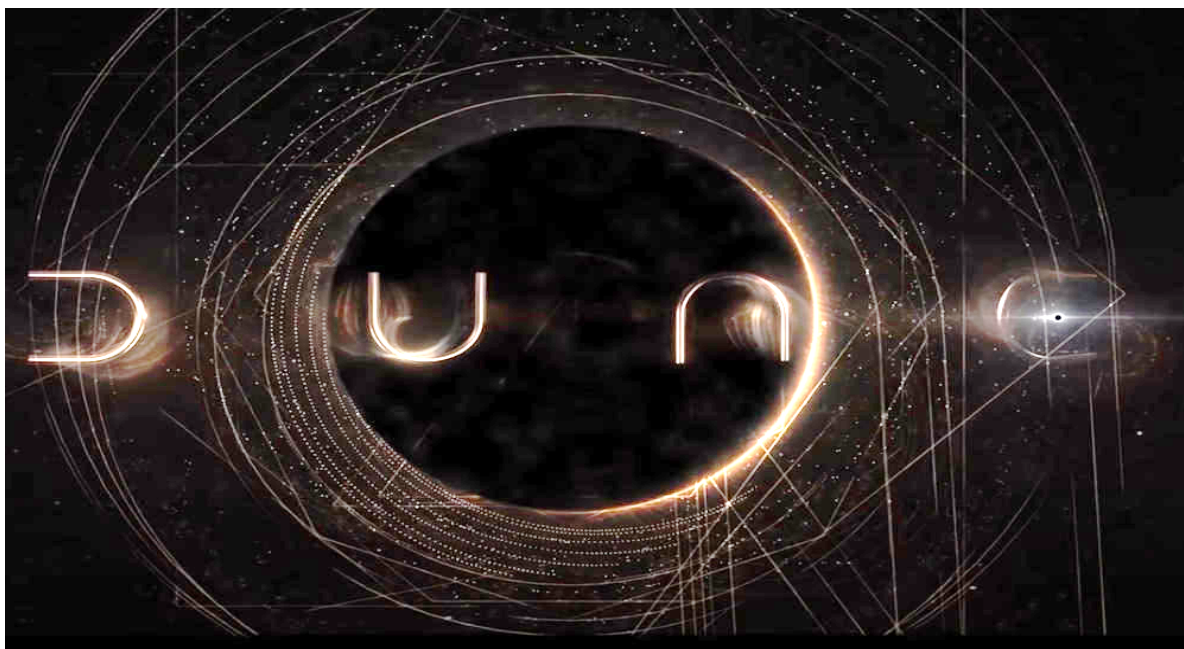


FUTURE MYTHOLOGIES *[DUNE \(VILLENEUVE, 2021\)](#), OR THE FORTUNE AND MISFORTUNE OF THE MOVIE HERO*

by Lorenzo Marras



- **WARNING:** This analysis contains some “**SPOILERS**” on the events and characters and we recommend reading “only after” you have seen the film or already know the book. This writing is also the result of many discussions over the years with Dr. Stefano Mannino on Herbert, *Dune* and its film adaptations, and here we want to thank him.

«We do nasty things to our leaders, we shoot them in the streets of Dallas, hang them on pieces of wood Golgotha, we finally say that in the United States we separate church and state, that's an asinine statement. I am a political animal and I really never left journalism, I'm writing about the current scene, the metaphors are there writing about the political ecology, the religious ecology, the social ecology, and the physical ecology of our world, and I think you do not separate any one part of this from the others, you don't separate mind and body and understand the human being. [...] Well, I'm a history buff, and have been a history buff since I was quite young and while reading history, I got the idea that we had not looked at the Messianic impulse in human society from a point of view that I did, who could be developed reporting that this person came on the scene, and these people followed and this is what happened was a kind of a journalistic approach to it. I didn't mind that you are there approach, but what I wanted was something that showed the impact of a Messiah on history as the creator of a power structure. Because inevitably no matter how good the Messiah, other people enter the scene, other people are attracted to the power structure. I think that the idea of power correcting and absolute power corrupted absolutely is not on the mark does not hit it. I think what happens is that power attracts the corruptible, that's an interesting concept fact that's almost the antithesis the reverse of the process that's is commonly accepted».

Frank Herbert, speaking about David Lynch's *Dune* (1983)
[the quotations are transcribed [from here](#) and [here](#)]

«*Dune* is a book that's like Proust. It's science fiction but it's very, very literary [...] I realized, “*Dune*” ... nobody can do it. It's a legend».

[Alejandro Jodorowsky](#)

The relationship between cinema and literature has always been complex, as it must balance the need to respect the source material while also maintaining the specificity of the cinematic medium. In some cases, this relationship can become so problematic that it borders on incommunicability. One of the most well-known examples of this is the adaptation of Frank Herbert's "*Dune*," a Magnum Opus of ultra-history science fiction from the 1960s, which is a complex and epic dynastic saga set in the distant future, spanning thousands of years (with a total [timeline of approximately 30,000 years](#)).

The epic nature of the ultra-history of *Dune* is characterized by a high-tech neo-feudal imagery, permeated with rigid Prussian-style militarism, and immersed in a context of religious syncretism and corporate monopolism. Without this premise - which places Herbert's imagery in a precise and indispensable historical framework that, even though fantastical, establishes its logic, guarantees its narrative strength, and justifies its meaning - any interpretation, comparison, and evaluation runs the risk of failing miserably. This is because *Dune* should ultimately be treated as a work of history, albeit an "ultra-history" (a term borrowed from Georges Dumézil, although not in its original sense); an "ultra-history" in the sense that it attempts to narrate the past through the future, or more accurately, the present through the past with the aid of the future.

For instance, this could be interpreted as a "present era" characterized by corporate and imperialist monopolism that risks plunging the world and liberal democracy into a dark feudal "past" with militaristic tendencies in the "future," but imbued with technology that appears to resemble magic and a frequently fanatical religious and messianic syncretism. Therefore, any adaptation of a "historical" work, as defined above, should always strive to respect the expressive, social, and cultural codes, and avoid excessive interpolations and embellishments of invented details that, even when grounded in a loosely reliable context, may risk compromising the interpretation (not only of the sources but especially "of the sense", of the "unified and deeper meaning") of the literary work and bring it perilously close to being narratively deceptive and an expressive fraud.



Deployment of Sardaukar legions on the planet Salusa Secundus.

The complicated journey of bringing Herbert's imagery to the big screen has been well-documented and widely known. It has always been considered a daunting and nearly

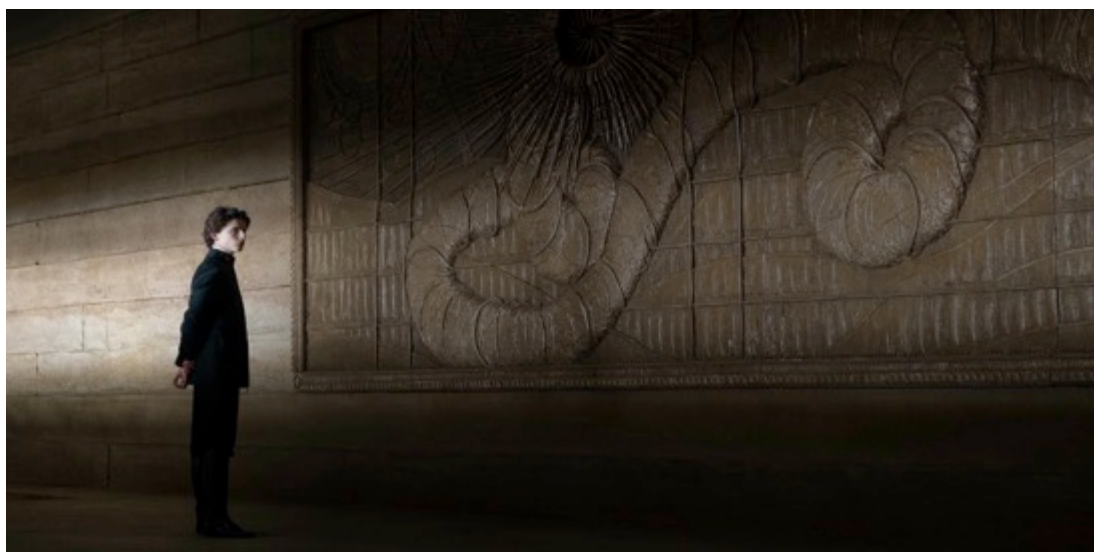
impossible task, especially before the era of digital cinema. The first serious attempt was made by Alejandro Jodorowsky in the 1970s, who despite investing exorbitant amounts of money in pre-production, was never able to begin filming. This story was later chronicled in the documentary “[Jodorowsky's Dune](#)” (2013). In the 1980s, David Lynch took up the challenge, and although his film was eventually released in theaters, the production process was plagued with difficulties. The final version of the film was edited without Lynch's input, leading him to disown it, even though it has since gained a cult following.

By 1984, it became apparent that adapting *Dune* for the big screen was akin to the unforgiving nature of the planet “Arrakis” in the story. As a result, the film industry seemed to shy away from Herbert's work. Despite some unsuccessful attempts at TV adaptations in the 2000s (such as “Frank Herbert's *Dune*” in 2000 and “Frank Herbert's Children of *Dune*” in 2003), as well as well-received video game adaptations (such as “*Dune I & II*” in 1992 and “*Dune 2000*” in 1998), it took more than 35 years for the courage to mount another attempt.

In the late 2010s, Denis Villeneuve, known for his visual prowess in films like “Arrival” (2016) and “Blade Runner 2049” (2017), took on the challenge. Perhaps emboldened by the success of the “Game of Thrones” TV series based on G.R.R. Martin's books, Villeneuve ventured into adapting Herbert's work. Interestingly, Martin's work, often compared to Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, is actually more indebted to Herbert's style, although it obviously eschews all the science fiction elements of *Dune*. In fact, one could argue that describing *Dune* to younger generations in the 2000s and 2010s would be most aptly done by likening it to “Game of Thrones” set in the future.

