

NOT EVEN WRONG: VILLENEUVE'S DUNE FLAWED AND DISJOINTED JOURNEY.

DUNE PART TWO (VILLENEUVE, 2024), OR THE CURSE OF «AUTEUR FLICKS» IN THE AGE OF «RULE OF COOL».

by Lorenzo Marras



WARNING: This analysis contains “SPOILERS” about the events and characters, and it is recommended to read “only after” having watched the film or if you are already familiar with the original work. Like the analysis of the first part, this too is the result of many discussions over the years with Dr. Stefano Mannino about Herbert, *Dune*, and its cinematic adaptations, whom we would like to thank again here.

«Now the Harkonnens were leaving to be replaced by the House of Atreides in fief-complete—an apparent victory for the Duke Leto. Yet, Hawat had said, this appearance contained the deadliest peril, for the Duke Leto was popular among the Great Houses of the Landsraad. **“A popular man arouses the jealousy of the powerful,”** Hawat had said. [...] The Padishah emperor turned against House Atreides because the Duke’s Warmasters Gurney Halleck and Duncan Idaho had trained a fighting force—a small fighting force—to within a hair as good as the Sardaukar. Some of them were even better. And the **Duke was in a position to enlarge his force, to make it every bit as strong as the emperor’s**».

Thufir Hawat, on why the emperor decided to eliminate Duke Leto and House Atreides (F. Herbert, *Dune*, 1965).¹

«Your father is a man **who believed in the rules of the heart**. But the heart is not meant to rule. In other words, **your father was a weak man**».

emperor Shaddam IV reveals to Paul why he decided to eliminate Duke Leto and House Atreides (D. Villeneuve, *Dune Part Two*, 2024).

¹ F. Herbert, *The Illustrated Dune*, Berkley Publishing, New York, 1978, p.4 & p. 375

«Because we're not a civilization anymore. We are a gang. And we're on the run. And we have to fight to survive! We have to break rules! We have to bend laws! We have to improvise! But not this time. No. Not this time. Not for Gaius Baltar. No. You! You have to die. **You have to die because, well, because we don't like you very much.** Because you're arrogant. Because you're weak. [...] ! That's justice! This case... This case is built on emotion. On anger. Bitterness. Vengeance.».

[Apollo Adama defends Gaius Baltar](#), *Battlestar Galactica*, Season 3, Ep. 20 (2007).

In 2021, the first part of Denis Villeneuve's new cinematic rendition of Frank Herbert's *Dune* was released, receiving accolades from many as an outstanding adaptation and film in its own right. Villeneuve, who openly expressed his admiration for Herbert's *Dune* and aimed to create the most faithful adaptation possible, was deemed successful where David Lynch's 1984 adaptation had fallen short.

In a detailed analysis from September 2021 – [Future Mythologies](#) –, we endeavored to articulate our dissent with the frequently laudatory appraisals of Villeneuve's rendition. Contrary to prevailing sentiment, we contended that despite its nearly threefold longer runtime compared to Lynch's compressed and convoluted adaptation, Villeneuve's *Dune* not only failed to address its issues but exacerbated them. Paradoxically, this resulted in an even more confounding adaptation, likely leaving viewers unfamiliar with the novels (or the 1984 version) struggling to grasp essential aspects of the original work. These facets, however, had contributed to its acclaim and established its status as a classic of twentieth-century literature. The 2021 analysis was long and detailed, similar to what we present now, because the essence of *Dune* lies not so much in the plot or character development but in its details. Without those details, *Dune* isn't *Dune*. The 2021 rendition of *Dune* featured numerous, often inscrutable cuts, simplifications, condensations, inappropriate updates, and non-characterized characters, ultimately presenting a version of Herbert's *Dune* mythology that was trivially Manichaean and sanitized to the point of being sugar-coated, like a Disney-fied adaptation. This led us to the sobering conclusion that what had been achieved was not so much a faithful adaptation of the book as it was a rendition of its back cover blurb.

However, it was suggested that judgment should be reserved until the release of the second part, which would presumably address all the criticisms of the first. After two and a half years, the second part is now in theaters, yet it shows that not even the back cover blurb of Herbert's *Dune* has been adapted. If the production of *Dune Part 2* (hereafter referred to as *Dune 2024*) asserts that at the core of *Dune* lies a «timeless conflict between the forces of good and evil»² and has thus shaped these films accordingly, it signifies (if the intention was really to create a version faithful to the logic of Herbert's Novel) a profound misunderstanding

² «Exploring both current and timeless themes, from romantic and maternal love to globalism, loyalty, vengeance, and catharsis, “*Dune - Part Two*” delves into author Frank Herbert's ecological themes in this tale of humanity versus nature. At the heart of the action lies a timeless conflict between the forces of good and evil. On one side are the Fremen, a representation of humanity fighting for the collective survival of the natives and the planet Arrakis. On the other side are the Harkonnen, a manifestation of corruption, violence, and greed. Their encounter is the conflicted story of Paul Atrides, who relies on the fierceness of Chani and the wisdom of Stilgar to gain the trust and support of the Fremen people, while the Harkonnen continue to ravage the sands of Arrakis for Spice - though their efforts do not go unopposed, further enraging them and leading to total war.».
Dune Part Two Press Book, Warner Bros. Pictures & Legendary Pictures, 2024.

of Herbert's Dune. Are themes like romantic and maternal love, and the eternal conflict between good and evil, truly the main ones in Herbert's Dune? From what we know, no. Following this logic, Herbert's intricate universe could only be misrepresented, turning it to a disappointingly simplistic and childish (albeit Rated PG-13) version of some Star Wars episodes.

In this context – that is, 'Dune 2024' does not practically address any of the issues highlighted in 'Future Mythologies' – we proceed as follows:

A) We will not reiterate—except in a concise and definitive manner—what was extensively discussed and analyzed there, which obviously remains applicable to 'Dune 2024.'

B) We will not specify again the herbertian terminology already explained there, to which we may refer.

C) Furthermore, we will not dwell on what was previously discussed in 2021 regarding the general production value of the film. 'Dune 2024,' akin to its predecessor, maintains visual impressiveness, with often spectacular solutions and occasionally truly 'stunning' scenes, rendering it unnecessary to reiterate this point here. Specifically, we refer to certain scenes featuring highly sophisticated image construction (for instance, the early flight of the Harkonnen vanguards to find shelter from the incoming sandworms), the various destructions of the spice extraction machinery (captured in a manner that perfectly amplifies their imposing scale), the stylized and monochromatic visualization of Giedi Prime, the 'rides' of the sandworms, and the destruction of the Shield Wall in the battle of Arrakeen through the use of atomics—scenes that exhibit incredible visual impact and are characterized by a notably high 'coolness' factor. The only issue that's got us raising an eyebrow is that the scenes featuring the most spectacular special effects are now reduced, even compared to the previous installment, to mere glimpses. The highly anticipated Arrakeen battle is condensed into a teaser lasting roughly three minutes in total (with half of the coolest scenes already showcased in the trailers). That being said, the same strengths and limitations of Villeneuve's aesthetics highlighted in 2021 also apply to "Dune 2024".



Atomic Sublime on Arrakeen

Moreover, given that the critique of ‘Dune 2021’ remains valid for ‘Dune 2024’ as well, it is also true that the pivotal part of the novel ‘Dune’ was precisely the first, wherein the entire imaginary was outlined, while the second part, despite offering essential additions and insights, focused more on the adventurous (‘action’ as we would say today) aspects of the story. For this reason, it was not difficult to imagine that the second part, having failed to adapt the preceding one, would not resolve its issues. Therefore, in this analysis, we will only concentrate on some essential points to provide an opportunity for reflection on the contemporary cultural industry’s trend, increasingly detrimental to cinema and viewers, of elevating certain directors to the status of genuine ‘great authors.’ This industry, exemplified by films like ‘Dune 2024,’ seems to want to make us believe we are facing the new Ophüls, Tarkovskys, Malicks, Bergmans, Kubricks, Godards, Coppolas, Scorseses, Herzogs, etc., when in reality, the cultural and artistic shallowness of many of these new ‘auteur flicks’ fails to elevate them beyond the level of talented craftsmen, incapable of offering anything resembling authentic cinematic art, art of the visible, as was definable until the 1980s. Because the problem, the curse we might say, of contemporary cinema is precisely this aesthetic and critical nebulosity that makes films that until the 1980s, and at best, would have been considered excellent flicks for a general audience are now proposed – to an audience increasingly anaesthetized by an aesthetics of coolness as invasive as it is end in itself – as adult and “artistic” works, if not as masterpieces worthy of being placed alongside the great classics of cinema history. The idea seems to be that it would be safer, from a commercial and economic standpoint, not so much to make an auteur film that can also be a great commercial success (this was the failed idea of the New Hollywood of the 1970s), but to make a film that looks and is classified as such, not that it is. What is being sold with the linguistic monstrosity “auteur flicks,” that is, is the perception of value (auteurship), its promise, not the auteurial value itself.



[Florence Pugh](#) as [Princess Irulan](#)

Indeed, ‘Dune 2021/2024’ serves as a paradigmatic example of this critical dumbing down. In “Future Mythologies,” we argued that while books can delve deep into character complexities and their interactions within a vast narrative scope, movies must strike a balance between being true to the source material and crafting an engaging, comprehensible cinematic experience for a broad audience. This often necessitates simplifications and reinterpretations when adapting a book to film, driven by factors such as pacing, character development, and visual storytelling. Yet, as highlighted in “Future Mythologies,” this general acceptance of adaptation liberties does not apply to Herbert’s “Dune.” But Dune 2024, with some choices in the finale of the second part, seems to go far beyond the usual shortcomings of a cinematic adaptation of a complex literary work like Dune. In fact, Dune 2024 not only fails, and in our opinion multiple times, to convey or reinterpret the crucial aspects of the original from which it draws inspiration, but with the ending it goes as far as to configure a situation where the failure in its understanding and the total reversal of Herbert's logic and intentions appear so radical, even contradictory, as to lead to a result that renders the film not even worthy of a evaluative comparison with the original according to ordinary critical parameters.



