

# Denis Villeneuve brings half of sci-fi classic *Dune* to life

Josh Varlin  
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*Dune*, directed by Denis Villeneuve; screenplay by Jon Spaihts, Villeneuve and Eric Roth; based on (the first half of) the novel *Dune* (1965) by Frank Herbert

Frank Herbert's classic science fiction novel *Dune* (1965) has bedeviled those who would adapt it into a film for almost as long as it has transported readers to the harsh deserts of Arrakis. After Chilean-French filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky failed to make a 14-hour version in the 1970s, and after David Lynch succeeded in making a justifiably panned version in 1984, French Canadian film director Denis Villeneuve has managed to make a critically acclaimed version.

Villeneuve's new film adaptation, which treats the first half of Herbert's novel, is an effective enough introduction to the novel itself and, one hopes, to the second half of the story, which is slated for a movie release in October 2023.

Villeneuve's *Dune* follows House Atreides, one of the key noble houses 20,000 years in the future, as they assume control over Arrakis, a harsh desert planet that is the source of the most important substance in the known universe, spice, which allows for interstellar travel and prolongs life. Arrakis, which the indigenous Fremen call Dune, is covered in sand save for some rocky outcroppings and a few cities, shielded from the desert and its massive sandworms by rock.

It rapidly becomes clear that, far from being a boon bestowed on Duke Leto Atreides (Oscar Isaac) by the Padishah Emperor Shaddam Corrino IV, Arrakis is a deadly trap. House Atreides's rival House Harkonnen, led by the vile Baron Vladimir Harkonnen (Stellan Skarsgård), has sabotaged spice production and colludes with the emperor and Dr. Wellington Yueh (Chang Chen), the Atreides's doctor, to launch an illegal invasion of Arrakis.

In the process, Duke Leto is taken prisoner and killed, while his concubine Lady Jessica (Rebecca Ferguson) and son Paul (Timothée Chalamet) escape thanks to assistance from Yueh, who regrets his Judas-like role.

Jessica and Paul escape into the desert, where they encounter Dr. Liet-Kynes (Sharon Duncan-Brewster), the Imperial Planetologist, and Duncan Idaho (Jason Momoa), the Atreides swordmaster, both of whom die in their defense. Fleeing into the desert once more, they encounter a group of Fremen. After an initial confrontation, they are accepted into the tribe, led by Stilgar (Javier Bardem).

Throughout these events, it becomes clear that Paul has extraordinary abilities. He has had vivid dreams of events that have come to pass, along with recurring dreams of a Fremen

woman, whom he meets at the end of the film and discovers is named Chani (Zendaya). He becomes increasingly prescient as he becomes exposed to Dune's spice, eventually having visions while awake.

One also learns about Fremen culture, conditioned by the arid environment and centuries of occupation by foreign invaders. The Fremen (from "free men") have strong intratribal loyalty, spit on the floor to demonstrate respect (as they have shared their moisture), are slow to trust outsiders, revere the sandworms in the persona of *Shai-Hulud* and believe that a messiah (*mahdi*) is coming.

The film largely follows the plot of the first half of the novel. Unfortunately, this to some extent prevents the film from standing on its own, either apart from the novel or apart from the second film, which is still in preproduction. Some judgment has to be withheld, as *Dune*'s artistic success will in large part be determined by *Dune: Part Two*.

As is expected from blockbuster movies today, the special effects are phenomenal. *Dune* is full of strange technology: personal shields, ornithopters, giant Heighliner ships operated by the Spacing Guild, lasguns, water-conserving stillsuits, towering spice harvesters. All of this is brought to life vividly, without the jarring imagery of the Lynch adaptation.

Moreover, assuming that the next film is of similar length, a total of five hours is appropriate for adapting *Dune*. Arguably the fundamental fault of Lynch's movie was that it attempted to pack a novel of some 800 pages, four appendices and a glossary into a two-hour film.

The acting and characterization are largely effective. Isaac brings to life Duke Leto, honorable to a fault and fiercely protective toward his son. Skarsgård is suitably malevolent as the Harkonnen patriarch, and the anti-gravity suspensors his character uses on account of his weight add a ghostly, rather than comic, quality.

Chalamet plays the role of a somewhat sullen teenager perhaps too well—one hopes that his character's charisma and will can come through in the second part. Ferguson's Jessica is far too emotional for someone with Bene Gesserit training, apparently in a misguided attempt to focus more on her maternal relationship with Paul. The musical talents of Atreides commander Gurney Halleck (Josh Brolin) are left out, for better or worse.

The movie has an ambiguous relationship with militarism, and it is clearly not an anti-war film. Unlike "space operas" such as *Star Wars*, many of the battle scenes are one-sided, showing vicious

orbital bombardment or hand-to-hand swordfighting in which Harkonnens brutalize the Atreides and Fremens, with the latter putting up more of a fight.

