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## Director Cuts: Denis Villeneuve

### Rich Johnson

There are *few* auteurs working today who push the boundaries of cinema as far as Canadian filmmaker Denis Villeneuve. Not only does he balance epic scope with intricate detail and intimacy but, by doing so, manages to explore the human condition on a *profound* level. Traversing most genres, Villeneuve carefully explores both the masculine *and* feminine, in which men and women are pushed to the very limits of pain and suffering; often born again through a *distinct* sense of fear. Something that remains a crucial theme throughout his filmography. As well as his overlooked early works, such as *August 32nd on Earth*, this course will also look at everything from the Oscar-nominated *Incendies* to *Prisoners* and his adaptation of Frank Herbert's *Dune*.

#### Main films:

*Polytechnique* (2009)

**Director(s):** Denis Villeneuve

**Studio(s):** Remstar Films

*Incendies* (2010)

**Director(s):** Denis Villeneuve

**Studio(s):** micro\_scope

*Prisoners* (2013)

**Director(s):** Denis Villeneuve

**Studio(s):** Alcon Entertainment / 8:38 Productions / Madhouse Entertainment

*Enemy* (2013)

**Director(s):** Denis Villeneuve

**Studio(s):** Pathé / Entertainment One / Telefilm Canada / Corus Entertainment / Televisión Española / Movie Central / The Movie Network / + 5 others

*Sicario* (2015)

**Director(s):** Denis Villeneuve

**Studio(s):** Black Label Media / Thunder Road

*Arrival* (2016)

**Director(s):** Denis Villeneuve

**Studio(s):** FilmNation Entertainment / Lava Bear Films / 21 Laps Entertainment



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***Blade Runner 2049*** (2017)

**Director(s):** Denis Villeneuve

**Studio(s):** Alcon Entertainment / Columbia Pictures / Sony / Torridon Films / 16:14 Entertainment / Scott Free Productions / Babieka / Thunderbird Entertainment

***Dune: Part One*** (2021)

**Director(s):** Denis Villeneuve

**Studio(s):** Warner Bros. (presents) / Legendary Entertainment / Villeneuve Films

***Dune: Part Two*** (2024)

**Director(s):** Denis Villeneuve

**Studio(s):** Warner Bros. (presents) / Legendary Entertainment / Villeneuve Films

**References to:**

**“REW-FFWD”** (1994)

**Director(s):** Denis Villeneuve

**Studio(s):** National Film Board of Canada (NFB) / Canadian International Development Agency

***Cosmos*** (1996)

**Director(s):** Jennifer Alleyn, Manon Briand, Marie-Julie Dallaire, Arto Paragamian, André Turpin, Denis Villeneuve

**Studio(s):** Max Films Productions

***August 32nd on Earth*** (1998)

**Director(s):** Denis Villeneuve

**Studio(s):** Max Films Productions

***Maelström*** (2000)

**Director(s):** Denis Villeneuve

**Studio(s):** Max Films Productions / Société de Développement des Entreprises Culturelles (SODEC) / Téléfilm Canada

**“120 Seconds to Get Elected”** (2006)

**Director(s):** Denis Villeneuve

**Studio(s):** Marblemedia / National Film Board of Canada (NFB)

**“Next Floor”** (2008)

**Director(s):** Denis Villeneuve

**Studio(s):** Phi

**“Rated R for Nudity”** (2011)

**Director(s):** Denis Villeneuve

**Studio(s):** National Film Board of Canada (NFB)



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**“Rated R for Nudity”** (2011)

**Director(s):** Denis Villeneuve

**Studio(s):** National Film Board of Canada (NFB)

***I Killed My Mother*** (2009)

**Director(s):** Xavier Dolan

**Studio(s):** Mifilifilms

***The Good Lie*** (2014)

**Director(s):** Philippe Falardeau

**Studio(s):** Alcon Entertainment / Imagine Entertainment / Black Label Media / Reliance Entertainment

***The Barbarian Invasions*** (2003)

**Director(s):** Denys Arcand

**Studio(s):** Pyramide Productions / Cinémaginaire Inc.

***The Brood*** (1979)

**Director(s):** David Cronenberg

**Studio(s):** Les Productions Mutuelles Ltée / Elgin International Productions

***Black Christmas*** (1974)

**Director(s):** Bob Clark

**Studio(s):** Film Funding Ltd. / Vision IV / Canadian Film Development Corporation / Famous Players

***Wake in Fright*** (1971)

**Director(s):** Ted Kotcheff

**Studio(s):** NLT Productions / Group W Films

***The Terminator*** (1984)

**Director(s):** James Cameron

**Studio(s):** Hemdale / Pacific Western Productions / Euro Film Funding / Cinema '84

***Women Talking*** (2022)

**Director(s):** Sarah Polley

**Studio(s):** Orion Pictures / Plan B Entertainment / Hear/Say Productions

***Rollerball*** (1975)

**Director(s):** Norman Jewison

**Studio(s):** Algonquin Films

***Elephant*** (2003)

**Director(s):** Gus Van Sant

**Studio(s):** Meno Film Company



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*Bowling for Columbine* (2002)

**Director(s):** Michael Moore

**Studio(s):** United Artists / Alliance Atlantis / Salter Street Films / Dog Eat Dog Films

*The Double* (2013)

