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Commentary

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COMMENTARY

Nolan's *Dunkirk*: A Note on Spectacle, History and Myth

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This short Commentary piece explores the role of spectacle in Christopher Nolan's film 'Dunkirk'.

Keywords: Christopher Nolan; Dunkirk; Spectacle; History; Myth

In viewers' accounts of Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk* (Warner, 2017), including that by its admirers and its critics, ideas of the sensory and of the immersive figure prominently. The view that, whatever else, it offers a distinctive cinematic experience receives widespread agreement. The emphasis is on a viewing position in which the witnessing of unfolding spatial-physical events, quite frequently the unfolding of kinds of violent disaster, is emphatically primary throughout, with narratives of social interaction (the group) and the portrayal of subjectivity (the person) largely subordinate to this, always tightly framed by it and often interrupted and dislocated by it. The abrupt and noisy way in which we enter the film through the sudden fusillade of rifle fire upon a group of British soldiers retreating through the Dunkirk streets establishes such a mode of viewing. As Nolan himself recognises, this places his work in a deliberately awkward relation to established narrative models of the 'war film' across the many and various forms this can take. It also subverts and reconfigures that relationship to modes of historical knowledge which many war films generate in part, albeit indirectly, but which inevitably becomes more central in those films placing actual events and incidents at the centre of their scripts. The more extensive a film's engagement with the detail of these events, the more that a degree of 'documentariness' becomes part of the viewing experience it offers.¹

¹ Films in the broad category of 'biopic' vary considerably in the terms of the play-off, of course, although by definition this is generally one in which there is a primacy of personal 'story' over

In this brief note of commentary, I want to explore questions about the undoubted originality of *Dunkirk* with a particular interest in how the intensity of the sensory experience, panoramic perspectives and disjunctions of narrative structure inform or underpin a broader cognitive engagement with 'what is happening' and then with 'what really happened'. 'What really happened' is an indispensable if mostly only indirectly evoked part of the viewing engagement with 'what is happening', an awareness of *historicality* being a major underpinning of the entire filmic project, as Nolan is aware.² Classic war films like *The Dam Busters* (ABPC, 1955) show one mode of this kind of relationship at work, including its prominence in publicity, where the promise of a new, 'truer' story of the 'real events' joins the promise of dramatic pleasures as a key attraction. However, the most relevant example from recent cinema would be Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (Dreamworks, 1998) particularly its first 25 minutes, which was widely publicized and discussed as a major intervention in our knowledge, including our emotional knowledge, about the D day landings of 1944. Here, the 'historicality' was reinforced through an initial mode of portrayal which partly replicated documentary footage and contemporary still photography in delivering a series of sensory shocks, organised as a sustained 'witnessing' of the Omaha beach assault. In doing so, it held back on focused story-telling until this initial, realist re-enactment phase was over, until the shockingly 'new' perception of the events had been delivered. Largely conventional narrative forms then became the key mode, however interrupted by intensive scenes of combat which connected back to the opening section.

What we can call *Dunkirk's referential* sub-level works rather differently and with no moments of formal 'documentarist' cuing to foreground its presence. Working imaginatively, and at times operatically, from the repertoire of contemporary action cinema, in the process extending this repertoire, the film stages scenes in which ideas of 'what really happened' operate as an important co-ordinate for affective

historical 'setting' (as in the recent 'Churchill' film *Darkest Hour* (Perfect World/Working Title, 2017), in which creative liberties with historical events was a recurrent theme in critical reviews).

² This awareness is displayed at several points in 'Allowing Fate to be Arbitrary', a conversation between Christopher and Jonathan Nolan in Nolan, C. (2017), ix–xxxvii.

orientation but do not displace *spectacularity* and its pleasures as the source of the principal viewing experience.

