
Kluwer Mediation Blog

Movie Mediation Musings – Arrival

Joel Lee (National University of Singapore, Faculty of Law) · Wednesday, April 12th, 2017

Public Service Warning: This blog post will contain spoilers. If you have not watched Arrival and intend to, please do not read any further.

I'm a movie addict. I admit it. And I am ashamed to say that most times, my favourite genre of movies is the "check your brain in at the door shoot em ups". Occasionally, I watch a more cerebral piece. To this I give credit to my long suffering wife, Pearl. (There is hope for me yet).

I recently watched (or rewatched) two movies which impacted me greatly in that I felt there were useful lessons that we as mediators and peacemakers can take away. I would like to dedicate this month's entry on one of those movies, "Arrival".

This movie deals with the arrival of aliens to twelve different locations on the planet. As can be expected, people freak out and security forces are mobilised. These aliens happen to be hepta-pods (seven-legged creatures) which freak people out even more. At each of these locations, attempts are made by the respective governments to communicate and interact with the aliens. This is a refreshing change from the typical "Let's Blow Them Out of the Sky" response (although to be fair, this possibility is an underlying theme through the movie). The story is largely told from the perspective of the USA and also refreshing is that the countries of the 12 locations set up a communications network to coordinate with one another.

One of the main protagonists is a linguist, Louise Banks, who is tasked with finding some way to communicate with the aliens. And this is where, to my mind, the first takeaway is. The task of having to communicate with an entirely new species with no commonality in language is enormous. It is not a matter of translation, which presupposes that there is someone who is able to be the bridge between languages, but a matter of building that bridge from scratch. Louise Banks has to create the connections between human words and the logograms the aliens use. She starts with nouns, which is sensible and then moving on to more abstract ideas. As one reads this, one may think to themselves that the likelihood of us having to establish a bridge with aliens is a small one. And depending on one's world view about whether alien life exists, one could be right. However, this is a task that we have all done at some point in our life.

Consider for a moment, a newborn. That child has no existing language structures. S/he is essentially a blank slate, a tabula rasa who will undergo the process of acquiring language over the next few years. And this is where it is fascinating. A child begins by associating sounds with certain things for example the sound "Dog" with the animal. Over time, that child begins to replicate those sounds and begins to speak. So far so good. However, as we grow older, we begin

to learn more abstract words. Even though they might be nouns, they are abstract concepts like love and loyalty and collaboration.

As words get more abstract, the process of communication gets more complex. We hear sentences with abstract notions and we often think we know what it means. Realistically, we only know what we mean by those words, not what the speaker means by those words. And our process of parsing through and giving meaning to language is unconscious. Our brain fills in the gaps automatically and we don't know we do this. And this is fundamentally why misunderstandings occur. Have you ever agreed with something someone said only to realise that you both meant very different things? This is this process in operation.

As mediators then, it becomes important to realise that sometimes, even when parties seem to be speaking the same words, they may not be speaking the same language. Put another way, it pays to seek clarification, especially on words or notions that are more abstract or to elicit some kind of evidence or data to support perceptions or value judgments that may be presented.

And this leads us to the second takeaway. There is a moment in the movie where there is a discussion on how the Chinese government is communicating with the aliens. The team is trying to decipher what the translation means when Louise Banks realises that the Chinese are communicating with the aliens through the metaphor of the tile game of mahjong. The conversation that transpires after is deep because it brings into sharp focus how metaphors permeate our language and affect how we see the world. Put simply, if the Chinese are communicating with the aliens in terms of the metaphor of a game, then there are certain characteristics that one will necessarily associate with it. For example, there will be a winner and a loser. There is a certain amount of strategy involved or luck. Specific games will call up other characteristics. The game of chess is strategic, dissociated and individual. The game of poker is individual, partly based on luck and may depend on deception. The game of football is involved and a team effort. Communicating with the aliens through the metaphor of a game will affect how the aliens perceive our world and us.

If we take a step back, we can begin to think of many metaphors that we use when engaging in conflict. They can be competitive e.g. metaphors of games or war or collaborative e.g. metaphors of construction or creation. It is important then to recognise how our metaphors shape the way we see the world and approach conflict and how the metaphors our counterparts or parties use shape theirs. Sometimes, the metaphors are incompatible and this may make it much harder for resolution to happen. It may be that the metaphors used need to change or that we need to find a metaphor that can encompass both sets.

And this leads us to the third takeaway. As the adage goes, "Perception is Projection". Metaphors shape how we see and respond to the world. And often, we often perceive that others see and respond to the world the way we do. So, if we believe the world is competitive, we will tend to view other people as competitive as well. And we will ignore any data to the contrary. This is commonly referred to as confirmation bias. Therefore, your friend Mary may be the most collaborative, kind and loving person on the planet. However, if you are projecting your world view on Mary's behaviour, then you will either ignore all her behaviours that do not conform with your world view or worse, attribute a negative intention to her actions. If she was being cooperative, you might say that she was doing that to lull you into a false sense of security. I had a friend who was a fan of Ayn Rand's work and he went around believing that everyone was selfish and would do things for selfish reasons. One day, I had just donated blood at the blood bank and he

said I had done that so that I could feel good about myself. I remember being very offended then but now, I can see how that was a function of his world view. Fortunately, my mama didn't raise a dumb son so I knew better than to argue with someone's world view.

But there's a double-edge to this. Sometimes, because we perceive the world a certain way, we sometimes act in ways that actually bring about the world that we are projecting. This is commonly known as the self-fulfilling prophecy. We see this portrayed in the movie by the CIA representative who is constantly viewing the world through the lens of threat and risk, win and lose. It is the actions of this individual who, when thinking that the actions of the aliens might not be benign, took the initiative to shut down the lines of communication between the USA and the remainder of the other 11 countries, who were still maintaining channels of communication. In the movie, this seems to be the tipping point, prompting every other country to similarly cut channels of communication. Of course, this self-fulfilling prophecy can also be self-defeating. When it became clear that the intentions of the aliens were not hostile, the CIA representative's response was akin to "Oh well, nothing we can do about it now. It's out of our hands." Fortunately, this view was not shared by others and channels of communication was restored, which led the film to a more happier, if not fully happy, ending.

What prompted the CIA representative's actions? When the aliens used the word "weapon", the CIA representative had kittens. He ignored Lousie Banks' cautions that the aliens may not be distinguishing between the words "weapon" and "tool" and that attempts to clarify needed to be made. He then ordered a shutdown in communications. And this leads us to our fourth and final takeaway. At some point, there is the realisation that the aliens at each of the 12 sites were giving humankind one-twelfth of the tool (or weapon). And if humankind did not reopen channels of communication and share information, then they would never had benefited from an advanced civilisation's gift. How like mediation. When the mediation begins, parties are often distrusting of one another, the relationship and communication having broken down. As mediators, we need to somehow bridge this relationship and communication gap, help parties reopen channels of communication so that information can be shared and resources to solve the problem pooled. And to complete the analogy, we might be compared to the aliens (I'm sure parties have thought this from time to time when we are making process interventions) who are setting up the circumstances for the parties to collaborate. There is of course no guarantee that they will collaborate. That is a choice they will have to make and for which we should not take responsibility for.

I'm sure with sufficient caffeine, sleep deprivation and creativity, I might come up with more takeaways from Arrival. But for now, thank you for reading these musings. I trust you have found it enjoyable, if not useful!

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