**Director(s):** Jesse Eisenberg

**Studio(s):** Alcove / BFI / Film4

*Persona* (1966)

**Director(s):** Ingmar Bergman

**Studio(s):** AB Svensk Filmindustri

*Metropolis* (1927)

**Director(s):** Fritz Lang

**Studio(s):** UFA

*Blade Runner* (1982)

**Director(s):** Ridley Scott

**Studio(s):** The Ladd Company / Shaw Brothers / Blade Runner Partnership

*El Topo* (1970)

**Director(s):** Alejandro Jodorowsky

**Studio(s):** Producciones Panicas

*Jodorowsky's Dune* (2013)

**Director(s):** Frank Pavich

**Studio(s):** City Film / Snowfort Pictures

*Dune* (1984)

**Director(s):** David Lynch

**Studio(s):** Dino De Laurentiis Corporation

*Frank Herbert's Dune* (2000)

**Director(s):** John Harrison

**Studio(s):** New Amsterdam Entertainment / Blixa Film Produktion / Victor Television Productions

*Under the Skin* (2013)

**Director(s):** Jonathan Glazer

**Studio(s):** BFI / Film4 / Silver Reel / Creative Scotland / JW Films / FilmNation Entertainment

*Lawrence Of Arabia* (1962)

**Director(s):** David Lean

**Studio(s):** Horizon Pictures



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*Apocalypse Now* (1979)

**Director(s):** Francis Ford Coppola

**Studio(s):** Omni Zoetrope

*2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)

**Director(s):** Stanley Kubrick

**Studio(s):** Stanley Kubrick Productions

**Notes:**

*“There’s something about this desire of making films that puts me in contact with the world, and I can transcend that fear, but the fear is something that is a part of me.”* — Denis Villeneuve

**INTRODUCTION: FUTURE FOUNDATIONS**

Denis Villeneuve was born in Gentilly, Quebec, Canada. Gentilly, formerly known as Saint-Édouard-de-Gentilly, is a village located in the town of Bécancour.

French Canadian cinema originated in Quebec and tends to do better at the box office than the English-speaking Canadian films. French Canadian films often explore themes of family, relationships, and privilege.

Approximately 620 feature-length films have been produced or partially produced by the Quebec film industry since 1943. This low output can be linked to how, from 1896 to the 1960s, the Catholic clergy tried to control what movies Quebecers could see. Two methods were employed: censorship and prohibition of attendance by children under 16. Documentaries, some of which were made by priests and civil servants became well known with commercial films only appearing in the 1940s and 1950s.

Two key changes in the late 1960s paved the way for a new era in Québécois cinema. First, in 1967, Quebec’s (religious) censorship bureau was replaced by a film ratings system administered by the province. The other phenomenon was the introduction, in 1967, by the federal government, of its Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC, to become Telefilm Canada). This allowed a greater number of films to reach the screen through government subsidies.

French Canadian directors include Xavier Dolan (*I Killed My Mother*, 2009) who is also an actor and producer, Philippe Falardeau, (*The Good Lie*, 2014), and Denis Arcand, (*The Barbarian Invasions*, 2003), which was the winner of the “Foreign Language Film” category at the 2004 Academy Awards.

Canadian directors include David Cronenberg (*The Brood*, 1979), Bob Clark (*Black Christmas*, 1974), Ted Kotcheff (*Wake in Fright*, 1971), James Cameron (*The Terminator*, 1984) and Sarah Polley who won Best Adapted Screenplay for her movie *Women Talking* (2022) at the 95th Academy Awards.



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One to look out for (according to the Hollywood Reporter article [“6 Canadian Directors to Watch: Making Unsettling Films Which Challenge Ourselves”](#)): Wayne Wapeemukwa, Sadaf Foroughi, Shelagh McLeod, Jackie English, Jason and Carlos Sanchez.

Denis, Denis...

Through deft of character and heft of scale, few would disagree that French-Canadian filmmaker Denis Villeneuve is one of the best directors working today. A true auteur; his empathetic approach to cinema involves thematic and philosophical views, coupled with what appears to be an *exact science*; stories that display both intimate *and* epically devastating emotion.

To lend *some* context to where he was born, Villeneuve grew up by the St. Lawrence River in Bécancour; an environment defined by a constant horizon and the permanence of both the church and a nuclear power plant.

“Those were the two forces that I dealt with in my life, religion and science. And both were linked with faith. The idea that I had to trust engineers, and I had to trust the priest. Both were initiating some fear, you know? I was born from that contrast.” (Nate Jones, [Vulture](#)) Therefore, it makes *complete* sense that he would develop such a fascination with the relationship between mankind and the environment and the isolation of human beings by way of the familiar or even the uncanny.

Villeneuve has three children from a previous relationship with Julie Rainville, including Salomé Villeneuve who has worked in the costume department on a number of her father’s films. She has made short films so far, including *II* (2022), which was her first commercial release. The film premiered at the 2022 Venice Film Festival, the only Canadian film to screen at Venice that year.

He is married to Tanya Lapointe a Canadian documentary filmmaker and former journalist, most noted for her 2020 documentary film *The Paper Man* (2020). She worked as a production assistant on Villeneuve’s *Arrival* (2016), subsequently announcing her departure from journalism in 2016 to focus on the documentation of Denis Villeneuve’s movies.

