

MOVIE REVIEW

“DUNKIRK”: Rescuing Heroism From Postmodernity

“Dunkirk” expresses traditional values in a postmodern voice. The result is both cool and drenched with meaning. The effect is that we lower our guard to become directly vulnerable to the predicament of the soldiers fighting the battle onscreen.

I was thrilled by the movie and left feeling enlarged, as if I had experienced not just the suffering and heroism of the characters, but the suffering and heroism of history. Thus inspired, I will propose here that “Dunkirk” achieves and transmits an emergent, post postmodern aesthetic.

At any rate, the movie is a big hit, both financially, having generated over half a billion dollars in less than three months, and critically, with a Rotten Tomatoes critics rating of 93, many of them raves.

The story of Dunkirk is that of one of the great heroic rescues in military history, celebrated by every school child in the UK, including the film’s creator, Christopher Nolan, who was born in London in 1970. And this is the story: Thirty years earlier, during the Second World War, 400,000 British and French soldiers had retreated from the German army and were trapped against the sea near the small town of Dunkirk on the northern coast of France.

Agonizingly, the Brits were a mere 80 kilometers from the shores of Dover, but separated from their home by the churning English Channel. To rescue them the British citizenry launched a civilian flotilla of what has come to be known as the "little ships of Dunkirk", 800 of them: fishing boats, pleasure boats, lifeboats and assorted dinghies. Piloted by regular folks, they steamed across the Channel and rescued 330,000 of the soldiers who were waiting faithfully in lines facing the sea, as they were being randomly picked off by German fighter pilots. Such a heroic story -- indeed the thousands of individual heroic stories -- are worthy of whatever glory history wishes to bestow.

But Nolan tells none of them, at least not in the way we’ve come to expect. As the movie opens we know almost nothing of the context of what is happening as we enter onto the beach with a small band of retreating British infantrymen. What has led to up to this astonishing scene? How does it relate to the war at large? We are not privy to the politics or strategies of the conflict, and see none of the typical war movie scenes of ministers arguing or generals pouring over maps.

Instead we proceed to follow these soldiers through their excruciating travails as they seek rescue. But we never get to know them. They have no discernible backstories or even much in the way of personalities. I kept waiting for the stock war movie characters to emerge: the plucky one, the bully, the lover boy, the rural rube, and while we see some of these behaviors, they are incidental. The soldiers even look alike; think Harry Styles of the boy band “One Direction”. He plays one of the leads, a fact I was not aware of until after I saw the movie. Frankly, I'm still not exactly sure which character he played, or for that matter, which characters were who from scene to scene. *Saving Private Ryan* this is not.

All of which, oddly, strengthens the impact of the movie, as it deploys its cool detachment directly into the heart of what has come to be, in 2017, a great juicy legend.

The postmodern worldview

Postmodernity as a worldview emerged out of the ashes of the first half of the 20th century, and achieved real cultural coherence in the 60s. It is an explicit rejection of the grand narratives of history, the animating stories of all cultures up to then (and many cultures to this day) which proclaim that their tribe, clan, God, nation or race is superior and destined to prevail. An emergent wave of postwar consciousness convinced millions of previous believers that these tales are dangerous delusions that have caused endless oppression and brutality throughout history.

When the Enlightenment dawned in the early stages of modernity many people came to believe that science, logic and rationality would save us from our historic savagery. Instead, as we saw in the Second World War, it mechanized it. The impulse of genocide, nothing remarkable in human history, took up the tools of modern logistics, transportation and mass production to create literal factories of death. Science and technology, once thought destined to liberate us from squalor and drudgery, was turned to the task of making bombs that could -- and did -- kill hundreds of thousands of people at a stroke.

The great wars of the 20th century do not represent a degradation of human morality as much as an increase in our technical ability to murder at a larger scale. This era can be seen as a “sour spot” in human history, where premodern mentality, which has been forever pitiless toward its enemies, is given modern weaponry. This is a problem that plagues us to this day, where people and cultures with traditional ethnocentric worldviews seek weapons they could never themselves create -- guns, chemicals, even atomic bombs -- and would be happy to employ them for the greater glory of their God.

