

Review #93 : Dune (1984)

It could have been a masterpiece ...

TRAILER

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M0tJrEhXgj4>



SYNOPSIS

In the far future, the known universe is ruled by Padishah Emperor **Shaddam Corrino IV**. The most important substance in his galactic empire is Spice, which has many special properties, such as **extending life and expanding consciousness**. Its main ability is to assist the Spacing Guild by allowing safe **interstellar travel** to any part of the universe instantaneously.

Sensing a potential threat to spice production, the Guild sends an emissary to demand an explanation from the Padishah Emperor (**Jose Ferrer**, *see picture*), who confidentially shares his plans to destroy **House Atreides**.



The popularity of **Duke Leto Atreides** has grown, and he is suspected to be amassing a secret army using sonic weapons called **Weirding Modules**, making him a threat to the Emperor. Emperor Shaddam's plan is to give the Atreides control of the planet **Arrakis** (also known as Dune), the only source of spice, and to have them ambushed there by their long-time enemies, the **Harkonnens**. The Chief Navigator commands the Emperor to kill the Duke's son, **Paul Atreides**, a young man who dreams to find his purpose in life. Mother Helen Mohiam, head of the **Bene Gesserit** sisterhood, thinks that he might be the *Kwisatz Haderach*.



The Atrides leave for Arrakis, a **barren desert planet** plagued by gigantic sandworms and populated by the **Fremen** rebels, a mysterious people who have long held a prophecy that a messiah would come to lead them to freedom. Meanwhile, on the industrial world of **Giedi Prime**, the sadistic **Baron Vladimir Harkonnen** tells his nephews Glossu and Feyd about his plan to eliminate the Atrides by manipulating someone into betraying the Duke. Before Leto can establish an alliance with them, the Harkonnens launch their attack. The Atrides are unable to withstand the attack, as the Harkonnen are supported by the Emperor's elite troops, the Sardaukar, and aided by a traitor within House Atrides. Captured, **Duke Leto is killed**.



Leto's concubine Lady Jessica and his son Paul escape into the deep desert, where they manage to join a band of Fremen rebels. Paul teaches the Fremen how to use the Weiriding Modules and begins targeting mining production of spice. Within two years, spice production is effectively halted. Warned by the Spacing Guild of the situation on Arrakis, the **Emperor is amassing a huge invasion fleet above Arrakis** to regain control of the planet...



CRITICAL RECEPTION

The first cinematic adaptation of Frank Herbert's 1965 landmark novel premiered in theaters in 1984 and immediately faced an onslaught of negative criticism. Some critics assessed **David Lynch's** *Dune* as a failure or a success in **terms of adaptation**, some others in more general **entertainment terms of special effects, presentation and general coherence** :

- [Gene Siskel](#) (1984) : *The Worst Stinker of 1984*

*'It's **physically ugly**, it contains at least a dozen gory gross-out scenes, some of its **special effects are cheap** — surprisingly cheap because this film cost a reported \$45 million — and its story is **confusing beyond belief**. I hated watching this film.'*

- [Janet Maslin in The New York Times](#) (1984) : *1 star out of 5*

*'Several of the characters in Dune are psychic, which puts them in the unique position of being able to understand what goes on in the movie. The **plot is perilously overloaded** (...)'*

- [Variety](#) (1984)

*'This is a **huge and imaginative sci-fi epic**. **Visually unique** and teeming with incident, David Lynch's film holds the interest due to its abundant surface attractions, yet it won't create the sort of fanaticism which has made Frank Herbert's 1965 novel one of the all-time favourites in its genre. Lynch's adaptation covers the entire span of the novel, but simply setting up the various worlds, characters, intrigues and forces at work requires more than a half-hour of expository screen time.'*

*'Francesca Annis and Jürgen Prochnow make an **outstandingly attractive royal couple**.'*

- [Richard Corliss of Time](#) (1984)

*'**MacLachlan, 25, grows impressively in the role** ; his features, soft at the beginning, takes on a manly glamour once he assumes his mission. Generally speaking, the actors seem hypnotized by the spell Lynch has woven around them — especially the lustrous Francesca Annis. When Annis is onscreen, Dune finds the emotional center that has eluded it in its parade of **rococo decor and austere special effects**. She reminds us of what movies can achieve when they have a **heart as well as a mind**.'*

- [Harlan Ellison](#) (1989) praised Lynch's *Noir and Baroque approach* to the film – in some ways similar to *Blade Runner*
- [Frank Herbert in Eye](#) (1985) complimented Lynch and listed scenes that were shot but left out of the released version

*‘I enjoyed the film even as a cut and I told it as I saw it : what reached the screen is a **visual feast** that begins as Dune begins and you hear my dialogue all through it.’ Herbert also commented : ‘I have my quibbles about the film, of course. Paul was **a man playing God**, not a God who could make it rain.’*

- [Roger Ebert](#) (2004)

*‘This movie is a **real mess, an incomprehensible, ugly, unstructured**, pointless excursion into the murkier realms of one of the **most confusing screenplays** of all time. Even the colour is no good. Everything is seen through a sort of dusty yellow filter, as if the film was left out in the sun too long. Yes, you might say, but the action is, after all, on a desert planet where there isn't a drop of water. David Lean solved that problem in *Lawrence of Arabia*, where he made the desert look beautiful and mysterious, not shabby and drab.’*

*‘The movie's plot will no doubt mean more to people who've read Herbert than to those who are walking in cold. The movie has so many characters, so **many unexplained or incomplete relationships**, and so many parallel action that it's sometimes a toss-up whether we're watching a story, or just an assembly of meditations on themes introduced by the novels.’*

*‘Occasionally a **striking image will swim into view**. If the first look is striking, however, the **movie's special effects don't stand up to scrutiny**. The evil baron floats through the air on trajectories all too obviously controlled by wires. The spaceships in the movie are so shabby, so lacking in detail or dimension, that they look almost like those student films where plastic models are shot against a tablecloth.’*

*‘Actors stand around in ridiculous costumes, mouthing dialogue that has little or no context. **Portentous lines of pop profundity** are allowed to hang in the air unanswered, while additional characters arrive or leave on unexplained errands. Dune looks like a project that was seriously out of control from the start.’*

MY REVIEW

FROM THE BOOK TO THE MOVIE

Frank Herbert 's classic science fiction novel *Dune* is a masterful epic, blending a variety of social, political, economic and religious issues into a **gripping and thought-provoking tale of 'messianic' ascension**. Herbert's story was more than just a bunch of rebels running around on sand dunes, chasing giant worms and fighting evil, fat, bloated dictators. It has intelligence, unexpected **depth and immense creativity** around themes such as class struggle, corruption, betrayal, ascension and war within feudal kingdoms.

I don't like **David Lynch** and I don't like his movies. And yet, honestly, *Dune* might be his best film. It is a **missed opportunity of epic masterpiece** that everyone seems to not give the respect it deserves. Of course, it's hard to do so when the director, a spoiled douche by all accounts, refuses to acknowledge his own film's **hints of greatness**.

1 – Screenplay / Plot

MINUS. One of the film's major drawbacks according is its **confusing and overloaded plot**, and I might also mention **some incoherence, incomplete relationships and unexplained facts** — though I suspect final editing might have cut out significant scenes. On this one point I *do* agree with the above-mentioned critics : *Dune* tries to cram so much into its lengthy time span, that to anyone who hasn't already read the books, **the film is incomprehensible**. Even the narrated introduction, intended to bring viewers up to speed on the world they are about to enter, fails to bring clarity to the muddled presentation of Frank Herbert's **incredibly complex world**. We are also left with many unconnected and stilted scenes in which characters act and react, but without any clearly defined and unifying drive. Some momentous events are also glossed over in a surprising rush to get on to the next scene as screen time runs short. Once again, lack of time and bad editing seem to be highly responsible here.

However *Dune* tries to complement and simplify the complexity of its plot through the clever **use of character voice-overs**. Much of Herbert's original novel focuses on **inner thoughts** that take place un verbalized within his characters. The film tries to translate this as we actually listen to the characters 'thinking'. In small doses it might have been a useful tool, but *Dune* somehow crosses a line, overwhelming viewers with unending internal monologue

and persistent vocalized descriptions. David Lynch insists on **telling** us what is happening through narration and inner monologue rather than **showing us through actions and emotions**, as befits the more visual medium of film.



However, removing the *voice over* narration all together would be a mistake, as this insistent, personal, whispered *voice over* lends some ‘*dream sense*’ aspect to the proceedings.

2 – Production design / Sets / Special effects / Fight sequences

PLUS. The lush colour palette (*enhanced in re-mastered editions*) and attention to detail in *Dune* makes up for all of its complexities. The movie might actually be easier to understand if every shot wasn't so full of **details and dark beauty**. The sets are massive and accomplished through a variety of means, including **models, matte paintings, and practical means**. And the *knife* fight sequences are very original too — although a little too short for my taste.



Commendably, the production design transmits to the audience a **sense of history and authenticity**, but more importantly, *some sense of meaning* in this story. It's not so the exposition, nor the screenplay, it's the **visual approach that convey meaning** here.

MINUS. The special effects are generally not as good as they might have been when one thinks, for instance of **George Lucas**'s achievement in *Star Wars*. The opening fight training with the electro-magnetic shields between Paul and his mentor will surely make you smile.



The biggest weakness though is the depiction of the **final battle** between Muad'Dib's army and the forces of the Emperor. The combat is **not particularly convincing or impressive, marred mainly by poor matte and blue screen work**. But frankly, there was no other way to create this scene in 1984. In the age before CGI, the important elements of the sequence (worms, ships and cityscapes) had to be entirely constructed from miniatures. Those miniatures then had to be composited with *live action* actors. Not easy, especially given the vast difference in scope between combatants (worms and Sardaukar).



3 – Musical Score

PLUS. The electronic score by **Toto**, with all its power chords, may somehow seem dated in 2010s. Personally, I think it perfectly captures a moment in time, and has a techno-quality that still sounds ‘futuristic’.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MCiRR3X7rjM>

The **opening orchestrated *symphonic suite* is superbly solemn and appropriately dark.** It’s one of my favourite film music with its interwoven themes, and the fugue-like relationship it has with images — although it never seems to quite catch fire. In fact, the music is exactly like the film as a whole : it simmers with greatness yet never quite fulfills its promises. The music of *Children of Dune* is wonderful and epic as well.