Her “Making of...” books include:

*The Art and Soul of Blade Runner 2049* (2017)  
*Bladerunner 2049 – Interlinked - The Art* (2020)  
*The Art and Science of Arrival* (2022)  
*The Art and Soul of Dune* (2022)  
*The Art and Soul of Dune: Part Two* (2022)

Villeneuve’s films often juxtapose scale and intimacy... but more specifically explore alienation, fear, and vulnerability. Also, in true French terms an exploration of the masculine and feminine.



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Let's take a look at his personal taste in film...

In the [Criterion Closet](#) it is interesting to hear him highlight the relationship between director and cinematographer which has been hugely important to Villeneuve and his own collaborations, as we will see.

His five favourite films according to [Far Out Magazine](#):

*2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968)  
*Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979)  
*Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982)  
*Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Steven Spielberg, 1977)  
*Persona* (Ingmar Bergman, 1966)

Favourite movies, according to [Indiewire](#):

*The Fabelmans* (2022)  
*Lawrence of Arabia* (1962)  
*Vertigo* (1958)  
*No Country For Old Men* (2007)  
*2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)  
*Children of Men* (2006)  
*Dead Ringers* (1988)  
*The Square* (2017)  
*Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017)  
*Downsizing* (2017)  
*Those Who Make Revolution Halfway Only Dig Their Own Graves* (2016)  
*There Will Be Blood* (2007)  
*Mother!* (2017)  
*A Star Is Born* (2018)  
*Seven Samurai* (1954)  
*The Rider* (2017)  
*The Beguiled* (2017)  
*Inception* (2010)  
*Tenet* (2020)  
*Blade Runner* (1982)  
*Amores Perros* (2001)  
*Dogtooth* (2010)  
*Dogville* (2004)  
*Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977)  
*Duel* (1971)  
*Jaws* (1975)  
*Under the Skin* (2014)  
*A Prophet* (2010)  
*Dunkirk* (2017)



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## PART ONE: EARLY FILMS & SABBATICAL

Villeneuve's first film was the 30-minute documentary "REW-FFWD" (1994). Synopsis: A young photographer is on assignment in Jamaica. It's a cultural shock. First anguished, he later becomes quite fascinated by the people he meets, their neighbourhood and their music. [Watch the film here.](#)

In 1996 he directed the segment "Le Technétium" for the anthology film *Cosmos*. Synopsis: A series of short tales feature an immigrant cabby, his passengers and other individuals in crisis.

His first feature film, inspired by the French New Wave, came in 1998 with *August 32nd on Earth*. Synopsis: At 26, Simone is already rethinking her entire life after surviving a horrible car crash. She quits her job and heads off in search of her closest friend Philippe to ask him to have a child with her. Philippe is apprehensive but finally agrees on the condition that the conception occurs in the desert.

Once again, this distinct sense of alienation can be seen as far back as *August 32nd on Earth*, where the lives of best friends Simone (Pascale Bussi eres) and Philippe (Alexis Martin) are brought into focus after surviving a highway incident and decide to head out into the Utah salt flats to conceive a child. Here, sun-bleached by Andr e Turpin's beautiful cinematography, are two lost and vulnerable souls exposed by high angles and expansive wide shots; a framing of scale emphasising our sheer insignificance amongst the barren landscape; signatures still seen in the director's work today.

*Maelstr m* followed in 2000. Synopsis: 25-year-old Bibiane is successful but finds her life lacks purpose. Following several unfortunate events, she gets drunk and hits a man with her car. She can't recall anything but soon learns she is to blame for his death. Just as she is about to end it all, she meets Evian, the son of the man she killed.

Disappointed with his first two features Villeneuve decided to take a nine-year sabbatical from filmmaking to be a stay-at-home dad, vowing only to return to filmmaking when he knew his output could be something he was proud of, refocussing his approach as an artist.

## PART TWO: PRESENT TENSE

Returning to filmmaking Villeneuve eased himself back in with a couple of short films: "[120 Seconds to Get Elected](#)" in 2006 and "[Next Floor](#)" in 2008. Another couple of short films were made in 2011 that are very much a reflection of his work up to that point: "[Rated R for Nudity](#)" and "[ tude empirique sur l'influence du son sur la persistance r tinienne](#)", which translates to: "Empirical Study on the Influence of Sound on the Persistence of Vision". The film is simply red and green flashing to punk music.

*"If I have a boy, I'll teach him how to love. If I have a girl, I'll tell her the world is hers."* — Val rie

Villeneuve's first film after his sabbatical – and often referred to as his first feature; a film he would be "proud of" – was *Polytechnique* in 2009. Synopsis: Based on the 1989  cole Polytechnique massacre the film re-enacts the events of the incident through the eyes of Val rie and Jean-Fran ois who study at a school in Montreal. One day, a brutal event causes irreversible changes in their lives.





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A 25-year-old man enters the school with a rifle in his hand and his goal is to murder every woman in the building.

