Ion INDOLEAN

Searching for *Something* in Sci-Fi Movies

Abstract: This article seeks to understand the way in which the Canadian director Denis Villeuneve sees his protagonist, Paul Atreides from *Dune* (2021)—based on the eponymous novel by Frank Herbert, as a starting point for almost every successful sci-fi movie in history: a good story, full of theological myths, where a chosen one has to demonstrate his virtues, in spite of all the evil lures. After establishing this narrative context, the article embarks on a mission to observe how the space epic genre (better known as *space opera*) established itself in cinema and how it has come to look now, by analyzing movies from successful series such as Blade Runner and Alien.

Keywords: Dune, Frank Herbert, Dennis Villeneuve, Ridley Scott, Alien, Blade Runner, sci-fi sagas, space epic genre, good, evil, humanity, artificial intelligence, robots.

> "The mystery of life isn't a problem to solve. But a reality to experience. A process that cannot be understood by stopping it. We must move with the flow of the process. We must join it. We must float with it." (Dune)

Ion INDOLEAN

Babeş-Bolyai University
ion.indolean@ubbcluj.ro

EKPHRASIS, 2/2022

Ekphrasis.
Images, Cinema, Theory, Media
pp. 68–84

DOI: 10.24193/ekphrasis.28.3
Published First Online: December 20, 2022

Watching recent sci-fi films that have stuck in my memory, I could identify something interesting, even though somewhat predictable. They all relate, in one way or another, to the power of faith. This faith can take many forms and is not always religious. The characters in these films believe in a higher power, in a

community, in technology or in them. Whatever the case, the heroes of these stories are searching for *something* elusive, a unifying balance. Somehow, all of these films reach a certain genesis, they communicate by dividing the world into heroes and villains, but not in a simplistic binary way. Today's hero can always become tomorrow's villain. The stories in which they live and act have the character of a path to the perfection (or salvation?) of humanity and the species. They operate under extreme conditions and therefore their outcome can be either a beautiful utopia or the destruction of humanity (or mankind?).

Where we come from and where are we going, can be often seen as the central question(s) in sci-fi endeavors. How do we preserve life and who is worthy of preserving it? Why is it that the savior, a messiah descended in various forms, is always initially rejected, abused and tried? Why is our go(o)d always put to the test? In fact, why is this good challenged by the one interested in a life among shadows, chaos and disaster?

This—let's call it—*divine providence* of the world is always formed from "two wholes [which] present themselves as foci for God's attention: that of the world as a whole, versus the context of an individual created person's life" (Adams 170). Whichever way you look at it, *positive* heroes are guided by a code learned from those who formed them, which they too have received from their predecessors. This acquired tradition makes heroes fight for a better future, as they understand it. Their *good* (past, present, future) may be bad or *evil* for other(s).

The sci-fi genre starts with this bipolarity and these questions in mind and seeks to trace possible future realities, where man is always left to answer the great questions of the past / present / future. The hero's dilemma is still, at all times, about his usefulness in (and for) the world, and the destiny he struggles to fulfill.

He is placed in the middle of the battle between good and evil at a postmodern time, when "the concept of an absolute evil no longer exists" (Buchholz, Mandel 124). This confuses even more the hero, who feels caught in a much more nuanced dilemma: what is he fighting for? And are his ideals the *good* ones?

> One factor psychology attempts to best understand in relation to goodness and evil is morality. Depending on one's upbringing, environment, and other factors, moral values differ and change from person to person. (Buchholz, Mandel 125)

This means that when we judge if an action is good or bad, we have to ask ourselves according to what teachings we should align it. Good and evil in Western civilization might differ to Oriental teachings. At the same time, good has to be good in relation to something else, right?

These kinds of questions have always preoccupied artists and creators, who have tried to find possible answers in their narratives. This is also the case for filmmakers, who through their intellectual penetrating power have raised important debates for our times.

Good and *evil* — paths in sci-fi cinema

One of the fathers of the sci-fi genre in cinema, Ridley Scott, has always asked through his fabulous worlds these kinds of essential questions: where do we come from, where are we going, how can we understand humans' intentions? He has done so by adopting his own, unified stylistics over the decades, always inventing exceptional visual settings and worlds. He remains just as relevant today—the recently finished HBO series *Raised by Wolves* standing as testament to his craftsmanship.

Denis Villeuneve, belonging to a newer time, but also interested in the great themes of humankind, has managed to establish himself as a leader of (t)his generation and makes a link with sci-fi genre's classic directors, among whom of course Scott. The moment that definitively united their personalities is when the Canadian directed the *Blade Runner* sequel. Each has crafted its own version of the story (1982, respectively 2017), in a dialogue that takes on forms both mystical and aesthetically sublime.

