

Desert Power

A Chronological Comparison of *Dune* and Its Relationship With Contemporary American Views Towards Islam

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Abstract

This study sets out to examine the relationship between Frank Herbert's science fiction epic *Dune* and contemporary American views towards Islam. It investigates the first *Dune* novel (1965), the 1984 film adaptation by David Lynch and the most recent reworking by Denis Villeneuve, entitled *Dune: Part One*. I posit that a chronological comparison of their historical contexts can illuminate how Americans viewed Islam in the 1960s, the 1980s and today. This is inspired by John Rieders thoughts on the science fiction genre as "historical and mutable." I approach this study by close reading the texts of the three works in question and then confronting my findings with secondary literature on the contemporary American views of Islam. David Greenham's conceptualization of close reading is helpful here, especially his thoughts on the adversarial context. In this study, I also use reviews of both film adaptations in order to illustrate my results. The concept of world-building as theorized by Mark Wolf is central to this analysis. This means that I focus on the building blocks of the Duniverse, not on plot or character development. Language features prominently, because it is important for the construction of imaginary worlds. Two final significant concepts here are drawn from adaptation studies: an archival and teleological reading of adaptations. Here, recent research by David Amadio on *Dune* (1984) helps our thinking about the Islamic and Arabic elements of *Dune* (1984) and *Dune: Part One*. This study finds that consumers use already existing knowledge to "fill out" an imaginary world and that this influences how a world is seen. This suggests that dominant ideas of Islam are mirrored in *Dune*. Finally, this chronological comparison identifies numerous areas for further research on *Dune* and its historical contexts.

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Introduction

“Lisan al-Gaib! Lisan al-Gaib! Lisan al-Gaib!” It is the middle of a scorching day and the voices of the Fremen, the population of the planet Arrakis, carry across a dusty plain towards Paul Atreides, played by Timothée Chalamet. The Fremen are wearing desert robes that reveal nothing but their vibrant blue eyes. Huge spacecraft and thousands of soldiers are visible in the background. This is *Dune: Part One*, the 2021 film by Denis Villeneuve.¹ It is meant to be science fiction, but the real-world Islamic overtones are obvious. They can mostly be found in the language, dress and religion of the Fremen, but they are discernible in other factions as well. The Arabic and Islamic influences of *Dune* invite multiple questions. One could, for example, investigate the language of *Dune*, like science fiction scholar Kara Kennedy and linguist Karin Christina Ryding have done.² Alternatively, one could build upon the recent work by historian Frank Jacob, who studied the “Orientalist” semiotics of *Dune* and thus discusses Islam frequently.³

These specific approaches are important for our understanding of *Dune*. However, there has not been a chronological comparison of the connection between the Islamic elements in *Dune* and the contemporary American view of this religion. The present study will therefore examine how *Dune* reflects and refracts contemporary American ideas about Islam. I am close reading the Islamic aspects of *Dune* evident in the first novel (1965) and both film adaptations (1984 and 2021). I also describe the socio-political context of Islam in America when the novel and its adaptations were

¹ In this study, I will clearly indicate to which version of *Dune* I am referring. I just use *Dune* when I am discussing the franchise as a whole.

² Kara Kennedy, “Epic World-Building: Names and Cultures in *Dune*,” *Names* 64:2 (June 2016): 99-108; Karin Christina Ryding, “The Arabic of *Dune*,” in *Language And Place: Stylistic Perspectives on Landscape, Place and Environment*, ed. Daniela Francesca Viridis, Elisabetta Zurru and Ernestine Lahey (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2021), 106-123.

³ Frank Jacob, *The Orientalist Semiotics of Dune: Religious and Historical References within Frank Herbert’s Universe* (Marburg: Büchner, 2022).

published. I illustrate the close reading and historical context with critical reviews of the adaptations. Collectively this illuminates the impact *Dune* has had on culture, and it also uses the films to examine audience views, thus revealing cultural shifts in the understanding of Islamic images in book and film. Do these views change over time? And if so, is this visible in *Dune*? Does *Dune* in turn influence contemporary American ideas of Islam? In other words: is *Dune* a mirror or a prism?

In 1965 the American author Frank Herbert published *Dune*, the first book in a series that would inspire many other sci-fi epics. The novel was not an immediate success, but over the years it became a science fiction classic. The original *Dune* book has sold almost 20 million copies.⁴ Author Hari Kunzru writes in *The Guardian*: "(...) it is perhaps the greatest novel in the science-fiction canon and Star Wars wouldn't have existed without it."⁵ The book was adapted for the big screen by David Lynch in 1984 and turned into two miniseries by John Harrison in the early 2000s. Since 1999, Brian Herbert has continued his father's work by authoring multiple *Dune* novels together with Kevin J. Anderson. In 2021, a new film adaptation by Denis Villeneuve hit theatres and streaming services. This film, titled *Dune: Part One*, deals with the first half of the original book and its sequel will arrive in 2023 or 2024. Despite the pandemic and a simultaneous streaming and cinema release in the United States, *Dune* did well at the box office, making almost 400 million dollars in the process.⁶ HBO Max is also working on *Dune: The Sisterhood*, a prequel series about the religious order of the Bene

⁴ "Dune," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed July 14, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dune-by-Herbert>.

⁵ Hari Kunzru, "Dune, 50 years on: how a science fiction novel changed the world," *The Guardian* (International Edition), July 3, 2015, accessed April 29, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/03/dune-50-years-on-science-fiction-novel-world>.

⁶ "Dune (2021)," *The Numbers*, accessed April 29, 2022, [https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Dune-\(2020\)#tab=summary](https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Dune-(2020)#tab=summary).

Gesserit. *Dune* further inspired at least three comic books, two graphic novels and multiple board and video games.

Fan interaction can be traced in several ways, one of which is the *Dune* subreddit, which has around 221,000 members at the time of writing.⁷ A similar online meeting place for fans of *Dune* is the *Dune Wiki*, an online forum and encyclopaedia of the “Duniverse”.⁸ Each version of *Dune* is, of course, debated on social media as well. This ranges from short comments on Twitter to extensive analyses. An example of the latter is a 1,5 hour YouTube video entitled “The real Dune,” which has racked up almost 4 million views at the time of writing.⁹ Professional film critics have also devoted numerous articles, reviews, podcasts, videos and other texts to the novel and the film adaptations.¹⁰ As these figures show, *Dune*’s cultural impact has been (and continues to be) tremendous. This makes *Dune* an ideal case study through which to interrogate popular ideas about science fiction and (in this case) religion.

Throughout this study, I follow science fiction scholar John Rieder in his conceptualization of the science fiction genre. It is productive to view science fiction as “historical and mutable,” according to Rieder, because “(...) it challenges its students to understand genre in a richer and more complex way, within parameters that are social rather than just literary.”¹¹ This allows us to ask how the Islamic elements in the novel, *Dune* (1984) and *Dune: Part One* reflect a changing historical

⁷ “Dreams are messages from the deep,” Reddit, accessed August 12, 2022, <https://www.reddit.com/r/dune/>.

⁸ “Dune Wiki,” Fandom, accessed August 14, 2022, https://dune.fandom.com/wiki/Dune_Wiki.

⁹ Alt Shift X, “The real Dune,” Alt Shift X, May 22, 2022, video, <https://youtu.be/R0krUthYxF4>.

¹⁰ For example: Paul Attanasio, “‘Dune’: Lost in the Dust,” *The Washington Post*, December 14, 1984, accessed August 14, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1984/12/14/dune-lost-in-the-dust/0e9d0554-d94f-4726-b4f5-82c35326bdc5/>; Ali Karjoo-Ravary, “Is *Dune* A White Savior Narrative?,” Slate, October 26, 2021, accessed August 1, 2022, <https://slate.com/culture/2021/10/dune-2021-movie-vs-book-white-savior-islam.html>; Haris A. Durrani, “The novel ‘Dune’ had deep Islamic influences. The movie erases them,” *The Washington Post*, October 28, 2021, accessed August 1, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/10/28/dune-muslim-influences-erased/>.

¹¹ John Rieder, *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2017), 17.

context. Rieder ends his discussion of genre theory with the following statement: “(...) [I]f the version of genre theory offered here is valid, the project of comprehending what SF has meant and currently means is one to be accomplished through historical and comparative narrative rather than formal discription.”¹² Therefore, my aim is to write a comparative analysis of *Dune*'s relationship with the contemporary American views of Islam. I hope that this inspires other academics to examine the world of *Dune*. Throughout this study, I will direct attention to possible areas for further research.

All three sections of this work contain a close reading of the Islamic and Arabic elements of *Dune*. Literature scholar David Greenham's approach to this method is helpful here. He posits that “[a]ll meaning is determined by context.”¹³ Greenham recognizes several contexts through which to examine a text: the semantic, syntactic, thematic, iterative, generic and adversarial contexts. I will mostly use the semantic (“what individual words can mean”), thematic (“how themes emerge and affect meanings when we read”) and adversarial contexts.¹⁴ The latter is probably the most productive for this study. The idea here is to examine a text “from a position *outside* the text.” Greenham writes: “Such contexts are adversarial, not because they are necessarily *against* the text, (...) but because they begin with a *confrontation* between the text and some other text (...).”¹⁵ In this case, we confront *Dune* with secondary literature on *Dune* and the American views of Islam at the time. A final confrontation happens between the texts of *Dune* and a number of critical reviews of the adaptations.

The emphasis on critical reviews is partly inspired by Justine Larbalestier declaration that “(...) letters, reviews, fanzines and marketing blurbs are as important as the stories themselves in understanding the evolving relationship between men and

¹² Rieder, *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System*, 31.

¹³ David Greenham, *Close Reading: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2018), 33. Italics in the original.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 144-145. Italics in the original.

women in sf.”¹⁶ I contend that this also applies to the inquiry of the contemporary views of American Islam and science fiction. However, the length of this study limits the amount of texts that can be included in my analysis. In order to still give some weight to the research, I decided to focus on critical reviews with a large audience and a lot of cultural clout, like those published in national newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

It is possible to analyze movie reviews in a quantitative way, by letting an algorithm count certain words and attach a positive or a negative value to them. This is called a sentiment analysis. An approach like this makes it easy to examine large data sets, which would allow me to include much more reviews in the present study. However, there are also numerous disadvantages to this method. For one, computers find it difficult to recognise sarcasm when evaluating sentiment. It is also hard for machines to accurately track feelings because “individuals express sentiment for social reasons unrelated to their fundamental dispositions.”¹⁷ Another problem here would be the fact that I am not trained in data mining. Because of these difficulties, I do not attempt to examine *Dune* quantitatively.

