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Denis Villeneuve's multilingual cinema: Decentring space, time and language in *Arrival*

Abstract: In Quebecois filmmaker Denis Villeneuve's multilingual films, the ability to manipulate peripheral and even marginalised languages is the key to unlocking oppressive structures and shifting power dynamics within them. This chapter analyses Denis Villeneuve's multilingual, transnational cinema, in which characters not only speak multiple languages, but deploy them strategically to exert social power. Drawing on Bill Marshall's vision of cinema and nation in *Quebec National Cinema* as a 'very mobile spiral' (2000: 3), it charts the progressive decentring at play in Villeneuve's 2016 quadrilingual film, *Arrival*.

Introduction

With dialogue in Arabic, English, Finnish, French, Hungarian, Japanese, Mandarin, Norwegian, Russian, Somali, Spanish and even extraterrestrial languages, Quebecois filmmaker Denis Villeneuve's cinema revolves around language. From 2010's trilingual *Incendies* to 2017's heptalingual *Blade Runner 2049*, Villeneuve's films increasingly feature protagonists who both speak multiple languages and use multilingualism to exert social power. In these films, lingua francas like English and French remain essential, but it is the ability to manipulate peripheral and even marginalised languages that is key to unlocking oppressive structures and shifting power dynamics within them.

Though Villeneuve's films are increasingly produced within the Hollywood system, they have also been becoming increasingly diverse, moving from his early monolingual films to his recent multilingual portraits of border-crossing, liminal space and transcultural encounters. 2010's *Incendies* depicts a civil war in an Arabic-speaking country which is never named. In 2015's *Sicario*, the monolingual FBI officer Kate finds herself lost in a cross-border operation between the US and Mexico, while her secretive partner Alejandro juggles Spanish and English to manipulate

the operation to his own ends. And in 2016's *Arrival*, the polylingual linguistics professor Louise (Amy Adams) must decode the language of extraterrestrials if she is to defuse escalating tensions that threaten the global order. These films theorise the border, the interstice and the point of encounter. In doing so, they provide a polycentric vision of the relationship between language and power in the globalised world, reconfiguring the stereotype of monolingual Hollywood from within.

Despite having directed nine feature films alongside multiple documentaries and short films during his 30-year career, many of which were critically acclaimed and commercially successful, Denis Villeneuve's filmmaking has mostly escaped scholarly attention. This chapter shines a light onto Villeneuve's multilingual oeuvre for the first time. It analyses the ways in which many of Villeneuve's protagonists not only speak multiple languages, but *deploy* them strategically in violent scenarios. In this use of language such characters can be understood not simply as multilinguals, but as master linguists, "able to deploy their language skills to benefit themselves. For it is not simply the ability to speak multiple languages, but the ability to use them in effective and innovative ways, that makes social power accessible to the multilingual speaker" (King 2017: 41). This chapter draws on Bill Marshall's research on Quebecois cinema and his conceptualisation of the nation as "a very mobile spiral" (2000: 3) to chart the progressive decentring at play in Villeneuve's most linguicentric film, *Arrival*.

Denis Villeneuve's multilingual cinema

On the film blog *Indiewire*, David Erlich (2017) describes Denis Villeneuve as "a filmmaker who's always understood the power of words". The director of nine feature films and seven shorts since the beginning of his directorial career in 1994, with each project Villeneuve's oeuvre has not only become increasingly transnational (portraying a range of countries and engaging a number of international coproduction partners) but progressively multilingual. Villeneuve's early films were produced in his native Francophone Canada, with scripts in the local languages of either French or English. These include *Un 32 août sur terre* (1998), *Maelström* (2000) and *Polytechnique* (2009). However, it was with the release of his French,