[Timothée Chalamet](#) as [Paul Atreides](#)

In ‘Future Mythologies,’ what criticisms did we level against ‘Dune 2021’? To begin, we pointed out that Herbert’s universe was intricately designed as a neo-feudal society equipped with advanced technology, characterized by strict Prussian-style militarism, and deeply immersed in a mix of religious syncretism and corporate monopolism. It was a world that escaped the simplistic and juvenile dichotomy of good versus evil. In this respect, ‘Dune 2021’ notably falls short. The film struggles to transmit the essence of Herbert’s rich worldbuilding, which is the cornerstone of Dune’s identity. Additionally, it oversimplifies the narrative, reducing it to a common story of dynastic revenge and a binary conflict between good and evil. This rendition may leave the audience impressed, perhaps even overwhelmed, by the production’s splendor, yet fundamentally unengaged. Dune’s enduring appeal as a classic (noted as a key inspiration for George Lucas’s ‘Star Wars’ and the “main” source for George R. R. Martin’s ‘A Song of Ice and Fire’) stems from its worldbuilding that prompts reflection on a multitude of contemporary issues—social, ethical, economic, political, and also philosophical, theological, and mystical. As we extensively argued in ‘Future Mythologies’ back in 2021, without Herbert’s meticulous worldbuilding, Dune ceases to be Dune. The team behind ‘Dune 2021-2024,’ fearing audience alienation, seeming to opt to follow the video games design strategy, dubbed ‘Keep It Simple, Stupid’ (KISS). This decision effectively dismantled Herbert’s complex world, aiming to produce a story that is as mainstream, casual, and superficial as possible. In order to turn Dune 2021/2024 into a blockbuster, the creators opted to exclude any reference to the complex economic and commercial events pivotal to Herbert’s storyworld. This led to the conspicuous absence of the emperor, the Spacing Guild, the Landsraad, and the CHOAM, key entities in the elaborate depiction of the political-economic dynamics in the novel. Most notably, the critical role of the ‘spice’ within the Dune universe was not adequately explained for viewers unfamiliar with it. There’s a quick shoutout to it in the opening minutes, like “the spice is key for interstellar trips, so it’s a major asset”. Later on, as a crucial element of Dune it’s practically ghosted. This oversight persisted into ‘Dune 2024,’ where there’s virtually no discussion on the significance of the spice and Arrakis to the universe’s economic, political, and social framework. In the narrative setup they’ve got going, honestly, even if the spice isn’t explicitly mentioned, it wouldn’t make much of a difference. Especially if they don’t really lay out the

essential role of the Guild and CHOAM doesn't even get a shoutout. The novel's feudal social relations and the strict Prussian-style militarism were merely suggested, catering only to viewers either well-acquainted with Herbert's original work or David Lynch's adaptation. Conversely, the characters were simplified into a juvenile and binary interpretation of contemporary (neo)liberal ideologies of the 2020s. The Atreides were portrayed as the unequivocal 'good guys,' characterized by their benevolence and a semblance of democratic ethos, occasionally expressing a desire for a vague notion of freedom and an individualism that disregards social, dynastic, and cultural norms. In contrast, the Harkonnens were reduced to the archetypal 'bad guys,' driven by a malevolence akin to senseless cruelty, depicted with a cartoonish immorality, and at times, profound foolishness. This characterization likely stems from an attempt to modernize the concept of the 'villain' (and consequently also that of the "enemy") to align with the simplistic perceptions of the 2010s/2020s, where villains, especially those in positions of power, are portrayed as both idiotic and sadistically monstrous, eager for bloodshed without any moral restraint. We will revisit this point when we discuss the portrayal of Feyd-Rautha. As mentioned, the rich socio-cultural tapestry of *Dune* was thus diminished to a mere feud between two families harboring centuries-old animosity, focusing on the revenge of one family seeking to rectify past grievances. This approach transforms an epic reflection on power and the perils of messianism, set against a broad political and cultural canvas, into a visually stunning yet thematically shallow story, to put it mildly. As we said in "Future Mythologies" in this intent the creators were perhaps helped by the rereading, starting from the 2000s, of Herbert's universe in a "Star Wars" key by the author's son, Brian Herbert, and Kevin J. Anderson.³



[Florence Pugh](#) as [Princess Irulan](#)



[Christopher Walken](#) as emperor [Shaddam IV](#)

So, how did *Dune* 2024 attempt to address these criticisms? Put simply, it didn't resolve them but rather embraced and capitalized on them. While *Dune* 2024 may appear to be less problematic than its predecessor at first glance (indeed, it introduces characters inexplicably omitted in 2021, such as the emperor and Princess Irulan), a discerning examination, capable of seeing through the film's constant display of technical and visual coolness, reveals that its substance diverges even more radically from the original source, ultimately contradicting it decisively. For this reason, in the world of 2010s/2020s cinema plagued by the virus of coolness, which in one way or another always manages to slow down the brains of viewers

³ As already noted in 'Mythologies of the Future' in 2021, in this analysis, we will only consider what was written or approved by Frank Herbert, and thus we will regard anything published since the 2000s by Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson as non-canonical.

(even the most attentive and prepared), it would always be good practice to avoid hot takes, and to take a few days to get over the "cool" aesthetic hangover, so as to be able to formulate a "sober" and lucid critique (that doesn't mean not making mistakes, but avoiding them because you're all caught up in the pompous coolness of the cinematic execution). Anyway, *Dune* 2024 for the most part, despite also featuring cuts, omissions, curious interpretations, and trivializations, appears merely superficially aligned with Herbert's original. However, it collapses entirely when it comes to the emperor's revelation of the motives behind his plot to massacre the Atrides and kill Duke Leto. In the finale, unlike in the novel, the emperor chooses to explain to Paul the reasons for deciding that Duke Leto had to die. According to Villeneuve, the rationale for killing not only Duke Leto but also, by extension, all the Atrides, was that the emperor was incensed by a House's Lord governing with his heart and thus being perceived as "weak". Or, even better, incensed because he was a «good guy». Moreover, this motivation is perfect for any story based solely on the eternal struggle of good against evil, as in such a framework the good fights the bad only because it's bad, and the bad wants to destroy the good solely because it's good.

The motivation presented, obviously absent in Herbert's novel and therefore in respect to it, is so foolish, childish, and contradictory that it is irritating on one hand and capable of plunging the entire film – Part 1 and Part 2 - into absurdity on the other. Consequently, it undermines even the aspects of the film that were previously commendable and diminishes their worth. Hence, the choice to title this paper "Not Even Wrong", to indicate an adaptation done so poorly that it is not even worthy of being considered a failure.⁴

Compared to such reasoning, the 'Martha Gate' in Zack Snyder's *Batman v Superman* (2016) seems akin to a scholarly discourse on the «Inaccessible Light» in Dante. It's really difficult to understand why this choice was made, perhaps to continue down the path of that undue modernization of the Atrides according to the (neo)liberal logic of our contemporaneity that we extensively discussed in 'Mythologies of the Future,' portraying them as the 'good guys.' In this way, both Paul and Duke Leto seemed to reason as if in the world they lived in there were no rigid moral and dynastic feudal codes and an inviolable Salic law that not only would have prevented the protagonists from having certain thoughts but even from conceiving them.

In contrast, the feudal structure in the novel provided understandable and historically grounded motivations for the emperor.

⁴ The colloquial term "not even wrong" is widely recognized for describing efforts that are so inadequately executed or conceived that they don't merit consideration or "constructive" critique (a stance we assertively took in 2021, with thorough reasoning). This term was first introduced by the theoretical physicist Wolfgang Pauli to critique scientific theories that were too poorly crafted to be deemed incorrect or valid. We argue that in a critical and cinematic framework, it aptly applies to film adaptations that veer so far from their originals that they betray the inherent logic, rendering them incomparable to their sources or their adaptations illegitimate. While deviations from a literary source are expected and can be artistically valid, the specific adaptations in "Dune 2021/2024" significantly diverge from the original, overlooking key elements and simplifying or altering them to the extent that they betray the original vision. This paper leverages "not even wrong" to underscore how the 2021/2024 version of "Dune," despite its technical prowess and visual splendor, lacks thematic depth and at times borders on the absurd, failing to capture the intricate principles that define 'Dune' as a profoundly complex and significant work. Sadly, this has led to an adaptation that overlooks the most vital and innovative elements of Herbert's novel.

As extensively discussed in *Future Mythologies*,⁵ the emperor's apprehension towards the Atreides stemmed from their perceived threat to his authority, primarily driven by two factors: Duke Leto's increasing popularity within the Landsraad (the assembly of all nobles) and the formidable strength of the new Atreides army, trained with innovative methods by Duncan Idaho and Gurney Halleck, which posed a credible challenge to the feared Imperial Sardaukar. An Atreides House boasting military capabilities comparable to, if not surpassing, the emperor's own forces had the potential to rally the Great Houses against the Empire, thereby undermining his rule. emperor Shaddam IV's decision to eliminate House Atreides was rooted in strategic political calculations, reflecting the ruthless nature of power dynamics in the 'Dune' universe. It was not motivated by personal animosity or disapproval of Duke Leto's governance style, or because he is a "good guy", as suggested in *Dune 2024*. Rather, it was a calculated move driven by political expediency and the preservation of imperial dominance. After all, the emperor had seen it coming, for in the novel it is Duke Leto himself who explains to Paul why, despite having realized from the start that giving the Atreides control of the planet Arrakis was a trap, they had decided to obey and go there anyway. The reason is that on Arrakis there were two things that could make House Atreides powerful enough to challenge the emperor: the spice, of course, but also the Fremen, meaning a potential army already hardened by the hellish conditions of Arrakis, which, if trained and well-equipped, could surpass the imperial Sardaukar.⁵ In *Dune 2021*, they just briefly touch upon all of that. On one hand, when the Baron tells Rabban that the Atreides were getting too cocky, and on the other hand, that Duncan and Gurney had trained a unit that could go toe-to-toe with the Sardaukar. But in the rest of the two flicks, it's like it never even happened, and their implications aren't even tackled.

In short, the emperor wants the end of House Atreides, not for personal reasons, but for political ones.

Is the situation described perhaps not reflective of a very specific historical dynamic, akin to a classic medieval scenario, where the emperor/King perceives the increased power (both military and noble) of a feudal lord as a threat to his own reign, prompting him to seek its elimination?⁶ Is it not evident that only such a rationale could drive the emperor to decree the annihilation of an entire house? Merely killing the Duke Leto would not suffice to neutralize the threat posed by a house gaining substantial power, capable of challenging imperial authority. The danger lay not solely with Duke Leto, but with the entire Atreides house and its burgeoning influence and military might within the intricacies of the Landsraad. Conversely, if the motivation truly stemmed from Duke Leto's perceived weakness in governance, what

⁵ F. Herbert, *The Illustrated Dune*, p. 46: «We have there the potential of a corps as strong and deadly as the Sardaukar. It'll require patience to exploit them secretly and wealth to equip them properly. But the Fremen are there... and the spice wealth is there. You see now why we walk into Arrakis, knowing the trap is there».

⁶ W. E. McNelly (ed.), *The Dune Encyclopedia*, Berkley Books, New York, 1984, p. 407: «No wise emperor allowed any Great House to grow too powerful. Therefore, Shaddam IV had long been concerned with House Atreides which exercised much influence in the Landsraad. Shaddam understandably feared that a Landsraad alliance might coalesce around a powerful Great House, altering the balance of power at the expense of the Imperium. But Shaddam had his own ambitions: not only did he wish to maintain his own power, but he also desired dominance over the Landsraad through control of CHOAM Directorship votes. House Atreides stood in his way. In addition, the Red Duke had trained a small military force which, man-for-man, equaled file Sardaukar. Thus Shaddam's mind was decided in the course he and Harkonnen would bike with his royal cousin».

purpose would there be in waging war against the entire Atreides house and jeopardizing spice production if his governance posed no threat?

