

-Research Article-

Desert Power: The Eerie and Disenchanted Philosophical Landscape of Denis Villeneuve's *Dune: Part One*

Francesco Sticchi*

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to contribute to the discussion and debate on Denis Villeneuve's Dune: Part One by using a film-philosophical approach, which will take into account how particular aspects of the storyworld, stylistic patterns, and specific chronotopes inform the film's singular take on the famous story/saga. The article contends that the film puts forth an operatic aesthetic of disenchantment and misrecognition and strategically uses ambiguity and uncertainty as existentialist motifs to deconstruct ideas of heroism and predestination. These affective dynamics provide the storyworld with an eerie tension stressing lack, loss, mourning, and powerlessness. Concurrently, the cinematic chronotope of the desert presented in the film, in contrast with that of classic epic movies such as Lawrence of Arabia (1962) by David Lean, exists as a living and immanent organism embodying an unresolved dense field of possible ethical experimentations.

Keywords: *Film-Philosophy, Cinematic Chronotope, The Eerie, Desert, GeoPhilosophy*

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-Araştırma Makalesi-

Çölün Gücü: Denis Villeneuve'nin Dune: Çöl Gezegeni Filminde

Ürkütücü ve Büyüsü Bozulmuş Manzaranın Felsefesi

Francesco Sticchi*

Özet

Bu çalışmanın amacı, Denis Villeneuve'nin Dune: Çöl Gezegeni adlı filmi hakkında yürütülen tartışmalara katkıda bulunmaktır. Bu amaç doğrultusunda, anlatı dünyasının belirli yönlerinin, üslupsal kalıpların ve belirli kronotopların ünlü destanın uyarlanmasında nasıl etki bıraktığını hesaba katacak bir film felsefesi yaklaşımı benimsenmiştir. Makale, özellikle çöl ekolojilerinin önemini ve rolünü vurgulayarak filmin estetiğine ve temalarına büyük önem vermektedir. Gerçekten de, filmin büyüünün bozulması ve yanlış tanımanın operatik bir estetiğini ortaya koyduğu, buna ek olarak kahramanlık ve kader fikirlerini yapıbozuma uğratmak için muğlaklık ve belirsizliği varoluşçu motifler olarak stratejik bir şekilde kullandığı tezi, çalışmanın ana tezlerinden birini oluşturmaktadır. Bu duygusal dinamikler, anlatı dünyasına eksiklik, kayıp, yas ve güçsüzlüğü vurgulayan ürkütücü bir gerilim katar. Aynı zamanda, Dune Çölü, David Lean'in Arabistanlı Lawrence'ı gibi klasik epik filmlerin aksine, varoluşsal belirsizliği vurgulayan canlı ve içkin bir organizma ve olası etik deneylerin yoğun bir alanı olarak var olur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Film-Philosophy, Cinematic Chronotope, The Eerie, Desert, GeoPhilosophy

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Robinson needed to imagine his island as deserted precisely in order to unite in himself the world he had lost with the new land beneath his feet. But, as we've seen, this unity is broken by the very paradox on which it is founded.

The paradox remains our own. To think of life in all its forms as 'alone together', collectively dispersed on a planet without a transcendence –

human or divine – to guide it, is the challenge of our age.

(Aidan Tynan, *The Desert in Modern Literature and Philosophy*: 170)

Introduction

Dune is one of the most commented upon sci-fi sagas ever written, with interconnected disputes discussing themes of heroism/anti-heroism, mythological motifs, and ambiguous references to colonial history and Orientalist tropes. Likewise, the different audiovisual adaptations of the novels have been at the centre of speculations and debates, with either now legendary never-realised projects (Alejandro Jodorowski's dream), or incomplete ones (David Lynch's nightmarish version). Denis Villeneuve's recent adaptation of the first part of the opening book of the saga (*Dune: Part One*, 2021, a project intended to be faithful to its source material see Vanity Fair, 2021) as expected, has spawned discussions about the various features and merits/flaws of the film.

The aim of the essay is to contribute to the conversation by taking into account how particular aspects of the storworld, stylistic patterns, and specific chronotopes (time-space constructs as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin, 1981: 80) inform the film's singular take on the story. Chronotopes embody returning experiential and thematic concerns, typical of genres, forms of storytelling, and historical contexts, which, however, need to be examined in accordance with the dialogical or interactive and potentially conflictual dynamics provided by a particular artistic object (Bakhtin, 1981: 252-256). In this sense, the essay will not delve into issues of adaptations (the script has been written by Eric Roth, Jon Spaihts, and Villeneuve himself) and problems arising with the comparison between media-specific languages and strategies; the discussion is focused on the eerie deconstruction of heroism the film enacts and on the function the desert plays in relation to these dynamics. Following Aidan Tynan's work on the subject, we could argue that for its unsettling and destabilising nature, the chronotope of the desert can be compared to a body-without-organs, a chaotic unity capable of challenging anthropocentric notions of human subjectivity in favour of a process-based ecological entanglement (cf. Deleuze and Guattari, 2000: 87; Tynan, 2020: 46). Similarly, links to Lynch's *Dune* (1984) or to David Lean's classic epic *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962, a reference point for Villeneuve, whereas Frank Herbert was notoriously influenced by T. E. Lawrence's *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* [1926] for the elaboration of *Dune*'s universe and its populations) will be more instructive for the purpose of fleshing out productive observations on such themes. The multifaceted philosophical landscape of the film engenders existentialist motifs and foregrounds a tension between disenchantment and a chaotic and vital desertic ecology. Therefore, it is also necessary to specify that cinematic chronotopes are adopted, in this analysis, as material and operational structures rather than simple representational patterns that we observe at the distance (see Bakhtin, 1981: 274; Hesselberth, 2014: 85; Jordan-Haladyn, 2014: 21-25, 106-108). These storyworlds, we could also add, work by enacting dense emotional maps and territories for viewers to explore and interact with (Bruno, 2002: 384-385; 2014: 194; Hven, 2017: 49, 155, 204, 211). Filmic ecologies, through all their internal features and characteristics, establish affective coordinates for viewers' participation and, for this reason, flesh out peculiar geo-philosophical constructs; this notion, in turn, highlights how concepts, mythological and fantastical figurations, and social formations are all grounded within the undetermined plane of immanence that defines our ontological space (see Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 88-89, 96; Tynan, 2020: 6667). Audiovisual storyworlds become, then, complex geographies with