Further inquiry into the fandom of *Dune* is necessary, though, as it has not been a priority among scholars. Instead, most studies tend to focus on Herbert and his text, not on the way it is experienced by fans.¹⁸ This prompts numerous interesting questions. Who are the fans of *Dune*? How do fans of the film adaptations differ from

¹⁶ Justine Larbalestier, *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), xvii, cited in Rieder, *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System*, 30.

¹⁷ Mayur Wankhade, Annavarapu Chandra Sekhara Rao and Chaitanya Kulkarni, “A survey on sentiment analysis methods, applications and challenges,” *Artificial Intelligence Review*, February 7, 2022, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10462-022-10144-1>.

¹⁸ For a few recent examples of recent scholarship on *Dune*, see: Joel P. Christensen, “Time And Self-Referentiality in the *Iliad* and Frank Herbert’s *Dune*,” in *Classical Traditions in Science Fiction*, ed. Brett M. Rogers and Benjamin Eldon Stevens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 161-175; Daniel Immerwahr, “The Quileute *Dune*: Frank Herbert, Indigeneity, and Empire,” *Journal of American Studies* (July 2021): 1-26; Kara Kennedy, “Spice and Ecology in Frank Herbert’s *Dune*: Altering the Mind and the Planet,” *Science Fiction Studies* 48:3 (November 2021), 444-461.

those who stick to the novels? And what about the people who play board- and video games based on *Dune*? How do they engage with these interactive adaptations? Other work could examine “the changing relationship between the cultural industries and fandom’s immaterial labour,” as media scholar Dan Hassler-Forest has done for *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*.¹⁹ In other words, *Dune*’s fans need more academic attention. This would help to situate each adaptation of *Dune* in its context.

The first *Dune* novel and its film adaptations all focus on the heroic rise and fall of Paul Atreides. Other important people include his mother Jessica, his father Leto, Thufir Hawat, Fremen leaders like Pardot and Liet Kynes and of course different members of the Harkonnen family (like Vladimir and Feyd-Rautha). This means that it would be logical to pay attention to the personal journeys of these characters or to the narrative as a whole.

My approach is different, however, because I focus on the world-building of *Dune*. I won’t chart Paul’s neoliberal subjectivity, like science fiction scholar Joshua Pearson has done, or write about the agency of the women in *Dune*, the topic of a recent book by the aforementioned Kennedy.²⁰ Instead, I will take cues from the work of communication scholar Mark J.P. Wolf, who has written extensively on world-building and imaginary worlds.²¹ In his seminal book *Building Imaginary Worlds* Wolf discusses what makes these worlds tick:

How imaginary worlds work (when they are successful) depends on how they are constructed and how they invoke the imagination of the audience

¹⁹ Dan Hassler-Forest, “Selling *The Force Awakens*: Fan Labor and Brand Management,” in *Disney’s Star Wars: Forces of Production, Promotion and Reception*, ed. William Proctor and Richard McCulloch (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019), 70.

²⁰ Joshua Pearson, “Frank Herbert’s *Dune* and the Financialization of Heroic Masculinity,” *The New Centennial Review* 19:1 (2019): 155-180; Kara Kennedy, *Women’s Agency in the Dune Universe: Tracing Women’s Liberation Through Science Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

²¹ Mark Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2012), Mark Wolf, *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Mark Wolf, *Exploring Imaginary Worlds: Essays on Media, Structure and Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

experiencing them. Worlds, unlike stories, need not rely on narrative structures (...) They are realms of possibility (...) [and] can make us more aware of the circumstances and conditions of the actual world we inhabit.²²

This definition of imaginary worlds can be applied to *Dune* as well. The female leader of the order of the Bene Gesserit is called Gaius Helen Mohiam, for example. This combination of a male Roman name, a female name and an uncommon surname stresses Wolf's "mix of familiar and unfamiliar" that characterises imaginary worlds. As *Dune* is set thousands of years into the future, it invites reflection upon our contemporary world and the possible developments that could lead to a universe where the gender of certain names has changed and (to name another example) an important faith is the Zensunni religion, a blend of Sunni Islam and Zen Buddhism.

I decided to focus on world-building because it has grown ever more important in the digital age, according to media scholar Dan Hassler-Forest. He states: "(...) the focus in fantastic fiction has shifted ever more strongly from linear storytelling to the development of coherent, recognizable and ostentatiously branded storyworlds."²³ This could be true for *Dune* as well, because the most recent film adaptation definitely provides fans with an "ostentatiously branded storyworld," as is evidenced by toys made in the likeness of the actors.²⁴

Following J.R.R. Tolkien, Wolf distinguishes between the "Primary World" (the world "in which we actually live") and "secondary worlds" (imaginary worlds).²⁵ He posits that there is no "strict delineation between Primary and secondary worlds."

²² Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, 17.

²³ Dan Hassler-Forest, "The Politics of World-Building: Heteroglossia in Janelle Monáe's Afrofuturist WondaLand," in *World Building: Transmedia, Fans, Industries*, ed. Marta Boni (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 377.

²⁴ See, for example: Timothée Chalamet (@tchalamet), "i've been playing with myself all day," Instagram photo, April 27, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/COJtnDDBFT/>.

²⁵ Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, 23; Mark Wolf, "Transmedia World-Building: History, Conception and Construction," in *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*, ed. Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato (New York: Routledge, 2018), 141.

Instead, they exist on a scale of “secondariness,” with some worlds closely resembling our own world and others being more detached from it. *Dune*, like *Star Trek*, belongs to the category of worlds that include the Primary World in their secondary world.²⁶ In *Dune*, Earth was the original location of humanity, before humans developed interstellar travel and settled the universe. This origin story is the reason that many names and concepts in *Dune* sound familiar to our ears.

It is important to note that I am only examining the text of the first *Dune* novel, *Dune* (1965) and *Dune: Part One*. This means that I will not be looking at visual or musical cues to make my argument. This is an element of *Dune* that would benefit from further research.²⁷

The first chapter of the present study deals with the Islamic ideas in the first *Dune* novel. Which Arabic words and Islamic themes contributed to the world-building of *Dune*? In this section I also investigate the contemporary American views of Islam when *Dune* was published. To what extent did *Dune* mirror this view? In the second chapter I chart how *Dune*'s Islamic influences featured in its first film adaptation, released in 1984. This part again examines the contemporary American view of Islam, asking how this changed since 1965. Did the *Dune* film reflect the American view of Islam at the time? I illustrate my findings here with a selection of critical reviews. In the last chapter I zoom in on the most recent film adaptation, released in the autumn of 2021. Here, my research is guided by the same questions I asked in the first two chapters. I enquire how *Dune: Part One* engages the Islamic themes of both the original *Dune* and *Dune* (1984). What does this say about the cultural shifts in the American perception of Islam?

²⁶ Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, 26-27.

²⁷ A brief exploration of the music of *Dune* (2021) can be found here: Gavia Baker-Whitelaw, “Inside the Middle Eastern influences of Hans Zimmer’s ‘Dune’ score,” *Daily Dot*, November 3, 2021, accessed July 25, 2022, <https://www.dailydot.com/unclick/dune-music-middle-east-hans-zimmer/>.

1: Dune, the novel

Invented languages are essential for the construction of imaginary worlds. Tolkien scholars Dimitra Fimi and Andrew Higgins call language invention “an integral “infrastructure” for building imaginary worlds (...).”²⁸ Science fiction worlds need to be different from the primary world, but also contain enough recognisable elements from the primary world so that they won’t alienate their readers.²⁹ In *Dune*, this is achieved through the repurposing of primary world languages like Arabic and English to secondary world languages like Galach and the Fremen language. According to Herbert, the latter language evolved from Arabic and Chakobsa, a “Caucasian” hunting language, while Galach had English and Slavic origins.³⁰ A great deal of *Dune*’s world was “borrowed” from Lesley Blanch’s *Sabres Of Paradise*, a novel that came out in 1960. This book chronicled the jihad that Islamic rebels fought against the Russian Empire in the 19th century. Herbert reproduced some quotations verbatim, but still managed to build an original world out of them. In the *Los Angeles Review Of Books*, high school teacher Will Collins concludes: “The extravagant world-building that fires the imagination of so many readers would be nearly impossible if authors refused to seek inspiration in our own histories, religious traditions, and myths.”³¹ In this section, I set out to examine precisely that: the primary world inspiration of *Dune*.

It is well known that *Dune*’s world consists of numerous Arabic and Islamic terms.³² Some of these mean the exact same thing in *Dune* as in the Primary World,

²⁸ Dimitra Fimi and Andrew Higgins, “Invented Languages,” in *The Routledge Companion To Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York: Routledge, 2018), 22.

²⁹ Kennedy, “Epic World-Building: Names and Cultures in *Dune*,” 99-100; Mark Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, 24.

³⁰ Herbert, *Dune*, 589, 593.

³¹ Will Collins, “The Secret History of *Dune*,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 16, 2017, accessed August 1, 2022, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-secret-history-of-dune/>.

³² Kennedy, “Epic World-Building: Names and Cultures in *Dune*,” 99-108; Haris Durrani, “The Muslimness of *Dune*: A Close Reading of “Appendix II: The Religion of *Dune*,” *Tor.com*, October 18, 2021, <https://www.tor.com/2021/10/18/the-muslimness-of-dune-a-close-reading-of-appendix-ii-the-religion-of-dune/>; Ryding, “The Arabic of *Dune*,” 106-123.

whereas others are (slightly) altered or are given a different meaning entirely. A close reading of these cases shows that Islamic concepts and themes can be found at the core of *Dune*'s world-building. The importance of these themes for *Dune*'s world and the nuance with which they are often treated does not seem to reflect the contemporary American view of Muslims in the 1960s, which was decidedly anti-Islam.³³

The first example of Islamic influence on *Dune*'s world-building has a lot to do with the North-African scholar Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) and the *Kitāb al-'Ibar*, his general history of the world. Many scholars have acknowledged the connection between *Dune* and the *Kitāb al-'Ibar*. Kennedy and Jacob mention it briefly, for example, while historian Haris Durrani goes into more detail on the relationship between the two works.³⁴ Islam scholar Carl Ernst tentatively explores Khaldun's impact on *Dune* in a webinar for the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, entitled *Dune and Islam*.³⁵ A closer look at this relationship is in order, however. Near the end of the first novel, Herbert relays a dialogue between Paul and his right hand, the Fremen leader Stilgar:

Presently, he [Paul Atreides] said: 'What about the city people? Are they in position yet?' 'Yes,' Stilgar muttered. Paul looked at him. 'What's eating you?' 'I never knew the city man could be trusted completely,' Stilgar said. 'I was a city man myself once,' Paul said. Stilgar stiffened. His face grew dark with blood. 'Muad'Dib knows I did not mean—' 'I know what you meant, Stil. But the test of a man isn't what you think he'll do. It's what he actually does. These city people have Fremen blood. It's just that they haven't yet learned how to escape their bondage. We'll teach them.' Stilgar nodded, spoke in a rueful tone: 'The habits of a lifetime, Muad'Dib. On the Funeral Plain we learned to despise the men of the communities.'³⁶

³³ Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 275.

