

FRANK JACOB

# THE ORIENTALIST SEMIOTICS OF *DUNE*

Religious and Historical References  
within Frank Herbert's Universe



BÜCHNER

## The Orientalist Semiotics of *Dune*



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# 1 Introduction

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

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.«<sup>2</sup> 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

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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.«<sup>3</sup> 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.«<sup>4</sup> 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.«<sup>5</sup> It is therefore hardly surprising that *Dune* is often referred to as »the best-selling

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3 Ibid.

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

5 Ibid., 47.

science-fiction novel ever,«<sup>6</sup> having sold more than 12 million copies worldwide.<sup>7</sup> The novel has also been called »epic« since it was published in 1965,<sup>8</sup> 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.«<sup>9</sup> It has consequently been highlighted that *Dune* is not only epic but even shows some similarities with the Greek epic of antiquity.<sup>10</sup> 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.«<sup>11</sup> 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.«<sup>12</sup> 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-

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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.«<sup>13</sup> 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,<sup>14</sup> which was itself published a few years after *Dune's* original release. The interrelationship between the Imperial Court, resembling the Wallersteinian center, and Arrakis,<sup>15</sup> 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

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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.«<sup>16</sup> 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.«<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup> 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.«<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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

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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.«<sup>21</sup>

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.«<sup>22</sup> 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,«<sup>23</sup> and ever since has been »often named as the greatest science fiction novel ever written.«<sup>24</sup> The seminal novel of the *Dune* series alone »is a weighty book, heavy in the hand, and in the head,«<sup>25</sup> 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,<sup>26</sup> which Herbert obviously used as inspiration as well,<sup>27</sup> or J. R. R. Tolkien's (1892–1973) *The Lord of the*

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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*.<sup>28</sup> 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.«<sup>29</sup>

Whatever the sources and intentions of Herbert might have been,<sup>30</sup> the *Dune* series presents a »deep aesthetic integrity,«<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

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«<sup>34</sup> 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,«<sup>35</sup> 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.«<sup>36</sup>

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.«<sup>37</sup> It is therefore not surprising that Herbert, himself an ecological activist of a sort,<sup>38</sup> 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

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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.

East that were biased, e. g. through the repetition of stories that were fictional rather than factual, with one of these stories having been that of Lawrence of Arabia and his role during the Arab War against Turkish rule during the First World War. This embedding of current events or personal experiences and knowledge was nothing spectacularly new, as the »father of German SF,« Kurd Lasswitz (1848–1910),<sup>39</sup> to name just one prominent example here, used his experience as a scientist for his literary works as well and even gave them more credibility through his professional expertise.<sup>40</sup> Some readers consequently considered *Dune* to be »an ecological novel,« while SF fans naturally argued that »[i]f *Dune* isn't considered [SF], the people who read it must be blind.«<sup>41</sup>

The diversity of perceptions of *Dune* secured it the rank of »a bestselling mainstay of the science fiction canon«<sup>42</sup> for decades, and it was essentially a question of technical possibilities that would decide about its adaptation for the silver screen. In the 1970s, the Chilean filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky attempted to direct a film based on the novel, but the director, »like most of the people he enlisted in his project (including Salvador Dali and Mick Jagger), was only minimally acquainted with Herbert's novel.«<sup>43</sup> The storyboard for what would eventually have been »a 14-hour-long movie only tenuously related to the book« was a wild reinterpretation, and the documentary *Jodorowsky's Dune* (2013, dir. Frank Pavich) provides an insight into the initial project to bring *Dune* to the cinema. Eventually, the first *Dune* film saw the light of day in 1984, directed by David Lynch. The film was harshly criticized and stood out as some kind of failure with-

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39 Lasswitz wrote a number of short stories, novellas, and novels, including his masterpiece, the two-volume novel *Auf zwei Planeten* (On Two Planets, 1897). Kurd Lasswitz, *Auf zwei Planeten: Roman in zwei Büchern* (Weimar: Felber, 1897).

40 William B. Fischer, »German Theories of Science Fiction: Jean Paul, Kurd Lasswitz, and After,« *Science Fiction Studies* 3, no. 3 (1976): 257.

41 »Mindspeak: Letters,« *Godless* 3 (1973): 10.

42 Weingrad, »Jews of *Dune*.«

43 Ibid.

in the director's œuvre,<sup>44</sup> though Lynch was already well-known for films like *The Elephant Man* (1980) and *Eraserhead* (1977), the latter having some kind of »midnight-movie cult status.«<sup>45</sup> For Lynch, *Dune* must have presented an interesting plot, as the director remarked in a later interview about his working style that »[t]here are certain desires that color your ideas and make them personal. I'm attracted by certain concepts. Once they start coming, I start to link them. I also like to do other people's work because the ideas are already organized. I have more confidence, though, in my own concepts. I understand them better and therefore can get more out of them.«<sup>46</sup> Regardless of the bad reviews, Lynch is today considered »a seminal, consistently divisive postmodern auteur, [whose] films have been booed and castigated as much as they have been revered and embraced by cult fanatics.«<sup>47</sup> His film based on the first *Dune* novel was simply too short, and only those who had read the book were probably able to fully understand the film. He tried to »collapse the boundaries between spectator and screen; as such, [*Dune*] underscore[s] how fantasy is not just a mindless escape from the real world, but a device for reconstructing and revolutionizing the social, psychological, and ideological fabric of the real world.«<sup>48</sup> However, in Lynch's film, the aesthetics were probably not sufficiently interwoven with the story, and since its main elements had to be explained rather quickly, the film was simply too overwhelming for the audience.

In 2000, the three-part TV miniseries *Frank Herbert's Dune* (dir. John Harrison) tried to solve the problem of time, and it was followed by a second three-part TV miniseries, *Frank Herbert's Children of Dune* (dir. Greg Yaitanes), three years later, which was based on

44 Todd McGowan, »Finding Ourselves on a ›Lost Highway‹: David Lynch's Lesson in Fantasy,« *Cinema Journal* 39, no. 2 (2000): 51.

45 Lloyd Rose, »Dune Diary,« *Film Comment* 20, no. 1 (1984): 2.

46 Laurent Bouzereau, »Blue Velvet: An Interview with David Lynch,« *Cinéaste* 15, no. 3 (1987): 39.

47 D. Harlan Wilson, »Review: The Impossible David Lynch by Todd McGowan,« *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 18, no. 2 (2007): 279.

48 Ibid.

Herbert's second and third novels in the *Dune* series, i. e. *Dune Messiah* (1969) and *Children of Dune* (1976). While some reviews were relatively good, others still criticized that the plot was hard to understand for a general TV audience.<sup>49</sup> This, however, did not prevent the production of another *Dune* film, which, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, was finally released in October 2021. This »epic spectacle,«<sup>50</sup> directed by the Canadian filmmaker Denis Villeneuve, shows the first half of Herbert's seminal *Dune* novel and received a lot of praise from critics, and it was recently confirmed that a second film that will finish the storyline of the first book is going to follow *Dune* and will supposedly be released in October 2023.<sup>51</sup> The film takes a lot of time to develop the story of *Dune* and does not overwhelm its audience; the aesthetics of the film, however, continue to present certain orientalist elements, e. g. in its depiction of Chani, which very much resembles Steve McCurry's photograph of the so-called Afghan Girl (Sharbat Gula) (Fig. 1), who was shown on the cover of *National Geographic* in June 1985.<sup>52</sup> The image was later used with political connotations, and advertisement materials for *Dune* (2021) depict Chani in a way that resembles the semiotics of the former image (Fig. 2).

The orientalist semiotics of the novel have consequently been preserved over the years and are even more visible in 2021 than they were in 1984. The sign system Herbert based his considerations on has consequently not been separated from his vision for a future universe, a

49 Melanie McFarland, »Familial Drama and Effects Power *Children of Dune*,« *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, March 13, 2003; Ron Wertheimer, »Television Review: A Stormy Family on a Sandy Planet,« *The New York Times*, March 15, 2003.

50 Celina Osuna, Ed Finn and Osvaldo E. Sala, »What *Dune* Should Teach Us about the Beauty of »Wastelands,« *Scientific American*, October 21, 2021, accessed November 6, 2021, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/what-dune-should-teach-us-about-the-beauty-of-wastelands/>.

51 Abigail Covington and Adrienne Westenfeld, »»Dune: Part 2« Is Happening—And Denis Villeneuve Knows Where His Plot Will Head,« *Esquire*, November 8, 2021, accessed November 15, 2021, <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/a38040674/dune-2-sequel-details/>.

52 »Dune: Interview with Dietmar Dath,« *Cuts: Der kritische Film-Podcast* 79, September 29, 2021, accessed October 2, 2021, <https://cuts.podigee.io/124-dune>.



Figs. 1 and 2: The »Afghan Girl« and Chani; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Sharbat\\_Gula.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Sharbat_Gula.jpg) (Accessed January 22, 2022) and IMAGO/Prod.DB.

fact that makes *Dune* sound and look very orientalist in its perception and depiction of Middle Eastern culture. Therefore, this study presents a discussion of these specific aspects of orientalism and the semiotics related to them in the novels and films, showing how deeply the semiotic and stereotypical motifs related to Islam and the history of the Middle East affected and still affect the creation of popular media. After an initial analysis of the first novel's plot and a survey of the main motifs that can be identified, I will therefore show how orientalism is semiotically constructed and preserved within *Dune* in multiple ways. Eventually, I will take a closer look at the depiction of Paul Atreides, the novel's heroic main character, in relation to the (hi)story of T.E. Lawrence, better known as Lawrence of Arabia, an orientalist role model for the former, and the role of a holy war, the *Jihad*, whether it be considered as part of the First World War in the Middle East or Herbert's story in outer space. The study is consequently as interested in the historicity and the semiotic charging of mid-20th-century science fiction as much as it is in learning more about the impact of such popular media on perceptions of orientalist semiotics until today.

## 2 Plot and Motifs

The *Dune* novels deal with a rich variety of topics that are often repeated, so some themes seem to be quite obvious and central within Herbert's overall creation: »[T]hemes such as metamorphosis into the other, addiction, secrecy and disguise, and rebellion, as well as the interrelated motifs of the journey to the underworld, tests and trials, death and rebirth, apotheosis, and revelation, all of which are subsumed into the encompassing monomythic structure that recurs in each volume of the series.«<sup>53</sup> Since these topics have not lost any of their appealing force over the last decades, it is hardly surprising that the plot can still be the base for a cinematic blockbuster in the 21st century. Especially the ecological aspects seem to be more actual than ever, and as Donald Palumbo argues, questions about the desert planet's possible ecological change are the central monomyth of the series, and the »novels' fractal reiteration of th[is] monomyth and its component motifs ... demonstrate that the series exhibits a fractal structure—and thus accomplishes the impressive aesthetic achievement of mirroring its ecological theme in its structure—by identifying the monomyth as the single and recurring framework which shapes and contains the series' consistent duplication.«<sup>54</sup> This monomyth, related to the future of obviously inexchangeable and therefore tremendously valuable resources, can easily be transferred into our times, which is why the appeal of Herbert's story is still alive and will be for decades to come. At a time when more and more parts of the

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53 Donald Palumbo, »The Monomyth as Fractal Pattern in Frank Herbert's *Dune* Novels,« *Science Fiction Studies* 25, no. 3 (1998): 434.

54 Ibid.

world are becoming desert-like and resources are becoming more and more valuable, the story of *Dune* seems to be quite actual and particularly related to our times as well.

However, while *Dune* establishes the myth of Paul Atreides as some kind of messiah, the following volumes destroy this myth again. In contrast to the motifs related to Paul's rise and fall, the ecological questions seem to remain more central, although this focus only becomes obvious within and through the later novels. While Paul intended to change Arrakis by becoming a messiah-like savior, it is young Leto II who eventually reaches an even higher level of conscience when he »merges symbiotically with Arrakis's sandtrout (a stage in the sandworm life-cycle),« an act that »gives Leto II invulnerability, great longevity, and inhuman speed and strength, but ... also leads to his gradual metamorphosis into a sandworm.«<sup>55</sup> The topical varieties in the novels have allowed scholars to take a closer look at Herbert's universe from different angles, thereby offering interpretations of numerous interesting aspects related to the history of the desert planet and the fight for its control or eventual change into something ecologically different.<sup>56</sup>

For the present analysis and following discussion, a short survey of the plot of the first novel will suffice. In short, »Dune opens with a galactic perspective ... and the galaxy is controlled by an unstable threesome of powers—the Padishah Emperor, a group of feudal dynasties, and the Guild, who run the inter-stellar traffic.«<sup>57</sup> In addition

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55 Ibid., 435–436.

56 Susan McLean, »A Question of Balance: Death and Immortality in Frank Herbert's Series,« in *Death and the Serpent: Immortality in Science Fiction and Fantasy*, ed. Carl Yoke (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1985), 145–152; Don Riggs, »Future and ›Progress: in Foundation and Dune,« in *Spectrum of the Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Sixth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts*, ed. Donald Palumbo (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1988), 113–117; Astrid Schmitt von Mühlenfels, »The Theme of Ecology in Frank Herbert's DUNE Novels,« in *The Role of Geography in a Post-Industrial Society*, ed. Hans-Wilhelm Windhorst (Vechta: Vechta: Vechtaer Druckerei und Verlag, 1987), 27–34.

57 Haden-Guest, »Fave Rave,« 16.

to these obvious forces, the religious-like order of the female Bene Gesserit, whose members are intent on and often succeed in controlling politics from the shadows, plays an important role as well. All in all, the reader or viewer would be reminded of a *Game of Thrones*-like past, which the German author Dietmar Dath referred to as »feudal absolutism« (*Feudalabsolutismus*).<sup>58</sup> In the year 10,191, a family feud between two powerful families and their respective leaders—i. e. the Atreides, led by Paul's father »Duke Leto who is trim, bearded, like the man on the Player's pack,« and the Harkonnens, represented by »Baron Vladimir Harkonnen who is unimaginably gross and unimaginably wicked«<sup>59</sup>—serves the Padishah Emperor Shaddam IV to strengthen his own position. Thufir Hawat, Mentat<sup>60</sup> and Master of Assassins for House Atreides, explained the reason why House Atreides was now supposed to take over Arrakis from the Harkonnens, which was why Paul and his family had to leave their home planet, Calladan: »their mortal enemies, the Harkonnens, had been on Arrakis eighty years, holding the planet in quasi-fief under ... contract to mine the geriatric spice, melange. Now the Harkonnens were leaving to be replaced by the House of Atreides in fief-complete—an apparent victory for the Duke Leto. Yet, Hawat had said, this appearance contained the deadliest peril, for the Duke Leto was popular among the Great Houses of the Landsraad.«<sup>61</sup>

The spice is actually the »gold« of Herbert's universe, something that is emphasized even more in the 1984 film when the emperor's daughter Irulan highlights its value at the beginning.<sup>62</sup>

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58 »Dune: Interview with Dietmar Dath.«

59 Haden-Guest, »Fave Rave,« 16.

60 A Mentat can be described as a kind of human supercomputer.

61 Frank Herbert, *Dune* (1965), accessed November 10, 2021, <http://readonlinefreebook.com/dune/c-one>.

62 The introduction and the film itself were technically quite advanced for its time. The Italian Carlo Rambaldi (1925–2012), who had also worked on the special effects for *E. T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982, dir. Steven Spielberg), created the worms. The music for the film was composed and performed by Toto.

The spice extends life.  
 The spice expands consciousness.  
 The spice is vital to space travel.<sup>63</sup>

It is so important as not only is it consumed by the aristocratic elites to extend life but it is also needed by the navigators of the Space Guild to bend time and space to provide them with the possibility to travel through space. Since spice was only available on Arrakis, its possession and the contract for the universe's spice production resembled an important source of income and power. But as Baron Harkonnen formulates it in *Dune* (2021), »the Emperor is a very jealous man« and in fact intended to weaken the Atreides by sending them to Arrakis. In the 1984 film, the danger of House Atreides to the Emperor is further emphasized by the introduction of a sound-based weapon system, which was perhaps intended to highlight the motif of »powerful language,« while the roles of the Space Guild and Shaddam IV in the plot against House Atreides are explained in relation to the guild's demand to prevent Paul from changing the planet's ecology and ending the spice production. A third-stage Guild Navigator therefore arrives (Fig. 3) to instruct the Emperor: »The spice must flow. ... We want him [Paul] killed.«<sup>64</sup> Here, the Harkonnens are solely depicted as executioners of a plan the Emperor and the Space Guild had formulated. In the 2021 film, this perspective is changed a bit, as the Bene Gesserit act as a link or mediator between House Harkonnen and Shaddam IV, and the role of the guild is not as prominent as in the novels or the 1984 film, for which Lynch had developed some kind of mutated form of the navigators, one of which is presented during the meeting with the Emperor as floating in a giant black tank. Regardless of these alterations in the visual depiction, the army of the Harkonnens eventually also receives military support from the Imperial Army, namely through some legions of special troops: the Sardaukar.

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63 *Dune* (1984, dir. David Lynch).

64 Ibid.



Fig. 3: The arrival of the third-stage Guild Navigator at the Imperial Palace in *Dune* (1984).

It becomes obvious that the spice production alone is of concern for the Space Guild, as the navigators are not only able to travel through space under its influence but are also addicted to it. Since they control interstellar travel, they are the only ones who can decide on war and peace between the Houses and are usually paid by all parties involved. Without spice, there is no future for them, which is why an ecological change on Arrakis would mean the end of the worms and thereby the end of spice, as the latter is a byproduct of worm-related procreation.<sup>65</sup>

While the plot against the Atréides is being prepared, Paul is tested by the Bene Gesserit. Jessica, who was a student of the order, was supposed to give birth to a girl, who would marry one of the Harkonnens to end the feud between the two bloodlines, but the concubine of Duke Leto gave birth to Paul instead. Since the Bene Gesserit crossed bloodlines for centuries »to produce the Kwisatz Haderach, a super being,«<sup>66</sup> there is a possibility that Jessica, against her original

<sup>65</sup> See Appendix I: The Ecology of Dune in Herbert, *Dune* for more details.

<sup>66</sup> *Dune* (1984, dir. David Lynch).

orders, might have given birth to this being, a man. Therefore, Paul is supposed to be tested by the Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam. Paul, who is instructed to follow the latter's command during a test, is asked to come closer by the powerful Bene Gesserit, who uses a special voice to control other people's minds and actions.<sup>67</sup> Since the following scene is quite central, it shall be quoted in some detail:

›Now, you come here!‹

The command whipped out at him. Paul found himself obeying before he could think about it. Using the Voice on me, he thought. He stopped at her gesture, standing beside her knees.

›See this?‹ she asked. From the folds of her gown, she lifted a green metal cube about fifteen centimeters on a side. She turned it and Paul saw that one side was open—black and oddly frightening. No light penetrated that open blackness.

›Put your right hand in the box,‹ she said.

Fear shot through Paul. He started to back away, but the old woman said: ›Is this how you obey your mother?‹

He looked up into bird-bright eyes.

Slowly, feeling the compulsions and unable to inhibit them, Paul put his hand into the box. He felt first a sense of cold as the blackness closed around his hand, then slick metal against his fingers and a prickling as though his hand were asleep.

