

## ETHICS EDUCATION FROM SUFFERING ON SCREEN? TRAGIC VISIONS IN *ARRIVAL*

James MacAllister<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> The University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper I argue that tragic films can have significant potential for ethics education when they prompt audiences to sympathise with suffering on screen. I first summarise two accounts of the relationship between tragic art, moral education and aesthetic value (those provided by Rorty and Lamarque). I then discuss problems with these accounts and explain how a new criterion of aesthetic value might help to resolve them. I thereafter argue that tragic films have potential to ethically educate audiences in a way that enhances the aesthetic value of the films in at least three directions: by deepening moral understanding, by deepening understanding of the nature of human being and ethical purpose and by deepening understanding of ethical theory. I conclude by showing how Denis Villeneuve's film, *Arrival*, screens a tragic story with ethics education potential in each of the aforementioned senses.

**Keywords:** screen suffering; tragic film; ethics education through film; educational ethicism; ethics in Villeneuve's *Arrival*.

## 1. Tragic film

In this paper I explore the possibility that audiences might be ethically educated by some tragic screen stories and, more particularly, by good tragic films. In my view a good tragic film will very often possess at least two of the following three dimensions. The plot will involve suffering (usually familial in nature), that the audience will be prompted to sympathise with, and where the suffering on screen carries potential for ethics education.<sup>1</sup> The idea that a good tragic film will involve suffering of ethical import, usually within a family, is inspired by Aristotle's *Poetics*.<sup>2</sup> However, the two main arguments in this paper, the ones put forward at the start of the next paragraph, are not, strictly speaking, Aristotelian. Aristotle did not speak about tragic film having potential for ethics education in the senses I do. His treatise on tragedy was fairly obviously not about film but ancient Greek theatre. In speaking of a good tragic film having tragic dimensions, I therefore mean to suggest that there are both continuities and discontinuities between contemporary tragic films and ancient tragic art. While the three dimensions I highlight pick up on points of similarity between good tragedy, old and new alike, I also recognise that important differences exist between the experiences of viewers of contemporary screen tragedies and audiences of ancient Greek tragic performances on stage. I speak of films with tragic dimensions as opposed to films that are tragic through and through in an attempt to recognise and acknowledge these similarities and differences.

I seek to defend two related claims in this paper about good tragic films. First, that some tragic films may prompt an actual or possible audience to a gain in ethical understanding. Second, that a tragic film will be enhanced as an artwork if it contains an aesthetic property capable of prompting gain in ethical understanding. My understanding of the possible ethical, aesthetic and educational value of tragic film has been informed by the work of Amelie Rorty and Peter Lamarque. In this paper I will therefore first unpack their accounts of the relationship between tragic art, moral education and aesthetic value. I then discuss problems with these accounts and explain how a new criterion of aesthetic value might help to resolve them. I thereafter explain how tragic films have potential to ethically educate audiences in a way that enhances the aesthetic value of the films in at least three directions: by deepening moral understanding, by

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<sup>1</sup> My argument, that good tragic films have potential for ethics education based on an experience of shared suffering, has been influenced by the work of Stacie Friend on documentary tragedy. Friend (2007) claims that documentary tragedies deal with a non-comedic subject in a way that affords insight into experience, often moral experience.

<sup>2</sup> He stipulated that the best tragedies are concerned with "situations in which sufferings arise within close relationships", most often within families (*Poetics*, 53b18-22).

deepening understanding of the nature of human being and ethical purpose and by deepening understanding of ethical theory. I conclude the paper by showing how *Arrival (2016)* screens a tragic story with ethics education potential in each of the senses mentioned just now.