By the time he had arrived at *Polytechnique*, Villeneuve began to develop his signature of long takes with steady camerawork. Not a huge fan of dialogue – he has often stated cinema can work just as well without it – his eye focuses on a precise mise-en-scène with periods of wordless silence. All of this heightens the atmosphere of his films considerably. Villeneuve loves high contrast cinematography and with *Polytechnique* shot in black and white not only was it a way to shoot with more clarity but also to avoid the presence of blood on screen. The film was screened for the family members of the victims before being released commercially and was released with their blessing shortly after. It was also filmed simultaneously in English *and* French.

It's a disturbing watch... but a necessary one. Up to this point, Villeneuve had written all of his previous films now co-writing *Polytechnique* with Jacques Davidts.

The name of the perpetrator is never once mentioned in the film. Parallels can be made to Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003) six years earlier based on the Columbine massacre. An intense triple bill provided by watching Michael Moore's incredible documentary *Bowling for Columbine* (2002).

*"Death is never the end of the story. It always leaves tracks"* — Notaire Jean Lebel

Villeneuve's next film is the blistering *Incendies*, nominated for an Academy Award for "Best Foreign Language Film" in 2012. Synopsis: A dying mother writes to her children Jeanne and Simon requesting them to fulfil her last wishes. Following her instructions, they discover a world full of hatred, differences and love. Mystery *and* fear unfold in a series of flashbacks that not only shows their mother's tragic life story but also the complex nature of conflict and the victims of war.

If you manage to track down a copy, you can read my contribution to the 4K release from 101 Films: "The Empathy and Alchemy of Denis Villeneuve".

The film was shot in 40 days, Villeneuve using Jordan for some scenes in which he would later return to for both parts of *Dune*.

The film is based on the 2003 play by Quebec playwright and director Wajdi Mouawad; the second story in his thematically related series *Le Sang des promesses*.

From the offset, these challenges are brought to vivid life through Villeneuve's direction; the opening sequence a classic John Ford shot in reverse. Turpin's photography paints a barren Middle Eastern landscape, the camera retreating into a shack, the desert framed as we pan around to the sound of Radiohead's "You and Whose Army?". We witness young boys — their heads shaved by soldiers — as Thom Yorke's vocals hit at the precise moment one of the innocent faces stares directly at us; barbered by the barbaric. It is one of his most devastating features to date, bookended by an equally shocking twist to rival Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* (2003) that delivers perhaps two of Villeneuve's strongest female characters.



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*Incendies* lays the foundations for Villeneuve's success as a mainstream filmmaker in which we see his familiar themes of anguish, grief and human suffering that he went on to explore time and time again.

The disturbing reveal at the heart of *Incendies* emphasises the consequences of war all the more — those darkest corners of human nature — and it is Villeneuve's instinctive approach as a director, working on such a *profound* level, that enables him to navigate such brutal truths; what human beings are capable of when pushed beyond their limits.

*“Pray for the best, but prepare for the worst.”* — Keller Dover

Truth *and* consequences are explored in his first English-language film (and breakthrough) *Prisoners* (2013), one of the best thrillers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Synopsis: When the police take time to find the daughter Keller Dover (Hugh Jackman) and her friend, he decides to go on a search himself. As Detective Loki (Jake Gyllenhaal) looks into the case, Dover's desperation leads him closer to finding the truth, no matter the violent cost.

Screenwriter Aaron Guzikowski wrote the script for the 2009 [Annual Black List](#); an annual survey of the “most-liked” motion picture screenplays not yet produced. Partially inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's “The Tell-Tale Heart”, Guzikowski based the script on a short story he wrote, involving a father whose kid was struck by a hit-and-run driver which leads to him putting the suspect in a well in his backyard. The gothic undertones along with Poe's detective musings can be picked up on throughout, including the mystery at the centre of the film... right down to characters buried alive.

This is the closest to Villeneuve tapping into Hitchcockian cinema and is also eerily reminiscent of the French/Dutch film *Spoolooos* (aka *The Vanishing*, 1988) in which a man desperately searches for his missing wife. Villeneuve seems to echo the emptiness of specific shots.

Hugh Jackman's Keller Donner has no choice but to take matters into his *own* hands as he spirals further downward; blinded by anguish and fuelled by his anger and helplessness; a man who faces the fear of all *fears*: losing a child. In a brutal scene, he completely loses control taking his anger to the brink having already tortured Pauls Dano's fragile (and already broken) Alex Jones who may or may not have, abducted his daughter.

Starting with *Prisoners*, cinematographer Roger Deakins began working with director Denis Villeneuve. The two proceeded to collaborate on *Sicario* (2015) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), with Deakins earning Oscar nominations for all three films.

*“Control, it's all about control. Every dictatorship has one obsession and that's it. In ancient Rome they gave the people bread and circuses. They kept the population busy with entertainment, but other dictatorships used other strategies to control ideas, the knowledge... how do they do that? Lower education, they limit culture, censor information, they censor any means of individual expression and is important to remember this, that this is a pattern, that repeats itself throughout history.”*

— Anthony



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Although made before *Prisoners*, it wasn't released until a month after. The film was a practice run for Villeneuve filming in English, his methodical and orchestrated approach delivering another suspenseful thriller that taps into the nightmare of duality. Synopsis: Adam (Jake Gyllenhaal), a college professor, spots an actor in a movie who looks exactly like him. Adam tracks down his doppelgänger, Anthony, and starts living his life secretly, which gives birth to a complex situation.

