

# *Dune: Part Two*—An endless series of explosions and gunfights

Josh Varlin  
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Denis Villeneuve's *Dune: Part Two*, following *Dune: Part One* (2021), covers the drama of the latter half of Frank Herbert's celebrated science-fiction novel *Dune* (1965). Unfortunately, what Villeneuve has provided is a bland and seemingly endless series of explosions and gunfights. The film fails to capture much of what's best in Frank Herbert's attempt to depict the epic sweep of a marginalized people defeating a powerful galactic empire.

The film is mostly a schematic, plot-based adaptation of *Dune*. Between the two films, totaling about five hours, Villeneuve hits most of the major plot points of the novel. However, so much of the book's vitality is missing, substituted for by action sequences and dazzling special effects.

In a review of the first film, this writer expressed "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." It is no pleasure to report that those pressures won out against those more "intriguing" elements of the novel.

Picking up immediately after the events of the first film, *Dune: Part Two*'s narrative more or less corresponds to the novel's, although changes have been made. Paul (Timothée Chalamet), heir to House Atreides, and his mother Jessica (Rebecca Ferguson), join the indigenous Fremen in their fight against despotic House Harkonnen, which murdered his father with the assistance of Emperor Shaddam Corrino IV (an awkward-looking Christopher Walken). Paul is gradually integrated into the oppressed Fremen culture, falling in love with Chani (Zendaya) and fighting among the guerrilla warriors led by Stilgar (Javier Bardem).

Despite misgivings, Paul proclaims himself the prophesied messiah of the Fremen, and is accepted as such thanks in part to Jessica's manipulations. He rallies the Fremen to fight against the Harkonnens and the emperor's forces, kills Baron Vladimir Harkonnen (Stellan Skarsgård) and duels the

baron's psychotic nephew, Feyd-Rautha Harkonnen (Austin Butler). Upon winning the duel, he takes Princess Irulan (Florence Pugh) as his wife, proclaims himself emperor and then launches the holy war he had foreseen and feared.

Even the two films' five-hour length is not enough to fit in every facet of the sprawling novel. Moreover, the book features numerous epigraphs from Herbert's fictional future histories, as well as internal musings that rarely translate to the screen, at least in that particular form. As in *Dune: Part One*, the cumulative effect of removing these elements is to delete the exploration of the history of Herbert's imagined universe and the psychology of his characters. This weakness is even more pronounced than it was in the first film, excising the depth (as well as the graceful imagery) that the novel provides and leaving us with something essentially flat and lifeless.

The complex factors motivating Paul, Stilgar, Jessica et al.—the curse of prescience, the desire for a verdant Arrakis, religious prophecies, feudal social norms, ecological constraints—are hinted at but rarely explored. A telling moment in this respect arrives when Chani explains the Fremen techniques for capturing water from the desert, both for immediate drinking water and for the long-term project of colonizing Arrakis with water-capturing plants to change the planet's environment. In the film, Paul zones out during the explanation, enthralled by Chani's beauty. Not only is the ecological aspect passed over, but the romantic connection between Paul and Chani is presented more as a teenage romance than as the deep connection described in the novel.

The second *Dune* also essentially ignores the complex political and economic structures that frame Herbert's novel, including the mercantilist CHOAM, the Spacing Guild and the Great Houses of the empire. This is facilitated through the elision of significant portions of the book's narrative and other changes: Paul fights in the desert with the Fremen for a few months, rather than years; his younger sister Alia (Anya Taylor-Joy) is therefore present only as a fetus and in a perplexing vision; Paul and Chani do not have

a son who dies in the final battle; and Paul seemingly spurns Chani for Irulan, as opposed to pointedly marrying Irulan only for politics while declaring his love for Chani.

Again, some of these changes may have been necessary or inevitable, and others could fall into the category of artistic license, but the overall effect is a hollowing out of the novel and a general retreat into mere spectacle.