## 2. Aristotle, wayward action and ethical purpose

Amelie Rorty (1991) argues Aristotle provides the best account of our experience of tragedy. Aristotle famously asserted that tragedy is “an imitation of an action that is admirable (...) effecting through pity and fear the catharsis of such emotions” (*Poetics*, 1149b24-28). According to Aristotle tragedy re-presents (mimesis) an action (spoudais) in a plot (mythos) that is complete and possesses magnitude (*Poetics*, 1149b10-14). He specifies that tragedy imitates not persons, but actions and life (*Poetics*, 1150a15-16). The plot organises action (*Poetics*, 1150a3-4), and “wellbeing and illbeing reside in action” (*Poetics*, 1150a16-17), so the plot is the “source and soul of tragedy; character is second” (*Poetics*, 1150b1-2). Aristotle adds that tragedy must depict characters of a certain kind in regard to action and reasoning (*Poetics*, 1149b38-11502). More specifically, Aristotle claims the best tragedies should depict someone of moderately good character but with a flaw (*Poetics* 53a). Rorty provides an illuminating account of this. She argues that translating flaw as “error” or “mistake” fails to do justice to the “dispositional nature” of the hero’s hamartia (Rorty 1991, 61).

Rorty argues that in the best tragedies the main character possesses an “erring waywardness” that renders them susceptible to a misfortunate change in the “projected arc” of their lives (Rorty, 1991, 54). This waywardness in the tragic protagonist often entails initial ignorance about who one really is (Rorty 1991). To unpack her point she takes the case of Oedipus. Initially Oedipus was acting under the understanding that he was marrying the Queen of Thebes. While true, he was nonetheless ignorant of the crucial fact that should have determined the course of his practical deliberations—he was also marrying his mother. Oedipus, she claims, depicts “the story of an action that undoes a person of high energetic intelligence” (Rorty 1991, 58). Rorty develops her argument out from Aristotle’s point that it is more than anything actions that determine the extent to which people experience “wellbeing” or “illbeing” in their lives. She claims that the best tragedies attain unity by showing how the serious actions (spoudaios) of the hero connect into a coherent whole.

She says that serious actions are those actions that define a person’s life and “make a difference to how a person lives” (Rorty 1991, 57). Tragedy

depicts serious actions that go wayward and deliver disaster to the main protagonist (Rorty 1991). She argues that sometimes the very actions that aim at flourishing, end up being the root of a person's undoing. Sometimes the vigour by which a person acts for the sake of their happiness ends up "blinding" them to important facts at the periphery of their awareness (Rorty 1991, 59). In tragedy more than anything it is wayward, serious actions that undermine the prosperity of the hero. She claims that Oedipus was in many respects the quintessential tragic Aristotelian hero.<sup>3</sup> His "bold", "quick" and "intelligent" character is "essential" to his action (Rorty 1991). His bold quickness is both his greatest strength and the source of his demise. In his haste to leave Corinth he fails to interrogate rumours about who his parents really are. On his attack by a stranger, he retaliates too quickly and fails to ask who the stranger really is.

A "more measured man" perhaps would have been more cautious and not suffered the fate of Oedipus (Rorty 1991, 69), but Oedipus would not have been the bold man he was without his impetuosity. For Rorty, the downfall of Oedipus was a "by product" of his excellence. Oedipus strove to avoid his fate, but in this very striving, he brought about the conditions of his downfall. She concludes that

[I]t is no accident that excellence sometimes undoes itself, one of the dark lessons of tragedy is that sometimes there are no lessons to be learnt, in order to avoid tragedy. (Rorty 1991, 68)

In Rorty's view, tragedy does not provide audiences with "moralized warnings" about "actions to avoid" (Rorty 1991, 68). Nor does it affirm the view that chance dictates all in life. Instead, tragedy can deepen audience understanding about a neglected aspect of the relationship between human nature and ethical purpose. While it is "in our nature to strive for what is best in us" (Rorty 1991, 68) sometimes this striving can become the source of great suffering.

### 3. Aesthetic value, moral lessons and moral vision

I am sympathetic with the thrust of Rorty's account but it is also rather fatalistic. Her belief that tragedy does not provide moral warnings about actions to avoid rather ignores the possibility that the flaw in the main protagonist in a tragic film might be one that audiences can learn to avoid.

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<sup>3</sup> This seems fair as Aristotle says that the best tragedies contain a moment of recognition (anagnorisis), 'a change from ignorance to knowledge' that coincides with the reversal in fortune (peripetia) of the hero (Poetics, 52a11-52b) and he provides Oedipus as an example.