And we're back at it again, hitting that issue of taking out the spice (and the Guild) from the main narrative equation, 'cause now it ain't clear why interrupting the spice flow would be a problem not just for the protagonists, but for the entire known universe.⁷



[Rebecca Ferguson](#) as [Lady Jessica](#)

But these are futile discussions because the emperor depicted in Herbert's *Dune* could never act as shown in *Dune 2024*. According to feudal practice, a series of strict and formal rules governed the actions of all, including the emperor. While it was possible to eliminate or strip the head of a House and/or their family of possessions, it required a formal accusation of high treason against the emperor or the Landsraad. Furthermore, any verdict had to be formally ratified by the Landsraad itself and also by the Guild or The Bene Gesserit.⁸ In

⁷Also for this reason, at the end of *Dune 2024*, when Paul threatens the Houses that have arrived on Arrakis that if they do not stop, he will destroy the spice fields using atomics, it is not perceived, if at all, what exactly this threat entails. This stems, again in *Dune 2024*, from another omission, that of not making the viewer understand what Paul's ultimatum to the emperor consists of. In the novel, it was clear that the Ultimatum included the threat to destroy the spice. In this ultimatum, which in *Dune 2024* has been shifted entirely to the end, Paul asks the emperor not even to abdicate, but for the official recognition of his ducal right, the punishment of his father's assassins, and marriage to the emperor's daughter Irulan. Paul, in this sense, makes a "reasonable" request and especially one according to the rules of the Kanly code (obviously, if memory serves, never mentioned in *Dune 2021/2024*), which is respected by all (including the emperor and Baron Harkonnen) and imposes strict rules and specific rituals governing vendettas among noble families, to prevent endless cycles of violence and to regulate disputes in an orderly manner. The emperor then goes to Arrakis because he sees the flow of spice and with it the stability of the universe at risk. Indeed, being Arrakis the only world where the Spice is found and can be extracted and produced (and on which depends the entire guild and therefore interstellar travel, the Bene Gesserit sisterhood, the Mentats, etc.), a large-scale war using atomics would risk collapsing the entire social and economic system of the known universe, bringing it back to the "stone age" of space navigation. For this reason, the emperor goes to Arrakis to try to resolve the issue: for a war against a world that the most important raw material existing would completely destabilize the already unstable order of the Universe.

⁸ W. E. McNelly (ed.), *The Dune Encyclopedia*, p. 374: «The official representative of each House was the Head of the Household, generally a hereditary position, although some families elected their Heads from among the family membership at large, or from certain specific lines; other clans practiced variant forms of succession, such as the House al-Qair, in which the Head of the House was automatically the eldest surviving member of the family. Although many family heads attended sessions of the Landsraad regularly, others appointed official Representatives to act in their stead; under Landsraad law, these Representatives had the same legal status as

Herbert's depiction, the emperor cannot behave like an absolute and capricious despot who arbitrarily kills individuals. In flipping it like this, it seems they're aiming to get it more in line with emperor Palpatine from Star Wars, not just when he decides to scrap the Senate and have no formal control to answer to, so he can control the galaxy through fear, but especially in his post-1980s rewrite.⁹ However, in Herbert's *Dune*, governance does not operate on such personal rule. The emperor cannot rule the Known Universe without the support of the Landsraad, the Guild and the Bene Gesserit, and therefore, without the consent of all parties involved. Additionally, it's worth noting that the notion of a despot, tyrant, or dictator killing individuals simply because they perceive them as weak is absurd, even in the context of the 2010s/2020s reality. Even the most notorious dictators are typically accused of eliminating individuals due to their perceived threat to their power, rather than for personal satisfaction. What exactly would be the threat, to the emperor, of a Duke governing "his" fiefdom in a more benevolent manner? It's hard to understand.

The simplification of these complex political dynamics to an issue of the emperor's personal preferences not only diminishes the depth of the central conflict of the novel but also ignores the complete web of alliances, strategies, and tensions that form the core essence of the political drama of "Dune." The complexity of power relations and the sophisticated game of thrones that defines the *Dune* universe are essential for understanding the characters' motivations and the plot's evolution. For this reason, unlike some other novels – even those more complex and profound but which, in respect of their core, can be modified without altering their meaning –, a faithful adaptation of "Dune" (isn't this what Villeneuve had promised us?) requires a deep understanding and an "accurate" representation of the political, social, and religious dynamics and power relations that drive the characters' actions. Simplifying these dynamics not only impoverishes the narrative but also substantially departs from Herbert's original vision, where indeed the strength and rise of the Atreides are perceived as a real and tangible threat that the emperor seeks to neutralize by any means necessary. Duke Leto, in short, is anything but weak.

their masters, and thus could act unilaterally in their behalf; for this reason, the practice was not widespread except in those Houses where the Head of the House was ill or suffered some other diminished capacity. Legally, the Head of the House was the House; under certain circumstances, the Head and his House could be tried by the Landsraad for treasonous acts against the Empire or the Landsraad, and the Head or his House or both exiled, deprived of their titles and lands, or exterminated. There were nine such trials in the history of the Imperium; only one, that of House Masudi, resulted in the execution of all family members (in the year 3536; the Protector, Shi-Lang, ordered the name of this House expunged from all Imperial histories and records, although he was not successful in obliterating its memory; curiously, however, no record remains, and no trace has been found in official archives, of the crime of House Masudi)».

⁹ We mean to say that emperor Palpatine up until 1980 wasn't conceived by Lucas as a Jedi/Sith and had no connection with the Force; he was essentially a politician (directly inspired by the figure of Richard Nixon): "[L. Kasdan: Was he \[The emperor\] a Jedi? G. Lucas: No, he was a politician. Richard M. Nixon was his name. He subverted the senate and finally took over and became an imperial guy and he was really evil. But he pretended to be a really nice guy.](#)" Later on, however, emperor Palpatine was transformed into a mashup between emperor Shaddam IV, the Baron Harkonnen, and an Honored Matres (the enemies of the Bene Gesserit and, therefore, a sort of serious and adult version of Lucas's Sith; although, of course, in Herbert both factions can be seen as grey or morally complex, rather than completely good or bad).



[Léa Seydoux](#) as [Lady Margot Fenring](#)

However, the emperor's motivations in *Dune 2024* are not only simplistic and terribly 'dull' compared to the original source but also surprisingly lack depth in light of some of the director's statements about the character of the emperor. Villeneuve describes him as «a technocrat who tries to maintain control of a galaxy, just like a government struggle to maintain control of a country».¹⁰ While we interpret Villeneuve's use of the term 'technocrat' to imply a bureaucratic role, even in this sense, the definition is ill-suited for describing the emperor. Traditionally, a technocrat is understood as an individual who governs based on technical knowledge, specific experience in their field, and a pragmatic and rational approach to problem-solving, often prioritizing efficiency and effectiveness. However, killing someone because they govern with their heart reflects motivations and logics more aligned with personal power dynamics, emotional or ideological ('I am 'strong and evil' and cannot tolerate any 'good' or 'weak' person, whom I must and can kill'), and should not be associated with the rational, efficiency-oriented approach typically attributed to a technocrat. The emperor's decision, as portrayed in the context of the 2024 'Dune' film, appears to be driven by personal and emotional motives, as well as a desire to eliminate a political threat or

¹⁰ «The emperor is portrayed as a technocrat striving to dominate a galaxy, mirroring a government's effort to control a nation. Unyielding, he takes drastic actions that conflict with his essence, notably the betrayal and murder of his ally, Duke Leto Atreides, to consolidate his power. This act not only shatters his moral compass but also casts him into a realm of darkness. He is depicted as a figure burdened by guilt and remorse, a man fractured by his choices». D. Villeneuve, *Dune Part 2 Press Book*, Warner Bros. Pictures & Legendary Pictures, 2024. This interpretation raises two points. Firstly, it appears to oversimplify the emperor's character as originally envisioned by Frank Herbert. Secondly, within the *Dune* universe, the term technocracy, in its strictest sense, relates to the worship of technology. This ideology led to the Butlerian Jihad, a significant rebellion against AI and computers, culminating in a ban on technology that emulates human thought and an emphasis on enhancing human abilities, which machines once replaced. Moreover, in the reality of the events depicted in the film, a technocratic society does exist, but it is not that of the emperor, but rather that of the Bene Tleilax, even if in reality their technocracy serves a nearly theocratic vision and mysterious mystic/religious objectives, as they see themselves as agents of fate or divine will. That said, in the world of *Dune*, technocracy, especially when associated with trust in technology at the expense of the development of human physical and organic potentialities, is viewed with great suspicion.

rival, rather than by a technocratic calculation of efficiency or rational management of the Empire. Therefore, describing the emperor as a technocrat seems entirely nonsensical within the political framework of Dune, akin to describing, in our reality, Charlemagne as a technocrat. While, and it's not by chance, to be "perfectly" describable as a technocrat (in the sense of a bureaucrat) is, once again, emperor Palpatine from Star Wars. On the other hand, if one chooses to view the emperor as a technocrat, then the fact that Leto decided to rule with heart should have been yet another reason not to perceive him as a threat, especially, we hinted at it, if his governance proved to be administratively and bureaucratically efficient, that is, if he successfully fulfilled the tasks that, as a vassal, were his duty.

This reopens the debate previously touched upon in "Future Mythologies," namely the formally feudal context of Herbert's Dune universe, which in Dune 2021 was only hinted at through flashes. However, in the case we are examining, it resurfaces forcefully because in Herbert's Dune, Arrakis is given to emperor Duke Leto as a "full fiefdom," meaning a fiefdom where a duke (or any feudal lord) possessing a "full fief" enjoyed considerable autonomy (though not unlimited) in managing his fief. Certainly, however, the specific manner in which the duke chose to govern his territory—whether with kindness or an iron fist—was largely a matter of personal discretion, provided he maintained order and administrative efficiency and respected his feudal obligations to his sovereign, in this case, the emperor. As long as these obligations were met, the sovereign and/or emperor did not interfere in the internal affairs of the fiefdom; unless significant problems arose that could threaten the stability of the kingdom or empire. Hence the need, to ratify the elimination of Duke Leto, to ensure that, by leaving Arrakis, the Harkonnens (who on Arrakis were not under a "full fiefdom" regime, but so to speak, on a contract) "sabotaged" the planet in such a way that the Atrides could not fulfill their obligations to the emperor. Indeed, by not ensuring a regular flow of the spice, they would endanger the stability of the empire and provide a justification for intervention and punishment. Therefore, that Duke Leto ruled with heart should have been of no concern to the emperor, and even if it were, he could do nothing about it because the motivation violated the social rules and the code that regulated disputes between houses and would never have gained the consent of the Landsraad (and the Guild or The Bene Gesserit) to eliminate a Duke over something – especially in a feudal-type reality – so trivial and insignificant. Moreover, even if in Dune 2021/2024 there is never any mention of something like the granting of a "full fief," in Dune 2021, the scene of the herald of change notifying Duke Leto of the "Arrakis fiefdom" assignment, what is it if not an investiture ceremony for the granting of a fief in a "full" regime? Which raises the question, how is it possible that a film creates a scene with a very specific and unequivocal meaning in that context, and in the subsequent film, it is disregarded, resulting in an inconsistency? Sure, one could also wonder why, in this scene from Dune 2021, the Atrides are questioning (quoting from memory) "why they've made this ceremony so grandiose and expensive for a formality." Formality? Regardless that in a feudal-like system form is everything, but the emperor is also entrusting the Atrides with "full fief" of the most important planet there is, as well as managing the substance essential for the entire known universe, not some unknown moon to extract a material found on any planet in the galaxy.



