

Adaptation as Translation: Fidelity, Loss, and Gain in David Lynch (1984) and Denis Villeneuve (2021/2024)

Keyur Kiritbhai Chhelana

PhD Scholar, Department of English

Bhakta Kavi Narsinh Mehta University, Junagadh, Gujarat

Dr. Nayankumar D. Tank

Co-Author

Associate Professor, English Department,

Arya kanya Gurukul mahila arts and commerce college, Porbandar.

Abstract

Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965) stands as the most aspiring works of hypothetical fiction ever written in literature, layering ecological philosophy, political intrigue and religious mythology into a narrative that has challenged and inspired generations of readers. This entire journey from page to screen has been long, complicated and deeply educational for scholars of adaptation studies. This paper examines two major cinematic adaptations of the novel: David Lynch's *Dune* (1984) and Denis Villeneuve's *Dune Part I* (2021) and *Dune Part II* (2024). Using Linda Hutcheon's view of adaptation as a creative translation, alongside Robert Stam's concept of intertextual dialogue and Andre Bazin's reflections on the relationship between literature and cinema. This paper explains that film don't just copy books but as translating it into a new medium. The translation includes sometimes losing things, sometimes inventing new ones and always leaving the director's fingerprints behind. The paper analyses what each filmmaker kept and what they let go and what they pulled out of Herbert's prose could not. In the end, researcher shows that judging adaptations by their fidelity is a dead end, and that both Lynch and Villeneuve created something new and worth watching because they translated Herbert's novel, not just copied.

Keywords: Adaptation Studies, Fidelity, Translation Theory, *Dune*, Speculative Fiction

1. Introduction

There are certain readers who approach a film adaptation of a beloved novel with suspicion or doubt. Because they come to the cinema already armed with the book and already measuring every scene up against their memory of the text, already mourning whatever has been left out before the opening credits have finished rolling. This kind of attitude reflects a deeply rooted statement about what adaptation is supposed to do and reproduce the source, remain faithful to it, serve it. In the twentieth century, this hypothesis or assumption directed both popular and academic discussions of literary adaptation. A film

based on a novel was judged mainly by how closely it resembled that novel. Deviation was treated as failure and transformation was treated as betrayal.

Scholars of adaptation studies have spent the last many decades for this assumption. Linda Hutcheon in her foundational study *A Theory of Adaptation*, claims that adaptations are not copies but “repetitions without replication” and that they deserve to be understood as independent creative works that exist in a productive relationship with their source texts rather than in a subordinate one (Hutcheon 7). Thomas Leitch, similarly, has argued that fidelity criticism “sets up an impossible standard” because it asks filmmakers to achieve something that is unachievable: the reproduction of one medium within another (Leitch 3). Robert Stam spreads this thinking even further, suggesting that we think of adaptations as instances of intertextual dialogue, conversations between texts and between the cultural moments in which those texts are produced and received (Stam 3).

This research takes these theoretical frameworks as its starting point and applies them to one of the most argued cases in the history of science fiction adaptation: the cinematic journey of Frank Herbert’s *Dune*. Published in 1965, the novel has been called the best-selling science fiction novel of all time and its influence on literature, film and popular culture has been vast. Yet it’s very qualities that make it so remarkable as a work of literature and its philosophical density and its reliance on interior consciousness, its layered world-building, have also made it notoriously difficult to bring to the screen. David Lynch tried it in 1984 and produced a film that was, widely measured a failure. Denis Villeneuve also attempted it across two films released in 2021 and 2024, produced what many critics have called a conquest of modern science fiction cinema.

This entire paper argues that the difference between these two outcomes is not simply a matter of budget or technology or even directorial talent as well. It is a matter of translation strategy. Lynch deal with the novel as a surrealist artist and imposing his own aesthetic sensibility onto the material and producing something that was genuinely strange and original even if it failed to communicate Herbert’s full vision to mainstream audiences as well. Villeneuve approached it as a careful and respectful translator who understood that fidelity to the spirit of a text and it requires departing from its letter or words for the best. Both directors lost something in the process of translating Herbert’s prose into cinematic language. Both gained something as well. And both left the imprint of their own voice on the material in ways that tell us as much about their cultural moments as about Herbert’s novel.