entrenched meanings, existential dynamics, and related ethical dilemmas.

Unmistakably, the world of *Dune* resorts to and reiterates what Edward

Said and post-colonial scholarship would define as Orientalist tropes (see 2003: 171-172, 190, 196-197). Paul Atreides' (Timothée Chalamet) journey to the wastelands of Arrakis (away from the green and watery lands of his home-planet Caladan) is the typical literary-colonial motif of the stranger in a strange land meeting with the fascinating noble and nomadic indigenous population, the Fremen. In a saviourist and ironic dynamic similar to that of *The Last Samurai*

(Zwick, 2003), *Dances with Wolves* (Costner, 1991), *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009), or *Lawrence of Arabia*, the main character subsequently joins and aims to guide the natives through what seems to be an anticolonial struggle for (externally granted) independence. Of course, since Paul exists as the main character and focus of the story, the centrality of his journey (as the infamous chosen one) and perspective on the events reinforce these particular narrative mechanisms. Such tropes pair also with the construction of a fictional world, which, in accordance with strategies of the sci-fi/fantasy genre, is populated by distinct and separated civilisations with related unique habits, norms, and aesthetic codifications maybe reproducing exoticising or racialising fantasies. However, in order to appropriately understand -and not to dismiss- the concerns around these imaginary structures of meaning it is also necessary to observe how such dynamics are enacted and eventually challenged in each audiovisual case study. Indeed, part of the main argument of the essay is to underscore how the film critically engages such ideas through operatic strategies of disenchantment and detachment.

Disenchantment, Detachment, and The Eerie

The film displays a dark and morally ambiguous universe: a dystopic technofeudal future, where noble-patriarchal houses compete over military and economic supremacy in the 'Imperium'. The control of the infamous 'spice', key natural resource harvested on Arrakis, essential fuel for every and social and military operation, and powerful psychophysical elixir, is, then, at the centre of the endless disputes between the most influential houses. These themes resonate with the sombre aesthetics of this tormented storyworld, featuring mostly softened (though nuanced and contrasted) visual palettes and tonalities (cinematography by Greig Fraser), a slow cutting rate (editing by Joe Walker), and associated with a highly elaborated but minimalistic mise-en-scène (set design by Patrice Vermette). These patterns, what is more, are quite typical of the melancholic and atmospheric cinema of Denis Villeneuve, often dealing with issues of ethical uncertainty, existential failures, and radical questioning of characters' identities, developed through circular or unresolved dramatic trajectories. Nonetheless, since the prologue of the film (introducing main conflicts and themes from the point of view of the Fremen fighter Chani [Zendaya]), we have the indication of the archvillains of the story in the 'brutal' Harkonnens. Viciously rich and greedy, the members of this house are extremely pale, dressed harshly in dark metal and leather-based suits and their own 'ecology' (the planet Giedi Prime) is a world of electricity and machines covered in an eternal night. The head of the group, the Baron Vladimir (Stellan Skarsgård) is also visually coded in a way that emphasises his immoral greed and contempt: presented as a massive horrific version of the capitalist robber-baron, we see him fluctuating via spinal implants, talking in a disturbing guttural tone or often appearing covered in fog, shown in chiaroscuroⁱ, and even emerging from an oilfilled bath.

Although the Harkonnens openly embody malicious characteristics, also the chronotope inhabited by the supposed heroes of the story (house Atreidesⁱⁱ, with a name that evokes the Homeric and Greek mythological tradition) share some elements of a gothic/horror aesthetics. First of all, although Caladan features a more pleasant ecology made of green hills, harmonious

ⁱ In a sort of homage to the legendary colonel Kurtz played by Marlon Brando in *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979).

