CULT NOVELS ON THE SCREEN: *DUNE* AND *THE NAKED LUNCH*

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The adaptation of cult novels admired by an enthusiastic readership raises specific problems. Here I examine the film adaptation by David Lynch of a readers' cult novel, Frank Herbert's *Dune*, and that by David Cronenberg of a writers' cult novel, William S. Burroughs's *The Naked Lunch*. Lynch's *Dune* was an expensive blockbuster aimed at the readers who had instituted the cult of Herbert's novel. Though it was remarkably faithful to its source, the film flopped because it failed to please the novel's fans. On the other hand, Cronenberg's extremely free adaptation of Burroughs' work was hailed by the critics as an artistic success, though its status among cinema-goers is less successful.

In his book *Classic Cult Fiction* (1992), Thomas Reid Whissen defines the cult book as that which seems to speak not only to its readers but for them (ix). As he says, "a book acquires cult status on the basis of reader response rather than the author's intentions" (xi). Typically fans of cult books read into the book many of their own preoccupations: cult books create networks of readers who passionately admire them but also parallel cults of readers who reject them as trivial or boring. Cult novels appeared in Romantic Europe —Whissen cites Goethe's *Werther* (1774-82) as the first cult novel— but come now mainly from the USA where they have been closely associated to the preferences of 1960s college students for certain countercultural texts.

Whissen makes no distinction between what I will call the readers' cult book and the writers' cult book. Frank Herbert's *Dune* is a readers' cult book, admired by its fans but not so by the literary critics, whereas William Burroughs's *The Naked Lunch* is a writers' cult book now widely accepted by the literary establishment. Both categories may fuse, yet readers' cult novels depend essentially on the reader's identification with a strong individual character of mythical dimensions, whereas writers' cult novels are enjoyed because the author is admired by aspiring or established authors due to his or her condition as a highly original (Romantic) artist. This explains, in addition, why cult books are found at either side of the canonical divide and why they cannot be simply identified with pulp or popular fiction.

The screen adaptations of *Dune* by David Lynch and *The Naked Lunch* by David Cronenberg reflect this duality between the readers' and the writers' cult novel. The readers' cult novel is more difficult to adapt successfully, as the film version must face the resistance of its own core audience, those who created the cult. These tend to mistrust interpretations

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other than their own. In contrast, writers' cult novels challenge the adapter to circumvent the problems of translating literary texts into filmic language. They are, however, less bounded by the demands of readers, who generally react with more moderate enthusiasm towards the book. Despite the differences, both categories are symbiotic, for they require a previous or subsequent reading of the cult novel to make complete sense.

Warm reader response inspired Herbert to write *Dune* (1965) out of an original short story published in 1963 in Astounding Science-Fiction. *Dune,* awarded the Nebula (1965) and the Hugo (1966), has been followed by *Dune Messiah, Children of Dune, God Emperor of Dune, and Heretics of Dune.* Soon a cult grew among American college students, expanded to ten million adepts worldwide by 1984 when Lynch's film was released. Dune is epic space opera at a large scale dealing with the fall of the house of Atreides some 8,000 years in the future, orchestrated by the Emperor Shaddam IV and the Atreides' enemies, the Harkonnens. Paul Atreides, teenage son of the assassinated Duke Leto and his concubine, the Bene Gesserit witch Lady Jessica, rises to the leadership of the Fremen, a people who live in the desert planet of Arrakis, also known as Dune. Arrakis is coveted by the Guild, a powerful organization that regulates interstellar travel, which depends on the use of a drug, the spice or melange, mined in Arrakis. The novel ends when the Fremens' uprising led by Paul succeeds in defeating the Harkonnen and deposing the treacherous Emperor.

