

A Narratological Study of Streaming Science Fiction Films: The Case of “Dune”

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ABSTRACT: As technology continues to advance, science fiction films are adopting new narrative forms. The Hollywood-produced film "Dune" follows the traditional narrative model while also absorbing elements from popular culture, thus becoming a new type of secular mythology. It takes the traditional narrative model one step further and becomes what Deleuze describes as a new paradigm of cinematic narrative, known as "pure optical and sound situations". By studying the narrative logic and style of "Dune" through the theoretical paradigm of narratology, we can not only focus on the changes in the narrative content and form of science fiction films in the era of streaming media but also explore the aesthetic meaning of science fiction embedded within it.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Dune" is a science fiction film directed by Denis Villeneuve. With this work, he was nominated for Best Picture and Best Adapted Screenplay at the 94th Academy Awards, as well as at the 79th Golden Globe Awards, and grossed over \$300 million at the box office, receiving both commercial success and critical acclaim. In an interview, Villeneuve stated that his creative techniques and ideas were influenced by directors such as Steven Allan Spielberg, Stanley Kubrick, and François Truffaut. Throughout his career, "Dune" can be considered the culmination of Villeneuve's work in using science fiction to tell stories and analyze social issues. The film touches on topics such as religion, philosophy, and environmentalism. As a science fiction film, it provides a "daydream" that allows people to escape the reality of the rapidly advancing modern world, while also reflecting the conflicts viewers encounter in reality and providing an imaginative solution. This makes science fiction movies possess a secular mythological attribute, attracting us to interpret them using the theoretical paradigm of narratology.

With the rapid pace of technological advancements and the ever-increasing complexity of our world, it is no surprise that more and more people turn to science fiction theme as a means of exploring potential futures and reflecting on the present issues we face. As such, "Dune" stands out as a prime example of a film that offers a unique blend of fantastical storytelling and real-world themes, making it a compelling case study for examining the narrative structures and themes within science fiction films. The purpose of this research project is to delve

deeper into the significance of the narrative structure and thematic content in "Dune" and analyze how these elements contribute to its commercial success and critical acclaim. Through a detailed examination of the film's use of narratology, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of how science fiction films tell stories and how they reflect the cultural and social issues of our time. The research seeks to demonstrate the value and relevance of science fiction films as a means of storytelling and social commentary, providing insights into how film directors can use narrative techniques to convey complex ideas and emotions to their audiences. By analyzing "Dune" in this context, we hope to provide new perspectives on the power of science fiction theme as a genre and its ability to captivate and inspire our culture. Ultimately, the study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of science fiction films in shaping our cultural and social consciousness, and their potential to offer new and imaginative solutions to the challenges we face in our rapidly changing world.

2. SECULAR MYTH NARRATIVE TYPE

"Dune" is a science fiction story about interstellar space in the future, as well as a secular mythological story of modern society. According to Claude Levi-Strauss, the "father of structuralism", even though the stories we read today are constantly changing, we can still identify a common "core" integrated with Greek mythology – a structural unit that is constantly repeated in various mythical stories with different appearances ^[1]. The significance of this research is to highlight the common social functions that different narrative behaviors possess:

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through various and diverse stories, they collectively present certain contradictions that are latent in their social and cultural structures, and attempt to balance or provide imaginative solutions.

Science fiction stories offer viewers a transcendent experience on the surface, but in actuality, they present contradictions based on reality, preserving their fundamental properties through similar plots. In Vladimir Propp's study of Russian folktales, "Morphology of the Folktale", he discovered that although Russian folktales have countless characters and varied plots, there are undoubtedly basic and unchanging elements [2]. Propp proposed seven categories of roles and actions, including the villain, benefactor, helper, princess (or person or object to be found), dispatcher or sender, hero or victim, and false hero. A character in the story can play different roles in different paragraphs and at different times during the story. Additionally, he summarized the numerous folktales into six narrative units and thirty-one narrative functions. Based on these narrative units and functions, Propp conducted a comprehensive and specific narrative study of Russian folktales. Propp's research has also been applied by scholars in the fields of popular culture and film studies. Based on Propp's narrative unit and function sequence theory, the film "Dune" can reveal its secular mythological characteristics.

