

THE ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND FILM LANGUAGE OF DENIS VILLENEUVE’S FILMS*

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Abstract

This research article aims to: 1) examine the narrative structure of Denis Villeneuve’s mature science-fiction films; 2) analyze the key features of film language that shape viewers’ cognition and emotion; and 3) explain how narrative design and audiovisual strategies interact to produce a consistent authorial signature across different texts. This study conducts a qualitative research study using textual analysis. The data are drawn from four films directed by Denis Villeneuve between 2016 and 2024: Arrival (2016), Blade Runner 2049 (2017), Dune (2021), and Dune: Part Two (2024). The analysis is guided by a two-part instrument focusing on narrative elements (character trajectories, conflict structure, themes, and narrative complexity) and film language (cinematography, color systems, sound design, and editing rhythm).

The research results found that:

(1) Villeneuve’s narratives repeatedly organize protagonists around identity disruption and ethical pressure, using layered conflicts that connect institutional power, ecological threat, and intimate relationships.

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(2) His film language is characterized by restrained cinematography, low-saturation palettes, atmosphere-driven soundscapes, and patient editing, which collectively amplify uncertainty and moral tension rather than relying on spectacle alone.

(3) Across the four films, narrative structure and film language function as mutually reinforcing systems, producing a recognizable pattern of “controlled complexity” that keeps large-scale world-building emotionally legible through intimate stakes.

Keywords: Denis Villeneuve’s Films, Narrative structure, Film language

Introduction

Film’s mainstream storytelling has long been shaped by the classical Hollywood ideal of clear causality, stable character functions, and stylistic transparency. Even as contemporary production has diversified, this tradition still underpins spectators’ expectations of narrative coherence and legible audiovisual guidance. In modern genre films, the tension between established narrative norms and individualized authorial signatures has become especially visible, as directors are increasingly required to balance market readability with stylistic distinction. Bordwell (2006) argues that modern film has not simply abandoned classical storytelling. Instead, contemporary films frequently reshape classical narrative and stylistic principles in response to changing industrial conditions and new aesthetic demands.

Seen against this backdrop, Denis Villeneuve offers a compelling case of how auteur identity can remain visible within the pressures of mainstream genre production. His progression from Canadian film to large-scale English-language filmmaking has resulted in a distinctive body of work—*Prisoners*, *Sicario*, *Arrival*, *Blade Runner 2049*, and *Dune* among others. Despite differences in genre and production scale, these films repeatedly return to characters navigating

uncertainty while pursuing truth, identity, or moral orientation. The thematic continuity is reinforced by a controlled audiovisual approach. Across Villeneuve's filmography, restrained framing, controlled pacing, and meticulously shaped soundscapes operate as narrative drivers rather than decorative flourishes, sustaining suspense and sharpening psychological pressure. Although existing research has begun to outline the main stages of his development and the stylistic recalibrations that accompanied his rise within large-scale science-fiction films (Ransom, 2020), the deeper structural interplay between his storytelling strategies and his audiovisual choices has yet to be examined in a fully integrated way.

Much of the existing literature either concentrates on single-text interpretations or extracts individual stylistic features—most notably spatial composition and world-building—without showing how these choices repeatedly structure meaning across multiple films. As a result, a central question persists: by what mechanisms does Villeneuve preserve a coherent authorial signature while traversing crime thrillers, philosophical science fiction, and franchise-scale spectacle? To address this issue, this study investigates the reciprocal relationship between narrative structure and film language in Villeneuve's cinema, with particular attention to how restrained aesthetics, spatial organization, and thematic inquiry collectively remodel contemporary genre storytelling.

Objectives

1. To examine the narrative structure of Denis Villeneuve's mature films.
2. To explore the film language of Denis Villeneuve's films.

Literature Review

A common finding in recent studies of Denis Villeneuve is that his stories are based on doubt, which is carefully crafted instead of happening by chance.

