

CROSSING THE THRESHOLD OF TEMPORALITY: “STORY OF YOUR LIFE” AND ARRIVAL

Chiara Patrizi

Università degli studi di Milano

ABSTRACT

In Denis Villeneuve’s 2016 science fiction movie, *Arrival*, the world is disrupted by the sudden arrival of a fleet of alien spaceships, an event that is going to challenge human conceptions of time, language, and free will. The aliens (named Heptapods) are indeed unfathomable creatures, whose language and sense of time resembles nothing on Earth. However, human life, with its burdens of death and grief, proves to be no less challenging, and in this regard the mysterious “gift” the aliens carry with them will turn out to be disconcerting and illuminating at the same time.

The movie is based on Ted Chiang’s 1998 novella “Story of Your Life,” and both the original text and its film adaptation deal with the understanding and coming to terms with the otherness—alien language, time, death, grief—through the encounter of human and extraterrestrial existence and the exploration of the threshold that connects (or separates) life and afterlife.

The essay examines the ways in which the novella and the film address the modes of the eerie, a concept which has been theorized by Mark Fisher as “a failure of absence or a failure of presence.” These modes offer a key to analyzing and understanding the strategies that Chiang and Villeneuve employ to narrate a story—two complementary stories indeed—which affects the communal as well as the individual existence. With its ostensibly impossible language, such a story bears a significance that lies beyond and outside human perception. “Story of Your Life” deals with the “out of”—that outer dimension which lies beyond our experience of the categories of time and space (Fisher 24-25), not necessarily from a scientific perspective but rather from an existential one.

Thus, the Heptapods’ arrival raises questions (Why are they here? What do they want?) and poses challenges (How can we speak to them?) which open the way for other, more existential questions and challenges. These issues are not valid only in the narrative environment of science-fiction, but they deal with fears and doubts which are very tangible outside the fictional world, too, whenever the mind is shaken by an image or an event that breaks through our pre-established certainties regarding the life we inhabit.

Eventually, failure of absence (the appearance of the spaceships) and failure of presence (the death of the daughter of the protagonist) meet here, and their encounter provides a powerful meditation on the eerie feelings that haunts human agency and affects our understanding of reality.

Keywords: sci-fi; eerie; time; trauma.

INTRODUCTION

According to Mark Fisher, while the weird is constituted by “the presence of that which does not belong,” the eerie “by contrast, is constituted by a *failure of absence* or by a

failure of presence" ([2016] 2017, 61).¹ My essay will explore how these two liminal features of the eerie find expression in Ted Chiang's 1998 novella "Story of Your Life" and in its 2016 film adaptation *Arrival*, directed by Denis Villeneuve. Drawing on Fisher's work, I will examine the way in which time can be considered the ultimate eerie landscape where consciousness faces the other, the unknown, and strives to "communicate" with it, thus providing some interesting insights into the human condition.

Although there are some inevitable differences between the novella and the movie, in both cases the story centers on the sudden appearance of a fleet of alien ships and on the encounter between humans and the extraterrestrial creatures named "heptapods," narrated by Dr. Louise Banks, a linguist who has been hired by the U.S. government to establish communication with the aliens. Not surprisingly, the relation between humanity and "the other" is central in the story, whose concept of alterity embraces extraterrestrial life and outer space, as well as human life and death. Indeed, as is evident from the beginning, the aliens are unfathomable creatures, whose language and sense of time resembles nothing terrestrial. However, human life, with its burdens of death and grief, proves to be no less challenging, and in this regard the mysterious "gift" the heptapods carry with them will turn out to be disconcerting and illuminating at the same time. Therefore, while certainly Louise's story deals with her encounter with the heptapods and her efforts to learn their languages, at the same time, it is also the