The central research questions of the paper are as follows. First, First, which parts of Herbert’s novel got left out in each adaptation, and what drove those choices? Second, what did the films add and things the novel simply couldn’t offer because of its medium? Then, how did the times and cultures in which each film was made influence the directors’ decisions? And finally, when you put these two adaptations side by side, what do they show us about what film can and can’t do when it tries to reinvent a story?

2. Theoretical Framework: Adaptation as Translation

The symbol of translation has been present in adaptation studies for some time, but it has gained particular traction in recent decades as scholars have required a framework that acknowledges both the creative autonomy of the adapter and the meaningful relationship that every adaptation maintains with its source as well. The metaphor is productive because translation is a practice that everyone spontaneously understands to involve both limitation and freedom. A translator is not free to say whatever they wish: they are answerable to an original text and its meanings also its rhythms and its intentions for the work as well. On the other hand, a translator is not a machine: every translation reflects choices, interpretations, and the translator's own sensibility and cultural location.

Linda Hutcheon deals with this most directly. In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon defines adaptation as “an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works” and insists that it should be understood as “a creative and an interpretive act of appropriation or salvaging” (Hutcheon 8). For Hutcheon, the fact that an adaptation is recognized as an adaptation that audiences bring their knowledge of the source text to their experience of the adapted work, is not a limitation but a structural feature of the form. The “double awareness” that audiences bring to adaptations is part of what makes them interesting and meaningful (Hutcheon 120). This is a big part of what makes adaptations interesting. It's like reading a translated poem when you already know the original and the gap between the two becomes the thing worth exploring.

Robert Stam takes a related but wider angle for the same. He borrows from Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, Stam argues that adaptations should be understood as participants in an ongoing intertextual conversation rather than as derivative or secondary texts. He writes that “literature and cinema are caught up in a ceaseless process of mutual exchange and quotation” and that adaptation is one of the primary devices through which this exchange takes place (Stam 3). This perception releases the adapted film from the responsibility of fidelity and allows it to be evaluated on its own terms, as a contribution to a larger cultural conversation only.

On the other hand, Andre Bazin, writing several decades earlier approached the question from a different angle but arrived at a same conclusion. In *What Is Cinema?* Bazin argued that the relationship between literature and film is one of mutual respect and that “a faithful adaptation” need not mean a literal one (Bazin 67). What fidelity requires, in Bazin's view, is not the reproduction of every plot point and every line of dialogue but the preservation of the essential spirit, the tonal and thematic core of the original work. This is, again, a conception of adaptation that closely mirrors the practice of literary translation. A translator who renders Shakespeare's *Hamlet* into another language cannot preserve the exact words; what they must preserve, if the translation is to succeed, is something more essential and more difficult to define.

Thomas Leitch swings at the “fidelity” idea from another direction. Leitch argues that the fidelity model is not merely obstructive but actively misleading, because it constructs an impossible hierarchy in which the source text is always superior and the adaptation is always found wanting. “Every adaptation,” he writes, “involves choices that represent departures from the original, and these departures are not failures but necessities” (Leitch 3). The real questions are about what choices the adapter makes and why, whether those choices result in something worthwhile in its own right. All these ideas together, these theoretical frameworks provide a strong set of tools for analysing the two *Dune* adaptations under deliberation here. These kind of adaptation and work allow us to move beyond the question of whether Lynch or Villeneuve was more faithful to Herbert and to ask instead what each director translated, what we are watching stand to gain from their choices.

