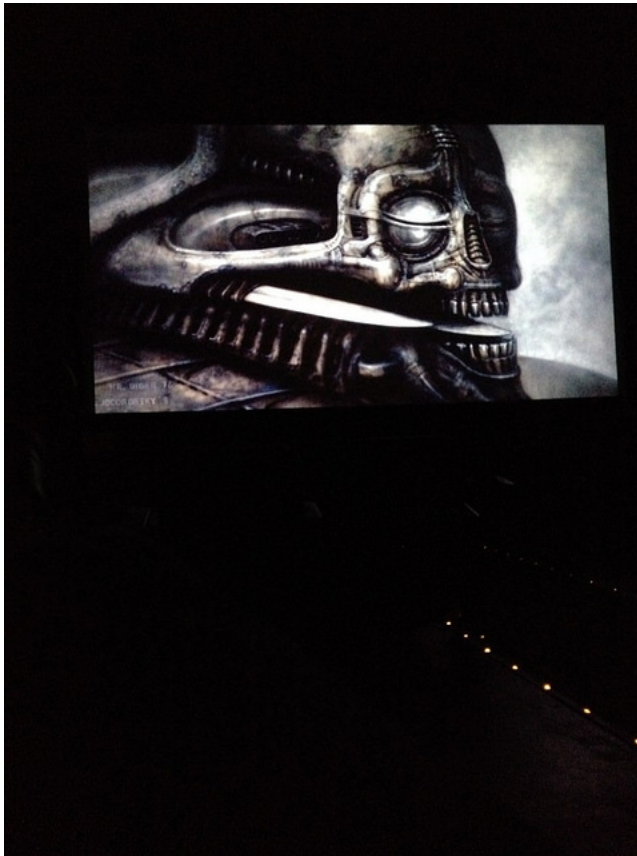


FILM ◊ LITERATURE ◊ OPINION ◊ SCI.FI/FANTASY

FANTASTIC FAILURES IN JODOROWSKY'S DUNE

written by *Laura Vena* April 29, 2014



The Persistent Dreams of Mom and Alejandro Jodorowsky

“And one voice, with sublime disregard for the situation, read poetry aloud in the fiery study, until all the film spools burned, until all the wires withered and circuits cracked.”
— Ray Bradbury, “August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains”

The documentary film, *Jodorowsky's Dune* about Alejandro Jodorowsky's unrealized adaptation of Frank Herbert's sci-fi classic opens with an epigraph quoting Viktor E. Frankl: “What is to give light must endure burning.” And so it is with the exquisitely luminous residue that constitutes the fabulous remains of the never made film that are autopsied here. The documentary chronicles the two-year long dream in which the Chilean-French avant-garde theatre artist and cult film director meticulously mapped out his quixotic vision for the film in collaboration with then relatively unknown, but crazy talented, artists and creators, such as Moeibus, Chris Foss, and H.R. Giger, among others.

The film (which may have ended up being between 12 and 20 hours long had it ever been made) never came to

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fruition. But far from branding the project a failure, *Jodorowsky's Dune* celebrates the genius and audacity of Jodorowsky's artistic vision, as well as his utter devotion to pursuing it down the rabbit hole, into the great unknown. The implications of this revelation may lead one to rethink the value of the artistic product (as opposed to process) and reassess the ramifications on creativity of our obsession with the art object as commodity.

“Soft rain will come and the smell of the ground, / And swallows circling with their shimmering sound / And frogs in the pools singing all night, / And the wild plum trees in their tremulous white”
—Sara Teasdale, “There Will Come Soft Rain,” 1-4, from the 1920 collection *Flame and Shadow*, as transcribed by my mother in her Masters' thesis in 1978

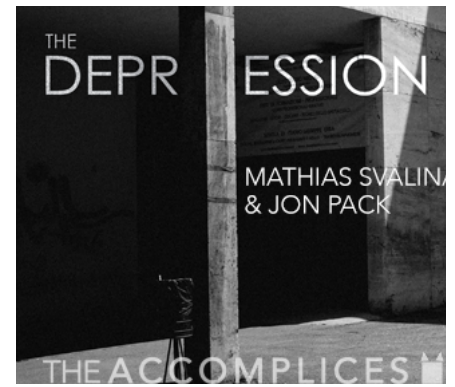


So I'm in the garage of my parents' home where I grew up, looking out onto a small, sprawling ecosystem of boxes and heaping household outcasts, not unlike the pattern of decentralized urban planning and its detritus that leads to sprawling clusters of disconnected communities we call a city.

