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# The Messiah of Youth: Ageism, Power, and Space in *Dune: Part One* (2021) and *Dune: Part Two* (2024)

**Abstract:** This article analyzes *Dune: Part One* (Denis Villeneuve, 2021) and especially *Dune: Part Two* (Denis Villeneuve, 2024), focusing on how cultural age, gender and the different planetary backgrounds of the key characters intersect. The article argues that both films adopt what Kathleen Woodward calls “the youthful structure of the look” (164). That is, Villeneuve’s *Dune* adaptations stereotypically present ageing characters in power as out of touch with their realities, as they lead whimsically and make poor decisions. The protagonist figure of Paul Atreides (Chalamet) makes this more obvious through his ability to learn and the ways in which he is shaped by multiple cultures. The *Dune* universe is populated with ageing characters who represent the main forces that Paul has to face: Baron Harkonnen (Skarsgård), the silver-haired Emperor (Walken), and Reverend Mother Mohiam (Rampling). These ageing characters contrast with the youth exhibited by Paul. The article develops a reading of the spaces in the 2021 and 2024 *Dune* adaptations and the ways in which they intersect with the films’ discourses on ageing. The analysis of a range of spaces considers how they reinforce the films’ discourses on age (for example, discourses around poor eyesight).

The article also explores the relationship between Paul and middle-aged characters in order to draw comparisons with the role that fourth age plays in the films. The last part of the article takes into account how discourses around age, power, and cultural background intersect in the last scenes in *Part Two* and how the film channels these discourses through its representation of space. Finally, the article qualifies the idea that Villeneuve’s adaptations invite a white messianic reading, particularly in light of Chani’s (Zendaya) role—questioning Paul’s course of action—and the decision to have the very ending of *Part Two* focus on her rather than Paul.

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Denis Villeneuve's *Dune* universe (particularly *Part Two*) is populated with ageing characters: Reverend Mother Mohiam (Charlotte Rampling), Baron Vladimir Harkonnen (Stellan Skarsgård) and the Emperor (Christopher Walken). In 2022, when the second film was shot, the actors that play these characters were 76, 71, and 79 years old respectively. Villeneuve's 2021 and 2024 *Dune*<sup>1</sup> adaptations draw attention to the age of these powerful characters in the narrative in order to underline the youthfulness of the protagonist, Paul Atreides (Timothée Chalamet), and his ability to learn from people from a variety of backgrounds, cultures, and ages. As the narrative develops across *Part One* and *Part Two*, Paul gradually shows his growing ability to surpass these more experienced characters, who show signs of decline.

In this article, I analyze how cultural age and the different planetary backgrounds of the key characters intersect with film space. I argue that the Villeneuve adaptations, particularly *Part Two*, adopt what Kathleen Woodward calls “the youthful structure of the look,” which is, as she explains “the culturally induced tendency to degrade and reduce an older person to the prejudicial category of old age” (164). The operation of this look in *Dune* is evident in the focus of the films on the challenges presented to Paul by civilizations or social groups controlled by people in their third and fourth age. As Sally Chivers observes in similar terms, films that revolve around age in one way or another often show “a preoccupation with constructing youthfulness” (147). *Dune* stereotypically presents ageing characters in power as out of touch with their realities, as they lead whimsically and make poor decisions. These ageing characters contrast with the youth exhibited by Paul. This contrast is all the more evident as these older characters represent the main forces that Paul has to face. As viewers, we are generally asked by the films to side with Paul and his youthfulness, although I will qualify this statement towards the end of this article by suggesting that the ending of *Dune: Part Two* encourages viewers to question the imperial and ageist discourses that the two Villeneuve movies develop. Yet, this qualification does not fully reverse the negative image of ageing characters that the Villeneuve films paint.

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<sup>1</sup> Whenever I refer to *Dune* without further specifying in this article, I am referring to both film adaptations directed by Denis Villeneuve at the same time: *Dune: Part One* (2021) and *Dune: Part Two* (2024). Whenever I refer to Herbert's 1965 novel or Lynch's 1984 film adaptation, I mention it explicitly.

The universe of Villeneuve's *Dune* features four key planets or settings, including the imposing cityscapes of Giedi Prime (where the brutal Harkonnens live), the vast deserts of Arrakis (the planet that is home to the Fremen), the cliffs and stone castles of Caladan (home to House Atreides), and the somewhat indeterminate planet where the Emperor lives: Kaitain. The Bene Gesserit, for their part, are a female cabal that is not associated with a specific location. Yet, they pull the strings of power across the Empire and have a close relationship with the Emperor and his family. Villeneuve's films revolve around the struggle between the Harkonnens and the Atreides to control the production of spice in Arrakis. Spice is a valuable resource that enables interplanetary travel and offers health benefits. Much of the narrative focuses on the new life of young Paul on Arrakis: he embraces Fremen culture and is eager to learn from it, gradually gaining popularity, reluctantly leading the Fremen, and eventually facing the older Baron Harkonnen, the Emperor, and the designs of Reverend Mother Mohiam, a Bene Gesserit.