Preparation Unit. At the beginning of the film, we see the young leader of the House Atreides, Paul, living on a planet ruled by his family. The Atreides family receives orders from the Empire to take over the desert planet of Arrakis, which is currently controlled by the Harkonnen family. Paul frequently dreams of a young girl from the Fremen tribe (who is missing a family member around the campfire - Function 1). The Bene Gesserit sisterhood tests Paul with pain and informs him that he is the chosen one, but Paul refuses to accept this fate (Function 2 and 3). When they arrive on Arrakis, they find that the Harkonnens have already destroyed all the mining equipment before leaving.

Conflict Unit. The Empire secretly sends their Sardaukar troops to attack the Atreides base, coordinated with the Harkonnens, and Duke Leto Atreides is assassinated (a family member is harmed by the villain - Function 8). Paul and his mother are taken captive and the Harkonnens plan to abandon them in the desert to die (the hero is forced to leave home - Function 11). Using "the voice," Paul and his mother escape and are lost in the desert. From a distance, they watch as the base is destroyed, and Paul knows that his father is likely dead.

Struggle Unit. Under the influence of the spice, Paul once again sees visions of the future. He launches a holy war against the Harkonnens in his father's name and defeats them in battle (hero faces villain in a showdown and villain is defeated - Functions 16 and 18). Paul dons the ring of House Atreides and vows to revive his family. He plans to have Dr. Kynes inform the six major houses of the Empire's collusion with the Harkonnens to destroy House Atreides, in order to incite rebellion. Duncan saves Paul in the desert, and they make their way to the ecological station where Paul convinces Dr. Kynes to help him. Pursued by enemies, Duncan sacrifices himself to

buy Paul time. Paul and Dr. Kynes go their separate ways, with a plan to meet up in Fremen territory.

Return Unit. Paul escapes in a spaceship and travels through the desert to the Fremen camp, but he is not immediately recognized. The Fremen leader decides to protect him temporarily, realizing Paul's potential as a prophet (hero returns but is not immediately recognized - Function 23). However, some of the warriors challenge Paul's identity and call for a duel using the AMATAL RULE (hero faces a difficult challenge - Function 25). Despite the visions of his own death, Paul bravely accepts the challenge and emerges victorious (hero overcomes challenge - Function 26).

Acceptance Unit. Through his bravery and humility in battle, Paul wins over the Fremen people (hero is given a name) and gains the Desert power (hero ascends to the throne).

Although a more detailed analysis could identify the parts of "Dune" that better align with Propp's narrative sequence, the purpose of using narrative theory is to reveal the underlying meaning of the narrative in the "Dune" text. By analyzing the narrative of the text, it can be discovered that "Dune" has a considerable degree of secular mythological features as a science fiction film. Walter Benjamin declared in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" that "film is the most malleable artwork, which is related to its complete abandonment of eternal value."^[3] There is a natural gap between film and folk tales conveyed in ancient mythology or agricultural civilization eras, and they cannot be simply equated. If science fiction films still serve the functions of ancient myths or folk tales in the modern industrial era, it means that their social context has undergone significant changes. Therefore, if "Dune" is to be positioned as a secular mythological sequence produced by modern culture, its position in the film map of the streaming media era must be comprehensively examined.

To classify this film, it is necessary to examine it in the context of the entire filmography ^[4]. Firstly, based on the film's tone, it is a science fiction film with science fiction as its core, which is its essential attribute. Secondly, based on the elements represented in the film, adventure, action, and disaster are all indispensable parts of the film. Thirdly, based on the meaning conveyed by the film, symbols such as religion, philosophy, and ecology bring complex and ambiguous connotations. Fourthly, based on the film's incompleteness, the film presents a "pure event" and "pure time" through prior setting. Through in-depth analysis, it can be found that "Dune" does not belong to any specific type of previous films, but belongs to a composite sequence type that mixes technology, tone, elements, and meaning together. As a film in this composite sequence, "Dune" is a continuation and development of films such as the "Star Wars" series and "Independence Day" to some extent. However, on the other hand, it has far exceeded the boundaries created by the Hollywood film industry in the past and has different effects from the above-mentioned films. It is a type of unfinished narrative that arises in a new context and new technology. As a new type of secular mythological narrative, the textual structure of such films

typically consists of the convergence of two functional sequences. This contemporary version of "myth" is not a simple story, but rather a complement and overlap of two stories and two meaning structures.