English and Arabic-language *Incendies*, situated between Canada and an unnamed, war-torn Middle Eastern country reminiscent of Civil War-era Lebanon, that Villeneuve's oeuvre became multilingual, and began to gain considerable attention on the international stage. *Incendies* follows two parallel stories situated in the 1970s and late 2000s. The first portrays the young Arab woman Nawal (Lubna Azabal), whose first son is taken from her at birth, her harrowing experiences of war, and her escape as a refugee to Quebec. The second takes place in the wake of Nawal's death, as her twins Jeanne and Simon are directed by their mother's will to return to her country and seek out their brother and father. *Incendies* was nominated for the 2011 Best Foreign Language Film Academy Award, the 2012 Best Foreign Film César and the 2012 Best Non-Anglophone Film BAFTA, and gained Villeneuve new-found acclaim that gave him access to larger-budget and more transnational projects.

Following the international recognition of *Incendies*, Villeneuve directed the Canadian-American *Enemy*, a 2013 thriller about a man who discovers and pursues his doppelgänger. This film is also situated in Montreal with some Francophone actors including the French star Mélanie Laurent, but *Enemy's* dialogue is entirely in English and the film stars Hollywood actor Jake Gyllenhaal as both main characters. Also released in 2013 and starring Gyllenhaal, *Prisoners* moves Villeneuve further into mainstream Hollywood territory. Pitting Hugh Jackman as desperate father Keller against Gyllenhaal's detective Loki, *Prisoners* is a sinister child kidnapping thriller set in suburban Pennsylvania, with English dialogue. Then 2015 saw the release of *Sicario*, a thriller situated on the US-Mexico border which explores the shifting power relations between the US government and a Mexican cartel, with frequent code-switching between English and Spanish. The following year, the Oscar-winning science fiction film *Arrival* was released. While the supranational negotiations around how to approach the aliens draw *Arrival's* characters into multilingual discussions with world governments ranging from Sudan to China, the film's primary focus is on the eventual transmission of the creatures' transmedial, multitemporal language to Louise, who is mentally empowered and transformed by her acquisition of this potent code. Finally, Villeneuve's most recent feature is also his highest-profile (and another Oscar-winner); the \$33M sequel to Ridley Scott's 1982 *Blade Runner*, *Blade Runner 2049*

(2017). Though language is less of a dominant narrative motif in *Blade Runner 2049* than in *Arrival*, the characters speak in a mix of English, Finnish, Hungarian, Japanese, Russian, Somali and Spanish. At the time of writing, Villeneuve is in the pre-production stages of another Hollywood science fiction feature (his third in a row): an adaptation of Frank Herbert's 1965 novel *Dune*.

Upon first glance, Denis Villeneuve's career could be traced unilaterally as one moving away from Francophone Canada and towards Anglophone Hollywood. Indeed, in the transition from Quebec-funded, French-language films such as *Maelström* and *Polytechnique* to part-Canadian coproductions like *Incendies* and *Enemy* to US productions like *Prisoners*, Villeneuve's cinema appears to tread a linear path from Quebec to Hollywood. Villeneuve mentioned his strong relationship with US cinema in an interview with *The Guardian* after *Sicario* was nominated for the *Palme d'or* at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival (where only four of the twelve films nominated for that year's *Palme d'or* were monolingual and the average number of languages per nominated film was 2.4.)¹ Expressing surprise at having been included in the Cannes round-up, he confesses "my mind is more in America than Europe right now" (in Heinrich 2015). However, Villeneuve's US-produced films are neither Anglocentric nor monocultural, nor do they abandon Quebecois influences entirely. For despite operating within the Hollywood model, a predominantly monolingual environment, Villeneuve remains fascinated by borders and cross-cultural exchange. In fact, the more Villeneuve's films are embedded within the Hollywood system, the more linguistically and geographically decentred they become.