As Woodward observes, "we [tend to] cast ourselves as younger in relation to the old person we see on the screen" and we often do it in an "uncritical" way (165). That has also been the case with much of the scholarship on the 2021 *Dune* adaptation, which generally overlooks the film's (and the novel's) discourses on age and focuses instead on the figure of the white messiah, the depiction of the Fremen, and the orientalism of both the novel and the 2021 film. References to the Muslim world and culture, including Arabic words, abound in the *Dune* novel (Pop 26–7; Wander 97–8). Scholars have also drawn connections between Arrakis and the Middle East, particularly by reading the spice as oil, especially in the context of crises of oil shortage (Dridi 51; Pop 26–7). Yet, as Josr Dridi points out, *Dune: Part One* reduced the references to the Arab world—a strategy that has been confirmed by screenwriter John Spaits and director Denis Villeneuve (54). Indeed, this argument could also be extended to *Part Two*. Along similar lines, Misha Grifka Wander argues that *Dune: Part One* is a "Europeanized version of Herbert's universe" in which the anti-messianic tone of the novel is watered down to focus on Paul's heroism in contrast to the Barbarism of the Harkonnens (100–1). Dridi succinctly captures the colonial issues around which the novel (and also the film adaptations) revolve: "Arrakis is not decolonized but recolonized from within by a 'benevolent' white outsider who goes native, attains knowledge of its culture and geography, and gains power over its people and resources" (51). Before the second Villeneuve adaptation was actually released, Wander's analysis of *Part One* already pointed out that the uncritical portrayal of Paul could be "unshakeable" in *Part Two* (101)—a statement that encapsulates some of the challenges that analyses of the second film present. Dridi also underlines the "cultural ambiguity" of *Part One* (63)—an observation that can be equally applied to *Part Two*. The 2024 film seems to double down on *Part One*'s white saviorist themes and at the same time questions them through the eyes of Chani (Zendaya). Although this article will bear these debates in mind, I will

focus on the ways in which discourses on ageing crisscross with these aspects around which analyses of the novel and *Dune: Part One* have developed so far. In that sense, my analysis of *Part Two* through the lens of space and age aims to shed light on the attempts of the film to question (at least partially) Paul's messianic figure.

Age is a dimension that is also very present in Frank Herbert's 1965 novel. The different planets featured in the novel also depend on spice, a substance that, apart from boosting cognitive abilities, extends life. The appendix to Herbert's novel records that the spice has "geriatric qualities" (566). The novel also underlines the age of some characters. In *Frank Herbert's Dune: A Critical Companion*, Kara Kennedy draws attention to Paul, Chani, and Feyu-Rautha's youth multiple times (45, 51, 58, 63, 65, 72–3). Yet, the novel also explicitly directs readers' attention towards age. For example, there are several references to the age of Reverend Mother Mohiam while she talks to Jessica (Paul's mother) at the beginning of the novel. Reverend Mother Mohiam is part of a cabal, the Bene Gesserit, that advises leaders and tries to influence the course of politics. The narrator describes the Reverend Mother in the following terms before she talks to Paul about the dreams he has been having: "The old woman's voice was snappish, demanding", "The old voice carried a tone of cruel mimicry", "She [Jessica] braved the steady stare from the old eyes" (24). Notably, these references to Mother Mohiam's age (and a couple more) appear in just half a page. In this way, the novel associates from its very beginning the age of Mohiam with traits such as coldness, ruthlessness, and cruelty. Ageing is also a central element in the latest cinematic adaptations of *Dune*. Although in Villeneuve's films the spice does not explicitly have geriatric properties, discourses on age remain a cornerstone of the narrative. Age in the 2021 and 2024 films (particularly fourth age) is often associated with a demanding attitude and moral weakness. At the same time, the films associate prowess and shrewdness with younger characters, especially Paul.

As hinted in the previous paragraph, Villeneuve's *Dune* adaptations follow stereotypical portrayals of ageing in cinema, which often focus, as Josephine Dolan notes, on stories of decline (3). Scholars also identify senility and decay as common features of old age in film (Shary and McVittie 4; Goggin and Kriebernegg 30). That is the case of Hawat in *Part One*. Hawat is played by Stephen McKinley Henderson, who was 70 when the film was shot. An oversight of Henderson's character fails to prevent the Harkonnen attack on Arrakeen and eventually leads to the death of Duke Atreides, the father of Paul. Sally Chivers goes a step further in her diagnosis of films dealing with ageing and argues that old age is often associated with disability and illness (8)—an aspect that can be seen, within the context of *Dune*, in the case of Baron Harkonnen, as I show later. Apart from these general observations on the depiction of age in cinema, Peter Goggin and Ulla Kriebernegg point to other more genre-specific depictions. They note that older characters in science fiction tend to show bad temper and threatening and corrupt behaviours (32). Several authors have also pointed out

the gendered dimension of ageing and, more specifically, at the centrality of faces, particularly in the case of women (Chivers 12; Bañón and Zecchi 253). Chivers draws attention to the act of showing or hiding an ageing face (12) and specifically argues that “images that reveal wrinkles suggest ill health” (8). Along similar lines, Raquel Bañón and Barbara Zecchi mention that strategies to “mask” or “disguise” signs of old age in faces are often connected to the negative connotations associated with old age (253). As my analysis shows later, the 2021 and 2024 *Dune* adaptations constantly play with the notion of showing, covering, and hiding faces, oftentimes when older characters are involved.

