibly severed or broken on account of her first contact, thus assuring her—like the collective indigenous peoples of Australia and North America—of a post-contact future marked by loss and mourning.

The above details might collectively suggest that the cerebral film is in fact signalling a form of postcolonial positioning or perspective, meaning that the Manichean cine-splinter might also be taken as consciously or productively inviting viewers to articulate and enfold divergent black histories and identities via Weber. Or at least, in a manner that provokes viewers to perceive a compressed form of 'historical montage' that appears awash with contested 'world-memories.' Two concepts we can finally harness to help us move towards some conclusions.

Concluding with lost memories and *Jetztzeit*

In *Cinema 2* Deleuze describes 'world memory' as a heterogeneous form of memory that is at once non-psychological, pre-personal, and non-chronological (113-5). [xv] Notions that have been exploded and reconstructed recently by David Martin-Jones in his *Cinema Against Doublethink* (2019), as it offers an expansive survey of 'time-image' films drawn from the Global South that appear to probe the latest breakdowns and tectonic ruptures in contemporary global geopolitics. Emblematic of this trend are films such as *Tambien la Lluvia*/*Even the Rain* (Icíar Bollaín, 2010) and *Loong Boonmee raleuk chat*/*Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2010) which challenge viewers to confront alternative world histories, or just history, while dislodging, opening up, or signposting the lost paths of colonial modernity; or else allow forgotten histories and absented stories that belong to the whole world to flash (back) into existence. Courtesy of what we might now call *Arrival*'s creation of a crepuscular Aboriginal-African-American crystal-image—or a pointed Black historical montage—we might also include this US sf film as an example of this broader world trend. Albeit conceding that *Arrival* contains a more contracted world memory that the crystalline films Martin-Jones examines, that nonetheless makes viewers hesitate after gesturing towards 'something of the vastness of the world history in which we are immersed' (Martin-Jones 10).

As a Hollywood product fashioned in the economic heart of the global industry, *Arrival*'s form and content also invariably reifies how the 'struggle over the remembrance of lost pasts is what the smiling face of history ('not … that of the white

man … White Man himself') obscures'—particularly by actualising 'the wilful eradication of the history of violence through which white supremacy maintains its hegemonic position' (Martin-Jones 209). Specifically, the Manichean scene examined above coils its barbed postcolonial critique into *Arrival*'s wider narrative framework, encouraging viewers to recast and reinterpret Banks's celebrated ability to speak, think and perceive in the Heptapod language. Or put differently, having Weber embody a Black historical montage of colonial encounters *and* give voice to the dominant white/coloniser discourse works to undermine or overturn Banks' so-called break through with the Heptapods. For, as the first of the human race to communicate and think in the new power-knowledge system of the alien, Banks can essentially be understood internalising alienness in a way comparable to how Weber is shown to have internalised Whiteness (or hegemonic notions of white superiority *à la* Fanon).

Supporting such a reading, one of the first alien signs Banks learns to decode is the extra-terrestrial symbol for 'human,' which she subsequently shares with her colleagues around the globe. During these stages Banks believes that understanding the symbols offers her transparent access to the signified objects/subjects of their thought. That is, she believes that the alien signifiers are ideologically uncontaminated; something a linguistic professor should harbour suspicions about, knowing as she must that ideologies and politics always become encrusted within a language's operating systems and truth games. For what if, like human languages, this is not (and never can be) an invisible or transparent signifier, and is more akin to an alien-Latin-esque label like *aborigo*? A symbol that signals the aliens enclosing all humans together within a new homogenous category, in a mythical return of

organised 'alien' sciences such as Orientalism and Colonialism. *Human Skin,*

Heptapod Masks?

From this vantage a new historical binary is erected, systematically dividing *Terra*

aborigo and the inter-stellar Heptapods along newfound future/past,

advanced/primitive lines—thereby enacting the latest sf rupture in the global system

that serves to shatter world history into evermore lost paths and forgotten pasts. Of

course, the problem with this reading is that it overlooks the apparently benign nature

of the omniscient aliens, who are not armed to the teeth (except in literal terms with

regard to their Vampyroteuthis-like physiology), nor begin killing the 'less advanced'

human race from the moment they arrive (unless we think of the rare cancer as part of

a 'micropredatory' weapon or tool as was the case with many European-diseases; see

e.g. De Landa 103-134)). Instead, the Heptapods communicate openly to white

professors (of European descent) in the US, UK and Australia (glanced on various

screens-within-the-screen)… Oh, and the military generals in China. Another detail

that might give us pause, and prompt us to finally articulate *Arrival*'s fictional time-

and-space to the wider geopolitical zeitgeist of the film's production.