¹ In *The Weird and the Eerie*, Fisher specifies that "The sensation of the eerie occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or if there is nothing present when there should be something" ([2016] 2017, 61). He subsequently provides examples of these two opposing but complementary features. First, the notion of "eerie cry" is representative of the failure of absence because it implies "a feeling that there is something more in (or behind) the cry than a mere animal reflex or biological mechanism" thus generating forms of speculation and suspense in the mind of the individual. Fisher stresses how "the eerie concerns the unknown; when knowledge is achieved, the eerie disappears," even though not all mysteries are eerie or generate the eerie: "There must also be a sense of alterity, a feeling that the enigma might involve forms of knowledge, subjectivity and sensation that lie beyond common experience" (62). For what concerns the failure of presence, Fisher identifies it mainly in landscapes and visual scenes, taking as an example "the feeling of the eerie that pertains to ruins or to other abandoned structures" (62) which makes us wonder about their purpose and, especially, their meaning, as it is in the case of places like Stonehenge or the statues on Rama Ni. Moreover, the sense of the eerie is amplified here because standing in front of such ruins makes us speculate not only on them but especially about how the relics of our own culture will look in the future and, therefore, "we are compelled to imagine our own world as a set of eerie traces" (62).

narration of her daughter's life and premature death. It is a story about grief and loss, and about coming to terms with the limited time of human life.

A MEETING WITH THE UNKNOWN

I used the expression “at the same time” because the novella really manages to make a sequential mode of awareness and time-perception (human) interact with a simultaneous one (heptapod), as is apparent in the way Chiang structures Louise's narration. While recalling the events of her meeting with the aliens and her life with her daughter, she moves forward and backward in time, often linking the pieces of her story together through non-chronological associations, as shown by her distinctive usage of verb tenses, in which past, present, and future are often oddly sequenced, to the point that it is difficult to tell them apart. Yet her “being unstuck in time” is not the syncopated and schizophrenic journey of a wrenched Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.² Unlike Vonnegut's character, her experience is marked by a desperate but nonetheless fluid awareness that she has acquired from the aliens. The same effect is achieved in the movie *Arrival* by introducing a series of flashbacks at various points in the narration, which will turn out to be memories from the future, and not from the past (they might be called “anti-déjà-vu,” as a striking mid-film disclosure may suggest).

Given these premises, I believe that the modes of the eerie provide a useful key for interpreting a story whose structure and content challenge human cognition of outer and inner otherness. Here, *failure of absence* lies in the extraterrestrial element—the heptapods, the spaceships, the looking glasses—an element that can be evocative of the weird, too, and surely shares something with it, especially in the film, in which the

² Kurt Vonnegut's 1969 anti-war masterpiece, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, is the story of Dresden bombing survivor Billy Pilgrim, who travels back and forth in time without having the possibility to control his “power” in any way. The second chapter of the novel (when Billy's story starts) famously begins with the words, “Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time” ([1969] 2000, 19). Interestingly, in the notes of “Story of Your Life,” Chiang directly refers to Vonnegut: “As for this story's theme, probably the most concise summation of it that I've seen appears in Kurt Vonnegut's introduction to the 25th anniversary edition of *Slaughterhouse-Five*: ‘Stephen Hawking . . . found it tantalizing that we could not remember the future. But remembering the future is child's play for me now . . . To Stephen Hawking and all others younger than myself I say, ‘Be patient. Your future will come to you and lie down at your feet like a dog who knows and loves you no matter what you are’” ([1998] 2000, 333–34).

“arrival” of the spaceships is met with panic, hysteria, and random violence, as if the world were about to end.³ Even if the aliens never manifest aggressive intentions, their mere presence is enough to make humanity feel increasingly menaced and act irrationally, a reaction to the unknown very representative of our society, where any event that might imply a disruption or restructuring of our everyday certainties often generates violent and chaotic reactions.

In the novella, the spaceships do not land on Earth, instead alien devices, called “looking glasses,” are sent on various locations on the planet to allow heptapods to communicate with humans while remaining in orbit—whereas in the movie, there are twelve ships actually landing on different locations all over the planet. Teams of experts (military forces, physicists, linguists) are established by governments for the purpose of communicating with them. Among these experts are Louise Banks and the physicist Gary Donnelly (Ian Donnelly in the movie) who, after various attempts, eventually manage to interact with the aliens using their peculiar language or, more precisely, languages.

The task is extremely challenging, since nothing in the heptapods’ way of speaking or writing, nor in their physical appearance, resembles anything human, as Louise’s first description testifies:

[The heptapod] looked like a barrel suspended at the intersection of seven limbs. It was radially symmetric, and any of its limbs could serve as an arm or a leg. . . . Its limbs had no distinct joints . . . Whatever their underlying structure, the heptapod’s limbs conspired to move it in a disconcertingly fluid manner. Its “torso” rode atop the rippling limbs as smoothly as a hovercraft.

