

Sound in Dunkirk

Dunkirk is a 2017 war film that depicts the evacuation of British and French troops from Dunkirk during the second World War. It was directed by Christopher Nolan and its score was composed by Hans Zimmer. The film shows the evacuation from three perspectives: land, sea and air. Although the film has little dialogue compared to other war films, it moves the narrative forwards using sound design and the film's score.

Score and Shepard's Tone:

Hans Zimmer uses a Shepard's Tone throughout most of the film's score. A Shepard's Tone consists of three sound waves that have been separated by octaves. The higher tone will either gradually descend or ascend in pitch as well as the bass tone while the tone in the middle will often stay the same. This is to give the auditory illusion that the tone will either descend or ascend and in the film's case, it ascends, creating a sense of tension for the audience. This can be seen in many instances in the film. For example, during the film's climax where soldiers in the ocean are engulfed in flames and during the final dogfight when the German dive-bomber is about to drop a bomb on the remaining soldiers on the pier as well as Commander Bolton. The use of this non-diegetic sound creates extreme tension for the audience because the tone in the music seems as if it is constantly rising, emphasising how the soldiers and Bolton are awaiting their death. The score then abruptly stops when the bomber is shot down by the remaining Spitfire, emphasising the soldiers' and Bolton's relief. Additionally, the use of the tone during the fire scene can be used to underline the danger that all the soldiers are in.



Sound Design:

Sound design in this film is extremely important as a narrative device. The most prominent of these are both the sounds of the Spitfires and the German Stuka dive-bombers. The sounds are extremely accurate to what they would have been like to the British soldiers in during the evacuation. The spitfires were actually recorded using the real planes and although there were no Skuta dive-bombers left in existence during production of the film, the sounds were recorded using an electric

siren inside of a large steel drum. This was because the bombers had a very distinctive 'scream' type of sound as the planes dived. This diegetic sound was used many instances in the film to build up tension along with the Shepard's Tone as well as create a sense of dread for the characters as they were aware that the specific sound would signal their doom. During the final dogfight, the last remaining Spitfire's engines stop because of the lack of fuel the aircraft has and goes silent. This could reinforce the fact that all there is no more danger for the soldiers as the last German ships have seemingly been shot down. However, this peace is interrupted by the distinct sounds of one remaining Skuta and the soldiers once again become fearful for their lives as the Spitfire seems to have disappeared. Finally, the lack of dialogue in the film can suggest how hopeless and weary all the soldiers feel and helps build empathy for the audience.