[Trailer *Dune*, Villeneuve, 2021](#)

Villeneuve wisely chose to divide his adaptation of the first *Dune* book into two parts, as he recognized that capturing the complexity of Herbert's imagination in a single film, even if it is 155 minutes long, would be challenging. While Jodorowsky's hyperbolic suggestion of at least fourteen hours to adequately portray the book may be excessive, *Dune* is a work that cannot be easily condensed into a two-hour format without risking simplification and potential incomprehensibility. This is precisely what De Laurentis attempted with Lynch's film in 1984, resulting in disappointing critical and commercial outcomes that fell short of expectations.



Paul Atreides in the face of an iconographic representation of Arrakis religious culture.

If the second part of *Dune* is also 155 minutes long, it means that Villeneuve will have had more than twice the time that the 1984 version had to avoid the rushed pacing that afflicted Lynch's film and contributed to its poor reception.

However, the answer to whether Villeneuve has succeeded in taming the *Dune* beast in this first part is both “yes” and “no.” While *Dune* 2021 is visually spectacular and a good film in its own right, it completely fails, however, as an adaptation of Herbert's novel, and ultimately falls short even when compared to the 1984 film. It's a shame because every image in *Dune* 2021 exudes the passion, dedication, and effort made by the filmmakers to create the best and most grandiose version of Herbert's *Dune* possible.

Dune 2021 benefits from the additional minutes and stellar production values, resulting in a less erratic and more linear development of the story compared to the 1984 version. Villeneuve remains faithful to Herbert's plot, but not so much to the literary work as an organic wholeness – and this is the first point that needs to be addressed. *Dune* is not just an adventure or action novel; it is a vast and intricately detailed “fresco” of a universe, a reality, a world, and not just a series of events. Therefore, what defines the essence of *Dune* is not just the sequence of events, but the rich imagery (social, cultural, economic, and religious) upon which the events are built, and that alone determines their authentic literary significance.

This is where the challenge lies in translating *Dune* into images, and it's also what distinguishes the inventive universe of video games – the creation of a world before a story.

Despite the immense efforts put into the production design of *Dune* 2021, the end result doesn't deviate much from Lynch's version in terms of the cuts made. The world of *Dune* is transposed in a superficial way, and simplifies some aspects more than *Dune* 1984. Villeneuve's imagery captures some of Herbert's mechanisms, but not the full complexity of his story-world. We can perceive that the world is feudal, militaristic, and characterized by some form of despotism (though the religious and fanatical syncretism, as well as the importance of the corporate and monopolistic economic system, are not even mentioned), but it fails to authentically dramatize the depth and complexity of these aspects in Herbert's literary universe. And here, then, is one of the main shortcomings of *Dune* 2021, where something is perceived from Herbert's world, but it is not authentically and perceptively dramatized, reducing itself to details that the general audience, and all those who are not already familiar with Herbert, will not understand, if they manage to grasp them at all. To the extent that the various essential aspects of the world of *Dune*, which are shown here and there as briefly displayed details without any explanation (we will point out some of them during the analysis), in *Dune* 2021 practically take on the appearance of Easter eggs for Herbert's die-hard fans.

In this regard, *Dune* 2021 shows (almost) all the events of the book (and adds others, unfortunately always superfluous and redundant), but renounces the complexity of the context and fails to insert the events into an adequate system of images which can give them the precise meaning they have in the book. In doing so, *Dune* risks becoming something else. This was also the case with Jodorowsky's version, which, from what we could figure out, had taken *Dune* to “rape” it and make it say something else. But there is perhaps something even worse than making it say something else, and that's to turn in to a trivial story, seen hundreds of times, about a benevolent King who is deceived by an enemy and evil potentate who wants to usurp and eliminate him, and his wise wife and a predestined son, that fulfilling their destiny, will have to try to avenge in restore the order of justice.

Paradoxically, Villeneuve not only fails to add much to what Lynch did (which was what everyone believed and hoped for), but actually creates a narrative that appears even more “compressed” for those who are not familiar with Herbert's universe. The pieces of information about the story-world that are offered to the viewer now seem even less. In this sense, the 1984 film made everything more understandable and better explained (both visually and verbally). Villeneuve, it seems, reasoned as if the information offered in Lynch's version was still insufficient, and even made it more confusing. Perhaps feeling that he could not add much more (except for brief moments of perception that are, as mentioned before, understandable only to die-hard fans), he decided to remove them altogether, offering less to make the main events easier to follow and create a more urgent pace. *Dune* 2021, in this respect, has indeed been successful. It is evident that in cinematic storytelling, explanations that try to convey too much to the audience without proper dramatization often result in the failure of cinema as an art of the visible.



Fremen heroically stands out against the inclement, wild majesty of Arrakis.

The problem, however, is that this rule does not apply to *Dune*, and if the intention is to create an exclusively visual and sensorial experience (something to which the imagery of *Dune* is well suited), but renouncing almost completely any expositive element (both discursive and visual) of the folklore in which it is inscribed, then the undertaking becomes so complicated that it could put in trouble the greatest and most experienced director, even one who have made cinema as the art of the visible his stylistic mark. This complication, however, becomes a real danger when one chooses to place formal pursuit not at the service of narration, for a complete diegesis, but (almost) exclusively at the service of itself, e.g., not

of the story, but of its own coolness. In fact, if as we have said, it is true that cinema, as a system of images, must never submit to what Kerényi (quoting K. O. Müller), called the “joy of explaining”, thus sacrificing the visual as a self-signifying structure and in itself endowed with meaning, nevertheless this can only be when it is possible to grasp them in their “native soil and root” (which in this case is the imagery of Herbert’s *Dune*). Otherwise said, *Dune* is one of those rare works whose visualization does not benefit from a «subtraction design» (definition that, instead, is always an indication of a successful narrative imagination) and for which the appellation of “literary” would not assume those negative connotations that usually define its use within film criticism.

Either because the intention was to remain, at least in part, more faithful to the book's development (where many things are more clearly explained in the second part), or because of Villeneuve's propensity for an often calligraphic style (in this case in the set production and set design, which are excellent in themselves), *Dune* 2021 often gets lost in visual grandeur and design details, which are fascinating but never manage to grasp their 'root'; that is, they never succeed in becoming an authentic narrative and/or perceptive aesthetic, and they are never really expository. However, by doing so, the risk of making *Dune* a purely sensorial experience is that all those necessary details and clues for the viewer to fully enter the opera's imaginary may slip by. Villeneuve inserts many small details, but hinting at them without explaining them makes it difficult - if not impossible, as mentioned before - for those who are not already familiar with Herbert's work or at least Lynch's version to understand and enjoy the story, effectively making *Dune* 2021 a film enjoyable for everyone but understandable essentially only by fans. However, Herbert's world is what has made *Dune* so universally loved and iconic. Without it, as mentioned above, what remains is just a story already seen countless times but with visually cool images. In fact, *Dune* is a work where storytelling and story-world are so closely interconnected that one is impossible without the other: in Herbert's *Dune* worldbuilding and storytelling are one and the same. In contrast, *Dune* 2021 appears as a work where storytelling and (Herbert's) worldbuilding never refer to each other.



Visions from the future.

And it's in that sense, then, that Villeneuve's visual grandeur, with its dimensions always of epic scale, often risks becoming a problem, as it (almost) never manages to add anything to the narrative. This is because it appears as a grandiosity that fails to visually articulate (or, perhaps, intentionally avoids doing so), as is necessary in genuine sensory storytelling, where the narrative, the folklore of the imagined world, and the psychology of its characters are

effectively conveyed through the use of images, industrial design, architectural elements, interior design, costumes, mecha design, dress code, and other visual codes.

More precisely, Villeneuve seems more interested in provoking in the viewer a continuous “wow effect”, rather than telling the story, culture and psychology of *Dune* through a perceptual design.



Very long shot on the arrival of the “ornithopters” of the Atreides family at Arrakis.

And as we mentioned earlier, while it's true that much of this information is more explicitly explained in the second part of the book, the choice to follow the text so closely may not have been the best decision for the film. For viewers who are not familiar with Herbert's world, it can be frustrating to have to wait years to fully understand what is happening and to grasp the political and family dynamics of the factions at stake. In contrast, the 1984 film attempted to solve this problem by using Princess Irulan's introductions at the beginning of each chapter to provide important information about the events and folklore of *Dune*. In the novels, Irulan is not only the author of the most important historical chronicles of the world of *Dune* but also plays a crucial role in the story. However, in the 2021 film, her role is replaced by Chani, who is introduced with trivial statements about the beauty of the planet Arrakis. While the decision to give more space to Chani is understandable, her character ultimately feels insufficient and insignificant within the events of the film so far, and the absence of Irulan's perspective is felt.



Paul tries to disguise himself within a hologram.

In *Dune* 2021, the decision was made to keep the viewer in the dark about many aspects of folklore and dynastic rules, except for quick hints, should alone allow them to navigate the complex web of political and family relationships. As a result, viewers unfamiliar with the imagery of *Dune* may find themselves disoriented or, at best, forced into a simplified story that appears as another hero's journey in a world polarized in a simplistic good-versus-evil manner, as it was also in *Dune* 1984 (even is less so). However, this is the exact opposite of what the *Dune* cycle aims to be as a whole, which is the deconstruction of the myth of the hero's journey and of the world divided into good and evil.

In the world of *Dune*, there are no “good” Houses, as they are all “bad” and ruthless, following the logic and social and cultural codes of the neo-feudal reality in which they exist. Herbert himself, when asked to define *Dune* in a tweet, stated that it essentially speaks of “[distrusting” heroes and false “prophets”](#). These heroes often turn out to be false messiahs who possess great powers but are corrupted by them, using them for their own purposes and bringing death and destruction to the universe, as depicted in some of Paul's visions in *Dune* 2021 (we'll see what will be done about it in the next part of the movie).

