

University of Groningen

Living with Time

van Dijk, Mathilde

Published in:
 Religions

DOI:
[10.3390/rel12010017](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12010017)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
 Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
 2021

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
 van Dijk, M. (2021). Living with Time: Spirituality and Denis Villeneuve's Arrival. *Religions*, 12(1), Article 17. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12010017>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

Article

Living with Time: Spirituality and Denis Villeneuve's Arrival

Mathilde van Dijk

Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Groningen, 9712 GK Groningen, The Netherlands; mathilde.van.dijk@rug.nl

Abstract: At first sight, Denis Villeneuve's 2016 *Arrival* seems to provide a fairly standard science fiction narrative about the landing of aliens on earth and the panic that ensues, featuring aggressive soldiers, a suspicious CIA man, brilliant scientists and rioting populaces. The film could be read as propaganda for the humanities as it is a linguist rather than a natural scientist who saves the world. The second narrative is more important, as acknowledged by the director: the main character Dr. Louise Banks's mourning for her deceased daughter, Hannah. In contact with the aliens, she learns how to cope with this disastrous event, by acquiring a different perspective on how life proceeds and how time works. This is also where the film, subtly, tells a deeply spiritual narrative, in which Louise acquires tender competence to deal with what life brings, including Hannah's death.

Keywords: science fiction; spirituality; death; film

“... And in this way to experience nothing else but sweet love, embraces and kisses” (“... ende el neghene smake daeraf hebbene dan suete minne ende helsen ende cussen.”) (Hadewijch 1980, pp. 280–81; original Middle Dutch in Visioenen, Hadewijch 1996, pp. 80–81)



Citation: van Dijk, Mathilde. 2021. Living with Time: Spirituality and Denis Villeneuve's Arrival. *Religions* 12: 17. <https://dx.doi.org/10.3390/rel12010017>

Received: 21 October 2020
Accepted: 21 December 2020
Published: 26 December 2020

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2020 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Science fiction is an expanding universe. Multifaceted through its several subgenres and increasingly present in different media—e.g., books, films, television, games, pop music—it has a considerable cultural impact (Morse 2006, pp. 2–6). Phrases like “the dark side” are as common as “an offer he could not refuse” or “the usual suspects” and are used by people, who did and who did not watch the films in which these expressions originated. Increasingly mainstream, science fiction ranges from pulp to critically appreciated works. A sure sign of how at least some science fiction reached the Olympus of “high” art is how, in the first twenty years of the third millennium, authors Doris Lessing and Margaret Atwood won important literary awards outside the science fiction niche: the Nobel and the Booker prize, respectively. The former is awarded for an oeuvre, which in Lessing's case consists of much more than science fiction, as is true about Atwood. It is significant that the Nobel prize website specifically mentions the former's work in this field, although *The Golden Notebook* (1962) is the only title specifically mentioned.¹ The Booker prize is an even stronger sign of critical appreciation as it refers to a specific book, Atwood's novel *The Testaments* (2019). This is a sequel to her *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), continuing her account of a dystopia set in a near future.

Incidentally, both authors resisted being put into niches. Lessing famously rejected being labelled as a feminist author and, at least as far as some of her work is concerned, its labelling is science fiction. (Ridout 2017, pp. 298–99; Park 2013, pp. 6–7) Atwood regards her realist work as a report on current situations, as “what things were like”, rather than as feminist pamphlets (Tolan 2007, pp. 2–3). Moreover, she insists on the fundamental realism of works such as *Oryx and Crake* (2003), which have been labelled as science fiction because of their setting in a future and the presence of advanced scientific techniques, such

¹ <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2007/lessing/facts/>, consulted 30 November 2020.

as cloning. She proposed to call such works speculative fiction, because unlike science fiction, which, in her definition, tells the tale of “things . . . we can’t yet do or begin to do”, speculative fiction “employs the means . . . more or less to hand . . . on planet Earth.” (Atwood 2012, pp. 6–7; Atwood 2004, p. 513). As authors, both Lessing and Atwood may have felt that labelling their work as belonging to one genre or political movement or another diminished it. Science fiction or not, their work is an example of the wide range of what is usually labelled as science fiction and the difficulty of defining it, as Atwood makes clear in her *In other worlds* (Atwood 2012, pp. 6–7). Atwood’s and Lessing’s work shows how science fiction (if I may persist in labelling it as such) crosses over to other media both in so-called low and high art. In collaboration with Lessing, composer Philip Glass created the opera, *The making of the representative of Planet 8*, after her eponymous novel (1983); premiered in Houston Grand Opera 1988. Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* is now a successful TV-series, currently in its third season. It is also an example of the societal impact that science fiction may have, profiting from television’s ability to show instead of just tell, the images making the written text more “real”. The oppression of women is central to *The Handmaid’s* plot, in which Christian fundamentalists have taken over part of the United States. In recent protests against sexism, some participants donned the distinctive red dresses and headgear of handmaids to show how seriously they took infractions against the rights of women.² Other protesters used the costume to attack the quarantine measures under COVID-19.³