³ Nicols notes how this is actually one of the main differences between the movie and the novella: “While founded upon a time-honoured science fiction scenario *Arrival* also clearly articulates the sense of global peril which is typical of much of the cultural production of our current times, manifested in fears about ecological catastrophe, terrorist attacks, and the anthropocene, etc. *Arrival* may be overly sentimental . . . yet this is a movie which uses science fiction tropes to express an anxiety which now seems very ‘post 2016,’ about how liberal values are in danger of being overtaken by a self-interested, forceful, intolerant kind of politics” (2019, 123).

Seven lidless eyes ringed the top of the heptapod's body. . . [A]t no point did he ever turn around. Eerie but logical; with eyes on all sides, any direction might as well be 'forward.' (Chiang [1998] 2002, 117-118)

As for their behavior, heptapods are said to be “completely cooperative” (128) with regards to teaching their language to humanity. Unfortunately, when asked why they have decided to land on Earth, they simply answer “‘too see,’ or ‘to observe.’ Indeed, sometimes they preferred to watch us silently rather than answer our questions. Perhaps they were scientists, perhaps they were tourists” (137).

Both in the novella's description and in the movie rendition, the heptapods' physical appearance anticipates something disconcerting about their worldview, since the radial symmetry and fluidity of their bodies will turn out to reflect their way of understanding and representing reality. Through their obscure language, “they have many wonderful things to teach” humans, as Kurt Vonnegut would say, “especially about time” ([1969] 2000, 21).⁴

A breakthrough happens when Louise discovers that the heptapods' spoken language (constituted by fluttering sounds but organized in a syntax somehow comparable to human languages) is a completely separate communicative system from their written language, which “didn't appear to be writing at all; it looked more like a bunch of intricate graphic designs” (Chiang [1998] 2002, 129). It is a logographic writing, but very peculiar, since the script is not word divided: every sentence is represented by a new logogram, composed by the necessary words, joined together, stretched, rotated, modified, but still recognizable.⁵ Louise names the two languages “Heptapod A”

⁴ In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim is captured by an alien spaceship and taken to the planet Tralfamadore. Its inhabitants, the Tralfamadorians, see reality in four dimensions and therefore experience time in a way that is completely different from the corresponding human experience. The above quotation is taken from a letter in which Billy Pilgrim describes the Tralfamadorians as “friendly, and they could see in four dimensions. They pitied Earthlings for being able to see only three. They had many wonderful things to teach Earthlings, especially about time” ([1969] 2000, 21).

⁵ In “Story of Your Life,” the heptapods write through a screen, as Louise explains: “One heptapod spoke, and then inserted a limb into a large socket in the pedestal; a doodle of script, vaguely cursive, popped onto the screen” (124). In *Arrival*, the alien uses a limb to physically “spray” a sort of black ink in the air and draw the logograms. The movie rendition of heptapod writing is particularly evocative and effective: the logograms are roughly circular, they may be reminiscent of either water paintings or Shodō art (Japanese calligraphy), and they slowly disappear like

(speaking) and “Heptapod B” (writing) and, after studying and practicing both of them, she eventually theorizes that Heptapod B is “semasiographic writing, because it conveys meaning without reference to speech,” something far more complex than human picture writing, since it employs a real “visual syntax” for constructing sentences, unrelated to that of Heptapod A. Louise believes that behind such apparently unnecessary complexity lies the possibility that “for the heptapods, writing and speech may play such different cultural or cognitive roles that using separate languages makes more sense than using different forms of the same one” (132–133). Her hypothesis proves correct when she learns that heptapods have a simultaneous mode of consciousness in which time is a non-sequential dimension, hence impossible to express through speech. The semagrams of their writing, on the contrary, make every moment, every thought, “every mark on a page . . . visible simultaneously” (161), in accordance with a conception of time in which chronological order does not qualify as meaningful.