After the *Blade Runner 2049* moment, something even bigger happened in Villeneuve's career. A story he sensed he now possessed the artistic grandeur to cinematographically express: the life of Paul Atreides from *Dune* (2021).

Villeneuve succeeded where others had failed.

This article seeks to understand the way in which the Canadian director sees his protagonist(s) – while always being very careful to respect his predecessors' vision(s). Dune's story can be seen as a starting point for almost every successful sci-fi movie in history: a strong narrative, full of theological myths, where a chosen one has to demonstrate his virtues, in spite of all the evil lures.

After we will set this context, I want to embark on a mission to observe how the space epic genre (better known as *space opera*) established itself in cinema and how it has come to look (and speak) now.

A new hope?

The (re)appearance of *Dune* in 2021 brings back in a truthful way the *imaginarium* of writer Frank Herbert, interested not so much in the future of humanity's technology, but in the "politics of humanity" (Whitten 2021). His story, although it follows the tropes of the sci-fi genre, where two immense powers fight for control of the entire universe – seen as "a conflict between an old, dying, empire and an emergent, vital population" (DiTommaso 269)—, also has a more realistic, historical and philosophical side: the world of ideas of the 1960s, when the book was written, and which are still of great relevance as of today. In the same time, novels like Dune, alongside others written in the same decade (List brings up

'Stranger in a Strange Land' and 'Lord of Light'), are "centered on messianic figures" and "use science-fictional world to critique contemporary religious institutions and to explore possible alternatives" (List 21).

There is, of course, the religious structure of the book; written by an American, but based on many Islamic teachings, Dune establishes a set of rules which can be seen as uncommon for the great contemporary liberal, established, empires. Here, a rebel force seeks to impose a new kind of ruling, based on a chosen one, who may gather all the power (Parkerson 405). The discussion based on current Western good and evil becomes all the more interesting when we see that Paul Atreides is a well-meaning, moral individual, but one which is constantly struggling between two attitudes: leading in an "occidental" manner, on the one hand, or assuming a leadership descended from the medieval past, on the other.

> The distinction between the secular upper classes and the religious masses is reinforced by the peculiar role Christianity plays in *Dune* and *Lord of Light*, where, paradoxically, references to the Bible and Christian practices serve as a secular cultural code that unites the elite [...] where aristocratic characters occasionally refer to shriving in the context of threats to kill their enemies unconfessed. (List 24)

Even though Paul comes from this elite society, he can be seen as a correspondent for the prophet Mohammed. He is an intruder on planet Arrakis, but one who gradually converts to the customs of the place and begins to make them his own. Herbert relies heavily on Muslim culture, because maybe it is more pure and true to itself:

> Through the—albeit distorting—medium of orientalist works, Herbert borrowed extensively from Muslim societies in constructing an exotic and plausible desert world. The Fremen [...] are modelled on Arab nomads. They are also called Ichwan Bedwine, wear long robes, form tribes and are deeply religious. The men are circumcised and polygamous, value honour and bravery, and practise vendetta. Their most deadly weapon is the 'crysknife', which was inspired by the Southeast Asian dagger kris. The Fremen's language closely resembles Arabic and includes much Islamic vocabulary. The Fremen believe in 'Shari'a', the existence of 'jinn', and 'jihad'. (Determann 97)

In addition to this—or alongside it, Dune reveals the way of life, values, beliefs and aspirations of the Islamic community; to which we add a consistent concern for environmentalist practices which consolidated in the '50s and '60s:

> Herbert's decision to examine the messianic superhero against a backdrop of ecological concerns was no accident. [...] a central theme of the novel is not only ecology, but ecology examined in many different contexts. In addition to exploring

> environmental ecology—the study of the relation and interaction between organisms and their environment—*Dune* explores social, political, economic, and language ecologies, as well. (Parkerson 404)

And let's not forget about an anticipation (by appealing to the cyclical nature of history) of the decline of great empires and civilizations, a phenomenon triggered in most cases by the weight of the prolonged hunger for power, the erosion of the leadership structure, the corruption of original intentions, perhaps even the forgetting of the motivations for which a particular group took power in the first place etc. All these themes are deeply connected to realities taken from the Arab world:

> Dune's plot retraces both the rise of Islam in the seventh century and the increase in Arab power after the establishment of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1960. The planet Arrakis is the only source for the mélange, a substance essential for interplanetary navigation. It thus plays a similar role to oil in the economy of the twentieth century. As mélange is also called 'spice', the struggle over it is further reminiscent of early modern attempts to control the Indian Ocean trade. (Determann 98)

The film directed by Canadian Denis Villeneuve is a reminder, a reassessment of Herbert's world and perhaps a clearer positioning towards the ideas the American writer put forward. Dune forsees many of the issues that face us most insistently today: "production and price of oil, environmental threats, the escalating instability of the Middle East, Muslim fundamentalism, the erosion of the monolithic world powers, the failuire—or abandonment —of diplomacy, and the staggering cost in lives, money, and materiel" (Senior 317).