A predatory look filled the old woman's features. She lifted her right hand away from the box and poised the hand close to the side of Paul's neck. He saw a glint of metal there and started to turn toward ...

›Stop!‹ she snapped.

Using the Voice again! He swung his attention back to her face.

›I hold at your neck the gom jabbar,‹<sup>68</sup> she said. ›The gom jabbar, the high-handed enemy. It's a needle with a drop of poison on its tip. Ah-ah! Don't pull away or you'll feel that poison.‹

67 For a detailed discussion of the voice, see Mack, »Voice Lessons.«

68 »Jabbar« means to use force and refers to the Arabic word *jabbār*. With regard to gom, the meaning is unclear, although it could refer to »God's own medicine.«

Paul tried to swallow in a dry throat. He could not take his attention from the seamed old face, the glistening eyes, the pale gums around silvery metal teeth that flashed as she spoke.

›A duke's son must know about poisons,‹ she said. ›It's the way of our times, eh? Musky, to be poisoned in your drink. Aumas, to be poisoned in your food. The quick ones and the slow ones and the ones in between. Here's a new one for you: the gom jabbar. It kills only animals.‹<sup>69</sup>

Paul can eventually resist the pain—which in *Dune* (2021) for the first time triggers a real vision—and control his instincts, which is why he survives the test. This scene is central to understanding the role of the Bene Gesserit and the possible future role Paul could play as a »super being.« While the Reverend Mother represents the order in this scene, it is Jessica who »is the primary means by which Herbert introduces to the reader the politically motivated Bene Gesserit ... [who] appears to function as a quasi-magical finishing school for the future wives of feudal rulers. Secretly, however, the Bene Gesserit work toward their own political ends: They place acolytes into families as a means of crossing bloodlines and engineering a messiah.«<sup>70</sup> However, it is not only the Bene Gesserit who seem to be worried about Paul—especially since he is the first man to have survived the box test—and the family's move to Arrakis. Paul is also forced to be aware of and acknowledge future dangers on Arrakis by his other teachers, including Gurney Halleck, the swordmaster of House Atreides. It seems obvious that the feud with the Harkonnens will intensify once they are forced to leave the desert planet and the spice refineries behind.

As soon as the Atreides began to take control on Arrakis, they realized that the trap they had expected was actually worse than they had anticipated. On Giedi Prime, the home world of the Harkonnens, the Baron and his Mentat Piter De Vries prepare the destruction of

69 Herbert, *Dune*, <http://readonlinefreebook.com/dune/c-one>.

70 Mack, »Voice Lessons,« 42.

House Atreides and the retaking of Arrakis (Fig. 4). Since it is clear that »He who controls the spice, controls the Universe!« as the Baron also emphasizes in the 1984 film, the Harkonnens, who represent decadent capitalism in the *Dune* universe, need to regain control over it. In the 2021 film, a flying Baron therefore declares: »My desert, my Arrakis, my Dune.« The struggle for spice is consequently a struggle for influence on a colonial planet that offers a steady and almost incredible amount of income. The plan to regain Arrakis is based on a traitor, Dr. Yueh, who is persuaded to sell out the Atreides because the Harkonnens supposedly offered the release of his wife. He manages to sabotage the shield generators, giving the Harkonnen and Imperial troops access to the city, where Duke Leto's men are surprised and defeated. While Leto, after an unsuccessful attempt to poison the Baron, dies, Jessica and Paul are taken to the desert, where they are supposed to just disappear. Instead, however, they are able to escape and eventually reach the Fremen, the indigenous people of Arrakis, with whom Leto had tried to arrange an alliance to exploit their military potential. The two refugees manage to get accepted into the tribe of the Fremen leader Stilgar, and Paul eventually meets Chani, a young woman he had envisioned in numerous dreams. As Paul Muad'Dib, he joins the tribe and becomes a Fremen, although he at the same time conceals his identity as the new Duke.

While Paul is soon accepted as some kind of naturalized Fremen leader and will orchestrate the Fremen's resistance against the newly established Harkonnen rule on Arrakis, Jessica becomes a Sayyadina, a »holy mother« of the Fremen, and drinks the »Water of Life,« a water-like liquid produced by a drowning worm. However, during the transformation process, the unborn daughter of Jessica, Alia, is altered and born with all the knowledge of a Bene Gesserit Reverend Mother. Paul's guerilla war against the Harkonnen is successful, but his visions are blinded or at least not fully clear, which is why he eventually decides to drink the »Water of Life« as well. The connection between worms, spice, the desert planet, and the superhuman being is therefore clearly visible. In the 1984 film, Paul defends his decision to



Fig. 4: Mentat Piter De Vries on his way to deliver a message from Duke Leto to Baron Harkonnen (*Dune*, 1984).

Chani, who fears that her lover might die: »I'm dead to everyone unless I try to become what I may be.« Eventually, Paul becomes enlightened, and as Kwisatz Haderach, the one the Bene Gesserit wanted to create, he is able to bring down the whole universe. Using the Fremen and the sandworms of Arrakis, he forces the Emperor to accept his rule, especially since the Space Guild demands a continuation of the spice production. The inscribed »white savior« narrative, which has been used by other writers both before and after,<sup>71</sup> eventually brings Paul back to his original context, i. e. a leading position within the known universe. The myth is fulfilled, although it is demolished again in the following novels, which, however, are not necessarily important for further discussion here.

Before we turn to the orientalist semiotics of *Dune*, it seems nevertheless in order to provide a short discussion of existent motifs and the historical references that exist beyond the resemblance to the story of Lawrence of Arabia. Like many other novels of the 1960s, e. g. Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), *Dune* »centers upon

<sup>71</sup> Karl May, to name just one example, used this narrative for his Winnetou novels.

a hallucinogenic exploration of inner space, but [its] narrative[ ], written within a historical context framed by Western European decolonization and an ascendant Cold War American neo-imperialism, explicitly criticize[s] territorial colonialism and posit inner space as a landscape colonized by social norms and unconscious psychological urges.<sup>72</sup> Although anti-colonial in nature, the novel, however, does not fully overcome orientalist interpretations, as the Mahdi, as Paul is perceived by the Fremen, resembles the British general who tells Middle Eastern tribes how to wage a successful war against an occupying force, rather than a true native liberator, which could be historically better linked to the Mahdi narrative.<sup>73</sup> Herbert therefore exchanges the roles that were played by Muhammad Ahmad (1844–1885) and Charles George Gordon (1833–1885) during the Mahdist War in general and the siege of the Sudanese city of Khartoum in particular.<sup>74</sup> This aspect of the »white savior« narrative was also not resolved by the 2021 film. An Atréides—from a planet that reminds the readers and spectators of Britain, especially with its obvious reliance on air and sea power—is sent to a colonial sphere, where he instrumentalizes the local population. With the »whiteness« of Paul Atréides and the »Muslimness« of the Fremen, the anti-colonial colonialism, as I would like to refer to this particular phenomenon related to the *Dune* story, is continued, and therefore fits much more closely to a Western narrative about the Middle East in the tradition of Lawrence of Arabia than a Mahdi movement for liberation.

Regardless of these interpretations related to the history of the British Empire, Andrew Hoberek has proposed a different reading of the plot:

I read Frank Herbert's popular 1965 science fiction novel *Dune* as dramatizing Kennedy's vision of modernization theory. *Dune* tells the story of a young man named Paul Atréides, who, stranded on a desert

72 Higgins, »Psychic Decolonization,« 228.

73 P. M. Holt, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1881–1898* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1958).

74 Godfrey Elton, *General Gordon* (London: Collins, 1954).

world following an ambush by the treacherous Harkonnen family, molds the native Fremen into a fighting force with which he not only vanquishes his rivals but also seizes the imperial throne itself. Underlying this story, however, is another, of the promised Kennedyesque transformation of the planet Dune or Arrakis.<sup>75</sup>

There is, in general, no right or wrong when it comes to the perception of a literary text, as every generation might read it differently, but the diversity of aspects that have already been mentioned further help to explain why *Dune's* plot is so popular. And since »[m]ythological characters and mythic plots often turn up like old friends in SF,«<sup>76</sup> *Dune* is no exception in this regard. When Frank Herbert created the universe, in which the Fremen are exploited to keep the Space Guild in power, he naturally used his own time as a reflective basis for this creative process. In fact, one can agree without any hesitation with religious studies scholar Lorenzo DiTommaso in saying that »history and historical effect play essential roles in the grounding and development of the numerous plots in *Dune*.«<sup>77</sup>

Analyzing the texts, DiTommaso further argues that »Herbert believes that history is a linear and progressive process, whose effects, while not always predictable, are nonetheless logical and understandable.«<sup>78</sup> The existence of all sorts of religious elements the author and his readers knew in their time are obviously still, although sometimes only partially, visible in the future, so that »the diverse religious tra-

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75 Andrew Hoberek, »The New Frontier: Dune, the Middle Class, and Post-1960 U. S. Foreign Policy,« in *American Literature and Culture in an Age of Cold War: A Critical Reassessment*, eds. Steven Belletto and Daniel Grausam (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 86.

76 Ellen Feehan, »Frank Herbert and the Making of Myths: Irish History, Celtic Mythology, and IRA Ideology in ›The White Plague,« *Science Fiction Studies* 19, no. 3 (1992): 289.

77 Lorenzo DiTommaso, »History and Historical Effect in Frank Herbert's ›Dune,« *Science Fiction Studies* 19, no. 3 (1992): 311.

78 Ibid.

ditions and the politico-social history of all aspects of the Imperium clearly reveal the evolutionary nature of his vision of history.«<sup>79</sup>

Herbert obviously did not—in contrast to other works of SF, maybe first and foremost the *Star Trek* universe—believe in a future that would overcome the divisions of categories like class, ethnicity, or religion, and once stated: »I now know ... that all humans are not created equal. In fact, I believe attempts to create some abstract equalization create a morass of injustices that rebound on the equalizers.«<sup>80</sup>

The universe that is depicted in *Dune* is actually itself only the consequence of war, another *Jihad* that happened 10,000 years before. This »Butlerian Jihad,« as it is called, and its impact is outlined by Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson in their novel *Dune: The Butlerian Jihad* (2002).<sup>81</sup> In this war, the last free human beings waged a crusade against machines that were able to think and which were led by Omnius, a sentient kind of supercomputer. As a consequence of this first Jihad in Herbert's universe, technological development came to a halt and human minds were forced to develop instead, which is why the Mentats eventually replaced the supercomputers. Therefore, the events »ultimately promoted religion over science and technology, and humanness over machines and artificial minds.«<sup>82</sup> The order of Herbert's *Dune* series is thereby created by the historical events that took place long before the first *Dune* novel sets in. In the time between the Butlerian Jihad and Paul's story, it was »new science [that] explore[d] the development of human physiological and psychological potential as opposed to the largely forbidden artificial minds and thinking machines. It develop[ed] primarily as three mental schools:

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79 Ibid.

80 Frank Herbert, »Dangers of the Superhero,« in *The Maker of Dune: Insights of a Master of Science Fiction*, ed. Tim O'Reilly (New York: Berkley Books, 1987), 99, cited in DiTommaso, »History,« 311.

81 Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson, *Dune: The Butlerian Jihad* (New York: Tor, 2002).

82 DiTommaso, »History,« 313.

the Guild (mathematics and navigation), the mentats (computation and analysis), and the Bene Gesserit (politics and genetics).<sup>83</sup> It can be argued here that these developments in a way reflect the scientific developments of the late 19th and early 20th century, when these aspects played an important role in the world's historical course of events. In a way, the development of the *Dune* universe is consequently somehow reversive as well, since the Butlerian Jihad led, to quote Lorenzo DiTommaso once more, to the reintroduction of »the grand conceptions of personal combat and heroic elitism, the presence of crack forces such as the Sardaukar and the Fremen, and the inclusion of personal weaponry like the kindjal, the slip-tip, the shigawire garrote, and the maula pistol. Allied with this is the personalization of warfare itself, where the emphasis has shifted from the largely unavailable superior technology to personal battle training.«<sup>84</sup> At the same time, society was divided again between those who were better trained and those who were not. In the political arena, the Bene Gesserit had an advantage, and in the military conflict, the Fremen warriors and the Sardaukar were some kind of warrior elite, which both factions, the Atreides and the Harkonnens, intended to exploit.

Paul, in this regard, is presented as some kind of pinnacle of the possibilities for human development by training, as he was trained by the leading individuals in different fields. His father, Duke Leto, taught him politics, Duncan Idaho and Gurney Halleck provided military training, and his mother showed him how to use his voice and control his emotions. These experiences and the fact that Paul himself »is at the apex of the pyramidal *faufreluches*,<sup>85</sup> even down to his superior genetic history» made him a natural aspirant for rule and power, but it was his ability that gained the support of the Fremen, who, from the Eurocentric perspective that *Dune* carries, were not able to free themselves without Paul's leadership. That he is accepted as the Fremen's messiah is related to the policies of the Bene Gesserit,

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83 Ibid., 317.

84 Ibid., 313–314.

85 The term describes the class system of the Old Imperium in the *Dune* universe.

who, over the centuries, had planted a *Missionaria Protectiva* that used the religious beliefs of the desert planet's natives to prepare their exploitability by the order at a time when this would become necessary. The narrative of the Bene Gesserit therefore «transformed an autochthonous Kwisatz Haderach-like idea into the concept of Lisan al-Gaib, the Voice from the Outer World.»<sup>86</sup> In a way, this adoption and re-interpretation of the Fremen's religious ideas is an act of colonial control as well, as it was applied by the Jesuits, who seem to have been in Herbert's mind when he created the powerful order, especially in the regions of their mission when the historical religious missionary order supported the colonial rule of the West. The Fremen saying that »God created Arrakis to train the faithful,« which is prominently cited in Lynch's film, could therefore be developed by saying the »Bene Gesserit influenced Fremen religion to exploit the faithful.«

While SF is not a genre that is progressive or reactionary per se, although it has been argued by scholars that it »is essentially the literature of progress, and the political philosophy of SF is essentially liberal«<sup>87</sup> and that »SF studies ... has long been allied with Marxist, feminist and queer theory, and increasingly with critical race studies, as politically engaged theorists and critics have found in the genre the radical potential for thinking differently about the world,«<sup>88</sup> an analysis of the different motifs that are presented throughout the *Dune* series shows that there is an ambivalence that offers all kinds of readers, progressive and reactionary alike, a way to identify with the plot. In the following parts of this section, I would therefore like to take some time to present a couple of the main motifs before the work's orientalist semiotics are discussed in detail later.

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86 DiTommaso, »History,« 316.

87 Ken MacLeod, »Politics and Science Fiction,« in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, eds. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 231, cited in Aaron Santesso, »Fascism and Science,« *Science Fiction Studies* 41, no. 1 (2014): 137–138.

88 Mark Bould, »Introduction: Rough Guide to a Lonely Planet, from Nemo to Neo,« in *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction*, eds. Mark Bould and China Miéville (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009), 2, cited in *ibid.* 138.

## Colonialism

The religious monopolization of the Fremen's beliefs through the Bene Gesserit is only one aspect that emphasizes that »language is the instrument of empire«<sup>89</sup> in the *Dune* novel, although the latter »dramatizes the uprising of a colonized diaspora population, the Fremen, against outside imperial oppressors.«<sup>90</sup> However, Herbert's vision is not as progressive as this short evaluation might sound, especially since Paul does not free the Fremen but rather directs their military potential against his own enemies and eventually causes a universal Jihad in his and his father's name. The Fremen therefore, as Frantz Fanon (1925–1961) has argued on behalf of colonized people, »the Wretched of the Earth,«<sup>91</sup> cannot decolonize their own thoughts and thinking from the influence of the colonizers, which means that Paul's role as a long-expected outer-world messiah prevents indigenous self-determination.<sup>92</sup> While Herbert's story thus only partially reflects the demands related to decolonization, he »assert[s] that privileged Western subjects must decolonize their minds in order to achieve autonomous self-ownership.«<sup>93</sup>

In *Dune*, however, the Fremen do not achieve »autonomous liberal subjectivity,« but rather it is Paul who, like other heroic figures in 1960s SF, goes on a journey as »that which is alien in the self must be mastered, and that which is unknown or unconscious must be brought to awareness through deliberate rational control.«<sup>94</sup> As a »psychedelic superman,« Paul will eventually join the »time-space

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89 David Damrosch, »The Semiotics of Conquest,« *American Literary History* 8, no. 3 (1996): 516.

90 Higgins, »Psychic Decolonization,« 229.

91 Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la Terre* (Paris: Éditions François Maspero, 1961).

92 Higgins, »Psychic Decolonization,« 230.

93 Ibid. Higgins adds the following information related to this statement: »Jean-Paul Sartre actually makes exactly this argument about the need for privileged Westerners to decolonize their own subjectivity in his 1961 preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.«

94 Higgins, »Psychic Decolonization,« 230.

manipulators who regulate and control flows of information, production, and consumption<sup>95</sup> and thereby seems to only replace a previous ruler. It could furthermore be argued that Paul intensifies the exploitation of the Fremen, who, after the liberation of Arrakis, are turned into a transuniversal army to wage a Jihad against the other houses, i. e. Paul's adversaries. This motif would then also have a historical precedent it relies upon, namely the recruitment of colonial troops during the First World War.<sup>96</sup> Since Paul eventually controls the spice production and a considerable army to conquer the universe, Arrakis, i. e. the colonial space, provides him with the resources to establish and extend his own rule. He therefore acts, one could argue, like an SF incarnation of the British Empire, and the orientalist semiotics presented in *Dune* even intensify these similarities.

This colonial view of the masses of soldiers who only need to be controlled, as they would otherwise »run wild in a hysterical jihad resulting in war and chaotic destruction,« is something that was often expressed by colonial military officers, e. g. the Germans who served in the Ottoman Army before and during the First World War,<sup>97</sup> as well as British officers who were involved in the campaigns in the Middle East.<sup>98</sup> The image of the destructive masses might therefore be interpreted as a reference to the negative view of the human masses held by the French scholar Gustave Le Bon (1841–1931), who stated in relation to the latter that

Civilisations as yet have only been created and directed by a small intellectual aristocracy, never by crowds. Crowds are only powerful

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95 David M. Higgins, *Reverse Colonization: Science Fiction, Imperial Fantasy, and Alt-victimhood* (Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 2021), 36.

96 Dick van Galen Last with Ralf Futselaar, *Black Shame: African Soldiers in Europe, 1914–1922* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

97 Liman von Sanders to Carl Mühlmann, Munich, January 30, 1927, German Federal Archives, Military Archives (BArch MArch), RH61/1088.

