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Dunkirk as a Movement-Image Film

Kyan Hamilton

The evacuation of Dunkirk occurred during World War II, from May 26 to June 9, 1940, when thousands of both British and French soldiers were surrounded by the Germans and forced to flee France. With the help of British civilians, 380,000 soldiers were rescued from the shores of Dunkirk. *Dunkirk* is a film adapted from this historical event, yet it manages to evolve past the traditional war movie. It still functions as a movement-image film by ultimately solving the overarching problem of the movie, which was to get as many British soldiers home as possible. *Dunkirk* coherently works with the many different moving parts of the film—from emotional shots to intense score—to show the true travesties of war. Christopher Nolan makes *Dunkirk* operate as a working piece of thought that evokes strong emotion, thoughts, and responses from the viewers.

Converging Timelines Serving as a Unity & Exhibition of the “American Dream”

In *Dunkirk*, a major technique used to bring about the overall effectiveness of the film to the viewers was parallel alternate montage. In Richard Rushton’s *Cinema After Deleuze*, parallel editing is defined as bringing together individual narrative strands to ultimately constitute as a whole (15-16). This is evident in *Dunkirk*’s three eventually intersecting timelines: The Mole (one week), The Sea (one day), and The Air (one hour). Each timeline takes place across a discrete entity of time, but by the climax of the film, they are brought together, and the characters are, for the first time in the movie, viewed in the same image of time.

When the three timelines finally converge, Tommy (Fionn Whitehead) and Alex (Harry Styles) are swimming to a minesweeper for safety from Germans, but it is bombed. Dawson (Mark Rylance) and Peter (Tom Glynn-Carney) see this happening and sail over, rescuing Tommy and Alex, along with a slew of other soldiers. While all of this is happening, Farrier (Tom Hardy) is flying overhead, trying to shoot down the enemy plane that is targeting the minesweeper. Though these three sets of characters seemingly had

no impact on one another, when they finally came together in this climactic scene, a sense of understanding washes over the viewers. Throughout the film, we as viewers are trying to make sense of the disparate timelines and how they would ultimately connect to one another.

These three timelines brought together entirely different sets of characters who each portrayed different lives affected by the war. There wasn't just one savior in *Dunkirk*, nor was there simply one group that needed saving. Three different sets of lives were all coming together for one greater cause—to rescue the Allied soldiers off Dunkirk beach—and those lives are only a representation of all of the lives jeopardized, sacrificed, and risked for one greater purpose. These timelines displayed the great magnitude of sacrifice that each character gave toward their common goal, which goes to show that much more surrender, bravery, and perseverance was succumbed to other “unknown” characters of the war.

In nearly every Hollywood film, an “American Dream” is hidden under a layer of ambiguity. Many times, it can be left up to interpretation. For us, the “American Dream” in *Dunkirk* was Americanism—“Americanism” not only being inward pride for one's country, but “Americanism” as the sacrifice, courage, and hopefulness it takes to risk your life for something you believe to be more important than yourself. In *Dunkirk*, the “American Dream” was not just about Tommy, Alex, Mr. Dawson, or Farrier, it was about all of them and more. The “American Dream” is not simply about one person—it is about all of us. The characters in *Dunkirk* displayed that with grace, fortitude, and transcendence.

The Affection Image & Use of Film Techniques

Throughout the film *Dunkirk*, different camera techniques were used to awaken emotion within the viewer. Both the actors' performances and use of shots sweep the audience with sympathy for the characters and their fates within the film. It makes the viewer feel a specific way, which is very important in relation to the movement-image. Within Richard Rushton's *Cinema after Deleuze*, it is explained that, “First of all, the close-up endows...the situation with the feelings or thoughts of a character. But in doing this, the close-up has the possibility of surpassing what the objective set presents” (16-17). A perfect example of the close-up technique being

used in the film is through the performance of the “Shivering Soldier” (Cillian Murphy). Within his scenes on the boat, there are a number of remarkable uses of camera shots. Firstly, once the soldier is saved off the boat, the film gives the viewer a perfect close-up of Murphy's character, in which he soullessly stares off-seeming almost as if he is still in the heart of battle, as if he still has yet to leave that place in his mind. This shot is complimented by a flashback that is done of the Shivering Soldier, showing him leading his men to look for soldiers lost in sea following the day of battle. This scene is necessary as it shows the kind of man and soldier that he was before his traumatic experiences at Dunkirk. The scene shows him being strong and resilient; however, when the movie introduces him, he is portrayed as broken and lost. This shot is done beautifully, as close-ups are made to convey feelings into the viewer, which is perfectly complemented by Murphy's performance.