Nevertheless, some commentators have held *Dunkirk* to quite tight levels of documentary accountability. They have, for example, referred to the near absence from the 'Mole' strand of the film (the mole is a long jetty) of the major warships (nearly forty) which the records show were involved in the evacuation and which played a more important role than the 'armada' of small boats, however effective these were; they have noted the sense of a smaller event than one involving over 300,000 troops and they have remarked on the underplaying of the role played by French forces in providing the rearguard cover for the evacuation to be successful. The possibility of the use of CGI (eschewed by Nolan) in conveying magnitude visually (as found, for instance, in *Saving Private Ryan*) is sometimes raised in these charges. However, what this line of criticism fails to recognise adequately is the kinds of profound *transformation* Nolan wished to work on his source accounts, in order to craft a depiction of destruction, death and the struggle for survival within a particular filmic aesthetic very different from that of conventional dramatized documentary modes.

Clearly, one key aspect of the transformative plan is the regular movement across three narrative stands, 'mole', 'sea' and 'air' – each working down the length of the film within radically different time-frames and action spaces. These finally and briefly overlap, duplicating from different perspectives the incidents they depict and generating both anticipatory and retrospective connections for the viewer in ways which some have found stimulating to navigate and others have found to be confusing. This is, of course, a Nolan 'signature' feature and one of its functions in breaking up narrative time and space is to fracture any attempt at following some overarching 'story of Dunkirk' (along the lines of the story of the *Dam Busters* raid) and to give emphasis to the discrete arenas of localized and often destructive action.

It might be useful now to look briefly at each of the narrative strands in terms of the way it engages with 'Dunkirk' as a referent historical event about which there is a pre-established national story. Of the three strands, 'Air', working across one hour, is the most restricted in generating any meanings beyond those around its tight

portrayal of the experience of air combat involving three Spitfires and a number of enemy planes. This it does, working from a basic grammar of shots (including three-quarter profile of pilot in cockpit, pilot's view of enemy aircraft under engagement, shots of aircraft from above and below at varying distances) and sounds (terse radio exchanges between pilots, loud bursts of cannonfire) that are broadly familiar from previous air war sequences. In Britain, this would include films like *Angels One Five* (Templar Films, 1952) and *Reach for the Sky* (Rank, 1956). However, Nolan brings an immersive and sonic intensity to this grammar (involving viewer positioning at times quite close to that of a player of a combat videogame) which take it well beyond straight repetition.

The 'Mole', working across an entire week and therefore much more the product of selection and condensation than either of the other two strands, is essentially focussed on action around the jetty and beach, as troops try to embark, often under intensive air attack, which causes a hospital ship to sink, and torpedo attack, which sinks a destroyer (the only large naval vessel seen in the film) shortly after it has left with its complement of troops. Speech is generally limited to urgent commands but, early on, the presence of a naval commander and an army colonel, joined by a Rear Admiral, allows a brief discussion about the overall plan of evacuation, and obstacles to it, which moves beyond anything else in the film in setting events within their historical-military context as this was perceived at Command level. The scene is close in character to the kind of 'strategy talk' which is a key ingredient in many war films and which Nolan has stated he wanted to keep to a minimum (Nolan 2017: xi). It is indispensable to the making of broader sense out of what is happening and what will happen and it situates the fragmented action spaces within the frame of a wartime national emergency, articulating sharply the logistical 'challenge' of Dunkirk. A brief exchange between Commander and Colonel close to the end of the film brings closure to this frame in terms of the 'challenge *met*' with a tenfold bonus ("Churchill got his thirty thousand"/"And then some, almost 300,000. So far").

