

Intergalactic Triumph: American Hegemony Represented in *Arrival* (2016) Movie

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ABSTRACT

This research examines a Hollywood movie entitled *Arrival* (2016) to see how American hegemony is represented and maintained in the movie. This is a qualitative research that is conducted under the framework of American studies. The concept of American values, Hegemony by Antonio Gramsci and Soft Power by Joseph Nye are used to answer the research questions. Semiotic film theory is employed to analyze the data in the form of dialogues and movie scenes. The results show the representation of American hegemony is seen in the characters that show American values, the U.S foreign policy, the U.S military supremacy, and the U.S economic field. Meanwhile, the maintenance of American hegemony is represented in American's destiny to unify the world and also in hegemony through the language.

1. INTRODUCTION

The United States is one of the countries that has great influence to shape global markets and political stance outside its governmental system. The Cold War marked how the U.S position escalates to be the hegemon because the fall of the Soviet Union made the U.S the only resistant power. This phenomenon occurred because the U.S also made a quick movement by rearrangement of international organizations such as WTO (World Trade Organizations), IMF (International Monetary Fund), and World Bank in foreign policy making that affected global system (Masitoh, 2018, p. 1).

There are two powers that a hegemon should have to create such stability on the dominant position; hard power and soft power. Hard power indicates the implementation of intention through coercion such as military intervention in the means of economic and political influence. Soft power refers to the strategies used by embedding knowledge and culture that can eventually be accepted by many parties without showing any signs of threat (Weinbrenner, 2007, p. 1).

Moreover, Davidson (2017) in her article analyzed that science fiction movie genre like *Star Trek* "provided a vision of manifest destiny for the 23rd century and a manifestation of American" (Davidson, 2017, p. 8). She stated that unlike other American science fiction movies, *Star Trek* shows some points that highlight American hegemony as the savior of the future, in other words, the utopian future that is described in the movie is defined by western liberalism and the extension of its global benefits. It also shows that "social, economic, cultural and, above all, technological progress can only be achieved by expanding the reach of western liberalism" (Davidson, 2017, p. 17).

Films are used to represent some events or history so people in the present time know what it was like during that time. That is why "the value of signs in the film depends on the social context pertaining at the time the film was made, at the time the film is seen, and by whom it is seen" (Bignell, 2002, p. 196).

The purposes of this research are to find the representation of American Hegemony and the maintenance of American Hegemony found in Denis Villeneuve's "*Arrival* (2016)" movie. This research explains the idea of American hegemony and how the idea of American hegemony is maintained in the movie with semiotic film theory.

2. METHOD

This is a qualitative research under the American Studies framework. The data are the dialogues and the scenes of *Arrival* (2016) that represent American Hegemony and its maintenance in the movie. The source of data are the

movie and the online articles about *Arrival* (2016). The methods of data collection were conducted by organizing the data into two categories; the dialogue and scenes that represent American hegemony and the dialogue and scenes that represent the maintenance of American hegemony in the movie. Further, the concept of American values, Hegemony by Antonio Gramsci and Soft Power by Joseph Nye are borrowed to identify the idea of American hegemony and the maintenance of American hegemony in the movie. Lastly, the data are analyzed by employing the semiotic film theory to find the meaning behind the dialogue and the scenes.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The Nation Power that Survives

The media often portray the United States as a country which is always ready to face any obstacle that might disturb the state's stability, either politically, economically, or culturally. *Arrival* movie depicts some representations about how the United States runs hegemonic power in terms of policy making, global coordination, military use.

On minutes 00:08:45 – 00:09:11 & 00:10:20 – 00:10:52 the dialogue connotes how the US is represented as handling the situation better because the government has prepared “a protocol for the scenario” and how the US makes their domestic policy through the quick reaction of ATF (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives) toward independent suppliers of hunting equipment and firearms. It is to avoid the misuse of those equipment. The image is responsive and has a strong defense because “the value that a country advocates in domestic and foreign policies, and international mechanism is able to influence other countries’ preferences” (Lin & Hongtao, 2017, p. 71).

The dialogue on minutes 00:14:13 - 00:14:27 connotes that the Dow Jones Industrial Average owned by the US is significant to the world's economic system because it overshadows blue-chip companies that have stable earnings, which means that if there are slight problems that affect this index's tracks, other countries' economic systems are affected. It can be connected to Gramsci's theory that economic activity is significant to hegemony.

Dialogue and scenes on minutes 01:03:04 – 01:05:02 connote the abuse of power by Colonel Weber but he legally does it because the law in the U.S that permits government official to wiretap as a reason of national security. This is referred to as the US hegemony in domestic and foreign policy by using soft power. The existence of soft power in domestic and foreign policies relies on the legality and morality of these policies (Lin & Hongtao, 2017, p. 71). The scene in this minutes uses low key lighting and deep focus so it gives the sense of danger because the characters are discussing the next strategy to handle this situation and the focus helps the audience focus on the scene.