The film is loosely adapted from José Saramago's 2002 novel *The Double* and released the same year as Jesse Eisenberg's *The Double* which is based on a different book of the same name *The Double* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, first published in 1846.

A deep-seated paranoia propels a *true* manifestation of fear throughout... a film that is perhaps Villeneuve's *most* cryptic to date and only adds to its unnerving tone as we are left to decipher a sense of order from chaos.

As Adam seeks out his doppelgänger, he becomes more and more anxious and paranoid as his individuality is brought into question.

All the while there is an impending sense of dread throughout that leans towards familiar territories involving 'imitations' and assimilated personalities reminiscent of Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982) and Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige* (2006). According to IMDb, Villeneuve was drawn to the project because there was something that was very prevalent in the source novel: repetition is hell. This is particularly evident in Adam's role who is clearly living a life that he doesn't enjoy or appreciate any more.

Although most of these examples use the doppelgänger more explicitly as the monstrous 'Other', Villeneuve began to dig deeper through his use of symbolism — those *shades* of yellow — and metaphor to explore fear through femininity (also displayed in *Arrival*), uncanny and the Kafkaesque; those innate human fears about the loss of self... a final, unforgettable shot, seared into our consciousness.

Note the two shots that show Villeneuve's repeat framing and spider-like visuals from *Enemy* and *Arrival*.

"Nothing will make sense to your American ears, and you will doubt everything that we do, but in the end you will understand." — Alejandro

In contrast to the 'web' of intrigue at the centre of *Enemy*, Villeneuve's next film returned to a territory similar to *Incendies* dealing with the harsh realities of the war on drugs, once again from a female perspective. Synopsis: After rising through the ranks of her male-dominated profession, idealistic FBI agent Kate Macer (Emily Blunt) receives a top assignment. Recruited by mysterious government official Matt Graver (Josh Brolin), Kate joins a task force for the escalating war against drugs. Led by the intense and shadowy Alejandro (Benicio del Toro), the team travels back-and-forth across the U.S.-Mexican border, using one cartel boss to flush out a bigger one.



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Interviewed for [AFC](#) in 2015, Roger Deakins reflected:

“During my discussions with him, we went through all of the options that were available to us in terms of camera and technique in order to shoot the film... Finally, I realized that one of the most noticeable influences on our choices of camera placement, framing, and lighting was the style of Jean-Pierre Melville. He’s able to attain a sort of simple yet stylish realism...”

One of Roger Deakins’ techniques as a cinematographer is to “cut the frame”, which means he often uses architecture, objects, characters, or anything else to help focus the audience’s attention on a certain portion of the frame. For Deakins, it is all about simplifying the frame but also generates a perceived threat. Think of when a killer or imposing character enters a room... intensified all the more when the killer peeks around a corner at their soon-to-be victim. We have seen this time and time again in thrillers and horror movies.

Take this tense moment as Benicio del Toro’s Alejandro blocks half the frame, which allows us to pay attention to Josh Brolin’s character, Matt, in the background. This is really effective blocking and staging as it demonstrates both Alejandro’s power and Matt’s indifference in one shot.

The following is a breakdown via [Jordan Panderson](#):

The analysis shows how Deakins works with some recurring themes implementing his well-known style. *Sicario* centres around a morally grey area; a blurred line between right and wrong. “Using the lens’s focus, Deakins creates a moral sleight-of-hand with the CIA agents; *Focus here but not there*. Secondly, the use of reflections, especially in mirrors, signifies how we the audience should contemplate our own moral boundaries as it relates to the characters.”

There are reflective shots throughout with endless lines emphasizing distance. “Few shots in *Sicario* are “flat” or two-dimensional – and those few are painterly in their *mise-en-scène*.”

The checkpoint scene is a masterful direction of tension.

The ‘borders’ are more explicit than implicit; a film literally dealing with a U.S. task force that travels across the U.S.-Mexican border to flush out a drug cartel. Taylor Sheridan’s taught screenplay is executed perfectly during a crucial moment at the border, Sheridan’s rich characterisation and Villeneuve’s sense of perspective enabling the audience to understand Macer’s internal conflict as she fights to deescalate the situation while, at the same time, protecting herself.

For all the darkness at the centre of *Sicario* (2015), the character of Kate Macer represents a more *hopeful* character, despite the terrible situation she finds herself in. Whereas Villeneuve’s work can often explore both masculine *and* feminine themes — his dichotomy of strong-willed women and compromised men — in *Sicario* it is *not about* gender but Macer’s quality as a *human being* that sees the audience through the story.

“*If you could see your whole life from start to finish, would you change things?*” — Louise Banks



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Villeneuve chose material also centred on a female lead in 2016's *Arrival*. As a small slice of science fiction, we haven't quite reached the heights of his epic visions yet; instead building on the themes of a parent's pain and loss already explored from a male perspective in *Prisoners*. Synopsis: Linguistics professor Louise Banks (Amy Adams) leads an elite team of investigators when gigantic spaceships touchdown in 12 locations around the world. As nations teeter on the verge of global war, Banks and her crew must race against time to find a way to communicate with the extraterrestrial visitors. Hoping to unravel the mystery, she takes a chance that could threaten her life and quite possibly all of mankind.