In *Enemy*, the discussion sees uncertainty as a way to destabilize identity and keep interpretations open. This puts narrative confusion as a deliberate strategy of the genre (Kreitler, 2022). *Incendies* is studied as a different kind of urge, focusing on how the film's speed comes from the gradual revealing of hidden histories, with each new piece of information adding to the moral weight of remembering (McLaughlin, 2024). Arrival studies show that this pattern extends into the realm of time. They say that circularity in time is not only a creative form but also a way of changing how the audience thinks so that emotional realization becomes the most important story event in the film (Gokhale et al., 2023). When read together, these reports show that Villeneuve's stories always favor investigation, delay, and moral unease over quick closure.

Another group of works moves from story logic to film language and says that Villeneuve's identity as an author is not separate from his strict spatial style. Researchers say that his settings often work as expressive systems that control power and affect psychological experience, not just as scenic backdrops (Chen, 2024). This is most clear to see in his science fiction movies. The use of big buildings, minimalism, and careful lighting creates a heavy mood of existentialism. Here, the sense of restraint is not just for looks; it becomes an affective method that raises stress through silence, scale, and the careful distribution of visual emphasis (Wang, 2024). From this point of view, Villeneuve's world-building is a story-telling act on its own, because the setting keeps conveying issues of rank, weakness, and danger before characters express these ideas through conversation.

Another academic work looks at Villeneuve's later career through how his work has been adapted and interpreted culturally, with *Dune* being the most important work studied. Comparative studies of Herbert's writing and Villeneuve's movies say that the director changes the story world in order to explore ideology, power, and identity. The director tries to change or confuse the exoticist ideas that have been passed down while keeping the epic structure of the original

material (Dridi, 2022). Other research focuses on tonal gravity, saying that the films practiced sound and sight methods make a serious, almost holy mood that makes the story's political and moral seriousness stronger (Tembo, 2022). Reading about characters, especially women in *Dune*, shows how ideological issues are part of story and visual order. This connects how people see movies and TV shows to current reception debates (Przytuła, 2024). When looked at as a whole, these studies give us a broader view of who Villeneuve really is as an author by revealing the ways that story structure, limited use of style elements, and choices made for adaptations work together to create meaning in different texts and situations.

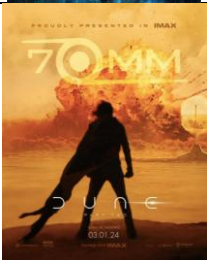
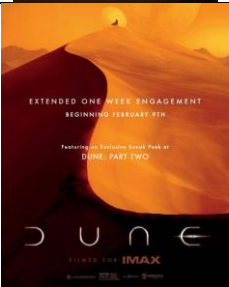
Methodology

This study investigates how Denis Villeneuve's authorial signature is shaped by the interaction between narrative structure and film language. It adopts a qualitative design and uses textual analysis.

1. Population and Sample

Villeneuve has directed 18 movies in his career. Purposive selection was used in this study to identify award-winning works published between 2016 and 2024, guaranteeing that the analysis stayed on topic and kept pace with the expansion of contemporary genres. *Arrival* (2016), *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), *Dune* (2021), and *Dune: Part Two* (2024) were chosen as representative texts. These titles together show that Villeneuve has reached a mature stage in English-language cinema and has become a well-known sci-fi author (Table 1).

Table 1 Selected Films (2016–2024)

Film Title	Year	Film Poster	Selection Rationale
Arrival	2016		International recognition for sound, genre prestige, and award reception.
Blade Runner 2049	2017		Noted for cinematography, art direction, and visual effects acclaim.
Dune	2021		Major awards for cinematography, editing, sound, score, and visual effects.
Dune: Part Two	2024		Widely listed among top films of 2024 and noted in major award contexts.

2. Research Instrument

This study uses a simple two-part analysis guide to examine Villeneuve's films from his mature period. The first part looks at narrative structure, such as how the story is arranged, what roles the characters play, how conflicts are built, how the setting creates pressure, and what themes the films focus on. The

second part looks at film language, including camera work, sound, color use, space and composition, and editing pace. Instead of treating these audiovisual elements as just style or decoration, this guide views them as tools that directly shape how the story works. This makes it easier to compare the four films using the same set of observations.

3. Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study were gathered through repeated viewing of the four films via major streaming services (Tencent Video, iQIYI, Bilibili, and Migu Video). While watching, I kept notes using the two-part guide. I paid special attention to moments where the story takes a turn, where the main characters' attitudes or choices shift, and where sound or visuals clearly carry important meaning.