Minutes 00:40:38 – 00:40:40 show the accordance of explanation about exceptionalism deeply engrained in the American thoughts between the connotations of Colonel Weber statements that the Anglo-Saxon is considered as more advanced race than the Aborigines who live in Australia longer than those British colonizers. Although Colonel Weber is a Black-American, he has American thoughts from his knowledge during the training as a military personnel before he achieves the position of Colonel. As a military personnel and a nation defender, he surely adopts the Puritanical view that is the foundation of American ideology.

3.2. The Nation Power that is Maintained

The findings on this research also show that there are several aspects of cinematography that represent how American Hegemony is maintained in the movie. For example, on minutes 01:29:58 – 01:31:57, Costello tells Dr. Banks that it will help humanity, but it also needs humanity help. The connotation of this dialogue is odd, because the Heptapods only tells Dr. Banks, an American linguist, that the creature needs her help. The movie does not represent the Heptapods seeking help to country like China or Russia which are represented as one of the dominant groups. The tone of the scene changes drastically to brighter tone. The filmmaker tries to give an intense meaning by positioning the key light on high key lighting to indicate the situation and the subject on the scene seems clear. Fill light is also positioned on front lighting, that refers to the absence of shadow and gives a sense of openness. The neutral shot is used as the balance to the lighting.

Minutes 01:37:19 – 01:38:20 is an answer to the big question that is waited for by the US officials. This section tries to connect to the previous dialogue and scenes. In the previous dialogue, Costello the heptapod tells Dr. Banks that she has weapon and she can see future that is why the heptapods want to have teamwork with Dr. Banks. In the following dialogue, Dr. Banks concludes that it is not a weapon, but rather it is a gift. However, she did not mention that she is the only one who is able to master heptapod language because it is her destiny to master the language and to see the future. She did say implicitly because the dialogue that says “they gave it all to us” connotes that it is herself who is given the destiny for this. Since the movie represents that heptapods only send message to Dr. Banks, it can be linked to the myth of the chosen nation, or the manifest destiny. Manifest Destiny is claimed to be the first American Thoughts foundation. The US hegemony is also rooted from this myth. The scene relates

to the explanation of the three key themes of manifest destiny by Weeks (1996). The movie represents the maintenance of American hegemony (1) by choosing American people as the savior of humanity through the heptapod language (2) through the mission that is destined for Americans (Dr. Banks) to the global unification (3) by means of the destiny to master heptapod's language and spread it to the world so that everyone can see something to come.

Language is also part of the hegemony as Gramsci explained that language is central to politics and hegemony. It could be achieved if there is 'common sense' and 'good sense' (Ives, 2004). As the scene flashes-forward, the reason why China changes their intention is that Dr. Banks tells General Shang his wife dying words. Heiserr, the writer of *Arrival* stated that the translation for the General's wife dying words are "In war there are no winners, only widows" (Heiserr, as cited in Patches, 2016). According to Femia, that is quoted Gramsci, the situation that occurs between Dr. Banks and General Shang is caused by consensus. The relationship of these two characters occurs because Dr. Banks uses his expertise in Mandarin to communicate with General Shang. Dr. Banks travels through time and space, so that she can negotiate with General Shang. The consensus in their negotiations occurs because of the belief held by General Shang, where Dr. Banks says the sentence that General Shang's wife pronounces when she is dying, "In war there are no winners, only widows". The dialogue also has connotation to Dr. Banks action as an American that she succeeds in uniting all nations. It shows the maintenance of American hegemony as what Gramsci explained as 'Intellectual and Moral Leadership'.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the result, it can be concluded that the *Arrival* (2016) movie still has the same formula with other American movies that maintain positive image of America as the persistent power. The representation comes from how the United States in the movie uses its military power, the domestic and foreign policies, the perspective of seeing other nation, and several ways to maintain the hegemony such as the perseverance of myth of the nation and through Soft Power.

First, American Hegemony is represented in the characters of the US official when dealing with other countries. The characters that are involved in the United States officials are shown to have American value by maintaining the negative stereotype of countries that have history of war with the US in the past such as China and Russia. There are rights to intervene other countries with legal laws and prevent other countries to intervene the US business. The US Army supremacy is represented in the movie by showing the US has more advanced technology than other countries to communicate with the Heptapods. The fall of the US economic field is represented to affect other countries as well.

Second, American Hegemony is maintained in the movie through the character's destiny to unify the world. The screenwriter, Eric Heisserer believes that he provides China as the dominant position but the movie represents an American linguist, Dr. Banks is chosen to understand the Heptapods' language to bring special mission: helping humanity and turns down China's attack on the vessel. The maintenance of hegemony is also represented in the movie through the way language becomes the medium to validate America's persistent power because the only person who understands the Heptapod's language is an American person, Dr. Banks.

Thus, this research presents the way to look at American cultural product is not merely an entertainment but also has its way to influence the audience. Other researchers are expected to broaden the discussion and further research can be done to examine more American values in American cultural product and how it may influence audience in the way they make the United States depiction as a great persistent power.

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