3. Herbert’s *Dune* as a Source Text: The Challenges of Translation

Before turning to the adaptations, it is necessary to look what are the factors challenge to any filmmaker regarding Herbert’s novel. *Dune* is not just a simple long or complex novel, but it is both. It is a novel whose most important dimensions are almost completely interior. Herbert’s description or narrative depends upon access to the internal lives of his characters in a way that very few other science fiction novels do as well. The reader is continuously inside the minds of Paul Atreides, Lady Jessica, and numerous other characters, privy to their views, their fears, their calculations, and their visionary experiences. This interiority is not incidental to the novel’s meaning; it is central to it.

The philosophical core of the novel, its meditation on prescience and on the dangers of compelling leadership, on the relationship between individual or personal consciousness and historical need, is took almost entirely through internal monologue and interior reflection for the text. Herbert’s Paul is a deeply unsure figure whose heroism is undercut at every turn by his own awareness of the damage his rise will cause. “I am a monster,” Paul reflects at one point, recognising that his messianic path will lead to holy war and mass death (Herbert 452). This self-awareness is what gives the novel its moral difficulty and complexity. Without it, the story risks becoming precisely the kind of uncritical hero narrative that Herbert was most anxious to critique.

The ecological point of view of the novel presents a different kind of challenge between them. Arrakis, the desert planet at the centre of the story, is not merely a setting but it is an argument for the ecological perspective. Herbert had done wide research into desert ecology before writing the novel and his portrayal of Arrakis reflects a sophisticated understanding of how ecosystems function and how human interference can either destroy or transform them into worst. The Fremen culture, the sandworms, the spice economy and the terraforming project are all elements of a clear ecological vision that is woven throughout the narrative. As Kara Kennedy notes in her critical companion to the novel, “Herbert uses Arrakis to dramatise the consequences of treating a natural environment purely as a resource to be extracted rather than a system to be understood and respected” (Kennedy 89).

The political and religious dimensions of the novel are equally complex and difficult as well. The feudal Imperium, the Great Houses, the Bene Gesserit, the Spacing Guild and the Fremen are all members in a political system of extraordinary complexity. Herbert expended considerable time for developing the history and internal logic of this system. On the other hand, the novel rewards careful reading with a level of world-building detail that is difficult to convey in any visual medium. The religious dimension is equally layered like, The Bene Gesserit's manipulation of Fremen prophecy, Paul's rough relationship with his own messianic identity, and the novel's broader analysis of religious institutions all require sustained narrative attention to communicate effectively. These challenges, the ecology, the political difficulty and the philosophical uncertainty are exactly what make *Dune* so rewarding as a novel and so difficult to translate into film.

4. David Lynch's *Dune* (1984): The Surrealist Translation

David Lynch stepped into *Dune* with an artist whose sensibility was almost completely at odds with the supplies of a mainstream science fiction epic. Before this his previous films, *Eraserhead* (1977) and *The Elephant Man* (1980) had recognized him as a director of amazing visual imagination and psychological intensity but neither movie really set people up for how he had handle something as complex as *Dune*. Lynch has been open about his struggles on the project. In interviews, "I sold out on *Dune*," he told Chris Rodley in a conversation published in *Lynch on Lynch*. "It's a film that got away from me" (Lynch, qtd. in Rodley 159). This revealing thing to admit, but it should not be taken to mean that Lynch's *Dune* is without value or interest. What it produced and whatever its failures as an adaptation is a sincerely strange and visually remarkable film that reflects its director's obsessions in ways that are totally consistent with his broader body of work as well.

4.1 What Was Lost?

The most significant loss or missing in Lynch's adaptation is Herbert's moral uncertainty. Paul Atreides is the straightforward hero with gifted, noble, destined, and ultimately successful. Herbert's Paul (the hero) is a lot more complex and complicated, Lynch presents Paul's journey as a conventional hero's quest, and it is complete with a victorious conclusion that Herbert's novel really refuses.