³⁴ For the connection between *Dune* and the *Kitāb al-'Ibar*, see, for example: Kennedy, "Epic World-Building: Names and Cultures," 103; Durrani, "The Muslimness of *Dune*" accessed August 15, 2022; Jacob, *The Orientalist Semiotics of Dune*, 70.

³⁵ Carl Ernst and Michael Muhammad Knight, "Dune and Islam," moderated by Todd Ramón Ochoa, UNC Religious Studies, November 13, 2021, video, 23:10, https://youtu.be/t6d9x_a0Q1w.

³⁶ Herbert, *Dune*, 512.

At first glance, this paragraph seems to contain nothing more than a tense conversation between Paul and Stilgar on the eve of their final battle against Emperor Shaddam IV. It is, however, also an example of the Islamic influence on *Dune's* world-building. The passage centres on the difference between powerful nomads (the Fremen) and weaker "city people". This idea can be found throughout the world of *Dune*: the harsh desert produces formidable warriors, while the sedentary lifestyle of the "men of the communities" makes them weak. It reflects a key concept in Ibn Khaldun's *Muqadimmah*: real power comes from the desert, while the city is decadent and frail. This book, written in the 1370s, is the introduction to the *Kitāb al-'Ibar*. In it, Ibn Khaldun discusses the rise and fall of dynasties and his cyclical vision of history. He posits that "the toughness of desert life precedes the softness of sedentary life." This means that people in the desert only need the essentials to survive, whereas the preoccupation of sedentary people with luxury makes them weak.³⁷

Ibn Khaldun goes on to say that group feeling, or *'asabiyah*, is essential to achieve anything. He writes: "Group feeling produces the ability to defend oneself, to offer opposition, to protect oneself, and to press one's claims. Whoever loses it is too weak to do any of these things."³⁸ Ibn Khaldun states that this *'asabiyah* is strongest in Bedouins, the nomadic tribes of the desert, since the unforgiving conditions of the desert kept their lineage pure.³⁹ In *Dune*, the concept of *'asabiyah* can be found in the belief of the Fremen that the good of the tribe is more important than that of the individual. This is observable in the self-sacrifice of a Fremen warrior in order to kill hundreds of enemy soldiers and the Fremen practice to reclaim the water of the

³⁷ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqadimmah: An Introduction To History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, ed. N.J. Dawood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 93-95.

³⁸ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqadimmah*, 111.

³⁹ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqadimmah*, 99-100.

deceased in order to keep the group alive: “They’re recovering Jamis’ water,’ Chani said. (...) It’s the rule. The flesh belongs to the person, but his water belongs to the tribe... except in combat.”⁴⁰

The Bedouin inspiration is discernible in the naming of the Fremen as well. Another name for the Fremen is “Ichwan Bedwine”, described in *Dune’s* appendices as “the brotherhood of all Fremen on Arrakis.”⁴¹ Not only does “Bedwine” sound very similar to “Bedouin,” but “Ichwan” or *ikhwān* can also be translated to “brethren”, as Kennedy points out.⁴²

Another connection between *Dune* and the *Muqadimmah* can be found in the way both works treat religion among nomads. When discussing the practices of the Bedouins, Ibn Khaldun writes: “But when there is religion (among them) through prophethood or sainthood, then they have some restraining influence in themselves. (...) It is, then, easy for them to subordinate themselves and to unite (as a social organization).”⁴³ This brief citation summarizes the second half of *Dune’s* first novel in a few sentences. The Harkonnen attack on the Atrides brings Paul and his mother to the Fremen, where they exploit prophecies planted by the Bene Gesserit to gain control of the entire people. At the end of the book, the Fremen are no longer scattered tribes, but “united as a social organization” under the leadership and “prophethood” of Paul-Muad’Dib.

A final example of Ibn Khaldun’s influence on *Dune* can be found in the aforementioned *Kitāb al-Ibar*. In *Dune*, the “Kitab al-Ibar” is the “combined survival

⁴⁰ Herbert, *Dune*, 244, 350. Chani adds “except in combat” because she’s talking about single combat to the death, without stillsuits to protect the combatants from the desert: “The winner has to get his water back that he loses while fighting.”

⁴¹ Herbert, *Dune*, 595.

⁴² Kennedy, “Epic World-Building: Names and Cultures,” 104.

⁴³ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqadimmah*, 120.

handbook/religious manual developed by the Fremen on Arrakis.”⁴⁴ In the primary world, the *Kitāb al-‘Ibar* (the ‘Book of Examples’ or ‘Book of Allusions’) is the title of Ibn Khaldun’s work on history, religion and politics. This is mentioned by Ernst as well.⁴⁵

Ibn Khaldun was not the only inspiration for *Dune*, however. A second example of the Islamic influence on *Dune*’s world-building can be found in the names of the world of *Dune*. Naming is an essential part of world-building, states Kennedy, because it can be used to “gesture towards an even larger, more expansive, universe than is described in the story.” That way, “world-building can successfully set up the illusion of completeness and allow readers’ pre-existing knowledge to fill in the gaps.”⁴⁶ This is echoed by Ryding, who writes: “[*Dune*] is in fact built crucially around what the reader already knows or suspects.”⁴⁷ This view of world-building helps our thinking about the interaction between *Dune* and Islam, as it allows us to hypothesize that “readers’ pre-existing knowledge” of Islam determines how they experience representation of this religion in *Dune*.

In his webinar, Ernst recognizes dozens of names, exclamations and “successful imports” (words with similar meanings in *Dune* and Arabic) that are taken from Islamic cultures.⁴⁸ I have already mentioned two instances where Arabic terms appear in *Dune*: the “Bedwine” and the “Kitab al-Ibar.” The meaning of “Bedwine” in *Dune* is virtually the same as the primary world “Bedouin,” while the meaning of “Kitab

⁴⁴ Herbert, *Dune*, 596. I use “Kitab al-Ibar” when I’m referring to the Fremen handbook and *Kitāb al-‘Ibar* when I’m discussing Ibn Khaldun’s work.

⁴⁵ For a discussion of the *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*, see: Waseem El-Rayes, “The Book of Allusions: A New Translation of the Title to Ibn Khaldun’s *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*,” *Religious Studies and Theology* 32:2 (February 2014); Ernst and Knight, “Dune and Islam,” 23:10, https://youtu.be/t6d9x_a0Q1w.

⁴⁶ Kennedy, “Epic World-Building: Names and Cultures,” 100.

⁴⁷ Ryding, “The Arabic of *Dune*,” 120.

⁴⁸ Ernst and Knight, “Dune and Islam,” 13:30, https://youtu.be/t6d9x_a0Q1w. For a non-academic overview of Islamic terms in *Dune*, see Khalid Baheyeldin, “Arabic and Islamic Themes in Frank Herbert’s ‘Dune’,” *The Baheyeldin Dynasty*, January 22, 2004, accessed July 20, 2022, <https://baheyeldin.com/literature/arabic-and-islamic-themes-in-frank-herberts-dune.html>.

al-lbar” is slightly altered in *Dune*. Other examples of Islamic terms in the novel include “Lisan al-Gaib”, “Bi-lal kaifa” and “Jihad.”

The appendices of the novel state that “Lisan al-Gaib” is “The Voice From The Outer World” and “an off-world prophet”. This term consists of the Arabic words *lisān* (‘tongue’ or ‘voice’) and *al-ghayb* (‘invisible’ or ‘supernatural’).⁴⁹ Historian Omnia El Shakry writes: “Within the Islamic religious sciences, *al-ghayb* is a somewhat technical term referring to that which is inaccessible to human knowledge, both to the reason and the senses, and hidden in the divine.” El Shakry also points out Paul’s journey along the edge of *al-ghayb* and the Bene Gesserit’s futile efforts to control this mystical place. She notes, however, that “in the Qur’an, God alone ‘knows the unseen [*al-ghayb*]’... disclosing it to no one. (...) All who truly attempt to approach *al-ghayb* know full well that its mastery is, ultimately, a chimera.”⁵⁰ Here, Herbert twists the meaning of “Lisan al-Ghaib” in order to give his protagonist almost godlike abilities. Ryding argues that Herbert often altered Arabic words he used in order to suit his needs for the development of the world of *Dune*. She writes:

In many cases, Herbert’s *Dune* Arabic meanings differ from actual usage and his transliterations regularly differ from accepted norms, showing not only that he mined secondary Arabic language sources for terms that sounded exotic and authoritative, but also that he often reshaped them to convey novel imaginary content (...).⁵¹

Another Islamic term in *Dune* is “Bi-lal kaifa,” which means “amen” or, literally, “[n]othing further need be explained.”⁵² This connects to *bi-lā kayf*, which can be translated to “without explanation.” It was used from the tenth century onwards in

⁴⁹ Herbert, *Dune*, 597; Kennedy, “Epic World-Building: Names and Cultures,” 104; Ryding, “The Arabic of *Dune*,” 115. Italics added.

⁵⁰ Omnia El Shakry, “Language,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 27, 2022, accessed July 20, 2022, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/language-2/>. Italics and brackets in the original.

⁵¹ Ryding, “The Arabic of *Dune*,” 109.

⁵² Herbert, *Dune*, 588.

discussions by Ash‘arī theologians, who claimed that God has a face and hands, whereas some of their contemporaries disagreed. The Ash‘arī “refused to say what those words actually mean when applied to God: they would only affirm them “without explanation” or “without [asking] how” (*bi-lā kayf*).”⁵³ Again, *Dune* bends an Islamic term in its world-building, pointing to a much deeper Primary World history while doing so.

