

Review of *Dune: Part Two*

Mark McCleerey



Dune: Part Two. Dir. Denis Villeneuve. Warner Brothers/Legendary, 2024.

Denis Villeneuve's eagerly awaited second half of his adaptation of Frank Herbert's novel *Dune* lives up to the anticipation. Like his first *Dune* (2021), *Part Two* combines captivating images and sounds with equally compelling thematic content. I will present here a broad synopsis of it, along with some remarks about what it has to say about the history of colonialism, and then consider the film's engagement with religion, particularly messianic faiths.

Villeneuve's first *Dune*, set thousands of years in the future, traces the arrival of House Atreides on the planet Arrakis to take over the mining of its enormously valuable spice. This leads to the House's fall and near-annihilation at the hands of traitors, including the Emperor (Christopher Walken). The Atreides' scion, Paul (Timothée Chalamet), and his mother, Jessica (Rebecca Ferguson), survive—aided by Fremen Fedaykin, the formidable warriors of the wasteland. *Dune: Part Two* picks up the story shortly afterwards. Paul and Jessica help the Fremen fend off and destroy a platoon of Harkonnen troopers, the latter House having re-taken control of mining operations.



With this sequence, the movie aligns itself with science fiction films that advance certain perspectives on a specific aspect of Western colonialism. The difference between the combat methods in *Part Two*, here and in other scenes, strongly evokes the French and U.S. failures in Vietnam to subdue resistance fighters from the 1950s to the early 1970s. We see this clearly in the contrast between the Harkonnens' overreliance on technology, including full body armor, and the natives' superior guerilla tactics, rooted in intimacy with their environment. Other films have similarly reconstructed this, including *Return of the Jedi* (Richard Marquand 1983) and *Avatar* (James Cameron 2009). Peter Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers* (1997) touches on it too, albeit with a satirical bent: The film indicates in its conclusion that the overequipped imperialists will ultimately triumph. Such metaphorical constructions of past wars in movies are not uncommon; more broadly, many films "provide allegorical representations that interpret, comment on, and indirectly portray aspects of an era" (Kellner 14). The Vietnam War in particular has left a complicated legacy, within both U.S. culture at large (Isserman and Kazin 67) and science fiction cinema.

Afterwards, Paul and Jessica join the Fremen community of Sietch Tabr, one of many Fremen underground redoubts. Jessica succeeds the sietch's Bene Gesserit reverend mother by surviving a dangerous ritual. In time, the Harkonnens find themselves continually thwarted by further Fremen

attacks—even more so after Paul, now known as a messianic prophet called Muad'Dib, becomes the Fedaykin's chief strategist. Eventually, Paul cements his status as the Fremen's messiah at a formal gathering of sietch leaders. Exploiting newly acquired powers of historical and prescient vision, he declaims himself the supreme ruler of Arrakis. Alarmed at the disruption of spice flow, the Emperor comes to Arrakis, as do representatives of the other Great Houses. The Fremen defeat the Emperor's troops and Paul ascends to the throne. As the other Great Houses refuse to accept this forced succession, the Fremen Fedaykin prepare to attack them as an act of holy war (the word "jihad" appears frequently in the novel). Paul's last words in the film are the chillingly ironic "Take them to paradise."

SFRA Review editor Ian Campbell has [argued](#) that the 2021 *Dune*'s critique of the white savior narrative is, although admirable, not especially noteworthy: Even mainstream commentators easily discerned it. As I agree with this, I will mention only that *Part Two* continues this worthwhile critical interrogation. I will, however, offer some thoughts about a related yet more compelling dimension of the film: its strong critique of messianic religion. Villeneuve takes this from the novel and builds on it in several ways, three of which I will briefly explore.

The first is Paul's prescient visions of a future jihad that will spread throughout the galaxy and claim billions of lives in his name. These begin in the first *Dune* and become more vivid and terrifying in *Part Two*. The key moment comes when the survivors of a Harkonnen assault on Sietch Tabr prepare to seek safety in the south, and Paul refuses to accompany them—knowing that to do so will be to invite the genocide of his visions. He later relents, and the jihad begins shortly afterwards. The power of messianic thinking and its appeal to the messianic figures themselves, even an enlightened one such as Paul, is overwhelming.

The appeal is not so great to Chani (Zendaya), Paul's Fremen mentor and lover, which leads us to a second way in which *Part Two* challenges messianic faith. Early on, the film establishes Chani's skepticism toward the prophesies, and she remains steadfast. Moreover, her skepticism flows logically from one of the most notable improvements that Villeneuve and co-screenwriter Jon Spaihts have made to Herbert's novel. Though the book paints Chani as a skilled and ruthless warrior in her right, she nevertheless submits almost completely to Paul's will once the two begin their personal relationship. Villeneuve's films, however, endow her with far more agency—which includes, among other things, adamant resistance to Paul's status as the Fremen's messianic leader. She expresses nothing but contempt for the very notion of the Lisan al-Gaib, the "voice from the outer world." She insists that the Fremen must free themselves from their oppressors, should never rely on help from any outsider.

Not even Stilgar (Javier Bardem), the leader of Sietch Tabr, can convince her. For example, when he adduces Jessica's success in the reverend mother ritual as partial fulfilment of the Fremen's messianic prophecy, Chani angrily rejoins, "Her people wrote that!" Later she remarks, "You want to control people? You tell them a messiah will come. Then they'll wait...for centuries!" She maintains this resistance to the end of the movie—indeed, to the very last shot. The film

bolsters all this with other Fremen's skepticism; for example, one of the elders admonishes Stilgar, "Your faith is playing tricks on you."

Finally, *Part Two* critiques messianic faith in a third way with its compelling (if somewhat oblique) integration of the novel's Missionaria Protectiva, an ancient Bene Gesserit program designed to plant myths and prophecies on worlds throughout the Imperium with the goal of making their populations receptive—and vulnerable—to the Bene Gesserit's grand designs for humanity. Although never mentioned by name, both of Villeneuve's *Dune* movies allude to it, via several characters, including the Emperor's daughter Irulan (Florence Pugh), Paul, the Bene Gesserit Reverend Mother Mohiam (Charlotte Rampling), and Chani. The latter's aforementioned claim ("her people") is an example of this. Another example comes when Paul, speaking to Jessica, refers to "your Bene Gesserit propaganda." By using this element of the novel in conjunction with Chani's and other characters' skepticism, and with Paul's visions, *Dune: Part Two* positions messianic faith as a dangerous and manipulative falsehood.

In sum, *Dune: Part Two* joins the tradition of science fiction cinema's discursive interaction with human history—specifically, with explorations of Western colonialism and certain forms of religion. If Villeneuve makes a third *Dune* film, it too will be highly anticipated, due in part to how he might expand on all this.

Works Cited

Isserman, Maurice, and Michael Kazin. *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*. 2nd ed., New York, Oxford UP, 2004.

Kellner, Douglas. *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era*. Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

Mark McCleerey is a Visiting Lecturer at Indiana University Bloomington.