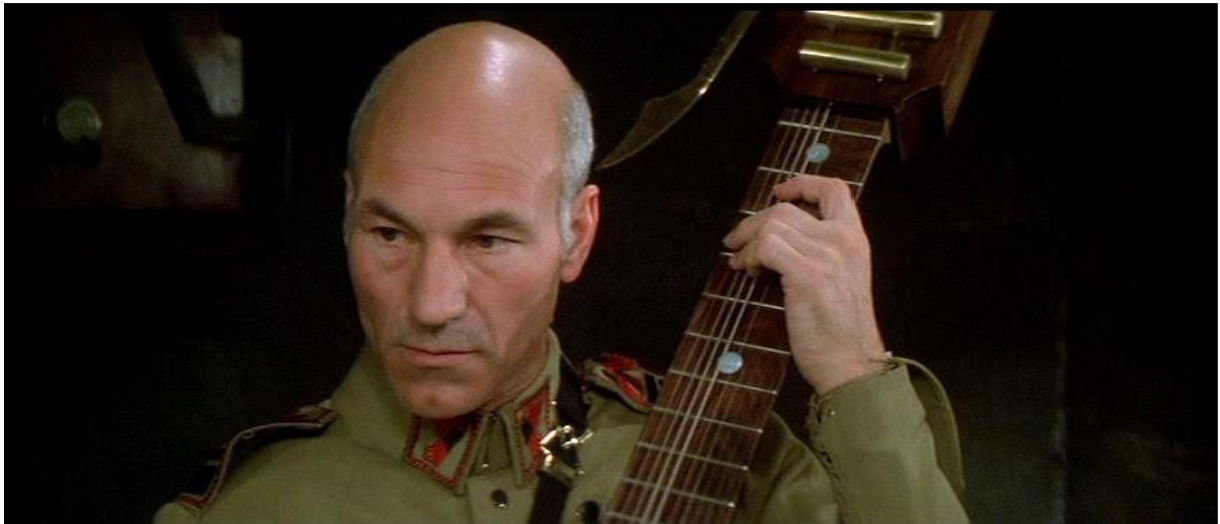
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtent_VkvGU

4 – Cast / Direction

PLUS. Young **Kyle MacLachlan** is ideal as Paul Atreides, an other-worldly figure who will change the way of the universe. He is the perfect combination of **youth and almost inhuman greatness.** **Jürgen Prochnow** is haunting as Paul’s dignified father, and **Francesca Annis** (*see picture*) as Paul’s mother Lady Jessica is one of the most interesting characters here and provides us with the most **moving moments** in the film.



Otherwise, *Dune* is filled with so many great supporting roles that it's hard to name them all. Standouts include Brad Dourif, **Max von Sydow**, **Jose Ferrer** and **Patrick Stewart** (*see picture*). All play with appropriate **subtlety and refined finesse** in this world of feudal kingdoms and simmering ambitions.



MINUS. *Dune* flies to the other extremes when developing its villain, the **Baron Harkonnen**. His character lacks any shred of subtlety and **is the ultimate bad villain cliché**. Director David Lynch practically trips over himself in his rush to make the Baron look like the devil himself. As a villain, Harkonnen's **one-dimensional and obscenely over-the-top** : raping and murdering young boys for sexual pleasure and living in slovenly, bloody luxury. In one single scene, *Dune* manages to associate physical grossness, moral depravity, violence and disease with homosexuality. With AIDS references penetrating popular culture in the 1980s, I suppose it's not just an accident that the homosexual villain has suppurating sores on his face.

CONCLUSION

Despite weak direction and undisputable flaws, *Dune* is a complex masterwork filled with masterful (or not) sets, **unforgettable imagery and solid performances** through and through.

ANALYSIS

1 – An Ecological Tale

The sprawling, epic storyline of the novel *Dune*, first serialized in *Analog* in 1963, occurs in a very distant future. Man has conquered the stars and colonized a number of planets throughout the galaxy. These worlds are joined together in a kind of cosmic Parliament called the Space Guild, while the entire galactic economy is based on Spice production, Spice being the one and only substance to **allow space travel**. The Spacing Guild and its navigators utilize the spice to ‘*fold space*’ and transport goods and citizenry from one world to another.

In terms of historical importance, Herbert's *Dune* is widely considered one of the first and most important ‘*ecological*’ science fiction stories because it deals with the **use, exploitation and preservation of natural resources** — consider the spice something along the lines of oil. But also because Herbert's work goes into detail about many life forms on Arrakis, and reveals how they are **all interconnected in one unique ecosystem**.

2 – Declining and Rising Empires

Lorenzo Di Tommaso compared *Dune*'s portrayal of the downfall of a galactic empire to **Edward Gibbon's** *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* which argues that the rise of **Christianity** coincided with the Decadence of **Ancient Rome**. In ‘*History and Historical Effect in Frank Herbert's Dune*’ (1992), Lorenzo Di Tommaso outlines similarities between the two works by highlighting the excesses of the Emperor on his home planet of Kaitain and of the Baron Harkonnen in his palace. The Emperor loses his effectiveness as a ruler from **excess of ceremony and pomp**. The hairdressers and attendants he brings with him to Arrakis are even referred to as parasites. The Baron Harkonnen is similarly **corrupt, materially and sexually decadent**. Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* explains the fall of Rome with the rise of Christianity. Gibbon claimed that **exotic imports from conquered provinces and moral softening weakened Rome** and left it open to new, stronger ideas. Similarly, the Emperor's Sardaukar fighters are little match for the Fremen of Dune because of the Sardaukar's **over-confidence** face to the Fremen's **capacity for self-sacrifice**. The Fremen **put the community before themselves** in every instance, while the world outside wallows in luxury and decadence at the expense of others.

3 – A Politic Metaphor : Economic struggles in Middle East

Many words, titles and names (Padishah Emperor *Shaddam IV*, *Hawat*, *Bashar*, *Harq-al-Ada*) in the Dune universe as well as a large number of words in the language of the Fremen people are derived or taken directly from **Arabic** (e.g. ‘*erg*’ which is the Arabic word for ‘*dune*’). To begin with, ***Muad'Dib*** means in Arabic ‘*the maker of literature*’. The Fremen language is also embedded with *Islamic terms* such as *Jihad*, *Mahdj*, *Shaitan*, and the personal bodyguard of Paul, Fedaykin, is a transliteration of the Arabic ‘*Feda'yin*’.

In terms of politics, *Dune* serves overtly as a metaphor for the **treatment of Third World Nations in the Middle East by resource-hungry Empires**. Arrakis, a back-water planet, is overly exploited by the *Landsraad* for the spice that powers its economy. Yet the people of Dune, the Fremen, do not share the wealth of that resource. As a foreigner who adopts the ways of the desert-dwelling people and then leads them in a military capacity, young Paul Atreides' character bears some similarities to the historical **T. E. Lawrence**.

4 – Gender issues

The patriarchal society of Dune

Frank Herbert was certainly not supportive of the feminist cause and the world he depicts is a male-dominated society. In *Dune*, female characters have a **significantly lower prominence** than male characters. As a matter of fact, women in *Dune* culture are largely left to **domestic duties and giving birth** — with the exception of the *Bene Gesserit* elite order. The sisterhood however never act or use their power to aid themselves, only the men around them, and they have a great sense of community and devotion to greater causes.

According to Herbert's philosophy, humans are not created equal — while equal justice and equal opportunity are higher ideals than mental, physical, or moral equality. On the other hand, a central theme of *Dune* is the **connection between Jessica and her son**, which underlines the importance of **complementarity between female and male characters** — treated on a hierarchical basis very close to that of the Christian world. In a *Bene Gesserit* test early in the story, it is implied that in *Dune* culture, men are generally ‘*inhuman*’ in that they irrationally place desire over reason. While her son approaches a power which makes him almost alien to the reader, Jessica remains ‘*human*’.



Throughout the story, Jessica struggles and manages to help her son at key moments in his realization of power. As the saying goes, *behind every great man, there is a woman*.

5 – The Super-Hero Syndrome

Paul's rise to almost super-human status follows a plotline common to many **heroic stories** :

- He has unfortunate circumstances forced onto him – generally his father is killed
- After a long period of **hardship and exile**, he confronts and defeats the source of evil

As such, *Dune* is representative of a **general trend beginning in 1960s American science fiction** in that it features a character who attains ‘god-like’ status through ‘scientific’ means such as **Superman**, **van Vogt**’s **Gilbert Gosseyn** and **Henry Kuttner**’s **Telepaths**.

However, **unlike previous superheroes who acquire their powers suddenly and accidentally**, Paul's are the result of ‘*painful and slow personal progress*.’ And unlike other superheroes of the 1960s — who are the **exception** among ordinary people in their respective worlds — **many characters** in *Dune* grow their powers through ‘the application of mystical philosophies and techniques.’ For Herbert, even ordinary person can develop :

- **Incredible fighting skills** (*Fremen, Ginaz swordsmen and Sardaukar*)
- **Superior mental abilities** (*Bene Gesserit, Mentats, Spacing Guild Navigators*).

About Herbert’s influence by **Zen Buddhism** and **Taoism** : *see below*.

6 – Non-Euclidian reality and *Waking Dreams* in David Lynch's *Dune*

Dreams figure explicitly in Lynch's film as **important turning points in the plot**, and also as an **artistic mode of expression**. Within the narrative of *Dune*, dreaming is an important vehicle for the story-telling.

▪ **First Dream : The Second Moon / Paul's Calling**

Paul experiences psychic and **prophetic dreams** in his home planet Caladan : *dreams that foretell of his destiny*, his important role in shaping the future of the universe. Specifically, he dreams of Dune's **Second Moon** — which symbolizes the coming of the 'messiah' Muad'Dib to Arrakis — and also catch a glimpse of his future love interest, Chani.



We understand that this dream is a *prophecy* which represents **truth and reality delivered to Paul by a Divine Being**. Later, when Paul's destiny is in doubt because of the war with the Harkonnens on Arrakis, he explicitly ties belief in his dreams, in the prophecy of his future, to faith : '*God created Arrakis to train the faithful. One cannot go against the word of God,*' he says. It is the Word of God, then, that **gave Paul the dreams and inspired his actions**.