Interviewed for *The New York Times* during the film's release, Villeneuve highlighted: "For me, masculinity is about control, and femininity is more of an embrace, the art of listening. It's very inspiring to explore the shadows of masculinity and femininity, and the tensions between both, and the place of women in the world right now."

Based on Ted Chiang's Nebula-winning 1998 novella "Story of Your Life" the adaptation — co-written with Eric Heisserer — leans heavily into Villeneuve's Kubrick influence for the first time, delivering a contemplative work of science fiction that presents monolithic mysteries and obscure alien life forms.

Despite the sci-fi elements, this is a very human drama shaped by an elusive sense of 'time'. Go in completely blind for the full impact of the film.

Amy Adams & Denis Villeneuve Reunite 8 Years After *Arrival* for Vanity Fair. [Watch here.](#)

Leaning into science fiction we can begin to see Villeneuve flex his muscles and explore ideas in more depth working with concept artists such as Peter König.

Designs remain free and abstract but also monolithic and, ultimately, Kubrickian.

There is an interesting [article](#) on the linguist behind the film in which she talks about speaking to aliens and how Donald Trump is affecting language.

The design of the film and use of language are all part of its unique approach to science fiction.

### PART THREE: FUTURE TENSE

"Sometimes to love someone, you got to be a stranger." — Rick Deckard

With *Blade Runner 2049*, Villeneuve pulls off the almost impossible in directing a sequel to one of the most seminal works of science fiction. Synopsis: In this sequel to Ridley Scott's seminal sci-fi, K (Ryan Gosling) is an officer with the Los Angeles Police Department who unearths a secret that leads him in search of a former blade runner, Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford), who has been missing for over three decades.

Ridley Scott's original *Blade Runner* is one of Villeneuve's favourite movies... so... no pressure there.



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Blade Runner was based on Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968) by Philip K. Dick.

Although a defining work, influences can still be traced back to another seminal sci-fi movie, Fritz Lang's silent classic *Metropolis* from 1927.

The most prominent influences are in the cityscape, Ridley Scott fusing elements from the industrial North of England, in which he grew up, the artist Moebius' work on the short comic "The Long Tomorrow" (1976), and the groundbreaking visions of Lang. Architecture is a crucial aspect of the world of *Blade Runner*, the Bradbury Building a prime example, of which Ridley Scott utilised the interior for the final sequence.

For the design of *Blade Runner 2049* Villeneuve's appreciation for Brutalist architecture starts to come to the forefront. We can see this in London's Dorfman Theatre, the Spomenik Memorials throughout the former Yugoslavia, and the Geisel Library in La Jolla, California.

So, to remain true to the original, Bigatures were worked on to create a more believable cityscape and environment so that CGI didn't detract from storytelling.

Much like the original, although critically acclaimed the film for successfully capturing the spirit of Ridley Scott's masterpiece, it bombed at the box office, costing its production company Alcon Entertainment at least \$80 million. While Villeneuve never expressed regret, he also admitted it was by far the biggest challenge of his career and felt lucky to ever work again afterwards. But, despite not doing well financially, it still scooped up awards. As well as receiving an Academy Award for "Best Visual Effects", Roger Deakins also took home an award for his stunning cinematography.

There are a number of shots reminiscent of Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966), such as Villeneuve's signature use of raised hands (connection) and back lit figures, eyes, profile shots and an interesting use of double exposures between the female leads and lone figures lost amongst architectural details.

Empathy (or lack of it in terms of the characters) is one of the core emotions at the centre of Ridley Scott's sci-fi masterpiece *Blade Runner* (1982)... and if *anyone* was to direct a worthy sequel there was *no question* that Villeneuve was the best man for the job. Not only does he deliver on its beautifully brutal vision and philosophical themes, but, simultaneously manages to build on the world while retaining its central mystery.

"I put together a team of dreamers to create the future of an old dream." This is Hitchcockian in its approach; the central conceit of the original film — is he or *isn't he?* — part of the MacGuffin as Officer K (Ryan Gosling) attempts to solve a case he may or *may not* be part of.

Both K and Deckard — now living in the ruins of Las Vegas — are isolated male figures; K in particular segregated all the more within the confines of his apartment unable to fit into 'normal' society as a replicant and made all the worse hunting and retiring his own kind.



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The distinct sense of isolation is echoed throughout as Officer K attempts to “connect”, falling in love with what is essentially a programmed image. The ultimate use of AI that helps him understand what both love and domesticity are. The complete opposite to his job as a Blade Runner, hunting down his own kind.

The sense of isolation is echoed throughout as Office K attempts to “connect”, falling in love with what is essentially a programmed image. The ultimate use of AI that helps him understand what both love and domesticity is. The complete opposite to his job as a Blade Runner, hunting down his own kind.

*“I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little death that brings obliteration.”* — Lady Jessica Atreides

Without having made the *Blade Runner* sequel, Villeneuve would not have assembled everything he would have needed to explore his most epic vision so far... for it would seem that *all roads* have led to Arrakis. Rather than brush away the sand from a fossil each of his films have built on the previous, one brick at a time, and with his adaptation of *Dune* — the first part released in 2021 — he would continue to present bigger and more complex challenges. Splitting Frank Herbert’s original novel into two parts, Villeneuve has allowed the story to breathe; delivering a *definitive* science fiction epic that had a profound impact on the filmmaker growing up. A rich and surreal universe, the *Dune* saga manages to convey and become a catalyst of all the themes discussed so far on a *much larger* canvas.