The first sequence is a story of saving the world, in which a formerly peaceful society is disrupted by the attack of evil forces, and the protagonist experiences a struggle between good and evil, a competition between dark and light kingdoms, and a journey of hardship as a hero to regain peace. This is precisely the functional sequence studied by Propp in traditional folk literature. In early science fiction films such as "A Trip to the Moon"(1902) and "Frankenstein"(1910), this secular mythological narrative pattern is evident, and it remains a major component of the narrative. The second sequence stems more from the "creation" brought about by popular culture after the industrial civilization: the self-salvation of a hero with a mission to save the world. That is, there are two levels of story and meaning in a film. One is the social mythological level, in which the protagonist overcomes an external threat projected from some internal social dilemma and integrates his or her own community. The other is the personal mythological level, which involves the myth of autonomous will or the myth of the subject. In this level, a person who has been frustrated in modern society and is experiencing personal lack encounters true love or healing trauma while saving society and regains the meaning and perfection of life. Examples of such science fiction films in the post-industrial era that exhibit the dimensions of social and personal myths include the "Star Wars" and "Matrix" series.

3. NEW SECULAR MYTH NARRATIVE TYPE

"Hollywood movies spare no effort in weaving various fascinating hero myths, but their spiritual core still embodies the ultimate expression of American values, encompassing the 'American Dream' and the values of the capitalist Protestant ethic." [5] After the social crisis and cultural upheaval of the 1960s, the Hollywood film industry underwent significant changes. Some film genres gradually disappeared, such as Westerns and musicals, while in many cases, there was an increasing number of 'grafted' or collage-type genres: forms that mixed two or more types. Examples include the 'Star Wars' and 'Matrix' series. Different genres, including their grafted or collage styles, appeal to their own audiences both explicitly and implicitly. Viewers of a certain film genre derive pleasure from the extremely familiar story, characters, and narrative patterns being renewed. Another type of viewer finds pleasure in discovering new variations on old clichés by referencing similar films. As a product of Hollywood, "Dune" exhibits distinct modern mythological attributes. By combining Propp's functional sequence and Claude Bremond's paradigm model, we can analyze the two functional sequences of this new mythological narrative type.

In the first functional sequence, the social mythological level, the family or kingdom in folk stories

is usually replaced by a modern national state. In Hollywood movies, this modern national state that encounters crises and overcomes them naturally refers to the United States. In Hollywood science fiction films, the plot generally involves a major battle between the Earth's forces and alien evil forces, with the US government naturally assuming the role of representing humanity - the side of goodness, love, and justice. In "Dune," the symbol of future human society is House Atreides under imperial rule. As one of the only senders and receivers of motion elements in the film, it determines the mythological tone of the first function of the film. The so-called House Atreides is a melting pot of races, accepting ethnic groups from the sky and the sea. As the prestige of the empire develops, it undoubtedly reminds viewers of American society, which is compatible with multiple ethnic groups and skin colors - a reaffirmation of the American capitalist Protestant ethic. It is worth mentioning that as political correctness has become increasingly important in modern Hollywood movies, Dr. Kynes, the judge in the film, appears just and rational when faced with the task of handing over two families. On the one hand, this is a coping strategy adopted by mainstream culture in response to the turbulent black civil rights movement for half a century. On the other hand, Dr. Kynes, in the face of the destruction of House Atreides, resolutely chooses to help Paul, which can be seen as an intention to preach to black people in the film."

Claude Bremond argued in his book, "The Logic of Narrative Possibilities," that "any narrative follows a basic sequence with dual possibilities." [6] This highlights the development of the surface logic of narrative, wherein a narrative text is a constantly dividing structure. According to Bremond's theory, the initial situation presented by the narrative is that the protagonist faces a certain dilemma, which opens up two possibilities for the narrative: either breaking the dilemma or being stuck in a deadlock. The narrative logic also implies a possibility that originated from ancient Greek drama - delay - which leads to constant changes in the story as it progresses towards its ending.