▪ **Second Dream : The Hand of Justice / From Calling to Action**

Next in the dream vision, an outstretched human hand is seen floating in the center of the frame. It may represent, on the one hand, **Paul's new grip on the universe**, and on the other hand, **faith and justice**, which would certainly fit this context, as Paul's faith in his dreams has led him to Arrakis, and he will bring justice to the Fremen and to his enemies.



▪ **Third Dream : The Ripple Effect**

Throughout the film, Paul dreams of a **droplet of water falling into a pool, and having a ripple effect there**. This shot recurs in several dream montages, including the *Water of Life* sequence. This may be a metaphor for the process of waking up, the ‘*drip, drip, drip*’ if you will of knowledge added to knowledge, of insight added to insight, of faith added to faith. And the ripple effect represents the way that **Paul's circle grows**, ultimately to include an entire Army of followers.



▪ **Disappearance of the Dreams : Doubt**

At one point, when Paul is discouraged and in the thick of the battle, he feels cut off from his dreams. He experiences a moment of extreme self-doubt : ‘*All the images from my future are gone,*’ he reveals to Chani. To highlight this point, Lynch cuts to a dream montage in which Dune's **Second Moon cracks like an egg**, shattering into pieces in the night sky. This is what Paul fears, the shattering of his dreams and his **failure to achieve his destiny**.

▪ Expanding the Dreams : The *Water of Life*

*‘I’m dead to everyone unless I become what I may be. **The Sleeper must Awaken.***’ Thus Paul decides to drink the **Water of Life** to undergo a painful process of self-actualization and self-realization. Specifically, the Water of Life will allow Paul to see below the surface of things to the *hidden underneath*. This is a very common Lynchian concept, of the world in two parts, *as it appears to the naked eye* and *as it truly is*. That *underneath* that Paul sees in his vision after drinking the Water of Life involves an important, formerly unseen connection between the Spice and the Sand Worms. Lynch's unconventional visuals again express the nature of Paul's revelation, as the film cuts to images of outer space with Paul laying still and prone **at the center of everything** — the very *well-spring of the cosmic mind*.



▪ Achieving Perfect Consciousness

We then see images of a Guild Spaceship, as the Third-Stage Navigator becomes aware of Paul and *swells with orange light, almost like rage*. Disconnected from ‘truth’ and ‘faith’, the Guild is all about control and hiding the underneath. By taking the Water of Life, Paul has shattered this system, invaded their ‘*sacred space*’ and **rejected their vision of reality for his own** to experience a **personal connection** to the Divine. Paul here no longer needs the Guild to be his intermediary. He can be everywhere at once.

Herbert’s combined references to both **Islamic Esoterism** and **Taoism** are also revealed in his creation of *Zensunni*, the **mystical philosophies and techniques** through which the Fremen develop superior **fighting skills and mental abilities** in order to become *free men*.

To learn more about the influence of **Islamic Esoterism** and **Taoism** on *Dune* : *see below*.

7 – *Dune's* Production Design reveals the Universe of the *Underneath*

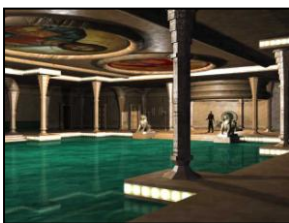
David Lynch created not one world in *Dune*, but **five separate and distinct worlds**, all of which brilliantly create a **context for the action**. Commendably, the production design isn't just *eye candy* and transmits to the audience a **sense of history and authenticity**, but more importantly, **convey aspects and meanings** of the story with images, substance and colour.

1 – **Kaitain** : Home of the Emperor Shaddam IV

As a Guild space craft arrives in Kaitain, Lynch provides an exterior view of the royal city by night, and it looks almost identical to the **Kremlin circa 1984**, with a few futuristic touches. It's an *Old World City* of long history, but also, clearly, of some **sinister aspect**.



The interiors seen on Kaitain are **opulent, decked out entirely in gold**, with ornate spires and an abundance of space and pools. This is, quite naturally, the environs of a King. Even the



Emperor's pyramidal spaceship seen at the end of the film is golden, a symbol not only of wealth perhaps, but **egregious, thoughtless waste**. The artificial, gold universe of this futuristic **Midas** proves a real contrast to the authentic, sun-warmed gold of Arrakis, a very different kind of kingdom. One world is all about wealth ; the other is about survival.

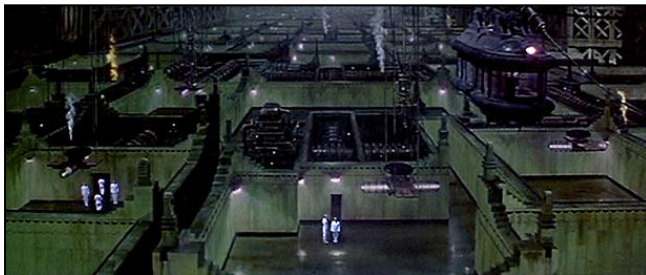
What the viewer gleans instantly from the views of Kaitain is that it is a world of extreme riches, but not warmth. In other words, this **gilded, extravagant world of affluence has much to lose and little to give**.

2 – Giedi Prime : The Harkonnens' lurid and over-industrialized Realm

The planet of villains, is a **world entirely out of balance and proportion**. Giedi Prime is an industrialized realm of **lurid, sickly green hues, rains of black oil**. Its materials (steel and bolts) and **excessive machinery** transmit the idea of a **hard, unforgiving place**. It is *perpetual night time* on this world too ; there is no sunlight to warm the human soul.



The message conveyed here is that Giedi Prime is an **inhuman, ecological disaster**. And this



visually informs the viewer something important about the film's storyline. Even if they are administrators of Arrakis and the Spice, the Harkonnens are **incapable of understanding** the connection between the Fremen, the Spice and the Worms.

They are not interested in maintaining environmental balance, they are only strip-miners.

Again, this is something Lynch establishes visually. The Harkonnens, as evidenced by their Baron's (**Kenneth McMillan**) egregious acne, are **diseased parasites, sucking life from others**. They are so inhuman, actually, that their **appetites are literally monstrous**. The Baron imagines incestuous delight with his nephew and Rabban is a brutal beast who takes joy in killing. All the citizens of Giedi Prime are outfitted with heart plugs that can be ripped out — leading to a terminal blood flood — and the only thing surprising about this is that Harkonnens have hearts at all.

3 – The Guild : The Navigator's society

The Navigators drive massive, cathedral-like ships and wear priest-like clothes. From their first scene, we understand, that they **carry a power above and beyond sovereign statehood**. They are, essentially, *Dune's* version of the **Catholic Church** in historical Europe.

4 – Caladan : The Atreides Home

Caladan is a **beautiful, lush world of oceans, wood-panelling and exquisite carpentry**. The people here seem to live **in harmony with nature**, and even their lamps are made to resemble the wild life of the planet : roaming birds. The message here is that only in a **world of natural beauty and balance** can the *Kwisatz Haderach* arise.



Nurtured in a world where everything — from environment and education to physical fitness — seems in balance, Paul is able to be **receptive to the prophecy** that changes his life.



5 – Dune / Arrakis : The Desert Planet

Arrakis is a harsh, unforgiving world, but not unlike Caladan, the planet seems to evidence a unique **sense of balance**. The Fremen with their still-suits express the idea of recycling and giving back to the body used resources, and that's also a metaphor for the planet itself. Here, the structures of the City Arakeen are built unobtrusively from earthen walls of clay, and the Fremen store vast quantities of water in subterranean reservoirs. The idea is of stoic conservation and *eking out a life in a difficult environment*. Though Paul was born and raised in a land of natural plenty, he comes to see the **ascetic beauty** of Arrakis ; the way that the Fremen have forged a sustainable paradigm and way of life in a harsh terrain.



CONCLUSION

In *Dune*, each of these five worlds is **crafted beautifully, down to the smallest detail**. Amazingly, the sets don't look like traditional movie sets ; they appear to be part of a *lived in* world. From the portraits hanging on the walls and the exquisite woodworking on Caladan, to the tiles in the Grand Hall on Arrakis, Lynch showcases his trademark attention to detail and penchant for lush visuals here. *Dune* is utterly, inarguably, magnificent in this regard at least.

HERBERT'S INSPIRATIONS

In Herbert's days, most SF writers limited their inspiration to **H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, Edgar Allan Poe** or **Mary Shelley**, reaching back only 200 years. But Herbert understood that science fiction is less a genre than a **modern vocabulary** through which to express the oldest genre in the world, the *fantastic tale*, which enabled him to reach back not 200 years, but 3,000 — right through to Greek epics.

Herbert innovated in one other major way : in his day, science fiction was seen mostly as a way to express ideas through story, so **characters were typically flat, plots were contrived and dialogue stilted and unrealistic**. Herbert drew on his extensive education to marry SF with some of the strongest elements from literature, history, mythology, religion, science and his personal life. A few of his most notable inspirations include :

REAL LIFE AND HISTORICAL INFLUENCES

Let's start with the beginning :

1 – Herbert's Personal Life

So far every great story I've read turns out to be built partially as a **mythic retelling of the author's life**, perhaps because this process grants the writer a **new vocabulary for understanding the forces he/she is wrestling with**. Here are a few elements from Herbert's life which may have influenced *Dune* :

DUNE	HERBERT'S LIFE
Paul's mother and most other women in the story are <i>Bene Gesserit</i>	Herbert's mother and his ten aunts were Jesuits
Fremen displayed awe and admiration as Paul drove by and advised them about ecology	The people of Tlalpujahuá displayed awe as Herbert drove by and advised them about ecology

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Leto is concerned with his son's safety almost to the point of distraction from his important job. ▪ Jessica is a young, beautiful and loving mother, very close to her son. 	<p>Herbert's parents were depressive alcoholics who barely registered his existence — so this element of Herbert's life was used as a <u>reversal</u> to complement with the darker reality of his personal life</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Bene Gesserit are <i>truth sayers</i>, possessing the magic ability to tell if people are lying or not. They use a 'pain box', an instrument of control through torture, over Paul. 	<p>Herbert's father often threatened to subject young Frank to a lie detector. As an adult, Frank Herbert also purchased a lie detector, often forcing his sons Brian and Bruce to submit to it.</p>



2 – **Alexander the Great** (356-323 BC)

Although I have no direct evidence, my intuition suggests that Herbert may have used the real-life story of **Alexander the Great** as a source. Like Paul, Alexander **enjoyed the highest quality education imaginable**, receiving instruction in geography, philosophy, ethics, politics, zoology, botany, mathematics, logic, weapons, military strategy, horseback riding, drama, poetry, music and literature. Like Paul, this education was arranged by his father, King Philip II of Macedonia. Also like Paul, Alexander was forced to deal with the **assassination of his father** when he was still only a young man.