ⁱⁱ Furthermore, according to the mythological canon, the Atreides were a dynasty doomed by familial conflicts, fratricide, and betrayals.

seaside sceneries, and elegant titanic halls and spaceships reminiscent of brutalist architecture, such environments are always covered in a crepuscular light. Moreover, the iconography associated with this house blends together multiple symbols and patterns. For instance, bas-reliefs of duels recalling Mesopotamic mural art, or sculptures and paintings of bullfighting and toreadors (with recurring shots of massive trophies of related events) cover the rooms; furthermore, Celtic-style (distorted) bagpipes act as the main instrument of the group's anthem (used as their leitmotif), and black 19th century military ceremonial suits or gigantic medieval armours (with eagle-like banners) are parts of the rich assemblage of features that characterise the Atreides. In general, these images evoke and suggest a connection with a long tradition of masculine military and authoritarian culture, obsessively emphasising its presence and relevance. On the other hand, this iconography is deployed within a gloomy architectural context, foregrounding dark tones, hazy weather, and dim lighting reinforced by the reiteration of funereal elements (tombs and paintings of ancestors), thus infusing the chronotope with an overall sense of melancholy and decadence. It is not incidental, in this sense, that the first half of the film follows exactly the fall and decline of the house, accepting (though acknowledging the fatal risks connected with the mission) the imperial order to substitute the Harkonnens in the colonial management of Arrakis; thus, the Atreides consciously embark on a doomed expedition that culminates with the death of Duke Leto (leader of the house, played by Oscar Isaac) and the demolition of his army. Moreover, the almost constant presence of the score by Hans Zimmer and the sound design, which are very much constructed as a blended soundscape avoiding clear distinctions between the diegetic and extradiegetic spaceⁱⁱⁱ, work by stressing tragic themes of death and impending catastrophe. In fact, while operating through the classical structure of leitmotifs and returning themes associated with characters and locations, music and sound effects also provide a persistent uncanny quality to the storyworld because of the overwhelming presence of distorted sounds and disharmonic melodies^{iv}.

The existential frailty characterising the Atreides and its leader is anticipated also by moments that confer a demythologised nuance to the iconography that we have previously examined. The early sequence depicting the departure of the group from Caladan shows how specific symbols (in particular the recurring towering trophy of a bull's head) are easily removed and packaged for the travel as with any other commodity or mundane object. Even the same official occasion of the acceptance of the mission (an interplanetary meeting featuring authorities in full ceremonial dresses) is enacted as a mere performative act operated to sacralise an already made decision. Stressing this point, the conversation between Paul and his mother, Lady Jessica (Rebecca Fergusson), happening right before the diplomatic event, addresses it as a matter of pure formality and etiquette. Such dynamics tend to disempower, or to signal a profound vulnerability within the ideas of eternal solemnity and austerity evoked by the house, since they remove any transcendent moral value from objects, symbols, and, consequentially, from the characters that exhibit them. The Atreides exist as nothing more than one of the players in a Hobbesian game for power and dominance, in which they participate as a group entitled through superior military capacity; similarly, even the malicious Harkonnens do not personify any supernatural notion of evil, but operate in accordance with pragmatic and ultimately destructive economic calculations (the often meditative posture of the Baron seems to emphasise this aspect). The same 'failed' sacrificial death of Duke Leto, which appears as a heroic final gesture, instead, reinforces the precarious nature of these chivalrous codes and, consequently, the moral and idealist immobility that are embedded by the house and its leader. When attempting to murder the Baron and his entourage with a hidden venom, Duke Leto lies still naked uttering the final words: 'here I am, here I remain', an epitaph that is associated with a returning reference to motifs of masculinity and warrior prowess as the close up of him dying is alternated with images of the already-mentioned bull's head.

ⁱⁱⁱ Steffen Hven recommends rejecting the opposition altogether (see 2022: 121-144).

^{iv} The crew of the film, celebrated with multiple Academy Awards, has referred to sources of inspiration coming from avantgarde music, with examples varying between bands such as Joy Division and composers on the lines of Luciano Berio, György Ligeti, and Karlheinz Stockhausen (see Frame.io, 2021).

As we can see, the film exhibits a conflictual tension; its symphonic audiovisual structure constantly dialogues with a disenchanted and 'cold' look at the same iconography and moral hierarchy displayed, and this opposition engenders both a persistent critical ambiguity and an eerie mood. Here, I am not adopting these notions to merely indicate decorative and superficial effects of the movie, but modes of the filmic experience, or following Carl Plantinga's work, the general affective charges that dominate a storyworld and direct viewers' intellectual and emotional alignment (2014: 145). Likewise, when referring to 'The Eerie' I am very much inspired by the insightful distinction provided by Mark Fisher separating this intricate tension from 'The Weird'. The latter, according to the British theorist -expanding on the notorious Freudian account of the *unheimlich* or uncanny- indicates an unfamiliar presence within familiar or known contexts, which produces a disturbing sense of displacement, threat, and chaos (with related castration anxieties see 2017: 6-7). Following Fisher, such affective and conceptual disorientation is the multifaceted feeling that dominates Lynch's cinema and characterises his *Dune*, which displays a world of abject inconsistencies, of unsettling and morbid associations (cf. 2017: 57-58). Just by looking at the Baron of Lynch's version (Kenneth McMillan), covered in pustules, receiving constant surgical management or torturing young men -with quite explicit sexual innuendos-, we may have an idea of such unsettling dynamics. The Eerie, on the other hand, is connected with the pervasive presence of an absence (or absence of a presence), that is with an unfilled lack in experiential spaces that produces a more subtle, but pervasive failed recognition or misrecognition (2017: 63-65, 108, 128). Unresolved enigmatic perceptions (the eerie cry of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven* evoking existential angsts) or the romantic sublime of post-apocalyptic scenarios (a famous example is the overwhelming lifelessness portrayed in Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem *Ozymandias*, see also Tynan, 2020: 100), for instance, constellate eerie film ecologies. Because of the ominous power of the weird and the eerie, however, Fisher stressed the experimental and imaginative role of these affective moods in providing spaces for new perceptions and figurations or different critical positioning in relation to a present state of affairs (see 2017: 100-103).

