

# Film Phenomenology and the “Eloquent Gestures” of Denis Villeneuve’s *Arrival*

Now, more than ever, we live in what Lev Manovich referred to as the “society of the screen” (99). Once primarily used to—quite literally—frame work and leisure time, screens have become increasingly pervasive in all aspects of life. Dynamic screens hail our attention from billboards and bus stops, nudging toward those interactive projections of *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Minority Report* (2002). The domestic space offers no respite as screens litter the surfaces of the home: attached to walls and refrigerators, scattered on tables and sofas, a multitude of screens of all sizes beckon our attention. In response to the omnipresence of the screen—and its resulting in both digital and physical clutter—screen designers are increasingly concerned with reducing the screen’s “interruption.” A recently released Samsung television, for instance, is simply called *The Frame*, and its selling point is its “art mode” that transforms the television into a work of art when it is not in use. “The idea for me,” explains its designer, Yves Béhar, was to “integrate technology into people’s lives that’s non-disruptive, so that it falls into the background” (qtd. in Stinson, par. 5), while elsewhere he says that *The Frame* “is more about technology being invisible” (qtd. in White, par. 13).

The way that Béhar envisions an “invisible” technological landscape that “falls into the background,” seamlessly integrated with its user’s life, evokes Vivian Sobchack’s recent description of the “screen-sphere,” referencing the “ubiquity, multiplicity, and connectivity of the screens around us” (“Screen-Scape” 165). The network of devices that comprises the screen-sphere demands a new form of phenomenological engagement from its user, one that has radical implications for the formation and experience of identity. As Sobchack claims, “we live today primarily *in* and *through* screens, rather than merely *on* or *with* them. They no longer mediate our knowledge of the world, ourselves, and

others; beyond representation, they have now become the primary means by which our very ‘being’ is affirmed” (158). Not only limited to selfies that offer a filtered (self-)perception to others through *social media*, screens are now completely integrated with the body in what could be described as *biological media*. The Apple Watch, for instance, presses against the skin to record steps, monitor pulse, sense the rhythms of sleep, and even has a function that reminds its wearer to “breathe.”

On the one hand, the screen-sphere promotes greater interactivity between users, technology, and other people. Yet on the other hand (to use a carefully chosen metaphor), the screen-sphere is tinged with concerns that despite fostering enhanced connectivity in *virtual space*, we may be losing touch with the *material ground* of identity and intersubjective communication. In this essay, I put Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of language and intersubjective experience in dialogue with Denis Villeneuve’s *Arrival* (2016). As Sobchack describes, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is a sustained investigation into “the sensuous contours of language, with meaning and its signification born not abstractly but concretely from the surface contact, the fleshly dialogue, of human beings and the world together making sense sensible” (*Address* 3). In the first section of this essay, I gloss Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of language, in particular his claims that our capacity for intersubjective communication through speech and gesture is always grounded in the lived experience of the perceptive and expressive body. Then, I test Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological thought in a handling of the “sensuous contours of language” as they are expressed in—and mediated through—Villeneuve’s *Arrival*. I suggest that the film is not only narratively about (mis)communication between human and alien forms of language, but further, I argue that *Arrival* is self-reflexive of film as a sensuous event. The multiplicity of screens in its mise-

en-scène not only provides a vivid illustration of the screen-sphere, but also, through *Arrival's* appeal to the sensorium, it serves as a vital reminder that film language necessitates an intersubjective and embodied “fleshly dialogue” between the spectator and the screen.

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By referring to how conscious experience of the world is always existentially—and materially—embodied in the flesh, enacted through an existential structure of intentionality that correlates acts of consciousness with its object, Merleau-Ponty emphasises that our understanding of the world hinges on the experience of the lived-body. The lived-body is simultaneously both a subject *in* the world and an object *for* the world. That is, not only is the lived-body capable of perception but also it is “our expression in the world, [and is] the visible form of our intentions ... an active body capable of gestures, of expression, and finally of language” (Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy* 5, 7). The lived-body’s *intrasubjective commutation* of perception and expression therefore forms the material grounds for *intersubjective communication*. As Sobchack explains, the “lived-body projects and performs its perceptual perspective and situation and bears meaning into the world as the expression of that situation. The highest level of this performance is *speech* and its fixation as *writing*” (*Address* 41).



