

Movie: Arrival (2016)

Score: 5/5 as a movie, but 0/5 as an achronological movie.

Review of Achronologicity

By all accounts, Arrival is an excellent movie. Its cinematography, acting, and pacing were all praised. But how good is it as a movie that does not take place in order?

I argue here that arrival is typical, almost cliché, in its use of the non-chronological plot. Rather than structure the plot in an unusual form, one that might make it harder for the audience to follow, Arrival simply inserts a few key scenes out of chronological order in order to surprise the audience and punctuate the primary plot twist. Most of the movie takes place in real time – sometimes, however, we get what seem to be flashbacks to the main character’s personal life: the death of her child and the separation with her husband. In the end, we find that these were not flashbacks at all – but visions from the main character’s nascent ability to see the future (developed as a consequence of her learning the circular language of the movie’s alien visitors). In a movie as intellectually complex as Arrival, it’s easy to miss how dead simple this “achronology” is. Note earlier that I said “in the end, we...”. All we really have is a plot twist, at the end of the movie, with some perfunctory nods towards the strangeness of time. The dramatic pacing, the nature of the plot, is still fundamentally linear.

Arrival joins a host of movies that do the same thing: The Prestige, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, and Cloud Atlas. All of these movies essentially assert the dominance of the dramatic over the chronological; they move scenes to where they deliver the most dramatic punch, rather than when they actually happened. In contrast, I propose Rashomon as a prototypical example of a movie that plays with chronology not to make a traditional plot more dramatic, but to change the very nature of the plot itself. In Rashomon, the drama of the movie is transformed into the testimony of a court room through the repetition of a single even from multiple perspectives. No such transformation is present in Arrival or any other of the “achronological” movies.

Is this a bad thing? Not at all. But it’s perhaps a low bar. Failing to ensure dramatic pacing because it’s “inaccurate” to the real timeline is a rather dismal failure of imagination. Since Aristotle and the ancient plays it has been codified artistic knowledge: start at the beginning, but don’t be afraid to not end at the end. So I suggest that what we are really interested in with “achronological” storytelling is not a lack of chronology, nor a defiance of it, but a manipulation of time to fundamentally change the form of the story.

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