Apart from its discourses around age and colonialism, Villeneuve’s *Dune* universe stands out because of its distinct rendering of the different locations/planets in which the action takes place and their connection to the characters that populate and rule over them. For example, the hardly lit black and white shots of Giedi Prime convey the crudity and ruthlessness of its inhabitants and the Harkonnens, the cruel ruling family of this world. In *The Science Fiction Film in Contemporary Hollywood* (2023), Evdokia Stefanopoulou notes that science fiction films tend to revolve around either bodies or worlds (spaces), although she also acknowledges that they are related (14–15, 174). In a similar vein, writing about Villeneuve’s *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), Christophe Gelly and David Roche consider how the physical and virtual spaces in this film interact with the film’s discourse on human, replicant and AI bodies (2022 162). Taking these contributions as a point of departure, this article aims to develop a reading of a selection of spaces in *Dune* and the ways in which they intersect with the films’ discourses on ageing and power, by paying close attention to youthful and ageing bodies, their actions, and how they are presented.

The analysis of ageing in *Dune* in this article focuses on the use of film spaces to see how the films reinforce the insistence of the novel on ageing by visual means and how it activates the youthful look that Woodward identifies in visual culture (164). In this sense, I follow Goggin and Krieger’s observations about ageing in science fiction cinema and series. They note that elements related to the *mise-en-scène* are part of how we perceive ageing. They refer, for example, to props, landscapes, and even vehicles (32). Also, in the article “Imagining Geographies of Film,” Stuart Aitken and Deborah Dixon identify five key focus areas that can help to pay attention to the multiple dimensions that configure film spaces (328–335). “Landscape as actor”, “landscapes as work and doing work”, and “scales” (329–31, 333–4) are the three elements that lend themselves more clearly to aid in the analysis of *Dune*, although I will leave aside scale, as it is the aspect that is probably less clearly connected to ageing. Instead of landscape, I prefer to use the more general term ‘space.’ In this sense, the idea of spaces as actors refers to space as a reflection of the personality or mind of a character. Space as work and doing work refers to the idea of films using or manipulating space to add additional layers of meaning, to advance plot lines or to draw additional connections. My approach to space is also informed by Mark Cooper’s work. He

observes that films tend to be structured around “a spatial problem” (149). For Cooper, characters’ looks are central in the articulation of space, as films often rely on looks to explore spatial divisions and tensions (151). This approach to space can be particularly productive when looking at discourses on ageing, given the centrality of faces in such narratives.

### Between the Mist and the Shadows: Hiding and Foregrounding Old Age

As advanced in the introduction, *Dune: Part Two* features several central actors who were in their early or late 70s when the film was shot. In this section, I focus on Baron Harkonnen, Reverend Mother Mohiam and the Emperor as three figures that both hold a large amount of power and stand at the line between third and fourth age. These three characters are also the main ones that stand in the way of Paul. The characterization of Baron Harkonnen (Stellan Skarsgård) is particularly surprising, as he—and the rest of the Harkonnens, also women—have bald heads (a major change when compared with the red-haired Baron in David Lynch’s 1984 *Dune*). This detail underlines the age of a character who is, as other Harkonnens, particularly cruel, killing anyone who minimally stands in his way. The megalomaniac black and white cityscapes of Giedi Prime also underline the totalitarian character of this society and the Baron himself. Yet, despite the seeming prowess of the Harkonnens, the Baron, who is a person with obesity, moves around thanks to a flying machine that follows him around and allows him to levitate. Apart from this, he also carries technological implants on the back of his body that emit a source of orange light, showing his bodily limitations (e.g. *Part Two* 0:49:00). This characterization of the Baron is an apt example of the connection between old age and disability that Chivers has identified in onscreen narratives about age (8).

The idea of hiding old age is present from the moment Baron Harkonnen is introduced, twenty minutes into *Part One*, as Rabban (Dave Bautista) informs him of the transfer of power over spice production on Arrakis from the Harkonnens to the Atreides (0:18:49–0:19:50). The Baron, in turn, explains to him that this change could be a poisoned gift for the Atreides. In this first appearance, the fully naked body of the Baron, filmed from a side or from the back and in long and extreme long shots, is in the middle of a cloud of steam that dims his silhouette, as if he were sitting inside a sauna, rendering his body contours almost imperceptible. A similar strategy is employed in closer shots that focus on his face. When the cloud of steam seems to finally leave the frame, he looks down, preventing viewers once again from appreciating his facial features. *Part One* and *Part Two* present the Baron as someone with substantial time to relax, although they do so in an abject manner. The Baron appears taking a mud bath three times (one in *Part One* and two in *Part Two*). The first of these baths is particularly representative, as the Baron emerges from the bottom of the tub at the