Speech, John O’Neil claims, “is the invocation of our own being in concert with others,” and he explains that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of speech is “a phi-

losophy of initiative, of style and gratuity accomplished against the limits of received language” (xxx). That is, speech springs from language as it is institutionalised into the syntactical rules that govern its use. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, understanding speech is not just a matter of “[consulting] some inner lexicon which gives us the pure thoughts covered up by the words or forms we are perceiving,” but rather “[we] lend ourselves to its life, to its movement of differentiation and articulation, and to its eloquent gestures” (*Signs* 42). Language’s “eloquent gesture” testifies to its material origins in the perceptive and expressive lived-body. The term itself reveals that language is not only acoustically heard but also is synaesthetically felt, such as when we describe the textures of the voice (e.g. a “sharp” tone). Indeed, the way that comprehension involves the full sensorium is reflected in the way that the Latin root for ‘comprehension’—*prehendere*—means ‘to seize.’ For Merleau-Ponty, conversations are intersubjective events in which “I project myself into the other person” and vice versa, so much so that it “resembles a struggle between two athletes in a tug-of-war” (*Prose* 19).

Although he is describing spoken dialogue, his metaphoric description of the muscular dimension of interpersonal communication evokes the eloquence of bodily gesture. Throughout his phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty describes the significance of physical gesture as an expression of conscious experience: what he terms the “first language” (*Primacy* 8). When we see someone express their perception through gesture, such as rapidly twisting their neck to look in a different direction, their gesture is inhabitable because we can similarly re-orientate the body and signal our shift in intentional direction to other people. As Merleau-Ponty explains, “I do not understand others by some act of intellectual interpretation ... I join it in a kind of blind recognition which precedes the intellectual working out and clarification of the meaning ... It is through my body that I understand people” (*Phenomenology* 216). Of course, we do (usually) come to understand other people intellectually, but Merleau-Ponty attests that the body has a pre-reflective capacity for gestural comprehension that forms the carnal grounds of intersubjective experience. Describing the lived dimensions of “carnal intersubjectivity,” Richard McCleary writes that “flesh meets flesh in the flesh of the world, and man [becomes] a living mirror for his fellow man ... A mirror full of moving shadows; for even though a world which can arise from carnal gestures is a ‘magic’ one, the wondrous creatures of our vision always drag along reluctant flesh” (xviii).

I have given a thorough description of language as a “magic machine for transporting the ‘I’ into the other

person's perspective" because Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the incarnated grounds of sense-making and capacity for language has been influential in film studies (*Prose* 19). And, after all, what else is the cinema but a "magic machine" that is empowered to transport us into another person's perspective, or "a living mirror ... full of moving shadows"? For the rest of this essay, then, I offer Villeneuve's *Arrival* as a case study that illuminates Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of intersubjective communication, as the film is a meditation on the reversible structure of language and perception. Indeed, as I describe below, the film proposes that inhabiting a different language can change the way in which we perceive and inhabit the sensible world itself. Further, a phenomenological analysis of the film reveals how the spectator is drawn into a carnal dialogue with the material texture of the screen, a shared space that fosters intersubjective understanding.

*Arrival* opens with a series of vignettes portraying Dr. Louise Banks (Amy Adams) interacting with her daughter as she is born, her growth into a plucky adolescent, and her tragic death from cancer. Along with their golden and sepia tones, Louise's voice-over establishes these vignettes as memories, albeit with the warning that "memory doesn't work the way I thought it did. We are so bound by time, by its order." Louise is a professor of linguistics and her skills as a translator are required to determine an alien race's intentions when twelve spacecraft position themselves around the world. The aliens (named "heptapods" for their seven legs) "speak" through incomprehensible groans and vibrations; however, Louise discovers that they also communicate through a vibrant visual language. Through their trunk-like legs, the heptapods weave great circular patterns that shimmer in the air like smoke. Unlike the linear connections of graphemes and morphemes, the heptapod's logograms are circular and continuous. As Dr. Ian Donnelly (Jeremy Renner) explains, their "logograms are not bound by time ... their language has no forward or backward," prompting the scientists to question, "is this



how they think?"