Rorty is also not entirely clear that any moral educational benefit from tragedy can add to the value of the tragedy as an artwork. She notably asserts that the *Poetics* does not provide an “aesthetic theory”. However, she does recognise that Aristotle directs his analysis onto the formal artistic properties in the best tragedies. These formal aesthetic properties interest him she claims because of the effect they can have on the understanding of the audience. Contrary to Plato, Aristotle wanted to demonstrate how tragedy can “promote instead of thwart understanding (...) attune rather than distort the emotions” (Rorty 1991, 54). While Rorty does not spell out this point exactly, the implication seems to be that tragedy has most aesthetic value when the formal structure of it delivers a particular educational effect: to help the audience see how the well-intentioned (but ill-judged) actions of an admirable character can lead to great suffering.

Peter Lamarque (1995) shares one of Rorty’s core convictions about tragedy. He agrees that the flaw of the tragic hero is a “contingent by-product” (Lamarque 1995, 240) of an otherwise commendable character. However, he is more explicit about his belief that Aristotle is well placed to explain the distinctively aesthetic value of tragedy. Like Aristotle, Lamarque believes that the best tragedies have a moral content of almost universal human interest. He maintains that tragedies engage with “some of the deepest concerns of human beings in their attempts and repeated failures at living a moral life” (Lamarque 1995, 241). What most interests Lamarque is the artistic means and modes by which tragedy explores the moral concerns of human beings. Lamarque therefore unpacks the question of how the representation of suffering and disaster in tragedy can have both moral and artistic value.

He argues that tragedy can communicate moral content in at least two ways: through a *moral lesson* on the one hand and a *moral vision* on the other. In the case of the moral lesson a tragedy will expressly aim at teaching a moral principle. Lamarque does not think that any moral learning in such a mode will inevitably be superficial but he does perceive an overall deficiency in the moral lesson view of tragedy. Either the moral lesson is too *intimately connected* to the plot and characters in a specific tragedy, so that it cannot be turned into a more general moral principle, or the principle will be *so removed from* a specific tragedy that it cannot be meaningfully connected to events and characters in it (Lamarque 1995). In both cases the moral lesson might be assimilated by the audience but it is hard to see how the moral lesson adds to the *aesthetic* value of the work.

However, the dichotomy here developed by Lamarque seems questionable. There need not be divergence between aesthetic value and a moral lesson that is stated propositionally in a tragic artwork. Indeed, some individual

moral lessons in a tragedy might make significant contributions to the coherence and unity of the overall plot and pleasure in tragedy, adding to the aesthetic value of the artwork as a result, while at the same still carrying significant potential for moral education. Some moral lessons may in short carry potential for moral education when viewed in isolation but gain deeper resonance when viewed in relation to the wider plot and artistry of the artwork as a whole.<sup>4</sup> A film could, for example, communicate some moral lesson in propositional form while employing artistic means to reinforce this same moral message more visually. Indeed, *Mountain* (2017) is a film that combines voice over and visual image (that is to say to moral lesson by both verbal proposition and visual artistic means) to deliver a powerful moral educational lesson.<sup>5</sup>

However, Lamarque does explain how the moral vision view can in isolation begin to make sense of how specifically aesthetic value can result from moral content in tragedy. In the mode of moral vision, the moral content in tragedy is *shown* rather than stated propositionally (Lamarque 1995). Here tragedy calls upon audiences to look upon a complex moral situation differently. Through this process they can “acquire” a new “vision or perspective on the world” (Lamarque 1995, 243). Lamarque insists that to fully grasp the nature of the relation between moral and artistic value in tragedy a further distinction is necessary: between internal and external audience perspectives. In the internal perspective the audience of tragedy imaginatively participates in the tragic world. When experienced in this perspective the characters in tragedy are “imagined to be fellow humans in real predicaments, objects of sympathy and concern, similar to ourselves in many respects” (Lamarque 1995, 247). Under the external perspective there is no imaginative engagement with the lives of the characters. Instead, characters are viewed as artistic constructs. In the external perspective, the focus of audience attention is on the “modes of presentation” (Lamarque 1995, 247) and the extent to which the overall plot and structure help to bring about the desired cathartic effect.

