

A Dunkirk Hype/What's Behind a Hype?

SIMON DESPLANQUE

BETWEEN THE END OF MAY AND THE BEGINNING OF JUNE 1940, the British Expeditionary Forces (BEF) sent into France to fight against Germany were stuck in and around the city of Dunkirk. Against all odds, the British managed to evacuate 338,682 soldiers during Operation Dynamo, thereby avoiding the annihilation of their expeditionary forces ([Vanwelkenhuyzen](#) 3). In 2017, two award-winning movies re-enacted this decisive historical event: Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk* and Joe Wright's *Darkest Hour*. While Nolan emphasized the military aspects of the evacuation, Wright reminded the viewer of the role played by Winston Churchill in these fateful days of 1940. Despite their different focuses, these two films are similar in that they both mythologized the events that led Britain to fight "alone" against the Third Reich. In the United Kingdom (UK), success was immediate. In addition to the multiple prizes the films received,¹ *Dunkirk* remained number one in British movie theaters for five weeks ([Tartaglione](#)) and grossed around \$80 million while *Darkest Hour* made a little more than \$33 million ([Box Office Mojo](#)).

World War II in general, and the events of 1940 in particular, are at the center of what David Reynolds calls a British "national obsession" (197). The war continues to be invoked on various levels ([Legget](#)) and plays a crucial role in the definition of contemporary British identity. In this context, the success of these films relies on their framing of events, which calls for a systemic analysis of the liberties their directors took with the past. Some cinematic works may correctly "engage the discourse of history" ([Rosenstone](#), *Visions* 72), while others tend to alter facts or mythologize history altogether. One anecdote illuminates how these movies may fall into the latter

category. Less than a week after the release of *Dunkirk*, Nigel Farage, the then leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), tweeted a photo of himself at the entrance of a cinema. With a solemn look on his face, he soberly wrote: “I urge every youngster to go out and watch *Dunkirk*” (Figure 1). Given the romantic discourse promoted by Farage and his pro-Leave colleagues during the entire Brexit campaign (Spencer and Opperman), it is indeed fair to assume that their contents were in line with a mythologized view of History.

The mention of this blockbuster by one of the most prominent Brexiteers is emblematic of a broader dynamic, that is, how fiction can convey powerful political myths by reactivating the memory of past events. *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour* are iconic of these complex interactions. Indeed, their success is inseparable from the nationalist hype triggered by the Brexit referendum. Their depiction of the evacuation of Dunkirk—an event often presented as a moment of national cohesion—rather than the ensuing Battle of Britain, traditionally pictured as the victory of “the Few” (the Royal Air Force—RAF—pilots) is crucial². This focus reinforced the general idea of united people actively contributing to victory under the leadership of a providential leader. *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour* not only captured the atmosphere of their time: they promoted a mythologized account of History



FIGURE 1. Nigel Farage's tweet a few days after *Dunkirk*'s release. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

perfectly in line with the romantic, populist narrative conveyed by the pro-Leave camp during the 2016 Brexit campaign.

Such myths must be understood as “ideologically marked accounts of past, present, or predicted events” (Flood 42) that fulfill various functions in the societies that share them, including providing examples for behavior and confederating group identity (Schöpflin 19). For these reasons, myths are an important means through which societies define themselves. Therefore, when they address past events, they can have powerful, long-lasting consequences. As Michel Foucault writes, “since memory is actually a very important factor in struggle... if one controls people’s memory, one controls their dynamism” (28). Given the fact that movies can contribute to the diffusion of such myths, it is surprising that, in film studies, the political outreach of cinema has not been studied beyond the sole question of the perpetuation of a national imaginary (see Hjort and MacKenzie). This will try to address this shortfall by showing some of the political myths movies can convey.

This article will first examine the links among films, memory, and myths. The three myths conveyed in *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour* will then be explained: that British civilians played a crucial role in the rescue of the BEF, that the British people was united under the leadership of Winston Churchill, and that the British alone managed to repeal a German invasion of the British Isles. These myths distorted history, reactivated two archetypal political myths (the myth of national unity and the myth of Britain as savior), and promoted a potential populist narrative of the battle. Finally, these myths echoed certain narratives promoted by the “pro-Leave” supporters during the Brexit campaign.