The film references the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis that posits that language not only functions as a mechanical means of expressing thought but also structures thought and perception. Glossing the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, linguist Basil Hussein explains that language "determines how [we] perceive and organize ... both the natural world and the social world" and that language "defines your experience for you ... [it] is neutral but gets in the way, imposing habits of both looking and thinking" (644). The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis offers a rebuttal to Merleau-Ponty's claims regarding the impossibility of a perfect translation of language. "We may speak several languages," he suggests, "but one of them always remains the one in which we live ... to [completely] assimilate a language, it would be necessary to make the world which expresses one's own, and one never does belong to two worlds at once" (*Phenomenology* 218). However, Louise does begin to "belong to two worlds at once" and, as she becomes fluent in Heptapod, her perception of the world—and time—changes. Rather than remaining on a linear plane, Louise begins to experience time as a simultaneous structure that blurs the past, present, and future. Indeed, the spectator shares her disorientation as the film weaves subjective imagery into the diegesis and is frequently filmed in swooping, circular camerawork that mimics the film's cyclical narrative structure. The film's major conceit reveals that the "memories" that opened the film are fragments from Louise's future, a future that she embraces despite knowing the impending tragedy that awaits.

*Arrival* is based on Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life," a philosophical short story about free will and determinism that goes into more detail about how language structures experience. "The physical universe [is] a language with a perfectly ambiguous grammar" itself, muses Louise, and that "[every] physical event was an utterance that could be parsed in two entirely different ways" depending on whether it was grasped by a "sequential" or "simultaneous" mode of awareness (Chiang 133-34). Louise reflects that the heptapods' "simultaneous" mode of conscious awareness meant that speech's linearity creates "a bottleneck," and so that rather than similarly "[constraining] writing with a glottographic straitjacket ... [logograms] naturally took advantage of the page's two-dimensionality" (Chiang 135). Rather than writing in linear sentences, logograms map complex thoughts into individual shapes that are immediately perceived.

Crucially, the novel explains that the heptapods' language is performative. The heptapods have a different awareness of time because "[instead] of using language to inform, they used language to actualize" (Chiang 138).

Human speech is performative too, of course. Judith Butler, for instance, argues that a performative speech act is a “discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names,” its power constructed through a “ritualized production, a ritual reiterated” and circulated throughout culture (13, 95). However, here I want to emphasise not only how language is discursively *performative*, but how *Arrival* visibly, audibly, and materially *performs* the heptapods’ seemingly incomprehensible language itself.

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Early in the film, Louise gives a lecture on the sonic anomalies of Portuguese, explaining that the language originated in the Kingdom of Galicia where “language was seen as an expression of art.” In doing so, *Arrival* foreshadows how the spectacular logograms of Heptapod resemble works of art because they form ephemeral Rorschach patterns that hang in the air. The moment that the heptapods first perform their visual language is filmed in a long shot: the logogram blooms in the air before fully materialising in centre frame. The camera then cuts to the astonished faces of the scientists who gawp at the spectacle. Fittingly, the shot then cuts to a camera that is recording the display as Colonel Weber (Forest Whitaker) asks his technician, “are you getting this?” But he could be speaking directly to the spectator: the shot is doubly framed by the cinema screen and the diegetic visual technology, and the visually stunning language commands the spectator to look on in wonder. As if responding to the spectator’s desire (and the scientists’) to get a closer look, the shot cuts to an extreme close-up. The camera crawls down a section of the logogram, capturing its materiality that is reminiscent of black smoke or squid ink that is suspended in still water.

Additionally, the logograms are accented by sound. The film’s sound editor Sylvain Bellemare explains that the sounds of the otherworldly logograms were made by the very domestic sounds of vegetables that were dropped in water, dried rice, and metal brushes being scratched across plastic boards (qtd. in Walden, par. 17). However, while the heptapods’ visual language is certainly—and literally—foregrounded, it is not the only way that *Arrival* performs the aliens’ language because the heptapods have a sonically resonant form of speech.

Similar to the prosaic sounds that accompanied the aliens’ visual language, the heptapods’ speech was crafted by sampling and layering a range of natural noises: camels, pigs, birds, and a traditional Māori flute (Bellemare qtd. in Walden, par. 20). Elsewhere, Bellemare describes that the heptapods needed to sound organic, “a bit like whales [or] a subaquatic creature. That was a goal, to make them as a living beast, [perceived] at a very low frequency” (qtd. in Grobar, par. 11). When sound is transmitted at low frequency, it is not only acoustically heard but also viscerally felt. Here, I return to Merleau-Ponty because, as he demonstrates in his description of the way that acoustic texture facilitates intersubjective understanding, “the conversation pronounces itself within me, it summons me and grips me; it envelops and inhabits me to the point that I cannot tell what comes from me and what from it” (*Prose* 19). Therefore, although the specific translation of the heptapods’ speech might go over our heads, its meaning, which alerts us to the awesome power of the alien beings, is felt from within.