After the viewing stage, the analysis was done in two linked parts. First, I compared the narrative structures across the films to see what they share. Such as searching for truth, questioning identity, facing moral uncertainty, and dealing with conflicts. Second, I reviewed the films' audiovisual choices to see how these patterns are strengthened through filmmaking techniques, especially cinematography, sound design, color control, spatial layout, and editing tempo.

By combining these two angles, the study aims to show how Villeneuve's story construction and his controlled, restrained style work together and form a consistent approach across his mature science-fiction films.

4. Conceptual Framework

This study proposes an integrated conceptual framework to explain how Denis Villeneuve's authorial identity is produced through the interdependence of narrative structure and film language in his mature science-fiction cycle. Narrative structure is operationalized through character trajectories, multi-level conflict, thematic anchoring, and degrees of temporal or investigative complexity. Film language is conceptualized as a set of audiovisual mechanisms—cinematography, color systems, sound design, and editing rhythm—that do not

merely illustrate story events but actively regulate viewer cognition and emotion. The framework assumes a reciprocal relationship: narrative design provides the interpretive architecture for meaning, while film language supplies the sensory and spatial conditions that intensify uncertainty, ethical tension, and intimacy. The anticipated outcome is “controlled complexity,” a recognizable cross-film pattern that allows large-scale world-building to remain emotionally legible through intimate stakes (Figure 1).

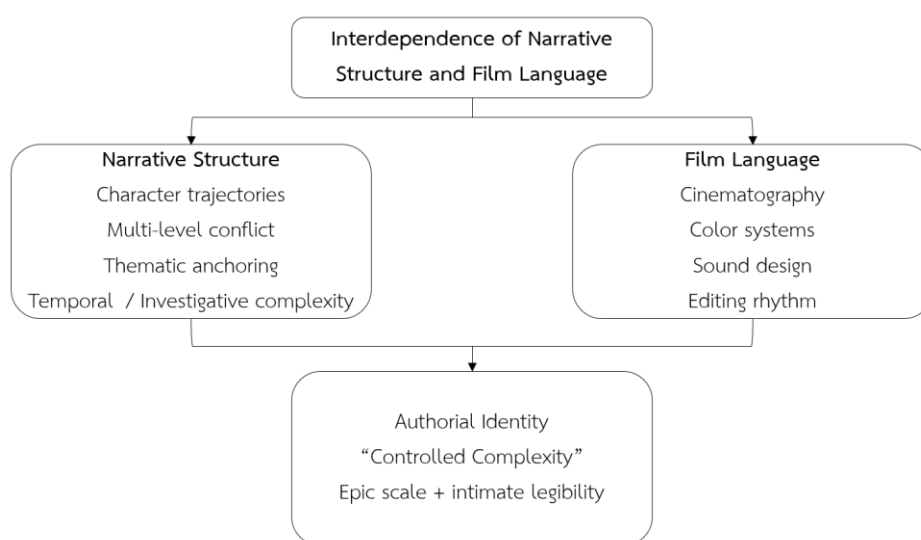


Figure 1 Theoretical model (Source: Constructed by the researcher)

Results

This study analyzed the narrative structure and film style of Denis Villeneuve’s *Dune*, *Dune: Part Two*, *Arrival*, and *Blade Runner 2049*. The results show clear patterns shared across the four films in character design, conflict structure, thematic concerns, narrative shape, and audiovisual choices. Taken together, these repeated features point to a consistent authorial method that combines large-scale science-fiction worlds with intimate, character-driven emotion and relationships.

1. Narrative Structure in Denis Villeneuve's Films

1.1 Character trajectories and internal tension

Across *Arrival*, *Blade Runner 2049*, *Dune*, and *Dune: Part Two*, the analysis finds a consistent approach to building protagonists and their internal tensions. Villeneuve repeatedly positions protagonists at the intersection of private vulnerability and large-scale political or civilizational pressure. Louise exists between professional rationality and intimate grief; K moves from procedural obedience to existential doubt; Paul's coming-of-age is inseparable from dynastic collapse, messianic projection, and the moral hazard of leadership.