Paul's journey in *Dune* is indeed a journey, but not an “extraordinary” one in the conventional sense of the term, meaning “beautiful” or “admirable”, as the marketing of *Dune* 2021 may imply. Instead, it is possibly the beginning of an extraordinarily tragic journey, where the only solution to “solve” the problem is to embrace it, a journey that is precisely the opposite of the traditional hero's journey. While this is evident in the book, it was less explicit in Lynch's 1984 adaptation, and even contradictory in the finale. In *Dune* 2021, however, it could have been made clearer, without didactic explanations. The problem with the 2000s TV adaptations was that, in an attempt to compensate for Lynch's shortcomings, everything had to be explained by the protagonists in an invasive and annoyingly didactic way. In contrast, *Dune* 2021 chose to simplify in order to cater to the general public, making the work more usable and clearer, although *Dune* is not naturally suited to being clear, at least not as a commercially viable format. And it is not, usable and clear, because *Dune* – and in particular starting with *God emperor of Dune* in 1981 – is a work where clarity is not obtained through simplification.



Spice, the most precious good in the universe and available, in the known universe, only on Arrakis.

In our opinion, one of the main issues with *Dune* 2021 is that cinema should strive to maintain its own autonomy, even when adapted from literature. This means that a film should not rely

on another medium to understand the main events or what is happening on screen. For instance, in *Dune* 2021, the viewer should not have to resort to the book or prior knowledge to understand the relationships between the Houses, why spaceships come out of a hole shaped like a *space cannoli*, or why characters have marks on their foreheads, painted lips, white eyes, wear orange visored helmets, etc. The film should stand on its own, without forcing the viewer to rely on outside sources or wait for future installments to clarify what happened. At the same time, in Tolkien's words, whether it is literature, film or radio «the canons of narrative in any medium cannot be wholly different; and the failure of poor films is often precisely in exaggeration, and in the intrusion of unwarranted matter owing to not perceiving where the core of the original lies» (J.R.R. Tolkien, *Letter 210*, not dated, June 1958).



Reverend Mother tests the pureness of Paul's human nature through the “gom jabbar”.

It is evident that, similar to his other films, Villeneuve aimed to create more of a visual experience rather than a discursive one in *Dune* 2021, but he falls short of reaching the formal apex he achieved with *Blade Runner* 2049. This is also reflected in the pervasive use of Hans Zimmer's evocative music, which is predictably “epic” (a genre that Zimmer has popularized if not invented), but at times it can be overly intrusive and result in a truncated and rhetorical effect that feels “unfitted” (as it becomes overly layered with epicness upon epicness). Interestingly, Zimmer has created multiple versions of the soundtrack (at least three), which contain some interesting pieces that occasionally deviate from his classic and slightly stereotyped canon, although these variations may not have been fully utilized in the film, unless something was missed during viewing.

However, compared to Villeneuve's previous films, it seems that he has taken it to an extreme in *Dune* 2021, almost turning the film into an exercise in exploring the emotional and evocative potential of total and/or very long shots, showcasing the landscape and panoramic possibilities of cinema. This focus on visual aesthetics takes precedence over narrative imagination and perceptual narration, i.e., a storytelling through the visual elements. As a result, the film captivates us with stunning panoramic sequences of Arrakis, many of which are truly breathtaking and impactful, even exhilarating, especially when seen in IMAX format. Yet, as captivating as these scenes may be, they are akin to being surprised by a fiery red sunset in Namibia or a night illuminated by the dance of purple hues of the aurora borealis

- exciting, like [many documentaries shot in high definition and available online](#) with equally spectacular and “emotional” images, if not more so.



Shai-Hulud, the sandworm of Arrakis.

In this regard, we mentioned earlier that instead of resolving the pacing issues that plagued Lynch's version, Villeneuve not only fails to resolve them, but actually amplifies them in *Dune* 2021. Despite having a runtime of 155 minutes to tell only half of the story, the film provides less visual and discursive information compared to Lynch's adaptation. Villeneuve's choice to add almost infinite series of stylish and stunning overviews of Arrakis, which could be described as “epic” by millennials, for at least thirty minutes of screen time, serves little narrative purpose and sacrifices precious minutes that could have been used to provide useful information and portray the details that are the substance of *Dune*, but are relegated to being mere visual elements in the film without any meaningful dialogue. These details could have made the events more comprehensible, portrayed the characters in a better light, and allowed the audience to orient themselves in the complex social-political framework interwoven by Herbert.

In essence, the improvement of Villeneuve's version over the often-criticized Lynch/De Laurentis adaptation lies in its adherence to the aesthetic parameters of the 2010s, making it “cooler” in many aspects (such as the visually impressive “ornithopters”), but not necessarily more “beautiful” in a traditional sense. Apart from technical and visual updates, there are few significant differences from what we saw in the version released 37 years ago. Indeed, as we have argued repeatedly (and as we will further demonstrate in detail in the appendix), *Dune* 2021 paradoxically appears to borrow more from Lynch's version than from Herbert's book. In this sense, [Villeneuve's *Dune* could be seen as a remastered version in Ultra HD, a Special Extended Edition, or a Cool Edition of the 1984 version](#). It's worth noting that Herbert himself did not dislike the 1984 version, except for some simplifications: the inclusion of the “Weirding Module,” and the problematic ending that transformed Paul into a god and destroyed the ecosystem of Arrakis, which was crucial for the existence of the spice, the focal point of the story.

However, in the 2000s the increasing dominance of “coolness” as a category has superseded traditional notions of “beauty” and storytelling. In many cases, coolness has become the driving force behind scenes and sequences, detached from a coherent narrative framework and

evaluated solely for their coolness factor. It's important to note that coolness should not be confused with storytelling or beauty, unless one's intention is to redefine these terms beyond their traditional meanings prior to the 2000s. According to classical criteria of aesthetic evaluation, storytelling and beauty should be considered separately from coolness, unless the goal is to transform their intended meanings.

It's worth mentioning that Villeneuve's approach, while occasionally leaning towards aestheticization, does not fully embrace the "Rule of Cool" popularized by directors like Tarantino and J.J. Abrams, which prioritizes coolness over exposition. Nevertheless, in *Dune* 2021, there is a risk that viewers may judge the film solely based on the coolness or grandeur of individual scenes, without considering their narrative value or how they contribute to the story as a whole. However, the beauty of *Dune* lies not only, or even primarily, in its coolness, but in its greatness. This greatness is not solely measured by the epic scale of the scenes, but also by the complexity and depth of the story-world, conceived as an organic totality where each part is interconnected. The narrative, the visualization, and the imagination are intertwined in *Dune*'s beauty, and reducing it merely to coolness would be losing its wholeness.

It is also in this sense that, despite all the talent at his disposal and the quality guaranteed by a stellar production value, also in terms of visual impact, Villeneuve falls short of matching Lynch's truly alien and rightfully disturbing imagery.



The Fall of House Atreides.

Dune 2021 is visually stunning and provides a captivating visual and sensory experience. However, it lacks the necessary expressive force that a faithful adaptation of *Dune* should possess. It falls short in terms of imagination and vision, unlike Lynch's version, which, as I mentioned earlier, had its own problematic aspects but was more imaginative and visionary. Similarly, Jodorowsky's psychedelic and surrealist version, had it come to fruition, may have also captured these qualities. In Lynch's version, the images, for better or worse, often had a significant diegetic force. And it is precisely in this aspect - and here we are delving into another set of problems - that the danger of excessive aestheticization becomes apparent. Aestheticization inherently implies a sense of pleasantness, transforming the aestheticized subject into something more appealing and intriguing, even comforting. However, this does not align with Herbert's often despairing atmospheres in the world of *Dune*, which is

fundamentally portrayed as an “ugly” world where living is far from pleasant. In *Dune* 2021, the world is depicted as a harsh reality, but not as ugly or brutal as it should be, almost glamorizing it as “cool” in many ways.

“Properly ugly,” we said, because the dirty and often repugnant of Lynch’s adaptation had an expressive and aesthetic function, even expressionist, and therefore also cognitive. This in order to be able to speak through perception, to be connected to a world that, in its essence and just like its “protagonists”, was corrupt to the core, rotten, dangerous and hostile. The viewer, and this is the expressionism invoked, saw it as the protagonists perceived it, that is as an externalization of their – often crazy and sick – interiority. Villeneuve’s “cool” and overly postcard-like film, on the other hand, seems “always” to be reduced to an exclusively cosmetic function; as if in Arrakis one could go for a trip, an excursion or a walk, when instead it is a world described as inclement and of often deadly. Moreover, Villeneuve never shows, not even in passing, the tremendous poverty that pervades society, where water costs a fortune (so much so, as it is said in the book, that the majority of people practically wash themselves with sand: «No showers down here. You scrub your ass with sand!») and the rich, in order to flaunt their superiority and mock the people, throw it on the ground in front of them, to the point of becoming a custom that should always be respected. Obviously, we were not asking for a complete deconstruction of the aesthetic aura of the myth like that of Robert Bresson in *Lancelot and Guinevere* (1974), but that the aestheticization should always be accompanied by a description, even if only partial, of the “monstrosity” and “drama” that pervades the neo-feudal world of *Dune*, even if in many ways crossed by a wild and mysterious, threatening and lethal “beauty”. In short, it might have been preferable that in a portrayal of Herbert’s *Dune*, there weren’t only “cool” images, because that’s the point: every image in *Dune* 2021 must always be “cool,” iconic, constantly arousing ecstatic wonder. The problem with such production design is, however, exactly what was mentioned before: every aestheticization, when taken to the extreme, can only lead to its opposite, that is, an-aestheticization (a critical numbing effect).



Vladimir Harkonnen (Stellan Skarsgård) in a gothic setting featuring vampire iconography.

The most evident example of what we are trying to argue is the portrayal of Baron Vladimir Harkonnen, which deliberately



avoids the grotesque and repugnant morbidity that characterized Lynch's version, aiming instead for a description that seems to align more closely with the book (although it takes inspiration from Lynch in depicting the Baron's ability to move as if levitating, in the sense of flying). Lynch, however, made that choice, we believe, also to address a detail that even in the 1980s could not be explicitly depicted as it was in the book. Namely, what made the Baron grotesque and repugnant were his excessive passions, his extreme obesity, and, above all, his portrayal as a violently bloodthirsty villain, potentially associated with pedophilia or homosexuality, which risked conveying overtly homophobic undertones in his characterization. This depiction, when conveyed through a popular film, could potentially fuel homophobic sentiments in the audience. Herbert later addressed the issue of homophobia in *Dune* in *The Emperor-God of Dune* (1981), particularly through a dialogue between Moneo Atreides and Duncan Idaho, as well as in some public statements ([such as one at UCLA in 1985, around minute thirty and following](#)).

