

1 Introduction

»Over [50] years ago, Frank Herbert crafted a remarkable depiction of our time, so, read, or reread, *Dune*—and read it hard.«¹

Not everyone agrees with William A. Senior's evaluation of the plot and importance of *Dune* (1965), the novel by Frank Herbert (1920–1986), which has been turned into another movie, directed by Denis Villeneuve, and shown on the big silver screen again in 2021. British journalist Janan Ganesh even demands that intellectual debates about the plot and its depiction be stopped, albeit he offers at least some interpretations himself when he argues that »[t]he grandiose silliness of *Dune* cost [him] 155 minutes of LA sunshine.« Although *Dune* (2021) »might be the handsomest thing committed to screen since *Lawrence of Arabia*,« Ganesh argues that the film is not »profound. Showing a dust bowl of a planet is not an insight into climate change. Showing a case of imperialism is not a rumination on imperialism. Whispering a sentence does not make it wise. If the big idea is that power is a burden, it is a Harry Potter film.«² However, such an evaluation neither considers nor understands the vast semiotics that lie within *Dune* and have kept the story alive and even ready for two more blockbuster movies in the third decade of the 21st century. Ganesh wants to de-contextualize the movie and understands it

1 William A. Senior, »Frank Herbert's Prescience: »Dune« and the Modern World,« *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 17, no. 4 (2007): 320.

2 Janan Ganesh, »Stop Intellectualising Pop Culture,« *Financial Times*, October 30, 2021, accessed November 6, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/cf224502-1f57-4204-8da4-9720e39bd509>.

purely as something entertaining when he states that »[t]he problem is its investiture by critics and audiences with more meaning than it can bear.«³ I disagree with such an evaluation and would rather claim that there is more meaning to the film, drawn to it from the original novel, than the audience can take in while watching the film only once, especially if those who watch it are unfamiliar with Herbert's novel. In fact, every form of literature or visual media is in a way impacted by the time of its creation and the message the author or creator wants to transport with the story. Consequently, it is hard to read or watch *Dune* without constructing a connection to motifs or historical contexts Herbert had in mind when he drafted the plot for his story about a future universe as well as such ones the audience has in mind with regard to their own cultural and historical experiences. The present study will therefore show the extent to which Herbert used orientalist semiotics for the creation of the universe his plot is related to and its heroic figure, i. e. Paul Atreides, the central protagonist of the first of his *Dune* novels that was published more than five decades ago. It is thereby an attempt to decode the sign system the first novel of the *Dune* series was based upon and the extent to which these semiotics, especially the orientalist ones, have been conserved and represented to later generations on the big silver screen as well.

The science fiction (SF) genre was particularly suited for Herbert's universe and its problems that were and still are so easy to be connected with the reader's time because, as American scholar Janet Kafka emphasized, »free from the conventions and demands of the mainstream, SF can deal with any socio-political, ethical, or technological problem that the human race might meet, from nearly any point of view.«⁴ In this sense, as Kafka continued in her reflection, Herbert succeeded in »creat[ing] a totally believable alien world, complete with culture, philosophy, ecology, [and] language.«⁵ It is therefore hardly surprising that *Dune* is often referred to as »the best-selling