*Arrival* also evokes Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the eloquence of gesture. When Weber recruits Louise, he attempts to convince her to translate a few moments of the heptapods’ rustling language, but she tells him that “it is impossible to translate from an audio file” alone, and that she would “need to be there to interact with them.” This hypothesis is confirmed later when the characters are in the field and have their first interactions with the heptapods in the cavernous antechamber of the spacecraft. In addition to a large opaque screen that separates the humans from the aliens, the scientists are distanced from the aliens and the viewers because they wear heavy protective gear that disguises their bodies and faces (at times the spectator is offered a subjective point-of-view shot that shows how the mask obscures Louise’s vision). Louise realises that the research team’s translation sessions will not progress if she is distanced from the aliens because, as she says, “they need to see me.” For this

reason, she acts against orders by removing her protective gear and approaching the screen. Louise presses her hand against the screen and, mirroring her movement, one of the aliens presses one of its appendages against the glass.



Thus, the film comments on the importance of gestural communication (perhaps further enhanced by the way that the heptapods resemble hands), something that has perhaps been lost in our increasing contact with other people through the screen-sphere. Although mobile devices invite us to caress their smooth surfaces, and social media platforms like Instagram and Tinder allow us to interact with others by double-tapping or swiping our fingers across digital skin, the screen-sphere diminishes the value of body language. As Merleau-Ponty explains, gestural communication and comprehension hinge on “the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others ... It is as if the other person’s intention inhabited my body and mine his. [A gesture] outlines an intentional object. This object is genuinely present and fully comprehended when the powers of my body adjust themselves to it and overlap it” (*Phenomenology* 215). *Arrival* gives an exaggerated illustration of this when the heptapods tap on the glass barrier and Louise realises that they want her to write a logogram on the screen between them. She places her hands on the screen at the same spot as the heptapod and it emits a vast cloud of its “ink” that swirls between them. Louise says that she cannot write “with both hands” and takes one away. At this moment, the heptapod bangs on the screen; the heavy knock blends into the deep vibrating groan of the heptapods’ speech that resonates through the air and the body. Louise is profoundly affected and, in a trance, she closes her eyes and is pulled into one of her “memories” (touching and caressing her infant daughter). Opening her eyes, Louise and the heptapod slowly—and in a symmetrical curve—move their hands on the screen to craft a circular logogram together. In this powerful moment, Louise’s body seems to “adjust... and overlap” the heptapods’ intentionality, and their bodies come together in a moment of expressive meaning-making.

In sum, *Arrival* visibly, audibly, and kinetically performs the specific language of the heptapods. However, the film’s value not only lies in the film’s philosophical meditation on language and how it structures perception. Rather, *Arrival*’s power lies in how it mediates its philosophy to the spectator in an intersubjective and synaesthetic experience. Indeed, the self-reflexivity of the film did not go unnoticed by critics. Manohla Dargis describes the space for the language performance as “a type of stage, an immersive theatre that engages sight, sound, and a sense of touch” (C1). But further, the moment in which Louise and the heptapods “adjust ... and overlap” one another—mediated through a screen—is analogous to the general relationship between the spectator and the cinematic screen. Sobchack explains that the screen-sphere radically challenges the notion of the singular and rectangular screen placed before the spectator and destabilises “the fixed position and physical passivity initially associated with watching cinema ... from a distance and sitting down” (“Screen-Scape” 157). But challenging the idea of a fixed and physically passive spectator has been a central claim of phenomenological film theory as “the film experience is a system of communication based on bodily perception as a vehicle of conscious expression. It entails the visible, audible, kinetic aspects of sensible experience to make sense visibly, audibly, and haptically” (Sobchack *Address* 9). Therefore, just as in the novella, the heptapods’ logograms “[take] advantage of the page’s two-dimensionality” (Chiang 135), *Arrival* takes advantage of the screen’s materiality, employing the modes of embodied experience to invite the spectator to inhabit a multi-dimensional space.

