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# Film Review: Dune

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## Film Review: *Dune*

Directed by Denis Villeneuve, performances by Timothée Chalamet, Rebecca Ferguson, and Oscar Isaac, 2021. 156 mins.

Reviewed by **Fabio Bego**

Denis Villeneuve's film *Dune* (2021) provides interesting insight on how notions of race, gender, and empire that are at the core of current post-colonial critique are being transferred into popular culture. Analyses of the short- and long-term consequences of colonialism in the contemporary world pervade public discourse in shows and documentaries for mainstream media, blockbuster movies, institutionally financed film festivals, and art exhibitions. From a political perspective it is possible to distinguish two broad approaches. On the one hand there is a critique from the left which is focused on the deconstruction of race and ethnicity. On the other hand, there is a critique from the far right that aims at restoring race and ethnic divisions and privileges which were presumably spoiled by "globalization" or "communism." Without wanting to draw strict lines between the two political orientations of current postcolonial critique, in this review I argue that *Dune* squarely falls into the second category.

I became interested in this film after reading some positive comments on Italian far right blogs. To understand the reasons why fascists appreciated this film, I take a look at *Dune* through the book *Revolt Against the Modern World*, by Italian racist and fascist philosopher Julius Evola. The book was originally published in 1934 but is still a major reference for fascists around the world.<sup>1</sup> In order to highlight the analogies between the book and *Dune*'s anti-imperialist discourse, it is necessary to present the basic concepts of Evola's ideas of empire. Evola thought that world history evolved around the dialectic between a supernatural order and a worldly or inferior order. He identified the supernatural order with the term "tradition." Evola affirmed that traditional societies were organized according to races, caste systems and sexes. This form of organization allowed societies to live harmoniously, although not peacefully, according to their status. The decay of traditional values and hierarchies led to the advent of the inferior order. This is the reason why modern societies are dominated by greed and individualistic interests. Evola affirms that the supernatural

order is ruled by men and has a masculine character whereas the inferior order has a feminine character.

Drawing on this division, Evola defines two types of empires. The traditional empire, where the emperor has authority because he is sacred, and modern imperialism where the ruler has lost his sacredness and can obtain authority only with violence. Evola associates the term imperialism to the expansion of Western European states in the modern era and affirms that Europeans have destroyed the traditional societies that they colonized. He also believed that modern slavery in North America has been much crueller than the slavery of the ancient societies. In his view, in Indian traditional society, slavery was inconceivable because the persons that belonged to the caste of workers accepted their social function and, differently from modern slaves and workers, they did not feel alienated from their work. He justifies the hierarchical divisions of traditional society by claiming that workers were free to belong to their caste as their rulers were to belong to theirs. Evola criticized modern nationalism that, in analogy to more recent Marxist-inspired theories, he considered invented traditions.

One of the first similarities that emerge by the comparison between the two works is the division of society into castes. In *Dune* there is an aristocratic class represented by the emperor (that we do not see in this film), the duke of Atreides, his son and the main antagonist of the film, the baron. Then there are warriors who, in analogy to Evola's imagination, are depicted as ascetic persons, devoted to fighting and to the rituality that surrounds it. There is a class of clerks that mediates the relations between the different rulers. And finally there is the "people," which is represented by the mass from the planet Arrakis, the Fremen. The latter praise and chant the name of their prince. They recognize his sacredness and seem spiritually aware of the mission that the prince is about to undertake before he knows it.

*Dune* reflects Evola's thoughts on gender divisions. Evola considers men as depositaries of supernatural values and knowledge. Only men can be sacred rulers. In his view women acquired sacerdotal and political power only when Tradition decayed. Their religious practices cause the devirilisation of men and lead societies to embrace collectivist forms of organizations which end up in transferring power from the ruling elites to the lower popular classes. In *Dune* women are represented as owners of magical knowledge that disturb the rule of men. The main female character, the mother of the prince, is seen with suspicion by the duke who doubts her love for their son. She is also seen with suspicion by her son, the prince, who believes that she has turned him into a freak with her magic powers. Finally, she is seen with suspicion by the fierce barbarians, the Fremen, whose warrior lifestyle gains no benefit from an "aged" woman.