[Josh Brolin](#) as [Gurney Halleck](#) and [Javier Bardem](#) as [Stilgar](#)

In short, attempting to justify the emperor's decision with an inclination towards 'governance of the heart' and disdain for 'the weak,' while simultaneously asserting that his core trait is technocratic, reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the original source material and suggests a lack of clarity in the creative vision of the adaptation. This inconsistency leaves the impression of ambiguity regarding the characterization of the emperor. Portraying him as driven by emotional and ideological motives, rather than a rational, technocratic approach, constitutes a performative contradiction. Regardless, what is paramount in this context is that attributing the rationale for the Atrides massacre to their leader's perceived weakness contradicts the underlying logic of the novel. In Herbert's narrative, as already mentioned, Leto and the Atrides are portrayed as anything but weak. But that's not all, unfortunately, because Villeneuve's portrayal of the emperor, after plotting against the Atrides, would be a man "wrecked" by what he's done. But even this feels off with what you've chosen to show in the finale. First off, it's never explicitly stated (unless we missed something) that Duke Leto and the emperor share a familial connection and common ancestors, making them "cousins," albeit "distant cousins," meaning not by direct relation. If this connection, even though distant, had been highlighted and the decision to kill him had been like in the novel, then describing him as wrecked might have made some sense. Not so much, though, if you decide the emperor killed the "distant cousin" because he thought he was a good guy. Why would the emperor, who doesn't hesitate to kill a relative for such a ludicrous reason, then be "wrecked" by what he's done? Especially if it's not even shown that Duke Leto was a relative, even if distantly. Which, on the other hand, would have been perfectly logical if the emperor had been forced to kill the "cousin" due to necessary political calculus and the ongoing power plays: the threat to his reign from Duke Leto's popularity and strength, that is, forced him, albeit unwillingly, to decide his death. Then, yes, he could have been described as "wrecked".

In this regard, and circling back to the initial argumentative premise, attributing the catalyst for all events in *Dune* – the massacre of House Atrides, the involvement of the Harkonnens, and the rise of the Fremen – to the emperor's intolerance of a 'weak' individual seems so absurd and simplistic that it single-handedly undermines the entire adaptation, regardless of any other commendable aspects it may possess. It nullifies any critical analysis of these aspects. For these reasons, we reiterate once more that the decision to justify the

emperor's motivations in this manner renders Denis Villeneuve's cinematic adaptation of *Dune* seriously flawed and disjointed, such that it could be described as 'not even wrong.' Such a rationale behind this seemingly paradoxical choice (which diverges significantly from Herbert's original vision) and this performative contradiction (contrary to the declared intentions in characterizing the emperor) could stem from two closely intertwined factors, both related to the dynamics of marketing blockbusters on the eternal struggle between good and evil:

- A) A) The first one harks back to what was already noted in "Mythologies of the Future," meaning that the authors decided to flip the roles between the emperor and the Harkonnens. And this is clear right from the get-go when it's claimed that the Harkonnens, through the spice trade, would become richer than the emperor. That's just crazy because in Herbert the emperor is «hundreds of times» richer than the Harkonnens, and they were on Arrakis, as we mentioned, under contract, on behalf of the emperor and CHOAM. So, the emperor was raking in over 50% of the spice profits on Arrakis. This sets up a seriously messed-up situation, bordering on insanity, where the emperor cooks up a plot against one of the most important Houses in the universe just because he doesn't "like" its leader, yet he would overlook a house, the Harkonnens, who have become richer and thus more powerful than him behind his back? We don't know if they realize how absurd such a situation is, but that's what Villeneuve's authorial version of *Dune* suggests. So, while in Herbert's version, the Harkonnens are puppets of the emperor, in *Dune 2021/2024*, it's the emperor who becomes the puppet of the Harkonnens. Indeed, in *Dune 2024*, this is explicitly stated by the Baron to Feyd-Rautha after the showdown in the Arena on Giedi Prime. Consequently, it is the Harkonnens who manipulate the emperor for their machinations, exploiting his 'stupidity' to elevate Feyd-Rautha to the throne. In the novel, however - even though the Baron toyed with the idea of a Feyd-Rautha Harkonnen emperor to keep him in check (Feyd-Rautha kept trying to kill him to speed up his own rise) and strike a deal with him -, ¹¹ the Harkonnens aspired only to gain a seat on the board of CHOAM (a position on the board was the reward promised by the emperor for their assistance). They neither could nor had the opportunity to acquire more. This inversion of roles was evidently implemented to reinforce the Manichean logic prevalent in the narrative overhaul for the 2021 and 2024 films, reducing a multifaceted political, social, and religious entanglement of galactic proportions, involving various influential factions (the emperor, the Guild, the Landsraad, the Bene Gesserit, the Bene Tleilax society, the Great Houses, the Fremen, etc.), exclusively into a "young adult drama" between two houses (good guys vs bad guys) reminiscent of a second-rate soap opera. Moreover, in the novel, the emperor turns to the Harkonnens precisely because of their perceived weakness (wasn't he compelled to assign them legions of Sardaukar to aid them in defeating the Atreides?) and susceptibility to manipulation, to the extent that they posed no threat to him, unlike the Atreides (who were stronger, more influential, and more formidable than the Harkonnens). An inversion of roles, in short, quite bizarre, not functional to the story, incongruent with

¹¹ F. Herbert, *The Illustrated Dune*, p. 342.

Herbert's world, dichotomous with respect to the text, and which seems to denote a high level of presumption and an elephantiasis of the ego on the part of the authors. It appears that in deciding to deviate so drastically from the original story and the 'flawless' narrative logic it embodies, the authors do so not merely to streamline the story, but because they really consider themselves better than the author from whom they draw inspiration and believe they can improve upon Herbert, bettering him.



[Dave Bautista](#) as [Glossu Rabban Harkonnen](#)

B) Once the decision was made to portray the Atreides as the 'good guys' and the Harkonnens as the 'bad guys,' it led to a scenario where the emperor could no longer justify the Atreides as a threat. Their development of an army capable of challenging the Sardaukar and their growing popularity, which could potentially unite the houses against the emperor, made it difficult, if not impossible, to maintain them as the 'good guys'—outsiders to the violent and treacherous game of thrones. Because, as we discussed in "Mythologies of the Future," in Herbert's *Dune*, there are no "good guys," and even the Atreides (why did Herbert choose that name?) aren't "good," but at best, "better," more "nobler". Herbert intended to warn readers that in the real world, there are no "good guys," and one should always be wary of heroes who claim or are labeled as such. In the film, however, the notion of good guy as more nobler, seems to be interpreted in the politically correct sense of the 2010s/2020s, as the only possible one. Therefore, the "good guys" are never a "threat," they don't act or plot alliances/conspiracies to take or usurp power, and above all, they would never do so violently. On the other hand, if the Harkonnens were puppets of the emperor, pawns in his broader power game, then they wouldn't be considered "truly" evil and therefore a real threat to the "good guys."

While attributing absurd motivations to the emperor, which are incongruent with those in Herbert's novel, may represent the lowest point of Villeneuve's entire *Dune* adaptation, *Dune* 2024 presents additional criticalities compared to the novel. As mentioned repeatedly, the

emperor's ludicrous motivations render further analysis practically futile, even if other aspects had been executed excellently. Therefore, we will focus solely on some of the most significant ones here.



[Austin Butler](#) as [Feyd-Rautha Harkonnen](#)

In 2021, one notable absentee character was Feyd-Rautha, iconically played by Sting in 1984 and brilliantly portrayed by Austin Butler in *Dune 2024*. While Butler's performance warrants attention, his character's portrayal is caricatural and inconsistent with the corresponding literary figure. This phenomenon reaffirms observations made in the "Future Mythologies" regarding Baron Harkonnen: Villeneuve opted to depict him as a sort of Colonel Kurtz from *Apocalypse Now* with a gothic-vampiric twist, giving him movements reminiscent of Dracula, particularly Coppola's version. An instance of this is when, in *Dune 2021*, he dodges the "assassination" attempt on Duke Leto by swiftly moving to the upper corner of the room. This impression is fully validated in *Dune 2024*, as Feyd-Rautha too is imbued with vampiric traits, displaying a kind of relationship with three women to whom he feeds the victims of his homicidal madness, similar to how Dracula shared his victims' blood with his three brides. In this context, Feyd-Rautha, unlike the ruthless and psychotic character from Herbert's novels, seems to embody all the traits of the classic comic book villain we've discussed earlier. We now discover that Feyd-Rautha and (as Villeneuve seems to suggest) all the Harkonnens, are so evil and bloodthirsty as to be cannibals as well, and, if they feel like it, they could kill anyone near them, even if they were there just to serve them, solely for the pleasure of doing it. On the flip side, the first words out of Feyd-Rautha's mouth in *Dune 2024*, right before he offs two servants just to test out the new knives he got for his birthday, go something like this: "Darlings, you hungry? How about some lungs or maybe a bit of liver?" This is so caricatured and ridiculous that it wouldn't even fit in the legends about Countess Erzsébet Báthory, yet we see it presented in a film often regarded as on par with a "masterpiece" of authorship, "sophisticated" and "cultured".