A final Islamic term to discuss is “Jihad,” essential to the world-building of *Dune* in more ways than one. Take, for example, an event called the “Butlerian Jihad”, which happened, in *Dune*’s fictional history, around 10,000 years before the events of the novel. During this 100-year long “crusade against computers, thinking machines and conscious robots,” “the god of machine-logic was overthrown” and it was established that “[m]an may not be replaced” by computers and artificial intelligence (AI). When the Butlerian Jihad ended, humans started training their own minds in order to process large amounts of data. The results of this are the Bene Gesserit, the Spacing Guild and the mentats, all of whom possess unique mental powers like prescience and “human computing.”⁵⁴

The term “Jihad” is also central to Paul’s (inner) world. As he rises to prominence among the Fremen, he battles with visions of a literal universal war in his name:

Paul, hearing these words, realized that he had plunged once more into the abyss...blind time. There was no past occupying the future in his mind...except...except...he could still sense the green and black Atreides banner waving...somewhere ahead...still see the jihad’s bloody swords and fanatic legions. *It will not be*, he told himself. *I cannot let it be.*⁵⁵

⁵³ David R. Vishanoff, “Religious Beliefs,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Politics*, ed. Emad El-Din Shahin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁵⁴ Herbert, *Dune*, 570, 596, 598.

⁵⁵ Herbert, *Dune*, 348. Italics in the original.

There are a few things to notice here. Firstly, the green and black of the Atrides flag call to mind two colours commonly associated with Islam. Throughout history, these colours have been used by Islamic countries or groups because they were important colours to the Prophet Mohammed.⁵⁶ This is noteworthy because it suggests that Islam does not exclusively influence Fremen culture, but other, more “Western” factions like the Atrides as well.⁵⁷ Another example of this can be found in the appendix detailing the religion of *Dune*, where we find the following sentence: “the Muadh Quran with its pure Ilm and Fiqh preserved among the pundi rice farmers of Caladan (...).” This future version of Islam is not exclusive to Arrakis, but thrives on Caladan, Paul’s homeworld, as well.⁵⁸ I am inclined to agree with Kennedy here, who concludes: “Herbert seems to be indicating that there is no clear separation between the West and the East and each has something to learn and gain from the other.”⁵⁹

Secondly, the jihad is apparently so important to the world-building of *Dune* that it remains in Paul’s thoughts when he loses almost all his prescient abilities, when he exists in “blind time”. These visions are central to both the development of the narrative and the world-building of *Dune*. In other words, the term jihad is an essential building block of this science fiction epic.

Thirdly, with the use of words like “bloody” and “fanatic,” it becomes clear that *Dune* interpretes jihad as a holy war. This is understandable, as the primary meaning

⁵⁶ See, for example: Christopher Beam, “Islamic Greenwashing: Why is the colour green so important in the Muslim world?,” *Slate*, June 9, 2009, accessed August 14, 2022, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2009/06/why-is-the-color-green-so-important-in-the-muslim-world.html>; William McCants, “How ISIS Got Its Flag,” *The Atlantic*, September 22, 2015, accessed August 14, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/isis-flag-apocalypse/406498/>.

⁵⁷ For a discussion of the “Western” elements of the Atrides see Kennedy, “Epic World-Building: Names and Cultures,” 100-101.

⁵⁸ Herbert, *Dune*, 596. According to Durrani, this is a reference to Muadh Ibn Jabal, “a scribe and companion of the Prophet who compiled the Qur’an during the Prophet’s lifetime.” See: Durrani, “The Muslimness of *Dune*,” accessed July 21, 2021.

⁵⁹ Kennedy, “Epic World-Building: Names and Cultures,” 106.

of jihad is “[w]arfare with spiritual significance,” according to historian David Cook. He further states that the standard definition of jihad includes a military component. Some Muslims, though, define jihad as “exclusively spiritual”. However, Cook states that the evidence in Muslim literature suggests that the primary meaning of jihad is militant.⁶⁰ This is also the case in *Dune*, as can be seen near the end of the book. Paul is about to enter into a fight with Feyd-Rautha Harkonnen and thinks: “He [Paul] had thought to oppose the jihad within himself, but the jihad would be. His legions would rage out from Arrakis, even without him.”⁶¹ It seems to me that this fragment confirms that Paul does not subscribe to the “exclusively spiritual” definition of jihad, but instead can only think of jihad as militant and violent.

In *Dune*, “Lisan al-Gaib,” “Bi-lal kaifa” and “Jihad” retain their Primary World religious connotations, even though they were warped to fit the imaginary world that Herbert was creating. It is not clear, however, to which God these terms in *Dune* refer. This might have something to do with the fact that God is not clearly defined in *Dune*. Instead, the religion in the novel is based upon an amalgam of different religious traditions, like those of the Zensunni Wanderers and the Fourteen Sages, who developed the “Orange Catholic Bible.”⁶²

In short, the fact that Herbert changed Islamic terms to suit the needs of his world-building can be seen as a clear case of appropriation. However, building a world with terms like “Lisan al-Gaib,” “Bi-lal kaifa” and “Jihad” gestures towards a more profound relation with its Islamic inspiration. This is acknowledged by Durrani, who posits that *Dune*’s appendix on religion reveals a lot about the Muslimness of the first novel. He writes: “*Dune* does not cheaply plagiarize from Muslim histories, ideas, and

⁶⁰ David Cook, *Understanding Jihad* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 2, 181-182.

⁶¹ Herbert, *Dune*, 548.

⁶² Herbert, *Dune*, 568-577.

practices, but actively engages with them.” According to Durrani, “(...) if one is Muslim, or otherwise intimately aware of Muslim traditions, that person’s experience of *Dune* differs vastly from any other reader’s encounter with the saga.”⁶³ So, *Dune*’s use of Islamic themes and Arabic words enables its readers to employ their understanding of Islam to complete this world.⁶⁴ In order to situate *Dune* in its historical context, we now need to ask how Islam was viewed by Americans when *Dune* hit the shelves.

The first *Dune* novel was published in 1965, a turbulent time for Muslims in America. The Civil Rights Act, which was meant to stop racial and religious discrimination, had passed in 1964, while the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 would lead to increasing arrivals from Islamic countries in the following years.⁶⁵ On February 21st of that same year, however, the most “powerful symbol of Islam in America,” Malcolm X, would be murdered.⁶⁶

A year before his death, Malcolm X had severed his ties with Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam (NOI). This organization was one of the predominant ways that Islam was represented in America at the time. Religion scholar Megan Goodwin writes: “Both the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation [of Islam] allowed members to resignify their own Blackness by claiming ties to Islam, to locate themselves in histories other than those of oppression and enslavement.”⁶⁷ The NOI had occupied the imagination of white America since 1959, when the documentary *The Hate That Hate Produced* was aired on national television. According to historian

⁶³ Durrani, “The Muslimness of *Dune*,” accessed July 21, 2022.

⁶⁴ See above, note 46.

⁶⁵ GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America*, 273-274.

⁶⁶ Edward E. Curtis IV, *Muslims In America: A Short History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 64.

⁶⁷ Megan Goodwin, “Gender, Race and American Islamophobia,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Islam and Gender*, ed. Justine Howe (London: Routledge, 2020), 466.

Garrett Felber “this program sensationally situated the NOI as a “hate group” similar to the Ku Klux Klan by referring to Black Nationalists as “Black racists” and “Black supremacists.””⁶⁸ In doing so, the documentary certainly contributed to Islamophobic and racist stereotypes about Muslims in America.⁶⁹

The existence of such stereotypes from the 1960s onward is recognized by religion scholar Kambiz GhaneaBassiri as well, who writes that “(...) most non-Muslim Americans’ views of Islam were shaped by stereotypes, particularly in light of media reports of “Arab/Palestinian terrorism,” the Arab oil crisis, and the Iranian hostage crisis (...).” However, he also states that this bias was not reflected in “exclusionary laws”.⁷⁰ One of the laws that GhaneaBassiri refers to is the Immigration Act of 1924, which banned immigration from Asia altogether. This law was, as already noted, overturned in 1965. At that time, the nature of Islam in America began to change. It had been seen as a black religion, from the moment enslaved West-Africans brought Islam to America until the 1960s.⁷¹ However, the influx of Islamic immigrants from Asia and America’s military involvement in Islamic countries influenced the “late 20th-century racial coding of American Islam as brown, rather than black (or white for that matter).”⁷² Still, this probably did not factor into the world-building of the first *Dune* novel, since it was published at the very start of this development.

To publish a work like *Dune* in the America of the 1960s is, at the very least, remarkable. Although it is clear that there was a strong Islamic presence in the country, it is also evident that there existed a lot of misunderstanding of Muslims and hostility towards Islam at the time, mostly influenced by the idea that Islam was a black,

⁶⁸ Garrett Felber, *Those Who Know Don’t Say: The Nation of Islam, the Black Freedom Movement, and the Carceral State* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 18.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America*, 275.

⁷¹ Goodwin, “Gender, Race and American Islamophobia,” 466.

⁷² Goodwin, “Gender, Race and American Islamophobia,” 467.

“hateful” religion. It will therefore not be surprising that the editors of the first novel asked Herbert why he included this many Islamic themes in the book.⁷³ Still, I would argue that Herbert’s “nuanced understanding” of Islamic and Arabic terms in the world-building of *Dune* can be seen as curiosity about a foreign religion.⁷⁴ The importance of “readers’ pre-existing knowledge” to “fill in the gaps” also reveals that *Dune*’s treatment of religion is experienced in very different ways by those who are well-versed in the intricacies of Islam and those who are not.⁷⁵

Finally, there is the simple fact that this work of science fiction gives readers the opportunity to engage in detailed theological discussions about a future version of Islam, as evidenced by Durrani. These conclusions indicate that the American view of Islam in the 1960s as black and “hateful” was not reflected in *Dune*. In order to track the development of Islam in *Dune*’s world-building over time, we must now turn towards Lynch’s notorious adaptation from 1984.

2: *Dune* (1984)

Dune (1984) was a colossal catastrophe. It received almost exclusively scathing reviews and it barely made 33 million dollars at the box office, while the production costs were around 40 million. On top of that, Lynch did not get to realise his vision of the story, as his five hour director’s cut was compressed into just two hours.⁷⁶ Still, this does not mean that Lynch’s work is irrelevant for the present study.

⁷³ Ali Karjoo-Ravary, “Frank Herbert’s *Dune* novels were heavily influenced by Middle Eastern, Islamic cultures, says scholar,” *CBC*, October 22, 2022, accessed July 25, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/day6/introducing-the-metaverse-crisis-in-afghanistan-stuff-the-british-stole-islamic-influence-in-dune-and-more-1.6220405/frank-herbert-s-dune-novels-were-heavily-influenced-by-middle-eastern-islamic-cultures-says-scholar-1.6221670>.