But for many millions of people the experience of world conflagration was a spur for further moral development, the arising of a more fully modern mentality that realizes that fighting other modern countries is ruinous to both. (It's worth noting here that even though the spectacle of fight-to-the-death modern warfare was unprecedented, shocking and evolutionarily potent, the actual percentage of people killed by violent conflict in the 20th century as a whole was lower than in any century previously recorded).

Further, for a nascent leading edge of civilization, a *postmodern* worldview began to arise in the years after World War Two, which sensitized its adherents to the pernicious nature of domination in general, and which extended to include a conviction that human nature itself was hopelessly debased. A great self blame, even self-hatred, became a new feature of humanity at the cutting edge of culture.

Motivated by this realization, postmodernity seeks not so much to tell a new story of humanity as it does to deconstruct all the previous stories. Instead of proposing new truths it proffers the idea that there is no truth, that all of the romantic chronicles of history are nothing more than narratives designed to serve the interests of the people in power. It doesn't matter who is blessed by God, whose history is more glorious, whose people are more noble, or even who is right or wrong. What matters is who has the power to oppress who.

The postmodern aesthetic

Out of this postmodern philosophy arises art that eschews meaning in favor of experience. Thus a war movie with no bad guys. In "Dunkirk" the Nazis are a generic enemy and no effort is made to establish the moral superiority of the Allies. If, as I was taught in high school, all of literature can be divided into the categories of "man vs man", "man vs nature" and "man vs himself", "Dunkirk" has the flavor of the second. Like a plague, the enemy is everywhere and nowhere, implacable, random, and more an impersonal force than a ferocious foe. We never see a German's face and are told nothing of their predicament. We are thankfully subjected to very little "war porn", the evisceration and graphic suffering that has become a feature of contemporary war movies.

But make no mistake, this war is still indeed hell, but by unlinking the suffering from the characters on screen, Nolan makes it more personal and visceral for the viewer.

While “Dunkirk” is visually cool it is sonically hot. I’ve never heard anything like the soundtrack to this film, and I am smitten by its genius. Written by celebrated movie composer Hans Zimmer it is a blaring amalgam of the sounds of the scenes: bombs exploding, sirens wailing, heavy equipment clanging, the roar of the ocean. You hear the human sounds of running, hearts beating, gasping and death. There are no musical themes, no discernable reprises and certainly nothing to hum in the shower. It is a thrillingly extreme example of the aesthetic of walloping the viewer with an immersive, visceral experience. The audience is meant to feel as if they have experienced this battle.

Unfortunately, many of us in the theater where I saw “Dunkirk” were feeling too much. I saw the film in a new IMAX theater here in Colorado, so it may have been an isolated malfunction, but the soundtrack was assaultively loud. I tried to be discrete about covering my ears to ease the pain until I looked around and saw so many other people doing the same. Afterward I witnessed a couple in the audience complaining to the manager about the movie being “a public health hazard.”

But I can’t wait to hear it again! And Hans Zimmer is one of my new favorite composers. It’s a testament to his genius that he is the same man who wrote the score to “Elysium,” one of my my favorite soundtracks, which is as ethereal as “Dunkirk” is bludgeoning.

On the downside I was frustrated that I was unable to hear or understand two-thirds of what was being said by the characters. This too is a credo of postmodern cinema: *don’t get so hung up on the words and ideas, just sit back and let it wash over you*. Fair enough, but please, I also want to know what the characters are saying. You, Mr Nolan, went to the trouble to write a script, and I want to know what’s in the damn thing.

This is my grievance against much of contemporary film and television: mumbling and overpowering soundtracks, and Christopher Nolan is among the worst offenders. After his Batman Dark Knight series I swore I would never see another of his films without subtitles. I plan to rewatch “Dunkirk” with closed captions as soon as it is released for home viewing.