«[Feyd-Rautha Harkonnen](#) as [Countess Erzsébet Báthory](#)»

Rabban's character in *Dune 2024* is also reduced to this: every time he appears on screen, he screams and kills someone at random, kills someone and screams, screams and kills someone... and he does it merely because he's angry or because someone dared to speak to him. Rabban in the novel is a much more significant and complex character, betrayed by the Baron for political calculations. Furthermore, Feyd-Rautha is so "evil" that we are now told he also killed his mother. It goes without saying that Frank Herbert never wrote of such a thing in his novels.¹² Despite Giedi Prime's society being founded on violence and slavery, there's something, dare we say, truly insane in this depiction of the Harkonnens, now described as cannibal vampires. After all, in the novel *Dune*, none of the Harkonnens are so ridiculously and absurdly "evil", not even the Baron we might say, at least not in the excessive and childish way in which the Harkonnens have been transformed in *Dune 2024*, that is as monsters, indiscriminate murderers and caricatures of evil. These are, perhaps, the same Harkonnens about whom Herbert writes a passage like the following:

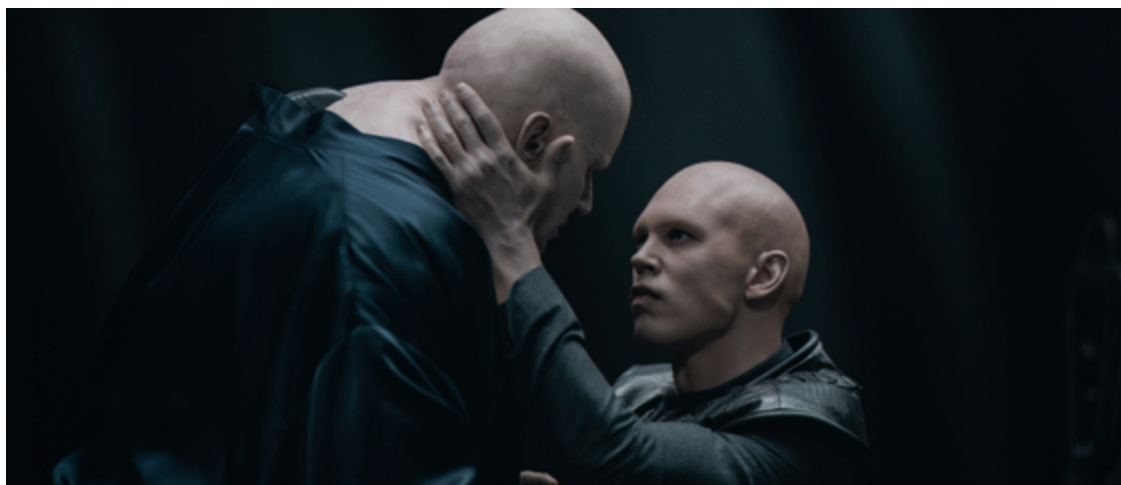
«"I make a point," the Baron said. "Never obliterate a man unthinkingly, the way an entire fief might do it through some due process of law. Always do it for an overriding purpose—and know your purpose!"

Anger spoke in Rabban: "But you obliterated the traitor, Yueh! I saw his body being carried out as I arrived last night."

Rabban stared at his uncle, suddenly frightened by the sound of those words. But the Baron smiled. "I'm very careful about dangerous weapons," he said. "Doctor Yueh was a traitor. He gave me the Duke." Strength poured into the Baron's voice. "I suborned a doctor of the Suk School! The Inner School! You hear, boy? But that's a wild sort of weapon.»¹³

¹² We don't rule out that this idea could be taken from the aforementioned novels about *Dune* by Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson, where it's also mentioned that even Shaddam IV killed his own father for his power ambitions.

¹³ F. Herbert, *The Illustrated Dune*, p. 238. Yes, it's also true that the Baron, out of a sort of jealousy and to punish him, at one-point orders Feyd-Rautha to kill all the women in the pleasure chambers, where Feyd-Rautha



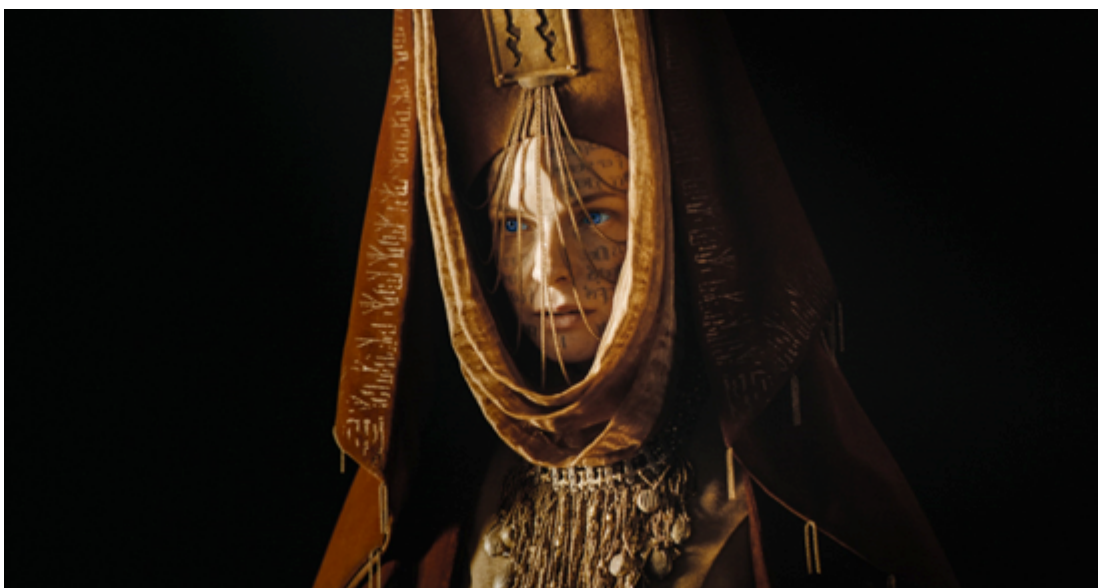
[Stellan Skarsgård](#) as Baron [Vladimir Harkonnen](#) and [Austin Butler](#) as [Feyd-Rautha Harkonnen](#)

Another criticism of *Dune* 2021 was its portrayal of the Bene Gesserit sisterhood, whose manipulative skills through silence and secrecy in orchestrating many of the main events in the *Dune* universe were not adequately explained. In *Dune* 2024, this aspect is clearly highlighted several times. Moreover, in *Dune* 2024, it's made quite clear that for the "genetic descent" experiment they had been carrying out for centuries, for the Bene Gesserit, whether an optimal candidate to contribute to this experiment was a "good" person or a bloodthirsty monster was entirely irrelevant. However, in this instance, Villeneuve seems to go further, suggesting that the Bene Gesserit manipulated the emperor into devising the plan against the Atreides, an idea not supported by Frank Herbert's works. Herbert implies that the Bene Gesserit influence events and the emperor to ensure his lineage serves their purposes, but not that they manipulate him into deciding to eliminate House Atreides. Such an action would be contrary to their interests, as they had worked to unite Duke Leto's daughter with one of the Harkonnens to create the Kwisatz Haderach. After all, if it were as described in *Dune* 2024, then why, as shown in the previous film, was Paul tested with the "gom jabbar"? Why bother traveling all the way to Caladan and testing his purity if they wanted that genetic line to end? It's also important to note that in the *Dune* universe, all significant political figures, including emperors, are trained from youth to resist external influences, including those of the Bene Gesserit. Villeneuve's choice seems to be part of an inversion of roles between the emperor and the Harkonnens, which, as we've seen, results in the emperor being portrayed as a puppet of the Harkonnens in *Dune* 2021-2024, not the other way around. Now, if the emperor is also manipulated by the Bene Gesserit, his portrayal in the 2024 adaptation is truly diminished, to the point of rendering him a character bordering on stupidity.

Despite *Dune* 2024 finally featuring the emperor, Princess Irulan, and Feyd-Rautha, the film does not shy away from omitting an important character, namely Alia, Paul's sister. Alia is not entirely forgotten, but inexplicably, she is not born during the events leading to the Battle of Arrakeen (we can catch a glimpse of her for a few seconds as an adult, in a mental

had been staying after the arena fight, but, and this is the point, he somehow hints at a protest (p. 372). One could argue that Lynch also shows the baron killing a servant in a moment of rage. Leaving aside that it wouldn't change anything, as what's in question here is Herbert's adaptation, not a remake of *Dune* 1984, in Lynch's film, however, it happens only once, not repeated dozens of times and in increasingly hyperbolically violent and gratuitous ways.

projection with Paul, played by Anya Taylor-Joy, but not credited). The reason for this choice, at least from what is shown in the film, is unclear, especially since Alia is a beloved character among fans of both Herbert and Lynch. The same goes for the decision to compress the timeline of events – from Paul and Jessica's encounter with the Fremen to the Battle of Arrakeen – to a few months, whereas in the book, it spans two to three years. However, Villeneuve decides not to entirely cut Alia (we can also see her for a few seconds, as an adult, in a mental projection with Paul, played by Anya Taylor-Joy, but uncredited) and, drawing from a passage in the novel, decides that Jessica, after consuming the water of life, can henceforth “chat” with her daughter still in the womb; “chat” in the sense of actually dialoguing, seeking advice, sharing her thoughts with Paul, and vice versa, allowing him to talk with her. Moreover, Alia, despite being a fetus, is even capable of reading Paul's emotional mind. This can be added to the now numerous absurdities of *Dune 2021/2024*. In the novel, there is something similar, true, and it occurs when Jessica must undergo the water of life ritual. The water of life is a potent toxin extracted from the bodies of the sandworms of Arrakis, and consuming it entails undergoing a sort of poisoning that is both physical and psychic. The ritual involves overcoming the toxicity of the water of life by metabolizing it, a process that requires extraordinary inner strength and mental control. If successful, the poison is transformed and bestows enhanced psychic powers, including heightened awareness and the ability to access ancestral genetic memories. The water of life ritual is, in essence, a rite of passage, an intense physical and existential trial, where the character is forced to confront their limits, fears, and the hidden potential within themselves, symbolizing the passage through death to a new life of expanded understanding and power. During this trial, which is supposed to confer upon Jessica the status of Reverend Mother, the fetus of Alia is also influenced by the poison, thus acquiring enhanced powers, capable of altering the “perceptual spectrum” and becoming prenatally aware, accessing ancestral memories, which is why she is deemed an “Abomination.” And it is during the most difficult and dangerous moment of the ritual, when their survival was at stake, that a sort of “telepathic” dialogue between Jessica and Alia occurs, in which Jessica tries to reassure Alia that everything will be alright. But their “dialogue” ends there. Despite the ritual granting Alia unusual cognitive awareness and maturity for a fetus, the novels do not detail any constant dialogue between her and Jessica for the rest of the pregnancy. In the novel, rather than the chats between Jessica and Alia, what is important is the concept of “Abomination,” the early acquisition of abilities and ancestral memories, all presented as essential for Alia's development, character, and future actions, which are not adequately addressed in *Dune 2024*, except in hints. Herbert, instead, focuses more on the implications of these abilities and their perception within the “Dune” universe, rather than a series of trivial New Age dialogues between mother and unborn daughter. The narrative function of these essentially useless “new age” dialogues within the film's plot remains unknown.



[Rebecca Ferguson](#) as [Lady Jessica](#)

Staying on the topic of the water of life, the decisions regarding its effects on Paul's perceptual spectrum and the expansion of his precognitive abilities in *Dune 2024* are problematic. The water of life ritual is a process that only the Bene Gesserit Reverend Mothers, and generally only women, can undergo. This is well explained in *Dune 2024*. Nonetheless, Paul decides to undergo this rite, which no man has ever survived before, thus defying death. Once he overcomes the water of life ritual, Paul gains several extraordinary abilities. Paul, who was already capable of having visions of the future before the ritual, sees his precognitive abilities significantly expanded afterward. This allows him to see potential futures with greater clarity and to navigate among them with more awareness. Paul also gains access to both male and female ancestral memories residing in his genetic heritage. This means he can now draw on the experiences and wisdom of countless ancestors, giving him a much broader perspective and knowledge. The combination of his precognitive powers and access to genetic memories thus endows Paul with a form of awareness that borders on omniscience, at least in relation to future events and power dynamics in the "Dune" universe. Though not a direct result of the water of life ritual, his newfound knowledge and powers also enhance his persuasive and leadership abilities, making him a charismatic and visionary leader capable of mobilizing the masses and manipulating others at both conscious and subconscious levels. It is the acquisition of these abilities that "officially" makes Paul the messiah the Fremen were waiting for.