As a cultural historian working in the multidisciplinary field of religion, I am interested in science fiction as a critique and/or mirror of present-day culture. From its start, which I would put in the nineteenth century, it participated in the debate surrounding religion as it emerged from the Enlightenment. (Seed 1995, pp. ix–xvi; McGrath 2012; Van der Spek 2000; Casanova 1994, pp. 11–39; Heimann 1999, pp. 458–507). Traditionally, science fiction has been viewed as being hostile towards religion, as it features a world in which religion has become superfluous because of scientific and technological progress (Busto 2014, pp. 395–404). Specifically, this applies to the subgenre of science fiction which focus on the consequences of technological and scientific inventions. If religion exists at all in its imagined universes, it functions as a backwards form of superstition that is fortunately no longer practiced by the enlightened main characters of the narrative. Older *Star Trek* series, such as *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, incorporate this critical view of religion. The captain is horrified when he finds out that the inhabitants of a remote planet have come to regard him as a god, the Picard (*Star Trek: The Next Generation* 1989; 3: 4). In such narratives, science fiction acts as a mouthpiece for the supporters of the secularization thesis, who predict the same scenario as scientific knowledge and technical possibilities expand (Schluchter 2009, pp. 7–17; Weber 1968, p. 433).

Although once widely accepted, the validity of the secularization thesis has come under increasing criticism in the past few decades. Despite advances in science and technology, the human species persists in wanting a truth that transcends daily reality, to the infinite dismay of radical secularists, such as the British biologist Richard Dawkins (2006, pp. 161–207). It has become clear that, viewed from a global perspective, religion is certainly not declining. Christianity in particular is expanding explosively south of the equator and, as far as Western Europe is concerned, turning away from the Church does not necessarily mean leaving religion all together (Davie 1994; McAvan 2012, pp. 1–30). Some forms of religion and spirituality are flourishing, in the West and globally (Jenkins 2011³). This is why so-called postsecular theorists argue that religion never disappeared, but that it changed into a form which allows more space for the selfdevelopment of individuals as religious subjects, who become their own authorities as far as transcendence is concerned. Moreover, increasingly, individuals define themselves as spiritual, not religious, connecting

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/03/how-the-handmaids-tale-dressed-protests-across-the-world>, consulted 6 December 2020.

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/25/trump-handmaids-tale-coronavirus>, consulted 6 December 2020.

the latter to the authoritative organisation of a church (Taylor 2007, pp. 473–536; Heelas and Woodhead 2005).

Moreover, in the West at least, the German–American sociologist Luckmann perceives a sliding towards other media than the church to find transcendence, to connect to a higher reality. In the afterword to the German edition of his *Invisible Religion*, written 24 years after the original, he stresses how human beings appear to be inclined to seek for significance of whatever they do or whatever befalls them in life. In many cases, scientific knowledge and everyday experience suffice, but not for those experiences which exceed understanding, like death. When a loved one dies, the question of why can be answered in a purely technical fashion: they were ill, had an accident, were old and so forth. The questions of why this had to happen, why anyone dies at all and how to cope with it is quite another matter—this is where spirituality comes in and the need for transcendence arises. Increasingly, people fulfil this need in a multitude of other places, including the narratives in contemporary mass media (Luckmann 1991, p. 180; Luckmann 1967). Returning to *Star Trek*, the American sociologist Jindra cites it as being one of those places. (Jindra 1994, pp. 27–51).

Moreover, this franchise is not as secular as it would seem at first glance. Like any science fiction, *Star Trek* addresses the “big questions” such as “what is life? Where do we come from?” and so on, which require a gaze into the beyond. Later instalments feature crew members, who practice religion or spirituality, for instance commander Chakotay in *Voyager* (1995–2001) (McGrath 2015; Ammon 2014). *Star Trek* is also less consistently rational than it proclaims to be: human intuition and emotion occasionally are more powerful than reason and logic (Simpson 2016, p. 83). The American science fiction scholar Telotte identified films and television series that focus on encounters with extraterrestrials as particularly good vehicles for transcendent experiences (Telotte 2001, pp. 142–60). These are a regular feature in all *Star Trek* series. Increasingly, as CGI-technology develops, film and television have the advantage over written science fiction. Landscapes, cities and creatures appear as being real. The same applies to the transcendent.