Alexander's tutors included **Leonidas**, **Lysimachus** and **Aristotle** (*). This *unheard of* level of education lent Alexander a remarkable quality : as a teenager he exhibited the **striking self-possession of an adult** and as an adult Alexander **seemed almost otherworldly**. He could make insights and find connections in a way no one else could even approach. Again like Paul, Alexander's nearly 'super-human' abilities enabled him to conquer almost the entire known world while he was still a young man.

(*) Aristotle (384-322 BC) had one of the most powerful minds in human history. He discovered the entire field of logic, working backwards from mathematics to identify the [Nine Rules of Inference](#). Aristotle vastly expanded the **philosophy of ethics**. He had been trained by Plato (427-347 AD), who had himself studied under Socrates (469-399 BC). Together Socrates, Plato and Aristotle are the undisputed heavyweights of Western Civilization.

3 – [T.E. Lawrence](#) (1888-1935)

During World War One, **Thomas Edward Lawrence** got himself assigned as a kind of liaison between the Arabian Beduins and the British Army. He surprised the Beduins and his superiors by becoming a military leader, organizing a string of spectacular victories against the German-backed, well-armed Turks. In 1926, Lawrence recorded his adventures in the autobiographical novel *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, which was immediately lauded as the greatest adventure story ever told. In 1962, Lawrence's story was made into the brilliant film *Lawrence of Arabia*, which may have influenced Herbert : Paul is the 'messianic' man, the Beduins are the Fremen, the Harkonnens are the Turks, the Sardaukar are German Troops, and the *Padishah* Emperor Shaddam IV represents the Egyptian Empire.

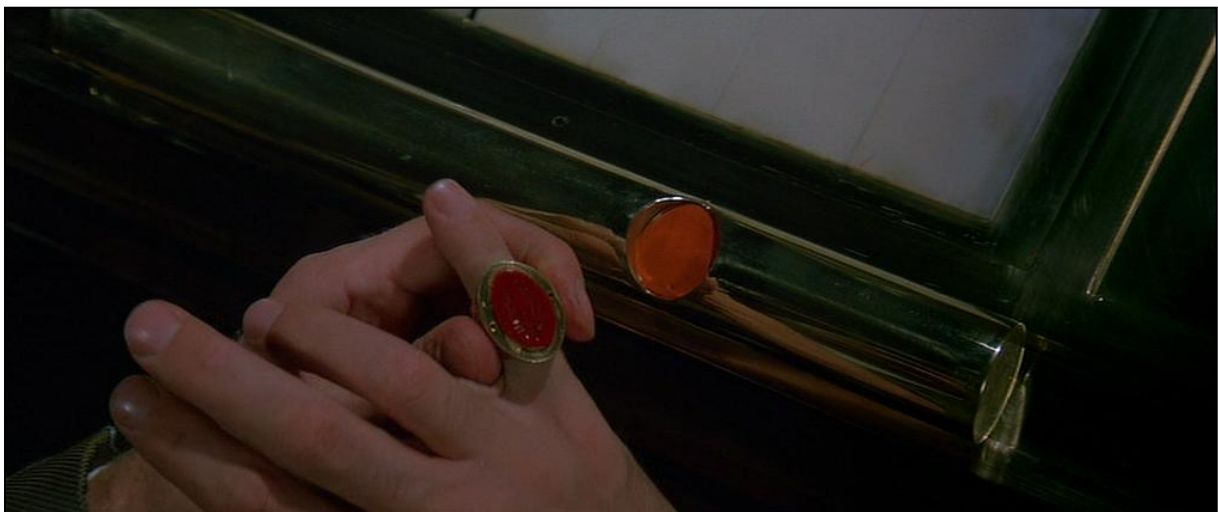


The only difference between Lawrence and Paul is their sexual orientation. In his autobiography, T.E. Lawrence explains how his homosexuality contributed to his military career. He says that he was initially attracted to soldiering because of the all-male environment, and his desire to impress other men is what ultimately motivated him to become a hero. Rather than writing a gay male hero, Herbert transferred Lawrence's homosexuality to *Dune's* villain, Baron Harkonnen, while Paul's great love is a woman named Chani, not a man named Dahoum. According to his own biography, Herbert considered **male homosexuality as immoral**. He died without ever expressing love or approval for his ironically gay son Bruce.

LITERARY INFLUENCES : HEROES AND MYTHS

4 – *Henry V* and *Hamlet* (1601) by William Shakespeare

- **The Prophecy** is delivered by the Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam, Head of the *Bene Gesserit* Order = Prophecies were delivered by the Head Witch Hecate in *Macbeth*
- Paul carries his father's **signet ring** (nice hands by the way) = *Hamlet*



- **During the climax, the hero publicly duels with his minor adversary**, who carries a **poisoned blade**, while his major adversary looks on = *Hamlet*
- Liet's **conversation with the ghost** of his dead father Pardot Kynes = *Hamlet*
- **Use of asides** = **Shakespeare** conveyed his characters' thoughts by having them make *asides*, moments where they spoke directly to the audience, openly revealing their inmost thoughts. Herbert adapted this idea by showing character thoughts in italics.

- **Use of metered Verse hidden in Pose** = Herbert also borrowed Shakespeare's convention of occasionally writing passages in blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter, which he would disguise as standard unmetered prose. For example, Romeo and Juliet proclaim their love to each other in perfect Sonnet form. Shakespeare's plan seemed to be to inspire an elevated emotional response in his audience by triggering their poetic response subliminally, *without them being aware of it*. The first writer to introduce the 'metered verse hidden in prose' idea into SF was **Van Vogt** (1912-2000). Herbert took it much further, burying not only Sonnet form (14 lines of iambic pentameter), but several other forms, including Haiku.

Indeed, **Shakespeare's own writing was an innovative compression and refashioning of his inspirations**. His favourite was Arthur Golding's 1567 translation of *Metamorphoses*, by **Ovid**. The useful [Narrative and Dramatic Sources of all Shakespeare's Works](#) explores Shakespeare's influences back to Homer, Sappho and Callimachus.

5 – *Oedipus Rex* (430-415 BC) by Sophocles

It is from *Oedipus Rex* that Herbert borrows the underlying theme of **prescience** — the ability to tell the future — and **prophecy** — a foretelling of a future event (*). Everyone wishes they could somehow avoid missteps, but would we really be happy if we could see the future ? Would that knowledge give us the power to change things, or does fate just steamroll over our attempts to influence our lives ?

(*) The Ancient Greek idea of foretelling the future centered around a shrine called **The Oracle at Delphi**, established circa 1,400 AD. People would come from all over Greece, Rome and even further to ask when to plant their crops, who to marry, even whether or not to go to war. Prophecies were given by the **Pythia**. The Pythia would enter a small room called the *Adyton*, where she would sit on a tripod over a cleft in the earth, waving laurel branches and smelling the sweet-smelling fumes which came up from below. If she inhaled too much she might become delirious or even die, but usually the gas induced a trance, upon which the Pythia would utter **cryptic prophecies**. Geologists have recently discovered that Delphi once issued a combination of gasses including hydrocarbon, methane and ethylene. Ethylene is a hallucinogenic, so the Oracle's prophecies seem to have been at least partially the result of a drug trip. I believe that one of the main points of Sophocles' play is to stop listening to the Oracle, as even if she *could* tell us the future, knowing the future would be a bad idea. We all need to figure things out for ourselves.

Herbert borrowed several other themes and figures from Sophocles, including the **blind prophet**, the hero becoming blind at the death of his wife, and the flawed person being sent out into the wasteland to die — rather than burdening his family and tribe.

Herbert also flirted with the subtheme of incest. In *Dune* world, **love can only exist between**



equals, and as there aren't many 'super-humans' on Arrakis, Atreides siblings tend to fall in love : In *Children of Dune*, Paul's twins **Leto** (a young **James McAvoy**) and his sister **Ghanima** follow the '**Path of Light**', refusing to give in to their mutual attraction, and keep it down to brotherly affection.

However, in the *Dune* book (not in the film), Alia is in love with her brother Paul, so she attempts to seduce him into an incestuous relationship — an evidence that Alia has fallen into the '**Dark Path**'. As with Baron Harkonnen, any sign of sexual transgression or perversion here is a sign that the person is evil, or *about to become* evil. Indeed Paul does not return those feelings but the subtheme is still here anyway — Sophocles', not Freud's (*).

(*) **Psychoanalysis** by **Sigmund Freud** (1856-1939)

Freud 'revolutionized' psychology by theorizing that **myths and dreams are the keys to understanding our unconscious**... well at least the myth of Oedipus, the tragic figure who unwittingly kills his father and marries his mother (!) **Carl Gustav Jung** (1875-1961) thought using myth to understand the unconscious was a great idea, but observed that people's experiences followed the patterns of *many* myths, and Freud's fascination with Oedipus **reflected not a universal, but Freud's own issues**. Jung was also uncomfortable with the fact that Freud was cheating on his wife with her sister, who lived in the same house. Finally, Jung found it **hypocritical** that Freud wanted to analyze everyone else, but **refused to be analyzed himself**. Because Freud never faced his own issues he never got any better, and so spread as much pain and harmful ideas as good ideas. Jung was half-crazy too, but at least he *knew* he was crazy and spent his whole life trying to find a way out of his own delirium.

6 – *The Hero* (1936) by Lord Raglan (1885-1964)

Like **Joseph Campbell** (1904-1987) in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), Raglan tried to make sense of myths by **finding common underlying patterns**. Raglan identified 22 characteristics typical of *mythical* heroes, thereby implying a **Raglan Scale** : the more points a character has, the more 'heroic' he is. Paul Atreides scores between 13 and 17.