98 James Renton, »Changing Languages of Empire and the Orient: Britain and the Invention of the Middle East, 1917–1918,« *The Historical Journal* 50, no. 3 (2007): 645–667.

for destruction. Their rule is always tantamount to a barbarian phase. A civilisation involves fixed rules, discipline, a passing from the instinctive to the rational state, forethought for the future, an elevated degree of culture—all of them conditions that crowds, left to themselves, have invariably shown themselves incapable of realising. In consequence of the purely destructive nature of their power crowds act like those microbes which hasten the dissolution of enfeebled or dead bodies. When the structure of a civilisation is rotten, it is always the masses that bring about its downfall.<sup>99</sup>

In contrast to the masses who act spontaneously, emotionally, and often based on unconscious decisions, Paul's story as the »superior savior« is one in which »consciousness becomes the basis of differentiation, and differences in consciousness are the product of genetics, cultural cultivation, [and the] psychedelic use«<sup>100</sup> of the druglike spice. The »messiah« from the outer world in the novel »experiences increasingly powerful psychedelic trips using the spice mélange until he attains superhuman self-control and an expanded omniscient consciousness.«<sup>101</sup> Although such a journey is not colonial in itself but rather an element of many heroic stories and films in which the protagonist has to finish a journey to find and accept his own inner self, in *Dune*, the hero, of the first novel at least, is superior to the Fremen—as well as women<sup>102</sup>—because »only the Kwisatz Haderach, a genetic superman produced through centuries of eugenic breeding, can achieve omniscient consciousness, and the Kwisatz Haderach must be male.«<sup>103</sup> Herbert, and the above-quoted testing of Paul

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99 Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001), 10, accessed September 2, 2016, <https://socserv2.socsci.mcmaster.ca/~econ/ugcm/3ll3/lebon/Crowds.pdf>.

100 Higgins, »Psychic Decolonization,« 232.

101 *Ibid.*, 236.

102 This misrepresentation of women in SF, especially films, has continued since that time. Marianne Kac-Vergne, »Sideline Women in Contemporary Science-Fiction Film,« *Miranda* [Online] 12 (2016): <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.8642>.

103 Higgins, »Psychic Decolonization,« 236.

through the Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam emphasizes this, puts weight on self-control and independence, something the Fremmen obviously do not possess, neither under the rule of House Harkonnen nor after their »liberation« by a white male super-being. *Dune*, while appearing anti-colonial at first, therefore again presents a perspective related to the idea of the »white man's burden.«<sup>104</sup>

Those who eventually rule the universe are the ones who can control their impulses and are therefore considered culturally superior, and when *Dune* »valorizes self-mastery to a fetishistic level, and it demonizes impulses that reduce or diminish an individual's self-control,« it somehow repeats arguments that were used to legitimize colonial rule in the past. Only villains—and while their image seems to be related to the Cold War dichotomy, it is also in a way present in the film about T.E. Lawrence—would, on the other hand, give in to their impulses based on lust or appetite, a fact that »Herbert graphically emphasizes ... through the Baron's unrestrained lust for violent homosexual intercourse with young boys.«<sup>105</sup> In this regard, Vladimir Harkonnen represents the personification of temptation, as he, to quote American studies scholar David M. Higgins once more,

enslaves others through their appetites, dependencies, and passions. He manipulates Doctor Yueh (breaking his imperial conditioning) by kidnapping and threatening his Bene Gesserit wife. He controls his mentat through *mélange* addiction, he manipulates Thufir Hawat by twisting his lust for revenge and addicting him to a poison that requires a daily antidote, and he addicts his bodyguard to drugs in order to ensure his obedience. In each of these ways, Baron Harkonnen demonstrates the dangers of the loss of self-control; dependency is framed as a vulnerability that can be exploited by one's enemies.<sup>106</sup>

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104 The term was originally used by Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936) for a poem that was published in *McClure's Magazine* 12, no. 4 (1899).

105 Higgins, »Psychic Decolonization,« 237.

106 Ibid.

The exploitation of natural resources and politics to achieve the former is without any doubt an element in *Dune* that links Herbert's novel to the time of its creation, when globalization began to reach a peak again after the two world wars had destroyed the links between a globalized world of trade and exchange. With regard to the relationship between imperial center and colonial periphery, considering some of the main conflicts of the post-WWII era, *Dune* supposedly »explores the possibility that the power differential of such a mutual dependency can be reversed in order to address the imbalance of power between the imperial center and the colonial margins.«<sup>107</sup> The latter aspect, however, does not take into account that, in the novel, this change of imbalance is only achieved under the leadership and command of a representative of the center, which is why the story of *Dune* is not fully anti-colonial, but very often Eurocentric in the sense of the imbalance Wallerstein's world-systems analysis would later use as its fundamental consideration. Therefore, although »Herbert's dream of a reversal of power between center and periphery is more radical than Fanon's call for independence, reparation, and autonomous self-development for postcolonial nations after colonial withdrawal,«<sup>108</sup> the shortcoming of the novel is that the decolonization process is not achieved by the colonized Fremen themselves, but by a »Lawrence of Arabia« figure who helps the »noble savages« to overcome their colonial existence, but only in the service of House Atreides.<sup>109</sup>

This also points towards two important aspects that need to be taken into consideration: 1) the Fremen are not really decolonized, as they continue to fight in the name of a war that was imposed upon them, and 2) Paul is a figure Western readers can identify with, similar to Old Shatterhand in Karl May's (1842–1912) novels,<sup>110</sup> Hawkeye

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107 Ibid., 238.

108 Ibid.

109 Ibid.

110 Karl May, *Winnetou* (Freiburg i.Br.: F.E. Fehsenfeld, 1893). On May's works about the Native American tribal chief, see Helmut Schmiedt, *Die Winnetou-Trilogie: Über Karl Mays berühmtesten Roman* (Bamberg: Karl-May-Verlag, 2018).

in James Fenimore Cooper's (1789–1851) *Leatherstocking Tales* (1827–1841),<sup>111</sup> or James Cameron's film *Avatar* (2009). In short, »Paul embodies the epitome of genetic perfection and the apotheosis of Western masculinity.«<sup>112</sup> Because he resembles the eventual success of male domination, as the super being of the future can only be male, Paul thereby »emerges as an ultimately conservative and authoritarian hero for the contradictory fantasies of the rebellious 1960s.«<sup>113</sup> However, his myth is destroyed in the following novels, so maybe Herbert intended to correct the image he had created in his first novel.

### Ecology

Herbert's description of ecological topics is just as important as the colonial motifs within *Dune*. It is impressive that Herbert, in his novels, predicted problems in relation to climate change that we are facing today.<sup>114</sup> The protagonists of this story are obviously the worms, who are essential for the stability of the universe, since they produce spice, but who eventually suffer from the man-made, in this case Paul-made, ecological changes on Arrakis after the struggle between the Emperor and the Harkonnens on one side and Paul and the Fremen on the other had ended. The *Dune* series, over the relatively long period of its creation—Herbert spent two decades working on it—, »focuses on a symbiotic relationship between humans and a sandy planet inhabited by huge worms.«<sup>115</sup> The imperial ecologist and

111 James Fenimore Cooper, *Leatherstocking Tales*, 5 vols. (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1843). On the depiction of indigenous people in Cooper's works, see Anna Krauthammer, *The Representation of the Savage in James Fenimore Cooper and Herman Melville* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

112 Higgins, »Psychic Decolonization,« 239.

113 Ibid., 240.

114 Mauricio Lima, »Locust Plagues, Climate Variation, and the Rhythms of Nature,« *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 104, no. 41 (2007): 15973.

115 Nathalie Blanc and Agnès Sander, »Reconfigured Temporalities: Nature's Intent?« *Nature and Culture* 9, no. 1 (2014): 7.

planetologist Liet Kynes is central to explaining the ecological aspects in the first novel, especially in a speech that is part of the appendix. On Arrakis, there are two things that are essential: water and spice. The latter is even more important for those who intend to exploit the planet, and, as it turns out, the wish of the Fremens to transform the ecological system of the planet with water threatens the existence of the worms, and thereby spice. This naturally points to the dilemma that the stability of the existent universe depends on the harsh living conditions and the exploitation of natural resources on Arrakis, a view that very much overlaps with theoretical considerations about the accumulation of capital (Luxemburg), the existence of world-systems (Wallerstein), and the organized underdevelopment of colonial space (Rodney).

The exploitation of the spice in a way resembles the way in which Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919) described capitalism and how it worked to achieve further accumulation:

[C]apital is faced with difficulties because vast tracts of the globe's surface are in the possession of social organisations that have no desire for commodity exchange or cannot, because of the entire social structure and the forms of ownership, offer for sale the productive forces in which capital is primarily interested. The most important of these productive forces is of course the land, its hidden mineral treasure, and its meadows, woods and water, and further the flocks of the primitive shepherd tribes.<sup>116</sup>

To gain access to the spice, the imperial center therefore intends to control and exploit the desert planet, Arrakis, which might be considered the periphery within the universal constellation that eventually resembles Wallerstein's idea of world-systems. The latter argued that »[i]n peripheral countries, the interests of the capitalist landowners ... lie in maintaining an open economy to maximize their profit from

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116 Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, trans. Agnes Schwarzschild (London: Routledge, 1951), 370.

world-market trade,«<sup>117</sup> and if one applied these interests to Arrakis, it would be obvious that it was the access to and the steady supply of spice that were needed to keep the universe in its present existence, especially since the space navigators needed this resource to continue running interstellar transport. The economic, political and social development of Arrakis and a change of its ecosystem would have consequently challenged the existent order of the universe, which is why the planet needed to stay systematically underdeveloped. Walter Rodney described such a policy with regard to (colonial) Africa, although it could be applied to Arrakis as well, because for Rodney, underdevelopment »expresses a particular relationship of exploitation: namely the exploitation of one country by another ... [so that] the underdevelopment with which the world is now pre-occupied is a product of capitalist, imperialist and colonialist exploitation.«<sup>118</sup> However, capitalism and exploitation are not the only dominant elements within Herbert's plot.

The landscape of Arrakis plays an important role, and the desert is fundamental to an understanding of the ecological aspects presented in *Dune*. In popular media, »deserts are [very often] populated by sun-bleached skulls, heroes in dire straits and a whole lot of nothing. They are defined by absence: no roads, no shelter, no water. The image of the desert that these films have inspired in popular culture is of a place inimical to human life, a landscape that is trying to kill us.«<sup>119</sup> Deserts tend to be presented as wastelands or post-apocalyptic spaces, e. g. in *Mad Max* (1979, dir. George Miller), and the leading aristocratic houses only consider Arrakis important due to its spice. The suppression of the Fremen for the exploitation of the desert due to spice production is something indigenous people around the world can relate to in multiple ways, especially when their land is taken away to exploit resources, an act that eventually also changes the

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117 Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein*, 88.

118 Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Cape Town et al.: Pambazuka, 2012), 14.

119 Osuna, Finn and Sala, »What *Dune* Should Teach Us.«

natural environment of the respective space.<sup>120</sup> In SF, however, wilderness plays another role within the respective plots. The latter acts »as a viable, constant preoccupation for a general, intelligent reading audience [and] SF's wild planetary terrains of forests, oceans, deserts, and mountains, and the interplanetary regions of outer space, have kept alive the wilderness geography of physical challenge, emotional wonder, spiritual hope, and the exploration of the unknown.«<sup>121</sup> At first, Paul is attracted by the unknown desert, which, like unknown spaces in SF in general, »provides a medium of adventure, a place where an alert protagonist discovers his essential values.«<sup>122</sup> The desert and the experience related to it in *Dune*, however, also fulfills aspects related to a romantic view about this particular landscape, which was romanticized in 19th- and early 20th-century literature<sup>123</sup> as much as it played a vital visual and conceptual role in *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962, dir. David Lean).

The protagonists often change due to their existence in the desert, and it is therefore unsurprising that the landscape seems to play some cathartic role in popular media as well. In SF as a genre, the wilderness has central meanings, and as such, landscapes play several roles: »They are adversaries. They are gauges. They are places of immediate, intuitive self-knowledge where one rises or falls, triumphs or dies.«<sup>124</sup> However, this role, while obvious for the reader and the latter's perception of the plot, as it is usually linked to or set in comparison with other stories about the desert, is not clearly visible in the *Dune* novel: »It does not have life and character unto itself ... In the *Dune* novels the desert is important as background, as a prop, as a

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120 Curtis Rattray and Tero Mustonen, eds., *Dispatches from the Cold Seas: Indigenous Views on Selfgovernance, Ecology and Identity* (Tampere: Tampere Polytechnic, 2001).

121 John Dean, »The Uses of Wilderness in American Science Fiction,« *Science Fiction Studies* 9, no. 1 (1982): 68.

122 Ibid.

123 E. M. Hull, *The Sheik* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001 [1919]) is a famous example of the genre of »desert romantic.«

124 Dean, »The Uses of Wilderness,« 70.

structural means of strengthening character development within the stories. ... The desert is their most glorious, attractive costume. The desert is a cerebral, decorative entity in the *Dune* novels. The independent, physical presence of a desert wilderness is oddly—though appropriately—inoperative.«<sup>125</sup>

When one compares Herbert's anti-colonial motifs, which are not fully developed, the same could be said about the ecological narrative, at least for the first novel of the *Dune* series. Herbert puts more weight on climate- and environment-related issues in his later works, e. g. *Children of Dune*, but the ecological appeal of *Dune* is probably more related to the respective reader's perception than the actual presentation of the desert space. This also points to the use of orientalist semiotics to present an image of a desert planet that the audience would naturally be able to relate to, especially when one considers the existence of desert descriptions within the popular media of the 19th and 20th centuries that Herbert could rely upon in his novel as well.

### Human-Animal Relations

One aspect, however, namely the human-animal relations on Arrakis, is displayed quite prominently, and it will be interesting to see how Villeneuve presents this in *Dune: Part Two*. Since SF is often interested in »the social impact of science and technology«<sup>126</sup> as well, the question about the role of animals and their relation to human beings is something very central to some writers or directors who work in the genre. American media and cultural studies scholar Sherryl Vint has pointed out that »[t]he use of animals in research on pharming (genetically engineering animals to produce useful pharmaceuticals) and xenotransplantation (the transplantation of living tissue from one species to another) requires that we hold the contradictory beliefs

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>126</sup> Sherryl Vint, »The Animals in That Country: Science Fiction and Animal Studies,« *Science Fiction Studies* 35, no. 2 (2008): 178.

that animals are sufficiently like humans to provide useful biological matter, yet sufficiently unlike us that their slaughter in these pursuits is not an ethical issue.«<sup>127</sup> This dilemma is often addressed in SF, and Herbert puts questions related to human-animal relations, i. e. human-worm relations, at the center of his considerations. The worms, as natural spice producers, are without any doubt the most important animals of the *Dune* universe.

The Fremen call them *Shai-Hulud*,<sup>128</sup> make sacred knives (*Crysknife*) from their teeth, and use the »Water of Life« for religious purposes. The connection between humans and worms is thereby a socio-religious one, and since the Fremen also use spice, they are very much dependent on the existence of these animals. For the foreign occupiers of Arrakis, the worms are, however, an interruption of their productivity, as the rhythmic sounds of the spice harvesters always attract a worm. The relationship between the worms and spice is actually unknown to the intruders, although Paul seems to understand this connection early on. It is also important to highlight that he can eventually only become the »human super-being« by drinking the »Water of Life,« which means that he can only fulfill the prophecy due to the existence of the worms. This is a very central aspect, as only the symbiosis that takes place at this moment allows human evolution. Herbert therefore sheds light on a central aspect of human history, namely the role of animals as an important aspect of evolutionary developments.

The immeasurable value of the worms is obvious with regard to the stability of the universe and the availability of space travel as well. The worms are therefore economically and politically so important that the ecological change of Arrakis would cause their destruction as well as turmoil in the *Dune* universe: »By the time of *God Emperor*,<sup>129</sup> the sandworms have become extinct. Since the species is the sole

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127 Ibid.

128 The Arabic term *Shay'-Khulud* literally translates as »Thing of Eternity« or »Thing of Immortality.«

129 Frank Herbert, *God Emperor of Dune* (New York: Ace, 1981).

producer of the spice melange that allows interplanetary travel, what seemed like conservation on a planetary scale could have meant the destruction of society on an interplanetary scale.«<sup>130</sup> Considering the role animals historically and currently play as resources for human life, this aspect of Herbert's works is more actual than ever. The awareness of these issues will likely increase even more in the near future, which will probably further the popularity and up-to-date-ness of the novels in turn. The same could be said about the religious motifs Herbert included in his works.

## Religion

The plot of *Dune* is set thousands of years in the future, but religious elements of the main religions of the world, i. e. Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism—easily identifiable Jewish aspects, as mentioned before, appear relatively late in the series—, appear in some kind of mixed versions, »changed at times almost beyond recognition.«<sup>131</sup> The main religion of the *Dune* universe is Zensunni, which reminds the reader of Islam, and, in the case of the Fremen, was influenced and changed by the Missionaria Protectiva of the Bene Gesserit. In SF works of the 1960s, as scholar Julia List highlights, »the genre's focus shifted dramatically towards exploring the social ramifications of scientific developments rather than the intricacies of the technologies themselves.«<sup>132</sup> Religion was something of lesser interest, and although Herbert spent a lot of time on creating the beliefs for his universe, in the first *Dune* novel, religious elements play a practical role for the overall plot development because »the communal benefits of the

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130 Walter E. Meyers, »Problems with Herbert,« *Science Fiction Studies* 10, no. 1 (1983): 106.

131 Weingrad, »Jews of *Dune*.«

132 Julia List, »Call Me a Protestant: Liberal Christianity, Individualism, and the Messiah in ›Stranger in a Strange Land‹, ›Dune‹, and ›Lord of Light,« *Science Fiction Studies* 36, no. 1 (2009): 21.

native Fremen's sincere religious beliefs are immediately apparent to the protagonist Paul's mother Jessica.«<sup>133</sup> The religious beliefs of the Fremen are, however, similarly exploited by the Atréides, as the indigenous people themselves present a source of military power and thereby resemble a path to regain political influence. Paul does not really seem to be a religious person, although Dr. Yueh gives »a copy of the Orange Catholic bible—an ecumenical religious text—to Paul, suggesting that Paul »may find the book interesting ... It has much historical truth in it as well as good ethical philosophy.«<sup>134</sup> Although religion seems to be less powerful within the aristocratic environment of the *Dune* universe, the existence of a bible at least points to a specific religious frame of reference that must have existed beyond the Atréides' experience on Arrakis.

However, Herbert does also point out the dangers related to the misinterpretation or abuse of religion when he explains how Paul realizes that the Fremen leader Stilgar is weakened by his religious belief: »Paul saw how Stilgar had been transformed from the Fremen naib to a *creature* of the Lisan al-Gaib [messiah], a receptacle for awe and obedience. It was a lessening of the man.«<sup>135</sup> This religion-based weak spot is exploited by Jessica, who realized the existence and impact of the Missionaria Protectiva that had been planted by the Bene Gesserit centuries before. She presents Paul as the expected messiah and therefore secures their survival within the Fremen community. Princess Irulan, whose comments often appear within the *Dune* novel, sums up this relation between religion and politics and remarks that »you cannot avoid the interplay of politics within an orthodox religion ... Because of this pressure, the leaders of such a community inevitably must face that ultimate internal question: to succumb to complete opportunism as the price of maintaining their rule, or risk

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133 Ibid., 22.