beginning of the scene while Rabban informs him that they have chased Paul into a major sandstorm in the desert, which most likely led him to his death (*Part One* 1:54:38–1:55:55). Before the Baron emerges to the surface of the tub, the film features a long shot of the tub filled to the brim with what appears to be dark viscous matter. The next shot of the bathtub shows his head emerging from the liquid as a black substance slowly drips down his face and his shoulders, obstructing a clear view of his face in particular. This moment is preceded by the bubbling of the muddy water as his head begins to protrude from the water. After they finish their conversation, the Baron submerges himself again into the water, a movement that is followed by a detail shot of the liquid substance bubbling again. The close shot also draws attention to the pitch-black color of the liquid and the brown hues of the bubbles. Although the Baron is engaged in an activity that probably has a positive impact on his health, the sequence of details described above presents him in an abject way. This representation matches common representations of fourth age as “waste” (Gilleard and Higgs, *Contexts* 162 in Dolan 4). Given the color, textures, and bubbling of the liquid he is bathing himself in, he seems to be literally taking a bath in a pool of waste—which, apart from alluding to the lack of morality of the Harkonnens and their obsession with profit (through this indirect visual reference to oil), also underscores his age. Indeed, Gilleard and Higgs also observe that fourth age—in contrast to third age, which is often seen more positively—tends to be framed in terms of “narratives of frailty and abjection, of the loss of status and place, of agency and identity” (“An Enveloping” 235 in Freijo et al.). The insistence of the latest *Dune* adaptations on depicting the Baron inside this abject bathtub draws attention to his age but also to his imminent loss of power and eventual demise.

Reverend Mother Mohiam (Charlotte Rampling) is a member of the female cabal of the Bene Gesserit. In *Part Two*, she underlines that the Bene Gesserit do not hope: they plan, showing their involvement in quietly developing schemes. Like their plans, she moves in the shadows and her face often remains undecipherable. This is all the more surprising since she is played by Charlotte Rampling, whose face we barely see during the film—an aspect that I will analyze later. The contrast between Paul’s youth and Mohiam’s age is evident from the beginning of the film, when a detail shot features a hand of each of them: Paul places his hand inside a box that will read his personality and visions of the future. In the same shot, Mohiam holds the box with her wrinkly hand on top, evincing the age difference between both characters (0:23:52). Paul’s relationship to Mohiam is also quite telling. In the same scene, Mohiam places Paul in a submissive position when she controls his body (using the so-called voice) and forces him to put his hand inside the aforementioned box. Paul also receives information from her about his visions that allows him to evolve as a person. Yet, by the end of the second part, it is actually Paul who uses the voice on her. This time the tables have turned. Right before Paul challenges the Emperor in *Part Two*, she says: “Consider what you are about to do, Paul Atreides.” To this, Paul swiftly replies: “Silence!” causing

her to fall back and to whisper “abomination” when she realizes the power and the lack of respect for established authority that Paul shows (2:25:09–2:26:40). The fact that Paul’s use of his voice makes her lose her balance and fall back illustrates that older women tend to be “cinematically represented as devalued” (Cole et al. 151). At the same time, this moment, seen in conjunction with the earlier encounter with Mohiam in *Part One*, illustrates Paul’s relationship with older characters, learning or developing qualities from them and then beating them at their own game.

Although Mohiam is introduced as an imposing figure that pulls the strings of power from the shadows, the fact that she often operates behind the scenes not only signals her and the Bene Gesserit’s cunning but also her ultimately precarious status as an old woman. The first time Mohiam appears so is in the scene at Castle Caladan when she tests young Paul with a box and the Gom Jabbar, a poison needle that may cause his instant death (0:23:10–0:28:00). The scene relies on extremely low-key lighting and Mohiam herself wears black clothes. Apart from this, she wears a black mesh over her face, which not only prevents viewers from seeing her facial expressions and wrinkles but also allows her to almost completely merge with the dark background and, in practice, almost disappear in the background. Other Bene Gesserit (Jessica [Rebecca Ferguson] or Princess Irulan [Florence Pugh]) occasionally also cover their faces with similar meshes. Yet, almost every single time Mohiam appears her face is covered or hidden in the shadows. The conversation between Jessica and Mohiam that follows Mohiam’s testing of Paul makes Jessica’s uncovered face much more visible than Mohiam’s, which still hides under a birdcage veil (0:28:00–0:29:20). Apart from this, Jessica’s middle-aged face is also better lit. In several other instances, Mohiam’s face is not covered but the veil that envelops her head and the lack of lighting keep her face almost in complete darkness. That is the case of a scene in *Part Two* on the Emperor’s planet in which Princess Irulan and Mohiam talk about the possibility of Paul being alive (1:09:52–1:11:17).