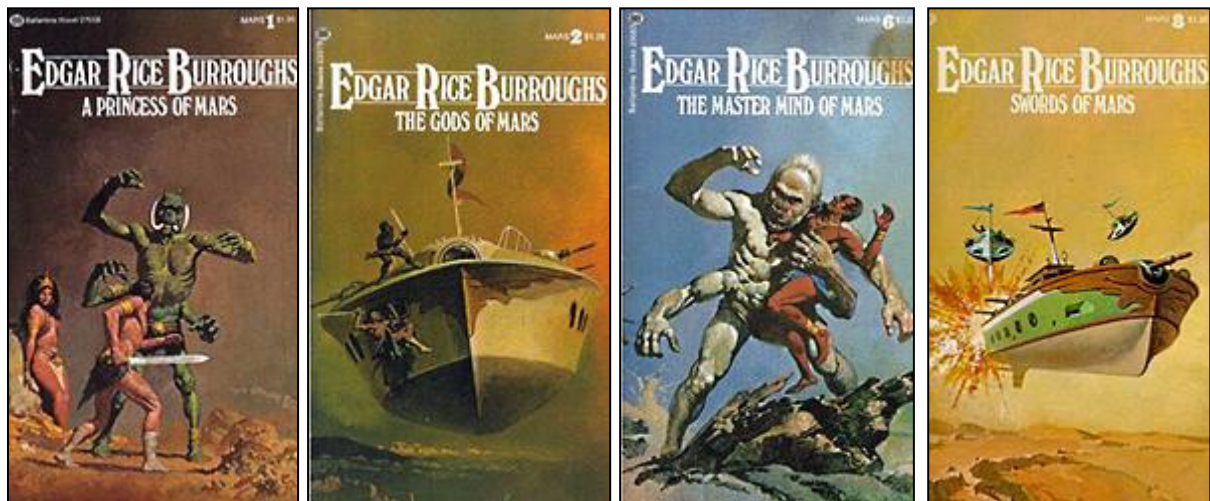
7 – *The Golden Bough : A Study in Magic and Religion* (1911-1915) by Anthropologist Sir James George Frazer (1854-1941)

Brian Herbert said this was one of the books his father studied most closely. Frazer's comparative study identified some **underlying patterns common to many world myths** including ‘*the mindless animal in the depths of the psyche that guards the pearl of life.*’ Herbert said this was an inspiration on his first two novels : *Dragon in the Sea* (1956) and the *Sand Worms* from *Dune*.

SF LITERATURE AND SCIENTIFIC INFLUENCES

8 – *John Carter Mars series* (1912-1941) by Edgar Rice Burroughs (1875-1950)

Herbert absolutely adored these books as a young man, and in a way *Dune* is basically the **serious and literary, adult** version of Burrough's pulp SF. ERB's books were also a direct influence not only on Herbert, but to Arthur C. Clarke, Carl Sagan, George Lucas, Michael Moorcock, Leigh Brackett, Olaf Stapledon, Robert Heinlein, Edmond Hamilton, Philip Jose Farmer and Ray Bradbury among others.



Herbert originally set *Dune* on Mars but quickly discarded the idea, feeling that writers had used Mars to death.

I can find only **one direct borrowing** : Lady Jessica finds a note in an arboretum. The note contains the *Bene Gesserit* coded phrase : ‘*On that path lies danger*’ which actually tells Jessica that there's a secret message hidden somewhere in the room. She eventually finds the message, subtly written in Braille over the tree-leaf that hung near the note. Compare with this passage from ERB's *The Warlord of Mars* (1913) in which John Carter finds a scrap of paper while imprisoned in the dark : ‘*I became aware of strange protuberances upon the smooth surface of the parchment. For a time they carried no special significance to my mind. But at last they seemed to take form, and then I realized that there was but a single line of them, like writing.*’ The bumps turn out to be a secret coded message.

9 – *Foundation Series* (1941-1993) by Isaac Asimov (1920-1992)

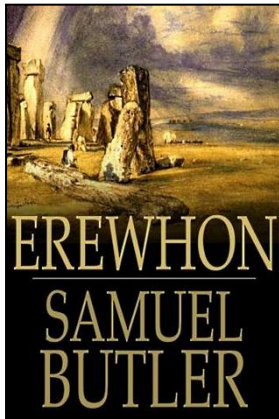
Foundation won a Hugo Award (the highest in the field) in 1966 for ‘*best series ever.*’ Asimov's story concerns a scientist called a *psycho-historian*, someone trained to understand the broad patterns of history well enough to make oracular predictions. Asimov's hero, Hari Seldon, predicts that the Galactic Empire will eventually fall just as the Roman Empire fell. He suggests the creation of a sort of world encyclopaedia, a **library-planet** in fact called *Foundation*, where all human knowledge can be preserved through even Dark Ages, **just as monks preserved the wisdom of the Greeks and the Romans through historical Dark Ages**. Seldon's plan basically works, yet a significant challenge rises in the form of a *mule*, a super-powered mutant who is so singular that he falls outside Seldon's prophecies.

Asimov was very familiar with Wells' writing and wrote admiringly of him. Wells believed that such knowledge would allow the encyclopaedists to manipulate ‘*everyone who controls administration, makes wars, directs mass behaviour, feeds, moves and starves populations*’ **for the good of all humanity** – the same basic premise as Asimov's book. Asimov's Psycho-historians are basically the same as what Wells called *Human Ecologists*.

As the *Foundation* series developed, Asimov also began **opening chapters with epigrams** from the *Encyclopedia Galactica*. This introduced a brilliant way to shorten the description of the alien culture of his world to the reader, keeping the main story focused on the plot. Herbert expanded this idea in *Dune*, beginning *every* chapter with an epigram and flirting with neat literary devices like partial fore-shadowing — revealing a few **tantalizing details** about this alien culture but forcing us to read the chapter if we want the whole story.

10 – *Erewhon* (1872) by Samuel Butler (1835-1902)

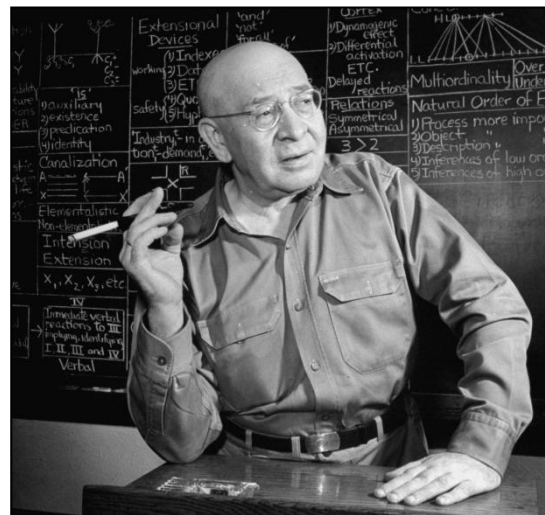
In 1863, Samuel Butler wrote an essay entitled *Darwin Among the Machines*, which applied Darwin's *Theory of Evolution* with the Industrial Era, prophesying that one day machines would become sentient and that *we* would become their slaves. This idea was copied in *The Matrix* series by the way.



In 1872, Butler expanded this argument into his most famous novel *Erewhon*. Stories about **utopias** have been around at least as long as Plato's *Republic*, but it was Saint **Thomas More** (1478-1535) who first coined the term in his 1516 novel of the same name, *Utopia*. It is literally Greek for 'nowhere' so Butler's satiric book is titled 'nowhere' written backwards, more or less : *Erewhon*. *Dune* in fact refers to a '*Butlerian Jihad*', a war which resulted in the **outlawing of any machine made to think like a man**.

11 – *Science and Sanity : Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics* (1933) by [Alfred Korzybski](#) (1879-1950) – 825 pages

Several people said that Herbert took a class in **General Semantics** in San Francisco shortly before writing *Dune*, and that the ideas strongly influenced his development of the *Bene Gesserit* Order. I've not read all 825 pages of *Science and Sanity*, and I don't intend to, finding it already impossible to make sense of some part of it. He especially reminds the reader that the word is only an imperfect placeholder for an idea. I *think* the basic message of his book is that **when we confuse words and other signifiers for the 'unvoicable' truths they represent, that misassumption distorts our perception of reality**. Korzybski hints that he has discovered a revolutionary new way of looking at the universe that will change everything, but the



only meaning I've been able to sift from his book from one reading is a needlessly dense and turgid restatement of **Plato's** *Allegory of the Cave*. Herbert was probably turned on to General Semantics by fellow SF writer **Van Vogt**, an enthusiastic supporter of Korzybski.

12 – *Uncertainty Principle* (1927) by Werner Heisenberg (1910-1976)

This book is crucial to understand the moral confusion of most *New Age* books and films nowadays. Werner Heisenberg pointed out that it's *impossible to determine both the position and momentum of an electron at the same time* (*). This arguably implies that **the way we look at a quantum event may change the nature of the quantum event**. ‘*If a tree falls in the woods, and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound ?*’ Heisenberg's principle is the basis of a lot of New Age ideas like ‘*the basic stuff of the universe is malleable to human intention and expectation*’ as in *The Celestine Prophecy* by **James Redfield** (1993). Herbert himself thought that if the way we look at something changes the something, this is further proof that **there could be no absolutes**.

(*) According to Heisenberg : no one has ever seen a subatomic particle. They don't have a ‘colour,’ or an ‘appearance,’ or a ‘surface.’ In fact, subatomic particles aren't really particles at all, but more like **waves of probability which change, depending on how you look at them...** therefore scientists are telekinetic ! This is all wrong of course. Particles do exist outside our experience, and do not need our experience to exist as such. There are absolutes.

EASTERN PHILOSOPHY INFLUENCES

13 – ***Zen Buddhism***

Herbert sprinkled Zen (*) ideas and epigraphs throughout *Dune* — which does not appear as clearly in the film. When Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam nonsequiters Paul with ‘*Ever sift sand through a screen ?*’ Herbert next writes : ‘*The tangential slash of her question shocked his mind into higher awareness.*’ This is the technique of the Zen Master : saying or asking something that sounds like gibberish, but also like it might be incredibly profound, provides you to think about it long enough. Zen masters developed this trick to ‘open up’ the mind of their students *without* filling it with their own opinions.