134 Ibid. The reference to Herbert is from the 1965 edition of *Dune* (New York: Ace, 1965), 55.

135 Herbert, *Dune*, 539–540 cited in List, »Call Me a Protestant,« 23.

sacrificing themselves for the sake of the orthodox ethic.«<sup>136</sup> Eventually, Paul becomes what the Bene Gesserit wanted to achieve with regard to their eugenics program, but he also is able to act as a messiah for the Fremen and dictate terms to the Space Guild at the same time and thereby combines the three powers in the *Dune* universe under his leadership. The price for the latter is a universal Jihad that will determine the future in Paul's name. This, however, also leads to a specific hubris, which will later be taken into closer consideration when the protagonist of Herbert's first novel is compared with T. E. Lawrence. It is nevertheless not only religion and its interpretation that define an elitist status for the imperial aristocracy.

### Political Elitism

Although Herbert clearly identifies religious aspects and highlights the role of religion in political processes, he does not provide »easy answers.«<sup>137</sup> The political elites are not fully controlled by religion, and »[o]ne may believe that the Jesuits were in Herbert's mind when he created the Bene Gesserit without having to accept the nonsense of some sort of Catholic Protocol of Zion.«<sup>138</sup> The political elites of the *Dune* universe meet in the *Landsraad* (Fig. 5), the body where the Great Houses are represented and debate with the Emperor.

Since Leto's influence had been growing to a dangerous level, the plot against him and House Atreides was the expression of a power struggle between the Emperor and the Great Houses, something that could be easily described as a »game of thrones.« The 2021 film takes this aspect into closer consideration when Paul, after the attack by the Harkonnens and the violent death of his father, speculated about using the *Landsraad* as a political counterweight against the Emperor.

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<sup>136</sup> Herbert, *Dune*, 462–463, cited in *ibid.*, 27.

<sup>137</sup> Meyers, »Problems with Herbert,« 107.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

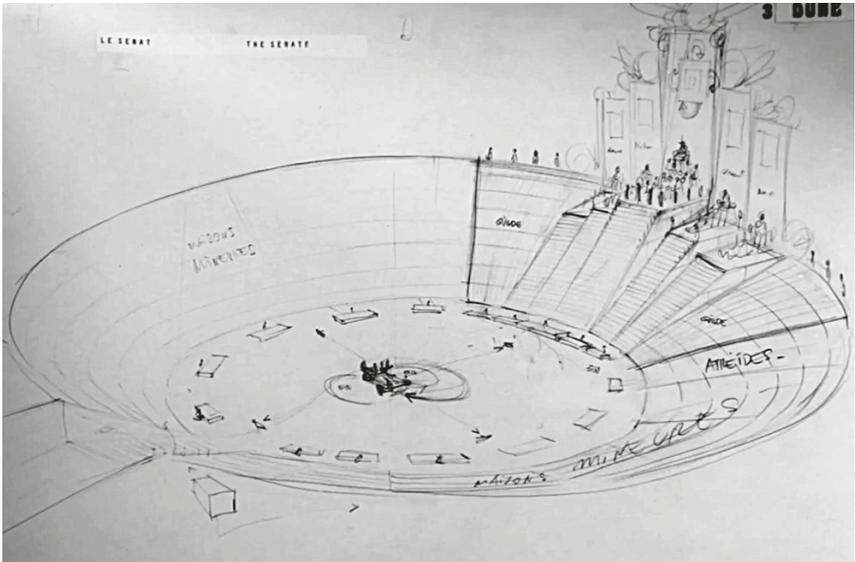


Fig. 5: Landsraad Hall, Storyboard for Jodorowsky's *Dune* by Moebius; <https://dune.fandom.com/wiki/Landsraad> (Accessed November 16, 2021).

It is interesting that the latter's plan stimulates the rise of Paul as a messiah for the Fremen and the end of the universal order as it had been known. Political elitism thereby becomes closely related to Machiavellian considerations about power, and it is Herbert's multiperspectivity, also with regard to power, that was often stressed by evaluations of his *Dune* series.<sup>139</sup> He shows elite groups and elitism in different settings and highlights fluctuations with regard to hier-

<sup>139</sup> David M. Miller, *Frank Herbert: Starport Reader's Guide No. 5* (Mercer Island, WA: Starport House, 1980); Reilly, *Frank Herbert*. Meyers states with regard to this that »Herbert [is] one of the most ambiguous of current writers of SF. Any critic might be wary of Herbert's practice of turning the table on his readers from book to book. The best known reader to suffer from table rotation was John W. Campbell, Jr, who rejected *Dune Messiah* because the novel torpedoed the heroic image of Paul Atreides so carefully built up in *Dune*.« Meyers, »Problems with Herbert,« 106.

archies that are presented in his novels. The Bene Gesserit, the warriors in the *Dune* universe, the Great Houses, and the Fremen all have their own elites, whether they be military, political, or religious. Paul himself, during his own development, is part of multiple elites. For the Bene Gesserit, he is the super-being; for the Fremen, he is a messiah; as a warrior, he is superior due to his multiple different trainings; and in the universe, he will eventually end up as Emperor himself.

### Human Collectivism

Next to these elites and his rather negative perspective of the masses, Herbert also emphasizes the power of human collectivism in the *Dune* series. With his presentation of this motif, Herbert provides a conceptual approach in *Dune* as well as in some of his other literary works that very much resembles the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung's (1875–1961) reflections about a collective unconsciousness.<sup>140</sup> SF scholar Peter Brigg explains this in some detail:

*Dune* ... contains collective personalities whose natures are spread out on a time frame as well as on a spatial one. Once Paul Atreides, his mother Jessica, Chani and Alia have ingested the melange, they are in various states of community with members of their genetic unconsciousnesses. These abilities have an ambiguous outcome in *Dune*, but it is clear that Paul achieves a transcendent state of power, a unique ability to comprehend the complex movement of both personal and political history. The later *Dune* books examine the genetic collective in more detail, climaxing in *Children of Dune* with the possession of Alia by the Baron Harkonnen, long deceased, and with

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<sup>140</sup> Walter A. Shelburne, *Mythos and Logos in the Thought of Carl Jung: The Theory of the Collective Unconscious in Scientific Perspective* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988).

the role Leto II accepts once he has mastered the infinite lives in his past.<sup>141</sup>

In the overall series, one can therefore observe »how much Herbert has sought to integrate the human collective mind spread over time with the ecological situation.«<sup>142</sup>

Paul eventually succeeded by gaining access to the minds and memories of all preceding Reverend Mothers and by the possibility of seeing what nobody else, neither the Space Guild navigators nor the Bene Gesserit, was able to. Herbert describes this achievement in *Children of Dune* as follows:

This was Muad'Dib's achievement: He saw the subliminal reservoir of each individual as an unconscious bank of memories going back to the primal cell of our common genesis. Each of us, he said, can measure out his distance from that common origin. Seeing this and telling of it, he made the audacious leap of decision. Muad'Dib set himself the task of integrating genetic memory into ongoing evaluation. Thus did he break through Time's veils ...<sup>143</sup>

Herbert consequently »suggested the potential of man as a collective entity, both in the individual and social senses,«<sup>144</sup> yet at the same time he patriarchized this entity, as only a man was able to achieve this status that somehow is also one of dominance.

All in all, there is a richness in motifs that clearly emphasizes the value of *Dune* as an inspiration and warning alike.<sup>145</sup> *Dune*, as mentioned

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141 Peter Brigg, »Frank Herbert: On Getting Our Heads Together,« *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 13, no 3/4 (1980): 195.

142 Ibid., 200.

143 Frank Herbert, *Children of Dune* (New York: Ace, 1976), 94.

144 Brigg, »Frank Herbert,« 201.

145 Ronny Parkerson, »Semantics, General Semantics, and Ecology in Frank Herbert's *Dune*,« *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 67, no. 4 (2010): 403.

before, was not intended by Herbert to deliver easy answers to pressing questions. On the contrary, it poses more questions than it actually answers. One of these, as highlighted by anthropologist Claire R. Farrer, is particularly challenging: »Have we, as Herbert and other science fiction writers suggest, invested too much in Science and Technology without a concomitant consideration of the quality of life we are building as we race with abandon towards our new unknown frontier?«<sup>146</sup> In a way, *Dune* is therefore also part of an anti-science fiction genre, »a form of apocalyptic fantasy verging on religious myth,« which is expressed as a »romantic reaction against the secularization and rationalization of life that began in earnest with the democratic and industrial revolutions of the late eighteenth century.«<sup>147</sup>

This richness of motifs was developed in six novels about Dune that were finished by Herbert before his death in 1986, but his son Brian, together with Kevin J. Anderson, has written ten additional novels that have continued the series. Herbert himself might have thought about his universe as a place for philosophical reflections about the present, especially since »[t]he structure of myth and its story [in the *Dune* series] aid people in thinking through contradictions in their social world by displacing those contradictions into metaphor, at the same time identifying and resolving them in ways that help people live with paradox.«<sup>148</sup> Herbert's fourth novel, *God Emperor of Dune* (1981), a story focusing on Leto II, who had become a symbiotic creature after his unification with a worm trout, must, as scholar Stephen M. Fjellman has speculated, have been appealing to American intellectuals of their time,<sup>149</sup> especially since questions of power, dominance, and the price for peace were prominently dis-

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146 Claire R. Farrer, »On Parables, Questions, and Predictions,« *Western Folklore* 46, no. 4 (1987): 284.

147 Patrick Brantlinger, »The Gothic Origins of Science Fiction,« *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 14, no. 1 (1980): 31.

148 Stephen M. Fjellman, »Prescience and Power: 'God Emperor of Dune' and the Intellectuals,« *Science Fiction Studies* 13, no. 1 (1986): 50.

149 Ibid.

cussed in it. It would not be surprising if *Dune* is turned into a television series after the two films by Denis Villeneuve, as the novel series is, to quote Fjellman once more,

a massive saga-full of individual characters, competing groups and institutions, intrigue and action. It is a masterwork of complexity, melding ideas about ecology, politics, genetics, consciousness, psychedelics, time, chance, and memory with archetypes from the great mythical tradition. Paul is an epic hero, restoring his aristocratic house and bringing a downtrodden group to power. At *Dune's* end we cheer. Reading it has been an emotionally satisfying experience.<sup>150</sup>

Herbert was, however, critical about his own work and the perspectives it offered, as one can observe throughout his six novels, where nothing is written in stone. As mentioned earlier, Herbert constantly rewrites the order of the *Dune* universe and thereby even counteracts the readers' perception. In doing that, the »master of *Dune*« increases the awareness that something that might be considered positive in one space-time context can be negative in another.<sup>151</sup> Furthermore, he underlines that some decisions cannot be taken lightly but should consider possible long-term consequences—a consideration one would like to see more often in an American context.

Herbert described the multi-perspectivity of his works and the respective topics or motifs within them as follows:

I had already written several pieces about ecological matters, but my superhero concept filled me with a concern that ecology might be the next banner for demagogues and would-be heroes, for the power seekers and others ready to find an »adrenalin high« in the launching of a new crusade. ... I could begin to see the shape of a global prob-

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 51–52.

lem, no part of it separated from any other—social ecology, political ecology, economic ecology. ... I find fresh nuances, theories of history, geology, anthropology, plant research, soil chemistry, and the metalanguages of pheromones. A new field of study arises out of this like a spirit rising from a witch's caldron: the psychology of planetary societies.<sup>152</sup>

This statement emphasizes that *Dune* cannot be understood as a topical monolith but must rather be seen as a series that almost organically grew and commented on the developments of its time.<sup>153</sup> This would turn Herbert into an operational intellectual and commentator on world events, although he transplanted them into a far-distant future. What he was particularly concerned with, besides the above-discussed motifs, was the question of power. The role of the heroic protagonist in *Dune* is very much determined by it, which is why Paul, like other political leaders Herbert could have thought of at the time when he wrote his novel, »emerge[d] to discover that [they] must wage war to gain and maintain ... power. Herbert strongly believed war to be the logical consequence of any struggle to gain and maintain power, whether political or economic.«<sup>154</sup>

The reflection about power is, however, combined with aspects related to semantics and the role of language to create an image of leadership that people would be attracted to. Since Herbert had studied semantics in San Francisco and also worked for the semanticist Samuel Ichiye Hayakawa (1906–1992),<sup>155</sup> this implementation of language-related aspects into his work is hardly surprising. For example, for his idea of the Bene Gesserit, »Herbert combined principles of general semantics with yoga, Zen, biofeedback, and nonverbal communication to produce these powerful beings of superior intelligence

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152 Frank Herbert, »Dune Genesis,« *Omni* (July 1980): 74, cited in Parkerson, »Semantics,« 404.

153 William F. Touponce, *Frank Herbert* (Boston: Twayne, 1988), 13–14.

154 Parkerson, »Semantics,« 405.

155 S. I. Hayakawa, *Semantics* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952).

and ability.«<sup>156</sup> Considering the overall shape and richness in motifs in *Dune*, Herbert definitely acted quite eclectically, maybe also because he envisioned the future in the *Dune* universe to be based on a fragmented and reconnected version of the present, albeit one haunted by the same problems.

Herbert himself did not seem to change as a person, regardless of the fact that *Dune* became a best-selling novel and was adapted for the 1984 film. Vonda N. McIntyre described Herbert in her obituary as an always open-minded man of vision:

The increasing wealth and fame of his last 15 years never changed him, as such events change so many other people. He never became pompous or suspicious or greedy. It was always a delight to see him enjoy his success and use it to benefit people. Whether the subject was a book, or one of the numerous projects to film *Dune*, or a new computer, or his hexagonal chicken coop, or *World Without War*, he brought his own unique spirit and sense of humor to the discussion.<sup>157</sup>

In fact, Herbert also considered his *Dune* novels to fulfill an educational purpose. In an interview in 1971 for the fanzine *Friends*, he argued in this regard:

If a man is walking down a path—and he is made aware of the dangers in front of him ... and made aware of something he can do to avoid that danger, to stop, or change his course—he will take the corrective measure. I want to make people aware because within that awareness they will see the dangers. ... Our whole western culture, especially the English language culture, has been raped by several controlling aspects of our language—which control our thought processes. One of these controlling aspects is the way we are so prone to stop motions, to freeze motion with the verb 'to be'. What are you?

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<sup>156</sup> Parkerson, »Semantics,« 406.

<sup>157</sup> Vonda N. McIntyre, »Frank Herbert, 1920–86,« *Science Fiction Studies* 13, no. 3 (1986): 405.

What do you intend ›to be‹ when you grow up? Human potential is, I would say, the ultimate frontier. This is the barrier we are constantly breasting.<sup>158</sup>

Herbert understood that the future would only be possible if human beings accepted the steady necessity to adapt their life to a constantly changing future, for which »adaptability is the key to survival in an ever changing universe. And the pressures of our civilisation, time after time, have been conformity, rigidity, and non-variability. This is observably an error. A moralistic thing. The authoritarian model. There are several fallacies in the assumptions upon which we base our civilisation: One of them is pride in knowledge. It's destructive.«<sup>159</sup> In this interview, Herbert also shared his worries about the abuse of power, e. g. during the Vietnam War, which had been so obvious and fatal in the Hobsbawmian »Age of Extremes«<sup>160</sup> up until then:

There is a misunderstanding of power in our society. If one bulldozer won't do it, two will. If two battalions won't do it, four will, and so on. It's a nonsense thing, because if the issue is an issue of our ignorance, then no amount of battalions will do it. And Vietnam is a perfect exemplary demonstration of this. Our particular nation, which was founded in guerilla warfare and an understanding of some of the ways of using power, seems to have lost that by the wayside. Somewhere we dropped it.<sup>161</sup>

Herbert, in contrast to the realities he observed, dreamt of a more united, more peaceful world:

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158 MS Winecoff, »Frank Herbert: Author of *Dune*,« *Friends* 23, February 2, 1971, 11.

159 Ibid.

160 Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Penguin, 1994).

161 Winecoff, »Frank Herbert,« 11.

I say, apart is insane, together is sane. In fact, here's a very interesting thing: this word together is cropping to *mean* sane, to mean balanced. ... As far as *Dune* was concerned, I was working on a sanity level with these assumptions. I am very strong on Jungian archetypes, in the sense that these are pretty universal from culture to culture. They have slightly variable manifestations, but you will find the monster in the deep, the golden youth, the riches guarded by the demon, you find the mandala, the divided circle ...<sup>162</sup>

Herbert, as an activist kind of SF writer, criticized the glorification of violence and the unwillingness to understand the impact of power and its abuse for the destruction of civilizational values. In the interview with *Friends*, he therefore also expressed his disappointment in humanity and the myths it continued to pass on from generation to generation: »Look at the parade of violence in the way we present our history. It is organised by wars; our major heroes are war heroes and war itself is glorified. ... We are time-bombed in our civilisation. This is part of the suppression of awareness. You know, if you extend your awareness out over a sufficient amount of time and space you will encompass your own death.«<sup>163</sup>

Considering these remarks from Herbert, it is surprising how strong the orientalist semiotics are in the first *Dune* novel and the extent to which the novel's plot is related to stories about Lawrence of Arabia. Again, Herbert depicts an intrusion into the wilderness, which is eventually changed by the heroic protagonist to fit his needs. Therefore, the wilderness as such and the indigenous people who call it their home are again exploited. Such an intrusion into and, in a way, interruption of the wild has recently been seen more critically. American scholar John Visvader, to name just one example here, emphasized that it might be better to simply stay away from the wild, a lesson that can also be learned from *Dune*. Visvader argues that

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162 Ibid.

163 Ibid.

»[a]ll we have to do is to make sure to learn to leave things alone, the more the better, within a gentle parenthesis. Nothing is wild in any absolute sense, but things can remain wild in a sense that is important both to them and to us.«<sup>164</sup> This would also include the refusal to reinterpret the »wild« according to stereotypes that fit our own narratives and considerations rather than the realities of the indigenous people described. In this regard, Herbert was not progressive enough, and maybe he was still trapped within the existent orientalist semiotics of his time, but whatever the reason may have been, his *Dune* novel is full of orientalist elements that shall now be discussed in more detail.

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164 John Visvader, »Future Wild,« *Human Ecology Review* 25, no. 2 (2019): 13.

### 3 Orientalist Semiotics

Herbert stated in an interview that he did not just start writing *Dune* but actually spent five years on research, reading mostly works that were non-fiction.<sup>165</sup> Some of the names he created for his protagonists do obviously resemble Arabic words, and considering his intensive research work and his education, it cannot be assumed that Herbert was unaware of his semiotic constructions when crafting the universe his story takes place in and the people that determine the course of history in it. With Paul Muad'Dib at the center, the resemblance with *mu'adeb*, the Arabic term for »private tutor,«<sup>166</sup> seems to be one of those aspects pointing directly to the question of how far Herbert thought about the terminology and how far it was chosen for a specific semiotic purpose. The latter, willingly or not, often replicates orientalist stereotypes and considerations and must therefore be seriously taken into consideration when one takes a closer look at the orientalist semiotics of *Dune*. Haris Durrani has already emphasized »the books' engagement with Islam to transcend linguistic wordplay and obscure intertextuality.«<sup>167</sup> The deep »Muslimness« of *Dune* and its links to Middle Eastern culture, history, and religion almost demands a closer analysis of these aspects and the presented orientalist semiotics in particular. In fact, »*Dune* does not cheaply plagiarize

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<sup>165</sup> Wincoff, »Frank Herbert,« 11.