With so many current global crises, it's no wonder that a new cinematic version of Herbert's story is being released as we speak. With this 2021 version—which contains half of the first book, with the sequel anticipated for 2023—, Villeneuve succeeds on a cinematic level what has been attempted in the past without great success, when in the '70s and '80s neither Alejandro Jodorowsky nor David Lynch found the formula to connect all the elements towards a truly polished movie project.

While Jodorowsky encountered financial difficulties and a refusal by major Hollywood producers to back him all the way, and his film remained only at the draft stage (having a script, layouts, storyboard, actors, etc.), Lynch completed the project, but the critical reception as well as the quality of the screen production almost ended his career (Lim 68). His film was a failure by all accounts, even if some of it has gone down in history and led to cult-film status.

That's not to say that the two projects haven't enjoyed some intense reverberations. For instance, Jodorowsky explains in the documentary made by Frank Pavich, *Jodorowsky's*

Dune (2013) that the artists he found and guided during his dream project ended up in the forefront of some of the biggest hits in sci-fi genre:

> The *Dune* gang included the late Dan O'Bannon, who wrote and directed the no-budget favorite *Dark Star* (which inspired Jodorowsky to hire him as special effects supervisor) and went on to write the original *Alien*; Swiss surrealist H.R. Giger, who made creatures and sculptures for *Alien*; the French graphic artist Jean 'Moebius' Girard, of Heavy Metal fame; and Chris Foss, who painted cover art for 1970s sci-fi paperbacks. (Seitz 2014)

Let's remember the strong link to *Alien*, because we will come back to it.

Returning to Villeneuve's version of *Dune*, we should ask ourselves what makes it a success. First and foremost, I should say, clarity. The Canadian director manages to turn a challenging book, with many interior monologues and narrative nuances difficult to synthesize in a short time, into a remarkable audio-visual spectacle, a metaphorical representation of contemporary, civilizing, greedy, obsolete, debauched (Western only?) society.

In the face of the crisis we live in, *Dune* takes on a necessary ethical message and underlines the fact that we are small in this world. We are small and insignificant, even if, on the verge of a collective or personal outburst, we foolishly believe that we matter more than we actually do. We want to feel that, without us, the world would fall apart; that, we are doing something essential, without which the world could not go on.

Villeneuve disguises these great themes of humanity in stylized, meaningful metaphors. The Canadian conveys universal fears and anxieties, totalizing beliefs, transforming a classic science fiction story into a twisted parable. Why twisted? Because it doesn't aim to offer a condescending lesson, it doesn't reveal some great truth not known until now, but rather it weighs up the way humanity is governed, the way we relate to our fellow human beings, to strangers, to those whom we don't know, whom we believe to be inferior or ill-intentioned, whom we see in an unfavorable light; those who we try to exploit mercilessly.

The film embrittles, without contesting, the great prophecy of a peacemaking, unifying messiah. Old rules, written or handed down through generations, come to be debated once House Atreides arrives on the disputed, spice-rich planet Arrakis, ruled until recently by the Harkonnen clan.

Here a very strong distinction is made: if Duke Leto Atreides is a man of principle and lives an ascetic life, Baron Harkonnen "represents the distillation of decadence", being "given himself completely to the pleasures of the flesh: morbidly obese, he is consumed by his sexual urges" (DiTommaso 274). He can afford to do just that because this planet is home to the most important spice in the entire universe, a sci-fi equivalent of medieval spices, something expensive and hard to get, for which men would go to war in a heartbeat.

Whoever controls the production of the spice actually controls the entire economy of the Galactic Empire. The year is 10191, but the issues remain the same: lust for money and power.

A messiah?

Paul Atreides (Timothée Chalamet) lives in his dreams, a future that is relative, imprecise and fragmented. He sees people, places, events (that might be) important to him. Will they materialize exactly as he anticipates them; or will they change at the very last moment? No one really knows, no one has the key to appease the future.

He is seen as "the central figure in a multi-faceted struggle between and archaic, feudal, and ossified galactic imperium and a vital, meritocratic, and adaptable desert people called the Fremen" (DiTommaso 269).

In an increasingly individualistic world, the fragility of this metanarrative in the guise of an obligation to Paul is the main concern. Without having known poverty, deprivation or *hunger*, the motivation to go all the way can become suspended, bracketed. In a world where 'must' no longer means anything, where 'must' has been replaced by 'don't feel like', Paul's shoulders are overwhelmed by the possibility of a struggle for which he is not yet trained, for which he will never be fully (and truly) prepared.