This characterization of Mohiam does not only point to her attempt to hide her intentions but also to preserve an illusion of youth. Drawing on previous scholarship, Bañón and Zecchi warn that masking old age seeks to avoid the potentially detrimental consequence of being perceived as old (253). At the same time, Simon Biggs, exploring the idea of masquerade in connection to ageing, observes that “the very act of hiding alerts the performer and audience that something is being hidden” (52). Following this train of thought, hiding Mohiam’s facial features also points to her waning influence. Commenting on *All About Eve* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950) in a book chapter about the performance of age, Jodi Brooks observes that ageing women tend to be placed in a “moment of fading” (239). In *Dune*, Mohiam seems to merge at times with the background or to embody a faceless person. Reproducing a similar discourse to the one mentioned by Brooks, Mohiam’s authority can be said to be literally fading, as well. In sum, Mohiam is not only hiding the schemes of the Bene Gesserit but also her age, perhaps precisely to avoid fading. Indeed, the moment when Paul uses the

voice on Mohiam shouting “Silence” is one of the few moments in the film in which viewers actually get to see Mohiam’s face, in spite of the low-key lighting in the scene (2:26:30). This time Mohiam’s face is not engulfed by shadows or hidden by mesh face coverings, as is customary both in *Part One* and *Part Two*. However, the fact that her face is most visible the moment she is disempowered confirms the observations of many cultural gerontologists when they denounce that signs of old age are associated with decline and disability and, as a consequence, social norms encourage individuals to hide such signs of ageing, particularly when it comes to their faces (e.g. Dolan 3; Chivers 8).

Perhaps the most relevant older character is the silver-haired and sometimes silver-clothed Emperor (Christopher Walken), as he is the one with the most power and the one Paul eventually has to face and defeat at the end of *Part Two*. The Emperor is advised by the Bene Gesserit, including Reverend Mother Mohiam and his own daughter, Princess Irulan, who is a Bene Gesserit, as well. Although he only appears in *Part Two*, in *Part One* he is mentioned as the person who has come up with the idea of partnering with the Harkonnens to kill Duke Atreides. Apart from his greying hair, the grey clothes that he wears during the final sequence set on Arrakis, bring his age to the forefront. In addition, the Emperor sometimes appears against a blurry background filmed in shallow focus. For example, at the beginning of *Part Two* (0:01:22–0:01:48). Cinematographer Greig Fraser has explained in an interview that he aimed for a “myopic” effect when shooting the Emperor in some scenes (“*Dune: Part Two* Cinematographer Greig Fraser,” minute 40). The film does not only suggest that the Emperor is a man who is losing his physical faculties but also his judgment. The Emperor is a man entrenched in a dirty way of doing politics, backstabbing his potential opponents. This is confirmed by his daughter, Princess Irulan, who says: “my father has always been guided by the calculus of power” (0:02:01). When he receives the news that Paul is alive, he drops the container with the message on the ground and wanders into shallow focus, giving the impression that he is going down an uncertain path, his political vision also potentially distorted by his age (2:06:17–2:06:47). This is a common—though stereotypical—strategy when depicting old age. Analyzing a frame of Dr. Borg (Victor Sjöström) and his daughter-in-law Marianne (Ingrid Thulin) driving towards Lund in *Wild Strawberries* (Ingmar Bergman, 1957), Thomas Cole, Nathan Carlin, and Ronald Carson note the following: “Bergman’s compositional choices raise a number of questions. Youth dominates old age and is more sharply focused, for youth life is composed of blacks and whites rather than grays. [...] Old age moves a person into the background of life, with few sharp contrasts and lack of focus” (142). In the shot that Cole et al. analyze, the figure of the older character seems to be quietly fading in the background of the frame. The shallow focus to depict the space that surrounds the Emperor in *Dune: Part Two* echoes the lack of focus on the character of Dr. Borg in Bergman’s film. Thus, both films rely on a similar strategy to depict male characters who experience a crisis during their fourth age and their sense of disorientation.

The film's preoccupation with sight can be appreciated in several other aspects of the film and its construction of spaces and positioning of characters within them. The "myopic" effect that Fraser mentions is not limited to the Emperor but actually permeates some spaces related to powerful figures both in his home planet and Giedi Prime. In this sense, such spaces perform the myopia of the Empire. The size, scale, and structure of the arena where the Harkonnen watch people killing each other has towering structures with viewing platforms for the elite. These viewing platforms—which look like visored helmets (e.g. 1:13:43)—are so far from the ground that the Bene Gesserit and the Baron need spectacles to actually see what happens in the arena. These elites do not have a clear view of the game and what is at stake. In this way, they are presented as somewhat myopic. More significantly, several buildings on the Emperor's planet have such narrow window openings that they barely let the light in and they hardly allow the person inside to properly see the outside if they wanted to (e.g. 1:08:54, 2:06:51). In addition, a conversation between Reverend Mother Mohiam, Princess Irulan and Lady Margot (Léa Seydoux) takes place in a sort of pavilion with a roof whose sides extend to a rather low extreme and in a completely vertical angle, obstructing the outside view of those who stand below this structure (1:25:23). The layout of these spaces draws attention to the indrawn character of those in power, who are mainly ageing characters and who seem to have willingly removed themselves from any contact (visual contact in this case) with the world outside. The design of these buildings and the stark light contrasts between the inside and the outside allude once again to the poor vision of the elderly in power.