Following this, the camera takes us below deck on Mr. Dawson's boat. Within this scene, Peter brings the Shivering Soldier below deck, in which the camera is displayed in a shaky cam. This effect is done because it builds tension within this scene, as well as plays along with the unpredictable nature of the soldier due to his recent time in battle. This scene pulls the viewer right in and has them make the conscious decision with Peter whether or not to lock the soldier underneath the vessel.

Next, the film perfectly wraps all of this up with use of the affection image. In Richard Rushton's *Cinema after Deleuze*, the affection image is defined as, “By way of images such as these we can sense a character's range of affect...” (17). In other words, the affection image can be seen as a careful close-up shot of a character's face, which causes the viewer to connect what they see to what they feel. This emotional response of a character in film has the ability to gain the viewer's sympathy, which allows the viewer to more so connect with the film. As viewers, we are able to imagine all of the pain and trauma that the Shivering Soldier has experienced due to his wounded facial expressions. A powerful scene displaying the affection image unfolds on Mr. Dawson's boat, and it is the doomed fight between the Shivering Soldier and Mr. Dawson on whether or not to continue their route to Dunkirk beach. Amidst their fight for the wheel, George (Barry Keoghan) is knocked down and his head is hit, leading to his eventual death. This scene perfectly illustrates the emotion of every single character. This scene is so powerful, for

as a viewer you can't help but feel bad for George and his family, but you also can't fathom the things that the Shivering Soldier has just been exposed to on that beach. It leads to the film making the viewer not morally able to blame the Shivering Soldier for his actions as he is merely scared for his life.

Lack of Dialogue, Sonsign, and Dividual Score

The dialogue, or lack thereof, was very influential in *Dunkirk*. This is due to the fact that we were not initially able to make strong connections with the characters in the film. This forces the viewers of the film to make connections without really knowing or fully understanding the characters. We, as viewers, had to make connections through the triumphs and hardships of the characters, and we had to try to put ourselves in their shoes. One of the scenes that pulls us closer to the characters was when Farrier decides to save the civilian ships and the Mole by pursuing the German plane even though he was running out of fuel. This fills us viewers with a sense of a sad sort of joy, because although we were relieved that he made this decision, his life was essentially coming to an end. This impacts our perceptions of Farrier because it demonstrates how selfless of a human he really is. Another scene that thoroughly impacts us as viewers is when Collins (Jack Lowden) is trapped in his downed plane. This scene makes us sympathize in fear with Collins because we all want him to survive. He is one of the many heroes of this film, and he didn't deserve to die after all that he had sacrificed. This particular scene further impacts us as viewers because we felt as though we were almost in the situation, as though we were trapped in the plane with him. We felt Collins' fear of his possibly impending death, and we felt his desperation to escape the ticking time bomb his plane was becoming. This scene changes our identification of Collins because he managed to handle his life-threatening situation better than most of us did—and we were simply watching.

It is very unusual to lack something as important as dialogue in a movie. Dialogue is how viewers connect to the characters of a movie, and it is how relationships are created. Without dialogue, it can become hard to personally feel or care for characters. Due to the lack of dialogue present in *Dunkirk*, there had to be something else that would aid the viewers in understanding the characters' inner feelings, emotions, and thoughts.