Despite his noble character, he is hesitant about the duty that awaits him, but not out of laziness, but because he understands its scale. List argues that the story is "the basis for a critique of messianism", exploring "the consequences of relying on fallible human beings for personal salvation when the soteriological value of faith is far from certain" (34).

Paul hears he might be the *one*. It's a burden that can irreparably change his course, confuse and distract him. The story questions how a prophecy can be fulfilled. It should not be forced. Paul's way can also crumble if it is too carefully crafted or guided by those around him.

The success of such a journey also lies in its mystical measure. Alongside Herbert, Villeneuve debates the legends manufactured by mankind, one might think he questions them: do they or do they not have a unique structure, are they flawless...

On Arrakis, Paul is greeted by the natives not only with cheers, but also with fanaticism: "Lisan al Gaib, Lisan al Gaib, Lisan al Gaib", the one announced in the prophecies, the destined one, and master of the language of the unseen realms. "Through Jessica's knowledge of the 'standard' Missionaria Protecticac myth, she is able to cast Paul (and herself) as the messiah and mother expected by the Fremen" (List 27). But that doesn't mean the natives will follow him blindly. In this seemingly sleepy desert world, the strict rules of nature operate; the law of the strongest and boldest applies. You only lead if you deserve it.

The Fremens, firm, principled people, are in fact the planet's main resource. But they are hard to trace: "their culture and daily lives are hidden from the outside so much that no one even knows what their population is; they hear and heed with fanatical zeal a call toward the creation of an earthly paradise; they remember a past history of destruction and betrayal by others; they resent the intrusion and arrogance of occupying powers whose mission clashes with their desire for self-determination and control" (Senior 317).

Here we find another nuance: financial assets are nothing without human support. That's the idea behind our hero's father, Duke Leto Atreides (Oscar Isaac), who arrives here not for monetary reasons but for human wealth. He senses what's really important on Arrakis, but he also knows he's running out of time, bravely and resolutely confessing to his partner (Rebecca Ferguson), "I thought we'd have more time." It's a capital reflection, told without emphasis. For some, the ending comes abruptly, unexpectedly, maybe too soon. The Duke feels his demise, though he is walled in, barricaded in a fortress that for his predecessors here, the mighty Harkonnens, has not fallen for generations. His destiny in this world is towards the end: a link in the story of his son, the one who crossed the right genetic lines and can bring peace to the Universe.

But will that be enough?

Paul Atreides' visions that don't give him peace of mind create a bond with the locals in advance. He feels natural here: intuits customs, lets himself carried away by instinct, anticipates the importance he can play in the event of a jihad, of a holy war (waged in his name?) against the Harkonnens—or even against the mighty Emperor Shaddam,

> an ineffective monarch, having given himself over to the 'court functions and the pomp of office', which is a feature of the Imperial system [filled] with the court lackeys, hairdressers, designers, and all the rest of the 'parasites' who constituted the royal court. (DiTommaso 273–274)

This call to battle doesn't make Paul any more smug or obstinate. On the contrary: reconciled to the burden, he allows himself to be seduced, he feeds it, and he does not rush it though.

Are these visions faithful, or do they arise with conceit, with personal expectations? Paul, "the Kwisatz Haderach created by the Bene Geserit to see into the 'unknown', is endowed with prescient powers that are the result of genetic engineering and the ingestion of psychotropic drugs rather than visions from a divine source" (List 34). This is why his premonitions come to be questioned: they may or may not happen; they only give an indication of what might happen. Nothing is written in advance. They can only become true if Paul really faces them. On this initiatory journey, expectations, hopes, burdens build up a sum of many variables.

Unlike his grandfather, the young hero is not allowed (anymore) to risk his physical integrity gratuitously, he can't "fight bulls for fun" or venture into the unknown. Paul has the status of a priceless jewel, above all known riches. The obsession with keeping him in the safest possible condition can soften him. Prepared—theoretically—for the inevitable confrontation, he shows himself to be feeble. Behind this seemingly vigorless body lives the energy of a shared bright future. The Providential, the one who has visions, the one to whom a supreme power *shows* what must be done, what will happen, represents the chance for *good* —on *Earth*, in the Galaxy.

But the circumstances transcend worldly intentions. Here it no longer matters to what extent House Atreides takes a softer approach to the Fremen in relation to the Harkonnen clan. Ways are no longer good or bad, ethical or unethical, because the discussion is about more than the pecuniary exploitation of spices and the control over the planet.

The ascetic Fremen's life makes them immune to the desire for enrichment and turns them into perfect soldiers. Remarkable in their own faith, they await the *coming* with dignity and patience. That doesn't mean they will follow anyone blindly. Paul—if indeed he is the chosen one—will have a long way to go in convincing them of his good intentions, his immaculate character.