Films, Memory, and Politics

Several researchers have discussed the importance of films in the depiction of past events and in the making of memory. In his study of interwar German cinema, Siegfried Kracauer offered one of the first sociological analyses of this nascent art form. In his view, two characteristics of the Seventh Art make it a relevant object of research. Firstly, a film, like any work of fiction, is set in a particular historical–political context. Like any artistic creation, it is common

to see political subjects mentioned, whether intentionally or not. Secondly, the Seventh Art materializes the representations that a certain population shares more surely than other media, since the making of a film is a collective enterprise (Kracauer 5). In Kracauer's view, the final result therefore reflects a multitude of points of view and not that of the director or screenwriter alone. On the psychological level, Daniel and Musgrave insist on the impact that immersion has on the viewer: "As people read, watch, or otherwise consume fictional narratives, they process those stories as if they were actually witnessing the phenomena those narratives describe, even if those events may be unlikely or impossible" (Daniel and Musgrave 503). This dimension is further accentuated with movies since the image is often perceived as "truer" than the language itself (Garry and Gerrie).

In this regard, some postmodern historians have shown how films, far from being mere mirrors of our vision of the past, help to shape the way their viewers imagine it. Even though films are not academic works, Robert Rosenstone argues that movies participate in the production of historical worlds in their own right. In his view, a focus on their "veracity" would deny both the "constructed" nature of history—often praised by professional historians—and the capacity of these works, even mainstream ones, to teach the viewer History³ (*History*, 41). In a separate but related vein, Carlsen and McGarry argue that "all film, whether fiction, documentary or newsreel, is a site of memory or forgetting of past events" (1). Cinema has become, for the so-called postmodern societies, one of the privileged ways to express their relationship to History. To the logic of entertainment adds a desire to celebrate, on the big and small screens, the events, and characters deemed worthy of being remembered.

Besides, films not only have an impact on the way viewers view history and remember certain past events: they also have a political dimension that needs to be scrutinized. Like other cultural productions, they are one of the "terrains" on which "power, ideology and identities are shaped, produced and/or materialized" (Grayson et al. 156). Not just propaganda films commissioned by official authorities, but all works convey political messages, sometimes unconsciously. Indeed, "most... filmmakers conceive of their products as being apolitical or neutral and... the overwhelmingly primary purpose of Hollywood productions is to turn a profit by entertaining as many people as possible. Yet entertainment is never devoid of social and

ideological content. . . . All movies project a particular geography of social relations. . . . Films reflect, perform, propagate, and reproduce social desires and anxieties” (O’Meara et al. 24–25). By focusing on these dimensions, these researchers have therefore shown how movies contribute to the perpetuation of a given national narrative.⁴

However, these movies convey other kinds of myths that perform essential political roles within these societies (Schöpflin 19). Indeed, myths not only fulfill a cognitive function (making sense of a sometimes brutal and uncertain world) but provide examples for action (the behavioral function) and allow to explain why the group has adopted a certain attitude (the justification function) (Van Ypersele 33; Flood 33–38). The myths conveyed by *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour* about the events of the Summer of 1940 are declinations of two archetypal political myths (i.e., myths that deal specifically with power relations and the exercise of power within a given society), Unity and Savior, the association of which produces a narrative in line with populist rhetoric. Their contents, implications, and relevance are explained in the next sections.

The People’s War

One of the main characteristics of the populist discourse is its emphasis on an allegedly pure, homogenous people (Mudde). The staging of *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour* clearly plays on that string. Indeed, the first myth these movies convey is the idea that, in the midst of a major defeat, civilians united to rescue their vanquished army trapped in France. This alleged ability to unite in the face of a looming threat (the so-called Dunkirk spirit) conveys a major political myth with populist overtones: the myth of Unity (Girardet 139). This postulates that happiness lies in the cohesion of a social community—generally the nation. In this idealized united community, all members strive toward the same goal, regardless of their class or origin.

This emphasis on Unity directly echoes one of the major motivations behind the “Leave” vote, voiced by the Brexiteers throughout the campaign: the idea of a homogenous nation, united against an external enemy. One of the reasons behind the vote was a rejection of globalization and, by corollary, nostalgia for a more community-oriented age. Indeed, “a large part of the British population felt as

though their country was slipping away from them” (Calhoun 59–60). This latter dimension can be put in line with some findings about electoral dynamics in the UK: according to several researchers, the far-right vote can be interpreted as the expression of a sense of loss of community and cultural identity (Bolet, Norris).