In "Dune," the peaks of the narrative are stacked up, and the main events of the narrative are constantly delayed. This not only includes the switch between the two narrative functions but also the continuous transformation of the main functional sequence into a sub-functional sequence. The main sequence in "Dune" is the confrontation between Atreides and the Empire. The solution to the problem is that the Atreides family plans to unite with the desert forces, but they are destroyed. The new solution is that young Paul Atreides tells the judge to inform the six major families of the Empire's mobilization to incite rebellion. However, this plan is constantly delayed due to the pursuit of the Harkonnen family. Thus, the narrative enters a sub-sequence: how to seek revenge? One of the solutions is for Paul to become the leader who helps the Freman take control of the spice in the desert. However, to join forces with the hostile outside world, he can only rely on his prophet identity, which leads to an interlude sequence: becoming the prophesied THE ONE of the Bene Gesserit and the prophet of the Freman people. The intersection of these two identities intertwines the first

and second functional sequences of the film's narrative. All subsequent plots serve these two identities.

In the myth of modern individualism, the second functional sequence of the film narrative, "the missing family member by the fireside," refers to Paul's future wife, Chani, whom he sees in the prophecy. In the personal life history of modern logic and concepts, this obviously indicates a lack of desire, while in the specific context of the film, it also highlights Paul's hesitation towards the mission he carries. For the audience, "Dune" is a modern "space opera". Paul resists learning the Voice from his mother, resists the Bene Gesserit's imposition of the identity of a prophet on him, resists his father making him the only heir of the Atrides, and repeatedly struggles with the destiny he carries. In ancient Greek tragic myths, tragic fate is often used as a model. Aristotle once said, "The object of pity is the person who suffers from undeserved misfortune, and fear arises because the sufferer is a person like us. Therefore, tragedy should show characters moving from prosperity to adversity, not the other way around, that is, from adversity to prosperity." [7] Tragedy is the art of conveying emotions of pity and fear. The story of Paul in "Dune" evokes compassion and fear in the audience, although it does not exactly correspond to tragedy in the ancient Greek sense. Paul's family was destroyed, his father was killed, he was pursued by the Harkonnens, and exiled to the desert. As a young prophet, he carried the mission of launching a "holy war". The hero resists fate but falls into despair, and accepting fate only leads to a more difficult future. When Paul wins the fight based on the Amatal rule, and earns the respect of the Freman, he achieves a basic victory, growing from a youthful boy to a capable warrior. This victory also means that he is walking the path predetermined by destiny and marks the continuation of this modern personal myth.

4. THE MYTH OF NARRATIVE TYPE

The development of technology and changes in philosophy have made film art a dynamic, polysemous, and unfinished part. Furthermore, changes in viewing habits mean that the solemn viewing experience in a movie theater is no longer the only option. The emergence of streaming services has made it possible to watch and experience films freely, anytime, anywhere, and in any form. In this system, the dimensions of social and personal myths are, to some extent, dissolved, and the boundary between popular culture and elite culture has become blurred. As a result, from the form of humanism to anti-humanism, utopia, dystopia, politics, society, and even ultimate philosophy, there is no clear location, making it an extremely complex part. Therefore, in "Dune," viewers can find a narrative form that exists outside of the two sequences - a dynamic narrative that is not bound by social or personal mythological levels, a type of unfinished narrative. With the advent of new technological revolutions, particularly the great advances in streaming media technology, the art of film has become increasingly difficult to interpret. The narrative paradigms extracted from typified social and personal myths on which movies were originally based may have ended, leaving viewers

feeling drained of energy. In this context, French post-structuralist philosopher Gilles Louis René Deleuze proposed a possible film narrative paradigm in 'Cinema 1: The Movement-Image'^[8] and 'Cinema 2: The Time-Image'^[9] namely, 'pure optical and sound situations,' and conducted profound philosophical reflections on film. Starting from this paradigm, it is possible to surpass the limitations of past narrative studies, which only focused on narrative content and form, and examine films from their aesthetic implications.

