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THE SPICE MUST FLOW

## Before the New *Dune*—the

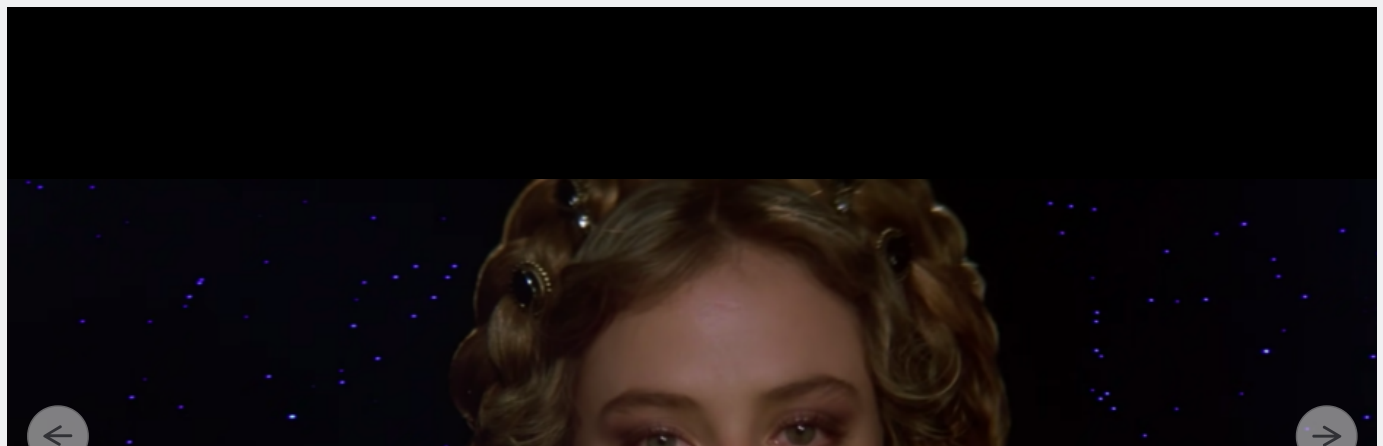
1984's

The pursuit of greatness must embrace the ridiculous.

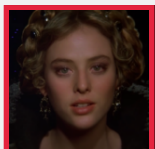
PETER OPASKAR - 10/17/2021, 7:00 PM

Frank Herbert's 1965 sci-fi novel *Dune* gets a new film adaptation—this one helmed by Denis Villeneuve (*Arrival*, *Blade Runner 2049*)—[later this month](#). But before Ars Technica reviews the movie, there's the matter of its predecessor: 1984's *Dune*, made by a then up-and-coming filmmaker named David Lynch.

Detractors call Lynch's saga—a tale of two noble space families 8,000 years in the future, fighting over the most valuable resource in the universe amidst sandworms the size of aircraft carriers—incomprehensible, stilted, and ridiculous. It lost piles of money. Yet fans, especially in recent years, have reclaimed Lynch's film as a magnificent folly, a work of holy, glorious madness.



Lynch begins *Dune* with *Sideways*) fades in to Lynch or do anything.



So which group am I talking about? *Dune* as "so bad it's good" or as a cult of cowards.

I once half-heard a radio interview with someone speculating that the then-current artistic moment was not "so bad it's good," and it wasn't "ironic" either—it was actually "awesome." (I didn't catch who he was, so if any of this sounds familiar, hit me up in the comments.) Art can speak to you while at the same time being absurd. The relatable can sometimes be reached only by going *through* the ridiculous. The two can be inseparable, like the gravitational pull between a gas giant and its moon—or **Riggs and Murtaugh**.

The example the radio interviewee gave was of Evel Knievel, the '70s daredevil who wore a cape and jumped dirt bikes over rows of buses. Absurd? Heavens, yes. A feat of motorcycling and physicality? Absolutely. But beyond that, we can relate to Knievel's need to achieve transcendence at such a, shall we say, niche skill. We might also marvel at our own ability to be impressed by something that should be objectively useless but is instead actually *awesome*.

