

# Alien No More: The Promise of Popular Culture for the Study of Diplomacy

Written by Anton Bronfman

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ANTON BRONFMAN, JUN 10 2024

Aliens arrive on earth. What is the first thing humans do? Diplomacy, of course! While disagreement persists over where diplomacy starts, where it ends, and who are the diplomatic actors, few would ignore its significance for the functioning of the modern (or perhaps any) international system. This significance raises an evident question—how do we come to understand what diplomacy is? Some look at what is conventionally defined as the practice of diplomacy and those traditionally considered as its practitioners (Neumann, 2007). Others consider the historical evolution of the institution, tracing continuity or marking clear breaks in past and present practice (Jönsson and Hall, 2003; Opondo, 2010). Few, however, turn to the sites through which many of us observe diplomacy—popular culture. This essay attempts to rectify this neglect by looking at one such site of diplomatic representations, namely the 2016 science-fiction movie *Arrival*.

Why look at this particular popular culture artifact to gain a better understanding of how diplomacy is perceived? Science-fiction concerns itself with “the question of what it is to be human” (Neumann, 2016, 118), therefore, one would expect to find plenty of inquiries into diplomacy, or what Sharp (1999, 51) refers to as a ‘human’ problem of “living separately and wanting to do so, while having to conduct relations with Others”. As popular culture studies pioneer Jutta Weldes and Christina Rowley (2015) argue, popular culture is inalienable from the study of international relations as it comprises the discourses, signifiers and representations that surround us in our everyday lives—it “constitute[s] our everyday common sense” (ibid, 19). Put differently, how we perceive diplomacy is a direct function of what we engage with in our everyday lives, for example sci-fi cinema. However, as Neumann (2016, 119) points out, “the study of how diplomacy is represented in popular culture is in its infancy”. This peculiar neglect of popular culture in diplomatic studies will be discussed in more detail below. For now, it will suffice to say that by injecting creativity and reflexivity into explorations of how humans communicate with, understand and trust one another, popular culture as a site for the study of diplomacy presents a valuable opportunity to challenge elitist thinking that a large part of the International Relations (IR) discipline continues to grapple with.

This essay is structured as follows. First, I will discuss the intersection of popular culture and diplomatic studies. Second, I will consider how we can think of diplomacy in *Arrival* and ask: what diplomatic representations are prevalent in the movie? Third, I will summarize the film, and then discuss how estrangement, the diplomat and (to a lesser extent) diplomatic practices are depicted in *Arrival*.

### Trapped in the margins—popular culture in diplomatic studies

It is important to note that popular culture does appear in some avenues for the study of diplomacy. For example, work on cultural diplomacy concerns itself with how popular culture artefacts are instrumentalized by actors in order to promote their interests and engage with the diplomatic audience directly. Some scholars talk about the role of ‘soft power’ (Iwabuchi, 2015), while others consider how the content used for cultural diplomacy can unveil deep-seeded preconceptions held by the diplomatic actor (see for example Fruhstuck, 2010). Few, as mentioned, take this analysis one step further to consider how diplomacy itself is projected in popular culture artifacts, and therefore how it comes to be understood by the people usually outside of the diplomatic purview. Perhaps one of the reasons for this is the elitist ‘mystique’ surrounding diplomacy in both academic and policy circles (Opondo, 2010). By treating

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diplomacy as a secretive endeavor that can only be understood through studying its practice and its practitioners, policymakers prefer to keep diplomacy in the hands of state actors and 'state interests', while scholars ignore popular culture as a site for producing and reinforcing diplomatic knowledge.

The arts, however, may be most conducive for studying reflexive diplomatic understandings, granted that they are not bound by ritualistic and inert protocols, unlike diplomatic practice amongst states (Neumann, 2007). As Constantinou (1994, 2) would put it, engaging with the arts is to "examine [the problem of diplomacy] outside of the traditional forms of posing the problematic". Similarly, because an artifact of popular culture is a 're-presentation' of the diplomatic world (Neumann, 2001), it creates room for reflection on the diplomatic 'frame' which determines where and how diplomacy is seen (Constantinou, 1994). As will be argued later, through re-presentation, the work of art becomes constitutive of the frame that determines the boundaries of the diplomatic worldview, and hence the practice of diplomacy in the 'real' world. In other words, the arts contribute to what becomes understood as 'proper' diplomatic practice. Ultimately, these re-presentations mediate the mutual estrangement of the real and fictional world.