Rather than relying on overt exposition, these arcs are advanced through dilemma-driven growth. The protagonist's interior conflict is not a decorative psychological layer but the engine of plot progression. The turning points in each film coincide with moments when a character's self-understanding is destabilized: Louise realizes the heptapod language alters temporality; K confronts the artificiality of memory; Paul begins to perceive the cost of becoming a symbolic savior. In this structure, identity is treated as a contested space shaped by institutions, ideology, and survival rather than as a stable personal essence.

1.2 Conflict as multi-level system

A second narrative outcome is the consistent use of layered conflict. Each film deploys external conflict (political rivalry, institutional control, environmental hostility, or interspecies uncertainty) alongside internal conflict (identity crisis, ethical hesitation, emotional rupture). These dimensions are not separated; they intensify one another. In *Dune* and *Dune 2*, the desert is not just a backdrop, but also a source of moral crisis in the competition for resources. The Harkonnen–Atreides struggle is driven by the political economy of spice, yet the conflict also reshapes Paul's consciousness and the Fremen's cultural destiny. The films thus avoid a purely heroic revenge narrative; they frame

leadership as both necessity and threat. In *Arrival*, the worldwide political reaction to the heptapods works like a public-scale echo of Louise's personal struggle with time. The threat that first contact could be turned into a military confrontation raises the cost of interpretation and highlights how dangerous it is to misunderstand the unfamiliar. In *Blade Runner 2049*, rigid social order and unresolved questions of technological ethics form a tight frame around K's investigation, so that looking for the truth becomes an act that could destabilize the entire system. Across these cases, Villeneuve seems to design conflict as a network rather than a single barrier, shaping the boundaries of understanding, emotion, and choice.

1.3 Themes anchored in intimacy

This narrative approach leads to a clear thematic balance between vast worlds and close, personal emotion. Again and again, family-like relationships—by blood, by choice, or even by artificial design—become emotional anchors that make the stories readable and moving even when the stakes are enormous.

Louise's bond with her future child turns time into an ethical question about love and an acceptance of loss. K's relationship with Joi presents manufactured intimacy as a space where human value is questioned rather than guaranteed by origin. Paul's closeness to Jessica and his uneven relationship with Chani make clear the tension between the demands of power and the needs of the heart. In this way, "family" is more than a feeling in these films; it becomes a lens for exploring sacrifice, agency, and the personal costs that come with myth and power.

1.4 Structural preference: controlled complexity

Finally, the four films show a consistent preference for "controlled complexity." *Arrival* uses a non-linear structure that makes temporality part of the film's meaning, not merely its form. *Blade Runner 2049* favors investigative fragmentation, distributing clues across spaces, memories, and institutional encounters. *Dune* and *Dune: Part Two* lean toward a more linear heroic trajectory

but embed parallel power lines and prophetic foreshadowing that complicate the apparent simplicity of revenge or liberation.

Across the corpus, the stories don't hand everything to the viewer. Instead, meaning emerges through time changes, delayed explanations, and ideological stakes that gradually come into view. This strategy reinforces Villeneuve's broader interest in uncertainty as a condition of modern subjectivity.

2. Film Language

2.1 Cinematography as narrative ethic

The visual analysis suggests that Villeneuve uses cinematography to turn story tension into pressure you can see in space and framing. He often relies on massive architectural lines, heavy empty space, and the contrast between imposing environments and fragile human bodies. This is most obvious in *Dune* and *Dune: Part Two*, where people are repeatedly swallowed by deserts, machines, and ritual spaces. The point isn't just visual grandeur; the images make power feel like something built into the world itself, larger than any single character.

In *Arrival*, the camera is more restrained and patient, keeping a measured distance that creates a reflective mood. The slow pace and clean frames give room for language, silence, and uncertainty to carry real dramatic weight. In *Blade Runner 2049*, the visual design leans toward containment and observation: windows, corridors, glass surfaces, and surveillance-like angles repeatedly place K inside systems that watch and limit him. Across all four films, Villeneuve's camera isn't simply documenting events—it helps express a clear perspective on human smallness, institutional force, and a quiet sense of existential isolation.