In this article, I will further explore the capacity of science fiction to function as a spiritual medium, as a possible route towards transcendent experiences, using the film *Arrival* as an example. The French-Canadian director Denis Villeneuve, based his 2016 film on a novella by the Chinese-American author Ted Chiang entitled *The story of your life*, which was published in 1998. His film features a classic science fiction plot about the landing of extraterrestrials on Earth and what happens afterwards. As we will see, using an imaginary crisis, it proposes an alternative for the way in which international society tends to deal with crises. Additionally, a second narrative unfolds: we follow the protagonist, Dr Louise Banks (played by Amy Adams), as she tries to cope with the premature death of her daughter. Villeneuve has said that, as far as he is concerned, this story is the heart of his movie.⁴

Arrival will be studied as a historical source, using the historical philological method of carefully “reading” it and placing it into the historical context, in which it originates. Surprisingly, my other specialty in the history of late medieval religion is particularly useful here, specifically as far as late medieval mysticism is concerned. The connection is less anachronistic than it might seem, as medieval mystics, and female mystics in particular, had a renewed impact from the late twentieth century (Wiethaus 1999). Many clashed with ecclesiastical authorities at some point in their lives, which, occasionally, led to the most terrible consequence of death at the stake, although others were canonized as saints. Thus, as supposed rebels, they became suitable heroines to those aiming for societal change, such as feminists, and to those in search of spiritual guidance, many of those seeking it outside traditional churches. Although I would certainly not suggest that Villeneuve created his film in direct consultation of works by medieval mystics, the images and the way in which Louise copes with her daughter’s death reminded me of their texts. Without descending

⁴ In an interview on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZ6HhFO-h-g&t=622s>, consulted 5 May 2020.

into vague theories of suspected resonances, I use the works of several medieval mystics as a lens to better chart the deeply spiritual content of Villeneuve's film. In addition, I will profit from the studies in spirituality as conducted by theologians, sociologists of religion and, obviously, students in science fiction film and literature.

Before starting an analysis of *Arrival*, a few words need to be said about the concept of spirituality, as used in this article. It is notoriously hard to define because its meaning is no longer as obvious as it used to be when applied to the practice of specific religions, such as the daily pattern of work and prayer in a Benedictine monastery. After the blossoming of a multitude of activities referred to as spirituality from the 1970s onwards, it is unclear what the term comprises, although there appears to be consensus about several common elements. I follow the Nijmegen theologian, Kees Waaijman, in his loose definition of the concept. Usually, anything to do with spirituality involves an awareness of the place of the individual in a larger transcendent reality. This consciousness can lead to certain ritual practices. A learning process, most often aimed at the formation of the self, is also a part of it (Waaijman 2000, pp. 305–7).

2. Palindrome

Only towards the end of *Arrival* do we hear the name of Louise's daughter—Hannah—when her mother explains to her that her name is a palindrome: a word that remains the same when it is written backwards and therefore has no beginning and no end.

The film begins with a cello, playing in a minor key. Music is used sparingly in the film, but when it is used, it usually consists of computer-generated sequences of minimal music, unlike the melodic cello at the beginning. The songs of humpback whales are also used, to represent the sounds that the aliens make. The cello accompanies an overview of Louise's daughter's life: from baby to toddler to rebellious adolescent. I was struck by the on-the-mark depiction of love and intimacy: the crying baby being returned to its mother (Louise: "come back to me"), the mother playing with the laughing toddler (Louise: "Here are my tickle guns . . . You'd better run"), the loving child (Hannah: "I love you"), and the furious adolescent (Hannah: "I hate you!"). Except for the scene shortly after Hannah's birth which, realistically, is in a hospital, all of these scenes take place in Louise's secluded house and garden on the shore of a placid lake. Scenes in the hospital follow: a medical examination under Louise's anxious gaze, the bad news conversation with the doctor, and the death of a bald, beautiful, forever unattainable daughter. Louise, again: "come back to me", walking alone down a long corridor in the hospital. It is worth quoting Louise's voice-over during these scenes:

"I used to think this was the beginning of your story. Memory is a strange thing. It does not work like I thought it did. We are so bound by time, by its order . . . I remember moments in the middle . . . And this was the end. [Cello stops-MvD] But now I am not so sure that I believe in beginnings and endings. There are days that define your story beyond your life, like the day they arrived." (0.57–3.4.3)

Whereas in Chiang's novella, Hannah is twenty-five when she dies, in the film she is in her mid-teens. Another difference is the cause of death: a climbing accident in the novella, an illness in the film. The illness is not specified, but the bald head appears to point to some form of cancer.

After this sequence, we view Louise on her way to teach a class in a university. She notes that there is something going on as people gather around televisions to catch the news, but she does not let herself to be distracted and continues to her linguistics class, on the history of Portuguese from the Middle Ages ("where language was seen as an expression of art", 4.26–4.28). She expresses surprise at the low number of students in the classroom, and soon the class is disrupted by the sounds of multiple messages—contrary to the rules, the students have not muted their mobile phones. Eventually, they ask their teacher to tune in to a news channel on television. This is how we learn about the arrival of 12 spaceships at different locations on Earth and the ensuing chaos, with looting and rioting all over the world. Soon after, the campus is evacuated.

In the middle of the night, colonel Weber (played by Forest Whitaker) collects Louise at her home and takes her to a landing site of the extraterrestrials in Montana. She has worked with him before, when she impressed him with the quick work she made of a Farsi text written by insurgents. "And you made quick work with those insurgents", Louise replies, when he reminds her (10.27). Did she feel that her language skills were abused? This remains unsaid. In the helicopter, she meets another expert: the arrogant physicist Ian Donnelly (played by Jeremy Renner), who begins their acquaintance with an attack on a proposition in a book of hers. Contrary to what she says, physics rather than language forms the basis of civilization, he tells her. His attitude is markedly different from the character's in Chiang's novella, in which the experts respect each other from the start.