There are Costco quantities of toilet paper, paper towels, and water bottles; two of my mom's walkers—one basic metal with tennis balls cut in an “x” and attached to the bottoms to ease their friction with the road, and the other, a once shiny, candy apple red, hot rod of a walker with wheels, hand brakes, and a seat—collecting dust; old picture frames, a broken tiffany desk lamp that belonged to my mother, rotting fruit in a box, mystery bags filled with mysterious contents, sloppy stacks of old newspapers, piles of clothing, ceramic pots, a portable toilet, rusted out tools, spools of wire, a solitary bike tire, empty wine cases, a wheel chair, badge-encrusted boy scout backpacks circa 1970s, and old ski poles. There are belongings each of us can lay claim to shoved along the sides of the space, but many of the recent inhabitants of the garage have been relocated from the room my mom lived in during the last years of her life—the den—and are symbols of her long period of ill health. It strikes me that this garage is a sacred place filled with artifacts that hold memory, even those forgotten. This garage is an archeological site, suspended and dreaming.

“What is the goal in life? It's to create yourself a soul.”

The eccentric and impassioned Jodorowsky is responsible for hallucinatory filmic spectacles like *El Topo* and



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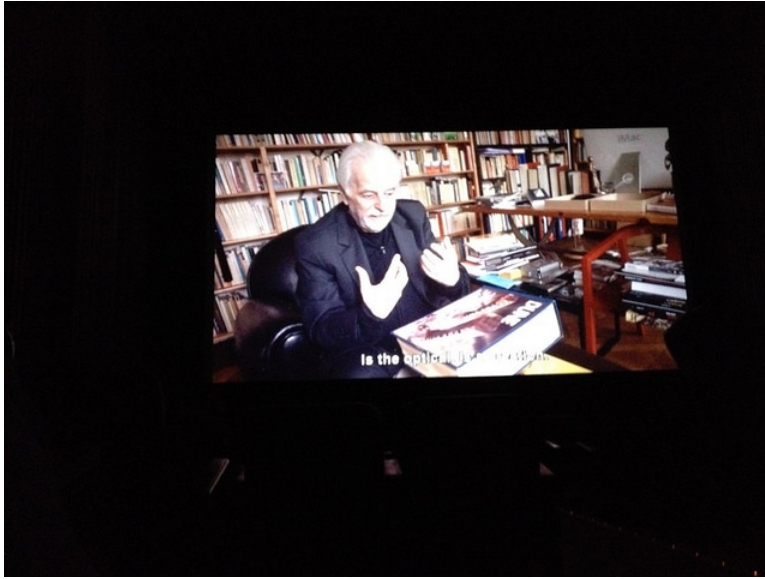
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Holy Mountain, which essentially invented the midnight cult film phenomenon. It's not surprising that Jodorowsky was drawn to the world of science fiction, which culls inspiration from the physical sciences, space, time, social science, and philosophy but is not bound by their rules, something that must have deeply appealed to his surreal and mystical nature.



The first articulated words in *Jodorowsky's Dune* come from the animated mouth of Jodorowsky, himself: "What is the goal in life? It's to create yourself a soul." This Borgesian sentiment seeped into every aspect of his *Dune* project, for which he assembled a team of "spiritual warriors," including casting his twelve-year-old son as Paul, the novel's young hero. In preparation to "be a warrior" worthy of the part, he enrolled his son in two years of rigorous martial arts, acrobatics, and mental agility training for six hours a day, seven days a week. Later, Jodorowsky asked himself why he sacrificed his son for the project. And he remembered that at the time, "I would have given my arm" for the film. "I was ready to die."

“Robins will wear their feathery fine, / And whistle their whims on a low fence-wire, / And not one will know of the war, not one, / Or care at last when it all was done.” (*Teasdale*, 5-8)

In my parents' garage, my intention is to search for my mom's copy of the science fiction novel, *Dune*, which she taught to high school students for years and was a favorite of hers. Even though I haven't seen it in years, I think I remember her copy well enough to recall the weight of it—how it felt in my hands. It was an oversized paperback, I believe, with weathered edges and a thick, heavy font slightly reminiscent of art nouveau lettering, but deeply infected by a 1970s grooviness. The cover was orange with a desert scene of sand, sky, and an enormous, orange star like the sun in the background, and it all guillotined by an expansive, descending darkness that could designate the approaching night or apocalypse.