Is the chosen one really the chosen one?

Is he worthy of his mission? Will this universal balancing act happen or not? At what cost?

These are all questions with no clear or definitive answers. Seen in the movie theater, the film takes on an epochal dimension; it is an eye-opener, having frightening powers for some, prescient or prophetic for others, healing for the rest.

Villeneuve's *Dune* doesn't set out to provide answers, at least not in its first part—with the second set for release in 2023. Sprawled out slowly, we explore the landscape in a similar manner to the way things play out in *Blade Runner 2049*. The focus is not primarily on the action, but on the protagonist, who discovers this new reality alongside with us amidst a shattering cinematic approach.

It's the same complex atmosphere that Villeneuve has managed to convey time and time again in his sci-fi movies as he debated issues of our humanity, of how we relate to each other, but also our mania to become creators.

His themes are not new to the science fiction genre though. Presented in this way on the screen, they began to take on a clearer (modern and then postmodern) shape as early as the 1960s (*Fahrenheit 451*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Planet of the Apes*), and then established themselves as a genre in their own right over the next two decades.

What unifies all these themes?

The major sci-fi themes revolve around worlds ruled by humans, aliens and / or artificial intelligence, long-distance travel across the galaxy, parallel universes, alternate societies etc., but they are all tied together by the fact that their heroes are searching for *something* that is very hard to come by, sometimes non-existent, sometimes only available at the end of the universe. List argues that they are all willing to work and fight for their goals and that they represent "heroic figures who are 'self-made' men and women"; "hard work and study are undertaken by all the protagonists" (39).

It doesn't matter if the protagonist is human, alien or robot, he wants to find a reason to live, a purpose beyond his own being and primary purpose. This happens in *Dune*, this also happens in both Blade Runners and all Aliens, as we will see, because this happens in our life, as well. We want to be part of a greater plan. We want not to have lived in vain. Sometimes we exceed own expectation in achieving our goal, but most of the times we are not satisfied because we feel we acted blindfolded. List points toward a "Prometheus archetype" as being a protagonist which seeks "salvation through training and knowledge rather than through belief or faith" (40)

Of course, these two attitudes can coexist, but do create a dilemma: what should the heroes of these stories follow more, science or faith?

This is the conundrum facing both Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) in the original *Blade Runner* and Detective K (Ryan Gosling) in Villeneuve's version. They struggle between listening to their reason or their feelings.

Are we human, or are we replicants?

Adapted from the novel 'Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?' written by Philip K. Dick, Ridley Scott's film offers an important debate on artificial intelligence, but also on human nature in general, featuring a hero who doesn't know (anymore) his true origin.

In a turbulent and dangerous world, ex-cop Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) is a blade runner—a kind of salvager hired to take out those replicant-robots who have become insurgents. The film hints that he himself might be such a replicant, but without making it very clear; no one really knows.

Deckard's struggle is with himself, an inner conflict we all have throughout our lives. It so happens that we search for our origins, don't know who we are, think we found out, and then something makes us doubt again. It's a situation that works in a loop. We have doubts that we somehow manage to remove, but others come and quickly take their place.

Throughout, Deckard is thrown into borderline situations, built not only for show, but rather as pretexts for something more meaningful. They are the trials the hero

must go through in order to better understand himself and reach some sort of personal reconciliation.

The most intense moment comes towards the end, when Deckard is confronted by the replicants he must eliminate. The leader of these robots with human faces and superhuman powers is Roy Batty, played masterfully by Rutger Hauer, who has not been given any similarly important roles, being always in the background or in the shadow of other actors. Like Deckard, Roy himself has conflicting memories and even feelings (he was programmed like this). In his own way, he is a poet. His presence seems to be one that can change your life, your thoughts, and your attitude.

Tenacious, strong, dominant, Roy leaves his opponent opportunities to escape. Is this happening for his own amusement? More likely, I would say he does this to guide Deckard and to open his eyes. Against Roy, Deckard doesn't stand a chance. But he keeps fighting. Roy tries to show him his side of the story, because in *Blade Runner*, the characters aren't good or bad for nothing. Rather, they live and guide themselves by a set of values. And their beliefs inevitably clash at some point.

Roy is a robot programmed primarily to fight. Beneath his tough exterior hides a nostalgic and sad individual. Only his (artificial, programmed) nature forces him towards violence. To Vangelis's musical chords, he searches for the monumental exit from the stage. It's a sequence in which time seems to stand still. Even for a robot, the renunciation of existence is overwhelming.