2.2 Color systems linked to world-order

The color findings suggest a coherent stylistic philosophy built on low saturation and strategic contrast. Villeneuve uses restrained palettes to sustain seriousness and to avoid the sensory excess typical of mainstream science fiction.

Dune and Dune: Part Two establish a clear desert color identity, led by sand and stone hues, with subtle shifts that help mark political territories, cultural groups, and changing levels of danger. Arrival leans on quiet, natural tones that soften the shock of first contact and keep the film's emotional and philosophical focus grounded in human experience. Blade Runner 2049, by contrast, builds its world on cold industrial colors, then breaks that chill with scattered pockets of warmth or intensity that hint at memory, desire, or crucial information.

In this approach, color operates as narrative indexing: it guides attention toward power centers, ideological climates, and emotional scarcity. The palette becomes a visual grammar for distinguishing environments of control from spaces of fragile tenderness.

2.3 Sound design as atmosphere and cognition

Sound emerges as a central tool for building “felt worlds.” The four films deploy environmental sound not only for realism but to shape expectation and psychological tempo.

In Dune and Dune: Part Two, the desert is sonically dense; wind, sand movement, and the anticipatory force of sandworm-related textures create an acoustic ecology that makes the environment a constant adversary. The score tends toward ritualistic grandeur, reinforcing the mythic dimension of political conflict.

Arrival uses a quiet, controlled soundscape that draws attention to silence, distance, and uncertainty. Instead of relying on familiar action signals, the film often slows the auditory rhythm into something reflective, matching its focus on interpretation and time. By contrast, Blade Runner 2049 foregrounds mechanical drones, heavy urban ambience, and layered electronic textures, building a soundscape that is both futuristic and emotionally bleak. In both films, sound is not just atmosphere; it helps the audience feel the world's inner temperature, not only see its surface.

2.4 Editing rhythms and emotional calibration

Across the four films, the editing tends to be patient and measured. When the pace does speed up, it is usually tied to major psychological turns or political breaking points. Rather than pushing nonstop intensity, Villeneuve builds tension slowly and releases it with care.

In *Arrival*, the editing strengthens the film's temporal ambiguity by weaving memory-like fragments into the present, until the audience understands that these "flashbacks" are actually scenes from the future. In *Blade Runner 2049*, the investigative storyline is held together through calm, steady transitions that leave room for uncertainty and allow the audience to follow K's growing doubt. *Dune* and *Dune: Part Two* move between slow, detail-heavy world-building and sudden bursts of action, using these shifts to show the point where belief, power, and ideology turn into irreversible decisions. This editing logic reinforces a broader stylistic identity: emotion is earned through duration, not manufactured through speed.

This study extends current Villeneuve scholarship by demonstrating that narrative structure and film language operate as mutually reinforcing systems rather than parallel features. Across *Arrival*, *Blade Runner 2049*, *Dune*, and *Dune: Part Two*, the findings indicate a stable authorial logic: protagonists are positioned within layered conflicts where institutional power, ecological pressure, or ideological expectation intensify inner rupture. This consistency suggests that Villeneuve's mature-phase science fiction is less defined by genre variation than by a repeatable method of staging uncertainty as both a narrative engine and an affective experience.

The results partially align with Mamula's argument that *Arrival* foregrounds language and multilingual encounter as a central cinematic problem. Our analysis supports this emphasis by showing how restraint in framing, pacing, and sound design constructs interpretation itself as the primary dramatic action

(Mamula, 2018). However, our cross-film comparison also indicates an important extension beyond Mamula's single-film focus: the epistemic delay he identifies in *Arrival* reappears in different conceptual forms in *Blade Runner 2049* (memory as contested evidence) and *Dune/Dune: Part Two* (prophecy as political technology). In this sense, what appears to be an *Arrival*-specific concern becomes part of a broader authorial pattern of "controlled complexity," where knowledge is never neutral but structurally entangled with power.