Later, I research cover images online and think that it might be the 1977 Berkley Medalion Books paperback release version with the words "An Unparalleled Achievement of Imagination" running across the top. My oldest brother, Marc, the family historian, swears he can find it, but he's exiled to Baton Rouge working on some film for a couple of months. I look out across the rubble....

I am hoping that holding Mom's copy of *Dune* in my hands and reading the sparse notes she would have handwritten meticulously with perfectly uniform loops and dips and tails in the margins would somehow bring me closer to understanding something essential about the story, Jodorowsky's unfinished film, or her.

But now, looking out onto a cityscape of teetering boxes and relics that are triggering an onslaught of memories and nostalgia, I know I'm not up to the task of sifting through it all to find the prize just yet.

“I wanted to change the consciousness of the audience...I want to create a prophet to change young minds of all the world.”

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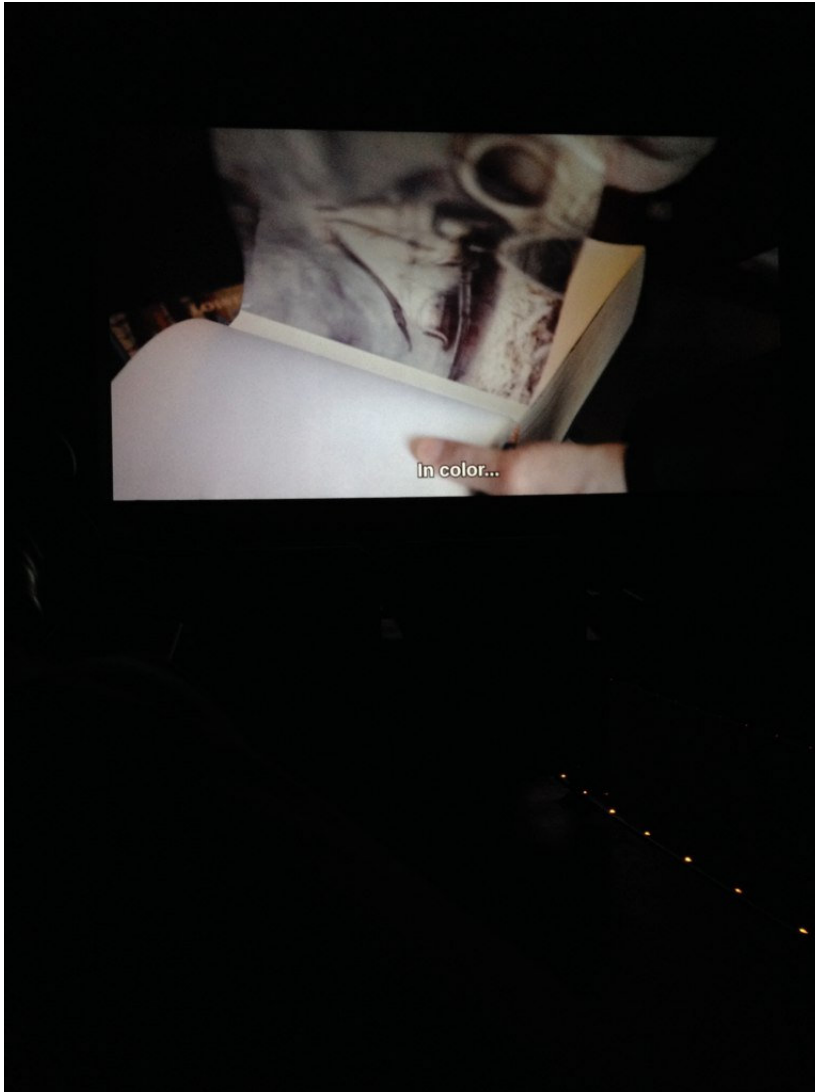
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At one point in the documentary, Jodorowsky has his hand placed reverently atop a book as thick as two phone books stacked on top of each other—the shooting bible for his version of *Dune*. It's extravagant, beautiful and contains the storyboards, concept art, architectural renderings, spaceship designs, and meticulous scene plans, created by artists now recognized as some of the world's greatest in their fields. All the planning, writing, and creating comes down to this book—the artifact that is the only thing Jodorowsky and his collaborators have to show for their efforts besides their own memories. Is it enough? How can an artist justify the time spent on a project that is never realized, never becomes an object in the world?