Indeed, in the first half of Villeneuve's *Dune*, instead of experiencing 'the weird presence of something that does not belong' we are constantly witnessing the eerie hollowing out of the very notion of belonging. Heroic figures are either spectral presences or mundane elements, thus contributing to the critical assessment of the storyworld as one in which a sense of greatness and solidity has been irremediably lost (or was always illusory and flawed), thus leaving out nothing more than mere simulacra of an assumed majesty. In this sense, *Dune* displays a sort of pre-Raphaelite sensibility^v, where the mourning for a vanished world emphasises the impossibility of bringing it back to life and leaves, again, a disturbing sense of hollowness as one of the core affective moods. Even the impressive quality of architectures, spaceships, and environments, instead of aggrandising the protagonists of the story, diminishes them or reduces their relevance and agency. This particular effect is produced also because of the consistent use of wide shots^{vi} perspectives to describe often isolated characters (while the intimate connection with them is enacted, by contrast, through more personal close-ups) or to immerse them within broader ecological dimensions emphasised by the aspect ratios adopted (2.39:1 for standard screenings and 1.43:1 for IMAX). This detached and existentialist look at the events of the film serves the underscored process of deglamourisation, and also highlights how the figures respond to social and political structures they do not necessarily control or are completely aware of. The disenchantment we are discussing is, therefore, produced, paraphrasing Max Weber's famous argument (Federici, 2019: 188; Weber, 1958) on the major changes that took place in modern thought, through a general suspect and sceptical look towards every supposed transcendental force. The failure or abandonment of divine

^v One may think about the melancholic works of Edward Burne-Jones describing stories and scenes from the Arthurian cycle.

^{vi} Even the ceremonial presentation of Duke Leto, and of other key figures of the Atreides (with the exception of the sword-master Duncan Idaho [Jason Momoa]), does not turn away from this sort of almost removed composition by relying on same-height or top-down angles, for instance, instead of the more conventional low-angle shots used to stress the dramatic importance and status^{vi} of the characters.

and magical actors or processes operating to justify events and circumstances, then, calls for homogenising methods of enquiry expressing the possibility of an objective understanding of the world (Weber, 1958). However, instead of celebrating the affirmation of a superior form of rationality and of conscious active subjects, the disenchanted world of *Dune* is pervaded, instead, by a tragic sense of disempowerment and moral confusion destabilising every clear notion of identity and ethical reference point.

On this note, we can move our attention to Paul and to the very nature of this *election* as chosen one. As for the decaying heroism of the Atreides, the messianic role of the character is equally deconstructed and brought back to a material and immanent dimension. Instead of existing as the disclosure of a higher destiny and the manifestation of a superior will, Paul's journey appears from the beginning as the product of other people's choices. In an apparent heart-warming conversation with his father on the tombs of the house ancestors, taking place after the initial ceremony, Leto declares a parental love without condition for his son, who expresses doubts about the mission they are undertaking and the role he needs to fulfil. Paul does not need to be the 'future of his house', the father argues, if he does not want to or does not feel ready for the task; however, he will inherit the leadership anyway as the Duke shows his ring with the family emblem, symbol of power transmitted from one generation to the other, and instrument through which Leto 'seals' his fate during the discussed political meeting. Their conversation ends on a contradictory note, as the Duke draws attention to the graves and adds: 'I found my own way to it. Maybe you'll find yours. In their memory, give it a try', a sentence that both confirms a pre-set route for the main character and also reinforces the discussed sense of mourning and the heavy heritage to carry on.

This exchange underscores the emotional and conceptual ambiguity that dominates the film and the polyvalent role of symbols and communication-a recurring motif in Villeneuve's cinema (Sticchi, 2018)- with the ring shifting between indicating a particular authority and revealing its own failures and limits. Concurrently, the dialogue suggests that Paul does not epitomise any peculiar inner quality if not that of family kinship, giving him access to remarkable political power independently of personal achievements or life choices. Likewise, his psychic abilities, as his swordsmanship, are the product of Jessica's (Paul's mentor and co-protagonist of the film) decision to train him in the ways of the Bene Gesserit: a prestigious order of witches she belongs to, who can predict the future, control minds, and manipulate reproduction. At the end of the Gom Jabbar test -a mortal challenge through which Paul needs to resist extreme mental pain inflicted by the Revered Mother of the same order (Charlotte Rampling)- the main character is surprisingly saluted as one of the important actors in the political battlefield because of his mother's lineage. It is Jessica's choice, against her caste's doctrine, of engineering the coming of an unbeatable leader (the Kwisatz Haderach of the prophecy), capable of bringing peace to the tormented galaxy, that has allowed Paul to wield a power usually forbidden to males. Therefore, his ascension to a new status is not displayed as a heroic revelation, but as the unveiling of political machinations, of -again- ready made deliberations the character just responds to. 'It's all part of a plan', he melancholically argues at the end of a visibly removed -since the characters stand away from one another in the fog-conversation with his mother. The same sequence of the test, which shows the full awakening of Paul's mystical abilities, while closely following the main character's torment and his final triumph over pain, frames such achievement as something that does not belong to the hero alone. His close ups are, in fact, alternated with images of Jessica standing outside the door where the trial is happening, empathically sharing her son's sufferings and reciting a notorious litany meant to overcome fear and reach higher awareness (the intercutting may even suggest shared thoughts between her and Paul).