Unquestionably, the unique addition of a Chinese General into *Arrival*'s cinematic

adaptation provokes us to zoom out and consider the Hollywood commodity as what

Benjamin might recognise as a small 'crystal of the total event';[xvi] a product that

contains and exposes important historico-political forces and pressures impinging

upon the here-and-now (*Jetztzeit*) of its creation or emergence (1999). In this

instance related to the dawning of a wider geopolitical-economic epoch. For as the

second largest global economy, military superpower, and movie market (but soon to

be first, see e.g. Shoard) in the world, the Chinese—more than any other nation—are uniquely granted a concomitant or parallel first contact story within *Arrival*'s narrative framework (we learn the Chinese have been using Mahjong tiles to communicate with the aliens, for example, while the Chinese military general is referred to as the 'Big domino' as his actions can trigger a chain-reaction in smaller nation states). Accordingly, as was the case with previous Hollywood sf soft power plays such as *2012* (Emmerich, US 2009) and *Gravity* (Cuarón, US, 2013)—or their complimentary 'Huallywood' sf-fantasy hybrids such as *The Great Wall* (Zhang Yimou, USA-China, 2016) (see e.g Fleming forthcoming b)—we diegetically discover the Chinese *progressively* becoming partly or wholly responsible for saving the white heroes, the future of the planet, or the human race. In *Arrival*, this is played out by Banks communicating a world-saving secret to General Shang over the phone; which in the last analysis he effectively whispers to himself courtesy of a Heptapod time-loop paradox and his vanishing white mediator (see Brown and Fleming 355). In their sole scene together, the patriarchal Shang greets Banks as if a benevolent absent father figure (notably Banks has only communicated with her mother in the narrative prior to this).

In the broader context such fictional gestures reflect Hollywood flattering the CCP at a time when American media corporations become increasingly economically enamoured and transnationally entangled with the Chinese 'super-nation' (Berry 467) and its lucrative super-marketplaces (see e.g. Homewood). And in light of these wider machinations we can arguably reinterpret *Arrival*'s narrative manoeuvres as a premeditated and premediating articulation of a historical there-and-then (of colonial proto-globalisation) with the here-and-now of the film's contemporary geopolitical

setting (globalisation), and its associated immanent/immanent economic projections. Having thus finally reframed *Arrival* as a small Benjaminian crystal of the total event,[xvii] we are better prepared to discern not only how the large can be discerned in the small (or the whole in the part), but also what it means to say that the past arrives as a flash in the present as per our epigraph.

When all is said and done, then, properly comprehending the operations of the past and future flashes of *Arrival* entails accounting for the financial dangers and economic risks of the present (and its projected futures). By way of a conclusion, we might finally divine from these sf dreams and Hollywood plays an on-going belief that although colonialism 2.0 is shaping up to be ethnically reconfigured, it will essentially be business as usual.

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[i] Afrofuturism is a label that interconnects a broad church of sf texts, discourses, and critical studies which generally seek 'to unearth the missing history of people of African descent and their roles in science, technology and science fiction' (Womack 2013 17); or else imagine other possible techno-futures that no-longer exclude people descended from the survivors of slavery, West-African genocides, and the Middle Passage (Dery 1994 177-180).

[ii] While other first contact films such as *District 9* (2009 Blomkamp) or *Avatar* (2009 Cameron) might equally have served to expose the functions of race and colonialism as a barbed theme or subtext undergirding contemporary sf, I here forensically focus on the deeply felt qualities of a single scene that I personally found demanded my repeat attention.

[iii] Isiah Lavender's *Race in American Science Fiction* (2011), for example, unearths how US sf literature betrays a historic 'preoccupation with race, skin colour, and white supremacy' (6). More broadly, Afrofuturism studies and critical race readings reinterrogate how the historical emergence of sf is politically imbricated with white colonial politics and practices.

[iv] Barthes notes that the etymology of *punctum* relates to a 'prick,' or a 'mark made by a pointed instrument,' which generates a 'sting, speck, cut, little hole,' and is conceived as 'that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)' (25-6).