Lamarque seems to be implying something like the following. The internal perspective encourages audiences to *experience* pity and fear toward tragic characters. The external perspective encourages audiences to reflect on whether or not their sympathy is *morally warranted* on the basis of how the suffering of the tragic hero has been *artistically shown*. Lamarque may not quote directly from the *Poetics* but he takes his suffering focussed, moral-vision view of tragedy to be broadly Aristotelian. He is right to think

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<sup>4</sup> Friend (2007, 186) similarly claims that artistry in the “dramatic storyline” can help documentary tragedies possess an overall unity and coherence.

<sup>5</sup> For discussion of how moral proposition and cinematic image combine in *Mountain* with significant potential for ethics education, see MacAllister (2024).

this. Aristotle after all defines suffering as “an action that involves destruction or pain; deaths in full view, extreme agony, woundings and so on”, and he maintains it is a central element in the plot of a good tragedy (*Poetics*, 1052b11). Aristotle also maintains that the most complete tragic plots should wherever possible “visualise what is happening. By envisaging things very vividly in this way, as if one were present at the actual event, one can find out what is appropriate” (*Poetics*, 1055a 17-21). Lamarque and Aristotle both regard the envisioning of suffering to be of central importance in tragedy. When a plot is unified and suffering is vividly visualised, audiences become best placed to recognise how the story of the hero hangs together.

#### 4. Gaining ethical understanding from tragic film

I have so far discussed the views of Rorty and Lamarque on the moral educational powers of tragedy and I have drawn attention to weaknesses in both of these views. Rorty seems to suggest that audiences to tragedy may well be doomed to repeat the mistakes of tragic characters in art. The mistakes of tragic characters that contribute to ill-fate will be imitated in life rather than learned from and avoided. She is less than clear on whether or not any moral education from tragedy is related to the aesthetic value of tragedy too. Meanwhile, Lamarque’s account contains a questionable dichotomy and is weaker for not acknowledging that it is possible for individual propositions to morally educate in a way that adds to the artwork as artwork by either enhancing the overall unity of the plot or by combining with the visual images on show to deliver the same moral message but with deeper resonance. When viewed in isolation from each other, the accounts of Rorty and Lamarque cannot do justice to the various means by which tragic film might assist audiences to accrue gain in ethical understanding either.

However, in spite of these weaknesses, I believe both perspectives can be combined together, to complement each other and begin to more fully account for the various means by which tragic film might be capable of ethically educating.<sup>6</sup> Rorty and Lamarque do after all point to different ways that tragic film might deepen moral and ethical understanding. Tragedy can teach a dark ethical lesson about how the very character traits that make a person admirable can also bring about their downfall (Rorty’s view). Lamarque highlights a further important element in any moral

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<sup>6</sup> Both of the perspectives contribute to part of my overall account. When put together the perspectives can more fully account (than they could if they remained as individual accounts on this topic) for how tragedy can have potential for ethics education that adds aesthetic value in a variety of ways.

learning from tragic art. Tragedy can teach moral lessons via propositions but moral education will accrue most aesthetic value when the moral content is *shown* in a very specific way. Tragic art should foster sympathy toward the main protagonist and it should encourage audiences to reflect on whether or not this sympathy is morally warranted on the basis of what is artistically shown.

In order to begin my explanation about how these problems may be overcome and integrated into a wider framework about the ethics education potential of tragic film, I firstly want to note that I think it is preferable to speak of ethics education from tragic film (rather than moral education). One of the reasons I think it is preferable to employ the term ethics education is because I think this term better captures the particular focus on suffering that most tragic films have. The category of the ethical is I believe broader than the moral—the ethical includes the moral but the moral does not include the ethical. Morality, as understand it, is primarily concerned with the obligations we have to ourselves and to each other whereas ethics focusses on living beings pursuing their flourishing.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes lives go well but sometimes people make mistakes or suffer ill-fortune at great cost to their prosperity. The lives of characters in films can similarly go well or be full of great suffering. Tragic films depict life stories of a special sort—stories of living beings suffering on screen because of chance events, bad luck, errors of judgment or moral mistakes.<sup>8</sup> Conceived thusly, ethical concerns are at the heart of most films with tragic dimensions and these ethical concerns are I believe rich in potential for ethics education.