3 Ibid.

4 Janet Kafka, »Why Science Fiction?,« *The English Journal* 64, no. 5 (1975): 46.

5 Ibid., 47.

science-fiction novel ever,«⁶ having sold more than 12 million copies worldwide.⁷ The novel has also been called »epic« since it was published in 1965,⁸ a classification that seems quite natural as the novel, due to its »wide-ranging themes, [the] basic narrative of the maturation of Paul Atreides and its violent clash of cultures, ... merits such acclaim in the modern sense of the word.«⁹ It has consequently been highlighted that *Dune* is not only epic but even shows some similarities with the Greek epic of antiquity.¹⁰ Next to these resemblances, Herbert's novel presents and discusses three main themes: »the use and abuse of political power, the importance of maintaining a whole planet's ecological balance, and the spiritual development (based on consciousness of the functioning of mind and body) of the young hero.«¹¹ It is probably due to these main themes and their general appeal that *Dune* remained popular over the decades, both as a novel as well as on the cinema or television screen, although previous attempts to bring the plot to life were considered rather disastrous before the new film was released in 2021. Robert L. Mack argued that »Herbert's particular vocal constructions in *Dune* mirror a general philosophical fascination with the human voice, and ... this specific resonance significantly contributes to the novel's enduring appeal.«¹² However, this would probably be an overly monocausal explanation, as many motifs can be identified in the novel and the films that are particularly appealing to a cross-generational audience. While read-

6 Shelly Freierman, »Popular Demand,« *The New York Times*, August 21, 2006, cited in Robert L. Mack, »Voice Lessons: The Seductive Appeal of Vocal Control in Frank Herbert's ›Dune,« *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 22, no. 1 (2011): 40.

7 David M. Higgins, »Psychic Decolonization in 1960s Science Fiction,« *Science Fiction Studies* 40, no. 2 (2013): 229.

8 Joel P. Christensen, »Time and Self-Referentiality in the *Iliad* and Frank Herbert's *Dune*,« in *Classical Traditions in Science Fiction*, eds. Brett M. Rogers and Benjamin Eldon Stevens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 161.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Kafka, »Why Science Fiction?,« 51.

12 Mack, »Voice Lessons,« 40.

ers or viewers could identify historical, political, or social questions related to the First World War and the Cold War, with a particular focus on the Middle East, during the 1960s and 1970s, recent interpretations have focused on other aspects, especially the ecological questions and warnings formulated by Herbert. Indeed, the novel offers a fascinating variety of narratives and motifs and has therefore attracted interest ever since its publication.

These multiple levels of interpretation, also related to questions of power and capitalist exploitation, are as well presented within Herbert's overall universe, which is »both futuristic and feudal, where powerful families compete to control planetary resources and influence precious, interstellar trade through acts of deception, bribery, and occasionally brute force.«¹³ The story, in a way, could therefore also be seen as an interpretation of a future universe according to a historical understanding close to Immanuel Wallerstein's (1930–2019) world-systems theory,¹⁴ which was itself published a few years after *Dune's* original release. The interrelationship between the Imperial Court, resembling the Wallersteinian center, and Arrakis,¹⁵ the desert planet that represents a colonized and exploited periphery within Herbert's novel and its existent universe-oriented world-system, in a way relates to historical realities Herbert could take into consideration when he designed the worlds and the universe in which the plot was supposed to happen. The possibilities for interpreting the *Dune* universe in general, and Arrakis in particular, are very broad, and as literary critic Colin Manlove pointed out with regard to Herbert's work, »[b]eneath the sand lie the rich deposits of the spice on which the whole fabric of the empire depends. The duality of aridity and

13 Ibid., 41.

14 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 71–105.

15 Arrakis could also be perceived as a colonial space that was kept underdeveloped to keep the capitalist order of the universe in Herbert's *Dune* alive. The SF author therefore expressed problems that leftist intellectuals also referred to. For such an interpretation from the early 1970s, see Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: BLP, 1972).

richness here is almost metaphoric.«¹⁶ Such evaluations were consequently frequently presented with regard to Herbert's novels set in the *Dune* universe. These works, as William A. Senior emphasized, »are not simply metaphoric but highly predictive« when one considers their genesis in the early 1960s, a time long before »the oil embargoes of the 1970s or the wild increase in demand we have seen in the past.« In a way, Herbert therefore predicted »many of the issues that face us most insistently today: production and price of oil, environmental threats, the escalating instability of the Middle East, Muslim fundamentalism, the erosion of monolithic world powers, the failure—or abandonment—of diplomacy, and the staggering cost in lives, money, and materiel.«¹⁷