<sup>166</sup> Haris Durrani, »The Muslimness of *Dune*: A Close Reading of ›Appendix II: The Religion of Dune‹,« *tor.com*, October 18, 2021, accessed November 6, 2021, <https://www.tor.com/2021/10/18/the-muslimness-of-dune-a-close-reading-of-appendix-ii-the-religion-of-dune>.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

from Muslim histories, ideas, and practices, but actively engages with them.<sup>168</sup> However, at the same time, the novels and the films alike reconvey orientalist stereotypes and narratives about the Middle East that have been widely perceived in Western popular culture since the late 19th century. While Herbert's deeper interest in Middle Eastern culture and reflection is clearly obvious, and although the novel's »Muslimness reflects a serious engagement with those sources and histories, a conversation with their underlying ideas and affects that surpasses exotic aesthetics, easy plagiarism, cheap appropriation, the assumption of unchanging religion or language, and even scintillating references,<sup>169</sup> there are orientalist elements in it that were maybe unconsciously replicated by Herbert as well. In that regard, Herbert without any doubt »enjoy[ed] rifling cultures almost as much as Tolkien, but there is less logic to his semantics.<sup>170</sup> One of these aspects, which will later be taken into closer consideration, is the resemblance of Lawrence of Arabia in Paul Muad'Dib. Before, however, it seems to be in order to introduce some essential thoughts related to orientalism and semiotics.

Edward Said (1935–2003), in his famous work *Orientalism* (1978), argued that »[t]he Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.<sup>171</sup> He furthermore considered orientalism to be »a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience.<sup>172</sup> Northern Africa, the Middle East, and the Far East were used as projection surfaces that were needed to define the self-image of Europe or the West in abstraction to this orientalist otherness. Therefore, the perception of the former regions within

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168 Ibid.

169 Ibid.

170 Haden-Guest, »Fave Rave,« 16.

171 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1995), accessed November 13, 2021, [http://www.ricorso.net/rx/library/criticism/guest/Said\\_E/Said\\_E3.htm](http://www.ricorso.net/rx/library/criticism/guest/Said_E/Said_E3.htm).

172 Ibid.

the latter was essential for the creation of what Said understands as orientalism, especially since it »expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles.«<sup>173</sup> The starting point for these developments was supposedly the end of the 19th century, and Said used French philosopher Michel Foucault's (1926–1984) thoughts about discourses as a base for his reflections about the establishment of this particular semiotic system related to the »Orient.«<sup>174</sup> Discourse about the latter in the West eventually led to the establishment of a particular semiotic system that became related to and essential for perceptions of the respective regions, particularly that of the Middle East. Signs that were accepted by Western societies to be linked to and to represent the »orientalist Other« were systematized step by step and thereby inscribed into images and narratives that consciously or unconsciously were transported over decades until Herbert eventually accessed them for his future vision of the *Dune* universe.

Semiotics in general can be very shortly defined as the study of any human-made or interpreted signs, which are »traditionally defined as »something which stands for something else« (in the medieval formula, *aliquid stat pro aliquo*) [and a]ll meaningful phenomena (including words and images) are signs.« This then means that »[t]o interpret something is to treat it as a sign. All experience is mediated by signs, and communication depends on them.«<sup>175</sup> What the study of semiotics is consequently particularly interested in is the meaning-making that is achieved by the use and implementation of visual or textual signs.<sup>176</sup> Semioticians consequently look at the intentional

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173 Ibid.

174 On this aspect, see Seumas Miller, »Foucault on Discourse and Power,« *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory* 76 (1990): 115–125; Stephen Frederick Schneck, »Michel Foucault on Power/Discourse, Theory and Practice,« *Human Studies* 10, no. 1 (1987): 15–33.

175 Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics* (London/New York: Routledge, 2017), 2.

176 Gary Genosko, *Critical Semiotics: Theory, from Information to Affect* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 1.

creation of signs and the perception of these signs within larger sign systems, i. e. the semiotics of beings, things, or actions.<sup>177</sup> Semiotics as such, therefore, is the science related to the creation, knowledge, and intention or perception of signs in different historical and cultural contexts and seems to offer a very suitable approach to study the orientalist signs represented in Herbert's *Dune*. In other words, one can—and in the case of *Dune*, this actually makes sense when one wants to reflect upon the semiotic system related to Herbert's universe, Arrakis itself, the spice, the worms, or the Fremen—»approach signs as objects of interpretation indistinguishable from our responses to them. But we can also approach signs in such a way that we suspend our responses to them so that deliberation is possible.«<sup>178</sup> In fact, as semioticians Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio argue, »[s]emiotics as human semiosis or anthroposemiosis can scour the entire universe for meanings and senses that can then be treated as signs.«<sup>179</sup>

Of course, signs do not always stand out but are linked within a system and a kind of chain as well as a historical context, which means that sign systems change according to time and space.<sup>180</sup> Some semiotic meanings of Herbert's *Dune* are consequently more obvious than others, or perhaps more accurately, more prominent than others. Some are hidden and some are in plain sight, some are Western and some are not, but some are, without any doubt, a Western interpretation of the Middle East, i. e. orientalism, in accordance with Herbert's own time and the time of the creation of the first *Dune* novel. Although often accused of being an unfitting academic field,<sup>181</sup>

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177 Kalevi Kull, »On the Limits of Semiotics, or the Thresholds of/in Knowing,« in *Umberto Eco in His Own Words*, eds. Torkild Thellefsen and Bent Sørensen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 42.

178 Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio, *Semiotics Unbounded: Interpretive Routes through the Open Network of Signs* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 3.

179 Ibid.

180 Ibid., 4.

181 Paul Cobley, »What the Humanities Are For: A Semiotic Perspective,« in *Semiotics and Its Masters*, vol. 1, eds. Kristian Bankov and Paul Cobley (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 4.

I consider the semiotic approach to Herbert's text and its later presentation in visual media a very suitable one, as it highlights which attempts were made, intentionally or unintentionally, to fill *Dune* with some kind of common orientalist semiotics that people around the world, but especially in the US, shared with regard to their reading of *Dune*.<sup>182</sup> This attempt is therefore closely linked to the demands for semiotic research, which were summed up by Gary Genosko: »A properly semiotic investigation into meaning ends up on the side of how it is produced, and what sort of systems are involved; what kind of mediations need to be taken into account, and how to account for the relationalities involved, not to mention the veils that have to be lifted in the process.«<sup>183</sup>

In the *Dune* films, Herbert's text and the filmic visualization also created a communicative unity,<sup>184</sup> although, depending on the film, the orientalist semiotics were more or less stronger than possibly intended. This, however, requires a detailed comparison of the films and mini-series, which is not the intention of the present text. The focus here is rather on the substance as well as the limits—generally an aim for semiotic or semiological studies<sup>185</sup>—of the orientalist semiotics of Herbert's *Dune*, and thus the present study is also linked to general systems theory,<sup>186</sup> in the sense that it not only looks at a semiotic system per se but at a system of semiotic orientalism as it was presented by Herbert in one of the most successful science fiction novels of all time. This approach was chosen to open a dialogue oriented towards

182 For a discussion of this law of signification, see Julia Kristeva, »Introduction: Le Lieu Sémiotique,« in *Essays in Semiotics/Essais de Sémiotique*, eds. Julia Kristeva et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1971), 1–2.

183 Genosko, *Critical Semiotics*, 1.

184 Thomas Friedrich and Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, *Bildsemiotik: Grundlagen und exemplarische Analysen visueller Kommunikation* (Basel/Boston/Berlin: Birkhäuser, 2010), 16.

185 Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 9.

186 Ludwig von Bertalanffy, »General Theory of Systems: Application to Psychology,« in *Essays in Semiotics/Essais de Sémiotique*, eds. Julia Kristeva et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1971), 191.

the representation and perceptions of cultural images in Western popular media.<sup>187</sup> While there are two major traditions for semiotic studies, one related to the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and one related to the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914),<sup>188</sup> the latter's definition of signs seems to fit the current approach best: Peirce »define[d] a Sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former.«<sup>189</sup> While Saussure, as a linguist, naturally focused a lot on language, it was Thomas A. Sebeok (1921–2001), among others, e.g. Roland Barthes (1915–1980)<sup>190</sup> and Umberto Eco (1932–2016),<sup>191</sup> who later argued that the study of semiotics should include all kinds of signs, not only those related to language.<sup>192</sup>

In the more science-oriented branch of biosemiotics, the biologist Jakob von Uexküll (1864–1944) »conducted his research in biology in dialogue with the sign sciences and evidenced the species-specific

187 Anna Maria Lorusso, *Cultural Semiotics: For a Cultural Perspective in Semiotics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 2.

188 Chandler, *Semiotics*, 2–3; Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio, »Semioethics as a Vocation of Semiotics: In the Wake of Welby, Morris, Sebeok, Rossi-Landi,« in *Semiotics and Its Masters*, vol. 1, eds. Kristian Bankov and Paul Copley (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 28. For detailed introductions to Saussure and Peirce, see Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 4–14 and 14–25, respectively.

189 Charles S. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, vol. 2 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 478, cited in Albert Atkin, »Peirce's Theory of Signs,« in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, accessed May 20, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/peirce-semiotics>.

190 Roland Barthes, *Signs and Images: Writings on Art, Cinema and Photography* (London: Seagull, 2016).

191 Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1979).

192 Thomas A. Sebeok, *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001). See also Jürgen Trabant, »Semiotics, Semiology, Sematology,« in *Umberto Eco in His Own Words*, eds. Torkild Thellefsen and Bent Sørensen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 176.

character of human modelling—which precedes and is the condition for human communication through verbal and nonverbal signs.«<sup>193</sup> Uexküll's biosemiotic approach is important for cultural studies as well, because he found out that organisms apply modeling processes to create their own environment that are either inward or outward and depend on the respective situation or context in which these processes take place.<sup>194</sup> Sebeok and others applied this to the study of cultural semiotics, which intends to provide a »first-order analysis« that is supposed to offer an »analysis of codes and structures that lie at the root of all meaningful exchanges.«<sup>195</sup> This cultural approach and the cultural interpretation of semiotics was even more important for the »most famous semiotician«<sup>196</sup> of all time, Umberto Eco,<sup>197</sup> who considered semiotics to be a form of social criticism as well.<sup>198</sup> Although the Italian intellectual is probably more known for his novels,<sup>199</sup> Eco also used his scholarly knowledge to relate to the readers of his stories.<sup>200</sup> He thereby showed that the understanding and analysis of signs is, »in effect, equivalent to the activity of unraveling how we understand fiction as a substitute for reality.«<sup>201</sup>

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193 Petrilli and Ponzio, »Semioethics,« 25. See also Kalevi Kull, »Umwelt and Modelling,« *The Routledge Companion to Semiotics*, ed. Paul Copley, (London: Routledge, 2010), 43–56; Kalevi Kull, »Jakob von Uexküll: An Introduction,« *Semiotica* 134, no. 1 (2001), 1–59.

194 Jakob von Uexküll, *Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren and Menschen* (Berlin: Springer, 1934).

195 Lorusso, *Cultural Semiotics*, 4.

196 Marcel Danesi, »Eco's Definition of Semiotics as the Discipline of Lying,« in *Umberto Eco in His Own Words*, eds. Torkild Thellefsen and Bent Sørensen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 19.

197 On Eco's life and work, see Clinton Hale, »Umberto Eco Takes Semiotics to the Masses,« *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 68, no. 3 (2011): 256–257.

198 Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 298.

199 David Robey, »Introduction: Interpretation and Uncertainty,« in *Illuminating Eco: On the Boundaries of Interpretation*, eds. Charlott Ross and Rochelle Sibley (London: Routledge, 2004), 1–3.

200 Hale, »Umberto Eco,« 255.

201 Danesi, »Eco's Definition,« 20.

With regard to the applicability and use of semiotics as a scientific method, Eco formulated the following demands:

A design for a general semiotics should consider: (a) a *theory of codes* and (b) a *theory of sign production*—the latter taking into account a large range of phenomena such as the common use of languages, the evolution of codes, aesthetic communication, different types of international communicative behavior, the use of signs in order to mention things or states of the world and so on.<sup>202</sup>

The theory of sign production is especially important when one considers the semiotic elements in Herbert's novel, as the American author obviously relied on elements that were specifically part of the semiotic code of his time and had thereby been a result of sign production before. This also means that the images Herbert created were related to the ones he and his audience might have been familiar with. As the Canadian philosopher and communication scholar Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980) argued, there needs to be a mutual understanding of these semiotic images for the media, in our case Herbert's novel, to become the message.<sup>203</sup> The success, or more accurately the appeal, of the novel therefore relied on the process of communication between author and audience by applying images and narratives that would be considered known at the time of the text's production.

Eco further outlined this process as follows: »When the destination [of a communicative process] is a human being ... we are ... witnessing a process of signification—provided that the signal is not merely a stimulus but arouses an interpretive response in the addressee. This process is made possible by the existence of a code.«<sup>204</sup> Culture, Eco insisted, should be studied as a whole and as something relying on systems of signification as a means to achieve conscious as well as sub-

<sup>202</sup> Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 3.

<sup>203</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Mentor, 1964).

<sup>204</sup> Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 8.

conscious communication: »Culture is, therefore, based on categories and signs that are necessary to communicate and it is organized into a system at the level of meaning.«<sup>205</sup> This also includes the creation and communication of ideologies, especially since an »ideology is a wealth of knowledge units,«<sup>206</sup> and for Eco, »ideology is the knowledge of the speaker but also the cultural framework of the receiver.«<sup>207</sup> The codes that exist are always in motion, but it is only if they are understood by both the creator and the receiver that they can actually be used to frame an ideology-based perception in its respective cultural context. Since human beings tend to organize their lives according to pre-existent meanings of codes and signs, their analysis is important for many scientific analyses, including the orientalist semiotics of an SF novel. Since »language provides the necessary semiotic resources and energy for the apparently endless variety of ideologies that humans generate,«<sup>208</sup> which images it produces and often re-produces over a long time must be taken into careful consideration. If we consider the white savior narrative as an element of racist ideology, *Dune* and its author, willingly or unwillingly, transported and reinvoked colonial stereotypes and orientalist semiotics.

These were also used with regard to the visualization of Herbert's universe on the cinema or TV screens. While advertising heavily leans on semiotics and sign systems,<sup>209</sup> so often do films or TV series. The audience usually has a specific expectation with regard to the specific narratives and images that are presented. When Herbert therefore »proved that the science-fiction genre could also accommodate en-

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205 Lorusso, *Cultural Semiotics*, 118.

206 Anna Maria Lorusso, »Looking at Culture Through Ideological Discourse,« in *Umberto Eco in His Own Words*, eds. Torkild Thellefsen and Bent Sørensen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 48. For another discussion of ideological connotations, see Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957).

207 Lorusso, »Looking at Culture,« 49. See also Eco, *L'Oeuvre*.

208 Annabelle Lukin, *War and Its Ideologies: A Social-Semiotic Theory and Description* (Singapore: Springer, 2019), 11.

209 Ron Beasley and Marcel Danesi, *Persuasive Signs: The Semiotics of Advertising* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2002), 9.

gaging world-building,«<sup>210</sup> it was directors and production companies who depicted interpretations of his texts. And while Herbert intended to use and alter existent names to provide a vision of the future that still sounded familiar to the reader's context, the filmmakers would bring *Dune* to life according to their own vision, which can but is not required to match the audience's expectation. Villeneuve's depiction of the Fremen is much more Middle Eastern than Lynch's, which is related to the decision of how to interpret, i. e. visualize, the orientalist semiotics that had already been replicated by Herbert himself, in particular because »Names help to establish *Dune's* medieval, feudal setting and its depiction of a desert planet inhabited by a quasi-Arabic and Islamic tribal people, the Fremen.«<sup>211</sup> In this regard, it must be emphasized that Herbert's creation of a new world was less progressive than the anti-colonial tones of his work suggest. Indian writer Mimi Mondal made an important point about this, and her remarks shall therefore be cited here at some length:

In a world where all fundamental laws can be rewritten, it is also illuminating which of them aren't. The author's priorities are more openly on display when a culture of non-humans is still patriarchal, there are no queer people in a far-future society, or in an alternate universe the heroes and saviours are still white. Is the villain in the story a repulsively depicted fat person? Is a disabled or disfigured character the monster? Are darker-skinned, non-Western characters either absent or irrelevant, or worse, portrayed with condescension? It's not sufficient to say that these stereotypes still exist in the real world. In a speculative world, where it is possible to rewrite them, leaving them unchanged is also political.<sup>212</sup>

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210 Kennedy, »Epic World-Building,« 99.

211 Ibid., 100.

212 Mimi Mondal, »All Worldbuilding, without Exception, Is Political,« *Hindustan Times*, February 26, 2019, accessed November 8, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/columns/all-worldbuilding-without-exception-is-political/story-iE1GcoR4ULSq8khLaJrdEO.html>.

Considering »the strong historical link between names in the Fremen culture and real-world Middle Eastern societies,« Herbert consequently continues orientalist semiotics, which »juxtaposes the Fremen as an exotic Other with the Western, ruling-class Atreides family.«<sup>213</sup> It is without any doubt more than obvious, when one takes a closer look at the Middle Eastern elements in *Dune*, that the novel can be evaluated as a misrepresentation of Arabic communities and societies in Western SF.<sup>214</sup> Herbert actually seems to have been relying on »the ignorance and ethnocentrism of his American audience« when he presented »foreign neologisms to create exotic effects.«<sup>215</sup> Paul, of course, becomes part of the Fremen society but transforms it, even militarizes it, according to his needs that are related to his concurrent role of being the Duke of House Atreides. The supposedly symbiotic relationship between the West and the East would eventually be perceived as the former dominating the latter. The name Paul, in this regard, is also a problematic reference to Saint Paul, who founded the Christian Church and initiated »missionary work.« Another biblical name is also represented in Jessica.<sup>216</sup> The House's name, however, is a reference to ancient Greek mythology and refers to Atreus, whose sons Agamemnon and Menelaus play important roles during the Trojan War. The use of the name of Leto, Paul's father, also points towards Greek mythology, as this name is also that of the titan mother of Artemis and Apollo.<sup>217</sup> Although Herbert sometimes changed names, e.g. Bene

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213 Kennedy, »Epic World-Building,« 100.

214 For a broader discussion of this issue, see Hoda M. Zaki, »Orientalism in Science Fiction,« in *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, ed. Joanna Kadi (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1994), 181–187.

215 Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 41, cited in Kennedy, »Epic World-Building,« 100. See also Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

216 Kennedy, »Epic World-Building,« 100.

217 *Ibid.* For a broader discussion of historical references in SF, see Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 106, 214 and 235.

Gesserit, which probably stands for »good or benevolent Jesuit,«<sup>218</sup> the connection still remains quite visible, maybe more so for readers in the 1960s than today. Besides the names, however, there are also some central references to the history, culture, and religion of the Middle East, which shall be taken into closer consideration in the remaining part of this chapter.

