



At one time, it was pretty unusual for a science fiction film to be nominated for Best Picture. In fact, prior to the expansion of Best Picture nominees from five to 10 in 2009, *Star Wars* (1978) and *E.T. the Extraterrestrial* (1982) were the only sci-fi contenders for the award. And some might argue that *E.T.* should be labeled a coming-of-age film rather than a sci-fi film.

Anyway, since 2009, science fiction films have garnered more attention from the Academy, and this year's entry is *Arrival*, a thoughtful movie in which Amy Adams plays Louise Banks, a linguistics expert who is called in to translate the language of an alien race that has chosen to visit Earth for a mysterious reason (the reason, obviously, is what the military wants Banks to figure out).

Banks is joined in her quest to decipher the aliens' unusual language by a whole tent full of unnamed, interchangeable technical experts. Also on hand, either physically or digitally via a massive wall of screens, are specialists and military officials around the world who are theoretically all attempting to solve the same puzzle.

I'll start with what's good about the film. The language the aliens "speak" is fascinating, and the journey toward understanding it is extremely compelling. Amy Adams does a beautiful job of portraying Banks as simultaneously terrified and entranced by her interactions with the visitors.

Additionally, the art direction, which features a primarily grayish blue palette, adds a wonderful, somewhat gloomy atmosphere to the body of the film which sharply contrasts those scenes in which sunlight is abundant.

Unfortunately, *Arrival* suffers from the same flaw almost every other science fiction film in which aliens come to visit seems to have. Eventually, no matter how interesting the first act is, the

second and third acts are populated by incredibly stupid military personnel. And then it's just the same story all over again.

In *Arrival*, it's like the screenwriters switch over to autopilot halfway through and just serve up the same old boilerplate military conflict. Characters who seem as if they may be relatively intelligent in the beginning turn into cardboard cutouts of stereotypical military commanders who are unable to think like rational human beings or consider any path that doesn't involve aggression.

This breakdown is annoying and unnecessary. It feels manipulative and false. It's like someone said, "You don't have enough conflict in your movie," and the solution was pulled, already written, from a box labeled "clichés."

And the thing is, the movie has plenty of room for organic conflict. With multiple scientists and linguists throughout the world working on translating the alien language, there are multiple opportunities for misunderstandings – not only because the aliens speak an unknown language, but because the scientists working on the problem come from different cultures and fields – and speak different languages – as well.

Rather than turning the narrative over to the military commanders, the writers could have explored the nature of language and communication. The second act could have been an illuminating journey into the ways sentient entities with different languages, cultures, expectations, and communication methods share ideas, misunderstand each other, and ultimately find common ground. This would have been a logical and satisfying direction for the story to go.

Related to this complaint is the presence of Ian Donnelly, Jeremy Renner's character, who is introduced as some kind of scientist (the type of scientist he is doesn't turn out to be important because he never does any science) and a potential source of intriguing conflict.

When Donnelly is brought on board, it seems as if his job is to balance out Banks's theories or be a voice of reason or conflicting viewpoints. It's not actually clearly explained what he's there to do. Which apparently was a problem in the writers' room as well, because he never does anything.

Donnelly doesn't challenge Banks. He doesn't inspire her. He doesn't contribute anything to the narrative. In a movie that manufactures conflict out of stale sci-fi tropes, the one character who seems to have been introduced for the purposes of delivering a dissenting but reasonable voice never rises to the occasion. I know the movie is adapted from a story, and maybe Donnelly has a bigger role in the original text, but somehow his purpose was lost in translation.

It might sound like I really disliked *Arrival*, and it definitely wasn't my favorite film of the year. But in between the stale military plot points and the absence of interesting characters besides Banks and the aliens, the core of the story – the part about language and communication – was actually incredibly interesting. I just wish it had been wrapped around something fresher.

Final Grade: B-