More concretely, in *Dunkirk*, the idea of social cohesion underpins the very structure of the movie. The fates of the heroes of the movie’s three “parts” (the BEF soldiers, the civilian sailors and the Royal Air Force [RAF] pilots) are deeply intertwined, which reinforces the idea that all of them are shaping history. Some promotional posters of Nolan’s *Dunkirk* already set the tone. They picture either a group of British soldiers waiting on the beaches or one of the small ships featured in the movie, with the caption: *When 400,000 Men Could Not Get Home, Home Came for Them* (Figures 2 and 3). In this case, home does not stand for the military that rescued the BEF—be it the Home Fleet or the Royal Navy—but rather for the common people who, in this period of national emergency, sailed through the Channel to rescue their fellow citizens. These civilians are the real heroes of Nolan’s picture: they are the only British that manage to get their soldiers back home. This is most evident in the second “part” of the movie, called “The Sea,” which depicts the journey of one of these small ships to Dunkirk to help evacuate the BEF.

This does not mean that *Dunkirk* is historically inaccurate. In this case, myth-making mainly comes from Nolan’s focus: the heroes of this maritime odyssey are civilian sailors, including two adolescents. Even though some civilians did take part in the evacuation, they were not especially important to the action. Nolan himself was aware of the historical reality. In a later interview, he acknowledged the oversimplification: “The idea that small boats rescued guys off the beach and brought them all the way back to England—that was the exception rather than the rule” (Shukla). Having acknowledged the possible distortion of events, the director added: “there were some boats that did take men all the way across. Ultimately, knowing the reality and what really took place, and after looking into it for years, I come out of it with even more respect and admiration for the people who were involved, and even more amazed that it came off the way it did” (Shukla). By primarily stressing the role of civilian sailors, the movie could lead to a misleading metonymy in the mind of the uninformed: this focus could be seen as representative of the evacuation as a whole.



FIGURE 2. *Promotional poster for Dunkirk.* [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

A similar, though shorter and more discrete, exaltation of the role played by the civilians in *Dunkirk* is present in *Darkest Hour*. In this movie, the military aspects of the operation are not central: the



FIGURE 3. *Promotional poster for Dunkirk.* [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

evacuation is just one of the many events the Prime Minister has to deal with in the midst of the *Blitzkrieg*. Therefore, the event is quickly depicted in one short shot: a fleet of “little ships” leaving the



FIGURE 4. *The little ships* in *Darkest Hour*. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

shores of England (Figure 4). In the final panel, those same ships are referred to as part of “Winston’s civilian fleet.” This appellation is misleading since Joe Wright clearly depicts Churchill ordering Admiral Ramsay to gather a large fleet of boats to evacuate the BEF. Like in Nolan’s *Dunkirk*, the role of the Royal Navy in the requisition of the boats is mentioned. However, labelling this gathering “a civilian fleet” and never picturing military vessels or military sailors indirectly reinforces the narrative conveyed in *Dunkirk*, released a few months before: that regular citizens—not military members—spontaneously mobilized to help their defeated army.

The historical reality is more complex. Even though important numbers of small ships were sent to Dunkirk—roughly 700—two nuances must be added. Firstly, these boats were not intended to cross the Channel several times: they mainly served as liaison transports between the beaches and the heavier Royal Navy ships that could not navigate close to the coast. Secondly, most of these small ships were requisitioned from civilians by the Royal Navy (Harman). This latter fact is, quite paradoxically, shown in the very first scenes of the film.

In a subtler way, Unity is also emphasized by the inclusion of the RAF, that, until then, had been excluded from the Dunkirk myth. This recurrent omission can be easily explained. Since the aerial actions mainly took place far from the beaches, returning soldiers

could not witness the protection that the Fighter Command did provide (Summerfield 795). This led to the creation of an enduring myth that the pilots abandoned the BEF soldiers to their fate. To his credit, Nolan produced an accurate depiction of the BEF's involvement in the battle. Indeed, from an historical point of view, "the Dunkirk evacuation was the starting point of almost a year of continuous air combat for the defense of Britain" (Overy 29). Nolan's version is not politically trivial: one of the components of the British national corps, once excluded from the memory of Dunkirk, is now being fully reintegrated, reinforcing the idea that the entire British people, even the individuals who have been traditionally blamed for their alleged lack of action, contributed to the success of the evacuation.

