Opinion
Culture

Zendaya and Timothée Chalamet star in a scene from the movie "Dune." (CNS/Warner Bros.)

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While many have dubbed *Dune*, Frank Herbert's groundbreaking 1965 novel, "unfilmable," Denis Villeneuve's latest onscreen adaptation successfully captures the novel's complexity, the individuality of the characters and, ultimately, the grimness of protagonist Paul's situation.

NCR goes to the movies

On March 25, NCR Opinion & Culture Editor Olga Segura moderated a conversation about the 2022 Oscars with Jose Solís and Sr. Rose Pacatte. This year's awards ceremony, honoring movies released in 2021, is Sunday, March 27. Here are the nominated movies NCR has reviewed.

"Being the Ricardos"

"The Hand of God"

"CODA"

"The Eyes of Tammy Faye"

"Attica"

"Don't Look Up"

"Dune"

"Encanto"

"No Time To Die"

"Nightmare Alley"

Dune was published in 1965 but its themes feel especially pressing today, when humanity is experiencing the consequences of ecological disruption on a planetary level, as well as the patterns of migration and societal upheaval this disruption

influences.

The novel is set in a galactic empire some 20,000 years in the future. The hero, Paul, is the son of Duke Leto Atreides, and Lady Jessica, the duke's concubine. Jessica was trained by the Bene Gesserit, a shadowy order of women who wield psychic powers, influence politics and manipulate history. One thing the Bene Gesserit have manipulated is Paul's gene line. Another is religion, in various cultures across the galaxy.

In the beginning of the story, a Bene Gesserit Reverend Mother puts Paul to the test, to see if he might be the "Kwisatz Haderach" their secret breeding program is intended to produce. The test is inconclusive but shows the reader that the stakes in this story are life and death.

The interplanetary economy depends on a rare substance called spice, which is addictive, enhances longevity and grants psychic abilities. The Spacing Guild navigators use spice to travel between planets, faster than the speed of light. Spice is found only on the desert planet of Arrakis, or Dune, a harsh and inhospitable world of terrifying Coriolis storms and giant sandworms. Whoever controls the spice controls the galaxy.

For years, Arrakis has been ruled by the ruthless Harkonnens, enemies of House Atreides. But the emperor has ordered the Harkonnens to hand Arrakis over to the Atreides family. Duke Leto knows that this is probably a trap. Seeking to secure "desert power," the Atreides open negotiations with the indigenous people known as the Fremen. Clearly modeled on North African tribal cultures, the Fremen are deadly fighters who know how to survive in the deep desert.

On Arrakis, the trap is sprung, House Atreides is defeated, the Harkonnens reclaim power, and Paul flees with his mother into the desert, where, before they make contact with the Fremen, the spice he has been ingesting awakens his latent prescience. Paul sees visions of his many possible futures, and discovers, with horror, the secret breeding program that has produced him.

Paul is not the "chosen one" who was expected, however. He only exists because his mother defied Bene Gesserit orders and gave birth to a boy instead of a girl. He is a genetic, cultural and political anomaly who drops into the web of myth and prophecy, and into the severe Fremen culture, at just the right time to disrupt every other power play in the galaxy.

Trailer for Denis Villeneuve's "Dune" (YouTube/Warner Bros. Pictures)

A simplistic version of the story would be that from here on Paul takes on the messianic mantle and becomes the savior who rescues the Fremen from oppression, initiating a golden age on Arrakis. But this story is not so simple.

Paul may be destined to lead the Fremen to victory, but this also means using them for his own ends, just as he himself was used by the Bene Gesserit. And, as it will turn out, attempts to meddle with the ecology of the desert, to make it more pleasant and habitable, could end up undermining the whole of human society.

And becoming a chosen one also comes at a cost. As Paul begins to understand his power, he knows every move he makes is fraught with significance. When he fights for his life for the first time, we see the weight of this awareness, the significance of his decision to use his power to kill — and this is where Villeneuve's film ends, to be continued in the sequel.

Clearly, one challenge any director faces, in bringing *Dune* to the screen, involves managing this wealth of content.

Nevertheless, the book begs for a big-screen adaptation. Everything about it is monstrous, gorgeous, bizarre and cataclysmic. It needs to be seen. And, unlike other novels with a dedicated fandom — *The Lord of the Rings* for instance — one need not worry that the story will automatically suffer in a different medium, because Herbert, for all his extraordinary storytelling and world-building, is no great stylist. Herbert's language works hard, but one can easily imagine his world existing independently from his prose.

And because the story is set in a future where powers we can barely imagine are part of everyday life, the actors need to do what the cast of Villeneuve's film do so compellingly: balance the epic peril and purpose on one hand, with human affection, weakness and fears on the other.