### Beyond the Old Ways? The Ambivalence of the Young, Skillful Learner

Against this background of extremely powerful but literally fading and waning older figures, the films consistently underscore Paul's ability to learn from other people, particularly from the Fremen. Apart from this, Paul is also advised by several people who are substantially older than him. Yet, the films underline that Paul's true asset is the combination of his willingness to learn and his youth. Stilgar (Javier Bardem), a Fremen, plainly conveys this idea when he says in *Part One* that Paul is young and he "can learn their ways" while Jessica, his mother, is "too old to learn" (2:08:45–2:08:55). Rebecca Ferguson, who played Jessica, was 39 when the film was shot in 2022. *Part One* highlights Paul's skillfulness when it comes to adjusting to new environments. Before his first incursion into the Arrakis desert, Paul already knows how to adjust the special suit people must wear to survive in the desert, unlike his father—played by Oscar Isaac, 40 at the time of filming (0:55:09–0:56:29). This point is later underscored again by the film, as Paul helps his mother adjust her suit after flying

away into the desert following the Harkonnen attack on House Atreides (1:59:36–1:59:48). Although the film underlines Paul's sharp skills and disposition to learn, connecting them to his youth, he does not really mingle with younger characters, except for Chani, whom he does not always listen to. Instead, the interactions with older characters are what seem to actually make Paul grow, although Chani also teaches him valuable lessons about Fremen culture. Cole et al. note that films sometimes also include positive stereotypes about older characters. Namely, they indicate that some films revolve around themes of intergenerational interactions and mentorship (Cole et al. 143). Despite the stereotypical depiction of late third age and early fourth age in Villeneuve's *Dune* adaptations, the films actually present intergenerational relations as extremely beneficial. Paul learns from middle-aged characters such as his mother Jessica, the Fremen leader Stilgar (Javier Bardem was 53 when filming the second film) or his teacher, Gurney Halleck (Josh Brolin, 54). Even Reverend Mother Mohiam, who stands between third and fourth age, occasionally acts as a mentor in *Part One*, as she teaches him to control his impulses through the Gom Jabbar test and makes Paul aware of possibilities or schemes that he was previously unaware of.

Paul does not only learn from and surpass older humans. He also shows his ability to understand and tap into the power of the eldest creatures in the film: the sandworms that populate the vast deserts of Arrakis. The film once again draws attention to age through the rugged skin of the worms and their grey skin tone. Indeed, moments before the first sandworm appears in *Part One*, Paul has a sort of vision in the desert after accidentally inhaling some spice (1:03:00–1:04:15). During this vision, Paul says: “I recognize your footsteps, old man” (1:04:06). After uttering these words, Gurney reaches Paul by the shoulder and escorts him back to the helicopter. Taking this into account, Paul's words appear to refer to the training received by his teacher Gurney (as Paul utters similar words in an earlier training scene [0:15:50]). Yet, the shots that precede these words actually build up tension as the worm approaches Paul's location and he seems to be hypnotized by the vision he is having while the other characters run back to the helicopter. Through these words then, Paul seems to refer to the “old man” of the desert, a sandworm. Paul's ambiguous words hint that he seems to intuitively understand the worm. In *Part Two*, after the spectacular sandworm riding scene, a Fremen woman says: “He [Paul] called a grandfather worm, the biggest ever seen” (0:58:10), again inviting viewers to notice the elderly attributes of the sandworms. As Villeneuve himself has noted, the worms in *Dune* have a “pre-historic quality” (“Designing the Sandworm” 02:00). Because of this and their scale, these creatures evoke awe and reverence rather than the thoughts of decline and decay that are associated with elderly humans in the films. Despite the more favorable portrayal of these old creatures, the fact that Paul learns to ride them as a means of transport in the second film suggests that he is also able to dominate them, just as he overcomes old figures of power and authority at the end of the film.

The myopic effect and the obstacles that prevent characters from appreciating their surroundings do not seem to pose a problem for Paul. He is involved in some scenes in which there is an excess of sand dust. In some instances, the sand dust covers all the screen and yet he successfully handles such situations, which constitute turning points in both films. In these scenes, Paul's ability to move through clouds of sand successfully constitutes spatial work in Aitken and Dixon's terms (331)—work that underscores Paul's youthful skillfulness. In *Part One*, Paul manages to land a helicopter that is missing some of the parts that keep it flying in the middle of a massive sandstorm (1:55:55–1:58:45). This maneuver allows Paul and his mother to escape the Harkonnens and eventually find the Fremen. *Part Two* features a similar situation in visual terms: Paul manages to ride a giant sandworm even though he is constantly being whipped by gusts of sand as the worm moves forward at a high speed (0:51:30–0:57:58). This moment is particularly relevant as it is a key challenge that Paul has to overcome in order to gain the respect of the Fremen. In both scenes, Paul is engulfed in sand dust and yet, this does not prevent him from orienting himself. The stasis of the often-old characters who encounter obstacles in their field of vision contrasts with the movement of Paul himself, who manages to go forward even in unfavorable circumstances.