Synopsis: Paul Atreides (Timothée Chalamet) arrives on Arrakis after his father accepts the stewardship of the dangerous planet. However, chaos ensues after a betrayal with forces clashing to control the precious resource, Spice Melange that holds the secret to the universe and Paul’s destiny.

The film is based on the first half of Frank Herbert’s 1965 novel of the same name. For the first time since *Incendies*, Villeneuve contributed to the script with screenwriters Jon Spaihts and Eric Roth. *Dune: Part One* was originally supposed to be released in late 2020, but due to Covid was postponed. The film’s success was a huge part of bringing audiences back into the cinema in October 2021, despite there still being a pandemic. It was uncertain whether the film would be a success at all and remain only half an adaptation.

It is, of course, the classic Hero’s Journey; an epic Greek tragedy full of political intrigue, myth and religion as Paul Atreides’ thirst for knowledge and destiny to save an entire universe collapses around him. Loss of privilege, loss of family, friends... before he is lost in the desert and reborn as a messiah. In one of the most well-known quotes from the book’s fictional incantation “Litany Against Fear” — *“I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer....”* — it is a passage that only emphasises the ‘F’ word; which Villeneuve summarises perfectly in his foreword to *The Art and Soul of Dune*:

“The desert inspires a deep sensation of isolation in one’s heart. It provokes inevitable introspection. Like a microscope, the desert magnifies our existential fears. Stripped down from any social construction, and in direct contact with the vertigo of the infinity of space and time, we are left naked. The desert brings us back hypnotically to our very own human condition.” — Denis Villeneuve from Tanya Lapointe’s *The Art and Soul of Dune* (London: Titan Books, 2021), p.8.



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In 1974, Chilean and French avant-garde filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky began working on *Dune*. Notable work includes Acid Western *El Topo* (1970) as well as a writing partner to Moebius; including their most well-known work, the French graphic novel series *The Incal* (1988).

This potential version of *Dune* is considered the most ambitious film ever attempted; Jodorowsky making not only a film but “a prophet”... his end goal was to “change the world”. A bible was created consisting of all the storyboards and concept art.

Frank Pavich’s 2013 documentary *Jodorowsky’s Dune* goes into the entire story of the development.

It was finally brought to the screen by David Lynch, who disowned the film due to the studio significantly interfering with his creative vision, heavily editing the film to the point where it no longer represented his intended story.

John Harrison also made a TV mini-series, including a follow-up *Children of Dune* in 2003, which also encompasses the second novel *Dune Messiah* (1969).

It is worth looking at key scenes from the novel to see how each director has interpreted the material.

Villeneuve’s version boasts one of the best ensembles including Timothée Chalamet as Paul Atreides, Rebecca Ferguson as Lady Jessica, Oscar Isaac as Duke Leto Atreides, Josh Brolin as Gurney Halleck, Stellan Skarsgård as Baron Vladimir Harkonnen, Dave Bautista as the “Beast” Rabban, Zendaya as Chani, Charlotte Rampling as Reverend Mother Mohiam, Jason Momoa as Duncan Idaho, and Javier Bardem as Stilgar.

Villeneuve is on fire with his composition and handling of scope and scale through real-world settings.

Interictally designed by production designer Patrice Vermette every space and mechanism is completely believable.

Another crucial collaborator was Australian cinematographer Greig Fraser whose credits include Kathryn Bigelow’s *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), Gareth Edwards’ *Rogue One* (2016) and Matt Reeves’ *The Batman* (2022). His use of experimenting with light, colour, and shadow to create a sense of tension and foreboding atmosphere is prevalent in his photography. During the shoot he always carried a 35mm film camera, the photos of which accompanied actor Josh Brolin’s poetry and writing in the book *Dune: Exposures* (2024).

“*The visions are clear now. I see possible futures, all at once. Our enemies are all around us, and in so many futures they prevail.*” — Paul Atreides

Synopsis: Paul Atreides finds himself pulled into the Fremen culture while seeking revenge against the conspirators who destroyed his family. Facing a choice between love and the fate of the universe, he must prevent a terrible future only he can foresee.





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With the success of *Dune: Part One*, *Part Two* went into production the was greenlit by Legendary in October 2021 after the first film's premiere at the 78th Venice International Film Festival on September 3, 2021. Principal photography took place in Budapest, Italy, Jordan, and Abu Dhabi between July and December 2022.

Working on the look of *Dune: Part Two*, Denis Villeneuve stated for *Letterboxd*: “*I try to find influences that are outside of the cinema circle...I try to create a space for the mind to exist outside of the many influences we have.*” — Denis Villeneuve

Production designer Patrice Vermette made use of the Brion Monumental Tomb, designed by architect Carlo Scarpa, in Veneto, Italy. This was chosen for the quiet scenes set on the capital planet Kaitain to stand in sharp contrast to the windswept deserts of Arrakis and the black-and-white fascist world of the Harkonnen on Giedi Prime.