Several other occasions reiterate the political nature of the hero's alleged predestination. On the arrival on Arrakis, huge crowds welcome Paul as a messiah sent to finally liberate the planet from its oppression. This sequence features also some of the most enigmatic shots of the film, with the display of groups of people dressed in ways that simulate middle-eastern

and 'Muslim' (although the use of this adjective is quite vague itself^{vii}) and Bedouin/Tuareg clothing, cheering at the sight of Paul and Jessica. Of course, these images seem to evoke a classical white-saviour trope, with an external western hero coming to the welcomed rescue of a dominated people and offering a more humane colonial governance. However, as we learn right after these moments, the acclaim was nothing more than a routine performance (the Harkonnens forced the people of Arrakis to faithfully attend official ceremonies), while the references to messianic comings are, Jessica informs us, the product of Bene Gesserit's influence on the population, meant to facilitate Paul's journey. The main character responds to these observations with a cynical 'they see what they have been told to see', a further reference to the ambiguity of signs and revelations, which are understood in accordance with habits, beliefs, and expectations rather than because of any adequate referential quality they subsume. This consistent uncertainty stresses how the figures of the film always exist as part of a world larger than them and highlights both their individual weaknesses and the relational complexity defining their subjectivities. The Bene Gesserit seem to be more explicitly in touch with this particular tension affecting the storyworld, as they constantly train in all sorts of disciplines, from martial arts to psychological and linguistic ones. Though the dark sisterhood displays the typical iconography used to configure and label 'rebellious' women: witches living in the shadows and practicing cruel rituals, with ambiguous 'conspiratorial' intentions, these patterns are, nonetheless, played as evidence of a superior awareness about the power relations that dominate the existential landscape. In particular in the case of Lady Jessica (a character who defies clear identification with specific roles), therefore, the Bene Gesserit sisters endeavour to play an active role in the configuration and redetermination of individual paths and use their craft to avoid the most nefarious consequences of endless wars.

Doubts about Paul's status come, very significantly, from his same visions. His predictions may materialise, as in the case of the Duncan's falling in battle or of Jessica's pregnancy, though his understanding of them remains bounded by subjective and incidental partiality. Indeed, when discussing the former vision, Paul argues that Duncan could be saved if he had been there with him at the moment of his killing; later, however, we see that his death is exactly motivated by Paul's presence and by the ultimate sacrifice of the warrior in his defence. Furthermore, in many other occasions, the main character's forecasts seem to indicate enigmatic possible futures with multiple related outcomes rather than certain events. Paul sees himself both kissed and stabbed by Chani in the same prediction, as head of a crusade bringing 'order' to the galaxy while storming it with endless violence, or imagines the desert of Arrakis both as the place of his affirmation and that of his demise. The most explicit case of Paul's ambiguous perception of time is enacted by his foreshadowing of the Fremmen Jamis (Babs Olusanmoku). Envisaged and indicated in a dream as 'the friend' and described as the mentor guiding him through 'the ways of the desert', Jamis will appear in the final section of the film as the one actually fighting against Paul and Jessica's admission to the sietch (Fremmen's underground community). The character supposed to gently welcome our hero happens to be the same challenging him to a mortal knife fight and, ironically, finally dying in order to make Paul 'one of the Fremmen' as the leader of the group, Stilgar (Javier Bardem), argues by commenting that every life taken should be replaced. Furthermore, before and during the fight, we hear extradiegetic distorted voices (associated in the film with the manifestation of Bene Gesserit mystical powers) encouraging the character to rise and kill his opponent; at the same time, these mysterious presences add that 'when you take a life, you take your own' and that Paul Atreides must die so that the Kwisatz Haderach can appear. Notwithstanding these anomalies and contradictions, we could infer that all these images, dreams, and visions seem to indicate moments of passage and transitions: the death and rebirth of Paul together with an admission allowed through sacrifice (the close up of Jamis' corpse carried by his comrades indicates the way through the desert in the very final sequence) all hint at the acceptance of entering into a

^{vii} Hamid Dabashi, in an incisive polemic article dealing with the debates on the film's politics, has rightfully remarked how the very notion of a unified 'Islamic culture', whether assessed in positive or negative terms, hilariously meets with infinite varieties and ever-changing modes of understanding this idea of belonging (2021).

new dimension and embracing this journey. On the other hand, what remains evident is the moral ambiguity of events that are rarely framed as clearly positive or destructive changes and, consequently, our impossibility of relying on Paul's understanding of his visions, mostly motivated by contingent desires and needs of the character. After all, the very presentation of Paul as unreliable narrator shows him dreaming details of Chani's glamorous face (intercut with his close ups), fantasy sketches he will use as the good omens confirming his mission to become a mythical leader. Even the heroic and positive perception of the Fremmen, as a noble warrior community, is something that initially emerges from the imagination of the character, when we see him reading books on their customs and fantasising about them as secretive figures in hieratic stances.