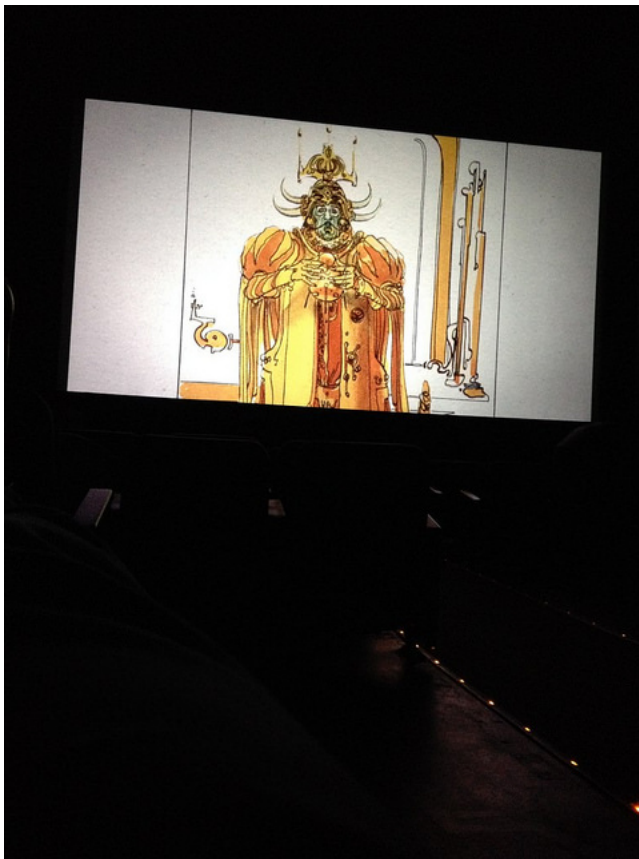
“I wanted to change the consciousness of the audience...I want to create a prophet to change young minds of all the world.” Jodorowsky is bursting at the seams. Through inspired interviews, the animation of storyboards, and dramatic readings from the shooting bible, Alejandro Jodorowsky’s vision for the film version of *Dune* comes to life, full of mysticism, obsessively exquisite renderings and over-the-top, lunatic imaginings of the filmmaker and his devoted “warriors.” And at the center of this vortex is Jodorowsky, now in his mid-80s, but ignited by a boy’s wonder, aflame with a viscerally pulsating passion, barely containable in his seat.

But in the end, despite his conviction, he was unable to secure the money to make the film and realize his dream. (“This system makes of us slaves without dignity or depth. This money. This shit. This paper...” has nothing inside. “A movie has a head: woooosh! And a heart: boom boom!” he exclaims.) Some will call this failing. Still, it’s difficult to call a man who was able to achieve what Jodorowsky did in those two years a failure. Let’s take an accounting: he lured a reclusive Orson Welles out of retirement to play the story’s tyrant, convinced Pink Floyd, among others, to compose the soundtrack, and secured Mick Jagger and Salvador Dali as antagonists with nothing but his enthusiasm and charm. In fact, after an intimate look at the amazing

shooting bible and taking into consideration the caliber of his collaborators and the magnetism of his personality, it's difficult to think of Jodorowky as anything but a magician.

“Not one would mind, either bird nor tree, / If all mankind perished utterly; / And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn, / Would scarcely know that we all had gone.”
(Teasdale, 9-12)

I have my mom's Masters thesis in front of me, dated March 1978. I found it on her bookshelf, its plastic blue binding falling off, leaving the lower half undone with small holes drilled along the edge. The whole manuscript—115 pages long, including unnumbered pages like the title page, acknowledgements, table of contents, and indices—is loose inside a white binder with purple lettering stating “San Francisco State University” next to a purple alligator, standing in sweater and tennis shoes with what looks like a cool beverage clutched between his claws. He looks off into the distance. The thesis, which exults and exalts the literary genre of science fiction, shows its age in its use of old technologies: images are cut and paste with scissors and glue, and it's typewritten with some of its thin pages fading. Its writer demonstrates in every word and image the enthusiasm and love of a true believer, which could be summed up by number 4 of the 43 essential criteria of science fiction she included—it “arouses a sense of wonder.”