As mentioned in the introduction, *Dune* has often been read as a white savior or messianic narrative. Certainly, Villeneuve's adaptation also invites such a reading at several points. Yet, I would like to complicate that reading a bit by considering the ways in which spatial configurations and discourses on age and colonialism intersect in the final sequence of the battle at the palace in Arrakeen, the Empire's city on Arrakis. At the end of *Part Two*, Paul embraces the messianic myth that some Bene Gesserit have been spreading about him among the Fremen and he devises a plan to face the Emperor and the Harkonnens. Even though the scenes that precede the takeover of the palace present Paul as a messiah for the Fremen, the scenes at the palace tell a slightly different story. In order to develop this reading, I want to draw attention to the awe-inspiring character of the landscapes, cityscapes, and interior design in the films. *Dune* presents us with different exotic worlds—Giedi Prime and the wide array of desert shorts are good examples of this. In that sense, Daniella Berghahn's recent observations on exotic cinema seem fitting. She points out that "exoticism's deliberate foregrounding of textures and colours, its reliance on the seductive power of beauty, is a strategy of concealment and obfuscation" (44). While this need not necessarily be a strategy in *Dune*, the awe that these images produce may prevent viewers from paying attention to the roles they play in the film.

The final scenes at the Arrakeen palace in *Part Two* constitute one of the clearest instances of spaces in the film "as work and doing work," following Aitken and Dixon's notion of the term (329–331), and of doing such work in terms of age and power. Giedi Prime is shot using infrared cameras that give the Harkonnen planet a distinctive and alien-like black and white look. These aesthetics are emulated in some of the final scenes at the palace in Arrakis

once the Emperor and Baron Harkonnen arrive. While infrared cameras are not used in these scenes, the arrival of the Emperor and the Baron seems to infuse the palace with the light that is characteristic of the Harkonnen homeworld (2:11:18–2:13:15). What is particularly relevant in these scenes is that once Paul walks into the castle, lighting changes and white light is replaced by light with warmer orange hues (2:18:48–2:22:05). These orange tones recall previous desert scenes in Fremen territory. For example, the second scene in *Part Two*, which stands out because of the orange hues that take over the frame (0:03:00–0:11:40). The final fight between Paul and the Empire, represented by the Harkonnen Feyd-Rautha (Austin Butler), plays with this association between Fremen territories (represented by Paul here) and orange light, as sources of orange light beam into the room as the two men fight (2:28:00–2:32:30). Yet, in one of the final shots, once Paul has defeated Feyd-Rautha, black and darkness seem to engulf the now dimmer orange lighting (2:33:20). This development suggests that even though Paul has harnessed Fremen knowledge and energy, the logics of the Empire—an Empire ruled by ageing characters—have prevailed. More specifically, the film suggests that what has allowed Paul to thrive is Harkonnen ruthlessness. Indeed, before he decides to embrace his messianic position and lead the Fremen against the Empire, he learns that his grandfather is actually Baron Harkonnen and he tells his mother: “so this is how we survive: by being Harkonnens” (1:59:35), embracing his Harkonnen side with a surprising readiness. Through the evolving use of color and lighting in these scenes, the film does significant spatial work, reinforcing a reading of Paul as a figure that manages to defeat the Empire and, in the process, comes to embody some of the moral issues that he was fighting in the first place.

The film’s ending presents Paul as a character of a highly ambivalent nature whose actions are, at least at the end of *Part Two*, at the service of gaining power. The end of the film suggests that Paul has defeated the Empire and old age, as the Emperor kneels before Paul and kisses his hand (2:34:45–2:34:52). This moment becomes the maximum expression, in Woodward’s terms, of the “youthful structure of the look” (164) in the film, as youth finally triumphs over old age. As the Emperor is about the kneel down, he is shot in shallow focus and his figure is blurred. In this way, the ending of the film reminds viewers of previous associations of old age with poor eyesight, lack of vision, and the notion that ageing figures literally fade in the last phase of their life. Yet, *Dune: Part Two* develops an ambivalent position towards the figure of Paul in these closing moments. During the previous conversation with the Emperor, both Paul and the Emperor are filmed using hard lighting (2:25:45–2:28:04). This leaves half of their face in darkness while the other half of their face remains lit, suggesting that both characters are of a double-sided nature. More importantly, the use of the same kind of lighting on both faces suggests that young Paul and the old Emperor may not be so different after all. Indeed, the Emperor tells Paul that “the heart is not meant to rule” (2:27:39). This is precisely the path Paul chooses at the end of the film. He downgrades his relationship with

Chani, disregarding her advice in previous scenes and proposing to Princess Irulan despite the fact that he still loves Chani. Even though Paul defeats the Emperor in the end, he does so at the price of becoming like him.

The final shots of the film confirm this hypothesis, as the film ends with a close shot of Chani's angry face, who does not believe in the prophecy about Paul and voices her disagreement and disappointment with Paul's decisions in the last third of the film (1:54:30–2:37:42). After the Emperor kneels before Paul, all the characters in the room kneel or bow to Paul except two: his future wife Princess Irulan and Chani, who stand at opposite sides of the room while Paul stands in the middle (2:33:50–2:36:13). The film particularly emphasizes Chani's refusal to show respect to Paul after his victory, as she not only does not bow but immediately leaves the room after Paul turns back to look at her. Chani's reaction underlines the film's objection to the path that Paul has chosen to pursue. Previously, as people kneel down before Paul, the film features a shot taken roughly from the point where Chani stands. In this shot, the orange beams of light that get into the palace room are probably the dimmest in the whole sequence (2:35:00). Therefore, *Dune*'s ending is far from celebratory—and while the film remains ageist throughout, the ending seems to question, at least partially, the narrative that pits cosmopolitan youth against the idea of a corrupt, myopic old age. By the end, young Paul seems to be developing traits that resemble those of the elderly figures of power that he and the Fremen fight earlier in the film.