A Nation under the Leadership of a Semi-Divine Politician

In both films, Unity does not spontaneously emerge. A central figure contributes to the communion of all UK citizens regardless of their class, rank, gender, or race: the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. Interestingly, during the Brexit campaign, the figure of Churchill was mobilized by each side to support its cause, which led to vivid debates. While his grandson, Nicholas Soames, said Churchill would have voted "Remain," the Brexiteers argued that "he did not want his country to be fully involved in European integration and would therefore have backed a British exit" (Shirbon). Regardless of the potential veracity of these allegations, the recuperation of Winston Churchill's legacy is indicative of a deeper trend. Indeed, the centrality of the leader is one of the defining features of "populist grammar." As Paul Taggart put it, "populism requires the most extraordinary individuals to lead the most ordinary of people" (1).

In this regard, the Prime Minister depicted in Nolan's and Wright's films is a model for any would-be populist leader. This is clearly visible in *Darkest Hour*, especially in the underground scene. Before making up his mind about the opening of peace talks with Nazi Germany, the exhausted Prime Minister abruptly decides to meet the "average Londoners." After figuring out how to take a ride on the metro as an ordinary citizen, he finally manages to step in a

car. What happens then is highly symbolic. Churchill introduces himself to the citizens, “commun[es] deeply with each one of their names, and asks them whether Britain should stand tall against tyranny. The answer comes roaring back, from citizen after shining-eyed citizen: *Yes! Stand against tyranny!* The scene culminates with Churchill offering words of Macaulay that are completed, in a flawless quotation, by a vibrant black Londoner” (Gleiberman). Since this is the only time that common citizens are pictured in Wright’s film, the impact of the scene is very powerful. Symbolically, the Prime Minister’s will to carry on the struggle is completely endorsed by his people.

This scene, which is a pure invention, gives a distorted impression of communion between the Prime Minister and his constituents. As François Kersaudy notes, Churchill was not always that popular with the British public. In December 1939, according to the British Institute of Public Opinion, 51.69% of survey respondents supported Chamberlain as Prime Minister while only 30.27% wanted to see Churchill entering 10 Downing Street (Kersaudy 17). In terms of policy, this movie overlooks another aspect: until March 1940, one Brit in four continued to favor Chamberlain’s appeasement policy (British Institute of Public Opinion 78). Nevertheless, in the various cinematic and televisual productions that pictured him since then, this myth has been virtually unchallenged. Moreover, it goes hand in hand with another one: Churchill’s leadership saved the United Kingdom. As Andrew Roberts showed, in an essay revisiting all the depictions of Churchill in cinema and television since the 1930s, the former Prime Minister had been glorified until the beginning of the 2010s. From then on, more revisionist depictions began to flourish (Roberts). This is clearly not the case in *Darkest Hour* and *Dunkirk*, which restore the old narrative. *Darkest Hour* eulogizes the Prime Minister as the right man in the right place, the only politician willing to carry on the struggle. All the members of his own party are either reluctant to fight or in favor of peace negotiations with Hitler. This real cleavage between Churchill and the rest of his cabinet has been amplified. Neville Chamberlain’s attitude in the movie contrasts with his real stance in that critical time. At the end of May 1940, “though appeasement might have seemed irresistible at such a moment, Chamberlain supported Churchill, a factor overlooked by the many later critics” (Overy 31). In the movie, however,

the former Prime Minister is hardly more than Lord Halifax's lackey, the latter needing the former to topple Churchill.

By constantly insisting on the rift between the Prime Minister and his cabinet members, the director forges the image of Churchill as "a man of the people," reinforcing the impression of popular unity behind his leadership, while opposition is confined to political circles. The "Old Lion" seems closer to the common people than to the members of the political establishment. His future colleagues reject as "absurd" his nomination as Prime Minister; even the King initially admits that he would prefer Neville Chamberlain, the appeaser, and Lord Halifax, the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs who wants have discussions with Hitler. In contrast, the symbiosis between the ordinary population and its leader is present from the beginning of the movie. While heading to the Royal Palace for his nomination, Churchill looks at the people working in the streets of London. Both intrigued and fascinated, he tells his driver with a touch of regret: "I've never ridden a bus. [...] I've never queued for bread. I believe I can boil an egg. But only because I've seen it done."