Arriving in the frantic atmosphere of a hastily set up army camp, the two scholars are immediately hoisted into a kind of space suit and taken to the extraterrestrial spaceship, which hovers about two metres above the ground. It looks like a black, vertically elongated shell, from which strange noises can be heard. A square hatch opens at the bottom, and Louise and Ian are brought up on an aerial platform and step into a square, black corridor. Below, above and sideways no longer apply as they walk towards a transparent wall with white light behind it. Two creatures emerge from the mist: their form becomes clearer in the course of the film. They have seven limbs, which is why the humans call them "heptapods". At first sight, they look like octopuses, but with one limb less; later on, they resemble huge hands with some sort of bone structure beneath the skin, and eventually there appears to be a kind of head.

Louise's expertise as a linguist is crucial. Her discovery of the heptapods' language is indispensable to the human team's mission: to discover why and how they came. Even the physicist Ian comes to appreciate Louise's skills, although this is only when he discovers that she approaches language like a mathematician. He also admires her capacity to avoid miscommunication with the aliens. Communication is not his strength, he acknowledges, and jokingly surmises that this must be why he is single. Louise replies that it is also possible to be an expert in communication and yet end up single.

After this conversation, Louise and Ian become friends. They share their openness to the beauty of the shells and their researcher's drive. Their scientific curiosity leads them to remove their suits at the third encounter with the beings: Louise first and Ian following, muttering: "Screw it . . . everybody dies, right." (46.42) In doing so, they take far more risk than the soldiers and the CIA agent in the camp find acceptable. Ian also reads up on Louise's field and becomes aware of the theory about how immersion in another language rewires the brain. This theory claims that people who really immerse themselves in a language's culture come to have a different perspective on reality, and Louise recognizes this as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

Louise quickly discovers that there is no connection between the heptapods' sounds and their language. They have a script: using inky excretions from their bodies, they project circular figures on the wall. Line and smudge patterns around the edges indicate differences in meaning. Louise also finds that the heptapods write in two directions: they begin their sentences at the left and the right simultaneously, using two limbs. Apparently, they know in advance how a sentence ends. As Louise's connection to the creatures intensifies, she comes to share their perspective on time as being nonlinear and, even more spectacular, to experience it as such. She has more and more visions of herself and her daughter, although she does not understand immediately who the child is. In the visions, Hannah makes images of encounters between the heptapods and her parents in drawings and modelling clay. When she asks why her dad left, Louise replies that she told him something that he was not ready to hear.

Meanwhile, in the camp, there is global communication among humans, but no cooperation. Many people doubt that the heptapods' intentions are good, and some believe that they have come to sow discord among humans. The Chinese, in particular, react aggressively. General Shang (played by Tzi Ma) mobilizes the army and is the first to fire

on the alien spaceships. Louise cries out in dismay: “We need to be talking to each other!” (1.07.42–1.07.43).

After Shang’s attack, the heptapods prepare for departure. The human camp follows suit, afraid of the heptapods’ revenge, but Louise drives to the spaceship for a final encounter. It is hovering higher and in a horizontal position, resembling a blue whale rather than a shell. A pod descends from the ship, shaped like a yarn spool. When Louise enters it, she is surrounded by white mist and white light. Soon, she ends up in the heptapods’ element, in the white light. Fluidity is suggested as a heptapod swims past her. She finally learns why they came: to teach humankind their language as to make sure that it will be able to help the heptapods in a disaster that will happen in their world. Louise has a vision in which she encounters General Shang at a gala event. He tells her that he only accepted the invitation to meet with her as she accomplished a remarkable feat: she changed his mind. She called him using the words that his deceased wife spoke on her deathbed. We do not hear what these words were, but he gives Louise his private number. When Louise is back on the ground, Ian comes to meet her. As he hugs her, she experiences a flash of insight: “I just realized why my husband left me.” (1.45.59).

Upon her return to the camp, Louise steals the CIA agent’s telephone and calls General Chang’s private number, preventing a global conflict. The heptapods depart and, for the last time, sequences in the future and in the present interweave as Ian embraces Louise. The melodic cello from the beginning returns, this time in duet with a violin. We understand that Ian is/will be Hannah’s father. Louise tells her daughter: “So, Hannah, this is where your story begins: the day they departed.” (1.42.50–1.42.59) Continuing in a voice-over, she vows: “Despite knowing the journey and where it leads, I embrace and I welcome every moment of it.” (1.43.02–1.43.18) She asks Ian, “If you could see your whole life from start to finish, would you change things?” (1.44.33–1.44.37) Ian replies that perhaps he would be more open about his feelings. He also confesses that meeting her was more special to him than his encounters with the heptapods. Again, we view scenes of love and intimacy: between Ian and Louise and between the two of them and Hannah, ending with Ian’s question: “You wanna make a baby?” (1.46.15).