Deleuze believed that modern America had produced several new image types, and traditional narrative paradigms were no longer able to provide satisfactory answers to them. For example, Stanley Kubrick's '2001: A Space Odyssey' presents the audience with a seemingly illogical story, beginning with the moment the large black stone is erected before prehistoric humans, who have just started to recognize tools. Later, black stones appear in various locations in the universe, standing on the moon, floating in space, carrying a certain mysterious meaning. Deleuze believes that this rebellion against traditional narrative paradigms can be traced back to Italian neorealism films, where 'realism is defined by its specific level, which does not exclude fiction, even fantasy. It includes phantasmagoria, strangeness, heroes, and legends. It can accept the eccentric and excessive, but only those that are within its own eccentricity and excess.' In other words, realism is primarily concerned with a reality that conforms to everyday logic, regardless of whether it is draped in the guise of magical or science fiction. Italian neorealism films, represented by works such as 'Rome, Open City,' 'Bicycle Thieves,' and 'The Tramp,' depict the true face of reality because they do not 'represent a reality that has already been decoded,' but 'hit a reality that is always ambiguous and should be interpreted.' In other words, true reality is uncertain and cannot be integrated into a fixed structure or type by logic. Such a true reality is the 'pure optical and sound situations.'"

"Pure optical and sound situations" refer to original situations in real life that have not been artificially extracted, possessing ambiguity and generativity. Deleuze believed that great artistic expression involves expressing the unspeakable, and that great films use audio and visual elements to convey the unspeakable, telling a story that cannot be told: a story of "pure optical and sound situations." Firstly, "pure optical and sound situations" no longer depict "logical events" but elucidate "pure events." Deleuze believed that a "pure event" is one that breaks the atomistic structure of the event and returns the event itself to its generative original state. This is closely related to the notion of a "pause," where "pure events" always exist in continuity, and the time of the pause is not only before and after the event but also within the event itself. In "Dune," the focus is on the protagonist's anticipation of this "pause," and the "pause" becomes the protagonist, causing a fracture in the sequence of events where "the generative simultaneity escapes the present." In this sequence of events, causal logic is inevitably disrupted. For example, in "Dune," the assembly of events does not follow any necessary or contingent rules but unfolds in a manner that cannot be defined by the potentiality of "pure events,"

forming the experience of the heterogeneity, interweaving and fusion of reality and memory. Secondly, "pure optical and sound situations" are no longer in the linear time of reality but in "pure time." Deleuze opposes linear time and proposes a new view of time in film art - "pure time," which emphasizes the multidimensional integration and communication of time. Deleuze believed that the "present" or "moment" is actually a flowing "moment," and similarly, the "future" has already arrived. Any "moment" or "present" includes the "past" and "future." The narrative of "Dune" is deeply connected to this non-linear "pure time," as Paul is the trinity of the flowing moment, the present, and the future, living in the triple self-image of the past narrative of Bene Gesserit, the present, and the future. Therefore, we can see that Paul's situation is also a kind of "pure time."

5.CONCLUSION

Narrative research involves analyzing the ways in which stories are constructed and told in films, as well as the effects that these stories have on audiences ^[10]. By examining how narratives are created, scholars can gain insight into the cultural and social meanings that films convey. In the case of science fiction films, narrative research is particularly important because these films often deal with complex themes and ideas that require a carefully constructed story to effectively convey ^[11]. "Dune" is a prime example of how narrative research can reveal the deeper meanings and implications of a film. The film's narrative structure is a key component of its success, as it weaves together multiple threads of storytelling to create a rich, multi-layered experience for viewers. The film's story explores themes such as religion, power, and ecology, using a complex narrative structure that keeps audiences engaged and invested in the story. Moreover, "Dune" goes beyond traditional mythological narratives by presenting a dynamic and unfinished type of myth that evolves and changes as the story progresses. This innovative approach to narrative storytelling is one of the reasons why "Dune" has resonated with audiences both commercially and artistically.

In conclusion, narrative research is a crucial method for analyzing the complex and nuanced narratives found in contemporary films. Science fiction films, in particular, require careful analysis of their narratives to fully understand the social and cultural implications of their stories. "Dune" is a prime example of how narrative research can uncover the deeper meanings and implications of a film, and how a dynamic and unfinished type of myth can contribute to a film's success.

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