Another way Nolan employs a postmodern imagination is by deconstructing time. The movie unfolds on three timelines: one week for the soldiers on the beach, one day for the skipper (a middle-aged salaryman), his son and his son’s friend in one of the small boats, and an hour for a dogfight between a British and German fighter pilots. Nolan weaves us from location to location evoking a disorientation that unmoors us from conventional perceptions of reality.

The postmodern aesthetic of “Dunkirk” is often described as “surface without depth,” an expression of the display of life shorn of meaning. Don’t be alarmed - it can be a liberating experience. It is not unlike the realization in meditation that we can observe the real-time unfolding of our object of meditation without adding any thought.

We can see examples of surface without depth in other movies as well. Consider the wild ride of sensuality in “Moulin Rouge” or the deranged grasping of real estate sales leads in “Glengarry Glen Ross”. These movies, like Dunkirk, are less about telling a story than about immersing the viewer in a specific and vivid experience.

This detachment from meaning is expressed not just in postmodern cinema, but also in other postmodern art forms. Cirque du Soleil, for example, is a reimagining of the traditional circus which presents itself as a deconstructed display of circus artistry with very little in the way of characters or storyline. Like the soldiers of “Dunkirk”, Cirque performers are never named and have no back story. They are not on a journey. Their athletic mastery and jaw-dropping crescendos are invariably deflated by ironic flourishes or a premature redirection of attention. But no matter: they astonish us with feats of artistry that, like “Dunkirk”, are made more potent by being liberated from the personal.

Another work of art that expresses surface without depth is the television show “Seinfeld”. It is known as the show where nothing happens, which is not exactly true. Plenty happens, as we are immersed in the inner worlds of four very funny people who are caught in a loop of their own selfish ruminations. Jerry breaks up with a girlfriend over how she eats her peas; Elaine evaluates sex partners as to whether they are worthy of one of her dwindling supply of discontinued birth control sponges; George obsesses about the size of his penis; and Kramer invents a bra for men. In other words, there’s always something happening -- it’s just that nothing *meaningful* happens. Even when George’s fiance dies (after being poisoned by the glue from the black-market wedding invitations he bought) everybody just kind of moves on, slightly perplexed by their relief that she’s gone.

We can see this deconstruction of meaning in fine art as well: Andy Warhol challenges us to consider by what standard a can of Campbell’s Soup may be judged as not being beautiful. Or consider Damien Hirst’s sculptures featuring real sharks, pigs and horses that have been sawed into pieces and put back together in individual tanks of formaldehyde. One of his seminal pieces, part of the permanent collection of the great Saatchi Gallery in London, is titled “Some Comfort Gained from the Acceptance of the Inherent Lies in Everything.” Can’t get more postmodern than that!

It's interesting to see that works of art as different as these, and as different as each is from "Dunkirk", can express the same aesthetic values. Yet here is where I argue that Nolan takes things a step further.

Post postmodern beauty

The most important creative decision of this movie, and the one that moves it beyond a purely deconstructive view, is the choice of the subject matter itself: the Battle of Dunkirk. This event happened; there is no getting away from its real world power as one of the great war events of all time. The heroism of the characters, from the soldiers on the beach, to the civilian skippers of the ragtag flotilla, to the voice of Winston Churchill, who we hear at the very end -- all are pre-installed in the minds of millions of people, and perhaps in the karmic field of humanity at large.

Nolan could have done a similar narrative as a science fiction movie, a genre with which he is quite accomplished. He could have unspooled a cool, detached drama of an intergalactic war where anonymous soldiers were evacuated by nameless rescuers. But that would have been boring and meaningless. As it is, everything in "Dunkirk" is rich with meaning and never boring. We don't need context. We know the context, and if we don't, we ask our friends or look it up on Wikipedia. You couldn't strip the Battle of Dunkirk of its depth if you wanted to.