3. Topical Concerns

Is *Arrival* really science fiction? The British literary scholar Bran Nicol argues that it might be more appropriate to refer to this film as “humanities fiction” instead. The humanities, rather than the natural sciences, save the world. He further points out that it is unusual in film for a female scholar to be represented as the most brilliant among the experts (Nicol 2019; Queriquellim 2019, pp. 3758–65). Imitating the science fiction practice of using real science, the film refers to real linguistic theories; in this case, the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis. Sapir argued that language not only describes reality, but makes it (Sapir 1929; Hussein 2012, pp. 642–43). Whorf became fascinated by the Hopi language, which proved to have an entirely different structure from the Indo-European languages that he had previously researched. He speculated that this might correspond to a different way of thinking and of viewing the world (Whorf 1940, 2012; Hussein 2012, pp. 643–45).

Contrasts are important in the film, for instance between the serene atmosphere of Louise’s house on the lake and the frenzy of the army camp. Moreover, there is a contrast between Ian’s and Louise’s scientific curiosity and the aggressive stance of the military, the CIA and the politicians who, despite not actually being depicted in the film at any great length, are a constant presence behind its scenes. All three of the latter are interested only in the question of whether the heptapods might be dangerous to humankind. The contrast between Louise’s and Ian’s open attitudes and their genuine interest in finding out about the strange guests make clear that their way of doing things is more useful. Initially, there is also a contrast between Ian and Louise: Ian as a representative of hard science par excellence, i.e., physics, and Louise as a representative of the humanities.

Arrival could certainly be read as propaganda for the latter, which are in trouble all over the Western world (Nicol 2019, pp. 108–12, 117; Braidotti 2013, pp. 143–85;

Nussbaum 2010). In my own country of the Netherlands, a government committee recently suggested reallocating funds from the humanities, social and medical sciences to technological and natural sciences. The only criterion for increasing the latter's funding appears to be the expectation of rather narrowly defined economic profit; a tendency that is unfortunately seen in many Western countries.⁵ *Arrival* counters these tendencies by showing the importance of communication, in which Louise's linguistic expertise is crucial. Even the physicist Ian allows himself to be convinced by her, despite his initial scepticism about the value of her work.

Writing this article in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, it is almost impossible not to connect the events in the film with current affairs. As in *Arrival*'s fictional crisis, there is contact but little cooperation in the fight against the virus, even within the European Union. Publishing his article in 2019, Bran Nicol suspected a connection between the aforementioned antihumanities tendencies, Donald Trump's election to President of the United States in 2016—the year of the film's release—and the coming to power of similar politicians in other countries, all of which have not helped international communication and cooperation (Nicol 2019, pp. 119–24). The film also addresses Western fear, such as the suspicion of China, and shows how a genuine interest in others, communication with them and linguistic skills can overcome such prejudices.

4. Failing Communication

Arrival has a complicated structure: present and future intermingle and break into each other at any given moment. In fact, it only gradually becomes clear to us that the scenes with Hannah and of family life in Louise's home take place after the events with the heptapods, instead of before. This narrative strategy corresponds to the transformation that Louise experiences in the flowing white light. Like the heptapods, as a consequence of immersing herself in their language and as theorized by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, she comes to view time like they do: as being nonlinear. For her, everything happens at the same time and therefore always remains present.

What is essential is that the future cannot be changed, or only partially: the extraterrestrial beings influence their own future by teaching the humans on Earth their language, and Louise prevents a war. However, she cannot stop her daughter from dying, although she can continue to enjoy the love that bound them. The same goes for her memory of her future with Ian, in which she only realizes at a late (or early) stage why he left her/is going to leave her. In love, assuming him to be her soulmate in every respect, she does not realise that he did not transform as profoundly as she has. Not as immersed in the heptapods' language as she is, not sharing her experience in the flowing white light, Ian remains bound by linear time. As watchers of the film, we are left to imagine his sense of betrayal when he learns that she willingly had a child with him, despite of her foreknowledge of the suffering that lay ahead of their daughter and them as her parents.

Thus, tragically, no matter how efficiently Louise deals with the contact with the heptapods and the Chinese general, she is unable to communicate with the father of her child, Ian, when it matters most. They lose each other in the scene in which she asks him whether he would change anything if he knew beforehand what would happen. Louise ends up alone, with her memories—her remark about how being a communication expert and single now reads as another instance of foreknowledge or rather of a nonlinear awareness as to how her life will proceed—an awareness that Ian lacks.