This entire loss is connected to a wider problem with Lynch's treatment of interiority as well because the director tries to pay for the novel's reliance on internal monologue by using voice-over narration rather than a device that has been disapproved as awkward and unsuccessful way. As Leitch observes in his discussion of adaptation strategies, voice-over narration is "one of the least satisfying solutions to the problem of literary interiority" because it tells the spectators what characters are thinking rather than showing them (Leitch 176). On the other hand, In Lynch's case, the consequence is a film that feels simultaneously over-explained and under-developed because the voice-overs tell us that Paul is having complicated thoughts without the film itself showing us the complexity of those thoughts.

The ecological perspective of the novel is similarly weakened. Arrakis in Lynch's film is a prominent visual environment, reduced with genuine cinematic skill but on the other hand, it purposes mainly as backdrop rather than as the challenging company it is in Herbert's novel or text. The Fremen culture is simple and their relationship with their place/planet reduced to a series of visual signs rather than a clear ecological philosophy as well. As Kennedy summarizes, the novel's "detailed account of water discipline, sand trout, and the Fremen's long-term terraforming project" is basically absent from Lynch's adaptation which is "content to use the desert as atmosphere rather than as argument" (Kennedy 134).

4.2 What Was Gained?

Apart from the lost, Lynch brought to *Dune* a visual imagination that is unlike anything else in science fiction cinema of the period. The production design of the film, with its Gothic machinery, odd architecture and its atmosphere of corrupt strangeness, creates a world that feels sincerely alien in ways that later, more technically sophisticated adaptations do not always achieve. The Harkonnen sequences in particular bloated, twisted, almost operatic stick in the mind. This isn't just spectacle, but it fits with Lynch's ongoing captivation with beauty's surface and corruption underneath.

Psychological strength is also there but in a different ideology. The dream sequences, the terrifying visions these moments have a hallucinatory power, and they do tap into Herbert's obsession with altered consciousness as well. Even if the film doesn't get Herbert's philosophy across still it brings something vivid and specific to the screen for the audience. Robert Stam's concept of intertextual dialogue is useful here where Lynch's film can be understood as entering into a discussion with Herbert's novel in which Lynch brings his own aesthetic vocabulary to bear on material that genuinely interests him, even if that vocabulary is not always adequate to the material (Stam 45).

4.3 The Translator's Voice

In the end, Lynch's *Dune* is ultimately a film more interesting as a portrait of its director than as a direct translation of Herbert's text. This is not always a problem; the best translations stand out because of the translator's voice or own idea. But it does mean that Lynch's *Dune* tells us as much about David Lynch and about Hollywood in the mid-1980s as it does about Frank Herbert. The Cold War anxieties that Fredric Jameson identifies as the "political unconscious" of American popular culture in this period are visible in the film's action of power and empire, which is more concerned with personal heroism and dynastic conflict than with the structural critique of imperial exploitation that drives Herbert's novel (Jameson 9).

5. Denis Villeneuve's *Dune* (2021/2024): The Faithful Translation

Denis Villeneuve came to *Dune* with a different set of purposes and a different cultural moment behind whole the work for him. His films including *Arrival* (2016) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) had established both his ability to work with complex hypothetical fiction material and his commitment to using the science fiction genre as a vehicle for serious thematic exploration for the same. He had also spoken publicly about *Dune* as a personal and professional passion, a novel that he had read as a teenager and returned to throughout his adult life. That kind of personal investment appears everywhere in his adaptation.

5.1 What Was Lost?

Villeneuve's adaptation is significantly truer to Herbert's novel than Lynch's, but authenticity is a relative concept and there are significant elements of the source text that his films do not capture at all. The most notable gap or the loss is Herbert's anti-messiah argument. The novel is too deep where a warning against the kind of compelling leader who inspires absolute devotion: Herbert's Paul is a figure whose strange gifts are precisely what make him dangerous. As Misha Grifka Wander argues, "Herbert's *Dune* is, on one level, a critique of imperialism, colonialism, and the concept of the messiah figure" and the novel asks its readers to be unsettled by Paul's rise rather than inspired by it (Wander 3).