To stress this point, one of the final images of the film is Paul's close up in chiaroscuro with a smug smile that shows the so-far undecided lost kid in an arrogant and confident pose, now sure that his road leads into the desert and that the power of this ecology can be tamed. Whether Paul has decided to accept his 'planned' destiny and election, and feels ready to carry out revenge and war in the name of a higher purpose entitled to him, or has differently put together the signs of his visions, this is something we cannot conjecture upon with certainty. Viewers can only rely on the troubled gaze of Jessica^{viii} -the final close up of the film is on her-looking with concern at her son and at possible events with a knowledge that is forbidden to them. It is on this note, after taking into account how the film critically complicates classical themes of election, predestination and heroism, that we move our focus to the chronotope that more explicitly stresses the disorientation of our main character: the desert.

Desert Power

Two comparative images assess the role of the dunes of Arrakis in the film; before departing from Caladan, a haunted Paul melancholically strolls among its hills and shores, and dips his hand in the transparent waters of a beach to see it unchangingly immerse and emerge while thinking about an uncertain and frightening future. When for the first time in the open desert, instead, Paul finds himself hit by a wave of sandy wind, breathing in the spice-filled air, which causes abrupt visions and loss of orientation. The character plunges again his hand in the ground (extreme close up) to observe, instead, the grainy nature of its colourful sands with sparkles of spice over the screen. In these moments, particularly when our attention is on Paul, diegetic sound is tuned down in favour of the ominous score and extradiegetic distorted voices that stress the confusion and destabilisation of the character, and his entrance in a completely different experiential dimension. Generally speaking, the camerawork also, when on Arrakis, favours moving and more unbalanced shots instead of the expressionistic tableaux compositions adopted in the initial section on Caladan. Therefore, the plain and mapped crepuscular ecology of his home planet is substituted by a dense and overwhelming landscape, uncharted and lacking reference points while disturbed by constant hostile weather. The opposition between these two different chronotopes reiterates the loss of a domestic location and the trope of being 'in a strange land' for the main character, where the desert essentially operates as a space of pure alterity and defamiliarization substituting the precisely demarked ecology of the known world.

When thinking about this sharp dialectic contrast, it is easy to see how, as Aidan Tynan recently discussed in depth, the desert exists probably as one of the most important tropes in modern literature, condensing and stressing, in different ways, tensions and anxieties of modernity (Tynan, 2020: 21). This happens because the desert gives a body to the problems arising with the advent of capitalist structures and social relations; it features both the challenge to its taxonomy and organisation of reality, since it exists without clear enclosures, indicators of ownership, and urbanised conglomerations and, for these reasons, it appears as the open space

^{viii} The film foregrounds the polyvalence of this character by establishing a subtle incestuous tension between her and Paul, and avoiding clear moral approval of her political schemes, which, as well, can be seen as outcomes of illusory and aggrandising beliefs.

to conquer and reterritorialise also because of its hidden riches and resources to accumulate (2020: 5; Negarestani, 2008: 35-36). It is a labyrinth (though one in which 'nature' overcomes the human mind), the existentialist topos of meditation, loneliness, and radical interrogation, where subjectivity is put to test and lost, or the agentive geography for a romantic notion of

individualism to thrive. In *Robinson Crusoe*, indeed, desert islands epitomised the absence of civilised spaces and, concurrently, the challenge to bring those structures and rules within an alien chronotope in order to actually demonstrate their universal value and consistency (2020: 139). The imaginative strength and ambiguity of this ecological body-without-organs has been adopted for all sorts of purposes and effects, now also operating as eschatological container of the fears elicited by the current environmental catastrophes and crises (see 2020: 41, *Dune* as well, taps into this particular tension). In many cases, it is possible to see how the otherness of the desert (from a Western colonial perspective) can encourage Orientalist fantasies and act as a recipient of the needs of external dwellers. The openness of the desert, its apparent and imaginary lack of sedentary communities, or of a harmonic nature can simply exist as the double of a civilised and more 'rational' world (see 2020: 41, 147). In this way, we can place and configure binary metaphysical oppositions between an ordered reality with its cultured population and a more brutal/natural one with its nomadic tribes. In fact, it could be possible to argue that the desert, or desert islands, are imagined as isolated and void spaces only to allow continental and colonial formations to rise and negatively define themselves, where, on the other hand, these 'strange' spaces always exist as populated rich and interconnected ecologies (see Diaz, 2015).