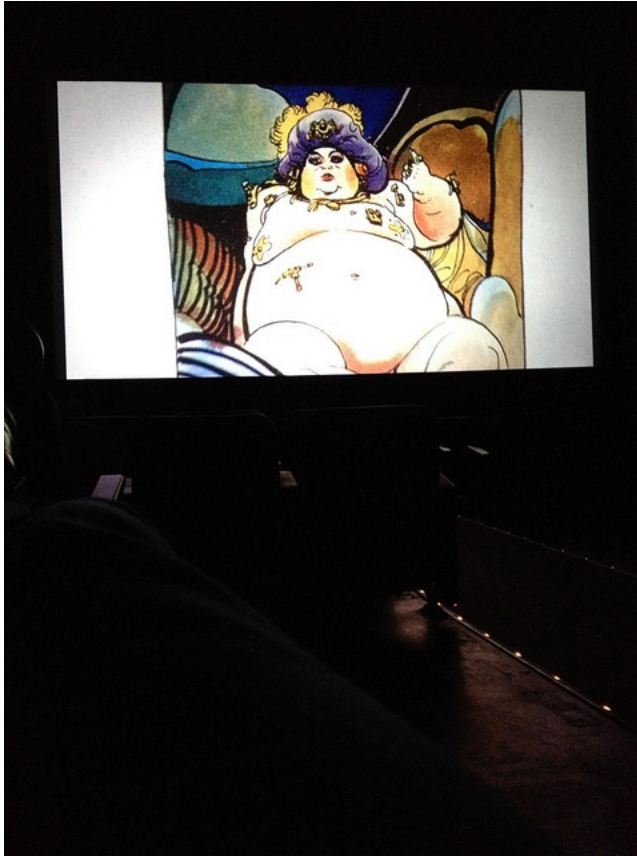
The thesis starts with a poem by Sara Teasdale and ends with a quote and image from the book, *Dune*. There are sections on Mary Shelley, H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, Luis P. Senarens, among many others. In the Ray Bradbury section, Mom even alludes to the thrill of meeting her literary hero and the impression his work ethic and persistent wonderment made on those around him. I leaf through the pages, careful not to tear the delicate paper it was typed on. There are signs everywhere that my mom's literary inclinations were essentially tied to how she acted in the world. Mom stitched little glimmering stars into everything: my clothing, my bed, my books, my mind.

Books, words, and language—not photos—evoke my mom for me, and most especially passages that transport the mind to other possible worlds, beautiful and terrible creatures, extraordinary modes of thinking, imagining, and being. Like Jodorowsky, my mom had the audacity to encourage dreaming and art making for the sake of pleasure, necessity, or expression.



The “normal” man is precisely the fantastic being; the fantastic becomes the rule, not the exception.”
(Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic*)

Jodorowsky achieves transcendence through extreme means—he planned to alter the ending of *Dune* by killing off the story’s hero, Paul. In order for the characters and audience to move past identification with the hero, Paul must die. In this version, all humanity becomes Paul—a single human consciousness that has achieved enlightenment. In the mind of Jodorowsky, because of this awakened community consciousness, the planet is reborn—plants start to grow, people flourish.