Whatever was the real reason, Lynch chose not to explicitly represent the motivations that determined the repugnant and corrupt nature of the character, but instead found another way to externalize it, as seen in the 1984 film through a skin disease that transformed the Baron into an aberration and conveyed a sense of “strangeness” that suggested his depravity and that of the Harkonnen family. The problem is that the visualization in *Dune* 2021 does not mention the aforementioned passions, but also does not effectively externalize the corruption and rottenness that permeates the Baron to the core. As a result, the representation in *Dune* 2021 appears more ordinary, stereotypical, and mainstream, and perhaps even more reassuring and acceptable.

Baron Harkonnen in a pose reminiscent of some of those of Walter Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*.

In *Dune* 2021, the Baron appears more like a techno-gothic-industrial and vampire version of Colonel Kurtz in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), rather than a morally disgusting character marked by abysmal depravity. While the use of the techno-gothic-industrial aesthetic to characterize the Harkonnen culture is acceptable, it should not come at the expense of erasing the disgusting and depraved aspects of the character. As Jodorowsky did, we could make use of an artistic characterization of the Harkonnens by an author like Hans Ruedi Giger. For example, Moebius and Giger conceived Baron Harkonnen's castle for Jodorowsky as a colossal structure that is also a statue of himself because a character like the Baron could only live in himself. Although Herbert did not describe Harkonnen Castle in this way, Giger's representation is an authentic imaginative and expressive visualization that is absolutely alien and ingenious. Giger's biotechnological, techno-industrial, and organic aesthetics may not suit Giedi Prime, the planet of the Harkonnens, which is an industrial nightmare but not a biotechnological one. However, it would be perfect to represent another planet in the *Dune* universe, such as the planet of the Tleilaxu and/or Bene Tleilax, known as Tleilax.



**Representations of Castle Harkonnen
according to H. R. Giger for Jodorowsky's *Dune*.**

Giger and Moebius's representation of the Harkonnen culture in Jodorowsky's version of *Dune* made it clear that their cultural evolution had taken a totally different path. In fact, for a culture that is at least 8000 years (or even 15000 years) ahead in the future compared to our present time, it seems unlikely that their aesthetics would only minimally evolve from our contemporary design, as seen in Villeneuve's *Dune*. This issue is similar to the representation of the culture of Krypton in *Zack Snyder's Man of Steel* (2013), which was less inspired, interesting, and “alien” compared to Richard Donner's *Superman* (1978). In this sense, the design of *Dune* 2021 appears to be influenced by *Star Wars*, and this may not be a coincidence, as the director has stated since 2018 that he wanted to make *Dune* a “*Star Wars* for Adults”. This is also evident in gratuitous scenes like Duncan getting off his ship and then going back to control its mechanics/electronics, seemingly for no reason other than to create a parallel, for the viewers, with Han Solo.

In any case, if that was indeed the intention, it is safe to say that Villeneuve has not succeeded at all. From what we see in this first part, it is not clear what exactly makes *Dune* 2021 more “for adults” compared to George Lucas' original trilogy. In fact, in several respects, *Dune* 2021 appears even less “for adults” than *Star Wars*, and only slightly more “mature” in the literal sense of the term. Where is Herbert's complex and layered world, brutal, ruthless, and “unfair,” where feudal lords can often act with impunity towards their subjects without being held accountable? Moreover, when *Dune* is simplified to the point of appearing as a mythical hero's journey in a world polarized into good guys and bad guys, Herbert's imaginative world is overshadowed by Lucas', when it would have been preferable to highlight the radical differences, the most important of which is the interpretation of the “hero's journey.”

All of this, as we mentioned at the beginning, is precisely because the world of *Dune* is deeply dystopian, dark, gritty, and always menacing, where bloodthirsty and immoral characters like the Baron represent, in many ways, the “normality” of an elite whose power is perceived as absolute and unquestionable. In this regard, we believe it would have been possible, and even preferable, to find a way to highlight the perverse depravity of the Baron without resorting to a homophobic representation. The current portrayal seems to have diminished not only the character's significance, making him more marketable for a mainstream audience, but also the culture in which he exists, resulting in clearer but more simplistic and less inspired imagery.



Duke Leto receiving the Herald of Change.

One critical issue in representing Herbert's imaginary world aesthetically and coolly, and perhaps the most significant with regard to any possible cinematographic transposition, is that the universe of *Dune* is a neo-feudal and militaristic one embedded in an oppressive corporate imperialism. It is no coincidence that all the great Houses, without exception, are super-militarized because they are feudal Houses.

Technology in *Dune* is high-tech but has crazy limitations due to its exorbitant costs, which only the emperor or the great Houses (but much less) can afford. These technological limitations do not indicate that the technology is decadent and almost unreliable, as portrayed in the 2021 film, to activate the parallel with *Star Wars*. In fact, technology is so reliable in *Dune* that a spaceship can last for millennia without special maintenance. However, availability is limited because the technology is understood in a medieval/feudal sense, rare and available only to a few who can afford it, and is priestly and initiatic. Those who manage it are usually priests and/or priestesses who have the knowledge, techniques, and secrets necessary to make it work, which they guard jealously.

For example, the navigators of the Spacing Guild, who are priests and “prophets” of interstellar travel, and whose appearance is unknown to all (although many nobles have speculated), because in order to “foresee” (celebrate? prophesy?) the routes for interstellar navigation, many of them have “evolved,” transformed into a hybrid of human and marine mammals (specifically those referred to as being in the “third stage”), for instance, endowed with a kind of foresight (albeit limited). And indeed, in the only scene of *Dune* 2021 where they are glimpsed, the navigators are correctly depicted in what could be described as “liturgical” garments, and the helmet is designed in such a way, we believe, both to conceal

their appearance and to prevent their exclusive and total “dependence” on the Spice from being perceived. The Bene Gesserit is also another initiatic knowledge. In the world of *Dune*, as in ancient times, the priests who control technology use it to increase their power, and knowledge is used to deceive and manipulate, as it is an exclusive and initiatic power.

This close relationship between Houses and armies is a pivotal element of the order and social structure and an element that drives events. It would be better understood if in *Dune 2021*, it was made clear that the emperor wants the elimination of House Atreides, and among the reasons that move him there is the fact that Duke Leto developed a military force capable of competing with those of the emperor – the dreaded Sardaukar – that is perceived as a serious threat to his regency. In *Dune 2021*, the emperor's regency is reduced to a fleeting passage in which the Baron mentions it in a manner that explicitly recalls Kurtz/Brando in *Apocalypse Now*, in a sibylline way to Rabban. Instead, this situation is a classic feudal one where the emperor/King perceives the increased (military) power of a feudal lord as a threat

Herbert's imagined world in *Dune* is deeply rooted in a feudal system, where the power of the Houses or “corporations” is closely tied to their armies. The army is the tangible manifestation of their rule, and it should be noted that even in the case of House Atreides, the army serves only the Duke, not the people. The imagery of *Dune*, therefore, depicts a neo-feudalism permeated by a Prussian-style militarism. This means that while each House has its own army as a symbol of its power, the concept of the army itself is modern and influenced by Prussian militarism, where everyone is expected to be military-oriented, especially the members of the ruling Houses. Therefore, it is crucial to not downplay or relegate the Prussian-style feudalism of society in *Dune* to a mere accessory or frill. Villeneuve's adaptation of *Dune* also partly reflects this, by showing and making it perceivable, but without emphasizing it as the cultural code of society. However, the danger of mitigating this aspect is that it may lead to the core logic of Herbert's vision slipping away, potentially resulting in the loss of unity and coherence in the overall “sense” of *Dune's* world.



Deployment of Atreides forces on Arrakis.

Consider, for example, the dialogue, moreover boring, between Leto and Paul at the cemetery. In this scene, Paul complains that he would have preferred a different future for himself, which is clearly an undue modernization that is typical of the 21st century. This desire for choice, something that does not exist and cannot exist in Herbert's world, is inconsistent with Paul's position as the Duke's son, the only male heir in a world where a particular version of the “Salic law” is in effect. The idea that Paul can simply reject the role of Duke, bypassing

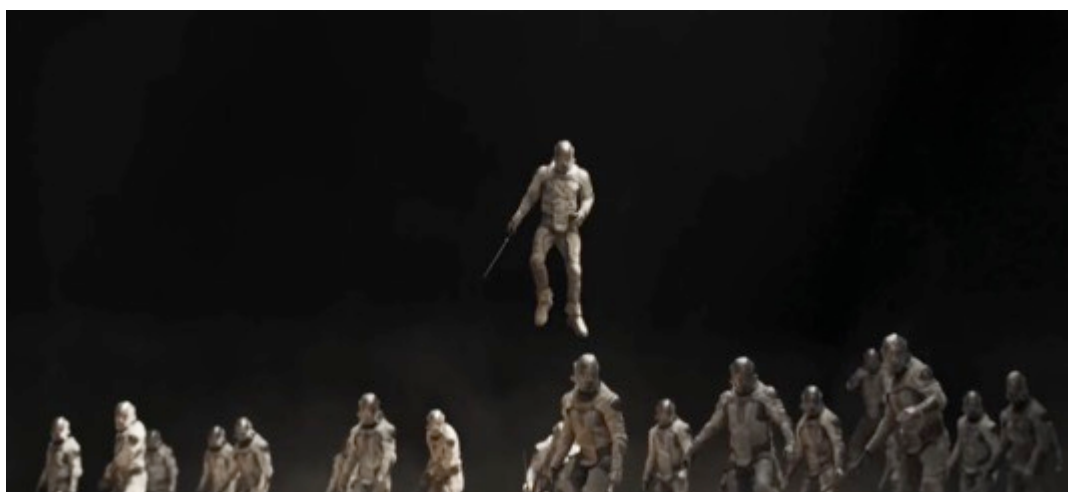
the laws of dynastic succession and the customary norms that define them, is inconceivable in a feudal world. This same inconsistency applies to Leto, who tells Paul something along the lines of “if that's what you want, I'll accept it, and I'll be equally happy because you're my son.” While Leto is described by Herbert as a more enlightened and compassionate lord, one of the few, if not the only one, in the *Dune* universe, known as “Leto the Just,” this enlightenment is not in the liberal sense and is inserted to the feudal code and rules that he has always respected. For Leto, being the Duke is not a role, task, job, or employment that he chooses to do; he “is” the Duke, as it is an inherent part of his being in the dynastic-noble logic. Leto is more enlightened than other rulers and endeavors to protect “his” people when he can, but precisely because they are “his” people and he is (more) enlightened, not because it is his duty to do so.