From this comes the use of sonsign and the dividual score in *Dunkirk*. These two techniques are very evident and helpful in making the movie as powerful as it is. According to Deleuze, a sonsign is a pure sound situation that draws the viewers out of the film to experience the broader, more social context throughout the film. The sonsign present in *Dunkirk* is the sound of the stopwatch ticking throughout a majority of the film. This sound affects us as viewers by making us feel as though we are in the situation with each and every one of the characters. This sound is extremely noticeable, especially when the scene focuses on a single person and not a group of people. This is because the film was focusing on that one person's fear in that exact moment. It is also very noticeable when the film is switching between the three different timelines. It almost imitates to the audience the sound of the character's lives running out of time. Moreover, this was simulating the desperation that was accompanying their lives slowly, but quickly ticking away. Another time that the stopwatch ticking is very evident is when the characters are in the air. When the planes would sweep through, the sounds of the stopwatch seemed to mimic their heartbeat at that moment. Ultimately, this effect gives viewers the sense of time slowing down as the soldiers anxiously await their fate with their eyes and mind stuck on the end goal, which is survival.

The dividual score of a film is known as the music that is being played "behind the scenes"—music that goes beyond corresponding with the image. An example of this technique in the film is the Shepard tone. The Shepard tone can be known as a score that manages to noticeably increase in intensity, while never reaching an actual crescendo. This sound creates a strong feeling of tension. The Shepard tone also forces the viewers to grow anxious and nervous out of fear of the future. As viewers, we had no clue what was going to happen next in the film, and this made it appear like something bad was going to happen—even if it was not. At times, the sense of unknowing this sound creates causes the viewers to want to cover themselves from the impending doom they will soon be experiencing alongside the film's characters.

Demonstration of Molarity

In Richard Rushton's *Cinema After Deleuze*, molarity is a branch off of an indirect image of time, which can be described as films that

“are typically defined by a problem or set of problems for which a solution must be found” (4). That is, molarity relies on the idea that nothing and nobody needs to change—a fixing or freezing of time, of sorts. The problem in the film has a solution, and once it is found, the future does not need to change: everything in this instant is just as it should be.

A great example of molarity displayed in *Dunkirk* is the exposition at the end of the film. Even though the viewers know that there will be hardships in the future for the characters in the film, the voice-over in the final scenes of *Dunkirk* focuses on the positive outcome of the historical event. When Tommy, Alex, and thousands of British and French soldiers are finally rescued, it does not feel like they have achieved anything by surviving the beaches of Dunkirk. However, the voice-over at the end of the film reassures the viewers that even though the evacuation of both the British and French soldiers from Dunkirk was a “military disaster,” it was ultimately a victory for Britain and its people—because now they can live to fight another day. The exposition manages to “freeze time” by causing the viewers not to think about what happens next to the characters, and instead turning the evacuation into a victory. This results in the civilian rescue of the film's characters and soldiers being a happily-ever-after ending, in which no change is sought. Things are just as they should be.

Throughout *Dunkirk*, so many techniques are used to make the film as powerful and moving as it is. Christopher Nolan's expert usage of parallel alternate montage, the “American Dream,” affection image, close-up shots, skilled character performances, sonsign, dividual score, and lack of dialogue force the viewer to search for a connection with the characters that is not found as easily as it is in other films. *Dunkirk* is utterly complex, but that is what makes it the beautiful film masterpiece it is. This film, unlike typical movement image films, allows the viewers to create an unbelievable amount of thought. Their minds are not the film's, but their own. This causes *Dunkirk* to be a film that can be left up to interpretation. *Dunkirk* can be what each viewer needs it to be.

There is not one set entity that forces *Dunkirk* into being classified as a movement-image film, but an innumerable amount. To our group of viewers, the greatest example of these was the disparate-then-converging timelines that ultimately shaped the way the film could be viewed, analyzed, or studied. Throughout the film,

numerous techniques went into creating the enormity of what the parallel montage provided—and it resulted in each viewer connecting to the film in a different way. *Dunkirk* is not a typical war movie. We may not know much about the individual characters, but the soldiers are undoubtedly viewed as people. They were not simply pawns in a greater game, but human lives that have value. The lack of dialogue leads us to question about their lives: Who are they, *really*? Do they have families at home? Friends? Within this film, we discovered that there aren't always going to be “good guys” and “bad guys” in war. War is so much more than black and white—there is so much gray. After watching and contemplating over *Dunkirk*, our group was left changed. Is there ever one victor in war? Is there ever a happy ending for *everyone*?

Works Cited

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