Villeneuve's theorising of the border space and decentring of the nuclear one can be read against Bill Marshall's influential 2000 book *Quebec National Cinema* (published before Villeneuve had begun directing transnational films). For Marshall, the Quebecois filmmaking space is a unique and privileged one for understanding the pulls between national and supranational, Francophone and Anglophone, local and global. He writes:

1 Author gathered data, cross-referenced from <https://www.allocine.fr> and <https://www.imdb.com>.

“National” film texts are [...] pluralized and even destabilized by the competing discourses of and on the nation that exist in the culture and polity [...] We must imagine, therefore, a constant tension between forces of homogeneity and heterogeneity, between the centripetal and centrifugal. (Marshall 2000: 3)

In recent years, Quebec has become a fertile space for multilingual films depicting physical, cultural and linguistic border-crossing. *Incendies* is perhaps the most striking of these examples. But others include French director Philippe Lioret's *Le Fils de Jean* (2017), a familial drama set in Montreal but including characters from France and Anglophone Vancouver, Xavier Dolan's *Juste la fin du monde* (2016), another familial tale set in suburban Montreal but with a Paris-dwelling protagonist and an all-French cast, and Philippe Falardeau's *Monsieur Lazhar* (2011), a schoolroom drama centred on an Algerian teacher in Montreal, with dialogue in French, English and Arabic. Such films portray Francophone Canada (almost always Montreal) as the site of translingual and transcultural encounters. Marshall's “centripetal and centrifugal” mapping of Quebecois cinema, which he sees as “most certainly a ‘national cinema’, but [...] far from [...] a stable object of investigation” (2000: 1), thus provides a useful frame for understanding Villeneuve's movement among Canada, the US, Mexico, France, Lebanon and beyond.

Villeneuve's portrayal of Montreal in *Enemy* decentres it from Quebecois city to anonymous metropolis, filmed in yellow overtones and avoiding any recognisable landmarks. *Enemy*'s Montreal is a city that could be any other, featuring actors mostly of non-Canadian origin. *Arrival* was also filmed in Montreal, but is set in Montana. In *Sicario* the contrast between suburban El Paso Texas and the volatile Mexican Ciudad Juárez, separated only by a border wall, is undermined by the soaring aerial shots which reveal both cities to be part of the same, red-earth landscape. *Incendies*' Middle Eastern setting is never named, perhaps in an attempt to convey the universality of war. *Blade Runner 2049* is set in a dystopian future Los Angeles, yet bears no resemblance to present-day California. *Dune* will be set in an entirely fictional space. This deterritorialised approach to space again evokes Marshall's words on Quebec cinema, in which “the ‘national’ in terms of the ‘normal’ might be read according to more elusive discourses, of the banal, of the non-assertion or at least non-foregrounding of the nation, of the representation of [...] reality in terms of its non-specificity as

opposed to its specificity” (2000: 3). Villeneuve operates within increasingly ‘centripetal’ filmmaking spaces, namely the American Hollywood studio system, but his films are also increasingly ‘centrifugal’ in their multilinguality and deterritorialisation. In fact, he is often described in interviews and film reviews as bringing an ‘anti-Hollywood’ ‘Quebecer’s sensibility’ (Mottram 2015; Heinrich 2015) to American cinema. For example, Nicolas Bauche (2015: 48) writes of *Sicario*:

Avec son dernier film, Villeneuve a trouvé un point d’équilibre entre l’idiome cinématographique (faire un film américain comme un natif) et les obsessions thématiques du cinéma québécois (ne pas renier sa fibre créative de l’autre côté de la frontière canadienne).

(With his latest film, Villeneuve has found a balance between cinematographic dialect [making an American film like a native] and the thematic obsessions of Quebec cinema [without renouncing his creative flair from across the Canadian border]).²