The relation between the exploitation of natural resources, with spice representing oil, and Arrakis being a metaphoric name for Iraq could be identified with the war for influence on the desert planet.¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, and in particular due to the orientalist semiotics of the novel that will be discussed in some detail later, »[t]he Middle East ha[s] been perceived much as Arrakis in *Dune* as a place for the major powers to exploit and ignore.«¹⁹ A conflict between two houses—the progressive Atréides and the villainous Harkonnens—as well as the influence of the Space Guild, representing contractors and oil companies within this global conflict, pointed to the Cold War but also to more historical conflicts related to the history of the First World War in the Middle East.²⁰ It is not surprising that Paul Atréides, or later Paul Muad'Dib, just like T. E. Lawrence in the Western imagination, acted as if »he were a contemporary imam promising glorious

16 Colin Manlove, *Science Fiction: Ten Explorations* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1986), 81, cited in Senior, »Frank Herbert's Prescience,« 317.

17 Senior, »Frank Herbert's Prescience,« 317.

18 Willis E. McNelly, »Frank Herbert,« in *Science Fiction Writers*, ed. Richard Bleiler, 2nd ed. (New York: Scribners, 1999), 371, cited in *ibid.*

19 Senior, »Frank Herbert's Prescience,« 318.

20 *Ibid.*

salvation for all [suppressed Fremen, representing the people of the Middle East] willing to die for their cause.«²¹

Regardless of this multitude of interpretational approaches and narratives that readers or viewers can relate to, Herbert's creation did not only meet with praise. SF author and editor Sam Moskowitz (1920–1997) in particular did not like *Dune*: »The incorporation of the atmosphere of earth's medieval, political and moral climate make the plot development almost traditional by modern standards. Furthermore, the prominent use of psi phenomenon adds a note of conformity, which combined with the political climate, robs the effort of realism and transforms it into little more than a well-done adventurous romance.«²² Regardless of such critical remarks, *Dune* has »been recognized as among the best of all SF by both fans and writers: Herbert's *Dune* won the Hugo award of the World Science Fiction Convention and tied for the Nebula award of the Science Fiction Writers of America in 1966,«²³ and ever since has been »often named as the greatest science fiction novel ever written.«²⁴ The seminal novel of the *Dune* series alone »is a weighty book, heavy in the hand, and in the head,«²⁵ that can without any doubt be compared to other classics in the genres of SF and fantasy, e. g. Isaac Asimov's (1920–1992) *Foundation* trilogy,²⁶ which Herbert obviously used as inspiration as well,²⁷ or J. R. R. Tolkien's (1892–1973) *The Lord of the*

21 Ibid., 319.

22 John L. Grigsby, »Asimov's ›Foundation‹ Trilogy and Herbert's ›Dune‹ Trilogy: A Vision Reversed,« *Science Fiction Studies* 8, no. 2 (1981): 149; Sam Moskowitz, *Seekers of Tomorrow* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1966), 428.

23 Grigsby, »A Vision Reversed,« 149.

24 Michael Weingrad, »Jews of *Dune*,« *Jewish Review of Books*, March 29, 2015, accessed November 6, 2021, <https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/1633/jews-of-dune>.

25 Anthony Haden-Guest, »Fave Rave,« *Friends* 21, January 1, 1971: 16. Fanzines such as this were accessed through the Harvey Matusow Archive II: Underground Activities, University of Sussex Special Collections.