The intricacies and intrigues must be comprehensible to those who have not read the book. But the adaptation must also satisfy *Dune*-loving geeks who will expect justice done to those intricacies and intrigues, as well as the themes of politics,

religion, sexuality and ecology, that make *Dune* so unique.

David Lynch's 1984 film has been described as "a beautiful disaster," and "foundational," but what makes it memorable has little to do with the book's importance. Viewers unfamiliar with the novel will come away from the Lynch project with some striking images, most famously Sting in a codpiece, but probably won't be inspired to discuss questions about planetary ecology and messianic prophecies. The 2000 miniseries, by contrast, did better justice to the plot and themes, but came off as merely adequate.

While I am not certain that Villeneuve has succeeded in meeting either of these adaptation challenges entirely, he has met them where they are most significant, and his project faces no real competition from its predecessors. Unlike the Lynch film, Villeneuve's "Dune" keeps the audience's focus on what is at stake for the characters, and their place in the ecological and political tangle they find themselves in. And thanks to Villeneuve's excellent cast, the audience is more invested in the humanity of the protagonists. This is in contrast to the miniseries, in which, in spite of some impressive design and excellent acting, one can't get past viewing the plot as an elevated galactic soap opera. It doesn't help that in the miniseries William Hurt's Duke Leto comes off as flatly uninteresting instead of beautifully doomed, and Alec Newman's Paul comes off as both insufferable and implausible.

Villeneuve's cast is not only star-studded. It's also the right team for the project. Rebecca Ferguson portrays both sternness and vulnerability in her portrayal of Lady Jessica, though perhaps a little more iciness could have been called for. Oscar Isaac's Duke Leto is exactly the tragic figure the novel wants us to recognize. The pathos of his downfall can't be appreciated until one has seen the extent — and the limits — of his power, and his capacity for heroism. Villeneuve's film gives us that, and also gives us the taut fierceness of the Fremen, the creepiness of the Harkonnens, and a Duncan Idaho worthy of the character's legacy in the books.

Most importantly, Timothée Chalamet captures the actual misery of Paul's situation, especially when he realizes that he discovers that he's been bred to have special powers: discovering this isn't exciting for a teenage boy, no matter how exceptional. It is horrible. Paul has just lost his father, his place in the world, and now he also has his sense of self-ownership stolen from him. In his own eyes, he is a "freak."

Villeneuve does justice to Paul's inner conflict, as his prescience awakens. This goes beyond survival, beyond political domination. The problem is, how to wield his

newfound power without destroying whole worlds. And there's nothing simple or allegorical about this. Paul's power isn't like a magic ring he can drop into a crater of fire. It is an ecological question not only because it pertains to conditions on Arrakis itself, but because of the way everything affects everything else.

> Aside from everything else that is excellent about the film, it's a work of art that does what art is supposed to do.
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Nearly every destiny Paul sees unfolding is violent and horrifying. Over and over, he beholds a future "holy war" that rages across the galaxy, and that he himself will set in motion once he fulfils the prophecies and becomes the religious and political leader of the Fremen.

Even if Villeneuve leaves out some of what makes Dune so rich, the aesthetic of the film is dark and ponderous, but also beautiful, with giant futuristic machines, breathtaking vistas, and looming, block-like architecture. The largeness and the grimness of the imagery, as well as the intensity of the soundtrack, mirror the enormity of Paul's situation. Nearly everything he has known in life has been traded for a terrible prescience, and a responsible storyteller doesn't try to put a happy gloss on this.

For viewers accustomed to the idea that the archetypal hero's journey must automatically end with the defeat of evil at the hands of the archetypal savior, Villeneuve's "Dune" may be jarring, proposing questions instead of answering them. Which means, aside from everything else that is excellent about the film, it's a work of art that does what art is supposed to do.

Christian viewers may try to latch onto the messianic aspect of the story and see Paul as a Christ figure who arrives to bring healing waters to arid Arrakis. If they do so unironically, they miss the point. And they miss out, too, on the opportunity to question the triumphalist narratives that keep getting human beings into trouble, and always seem to end in the kind of holy wars Paul dreads in his visions.

Herbert may have based the Fremen and their "jihad" as he calls it in the book on Muslim cultures, but we can just as easily see the parallels with extremism in Christian societies and the dangers of movements that intertwine religious fervor

with patriotic obsession.

Paul Atreides, with his seemingly superhuman powers, is a far more suitable messiah than any of the political leaders who have been anointed by various extremist movements in our world. Nevertheless, the story shows us just how dangerous these movements are, and how forces of human history can get beyond the control of even the best and the bravest.