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Project 2

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The Bene Gesserit’s Control

What does it mean to be controlled or to have control over someone else? Throughout science fiction, this is a recurring theme that is used often, particularly with mind control, a reliance on drugs and the use of religion to control others actions. (Westfahl 187) While reading Frank Herbert’s ‘*Dune*’ we see many groups struggling for power within the Imperium, which is comprised of a feudal system of government. One of the more influential groups are the Bene Gesserit, an order of women whose sole purpose is to work behind the scenes among the different houses of the empire towards one goal, the creation of the Kwisatz Haderach who would be the male equivalent to a Bene Gesserit. To obtain their goal, they serve the empire, acting as advisors to the different houses among this system of government and even to the emperor himself. The main currency of this universe is Spice which is also used by the Bene Gesserit to initiate a sister into the order. This group of women even use religion to advance their goals. The purpose of this paper will be to explore how these women use their abilities to control and influence others and to further explore this theme of control.

In this universe, “He who controls the Spice, controls the universe!” (Dune 1984) This line by Baron Harkonnen explains the main drive of most individuals within this society. The family that controls the Spice production on Arrakis has a large influence on what happens among the government. The spice, or mélange is a life altering chemical, which can extend life for many, as well as gives the Guild Navigators the ability for prescience, which allows them to chart pathways through space to move instantly over large areas of space. For the Bene Gesserit, it is used in many of their “rituals” such as the Spice Agony, in which a sister consumes unprocessed spice which allows them to share the memory from a Reverend Mother, unlocking what is called The Other Memory, which is all of the wisdom and knowledge of past Reverend Mothers. Before a sister can become a fully-fledged Reverend Mother, she must go through vigorous training. They are taught in the ways of a courtesan, as well as one of their most powerful tools, The Voice. In the book, “Terminology of the Imperium,” Herbert describes The Voice as “that combined training originated by the Bene Gesserit which permits an adept to control others.” (540) There are however those who are immune to the Voice, or develop an immunity over time, so it is not an ultimate power. We see an example of this when Reverend Mohiam commanded Paul to come to her early on in the original novel. Due to training by his mother, he was able to recognize the control being placed upon him, but was still unable to fight it. Author Timothy O’Reilly found that

“Through the Bene Gesserit, Herbert analyzes the role of the unconscious in human affairs and the potential for its manipulation… The Bene Gesserit command over the individual unconscious finds its acuteness expression in the power of the Voice. (Frank Herbert 46)

This absolute control is a comment on being powerless to those who hold power over us. As science fiction is often an escape from the real world, it is easy for a reader to empathize with being controlled by someone with a voice; it could easily be our boss, our teacher, etc. It is interesting to see that this book was written in 1965, which was a time in which the feminist movement was very strong. A counter argument against this was made by Kathy Gower who found that the women of the story were secondary characters who were considered witches, and their ultimate goal was to bring a male into their sect. (Anderson 98) But to counteract her point, it is a male in which they will have dominion over.

In a paper by Paul Q. Kucera entitled “Listening to Ourselves: Herbert’s Dune, “the Voice” and performing the Absolute”, Mr. Kucera brings up an interesting point concerning the use of “The Voice” as a tool used among the many politics of Dune. He “investigated the role of “The Voice” as a trope for these matters of politics and the problems of absolutes, and for our experience of them.” (233) The person to which this power is being used upon is ultimately subject to the whims of the caster. At this point, the victim is helpless and can no longer be held accountable for their actions. In this way, the victim becomes programmed to do as they’re told. There is a dependence between the user and listener. The control is so strong that the victim acts out the commands of the speaker, thus becoming a physical manifestation of that persons will. This can also be compared to the programmed machine in Bradbury’s “There will come a soft rain.” A person who has been placed under the influence of the voice acts in a similar way to that of the computer in the house. They will act out the commands until they have been achieved, even if it leads to their ultimate doom. After Paul fully awakens his powers, he is told that there is a keyword “implanted by the old pain-pleasure method” that was conditioned into Feyd-Rauthu’s mind that would “render his muscles flaccid.” (Herbert 481) The level of conditioning that is planned far in advance is just another example of how far they are willing to go to control others.