The conflict between the Atreides and the Baron resembles the struggle between the masculine character of Tradition and feminine character of the inferior order. The Baron is not a traditional ruler. His actions do not follow a chivalrous bon-ton. The only tools that he has to increase his authority are deceit, blackmail and rude force. He's in no way sacred, but he's rather the representation of modern imperialism. In Evola's world, the figure of the Baron reminds that of the greedy giants who in his opinion lived in the Age of Bronze. The baron has magic powers that relate him to the inferior order. He can expand his body in a snake-like shape. Evola associated snakes to feminine religious cults. This link clearly emerges when the character of Dr. Liet Kynes, a Freman, is portrayed as a worshipper of the desert giant worms before being swallowed by it.

The temporality of *Dune* is quite similar to the historical ages described by Evola. The film shows us a future happening eight thousand years from now. We would expect AI to have taken our place in many dangerous and heavy duties such as war, but this might not be the case if we took Evola's thought seriously. *Dune* warriors, including the duke and the prince, prefer body to body combat by using swords, daggers, and spears. The fighting scenes are characterised by rituality and techniques that remind the orders of the knights of the Middle Ages and the Samurai that Evola considered quintessential representatives of Tradition. The story of *Dune* is not set in a random future. In analogy to Evola's work, *Dune's* conception of time is not evolutionary but revolutionary. The film seems to be set in the "Age of the Heroes," which according to Evola, was dominated by a civilization that tried to cleanse Tradition from the influence of the inferior order. The purpose of the "heroes" was to restore the Age of Gold, that is the time when humans were godlike creatures and Tradition reigned in its purest form.

The setting of the films provides metahistorical background for positive stereotypes about non-Western society that inform both *Dune* and Evola's work. The Fremens are portrayed as an ethnically and racially mixed community. They have diverse accents and bring to mind various descriptions of noble savages that populate Western imagination. The relation between the Fremens and the prince is reminiscent of the relation between the followers of Islamic religion and the Prophet described by Evola. According to Evola, the Prophet founded a race of spirit which was made of several disparate ethnic and race groups that were united under the sacred principle of the Umma, the Islamic nation. References to "Islamic" religion are not particularly audible in the film as they are in the book. But the image of the Fremens as heroic warriors who are blindly devoted to Tradition persistently emerges throughout the film. The prince is represented as a hero who, in analogy to the Prophet, is destined to create a new race of spirit.

*Dune* transposes into popular culture race conceptions that are similar to the ones conceived by Evola. The latter believed that race is not determined by

blood but by spirit and rituality. The blood functions as a vehicle that transfers certain spiritual qualities from one generation to the other. Evola's spiritual racism is not meant to overcome categories determined by other race theories, but to strengthen them on account of both "ethnic" (that is spiritual) and social grounds (rituality). He asserted that in traditional societies chiefs were not elected because they were connected to aristocracy by blood but after a ritual investiture. At times the ritual investiture demanded a physical duel. Drawing on Frazer's *Golden Bough*, Evola reports the legend of the priest king of Nemi, who, in order to be recognized as a ruler, needed to defeat a fugitive slave that challenged him. In *Dune* the moment of the investiture is represented by the duel between the prince and a Fremen played by a black actor with what sounds like a West African accent. The scene should be read through a hypertextual perspective, that is by considering the history of modern slavery and its impact on the history of Europe and North America. The "accent" of the character and the fact that he lives marooned with the other Fremen in the desert, denotes his "fugitive" status, both in a spatial and in a temporal sense. The "slave," in this case, has not merely broke free, but he is born "free." His freedom is so radical that he dares to challenge a "white" aristocrat who has trespassed into his territory. However, such freedom is an illusory state, generated by modernity. If society was governed by Tradition, there would have been no slaves and no masters, but rulers and workers separated in different castes. The challenger is therefore destined to be killed in what can be considered a visual representation of the Hegelian master/slave struggle that is expected to produce always the same result. The ending of the film is a metaphor of the contemporary world. It reinstates the primacy of white aristocracy over narratives of post-racialized societies. This is in my view one of the main reasons why fascists liked this movie.

**Fabio Bego** received a PhD in European and International Studies from the Roma Tre University in 2017. He works as a film programmer and independent researcher and is the curator of the Albanian film festival "Albania, si Gira." His interests include historiography, postcolonial studies, and the far right.

## Note

1. For this review I have consulted Julius Evola, *Rivolta Contro il Mondo Moderno: Terza edizione riveduta* (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1969). An English version is also available (Julius Evola, *Revolt Against the Modern World* [Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 1995]).