Villeneuve's films, especially *Dune Part II*, present Paul's transformation into a messianic leader with considerable ambivalence, especially in Chani's sceptical perspective. But they do not fully resist the narrative logic of the hero's journey that Hollywood cinema tends to impose on stories of this kind. Paul ruins a figure with whom the audience is invited to identify and whose victories are presented as satisfying in ways that Herbert's novel works intentionally to undercut. Blockbuster films rely on identification and catharsis in ways that run contrary to Herbert's scepticism.

5.2 What Was Gained?

What Villeneuve gains in his adaptation is substantial. He gains the skill to render Arrakis as the kind of immersive, fully realized environment that Herbert's ecological vision requires. The visual language of both films treats the desert planet not as backdrop but as protagonist, giving it the weight and presence that Lynch's film could not. The sandworms, finally become what they should be awe-inspiring and terrifying, simultaneously natural phenomenon and spiritual mystery.

Villeneuve also gives himself narrative room by splitting the story across two films. This lets secondary characters and relationships breathe. For instance, Lady Jessica's journey gets the kind of psychological focus Lynch's version can't touch. Chani's role is also far larger and more critical; her point of view complicates Paul's myth, even if it doesn't fully match Herbert's original tone of warning.

Hutcheon's argument that adaptations create meaning through their differences from their sources as much as through their similarities is particularly relevant here (Hutcheon 116). Villeneuve's choice to expand Chani's role and to give her the final word in *Dune Part II*, riding away from Paul and his religious war on the back of a sandworm and a creative addition to Herbert's narrative that serves Herbert's critical purposes better than a strictly literal reading of the novel would have. It is an example of what the best translators do and finding equals in the target average for effects that the source medium achieves by completely different means.

5.3 The Translator's Voice

Villeneuve's own voice as a filmmaker is present through both adaptations and it is less disturbing than Lynch's. His characteristic interest in silence, measure and the smallness of the human figure against vast environments gives both films a quality of intergalactic awe that is completely suitable to Herbert's vision as well. His preference for practical effects and real location shooting, combined with carefully controlled digital enhancement, gives Arrakis a proper physical reality that CGI-dependent productions often fail to achieve. As Lavinia Pflugfelder notes in her review of *Dune Part II*, Villeneuve "finds in the desert a visual language for Herbert's ecological and spiritual themes that is both cinematically spectacular and thematically coherent" (Pflugfelder 112).

The cultural moment of can find the mark of this era in is films. Released in the early 2020s, against the backdrop of hastening climate crisis and widespread debate of power and colonial exploitation, the films bring to Herbert's material a resolve that Lynch's Cold War adaptation could not have had. The spice economy starts to look obviously like a commentary on fossil fuels and the environmental cost of empire. That's not an add-on, but a meaningful modern translation of Herbert's own concerns as far as translation is concern.

6. Comparative Analysis: Two Translations of the Same Text

Now that each adaptation stands on its own and it is possible to step back and see what comparing them shows about cinematic adaption in broader way.

6.1 Narrative Fidelity

In terms of narrative fidelity, Villeneuve's version clearly much closer and near to Herbert's novel. Because he tracks the novel's plot with care, keeps the major characters and their ties relationships and holds onto the book's underlying structure as it is. Lynch, on the other hand, takes wider liberties rationalization and condensing the storyline in ways that at times break its internal logic. However, as this research paper has argued throughout, narrative fidelity isn't the whole story and it's certainly not the most important part of adaptation. A film can stick to the book's story and still miss its heart/plot or wander far from the original while managing to capture something essential about it.

6.2 Thematic Translation

In terms of thematic translation, it leads to more complicated comparison. Lynch keeps few aspects that Villeneuve does not emphasize, including the novel's Gothic atmosphere and its attention in psychological horror as well. Villeneuve conserves and develops elements that Lynch largely ignores like, the ecological warnings or arguments and the political critique of colonial exploitation. Neither adaptation fully captures Herbert's anti-messiah argument, though Villeneuve comes closer.