Throughout history, we’ve seen how many leaders have used religion to control the masses. The religions and many of the titles used in Dune are often Middle Eastern in origin. It is interesting to note, that many Middle Eastern governments are religious in nature. The Bene Gesserit follow a teaching called the Missionaria Protectiva which was a program that involved spreading seeds of legends and religions to new planets and young societies. This was done so that when needed, they could exploit these ideas for their own purpose, and could use those who followed these teaching for protection. When Paul and his mother Jessica escaped into the desert of Arrakis, Jessica was able to use the legend of Maudi to gain the trust of the Fremen which ultimately led to Paul’s rise to power. During the Roman Empire, Constantine used Christianity to his advantage, and by converting to Christianity, he became the first political leader to have an effect in the religious spectrum. (Eadie 88) By using Christianity, he was able to solidify his hold on power. Throughout the series, the Orange Catholic Bible is referred to often, it being a bible that is the culmination of the different types of major past religions, including Christianity and Buddhism.

In “Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep” by Phillip K. Dick, the religion of Mercerism is used as a tool to control the remaining people on earth. (Dick) Following the teachings of Mercer is a way to have people get along with each other and respect each other. It kept people in line, similarly to when Religion is introduced in “The Machine Stops.” It is often used as a means to exert control over a population that may be in the midst of becoming unruly. In sociology, Control theory is the view that people refrain from deviant behavior because diverse factors control their impulses to break social norms. Weber found that religion played a key role in social development. In the universe created by Frank Herbert, many people are exploited by their beliefs, a strong case for this being Jessica using the legend to control the Fremen. In the sequel novel, Dune Messiah, it shows how power corrupts, and a small faction of the Fremen including one of Paul’s closest advisors, begin to lose faith in their “messiah” even conspiring to kill him. This is an excellent example of how the over use of control can lead to a dystopian society. Paul’s reign as emperor lead to a peace around the universe, but only for a short while.

Throughout the series, one of the major factors that leads to a control of power is the addiction to spice and the hoarding of it for power. Spice, or mélange as it’s referred to by some, is a byproduct of the sandworms of Dune (Arrakis). By ingesting spice, some are able to experience prescience, or visions of the past, present and future. For the Bene Gesserit Reverend Mothers, or their Fremen counterparts, the Sayyinda, they are able to access their other memory, or the memories of past Reverend Mothers. For the Fremen, the Sayyinda act as spiritual advisor to the Naib leader. They are also able to create the water of life, which is a spice concoction similar to the spice agony used by the Bene Gesserit. In the Amazonian rainforest, ayahuasca is used by shamans to communicate with the spirit world, heal the ill and use prescience to help to solve problems that the tribe is dealing with. (Grazier 3) It is easy to see a comparison to the religious leaders in this series.

The spice itself is consumed by billions of the more affluent citizens of the Imperium, ingesting it in their food, and drink. It acts as a psychostimulant, and was often used as a recreational drug. Many who consumed it became dependent on it, with those who “abuse” it having their eyes glow blue. So it is easy to see how controlling the distribution of this substance can lead to a major influence in power. In recreational use, it acts as a sort of hallucinogen, similar to lysergic acid diethylamide or LSD. It also has its downside. Too much reliance on the drug puts you under the control of those who control its distribution. After Leto II becomes the god emperor, he hoards all spice production, causing all other factions to almost have to beg for it. The once mighty Bene Gesserit, are forced to make alliances with others.

The reliance on drugs is something that is used often in science fiction. At the time of Dune’s writing, the drug counter culture in America was on the rise. Another famous author of the time, Phillip K. Dick, often used drugs in his writings to actually remove the control from his characters. In his 1977 novel ‘*A Scanner Darkly’*, it really delves into the effects of drugs on people. The new drug, Substance D, has reality altering effects on the user, and eventually leads to what is referred to as a “Slow Death.” (Dick) As the book comes to a close, we see the main character is in a state of mental retardation due to the addiction, and is told that his religion is no longer his, in reference to the drug. In both cases, it is found that these drugs are used to control others.

The Dune Chronicles is a very expansive universe. New books are still being created by Brian, Frank Herbert’s son, even today. The further a reader delves into this universe, the more one can see the theme of control that is strewn throughout the books. The sisterhood of the Bene Gesserit use many subtle ways to hold power over others. By use of their *Missionaria Protectiva* they seed worlds with the knowledge that can later be used to exploit that society for their own purpose. One of their most powerful tools, the Voice, can control the minds of their targets. The use of spice and the distribution of it allows the family controlling it to hold sway over others. It should be easy to see now how Herbert created a world in which control was a major goal of all who wished for power. This theme is one seen quite often in many works of science fiction, and is one that can be applied to our everyday lives.

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