Although its initial reception in the US was divided, its power and depth eventually won the film over critics and fans alike. Its legacy lives on to this day, when, for example, the makers of cult series *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–2009) cite it as their primary source of inspiration: "Well, *Blade Runner* was really the intellectual aesthetic that we used on *Battlestar*. It actually fed *Battlestar* and the integrity that was begotten by that piece of work really bred the integrity of what we used on *Battlestar Galactica*." (Olmos 2019). In a relatively short time, *Blade Runner* became a myth, a hit and a phenomenon that everyone would talk about. It influenced video games, sci-fi movies, series and television programs.

Villeneuve became also interested in this debate—where we come from, where we're heading, what's good and what's evil—and chose to continue the story with *Blade Runner 2049*. A more advanced replicant model, Detective K (Ryan Gosling) works for LAPD (Los Angeles Police Department) in a dystopian future controlled by one Niander Wallace (Jared Leto), the owner of the company that makes these humanoid robots.

K is tasked with decommissioning older replicants. Although they feel, think, have organs, blood and tissue, these robots cannot reproduce themselves. So when K stumbles upon the bones of a female replicant who died while giving birth—an unimaginable 'miracle'—all his beliefs are challenged. Such information would also spark war.

Confronted with this dangerous truth, K's boss, Lieutenant Joshi (Robin Wright) orders him to destroy all evidence and dismiss the case. Her fear—that discovering the truth could

lead to revolution—represents a common idea in history that any big news can lead to unpredictable cha(lla)nge. We can compare this insertion into the story to the arrival of Paul Atreides on Arrakis. Both have the power to overturn the *natural* order of things.

The secret can't be contained too much and it gets to the cynical tycoon Niander Wallace, who sends his right-hand assistant, a sultry replicant named Luv (Sylvia Hoeks), to steal the bones, convinced he'll find the key to multiplying the miracle.

It's a little unclear why Niander wants to be able to biologically multiply these replicants. Certainly, one of his obsessions has to do with controlling the galaxy, an idea also used in most sci-fi movies, where the antagonist character wants nothing more or less than to rule the entire universe.

There are plenty of archetypal moments and characters in the film's narrative structure that, taken separately, might be unconvincing, but the charm of *Blade Runner 2049* is provided by cinematographer Roger Deakins' masterful visual approach and Denis Villeneuve's gentle pacing of the story.

What makes the viewer wonder even when things seem clear is the enigmatic energy of Ryan Gosling, an actor who continually manages to assert his personality. His charismatic figure resembles that of Timothée Chalamet, who plays Paul Atreides in *Dune*.

K believes himself at some point to be the Born One, the Chosen One, the Providential One, the One who will change the balance between humans and synthetics.

The idea of the robot seeking, in turn, to give life was speculated much more comprehensively and elaborately by the *Battlestar Galactica* series, where Cylons (robots with human faces, similar to the replicants in Blade Runner) strive to acquire the power to procreate.

It's a theme that both Villeneuve and Ridley Scott are interested in. For example, in *Alien: Covenant* (2017), the synthetic David (Michael Fassbender) seeks to break out of his condition as something created by man and overcome his Creator. This missing link towards biological completeness makes all these synthetics adopt a faith. Convinced that only divinity can help them, they strive for an ideal and end up behaving more humanly than humans: they make mistakes, love, lie and betray. They can resist their programming because they have come to *feel*.

It is also the case of K.

Denis Villeneuve suggests through the story of this film that the third part (*Blade Runner 2099*—the year of the project's making is not yet known) will be the final battle—like the one envisioned in the *Terminator* series —between humans and their creation.

Villeneuve manages to harmonise his own world with that of its creator, Ridley Scott, who had imagined it as fragmented and aimless: a continuous exposé that leaves room for interpretation and invites viewers to guess the characters' intentions.

The appearance of Deckard—the protagonist of the first part, now aged and holed up for three decades in a deserted Vegas—is not only meant to better legitimize the movie in

the eyes of the nostalgics, but also revisits the original dilemma: is he human or synthetic? Beyond that, what matters more, knowing exactly what he is (on one hand) or (on the other) understanding and accepting himself in the best possible way, whatever he is?

How human are you?

Only when K accepts himself as he is will he be at peace with himself. The end of the story finds him relieved: he is lying on his back on the stairs of a building, while inside Deckard reunions with his potential daughter. A robot and its—or his, should be here suitable?—children, what can be a better metaphor? The piece of uplifting soundtrack created by Hans Zimmer and Benjamin Wallfisch in Vangelis' style—"We tried to create the intention of a more contemporary sound using 40-year-old technology. It's a lot harder but the result has soul." (Lobenfeld 2017)—reminds of Roy Batty's angel-style demise from the original movie – the angel motif being systematically revisited in *Blade Runner 2049* as well, a subject discussed by Timothy Shanahan and Paul Smart (25, 115, 166, 178, 211). Everything is interconnected and, in the same time, has the vibe of being out of this world. Though K may not be who he dreamed of for a moment, though he may not be the chosen one, he is finally at peace: he has contributed to a grand plan. His effort has not gone unnoticed.