In ‘*Dune Genesis*’ he wrote : ‘As in [Escher](#)’s lithographs, I involved myself with **recurrent themes that turn into paradox.**’ The central paradox [of *Dune*] concerns the human vision of time. What about Paul's gift of **prescience** ? In the logic of the Delphic Oracle, prescience tangles itself in a web of **predestination**. Yet predestination negates Providence, surprises

and, in fact, sets up a mathematically enclosed universe whose limits are always inconsistent, always encountering the improvable. It's like [Epimenides](#) saying : ‘*All Cretans are liars.*’

(*) *Dune* also mentions the religion of the **Zensunni**, presumably a combination of ‘Zen’ and ‘Sunni.’ The word ‘Sunni’ is the nickname for *ahl al-sunnah wa-l-jamaa* which means ‘*The people who follow the traditions of Muhammad and his tribe.*’ We’ll come back on Muslim references later on in this analysis.

14 – **Taoism** (350 AD) – China

Sometime around 350 BCE, the curator of China's royal library, Lao-Tzu became disgusted with the way people attached to the court lived their lives, gave away most of his possessions and left town. When the guard at the gate asked him to sum up everything he'd learned from his years reading all those books, **Lao-Tzu** wrote the 5,000 character ***Tao-Te-Ching***, literally the ‘Book (*Ching*) of the Virtuous (*Te*) Path (*Tao*).’ By the way, note that the word ‘*path*’ as used in both *Star Wars* and *The Matrix*, ultimately originates in the Chinese idea of Tao.

The ***Tao-Te-Ching*** (*) (pronounce ‘*Daode Jing*’) is about balancing **Yang** (‘*in the sunlight*’) (pronounce ‘*yOng*’ as it is a word from Mandarin) with **Yin** (‘*in the shade*’). Also keep in mind that Yin represents the idea of **softness and female energy**, which actively *draws* the Yang, which represents hardness, male energy.

The [Five Principles of Yin and Yang](#) are :

1. All things have two facets : a Yin aspect and a Yang aspect
2. Any Yin or Yang aspect can be further divided into Yin and Yang
3. Yin and Yang mutually create each other
4. Yin and Yang control each other
5. Yin and Yang transform into each other

Dune alludes to Taoism throughout. The very first line is ‘*A beginning is the time for taking the most delicate care that the **balances are correct.***’ It’s not so different from Anakin’s destiny about ‘*bringing balance to the Force*’, a very common but warped idea about the complementarity of good and evil.

One of the most famous chapters in the *Tao-Te-Ching* is number 76 : **Hardness**. Here's **Ursula Le Guin**'s translation :

Living people are soft and tender.

Corpses are hard and stiff.

The living grass, the trees, are soft, pliant.

Dead, they're dry and brittle.

So hardness and stiffness go with death.

Tenderness, softness, go with life.

And the hard sword fails,

the stiff tree's felled.

The hard and great go under.

The soft and weak stay up.

In other words, ***the tree which bends in the wind survives***. The *Dune* book echoes this when the Reverend Mohiam tells Paul : ‘*The willow submits to the wind and prospers until one day it is many willows — a wall against the wind. This is the willow's purpose.*’ In the film, during the climactic moment of Paul's knife fight with Feyd, he says : ‘*I will **bend like a reed in the wind***’. **Look at the technique used here in the combat** : Paul *allows* Feyd to push him to the ground. This moment of softness takes Feyd off-guard and allows Paul to win.



To achieve victory Paul **must learn when to use softness** to defeat his enemies. Once again, it's all about finding balance.

(*) NOTES

MAIN TENETS

The *Tao-Te Ching* was meant as a **handbook for the ruler**. It encouraged the ruler to be a sage whose actions pass unnoticed that his **very existence remains unknown**.

- This ideal ruler imposes **no restrictions or prohibitions** on his subjects.
- He does not teach them **discrimination, virtue, or ambition** because *‘when intellect emerges, the great artifices begin. When discord is rife in families, ‘dutiful’ sons appear. When the State falls into anarchy, ‘loyal subjects’ appear.’*
- It is better to *‘banish wisdom, righteousness, and ingenuity’* and the people will benefit a hundredfold (!)

Taoism maintained that the individual should ignore the dictates of society and seek only to **conform to the underlying pattern of the universe**, the Dao (meaning ‘way’), which can neither be described in words nor conceived in thought. To be in accord with Dao, one has to ‘do nothing’ (*wuwei*) — that is, nothing strained, artificial, or unnatural. Through spontaneous **compliance with the impulses of one's own essential nature and by emptying oneself of all doctrines and knowledge, one achieves unity with the Dao and derives from it a mystical power**. This power enables one to transcend all mundane distinctions, even the distinction of life and death. You can see by yourself the references to these beliefs in *Dune*, especially when Paul achieves ‘self-fulfilment’ after drinking the Water of Life. They remain **very eclectic references** nonetheless, more in the spirit than anything else, really.

PHILOSOPHY

Philosophical Taoism is contemplative and it accepts death as a natural returning to the Dao. The themes and texts of philosophical Taoism became established during the **Warring States period** (481-221 BC). War is condemned but not entirely excluded : *‘Arms are ill-omened instruments,’* and the sage uses them only when he cannot do otherwise. *‘He that has conquered in battle is received with rites of mourning.’*

Religious Taoism is magical, cultic, esoteric, and sectarian, and emphasizes health and healing as ways to gain long life or even immortality. Tai-Chi and the medical practice of Qui-Gong are modern manifestations of Taoism.

The word ‘Dao’ refers to the ordering principle that makes cosmic harmony possible. Not a transcendent ultimate, the Dao is found in the world (especially in nature) and can be encountered directly through mystical experience. It is the ultimate, ineffable, eternal and creative reality that is the source and end of all things as well as the proper natural way of life humans must follow.

Techniques for achieving immortality included dietary regimens, breath control and meditation, sexual disciplines, alchemy, **ecstatic trances and spirit journeys**, the use of magical talismans, *etc.* Once again, I don’t think I need to explicit how *Dune* **borrowed** from this philosophy.

CHRISTIAN AND ISLAMIC REFERENCES

15 – Biblical references

These are some **direct quotes** taken from the *Bible* :

- ‘*Column of Smoke by Day, Pillar of Fire by Night.*’ (**Duncan Idaho** in a *cut scene* from Lynch’s 1984 version)
- ‘*I have been a stranger in a strange land.*’ (**Gurney Halleck**) = Exodus 2 : 22
- ‘*A time to get and time to lose. A time to keep and a time to cast away. A time for love and a time to hate. A time of war and a time of peace.*’ (**Lady Jessica**) = Ecclesiastes 3 : 4-6
- ‘*Paradise on my right, Hell on my left and the Angel of Death behind.*’ (**Paul Atreides**)
- ‘*Thou shall not suffer a witch to live.*’ (**Alia** in *Children of Dune*) = Exodus 22 : 18
- ‘*Thou shalt not make a machine in the likeness of a man's mind.*’ ([Orange Catholic Bible](#))

16 – *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879) by Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881)

The most famous section of *The Brothers Karamazov* is chapter five : The Grand Inquisitor. It tells the story of the **Second Coming of Jesus Christ**. Upon his return, Jesus is surprised to discover that even though the Church recognizes him, they're not happy to see him. In fact they toss him in prison. The Grand Inquisitor explains to Jesus that a real Messiah is a threat to the modern world, and to the Modern Church. Because Christ's rules are too strict, and because only a small number of people will ever be good enough to get into Heaven, the modern Church has followed the advice of the ‘*wise spirit*’ (Satan) and has intentionally told people comforting lies, so they can at least have peace of mind in this life.

In the *New Testament*, Christ gloriously **overcomes** all three of Satan's Temptations :

- The Temptation to **exchange freedom for bread**
- The Temptation to **demand a guarantee in exchange for faith**
- The Temptation to **turn his back on God and rule the world**

Dostoevsky's Inquisitor eventually claims that the modern Church has **succumbed** to all three of those Temptations.

Throughout the *Dune* series, Herbert combines **Dostoevsky** 's distrust for bureaucracies and overwhelming systems with *Erewhon* 's distrust for all-powerful machines. **Paul is in direct conflict not only with 'scientific' people** (who pretend they can manipulate nature and influence the future) but also **with the Guild** (which pretends to be the only way to travel and jealously retains a monopoly on Spice) until he's ultimately **killed by one of his own priests** in *Children of Dune*.

This **double conflict** is underlined in three major occasions in *Dune* :

- **In the opening of the film**, the Guild Navigators demand Paul's murder. Indeed they are aware that the *Kwisatz Haderach* is a threat to the existence of the Guild because he steps out of human understanding = Herbert here seems to be denouncing overwhelming systems which tend to reject geniuses or too distinctive people out of fear and jealousy, because they rise out of ranks, and cannot be controlled or handled the way they wish.
- **In one of the early scenes**, we are told that the spice, which **extends life and boasts psychic properties, especially consciousness**, is used by the *Bene Gesserit* sisterhood, which is undergoing scientific tests to **access the genetic memory of all previous men in history**. The sisterhood hopes to genetically forge a super-man able to gaze into the psychic realm, into the genetic memory of all. Thus will he be able to **see and shape** the future. But Paul is the **child of love** and Providence. Leto and Jessica have given birth to the Atreides heir through natural means, while the scientific experiments of the sisterhood have failed to fulfil their desire to rule everything while meddling with nature.
- **In one of the last scenes**, Paul achieves his goal of self-fulfilment and perfection, and is shown in a 'sleeping Vishnu' position, in a state of **new born God-like consciousness**, thus invading the Guild's '*sacred space*'. The Space Navigators (Priests) immediately become orange with fury : once again, Paul breaks out the system. It seems that he doesn't need the Guild (Church) nor their rules (dogma), nor their Spice (Sacraments) to reach perfection (God) anymore. He claims 'salvation' and '*liberation*' through a personal path, **on his own** — not 'through' them.

In other words, this conflict expresses the (very contemporary) **New Age rejection of dogma and rules** addressing an entire community (as in Christian religion) to embrace **personal and esoteric ways** of achieving 'salvation' and 'liberation' (as in **Taoism** and **Zen Buddhism**).