However, in *Dune 2024*, these aspects are not adequately explained or shown. The only one that finds a bit of space is Paul's ability to predict and navigate through various futures. In the book, this ability allows him to understand that whatever future he sees, the universal Jihad is inevitable, thus the only possible future. Although Paul's Jihad is not described in detail in the first book, it is clearly anticipated through Paul's visions and further explored in the sequels of the series. The Jihad is a military and religious expansion on a galactic scale, undertaken by the Fremen of Arrakis under Paul's leadership (who uses their faith and desire for freedom to mobilize them against all oppressors in the Universe). This Jihad will lead to the conquest of numerous worlds in the known universe and the death of billions of human lives in the name of a "holy" war. Navigating through various possible futures, Paul sees the

Jihad as part of his inevitable destiny, something that, despite all his efforts, seems unavoidable. His visions show him that any attempt to deviate could lead to even worse outcomes, and so he chooses the path, albeit tragic and extremely painful, that he believes will bring the least harm to humanity in the long term. At the same time, he recognizes the Jihad as a tool to unite humanity under a single cause, even if it is extremely violent and bloody, and to push towards a transformation he deems necessary for the survival of the human race. In Herbert's work, the Jihad raises profound questions about the power and dangers of faith, fate, and the ethical responsibility of leaders' actions, thus inviting reflection on the implications of major choices and their consequences for humanity. Above all, the Jihad serves as a critique of the concept of heroism and the danger posed by messianic figures. Herbert intended to warn his readers against the risks of idealizing individuals as saviors or predestined heroes, highlighting how actions taken in the name of the greater good can lead to unforeseen and sometimes dire and disastrous consequences. Through a narrative structured around the dynamics of power, Herbert's *Dune* acts as a powerful caution against the dangers inherent in blindly following messianic figures and uncritically believing in the myth of the hero savior. Although, as mentioned, these themes find more space in Herbert's sequels, they were clearly anticipated in *Dune*. In *Dune 2024*, on the contrary, all of this, as usual with *Dune 2021/2024*, is only briefly and vaguely hinted at, clearly showing that Paul chooses to embrace his destiny (although in a bland and sugarcoated manner, just like the visions of future Fremen massacres, realized in a really lame way).¹⁴ What is not clear is exactly what this decision to embrace the "evil" entails, almost implying that these aspects were included because they were in the novel, not because they were deemed necessary for a harmonious construction of Herbert's narrative. After all, once Herbert is reduced to the eternal struggle between good and evil, what else could be expected? That the image of the "good" would not be explicitly tarnished, at least in this film. And this is also what the reversal serves for, turning the Harkonnens into bloodthirsty monsters, because turning the enemy into a bloodthirsty monster then allows any action taken to stop them, even becoming monsters and doing the same things they would do, to be justified, and ultimately not perceived as truly "bad".

Two additional aspects seem significant in this further narrative "dumbing down." The first aspect concerns Paul's relationship with his visions of the future, and here the film seems ambivalent. Indeed, at one point, through a brief exchange with Gurney, it is suggested that in all the futures Paul saw, there was horror, and this was because he was taking control. The main problem is that the way these visions and concerns are portrayed makes Paul a kind of Anakin Skywalker in *Star Wars: Episode III - Revenge of the Sith* (G. Lucas, 2005; and many of these scenes about "premonitions" really seem to be mirrored between the two films). However, the subsequent crucial dialogue with Jessica about these futures and the only path he finds to solve the problem seems to render the issue even more equivocal. This dialogue implies that the futures Paul is discussing at that moment are not those concerning the Jihad, but rather those related to the success of the imminent battle of Arrakeen against the Harkonnens and the emperor. Paul says, "The visions are clear now. I see possible futures all at once. Our enemies are all around us. And in so many futures they prevail. But I do see a way." In this way, the film ambiguously suggests that he was only looking at the immediate future of the conflict with the Harkonnens and the emperor, potentially missing (and failing to make clear to the audience) the essential and general aspect that was hinted at in passing in

¹⁴ In *Dune 2021*, the visions of the Jihad were better depicted, even though it was hinted that Paul would directly participate in military operations on the ground, which turned out not to be the case.

the dialogue with Gurney. For in Paul's visions, in reality, his enemies never prevail. Paul has looked at all possible futures from a distance, not just in the immediate future. As we have seen, Paul had these flashes of the future where he saw himself as the main architect of a Jihad that would annihilate countless worlds and kill billions of people. And Paul did not want the responsibility for all this (as he indeed hints to Gurney) and thus went to look for all the alternative futures. Now, although it is not entirely clear if futures without Jihad can exist, as we have already mentioned, probably not because the system governing the universe had come to an end, what is certain is that there are no futures without Jihad and without him being alive and fulfilling his revenge, and for him, this is fundamental. Sure, he also saw the battle of Arrakeen, but he saw much further ahead and much more besides, and it is this "much more" that is important to him and decisive for the narrative structure of Herbert's *Dune*. Thus, certainly, he and his house had to survive, and the revenge had to be carried out: at the same time, it is equally certain that he would have wanted to avoid the Jihad. The path he then seeks is one in which he had to survive, the revenge had to be carried out, and the Jihad not occur. But he does not succeed, and thus finds a way in which he can survive and manage to "contain" the Jihad as long as he leads it. For these reasons, unlike what was said in *Dune 2024*, there are countless futures where his enemies do not prevail, but none in which this does not happen through the unleashing of a Jihad, which he would like to avoid. And his death, as mentioned, would not have prevented the Jihad but probably would have only postponed it, always with even more tragic outcomes. Therefore, by reducing Paul's visions to the immediate conflict against the Harkonnens in which they prevail in all futures, the film aligns Paul closer to Doctor Strange in "Endgame" by the Russo Brothers (2019) rather than *Dune's* Messiah.



[Rebecca Ferguson](#) as [Lady Jessica](#)

The other aspect concerns Jessica. In the novel, once Paul survives the water of life ritual, his new powers immediately surprise and worry Jessica, as they show that her son has far exceeded her expectations, challenging the idea of controlling him and opening up unknown

possibilities that not even she, a Reverend Mother, had anticipated or fully understood. In this sense, Jessica in the novel (as well as in Lynch's 1984 adaptation) is often shown to be afraid of Paul, to be genuinely terrified of what he has become and could do. In *Dune 2024*, on the contrary, Jessica is shown not only manipulating him to become what he is, but once this happens, she is portrayed as his guide and one of his most fervent followers. Such a portrayal of Jessica, on one hand, is functional, as we believe, to the rewriting of Chani (which we will return to later), on the other hand, it seems to have the function of mitigating the perception of Paul's "critical" aspects, allowing him to still be seen as the "good guy". Thus, the viewer – not perceiving, through Jessica's concerns, the potential danger he represents – risks missing the real nature of embracing his dark side (which, as hinted at in *Dune 2024*, does not consist of wanting to transform into the Harkonnens or understanding that one does not govern with the heart).

In other words, the film's implication that Paul is willing to embrace his dark side is of little to no importance. Indeed, if this conversion is dictated by merely personal reasons, such as revenge or that "one does not govern with the heart," then Paul becomes just another among the countless anti-heroes who have decided that good-natured, loyal, and "democratic" methods against evil no longer work and that evil must be answered with evil. In Herbert's work, contrary to this, Paul agrees to lead the Jihad because he also understands that the socio-economic system governing the known universe has reached its end; that system, based on the political tripod supposed to ensure its stability, is inherently unstable due to its monopolistic structure, has long been stagnant and resistant to any change.¹⁵ Thus, as we were saying, the Jihad, whether he embraces or rejects it, appears inevitable to him; this not so much because of significant macroscopic choices, but because everything that has happened over the centuries, somewhat like Asimov's "psychohistory," has led to this outcome, which therefore cannot be avoided because it no longer depends on the present choices of individual people, even ones as powerful as Paul. Paul also understands, however, that without him in command, the Jihad could prove even more devastating, with victims possibly numbering not in the billions, but in the hundreds of billions.¹⁶

¹⁵ In the novel "Dune," the concept of the "political tripod" refers to a power and influence structure based on three main pillars, represented by the three major political factions dominating the universe of the novel: A) House Corrino is represented by emperor Padishah Shaddam IV and his family, holders of the supreme political power over the Empire. B) The Space Guilds are commercial conglomerates that control trade and transportation in space, especially the spice traffic, a crucial substance for interstellar travel. The most important is the Spacing Guild, but broadly it may also include the Bene Gesserit. C) The great noble houses, such as the Atreides, the Harkonnens, and the Corrinos, which hold political, economic, and military power on specific planets within the Empire. They play a key role in feudal politics and power dynamics. These three pillars constitute the foundation of the political system of the Dune universe, interconnected by a complex network of alliances, rivalries, and political manipulations. The struggle for control of these pillars is at the heart of "Dune's" plot, with the main characters trying to navigate through the intricate power schemes to achieve their political and personal goals. As seen in *Dune 2021/2024*, all that remains is the struggle between two houses, with an emperor who is helpless and easily manipulable by all.

¹⁶ For accuracy, Paul Atrides has killed sixty-one billion people, sterilized ninety planets, completely demoralized five hundred others, and annihilated the followers of forty religions. W. E. McNelly (ed.), *The Dune Encyclopedia*, p. 320: "Through the Journals of Leto II, Paul Muad'Dib's son, we have preserved the reckoning of the father concerning the crusade he led. 'Statistics: at a conservative estimate, I've killed sixty-one billion, sterilized ninety planets, completely demoralized five hundred others. I've wiped out the followers of forty religions...' (Rate Ref. Cat. 55-A89). A record to put the Butlerian Jihad to shame in volume, if not degree."

On one hand, we have the same old hero story, seen a million times over, where despite grappling with agonizing doubts, the protagonist realizes that just being good won't fix the situation. So, they're not afraid to get their hands dirty to restore the disrupted order and fulfill their destiny; kinda like Anakin in "The Revenge of the Sith," who figures out that love doesn't save anyone and doesn't bring order to the universe, or Elsa in "Frozen 2" (Buck-Lee, 2019), who, even as a child, understands that romantic and idealistic fluff won't save the enchanted forest. On the flip side, though, we've got Frank Herbert's take. This raises again the problem of removing, in the film adaptation of "Dune," all the complexity of Herbert's political, cultural, religious, social, and economic system, leading to reductive and sometimes inane narrative choices, as often stated, transforming "Dune" into yet another variation on the eternal theme of conflict between good and evil, repackaged into a teen-drama structure for adults. On the other hand, trying to convince the audience that the drama and tragedy of a character like Paul Atreides—who, even before the water of life ritual, was endowed with a culture, intelligence, and analytical and perceptual abilities above almost everyone around him and who was born and had lived in a world where the bloody game of thrones was daily bread—, to come to understand something as childish as the fact that one does not govern with the heart and should have acted like the Harkonnens, must undergo the deadly ritual of the water of life and acquire powers and a perceptual spectrum bordering on omniscience, is not only inane, but also tremendously insulting to the intelligence of the viewers. And if it's common knowledge that Anakin Skywalker is basically a Young Adult version of Herbert's Paul Atreides, finding out that by 2024 Paul Atreides has turned into a version of Anakin Skywalker, even more sugar-coated in his transition to the "dark side", is something no Dune fan would've ever expected or wanted to see.



