Themes in Literature and Culture Studies: Frank Herbert's Duniverse - Thou shalt not make a machine in the likeness of a human mind (551.330, 23W)

Seminar Paper

The Role of Dune in Popular Culture

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Introduction

This paper analyses *Dune* (Herbert 1965) and the Duniverse[1] using the concepts of Popular, Mass and Folk culture. We will focus on Dune's role in the power relationship between the creators and the audience. First, the actors and the relationship of Popular, Mass and Folk will be defined using the case of the Duniverse which came from Folk culture and later became part of the two others. This tripartite division of Culture opposes the bourgeoisie, the owner of the means of industrial Mass Culture production against its audience, the *multitude* (see Hardt and Negri 2000). Second, we explore how people can appropriate Dune through *play*, a concept coined by Roland Barthes which describes an active interaction between the audience and the artefact. From this perspective, Dune is a broad playground for its audience to create Folk Culture. Third, the Dune's accessibility of appropriation is explored with the support of *Columbo* (Levinson and Link 1967), a television show that had the reverse trajectory of *Dune*, going from Popular to Folk Culture. This cultural approach to Dune aims to showcase the power issues that lie behind the massification of Dune and the possibilities of appropriation by its audience.

1) The Popular, the Mass, The Folk, and Dune

Dune came from Folk Culture, eventually moving on to Mass and Popular Culture; the Duniverse began in the Analog Magazine in 1963, and its latest component was recently released as a major Hollywood blockbuster (Villeneuve 2024), In the context of this study, culture is to be understood as the production of artefacts and the activities/behaviours that are related to them (Williams 1983, 91; MacDonald 1994). The three other terms, Folk, Mass and Popular, define quantitatively and qualitatively the people involved in the culture. Folk is a relatively small group of people who share similar interests, references, and, tastes–the focus of this paper–without necessarily being professionally related (see Harmon 1983a).
Science Fiction (SF) can be considered a Folk Culture, especially in magazines where "the writers are often not professionals, but readers who have gone over to a more extreme form of participation"(Shippey 2016, 89). The Mass is the target audience of the culture produced by the

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[1] In the following of this paper, the 'Duniverse' is shortened 'Dune' and refers to the franchise while *Dune* refers to the first novel of the series.

industry. The members of the Mass are not personally involved in constituting the group, and the only valuable choice they have is whether or not to buy a product (MacDonald 1994, 30). Their common denominator in taste comes from market analysis, and "questionnaire-sociologist" (ibid.), in other words, the mass culture audience is identified through normalising processes, taking the rule of the number as an indicator.

> It [Mass culture] is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen; its audiences are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying. The Lords of *kitsch*, in short, exploit the cultural needs of the masses in order to make a profit and/or to maintain their class rule. (MacDonald 1994, 30; original emphasis)

MacDonald assimilates Popular to Mass because "its distinctive mark is solely and directly an article for mass consumption" (MacDonald 1994, 29). To explore the audience of a Mass culture product as more than consumers, a distinction has to be made between the Mass and the Popular. In his preface to *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, Carrey defines the 'mass' as such:

> The 'mass' is, of course, a fiction. Its function, as a linguistic device, is to eliminate the human status of the majority of people — or, at any rate, to deprive them of those distinctive features that make users of the term, in their own esteem, superior. (Carey 1992, vii)

In this sense, the Mass is a bourgeois concept that constitutes humans as numbers and norms. The Popular would be opposed to it by considering the same people as humans. In a similar conception as 'the multitude' (Hardt and Negri 2000), the industry-produced artefacts certainly unify the Popular but the different identities, interacting with them, appropriate culture in various manners. In this vision, one important parameter of a culture's hegemony (see Gramsci 1994) is the legitimisation of modes of appropriations (see Bourdieu 1994, 444), i.e. politically valued tastes and practices related to artefacts. The struggle here lies between the actors of the Mass culture and Popular culture. Hegemony is obtained by a group when it is "posing all the questions around which the struggle rages not on a corporate but on a 'universal' plane" (Gramsci 1994, 216) through the "unison of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity" (ibid.). Mass culture becomes Popular if the audience *playfully* appropriates the Mass culture artefact. The different appropriations will be part of different Folk cultures,

communities that share a common taste. On this basis, a Mass only exists if its audience passively consumes the artefacts. I define then Popular culture as the works that have been widely appropriated in a way that unites Folk cultures while preserving their separate identities.

