



IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

Denis Villeneuve in Conversation

As Canadian filmmaker Denis Villeneuve welcomes audiences to his version of the planet Arrakis – the setting for his adaptation of Frank Herbert’s 1965 novel *Dune* (previously adapted for the screen by David Lynch in 1984) – he cements his reputation both as a director with a far-reaching vision of what cinema can be, and one with a true mastery of the craft.

Villeneuve has an intuitive understanding of how best to wield the tools of his trade – editing, cinematography, lighting, sound design – and, crucially, he surrounds himself with innovative craftspeople. His films fully immerse his audience in the story he’s telling. And that’s not just true of his more recent, bombastic science fiction, like *Dune* or, before it, *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) and *Arrival* (2016). It’s been evident right from his low-budget beginnings.

Villeneuve has always been fascinated with exploring the relationship between mankind and the environment, often portraying humans as aliens in their own world, and the craft choices he makes serve this juxtaposition of the familiar and the uncanny.

Consider his 1998 debut, *August 32nd on Earth*, which sees a pair of young French Canadian friends, Simone (Pascale Bussières) and Philippe (Alexis Martin), heading out on a road trip to the Utah salt flats to conceive a baby in secret. Working with cinematographer André Turpin – who would go on to shoot Villeneuve’s breakthrough film *Incendies* (2010) and become Xavier Dolan’s go-to DP – Villeneuve underscores this fish-out-of-water premise with evocative visuals. A high overhead shot sees the couple’s bright yellow car as a bug on the white sand, while elsewhere the pair are filmed in long-shot – two vulnerable people adrift in the vastness of the sun-bleached landscape. This particular framing, of tiny figures against expansive backgrounds, would become a recognisable Villeneuve motif.

Before these glorious desert shots, however, *August 32nd on Earth* opens with a claustrophobic nighttime car crash – the catalyst for Simone’s newfound desire to have a child. It’s unsettling from the off. Abrupt cuts from editor Sophie Leblond take in the flicker of rain in the car’s headlights, the green glow of Simone’s face contrasted with the pitch black interior of the car as she nods off behind the wheel.

And then, after the inevitable has happened, there’s an extreme close-up of her awakening upside down in her vehicle; she has literally been in suspended animation. Fighting her way out, Simone makes her way to the road, flags down a motorist and heads back to civilisation. In this establishing sequence, Villeneuve has, without dialogue, conveyed the fact that this is both the moment Simone’s life nearly ended and the moment it begins anew.

Villeneuve also uses inverted shots to great effect in *Polytechnique*, his 2009 dramatisation of the 1989 Montreal massacre that saw the murder of several female engineering students. (It was the director’s first film in almost 10 years, following 2000’s *Maelström*.)

Shot handheld and in black and white, the aesthetic is oppressive and foreboding and, in one pivotal sequence, cinematographer Pierre Gill pushes

the viewer into truly uncomfortable territory. A student named Jean-François (Sébastien Huberdeau) is driving to see his mother, racked with guilt for surviving the massacre when so many didn't. The camera follows his vehicle from above, pushing the angle past traditional limits until his car is both below and behind us. It's disorienting, sickening and hugely effective. The whole world feels turned on its axis, just as it does to the desperate Jean-François.

A year after *Polytechnique*, Villeneuve made *Incendies*, an adaptation of the play by Wajdi Mouawad. This was the film that put him on the international map. After premiering at Venice and winning several festival awards, it was nominated for both a BAFTA and an Academy Award.

A mesmerising opening sequence again says much without words. To the misleadingly gentle opening strains of Radiohead's 'You and Whose Army?', cinematographer André Turpin tracks slowly into a rundown room in the middle of a desert, where a group of unhappy boys are having their heads shaved by soldiers carrying guns. At the exact moment the song's much more propulsive chorus kicks in, editor Monique Dartonne cuts to a close-up of a young boy, staring directly at the camera as his shorn hair falls all around him.

The lingering shot and emotive marriage of edit and music make it immediately clear that he's a person of importance. Later, one of the film's main characters, French-Canadian woman Jeanne (Méïssa Désormeaux-Poulin), listens to Radiohead on her headphones as she and her sister take a pilgrimage to her late mother's Middle Eastern home – an indelible audio link between the narrative strands.

In *Sicario* (2015) – Villeneuve's third English-language film following *Prisoners* and *Enemy* (both 2013) – the lawless brutality of the US-Mexican border is at the heart of the film's audio and visual aesthetic. Cinematographer Roger Deakins shoots in twilight and takes in long shots of the unforgiving landscape. This is a literal no man's land of shadows and secrets, one in which idealistic FBI agent Kate (Emily Blunt) finds herself physically and morally adrift.