⁷⁴ Ali Karjoo-Ravary, “In *Dune*, Paul Atreides led a jihad, not a crusade,” *Al Jazeera*, October 11, 2020, accessed August 13, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/10/11/paul-atreides-led-a-jihad-not-a-crusade-heres-why-that-matters>.

⁷⁵ Kennedy, “Epic World-Building: Names and Cultures,” 100.

⁷⁶ David Amadio, “‘I Kinda Like to Go Off the Track’: Finding David Lynch in the Middle World of *Dune*,” *Adaptation* 14:3 (2021), 435-436.

In a recent article, literature scholar David Amadio examines *Dune* (1984) through the lens of adaptation scholar Thomas Leitch's ideas on adaptation. Amadio uses both an archival and a teleological model of adaptation. He explains that an archival reading explores the relationship between an adaptation and its source text, while a teleological reading investigates the goals of an adaptation.⁷⁷ In his analysis, Amadio manages to provide a fresh perspective on *Dune* (1984). However, he does not mention the Islamic influences of either the novel or Lynch's version. My aim in the following two sections is to use Amadio's method as an inspiration, in order to investigate the "Muslimness" of *Dune* (1984) along the lines of Leitch's ideas on adaptation.⁷⁸

To be fair, the field of adaptation studies is way too extensive and varied to do it justice here. It is a discipline in flux, if it can be thought of as a discipline at all.⁷⁹ With *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies* Leitch attempts to invite new perspectives on four "foundational debates" of adaptation studies: "the question what counts as an adaptation (...)," "the notion of fidelity," "the question whether adaptation study should be fundamentally analytical or fundamentally evaluative" and "the value of the case study (...) for adaptation studies generally." Additionally, he looks to the future of adaptation studies and asks if the field is better off with a focus on close readings "(...) or by more general, synthetic, holistic approaches."⁸⁰ There are dozens of scholars working on these debates, many of whom feature in the volume edited by Leitch. However, the length of this study makes it impossible for me to provide a

⁷⁷ Ibid., 437.

⁷⁸ For a discussion of the "Muslimness" of *Dune* see: Durrani, "The Muslimness of *Dune*."

⁷⁹ Thomas Leitch, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, ed. Thomas Leitch (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 5-6.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 7-9.

detailed analysis of their points. In this chapter I will instead stay close to Amadio's interpretation of adaptation studies.

Amadio is reading *Dune* through an archival and a teleological model of adaptation theory. The starting point for his analysis is a discussion between Leitch and adaptation scholar Patrick Cattrysse.⁸¹ An archival model focuses on "faithfulness to the original," which is usually how the general public views adaptations. At the same time, a teleological model sees adaptations "(...) as deliberate transformations, valued for the boldness of their departures rather than the accuracy of their devotion."⁸² Amadio goes on to describe which elements of the original *Dune* novel are kept by Lynch (like the all-knowing narrator) and which differ from Herbert's source text (as is the case in Lynch's depiction of the Guild Navigators).⁸³ He concludes that the film can be seen as "(...) more certifiably Lynchian than anything to be found in his other films."⁸⁴ The present study is not concerned with Lynch's legacy, though. Instead, we need to ask how Lynch treated the Islamic influences of the novel. Which Islamic names, terms and ideas are featured in the film's world-building? Did Lynch alter them in any way? It is important to note here that I am discussing the widely available version of *Dune* (1984). It may well be that access to the three hours of footage that were cut from the final version would provide different conclusions.

Dune (1984) includes numerous Islamic names and terms. All of these are taken from the novel. At the very start of the film, in Princess Irulan's opening monologue, we hear that "the known universe is ruled by the Padishah Emperor, Shaddam IV."⁸⁵ This refers to Islamic history, writes Jacob. He states that Padishah is

⁸¹ Patrick Cattrysse & Thomas Leitch, "A Dialogue on Adaptation," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 46:3 (2018), https://lfq.salisbury.edu/issues/46_3/a_dialogue_on_adaptation.html.

⁸² Amadio, "I Kinda Like to Go Off the Track," 437.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 437.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 446.

⁸⁵ "1," *Dune*, directed by David Lynch (1984, Lions Gate Entertainment), MPEG-4 video file.

Persian for “Master King,” while Shaddam refers to “the Arabic word *Şaddām*, “one who confronts.””⁸⁶ This is another example of the Arabic influence on the colonizers/oppressors in *Dune*. Any study that explores the Fremen through an “Orientalist” lens needs to take this into account. The emperor is pivotal to *Dune*’s plot and world-building, which makes it unsurprising that his name and title are not changed by Lynch. Moreover, the fact that Lynch includes Arabic terms in the opening monologue shows that he sees them as essential to understand the world of *Dune*.

When Paul and Jessica encounter the Fremen after their flight from the Harkonnen attack, another Islamic term appears. Paul is named “Usul” by Stilgar, a name that means “the base of the pillar.”⁸⁷ This is in fact the Arabic term that is mentioned most often (by my count at least seven times) in the film. Ryding explains that *’uṣūl* is the plural of *aṣl*, a word that “includes the meanings of “basis,” “origin” and “root”.” She asserts that there is a good chance that Herbert chose the plural because it sounds better than *aṣl*. This is another instance where the world of *Dune* is inspired by Arabic, but it is also an example where the Primary World meanings are bended to suit the imaginary world of Arrakis. In the film, Stilgar translates “Usul” to “the base of the pillar.” This is minimal explanation of a term that would be foreign to most American ears.

Right after Paul is named “Usul,” Jessica is called “Sayyadina” by Stilgar. This is a role that women can play in the Fremen religion. Ryding states that the term resembles the masculine *sayyidnā*, “a courteous term of address to a male school teacher (“our master”).” This word is also used to honour Sufi saints. She contends that “he [Herbert] appropriated the masculine term, altered it slightly, and applied it to

⁸⁶ Jacob, *The Orientalist Semiotics of Dune*, 70.

⁸⁷ “8,” *Dune*, directed by David Lynch.

Jessica as a title both of respect and of acknowledged semi-divinity.”⁸⁸ In the novel, Stilgar explains the meaning behind the title: “‘Among us,’ he said, ‘the Sayyadina, when they are not the formal leaders, hold a special place of honor. They teach. They maintain the strength of God here.’”⁸⁹ In the film, however, the term is not explained at all. Stilgar just says to Paul: “(...) and your mother shall be a Sayyadina among us.”⁹⁰ This evokes some mystery about the foreign world that Lynch is building, but it does not aid the viewer in completing this imaginary world with their own knowledge.

One could approach these findings archivally, asking for instance how faithful Lynch was to the source text his treatment of its Islamic and Arabic terms. Leitch points out that a focus on fidelity has long been criticized by adaptation scholars, while it is often used outside the field (by reviewers, for instance) to examine remakes of certain works. He writes: “[This] is an apt measure of the field’s estrangement from both the public discourse on adaptation (...) and other disciplines in the humanities (...)” Leitch concludes that the question of fidelity remains an important debate in adaptation studies.⁹¹ For the present study, a focus on fidelity is interesting, because it lets us ask how subsequent adaptations of *Dune* diverted from the novel and what this says about the contemporary American view of Islam when the respective remakes were published.

Another productive approach focuses on the goals of the inclusion of Arabic words in *Dune* (1984). This would be more teleological. How does Lynch employ these terms in his world-building and to what end? For example, Lynch’s treatment of “jihad” can be viewed in this light, because he lets Reverend Mother Ramallo explain the term in a vision: “the holy war (...), which will cleanse the universe and bring us out of

⁸⁸ Ryding, “The Arabic of *Dune*,” 118.

⁸⁹ Herbert, *Dune*, 330.

⁹⁰ “8,” *Dune*, directed by David Lynch.

⁹¹ Leitch, “Introduction,” 7-8.

darkness.”⁹² With this explanation, viewers are helped in their efforts to complete the world of *Dune*. This could be one of the goals that Lynch set out to achieve. However, other evidence contradicts this interpretation. The movie does not include a glossary, or extra material on the religion and cultures of *Dune*, which the novel did. This might be because of medium-related constraints, since it is difficult to imagine adding material to a movie that has been cut by almost three hours. Moreover, *Dune* (1984) omits or limits the use of many Arabic words that were important to the world of the novel. “Bi-lal kaifa” does not feature at all, for instance, while “Lisan al-Ghaib” appears only translated as “The Voice from the Outer World.” The term “Jihad” is mentioned just once. Finally, most Arabic terms in *Dune* (1984) are not explained by an all-knowing narrator. The exposition is instead used to convey the thoughts of the characters or to advance the plot, as Amadio points out.⁹³ That way, many Islamic and Arabic terms in *Dune* (1984) only function as window dressing. It seems to me that a voice-over would have been ideal to explain some of the Arabic and Islamic terms, just like the Reverend Mother does when she is talking about the jihad.

In other words, although *Dune* (1984) uses certain Arabic terms in its world-building, it does not explain most of them. It also omits or limits the use of important Arabic terms. This dials down the religious overtones of the movie, while obscuring the idea of Paul fighting an inner struggle against a universal holy war. Are these things a reflection of the historical context at the time?

By 1984, America’s relationship with Islam had changed significantly. I have already mentioned that from the 1960s Americans started to view Islam as brown rather than black.⁹⁴ Additionally, the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan met strong

⁹² “4,” *Dune*, directed by David Lynch.

⁹³ Amadio, “I Kinda Like to Go Off the Track,” 442-443.

⁹⁴ See above, note 72.

resistance from Islamic rebels. These mujahideen, or holy warriors, were supported by the United States in their jihad against the Soviet invaders.⁹⁵ According to political science scholar Tom Lansford, this policy “(...) enjoyed support from both the legislative and executive branches, as well as the American public.”⁹⁶ During the 1980s, America eventually provided the mujahideen with more than a billion dollars in military aid.⁹⁷ We have already seen that America’s military involvement in the Middle East contributed to the changing racial coding of American Islam from black to brown and that media portrayals of events in the Middle East influenced prejudice towards Muslims.⁹⁸ However, there also seems to have been a considerable amount of support for the mujahideen during the 1980s. This needs to be seen in the context of the Cold War, of course, where everyone fighting the Soviet Union could count upon the support of America.⁹⁹

Dune (1984) was released at the height of the Soviet war in Afghanistan. The timing could not have been better: here we have a science fiction world where pseudo-Islamic freedom fighters are battling an “evil” empire, almost exactly what was happening in the Primary World at the time. Moreover, the theme of Islamic rebels who fight a Russian empire is important to *Dune*’s world-building, as we have seen. This serendipity is not visible in *Dune* (1984), however, which downplays, not elevates, the (pseudo-)Islamic freedom fight.