## Diplomatically framed—'seeing' diplomacy in popular culture

So, what is diplomacy? An ever-growing critical body of work that engages with the timeless institution has emerged over the last four decades. These works, unlike their predecessors, transcend discussions of interests, instead considering how diplomacy facilitates the unfolding of actors' identity constructions, truth claims and battles for recognition (see for example the works in the edited volume by Constantinou and Der Derian, 2010). In his seminal work on the history of diplomacy in the Western world, Der Derian (1987) claims that diplomacy can be interpreted as the mediation of humanity's mutual estrangement from one another. The very first estrangement, in his analysis, was the alienation of humanity from God. This point is key as it helps consider Der Derian's theory of diplomacy beyond inter-state relations, because 'alienated truths', and the attempts to intervene in the multitude of claims that they give rise to, permeate all social contexts.

This expanded (and perhaps in some cases ambiguous) understanding of diplomacy is significant. As Constantinou (1994, 15) points out, diplomacy "does not exist" and "[t]he challenge is to make it appear". What Constantinou means by this bold remark is not that nothing (or everything) can be considered diplomatic. Rather, where and how diplomacy appears is contingent on the adoption of a particular worldview or frame. Once this frame is adopted, we are able to 'see' diplomacy. The trick is to remain cognizant of where this frame starts, how it is constructed and how it can be expanded. Otherwise, we become trapped in the image of the world that it projects (ibid). Thus, the task is not to simply claim that what is depicted in *Arrival* is diplomatic, which then naturally leads to a diplomatic reading of the movie. Rather, the question should be posed around the diplomatic frame that must be adopted to 'see' diplomacy in *Arrival*. For example, in thinking about how this frame is constructed, we can consider the storyline following China's unilateral interactions with the aliens that nearly results in global war. This is but one example of how the social context within which the popular culture piece is produced, namely the discourse on China's 'threatening rise' (Pan, 2004), can determine what depictions are permitted by the frame.[1] Thus, to study diplomacy in popular culture artifacts, it is necessary to trace how the setting is set or, in the words of Constantinou (1994), how the viewer is enframed in a manner that allows for a diplomatic reading. As will be demonstrated below, in the case of *Arrival*, this is done through three 'types' of estrangement: inter-state, inter-species, and intra-species. Crucially, in each of these types of estrangement, we can observe a similar role played by the diplomat. But first, a summary of the movie.

## Summary of *Arrival*

The premise of *Arrival* revolves around twelve alien spaceships that suddenly appear in twelve different locations across the globe. Louise Banks, an established linguist, and Ian Donnelly, a theoretical physicist, are recruited for the camp based next to the Montana landing site. Their goal is set for them by the military establishment also present at the camp—find out why the aliens ('Heptapods') have come to Earth. This goal is, to some extent, shared by all twelve nations, who engage in extensive expertise and findings sharing. As Louise's group progress in their sessions with the Heptapods, they attempt to teach the basics of the English language to the aliens, in the process learning

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about the Heptapods' visual form of communication, which is described as 'semasiographic' and non-linear—it represents meaning, but not sound, and does not follow a linear style of visual representation unlike human languages. What seems to be a process of harmless mutual discovery soon escalates, as other countries conclude that the aliens are offering some form of 'weapon' for humanity to use. Assuming that the aliens are trying to turn humanity against itself, China leads the way in removing itself from the channels established to share information, and instead declares war on the aliens. Desperate to avoid global war, and certain in the benign mission of the aliens, Louise attempts to get to the bottom of why the Heptapods have come to Earth, in the process defying the military establishment's hawkish pose and surviving a bomb explosion in the spaceship, planted by one of the disgruntled military officers. The climax of the movie unfolds when Louise discovers that the 'weapon' offered by the aliens is actually a 'gift', namely their language. This non-linear language allows one to perceive time as non-linear too, thus experiencing the past, present and future as happening simultaneously. Louise uses the newly learnt language (i.e. knowledge of the future) to reach out to the Chinese leadership and change their mind, thus preventing a pre-emptive strike against the aliens and resuming the exchange of information amongst all twelve nations. This results in a symbolic and, as alluded to in the ending, institutional 'unification' of humanity, who now possess the gift of the aliens.