However, to fully overcome the problems associated with the theories of Rorty and Lamarque I think a new criterion of aesthetic value is needed. One that can explain how the variety of different moral and ethical concerns depicted in tragic films can add to the aesthetic value of tragic films. It is my argument that a tragic film can be enhanced as an artwork when it contains an identifiable artistic property that is capable of ethically educating an audience.<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that I am not here claiming that potential for ethics education is the *only* possible criterion of aesthetic value for tragic films. While it is my argument that potential for ethics education is one of the main ways that tragic films can be enhanced as artworks, I recognise that other aspects of a tragic film might add to their

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<sup>7</sup> Bernard Williams (2011) has influenced my thinking on the difference between ethics and morality.

<sup>8</sup> Ridley (2009) makes a similar point about tragic art more broadly.

<sup>9</sup> Here it is not enough that a film just shows or says something with potential for ethics education. **How** it is shown or said matters. There should be an aspect of artistry in the property in the film that has ethics education potential. For further discussion of how film can accrue additional aesthetic value in virtue of ethics education potential, see MacAllister (2023a).



aesthetic value too. It is also worth noting that not all audiences of a film need to actually accrue any gain in ethical understanding from the film for it to accumulate additional aesthetic value in virtue of this potential. However, some actual or possible audience needs to be capable of being ethically educated by the film at some point in time.

On this account, aesthetic value is thus partly response dependent in that additional aesthetic value is dependent on the response (being ethically educated) of some actual or possible audience.<sup>10</sup> However, aesthetic value must also be rooted in some identifiable artistic property of the artwork. There must be some specific artistic feature of a tragic film that can legitimately be said to be capable of prompting gain in ethical understanding too. In the case of tragic films, I think this artistic property may often be a coherent and unified plot that is able to prompt audience sympathy with suffering on screen and brings about gain in ethical understanding. Importantly, I think this new account of aesthetic value can help overcome the two main problems thus far identified in the theories of Rorty and Lamarque. It seems to me mistaken to think (as Rorty appears to) that audiences cannot learn to avoid repeating the mistakes of tragic characters. Some tragic films (*Force Majeure* (2014) is a good example) depict characters that make moral mistakes that lead to great familial suffering. Audiences of tragic films like this might learn not to repeat the moral mistakes of on-screen characters because of the pain and shame they can bring to a family. Such learning to avoid moral mistakes of tragic characters would constitute a gain in ethical understanding derived from an identifiable artistic property of the film—the plot of the film after all revolves around the moral failure of Tomas and the consequences it has for him and his family.<sup>11</sup>

Contrary to Rorty, it is my view that the moral flaw of the protagonist in a tragic story may sometimes be one that audiences can learn to avoid, and if aesthetic value is understood in the way proposed here, explanation can be given as to how this learning would add to the value of a tragic film as an artwork. My understanding of aesthetic value can also overcome the main problem identified in Lamarque's view on tragedy. Lamarque seems to hold the view that a moral lesson stated in propositional form in a tragedy would be irrelevant to the value of the tragedy as an artwork. It

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<sup>10</sup> Lamarque (2020) also speaks about aesthetic value being response dependent. Although my analysis has largely drawn on Lamarque's earlier thoughts on how moral lessons and moral visions in tragedy can have aesthetic value, in his later work Lamarque stresses that aesthetic value more generally lies in human beings valuing how an object appears to them. Artworks are valuable as artworks when they are good works of their kind (see Lamarque, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> For further discussion of how audiences might be morally educated by *Force Majeure*, see MacAllister (2023b)

seems to me, however, that some moral lessons stated in propositional form in tragic art might be able to both deepen moral understanding and be important to the unity and coherence of the plot as a whole. A proposition so connected to the overall plot and pleasurable effect of a tragedy can in short be an artistic property of the tragedy with potential for ethics education. The account of aesthetic value developed here can help overcome the problems identified thus far in Rorty and Lamarque's views on moral education from tragic art.