[Zendaya](#) as [Chani](#) and [Timothée Chalamet](#) as [Paul Atreides](#)

It's unclear why, but in Dune 2024, Villeneuve chooses to extend the very first part, concerning the beginning of Paul and Jessica's stay among the Fremen up to the moment Paul rides a sandworm for the first time. While in the novel this part is resolved smoothly, in contrast, Dune 2024 stretches it to almost an hour, perhaps even more. But not only this, because Villeneuve also decides to rewrite it differently, transforming it into a sort of initiation for Paul among the Fremen to be accepted as one of them and focusing on his

Young Adult indecisions.¹⁷ This entire section is rewritten in the sense that among the Fremen there would be a sort of division between those who accept Paul as a guide and possible messiah (led by Stilgar) and those who do not believe and look at him with suspicion, thinking that Stilgar's faction is wrong, indeed that they are mad; among the non-believers, curiously, Chani stands out. And so, Paul gradually, after many guerrilla actions against Harkonnen machinery where he shows his potential and ability to ride a sandworm, manages to get accepted among the Fremen as a leader. There is nothing of the sort in the book, and from the very first meeting in the desert and as soon as they realize his combat skills and knowledge of Fremen customs, Stilgar and "all" other tribe members accept Paul. There is no division among them. Especially Chani welcomes and recognizes Paul immediately. In Herbert, the focus is on the gradual recognition of Paul's qualities and destiny by the Fremen, culminating in his acceptance and elevation to a messianic figure, but without marked divisions or internal tensions among the Fremen. Actually, in the novel, it's the opposite of what's depicted in *Dune 2024* (we believe to emphasize the more Young Adult approach chosen for Paul's transformational arc), as Paul leads the guerrilla and defines its strategies, rather than, as in the film, simply following the guerrilla as a regular soldier and having to prove his worth along the way. If there is any disagreement, it is about Paul not wanting to challenge Stilgar to officially prove his superiority according to Fremen traditions and thus "legally" take his place as their leader. This creates tension, as some Fremen see Paul's refusal to follow tradition as a sign of weakness or as a deviation from their customs.

However, Paul uses this moment as an opportunity to redefine Fremen traditions in light of their common struggle against the Harkonnens and the emperor. He shows a new way of considering leadership, emphasizing that killing valuable fighters in internal challenges would be a waste of precious resources and that the real challenge should be against their common enemies. This moment is significant because it shows Paul's ability to "influence" Fremen traditions for the common good, strengthening his position as leader and as a messianic figure, without causing internal division.

In Villeneuve's version of this part of the novel, the problem that seems to arise lies not in its variations, although we fail to understand what they bring to the narrative, but rather that it is tremendously stereotypical and lengthy, thus terribly boring. Was artificial tension being created with Chani to highlight the subsequent romantic resolution? Or what? To showcase Paul's young-adult weaknesses? It's not clear. Perhaps this is precisely why Villeneuve decides to transform Chani into the only person who has the courage, even during the finale, to continuously and openly "challenge" Paul and thus show, absurdly for us, that – despite everything that Paul is now capable of doing – she would be the only one who does not fear him. On one hand, it's likely that the decision was made to grant her the role of the one who didactically warns the viewer about the danger of prophecies regarding messiahs/heroes. On the other hand, it also seems to define the variations of Jessica's character that we have already discussed. In this way, indeed, it avoids having to show the two main female characters, both connected to Paul through love – one maternal, the other romantic – as both

¹⁷ Young Adult fiction is a literary genre aimed mainly at audiences between the ages of 12 and 18, though it can be enjoyed by readers of all ages. Young Adult stories often revolve around the experiences and challenges faced by teenage protagonists, exploring themes like identity, love, friendship, personal growth, and battling injustices. This, in short, is the difference between the Paul Atreides of *Dune 2021/2024* and the one from the novel, who, despite being young, is already a capable, highly intelligent, well-trained, and cultured adult, focused on his mission from the get-go and never troubled by the adolescent indecisions typical of 21st-century teen narratives.

concerned and in conflict with the hero. However, if these were truly the reasons, the effect appears to be rather unsuccessful. Indeed, what the viewer risks perceiving (we believe, even with "intentional unintentionality") in the end, is that Chani's contrast to Paul (which is shown to intensify right after the clash with Feyd-Rautha), is not driven by what has been previously well depicted – namely, doubts about Paul's messianic role – but rather by Chani's Young Adult woes stemming from Paul's decision to marry Irulan and, therefore, betray her. In short, does Chani "abandon" Paul because she doesn't want to let go of his "absurd" messianic role (which would be incongruent with the novel), or because he betrayed her with Irulan (which would be terribly Young Adult)? *Dune 2021* seems to intentionally leave this ambiguous, to create a typical "vanilla" situation, one that aims to please the widest audience possible, but in the end, we believe it convinces no one, certainly not us. So, check it, having a scene like that, where there's this split among the Fremen, and then you got Chani, when they're about to seal the deal after winning and all, straight-up challenging Paul in front of everyone, allies and foes alike? Not only is it off because it ain't in the book, but also 'cause, in a feudal and formal setup like Herbert's, it's just straight-up inconceivable. Chani's Muad'Dib's «consort/partner» and a big shot in the Fremen hierarchy, everyone knows that, obviously. But the enemies get it too, especially the Bene Gesserit among them. But if the hero's "partner" challenges his authority like that, in public, and in front of his enemies (making Chani out like she's some 21st-century empowered woman), not only does it break all sorts of written and unwritten codes of conduct, undermining Paul's authority, but it also puts the whole negotiation at risk, maybe not right away, but definitely down the line. Because openly challenging Paul in that situation would make the enemy think there are divisions among the Fremen. And if there are divisions, then they could be exploited, using Chani to weaken Paul; for example, making Paul's enemies think that if negotiating with Paul is a lost cause, maybe there's hope with Chani. Like, how could a director who claims visuals are more important than words, let slip the fact that depicting the scene in that manner might lead the audience, especially the perceptive ones, to view the situation as absurd? But the idea, it's pretty much the same thing we've seen before. The goal is to update characters and situations so they reflect the historical, cultural, and political vibes of the 2010s/2020s. So, especially among the good guys, there's this notion that you should be able to speak freely, express dissent in any way and at any time, to showcase the freedom of sharing your opinion. This approach emphasizes acting on your emotions and feelings, without worrying too much about traditional norms or the context you're in, or whether it's even the right time to voice your thoughts.

However, it remains a fact that almost an hour was dedicated to the “unnecessary” Fremen guerrilla (unnecessary also because not adequately explained according to the logic of the novel), only to then devote, in the finale, around three minutes to the Battle of Arrakeen, which was what many (and certainly us) were eager to see. This choice – in our opinion, at least – challenges the understanding of the logic behind cinematic priorities. We did not expect the duration of the Battle of Minas Tirith in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (which was perhaps even excessive), but at least 15 minutes, we believe, would have been deserved. But that's how it is.



The sandworms attack Arrakeen

That said, the last aspect to highlight from the first part of *Dune 2022* concerns the fact that in the novel, the Fremen's trust is also won through an agreement in which, in exchange for their hospitality, Paul and Jessica will teach the Fremen the secrets of the Bene Gesserit combat arts, among which the Weirding Way stands out, a topic we have already discussed in *Future Mythologies*. This exchange not only aims to consolidate a relationship of trust and collaboration between Paul, Jessica, and the Fremen but also to give them an advantage in the conflict against Harkonnen and Sardaukar forces. The Fremen, although excellent fighters, see in Paul and Jessica's offer an opportunity to further improve their martial capabilities. In the novel, this exchange of knowledge and protection plays a crucial role in Paul and Jessica's integration into Fremen society, as well as in Paul's rise to the role of messianic leader. Of this agreement to cement mutual trust, as well as the Weirding Way, there is no trace in *Dune 2024*, and as we have mentioned above, Paul gains the trust of the Fremen more for his reckless actions against Harkonnen machinery.



[Zendaya](#) as [Chani](#)

These variations in the initial section of the second part lead us towards a conclusion. Both in “Future Mythologies” and “Not Even Wrong,” we have tried to show how Denis Villeneuve’s adaptation of *Dune* 2021/2024, in our view, is such a significant failure that it cannot even be considered a failure. Villeneuve and his collaborators chose to adapt *Dune* not only by stripping it of all its essential characteristics, thereby making it a virtually incomprehensible surrogate to those unfamiliar with the original work or Lynch’s film, but they also had the presumption (typical of many “authors” of the 2010s/2020s) to improve it, introducing some changes that, however, completely contradicted its intentions and substance. As mentioned repeatedly, in doing so, *Dune* was transformed into yet another reheated soup about revenge within the feud between two rival families, set against a high-quality production and visual backdrop. In this sense, beyond the visual coolness, what remains is a story on the level of many 1980s B-series “action flicks,” but paradoxically sold, and in many cases received by critics and the public, as if it were an auteur film. And this without considering that the childish and Manichean revisions of the characters, the omissions of many, and the numerous non-characterizations of others, alone would be enough to decree its failure even as a film in itself, regardless of any comparison with Herbert’s original. ‘Cause when you pitch the same old story about the eternal battle between good and evil, and you present it in a dichotomous and cartoonishly childish way, then, despite all the coolness in the world, you’re still offering up a flick, not some sophisticated auteur cinema. And when you slap this black-and-white, juvenile caricature onto Herbert’s *Dune*, then disappointment can easily turn into outright indignation (critically speaking). This is because if you’re aiming to craft an experience that’s mainly visual, where images speak louder than words, a film ascends to the art of the visible only if those images are imbued with «sense», threaded into an organic and coherent web of meanings, and, crucially, are «dramatized» through scenic dynamics. Otherwise, as we’ve also pointed out in “Future Mythologies”, if it’s all about banking on their cool factor, and hence, their ability to provoke a superficial, sensory but not insightful response, then it becomes tough to distinguish such a meticulously designed and

produced film from any of the thousands of "[Scenic Landscape](#)" videos in 4K found on "[video sharing social media](#)." The mere coolness of the imagery and scenes (Rule of Cool), in other words, dulls the audience's "gestalting" ability – something Paul Atreides (at least in the novel) was a "master" of – since purely sensory pleasure always robs the emotion of all intelligence, cognition, and psychic continuity, limiting it to the level of mere sensation, never elevating it to genuinely perceptual pleasure.¹⁸

This allows us to return to what was claimed at the beginning of this paper, namely that films of this kind open the possibility for a broader reflection on the trends of contemporary cinema, dominated by the idea that the coolness of the imagery and individual scenes can be considered, as such, as the aesthetic and authorial quality of a film intended as an art of the visible.