## **Diplomacy in extreme circumstances—representations of estrangement in *Arrival***

As Pouliot mentions in Constantinou et al. (2021, 566), not every "engagement with alterity", and an attempt to mediate it, is diplomatic. Alienation in our lives, in the sense of experiencing separation or foreignness, has a multitude of sources, be that estrangement from our sense of the Self, our family relations or even civic duty. The actions we take to navigate through these ruptures cannot all be regarded as diplomatic, not least because of the conceptual messiness that this would entail. Pouliot provides two 'markers' which distinguish certain forms of mediating estrangement as diplomatic—representative claims and public governance. These markers may be too rigid, especially because it can sometimes be difficult to trace the 'governance' ramifications a diplomatic action may have, yet they nonetheless offer guidance for how we can think of the multiple forms of estrangement presented in *Arrival* as diplomatic. Arguably, these two markers should be considered in tandem with one another in order to comprehensively separate diplomatic interactions from other political and social relations. Furthermore, representation and governance are intrinsically linked, in the sense that who/what has the power to govern representations and how a particular mode of governance is represented are mutually constitutive.[2] Similarly, as Constantinou emphasizes in his discussion of advocacy and reflexivity, diplomacy should strive for a balance between the former and the latter in order to avoid collapsing into mere bargaining or philosophical pondering. In the case of Pouliot's markers, the presence of claims to collective representations should be supplemented by an attempt to mediate these claims within established institutional structures for an action to acquire a diplomatic dimension and transcend political deliberation.

Consider first the most conspicuous and traditionally acknowledged type of diplomatic mediation that occurs between the twelve nations. The communication amongst them mostly unfolds through conventional diplomatic channels, whether the UN or a multilateral forum for sharing scientific expertise (the twelve screens that we see at the Montana camp). In fact, even after the twelve nations go offline at the peak of hostilities, China still makes use of the UN to try and lead a collective attack against the aliens. Why are diplomatic channels so important? Apart from the obvious function of intelligence sharing (i.e. governance), diplomacy here acts as a means through which to re-negotiate the "necessarily ambiguous" (Sharp, 1999, 33) identities of the twelve nations (i.e. representation), granted the dramatic shift in the social context. In such an unprecedented environment, prior knowledge of who one is or how one acts cannot be taken for granted. Thus, diplomacy provides the opportunity to either reinforce or alter the representative claims that existed prior to the aliens' arrival.

The second type of estrangement, and most literal, is present between the aliens and humanity. Here, two points require clarification. It can be argued that the 'mutual' element of mediating estrangement that has been emphasized in critical diplomatic studies may be missing in this instance. After all, the Heptapods' knowledge of time creates a unique dynamic where one of the parties already 'knows' the other before the first interaction. However, similar dynamics can be observed throughout diplomatic history, especially in the case of European imperialism. While European voyagers did not know who they would encounter before they embarked on their colonial crusades, they

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did know who they wanted the Other to become. This universalizing mission, exercised through diplomatic exchanges, also removed the mutuality present in other forms of alienation. Second, the extent to which Louise ‘speaks’ for humanity can, of course, be contested. But her intention to speak for humanity, rather than for her country or for herself, is made abundantly clear throughout the film. As tensions amongst the twelve nations peak, Louise continues to advocate for “talking to each other” (Villeneuve, 2016, 01:09:15). This particular mediation of estrangement occurs mostly in the spaceship, where Louise and Ian attempt to represent entities larger than themselves. The Heptapods engage in a similar mission, granted that they have been sent by their species to establish contact with humanity. Here, however, the ‘governance’ aspect of the interaction is less clear. In fact, it seems as though representation is a mission in its own right for both parties, who gradually discover one another. Louise purposefully delays posing the ultimate question about the aliens’ purpose, while the Heptapods do not rush to disclose their need for humanity’s help in the future. This dynamic suggests an intriguing relation between representation and governance, perhaps suggesting that the former must precede the latter in order for diplomacy to succeed.

