

# Dunkirk

## Nolan & 70mm Film Strike Back

Mark Trompeteler on Christopher Nolan, his epic new film and the triumphant return of the grand cinematic vision.

One of the major significant pre-cursors of today's Premium Large Format brands, in the days of celluloid analogue cinema, was the worldwide premium exhibition format of 70mm analogue film. When sitting in the BFI IMAX a few years ago watching Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* in 15 perf/70mm IMAX format, I was convinced that this would probably be the very last time I would ever see a major commercial feature film, in a modern cinema, as part of a contemporary limited 70mm release. →



► **Cinema fights back: the epic nature of *Dunkirk* makes it imperative to watch it on the big screen**

### 70MM — AN ARCHIVE FORMAT

Obviously I was wrong. What I had not considered in my thoughts on the last days of 70mm film were a number of factors. First, the persuasive powers of major industry figures such as Christopher Nolan, Quentin Tarantino, Kenneth Branagh, the Weinstein Company, and others, to lobby and persuade studios to finance the shooting of major new feature films on 65mm film.

Second, the realisation by a number of Hollywood studios, that if the budgets of their big “tent pole” feature films are getting so big, and that if they want to be able to access and exploit these highly expensive visual assets, e.g. the latest *Star Wars* or *Bond* film, in 50, or 60, or 100 years’ time, then the most reliable and cheapest way of accessing and archiving those assets would be if they were stored on large format film, and not as a digital file. Who knows the total cost and the reliability of archiving and accessing a very valuable digital file for a period of 50 or 60 years?

Third, some industry observers and trade journals have speculated that possibly as much as between \$8-10million was spent on re-installing 70mm projectors into cinemas around the world for the 70mm release of *The Hateful Eight*. Such initiatives are said to be justified by box office figures indicating that the profits from continuous full houses in a small number of niche 70mm venues, on the release of such a film, compare very favourably to the box office take in less than full houses in a very much larger number of digital venues.

### 70MM — A GROWING TREND

The initial opening of Thomas Anderson’s picture *The Master* in 2012 was in just 14 70mm venues worldwide. Christopher Nolan lobbied and persuaded Paramount and Warner Brothers to screen his 2014 *Interstellar* in 50 70mm-enabled IMAX



venues. Tarantino’s 70mm version of *The Hateful Eight* opened in 70 locations in its first week, with a huge amount of accompanying publicity. This summer *Dunkirk* opened in 125 70mm venues worldwide. Warner Bros’ press releases announced that it was the widest release in the format in 25 years.

Lastly, I cannot help being mildly ecstatic that the championing, celebration

and love for 70mm amongst an older generation of die-hard enthusiasts has seen some vindication and some part-revival of this wonderful analogue format. They are epitomised by such individuals as Thomas Hauerlev, Bill Lawrence and many others, and such resources and events as the in70mm.com website, and the 70mm festivals that are held internationally — not least the annual Widescreen Weekend festival in Bradford (*see page 15 for details*).

### DUNKIRK — A RARE PREVIEW OPPORTUNITY

Through the thoughtfulness of a friend, and fellow IMIS member, Mark Lyndon, on 13 July I was sat in NFT1 at BFI Southbank for a special 70mm pre-release screening of *Dunkirk*, introduced by Christopher Nolan. Nolan had just been ferried across the River Thames from the red carpet world première at the Odeon Leicester Square, to which he returned once the house lights had dimmed at our parallel universe screening. This was a special screening running in tandem with the world première on the other side of the river. Only *Interstellar* Nolan could be at two screenings at the same time!



► **Redefining “immersive”:** audiences get a real sense of the cold, wet, anxious nature of the Dunkirk battle



## “THE CELEBRATION AND LOVE FOR 70MM AMONGST A GENERATION OF DIE-HARD ENTHUSIASTS HAS SEEN SOME VINDICATION”

Nolan and his wife, his producer Emma Thomas, came on stage and he talked about how he had been wanting to tell the story of Dunkirk on film for some time, and raise the awareness of this historical event globally. He described how it was a critical moment in modern history that has had a profound impact on the western world and everything that has followed. If Dunkirk had had another outcome we could all be living in a very different world.

### A LOVE OF 70MM FILM

Nolan also spoke of his love for the 70mm IMAX format, how it can create immersive experiences and convey intensity in storytelling. Both his wife, Emma, and he extolled the merits of film generally, including 35mm. Emma also recounted an anecdote about an embarrassing accident that occurred during the filming of *Dunkirk*. At one point a very expensive 70mm IMAX camera was dropped into the sea and was submerged in salt water for a not insignificant time. After some careful flushing and drying out it still worked. Could that happen with a digital camera?

### SPECIAL IMAGES AND A SPECIAL QUALITY

To me the screening of the 70mm film had that softer, warmer, slightly glossy surface quality to the film image in comparison to what I often feel is the crisper, precise, colder surface quality of a digital image.

The two are different, and you can have futile arguments about which is better — or not — forever. The main point concerning this screening, and the film itself, was about another more important factor.

Some of the best moments of cinema are those where meaning, emotion, story and action are conveyed solely through the use of images, editing, music and non-dialogue sound. This concept of “pure cinema” goes right back to the silent days. Think: the pregnant mother crossing the moors, to the workhouse, in a storm, at the start of David



▲ Crafting intelligent films for discerning viewers: filmmakers Christopher Nolan and Emma Thomas

Lean’s *Oliver Twist*; The Blue Danube sequence in *2001*; some desert and other sequences in Lean’s *Lawrence of Arabia*.

### PURE CINEMA

From its beginning, to its closing moments, *Dunkirk* is pure cinema. It propels the audience into an immersive experience of what it might have felt like to be at Dunkirk. It uses very few titles to explain what is going on. Dialogue is sparse and not essential to understanding what is happening, (useful in a global cinema market). The ticking clock/pounding heartbeat audio motif racks up the intensity throughout the film. It’s use of intercutting between three different “viewpoints” of events is also highly cinematic. Use of images, editing, music and non-dialogue sound reign supreme. **CT**

## AN INTELLIGENT EPIC FOR A NEW GENERATION

Many of the blockbuster franchise, superhero and remake movies in commercial cinema are somewhat trite. Nolan by comparison, is now consistently producing intelligent epic films that do not patronise the audience, keep one eye on the imperative to provide entertainment and drama, and another on box office appeal. In this he is a worthy successor to such film-makers as David Lean, Alfred Hitchcock, and Stanley Kubrick for our modern contemporary times. *Dunkirk* uses the old box office strategy of casting a pop icon as one of the actors. It handles violence and destruction of war in such a manner that young teenagers can go and see this and not be traumatised by 15 or 18 certificate blood and gore. In *Dunkirk* Christopher Nolan has produced a mass audience, wide age demographic, intelligent epic war film for modern times — a war film that still has an appeal to the music video/Marvel/DC comics superhero/video games generation. In doing so he has furthered the cause of 70mm film, arguably to a much wider demographic than *The Hateful Eight*, and also added some welcome quality to the global box office. **CT**