This is not the only criticism that can be directed towards *Dune* (1984). In fact, it is difficult to find reviews that say something positive about the movie. In the *Chicago*

⁹⁵ Tom Lansford, *A Bitter Harvest: US Foreign Policy and Afghanistan* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 125.

⁹⁶ Lansford, *A Bitter Harvest*, 127.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁹⁸ Goodwin, “Gender, Race and American Islamophobia,” 467; GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America*, 275.

⁹⁹ Cf. Lansford’s discussion of the Reagan Doctrine: Lansford, *A Bitter Harvest*, 127.

Sun-Times, film critic Roger Ebert penned perhaps the most damning verdict that I have ever read.¹⁰⁰ He writes: “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.” Ebert does not discuss the Islamic inspirations of *Dune*. Instead, he writes: “There are some theological overtones, which are best left unexplored.”

A similar image arises from Janet Maslin’s review in *The New York Times*.¹⁰¹ Like Ebert, she is very critical of the movie, while dismissing the Arabic of *Dune*. Maslin claims that *Dune* is a fan favourite because of its mysticism and adventure plot, not because of the “marvel of eclectic etymology” that is Herbert’s language.

Paul Attanasio’s review for *The Washington Post* is marginally more positive.¹⁰² He concludes: “You leave “Dune” feeling a kind of awe, but wondering what it was all about.” Attanasio thinks that Lynch was “smothered” by the novel, the book simply being too massive to adapt. Just like Maslin and Ebert, Attanasio does not mention the Islamic influences of the movie.

It could be the case that these three critics were too stunned by Lynch’s adaptation to discuss the Islamic inspirations of *Dune* (1984). A more likely explanation, however, is that they simply did not notice the Arabic in the movie. This matches the results of our close reading, which showed that *Dune* (1984) downplays the Islamic influences of the film. In order to fully grasp the contemporary view of American Islam, we turn now towards Edward Said’s *Orientalism*.

Said’s foundational work was published six years before the release of *Dune*

¹⁰⁰ Roger Ebert, ““Dune”,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 14, 1984, accessed August 15, 2022, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/dune-1984>.

¹⁰¹ Janet Maslin, “Screen: Science-Fiction Epic, ‘Dune’,” *The New York Times*, December 14, 1984, accessed August 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/12/14/movies/screen-science-fiction-epic-dune.html>.

¹⁰² Attanasio, “‘Dune’: Lost in the Dust,” accessed August 14, 2022.

(1984).¹⁰³ His study can be seen as another important moment in the development of America's view on Islam. In it, Said distinguishes three separate but interdependent meanings of orientalism. Firstly, the term "Orientalism" was used to describe the academic study of the east. It could be used for several disciplines, as long as the researcher in question studied the "Orient." The term has waned in popularity since the publication of *Orientalism*, and it has often been replaced by more neutral terms like Middle Eastern Studies. Secondly, Said points out that orientalism can be used generally as well: "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident."" Thirdly, orientalism has a clear dimension of power: "(...) in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." Here Said draws mainly on Foucault's theories on discourse and power.¹⁰⁴

Said's ideas have provoked numerous important replies. A recent example of this is Islam scholar Wael B. Hallaq's *Restating Orientalism*, which opens with a thorough criticism of Said's methodology. Hallaq asserts among other things that Said does not seem to understand Foucault on a number of key points and that Said "lacked any historical sense."¹⁰⁵ Another notable critic of *Orientalism* is postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, who questions Said's binary vision on the powerful (the colonisers) and the powerless (the colonised). Instead, he suggests that there is a hybrid space between these two categories.¹⁰⁶

However, Said's ideas can still be relevant for this study. Near the end of his book, he explores contemporaneous instances of orientalism. Here, he also discusses

¹⁰³ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Classics, 2019).

¹⁰⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 2-3.

¹⁰⁵ Wael B. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 30, 33, 45.

¹⁰⁶ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004).

the representations of Arabs and Islam in movies. This might help us understand the depiction of the Fremen in *Dune* (1984). He writes:

In the films and television the Arab is associated either with lechery or bloodthirsty dishonesty. He appears as an oversexed degenerate, capable, it is true, of cleverly devious intrigues, but essentially sadistic, treacherous, low. (...) The Arab leader (of marauders, pirates, "native" insurgents) can often be seen snarling at the captured Western hero and the blond girl (both of them steeped in wholesomeness) (...).¹⁰⁷

This 1978 view of Muslim representation in cinema does not align with *Dune* (1984). During the first time that Paul and Jessica (a variation on "the Western hero and the blond girl") meet the tribe of Stilgar (the "Arab leader of the "native" insurgents"), they encounter a noble people who make a wise impression. This is achieved through multiple elements like the diction of the Fremen, their acting and certain musical elements.¹⁰⁸ An extensive analysis of this scene goes beyond the scope of this study, though I will point out that Lynch stays close to the tone of the novel here.¹⁰⁹

Said also states: "Lurking behind all of these images is the menace of *jihad*. Consequence: a fear that the Muslims (or Arabs) will take over the world."¹¹⁰ Again, this is not recognisable in *Dune* (1984). The minor role of Islam and the positive portrayal of the Fremen in this film seem to indicate that Lynch was not concerned about Muslims taking over the world.

To conclude: there are multiple ways to look at *Dune* (1984). One of these is an archival model, which invites questions about the fidelity of an adaptation. This approach can yield results, but it is quite limited in its scope. A teleological approach considers the goals of an adaptation. This leaves room for new perspectives and

¹⁰⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, 286-287.

¹⁰⁸ "8," *Dune*, directed by David Lynch.

¹⁰⁹ Herbert, *Dune*, 312-324.

¹¹⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 287. Italics in the original.

ideas. Amadio's work on *Dune* (1984) is an thought-provoking example of a nuanced exploration of both models. However, he did not direct attention to the Arabic and Islamic themes in Lynch's film.

In this section I showed that *Dune* (1984) often downplayed the Islamic influences of the source text. I also briefly considered a teleological reading of this film, by asking how Lynch's world-building aided viewers in completing the world of *Dune*. Additionally, I explored a number of important developments in the way Americans viewed Islam between 1965 and 1984. The stereotypes that I mentioned in the first section still existed in the 1980s, even though there are signs that some aspects of Islam (such as a holy war against the Soviets) were valued by Americans. The trivial role of Islam in *Dune* (1984) is illustrated by its absence from reviews in a number of national newspapers. The Islamic elements in the world-building of *Dune* (1984) served as window dressing, but they are not biased towards Muslims. Lynch also missed the opportunity to comment on the mujahideen with this film.

All of this supports the idea that the film did neither reflect nor refract the contemporary American view of Muslims. However, this has not been proven. A sustained analysis of more reviews, fanzines, interviews and, if available, correspondence from Herbert and Lynch could help to illuminate this hypothesis. Now our attention shifts to the most recent film adaptation of *Dune*: Villeneuve's *Dune: Part One*.

3: *Dune: Part One*

Villeneuve's version of *Dune* was released in the autumn of 2021. This means that very little scholarly work has yet been published to help our thinking about this adaptation. The film is on the minds of various academics, though. Jacob's *The*

Orientalist Semiotics of Dune was published at the start of 2022. This book discusses the 2021 film at length.¹¹¹ In June, film and literature scholar Sarah Artt presented a paper on the performances of Timothée Chalamet and Charlotte Rampling in *Dune: Part One* at the University of Lisbon. As of now, this paper remains unpublished.¹¹² Many scholars wrote about *Dune: Part One* for non- or semi-academic publications. *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, for instance, published a series of essays on the film by academics from different disciplines.¹¹³ Some of them have also talked about the film in podcasts or webinars.¹¹⁴ In this section, I start by close reading the Islamic elements in the text of *Dune: Part One*. I then confront my results with academic perspectives on the contemporary American view of Islam and critical reviews of Villeneuve's adaptation in order to make my argument. I hope that this approach contributes to the growing scholarship on *Dune: Part One*. This would also help to place the sequel in its historical context when it is released in 2023 or 2024.

Dune: Part One uses a number of Islamic and Arabic terms in its world-building. Examples of these are "Shai-Hulud," "Lisan al-Gaib," "Mahdi" and "Sayyadina."¹¹⁵ There are also a couple of Arabic first names mentioned in the film, like Shaddam and Shamir. This is, of course, to be expected, since we have already seen that the world

¹¹¹ Jacob, *The Orientalist Semiotics of Dune*.

¹¹² Sarah Artt, "Step on Me Charlotte Rampling or on Arrakis No One Can Hear You Orgasm," [napier.ac.uk](https://www.napier.ac.uk/research-and-innovation/research-search/outputs/step-on-me-charlotte-rampling-or-on-arrakis-no-one-can-hear-you-orgasm#downloads), accessed August 4, 2022, <https://www.napier.ac.uk/research-and-innovation/research-search/outputs/step-on-me-charlotte-rampling-or-on-arrakis-no-one-can-hear-you-orgasm#downloads>.

¹¹³ Karjoo-Ravary, "Is *Dune* A White Savior Narrative?," accessed August 4, 2022; Haris A. Durrani, "Supplement: Denis Villeneuve, the White Savior of 'Dune'," Medium, October 29, 2021, accessed August 4, 2022, <https://hdernity.medium.com/supplement-denis-villeneuve-the-white-savior-of-dune-ac1d24a75f85>. For an introduction to the series see: Haris A. Durrani, "Sietchposting: A Short Guide to Recent Work on 'Dune'," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 27, 2022, accessed August 4, 2022, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/sietchposting-a-short-guide-to-recent-work-on-dune/>.

¹¹⁴ Ernst and Knight, "Dune and Islam," https://youtu.be/t6d9x_a0Q1w; Kara Kennedy, "The Fremen in Dune," interviewed by Maggie Freeman, Digital Nomads, March 29, 2022, podcast, <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1639870/10323794>; Ana Marie Cox and Dan Drezner, "E45: DUNE 2021 (UNLOCKED)," Space The Nation, November 5, 2021, podcast, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/6zfhew3ykL7kCCY7qXncQB?si=284c6dcdded3e4529>.