The ongoing communication eventually leads to a series of “exchanges” which, although somehow interesting (Dr. Banks reports various “lectures” on xenobiology and heptapod history), do not seem to offer anything particularly useful for understanding why the aliens decided to visit Earth in the first place. After several of such exchanges and without notice nor apparent reason, the heptapods declare they are about to leave, and so they do, as suddenly and unexpectedly as they arrived, “All at once, all over the world, their looking glasses became transparent and their ships left orbit. . . . We never did learn why the heptapods left, any more than we learned what brought them here, or why they acted the way they did” (171). Apparently, the alien encounter has not resulted in any technological development or specific knowledge for humanity, so the eerie, the transparent obscurity of the looking glass, remains for everyone on Earth, although perhaps not for Louise Banks.

In the movie, this is more explicit since, before leaving, the heptapods declare they have come to help humanity because in 3000 years they are going to need

mandalas, thus conveying a sense of ephemerality and fluidity which will prove fundamental to understanding their worldview.

humanity's help. To do so, they have come to Earth to offer a "weapon" that "opens time." The word "weapon" spreads panic again, and a war against the aliens seems to be dangerously in sight. However, as Louise immediately understands, "weapon" may not be the correct word for the meaning the heptapods wanted to express, which is more "tool" or better "gift." Such a gift is their language, the semagrams through which even humans might be able to experience time differently, in a non-sequential way, as she does now.

The encounter with otherness thus operates to deconstruct and examine our perception of reality from various perspectives, individual and communal, and offers a notable example of what Fredric Jameson considers "the historical function of present-day SF," a genre which displays a significantly "complex temporal structure: not to give us 'images' of the future . . . but rather to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own present, and to do so in specific ways distinct from all other forms of defamiliarization" (2005, 286).

This happens in "Story of Your Life" and *Arrival*, too. Their eerie sceneries are not images nor fantasies of the future, but rather they operate as defamiliarizing devices, with regards to the attitude of our society to the unknown (be it an unexpected event, a scientific discovery, or a living being). Moreover, as David Lucking notes, "Among the themes addressed in both the story and the film are what might generically be described as the problem of communication, the manner in which language encodes and perpetuates ways of perceiving and conceiving reality, and the nature of time and the related issues of free will and predestination" (2017, 132). Indeed, the two works deal with the possibilities and limits of language and, therefore, of human agency.

Louise learns a new language which opens her a door on a completely different understanding of time and experience. Apparently, the time she spent with the heptapods learning their language has affected her way of perceiving reality, suggesting that "the alien language induces a new manner of thinking [a linguistic experience that has been described in] the strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which in essence states the same: 'language shapes thought' (Sapir, 1949; Whorf, 1956)" (Milani

Queriquelli 2019, 3809).⁶ Actually, even though the movie appears to be implying the supremacy of language over perception, it does not look like the heptapod worldview is shaped by their language, quite the contrary. Moreover, rather than really reinforcing the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, Louise's experience testifies that in order to become proficient in a language which expresses a different mode of awareness, a single individual should be able to experience that kind of awareness, at least partially. That is, to achieve an effective intercultural communication, it is necessary to empathize and identify ourselves with other cultures. As a linguist, Louise must know this principle well and she manages to put it into practice even when "the others" literally come from outer space. Therefore, rather than determining our way of thinking, language is an instrument that helps us communicate with the senses and minds of other kinds of awareness, without necessarily abandoning our own modes of perception—it enriches and may influence our cognition of reality, but it does not determine it. Thus, linguistics is presented as a science that, just like physics, provides tools that enable us to deal with alterity, and with the unknown. Different worldviews call for different languages, and Louise has come to experiment such assertion in a most extreme way and apparently with great success.⁷ However, this instrument she now masters looks more like a damnation—not a gift—when it comes to the story of her daughter's life. This is the

⁶ The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis expresses linguistic relativism and it consists of two versions, a strong version (linguistic determinism), which is the one referred to in *Arrival*, and a weak version, which proposes that language influences, without being determinative of, thought (linguistic influence). In its strong version, the theory has been widely refuted. Luiz Henrique Milani Queriquelli notes how the reference to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is explicitly stated in the movie adaptation, whereas in *Story of Your Life* there is no direct reference to it, even though it seems quite clearly implied in Louise's actions and way of telling the story (3809–3810).