Greg Fraser experimented with a lot of different light sources to push the look of the film further from the black sun of Giedi Prime that produced the stark negative photography to the blood red of an eclipse on Arrakis.

Once again, Villeneuve shows impeccable compositions with Fraser and expands on the weight of the material.

The handling of the worms is stunning and by the time they are fully shown they have already become an integral part of the film, without feeling too goofy; Villeneuve simply sewing seeds and careful reveals to make them all the more believable, whether you understand their importance to the ecosystem, or not.

Cinematic echoes...

“*The visions are clear now. I see possible futures, all at once. Our enemies are all around us, and in so many futures they prevail.*” — Paul Atreides

Although a little more tenuous, while Villeneuve hasn't directly spoken about *Under the Skin*, he still ranks it among his favourite films of the 21st Century, and it surely has influenced his evolving brand of sci-fi. While the obscure and abstract nature of Jonathan Glazer's 2014 film may have more in common with Villeneuve's earlier, more impressionistic films such as *Enemy*, its themes of exploitation and consumption, albeit on a different scale, are ones that *Dune* itself explores in great detail. There are even those “oily” drowning moments within.

However, perhaps the most significant influence on Villeneuve's approach to *Dune* is David Lean's 1962 epic *Lawrence of Arabia*. He introduced the film at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2021, it being one of his favourite films, and its grand political narrative in the sweeping desert landscape certainly reverberates in *Dune*. The story of T.E. Lawrence is one that also influenced Herbert's book, with Paul's recruiting of the Fremen evoking Lawrence's role in the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire in World War One.



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While Coppola's approach to war filmmaking certainly will have influenced Villeneuve - including the ornithopters that evoke the US helicopters invading Vietnam - one of the more direct influences comes from Marlon Brando's casting as Kurtz.

Villeneuve has often referred to how Kurtz was an influence for his take on Baron Harkonnen; Stellan Skarsgård brushing his bald head with his hand; or Martin Sheen rising from the muddy water influencing the Baron emerging from an oily bath.

Other framing and design evokes *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Ridley Scott's original *Blade Runner*; concept artist Syd Mead's retro-futuristic architecture all over the design of the desert city Arrakeen in *Dune*. Villeneuve even echoes his own work with *Blade Runner 2049* and *Dune*. There are also nods to Jodorowsky's *Dune* storyboard that shows concept art from Ron Cobb (*Alien*, *Aliens*) for the ornithopter which appears in Villeneuve's adaptation.

More specific artistic references can be seen such as the Renaissance painting *Lamentation of Christ* (c. 1480) by Andrea Mantegna, reminding us of the death of Duke Leto Atreides along with a nod to the first printing's cover of *Dune* (1965).

## CONCLUSION: FUTURE REFLECTIONS

In summarising Villeneuve's journey as a filmmaker, each film has grown bigger and bigger than the last. Literal building blocks – as mentioned: brick by brick. After his smaller output (before the sabbatical), *Polytechnique* and *Incendies* studied humanity at its worst through both an enclosed and then exposed setting. But both films were still a close study of human beings including their pain and suffering.

Both *Prisoners* and *Enemy* were a study of claustrophobic and labyrinthian thrillers about men spiralling out of control.

*Sicario* was a portrait of cartel violence, while *Arrival*, despite its scope, still explored an almost unrivalled empathy.

He delivered the impossible sequel with *Blade Runner 2049* which, although never proved a hit, has more than proved that big, bold legacy sequels are *absolutely* possible.

It would seem that his career was always heading towards Frank Herbert's work. The clues were there all along. First a fan of the source material and secondly an expert filmmaker ready to tackle the immense universe that has always seemed so impossible to film.

And in addition to his huge appetite for ambitious projects he has not only embraced the brutalism and stunning cinematography but, most importantly of all, the human condition.

Most recent project...

Some of Villeneuve's most recent work has been a David Lynch tribute for *W Magazine*'s "The Directors Issue" from the 12<sup>th</sup> February 2025. Photographed by his *Dune* cinematographer Greig Fraser the series of photographs sees two versions of Paul Atreides cross each other's paths. You can



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read the full article here: <https://www.wmagazine.com/culture/timothee-chalamet-denis-villeneuve-cover-interview>

Future projects...

*“The visions are clear now. I see possible futures, all at once. Our enemies are all around us, and in so many futures they prevail.”* — Paul Atreides

Despite Villeneuve having stated he would like to detox a little with a smaller feature, “future” films include more science-fiction with *Dune Messiah* and *Rendezvous with Rama*, currently in development. Films in pre-production include an adaptation of Annie Jacobsen’s novel *Nuclear War: A Scenario* and Villeneuve’s version of *Cleopatra*. A return to the desert... but this time further back in time.

*“In contradiction and paradox, you can find truth.”* — Denis Villeneuve

Villeneuve’s contradictions and paradoxes remain in his contrasting imagery, characters and themes. He has become a prolific and intuitive filmmaker who, much like Ridley Scott, understands the tools and visual language of cinema to creating breathtaking imagery. Through collaboration and his understanding of editing, cinematography, lighting, sound design, he has managed to surround himself with other innovators. Having worked in partnership with the likes of Roger Deakins and Hans Zimmer he has never bound himself entirely to these individuals but always learned from them.