"The sheer size of *Dune's* literary cult", Ed Sikov writes (1995, 75), "meant that if the core audience rejected the film it couldn't possibly make its money back". This is in part what happened, but other factors turned *Dune* into, in Sikov's phrase, a gargantuan flop. Its producer, Dino de Laurentiis, wrongly assumed that *Dune* would appeal to both its readers and the public who had welcomed George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977) —a film remotely based on *Dune* itself. Laurentiis hired David Lynch to script and direct the film, with the expectation that the whole saga would be filmed (Chion 1992, 81) and with Herbert's approval of Lynch's screenplay. Yet Lynch himself complains that he was "sold out from the start by not having final cut, and by attempting to provide the producers with what they wanted more than what I wanted" (Alexander 1993, 76). So profound was his disappointment that he disowned a special 190' version for American television. Nonetheless, most critics today would agree with Miguel Juan Payán, who calls the film "el fracaso imaginario" and defines it as "una pequeña joya extremadamente respetuosa con la novela de la que parte" (1991, 71).

Respect was precisely Lynch's main problem when tackling Herbert's novel. *Dune* is a very dense novel, packed with outlandish terminology and great masses of information. Herbert even inserted four appendixes on ecology, religion, the Bene Gesserit sisterhood, and the main characters and technology of the Empire. Lynch relied instead on computer graphics to clarify the plot and also on the off-voice of Irulan, the imperial princess who is to recount Paul's rise in Herbert's novel. John Alexander observes that the opening, in which Irulan's presentation sets the story in motion, "suggests a 'literary' style to the narrative" that recreates "the chronicle feel" of the novel (Alexander 1993, 78). This is so, but in only 137 minutes of film Lynch had to compress much of the novel's plot so that it is hard to make sense of the sketchy characters and the obscure plot. Lynch also chose to greatly diminish the role of the women, the ecological programmes and the fascistic overtones of *Dune* to emphasize his own

obsessions: the conflicts between masculinity and femininity, the nature of corruption and violence, and the bewilderment of man trying to find his place in a strange world.

The epic scale, the messianic message, the conflict between good and evil of Herbert's novel survive in Lynch's film. The paradox is that Lynch's adaptation seemed too superficial to some, too dense to others; too little Herbert, too much Lynch or the other way round. As an adaptation it is possibly the best possible one given the length of Herbert's novel; as a film, it is remarkable because of the rare beauty of its Gothic atmosphere, years light from the clean look of Star Wars. Dune is not a failed adaptation. The symbiotic fusion between the interests of the original material and those of the interpreter work well, though Dune, the film, lacks more time to unfold its plot and a directors' cut. Dune was bound to fail on its release, yet it was also bound to form its own cult among Lynch's fans. It has glaring flaws that prevent it from reaching the status of masterpiece —but so has the novel. Actually, it could be argued that cults are built only around those texts (literary or filmic) with evident imperfections: some hate them because of their faults, others love them because they see these imperfections as a sign of the artist's Romantic exertions to reach perfection.

The Naked Lunch lacks story, plot, and continuity to the point that it is difficult to say whether it is a novel at all. Its twenty-three sections, apparently assembled at random by the editor, deal with a gallery of characters involved with drug addiction and also with sinister agencies controlling their bodies and minds. According to Burroughs, novels that follow logical sequences cannot reflect life, as "things don't happen in logical sequence and people don't think in logical sequence" (Burroughs 1974, 34). "I think", he adds, "it is possible to create multilevel events and characters that a reader could comprehend with his entire organic being" (34).