⁷ As Milani Queriquelli notes, Chiang's story articulates a delicate "balance between the sciences that underlie the plot" (3810), in which linguistics (and therefore all human sciences) are as necessary as the so-called "exact sciences" in the world of science-fiction. The movie is more unbalanced in this respect, and indeed Nicols proposes that "we might even refer to the film as an example of a sub-genre of science-fiction, i.e. humanities-fiction, 'Hu-Fi'" (2019, 117). In any case, both works certainly accord human sciences an important role in science-fiction. Darko Suvin had already stressed such importance in a 1977 essay, when he pointed out that: "*sciences humaines* or historical-cultural sciences like anthropology-ethnology, sociology, or linguistics (that is, the mainly non-mathematical sciences) are equally based on such scientific methods as: "the necessity and possibility of explicit, coherent, and immanent or non-supernatural explanation of realities; Occam's razor; methodical doubt; hypothesis-construction; falsifiable physical or imaginary (thought) experiments; dialectical causality and statistical probability; progressively more embracing cognitive paradigms; and so on. These 'soft sciences' can therefore most probably better serve as a basis for SF than the 'hard' natural sciences; and they have in fact been the basis of all better works in SF" (2010, 72).

most important of all the stories she may ever tell, but her daughter is not there (or will not be there) to listen to it. From this perspective, Fisher's *failure of presence* can be identified in the house from which the reader imagines Louise telling her story—a house which should not be so desolate, but the premature death of her daughter has turned it into her personal post-apocalyptic space. From where Louise stands, she is rehearsing a monologue, a bedtime story for an empty bed, her narration becoming at last the story of a trauma—the loss of a loved one. Trauma, in the words of Cathy Caruth, “is the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge . . . and thus continually returns, in its exactness, at a later time” (1995, 153).⁸ This becomes even more complex in Louise's story, since now that she has access to a simultaneous awareness, there is no “prior” or “later” to relate to; yet, at the same time, the combination of unexpectedness and continuous return that characterize trauma⁹ finds an explanation when observed from a heptapod point of view and, perhaps, allows her a way to find a kind of closure—somehow, sometime. And yet, to make sense of what happened, she ultimately chooses the act of telling a story, the most sequential and human gesture she could resort to as a way of coping with trauma. It does not matter much if she already knows how that story ends, the act of narrating constitutes the performative and therapeutic experience through which that experience can find its right place in her life (Nicols 2019, 115).¹⁰

WEAPON OPENS TIME

At this point, it is clear that Heptapod B is more than a “foreign language:” it is the visual representation of a culture in which time does not flow chronologically but appears to

⁸ See Caruth (1995, 151–157) and (1996, 1–9).

⁹ As Nicols pointed out, “Chiang's story is also about the paradox of coping with the inevitability of something which is at the same time entirely unexpected” (2019, 112), implying a similar combination of apparently contrasting but complementary traumatic elements in Louise's story.

¹⁰ Indeed, as C.S. Lewis observed, “Sorrow, however, turns out to be not a state but a process. It needs not a map but a history” (1961, 47).

be very fluid nevertheless,¹¹ in a way that is well represented by the aliens' mandala-shaped semagrams (Chiang [1998] 2002, 152); in other words, learning Heptapod B allows the opportunity for unprecedented intercultural communication. In such a culture, time becomes the eerie landscape in which the story of Louise's daughter's life and her own can be told, where past, present, and future merge together, carrying with them hope and loss, and shaping the perception of reality, while language is the true agent able to enact an otherwise impossible temporality. As Louise says at the beginning, "I know how this story ends; I think about it a lot. I also think a lot about how it began" (112). Since knowing the future is incompatible with free will, being human and having come to know one's own future inevitably raises questions about agency and free will and their relevance in cosmic history. Yet "what distinguishes the heptapods' mode of awareness is not just that their actions coincide with history's events; it is also that their motives coincide with history's purposes. They act to create the future, to enact chronology" (163),¹² they are, we might add, agents of fate. The concept of "fate" is problematic from a sequential mode of awareness, as Fisher points out, because it implicates the combined presence of weird and eerie:

The concept of fate is weird in that it implies twisted forms of time and causality that are alien to ordinary perception, but it is also eerie in that it raises questions about agency: who or what is the entity that has woven fate?