Heightening the transnational and transmedial discourse of his films, Villeneuve also often adapts texts of varied origins: *Arrival* is an adaptation of Ted Chiang’s 1998 novella *Story of Your Life*, *Incendies* is adapted from the 2003 play of the same name by Lebanese-Canadian playwright Wajdi Mouawad, *Enemy* is an adaptation of José Saramago’s 2002 Portuguese novel *O Homem Duplicado* (*The Double*) and *Blade Runner 2049* is the sequel to Ridley Scott’s 1982 *Blade Runner*, itself an adaptation of Philip K. Dick’s 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. In a fitting shift, in 2018 Villeneuve’s *Sicario* was itself given a sequel, *Sicario: Day of the Soldado*, by Stefano Sollima, director of the 2010 multilingual Neapolitan mafia series *Gomorrah*. From the Francophone Canadian civil war drama *Incendies* with its substantial Arabic dialogue to the Mexican-American cartel thriller *Sicario* with its English and Spanish-language script, Villeneuve’s films chart the liminal spaces across which peoples, cultures and languages pass and come into conflict.

“Weapon opens time”: language in *Arrival*

In an unspecified period resembling the present day, twelve ovoid UFOs land in locations scattered across Earth. Shots of anonymous cities, forests

2 Author’s translation.

and ocean surfaces situate these ships at once everywhere and nowhere, images of each landing interspersed with sweeping landscape panoramas. With quadrilingual dialogue, filmed in Montreal, set in Montana, focused on outer space, with secondary scenes located all over the world, the film is not anchored in any one location. Each ship contains two giant squid-like extraterrestrials, whose seven tentacle-like appendages earn them the name "heptapod". So begins Denis Villeneuve's 2016 science fiction film, *Arrival*.

In the wake of this titular arrival, soldiers, scientists and linguists in each of the twelve host countries are deployed to try their respective hands at obtaining an answer to a crucial question: 'what is your purpose here (and do you come in peace)?' One spaceship lands above an expansive, green Montana field, and *Arrival* follows polylingual linguistics professor Louise Banks (Amy Adams) as she is called upon by US military General Weber (Forest Whitaker) to attempt to communicate with the heptapods at the Montana site, in collaboration with physicist Ian Donnelly (Jeremy Renner). While the heptapods' clicks and groans remain unintelligible, their written language comprises artful 'logograms', circular symbols etched in the air with ink expelled from the creatures' tentacles. Over several weeks, Louise and Ian build a rapport with their alien interlocutors across a glasslike wall inside the UFO, developing a system using mime, drawings and other non-verbal forms of communication to roughly translate the logograms into English. Nicknaming the heptapods Abbott and Costello, Louise (and to a lesser extent, Ian) begins to bridge the gap between human and heptapod in ways no other global experts prove able to. Finally, we learn that the heptapods' purpose is to offer something to humankind. However, the heptapods' message is difficult to translate: Louise understands them to be offering a 'tool', though she is unable to determine what this tool may be. However, global panic ensues when the team in China arrives at a different translation: 'weapon'.

Arrival's narrative plays out in four languages: English, Mandarin, Russian and Heptapod. Though they are not spoken in the film, we learn that Louise is also fluent in Farsi, Sanskrit and Portuguese (and possibly others). The language learning process and the growing translingual bond between Louise and the heptapods forms the film's narrative arc and the majority of its plot. Thus language, and specifically the mechanics of



Figure 1. Louise and Ian interpret a logogram from the heptapods. *Arrival* (2016). Dir. Denis Villeneuve. 01:09:33

multilingualism, is *Arrival's* central theme. Within this context, the ability to communicate across language barriers is an asset, and the flexibility to navigate new linguistic challenges is invaluable. The heptapods are pure science fiction, but serve a powerful metaphorical function. As Emily Alder (2016) writes in *The Conversation*, “ultimately, *Arrival* is less about communicating with the aliens than with each other – internationally but also individually [...] The film’s message is that difference is not about body shape or colour but language, culture and ways of thinking. It’s not about erasing that difference but communicating through it”.

