

**DUNE: PART TWO**

Denis Villeneuve, Director  
 Warner Bros., 2024  
 2 hours, 45 minutes

**ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE  
 IS CONSPICUOUS BY ITS ABSENCE  
 IN DENIS VILLENEUVE’S *DUNE: PART TWO*.  
 AND THIS IS IMPORTANT.**

**Reviewed by  
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Between Denis Villeneuve’s first blockbuster sci-fi movie based on Frank Herbert’s novel *Dune* in 2021<sup>1</sup> and the sequel *Dune: Part Two* in 2024,<sup>2</sup> the world as we knew it changed.

When *Dune: Part One* was released in 2021, ChatGPT didn’t exist; few people were aware of large language models and generative artificial intelligence (AI), and fewer still foresaw the coming AI tsunami that would sweep around the world in 2023.<sup>3</sup> By the time *Dune: Part Two* hit cinemas in 2024, debates around the impacts, promise, perils, and morality and ethics of AI had shifted from side conversations amongst small groups of experts to being the center of attention on a global stage.

This might seem irrelevant to the complex and convoluted story that unfolds across the two films, but for one seemingly small detail: Herbert’s original novel, and Villeneuve’s movie adaptation, both take place in a future where “thinking machines” are seen as an evil that has no part in humanity’s future.

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1. *DUNE* (Warner Bros. 2021) (directed by Denis Villeneuve); *see also Dune*, IMDB, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1160419/> (last visited May 9, 2024).

2. *DUNE: PART TWO* (Warner Bros. 2024) (directed by Denis Villeneuve); *see also Dune: Part Two*, IMDB, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt15239678/> (last visited May 9, 2024).

3. The public release of ChatGPT by OpenAI on November 30, 2022, was pivotal in changing global dialogue around the development of artificial intelligence and its potential impacts on society. *See Introducing ChatGPT*, OPENAI (Nov. 30, 2022), <https://openai.com/blog/chatgpt> [<https://perma.cc/Z4S3-MGDA>].

Given this context and the quite profound societal shifts between 2021 and the present, I was interested to see just how far *Dune: Part Two* reflected the current AI zeitgeist, and whether it managed to connect Herbert's concerns over technology subsuming the essence of what makes us human with the unfolding story.

*Dune: Part Two* is, by any measure, a *tour de force* of the art of movie making. It rivals the cinematic skill and visual storytelling of *Part One*, and quite possibly exceeds it. The visuals, set and costume designs, soundscape, and locations are stunning. Yet as a piece of entertainment, it left me wanting more.

Here I should probably admit that, unlike the rest of the world (or so it seems), I was not a great fan of *Dune: Part One*. The cinematography was, as many have commented, exceptional. And Villeneuve remained remarkably true to Herbert's book with the script. But this is where I began to struggle.

I appreciate it when book adaptations reveal new ideas and insights, rather than simply rehashing old ones. Yet in Villeneuve's (mainly) faithful version of Herbert's best seller, there were no surprises, no twists, and no startling and original reinterpretations (unlike David Lynch's controversial 1984 adaptation).<sup>4</sup>

I suspect I'm an outlier here—a minority opinion in the fiercely debated world of film adaptation lore. But this perspective did mean that I sat down to watch *Dune: Part Two* with some trepidation.

The film turned out to be both better and worse than I was anticipating. The cinematography was still incredible. And there were occasional bright spots in the interplay between characters that genuinely grabbed my attention. Villeneuve also departs from Herbert's original in a number of ways—which should have satisfied my craving for originality. However, these departures were more along the lines of cutting out or downplaying plot lines that got in the way of more streamlined storytelling—an innovation of elimination rather than reinterpretation.

And, without giving away any spoilers, the latter half of the film felt rushed—much in the same way as David Lynch's 1984 version does—as Villeneuve tried to pour an ocean of Herbert's complex storytelling into a much smaller cinematic pond. Plus—and this *is* a bit of a spoiler—the film ends rather unsatisfyingly (to me at least) as it prioritizes setting up the sequel rather than resolving the journey that was started in the prequel.