2) *Playing* the Duniverse

The different modes of appropriation are observable in the Mass's passive audience and the Folk's playful audience, the former encouraged and legitimated by the industrial means of cultural production owners (the bourgeoisie) and the latter by the semiologists. Playful is here to be understood in the sense of Roland Barthes (1979) as a non-trivial interaction between the reader and the text–or any cultural artefacts–, in the same way a musician reads and plays a score. This playful interaction is only possible if we consider texts and works separate objects. To summarise Barthe's propositions about the definition of a *text* as opposed to *work*, the *text* is the meaning produced by the reader when reading a *work*. In this sense, the text is a multiple and ever-changing signified produced by the reader's experience of a work's "*integrally symbolic nature*" (Barthes 1979, 76; original emphasis). In semiotics terms, playing an artefact is the experience of a *work as a sign* and the *text as a signified*. Through this post-structuralist approach, the responsibility is given to the different folks to create a text from a work. The structuralist approach would have been enough if Dune was restricted to the sci-fi reader community because the author's and audience's cultures are uniform. In this context, the text does not clearly distinguish from the work as it is "caught up in a process of filiation" (Barthes 1972, 78), meaning that there is "a *determination* of the work by the outside world (by race, then by history), a *consecution* of works among themselves, and an *allocation* of the work to its author"(ibid.; original emphasis) and a *respect* of the author's manuscript and intention (ibid.). The sci-fi author does not need to explicit his intention because of the genre's convention and its community involvement. Science fiction narratives are constituted of *parabolas*, narrative tropes that are re-used and deformed across sci-fi stories (Attebery and Hollinger 2013), that the authors and readers can recognise and reproduce. If a sci-fi work is confined to its community, there should be a consensus around its meaning. The deferral of meaning (see Storey 2021, 195; Derrida 1973; 1978) in sci-fi occurs when a text reproduces a parabola, assigning it new to

connotations, and changing the meaning of all texts using this parabola. Dune is a special case of SF and is virtually absent of the generalist academic works on the genre. It is a special case because it combines most of the parabolas found in SF canons (see Table 1) established by Attebery and Hollinger (2013).

Table 1: List of the parabolae found in SF canon texts and Dune.

Canon Text	Parabola	Presence in Dune
Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*	The Experiment-Gone-Wrong, or Frankenscience	Paul's little sister and the Kwisatz Haderach breeding program
H.G. Wells, *First Men in the Moon*	The First Contact Story	First contact with the Fremen in their Sietch.
James Blish, "Surface Tension"	The Lost Colony World	Humans adapt to Arrakis. Use of genetic and ecological engineering.
Isaac Asimov, The Foundation Trilogy	The Galactic Empire	The Empire
Isaac Asimov, *I, Robot*	The Robot Rebellion	The Butlerian Jihad
Suzette Haden Elgin, *Native Tongue*	The Religious Dystopia	The Bene Gesserit and Paul's Jihad
A.E. van Vogt, *Slan*	The Mutant Superman	Paul is the Kwisatz Haderach, a superhuman
Edgar Rice Burroughs, *A Princess of Mars*	The Planetary Romance	Paul and Chani
Andre Norton, *Judgement on Janus*	The Rationalized Fantasy	Paul's double identity: as Paul Atreides and Usul Muad'dib, the Lisan al Gaib
Nicola Griffith, *Ammonite*	The Single-Sex Utopia	The Kwisatz Haderach has male and female qualities

Giving birth to the Duniverse, Herbert offers the reader, not only a sum of the SF parabolae but a narrative system able to articulate them. This is a double-edged sword: on one hand, the text becomes extremely complex to fully experience, on the other it gives its reader (or players) a powerful tool to explore the SF texts. It seems paradoxical that Herberts expect his readers to respect his authorial intentions with a novel that constitutes more of a system than a closed text. Combining all the parameters creates a lot of play space[2], where misreading is not an error but an exercise. In the case of Dune, Herbert was disappointed that people misunderstood his main character, Paul Atreides, as a colonial hero whereas he wanted to depict a manipulative mass murderer. However, the functions of Paul as a hero, lover, leader, responsible, good son, husband, father, friend, warrior, poet and martyr create arguably more space for a 'wrong' interpretation of Dune glorifying Paul. The same phenomenon happened in *Watchmen* (Moore and Gibbons 1987), with its fascist anti-hero, Rorschach, getting misinterpreted and glorified when it became Mass culture. However, its author dealt with the consequences of having an artefact get out of its original community by giving up any responsibilities of the different *Watchmen* adaptations. Like the folk culture creator, the popular culture creator should know the predisposition of the receiver and reinforce or appeal to them (Harmon 1983, 7).