Finally, instead of focusing on Paul, the film's very last scene invites viewers to empathize with Chani (2:36:48–2:37:40). After she leaves the Arrakeen fortress, we see her walk on top of a dune in an extreme long shot that draws attention to the reduced scale of her figure against the vastness of the desert. Her movement on the screen from right to left and her footsteps on the sand hint that she is heading to the deep desert, going back to her past life, and parting ways with the political events that Paul is involved in. Close shots of her face while she is panting and her lower lip trembling with rage underscore her disappointment in Paul. The final shot frames her face even more closely as she huffs (2:37:28–2:37:40). The closing shots clearly question Paul's choices by inviting viewers to share Chani's subjectivity. In an article on *Part One*, Wander notes—before the release of *Part Two*—that the second film may address the darker side of Paul's figure. Yet, Wander also observes that, at that point, this attempt at revising Paul's figure may come too late, as audiences would be likely to side with him (101). Wander's observations actually hold to a great extent for the most of *Part Two*. Dridi also points out in her analysis of *Part One* that “tight framing techniques” invite viewers to “[establish] closeness to and intimacy with the protagonist” (60). While this is also applicable to *Part Two*, the last third of the second film—particularly after Paul drinks the Water of Life—also includes a substantial amount of close reaction shots of Chani's face and some shots that reflect her point of view, drawing attention to her subjectivity (1:54:30–2:37:42). Apart from this, the film closes with a close-up of Chani's enraged face

instead of using a more celebratory tone underlining Paul's leadership and victory. This ending questions Paul's messianism and contrasts with the ending of Lynch's *Dune* which focuses on Paul's ability to summon a rainstorm. However, *Dune: Part Two* remains ageist throughout, as part of the problem with Paul's decisions is that he is too ready to embrace the devious tactics of the ruling elderly. The emphasis of the film's ending on Chani, the other key young character in the film, suggests that the only hope for a more ethical way of life still resides in the young.

## Conclusion

This article has highlighted the prominence of ageist discourses in *Dune: Part One* and *Dune: Part Two*. The films pit the youthfulness and ability to learn of the protagonist with the stagnation and miscalculations of elderly figures of power such as Baron Harkonnen, Reverend Mother Mohiam, and the Emperor, who eventually surrenders before Paul's youth and grit. Through the mise-en-scène, *Part Two* creates, in the words of cinematographer Greig Fraser, a "myopic" effect. Some spaces also pose obstacles in the characters field of vision, particularly when elderly characters from the Empire are involved. These spatial configurations draw attention to the poor judgment of ageing figures of authority and those around them. The films also hide the face of Reverend Mother Mohiam and, occasionally, of the Baron. This could allude to the attempts of these characters to discreetly operate in the shadows, but also to avoid unveiling signs of old age. Indeed, the blurry frames in the case of the Emperor and the engulfing blackness around Mohiam present the possibility of fading in public life as a threat to these characters. This contrasts with the ability of Paul to advance through adverse terrain, for example in the clouds of sand dust that pose a threat to his very life at different points in both films.

Following Aitken and Dixon, close attention to the ways in which spaces perform and do narrative work has drawn attention to the contradictions that Paul embodies in terms of the films' discourses on ageing and the relations between the different cultures or social groups. Paul seems to draw his remarkable set of skills from a range of contexts, including his family (the Atreides), the Harkonnens, the Fremen, the Bene Gesserit and even from being under the threat of the imperial family. Commenting on *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (J. J. Abrams, 2015), Evdokia Stefanopoulou observes that "the diverse planetary landscapes [...] indicate not only the vastness of space but also the variety and contradiction of forms that this constant technological /spatial growth entails" (163). Stefanopoulou also notes that such spatial contrasts often lead to the "incorporation of differences" (164). Something similar happens in *Dune: Part Two*. For Paul to keep growing his skillset, he eventually needs to incorporate the practices of ageing figures in power. At the same time, the film, by giving

greater prominence to Chani's subjectivity in its last third, questions the imperial/colonial turn in Paul's course of action. Yet, this revision does not entail a questioning of the film's discourses on ageing. Indeed, Paul seems to be contaminated by the ways of the elderly in the film. Apart from this, it is quite telling that a series of two films that repeatedly masks or hides many female faces (usually older and related to the power structures of the Empire) ends with a close shot of a younger female face that is well lit by the desert sunlight. In other words, unlike Paul and the older characters in the film, Chani's face does not have anything to hide, both in moral terms and in terms of age. This ending then questions the messianic figure of Paul but fails to dispute the ageist discourse that *Dune: Part One* and *Dune: Part Two* develop.

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