Arrival plays in depth with the ‘first contact’ motif of key films in the genre such as Steven Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and Byron Haskin’s *The War of the Worlds* (1953); indeed, *Arrival's* French title is *Premier Contact* (literally ‘*First Contact*’).³ However, the film’s ultimate function is not to explore the possibilities of extraterrestrial life, but to highlight the power of language, and specifically the value of multilingualism in the contemporary world. As Louise becomes increasingly

3 Indeed, many ‘first contact’ films are multilingual: *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* is also quadrilingual (in English, French, Hindi and Spanish) while the 1953 *The War of the Worlds* is bilingual (in English and Spanish).

proficient in heptapod, she begins to experience mental flashes of herself with a young child. As the flashes become more frequent, we learn that this child is Louise's daughter Hannah, and that she has died in adolescence from a rare disease. From the film's outset, the audience is led to believe that Louise's daughter has already died, and that the heptapods arrive when Louise is in mourning. However, *Arrival's* climax draws this assumption into question.

In the film's penultimate act, when the host countries have ceased to share intelligence about their respective ships, all international negotiations have broken down and the Chinese military has threatened to declare war on the heptapods, a renegade group of soldiers at the Montana site set off a bomb inside the spaceship. In the wake of the bombing, as the threat of interplanetary war looms, the US team prepares to abandon the communication mission and evacuate the site. In the frenzied aftermath of the attack, Louise rushes back into the ship, alone, and there discovers the true nature of the heptapods' 'offering':

Louise [*spoken English*]: Costello, where's Abbott?

Costello [*heptapod logograms with English subtitles*]: Abbott is death process.

L: I'm sorry. We're sorry. I need you to send a message to the other sites.

C: Louise has weapon. Use weapon.

L: I don't understand. What is your purpose here?

C: We help humanity. In 3000 years, we need humanity help.

L: But how can you know the future?

[*Costello telepathically sends Louise a mental image of her playing with Hannah*]

L: I don't understand. Who is this child?

C: Louise sees future. Weapon opens time.

This scene provides a double revelation. We discover the heptapod language is not only a means to present the offering: it is the offering itself. The language operates as a radical manifestation of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity, whereby the language one speaks influences one's perception of the world. As Nick Statt (2016) explains, "Louise's understanding of the heptapods' written language reorients her sense of cause and effect". The heptapods' language is not only visually circular, but temporally cyclical: it transforms the way in which the brain experiences time. Using their non-linear language which allows them to see into the future,

the heptapods know that in 3000 years' time they will experience a major crisis. The heptapods are thus offering their language as a gift which can unite the many groups on Earth – an unrending of the Tower of Babel – in the hope that this gift will curry enough favour with humanity to warrant their assistance in the future.

The moment Louise acquires full knowledge of the heptapod language is also the point at which the audience discovers the film's twist: the tender images of Louise and her daughter that increasingly intersperse the film are not flashbacks, but flash-forwards. Louise is not a grieving mother, but a future one who will now enter in to motherhood knowing the tragedy that lies ahead. The significance of the flash-forward in which Louise explains that Hannah's name is "very special because it is a palindrome; it reads the same backwards and forwards" takes on new significance. Her experience with her own daughter, much like her encounter with the heptapods, transcends the linearity of Earthly time. This acquisition of premonitory language is a bittersweet revelation, but also a gift which equips Louise to avert the impending crisis. Rushing out of the ship to attempt to stop the evacuation, she explains the significance of the language to Ian and Weber:

I can read it. I know what it is. It's not a weapon, it's a gift. The weapon is their language. They gave it all to us.... If you learn it, when you really learn it, you begin to perceive time the way that they do, so you can see what's to come. Time, it isn't the same for them, it's non-linear.

However, Weber dismisses Louise; Russia and Sudan have just followed China's suit in delivering ultimatums to their heptapods and the evacuation must proceed. Suddenly, the film flashes forwards, to a seemingly unrelated gala eighteen months in the future. As Louise surveys the gala, the Chinese military leader, General Shang, approaches her.

General Shang [*English*]: Dr Banks. It's a pleasure.

Louise: General Shang. The pleasure is mine, really.