Kate is often alone in the frame and, in pivotal sequences – including a final confrontation with Benicio del Toro's aggressive agent Alejandro – is more brightly lit than her shady colleagues. Similarly, the score by Jóhann Jóhannsson (who also collaborated with Villeneuve on both *Prisoners* and *Arrival*) digs into the disorienting discomfort of this environment, with looping sounds, deep heavy bass and rumbling growls.

Following *Sicario*, Villeneuve took on his most ambitious film to date – contemplative sci-fi *Arrival*. His adaptation of Ted Chiang's *Story of Your Life* isn't a straightforward alien drama; instead, the focus is turned inwards, to Amy Adam's Louise, a linguist employed to try and communicate with the extraterrestrials who have landed on Earth. That burden of responsibility is the backbone of the narrative, and Villeneuve and his crew don't overwhelm it with genre bombast. The effects are restrained; Bradford Young's camerawork elegant and involving.

Composer Jóhannsson eschews the traditional overarching emotional music of the genre to take a more avant-garde approach, which knits seamlessly with the sound design to bring together the human and alien sides of the story. Human voices are absolutely key, from extended harmonies to more guttural throat singing.

The real power of *Arrival*, however, comes in its structure, which plays with audience expectations of cinematic narrative to present both language and time as entirely non-linear. Editor Joe Walker, a regular Villeneuve collaborator, began cutting the film from the shooting dailies, making sure that the story's

strands weave together as a cohesive whole. He then worked closely with the director in post to ensure the emotional and thematic structure of the screenplay remains intact and, importantly, doesn't reveal too much too soon. It's thanks to some deft choices from Walker that Louise's personal flashbacks, which are so central to the film, take on a powerful resonance that's not fully realised until the final, poignant moments.

With Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049*, we see all of these craft elements converge on a truly epic scale. Stunning cinematography from Roger Deakins and a sweeping score from Hans Zimmer – which, again, blends seamlessly with environmental sounds, such as the revving of motorcycle engines – underscore Villeneuve's vision of a vast urban future. Masterful establishing shots quickly set the scene of each environment, including a powerful opening sequence that moves from the vivid green of a human eye to the muted colours of the huge circular star farms to the sprawling city of LA. Human life has changed, it tells us, although not in a way we can't recognise.

What's particularly striking, however, is the film's use of colour to convey different ideas and emotions. This is something Villeneuve has employed in earlier work like *Enemy*, in which Jake Gyllenhaal's dual doppelgänger characters of Adam and Anthony are dressed and lit in lights and darks respectively, reflecting their opposing personalities. In *Blade Runner 2049*, Villeneuve goes further; together with Deakins and production designer Dennis Gassner he has shaped an entire landscape of shifting, blending colours, through light and environment rather than the more obvious costumes or props.

Think of those concrete greys of Los Angeles, a city shaped by climate change and population growth that now houses millions of citizens in close quarters and has the looming dark bulk of the LAPD at its centre. In contrast, the isolated, crumbling Las Vegas desert in which Deckard (Harrison Ford) has chosen to lose himself is marked out in dusty red hues. Another trademark painterly long shot takes in K (Ryan Gosling), a tiny figure in the middle of the desert, silhouetted against the vast orange-red landscape as he strikes out on his painful search for answers.

That quest is painted in shades of yellow – a deliberate nod to *The Wizard of Oz's* yellow brick road – which is deployed any time K receives enlightening information: the headquarters of replicant manufacturer the Wallace Corporation is lit in artificial sunlight; rippling lights cast a sickly yellow glow across the reuniting of Deckard and Rachael (Sean Young); K's discovery of a yellow flower on a barren patch of land leads him to make an unimaginable discovery. And white – the purest colour of all but the one most easily sullied – comes into play whenever K gets close to the truth of who he is, most notably during the climactic sequence which takes place in the snow.

Dune is the next chapter in the career of a director who has been shaping his creative vision for over two decades. The budgets may now be bigger, but Villeneuve's confidence and talent have been in evidence since he first stepped behind a camera. It's his inventive approach to the craft elements of filmmaking that have made the road to Arrakis such a rewarding journey.

Nikki Baughan, bfi.org.uk, 22 September 2021

DENIS VILLENEUVE

Born in Bécancour, Quebec, Canada, 1967

As Director

- 2021** **Dune** (USA) also Producer and Writer
2017 **Blade Runner 2049** (USA)
2016 **Arrival** (USA/Canada)
2015 **Sicario** (USA/Mexico/Hong Kong)
2013 **Enemy** (Canada/Spain/France)
2013 **Prisoners** (USA)
2011 **Etude empirique sur l'influence du son sur la persistance rétinienne** (Short, Canada) also Cinematographer, Editor and Writer
2011 **Rated R for Nudity** (Short, Canada) also Editor
2010 **Incendies** also Writer
2009 **Polytechnique** (Canada) also Writer
2008 **Next Floor** (Short, Canada)
2007 **Un cri au Bonheur** (Documentary, Canada)
2006 **120 Seconds to Get Elected** (Short, Canada) also Writer
2000 **Maelström** (Canada) also Writer
1998 **August 32nd on Earth (Un 32 août sur terre)** (Canada) also Writer
1996 **Cosmos** (segment: **Le technétium**) (Canada) also Writer
1994 **REW FFWD** (Short, Canada) also Writer
1994 **Daniel Bélanger: Ensorcelée** (Video, Canada) also Editor

IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

- Preview: Last Night in Soho**
Thu 21 Oct 17:50; 31 Oct 17:40 (+ Q&A with Edgar Wright)
Screen Epiphany: Adjoa Andoh introduces Mandabi
Sun 24 Oct 18:30
Mike Leigh in Conversation
Thu 28 Oct 20:40
Doctor Who: Galaxy 4 (animated)
Sun 7 Nov 12:00
Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI
Mon 8 Nov 18:10
Preview: Drive My Car (Doraibu mai kê)
Mon 15 Nov 19:40
Preview: The Hand of God (È stata la mano di Dio)
Thu 18 Nov 18:30
TV Preview: The Amazing Mr Blunden + Q&A with writer-director-actor Mark Gatiss and actor Tamsin Greig
Mon 29 Nov 18:15

REGULAR PROGRAMME

- BFI Flare: Marlon T Riggs: Tongues Untied + intro by programmer Rico Johnson-Sinclair**
Wed 20 Oct 20:30
Experimenta: Frantz Fanon: Black Skin White Mask + discussion
Thu 21 Oct 18:00
BFI Flare: Marlon T Riggs: Black Is... Black Ain't + intro by programmer Rico Johnson-Sinclair
Thu 21 Oct 20:40
Relaxed Screening: Summer of Soul (... Or, When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised)
Tue 26 Oct 18:00
BFI Blu-ray Launch: Short Sharp Shocks II + intro
Wed 27 Oct 18:10
Art in the Making: The Black Arts Movement on Film + discussion
Wed 27 Oct 20:40
Woman with a Movie Camera Preview: Anatomy of Wings + pre-recorded Q&A
Thu 28 Oct 18:15
Silent Cinema: Body and Soul + intro
Sun 31 Oct 14:20
20-22 Omega
Sun 31 Oct 14:30; Thu 4 Nov 18:10
Member Picks: Moonlight
Fri 5 Nov 18:10
African Odysseys: Black History Walks Presents: Cause for Concern: Equal Before the Law
Fri 5 Nov 18:30-21:30
African Odysseys: A Date with the Devil: Darcus Howe's Journey from Black Power to Broadcasting
Sat 6 Nov 12:00-18:00
African Odysseys: Travels with my Camera: Is This My Country? + White Tribe
Tue 9 Nov 18:10
African Odysseys: Trouble in Paradise + Darcus Howe: Son of Mine
Sun 14 Nov 15:30
Terror Vision: Tales from the Hood
Thu 25 Nov 20:40

- Missing Believed Wiped Session 1: The London Palladium Show**
Sat 27 Nov 13:00
Missing Believed Wiped Session 2: Introducing 'The Precious Things': Holiday Startime
Sat 27 Nov 15:50
Seniors' Free Matinee, in partnership with African Odysseys: Once Upon a Time... When We Were Colored + intro
Mon 29 Nov 14:00
Relaxed Screening: Petite Maman
Tue 30 Nov 18:15

EDGAR WRIGHT'S LONDON AFTER DARK

- Passport to Shame (AKA Room 43)**
Mon 18 Oct 20:50; Sat 13 Nov 18:10
Peeping Tom
Tue 19 Oct 20:30; Sat 6 Nov 18:20
Beat Girl
Fri 22 Oct 20:40; Sun 31 Oct 16:20
West End Jungle + Look at Life: Market Place + Look at Life: Rising to High Office
Sat 23 Oct 20:40; Sat 20 Nov 14:40
The Pleasure Girls + Look at Life: Members Only
Mon 25 Oct 20:50; Mon 29 Nov 18:20
Frenzy
Wed 27 Oct 20:45; Fri 19 Nov 18:30
Darling
Thu 28 Oct 20:30; Sat 20 Nov 13:20
Bitter Harvest + Look at Life: Coffee Bar
Fri 29 Oct 18:00; Tue 9 Nov 20:45
The Small World of Sammy Lee + Look at Life: In Gear
Sat 30 Oct 20:30; Sat 6 Nov 20:45; Tue 23 Nov 14:30
Primitive London + Look at Life: Goodbye Piccadilly
Mon 1 Nov 20:50; Thu 25 Nov 20:50

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