Villeneuve indeed provides spectacle in spades. The scenes on the Harkonnen home planet of Giedi Prime, filmed with an infrared camera, are as arresting as they are unnerving. Villeneuve may intend the sequence to evoke fascism in the manner of Leni Riefenstahl's 1935 Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*. While this conveys something of House Harkonnen's arch-villainy, it adds literally nothing to our understanding of that house's social or political role, let alone to our understanding of fascism in our own universe and time.

The climactic duel between Paul and Feyd-Rautha is intense, even if one knows the eventual outcome.

Ultimately, however, one cannot substitute spectacle for substance.

This is not to deny the definite limitations of Herbert's novel, written during the Cold War, by any means. (Herbert reportedly plucked the name "Harkonnen" for his evildoers out of a phone book because it sounded "Soviet," although it's in fact Finnish.) The novel can be didactic, with long, pseudo-philosophical musings on genetic manipulation, drug use as a means for expanding one's mind and syncretic religious traditions millennia hence—a future for humanity not only improbable but short-sighted and pessimistic. Villeneuve's film avoids some of these pitfalls, but without providing a viable substitute for the world-building they introduce.

Yet Herbert's *Dune* also has its strengths. It spoke directly to events happening at the time such as concern about humanity's impact on the environment and particularly the anti-colonial struggle in Algeria. Herbert has Paul shout, "Ya hya chauhada!", which is rendered as "Long live the fighters!" in the Fremen language. This is actually a French transliteration of the Arabic phrase for "Long live the martyrs!", taken from newspaper accounts of the Algerian Revolution. Villeneuve's film has Paul shout something else, not in Arabic, which is translated as "Long live the fighters." Likewise, the film excises *jihad* as the translation for Paul's feared holy war—although, given the connotations that term has picked up in the last 60 years, that may have been an understandable move.

*Dune* the novel has a much more "organic" "historical" sense, of toil and strife of the oppressed against the oppressors, which is not only entirely absent from the film, where social change is a matter of military action, but also

largely gone from contemporary science fiction literature as well.

Herbert had many strange proclivities and some deeply unhealthy tendencies—he was a onetime speechwriter for a Republican politician, later on came to support Ronald Reagan and had musings on genetics that have, at best, an ambiguous relationship to eugenics.

Religious mysticism is rife in the book and social change in the form of the overthrow of a monarchical galactic empire was already stale in 1965.

Herbert's ideas emerged during an exceptionally difficult period in history for art and literature, science fiction included. America imperialism's world dominance, about to enter into a period of decline, had few intellectual challengers that were accessible to artists. Stalinism and the Cold War combined to damage social thought. Herbert had posited a variety of feudalism as a form of social organization in the age of space travel and human habitation on far-flung places in the galaxy.

These weaknesses became more pronounced as the *Dune* series continued, to the point where the latter books are basically unreadable, except by the most devoted fans.

Yet, watching Villeneuve's *Dune*, one appreciates that as constrained as the novel's ideas were, they were *ideas*. If Villeneuve removed those ideas from his film in an attempt to pander to what he thinks Hollywood audiences (or studios!) can handle, then he has underestimated filmgoers, as made clear by the global response to *Oppenheimer*.

The popularity of *Dune* reflects, in part, a desire for more serious science-fiction cinema, wielding not just technical wizardry but thought-provoking ideas about our world and its future, and, without doubt, the movement of societies on a mass scale. Villeneuve's *Dune* provides a skeleton of this at best—his assembled armies and battles represent nothing but militaristic pageantry, not the clash of social forces, which he utterly fails to capture.

The success of *Dune: Part Two* may, unfortunately, portend a *Dune: Part Three*, an adaptation of *Dune Messiah* (1969). This would complete Villeneuve's desired trilogy, adapting the first two of Herbert's books telling the story of Paul Atreides. It is difficult to see what, if anything, this would add.



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