Another example: in the book, Jessica always addresses Leto as 'my lord', sometimes even in intimate moments. She was not always seen at his side and often not even at the table, and she never openly questioned the Duke's decisions. In the world of *Dune*, formalities must always be respected, and modernizing them would undermine the historical context of the work and its organic wholeness that gives it meaning. Conversely, the diegetic unity of the story also requires maintaining these formalities. It is in this respect that this particular scene fails to establish a benevolent image of the Atreides family, as it tries to create sympathy for Leto and his family in a contemporary, philanthropic, and progressive sense. It is no coincidence that he was often referred to as the “old Duke” even after his death, signifying a separation between him and Leto. Leto himself “hated” his father, even though he sought his approval even after his death, while as portrayed in this scene we are made to believe that his father loved him and he loved his father. However, Leto's father was truly an “evil” character, a narcissist with a tremendous personality cult, and a typical feudal lord who considered his son as his property or, at best, as an extension of himself (*spostata*). Jessica - who was bought from the Bene Gesserit by the Letho's Father evaluating her in an exhibition where she was displayed naked along with other Bene Gesserit, like cattle or commodity – also harbored hatred towards the Old Duke. Besides, this portrayal by Herbert illustrates how Leto's Father believed he had a choice in choosing Jessica, but in reality, he was manipulated by the Bene

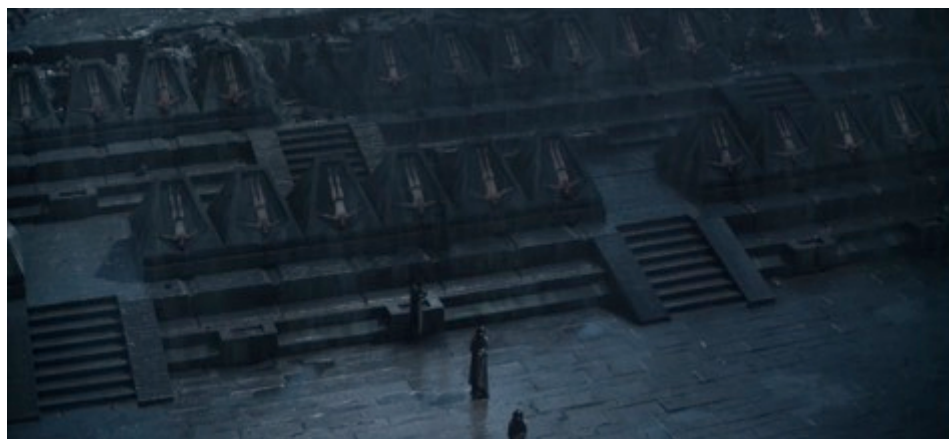
Gesserit, and he could not have chosen anyone else due to this manipulation. In the graveyard scene, we can once again see the risk we mentioned earlier, which is the potential transformation of the House of Atreides into the “good guys” and the House of Harkonnen into the “bad guys” in a manichean manner. This may be in line with the direction taken by Brian Herbert - Herbert's son - and Kevin J. Anderson, who worked on this version as a “creative consultant”, in their reworking of the *Dune* cycle with prequel and non-prequel stories, characterised in a simpler, dualistic sense.

The name “Atreides” was not chosen by Herbert randomly or for the sake of sounding cool, as with the “Vulture of Volterra” in *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer or the “Knights of Ren” in the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy by J. J. Abrams. Instead, the name was chosen purposefully to evoke the historical Atrides family and their intrigues, sins and feuds, and to emphasize that the world of *Dune* cannot be easily divided into clear-cut categories of “good” and “evil.”



Sardaukar warriors sneak into an enemy outpost.

It is also because of this precise historical setting, in Lynch, that he rightly insists on the militarism that pervades every aspect of the Houses, and which, again, Villeneuve only succeeds in letting it be 'perceived'. A feudal (Prussian) aspect of social relations that is also evident in the improper representation of the emperor's elite corps, the aforementioned Sardaukar, and which is also often aestheticized (for example, in that sort of gratuitous sacrificial ritual that obviously does not exist in the book and that is not clear – or perhaps it is too clear – what it wants to highlight and what expressive function it want to have). Because the perfect example to describe the Sardaukar is that of the Landsknechts (although, perhaps, partly inspired by the Spartans), who were willing to engage in any act of war and pillage, uncontrollable, probably overbearing, rough and boorish in everyday life, but perfectly trained, disciplined, orderly, and efficient in battle. So who did the Landsknechts respect? Only their emeperor (or Lord), as a feudal practice. They were certainly not, as *Dune* 2021 seems to suggest, a kind of barbarians and savages devoted to initiatory human sacrifices before going into battle. In *Dune* 2021 the Sardaukar, moreover, appear as a crasis between Tolkien's "Uruk-hai" – obviously those of Peter Jackson's adaptation – and the Imperial Stormtroopers of Star Wars, certainly not as an elite "mercenary" infantry of the fifteenth century.



Sardaukar (propitiatory?) sacrifices.

Many people were concerned about the potential politically correct direction the film might take, especially when the makers announced that it would emphasize the role of women. However, this is not the case, as the book itself presents women as strong and decisive characters, arguably the most powerful and decisive in the entire imaginary world. In Frank Herbert's "The emeperor-God of *Dune*" from 1981, Duncan Idaho even asks, "So tell me, Atreides: how is it possible that women are better soldiers than men?" In *Dune*, it is women who hold the real power behind the scenes, planning and orchestrating almost everymain events, while men are portrayed as almost like puppets.



Villeneuve could have done more to highlight this aspect, particularly when showcasing the combat skills of the Bene Gesserit, which are portrayed in a manner that the writer finds to be incorrect and trivial. For example, Jessica's fight with Stilgar is visualized according to the male hand-to-hand fighting style popular in the 2000s,

whereas in *Dune*, the Bene Gesserit training involves “alienating” techniques like the Weirding Way, which are otherworldly and give their fighters a distinctive and lethal edge beyond mere physical strength and ability. Because the Weirding Way is a technique of absolute superiority. In this sense, Villeneuve missed an opportunity to portray something that would have been truly captivating, based on the detailed descriptions in the book, and particularly within the visual style he has chosen for the film.

If we are looking for criticisms related to the portrayal of femininity in the film, they are more related to trivial cinematic choices rather than an improper politically correct emphasis on femininity. Firstly, the decision to give more prominence to one female character (Chani) while omitting another (Princess Irulan) without understanding the narrative advantage of such a choice. Secondly, the film depicts femininity through a modern lens of empowerment, which often equates it with physical strength and hand-to-hand combat skills, following the trends of the 2010s. This is evident in the portrayal of Jessica's Bene Gesserit skills. However, the character of Chani, despite being emphasized in the first part of the film, seems to be poorly matched by the talented Zendaya, unlike Rebecca Ferguson's flawless portrayal of Jessica Atreides and Sharon Duncan-Brewster's strong performance as Liet-Kynes. This results in a interpretation that feels irrelevant and uninspired, possibly due to the weight of expectations from Sean Young's portrayal of the same character in the 1984 film.



Finally, one of the narrative problems that seems to afflict the film is that Villeneuve creates a whole court of characters who are not-characters, and who are interchangeable, because they are not characterized at all and have a personality that is only sketched and with which the viewer cannot identify; characters who do what they do, either to reduce themselves to an expositional factor or because they are story-driven, because they have act this way to continue the story. Let's think, for example, of the Mentats – about whom it may be asked,

“and who would they be?”, precisely because only two are shown (Piter de Vries, Thufir Hawat), but are not introduced as Mentats – and all other characters such as Gurney Halleck, Iakin Nefud, head of the guards Harkonnen, Count Glossu Rabban, The Shadout Mapes etc. etc.). All characters that in Lynch's previous film, in some way and even if the screen time was always limited, had some characterization and never appeared unnecessary. And we could go on and on. All aspects and characters necessary to unravel the factions, the reasons that move them and the intrigues they always plot. And even this criticism alone – at least for those who believe that the narrative is even more important than the coolness of the images – we believe it is enough to determine that *Dune 2021* is indeed an exceptional visual experience (which risks reducing cinema to a mere visual and electronic “frame”), but only a good movie, not even an excellent one, since even taken in and of itself, it remains equally guilty of having created what we have defined as a court of non-characters, an ensemble of interchangeable and meaningless personas. Above all, however, it is a poor adaptation, and in this regard, it appears even inferior to Lynch's admittedly troubled version, whose perhaps greatest sin was the ending, completely wrong and contradictory, just like the one that, in all likelihood, would have been Jodorowsky's even more mystical and messianic finale, meaning, moreover, in the sense of the “messianism” of the Sixties. Furthermore, Lynch's version also presented more inspired costumes (which is important in this kind of film), as is the case, for example, of the Fremen costumes, perfect in 1985 with female ones baring naked arms and shoulders like in the novel. Instead, they are unisperied, and trivial in 2021, probably in order to bring them closer to a more current imagery, and thus directly evoke the *Bedouin/Tuareg* culture and/or the freedom fighters of the unilateral wars of our contemporaneity.