[Timothée Chalamet](#) as [Paul Atreides](#) vs [Austin Butler](#) as [Feyd-Rautha Harkonnen](#)

¹⁸ F. Herbert. *The Illustrated Dune*, p. 5: «[...] animal consciousness does not extend beyond the given moment nor into the idea that its victims may become extinct ... the animal destroys and does not produce . . . animal pleasures remain close to sensation levels and avoid the perceptual [...]». As we have previously observed elsewhere, Paul Atreides, in Herbert's vision, is called—through the "Bene Gesserit and Mentat Training"—to refine his perceptual skills to the degree of perfect awareness of the totality of the "objective" spatial, temporal, material, environmental, historical, cultural, and psychological conditions in which he finds himself immersed. In this way, he can understand everything and control reality (even the universe...) through his mind. It's in this sense that Paul Atreides would be the Kwisatz Haderach, a male whose mental powers can bridge space and time. Essentially, he's a master of what Herbert (using gestalt as a verb) would call the ability to "gestalt", gestalting, that is, the act of forming or configuring a gestalt, which is the perception of the totality of a situation rather than its individual parts. A master of gestalting must be able to perform a synoptic, total perception, not focused solely on the particulars and details of the situation, to grasp its truth not (just) as the sum of its parts but as something more or, rather, different from their sum, deriving knowledge from the relationships that all parts weave with others. For example, a Bene Gesserit master can understand a person "in one gestalten flicker" (p. 7) or, when searching for clues in an apartment, be capable of "gestalting the room" (p. 223). As is well known, the Bene Gesserit, in Herbert's story world, aims to surpass the limits of all logical and computational thought, since, unlike these, those trained in this discipline have the ability to receive and synthesize (even instantaneously) emotional and sensory information as well.

Movies, therefore, increasingly appear as a sort of perceptual and critical manipulation, skillfully orchestrated by the cultural industry to make the general public believe that films that until the 1980s were classifiable as “flicks” – light B-movies, action, entertainment blockbusters – are now to be considered as authentic auteur films, works of great artistic or critical value. For example, take the initial section of *Dune 2024*, where Paul must be accepted by the Fremen. Well, with “screens” side by side and considering the years that have passed between the two works, is it really possible to justify in a critical and reasoned manner why this part, and by extension the film as a whole, could be classified as a more authorial and superior cinematic work compared to [“*Rambo III*” by Peter MacDonald \(1988\)?](#)

We mention *Rambo III* not by chance,¹⁹ because the narrative structure of the first part seems to propose an almost mirror version of the first part of *Dune 2024*. Also in *Rambo III*, we have the hero who, in an attempt to save his friend and mentor Trautman, captured by the very bad, brutal, and bloodthirsty Soviet oppressors in Afghanistan, must overcome his hesitation towards being who he truly is and embark on a journey into the hostile Afghan lands to try to integrate into the community of mujaheddin fighters who are battling the Soviet invader and manage to obtain their help. After some initial disagreements and mistrust among the mujaheddin, *Rambo*, like Paul, manages to gain their trust and help, but only after learning and accepting their customs, while at the same time proving to be a worthy warrior. Now what would be the difference – in artistic and narrative terms – between this first part of *Rambo III* and that of *Dune 2024*? Screen side by side, we repeat, practically none. Yet, as is known, *Rambo III* is considered one of the worst films of the 1980s, mocked upon release by many as a sort of parody of the character of *Rambo* himself. Many critics and viewers found the plot of “*Rambo III*” unconvincing or too simplistic (isn’t this also the case for *Dune 2021/2024*?) and focused excessively on action while neglecting character development and solid storytelling (isn’t this also the case for *Dune 2021/2024*? To understand, just replace the action in *Rambo III* with the coolness of the scenes in *Dune 2021/2024*). The characterization of many characters was considered only sketched, when not stereotypical or poor (do we need to return to this aspect, one of the worst, of *Dune 2021/2024*, with its court of non-characters?). Moreover, despite the intent to address complex and current themes, the superficial treatment of complex and nuanced issues such as the Afghan-Soviet conflict was seen as a lack of depth that risked being offensive. And isn’t this also the case for *Dune 2021/2024*, once the currentness of the Afghan-Soviet conflict is replaced with the complexity of Herbert’s historical imagination, violated to the point of appearing as a parody of itself? “*Rambo III*” was then criticized for taking to the extreme scenes of violence that many judged exaggerated and unrealistic. And how are the Harkonnens in *Dune 2021/2024* characterized if not as a hyperbolic, cartoonish, and unrealistic representation of the Harkonnens’

¹⁹ For a more direct comparison, we could’ve taken the already mentioned *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (G. Lucas, 2005), but in that case, the comparison would’ve been too easily in favor of Lucas’s movie. Because if the “maturity” of *Dune 2024* is supposed to be about showing how the hero turns “evil,” then *Revenge of the Sith*, despite being plagued by dialogues that are often more “cringe-worthy” than those in *Dune 2021/2024*, portrays this shift towards the dark side in an even more tragic and brutal, and thus “mature,” manner. This transition, as already mentioned, is depicted in *Dune 2024* in a sugarcoated and ambiguous way, in comparison for Lucas’s film. In this sense, then, if the maturity and authorship of a film should be measured by this shift to the dark side of the protagonist, *Revenge of the Sith* should be considered a much more mature and author-driven film than *Dune 2021/2024*. After all, describing *Dune* as a story revolving around romantic and maternal love and the battle between good and evil fits *Revenge of the Sith* better than Herbert’s *Dune*. Anyway, *Rambo III*, besides the reasons detailed in our analysis, also offers an exaggeration that clarifies both the idea and the hyperbole we want to highlight.

wickedness? What would be the authorial difference between the portrayal of Feyd-Rautha in *Dune 2024* and the Soviet colonel in *Rambo III*? Perhaps that the portrayal of violence in *Rambo III* appears today far less exaggerated and cartoonish than that, sometimes senseless, through which *Dune 2021/2024* describes the gratuitous atrocities of the Harkonnens. *Rambo III* was then mocked for some hyperbolic, and now infamous, one-liners that described *Rambo* as a vengeful god, who would have no mercy on his enemies. However, what about the scene in *Dune 2024* when we see Rabban, described until then as a brutal murderer who fears nothing, not even Gurney Halleck (as shown by Villeneuve himself), running away not from Muad'Dib, but from the mere hint, because everything is confused by a storm that makes it impossible to see beyond three meters, that he might be approaching (and this before he knows it's Paul and that he has passed the water of life ritual). Lastly, if in *Rambo III* the political context of the film was seen as a very simplistic and idealized typical of Reagan-era "Cold War Propaganda," at least it could still be defined as a "political context." In *Dune 2021/2024*, as we have seen, Herbert's political context is not even simplified; it's just not there.

One might argue that the visual splendor of *Dune 2021/2024* defines the difference from a film like *Rambo III*. Regardless, such an answer would only slightly shift the issue because aestheticization does not define (or at least should not, at least according to classical critical parameters, those in use until the end of the 1990s) a film as an art of the visible. The problem, if one wanted to bring into play the degree of visual coolness, would be that despite all the numerous criticisms attributable to *Rambo III*, what it certainly could not be accused of was the production quality and visual grandeur, which rightly defined it as one of the most spectacular action blockbusters of the 1980s, with a visual impact that – considering the stylistic differences imposed by the respective genres and the production technology of the time –, has nothing to envy the aesthetics of *Dune 2021/2024*.²⁰

In short, a viewer who knows nothing about Herbert or has not seen David Lynch's 1984 version, after watching *Dune 2024* what would they have more, and better, compared to watching *Rambo III*? On what exactly would *Dune 2021/2024* invite reflection, better and more profound, that *Rambo III* would not?

What "wounds" (intellectual and emotive) would *Dune 2024* leave as you exit the cinema, wounds that *Rambo III*, on the other hand, would not inflict? These are the "scars" that, in one way or another, every true auteur film as envisioned up until the 1980s invariably leaves on its audience after viewing.

It should, therefore, be clear what issue we have sought to highlight in this extensive analysis, namely what increasingly prompts the question, year after year, about what

²⁰ Peter MacDonald's debut as a director nailed it by handling complex scenes and keeping the pace tight throughout the movie. MacDonald, who had been sticking to directing second units before this, showed off some serious skills in helming elaborate action sequences, creating iconic and visually stunning moments. The action scenes in "Rambo III" are seen as some of the most memorable and well-executed of the 1980s. "Rambo III" features a lineup of high-budget, intricate action scenes – think explosions, hand-to-hand combat, chases, and large-scale battles with hundreds of extras, military vehicles, and horses – all pulled off with finesse, especially impressive in an era before CGI became a thing, setting a benchmark for 1980s action movie excellence. John Stanier's cinematography effectively captured and recreated the colors and brightness of the vast "Afghan" landscapes and the twilight intensity of the battle scenes, helping to craft an exciting and visually impressive atmosphere. The smart use of light and landscape not only ramped up the action but also gave the film a top-notch cinematic quality.

happened between the 1980s and the 2020s. What has allowed an action flick, which in 1980s was universally derided by critics, to be “repackaged” in 2024 with an unprecedented level of coolness and “relaunched” in such a way that it is considered auteur cinema?

Answering this question requires a whole other level of analysis, complex and impossible to tackle here, but something we've already partially attempted in another series of writings.²¹ For now, we'll just point out how the period between the 1990s and the 2010s witnessed a historic shift where the rise of “nerd culture”, the ubiquitous and pervasive spread of participatory Social Networks, and the adoption of the “Rule of Cool” as the main aesthetic production criterion of contemporary (mainstream) cinema (all interconnected phenomena, each made possible only through the existence of the others), have redefined contemporary culture and turned them into powerful social tools capable of influencing the public and even political debate of the 21st century.

For now, all we're left with is the disappointment of a *Dune* adaptation that had every characteristic and means to deliver the most grand and spectacular version of Herbert's vision. Yet, in the end, we believe, due to mere financial and commercial calculations, it gave us two flicks that, while visually endowed with an out-of-scale “coolness-engineered grandeur”, have nothing to do with Herbert's work (sometimes, given the numerous inconsistencies, not even dealing with himself), except for the names of the characters, a few cosmetic references, and little else.

And so we can conclude this long examination as we began it in 2021, because after watching this “*Dune Part 2*,” the bitter conclusion about the possibility of adapting Frank Herbert's *Dune* for cinema can only be the same as Alejandro Jodorowsky's: «“*Dune*” ... nobody can do it. It's a legend».



²¹ L. Marras, *The Stealer of Dreams. Tarantino's Sixties or Filming The Void*: [Part 1: Cool Now!](#); [Part 2: Sublime Now!](#); [Part 3: Apocalypse Now!](#); [Part 4: Hateful Now!](#).

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