In *Lawrence of Arabia* the desert is displayed as a titanic atemporal dimension, *clean* -as the main character (Peter O'Toole) famously argues- and free of striated imperfections (cf. Deleuze, 1998: 115-125); it is the romantic realm of 'Gods and Bedouins', enriched in its sinuous shapes and colours by the notorious majestic 70mm cinematography by Freddie Young; a perfectly luminous body on which the main character can project his own image, and marvel at the ways it reflects the silhouette of the mighty warrior he dreams to be (also Tynan, 2020: 103). Thus, the desert happens to work as a sort of double of the movie screen, allowing for colonel Lawrence to materialise a form of life not confined by the hypocrisy and pettiness of British military hierarchy and of his bourgeois milieu, but more in touch with the ancient ideals of heroism and moral life he nostalgically longs for. The tragic parable of this character, in the film, is that of realising how much of his involvement in the Arab uprising against the Ottoman Empire was part of a different process of colonisation (in favour of British interests) and moved by a flawed self-idealisation leading him, through a circular narrative closure, to an inevitable suicidal path.

Because of the examined strategies of detachment, we could say that *Dune* proceeds in a similar way, showing us a character who is embracing a selfaggrandising dream, with possible disastrous consequences, rather than observing reality and acting with a more conscious stance. However, this process, in our case study, does not take place in an empty and crystalline ecology, but in a rather oppressive and more clouded one. It is interesting to see that, notwithstanding the extreme heat characterising the planet, the sky is almost always covered by a harsh haze and dominated by a mundane pale sun (here we can see elements of documentary film style), making it often impenetrable and, thus, extending the horizon and the smallness of the characters in it. Every region of Arrakis is continuously affected by winds, and by the constant presence of the spice, appearing as a granular facet of the very air of the planet (the opening monologue mentions this aspect as we see it). The sand itself also features a unique quality: it does not act as an immobile and static ground; instead, it behaves like a moving and living porous skin (see also Negarestani, 2005: 58). Indeed, one could also argue that while *LoA* foregrounds a spectatorial cinematic experience, *Dune* favours a haptic engagement through tactile images that are consistently referring to the desert as something that cannot be observed at a distance; dwellers are always 'into the desert', this

ecology is something to be felt and, at the same time, be absorbed by (see also Deleuze and Guattari, 2005: 493). This is emphasised in various moments but more specifically by the most iconic and intimidating presence of the film: the gigantic sandworm Shai-Hulud, worshipped by the Fremen as living embodiment of Arrakis' ecosystem and vessel of their entanglement with it. Extremely dangerous and threatening for spice harvesting, the passage of the mythical creature causes continued earthquakes visualised through a liquefaction and vibrant reframing of the sand. The image of the moving and fluctuating ground constitutes another recurring motif, appearing in several moments and also in Paul's visions to signal a specific conceptual characteristic related to this existential(ist) landscape. Indeed, such visual patterns are often associated with constant flows, processes, and transitions, which, though potentially annihilating, are also there to indicate a dislocation, a transformation in the composition of reality. Going back to Tynan, the desert of *Dune* is, therefore, clearly enacted as a space of deterritorialisation for its 'external' dwellers, as Deleuze and Guattari would also argue (2005: 382; Tynan, 2020: 11-12), with destabilising vectors operating through every grain of sand. The aesthetics of the sandworms features elements in tune with this tension, since they are presented as Lovecraftian abyssal gods, acephali and tentacular creatures composing the chaotic foundation of a planetary ecology, creating dizzying sensations of decentering for the characters encountering them (cf. Deleuze and Guattari, 2005: 251; Brown and Fleming, 2020: 22-24; Tynan, 2020: 87). These squid monsters differ from the serpentine iconography adopted in other cinematographic adaptations of *Dune's* universe^{ix} because, in this case, they mostly live underground, whereas they manifest themselves on the surface through all absorbing black holes, pitilessly swallowing organic and inorganic matter alike in their tentacular maws. In this sense, the abyssal and underground dimension of Arrakis is associated with a proliferating life, with thriving fauna and flora, and features the space where the numerous Fremen's sietches reside. In line with Reza Negarestani's uncanny and imaginative account of the liveliness of deserts (2008: 187, 201, 209), this specific cinematic chronotope is configured as a living organism; a sentient being and a plenitude, instead of a simple void wasteland inhabited by lonely wanderers, which, at the same time, embeds a tremendous destructive power (Tynan, 2020: 212).

The character that seems more attuned with the polyvalent nature of Arrakis is Dr. Liet-Kynes (Sharon Duncan-Brewster), imperial ecologist, who dies with her killers swallowed by a sandworm affirming to have 'no master but ShaiHulud'. As a Fremen, she considers the desert her home and has a high regard for the technology used on Arrakis, while showing a certain weariness towards the big noble houses and their economic obsession for the spice. In this sense, she also reminds us how the planet could have been more liveable if the harvesting had not compromised the possibility for more vegetation and water to blossom on the surface. Against the display of the desert as a metaphorical landscape for an inhabitable post-apocalyptic scenario, we have an ecology where life multiplies, though in a chaotic and hardly mappable way. Arrakis does not feature the green harmony of Caladan, which, in a way, romanticises the idea of a nature existing in service of mankind (cf. Tynan, 2020: 6-7, 20), nor is it dominated by the eternal polluted night of Giedi Prime. Paradoxically, it is only in the desert that we see life continuing and assuming different forms. The emotional maps of both the Atrides or the Harkonnens, no matter how colossal, are dead and decaying ones, where future temporalities are hollowed out either by complete ecological collapse or by a funereal obsession with the undead past. Arrakis, by contrast, in its distressing hostility, is the space to tame and control with its intrinsic 'desert' power often mentioned by the characters; the living body under capitalist extractive pressure, which, nonetheless resists its attempts at reterritorialisation. Indeed, if capitalism may appear as an unprecedented deterritorialising force, its neverending need for private accumulation always comes together with the axiomatic invention of new borders, properties, military and continental formations colonising life and space, in particular those that seems to defy this capture (see Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 98-

^{ix} One could easily advance a psychoanalytical reading opposing the anal creatures of Villeneuve to the more phallic ones of Lynch and following the Oedipal/Hamletic dynamics outlined in the narrative.

