Dune (Part One)

Ian Campbell

Dune. Dir. Denis Villeneuve. Legendary Pictures, 2021.

The film of *Dune* is absolutely beautiful, a true masterpiece of cinematography and sound. The casting, acting and script are very good. For those who have never read *Dune*, and cannot fill in the blanks, the film is largely incoherent and its central conflict does not have the impact that it does for readers. This is clearly a matter of deliberate choice on director Denis Villeneuve's part, as filling in these blanks would have been a comparatively simple matter. Critics and fans have been saying for decades that *Dune* is unfilmable; Villeneuve has addressed the problem by making a film that nobody who has not read the book will meaningfully understand. On one level, this may be marketing: after all, the overwhelming majority of the people who will see the film, like the majority of readers of *SFRA Review*, have already read the book. Villeneuve can thus rely on those readers' filling the gaps with the lore and world-building of the text, and focus instead on the spectacle, which is phenomenal. Yet on another level, the film can be interpreted as both a subtle and an overt deconstruction—in the original Derridean sense—of Herbert's novel. It compels the text-familiar audience to reconsider whether what seems logical is in fact an example of privilege that reinforces hierarchies. Like Villeneuve's most recent work, *Blade Runner 2049*, this film is metafictional.

Dune has of course been filmed once before, in 1984 by David Lynch, who famously repudiated the film, replacing his own name as director with the traditional Alan Smithee in response to post-production meddling by a studio intent on commercializing the film. Notably, the theatrical version was cut down by about 25%. The film was a critical disaster and a commercial flop in spite or perhaps because of the studio's actions, whereas the Villeneuve version has been mostly well-reviewed and has made a reasonable if not overwhelming profit—enough at any rate to greenlight the second installment. In recent years, the availability of something closer to the original cut has to a certain extent rehabilitated critical response to Lynch's film.

For the purposes of this review of Villeneuve's film, the salient aspect of the 1984 version is that it provides a reasonably clear explanation of the factions, the basic conflict and the centrality of the spice to that conflict. It is unclear whether and to what extent the introduction was Lynch's work or the studio's. While this explanation of the role and importance of the spice

is oversimplified, it does frame the film in terms of the spice; the introduction continues by explaining the conflict between factions as essentially one between planets, including a planet not found in the novel.

Again, while one may critique this presentation, it does provide viewers who have not read the book a reasonable understanding of who the Atreides are, what their problem is, and why they have to go to Arrakis. Lynch's/Smithee's use of complex effects to make the eyes of spice addicts entirely blue also shows the centrality of the spice to the story. In the 1984 film, like Herbert's text, the narrator is Princess Irulan. The novel has her present Paul as Muad'Dib and as something close to Messiah right from the beginning, and of course each chapter of the book is framed by her commentary from after the fact.

Villeneuve's film does none of this; rather, the film is framed by Chani, who does explain that spice is central (but crucially, not *why* it is) and that the emperor has sent the Atreides in place of the Harkonnens to rule her planet. The voiceover ends with "Why did the emperor choose this path? And who will our next oppressors be?" From the very beginning, Villeneuve is presenting the story from the perspective of the colonized people, though to be clear, the overwhelming majority of the actual film makes Paul and the people around him the central focus.

Yet whereas the novel, and to a lesser extent the 1984 film, present Paul as Messiah as a fait accompli, Villeneuve's film does nothing of the sort. It continually frames Paul as a well-intentioned and brave but privileged and largely clueless adolescent, torn between his father's standards and his mother's training. For the most part, he's the object rather than the subject of events. To the extent that Paul has a "Destiny", this is shown through his dreams and his reaction to them rather than told by Irulan. Paul reacts to his dreams of holy war (which the film calls "crusade") with revulsion: he does not want to lead a galaxy-spanning war that will end up with billions dead.

In addition to framing the film from the perspective of the indigenous Fremen, Villeneuve also problematizes the white-savior narrative with which so many critics over the decades have also taken issue: Paul sees it for what it is and tries to reject it. Herein lies the overt deconstruction the film wreaks upon the novel: fans of the book can perceive Paul as the hero, if a slightly

reluctant one, because the novel tells us he is the hero right from the start; moreover, the Fremen are the backdrop and the conflict within the galactic aristocracy the central plot. This is not a particularly daring perspective on the film: the reframing is widely commented upon in mainstream commercial media, not just among academic analysts.

Yet there is a rather more subtle sort of deconstruction taking place in the film, and it deserves attention at least as much as the first and more overt trope. In brief, Villeneuve presents a world and a conflict that make little sense unless and until the audience fills in the background material from Herbert's book: there are several major aspects of the galaxy-spanning empire that are not explained in this film. On one level, these lacunae reinforce the overt deconstruction: these things are not explained because the film has been framed from the Fremen's perspective, and these aspects are unknown or irrelevant to the Fremen. On another level, however, they exist as a means of deconstructing what happens when we read a text, especially an SF text, and how this can itself be a problem in the real world as well as in literature.