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Just as Louise’s experience of the world is shaped as she begins to comprehend the heptapods’ language, the film’s body attunes us to Louise’s experience, fostering intersubjective understanding. A clear—and common—example is when the film’s body adjusts itself to the intentional behaviour of screen characters, because visually aligning spectators with a character’s point of view further invites engagement. This is particularly important



in *Arrival*, as Adams's performance is purposefully pallid, her facial expressions illegible. However, the film's body can adopt her visual perspective to more squarely put us in her shoes. Indeed, *Arrival* offers not only material instances of Louise's vision but also offers moments of her "inner sight" and imagination, as dream and memory texture her experience. The film weaves Louise's "memories" (rendered quite literally "warm and fuzzy" through their sepia tone and intimate cinematography) with the antiseptic brightness of the present. Indeed, the timelines become increasingly confused—dream interrupting reality, future converging with the present—until the spectator necessarily shares Louise's disorientation.

Screen narratives do not only "focalise" around a character's visual experience, despite the term's association with vision. Acoustic experience also plays an important part, such as the sounds of Louise's breathing when she is wearing her protective suit. Gripped with nerves about her first meeting with the alien creatures, Louise takes a rapid series of shallow breaths until she almost hyperventilates. The sound of her breath has been transformed by her radio equipment so that it sounds sharp and metallic. Occasionally the camera adopts her visual perspective as she peers through a mask that obscures her view; however, the camera holds her anxious face in close-up for most of the sequence. However, the sounds of Louise's ragged breathing continue to fill the soundscape from all speaker channels, giving the effect

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that the spectator has been positioned *inside* her suit. Therefore, although the camera might be able to escape the confines of her suit, the soundscape ensures that the spectator remains trapped inside along with Louise and feels her claustrophobia and anxiety.

Describing the sounds of Louise's breaths as "sharp and metallic" further testifies to *Arrival's* appeal not only to the eye and ear but also the skin and guts. So too does this resonate with the description of Louise's subjective imagery as "warm and fuzzy." These images are shot in rich yellow and orange tones that gives the impression that they have been lit by a glowing fire, but they also often remain indistinct, inviting the eye to graze across the image and to probe it for clarity. In addition to how the low-frequency sounds of the heptapods' speech is viscerally perceived in the stomach, *Arrival* uses other techniques to kinetically affect the spectator. For instance, when Louise arrives at the military base in a helicopter, she looks outside the window to get her first glimpse of the spacecraft. The shot is undeniably impressive: the ovular vessel—a slim onyx egg—floats in a field surrounded by mountains as a thick plume of cloud or fog cascades down a mountainous ridge and lightly pools on the grass below. Jóhann Jóhannsson's score punctuates this visually stunning shot with what sounds like an orchestra of out-of-tune bagpipes, lending an unsettling sense of dread. This effect is compounded by the way that the camera swoops around the camp before lowering down to the ground. Although the camera movement is fluid, its circular movement—combined with Jóhannsson's dissonant score—is dizzying and reflects Louise's overwhelmed frame of mind.

Film theorist Tarja Laine has usefully examined the affective dynamics of screen spectatorship, and posits the film experience as a corporeal entanglement, a "halfway meeting" between the spectator and screen in which "both parties must 'exit themselves' to come into contact with each other" (161). As Laine goes on to describe, "spectators must exit their life-world, while the film exists outside the realm of representation, both becoming co-participants in the sensuous event [of] cinema" because comprehension "does not come from observing films at a distance, but rather from direct, bodily engagement with them" (161). Just as Louise cannot understand the heptapods by merely observing them, comprehending *Arrival* is certainly impoverished if we do not consider the synaesthetic richness of its aesthetic structure and how it entangles the spectator.

The screen-sphere offers a dynamic space for new connections between users and the screen itself. But although we are increasingly becoming plugged in—and perhaps turned on—by these new potentialities, we

must not lose sight of the lived experience of the body as the grounds of comprehension in both communication and new media entanglements. This essay has argued that *Arrival* provides an apposite illustration of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological description of the material grounds of language in the lived-body. Indeed, the film quite literally illustrates how "the wondrous creatures of our vision always drag along reluctant flesh" (McCleary xviii), as we make sense of the heptapods' language—and the film itself—through the sense-making capacity of the body. *Arrival* might narratively concern the arrival of alien life. However, attending to the film's affective-aesthetic structure returns the spectator to their senses and how it feels—and what it means—to be materially alive, and the importance of sensuous contact with others here on earth.

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