5. Louise as a Mystic

Given the centrality of Louise's history with her daughter, *Arrival* could also be seen as a hybrid of science fiction and domestic drama. This combination is unusual, but,

⁵ See Adviescommissie Bekostiging Hoger Onderwijs en Onderzoek, *Wissels om: Naar een transparante en evenwichtige bekostiging, en meer samenwerking in hoger onderwijs en onderzoek* (2019), 13, 16–17; 5 December 2020 downloaded from <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2019/07/19/adviesrapport-bekostiging-hoger-onderwijs>.

generally, science fiction films appear to be very open for a combination with other genres. Famous examples include the *Alien* franchise (1979–) and the first *Blade Runner* film (1982), which could be seen as horror and film noir, respectively. The frequent hybridity of films advertised as science fiction led to heated debates as to what the genre of a certain film actually is and caused some scholars to advocate abandoning such classifications altogether (Bould 2012, pp. 1–2). Be that as may, in *Arrival*, it is clear that the domestic drama of a mother losing her child needs its science fiction elements to tell the tale of how she comes to terms with it. The encounter with the heptapods allows her to reach into the truth beyond everyday reality, to have an experience of transcendence.

It is striking how Louise's life with Hannah and with Ian and Hannah is shown exclusively as a narrative of love and happiness—the fury of the adolescent Hannah is only an aspect of what intimately living with a growing child means. Ian and Louise must have quarrelled, but we do not see their rows. The same is true for the suffering, which Hannah must have experienced, although it is indicated by her bald head and the tubes in her nose on her deathbed. Louise chooses happiness and the sword through her soul—a choice not given to Ian—and they cannot overcome their differences, at least not in the periods shown in the film, which start with the arrival of the heptapods and end with Hannah's death.

The image of the sword through the soul is my own association, which connects Louise to the Virgin Mary and Simeon's prophecy that "a sword will pierce your own soul (Lk. 2: 35)." *Arrival* does not provide such direct connections to Christianity or any religion for that matter, except for a news item about a Pentecostal group whose members committed suicide. This event is not important in the narrative, except as an example of the panic that ensues after the arrival of the heptapods. Moreover, the terms spirituality or transcendence are never mentioned. Yet, they are indicated through *Arrival's* sound and iconography. The use of whale song for the noises that the heptapods make is significant as, from the 1970s onwards, many people came to connect these magnificent sea mammals—whose brains are not only bigger but also more complex than ours—to spirituality (Zelko 2013, pp. 183–94). Obviously, as the death of Hannah is so important in the narrative, the film contains many references to death. In the heptapods' spaceship, the black corridor with the white light at the end follows the reports of near-death experiences, a connection that is further enhanced by Ian's remark about his own death as he is getting out of his suit. When Louise goes for a last encounter with the heptapods, her small pod fills up with white mist as she enters, after which she suddenly finds herself with the beings: this could be seen as an experience of death and rebirth. Generally, white light is used in film for instances of contact with the divine and experiences of transcendence (McAvan 2012, pp. 56–57). The film poster also hints at spirituality, as there appears to be a halo behind Louise's head, which the other main characters lack.

Using works of medieval mystics as a lens, the imagery and Louise's dealing with her daughter's death shows similarities with the descriptions to be found in their works and biographies. Here, I specifically used the work of two thirteenth century Beguines, Mechthild of Magdeburg and Hadewijch of Antwerp, as well as the biographies of fourteenth century Liedewij of Schiedam. Chronically ill since youth, the latter lived a religious life at home, rather than in a religious community.

Louise's last journey to the alien ship, in which she is taken up into the heptapods' element, is shown as being like a mystical experience, not only in her complete immersion into the alien's element, but also in the fact that she receives a special kind of knowledge, which she is to share with her fellow human beings. This commandment that mystics must share their knowledge is a recurrent theme in medieval descriptions of visions as is the apparently fluid nature of the heptapods' element, which is similar to Mechthild's imagery in her *Das Fließende Licht der Gottheit* (Mechthild of Magdeburg 1993). Relying on the authority of Scripture, divine wisdom was often seen as flowing from a source, as water, as blood from Christ's sidewound or milk from a saint's breasts (Bynum 1987, 1991).

Beguines like Mechthild and Hadewijch developed the thought of a previous, most influential mystical author, the Cistercian abbot Bernard of *Clairvaux* (1090–1153). Like

him, they regarded humankind's relationship with God as a love affair between a bride and a groom. Christ's coming to earth and His willingness to suffer to atone for our sins were the primary signs of the depth of His love. His life as a human being was seen as a sequence of suffering, from birth to the crucifixion. He taught humankind how to live and love. Beguines and other religious men and women took on the challenge of attempting to imitate Him. Love and suffering became as central to their lives as it was in Jesus Christ's, as He was constructed in their day. If they were beset by illness or persecution, they accepted this as a chance to imitate Christ. For instance, Liedewij came to view her illness as an opportunity to suffer for others, as an instance to operationalize the love, that she felt for them. According to her biographers, she repeatedly had visions in which she saw a loved one in Purgatory or Hell, upon which she decided to take on more suffering to save them (Jongen 1994, pp. 74–76).