As mentioned earlier, the references to Jewish people and their traditions appear relatively late in Herbert's *Dune* series, namely in the sixth and last book by the author, *Chapterhouse: Dune* (1985).<sup>219</sup> Surprisingly, »unlike other faiths, the Judaism of the far future has changed not a whit,« and therefore, as Michael Weingrad emphasized in contrast to everything else that is different in Herbert's universe, the »Jews are as they have always been.«<sup>220</sup> In his final book, he therefore uses as many Jewish and even antisemitic stereotypes as he had used orientalist ones in his first novel. However, Paul, »the most heroic SF hero since Gully Foyle,«<sup>221</sup> is used to make a positive reference to Jewish religion in the novel. He could, due to the breeding program of the Bene Gesserit and Jessica's decision to bear a son instead of a daughter, become the super being, the *Kwisatz Haderach*. The term is a reference to the Hebrew *kefitzat haderech* (shortening of the way),<sup>222</sup> which is used in Jewish sources and Hasidic folktales to describe some kind of magical transportation or teleportation.<sup>223</sup> And this is what

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218 Kennedy, »Epic World-Building,« 101–102.

219 Frank Herbert, *Chapterhouse: Dune* (New York: Putnam, 1985).

220 Weingrad, »Jews of *Dune*.«

221 Haden-Guest, »Fave Rave,« 16.

222 Chaim Bentorah, *Hebrew Word Study: A Hebrew Teacher Finds Rest in the Heart of God* (Bloomington, IN: Trafford, 2013), 16–18. See also »Kwisatz Haderach,« in Peter Schlobinski and Oliver Siebold, *Wörterbuch der Science Fiction* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008), 193. For the use of the term, e.g. by Ben Gurion, see David Ohana, *Nationalizing Judaism: Zionism as a Theological Ideology* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 29.

223 Sandherin 95a, *The William Davidson Talmud*, accessed November 23, 2021, <https://www.sefaria.org/Sanhedrin.95a.16?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>. The belief that a person could appear in distant places almost simultaneously was not uncommon in other ancient contexts either. See Frank Jacob, »Die Pythagoreer:

Paul eventually achieves, namely the possibility to travel through time and space without actually moving. In addition, he can see the future much clearer in the end, while his initial visionary experiences seem to have often been blurred or unclear. It is the spice that allows Paul to access his visions, which, however, are often not clear but only offer possible alternatives of the future that he has to eventually let happen or somehow avoid. In that way, the visions appear to be what Dietmar Dath called sideviews on alternate timelines for the future and thereby present possibilities that must be seen from the perspective of what is actually an optional view of what could happen.<sup>224</sup> This motif of the *Kwisatz Haderach* is quite central within *Dune*; however, it seems to be the only strong Jewish element in the first novel, where orientalist semiotics are much stronger in regard to the presentation of Muslim elements within Herbert's universe.

In his novels, he intended to present the future of something his readers would be quite familiar with, i. e. the development of Islam into a religious belief that would still be part of the known universe thousands of years later. The specific »Muslimness of *Dune*«<sup>225</sup> is particularly and sophisticatedly described in the appendix about the »Religion of *Dune*.« It provides a deeper insight into the Orange Catholic Bible that is mentioned in the novel as well as the religious beliefs of the Fremmen. It has been emphasized by Haris Durrani that »[w]hile the appendix incorporates a variety of religious and philosophical references—including to Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Navajo traditions, Roman paganism, and even Nietzsche—the thrust of the historical narrative is overwhelmingly Muslim, and perhaps specifically Shi'i.«<sup>226</sup> The allegories used by Herbert to describe the conflict between indigenous people and the ones who intend to exploit them

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Wissenschaftliche Schule, religiöse Sekte oder politische Geheimgesellschaft?,« in *Geheimgesellschaften: Kulturhistorische Sozialstudien*, ed. Frank Jacob (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2013), 17–34.

224 »Dune: Interview with Dietmar Dath.«

225 Durrani, »The Muslimness of *Dune*.«

226 Ibid.

is, however, only one way to read the novel, as the supposedly existent conflict between Islam and modernity is presented by Herbert as well. In an interview,<sup>227</sup> he argued that his Middle Eastern friends considered the book to work more as a kind of religious commentary and understood it rather as a work of philosophical fiction and not SF.<sup>228</sup> It has been suggested that Herbert used different existent Islamic narratives as the base for his own universe building. In the appendix, Herbert mentions a *Kitab al-Ibar* (Book of Lessons) as an essential text for the Fremens' religious views and assumably is making a reference to the Arab historian and philosopher Ibn Khaldun's (1332–1406) work of the same title.<sup>229</sup> The title of Paul's own work, *The Pillars of the Universe*, is at the same time an obvious reference to T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.<sup>230</sup> Taking into account that Herbert must have been familiar with the film about Lawrence that premiered in 1962 and that he had a copy of *Seven Pillars* as well as a later translation of Jordanian historian Suleiman Mousa's (1919–2008) *T. E. Lawrence: An Arab View*,<sup>231</sup> the resemblances between Paul and Lawrence, which will be discussed in some more detail in the following chapter, are hardly surprising.<sup>232</sup>

Nevertheless, there are some other references to Islam and the Muslim Middle East that should not be omitted when talking about the orientalist semiotics of *Dune*. The Padishah Emperor of the *Dune* universe, the title in itself being a reference to Middle Eastern history,<sup>233</sup> is named Shaddam IV, referencing the Arabic word *Ṣaddām*, »one who confronts.« One could therefore argue here that Herbert's

227 Accessed November 25, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZGJ3pGEua&t=63s>. Durrani referenced the interview in his analysis.

228 Durrani, »The Muslimness of *Dune*.«

229 James W. Morris, *The Master and the Disciple: An Early Islamic Spiritual Dialogue, Arabic Edition and English Translation of Ja'far b. Mansur al-Yaman's Kitab al-'alim wa'l-ghulam* (London/New York: IB Tauris/Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2001), 13.

230 T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (London: Penguin, 1922).

231 Suleiman Mousa, *T. E. Lawrence: An Arab View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).

232 Durrani, »The Muslimness of *Dune*.«

233 Padishah is an old Persian term for »Master King.«

naming of his novel's characters was already a way of pointing towards their position within the newly created universal order of his book. When Paul is riding the worm, he uses a *kiswa* maker hook, and the term *kiswa* is explained as »any figure or design from Fremen mythology« by Herbert.<sup>234</sup> The *Kiswa*, however, is the black brocade cloth that covers the *Kaaba* in Mecca. Considering just these few terms, it already seems more likely that Herbert was very sensitively crafting linguistic meanings for his figures, which is why the orientalist semiotics of the overall work can hardly be considered orientalist by accident. That Herbert also actively references historical events is visible in Paul's personal guard, the *Fedaykin*, a reference to *Fedayeen* (those who sacrifice themselves), the term used for Arab commando groups, e. g. for Egyptian groups in the 1940s who fought against British rule there or Palestinians fighting against Israel in the 1950s.<sup>235</sup>

The term used for the worms, Shai-hulud, might also be pointing towards the Arabic words *sai'*, which translates to »thing,« and *khulud*, which means »to live forever.« The sandworms are also called the Makers, and considering the ecological system of Arrakis and the production process of the spice, it is obvious why this is the case.<sup>236</sup> Similar to the orientalist semiotics applied to the worms, the Fremen are depicted with images that strongly link them to the Middle East and Arabic or Islamic cultures.<sup>237</sup> According to Kara Kennedy, it is this »strong association with real-world Arabic and Islamic societies th[at] helps to construct the Fremen's identity as a religious people with a history of persecution, which leads to their desire for retribution and, ultimately, a jihad against off-worlders.«<sup>238</sup> The religion of the Fremen was linked, as mentioned above, to old Arabic texts

234 Herbert, *Dune*, xvii.

235 Zeev Schiff and Raphael Rothstein, *Fedayeen: Guerillas Against Israel* (New York: McKay, 1972).

236 Kennedy, »Epic World-Building,« 102.

237 Gwyneth Jones, »The Icons of Science Fiction,« in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, eds. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 170.

238 Kennedy, »Epic World-Building,« 102.

like the *Kitab al-Ibar*, while the priestesses' name, i. e. *Sayyadina*, and the role taken on by Jessica after she and Paul were granted access to the Fremens' society refer to an Arabic term, i. e. *sayyid*—to be lord over.<sup>239</sup> This meaning might also be related to the fact that the *Sayyadina* were the ones who could transform the Water of Life and would thereby become superior over the death this liquid held ready for anyone else who would try to drink it. The appearance of the Fremens reminds readers of the Bedouins, nomads of the desert. However, they are presented in an ambivalent way. On the one hand, the Fremens »appear as a quasi-Arabic and Middle Eastern people bent on jihad to avenge their historical oppression, unable or unwilling to think rationally and modernize their way of living,<sup>240</sup> while on the other, they seem to be unable to achieve this without the leadership of an outsider who enters their own society to save and lead them alike.

The fact that Paul is referred to and greeted as the *Mahdi*<sup>241</sup> is another reference, albeit one that, in a way, reverts the historical events related to the Mahdist War in Sudan between 1881 and 1889. In contrast to the historical case, where a British officer, General Gordon (Fig. 6), is sent to Khartoum to suppress a rebellion, in *Dune*, the foreigner is actually considered to be the Mahdi and leads it. At the same time, the Mahdi is not really going native but uses the Fremens for an extended war, supposedly a jihad, to defeat his enemies across the whole universe. This turns the independence-oriented fight of the Fremens into an expansionist religious war that supports pragmatic aims that are in no way related to the original needs and demands of the indigenous people of Arrakis anymore. Paul uses the legends about the »Lisan al-Gaib, the Voice from the Outer World.«<sup>242</sup>

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239 Ibid., 103.

240 Ibid., 104.

241 The term translates as »the guided one« and is used as an »honorary title of the expected deliverer or messianic figure in Islam.« Marcia Hermansen, »Mahdi,« in *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, vol. 2, ed. Richard C. Martin (New York: Macmillan 2003), 421, cited in *ibid.*, 105.

242 Herbert, *Dune*, 97, cited in *ibid.* According to Kennedy, »Lisan al-Gaib is a combination of the Arabic *lisān*, meaning ›tongue‹ or ›language,‹ and *gaib*, meaning



Fig. 6: *General Gordon's Last Stand*. Painting by George W. Joy (1844–1925); [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:General\\_Gordon%27s\\_Last\\_Stand.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:General_Gordon%27s_Last_Stand.jpg) (Accessed January 22, 2022).

The orientalist semiotics of *Dune* eventually all point towards another jihad, a holy war in the name of the Atreides, led by Paul Muad'Dib, the Lisan al-Gaib of the Fremen, who not only won power on Arrakis but intends to expand this power across the whole known universe. This part of the plot, in a way, could be understood as a resemblance of a spread of Islam across the MENA region, but one wonders if Herbert really wanted to emphasize violent expansion as the most important aspect of this jihad. In fact, the jihad rather finally links all kinds of strings of the novel to one climax, when Paul's acceptance of

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›invisible‹ or ›supernatural‹.« Ibid.

a partial Fremen identity also becomes uncontrollable, and he accepts unleashing a universal jihad as the ultimate consequence of his claim for leadership of the Fremen. Paul and his mother Jessica have turned into hybrids,<sup>243</sup> members of both worlds, the Great Houses and the Fremen alike, but this link seems to be responsible for setting in motion a much bigger danger for the whole universe, i. e. a universal Jihad that will eventually lead to a renegotiation of power in all its galaxies.

In the end, Paul is unable to prevent the jihad, although he had feared it as well.<sup>244</sup> He had set powers in motion that could no longer be controlled,<sup>245</sup> an aspect that very much relates to Herbert's intention to warn of false leaders and the populist control of religiously motivated masses. These elements are essential for the inner order of Herbert's universe, but they are similarly related to historical events and future dangers he would refer to in his fictional work. Nevertheless, the images he creates are ambivalent. Herbert describes an anti-colonial struggle leading to colonialism in the name of religion, maybe even something to be called an ideology, and thereby emphasizes the menace religious fundamentalism seems to pose. While anti-colonial in nature, the signs presented are very often related to an orientalist semiotic system, which was not fully decolonialized in 1965, and, considering the new film, not in 2021 either. One particular image shows this special ambivalence as well, namely the white savior narrative in relation to the history of T. E. Lawrence during the First World War. The following chapter of this book will consequently take a closer look at Paul of Arrakis and Lawrence of Arabia.

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243 Kennedy, »Epic World-Building,« 105.

244 DiTommaso, »History,« 320.

245 Herbert, *Dune*, 482.

## 4 Paul of Arrakis vs. Lawrence of Arabia

The focus on Paul as the male savior of Arrakis and the universe as a whole clearly establishes an almost fetishization of masculinity within the first *Dune* novel, as only a man can become the Kwisatz Haderach.<sup>246</sup> At the same time, Herbert's narrative draws from and relates to another famous story related to the Middle East, namely the one about T. E. Lawrence (1888–1935), or Lawrence of Arabia, as he has commonly been referred to since the end of the First World War.<sup>247</sup> The historical Lawrence served in the British Department of Intelligence in Cairo as a map officer. He had no sense for rules and hierarchies, and as »[a] subaltern on the staff, without a Sam Browne belt, and always wearing slacks, scorching about between Cairo and Bulaq on a Triumph motor-cycle, he was an offence to the eyes of his senior officers.«<sup>248</sup> In contrast to some of his superiors, Lawrence seemed to be really interested in the fate of the Arab people, and it was during a guerilla war against the Ottoman Army in the Middle East that he received his nickname of »Prince Dynamite«<sup>249</sup> before he would become known to the world as Lawrence of Arabia. His story

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246 This kind of super-masculinity, however, is not an exclusively Western phenomenon. See Man-Fung Yip, *Martial Arts Cinema and Hong Kong Modernity: Aesthetics, Representation, Circulation* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2017), 24.

247 On the man and the myth see, among others, James Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire: T. E. Lawrence and Britain's Secret War in Arabia, 1916–1918* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011); Nicholas J. Saunders, *Desert Insurgency: Archaeology, T. E. Lawrence, and the Arab Revolt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

248 David Garnett, ed., *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1938), 182.

249 *Ibid.*, 184.

was eventually filled with legends and stereotypes, which were particularly strong in the film about him that premiered in 1962, with Peter O'Toole (1932–2013) becoming the incarnation of T. E. Lawrence for a wide audience. The film tends to highlight the ambivalence of the famous man; when the journalist Jackson Bentley, who had accompanied Lawrence during the war, said that »[Lawrence] was a poet, a scholar and a mighty warrior,« he then adds that »[h]e was also the most shameless exhibitionist since Barnum and Bailey.«<sup>250</sup> When Lawrence is depicted receiving the order to go and find Prince Feisal in the desert, he cheers, but Mr. Dryden, a diplomat from the Arab Bureau, warns him about the venture: »Lawrence, only two kinds of creature get fun in the desert: Bedouins and gods. And you're neither. ... For ordinary men, it's a burning, fiery furnace.«<sup>251</sup> Since Herbert was probably not only familiar with Lawrence's history but also the film, both seem to be important sources for his novel, especially since there are important similarities between Paul of Arrakis and Lawrence of Arabia. The present chapter therefore intends to take a closer look at these two characters to show which elements of the historical Lawrence might have had an impact on the creation of the fictional Paul.

Just as Paul is challenging the rule of the Harkonnens on Arrakis, Lawrence, during the early period of the war, is thinking about the rule of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East in similar ways, as he »wanted to root them [the Ottoman rulers] out of Syria, and now their blight will be more enduring than ever.«<sup>252</sup> However, internal quarrels about the most suitable policy in the region destroyed his plan to take over Damascus quickly to push the French out of Syria.<sup>253</sup> In the early years of the First World War, Lawrence's »own hopes for promoting a rebellion of Mesopotamian Arabs against the Turks

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250 *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962, dir. David Lean).

251 *Ibid.*

252 Letter to Mrs. Fontana, Oxford, October 19, 1914, in Garnett, *The Letters*, 186–187, here 187.

253 Letter to D. G. Hogarth, Port Said, March 22, 1915, in Garnett, *The Letters*, 195–196.

and for co-operation between them and the British Army came to nothing. The last thing that the British Indian Army officers wanted was the Arabs as allies. And the Indian administration was looking forward to annexation.«<sup>254</sup> Just as Lawrence had understood that a war in the Middle East needed the support of the Arab tribes, Paul realizes in *Dune* that an alliance with the Fremen was of utter importance on Arrakis. The tension between the Arab natives and the Ottoman occupiers was historically as intense<sup>255</sup> as the one that was so endemic with regard to the relationship between the Harkonnen rulers and the exploited Fremen. Lawrence also described the region as such as harsh and hard to live in for non-natives, a description that would fit for Arrakis, too: »It will be a wonderful country some day, when they regulate the floods, and dig out the irrigation ditches. Yet it will never be a really pleasant country, or a country where Europeans can live a normal life.«<sup>256</sup> Feisal, one of the sons of the Sherif of Mecca, prominently portrayed in the film by Sir Alec Guinness (1914–2000), confirms this view on the cinema screen as well when he says that Lawrence might only be another »desert-loving English« on the search for adventure: »No Arab loves the desert. We love water and green trees.«<sup>257</sup>

When the revolt of the Sherif of Mecca began in June 1916,<sup>258</sup> Lawrence (Fig. 7) must have felt that another chance to undertake his ambitious plans in the Middle East was presenting itself. That he would eventually be sent to get in contact with Feisal and that he was able to mobilize the Arab forces to wage a guerilla war against the Ottoman Empire was the base for the legends that would later be attached to his person, but it was, without any doubt, also inspiration for Herbert's novel.

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254 Garnett, *The Letters*, 202.

255 Letter to his mother, May 18, 1916, in Garnett, *The Letters*, 203–208, here 206.

256 *Ibid.*, 208.

257 *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962, dir. David Lean). Later in the film, Lawrence explains why he loves the desert: »It's clean.«

258 Garnett, *The Letters*, 210.



Fig. 7: T.E. Lawrence; T.E. Lawrence Collection, Imperial War Museum, Q 73535.

In *Dune*, the time also seems to be ripe for a revolution against Harkonnen rule, and just as Lawrence seems to be an important aspect of the Arab success, Paul's appearance is a trigger for the successful guerilla war of the Fremen against the Harkonnens.<sup>259</sup> The orientalist semiotics are in this regard therefore also greatly highlighted by the environment, i. e. a desert, where the events take place.<sup>260</sup> However, while the British officer coordinates the military actions of the indigenous people and in a way solely uses their potential in the name and

259 »Dune: Interview with Dietmar Dath.«

260 Karin Christina Ryding, »The Arabic of *Dune*: Language and Landscape,« in *Language in Place: Stylistic Perspectives on Landscape, Place and Environment*, eds. Daniela Francesca Viridis, Elisabetta Zurru, and Ernestine Lahey (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2021), 106–123.

for the sake of the British Empire, which Lawrence initially seems to have wanted to avoid so as to create an independent Middle East instead, Paul not only uses the Fremen locally but leads them straight into an intergalactic jihad. Other Western powers had tried to exploit the idea of a holy war of the Muslims against foreign rule before, but Lawrence acted rather pragmatically, and Feisal seemed politically experienced enough not to mix religion and politics. While Paul is also the center of a myth related to his military victories and his final transformation into the Kwisatz Haderach, this myth is destroyed by Herbert in the second novel.