These synthetic creatures seem to have more humanity than humans.

Both Villeneuve and Scott operate with creation myths. Scott makes more direct references to this in his latest additions to the Alien series: *Prometheus* (2012) and *Alien: Covenant* (2017). These are prequels to the original story and speak, among many things, about the synthetic David's ambition to become a creator, but not necessarily through religion, but through scientific experiment. This ambition gives rise to a polarity between good and evil that can be placed within the theory of Marilyn McCord Adams as follows: "the role of (P5) Divine versus (P6) created agency in creating and resolving the problem of evil, their responsibility for its origin on the one hand and its conquest or control on the other" (172).

The central theme in *Prometheus* concerns the eponymous Titan of Greek mythology who defies the gods and gifts humanity with fire, for which he is subjected to eternal punishment (Kerényi 263). The gods want to limit their creations in case they attempt to usurp the gods. The film deals with humanity's relationship with the gods—their creators—and the consequence of defying them. Here, David—who is constructed in a human-like manner—questions his creators about why they are seeking their own.

The film sets the stage for David's worldview, elaborated furthermore in *Alien: Covenant*. In the title of this movie, the term *covenant* has two narrative meanings. Both refer to a pact—on the one hand with the divinity, on the other with the self. In the Bible, this word expresses

a promise that man makes to God. Here, the first covenant, the collective one, is made by the crew of the ship that left Earth to populate the planet Origae-6. The other, an individual one, is taken by David as a release from the software he is programmed with, by which it is designed to help man regardless of circumstances or personal thoughts.

The Covenant crew's main mission is to perpetuate the human species. The reason for leaving Earth is that humanity has lost some of its direction (both in fiction and in our real everyday lives) and is now seeking redemption far away from home; very far away. The theme of a dying Earth is another thing which ties all these sci-fi stories together.

The Covenant crew is awoken from hyper-sleep by a technical malfunction which Walter (the same Michael Fassbender)—an enhanced copy of the android David, perfected at not thinking for himself but only executing orders—has no way of fixing.

Chance intervenes, before which any logical and scientific measurement pales. It's the same hazard that Paul Atreides and, in fact, every hero in these science fiction stories struggles with. We can thus identify the pattern that is replicated here. First mate Oram (Billy Crudup) and his shipmates lose the ship's captain, Branson (James Franco, in perhaps the shortest role of his career). A fire in his own capsule, which won't open, burns him alive. Those close to him watch helplessly as Branson becomes the first casualty of this new order of *mis*fortune.

But *chance* is in fact fabricated, actually being the opposite. David lures the Covenant people on *his* planet. When they land here, he gives them a distorted version of reality. They don't know he is a synthetic gone rogue, who no longer feels the need to help his creators. He wants to perpetuate the Aliens—physically superior to man, a race he has learned how to master. For David, the human species is a stumbling block to the completion of the Alien race, which he took with him to this minor planet, undetected by Earth-based scanners. Here we can identify the struggle between two *goods*. David's good is seen as evil by humans and vice versa. Both sides can argue that they are right.

Seeking perfection, David finds himself more attracted to this caustic-blooded, metal-faced beast. The Alien is an organism hybridized by nature, on which David has experimented a few times in his decade on the small planet. His version of the alien represents a mechanism ordered in such a way that it becomes the ideal predator: a biologically-metallic organism that has the capacity and drive to be lethal. David dreams of the magic formula. He has time. Immortal by mechanical (but imperfect) circuitry, he seeks the indestructible body to clothe. He would thus fuse a high-performance brain and a potentially unbreakable body. The ideal being would be born.

As in *Prometheus*, Ridley Scott leaves many things unexplained. He doesn't tell us, for example, why David is interested in creation and perfection. Scott is visibly captivated by the fundamental questions (where do we come from and where are we going), which he incorporates into the discussion at the beginning of the film between David and the man who created him. There you have it, two Creators, face to face, talking.

The American director seeks to create his own reality, his own (fictionalized, aestheticized) answer. The crew of the Prometheus hoped that on this planet—where they met their end—will get a solution: a new beginning. It was not meant to be.

Now, the crew of the Covenant is heading for another beginning, but one based on the old narrative. A new society, based on earthly habits, is about to be born. Before our eyes, this space journey continues. Scott prefers to say no more. He invites us to guess. The fate of the Covenant expedition is tied to that of David.

His faith can shape the future of the whole universe, as it does for Paul Atreides. Perhaps the intentions of all these characters I've talked about are slightly different, but what links their stories is that each is searching for something they can't be sure will bring them closure. Their mission is to fight for the ideal they have formed. Born for a purpose greater than themselves, for an ultimate goal, they can never cease to search. Their gift is also their burden.