These remarks show Churchill seemingly as an outsider to his own people, but his multiple flaws—his heavy drinking and smoking, his bad temper—only make him more likeable and closer to them. In contrast, most of his colleagues keep a stiff upper lip and display highly aristocratic manners. This depiction of a Prime Minister in communion with his constituents is therefore perfectly in line with the "populist grammar" of the pro-Leave movement. In populist rhetoric, the leader is not only a charismatic strong man: he is also the embodiment of "the pure" people against the corrupted elites (Mudde 68). This anti-elitist attitude was a powerful driving force behind the pro-Leave vote (Iakhnis et al.). During the 2016 campaign, Nigel Farage presented himself as "a British 'common man' [...]" in tune with the ideas and interests of 'the people,'" opposed to the allegedly remote elites of Brussels (Mudde and Kaltwasser 36).

Another characteristic of Wright's Churchill brings him closer to populist standards: he is the epitome of the providential savior. The providential savior is another major political myth identified by Girardet, and some populist leaders like depicting themselves this way (Girardet; Schneider 857). More precisely, Churchill roughly corresponds to the Cincinnatus model. He is an experimented statesman who returns from his forced retirement to save the nation from

collapse (Girardet 73–74). However, unlike his Roman predecessor, Churchill has not always made successful choices. What makes Churchill outstanding is that, according to Wright, he is always lucid about Hitler's real intentions. This is why, when his cabinet encourages him to negotiate, he furiously declares: "How many more dictators must be wooed, appeased, good God, given immense privileges before we learn? You cannot reason with a tiger when your head is in its mouth!"

In his prescience, Wright's Churchill is more than a leader: he is both a prophet and a savior, nearly in the Christian meaning of the term. Throughout the movie, the use of religious metaphors reinforces this impression of quasi-divine providence. In the very first minutes of the film, the introductory sequence informs the viewer that the Parliament has lost *faith* in its leader, Neville Chamberlain, and is looking for a successor. Religiosity is not limited to dialogue: it is also suggested by the film's cinematography. Churchill is introduced to the viewer through the eyes of a new secretary who arrives at his home on May 10, 1940. She then heads to the politician's bedroom through dimly lit corridors. As the newcomer hears of the German advance in Europe, the light becomes weaker and weaker. When she arrives in the future Prime Minister's room, the whole stage is plunged into darkness. Churchill then lights a match, which enlightens his face, making him, symbolically, the light in the darkness (Figure 5).

The final scene from *Dunkirk* also gives a mystical aura to the Prime Minister. Back in the UK after their desperate struggle in France, the BEF soldiers seek to understand why their fellow countrymen welcome them so warmly. They look at the newspaper in which Churchill's June 4 "We shall fight on the beaches" speech is printed. While epic music grows in the background, one of them begins to read the Prime Minister's address. At the end of the speech, a quasi-religious silence falls—the first and only silent scene of the film. A black screen announcing the end of the movie then suddenly appears.

Rule Britannia!

Dunkirk and *Darkest Hour* not only stress the alleged exemplarity of the British nation and its leader: they also overemphasize the stakes



FIGURE 5. *Churchill's first appearance in Darkest Hour.* [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

of the operations that took place near the British Islands and the role of the sole British military forces. This focus contributes to the perpetuation of a UK-centered narrative, highly compatible with populist rhetoric. In *Darkest Hour*, the various characters seem to believe that the fate of the British Empire is being played on the beaches of Northern France. The same idea is implied in *Dunkirk*: once the BEF soldiers are finally brought home, the worst seems to be over. This emphasis on Britain alone omits other theaters of operations that, at that time, were equally important for the survival of the British Empire. Even if the Battle of Dunkirk and the ensuing Battle of Britain were ultimately “won,” it should not be forgotten that, simultaneously, “the war against Italy in north and east Africa was a major contest [...]. In August, Italian armies invaded Somaliland, and in September crossed into Egypt. [...] This war against Italy exposed how fragile Britain’s position was in 1940” (Overy 133).

Furthermore, both movies recycle the idea that a German invasion of the British islands was imminent in the Summer of 1940. Once again, this is particularly visible in *Darkest Hour*’s underground scene, in which a group of Londoners unanimously swears to the Prime Minister that it will carry on the struggle at all cost. However, the idea that Britain was on the brink of invasion is a complex historical issue. In 1940, Hitler was “in no rush to settle with Britain”: invasion was “to take place if other kinds of political and military

pressure failed” (Overy 41). Therefore, even though there is “no doubt that under the right circumstances Hitler was serious about invading Britain in 1940,” there “remained, none the less, a genuine ambivalence in his attitude to the British problem. He understood how difficult the practical questions were and was keen to avoid ‘risky experiments’ and ‘high losses’ [...] It is evident that not a lot was needed to deter Hitler from the idea of invading Britain” (Overy 140). This aspect is largely occulted from the fictional depictions of this period.

