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## Dunkirk (Movie Review)

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## Dunkirk (Movie Review)

### **Abstract**

"In an era of superhero movies galore, Dunkirk reminds us again of real human fragility and fear."

Posting about the movie *Dunkirk* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<http://inallthings.org/dunkirk>

### **Keywords**

In All Things, movie review, Dunkirk, Christopher Nolan

### **Disciplines**

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### **Comments**

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

# Dunkirk

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 [inallthings.org/dunkirk/](https://allthings.org/dunkirk/)

August 3,  
2017

Josh Matthews

**Starring:** Fionn Whitehead, Tom Hardy, Mark Rylance, Kenneth Branagh, Cillian Murphy

**Directed by :** Christopher Nolan

**Screenplay by:** Christopher Nolan

**Music:** Hans Zimmer

The men crouch on the beach, ducking for cover from the divebomber's bombs. A pilot crashes into the English Channel, drowning because he cannot open his cockpit. The captain steers a commercial boat, yelling at his son while the jetfighter tries to machine-gun them. Soldiers huddle up in the haul of the beached ship, watching the enemy's bullets pierce the haul. Later, they will scramble out of the haul when the water leeching through the bullet-holes threatens to drown them.

These scenes and more like them fill *Dunkirk*, a work of claustrophobia and persistent dread. In an era of superhero movies galore, *Dunkirk* reminds us again of real human fragility and fear.

*Dunkirk* contains slices of war horror from the 1940 British evacuation of Dunkirk during World War II. Surrounded by the enemy at the northern French city of Dunkirk, over 300,000 British soldiers await rescue from their people across the British Channel. They are all trapped, with only one way out, and they must make it home or die.

That plot goal is skillfully announced in the opening scene, in which a British soldier reads a fallen leaflet that says "You are Surrounded." After escaping enemy fire, that soldier runs to the beach. The sight there is awesome and awful: uncountable lines of British soldiers wait for boats to ferry them to England, making them easy targets for the enemy's planes. "It's a common enough sight to see dead soldiers on the beach," one soldier says to another, and it's also common to ignore them.

The major problem for the British is that they cannot risk their destroyers, which could carry thousands of soldiers at a time, to save the soldiers. If sunk, those destroyers could not stop an invasion of Britain. Instead, small commercial British boats are called to rescue the soldiers. Ordinary Britains pilot them, venturing from the safety of home into a warzone filled with fighters and U-boats. Protecting those boats from the sky are a few British Spitfires, the only defense against the bombers that could destroy most of the British army.

All of this is skillfully depicted by writer and director Christopher Nolan, whose entire career has probed themes of masculine fear and courage while interweaving multiple storylines and timelines. He does so again here. There are three stories told in *Dunkirk*: The Mole, The Sea, and the Air. Although these last one week, one day, and one hour long respectively, they are compacted here and tied together. All of them illustrate the enormous risks and horrors of the Dunkirk evacuation.

I have avoided using character names so far. That is because the movie gives us almost none. Its focus instead is on faces, who are perhaps types of British wartime participants. There is the noble navy officer, the shellshocked soldier, the courageous pilot, and the cowardly evacuee. All of these add up to the movie's main focus: return home to England and unite there to fight for her. After the evacuation, the invasion is coming. All Britains, no matter what type they are, must face this reality.

The movie's other key choice is to never name the Germans. If it was there, I missed the word "Nazi." No German faces appear here, although their weapons and machines do. They are simply called "the enemy," the unseen threat that can appear at any time to destroy and kill. On the beaches of France, this faceless enemy is unbeatable. We sense that if the British soldiers were to make it to England, maybe they could defeat the enemy there, although

even that is left in some doubt.

This is why the subject of the Dunkirk evacuation makes for a curious choice. Why a World War II movie about an evacuation, about a military disaster that nearly destroyed Britain's military forces, which would have resulted in surrender? Why was that movie made now?

I can think of many speculative answers. Brexit, the British separation from the European Union, is one possibility. (Although work on the movie began before the 2016 Brexit vote, the ideas and desires supporting Brexit were there long before.) The movie plays with British sentiments that would lead to Brexit, to a Britain that is now going it alone in world affairs, after leaving an international union in which Germany is a very heavy-hitter. To be fair, the movie does show the importance of friendship and healthy relations between the British and French. Still, given that *Dunkirk* is primarily about nameless Britains retreating to the safety of their nation, this is one of the most pro-British movies you will ever see.

Terrorism is another. With repeated recent terrorist attacks on London Bridge and the general threat of terrorist bombings anywhere in Europe, the movie arrives in a moment where a faceless enemy can strike us at any time. As in *Dunkirk*, that enemy's presence is known but unseen. The result, for the soldiers and for us viewers, is constant dread. *Dunkirk's* rallying-cry is to go home and defend home, which will be attacked. The response should be a nationalist one: Britain above all, because the survival of Britain is at stake.

Some viewers might be bothered by the movie's possible political messages. But *Dunkirk* is above all a really fine artistic accomplishment. It allows for the stirring of complex emotions and thoughts, which can generate debate about World War II or about current affairs. My wife and I had a long conversation about whether the movie is ultimately hopeful or bleak. I imagine that every viewer will fall somewhere on the spectrum between both. What I decided for myself helped me re-consider my views on nationalism, terrorism, and the general human will to survive.

I suspect that Nolan's other work could shed light on the question of why *Dunkirk* now. If you are partial to *Interstellar* and *The Dark Knight Rises*, *Dunkirk* might have glimmers of hope. Then again, if you prefer *Inception* or *The Dark Knight*, *Dunkirk* may seem anxious, uncertain, bleak. I wonder if Nolan will proceed with a sequel or a trilogy. A movie about the Battle of Britain seems an obvious next choice, a way to comment on and augment *Dunkirk*, as Nolan's Batman movies do for each other. As well, Nolan's depictions of aerial combat in *Dunkirk* are so awesome that more of that would be very welcome.

In a weak year for the ordinary American moviegoer, this is one of the best movies of the year.