S: Your president said it was an honour to host me in celebration.

L: Of course.

S: But I confess, the only reason why I am here is to meet you in person.

L: Me? Well, I'm flattered. Thank you.

S: Eighteen months ago, you did something remarkable. Something not even my superior has done.

L: What's that?

s: You changed my mind. You are the reason for this unification. All because you reached out to me at my private number.

L: Your private number? General, I don't know your private number.

The general holds out his phone on which his private number is displayed.

s: Now you know. I do not claim to know how your mind works, but I believe it was important for you to see that.

L [*hesitating*]: I called you, didn't I?

s: Yes, you did.

Cut back to the evacuation. Louise steals a government agent's phone and begins to dial.

Louise [*to herself*]: What do I say? What do I say?

Cut to the gala scene.

s: I will never forget what you said. You told me my wife's dying words. [*He speaks the words in Mandarin into her ear, inaudible to the audience.*]

Cut back to the evacuation. Louise begins speaking into the phone, in Mandarin.

The non-Mandarin speaking audience never discovers what the General's wife's final words were (though Mandarin-speaking viewers have a privileged understanding of the depth of the phone conversation). However, this multilingual moment – one which unfolds in both the present and the future – is the crucial turning point in the story. In this scene pairing, Louise's knowledge of Heptapod gives her the ability to access Shang's words in both present and past: as Vox's Tod Van Der Werff (2016) explains,

“Future Louise” knows she's about to have a conversation with Shang that will give “Past Louise” necessary information... so Past Louise can look between two points in time, 18 months apart, like you might look between two rooms in a house.

The mysterious phone call scene, with its sister scene in the future, encapsulates *Arrival's* thesis about the power of multilingualism to bridge divides. This divide is explored most obviously through the transspecies rift between extraterrestrials and humans. But perhaps more importantly, *Arrival* explores the Babelian divide between humans themselves. In these scenes, Louise's multilingualism operates on multiple levels to allow her to exert her abilities as a master linguist. Although General Shang speaks fluent English, making the phone call in Mandarin is not only a diplomatic choice, but allows Louise to utter the exact words his late wife had spoken, in confidence, on her deathbed. It is through the use of Mandarin

that Louise's words ultimately convince the General to withdraw his threat of war. However, while the dialogue in these two scenes switches between English and Mandarin, a third language is also present, as Heptapod exerts its influence via distortion of linear time. Knowledge of Mandarin is crucial for Louise's phone call to have the desired effect. But it is the cyclical temporality of the heptapod language which allows Louise to access the crucial Mandarin words. She is thus able to sway Shang's position, despite their radical power differentials. These scenes reveal Louise's ability not only to learn multiple languages, but to use them to strategic effect.

In the following scene, news bulletins report that the Chinese government has made a shock announcement: in a complete about-face, it will not declare war. Russia and Sudan likewise stand down. Communication lines open back up between world governments. Subsequent flashes forward reveal Louise publishing a Heptapod textbook and teaching the language to international groups. *Arrival* is a science fiction film far removed from real-world scenarios, its interpretation of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis a fantastical exaggeration. Yet the film's central message is one which speaks to the nature of the twenty-first-century, globalised world into which it was released. In *Arrival*, multilingualism is an asset and linguistic openness the key to successful transnational collaboration and diplomacy. Louise speaks English for much of *Arrival*, but she weaves in and out of the many languages she knows not only to advance her own position, but that of the heptapods and ultimately humanity. Her ability to juggle English, Mandarin and the transtemporal properties of Heptapod in the film's climax allows her to harness the power of multilingualism. According to David Erlich (2015), Villeneuve's cinema is about "the cycle of violence" under many guises. However, in contrast to Villeneuve's more violent films, namely *Sicario*, *Arrival* posits multilingualism as a solution to this cycle. As Pablo Villaça (2016) writes,

the context in this case is of dread before the Unknown – and the film understands that, in the face of fear, the reaction of a considerable part of humanity is aggression. It's no wonder, then, that Louise thinks about the challenges ahead of her in terms of language, while her superiors evaluate them following the logic of war.