This UK centrism can also be perceived in these movies’ focus. Indeed, their staging suggest that the British managed to overcome hardship mainly on their own. This sole overemphasis on the BEF led to some controversy in France. In the week that followed *Dunkirk*’s release, some journalists blamed Nolan for ignoring the crucial role played by the French Army. One of them wrote: “Where are, in this movie, the 120,000 French soldiers who were also been evacuated from Dunkirk? Where are the 40,000 others that sacrificed themselves to defend the city against a numerically superior enemy? Where are the members of the First Army that, abandoned by its allies [...], prevented the Wehrmacht to break through Dunkirk?” (Mandelbaum)⁵.

In reality, some of those events were actually shown or at least suggested in the movie. The British evacuation of the French is mentioned once the rescue of the BEF is achieved, and some of their soldiers even appear in two short scenes. In one shot, even colonial soldiers are featured. However, Mandelbaum is right in stating that their sacrifice—which allowed the rescue of the BEF—is never equally glorified. Besides, *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour* hardly mention one event that made Dynamo possible and on which the Allies had no influence whatsoever: the so-called *Haltbefehl*. On May 24, 1940, Hitler ordered the German forces to stop their advance on a line spreading from Lens to Gravelines. Regardless of the reasons that led the Nazi leader to give such an order, it saved the BEF. On some parts of the front, tanks were less than 20 kilometers away from Dunkirk and would virtually have faced no resistance whatsoever should the assault order have been given (Vanwelkenhuyzen 13). Accordingly, this two-day halt gave the Allies enough time to reorganize the defense of the city and secure the evacuation.

These omissions are not trivial. By glossing over the role of the French armed forces and by neglecting the “luck” factor, these films attribute the success of the evacuation to the British alone and reinforce the idea that they are “an indomitable island people,” an age-old narrative which was abundantly recycled during the 2016 campaign among the “Leave” supporters (Kumar; Shirbon). Depicting only the battles around Great Britain helps perpetuate a UK-centric narrative with more palpable stakes for the average UK viewer. Indeed, the evacuation of Dunkirk, that is, the Battle of Britain, was the prelude of a confrontation that, until today, continues to be seen as *the* event that saved Britain from invasion (Overy). Such UK-centered, overly dramatic narratives continue to be conveyed in public arenas. In the London *Science Museum* for instance, the engine that equipped the RAF fighters in 1940 is presented to the visitors as “the engine that saved Britain” (Figure 6).

We can reasonably argue that the success of these narratives will remain unchanged in the near future and might even increase over time. Indeed, as Mark Connelly argues, they “encapsulat[e] features of British history that are enduringly popular: British isolationism, patriotic sacrifice and the success of the few against impossible odds due to intrinsically noble qualities plus a capacity for improvisation” (Connelly 90). These features are perfectly in line with populist rhetoric, which emphasizes the alleged exemplarity of a given nation. In the UK, these events continue to be referred to, in some national narratives, as Britain’s “finest hour” (Reynolds)—a phrase popularized by...Winston Churchill. Therefore, given the popularity of those romanticized accounts, it is not surprising that some Brexiteers regularly reminded the British people of their glorious past by establishing more or less direct parallels between the EU and Nazi Germany. As Matthew Legget writes, “many Brexiteers perceive Brussels as the new Berlin and the European Commission the new Reichstag” (49). Boris Johnson, for example, declared: “Napoleon, Hitler, various people tried [to dominate Europe], and it ends tragically. The EU is an attempt to do this by different methods.” A few days later, a Conservative, pro-Brexit politician campaigner, Jacob Rees-Mogg, affirmed that “the former London mayor’s comments were” absolutely true “[and] said Hitler and Napoleon wanted to create a single European power...by force. And the EU is trying to do it by stealth” (“EU Referendum”).