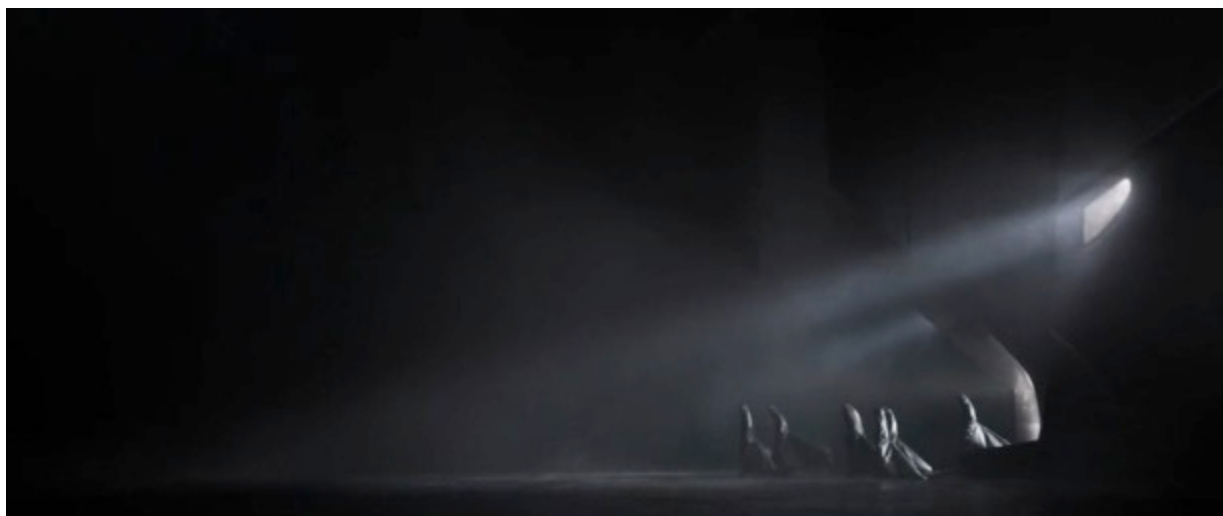


These are all critical points that seem to demonstrate, once again, that it is impossible to transpose Herbert's *Dune* without respecting its canon, especially in its strictly neo-feudal declinations, in which the events are set. This neo-feudalism is defined by precise social and cultural rules, as well as military and chivalrous codes that, even if formal, must be respected, as seen in Lynch's brief but fundamental expository scene, and – unfortunately absent in the 2021 version - of the 'kanly code'. As we mentioned in the introduction, the film's attention to detail in every scene may suggest that much has been sacrificed in the final editing to keep the

duration contained. It is possible that the choice has fallen precisely on the details that we have seen missing here, and that perhaps will find space in a later version, extended, home video; a bit like Peter Jackson did in the early 2000s for the film version of *The Lord of the Rings* (then richly expanded in later, extended home video, with several hours of additional scenes), but in that case having much more success in keeping intact the narrative and diegetic core of *Middle Earth imaginary*. Unfortunately, what we now have available is the version released in theaters, and since an Extended version of *Dune 2021* is currently only a speculation, the theatrical one appears to be almost like a “non-adaptation”.

And finally, we return to the beginning of this analysis, when we argued that Herbert's imaginary cannot be separated from its historical framework, its cultural imaginary and in general from the complex and varied court of details that define the background of the events, and that, even if transfigured in a fantasy/sci-fi sense, remain always “historically” related (in the sense of “entangled”) to each other, and therefore decisive, firm and inviolable. In fact, if the logic of a novel – be it science fiction, historical, adventure, romantic, epic etc. – is so totally organic and historically framed (in the case of *Dune*, precisely in a feudal and religious/syncretistic sense), one cannot, in an adaptation, render it, for example, as liberal/democratic in the twentieth century sense of the terms and expect, then, to succeed in maintaining intact the unity of the sense.

Because every adaptation of a renowned literary piece like *Dune*, as with any great classic, should set as its goal, beyond all the necessary creative variations from one medium to another, to preserve its sense, its unified e profound meaning, to take care of it. *Dune 2021* not only fails to do so, but it doesn't seem interested in doing it at all. For all these reasons, any attempt to simplify, ignore, embellish and drown out the precise historical, social and religious canon of the imagery of a book like *Dune*, believing, this way, to make it more enjoyable and adaptable, even to a slight extent, to a contemporary audience (thus aligning with their sensibilities) is a pursuit that – despite its visually stunning and captivating imagery – almost invariably leads to aesthetic and narrative failure, only with the result of obtaining, instead of a transposition of the book, the transposition of its back cover.



Arrival of the Bene Gesserit at House Atreides on Caladan.

Addendum

Here are some aspects that, in comparison to the book and the 1984 film, appeared to us to be problematic and/or inadequately or ambiguously represented, to varying degrees. It should be noted that these observations are based on a single viewing of the film during the preview, so it is possible that we may have missed some details. All quotations and references are taken from F. Herbert, *The Illustrated Dune*, Berkley Publishing, New York, 1978. Furthermore, it should be clarified that in these notes, as well as in the main analysis, we only consider what has been written and published by Frank Herbert.

- The role of the emeperor and his plot, which is crucial to understand the motivations of the Harkonnens, is not explained or shown adequately in the 2021 film. On the contrary, in the book, these aspects were clear from the very first pages of the book. In *Dune* 2021 this is only fleetingly hinted at in the sibylline answer of the Baron to Rabban. It appears that Villeneuve, in this first part, has decided to portray the Harkonnens as the villains, deviating from the original where they are mere pawns of the emeperor. In the book, the emeperor is the one who plans the attack against House Atreides and uses the Harkonnens to carry it out, as Leto is well aware of beforehand (F. Herbert, *Dune*, pp. 43-45). However, in *Dune* 2021, this is not evident and it seems to be the opposite: the Harkonnens are portrayed as using the emeperor for their own purposes. In reality, the emeperor saw the Duke's ambitions as a threat, particularly his popularity in the Landsraad (the assembly of nobles houses) and the strength of the new Atreides army, trained by Duncan Idaho and Gurney Halleck with innovative methods. A House Atreides with an army equal to, if not stronger than, that of the emeperor could potentially unite the great Houses against the Empire. In the 2021 film, there is a subtle inversion from the book that suggests the Harkonnens are the ones manipulating the emeperor for their own intrigues. This is depicted by the idea that the Harkonnens are portrayed as being richer than the emeperor, whereas in Herbert's original, the emeperor was immensely wealthier than the Harkonnens. In the book, the emeperor owns 51% of the stock of CHOAM (the most powerful monopoly/corporation managing all commercial transactions in the known universe), allowing him to control its board and economic transactions, and thereby entitled him to the lion share of the profits. The other Houses shared less than 50% based on their respective quotas. This subtle inversion in the film suggest that the Harkonnens are

portrayed as having more economic power and influence than the emeperor, indicating a deviation from the original source material. And that's why the Harkonnens were eager to obtain a place on the CHOAM board (which was promised to them by the emeperor as a reward for their assistance), in the hope of surpassing the wealth of every other House in the Empire, except for the emeperor himself. Herbert is clear in the novel that the emeperor goes to Arrakis with his entire court, including jesters, ladies-in-waiting, and his entire army with ten legions of Sardaukar, as shown in the last part of the novel and also depicted in the 1984 film. This is an incredibly expensive undertaking in the world of *Dune*, as hinted at in *Dune 2021* when Leto questions the cost of such an extravagant trip (i.e. that of Herald of The Change) for a seemingly trivial purpose. However, these hints are not fully explained or elaborated upon in the film, leaving viewers to wonder how the Harkonnens could have afforded such expenses. Paul even questions in the novel how the Harkonnens managed to transport their entire army to Arrakis, considering the exorbitant costs involved in such a transfer in *Dune's* currency. The Harkonnens were able to transfer their army to Arrakis by utilizing their reserves of spice as payment. However, this depleted their wealth to the extent that the Baron had to give away his riches to ensure the troops' transport, as mentioned in a brief dialogue between the Baron and Rabban in *Dune 2021*. In contrast, the emeperor had such vast wealth that he could afford an even more extravagant transfer, seemingly just for the sake of it, merely to display his power and opulence. Paul himself considers this display of wealth by the emeperor to be excessive and out of proportion. This discrepancy in wealth is crucial to understand the difference in magnitude between the emeperor and one of the Houses, like the Harkonnens, who, while powerful and wealthy, do not possess comparable riches as the emeperor, as depicted in the book.

- CHOAM (*Combine Honnete Ober Advancer Mercantiles*), a crucial element in the imaginative world of *Dune*, is practically never mentioned in *Dune 2021*. However, CHOAM represents two significant aspects in the *Dune* universe. Firstly, it symbolizes the driving force behind the entire economy of *Dune* - profit, as explained by the Harkonnens in the opening pages of the book (F. Herbert, *Dune*, p. 20). Secondly, it exemplifies the corporate monopolism that pervades the known universe of *Dune*, in addition to feudalism and militarism, which was perceived as a potential nightmare in the near future during the 1960s by many readers. CHOAM naturally holds the monopoly over spice trade and its distribution (as well as a significant portion of the economic transactions in the universe), and this drives one of the central themes of *Dune*, which is that this monopoly rests on a constantly precarious balance. The monopoly inevitably leads to stagnation, and stagnation, of course, breeds instability. In fact, there is a scene in the book during the decisive battle where Paul and Stilgar wait to see which banner the emeperor would raise – that House of Atreides or House of Harkonnen. However, the emeperor surprisingly raises the banner of CHOAM, indicating that the profit and interests of CHOAM outweigh the significance of individual Houses (F. Herbert, *Dune*, p. 454). This importance of CHOAM is evident from the beginning of the book when Feyd-Rautha realizes that the political intrigues of *Dune* revolve around wealth. He notes that each Noble House seeks to gain from CHOAM's coffers by using its directorial powers, and CHOAM directorates serve as a sign of effective power in the empire, balancing the

authority of the emperor and his supporters in the Landsraad (F. Herbert, *Dune*, p. 20).