Present day students of mysticism may be able to find inspiration in Liedewij's way of making her many complaints meaningful, but this is a lot more difficult when they read about her taking on more suffering voluntarily. Convincingly, the American philosopher of religion Amy Hollywood argued that such practices were not engaged in because of some pathological desire for pain, but to offer help to and to show solidarity with suffering humankind by finding a way to deal with their inescapable fates (Hollywood 2002, pp. 60–87). I would add that finding significance in pain and accepting it as a part of human life, more specifically if one attempts to live a life similar to Christ's, is also a way of coping, making sense of it in an era in which there was not a whole lot one could do to alleviate it if one fell ill, as Liedewij did, or was persecuted, as Hadewijch probably was (Hadewijch 1980, Letter 5, pp. 55–56). Ultimately, the attitude of these medieval women comes down to an acceptance of life and a willingness to work with what one gets.

6. Louise's Tender Competence

In the film, Louise chooses a similar acceptance of life. The constant emphasis on love and intimacy evokes a final association, in addition to the medieval mystics that I referred to in the previous paragraph: with the concept of tender competence, which I encountered for the first time in a lecture by the Dutch theologian Maaik de Haardt. She found it in American theologian Norvene Vest's *Friend of the Soul*, in which the latter advocates a different perspective on labour. Vest criticizes the doctrine of individual autonomy as though humans either have complete control over their lives or are entirely powerless, as both ideas allow no space for the unexpected, wonder or God. After all, if humans are total masters of their lives, God becomes superfluous and, in the opposite situation, their existence is futile, as is God's. Inspired by medieval wisdom, in this case the Benedictine Rule, Vest proposes regarding work as a vocation—as a God-given task to deploy the talents with which He has endowed all human beings as well as can be accomplished, with “tenderness and competence” serving Him and one's fellow human beings (Vest 1997, pp. 71–76; De Waal 1988, p. 106). De Haardt develops tender competence into an awareness of vulnerability and the uncontrollability of life, as well as a fundamental openness to deal with whatever life may bring (De Haardt 2004, p. 95).

Louise embodies tender competence in her acceptance of what life brings, in happiness and suffering. Using medieval mystics as a lens, it is significant that in the film, Hannah does not die of an accident, but of an illness and at a younger age, thus enhancing the theme of suffering. Like it is for medieval mystics, Louise's acceptance of life is not a passive act. It is a challenge to deal with what is in store for her: to love, take care of, lose and yet always hold on to Hannah and to her family life, and to relive it all again and again, in an ongoing learning process. In me, Louise's art of living evokes a passage in Hadewijch's *Book of visions*. Halfway through it, this Beguine fully realizes what the imitation of the Bridegroom entails, and takes this on, like Louise did with her life. This is why I chose a passage from Hadewijch's seventh vision as a motto for this article. Given Louise's acceptance of her life with all that it will bring, it is fitting to provide an extended version of it:

“Because this (i.e., the imitation of the groom-MvD) involves suffering, pain and misery and a new grieving in the soul, and to let this all come and go without complaint, and in this way, experience nothing else but sweet love, embraces and kisses.”⁶

In the Book of Visions, Hadewijch accepts this challenge like Louise did, again, without suggesting any direct connection between *Arrival* and the former’s visions. Yet their stance on life is similar: they accept it, all of it, and, as it is for Hadewijch, love prevails for Louise, always.

Her encounter with the transcendent, in the form of the heptapods in the flowing white light, teaches Louise how to live her life. It is not without consolation. Embracing the heptapods’ vision of the nonlinearity of time, her daughter remains with her, always, as does her happy family life. Her experience is healing, but does not remove all pain, in reliving the death of Hannah over and over again, and in the tragedy that she is not able to share her perspective on time with Hannah’s father, Ian.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Irrelevant.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: All data used in this article are publicly available.

Acknowledgments: I thank Maaïke de Haardt for loaning me her copy of Vest and Frank Bosman for pointing me to the opportunity to publish in this thematic issue.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Ammon, Laura. 2014. Where we have gone before: Star Trek into and Out of Darkness. *Implicit Religion* 17: 379–93. [CrossRef]
- Atwood, Margaret. 2004. *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* in context. *Modern Language Review* 119: 513–17. [CrossRef]
- Atwood, Margaret. 2012. *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Bould, Mark. 2012. *Science Fiction*. Abingdon on Thames: Taylor and Francis.
- Braidotti, Rosi. 2013. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge and Malden: Polity.
- Busto, Rudy V. 2014. Religion/Science/Fiction: Beyond the Final Frontier. *Implicit Religion* 17: 395–404. [CrossRef]
- Bynum, Caroline Walker. 1987. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bynum, Caroline Walker. 1991. The female body and religious practice in the Later Middle Ages. In *Fragmentation and Redemption*. New York: Zone Books, pp. 181–238, 365–93.
- Casanova, Jose. 1994. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Davie, Grace. 1994. *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Dawkins, Richard. 2006. *The God Delusion*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- De Haardt, Maaïke. 2004. Tender competence and the Authority of Systematic Theology. *Feminist Theology* 13: 91–96. [CrossRef]
- De Waal, Esther. 1988. *God Zoeken: De Levensweg voor Elke Christen*. Bonheiden: Uitgaven Abdij Bethlehem.
- Hadewijch. 1980. *Complete Works*. Translated by Mother Columba Hart. New York: Paulist Press.
- Hadewijch. 1996. *Visioenen*. Edited by Frank Willaert. Translated by Imme Dros. Amsterdam: Prometheus.
- Heelas, Paul, and Linda Woodhead. 2005. *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality*. Malden: Blackwell.
- Heimann, Mary. 1999. Christianity in Western Europe from the Enlightenment. In *A World History of Christianity*. Edited by Adrian Hastings. Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans.
- Hollywood, Amy. 2002. *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Hussein, Basel Al Sheikh. 2012. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis Today. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 2: 642–46. [CrossRef]
- Jenkins, Philip. 2011. *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jindra, Michael. 1994. Star Trek fandom as a religious phenomenon. *Sociology of Religion* 55: 27–51. [CrossRef]
- Jongen, Ludo. 1994. *Het Leven van Liedewij, de maagd van Schiedam*. Edited by Ludo Jongen and Cees Schotel. Hilversum: Verloren.
- Luckmann, Thomas. 1967. *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Present Day Society*. New York: Macmillan.
- Luckmann, Thomas. 1991. *Die Unsichtbare Religion*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