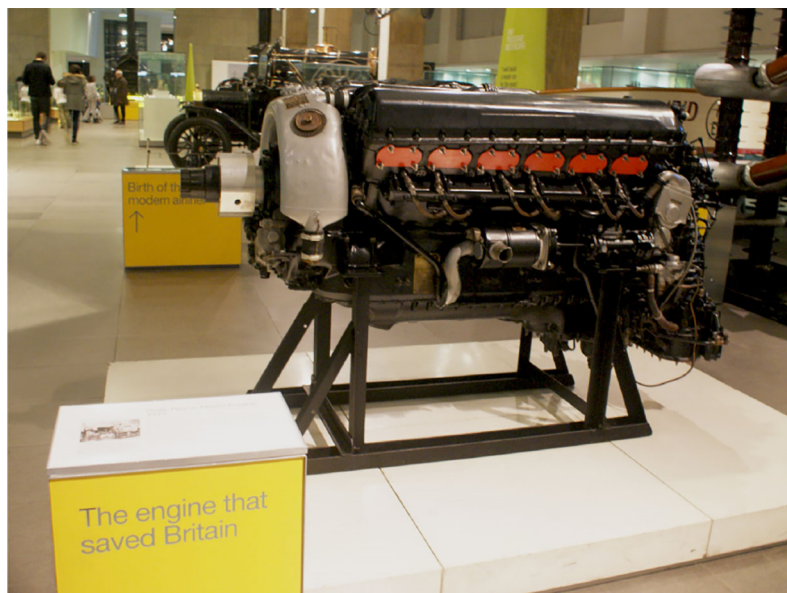


FIGURE 6. *The Rolls-Royce engine* in the Science Museum (London). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jpcr.13227)]

Conclusion: The Telltale Past

In this article, I have sought to uncover and make sense of the myths conveyed through [Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk*](#) and [Joe Wright's *Darkest Hour*](#). The way these movies account for the events of the Spring of 1940 can be summed up as follows: a united British people, unanimously supporting Churchill's providential leader, stood firm against the existential threat posed by Nazi Germany. I have shown that, with its emphasis on the homogeneity of the people, its depiction of Winston Churchill, and its UK-centered view of the political–military issues at stake in 1940, this narrative directly echoes the populist rhetoric at play during the Brexit campaign. The sole fact that Operation Dynamo is at the center of these films is, in this regard, indicative of their populist-compatible stance. Interestingly, the films' directors did not seek to revive the popular narrative of a UK fighting Hitler “alone” (as previously explained, this role has usually been fulfilled by the Battle of Britain and its latter evocations). Rather, they updated the myth of Dunkirk and its aftermath as a moment of alleged national unity.

The fact that movies encapsulate the debates and tensions of a given era is certainly not new. What this study suggests, however, is that historical movies can mythologize History and, while doing so, contributing to the promotion of archetypal political myths. This factor has been overlooked in film studies. Indeed, the researchers examining political myths on screen have mainly analyzed how films perpetuate a certain national narrative. I have gone beyond this reading to show that movies, with their political myths, can exacerbate some deep trends at play within a given society. That movies play on already existing currents of belief can partly explain the success of *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour*. The evolution of political myths through mainstream movies warrants further research, as does the mythologizing nature of cinematic grammar.

On a more normative level, the success of political myths such as Unity or Savior is a taste of things to come. According to French historian Raoul Girardet, these myths mostly emerge in societies in crisis, when “the proposed models of community life become meaningless, illegitimate.” In times filled with uncertainty and fear about the present and the future, “us” turns into “them”: “instead of identifying with the existing norms of global society, the group [...] defines itself as different” (Girardet 179).⁵ The idealized United Kingdom depicted in *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour* echoes these very fears that led a segment of the British people to vote for Brexit. Nolan and Wright’s movies can be seen as an answer to these anxieties, particularly to the sense of eroding community and sovereignty. Through the myths they convey, these films tell a story of nostalgia, resentment, fear, and anger, a series of feelings that not only made Brexit possible but that are now shaping contemporary politics.

Endnotes

¹ *Dunkirk* was nominated for eight Oscars and eight BAFTA Awards and received respectively three and one; *Darkest Hour* was nominated for six Oscars and nine BAFTA Awards and received two of each.

² Even in Hamilton’s *Battle of Britain*, one of the first movies to emphasize the role played by women, foreign pilots and, to a certain extent, civilians (Aldgate 213–14), the importance of this handful of pilots remained central.

³ In this paper, History with a capital “H” refers to the object studied by professional historians.

⁴ For a concrete example, see for instance Doraiswamy.

⁵ Translated by the author.

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Simon Desplanque: PhD in Political and Social Sciences (Université catholique de Louvain – UCLouvain). Researcher and Teaching Assistant in International Relations. Contact: simon.desplanque@uclouvain.be