6.3 Character Translation

The reveals of characters in the two adaptations also reveals the different translation strategies of the two directors. Lynch's Paul is an ordinary hero, On the other hand Villeneuve's Paul is a more complicated figure whose heroism is gradually qualified as the story progresses from the beginning to end. Lynch's Fremen are a commonly exotic culture while Villeneuve's Fremen are rendered with greater cultural specificity and puts the Fremen centre stage in the plot. As Karolina Zrníková notes in her analysis of anticolonial themes in the two adaptations, "the 2021 film adaptation emphasizes the emperor's culpability and presents House Atreides as more ambiguous, contrasting with the 1984 adaptation, which portrays them as more straightforwardly heroic" (Zrníková 68).

6.4 Visual Language

Both films succeed in inventing a visual language for Herbert's universe, but each in its own way. Lynch's visual language is lean into expressionistic and personal, drawing on Gothic and surrealist traditions for shaping a world that feels strange, haunted almost dreamlike. Villeneuve, in contrast works on an epic scale because visual language is more epic and objective and using scale and landscape to create a world that feels vast and ancient to human concerns. Both approaches have something to praise and offer them as translations of Herbert's material, but the novel is both an interior, psychological work and an epic, world-historical one.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that film adaptation is best understood as an act of translation rather than reproduction and that these understanding issues both adapters and critics from the impossible standard of fidelity and opens up more productive questions about what each adaptation does with its source material. Applied to the two major cinematic adaptations of Frank Herbert's *Dune*, this framework reveals two very different translation strategies with very different results. David Lynch runs Herbert's novel through his own surrealist sensibility. His film loses a good deal of the novel's philosophical and ecological content but gains a hypnotic strangeness and visual flair that fits Lynch's artistic world. On the other

hand, Denis Villeneuve translated *Dune* with greater care and stays closer to Herbert's narrative and thematic intentions, but producing films that lose something of Herbert's radical uncertainty about heroism but gain an ecological involvement and a visual magnificence that bring the novel's world to life in ways that no other adaptation had achieved.

Neither translation is "definitive" and neither should be expected to be. The history of literary translation is full of examples that great works have inspired multiple translations and each valuable for what it brings not how perfectly it matches an original work. Herbert's *Dune* is big enough for more than one translation and both Lynch and Villeneuve have contributed something real and lasting to the ongoing cultural conversation that the novel has been making since its publication in 1965. In the end, the most important thing this comparative analysis ultimately demonstrates is that whether it is faithful, creative, intelligent, and honest about the choices it has made. Judged by these standards only, both Lynch and Villeneuve have plenty to offer and their differences are at least as useful as the similarities.

Work Cited

- Bazin, Andre. *What Is Cinema?* Translated by Hugh Gray, University of California Press, 1967.
- Grifka Wander, Misha. "A Genuine Messiah: The Erosion of Political Messaging in *Dune* 2021." *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2022, pp. 1-18.
- Herbert, Frank. *Dune*. Chilton Books, 1965.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. Routledge, 2006.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Cornell University Press, 1981.
- Kennedy, Kara. *Frank Herbert's Dune: A Critical Companion*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.
- Leitch, Thomas. *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents: From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of the Christ*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007.
- Lynch, David. *Lynch on Lynch*. Edited by Chris Rodley, Faber and Faber, 1997.
- Pflugfelder, Lavinia. "Film Review: *Dune: Part Two* (Denis Villeneuve, US 2024)." *Journal of Religion and Film*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2024, pp. 108-119.
- Stam, Robert. *Literature Through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation*. Blackwell, 2005.

Xu, Tengyue. "Research on Soft Science Fiction Films Based on the Movie *Dune*." *Asian Cinema Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2022, pp. 45-61.

Zrnikova, Karolina. *Anticolonialism in the Movie Adaptations of Dune by Frank Herbert*. MA Thesis, Masaryk University, 2022.