Similarly, our findings echo production-facing interpretations of *Dune* that highlight the film's solemn world-building and the expressive role of design and atmosphere. The analysis confirms that monumental spatial composition and disciplined color systems are not merely aesthetic achievements but narrative mechanics that encode hierarchy, vulnerability, and ideological scale (Lapointe, 2021). Yet an inconsistency also emerges at the level of emphasis: where celebratory accounts may foreground visual grandeur, our results stress how restraint—especially in editing rhythm and compositional negative space—functions as an ethical stance that complicates heroic readability. This balance of continuity and tension helps clarify how Villeneuve sustains auteur identity while negotiating the demands of high-budget franchise cinema.

Discussion

The results of research objective 1 found that Denis Villeneuve's films consistently employ a narrative structure characterized by identity disruption, layered conflict, intimate thematic anchoring, and controlled narrative complexity. This is because Villeneuve constructs protagonists who navigate uncertainty across personal, political, and civilizational levels, allowing narrative meaning to emerge gradually through delayed revelation and moral ambiguity. This aligns with the concepts, theories, and research of Bordwell's (2006) argument that contemporary cinema reconfigures classical narrative structures

rather than abandoning them, as well as Kreitler's (2022) and Gokhale et al.'s (2023) findings that Villeneuve uses narrative uncertainty, temporal complexity, and epistemic delay as deliberate storytelling strategies. The present study extends these insights by demonstrating that such narrative devices function systematically across multiple films, forming a repeatable authorial pattern rather than isolated stylistic experiments.

The results of research objective 2 found that Villeneuve's film language is defined by restrained cinematography, controlled color systems, atmosphere-driven sound design, and slow-paced editing rhythms that intensify psychological tension and ethical gravity. This is because Villeneuve's audiovisual choices are not decorative but serve as narrative mechanisms that structure viewers' perception of power, vulnerability, and existential uncertainty. This aligns with the concepts, theories, and research of Chen (2024) and Wang (2024), who emphasize spatial design, lighting, and visual restraint as expressive systems that regulate affect and meaning in Villeneuve's cinema. Additionally, Tembo's (2022) discussion of tonal gravity and solemn audiovisual design in *Dune* supports the present findings that audiovisual restraint functions as an ethical and ideological framing device rather than mere spectacle production.

The results of research objective 3 found that narrative structure and film language operate as mutually reinforcing systems that generate a coherent authorial signature described as "controlled complexity." This is because narrative architecture provides interpretive structure while film language shapes emotional and cognitive engagement, allowing large-scale science-fiction worlds to remain emotionally legible through intimate character stakes. This aligns with the concepts, theories, and research of auteur theory and contemporary genre authorship studies, which argue that authorial identity emerges through repeatable stylistic and narrative patterns within industrial constraints. It also resonates with Dridi's (2022) adaptation analysis of *Dune*, which suggests that

Villeneuve reshapes epic story worlds to explore ideology and identity while maintaining narrative accessibility. The present study contributes a conceptual framework that integrates narrative and audiovisual dimensions, offering a systematic model for understanding how auteur identity is constructed in contemporary franchise-driven cinema.

Recommendation

1. General recommendations

Future studies and teaching-oriented applications can treat Villeneuve's mature science-fiction cycle as a model for how auteur consistency can coexist with industrial genre constraints. Researchers may adopt the two-part instrument used here—narrative architecture plus film language—as a reusable framework for comparative auteur analysis, especially for directors working within franchised or legacy IP. For classroom practice, curated sequence packages (e.g., one scene per film focusing on identity rupture, spatial pressure, and sound restraint) can help students link stylistic choices to narrative function. Finally, journals may benefit from encouraging cross-film designs that move beyond single-text readings to strengthen claims about authorial patterns.

2. Recommendations for further research

Subsequent research could expand the sample to include Villeneuve's non-sci-fi films (*Prisoners*, *Sicario*, *Enemy*, *Incendies*) to test whether “controlled complexity” and intimate-scale ethical tension remain stable across genres. A second direction is reception-based work comparing audience interpretations across cultural contexts, particularly regarding messianism, colonial discourse, and gender positioning in *Dune: Part Two*. Methodologically, mixed approaches combining close textual analysis with computational style measures (shot length distribution, color variance, sound density) may offer more replicable evidence

of stylistic coherence. Comparative studies with peers like Nolan or Garland could also clarify what is distinctively Villeneuve rather than broadly contemporary.

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