⁶ In Hadewijch’s original Middle Dutch in *Visioenen*, visioen 7, r. 36–40, 80–81: ‘Want dats doghen ende pine, ellende ende in groten nuwe vernoye te sine ende dat al laten comen ende gaen sonder vernoyen ende el neghene smake daerof te hebbene dan suete minne ende helsen ende cussen.’ My translation is informed by Mother Columba Hart’s in Hadewijch, *Complete Works*, 280–281, but I did not follow it entirely.

- McAvan, Emily. 2012. *The Postmodern Sacred: Popular Culture Spirituality in the Science Fiction, Fantasy and Urban Fantasy Genres*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company.
- McGrath, James F., ed. 2012. *Religion and Science Fiction*. Cambridge: Lutterworth Press.
- McGrath, James F. 2015. Explicit and Implicit Religion in *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek*. *Implicit Religion* 18: 471–84. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Mechthild of Magdeburg. 1993. *“Das fließende Licht der Gottheit”*: Nach der Einsiedler Handschrift in Kritischem Vergleich mit der Gesamten Überlieferung. Edited by Gisela Vollmann-Probe. München and Tübingen: Artemis.
- Morse, David. 2006. Introduction: The Science Fictional World. In *Anatomy of Science Fiction*. Edited by David Morse. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Nicol, 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 Journal* 32: 107–26. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Nussbaum, Martha. 2010. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Park, Sun Hwa. 2013. An opening in the wall. Lessing’s *The Memory of a Survivor* as autobiography. In *Women’s Utopian and Dystopian Fiction*. Edited by Sharon Rose Wilson. Newcastle on Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 6–22.
- Queriquellim, Luiz Henrique Milani. 2019. The marginality of linguistics in sci-fi: A critique from the story of the heptapods in the works of Chiang and Villeneuve. *Fórum Linguístico* 16: 3758–65.
- Ridou, Alice. 2017. Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*. In *Handbook of the English Novel of the Twentieth and the Twenty-first Century*. Edited by Christoph Reinfand. Berlin: De Gruyter, pp. 288–302.
- Sapir, Edward. 1929. The Status of Linguistics as Science. *Language* 5: 207–14. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Schluchter, Wolfgang. 2009. *Die Entzauberung der Welt*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Seed, David, ed. 1995. *Anticipations: Essays on Early Science Fiction and Its Precursors*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Simpson, William. 2016. Soul, the Final Frontier: Human Intuitions of Mind in *Star Trek*. *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 28: 81–92. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Telotte, Jay P. 2001. *Science Fiction Film*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Tolan, Fiona. 2007. *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Van der Spek, Inez. 2000. *Alien Plots: Female Subjectivity and the Divine in the Light of JAMES Tiptree’s ‘A Momentary Taste of Being’*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Vest, Norvene. 1997. *Friend of the Soul: A Benedictine Spirituality of Work*. Plymouth: Cowley Publications.
- Waaijman, Kees. 2000. *Spiritualiteit: Vormen, Grondslagen, Methoden*. Gent and Kampen: Carmelitana/Uitgeverij Kok, (English Translation in *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations and Methods*. Leuven and Dudley: Peeters).
- Weber, Max. 1968. Über einzige Kategorien der verstehende Soziologie’. In *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*. Edited by Max Weber. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr.
- Whorf, Benjamin Lee. 1940. Science and Linguistics. *MIT Technology Review* 41: 229–31.
- Whorf, Benjamin Lee. 2012. Science and Linguistics. In *Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. Edited by Penny Lee. Cambridge: MIT University Press.
- Wiethaus, Ulrike. 1999. Female Spirituality, Medieval Women, and Commercialism in the United States. In *New Trends in Feminine Spirituality: The Holy Women of Liège and Their Impact*. Edited by Juliette Dor, Lesley Johnson and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne. Turnhout: Brepols, pp. 297–314.
- Zelko, Frank. 2013. *Make It a Green Peace! The Rise of Countercultural Environmentalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.