16 – Islamic References

- *The Qur'an* by Muhammad (570-632 AD)

The *Dune* books and films are embroidered with references to the *Qur'an* as they are with Biblical ones. Part from the action set in Middle East and the heavy use of Arabic term (which bring more of an **exotic feeling** than anything else), Herbert's **symbolic use of colours** among other things, follow the *Qur'an*. For instance, in the *Qur'an*, green is associated with healthy growing plants that have plenty of water, so it's good — and a symbol of Muhammad even today, which explains why his descendants wear green turbans — while **yellow** is associated with plants that are withering from lack of water, so it's bad. In the 1984 film, people in the Atreides House are clad in **green**, but also **black** and **white** ; Arrakis, steeped in hot golden hues, long to recover its fresh greenery. Green is also, in Lynch's 1984 version, the colour of the Harkonnens, but it's a sickly, artificial one — which the 2000 miniseries have traded against a hellish **red**, according to the medieval tradition of depicting the Devil.

- Imam Mohammed Ahmed al Mahdi (1844-1885)

There are similarities between this story and the plot. Ahmed founded modern Sudan in 1885 by successfully leading a Muslim Jihad against the Egyptian and British forces. Sudan had been under foreign rule since 1821, when Mohammed Ali Pasha had invaded in hopes of getting rich by enslaving people. Some critics pointed out the fact that the **uniforms** worn by the Atreides might even be based on the outfit worn by the **Khedive** (= viceroy) from around 1867-1914. It's quite possible.



Considering not only the uniforms, but also the **hairstyle** worn by the Duke, and the whole outlook of Lady Jessica, one might also think about **late Victorian era and 1910s Europe**. The choice of Title in itself : ‘**Duke**’ (and not ‘*Prince*’ or ‘*King*’ or ‘*Emperor*’ as is more often the case in SF) might be a reference to the **Dukes of Austria**.



*Wasn't it after a **Duke's assassination** that the First World War, one of the deadliest wars of all times, began ?* Some of the issues at stake then are very close to those developed in *Dune* as well. It's what's fascinating about these series. You cannot give just *one* answer. There are many references and many possibilities all the way through.

Back to Islamic references, the **opposition** between Paul and the Guild, as mentioned before, raises important practical issues : Paul seeks fulfilment through **personal methods** and rejects the Guild's **rules and dogmas** — *although it is nonsense to think than one can dispense with dogma and seek only mysticism : it is not only arrogance, but illusion as well*. We previously mentioned the strong influence of **Taoism** and **Zen Buddhism**. But as *Zensunni* suggests, the Fremen's religion also includes references to Islam, in particular **Islamic Esoterism**.

DEFINITIONS

- Exoterism refers to **dogmas, observances** to which, in a traditional society, the **whole community** adheres, and which promises and provides the means for achieving salvation
- Esoterism refers to **unconditioned** and **personal ways** of self-realization and salvation.

Theory and practice, or doctrine and method ('way' or 'path') are simply envisaged at different levels. Doctrine **comes from God** (*), while method **leads back to God**. (*) This definition presupposes that we are talking about a 'revealed' religion, and also that the religion in question has retained its 'orthodoxy' (i.e. fidelity to truth) and has remained 'traditional' (i.e. has not undergone any essential innovation).

▪ Aspects of Islamic Esoterism

- Islamic exoterism (*sharī‘a*) is incumbent upon the whole collectivity. It is the corpus of religious beliefs and practices which shapes the community and leads individuals to ‘salvation’. It represents the ‘objective’ pole of Islam and comes to all from outside.
- Islamic esoterism or Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) is the inward or spiritual dimension of the religion, and is the concern only of those **few possessed of the appropriate vocation**. From the ‘operative’ point of view, whereas the goal of the *sharī‘a* is ‘salvation’ conceived as **something attainable only after death** — Sufism envisages as its main end the embarking on the path that leads to ‘sanctification’ or ‘liberation’ even in this life, here and now. This ‘subjective’ pole comes to the individual from within. It includes both the voice of **conscience** and **intuition**.

Here are three main aspects of Islamic esoterism :

1) Extinction and Rebirth / Reintegration into the uncreated Divinity

‘Spiritual realization’, in Sufism, is attained by means of the invocation (*dhikr* = Union), by an invoker (*Dhākir* = Subject) of the Name of God, the invoked (*Madhkūr* = Object). By uniting himself with God through the Invocation of the Divine Name, the spiritual aspirant *Faqīr*, as he is called in Sufism) realizes his **union with / reintegration into** the uncreated Divinity, thus achieving the ‘oneness of being’ (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) = the relative has no reality other than in the Absolute, and the finite has no reality other than in the Infinite — spiritual **extinction** (*fanā’*) precedes spiritual **rebirth and permanence** (*baqā’*) in the Divine Subject.

The same idea can be found in **Buddhism**, where Nirvana means ‘cessation’, ‘extinction’ of *raga* (greed, craving), *dosa* (hate, aversion) and *moha* (delusion) notably. The term applied to the experience of **Awakening / Enlightenment** lived by the *Arahants* (those who have achieved Nirvana) is *Bodhi* (in Pāli and Sanskrit ; in Devanagari : बोधि)

In Dune, the references are explicit. Paul needs to ‘awake’. Soon, ‘*The Sleeper has Awaken*’ and reached *expanded consciousness*. And to do so, he breaks off the Guild, which appears to be an overwhelming system keeping people into **ignorance and illusion**, and hiding the ‘*underneath*’. The Guild may also be interpreted as ‘*manifestation*’, reality as we see it.

2) Liberation from manifestation and concomitant suffering

The immediate, practical motivation for *dhikr* is that man finds himself entrapped in manifestation. Manifestation is doomed to impermanence, and this impermanence inevitably entails **separation, suffering, and death**. Islamic esoterism teaches that God alone is permanent — and blissful, and when the believer unites himself with the Divine Principle in fervent invocation, ‘spiritual poverty’ and ‘self-effacement’ (*faqr*), he **inwardly frees himself from manifestation and its concomitant suffering**.

Once again, this is an idea shared by Buddhism (*). In *Star Wars*, Yoda says to Anakin (about the dead) : ‘*Mourn them do not. Miss them do not. Attachment leads to jealousy. Train yourself to let go (...)*’ In *Dune*, after undergoing the agony of drinking the Water of Life, Paul feels nothing anymore. From that moment on, after showing so much on his soft features : love, pain, surprise, **Kyle McLachlan** is emotionless, his features are hard, and his eyes are like blue mirrors that say nothing. Great acting, but what a terrible philosophy !

(*) But not by Catholicism, which does not reject suffering but explains it and helps to accept it with hope and confidence in Providence (*fiat*) — and even gratitude (*magnificat*), as a way to share Christ’s Passion before sharing his Resurrection as an ultimate gift of love....

3) Purification, perfection, union

The *wird* comprises three Koranic formulas, each of which is recited 100 times :

- The 1st formula pertains to individuals and aims to establish **contrition and resolution**.
- The 2nd formula contains the name of the Prophet, and seeks to confer **perfection**.
- The 3rd formula contains the Name of God, and vehicles the mystery of **union**.

The three above-mentioned stages (*purification, perfection, union*) lead us directly to a well-known Islamic ternary, namely : *makhāfa*, *maḥabba*, and *ma‘rifa*. These may be translated as ‘Fear of God’, ‘Love of God’, ‘Knowledge of God’. They correspond to the **Hindu** ternary of *karma-mārga* (Way of Action and religious observance), *bhakti-mārga* (Way of Love), *jñāna-mārga* (Way of Knowledge), all of them containing an element of **fear and conformity**.

If Herbert largely borrows from **Taoist and Sufist personal methods of reaching liberation and perfection**, he is also however, as said before, quite ironical about ‘*heroes*’ and ‘*Madhi*’ in the name of which mass murders and deadly wars are made. He counter-balances these borrowings with scientific **rejection of absolutes**.

17 – Paul : Between *Messiah* and *Madhi*

In the end, there's a definite **contradiction** about Paul's messianic figure :



- **On the one hand, Paul is seen as some kind of Prophet**

Paul is a representative of what is good and beautiful, of truth and virtue, an incarnation of the *Logos* — doesn't he use the *Voice* ? His name, Paul, is taken from Paul = The **Apostle to the Gentiles**. This is a perfectly conscious choice, giving *Dune* takes on a strong smell of crusade all the way through. **Frank Herbert** said about Paul that : '*He is every prince who ever went in search of the Holy Grail.*' Doesn't he drink the *Water of Life* ? And doesn't he undergo some kind of 'agony' before 'resurrecting' into an even form powerful, invincible form ?

- **There are many hints about him being some kind of Saviour**

Paul has been chosen (*via* dreams) to be some kind of bridge between mankind and God, in the name of whom he speaks : '*No one goes against the will of God.*' But in Christianity, this Bridge was made through **suffering and personal sacrifice** (Christ's Crucifixion) whereas Paul wins his *Jihad* in the Muslim sort of way : through the **challenge of combat**. In *Dune* 2000 miniseries, Stilgar excuses Paul's murder of Jamis, explaining that : '*No man recognizes leadership without the challenge of combat*' which is of course stupid and selfish, and a dangerous misunderstanding. It would be more relevant to say : '*No man recognizes leadership without personal sacrifice.*'

→ As a matter of fact, Paul is closer to the Muslim figures of *Mahdi* than to the Christic figure of *Messiah* : isn't Muad'Dib his other name ?



- **On the other hand, Paul eventually *fails* his messianic destiny** — much like Darth Vader, originally the *Chosen One* — and it is his son **Leto**, who embodies the only hope (like Luke) with his twin sister Ghani...



In fact, Jamis's murder is a key element in Paul's life : it might correspond to Anakin killing the Tusken, and marks the start of Paul's descent to the 'Dark Side'. Paul wins the knife fight with Jamis, thus impressing the girl he loves and gaining instant respect from the Fremen. There's a **cold light in his eyes** and he imperiously allows others to dress him without helping. He's beginning to succumb to the idea of **getting what he wants by force, by hurting other people**. This sequence allegedly refers to the '**Third Temptation of Christ**' when Jesus is **offered dominion of all the Earth if only he'll turn against God**. While Christ refuses evil, Paul actually succumbs to it and cries.

→ **In fact, the second part of his name, 'Atreides', explains Paul's '*dark side*'**. Paul is a soft and luminous name about one who has seen the light and spreads the word of God, but 'Atreides' refers tragic figures from *The Iliad* (850 BC) such as Agamemnon.