This is not quite yet the end of this story though as I think there is a further gap in their thinking on tragedy. Rorty and Lamarque (and for that matter Aristotle) did not explore how tragic art might be capable of prompting deeper understanding of ethical *theory* but I think some tragic art can do this. My view is that good tragic films can have an “afterlife” where the cinematic images and ethical content live on in the experience of the audience after the final credits have rolled.<sup>12</sup> It is my argument that the audience might deepen their understanding of ethical theory in instances where the afterlife of a tragic film prompts them to engage with or revisit ethical theory and think more deeply about it. In sum, it is my argument that there are at least three possible ways that tragic films can have potential for ethics education that can add to the value of these films as artworks: by deepening moral understanding through moral lessons or a moral vision; by deepening ethical understanding of the nature of human being and purpose; and by deepening understanding of ethical theory.

## 5. A story of suffering on screen

I want to pull my paper together by discussing how a good tragic film, *Arrival* (2016), might contain potential for ethics education in each of the senses outlined above. Among other things, *Arrival* screens a life story of suffering. Indeed, the film is based on a short story by Ted Chiang, actually called “Story of your life” (2002). Familial suffering is on display—the sort most commended by Aristotle. Suffering within a family is visually depicted on screen in the very first moments of *Arrival*. In a voice over Dr. Louise Banks (Amy Adams) says “memory is a strange thing. It doesn't work like I thought it did. We are so bound by time, by its order”. While the full meaning of her utterance only becomes clear toward the end of the movie these words do provide a clue to the audience that all may not be exactly as it seems in this film.

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Kivy's (1997) discussion of the afterlife of literary artworks has informed my thinking here.

Louise is then depicted engaging lovingly with a newly born baby, her baby. The images abruptly jump forward in time to show Louise playing a cowboy game with her daughter who now appears to be 5 or 6. A doctor is quickly thereafter shown examining Louise's daughter, now a young adult, and we see Louise alone with the doctor in a hospital corridor. Louise is crying and in a voice over she says "and this was the end". An image of Louise's now bald (presumably from cancer treatment) and dying daughter follows. Louise's child, whom we later learn is called Hannah, has died. All of this unfolds to the sound of Max Richter's emotive piece *On the Nature of Daylight*. From the very start of *Arrival*, the images and music prime the audience to feel sympathetic pity and fear toward Louise. These first images, sounds and words artistically gesture toward why audience sympathy is warranted from an ethical point of view. The further visions that Louise goes on to experience in the movie make explicit why such sympathy is ethically justified.

Soon after, Louise remarks that "there are days that define your story beyond your life, like the day they arrived". "They" are heptapod aliens in twelve space ships. Louise is a linguist and together with a physicist, Ian Donnelly (Jeremy Renner), she has to establish who the heptapod aliens are and why they have come. To do this they need to first decipher the heptapod language. Louise meets this challenge with intelligence and bravery. They meet the aliens in a divided room—heptapods on one side of a glass screen, humans the other. When attempts at verbal communication with the heptapods reach an impasse, Louise has the wit to try written language, a move that leads to a breakthrough. The heptapods squirt out a sign and then another in cloudy ink. These are signs in the heptapod language, a language that Louise comes to understand.

The misty air on the aliens' side of the room comes to take on the function of a "writing surface" that enables conversation between human and heptapod (Zavota 2020). Later, Louise bravely takes her helmet off and approaches the heptapods. While this may at first sight seem impetuous and risky, it is a very calculated act. She wants the heptapods to be able to clearly see her, the unique human, Louise. Until she is sure the heptapods can grasp the distinction between one specific member of a species and the whole species it is pointless to ask them "why are *you* here?" Louise's introduction precipitates a moment of interspecies connection. The heptapods not only share their own names with Louise in return, one of them also connects their digits to Louise's through the glass screen they communicate through. A handshake of sorts, an act of friendship making and commonality between beings from different planets. Thereafter Louise begins to experience more powerful visions of her daughter. Initially the audience is encouraged to think these are memories from the past.