*Dune*, although it clearly shows some resemblances to the story about Lawrence, is, however, not »a mere copy of the story of Lawrence of Arabia with some science-fictional window dressing.«<sup>261</sup> Of course, superficially, the stories look very much alike. Two foreigners move into desert lands where they find indigenous people who are ready for rebellion against exploitative rulers. Both lead them to military victory, yet while Lawrence was really interested in providing the Arab people with their own choice for the future, Paul is leading the Fremen into a holy war against the whole universe instead. Regardless of these differences, Herbert, maybe too influenced by orientalist semiotics about religiously motivated violence and the jihad, »saw messianic overtones in Lawrence's story and the possibility for outsiders to manipulate a culture according to their own purposes.«<sup>262</sup> These overtones, however, might relate to the film rather than Lawrence's actual experiences, although *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*,<sup>263</sup> Lawrence's most well-known description of his time with the Arab people, is sometimes also written in an almost prophetic tone. Since the story of Lawrence itself, told in many ways and by numerous authorities, be

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261 Kara Kennedy, »Lawrence of Arabia, Paul Atreides, and the Roots of Frank Herbert's *Dune*,« *tor.com*, June 2, 2021, accessed November 6, 2021, <https://www.tor.com/2021/06/02/lawrence-of-arabia-paul-atreides-and-the-roots-of-frank-herberts-dune>.

262 Ibid.

263 Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*.

they journalists<sup>264</sup> or historians,<sup>265</sup> however, became part of the Western semiotic system about the Middle East, it is not surprising to find similarities between the events related to the First World War in the region and the war Paul is leading the Fremen into in Herbert's novel.

Lawrence's story gained momentum once Lowell Thomas (1892–1981), an American journalist, made the events in the Middle East known to a larger audience as part of other travelogues related to his experiences during the First World War.<sup>266</sup> While Lawrence had a rather ambivalent perception of his own role, especially as somebody whose work was related to the war effort of the British Empire, even though he wanted to secure the Arabs' interests and eventually independence,<sup>267</sup> in the public perception of his activities, he was the lonely white hero among savage people. His successes stimulated the Western idea that people in the Middle East needed a »white savior« figure to actually achieve something.<sup>268</sup> For Lawrence himself, as he later emphasized in *Seven Pillars*, »[i]t was an Arab war waged and led by Arabs for an Arab aim in Arabia.«<sup>269</sup> Similarly, his own relationship with the Arab people and the Bedouins he lived and fought with was much more complex, and the former and Lawrence must have felt betrayed by the course history took, regardless of their achievements during the second half of the war: »We lived many lives in those whirling campaigns, never sparing ourselves: yet when we achieved and the new world dawned, the old men came out again and took our

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264 Lowell Thomas, *With Lawrence in Arabia* (New York/London: Century, 1924). Thomas also contradicted rumors related to speculations about Lawrence supposedly having turned Muslim during his time in the Middle East: »Another ›bazaar rumor‹ that has been going the rounds is to the effect that Colonel Lawrence has renounced Christianity and turned Mohammedan. This also is the offspring of some feverish imagination! From what I saw of Lawrence I rather believe that he is a better Christian than the most of us.« Ibid., viii.

265 Basil H. Liddell Hart, *T. E. Lawrence: In Arabia and After* (London: Cape, 1934).

266 Accessed December 6, 2021, <https://www.cliohistory.org/thomas-lawrence>.

267 Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 23.

268 Kennedy, »Lawrence of Arabia.«

269 Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 21.

victory to re-make in the likeness of the former world they knew.«<sup>270</sup> In the end, Lawrence confessed that he »was continually and bitterly ashamed« of the way his superiors and the British politicians would exploit the Arab people, a clear difference between him and Paul, as the latter only frees the Fremen to use their military potential for his own advantage. The Duke of House Atreides consequently falls more in line with the political nature of British foreign policy in the Middle East than Lawrence actually did. Until the end of his Arab dream, the latter had hoped »that, by leading these Arabs madly in the final victory I would establish them, with arms in their hands, in a position so assured (if not dominant) that expediency would counsel to the Great Powers a fair settlement of their claims.«<sup>271</sup>

However, when it comes to blending in with a foreign and different culture, Lawrence's experiences, in a way, seem to be closer to the ones Paul went through on Arrakis. Life in the desert (Fig. 8) was hard for both men, but it was essential for their respective adaptations. Lawrence described the life of his army in the desert as follows:

»For years we lived anyhow with one another in the naked desert, under the indifferent heaven. By day the hot sun fermented us; and we were dizzied by the beating wind. At night we were stained by dew, and shamed into pettiness by the innumerable silence of stars. We were a self-centered army without parade or gesture, devoted to freedom, the second of man's creeds, a purpose so ravenous that it devoured all our strength, a hope so transcendent that our earlier ambitions faded in its glare.«<sup>272</sup>

There are also differences with regard to the acceptance of the foreign intruder. While Paul was protected in a way by the *Missionaria Protectiva* of the Bene Gesserit, Lawrence had to gain acceptance first: »I was sent to these Arabs as a stranger, unable to think their

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270 Ibid., 22.

271 Ibid., 24.

272 Ibid., 27.

thoughts or subscribe to their beliefs, but charged by duty to lead them forward.«<sup>273</sup> However, the life of the Arab people, as well as that of the Fremens, was quite harsh, or as Lawrence formulated it: »Bedouin ways were hard even for those brought up to them, and for strangers, terrible: a death in life.«<sup>274</sup> While Paul never really questions his identity that is an amalgamation of his roles as Duke of House Atreides, Paul Muad'Dib, and Kwisatz Haderach, Lawrence (Fig. 9) ultimately seems to have been more bothered by his existence among the Bedouins as a foreign intruder:

»A man who gives himself to be a possession of aliens leads a Yahoo life, having bartered his soul to a brute-master. He is not of them. He may stand against them, persuade himself of a mission, batter and twist them into something which they, of their own accord, would not have been. Then he is exploiting his old environment to press them out of theirs. Or, after my model, he may imitate them so well that they spuriously imitate him back again. ... In my case, the efforts for these years to live in the dress of Arabs, and to imitate their mental foundation, quitted me of my English self, and let me look at the West and its conventions with new eyes: they destroyed it all for me. At the same time I could not sincerely take on the Arab skin: it was an affectation only. Easily was a man made an infidel, but hardly might he be converted to another faith. I had dropped one form and not taken on the other.«<sup>275</sup>

The idea of the »white savior« was consequently nothing that Lawrence himself considered but was instead interwoven with his story through the audience's perception. Although this semiotic image also can be perceived by the readers of *Dune* or those who watch the films, it is more actively transported by the way the heroic figure, i. e. Paul Atreides, acts. This orientalist semiotic related to the idea that Middle

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273 Ibid., 28.

274 Ibid., 29.

275 Ibid., 29–30.



Fig. 8: View of the desert near Wejh; T.E. Lawrence Collection, Imperial War Museum, Q 59014.



Fig. 9: T.E. Lawrence, n.d.; T.E. Lawrence Collection, Imperial War Museum, Q 59314.

Eastern people need Western leadership to be successful has never disappeared from the screen—nobody so far has thought of a black Paul saving white natives yet—and will continue to appear as long as existent stereotypes that continue the replication of orientalist semiotics will be applied by film-makers and expected by the respective reading or watching audiences. Emmet Asher-Perrin emphasizes this when he states that

»Hollywood has a penchant for the white savior trope, and it forms the basis for plenty of big-earning, award-winning films. Looking back on blockbusters like *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Avatar*, and *The Last Samurai*, the list piles up for movies in which a white person can alleviate the suffering of people of color—sometimes disguised as blue aliens for the purpose of sci-fi trappings—by being specially ›chosen‹ somehow to aid in their struggles.«<sup>276</sup>

These films continue a literary tradition in which earlier novels had adopted ideas about white men who would enter a culturally different space in which they would act as the saviors of savage and inferior people who could not free themselves. Especially in the United States, this idea of exporting one's own revolutionary past to other parts of the world might have played into the sustainability of this particular narrative as well, although other revolutionaries, e. g. in Cuba in the late 19th century, were soon to be identified as inferior due to racist stereotypes and the realization that while the rebellious Cubans were also trying to get rid of a European colonial rule, they were themselves not white like the American revolutionaries were considered to have been.<sup>277</sup>

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276 Emmet Asher-Perrin, »Why It's Important to Consider Whether *Dune* Is a White Savior Narrative,« *tor.com*, March 6, 2019, accessed November 6, 2021, <https://www.tor.com/2019/03/06/why-its-important-to-consider-whether-dune-is-a-white-savior-narrative>.

277 For a detailed survey and a critical source edition, see Frank Jacob, *George Kennan on the Spanish-American War: A Critical Edition of »Cuba and the Cubans«* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

Herbert intended to use Paul as a figure to criticize hopes related to the expectation of a super hero or a super being, but this criticism does not really evolve in *Dune* itself but later on during the series.<sup>278</sup> The similarities between Lawrence's depictions of the Arab people, which in a way also resemble the ideas of inferior races and peoples as an intrinsic element of the British Empire and its self-perception, and the Fremen, who seem to be hardly more than a suitable tool for exploitation to serve Paul's political agenda, are hardly surprising. Whether Paul is a good leader might be questioned by the reader or the viewer at the end, but that he actually led the Fremen cannot be doubted. Lawrence described the people of the Middle East as simple, yet radical in a sense, when he later stated that

»Semites had not half-tones in their register of vision. They were people of primary colours, or rather of black and white, who saw the world always in contour. They were a dogmatic people, despising doubt, our modern crown of thorns. They did not understand our metaphysical difficulties, our introspective questionings. They knew only truth and untruth, belief and unbelief, without our hesitating retinue of finer shades. ... Their thoughts were at ease only in extremes. They inhabited superlatives by choice. ... They were a limited, narrow-minded people, whose inert intellects lay fallow in incurious resignation. Their imaginations were vivid, but not creative. ... The Bed[o]uin of the desert, born and grown up in it, had embraced with all his soul this nakedness too harsh for volunteers, for the reason, felt but inarticulate, that there he found himself indubitably free. He lost material ties, comforts, all superfluities and other complications to achieve a personal liberty which haunted starvation and death.«<sup>279</sup>

The simplicity of the Arab people is considered by Lawrence to be the consequence of their actual living environment, which leaves hardly

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278 Asher-Perrin, »Why It's Important.«

279 Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 36–38.

any room for »human effort.«<sup>280</sup> At the same time, the British officer understood the cultural differences that were a result of the Arabs' way of life: »His desert was made a spiritual icehouse, in which was preserved intact but unimproved for all ages a vision of the unity of God. To it sometimes the seekers from the outer world could escape for a season and look thence in detachment at the nature of the generation they would convert.«<sup>281</sup> At the same time, Lawrence emphasized that the »Arabs could be swung on an idea as on a cord; for the unpledged allegiance of their minds made them obedient servants.«<sup>282</sup> While he had argued he acted on behalf of their interests, in this statement, it is visible that Lawrence also realized how these people could be exploited by false leaders and promises, something that was not stressed to the utmost in Herbert's *Dune*, although similar concerns were expressed in later volumes.

Like in the novel, however, the experience of »[s]uppression charged the [Arab people] with unhealthy violence. Deprived of constitutional outlets they became revolutionary. The Arab societies went underground, and changed from liberal clubs into conspiracies.«<sup>283</sup> In *Dune*, it is exactly this situation that forces the Fremen to resist against the Harkonnens on Arrakis, a resistance that was eventually shared by the former and the »voice from the outer world,« Paul, the Lisan al-Gaib. The Fremen culture in itself is consequently used by Herbert to craft yet another »noble savage« image that falls in line with »the narrative's juxtaposition of their militant austerity with their susceptibility to being used by powerful people who understand their mythology well enough to exploit it.«<sup>284</sup> The Fremen seem to have no real political consciousness because although they deal with their life in the desert and their relation with the worms, they were obviously not able to defeat the Harkonnens. It needed the appear-

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280 Ibid., 38.

281 Ibid., 40.

282 Ibid., 41.

283 Ibid., 44.

284 Asher-Perrin, »Why It's Important.«

ance of one man to solve this problem, to use the full desert power for his personal advantage, in some way also applying the almost Machiavellian formula »the enemy of my enemy is my friend«<sup>285</sup> that was applied by so many colonial invaders, maybe most prominently by Hernán Cortés (1485–1547).<sup>286</sup>

The choices made by Herbert to build Arrakis in his imagination were not really unbiased, and even if he intended to create something that would focus on the anti-colonial struggles of his time and of the first half of the 20th century, the perspectives he provides are still very much attached to a Eurocentric or Western-centered worldview that had been so dominant in the centuries before. While intending to decolonialize his universe, Herbert was not fully able to decolonialize his own mind—at least when he wrote *Dune*, as later novels in the series seem to highlight his awareness about this fact. Emmet Asher-Perrin outlined that fans defend these sometimes antiquated views by pointing out that the novel was written decades ago, and therefore the time of its creation can be considered »as an explanation for some of its more dated attitudes toward race, gender, queerness, and other aspects of identity.«<sup>287</sup> However, the adaptations of the novel in later years, and this includes the film from 2021, did not stop replicating the orientalist semiotics of the work, and thereby also continued to represent images related to Lawrence of Arabia in an unfiltered and still heavily orientalist version to the global audience of the 21st century. Both Lawrence and Paul are able to blend in, but they never change their identity to the fullest. In the last resort, they will remain the foreigner or the outsider. They will not adapt themselves to the world they entered, but they will try to activate the people's power in

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285 The phrase in some variation even goes back to the ancient »Indian Machiavelli« Kautilya, who described such a situation in Book VI of his *Arthashastra*. Kautilya, *Arthashastra*, trans. R. Shamasastri (Bangalore: Government Press, 1915), 319–325, accessed November 27, 2021, <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealc/pritchett/oollitlinks/kautilya/booko6.htm>.

286 Hernán Cortés, *Letters from Mexico*, ed. and trans. Anthony Pagden (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

287 Asher-Perrin, »Why It's Important.«

that context to fit their own needs, although Lawrence at least later stated that he had the intention to work on behalf of an independent Arab nation. This exploitative element becomes particularly obvious when the focus is put on »desert power.« The way the Fremen under Paul's leadership wage war against the Harkonnens was without any doubt inspired by the reports about Lawrence's military campaigns and successes in the Middle East.

Lawrence needed to unify the Arab tribes to follow Sheikh Feisal and to support his rebellious bid against Ottoman rule. The Fremen were equally important for Paul's bid for power, although they did not need unification and were rather religiously and ideologically radicalized by the young Duke. The concept of desert power, however, is a clear reference to Lawrence, and the worms are almost like an allegory of the camel forces used by the British officer and his men to constantly attack the Ottoman supply lines in different places and with great speed between their respective actions (Figs. 10 and 11). In a way, they also resemble the fast and unexpectedly attacking force represented by the timeless travel of the Kwisatz Haderach, as »Camel raiding parties, self-contained like ships, might cruise confidently along the enemy's cultivation-frontier, sure of an unhindered retreat into their desert-element which the Turks could not explore.«<sup>288</sup> Paul, who proves his own worth to the Fremen by riding the worm on a planetary scale, uses the latter like Lawrence used the camels to overcome the desert and attack the Harkonnen spice production, severely damaging the spice supplies for the whole universe. The military actions, as well as their impact, are therefore obviously quite similar.

In *Dune*, desert power is essential, and Leto referred to it early on with regard to what is necessary to rule on Arrakis:

»Our supremacy on Caladan,« the Duke said, »depended on sea and air power. Here, we must develop something I choose to call desert

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<sup>288</sup> T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (New York: Alden Press, 1946), 345, cited in Kennedy, »Lawrence of Arabia.«



Fig. 10: Stilgar explaining how to ride the sandworm on Arrakis to Paul, *Dune* (1984).

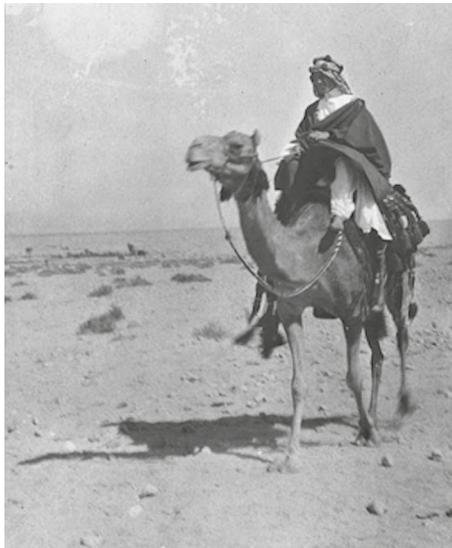


Fig. 11: Lawrence on a Camel, Akaba, n.d.; T.E. Lawrence Collection, Imperial War Museum, Q 60212.

power. This may include air power, but it's possible it may not. I call your attention to the lack of ›thopter shields.« He shook his head. »The Harkonnens relied on turnover from off planet for some of their key personnel. We don't dare. Each new lot would have its quota of provocateurs.«<sup>289</sup>

Ultimately, this desert power is not solely based on the Fremens but also, and equally as much, on the worms, who present, as the camels did for Lawrence, the means of transportation, powerful support for the final attack on Arakeen, the capital of the planet, and the source of valuable resources, i. e. spice in the case of the worms and meat in the case of the camels, if food was more important than transportation.<sup>290</sup> It is therefore not surprising that both men had to prove their ability to actually ride these animals in order to be fully accepted by the respective indigenous people. (Figs. 12 and 13–15)

Just as life on Arrakis depended on the worms, the lives of the Arab people and the success of Lawrence's operations depended on camels, as »[t]he economic life of the desert was based on the supply of camels, which were best bred on the rigorous upland pastures with their strong nutritive thorns. ... The camel markets in Syria, Mesopotamia, and Egypt determined the population which the deserts could support, and regulated strictly their standard of living.«<sup>291</sup> Initially, traveling on a camel was hard for Lawrence,<sup>292</sup> but the Arab forces

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289 Herbert, *Dune*. Quote taken from <http://readonlinefreebook.com/dune/c-six>, accessed November 27, 2021.

290 T. E. Lawrence, »The Occupation of Akaba,« *Arab Bulletin* 59, cited in Garnett, *The Letters*, 231–236. »The situation at Akaba was now rather serious, economically. We had no food, 600 prisoners and many visitors in prospect. Meat was plentiful, since we had been killing riding camels as required, and there were unripe dates in the palm groves. These saved the day, but involved a good deal of discomfort after the eating, and the force in Akaba was very unhappy till the arrival of H. M. S. *Dufferin* on the 13th with food from Suez.« *Ibid.*, 236.

291 Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 34.