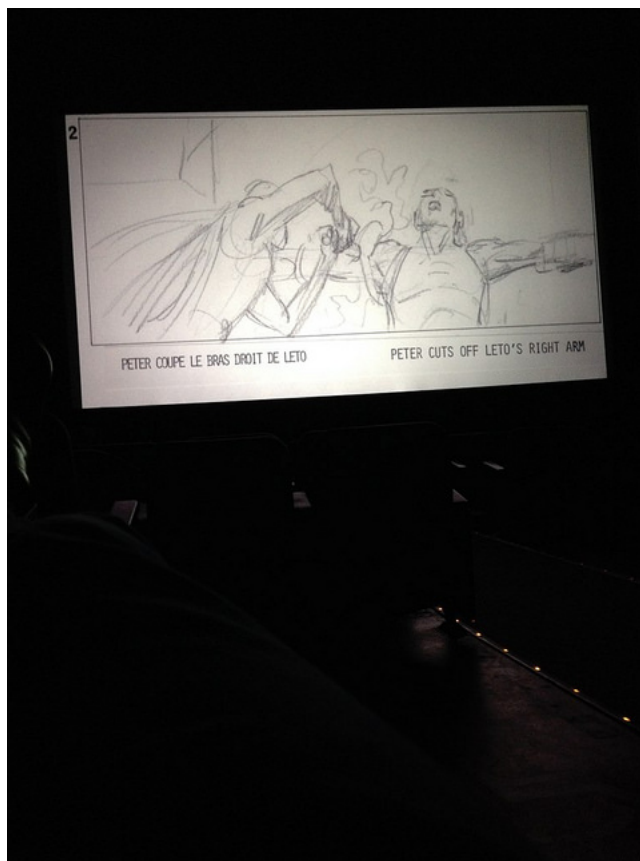


If we, the audience, identify with this hero, this royal protagonist who exists in a fantastical realm and overcomes the limitations of his expected role in his reality, we are at once swept up into the fantastical realm in which he resides. Belief is suspended. But if Paul dies, he, the man, becomes the fantastic object and we, in turn become fantastic humans. We transcend our limitations.



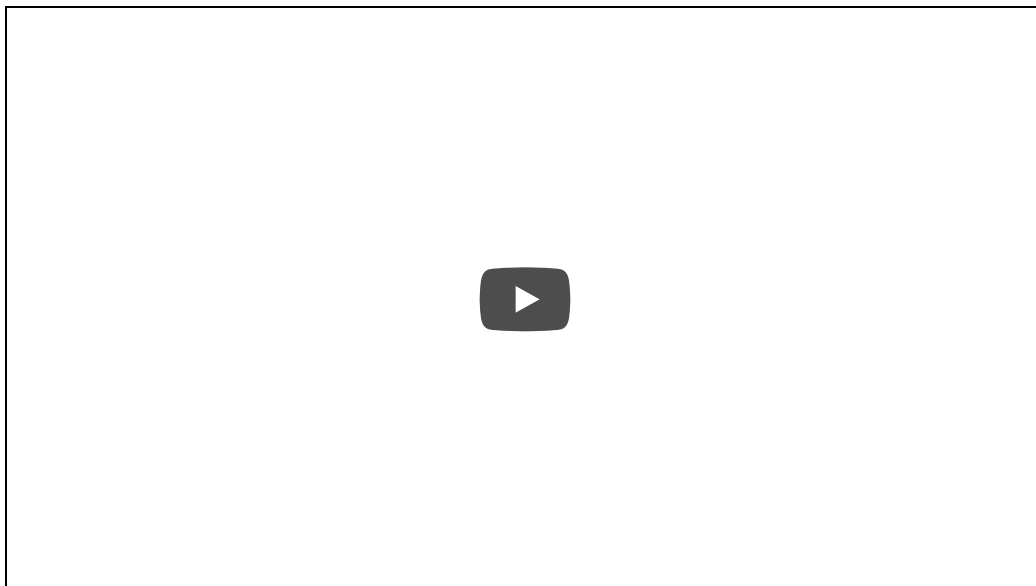
“Dune is in the world like a dream. And dreams change the world.”

Jodorowsky's Dune makes it clear that Jodorowsky radically re-envisioned and revolutionized the genre of science fiction film and visual storytelling, influencing the genre significantly moving forward. Films such as *Aliens*, *Blade Runner*, *Star Wars*, *Matrix* and so many more drew from the designs and the designers that Jodorowsky assembled for his *Dune* project. As far as he is concerned, to a certain degree, he achieved his aesthetic, philosophical, and mystical goals. Each of the artists involved in his project went on to work on other films, carrying Jodorowsky’s dream with them, multiplying it exponentially. In as much as art can transform lives, he has succeeded.



What I'm most interested in here is the persistence of a dream. I'm interested in the ability of a dream to transform others, of the cross-pollination that happens when one shares his or her dreams with others, of the radical aspects of the act of dreaming, itself. Despite the fact that Jodorowsky was blocked from realizing his dream in the form he had envisioned it, the filmmaker, himself, never seems to succumb to despair or to defeat. "Dune is in the world like a dream. And dreams change the world," he asserts, smiling knowingly. Jodorowsky, full of vivacity, eyes glimmering, is still dreaming in his eighties an incorruptible dream.

The official trailer:



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DUNE

FRANK HUBERT

JODOROWSKY



LAURA VENA

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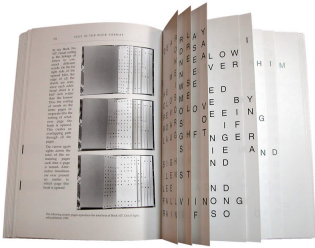
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