Bill Marshall writes in *Quebec National Cinema* that "there is no master hermeneutic of 'the nation' for decoding the films of a 'national cinema'". Rather, the nation is unfixed, not one reference point, not a refuge of

stability faced with globalization, but a very mobile spiral.” (2000: 3). Few films illustrate this idea more clearly than *Arrival*. Much like Villeneuve's navigation of space, *Arrival's* conception of language and time is both a circling and a decentring. For what are the heptapod logograms but 'very mobile spirals', shifting yet circular, spiralling through time? Louise understands the meaning of the circular logograms, the non-linearity of the heptapods' relationship with time, and the multilingual perspective required to save humanity. This decentred picture of language relations also reflects Villeneuve's trajectory as a filmmaker and his relationship with the centralised body of Hollywood cinema. In *Cahiers du cinéma*, Jean-Philippe Tessé (2016) writes of *Arrival* that "l'écriture des aliens 'ouvre le temps', le cinéma aussi" ("the aliens' writing 'opens time', as does cinema"). Villeneuve, like Louise, is a multilingual figure who operates within the monocultural centre but who understands the polycentric nature of the contemporary, multilingual world; one which is not a magnetic nucleus, but a 'very mobile spiral'.

Conclusion

From urban Montreal and pastoral Quebec to suburban Pennsylvania, rural Montana, the US-Mexico border, the Mexican city of Juárez and an unnamed Middle Eastern country resembling Lebanon, Villeneuve's films reveal the crucial importance of language in a world defined by border-crossing, immigration, and globalisation in its myriad forms. Within this multifarious world, the characters best equipped to navigate their surroundings, understand their relationships with others, and manipulate power differentials are those who not only speak multiple languages, but who understand how to use them strategically. In films like *Arrival*, violence is a blunt object where language is a precise tool. In all cases, monolingualism is a barrier and unwillingness to learn new languages spells doom for those who underestimate their value.

Denis Villeneuve's oeuvre so far charts a steady move away from regional Canadian filmmaking towards the larger budgets of Hollywood. From a production studies standpoint, this progression appears linear: a regional filmmaker drawn from a bilingual periphery to an Anglophone centre by the magnetic pull of the Hollywood system. This is one way

of understanding such a career trajectory. But Villeneuve's US-produced films do not conform to traditional conceptions of Hollywood as monolingual and "hegemonic" (Nornes 2007: 230), for these films are also his most culturally and linguistically diverse. The protagonists of films like *Sicario* and *Arrival* understand how to deploy language to exert social power, navigate high-stakes intercultural conflicts and negotiate solutions to seemingly insurmountable problems. *Arrival* is a science fiction drama in which disaster is averted by a lone hero. But in a radical update of this trope, *Arrival*'s hero uses not violence, but language, to achieve these ends. To paraphrase the heptapods themselves, such characters are not simply multilingual, but can use the 'tool', 'gift' and even 'weapon' of language.

In Denis Villeneuve's Hollywood films, English remains an essential lingua franca, but the potential for control lies in mastery of other, 'foreign' and even feared languages. Power is wielded most effectively in *Arrival* not by monolingual English speakers, even if they hold overt positions of authority in the US military or government intelligence agencies. Instead, the narrative is controlled by those most open to linguistic plurality and flexibility. Such films therefore resist the Eurocentric ideals of many cinematic traditions, in which *lingua francas* such as English and French are the only powerful codes, and open their master linguist characters up to the multitudes of power centres which characterise the globalised world. These films unfold in anonymous, plural or shifting environments, in which traditional understandings of space and territory are called into question. Villeneuve's multilingual, transnational filmmaking practises, much like the heptapods' language itself, are best understood as 'a very mobile spiral', at once cyclical – and decentred.

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