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4. The 1984 movie of *Dune*, directed by David Lynch, was criticized by many for being rather loosely inspired by Herbert's book, while lacking much of its nuance and deeper themes. For instance Rita Kempley, writing in the *Washington Post*, described the book's comparison to the movie as "what the Sahara is to the sandbox." Rita Kempley, '*Dune*' Does *Dune* Dirty, WASH. POST (Dec. 13, 1984, 7:00 PM, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1984/12/14/dune-does-dune-dirty/f6dc4d9c-b873-4b27-b6c2-4f3cabf79d79/>). And the film critic Roger Ebert described it as "an incomprehensible, ugly, unstructured, pointless excursion into the murkier realms of one of the most confusing screenplays of all time." *Dune*, ROGER EBERT (Jan. 1, 1984), <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/dune-1984> [<https://perma.cc/7DCC-LPQL>] (film review). And yet, when gauged on its own merits rather than against the book, there is an artistry to it that I find appealing. *DUNE* (Universal Pictures 1984) (directed by David Lynch); see also *Dune*, IMDB, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0087182/> (last visited May 9, 2024).

I suspect that I was part of a very small minority in hoping for more rounded and resolved storytelling from Villeneuve’s adaptation. But, even with my dissatisfaction with the film as entertainment, I did find its subtle commentary on technology and society worth exploring—even though this is a commentary that is largely defined by what is missing on the screen.

Viewed through the perspective of cinema as a mirror through which to better understand ourselves, Villeneuve’s epic takes on a new dimension—especially when it comes to the evolving relationship between AI and society.

As a number of people have previously explored, Herbert’s *Dune* takes place in a world devoid of computers.<sup>5</sup> This is clear in Villeneuve’s movies—once you start looking for it. There are no laptops in the films, no smart phones, no internet, no helpful AI chatbots—just finely tuned and adapted humans carving out their destinies in a decidedly non-digital future. In the first of Villeneuve’s *Dune* adaptations, even the electronic device Paul Atreides—the reluctantly messianic figure the story revolves around—uses to learn about the desert planet Arrakis, is an antique of dubious legality.

An understanding of what it means to be human—and how thinking machines threaten this—is foundational to Frank Herbert’s book. In a pivotal early encounter between Paul and the manipulative Bene Gesserit Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohaim, Mohaim tells Paul, “Once, men turned their thinking over to machines in the hope that this would set them free. But that only permitted other men with machines to enslave them.”<sup>6</sup>

Paul retorts with, “Thou shalt not make a machine in the likeness of a man’s mind,” to which Mohaim responds, “Right out of the Butlerian Jihad and the Orange Catholic Bible . . . But what the OC should have said is: ‘Thou shalt not make a machine to counterfeit a *human* mind.’”<sup>7</sup>

This exchange is missing from Villeneuve’s *Dune*, but the ramifications of the backstory are not. As a result, both films play out against a backdrop of a society that long ago banished thinking machines from their lives. And they reflect a future where the core—the soul, or the essence—of what it means to be human is determined by biological and psychological manipulation (aided and abetted by the psychoactive and somewhat mystical “spice” or “melange”) rather than computer augmentation.<sup>8</sup>

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5. For instance, Colin Groundwater’s 2021 *GQ* article, *Why There Are No Computers in Dune, and That Makes It Better*, *GQ* (Oct. 22, 2021), <https://www.gq.com/story/dune-star-wars> [<https://web.archive.org/web/20240406224238/https://www.gq.com/story/dune-star-wars>], explores how the lack of computers in *Dune* adds to the story, while Chase Hutchinson writes about *Where Are All the Computers in ‘Dune’?*, *COLLIDER*, <https://collider.com/dune-why-no-computer-explained/> [<https://perma.cc/CHM4-2EVR>] (Mar. 19, 2024).

6. FRANK HERBERT, *DUNE* 17 (New English Library 1972) (1965).

7. See *id.* As Frank Herbert’s son Brian writes in the *Afterword* to the 2010 edition of *Dune*, “The Butlerian Jihad, occurring ten thousand years before the events described in *Dune*, was a war against thinking machines who at one time had cruelly enslaved humans. For this reason, computers were eventually made illegal by humans, as decreed in the Orange Catholic Bible.” Brian Herbert, *Afterword* to FRANK HERBERT, *DUNE* 869, 878–79 (Ace Books 2010).