3) The accessibility of *Dune*

a)   *Dune* and *Columbo*: reading the Popular

The progressive popular culture creator needs to use the most common predisposition of her audience without falling into a conservative reproduction of the normalised mass culture. Her goal contains a paradox: how to criticise and appeal to the audience's predisposition at the same time? This bet was won by *Columbo*. Unlike Paul, the hero is flawed in the eye of the bourgeoisie's standards but valued for the popular tastes. At first glance, the comparison seems far-fetched but the two heroes share common aspects especially when it comes to supporting the audience's play with the text. Both of them are guided by rules and share with the reader a

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[2] Play takes here the french meaning of "jeu", the space of freedom in between two pieces, for instance, of a mechanism

superior knowledge of the story. Paul sees the future and calculates his actions to achieve his imperial goal and Columbo knows from the beginning who is the culprit and calculates his actions so he can legally prove it. In Dune, the end of the story is made explicit through Paul's reports of his future history through the excerpts of Princess Irulan's writings. In Columbo, the first part of the episode entirely shows the murder and the murderer. These devices shift the audience's focus from 'What is the story?' to 'How is the story constructed?'. Using Ryan's terminology of suspense, *Dune* and *Columbo* focus on *metasuspense* where "the focus of the reader's concern is to find out not what happens next in the textual world but how the author is going to tie all the strands together and give the text proper narrative form" (Ryan 2001, 143). This kind of suspense enables the audience in the process of playing, it democratises the writing process because the reader thinks as if she were the author. Columbo and Dune differ in the genre and the way they relate to real life. Science fiction relies on a defamiliarisation process in which the reader has to make some effort to understand the new system of reality the action is taking place (Suvin 1979, 7; Shippey 2016, 15). The detective story relies on real-life systems and norms, and specifically in *Columbo*, on popular culture in the sense of the ways of living of the people. Columbo relies on this popular knowledge to solve the mystery, "Columbo's guiding principle is that a break in custom stands in need of explanation"(Clayton and Moore 2023, 187). In Columbo, this question could be formulated as: 'What was done during the murder that could be used as proof against the culprit, knowing the habits of people?'. In Dune, this question could be formulated as: 'What elements force Paul to lead the Jihad knowing the rules of the Duniverse?'. This additional layer of knowledge is only possible through time and effort spent with the text which, especially in the complex system of Dune, requires either multiple reading or a slow and focused reading.

> It [Science fiction] does not call for the reader to apply the norms, rules, conventions, and so forth of his empirical world, but instead assumes a paradigmatic intelligibility that is both delusive and necessary. (Angenot 2017, 129)

 This greatly limits the chances for the cinema audience of *Dune* (Villeneuve 2021) to play with the text. The accessibility of the play is not only limited by the complex Duniverse but also by the lack of formal familiarity. Because it borrows from so many different forms, or parabolae,

there are no formal frames that the audience can refer to in order to play with the movie. On the other hand, because of the narrow form of a *Columbo* episode, the audience can easily see themself as the author, even if they never heard of a detective story.

Science Fiction, and *Dune* as an ambassador for Popular Culture, are powerful tools for learning. Through *cognitive estrangement*, a term coined by Darko Suvin (1972), readers train themselves to learn a language in the semiological sense. This competence is necessary for a playful reading of a text, an individual appropriation of an artefact and thus a de-massification of culture. From its birth, SF constituted a counterpower to bourgeois culture hegemony written for the lower-middle class (Carey 1992). Dune is a compendium of SF, that offers a wide range of interpretations and appropriations that are in opposition to the hegemonic one (except for the fascist readings of *Dune*, which hopefully are dominated by force and consent).

However, Paul will never be a Popular fictional hero, as he does not save individuals from the Mass. Sherlock Holmes did (Carey 1992, 8) and Columbo did too. But to transform Dune into a Popular product, creators will need to write another hero, more relatable and able to function as a 'heroic mediator' (see Harmon 1983b). It is hopeful to see an explosion of series and movies related to the Duniverse, making its system accessible and playable.