¹¹⁵ *Dune: Part One*, directed by Denis Villeneuve (2021, Warner Bros.), MPEG-4 video file.

of *Dune* consists of many Islamic and Arabic words. It would be more productive, therefore, to ask how *Dune: Part One* differs from both the novel and *Dune* (1984).

The two most used Islamic terms in Villeneuve's adaptation are "Shai-Hulud" and "Lisan al-Gaib." The former is the Fremen name for the gigantic sandworm of Arrakis, while the latter is used to refer to Paul as "The Voice from the Outer World." Ryding traces the most likely origin of "Shai-Hulud" to the Arabic *shaykh khulūd*, which means "old man of eternity." The pronunciation ("*shay khulūd*") and the translation ("Shai-Hulud" means "old father eternity") fit *Dune's* world-building.¹¹⁶

Paul and the viewer learn about "Shai-Hulud" within the first ten minutes of the film. A filmbook explains to him that "the Fremen share the deep desert with the giant sandworms, known to the Fremen as Shai-Hulud."¹¹⁷ Later on, Jessica receives a crysknife from the Fremen Shadout Mapes, her new maid. When asked about its meaning, Jessica answers that the knife is a "maker." Mapes erupts in a loud wailing and calls the knife "the tooth of Shai-Hulud." She also references a prophecy about Paul and Jessica. This is the first time that a viewer without knowledge of the novel is able to infer the religious meaning of the sandworms.¹¹⁸ Around two hours in, the planetary ecologist Liet-Kynes is attacked by Sardaukar, the "soldier-fanatics of the Padishah Emperor."¹¹⁹ She (Villeneuve chose to deviate from his source material by making this character female) exclaims: "I serve only one master. His name is Shai-Hulud."¹²⁰ This reinforces the idea that the sandworms are some sort of deity. Many viewers will by now have tried to complete the world-building of the film by using their

¹¹⁶ Ryding, "The Arabic of *Dune*," 117-118; Herbert, *Dune*, 603.

¹¹⁷ "2," *Dune: Part One*, directed by Denis Villeneuve.

¹¹⁸ "6," *Dune: Part One*, directed by Denis Villeneuve.

¹¹⁹ Herbert, *Dune*, 602.

¹²⁰ "14," *Dune: Part One*, directed by Denis Villeneuve.

existing knowledge about prophecies, Mapes' emotional reaction to Jessica and hierarchy (a powerful character serves a sandworm, not the emperor).

The term "Lisan al-Gaib" is first introduced by the Fremen who welcome the Atreides to Arrakis, in the scene that opened this study. Jessica explains to Paul that it is the local term for "messiah," adding "[i]t means that the Bene Gesserit have been at work here."¹²¹ Straight away, it is clear that the local population thinks that Paul is a prophet. In the film, Paul is very uncomfortable with this role. This matches Herbert's criticism of the hero, one of the main themes of the novel.

"Shai-Hulud" and "Lisan al-Gaib" are both explained in more detail in Villeneuve's adaptation than in *Dune* (1984). If we use a teleological model to examine *Dune: Part One*, we can argue that he wants viewers to understand the Islamic and Arabic world of *Dune* and that he does this by explaining these (likely unfamiliar) terms. A strong argument for this is the inclusion of extra material that deals with the world-building of *Dune*. For example, the filmbooks that play a part in *Dune's* world are included to provide more information on key themes. In one of these, we get more information on "Shai-Hulud": "They [the Fremen] consider this immense creature a tangible representation of God, and their relationship with it is a key component of their culture."¹²² Viewers who have not read the book, but who are inspired to complete this world, are rewarded with the confirmation that "Shai-Hulud" is in fact a holy creature.

However, just like in *Dune* (1984), there is also evidence that the director did not set out to help viewers understand the Islamic themes of this world. For starters, many Islamic and Arabic terms (e.g. "amtal", "Sayyadina") are not explicated at all. This could mean that, aside from those who are well versed in Arabic, most consumers

¹²¹ "5," *Dune: Part One*, directed by Denis Villeneuve.

¹²² "Extras: Filmbooks: The Fremen," *Dune: Part One*, directed by Denis Villeneuve.

of the film experience these elements as nothing more than some random exotic terms. More significant, however, is the fact that Villeneuve decided to leave many Islamic and Arabic themes out of the movie altogether. This includes arguably the most important of them all: jihad.

As outlined above, the term jihad is essential to the world of *Dune*. It is both an important historical event in the Duniverse (the “Butlerian Jihad”) and central to Paul’s struggle with his prescience. However, this term is not spoken once in *Dune: Part One*. The closest we come is a scene after Paul and his mother have fled the Harkonnen attack on Arrakeen. They are in the desert and the spice in their tent is exacerbating Paul’s visions. During one of these, he sees “[h]oly war spreading across the universe like unquenchable fire” and “[a] warrior religion that waves the Atreides banner in my father’s name.”¹²³ Islam scholar Ali Karjoo-Ravary wrote about this very subject when the first trailer for *Dune: Part One* was released. He states: “(...) jihad is bad branding, and in Hollywood, Islam does not sell unless it is being shot at.” This contrasts with the Islamic character of the original novel, according to Karjoo-Ravary:

Herbert’s understanding of Islam, jihad, and humanity’s future is much more complex than that of his interpreters. (...) Herbert’s nuanced understanding of jihad shows in his narrative. He did not aim to present jihad as simply a “bad” or a “good” thing. Instead, he uses it to show how the messianic impulse, together with the apocalyptic violence that sometimes accompanies it, changes the world in uncontrollable and unpredictable ways.¹²⁴

We have seen that Herbert often changed Islamic words to fit his narrative, but that he also hinted at a deeper, more technical view of Islam. This “nuanced understanding” is not discernible in *Dune: Part One*, where one of the most important Islamic terms is

¹²³ “5,” *Dune: Part One*, directed by Denis Villeneuve.

¹²⁴ Karjoo-Ravary, “In Dune, Paul Atreides led a jihad, not a crusade,” accessed August 13, 2022.

omitted altogether. Put differently, a teleological reading of this film seems to reveal that Villeneuve did not intend to help viewers understand the Islamic world of *Dune*. In order to situate these findings in their historical context, we now need to examine the contemporary American views towards Islam.

On August 30, 2021, America officially left Afghanistan after a 20-year war. This military involvement started when the US invaded the country to search for the culprits of the attacks of September 11, 2001. According to Goodwin, 9/11 “cemented Americans’ conceptualization of Muslims as phenotypically Arab, and as a violent terrorist threat to the United States.”¹²⁵ This sentiment is echoed by Said in a 2003 preface to *Orientalism*. He writes: “I wish I could say, however, that the general understanding of the Middle East, the Arabs and Islam in the United States has improved somewhat, but alas, it really hasn’t.”¹²⁶ To be more specific, we turn again to Goodwin, who directs attention to the racial character of American Islamophobia. She notes:

In a nation that strongly identifies with white Christianity, American Islam’s connection to Black and Brown-ness, to slavery and immigration, and to a monotheism not centred in Jesus, has led to widespread anti-Muslim religio-racism. America treats Muslims as though they are not Americans – as though they are a threat.¹²⁷

Sociologist Erik Love identifies this phenomenon as well. In his book *Islamophobia and Racism in America*, he states that Americans view the world through a “racial lens.” He writes: “In other words, there are a set of physical traits and characteristics that can mark someone as “Muslim,” regardless of their actual religion, ethnicity or

¹²⁵ Goodwin, *Gender, Race and American Islamophobia*, 467.

¹²⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, xi.

¹²⁷ Goodwin, *Gender, Race and American Islamophobia*, 467.

nationality.”¹²⁸ Love sees the ideology of white supremacy as the source of American Islamophobia.¹²⁹ He goes on to chart the history of Islamophobia in the United States and claims that “the word “terrorist” would become fully synonymous with Middle Easterners by the mid-1980s.”¹³⁰ This image was then reiterated by numerous Hollywood films showing Arab stereotypes.¹³¹ It is not surprising that 9/11 worsened the already existing Islamophobia in America. This was no temporary spike either, as Love points out that a lot of Islamophobic discrimination still existed when he wrote his book.¹³² This discrimination has numerous forms, from the depiction of Muslims in film and TV to biased policy by organisations like the CIA and the FBI.¹³³ The results of this are explained by professor of English Moustafa Bayoumi in his work *This Muslim American Life*. He writes:

War on Terror culture has meant that we [Muslim Americans] are now regularly seen as dangerous outsiders, that our daily actions are constantly viewed with suspicion, that our complex histories in this country are neglected or occluded, and that our very presence and our houses of worship have become issues of local, regional and national politics.¹³⁴

This is how a lot of Americans view Islam today. It is important to note that many Americans do not show these Islamophobic tendencies. A poll in 2015, cited by Love, found that 33% of Americans had a positive opinion of Muslim Americans. However, this was down from the 48% in 2010.¹³⁵ So, there is no denying that racist Islamophobia is still very much present in the United States. This has been the case

¹²⁸ Erik Love, *Islamophobia and Racism in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 2.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 91.

¹³³ For an example of the FBI targeting Muslim Americans, see: Love, *Islamophobia and Racism in America*, 11-13.

¹³⁴ Moustafa Bayoumi, *This Muslim American Life: Dispatches from the War on Terror* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 254.

¹³⁵ See, for example: Love, *Islamophobia and Racism in America*, 197-198.

for decades, although we have seen that the nature of the prejudice has shifted from black to brown bodies since the mid-1960s. It is time to examine some reviews of *Dune: Part One* to see if there is a relationship between the film and contemporary American views of Islam.

Critic Roxana Hadadi wrote about the world-building of *Dune: Part One* in her review for *Polygon* (which is owned by *Vox Media*). She posits: “The visuals are mesmerizing, but the world-building is flat.” Hadadi supports this claim with numerous instances where the movie does not live up to the world-building in the novel. There is the “script’s dampening of the religious elements”, the mispronunciation of the Arabic word “Mahdi” and the Persian word “Padishah” and the fact that the Fremen in the movie “lack the interiority they need to come across as something other than stock types.”¹³⁶

The one-dimensional representation of the Islamic elements in *Dune: Part One* aligns with Bayoumi’s conclusion that “our [Muslim Americans’] complex histories in this country are neglected or occluded.”¹³⁷ Love sees a similar process at work in America: “This is the awesome power, the terrible magic, and the ignoble wonder of race: to ignore diversity, to reject indigenous identity, and promulgate its own version of history all at the same time.”¹³⁸ Although the original *Dune* novel distorted Muslim history as well, it also hinted towards more complexity and diversity in its treatment of Islam.