The last type of alienation is what I would refer to as intra-humanity estrangement, with three levels of intertwining estrangements. Consider the military officer who plants the bomb in the spaceship. On one level, the officer is alienated from his family, whom he cannot convince of his safety. On another level, he is estranged from the decision making of his government and the institution he represents. We see this in his pondering of a ‘rant’ by an online streamer, who demands that the aliens are shown an act of ‘American’ force, rather than talked to. Finally, he is alienated from the aliens, tautology aside. He does not understand (finds strange), or want to understand (mediate this strangeness), their mission on earth. This is symbolized by him continuing to wear the hazmat suit while in the spaceship, even after Louise and Ian prove that it is safe to take it off. Overall, these three levels combine to form one group within the camp that is estranged from the other, which follows a rather basic hawks vs dove dichotomy. We see multiple attempts to mediate this intra-camp (or intra-humanity) estrangement after some of the sessions with the aliens, where Louise pleads for the linguist-scientific approach, while the CIA agent, for example, advocates for the highest level of suspicion. And we can speculate that identical diplomatic interventions were occurring across all camps, where, going back to Der Derian (1987), multiple truth claims were forming the foundation of an intra-camp diplomatic system. Here again, not only were the actors representing entities (or perhaps more appropriately ideas) greater than themselves, yet they were also engaging in decision making that transcended their immediate relations with the goal of steering developments in a particular direction—either the use of force or the use of words.

The two markers used by Pouliot are intended to distinguish between ‘everyday’ and diplomatic encounters, but they are, arguably, equally applicable to what seems to be exceptional circumstances, where one’s instinctual reaction may be that thinking in diplomatic terms is futile. Here, then, we can see how multiple estrangements, and the attempt to mediate them, are re-presented in *Arrival*, and the role of conventional and unorthodox diplomatic channels. It is now important to consider the role of the diplomat in this mediation.

## “I am human, nothing human is alien to me”—the diplomat in *Arrival*

Neumann (2016, 119) is right to suggest that the democratization (e.g. increased public scrutiny) of diplomacy has made “the representation of diplomats in the arts and in popular culture...ever more important”. Furthermore, representations of diplomats are not value neutral—they contribute to constructing the hegemonic perception of who the diplomat is (Neumann, 2020). Louise takes on the role of the diplomat in each of the three types of estrangement identified above—she communicates with the aliens (although the extent to which this is diplomatic can be questioned as mentioned prior), she tries to construct bridges between two sides of the camp and, in the end, she intervenes in the estrangement of the twelve nations. In all three instances, in the words of Sofer (1997, 184), she attempts to “experience the Other”, rather than uncritically and unreflexively promote her or her collective’s interests. In fact, in one of Louise’s fever dreams, Ian and Louise discuss the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which states that a person rewires their brain and worldview in the process of learning a foreign language. In that sense, she not only represents her world to the Other, but also represents the Other’s world back to her collective group (Sharp, 1999), be that humanity, America, or the people at the camp.

But Louise is not any ordinary diplomat. In Constantinou’s (2013) terms, she practices humanist diplomacy. Louise is

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the “cross-cultural communicator” necessary to not simply gather, but also interpret and represent the Other’s knowledge (and not just interests) (ibid, 145). She embodies reflexivity and self-criticism, as seen, for example, in her refusal to jump to conclusions when the word ‘weapon’ is used by the aliens, in stark contrast to the CIA agent. While Louise asserts that the Heptapods are trying to encourage humanity to “work together for once” (Villeneuve, 2016, 01:23:56), the CIA agent is adamant that, as history tells him, the aliens are pinning the twelve nations against one another. Indeed, history is full of examples of how colonial powers employed diplomatic practices centered around “fomenting rivalry between [the ‘barbarians’]” and “[p]urchasing the friendship of frontier tribes” (Opondo, 2010, 112). The CIA agent’s assumption that the aliens would conduct their relations in exactly the same way is a testament to the lack of reflexivity usually present in elitist diplomacy. Louise, on the other hand, uses this reflexivity and her knowledge of other cultures to correctly interpret Chinese communication with the aliens, which was conducted through board games and thus resulted in the aliens responding in militaristic and simplified binaries, which were then misinterpreted by humans.