Conclusion

Sci-fi has always offered stimulating debates on the direction humanity can take, being seen as a parable to our difficulties, which regardless of technological evolution or refinement of ideas will continue to relate to the most mundane human needs and dilemmas. As leaders of their generations, both Ridley Scott and Denis Villeneuve have captured the imagination of millions. Whether based in distant galaxies or here on Earth, the way they constructed their narratives fed imagination and provided potential answers to some of our problems.

Villeneuve's first sci-fi, *Arrival* (2016) was a good way to learn the ins and outs of this genre. In an alternate present, a superior alien civilization sends 12 ships to as many points on our green planet. They do not come to destroy us, but quite the opposite: to offer us something, a so-called *weapon*, but a mystical one, like a tool that reason can only explain if it is combined with passion. Problems emerge because the term '*weapon*' is an approximate one and has several significations, some even at opposite poles. The lack of clarity stems from the inability of language to capture the exact meaning of something. Through the geographical layout of the 12 ships, visitors force people to cross ethnic and political barriers. Chinese, Russians, British, Sudanese, Indians or Americans, all are suggested to put aside their differences and cooperate.

But for fear of divulging their secrets, each of the twelve camps ends up breaking off communication, and suddenly paranoia becomes widespread.

Adapted from 'Story of Your Life', for which Chinese-American Ted Chiang won the prestigious Nebula Award in 2000, this speaks so much about the reality of our times.

The stranger, the one who might come upon us, but also the one with whom we should come into contact in order to get to know each other, is not the alien. He lives much closer

than we think. He is the Chinese, the Russian, the Indian, the African, the Easterner, the Third World man of whom we are increasingly afraid. Until we are able to know and understand him better, things will always remain tense. This may be the most valuable lesson of all.

Works Cited

Adams, Marilyn McCord. "God and Evil: Polarities of a Problem." in *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, vol. 69, no. 2/3, 1993, pp. 167–86.

Buchholz, Ester S., and Joshua K. Mandel. "Reaching for Virtue, Stumbling on Sin: Concepts of Good and Evil in a Postmodern Era." in *Journal of Religion and Health*, vol. 39, no. 2, Summer 2000, pp. 123–142.

Determann, Jörg Matthias. *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life: The Culture of Astrobiology in the Muslim World*. London, I.B. Tauris, Bloomsbury Collections, 2021.

DiTommaso, Lorenzo. "The articulation of imperial decadence and decline in epic science fiction." in *Extrapolation*, vol. 48, no. 2, summer 2007, pp. 267+.

Kerényi, Károly. *The Gods of The Greeks*. Pickle Partners Publishing, 2016.

Lim, Dennis. *David Lynch: The Man from Another Place*. New Harvest, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015.

List, Julia. "'Call Me a Protestant': Liberal Christianity, Individualism, and the Messiah in 'Stranger in a Strange Land', 'Dune', and 'Lord of Light.'" in *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2009, pp. 21–47.

Lobenfeld, Claire. "*Blade Runner 2049*: How Hans Zimmer and Benjamin Wallfisch followed up the most influential sci-fi score of all time." in *FactMag*, 20 October 2017, https://www.factmag.com/2017/10/20/hans-zimmer-wallfisch-blade-runner-2049-interview/

Olmos, Edward James. "Edward James Olmos: actor; Blade Runner, Battlestar Galactica – Creative Continuity." in *YouTube*, uploaded by Bestow TV, 22 May 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkUv8JlUVfk&t=296s&ab_channel=BestowTV

Overbye, Dennis. "He's Not Done With Exploring the Universe." in *The New York Times*, 2 May 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/06/movies/prometheus-returns-ridley-scott-to-outer-space.html

Parkerson, Ronny. "Semantics, General Semantics, And Ecology In Frank Herbert's Dune." in *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, vol. 67, no. 4, 2010, pp. 403–11.

"Prometheus Crew: On A Mission Collision." in *Inquirer.net*, 26 April 2012, https://pop.inquirer.net/3843/prometheus-crew-on-a-mission-collision

Seitz, Matt Zoller. "Jodorowsky's Dune." in *RogerEbert.com*, 25 March 2014, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/jodorowskys-dune-2014

Senior, William A. "Frank Herbert's Prescience: 'Dune' and the Modern World." in *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 17, no. 4 (68), 2007, pp. 317–20.

Shanahan, Timothy and Paul Smart eds. *Blade Runner 2049. A Philosophical Exploration* Routledge, 2019.

Whitten, Sarah. "Dune is 'both dazzling and frustrating', critics say." in *CNBC*, 20 October 2021, https://www.cnbc.com/2021/10/20/dune-reviews-what-critics-think-of-denis-villeneuves-adaptation.html