b) Alternative playing of Dune

Hebert was not able to convey his intention through Dune neither should an SF writer be aiming for it. This is reflected in Dune by the absence of any societal ideal because every political move is summed up as a strategy to access and keep power (Pearson 2019, 157), without a depiction of what is done with that power. The only explicit authorial moral judgement concerns the Harkonnens-Atreides opposition. Harkonnens are evil in all aspects and their sexuality is homophobically depicted, whereas the Atreides are virtuous with strong family and freedom values that lead them to feel guilty about colonising the galactic empire. Showing goodwill to the anticolonialist message of Dune, its narrative can be analysed by comparing it to other SF stories on colonisation like *The Liberation of Earth* (Tenn [1953] 2010). In *The Liberation of Earth*, the Earth is colonised by two extraterrestrial species who use our planet as a warzone always in the name of the liberation of Earth. This satirical story is a clear metaphor for the colonisation and proxy war of the Cold War. The experienced reader can easily identify the Dendies and the Troxxt, the two extraterrestrial species, with the Harkonnen and the Atreides. However, she has

to deconstruct the propaganda that is included in Dune's diegesis through Irulan's historiography. The reader should realise by Dune Messiah that she has been tricked into supporting a genocidal tyrant. This makes visible that the propaganda satirically described in The Liberation of Earth is not as obvious as it seems when being immersed in it. However, if Herbert wanted to have been clearer about this message, it would have been easier to immerse the reader in another propaganda, the one of the Harkonnens for example, which could depict Feyd Rautha as a virtuous hero and Paul as a genocidal selfish manipulative villain. In Dune it is not the propaganda that is caricatured, but the good versus evil opposition. There is very little space for doubt in the virtue of the Harkonnens, making them not evil by propaganda, but evil by nature. This, again, might be hinting at Frank Herbert's political affiliation with McCarthyism, understanding the world with the good side of American Liberalism, and the evil side of Soviet Communism.

Herbert failed to convey a clear message about colonialism and imperialism but he offered a very rich and autonomous piece of culture. If the field of production is autonomous it is "inseparable from a specific cultural competence" (Bourdieu 1994, 446), meaning that the field of production is its own genre and thus needs specific knowledge to interact with it. The cultural competence the Dune reader acquires is vast in its thematics and fields of study. Dune borrows from different cultures, arts, practices, languages and narrative traditions. However difficult to read Dune is, the difficulty does not come from its formal aspect. There are very few poetic licences, and the style is made to highlight the functions, power and relations between the characters in a very clear manner. The division of the *Dune* book into three chapters (or books) and short sections makes the reading easier.

> The antithesis between quantity and quality, substance and form, corresponds to the opposition – linked to different distances from necessity – between the taste of necessity, which favours the most 'filling' and most economical foods, and the taste of liberty – or luxury – which shifts the emphasis to the manner (of presenting, serving, eating, etc.) and tends to use stylized forms to deny function. (Bourdieu 1994, 448)

In opposition to the bourgeois tradition, *Dune* shifts the emphasis from the manner to the function.

Conclusion: The Role of *Dune* in Popular Culture

We can be certain that Herbert was aware of the role of language in power. Language is defined by Saussure as such:

> Language is a system of signs that express ideas, and is therefore comparable to a system of writing, the alphabet of deaf mutes, symbolic rites, polite formulas, military signals, etc. . . . A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable . . . I shall call it semiology (Saussure 1974,16)

All these systems of signs are described in *Dune* and they are linked to the characters' functions and power relationships. Herbert also highlights the importance for a leader to learn languages, for instance when Paul reports the Reverend Mother's words at the beginning of *Dune*: "Then she said a funny thing: she said a good ruler has to learn his world's language, that it's different for every world" (Herbert 1965, 51). Learning a world's language is also the everyday life of an SF reader who gets used to playing with SF texts.

> [T]he task for humanities in the university… is not to create hierarchies of Works but to educate readers in reading. If this can be done with Shakespeare, fine; if it is better achieved with newspaper cartoons, that's fine, too. The task is to diminish the distance between the writer and reader, writing and reading, and **encourage students to be players**. (Schudson 1994, 489; my bold)

Bringing SF into academia could be an efficient method to 'encourage students to be players'. When students become players, they also acquire the skill to individually appropriate cultural artefacts, thus creating Folk Culture. If SF goes into Mass Culture as *Dune* did, a possible counter-power to the Mass Culture production's owners, who transform humans into norms and numbers, is to give people the key to appropriate this culture, to be players. If a multitude of individualities can appropriate Mass Culture, creating Folk Culture, they will have transformed the bourgeois-owned Mass Culture into a people-owned Popular Culture. It is unsure that *Dune*

will have this effect of democratising knowledge and humanising the Masses but the humanities in the university will certainly help.

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