- The Spacing Guild, which plays a crucial role in the events of *Dune*, seems to have disappeared in *Dune* 2021, as it is hardly mentioned except for a scene involving the emperor's Herald and some Navigators with orange visorhead helmets. However, the significance of these helmets is not explained in the film. In the original story, the helmets appeared orange because they contain the gas derived from the Spice, which allows them to foresee the routes for interstellar travel. This important aspect is not clearly conveyed in the visuals of *Dune* 2021, as the helmets appear to be just orange without proper context. Furthermore, the critical role of the Spacing Guild's monopoly of interstellar travel, is not adequately explained or depicted in *Dune* 2021. The portrayal of the Space Guild's Heighliner, which is supposed to be a massive spaceship, is also wrong as it appears as a kind of “cannoli” or a hole in space, resembling a wormhole at best, and those not clearly conveying its function as a cargo ship to those unfamiliar with the original story. This omission may leave viewers with a limited understanding of the Spacing Guild's significance in the *Dune* universe as well as the mechanics of interstellar travel powered by the Spice. Compared to the intricately designed “ornithopters” in *Dune* 2021, which are truly a masterpiece and reminiscent of Jodorowsky's vision and the 1992 *Dune* video game, the design of the Heighliner of the Space Guild appears lacking in meaning. In Lynch's previous film adaptation of *Dune*, despite being visually problematic, excessive, and seemingly overly baroque, the gothic design of the Heighliner made more sense as it was in line with the symbolic context of a feudal society where aesthetics and symbolism held great significance, sometimes even more than functionality. During the late Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Baroque eras, aesthetics served a dual purpose of functionality and symbolism. The aesthetics of wealth and power were often represented through beauty, marvel, and grandeur. Feudal lords, who possessed wealth and power, used aesthetics as a means to showcase their status. In this context, the portrayal of the Heighliner in Lynch's film, though visually extravagant, aligns with the symbolism of feudal aesthetics where the depiction of power was often grandiose, awe-inspiring, and at times even intimidating. In summary, the representation of the Heighliner in *Dune* 2021 seems to lack the symbolic significance and contextual coherence that the design in Lynch's film had, which reflected the feudal aesthetics of the *Dune* universe where beauty, marvel, and grandeur were integral to the portrayal of wealth and power. For this reason, the minimal and stylish aesthetics of *Dune* 2021 fail to capture the baroque aspect of feudal aesthetics. As a result, Villeneuve's film conveys the concept of feudalism, but does not visually dramatize it, unlike the 1984 film that fully succeeded in doing so. This is evident from the representation of the Heighliner of the Space Guild, which is depicted with a titanic baroque entrance. While Herbert's texts do not provide a detailed description of the Heighliner, the 1984 *Dune* Encyclopedia, approved by Herbert, describes it as having a spherical shape, in contrast to the cylindrical shape depicted in all film and television representations (see W. E. McNelly (ed.), *The Dune Encyclopedia*, Berkley Books, New York, 1984, p. 635). The question remains the same: the visualization of the Heighliner should always reflect the imagery in which it is inserted, in our opinion. Another fundamental difference we perceive between Lynch's design and Villeneuve's is that the Heighliner is portrayed as a cargo ship,

and an “empty” cargo ship does not seem logical, as it raises questions about where the cargo would be loaded and where the bays, compartments, and rooms would be located. Thus, it appears that coolness has taken precedence over logic in Villeneuve's design.

By omitting the Spacing Guild, the emperor, and CHOAM from the script, *Dune* 2021 reinforces the notion that the story primarily revolves around the rivalry between House Atreides (the good guys) and House Harkonnen (the bad guys), depicting it as a mostly “personal” feud (which is partially true), rather than acknowledging that both are mere pawns in a larger game governed by the sole objective of wealth and profit. Will this be highlighted in the second part? Perhaps, even though it would require introducing numerous information and descriptions by that point. Nevertheless, even if that was the case, what would be the purpose of moving them to Part 2? Is it an attempt to create artificial plot twists? Considering that *Dune* is a saga that is almost sixty years old and widely known, the crux of the matter is that, as repeatedly emphasized, it is not an action-thriller novel, and plot twists (as they are understood in 21st-century cinema) hold (almost) no significance, mainly because they are scarce, given that (almost) everything in the novel is clearly explained before events unfold. Furthermore, even if that was the intention, what are the expectations? That during the years between the first and second parts, those who were intrigued by the first part will not read the novels, watch Lynch's film, or seek further information?

- The symbol of Imperial Conditioning is depicted through the “tattoo” on Dr. Yueh in *Dune* 2021, but it is never mentioned nor its function explained, unlike in Lynch's film, where it was clearly depicted as an expression of Suk Medical School's Imperial Conditioning. The question of how the Harkonnens managed to break the Suk conditioning on Dr. Yueh is left unanswered, and Dr. Yueh's motivations, which are crucial to the entire first part of the novel, are simplified to the extent that the tragic aspects are sacrificed. Without clarifying the issue of the broken Suk conditioning and its feasibility, Dr. Yueh's Machiavellian and convoluted plan to kill the Baron becomes nearly incomprehensible.
- The portrayal of Bene Gesserit's secrets in *Dune* 2021 does not seem to have been handled in the most effective way. Firstly, it is curious that a faction which has made secrecy its most powerful weapon would expose its true purpose so openly, as seen in the film. The true purpose of the Bene Gesserit, as depicted in *Dune* 2021, is not to serve, but to manipulate events from behind the scenes in order to place a supreme being (“Kwisatz Haderach”) under their complete control on the throne. This is not just for the sake of power, but because they believe that no one else would be capable of handling it. However, if the world were to learn of Bene Gesserit's true purpose, they would likely attempt to eliminate them all. One might wonder how this would be possible, considering the strength of the Bene Gesserit. While it may take ten or more Sardaukar to defeat a single Bene Gesserit, especially a Reverend Mother or the Reverend Mother Superior who possess immense power even among the Bene Gesserit, there are vastly more Sardaukar than Bene Gesserit. Furthermore, in *Dune* 2021, it is stated that the complex plan to create the “Kwisatz Haderach” and gain control of the empire is aimed at improving living conditions and welfare in the

universe. However, it is not clearly specified that this improvement is not related to the welfare of society as a whole, as one might misunderstand, but rather to the less noble goal of improving the Bene Gesserit's own genetic lines. This is evident from another crucial aspect of the *Dune* world that is not properly conveyed in *Dune 2021*, which is the *gom jabbar*, the needle used by the Reverend Mother to test Paul. In the film, it is mentioned that the «gom jabbar» only kills animals, as the test is not only about testing one's abilities or endurance, but also about determining if one is genetically “purely” human and thus eligible to become the “Kwisatz Haderach” and preserve Bene Gesserit's genetic lines.

- The development of mental faculties through the use of a psychoactive drug that enhances perceptive abilities, as opposed to reliance on calculating machines, is only hinted at through fragments of dialogue.
- Why does such a technologically advanced society fight with melee weapons, like swords? In *Dune 2021*, in order to understand it, one must either be lucky enough not to miss a very quick mention, and know how to interpret it, or one must already know the answer, which is that the Holtzman shields (the ones that are activated with the bracelet on the wrist, and which are very well visualized in *Dune 2021*) make high speed weapons (bullets and/or other projectile weapons) useless, and can only be penetrated by slow weapons, as bladed weapons are. Also, in this case the 2021 movie leaves the viewer almost in the dark, especially when towards the end it shows Paul holding a sort of gun (which should be a Maula gun, i.e., a spring-loaded gun that shoots poisonous darts, the same, we believe, that is used against Leto). But, then, one might think, if they are there, why during the Harkonnen invasion does no one use them? Because Paul in that case has in front of him the Fremen, who, as the 2021 movie also makes clear, cannot use the Holtzman technology in the desert; this is because it can be activated only for short periods, since the harmonic vibrations they generate can attract Sandworms and sandstorms (such as those that are defined as Coriolis storms) affect its functioning, short-circuiting it. Furthermore, lasers could be dangerous, since the impact of a laser on Holtzman shields could create violent explosions caused by what are defined as unexpected “subatomic fusions”. This is why in the desert we see the Sardaukar carrying lasers that were useless in the assault on the fortress, against armies with very advanced technology that possessed integral Holtzman shields. And all of this, without forgetting that despite this, *Dune 2021*, during the Harkonnen's assault on the Atreides, in certain frames mistakenly depicts ships engaging in combat and using “laser” or “particle” weapons, which is absurd and extremely dangerous for the aforementioned reasons. In fact, the Great Houses had protections based on Holtzman technology (which is also visually portrayed in *Dune 2021* when the ships protected by Holtzman shields come into contact with laser/particle shots), rendering such attacks useless and, indeed, extremely perilous.
- We have emphasized multiple times that technology in *Dune* is highly advanced, with its only limitation being the exorbitant cost associated with obtaining it, which is typically prohibitive for anyone other than the empereror, and less extent, the great Houses. For instance, in *Dune 2021*, it is mentioned that there is no satellite control on Arrakis, but the reasons behind it are not explained. However, the book makes it clear that the cost of obtaining satellite control from the Spacing Guild would be astronomical, making it unaffordable for the Atreides (F. Herbert, *Dune*, p. 30). Additionally, the Fremen pay colossal amounts of money to the Guild to prevent atmospheric satellite control on Arrakis, thus keeping certain things hidden. This

explanation could have been included in the film with just a few seconds of dialogue, clarifying why satellite control is absent on Arrakis.

- In the book, Mentats are considered essential, but in *Dune* 2021, they are shown without being named or explained. In the book, Thufir Hawat recognizes Paul's potential and even proposes him to develop Mentat abilities, as a Mentat Duke would have been a valuable resource for House Atreides. However, in *Dune* 2021, there are characters with painted lips and sometimes white eyes, but it is unclear why they look and behave that way. The significance of their aesthetic with painted lips and their occasionally white eyes is not explained, leaving viewers without any context or understanding. The lack of explanation makes it difficult for viewers to comprehend the meaning or purpose behind the appearances and actions of these characters. In Lynch's film, on the other hand, it was understood that the Mentats were extensively used by all the Houses as political advisors, heads of security, and/or Masters of Assassins, and they were so because they functioned as “human computers” (in *Dune* 2021, their eyes turn white, we believe, to imply that they process data at a speed normally impossible for non-Mentats). This is because in the reality of the 10,000s in *Dune*, computers were not used, as they had been banned following a bloody revolt against machines (Butlerian Jihad). In Lynch's film, Mentats were depicted with lips-stained ruby red, indicating their use of “Sapho extract” to enhance their thinking abilities in organizing and processing vast amounts of data. The iconic mantra, “It is by will alone I set my mind in motion. It is by the juice of Sapho that thoughts acquire speed, the lips acquire stains, the stains become a warning. It is by will alone I set my mind in motion,” was created in Lynch's film to provide an explanatory context for the Mentats in a concise and memorable way. However, in *Dune* 2021, these explanations and iconic depictions are not present, leaving viewers without a clear understanding of the significance of Mentats' appearance and actions.