And Nolan clearly doesn't want to. He is not out to convey the typical postmodern view of the absurdity of war, or its horror or pointlessness, or how unsung soldiers are sacrificed on the altar of geopolitics. On the contrary, there are three or four instances in the movie where he means us to deeply feel the personal nobility of the characters. There is the moment where the fighter pilot makes a fateful decision (played by a stalwart Tom Hardy with most of his face covered by an oxygen mask -- but, damn, those eyes!). There's what happens on the boat, where a terrible act by one of the characters is met with heartbreakingly forgiving (and is there an actor more capable than Mark Rylance of transmitting strength with decency?). There's the voice of Churchill heard through the static of a radio, delivering his immortal speech on the occasion of the rescue: "We shall fight on the beaches. We shall fight on the landing grounds. We shall fight in the fields and in the streets. We shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender ..."

The postmodern aversion to sentiment is suspended in these moments, though none of the events are dwelt upon, or amplified by a swell of music, or in the case of Churchill,

even comprehensible (that darn soundtrack!), but I am grateful for them as they have wormed their way into my heart and enlarged it.

Another artistic decision that elevates “Dunkirk” over traditional big-budget, spectacle movies is Nolan’s choice to minimize computer generated imagery (CGI). At first I was disappointed. I attended “Dunkirk” with some friends, and afterward we all agreed that the movie did not do the battle justice in terms of scope. The historical reality is that there were 400,000 men trapped on the beach. We wanted to see a sweeping god’s eye view of all of them, and what a sight that would have been! There were 800 boats in the rescue flotilla. We wanted the camera to slowly pan out to include them all, more than one could count, and experience the overwhelming power of basic human goodness. Instead we were isolated on one fishing boat grinding its way through the waves. My assumption was that Nolan’s postmodern impulse was to purify this event and deflate some of its puffery.

But after reading more background on the making of the movie, including several interviews with Nolan, I have come to see it differently. He was actually going for a verisimilitude of a different sort, by setting out to make the biggest movie he could make *without CGI*. And indeed he created one of the most expensive cinema productions ever financed, featuring the biggest flotilla of boats ever assembled for a movie: 60 real boats, many of them authentic World War Two antiques. His cast of extras exceeded 3000 men. Understanding this artistic approach erased my disappointment in not being clobbered by a big CGI spectacle, and helped me appreciate the visceral reality -- and depth -- of cinema made out of images of actual people and actual things.

Many critics have commented on the impersonal nature of Nolan’s characters in “Dunkirk”, and one proposed that the point is the we can more easily project ourselves into the predicament of the players. Perhaps, but I don’t think that is what I was doing as I watched this movie. I don’t feel that I was experiencing either the story of the characters or of myself, but rather the story of humanity as a whole.

To me this feels like something new: an integration of worldviews, a traditional story told in a postmodern voice, where the best of each is included. They are thereby transcended into a new artistic expression of the human condition, where nobility is neither demeaned nor mythologized, but liberated into a realization that it is still here and available to us individually and collectively, and we have a responsibility to know it, nurture it and express it for the benefit of all.

The particular becomes the universal

To sum up, while “Dunkirk” does not focus on the growth of its characters, it is, I think, intended to cultivate the growth of its audience. As I said, I feel like a slightly larger person for having seen it, and that feeling has stayed with me for the weeks since. This is perhaps because “Dunkirk” is a transmission of the existential dilemma that faces all persons: that we wake up into this life and find death sitting on our shoulder. And how stalwart we are regardless, and what feats we’re capable of. It’s heartbreakingly good; we see how tragedy is a movement of the dance of Eros, the updraft that through us creates an ever more good, true, and beautiful world.

In this way “Dunkirk” is also about the evolution of humanity, which is sealed in the last line of Churchill’s speech where he says, “We will carry on the struggle until, in God’s good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old.”

This is the very deeply meaningful story of our life here on Earth, and this is the story told by the magnificent movie, “Dunkirk”.