^v Although his performance won him no nominations or awards (the year after the 2015 and 2016 'white Oscars'), Whitaker's supporting turn is, to my mind, characteristically commanding.
^{vi} The aesthetico-politics, ethics and ideologies of Eurocentric or global Hollywood products that circulate on a planetary scale often garner renewed racial scrutiny these days. This extends from their pre-production to exhibition stages and beyond, and often lead to debates and critique that form along ethnic lines. Beyond the celebrations and discussions surrounding the more recent *Black Panther*'s (Ryan Coogler, 2018) critical and box-office success, for example, these ideas might also be demonstrated by a glut of recent scholarship exploring the sf work of the white-Jewish actress Scarlett Johansson, that variously tracks in on issues surrounding 'whitewashing,' white supremacy, blackness, and trasnsracialism (see e.g Loreck 2018, Hilderbrand 2016, Fleming forthcoming a, Brown and Fleming forthcoming).
^{vii} This notion of psycho-mechanics intercepts an immanent model of 'film-thinking' or 'film-Philosophy' that has gained popularity in the wake of the cinematic writing of Gilles Deleuze—who maintained that a film constituted a form of inhuman autonomous thinking machine. More recent exponents of film-thinking models such as Daniel Frampton describe viewers intercepting or apprehending intensive bundles of affective and aesthetic forces, which are perceived as 'thoughtful intention' (2006, 275). Thus, rather than seeing filmmaking techniques (a close up or a face lit by three point lighting, say), viewers are here understood encountering the stylistic dramatization of a thinking film's impressions and feelings of a given character, scene or event.
^{viii} I have opted to render the spoken term here the more general 'aboriginal,' rather than the proper noun 'Aboriginal' which was not officially used until 1789, nineteen years after this story. This is in part prompted by an online version of the script (see e.g. https://www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk/movie_script.php?movie=arrival), but I will also later expand on problems surrounding Banks's use of the proper noun too, as is rendered in some versions of the film's subtitles.
^{ix} While Christopher Plummer's recent replacement of Kevin Spacey reifies and gives new life to commutation test thinking today, for Dyer writing in the late 1980s, the value of this hypothetical exercise lay in its ability to allow us to recognise (and re-cognize) the organisational principles that impalpably promote and prop up white power/privilege.
^x Arguably, the experiences and encounters of indigenous Australians find greater parallels with the First Nations and Inuit peoples of Canada (to introduce Villeneuve's own homeland as another counter example) or the Algonquin-speaking peoples, Plains Indians, and Pueblo-dwelling peoples than they do with black survivors of US slavery, West African Genocides, and the Middle Passage—if we (like the BBC) must fashion a monstrous comparative montage of colonisation contacts.
^{xi} The term 'indigenous' could also be taken as problematic here, as per an Anishinabek report 'outlawing' of the term 'Aboriginal' makes clear. As John Ahni Schertow explains, 'the term "indigenous," […] is fairly contentious as well – but not because of it's etymology. Rather, because it seems to be such a subjective term. Sometimes it's used to define a racial identity, other times a political one. And there's some people who aren't considered indigenous at all but they are technically indigenous People.' In the end, these Eurorean terms get in the way of 'reclaiming identity' (Schertow 2008). In an ACTOSS council of social services publication, it is similarly noted that many 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples are dissatisfied with the term "Indigenous" as, amongst other things, it is a generic term not fit for purpose, is used for convenience, can detract from a preferred individual or group identity (see ACTOSS 2016).
^{xii} That is, there would arguably be a palpably different political feel to Weber saying 'a more advanced race' nearly wiped out ' the 'Red Indians' or 'West Africans' (to continue using historical white western labels for effect) in a Hollywood film.
^{xiii} Within the film it is suggested the aliens make contact so that the human race will save them in 3000 years time. This means the first contact and hybridization ensures the aliens of future prosperity, in a manner that also reflects the operations of Western colonialism.
^{xiv} These fatalistic visions establish a new subjugation and sublimation to the now-dominating alien world-view or perspective, which quashes Banks's all-too-human specious sovereignty, foreclosing notions of free will (or what makes us human). Instead, only the past, or that which has already occurred, is accessible to the newly contacted/colonised mind. Human kind by extension here becomes re-encountered as a primitive species associated with a limited perspective, backwardness and the past. Debatably, *Arrival* here discloses its *Jetztzeit* image of

the (white) West receding into an anterior world-historical position, similar to that previously allotted to its colonial 'Others.'

xv In his discussion of Alain Resnais's films, for example, Deleuze describes encountering a form of memory 'which overflows the conditions of psychology, memory for two, memory for several, memory-world, memory-ages of the world' (2005b 113). These memories, which *Arrival* also appears to trade in (see e.g. Fleming and Brown 2019), are not strictly speaking 'in us,' for 'it is we who move in a Being-memory, a world-memory' (Deleuze 113).

xvi As if inhabiting the aphoristic Buddhist notion that one might discover an entire universe in a single drop of water, Walter Benjamin's *pars pro toto* approach to cultural images and products grants startling insight into the here-and-now (*Jetztzeit*) of their production; exposing important historico-political forces and pressures impinging upon their creation or emergence (1999). Of particular significance to my treatment of *Arrival* is Benjamin's argument that images of new or futural socio-political (dis)order always-already resonate with, or are pervaded by, the deep past (2005).

xvii In his infamous essay 'On the concept of History' Benjamin strives to project an alternative to historical materialism or Marxist methods. He there describes an alternative quasi-cinematic desire for a new 'graphicness (*Anschaulichkeit*)' to carry 'over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event' (Benjamin in Tiedmann 2002 931).