The eerie concerns the most fundamental metaphysical questions one could pose, questions to do with existence and non-existence. ([2016] 2017, 12)

Such questions are not meaningful within a heptapod worldview, but they have been haunting the human mind for ages. There is no sense in wondering which interpretation

¹¹ The inherent fluidity of the aliens' mode of awareness should not come as a surprise since, as Jameson notes with regard to "the great structuralist formula itself—the distinction between the synchronic and the diachronic . . . is always accompanied by a label that warns us not to confuse the diachronic with time and history nor to imagine that the synchronic is static or the mere present" (2003, 699).

¹² This concept is further developed in Chiang's novella and, though more superficially, in Villeneuve's movie through Fermat's principle of least time, to explain the difference between choice-oriented and purpose-oriented consciousness. See Noletto and Lopes (2018) for an analysis of the metaphorical usage of Fermat's principle in "Story of Your Life" and its relation to the philosophical interpretations of time and temporality.

is correct because, “both are equally valid. But you can’t see both at the same time” (Chiang [1998] 2002, 163). Perhaps, this is the reason why Louise is unable to reject her human worldview, nor can she embrace heptapod reality as fully as she would like to: she lies on the threshold between human and alien, between sequential and simultaneous awareness.

She notices how Heptapod B seems to have affected mainly her memory, and not her consciousness. Before learning the alien language, her memories grew sequential “like a column of cigarette ash,” the consciousness providing the ignition, whereas after they “fell into place like gigantic blocks, each one measuring years in duration,” without a specific order. While all this happens, her consciousness keeps going forward regardless, only with more difficulty, since now “the ash of memory lies ahead as well as behind.” But sometimes there is more, however sporadically, and she has “glimpses when Heptapod B truly reigns, and I experience past and future all at once; my consciousness becomes a half-century-long ember burning outside time” (166–167); an apparent paradox that might represent a possible conciliation between the time of physics and the time of human experience.¹³ She wishes she could achieve more: “I would have liked to experience more of the heptapod worldview, to feel the way they feel. Then, perhaps I could immerse myself fully in the necessity of events, as they must, instead of merely wading in its surf for the rest of my life” (171–172). But somehow she already has, humanly speaking, since “our species,” as Oelschlaeger points out, has “intimate relations to time: we are truly *time binders*” (1991, 333) or, as Don DeLillo would express it, “we [are] the only crucial clocks, our minds and bodies, way stations for the distribution of time” (1997, 235), and this is what she is indeed, and what she does by telling her story using what she has learned from the heptapods.

Even if Louise’s knowledge is necessarily problematic, the psychological landscape created by her narration constitutes the environment in which to

¹³ See Hayles ([1990] 1991, 91–114) and Oelschlaeger (1991, 320–353) for an analysis of the way in which the scientific principles regarding time and temporality have been interpreted and have affected the perception of reality in contemporary culture and literature.

contemplate our experience of time, a meditation that is particularly compelling in a society marked by a pathological acceleration of time and by what Jameson defines as the “physical and psychic dissociation of the human subjects who inhabit it” (2005, 287). “Story of Your Life” and *Arrival* escape such dissociation, as they show us Louise talking to her unborn-yet-already-dead daughter and wonder, “What if the experience of knowing the future changed a person? What if it evoked a sense of urgency, a sense of obligation to act precisely as she knew she would?” (Chiang [1998] 2002, 157). Like a modern-day Sisyphus, she, too, knows that her fate belongs to her even if it is already written,¹⁴ and she knows that,

eventually, many years from now, I’ll be without your father, and without you. All I will have left from this moment is the heptapod language. So I pay close attention, and note every detail. From the beginning I knew my destination, and I chose my route accordingly. But am I working toward an extreme of joy, or of pain? Will I achieve a minimum, or a maximum? (172)

Louise’s questions, with all their burden of suffering, remain unanswered, but she nonetheless keeps following the path which will take her to a future that is already past—or rather, to the simultaneous present of her fate. Having faced the unknown has given their protagonist no higher agency on her own story, however, “Story of Your Life” and *Arrival* both seem to imply that consciously living through time and experience is enough for a non-simultaneous creature. Through the lens of science fiction, Chiang and Villeneuve provide their audience with a penetrating account regarding what it means to be human, a condition always on the liminal state between different modes of temporality and perception, between life and death, and constantly challenged by their eerie languages and manifestations.