292 Letter to Colonel C. E. Wilson, Yenbo, December 6, 1916, in Garnett, *The Letters*, 211–213, here 212.



Fig. 12: Sandworm, *Dune* (2021); IMAGO/Prod.DB.

were »mostly camel corps.«<sup>293</sup> In his letter to Colonel C. E. Wilson on 8 January 1917, Lawrence describes Faisal's troops in some detail, not forgetting to highlight how uncommon the appearance of this army might have been in the West:

»The order of march was rather splendid and barbaric. Feisal in front, in white: Sharaf on his right in red headcloth and henna dyed tunic and cloak; myself on his left in white and red; behind us three banners of purple silk, with gold spikes; behind them three drummers playing a march, and behind them again, a wild bouncing mass of 1,200 camels of the bodyguard, all packed as closely as they could move, the men in every variety of coloured clothes, and the camels nearly as brilliant in their trappings, and the whole crowd singing at the tops of their voices a warsong in honour of Feisal and his family. It looked like a river of camels, for we filled up the Wadi to the tops of its banks, and poured along in a quarter of a mile long stream.«<sup>294</sup>

293 Letter to Colonel C. E. Wilson, January 8, 1917, in Garnett, *The Letters*, 214–221, here 217. The letter was also printed in *Arab Bulletin* 42.

294 *Ibid.*, 216–217.



Fig. 13–15: Images of Camels related to Lawrence's operations, 1916–1918; T.E. Lawrence Collection, Imperial War Museum, Q 59073, Q 58861 and Q 59018.

In addition to this detailed image about the troops he had encountered, Lawrence also reports on the best possible strategy to use them in a war effort against the Ottoman Empire. In this moment, Lawrence seems to be thinking and reporting as a superior white officer of the British Empire. He writes that the Bedouins

»still preserve their tribal instinct for independence of order, but they are curbing their habit of wasting ammunition, have achieved a sort of routine in matters of camping and marching, and when the Sherif approaches near they fall into line and make the low bow and sweep of the arm to the lips which is the official salute. ... Man by man they are good: I would suggest that the smaller the unit that is acting, the better will be its performance. A thousand of them in a mob would be ineffective against one fourth their number of trained troops.«<sup>295</sup>

Nevertheless, and especially since requests for tanks by Lawrence and Faisal had not been granted by the British War Office,<sup>296</sup> Lawrence had to fight a guerilla war, the same kind of war Paul began with the Fremens against the Harkonnens' spice production. While, in the Arabs' case, the Ottoman supply lines could be weakened,<sup>297</sup> the steady attacks on the spice production eventually stimulated the development to move toward the final battle on Arrakis for the future of the universal empire.

What made Lawrence known as a military genius and more important for the overall campaign of the British military in the Middle

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295 Ibid., 217–218.

296 General Headquarters, Egypt to War Office, December 29, 1918, The National Archives, UK, Records created or inherited by the War Office, Armed Forces, Judge Advocate General, and related bodies, WO 32/5729; Note by Major Maughan, December 30, 1918, The National Archives, UK, Records created or inherited by the War Office, Armed Forces, Judge Advocate General, and related bodies, WO 32/5729.

297 Letter to Colonel C.E. Wilson, Wejh, March 9, 1917, in Garnett, *The Letters*, 222–223.

East was his occupation of Akaba, a geostrategically important spot in modern-day Jordan.<sup>298</sup> The Arabs had

»needed to secure a base—they needed Akaba—but from his visit in 1914 he knew it was hopeless to take it from the sea, and impossible to march an army across the desert to take it in the rear. But what an army could not do, a band of enthusiasts might attempt with some hope of success. Lawrence therefore decided to cross the desert with Auda Abu Tayi who recently joined the Arab Revolt, with a small party, to raise the northern tribes and take Akaba in the rear.«<sup>299</sup>

Lawrence had therefore crossed the desert with a couple of men, in itself a sheer unimaginable act, and then began to recruit Arab tribesmen in the region around Akaba;<sup>300</sup> by 18 June 1917, he had enrolled »535 Toweiha (of whom twenty-five were horsemen), about 150 Ru-alla ... and Sherarat ..., and thirty-five Kawachiba ... Of these we chose nearly 200 and left them as guards for the tribal tents in Wadi Sirhan. With the rest we marched out of Kaf in the afternoon, and on [20] June ... entered Bair.«<sup>301</sup> The men stayed there until 28 June, further negotiating with local tribes, i. e. »the smaller sub-sections of the Howeitat on the Akaba road.«<sup>302</sup> The Battle of Aba el-Lissan, where Ottoman troops camped near a well, was in reality more important and less glorious than the assault on Akaba that was later overemphasized in the film about Lawrence. The Arab tribesmen had taken the higher ground on 2 July and were

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298 On the events related to the sacking of Akaba, see Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 234–321.

299 Garnett, *The Letters*, 223–224.

300 Extract of a report on Captain T. E. Lawrence's journey from WJH to NEHL—1,300 miles—contained in a letter from Sir. R. Wingate to Sir William Robertson, July 11, 1917, The National Archives, UK, Records of the Cabinet Office, CAB 45/76, 1.

301 T. E. Lawrence, »The Occupation of Akaba,« *Arab Bulletin* 59, in Garnett, *The Letters*, 231–236, here 231.

302 Ibid., 232.

»sniping the Turks steadily all day, and inflicted some loss. The Turks replied with shrapnel from a mountain gun, firing twenty rounds, which were all they had. The shells grazed our hill-tops, and burst far away over the valleys behind. When sunset came, Auda Abu Tayi collected fifty horsemen now with us, in a hollow valley about 200 yards from the Turks, but under cover, and suddenly charged at a wild gallop into the brown of them, shooting furiously from the saddle as he came. The unexpectedness of the move seemed to strike panic into the Turks (about 550 strong), and after a burst of rifle fire, they scattered in all directions. This was our signal, and all the rest of our force (perhaps 350 men ...) dashed down the hillsides into the hollow, as fast as the camels would go. The Turks were all infantry, and the Arabs all mounted, and the mix-up round the spring in the dusk, with 1,000 men shooting like mad, was considerable. As the Turks scattered, their position at once became hopeless, and in five minutes it was merely a massacre. In all I counted 300 enemy dead in the main position, and a few fugitives may have been killed further away, though the majority of our men went straight for the Turkish camp to plunder it, before the last shots were fired.«<sup>303</sup>

The Arab assault was actually quite dangerous, and Sheikh Auda Abu Tayi, who would later be portrayed by Anthony Quinn, only »had a narrow escape, since two bullets smashed his field glasses, one pierced his revolver holster, three struck his sheathed sword, and his horse was killed under him. He was wildly pleased with the whole affair.«<sup>304</sup> The Ottoman soldiers that had actually been taken prisoner did not survive long on the road due to the lack of water and food and an insufficient number of camels. Akaba was eventually handed over to Lawrence and his men by Sherif Nasir on 6 July 1917, especially since the latter wanted to avoid a massacre. So, on this day, Lawrence triumphantly entered the city and would soon enough be well-known

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303 Ibid., 233.

304 Ibid., 234.



Fig. 16: The triumphal entry into Akaba, 6 July 1917, T.E. Lawrence Collection, Imperial War Museum, Q 59193.

for this military success.<sup>305</sup> (Fig. 16) The same day, Lawrence and eight men left the city and arrived in El Shatt in Egypt three days later to give an immediate report about the events, although he was »somewhat exhausted by 1,300 miles on a camel in the last 30 days.«<sup>306</sup> The news about Lawrence's victory spread fast, and his achievement was considered a »very remarkable performance, calling for a display of courage, resource, and endurance which is conspicuous even in these days when gallant deeds are of daily occurrence.«<sup>307</sup>

Herbert, maybe also more drawn by the visualization of Lawrence's story on the big screen, uses the worms as an essential part of the Fremen's final military attack on Arakeen, where the shield wall is de-

305 Letter to General Clayton, Cairo, July 10, 1917, S. 225–231. S. 228 L1

306 Extract of a report on Captain T.E. Lawrence's journey from WJH to NEHL—1,300 miles—contained in a letter from Sir. R. Wingate to Sir William Robertson, July 11, 1917, The National Archives, Records of the Cabinet Office, CAB 45/76, 2.

307 Ibid., 2.



Fig. 17: Ageyl bodyguard, n.d., T.E. Lawrence Collection, Imperial War Museum, Q 58858B.

stroyed by an atomic attack and opens the way for the worms to transport the Fremen on their backs to the battle zone, while they also are part of some kind of hammer and anvil tactic that could be compared with Alexander the Great's (356–323 BCE) cavalry attacks against the Persian armies.<sup>308</sup> The sandworms »handily plow through the Emperor's forces in their surprise appearance,«<sup>309</sup> almost like a massive wall of camels when they hit the enemy lines during a full-speed advance.<sup>310</sup>

308 Frank Jacob, »Der Aufstieg Makedoniens: Eine Erfolgsgeschichte antiker Kavallerie,« in *Pferde in der Geschichte: Begleiter in der Schlacht, Nutztier, literarische Inspiration*, ed. Frank Jacob (Marburg: Büchner, 2016), 19–38.

309 Kennedy, »Lawrence of Arabia« cites Herbert's description of the sandworms' attack: »Out of the sand haze came an orderly mass of flashing shapes—great rising curves with crystal spokes that resolved into the gaping mouths of sandworms, a massed wall of them, each with troops of Fremen riding to the attack. They came in a hissing wedge, robes whipping in the wind as they cut through the melee on the plain.« Herbert, *Dune*, 464.

310 Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 145.

As efficient mounted forces, the description of the sandworms and their final attack consequently closely match Lawrence's story about camels and their use during his campaigns (Fig. 17).

However, it is not only their use of animals in a traditional way but the combination of this with knowledge that is related to either Lawrence or Paul that secures the Arab and Fremen victories, respectively. It therefore seems like both men act as a link between the imperial worlds both represent and the indigenous one the two men dive deep into. Lawrence's superiors also had no doubt at all that it was the part played by the British officers that was decisive for victory, an aspect that Herbert, consciously or unconsciously, also emphasized, as the Fremen only began to be successful in their military operations after Paul joined them.

General Sir Reginald Wingate (1861–1953), for example, in his description of the successes of the military operations between June 1917 and June 1918, is not hesitant to explain why the Arab forces were so efficient, and so his report shall be quoted here in some detail:

»Throughout September and October the railway was again subjected to constant attack at various points between Tebuk and Medina, resulting in the effective dislocation of traffic and inflicting upon the enemy considerable loss in material and personnel. ... Although the record of these operations thus briefly surveyed contains few military achievements of outstanding importance, yet the general results attained by the persistent aggression of the Arab's against the enemy's communications must not be under-estimated. ... Constantly harassed by a mobile and almost invulnerable enemy, the moral and material pressure to which the enemy has, during the past twelve months, been continuously subjected, may be estimated by the fact that between Tebuk and Medina during this period an aggregate of more than fifteen thousand rails, fifty two culverts and five bridges have been destroyed, two trains have been completely wrecked with electric mines, several station buildings and considerable quantities of rolling stock have been burnt, communication by telegraph and

telephone has been interrupted almost daily, four hundred and fifty Turkish dead have been buried by the Arabs and nearly double that number of prisoners taken, whilst material captures during the same period include five field guns, four machine guns, nearly one thousand rifles and large quantities of ammunition, in addition to £.T.25,000 in Turkish gold, and several big convoys conveying live-stock and supplies to Medina from the east. ... Such success as the Arabs have achieved must be attributed largely [orig. almost entirely] to the unsparing efforts of the British and Allied Officers attached to the Sherifian forces, to whom, working often under intensely trying conditions of climate, [erased: and constantly obstructed by native jealousy and incapacity,] have been due to the conception, the organization and, in great measure, the execution of these operations.«<sup>311</sup>

A similar impression is generated in *Dune*, where the Fremen seemed to be unable to free themselves from foreign rule before Paul arrived to deliver their »liberation.« The image of the indigenous people in Herbert's novel consequently remains in some way a romanticized one: »The overall characterization of the Fremen may be considered an overly romantic vision of Arab Bedouin society: long, flowing robes and dark or tanned skin; the practice of polygamy; values such as honor, trust, and bravery; and tribes that live primitive and simple lives in response to a brutal environment.«<sup>312</sup> As Lawrence, Paul accepts that he needs these indigenous people to be successful militarily, but the latter often remain limited, in the sense that, when depicted by Lawrence and Herbert alike, they remind the reader of the »noble savage.«<sup>313</sup>

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311 Report by General Sir Reginald Wingate on military operations conducted by the King of Hedjaz, June 1917—June 1918, Ramleh, June 15, 1918, The National Archives, Records created or inherited by the War Office, Armed Forces, Judge Advocate General, and related bodies, WO 32/5577, 5–11.

312 Kennedy, »Lawrence of Arabia.«

313 When Paul first meets Stilgar, such an image is created: »A tall, robed figure stood in the door ... A light tan robe completely enveloped the man except for a gap in the hood and black veil that exposed eyes of total blue—no white



Figs. 18 and 19: Paul and Lawrence in their hubris, as depicted in *Dune* (1984) and *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962).

In contrast to these indigenous leaders, Paul and Lawrence—at least the one in the film—develop some kind of hubris as well, as they consider themselves to be superior beings, ones that are in control of everything and are thereby unable to fail (Figs. 18 and 19).

In reality, Lawrence was rather burnt out, especially since »every year out in Arabia counts ten.«<sup>314</sup> The British officer actually confessed in a letter to a friend on 24 September 1917 that »I'm not going to last

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in them at all ... In the waiting silence, Paul studied the man, sensing the aura of power that radiated from him. He was a leader—a *Fremen* leader.« Herbert, *Dune* [1984], 92, cited in 39.

314 Letter to a Friend, Akaba, September 24, 1917, S. 237–238. S. 237 Lt.

out this game much longer: nerves going and temper wearing thin, and one wants an unlimited account of both.«<sup>315</sup> Lawrence felt that he needed to explain why he felt this way in some detail, which he did as follows:

»... on a show so narrow and voracious as this one loses one's past and one's balance and becomes hopelessly self-centered. I don't think I ever think except about shop, and I'm quite certain I never do anything else. That must be my excuse for dropping everyone, and I hope when the nightmare ends that I will wake up and become alive again. This killing and killing of Turks is horrible. When you charge in at the finish and find them all over the place in bits, and still alive many of them, and know that you have done hundreds in the same way before and must do hundreds more if you can.«<sup>316</sup>

For Paul, on the other hand, it is violence that paves his way to become the Kwisatz Haderach, something that is emphasized in the film directed by Denis Villeneuve as well. Paul has to kill a man to be accepted by the Fremen and to be able to rise as the super being in the future. He continues by killing Harkonnens and, in the end, only fears to be unable to contain the jihad of the Fremen, a fear not shared by Lawrence at all, especially since religious aspects are relatively absent in the latter's writings. Regardless of these differences, however, it is safe to argue that Herbert was inspired in multiple ways by the story of and about T. E. Lawrence, and he used several elements of it when he crafted Paul's relationship with the Fremen. However, Herbert did not always consider the historical but rather and primarily the imagined Lawrence when he found inspiration for life on and the war for Arrakis. Furthermore, the jihad that Paul is worried about might actually have been inspired by the conflicts in the Middle East that were created after Lawrence of Arabia had motivated the Arab tribesmen to join the rebellion against the Ottoman rulers.

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<sup>315</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid.



## 5 Conclusion

Every new generation might be attracted to *Dune* because it is so rich in motifs and topics that do not lose any of their actuality. While readers today will probably relate more to the ecological aspects of Herbert's work, those who read it in earlier decades might have been drawn into the *Dune* universe due to its resemblance with the history of »Lawrence of Arabia.« As has been shown in the previous analysis, the richness and variety of the plot presented in the first of Herbert's novels about the desert planet Arrakis offer so much readers could relate to, and that is probably why *Dune* is such a successful book and has been turned into a major two-part Hollywood film in the 2020s again. Herbert was not really trying to write SF, although the universe he built supposedly exists thousands of years in the future. Inspired by semantics, religions, and other aspects, like considerations about political power and leadership, Herbert offers the reader a fascinating yet at the same time somehow familiar world to dive into.

However, the author, consciously or unconsciously, also adopted a lot of orientalist semiotics that had been circulating in Western popular culture and the cultural imagination of Western readers for quite a long time. While Herbert's novel seems to lead directly into the post-colonial struggles of the post-WWII world and the global conflicts related to anti-colonial movements caused by a long history of abuse and exploitation, *Dune* actually replicates many stereotypes about the Middle East and its peoples. Although the Fremen can be considered to be suppressed indigenous people who eventually rise in rebellion, they are led by Paul Atreides, a heroic figure who clearly

represents a »white savior« narrative, which had been forged closely in connection with the stories about T. E. Lawrence.

When one takes a closer look at the names and terms Herbert used for the creation of his futuristic universe, the orientalist semiotics are more than obvious, and it can be emphasized that the author did not use any wording by accident. He intended to provide an insight into what might actually become of our world, yet he was not radical enough in so doing to overcome specific orientalist views of his time in which Western-centrism or Eurocentrism was still too strong. Of course, Herbert's take on the history of Arrakis very much resembled the anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggles of his time, but he was either not aware or not daring enough to really overcome existent stereotypes when he crafted the world of Paul and the Fremen. This does not mean that Herbert did not create an important work of (science) fiction, but it should increase our awareness about the subconscious power orientalist semiotics and stereotypes possess in popular media, even today and particular with regard to the visualization of the *Dune* universe. When we read texts or engage with any medium of popular culture, we have to be careful to properly locate it within the existent semiotic system and its historical context. This makes the reading much more profound and answers the question of why the story follows a specific narrative that is related to the author's own semiotic system and probably the stereotypes she or he had been confronted with before.

The ecological perspectives in *Dune* are often described as being far ahead of their time, which can be confirmed. Herbert discussed issues of climate and changes to it long before these debates became mainstream. However, in other cases, especially with regard to the depiction of indigenous people and their struggle against foreign rule, Herbert replicates much older romantic views that he mixes with semiotics about the Middle East that were already quite old when he took up the pen to describe Paul's history in his first *Dune* novel. Considering this, it is troublesome how strong specific ideas and stereotypes about the deserts and the people of the MENA region have



Fig. 20: The Cast of *Dune: Part One* (2021); IMAGO/Prod.DB.

been and still are today. When one takes a closer look at the visual semiotics of the *Dune* films, it can be stated that David Lynch seemed to be interested in creating something truly futuristic in the way he depicted the Fremens, while Denis Villeneuve unfortunately continues the historical visualization of the story with a much stronger oriental-ization of the Fremens, who clearly can be identified as Bedouin-like Middle Easterners in the newest film (Fig. 20).

Ultimately, the question remains: Does the *Dune* narrative really needs orientalist semiotics today to be appealing to readers or viewers? And if so, what does this say about the respective audiences? Should stories about successful resistance and rebellion not overcome such stereotypical aspects to be really resistant and rebellious? The answers to these questions will be given by the audiences of the future, the readers and viewers who demand changes in this regard. However, and regardless of these challenges and their respective responses, *Dune* remains an important and well-written work of (science) fiction, maybe especially because it raises these issues that we can debate

and thereby increase awareness of the need for multi-cultural and multi-religious diversity to reach the universe Herbert had intended to show us.

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