26 Isaac Asimov, *The Foundation Trilogy*, 3 vols. (London: The Folio Society, 2012 [1951–1953]).

27 Grigsby, »A Vision Reversed,« 150.

Rings.²⁸ It is interesting, however, that Herbert himself did not consider his work to be science fiction, but rather a replacement of current problems to an extraterrestrial setting: »If you want a gold mine of science fiction material, pull the assumptions out of the current best-seller list. Turn those assumptions over, look at them from every angle you can imagine. Tear them apart. Put them back together. Put your new construction on another planet (or on this planet changed) and place believable human beings into the conflict thus created.«²⁹

Whatever the sources and intentions of Herbert might have been,³⁰ the *Dune* series presents a »deep aesthetic integrity,«³¹ and its main motifs are as visible as a red string throughout all the novels. One of its basic concepts—in relation to the desert planet, the worms that produce the spice, and Paul’s appeal to the Fremmen—is an ecological one, as Paul promises to transform Arrakis, although this will eventually threaten the existence of the worms, the essential animals within the planet’s ecosystem.³² Here, the real science fiction is expressed, as scholar Donald Palumbo has emphasized:

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- 28 John J. Pierce, *Foundations of Science Fiction: A Study in Imagination and Evolution* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987), 123, cited in Kara Kennedy, »Epic World-Building: Names and Cultures in *Dune*,« *Names* 64, no. 2 (2016): 99. Also see Drew Sanders, »This Way Comes #2,« *Something Wicked* 2 (1969): 6. Tolkien originally published *The Lord of the Rings* in 1954–1955.
- 29 Frank Herbert, »Men on Other Planets,« in *The Craft of Science Fiction*, ed. Reginald Bretnor (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 129, cited in Grigsby, »A Vision Reversed,« 150.
- 30 The biographical works about Herbert offer at least some insight: Tim O’Reilly, *Frank Herbert* (New York: Ungar, 1981); Brian Herbert, *Dreamer of Dune: The Biography of Frank Herbert* (New York: Tor, 2004).
- 31 Donald Palumbo, »Plots Within Plots ... Patterns Within Patterns: Chaos-Theory Concepts and Structures in Frank Herbert’s *Dune* Novels,« *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 8, no. 1 (1997): 55. For a detailed discussion of one aspect within the work, i. e. the appliance of chaos theory, see Donald Palumbo, *Chaos Theory, Asimov’s Foundations and Robots, and Herbert’s Dune: The Fractal Aesthetic of Epic Science Fiction* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2002).
- 32 Palumbo, »Plots Within Plots,« 55.

[T]he science fiction writer (in the specific instance of Herbert) can articulate at great length and complexity a world-view that presupposes and is unified by certain scientific concepts, from which his work extrapolates, *prior* to any formal articulation of those same concepts by the scientific community—that is, that while science can investigate only what it first imagines, this crucial visionary step is often taken by the artist, not the scientist: that science follows a path art has already envisioned, and mapped for the culture as a whole.³³

Herbert masterfully interwove the ecological narrative of the *Dune* series with other topics so that the novels present »complex schemes frequently working at cross-purposes«³⁴ and the author's own and »many variations of this metaphor include to give still more examples, ›tricks within tricks,‹ ›plans within plans,‹ ›vision-within-vision,‹ ›meanings within meanings,‹ ›trickery within trickery,‹ ›wheels within wheels,«³⁵ so that »[e]ach variation, like the motif of schemes nested within schemes that most signify, underscores the series' fractal plot structure and thus echoes its ecological theme.«³⁶

For Herbert, as for other SF authors and readers alike, »fantasy, and even more so science fiction, [must have been] the fairyland of the adult mind, continually speculating and inquiring into the world which surrounds it.«³⁷ It is therefore not surprising that Herbert, himself an ecological activist of a sort,³⁸ did not really consider his work to be SF but rather a reflection about current problems that had been transferred to a different chronological and geographical setting. He consequently also applied existent semantics and semiotics, including orientalist ones, and in a way replicated narratives about the Middle

33 Ibid., 56.

34 Ibid., 58.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., 59.

37 Charles Garvin, »Science Fiction: A View in the Speculum,« *Bullfrog Information Service* 8 (1972): 19.

38 Don Baumgart, »It Has No Name,« *Earth Times* I (April 1970): 11.