¹³⁶ Roxana Hadadi, “Denis Villeneuve’s *Dune* is all world-building and no world-living,” *Polygon*, October 19, 2021, accessed August 13, 2022, <https://www.polygon.com/reviews/22733349/dune-review-denis-villeneuve-timothee-chalamet>.

¹³⁷ See above, note 134.

¹³⁸ Love, *Islamophobia and Racism in America*, 6.

Manohla Dargis, co-chief film critic for *The New York Times*, also reviewed *Dune: Part One*.¹³⁹ Like Hadadi, she notices that the film is flatter than the novel. Dargis writes that Paul is “(...) a messianic figure, one who is considerably less complicated and conflicted onscreen than he is on the page.” She further questions Villeneuve’s treatment of the hero and the fact that Paul is cast as white, something which is not evident in the novel. According to Dargis, Hollywood has a “demand for heroes and happy endings.” This conflicts with Herbert’s *Dune*, which is critical of the hero. In her review, she approaches *Dune: Part One* mostly through an archival model, asking how Villeneuve treats the source material. However, there are also hints of a teleological model, because Dargis examines Villeneuve’s goals with this adaptation. An example of this is the question how *Dune: Part One* relates to a “Marvel-dominated industry.”

More interesting for our purpose, though, are Dargis’ comments on the Islamic and Arabic themes of *Dune: Part One*. Here, she points out that Arrakis is home to “Bedouin-like inhabitants”, that “the shadow of Lawrence of Arabia (...) looms large, particularly because the Fremen and their language are drawn from Arabic origins” and that *Dune* was inspired by Turkish and Persian sources. There is no mention of Islam or jihad. A few weeks after publishing this review, Dargis explained some of her choices in a new article for *The New York Times*.¹⁴⁰ Here, she mentions reading “(...) an academic paper on Herbert’s use of Arabic in the novel (...)” (probably Rydings’)

¹³⁹ Manohla Dargis, “‘Dune’ Review: A Hero in the Making, on Shifting Sands,” *The New York Times*, October 29, 2021, accessed August 14, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/20/movies/dune-review.html>.

¹⁴⁰ Manohla Dargis, “Annotated by the Author: ‘Review of “Dune”: A Hero in the Making, on Shifting Sands,’” *The New York Times*, November 17, 2021, accessed August 14, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/17/learning/annotated-by-the-author-review-of-dune-a-hero-in-the-making-on-shifting-sands.html>.

as part of her research. Dargis frames this as “(...) a bit too far down the research rabbit hole (...).”

It is remarkable that this well researched review does not elaborate on the Islamic and Arabic themes of *Dune*. At the very least, this means that, while important to the novel, these themes are not essential to *Dune: Part One*. It also shows that Dargis assumes that her readers will not appreciate a technical discussion of the Arabic of *Dune*. This assumption could be tested by surveying the readership of *The New York Times*. Such an analysis falls beyond the scope of the present study, but it would certainly elucidate the contemporary American views towards Islam.

Dune: Part One was evaluated for *The Washington Post* as well, by film critic Michael O’Sullivan.¹⁴¹ This review provides a basic summary of the plot, but it contains even less references to the Islamic and Arabic inspiration of *Dune*. O’Sullivan mentions Lawrence of Arabia and the word “Mahdi”, but he also equates the Fremen with the Israelites being led out of slavery by Paul. Moreover, he assesses the Fremen as “oppressed natives (...) who seem to hate everyone.” This last comment seems to align with the Islamophobic idea that every Muslim is a threat.

Ten days after O’Sullivan published his review, *The Washington Post* published another piece on the film, by the aforementioned Durrani.¹⁴² This article is longer and more in-depth than that of O’Sullivan. Durrani first sketches the myriad ways in which *Dune* was influenced by Islamic and Arabic culture and then states that Villeneuve “waters down the novel’s specificity.” According to Durrani, this is a result of choices made by the team behind *Dune: Part One*. He cites screenwriter Jon Spaihts, who has

¹⁴¹ Michael O’Sullivan, “‘Dune’ is the movie fans have been waiting for, even if they’ll have to wait for the rest of it,” *The Washington Post*, October 18, 2021, accessed August 14, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/goingoutguide/movies/dune-movie-review/2021/10/18/c978d1d6-2e8f-11ec-8ef6-3ca8fe943a92_story.html.

¹⁴² Durrani, “The novel ‘Dune’ had deep Islamic influences. The movie erases them,” accessed August 1, 2022.

said that “to a typical American, the Arab world was much more exotic in the 1960s than it is today.” Spaihts explains that “if you were to build a kind of Arab future on Arrakis in a novel starting today, you would need to invent more and borrow less.”¹⁴³ Durrani does not agree, instead positing that *Dune: Part One* “relegates “Dune’s” Muslimness to exotic aesthetics.” Like Hadadi, he also draws attention to the fact that the Arabic and Persian in the film is mispronounced. He then discusses multiple instances where the film butchers its source material, before concluding: “Seeking to save Muslim and MENA [Middle East and North African] peoples from taking offense, Villeneuve (...) colonizes and appropriates their experiences.”

In this final section I have showed that *Dune: Part One* contains even less Islamic themes than *Dune* (1984). Their treatment betrays a neglect on the part of Villeneuve and his team for the Primary World inspirations of *Dune*.

Again, it is possible to examine this film through an archival reading. We can, for example, ask how Villeneuve treats his source material. Critics like Durrani, Hadadi and Karjoo-Ravary all highlight the ways in which Villeneuve’s adaptation differs from the novel.

Reading the text of *Dune: Part One* against the background of American Islamophobia also reveals that the Islamic elements in the film lack the complexity of the Islamic and Arabic terms in the novel. This illustrates the way that Muslim Americans are often viewed: as a discriminated and neglected demographic in the United States.

Different results emerge when the film is approached teleologically, however. I argued that it is not likely that Villeneuve wanted his audience to understand the

¹⁴³ Jon Spaihts, Walidah Imarisha and Daniel Nexon, “Are We Living In A Simulation?,” moderated by Nahal Toosi, Arab and Middle Eastern Journalists Association, October 30, 2020, video, 18:50, <https://www.facebook.com/AMEJAGlobal/videos/3442827715833020/>.

Islamic influences of *Dune*. This interpretation is corroborated by Spaihts' comments on the Islamic elements of *Dune: Part One*.

Dargis approaches Villeneuve's adaptation at least in part teleologically, asking what the place of the movie is in an industry that is dominated by Marvel. O'Sullivan meanwhile only reviewed the film on a surface level, sticking to a summary of the plot and some dubious comments. Both Dargis and O'Sullivan failed to include a proper discussion of the Islamic elements of *Dune: Part One* in their reviews.

These reviews seem to be indicative of trends among reviewers. Some of them ask how faithful Villeneuve's adaptation is, while others treat the film more from a goal-oriented perspective. I selected these reviews because they are read widely. However, I am under no illusion that they are the only possible way to look at *Dune: Part One*. More research, especially into the digital reception of this work, is needed in order to properly situate this film in its historical context. An analysis of the *Dune* subreddit, the *Dune* Wiki or the IMDb reviews could, for example, explain how this film is understood by the general public.

Conclusion

This study compared the first *Dune* novel, *Dune* (1984) and *Dune: Part One* over time. A close reading of these works showed how they treat the Islamic and Arabic elements of their source material. These results were then read through the framework of an adversarial context. Here, I confronted the texts of *Dune* with texts on adaptation by Amadio and Leitch. I also used secondary literature on the contemporary American views of Islam to situate my findings in their historical contexts. Finally, I used reviews of *Dune* (1984) and *Dune: Part One* to illustrate certain results. In all of the above, I focused on the world-building of *Dune*. This meant that I barely paid attention to the

narrative. Instead, I often preferred close scrutiny of the language of *Dune*, which is one of the building blocks of an imaginary world.

My analysis showed that the original novel was heavily inspired by Islamic culture and Arabic language. Herbert's technical, in-depth treatment of these influences does not seem to match the American views of Islam when the novel was published, which were often anti-Muslim and anti-Black.

The first (completed) film version of *Dune* hit theatres in 1984. This work toned down the Islamic inspirations of the novel by omitting many Arabic words and hardly explaining the terms it did include. This fit the Islamophobia that was present in the America of the 1980s. Many Americans were starting to view Muslims as brown rather than black. This resulted in different stereotypes. Lynch did not take the opportunity in *Dune* (1984) to comment on America's support for the mujahideen. It is also not likely that he wanted his audience to understand the Islamic elements of his world. A number of national reviews illustrated the triviality of Islam in Lynch's adaptation.

Villeneuve's version of *Dune* was released almost forty years after the first adaptation. I showed that it explained some Islamic terms, but that it also downplayed the Islam of *Dune*'s world-building. Most importantly, it did so by not mentioning the central theme of jihad by name, instead opting for "holy war." This can be read in the context of increasing Islamophobia in the United States after the attacks of September 11, 2001. The trend to view Arabs as violent threats to America has deep roots, but exacerbated after 9/11. A selection of reviews provided a mixed image of the reception of *Dune: Part One*. Some did not discuss its Islamic elements at all, while others directed attention to the multiple ways in which *Dune: Part One* did not do justice to its Arabic sources.

Besides the comparative narrative outlined above, I also wanted this study to map where more research is needed. Examples of this include fan studies, the visual and musical elements of both adaptations and the digital reception of *Dune*. More academic attention in these fields would help to situate each version of *Dune* in its historical context.

The close reading of the novel and both adaptations and the chronological comparison have revealed interesting results. However, this approach has its limitations as well. Perhaps the most important one is related to the scope of this study. By comparing three works and their respective historical contexts with each other, I may have wanted to do too much for this relatively brief study. This choice renders some of my arguments vague. I see these instances not as failures per se, but more as broad brushstrokes and ideas for further scholarly attention. Therefore, I sincerely hope that fellow academics will pick up on this (at times) tentative study.

That said, I feel like I have contributed some interesting ideas to the growing body of work on *Dune* and, by extension, the field of science fiction studies. This discipline can definitely help us to understand both our own time and the contemporary contexts for older worlds. I want to end this study with the words of Herbert: “A man’s flesh is his own and his water belongs to the tribe – and the mystery of life isn’t a problem to solve, but a reality to experience.”¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ Herbert, *Dune*, 577.

Selected bibliography

This bibliography contains the primary and secondary sources that I have used for this study. Among these are the novel and both films, but also a number of reviews. I have restricted the citations of websites, video's and podcasts to the notes.

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