Author **Frank Herbert** communicated what he saw as the **central theme of *Dune*** in an interview in 1979 : *‘The bottom line of the Dune trilogy is : **beware of heroes**. It is aimed at this whole idea of the infallible leader because my view of history says that mistakes made by a leader are amplified by the numbers who follow without question. **Super-heroes can be disastrous for human-kind.**’*

Dune is in fact a warning : *‘Don't give over all of your critical faculties to people in power, no matter how admirable those people may appear to be.’* Why not ? *‘Beneath the hero's facade you will find a human being who makes human mistakes. **Enormous problems arise when human mistakes are made on the grand scale available to a superhero.**’*

Perhaps more importantly : *‘Eventually, it is fallible mortals (and not heroes) who take over the power structure.’* This is dangerous because *‘It is demonstrable that power structures tend to attract people who **want power for the sake of power** and that a significant proportion of such people are imbalanced — in a word, insane.’* To illustrate this statement, Herbert drew examples of great men from Hitler, Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, Stalin and Mussolini, to John F. Kennedy and George Patton.

→ **In fact, one must be aware of the IRONY in *Dune*.** Mass murder was accomplished in the name of Hitler for instance, and indeed, in *Dune*, horrible wars and murders happen in the name of Muad'Dib. The whole message of ***Dune*** is encapsulated into this single, breathtaking, over-whelming, shocking image from the 1984 film version :



Children of Dune (2000) connects with ***Dune*** ending and opens on a battle aftermath which rates the miniseries PG-15 in less than five minutes. What else is there to say ?

DECODING THE NAMES

- **Alia** = A'La (Arabic female name) which means '*most high*'
- **Lady Jessica Atreides** = I suspect that Jessica is largely a *reversal* of Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth. Both are in league with the witches. Both have an intense relationship with a certain Duncan : Lady Macbeth tries to manipulate her husband into killing Duncan, while Herbert's Duncan is secretly in love with Lady Jessica. But there's a fundamental reversal : while Lady Macbeth is always scheming *against* her family, Lady Jessica is always scheming on her family's behalf.
- **Paul Atreides** : The name Paul is taken from Paul the Apostle. Herbert said : '*He is every prince who ever went in search of the Holy Grail.*' Atreides refers to Agamemnon Atreides, a hero from *The Iliad* (850 BC).
- **Baron Vladimir Harkonnen** : The title Baron may be an intentional homonym for 'barren' (as in 'one unable to have children'), being gay. The name Vladimir is probably a reference to **Vlad the Impaler** (1431-1476), the real-life inspiration for Dracula the vampire. Vlad's father was called Prince Vlad Dracul ('*Prince Vlad the Devil*') so he was called Vlad Dracula ('*Vlad the Devil's son*').
- **The Bene Gesserit** = a cross between Isaac Asimov's psycho-historians and Herbert's Jesuit mother and aunts. *Gesserit* = *Jesuit*. Herbert respected his mother's religion but never embraced it — although he felt that he benefited greatly from learning the Jesuit methods of argument.
- **CHOAM (Combine Honnete Ober Advancer Mercantiles)** = Herbert said '*The scarce water of Dune is an exact analog of oil scarcity. CHOAM is OPEC.*'
- **Fedaykin** = '*Feda'yin*' means '*one who sacrifices himself*' (for Allah). Saddam Hussein called his most trusted soldiers '*Fedayeen*'. **Yasser Arafat**, addressing a press conference at the United Nations in 1983, called Jesus '*the first Palestinian Feda'yin who carried his sword.*' This reflected the popular Muslim idea that Jesus was a prophet of Islam.
- **Fremen** = Based mostly on the Arabian Bedouins and the American Apache, but also the peoples of the Gobi, the Kalahari and the Australian outback. Their language is adopted from colloquial Arabic. The name is probably meant to suggest '*free men.*'

- **Kwisatz Haderach** = from the Hebrew *K'fitzat Haderech* (הדרך קפיצת) which means ‘a jump forward along the path’ (*K'fitzat* means “jump”, *ha* means “the” and *derech* means “way”). Indeed God ‘shortens the path of the righteous’ (*Numbers 13, 25*).
- **Duncan Idaho** = Duncan The Scot from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*
- **Muad'Dib** = *Dune* defines a Muad'Dib as a kangaroo mouse imported from Old Earth. That's definitely cute, but I think Herbert is actually referring to ‘*The Mahdi*’ which is the Muslim name for the **Second Coming of the Messiah**. ‘*Al Mahdi*’ literally means ‘the guided one.’ Many ambitious Arab leaders have called themselves Al Mahdi over the last several hundred years, notably Imam Mohammed Ahmed al Mahdi, but none of them seems to have been the right one so far.
- **Ornithopters** = This word means ‘an aircraft designed to derive its chief support and propulsion from flapping wings.’ The first ornithopter was probably the one used by Menippus to fly to the moon, in **Lucian of Samosata**'s story *Icaromenippus* (160 AD). Lucian intended the ornithopter as a high-tech modernization of the wax-and-feather wings Daedalus and Icarus used to escape Crete. Interest in ornithopters was rekindled by the blueprints for flying machines by **Leonardo da Vinci** (1452-1519). In all fairness, flapping wings are a highly inefficient way to move machines through the air but, well, this is SF after all. Herbert said ‘*Ornithopters are insects preying on the land.*’
- **Stilgar** = Paul's Fremen mentor combines the words ‘steel’ and ‘guard’.
- **Usul** = Paul's girlfriend Chani calls him Usul, a nickname which literally means ‘base of the pillar’ in Arabic. In Muslim scripture and Hindu iconography, pillars are usually symbols for the **masculine aspect of divine strength and fertility**.
- **The Sand Worms** = Visually, Frank Herbert called the Sandworm ‘*earth shipworms grown monstrous.*’ The [shipworm](#) (*Lyrodus pendicellatus*) is technically not a worm but a mollusc, with a tiny clam-like shell at the head. The shipworm uses its shell like a rasp, to burrow through wood ships and docks. Thus its nickname : ‘*the termite of the sea.*’ Herbert said that his inspiration for the sandworms came from a line in **Sir James George Frazer**'s *The Golden Bough* (1922) which alludes to ‘*the mindless animal in the depths of the psyche that guards the pearl of life.*’

HOW *STAR WARS* WAS INFLUENCED BY *DUNE*

Frank Herbert's 1963 *Dune* is to science fiction what *The Lord of The Rings* is to fantasy: the most popular, most influential and most critically-acclaimed novel in the genre. Herbert's novel was a revelation : before *Dune*, even the most well-written science fiction had been mostly 'wonderful gadget' stories, or political commentary expressed through exaggeration. It had never occurred to anyone that science fiction could offer the literary depth of Dostoevsky, the intricate intrigues of Shakespeare or so deeply fulfil the heroic epic form behind tales such as *Gilgamesh*, *The Odyssey*, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, *The Mahabharata*, and *Beowulf*.

George Lucas has often acknowledged *Dune* as an inspiration. In early drafts of the *Star Wars* script the influence was much more obvious — the story was full of feudalistic Houses and dictums, and the treasure the Princess was guarding wasn't the Death Star plans, but a shipment of 'aura spice.' The final version of *Star Wars* is related to *Dune* mostly in spirit : a science fiction heroic fantasy treated seriously. His lesser borrowings *might* include :

<i>STAR WARS</i>	<i>DUNE</i>
Princess Leia	Princess Alia (pronounce A-Leia)
Luke is the only hope	Leto is the only hope
There is a brooding romance between the twins	There is an incestuous romance between the twins
Villain turns out to be hero's father	Villain turns out to be hero's grandfather
Desert Planet Tatooine (with collateral use of Arabic-inspired terms)	Desert Planet Arrakis (with collateral use of Arabic-inspired terms)
Sandcrawler = Vehicle piloted by Jawas, 'left over from a mining era long ago'	Sandcrawler = Vehicle piloted by Arrakins, used to mine for spice
Moisture Farmers (Uncle Owen)	Dew Collectors 'used by Fremmen to provide a small but reliable source of water'

Spice Mines of Kessel <i>(mentioned in passing)</i>	Spice is the most valued commodity in the universe, mined from Dune
Jedi Mind Trick = Jedi ability which controls the actions of others	The Voice = Bene Gesserit ability which controls the actions of others
Jedi Bendu = Jedi training technique which gives them excellent internal control as well as supernatural prowess in combat	Prana Bindu = Bene Gesserit training technique which gives them excellent internal control and supernatural prowess in combat
Vision of Obi-Wan appears to Luke on Hoth, while he's seemingly dying	Vision of Pardot Kynes appears to Liet Kynes in the desert, while he's dying
The Trade Federation has a monopoly on shipping in space	The Spacing Guild has a monopoly on transportation in space
Luke practices his light-saber technique against an automated training remote	Alia practices her sword technique against an automated training dummy
The Millennium Falcon barely escapes from the jaws of giant, sightless space slug before it falls back into the asteroid.	The Duke's Ornithopter barely escapes from the jaws of a giant, sightless sand slug before it falls back into the dunes.
Luke spies on the Sand people using electric binoculars	Paul spies on the Fremen using electric binoculars
Repulsors = Small devices which counteract gravity (used in the landspeeder, speeder	Suspensors = Small devices which counteract gravity (used to suspend the Baron Harkonnen and Glowglobes)
Jabba is a worm thing, about 15 feet long, with human-like facial features, arms and hands, who sits atop a dais	Leto II is a worm thing, about 15 feet long, with human-like facial features, arms and hands, who sits atop a dais


CONCLUSION

Dune's referential background tries to mix the immiscible, which leads to a *very* opaque **melting pot of complex literary and bizarre philosophic ideas** which can easily leave you puzzled and disconcerted. With a thrilling plot, some beautiful images and an incredible cast, there are **almost as many reasons to love *Dune*** as to hate it — and questionings soon arise.



Dune is indeed spiritually disturbing. Borrowing heavily from Gnostic and Buddhist ideas of awakening, self-realization and inner light, *Dune* does not promote a pagan view of reality as most New Age stories, but while also borrowing elements from Islamic Esoterism in order to create some kind of '*Ecological Jihad*', Herbert immediately opposes warnings about enlightened heroes and *Mahdis*.

- Because of its occasional **morbidity**
- Because of its occasional **warped philosophic ideas** and **strong moral confusion**

I am obliged to rate *Dune* PG-15 , insisting on the fact that there *are* indeed many qualities in this saga, but also warning that *Dune*'s spiritual premises and Catholicism are *in some ways* mutually exclusive, and mutually hostile. Watch with care and skip some scenes !