However, in a crucial moment of re-cognition within the final ten minutes of the movie it becomes clear that Louise has not yet had her daughter. Indeed, it is only in this instant that she realises the girl in her visions is her daughter and that these are visions of the future.

All along viewers have been seeing images of Louise's future, a future she too can now see and clearly, even though she has yet to actually live it. Acquisition of the heptapod language has enabled her to experience time in a non-linear way. She can now see into the future. In this moment the tragic heart of the plot comes together. Aristotle claims the best tragic plots involve moments of "astonishment" where the "events that evoke fear and pity (...) occur above all when things come about contrary to expectation but because of one another" (*Poetics*, 1052a1-3). For viewers who realise what they thought were memories from the past are actually visions from the future, this is an astonishing moment. The moment defies audience expectation but the film also come to make sense to the audience as a result of this moment. Up until then the narrative is ambiguous but after this moment it comes to possess a definite unity and coherence.<sup>13</sup> The visions that Louise experiences are utterly tragic. She can see she will have a daughter called Hannah with Ian. She can see that Hannah will die young and she can see there is nothing she can do to stop it.<sup>14</sup>

## 6. Ethics education form tragic visions of the future

*Arrival* is not just a tragic film then but a very good tragic film because it has potential for ethics education in a manner that augments its aesthetic value. *Arrival* tells a story of suffering and visions and visual and other artistic means are central to the telling of this story. The film is full of artistic flair. The first shot of the alien space craft diverting the clouds, for example, invokes a sense of the sublime and experience of this feeling is possible again later when Louise enters the mist and stands vulnerably side to side with the heptapods—she is utterly dwarfed by them. The tragic visions of the future that she experiences are often wordless yet they are integral to the plot. The film can ethically educate then in the sense suggested by Lamarque and Aristotle. Viewers of the film are artistically shown why Louise is a proper object of tragic sympathy. Louise is an

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<sup>13</sup> Carruthers agrees that while viewers of the film know "from the beginning" that Hannah dies it is only after the "narrative turning point" near the end that viewers come to see she has "not yet been born" (2018, p 337).

<sup>14</sup> There is I believe a further tragic dimension in the movie that is worthy of comment. Louise employs her new powers to see into the future in order to prevent humans from going to war with the heptapods. She relays the dying words of a Chinese military leader's General Shang (Tzi Ma) wife to him—"in war there are no winners, only widows". I take this to be a tragic moment as women in tragic art are often depicted opposing war or lamenting the fallen in war.

admirable hero yet in a moment of “recognition” it becomes clear that devastating loss will befall her.

But if Louise is a tragic hero, as I am suggesting, how or where does she go wayward? How is the very strength of her character also the source of her suffering? The only possibility suggested in the film relates to what she tells Ian, or rather does not tell him, about their daughter. Hannah wants to know why her dad, Ian, left. Louise says “it’s my fault” to Hannah. She explains he left because she told him something about the future that “he was not ready to hear”, about an “unstoppable” illness. Ian thought Louise made the “wrong choice”. While Louise appears to think Ian left because she told him too *soon* about Hannah’s fate, I am inclined to think he left because she told him too *late*. Perhaps Louise’s “fault”, such as it is, relates to what she chose not to disclose to Ian when he asks her if she wants to make a baby at the end of the film.

Would it not have been better to have informed Ian there and then that Hannah would die very young? Louise knew this was to be Hannah’s fate but Ian did not. Perhaps Ian left because he felt he had a right to know about the suffering and loss that would follow from this moment—that Louise possessed foreknowledge of death she could and should have shared. Viewers are not shown enough to be sure. While the film does not provide answers, it does open up some interesting questions about the ethics of consent, reproduction and pregnancy (Carruthers 2018). If my interpretation of Louise’s “wrong choice” is right, there is a sense in which Louise is doubly punished for her foresight. From the moment of conception, she knows her daughter will die before her life has really begun. This must be horribly painful knowledge to live with.<sup>15</sup> She knows she will go on to lose the father of her child too. A further painful loss, again, because of what she knows.