The Naked Lunch was first published in France by the Olympia Press in 1959, making Burroughs a writer much admired by experimental writers (Pastor 1988, 103). When the novel was published in 1962 by Grove Press in the USA it sold steadily, despite the fact that the American and the British critics were sharply divided as to its merits. Eventually, the novel generated a series of public outcries and was prosecuted in Los Angeles and by the state of Massachusetts in Boston under the accusation of obscenity. A number of literary authorities testified in favour of the book in the notorious Boston trial; Burroughs, however, refused to defend his novel in court, regarding the trial as a farce. Finally, following guidelines issued by the U.S. Supreme Court, the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled in 1966 that the book was not obscene. "The ruling on *Naked Lunch*", Ted Morgan writes, "in effect marked the end of literary censorship in the United States" (Morgan 1988, 347). Today, The *Naked Lunch* is both a cult book and a classic of modern American literature and the once offensive Burroughs is a respectable member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. As Daniel García Pastor remarks, Burroughs may be frustrated for not having been able to write a best-seller and make his work more accessible to the general public but "su influencia... ha alcanzado a un número limitado pero importante de escritores que se han sentido cautivados por su pensamiento, sus métodos literarios, su peculiar estilo o la fuerza expresiva de sus imágenes" (1988, 149).

David Cronenberg is among those influenced by Burroughs' books. In Scott Bukatman's view, both Burroughs and Cronenberg deal obsessively with "the invasion of the body, the loss of control [and] the transformation of self and Other" (1993, 78). The admiration is mutual to the extent that Burroughs told Cronenberg that he was "the only person who could do *Naked Lunch*" (Rodley 1992, 161). Always the last person to hamper with anybody's artistic freedom, Burroughs gave Cronenberg his blessings to do as he liked with *The Naked Lunch.* He described his screenplay with an image from his most successful film, *The Fly:* just as Seth Brundle is fused with a fly when he tries to teletransport himself, Cronenberg's adaptation is the 'monstrous', symbiotic fusion between Burroughs' literary work and his own. The result is an intriguing film, which is Burroughsian without quite being *The Naked Lunch.*

A faithful adaptation of Burroughs novel was out of the question because of its high cost and because, as Cronenberg said, "there would be no culture that could withstand that film" (Rodley 1992, 161). Instead, he turned to Burroughs himself, basing part of the script on Ted Morgan's biography of Burroughs, *Literary Outlaw* (1988). Morgan himself wrote that "what gives [*Naked Lunch*] credibility is that Burroughs is writing out of his own experience. He's been there ... Every page is strewn with autobiographical clues..." (352). Thus, Cronenberg incorporated into his film some of the events in Burroughs' life — especially the accidental killing of his wife and his stay in Tangiers with Paul and Jane Bowles— giving it a minimal plot and recognizable characters. Yet, he faced the additional problem of how to make a film about "the act of writing and creating something that is dangerous to you" (Rodley 1992, 162) avoiding the habitual pitfalls of other films about writers, namely, that "the act of writing is not very interesting cinematically" (162). The solution was making that process something external, expressed through the troubled relationship between the protagonist Bill Lee and his monstrous, talking typewriters.

The film had a discreet commercial career —quite far from the success of *The Fly*— but it secured Cronenberg a number of distinctions in Canada and the USA. However, not all audiences had the chance to see it: in Spain, for instance, it was never released and has only been seen on TV. It is difficult to say to what extent Cronenberg's adaptation has contributed to a renewal of the cult around William Burroughs or to that around himself. Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* is somewhat pedantic and inevitably dependent on the viewer's familiarity with Burroughs' novel. Both together form, though, a most attractive artistic tandem.

Symbiosis is the key concept to an understanding of the fusion of cult novels and the cult films they generate. The symbiosis begins with the complicity established between the texts and the readers who create the cult around it. Cult directors such as Lynch and Cronenberg understand better than mainstream directors the possibilities of the cult novel for a screen adaptation, but they are also more likely to impose their personal mark on them, whether they try to recreate the cult book faithfully or freely. Their work is part homage, part individualistic interpretation, which is the way in which most readers approach cult novels. Cronenberg and Lynch read their own anxieties into the novels they adapt and this is why they are bound to fail, for readers of cult novels do not tolerate interpretations that differ from their own. Yet by failing, and because of their daring, they also create cult texts, glorious failures such as the films *Dune* and *The Naked Lunch.*

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