At the same time, when the duke and his family arrive on Arrakis, his legions are assembled in the desert chanting “Atreides!” While these are the protagonists’ soldiers, and the Atreides troops’ loyalty is given freely to the duke, it is also disturbing and reminiscent of US imperialist occupiers in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East. This is likely unintentional, but this itself is complicated by Paul agreeing with Stilgar’s charge—in Duke Leto’s presence, no less—that the Atreides and Harkonnens both “come here for the spice ... take it, giving nothing in return.”

Many of the edits, such as changing Liet-Kynes’s gender and removing the epigraphs, are either neutral changes or ones well within artistic license. However, the film also excludes or downplays several critical aspects of the novel, largely to its detriment.

Much of the subtlety and complexity of Herbert’s plot is covered up with cinematography that can abruptly alternate between desert landscapes and close-ups and with Hans Zimmer’s obtrusive score. As we noted about Villeneuve’s *Blade Runner 2049* (2017): “The film expends a great deal of energy attempting to convince the viewer of its importance. The sweeping compositions, the lingering close-ups and the blaring synthesizer soundtrack all seem to insist that the various goings-on are of tremendous significance. This is a film that demands—or perhaps begs—to be taken seriously.”

Villeneuve is aided by the source material in this case, although this does not overcome all of the weaknesses by any means, and these weaknesses will be more apparent to those who are not already fans of *Dune*. In particular, the intrigue of Herbert’s novel (Leto warns Paul of “a feint within a feint within a feint” as he searches for a traitor he knows is within his household) is largely dropped, simplifying the plot and making the film as a whole more heavy-handed.

Additionally, one of *Dune*’s glaring contradictions is that, millennia in the future, humanity is again ruled by dukes, barons and emperors, with ceremony and tradition carrying curious weight. In the novel, this “planetary feudalism” has the feel of an institution with some history, and its implications—loveless political marriages, brutal internecine fighting within the aristocracy, rigid class hierarchies—are more apparent.

A particularly arresting psychological aspect of the novel, also left out of the movie, is how the characters are compelled by necessity. Some of the changes are reasonable—removing epigraphs that foretell Dr. Yueh’s betrayal chapters in advance and internal monologues—but the cumulative effect is to remove this exploration. Not only do the Atreides know they are walking into a Harkonnen-laid trap in both the book and the movie, but Duke Leto in particular has morbid thoughts and senses his death is near. Moreover, Paul is explicitly told by the Bene Gesserit that his father will die shortly after their arrival on Arrakis.

In the novel, Paul’s vision of a terrible *jihad* waged in his name is not just a disturbing possible future but the best-case scenario, the least evil outcome, with other possible futures even bloodier. Paul is forced on his path knowing it will result in millions or even

billions of deaths, and that if he fails, even more will die. This sets up Herbert’s subversion of the idea of a messianic savior, and his libertarian-influenced criticism of centralized authority, in *Dune Messiah* and subsequent sequels.

The novel features a dinner party which introduces Paul to *Dune*’s customs, the local ruling class of merchants and sycophants, and the ecological ideas of Dr. Kynes, who posits that Arrakis can be made a paradise through the careful stewardship of water and long-term social planning. While a dinner party is not likely to find its way into a modern Hollywood blockbuster, and perhaps a different setting would have been more appropriate for the movie, the ecological ideas are left almost totally unexplored, glaring when one considers how dire the climatic situation is today compared to 1965. Particularly in the second half of the novel, the possibilities of people selflessly cooperating on a planetary scale to improve the environment are as motivating a force as prophecy and religion.

These ecological ideas (Herbert is credited with popularizing the very word “ecology”) saw *Dune* promoted in *Whole Earth Catalog*. This goes some way to explaining the novel’s popularity, but *Dune* also spoke to other aspects of the 1960s to varying degrees, with varying success and of varying significance. In addition to the above, this included psychedelic drug usage and anti-colonial struggles, most obviously in Algeria. Part two will presumably feature more of both, with the latter in particular being prominent in the second half of the novel.

*Dune* the novel is justifiably regarded as a classic, and often compared to J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* for its scope and ability to legitimize a genre of literature, as well as for its linguistic and historical world-building, although Tolkien was more accomplished in these regards. Herbert’s book won both the Hugo and Nebula awards and clearly inspired much of the sci-fi that has followed, particularly *Star Wars*. It maintains a hold today despite failed movie adaptations, Herbert’s increasingly bizarre sequels and his son’s cash-grabbing forays into the *Dune* universe, because it explores significant ideas and creates a compelling, if disturbing, future.

If Villeneuve’s *Dune* inspires more people to read Herbert’s *Dune*, it will have done a small service. For now, it has mostly provided an introduction to its own sequel. This reviewer hopes that the more intriguing aspects of the novel—anthropological, ecological, anti-colonial, political, even psychological—will find greater expression in *Dune: Part Two*, although there are a great number of pressures that will work against that being done effectively.



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