She has to first live *knowing she will* lose her daughter and husband and then she has to *live with the loss* of her daughter and husband. She has a “full view” of her suffering to come and the audience has “full view” of this too. To my mind Louise’s flaw (and flaw is no doubt too harsh) is the polar opposite of Oedipus’s. She has in common with him an energetic intelligence and bravery but whereas Oedipus sees too little of the future clearly, Louise sees too much of it clearly. A core strength of her character, her linguistic brilliance, is also the source of her suffering. Learning the heptapod language required a certain genius and striving on her part but

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<sup>15</sup> Zavota (2020) also mentions in passing how Louise’s knowledge brings immense tragedy. Her Derridean reading of *Arrival* however focusses on the primacy of writing and of the significance of the heptapod gift in the film.

the effort came at the cost of foreknowledge of great losses to come. *Arrival* thus has potential to ethically educate audiences in something like the dark sense outlined by Rorty. Perhaps the film can support some viewers to learn that great suffering can flow from how and what we strive to know. Even when the pursuit of knowledge is very well intended.

*Arrival* has potential for ethics education in other directions too. The film could for one help some viewers better understand an of aspect of ethical theory—the virtue concept of courage. Upon first contact with the heptapods it is clear from the images that Louise is petrified but she endures the legitimate worry that she might die and acts to help the human species understand the purpose of the strangers. Louise also demonstrates courage in the way she lives with her knowledge about Hannah’s fate. What matters to Louise is to make the most of the little time she has with her daughter. As she puts it “despite knowing the journey and where it leads, I embrace it and I welcome every moment of it”. Louise is truly courageous in the Aristotelian sense here.<sup>16</sup> She endures the prospect of pain, faces it, indeed embraces it, out of love for her daughter and to help her own species not come to war with the heptapods. Images first establish Louise’s bravery but audience perception of this is reinforced by verbal utterance. This is a good example of how words and images can combine into a moral lesson or principle capable of deepening the ethical understanding of the audience. The principle here being that it is ethically desirable to embrace life even when you know such an approach will bring pain.

The film could open up reflection or conversation about other aspects of ethical theory too. Louise’s embrace-the-journey approach to life arguably embodies a rather Nietzschean ethic. She knows her life will involve great suffering but she affirms her fate anyway. When she asks Ian, “If you could see your whole life from start to finish would you change things?” this question is also put to the audience. Louise has already declared her intention to embrace the journey, but would viewers? This moment in the film, this possibility, brings to mind Nietzsche’s famous doctrine of eternal recurrence.<sup>17</sup> Maudemarie Clark (1990) suggests that eternal recurrence can be understood as a moral thought experiment in which one is invited to think about whether or not they would be willing to live their life over

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<sup>16</sup> Aristotle held that it is apt for the virtuous to be pained by the prospect of wounds and death. Courage consists in knowingly enduring such pains (*Nicomachean Ethics*: 1117b). The fact that Louise exhibits courage in this way rather makes a mockery of Aristotle’s suggestion elsewhere in *The Politics* (1260a22-23) that the courage of women is different from men. Louise shows audiences the obvious flaws in Aristotle’s belief system here—women clearly can possess courage in the same ways that men do.

<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche’s (2001) most detailed thoughts on eternal recurrence are in *The Gay Science*.

and over again, in exactly the same way, for eternity. One's reaction to this possibility can provide insight into the extent to which one values their life. While it is not my argument that an eternal recurrence thought experiment is intentionally screened in this film, I do think *Arrival* can provide viewers with an experience akin to this. In so doing it can help viewers interested in this doctrine, deepen their understanding of it. First and foremost, though, *Arrival* screens a tragic story artistically and this screen story has significant potential for ethics education. In sum, I believe *Arrival* is a very good tragic film as the plot involves familial suffering that the audience are encouraged to share in and ethically learn from.

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