A more contemporary example might be **Tenet**. It's a relentless international thriller about **fate and climate change and the need for good people to hold evil at bay**. But it's also a "dudes rock!" bromance between Two Cool Guys in Suits spouting sci-fi mumbo-jumbo. It can't be one without the other.

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I first saw *Dune* on TV in junior high. I didn't get it. But I was young and stupid then; now I'm older and taller. I saw roughly the last half again around 2001 or 2002 at my buddy Matt's apartment while late-night channel-surfing. Matt had read most of the 58,000 books in the series by scribe Frank Herbert and (later) Herbert's son, and he was eager to nerd out on the lore. While I drifted in and out of consciousness, Matt provided color commentary about which characters would be cloned for 10,000 years and who would eventually be turned into a giant worm. Little did I know that this was kind of the ideal approach to *Dune*, which feels like a partially remembered dream that you have to piece together later.

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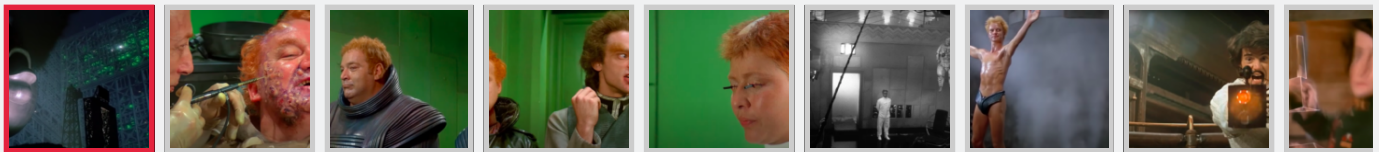
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From their first appearance in the original *Dune*, the Harkonnen home world.

g dominated on the  
Universal Pictures



## Travel without moving

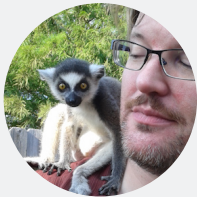
I love *Dune* because it feels just as alien as something set 80 centuries in the future should. (To put that span of time in context, remember that 8,000 years in the past would still be 3,500 years *before* the Great Pyramids were built.) To create this feeling, Lynch blurs the novel's plot and characters into a *Spaceballs* "ludicrous speed" lightshow.

*Dune* is the dream you have after reading a book about the distant future while listening to a 90-minute prog-rock album. Also, you may have done a pile of blow before falling asleep, because Sting is strutting around in Batman's speedo.

Characters drift in and out, and their identities and relationships are unclear. A bear-sized scrotal mutant can move spaceships with drug-induced mind-magic. Soldiers bring drums to a knife fight. Plot threads are left untied. Brad Dourif has breathtaking eyebrows. Cast members deliver their inner thoughts via whispered, close-to-the-mic voiceovers worthy of an ASMR YouTube channel. The pacing is leisurely, almost hypnotic. You're here for the wild sights, the rococo spaceships, the high-collared uniforms, and conversations so formal they border on liturgical. Just sit back and let them wash over you.

In other words, this was not *exactly* how Universal Studios intended to spend \$40 million in 1980s money.

## READER COMMENTS



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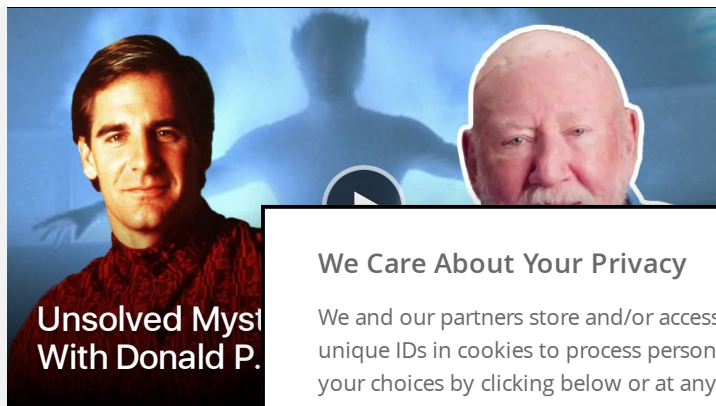
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