99; Tynan, 2020: 73). The only city on the planet, in fact, appears as an abandoned ruin where, again, majestic ziggurats and urban structures are covered by merciless heat and sandstorms that resist the stable enclosure of the space.

It may be argued that, in this way, and in particular by romanticising the Fremens, fiercely and heroically inhabiting this ecology (this group is presented with the most iconic and glorifying shots of the film), *Dune* may be assigning to the desert a sort of pure uncivilised status, defying every apparently sophisticated social assemblage and rationality. However, the aspects of this world we have discussed seem to stress how Arrakis, rather than standing as an immobile reality, is displayed in the fashion of a very dynamic space; to know and understand it, henceforth, means to get in close contact with its metamorphosing logic. Since it is shown as a process-based ecology, Arrakis challenges an idea of nature as a stable system to be observed and analysed with a detached and external look. Grasping the complexity of the planet means, first and foremost, being aware of one's unavoidable entanglement with it, a relationality which identifies individuality and thought as immanent events, as ways for particular bodies to interact with their own ecology. Connecting with the blackholes and sands of the desert means also recognising this space as a field of infinite possibilities, where reality is discovered and reframed at every turn and where past and future are intertwined. This temporality is one of the 'notyet', which, by rejecting a clear and detached understanding of the world, contains events and their non-linear and combinatorial organisation. Drawing from Anne Carruthers' analysis (see 2018) of *Arrival* (2016), *Dune's* universe is made of ethical chances, of occasions for encounters to be assembled and evaluated in their creative power, rather than one determined by teleological and moral acts.

This planetary and ontological dimension, which we could define as embodied and processual, highlights also an interesting affective and conceptual turn against the previously analysed strategies of disenchantment. If the film undermines or critically displays themes of heroism and predestination by placing them into a 'realist' political field, it is in an expanded notion of immanence and materialism that *Dune* recovers a sort of magical affective tension. The infinite depth of the desert embodies a puzzling polyvalence, pervading the experience with a sense of mystery and possibility, which, however, does not depend on otherworldly forces. It is in the folds of the real, of this chaotic ecology that new worlds and people lie unexplored and uncharted. Jamis reinforces these ideas in one of Paul's key visions, stating -in a reprisal of a famous aphorism by Søren Kierkegaard used by Herbert- that: 'The mystery of life isn't a problem to solve, but a reality to experience; a process that cannot be understood by stopping it. We must move with the flow of the process. We must join It. We must flow with it.' This enigmatic encouragement may be perceived by the main character as further evidence of the righteousness of his path, as a clear signal of a manifest destiny he must now embrace without doubts and fears and that will lead to future glory. However, as we have seen, signs and visions are nothing but traces we collect of a far more multifaceted existence.

Consequently, the world around Paul and the characters moves beyond any plot, machination, and pre-established deterministic order attempting to resolve it. The models we can construct to travel through reality are nothing but partial cartographies, incomplete maps that may lead us to the most destructive routes, in particular if we assume them to be objective and unchanging tools. What remains unchallenged is the force of life to continue and reproduce itself despite all the efforts to control and tame it. As Tynan points out, the chronotope of the desert allows us to acknowledge and embrace the precarity of dwelling that characterises our experience as beings in the world, our existing at the mercy of its 'inscrutable flows' (cf. 2020: 57). It is by coming to terms with this existential truth, however, that we are able to perceive and connect with this chaotic multiplicity, and, thus, catch opportunities to assemble new communities, to construct new modes of inhabiting our ecologies. If the film ends with the explicit claim that 'this is only the beginning', it is clearly to evoke the continuation of the storyline and to draw our attention to the next episode of the saga. Yet at the same time, this

statement also hints at a never-ending process, that of transformation and re-composition, which we may encounter at every turn in the desert of our reality, where individuality and collectivity are not opposed and both express bodily desires for connection and ethical creation; where void and pure density coexist, and nature is the infinite blackhole which swallows us all together; the Blackstar of David Bowie's last album (2016) and Claire Denis' *High Life* (2019), where death is nothing but an interruption, and existence persists beyond any subjective claim of domination (see De Michele, 2019). It is within this dark immanent space that a possibility for the creative re-enchantment (following Federici's argument see 2019: 195) of a crepuscular world may lie. Instead of addressing the absolute ambiguity of the real with the necessity to affirm individual dreams of order over chaos, as Paul seems to be doing by the end of the movie, it is possible to use this existential predicament as the push for ethical encounter, for the decentring of our perspectives on the world. Beyond the hero's journey, its limits and illusions, and the nihilist resignation to collapse, we must dwell in the desert to let a new people emerge within its impenetrable infinitude.

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