The 'sea' strand, operating across one day, is distinctive not only in the way that it works as a point of intersection both for the mole story and the air story, but also because it begins and ends in England, grounding the film in nationhood, in the

'home front' and 'civilian-ness'. It is also the strand operating with a classic 'small group in danger' narrative, strongly organised around the figure of Mr Dawson, the calm and determined skipper of the *Moonstone*, registered in Weymouth. Here, there is a connection back to earlier British films showing 'ordinary' civilians responding with initiative, courage and (crucially) understated speech to the brutal circumstances of war, a structure of feeling which strongly underpins the established 'little boats' story of Dunkirk. A central, indeed iconic, scene is the pageant-like arrival of a rescue armada close to the beach, with much flag-waving and cheering from those on the mole and from surrounding ships. Here, the formal, figurine-like positioning of crews upon the deck of the small boats gives this sequence an even more emphatic tableaux character than it would otherwise have. The relationship with received history (and myth) is unwaveringly positive, with Mr Dawson's quiet mode of heroism in multiple acts of rescue, becoming both a moral centre for the film and an implicit personification of dominant national values. At its conclusion, the 'sea' strand is also important in offering a sense of immediate aftermath, of 'what it all *meant*', using the public's positive response to disembarking soldiers, newspaper headlines and extensive extracts from Churchill's resonantly defiant speech as heard on the radio. This steeps the ending of the film within an affirming framework of emotions around the 'miracle' of 'deliverance' (both these key words appear in the film's opening title sequence). The determined positivity of national mood in the face of setback is heightened by its contrast with the shame and criticism which some of the soldiers are shown to be expecting, thereby stabilizing the film's core values and linking its various fictive depictions to a dominant version of the national-historical.

However, the 'sea' strand also includes another, far more negative, small-group story, about a group of soldiers who board a grounded fishing vessel to await the tide and then become involved both in violent internal argument and a sequence of events, including gunfire from the beach and aerial attack, which leads to the loss of their vessel and their rescue by the *Moonstone*. This sub-strand involves the most graphic and bleak portrayal of 'survivalism' which the film contains. The dissent, prejudice and violence generate a story of desperation the negativity of which is in some contrast with the apparent selflessness of the three Spitfire pilots (one finally

dead, one rescued and one making an emergency landing into captivity) and the efficient resolve of the *Moonstone's* crew.

I want now to return to those general questions raised earlier – concerning the way in which Nolan's film variously positions the viewer in relation to the historicity of the events upon which its narrative foci (variously exciting, bleak or celebratory in tone) draw, a positioning involving what I have called a degree of 'documentariness' in its cognitive profile, however implicit and indirect.³ Of course, firm arguments about the positioning of viewers require at least some level of evidence from audience research (and, certainly, for such an original film, investigations of this kind would be productive) but the film's structure and delivery give some indications of what we might call the 'options for knowing and feeling' on offer. It seems to me that there is a degree of internal tension at work here, clearly picked up in some accounts but unregistered in others. What is finally a conservative thematics of national achievement and character (by turns, elegiac and heroic) is combined with intense moments of destruction and death, often sonically and visually overwhelming. To the first of these dimensions, the film's affective design (aided throughout by Hans Zimmer's score, with strategic use of Elgar) constructs a respectfully affirming stance for its audiences to take up, one related to the established mythic tonalities of the 'Dunkirk spirit'.⁴ Within the terms of the second, however, they are taken for what is often by turns a thrilling and disturbing trip, one driven by the sensory immediacies of violent incident. Partly, this is perhaps a consequence of the dual and unstable dynamics of immersive sensory overload in this context, working at points to convey viewers back via its simulations to a shocking 'then' while at other points strongly reinforcing the 'now' of the viewing experience itself. Certainly, within the framework of contemporary films about World War II, what I have identified as a

³ This is perhaps an example of those documentary 'approximations' which Stella Bruzzi (2013) suggests occur across the documentary/fiction interface and which mix referential factors with factors of viewer perception in ways deserving exploration.

⁴ The 'Dunkirk Spirit', the snatching of victory from defeat, resilience in the face of adversity, is repeatedly mentioned in the interviews on the Special Features section of the DVD, including those with Nolan himself.

tension in the film sets up novel relations between spectacularity and historicity, between sensory immersion and sense, posing in new ways the question asked of many war films, of what they are really 'about'.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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