8. In his essay, *Humans, Machines, and an Ethics for Technology in Dune*, in *DUNE AND PHILOSOPHY: MINDS, MONADS, AND MUAD’DIB* 76 (Kevin S. Decker ed., 2022), Zachary Pirtle

Watching *Dune: Part Two* within this frame of reference allows a depth and meaning to come through that goes beyond the mere spectacle of the movie. While the film remains primarily a visually arresting and highly impressive feat of entertainment, it also illuminates the current challenges and opportunities presented by transformative emerging technologies—including generative AI.

We are, of course, not in an age of thinking machines yet. AI systems are becoming increasingly good at emulating certain things that humans do well, but they are not in any way self-aware, or conscious, or able to “think” in any conventional sense. Yet the growing capabilities of these systems are bringing us closer to creating machines that simulate human intelligence to the point that whether they are conscious or not may become moot.

There are already growing concerns that powerful AI could disrupt society in complex and unpredictable ways as it allows increasingly higher levels of decision-making to shift from people to machines. Whether this involves guiding autonomous vehicles, automating legal analysis, informing medical decisions, manipulating consumer behaviors, or operating critical infrastructure, we are already irreversibly integrating AI into every aspect of our lives.

Many of these integrations promise substantial benefits. This is already being seen in how AI is beginning to revolutionize medicine or is enabling education and learning to be scaled. There’s also a seductiveness to AI platforms that have a mastery of the written word that far surpasses what most of us are capable of—not to mention AI-based image creation and video production.

These are not trivial benefits, and I suspect we haven’t even begun to scratch the surface of what could be possible as the pace of AI development continues to accelerate. But as we embrace this AI future, what of the downsides? What are we giving up—or giving away—as we incorporate AI into our lives? Are we selling our souls to the promise of a future of artificial intelligence convenience as thinking machines become commonplace?

I don’t think we are. However AI changes us, I suspect that humanity is sufficiently adaptable and resilient to hold onto what makes us “us” while grappling with such a transformative technology. And yet this does not mean that the question of how AI could diminish who we are—despite all it has to promise—should be ignored.

This is a question that’s at the core of Frank Herbert’s *Dune*. And it’s one that moves below the surface of Villeneuve’s adaptation.

Watched with this in mind, *Dune: Part Two* challenges us to think critically about who we are, what defines us—both as individuals and as a species—and what the role of thinking machines is (or should be) in future society.<sup>9</sup> And it

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explores in some depth the complex relationship between technology and society in Frank Herbert’s fictional world. What emerges is a clear sense that the inhabitants of the *Dune* Universe are not anti-technology—and indeed this is a technologically complex society—but are opposed to technologies that lead to decision-making being relinquished to machines in ways that threaten what it means to be human.

9. It’s worth noting that there are other, far more prominent, social themes in *Dune: Part Two*, as there are in the book—including a searing commentary on the complex and intertwined influences of culture, belief, ideology, manipulation, and political power in shaping the future. Under these,

forces us to consider how these technologies might be governed in order to ensure humanity thrives. As it does, it has the potential to open up conversations that go beyond the uninformed ideas and polarizing polemics that sometimes seem to dominate public dialogue around artificial intelligence, and to enable nuanced thinking about the AI future we're building.

Whether we decide that the benefits of AI far outweigh the risks, or that we need to collectively slow the AI juggernaut, movies like Villeneuve's *Dune* duology give us the opportunity to imagine different futures, and what this might mean for the present.

And even though I still am not the greatest fan of either *Dune Part One* or *Part Two* as entertainment, I do think they are an important part of the canon of science fiction movies that push us to think about the future we're creating, and how we might steer it toward what we want, rather than what we are resigned to accepting . . . especially as they exist at a moment in human history that is undergoing a profound advanced technology transition that is being driven by AI.

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there is an undercurrent of how technology—and digital technologies in particular—impact this landscape.