¹⁴ The reference is to Albert Camus’ essay “The Myth of Sisyphus.” Like Sisyphus, Louise must forever bear the heavy rock of her awareness, the knowledge of her own fate. And yet, Sisyphus’s fate “belongs to him. His rock is his thing,” and “he knows himself to be the master of his days. . . . One always finds one’s burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile” ([1942] 1955, 109–110). Likewise, Louise’s experience shows a reality in which one’s fate cannot be changed, but nevertheless it can be embraced and even chosen—through a delicate but necessary balance between a simultaneous and a sequential awareness.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Camus, Albert. 1955 (1942). *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. Reprint, New York: Random House.
- Caruth, Cathy, ed. 1995. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Chiang, Ted. 2015 (1998). "Story of Your Life." In *Stories of Your Life and Others*. London: Picador.
- DeLillo, Don. 1997. *Underworld*. New York: Scribner.
- Fisher, Mark. 2017 (2016). *The Weird and the Eerie*. London: Repeater Books.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. 1991 (1990). *Chaos Bound. Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Jameson, Fredric. 2003. "The End of Temporality." *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 4:695–718. doi: 10.1086/377726.
- Jameson, Frederic. 2005. "Progress versus Utopia, or, Can We Imagine the Future?" In *Archaeologies of the Future. The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. London and New York: Verso.
- Lewis, C.S. 1961. *A Grief Observed*. New York: The Seabury Press.
- Lucking, David Ian Clive. 2017. "Enacting Chronology: Language and Time in Chiang's 'Story of Your Life' and Villeneuve's *Arrival*." *Lingue e Linguaggi* 21:129–143. doi: 10.1285/i22390359v21p129.
- Milani Queriquelli, Luiz Henrique. 2019. "The Marginality of Linguistics in Sci-Fi: A Critique from the Story of Heptapods in the Works of Chiang and Villeneuve." *Fórum Linguístico* 16, no. 2:3806–3816. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5007/1984-8412.2019v16n2p3806>
- Nicols, Bran. 2019. "Humanities Fiction: Translation and 'Transplanetarity' in Ted Chiang's "The Story of Your Life" and Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival*." *American, British and Canadian Studies* 32:107–126. doi: 10.2478/abcsj-2019-0008
- Noletto, Israel A. C., and Sebastião A. T. Lopes. 2018. "Heptapod B and the Metaphysics of Time – Hybrid Interfaces of Literature, Cinema and Science." *Polifonia. Estudos Literários. Dossiê Literatura e Intermedialidade* 40, no. 2:206–221. doi: 10.5281/ZENODO.2527613.

Oelschlaeger, Max. 1991. *The Idea of Wilderness*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Sapir, Edward. 1949. *Language, Culture and Personality*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Suvin, Darko. 2010. *Defined by a Hollow. Essays on Utopia, Science Fiction and Political Epistemology*. Bern: Peter Lang.

Villeneuve, Denis, dir. 2016. *Arrival*. Roma: Sony Pictures Entertainment Italia, 2017. DVD

Vonnegut, Kurt. 2000 (1969). *Slaughterhouse-Five*. London: Vintage Classics.

Whorf, Benjamin Lee. 1956. *Language, Thought, and Reality*. Boston: Technology Press of MIT.

Chiara Patrizi is adjunct professor of English Language and Culture at the University of Milan. She earned her Ph.D. from Roma Tre University, and her MA from Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Her research focuses on the “wilderness of time” of contemporary American literature, exploring the interactions between human existence and time in terms of wilderness experience. Her MA thesis received a special mention at the Lombardo-Gulli Award (2015). She participated in the American Literature Association 27th Conference (San Francisco, CA, 2016) in a panel sponsored by the Don DeLillo Society. In 2017, she was Visiting Scholar at Duke University (Durham, NC). She published on Don DeLillo, Langston Hughes, Jesmyn Ward, Ted Chiang, and on the relation between time and trauma in American literature. Her latest essay appeared in the volume *Blues in the 21st Century. Myth, Social Expression and Transculturalism* (Vernon Press, 2020). Since 2018, she is member of the advisory board of *Jam It! Journal of American Studies in Italy*. E-mail: chiara.patrizi@unive.it.