I've written before about Villeneuve's previous work, *Blade Runner 2049*, and how it deconstructs its own narrative of liberation and the Chosen One. In *2049*, when Joi holds up Nabokov's *Pale Fire* for a few seconds and then discards it, the audience can choose to discard it as well, as a sort of throwaway scene. But those who have read *Pale Fire* may understand the seemingly-nonsensical phrases the protagonist K is required to repeat as lines from the poem within the novel. From there, the film can be read through Nabokov's novel, which perspective will give a very different reading of the events of the film—a reading that is much bleaker than the one the film seems to present. Villeneuve's *Dune* functions metafictionally in a similar way, though here, the key text is Herbert's own novel, which is also the text the film is encouraging viewers to reconsider.

Central to the metafictional reading is that the spice is entirely missing from the film. Yes, it sparkles in the air; yes, it has unclear psychoactive properties; yes, it is valuable and available only on Arrakis. The film neither tells nor shows us that the entire upper class is addicted to the spice, nor that the spice gives longevity, nor that interstellar travel is impossible without it. The film only shows it as a valuable commodity, like spices in the nineteenth century here on Earth: a source of income or colonial conflict, to be sure, but not the *sine qua non* for an empire that spans a galaxy and many millennia. If a Part Two is made, Paul's threat to disrupt spice production will make little sense: it will be perceived as disruption of a valuable but not essential resource, rather than a threat to kill everyone in the upper class and grind space travel to a halt. Again, on one level, this is because to the Fremen, the spice is part of a communal religious ritual: they don't travel between worlds. At the same time, however, anyone who's ever read the book, and many who haven't, will associate *Dune* with "the spice must flow". Unlike the book, or the 1984 film, Villeneuve's film doesn't show or tell us why it must flow. We, as viewers, are required to fill in this information, because without it, the central conflict is incoherent. What we are doing when we fill in that information is that which the film is trying to induce us to think about.

The conflict between noble houses seems similarly incoherent. The film does touch upon the idea that the Emperor cannot be seen as helping to eliminate the Atreides, lest the other houses unite against him; yet the film also shows us the Sardaukar being assigned to the conflict, which the book does not, and in the battle the Sardaukar are presented as just that rather than as incognito. None of this is relevant to the Fremen, who get an overlord anyway, and it is this that the film is framing as something to consider. Fans of the books have for decades thought "Atreides good, Harkonnen bad". Both films and the book tell us and show us this binary opposition. The Baron is obese and cruel (and, notably, queer, though Villeneuve's film does not bring this up); the Duke outranks him and is fit, kind and manly. One part of the book Villeneuve's film does foreground is that the Atreides are trying to do something new on Arrakis, by treating the Fremen like humans deserving of dignity rather than as vermin. Tragically, however, this is cut short by those dastardly Harkonnens, and because the Atreides appear to have been wiped out, we can think of them as victims.

It is this binary opposition—that one noble house is Good and the other Bad—that the film is deconstructing in a way that the book and its sequels, which constantly give near-mythical qualities to the Atreides, do not. Essentially everyone who reads the *Review* is familiar with the dominant theoretical approaches to reading SF: following Freedman's rereading of Suvin, readers accept that aspects unfamiliar or counter to reality, but which are perceived as cognitively plausible within the world of the text, are part of the estrangement function and therefore needn't be examined all that closely except insofar as they estrange some aspect of our own reality. This has had many positive consequences, notably the inclusion of far more texts under the umbrella of SF than might otherwise be possible. But it's also this that Villeneuve's *Dune* is holding up in a distorting mirror. By forcing viewers to fill in the blanks themselves in order to ground the central conflict, it encourages viewers and readers to reconsider the uncritical acceptance of these conditions.

Through reframing the film, Villeneuve not only compels viewers to consider the conflict from the point of view of the Fremen, but also to reconsider the willing suspension of disbelief for those aspects of the textual world that may seem implausible, or may seem valid or decent or humane, but only through uncritical acceptance of what the text says. Viewers who read *Dune* a long time ago, perhaps even before the 1984 film, might well feel like Team Atreides is the right team; viewers watch Villeneuve's film and struggle to explain it to others who haven't read the book may well find themselves thinking of the Atreides as just another bunch of unelected, exploitive, colonialist gangsters. We might even take Chani's position and wonder who our own next group of overlords will be. The spice must flow, because it protects the privileges of our oppressors.

Ian Campbell is the editor of *SFRA Review*.