Louise also endeavors in striking the balance between governance and representation (or reflexivity and advocacy), juggling between the two depending on what type of estrangement she is mediating in a particular moment. Similarly, Louise balances protocol and ritual, which form the bedrock of diplomatic “predictability and reciprocity” (Neumann, 2001, 623), with thinking outside the box. For example, the thirty-seven sessions carried out between Louise and the aliens can be interpreted as a form of diplomatic institutionalization, where Louise and Ian begin each session by waiting for both Heptapods to arrive and engage in greeting ceremonials. But, when necessary, Louise is ready to escape the boundaries of protocols placed on both representation and governance, as was the case with her spontaneously taking off her hazmat suit to avoid confusion with the Heptapods, or her stealing the CIA agent’s phone to speak directly to the Chinese leadership. What emerges through this re-presentation is an alternative hegemonic reading of the diplomat, not as a ‘warmonger’ or bureaucrat (Neumann, 2020), but rather as an emotional being, capable of reflexivity and creativity. This is the diplomatic reading in which *Arrival* attempts to enframe the viewer.

## Conclusion

In 1994, Constantinou (10) posed a pertinent question—“eventually, who is it that decides where [a] reading of diplomacy ought to stop?” He summarized the answer rather succinctly almost twenty years later, when he argued that “what one knows in diplomacy and what one makes of that knowledge depends on what one understands diplomacy to be—and vice versa” (Constantinou, 2013, 144). If we understand diplomacy to be an exclusive elitist realm, then no knowledge can be derived from popular culture to expand our understanding of diplomacy.

This essay attempted to offer an interpretation of diplomacy that would benefit from the study of popular culture. Specifically, by emphasizing the importance of popular culture for how diplomacy is understood by those usually outside of traditional diplomatic channels, this essay offered a diplomatic reading of the sci-fi movie *Arrival*. Rather than simply asserting that what we observe in *Arrival* is diplomacy, the argument made attempted to trace how an idea central to diplomatic studies, namely estrangement, is re-presented on different levels throughout the movie, and how this creates space for a particular type of diplomatic actor to emerge as the dominant re-presentation in the film.

I will not claim, as Neumann (2020, 89) does in his analysis of Hagrid as the diplomat of the Harry Potter universe, that this interpretation of *Arrival* is “intuitively understandable” to the movie’s audience. In order to make that claim, this diplomatic reading would have to be supplemented by some form of reception studies that can help trace how meaning is derived from the movie and articulated in a manner that can be said to shape diplomatic understandings. I will suggest, however, that the argument made is an important one for escaping elitist conceptions of diplomacy in IR and, more broadly, for repositioning popular culture studies away from the margins of diplomatic studies. In his unfortunately hackneyed work, Alexander Wendt discusses the potentiality of humans interacting with aliens:

Would we assume, a priori, that we were about to be attacked if we are ever contacted by members of an alien civilization? I think not.

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(Wendt, 1992, 405)

Any attempt to answer Wendt's question would have to transcend theoretical pondering and ultimately take the realm of popular culture seriously. If every other movie about extra-terrestrial contact involves an alien invasion, then it is likely that we would a priori assume any contact to be hostile. Popular culture is where many make sense of the world around them. A study of diplomacy without taking it into account cannot be complete.

## Notes

[1] It is interesting to note that this storyline was not present in the original short story on which the cinematic adaptation is based—Ted Chiang's *Story of Your Life* (1998).

[2] I would like to thank Alex Astrov for pointing this out.

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