- As we have already said, the Sardaukar (of whom it is unclear why they should speak another language and not the typical imperial) are aestheticized in a way that we feel is not correct at all; to the point where we sometimes disregard the logic not only of the book, but also of the film itself. But this is not only because they now look like Uruk-hai in Star Wars imperial stormtrooper armor, the white ones (which also serve as a cross nudge with the “white hand” from The Lord of the Rings, i.e.

Saruman, who was the one the Uruk-hai served). Moreover, Villeneuve seems to incur in the same error that already distinguished Lynch's movie, that in the attack against House Atreides it show the Sardaukar not in Harkonnen uniforms, but with their owns, while the book is very clear about this: the Sardaukar wear Harkonnen uniforms, and for several good reasons. In Herbert's book, the Sardaukar are not depicted as wearing armor like they are shown in the film. In fact, their uniforms are described as black and "light," taking inspiration from Prussian uniforms as represented in the *Dune Encyclopedia* [W. E. McNelly (ed.), *The Dune Encyclopedia*, pp. 612–613]. The reason for the lightness of their uniforms is explained in the book as being strategic, as heavy armor would hinder their hand-to-hand combat skills and are made superfluous by the Holtzman shields, which are crucial in their fighting techniques involving swords and hand-to-hand combat. In the *Dune* 2021 film, Duncan (moreover, he is a well-written character, unlike others, in accordance with the text, despite the explicit attempt to create an unlikely parallel with Han Solo) answers when asked if he was sure it was Sardaukar, "when you cross a sword with a Sardaukar you realize it." This statement would only make sense if the Sardaukar were wearing Harkonnen uniforms to avoid being recognized, as it is described in the book and logical to assume. This suggests that Duncan was able to recognize them by their fighting skills, as the Sardaukar involved in the plot against the Atreides would not have needed to show their involvement openly by wearing their uniforms/armor, which would explicitly indicate the emperor's involvement (unless they were planning to eliminate all witnesses). Lastly, the suits seen in the film appear too bulky and massive, and in some cases, such as the Atreides troops, they are armored (suits that might fit, for example, in a universe and aesthetic like that of the Mass Effect video game)."



Sardaukar ready for combat, albeit in a suit that appears too bulky, as well as useless.

- Why was Feyd–Rautha, the character in 1984 played by Sting, eliminated from this first part? Feyd–Rautha is an important character in many ways, since she had a direct “rivalry” with Paul Atreides; also because in the big picture – which he could not know because it was one of the Bene Gesserit’s secrets – in place of Paul there should have been a female daughter with whom he should have married.
- You have more than three hours of film at your disposal, but you don't give space to the fundamental parts of the book (and important for describing the *Dune* universe) in

which the Atreides try to rule Arrakis and to do so they have to talk to all the local potentates.

- Compared to Lynch's film, the Harkonnens no longer have red hair in Villeneuve's *Dune*. In the book only the Baron had red hair, and that too as a young man. However, in Lynch's film, red hair was an interesting expressive choice, serving as a decisive and visually prominent detail for exposition. It could be argued that ultimately, these are personal expressive choices, which is also true. However, Lynch wanted to emphasize the importance of red hair as a distinctive sign of Harkonnens bloods, as Jessica – who is the Baron illegitimate daughter – also has red hair for this specific reason. Thus, the visual cues indicating Jessica's kinship with the Harkonnens are lost in Villeneuve's adaptation. The red hair could have served as a visual detail that immediately conveys the relationship between the houses and confirms Jessica's Harkonnen heritage to the viewers. However, Villeneuve still chooses to follow Lynch's decision, which is to give the Harkonnens a distinctive feature, but instead of making them all have red hair, he chooses to make them all bald. As one can infer, though, while Lynch's choice of red hair had a specific visual and narrative purpose, Villeneuve's choice seems to be merely cosmetic and thus diegetically pointless, seemingly aimed at visually conveying the malevolence of the Harkonnens through a somewhat vampiric aesthetic.
- What about the religious aspect? Where did it go in *Dune* 2021? Religion plays a crucial role in *Dune*, to the extent that many consider the entire literary cycle to be a sort of extensive religious commentary. Herbert's intricate and often fanatical religious syncretism, particularly as seen in Fremen culture, exemplifies the depth of religion in the world of *Dune*. The Fremen are believed to be descended from the diaspora of Zensunni monks who were persecuted by other religions in the universe. But who are the Zensunni? They are a syncretistic fusion of Zen Buddhism and Sunni Islamism. Unlike a mere superficial attempt to impress viewers, Herbert's narrative context in *Dune* is carefully detailed and seamlessly integrates these complex religious elements. Similarly, the Orange Catholic Bible in *Dune* encompasses all the religions of the universe, each providing its own version that has been merged into a single entity. This underscores the depth and intricacy of Herbert's world-building, where clarity is not achieved through simplification, but through carefully considered and thought-provoking exploration. Because that's what *Dune* is all about - not just a story of dynastic revenge, but a richly layered tale that delves into profound themes.
- In the book, the main characters are constantly engaging in inner dialogues, which Lynch understood well and thus gave voice to their thoughts in the 1984 adaptation. The characters are often shown thinking and their dialogues are actually their internal monologues or reasoning. Villeneuve, however, chose not to do so in the 2021 adaptation, possibly considering it an outdated cinematic technique. He believed that the dialogues should mainly be expressions of conversations between characters. The problem, however, is that this approach does not always work for *Dune*. For instance, the scene with the assassin seeker, as constructed by Villeneuve, becomes incomprehensible to viewers who do not already know what is happening, because Paul's thoughts are not externalized. Paul recognizes what the seeker is and why he should remain motionless (i.e. because the seeker is sensing movements), but no

details are offered that can help the viewer understand the rationale of the device and the situation.

- Paul Atreides possesses many abilities that are only hinted at in the film, such as his extensive training, including the use of the voice, and his natural aptitude for things that others have to learn. However, these aspects are presented in a condensed manner, leaving little clarity as to their origins. It's not explicitly stated that these abilities are the result of rigorous mental and physical training, involving conditioning of nervous and muscular reflexes, and much more sophisticated than those depicted in the 2021 film, such as the ability to see into the future and use the voice with confidence. This lack of clarity is also evident in the representation of combat techniques, such as Paul's and Jessica's hand-to-hand combat skills against Fremen. Villeneuve seems to have missed the opportunity to showcase visually effective combat techniques that could have been visually effective in the context of the film he chose to make. Consider these techniques should have been portrayed as they were in the text, with Paul and Jessica moving without appearing to move, almost as if they were appearing and disappearing, which is not something supernatural, but rather the result of extraordinary control that makes their movements resemble that of water, leaving a series of residual images in the adversary's retina that no longer correspond to where they actually are. To clarify how this could be visualized, we would like to use a nerd/otaku reference - this is how it was done in the [Mosou Tensei technique](#) in the manga/anime *Hokuto No Ken* (technique in Italian translated freely, but efficiently, as "[transmigration through Satori](#)"), where physical strength is unimportant and only experience and pain matter. In Herbert's work, this technique is known as the prana-bindu technique - the emptiness inside the mind and reality itself. It is an alienating technique (prana-bindu or Weirding Way as Fremen call it) because it involves separating oneself from oneself, not giving any sign of what one wants to do, but simply doing it. By mastering prana-bindu, there is no longer a distinction between what one wants to do and what one does. The weirding way/prana-bindu technique, in fact, is characterized by the absence of intention and the presence of movement. It is a movement that is not born from intention. Instead, it involves acting with reflexes so perfect that they respond in an almost "automatic" way, precise to the thousandth of a second, to everything in the surrounding environment. This is because, upon reaching the emptiness inside oneself, the intention is no longer expressed in any way, and the movements appear as if they were one, flowing like water, leaving the opponent with residual images of something that has already moved elsewhere. This technique will be taken to the extreme by the "enemies" of the Bene Gesserit, the "Honored Matres", thousands of years after the events narrated in the first book of *Dune*. As told in *Heretics of Dune*, they will perfect it to the point where they have sped up their nerve and muscle responses, and the thoughts of movement will come directly from neuromotor plates and neuromuscular spindles, thus making the technique even faster and more extreme. On the contrary, in the representation of *Dune* 2021 (which is also managed through an editing that seems a bit confusing, as it is not clear who is doing what), Jessica's technique is reduced to basic moves and flips, often appearing as useless movements (not only in the context of the film...). Even in this case, it falls short in direct comparison with the visualizations in *Dune* 1984, which may also be questionable, but in their simplicity,

bordering on banality, succeeded better in conveying the idea of the prana-bindu or Weirding Way.

- We mentioned that, even though Leto in the book is considered a more positive character compared to the other lords, this should not make us think of him as a sort of “benevolent and progressive ruler in the liberal sense of the term”. In order to better render this aspect, we quote from the book a dialogue between him and Jessica: «“No.” The word rang flat and final, telling her she could use trickery to persuade, but open argument was useless. Still, she had to try, even if the gesture served only to remind herself that she would not trick him. “My Lord,” she said, “if you’d only... “ “The answer remains no. I indulge you shamefully in most things, not in this. I’ve just come from the dining hall where there are —” “My Lord! Please.” “The choice is between your digestion and my ancestral dignity, my dear,” he said. “They will hang in the dining hall.” She sighed. “Yes, my Lord.” “You may resume your custom of dining in your rooms whenever possible. I shall expect you at your proper position only on formal occasions.” “Thank you, my Lord.” “And don’t go all cold and formal on me! Be thankful that I never married you, my dear. Then it’d be your duty to join me at table for every meal.” » (F. Herbert, *Dune*, p. 53). A little later, on p. 52, Jessica's feelings towards Leto's father, the old Duke, are clearly expressed: «Jessica turned away, faced the painting of Leto’s father. It had been done by the famed artist, Albe, during the Old Duke’s middle years. He was portrayed in matador costume with a magenta cape flung over his left arm. The face looked young, hardly older than Leto’s now, and with the same hawk features, the same gray stare. She clenched her fists at her sides, glared at the painting. “Damn you! Damn you! Damn you!” she whispered».



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