Dunkerque and *Dunkirk* (Christopher Nolan, 2017)

An interview with Jean-Yves Frémont, town councillor in employment, economic development and tourism, and Sabine l'Hermet, director of Dunkerque tourist office

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- ¹ *Dunkirk* focusses on a major event of the Second World War: Operation Dynamo (May 26-June 4, 1940) which consisted in evacuating the Allied forces trapped by German troops in Dunkerque's harbour and on its beaches (the British evacuated more than 330,000 soldiers in nine days).¹ This \$100 million Warner Bros. production, featuring Kenneth Branagh, Tom Hardy, Cillian Murphy and Mark Rylance among others, was not only shot in England and in the Netherlands, but also in the French city of Dunkerque where the actual events took place.
- ² Welcoming the shooting of international big-budget productions has become a worldwide competitive market, and the landing of *Dunkirk* on the beaches of this northern French coast city² was the result of long and secret negotiations. It contributed to the immersive and authentic experience wished for by Christopher Nolan³ that audiences could watch on IMAX screens.⁴ The present interview sheds light on how all this came to be and its touristic aftermath for the city of Dunkerque.

Raphaël Eppreh-Butet: Could you give us details on the origin of the collaboration between the city of Dunkerque (France) and the film *Dunkirk*, and its economic benefits?

Dunkirk focusses on a major event of the Second World War, that is to say *Operation Dynamo* (May 26-June 4, 1940) which consisted in evacuating the Allied forces trapped by German troops in Dunkerque's harbour and on its beaches (the British evacuated more than 330,000 soldiers in nine days).

Our beautiful story with *Dunkirk* began when Christopher Nolan and his team made a first secret and detailed visit to the city of Dunkerque in 2015. There was also a meeting between a representative from Warner Bros. France and a town councillor about locally shooting a blockbuster. We then received confirmation in January 2016 that a film directed by Christopher Nolan would be shot here. Consequently, Patrice

Vergriete, Dunkerque city Mayor, created a local film commission. It is one of his best achievements when it comes to positioning Dunkerque as a possible film location.

The film crew, helped by local technicians and craftspeople, started building different sets at the end of February 2016, while parts of the city were carefully modified so as to erase any modern detail and give them a 1940 appearance.

Shooting itself started on May 24, 2016 for 6 weeks and took place where the real events had unfolded some 76 years before. It involved 450 French technicians and more than 2,000 local extras. According to a study published by the CNC in January 2017,⁵ €19 million were spent on shooting *Dunkirk* in the Hauts-de-France area, with Dunkerque receiving €10.5 million.

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REB: What was the role played by the specifically created steering committee and Dunkerque tourist office in relation to the release of *Dunkirk* in 2017?

The steering committee, set up in September 2016, and Dunkerque Tourist Office played an important role in promoting the release of the film such as creating, as a kind of echo to Warner Bros.' *Dunkirk-360° video experience*, its own 360° organisation. It included the creation of the *Dunkerque Operation Dynamo*® brand, a photo contest highlighting the city of Dunkerque (from July 1 to August 31, 2017), a discovery programme of our city (by land, air or sea, as well as a guided tour of Dunkerque seaside streets and beaches), and the creation or refurbishing of sites and places linked to remembrance tourism (including a 'Behind-the Scene' exhibit with some elements from the film sets, and the Princess Elizabeth⁶ that we transformed into a restaurant). Finally other tourism partners were also involved such as the employees of the tourist information offices, while the restaurant waiters wore *Dunkirk*-labelled t-shirts distributed by the city of Dunkerque.

The 'Behind-the Scene' exhibit

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Dunkirk Merchandise

©Pierre Volot, Ville de Dunkerque

The Princess Elizabeth

A paddle steamer built in 1926 and that saved 1,673 soldiers in four crossings during *Operation Dynamo*.

© Hilda George

REB: What can you tell us about film-induced tourism after the release of *Dunkirk*?

In July and August 2017, there was a 36% increase in the number of tourists at the belfry and seaside resort tourism information desks, while Dunkerque welcomed about 1 million visitors.

We also noticed an 176% increase in the number of British tourists in July and a 536% one in August, while there were also more tourists from Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands.

According to the figures from a survey conducted between July 20 and August 30, 2017 of 750 French and foreign tourists, it turned out that 93 % of respondents had heard about the film, 32 % of them had seen the film, and 28% had come to Dunkerque solely or partly as a result of the film having been shot here. 24% of them also wanted to see where the film had been shot, while 39% knew about other films or series that had been filmed in the area such as *Weekend at Dunkirk* (Henri Verneuil, 1964), *Welcome to the Sticks* (Dany Boon, 2008) or the TV series *Baron Noir* (2016, 2018, 2020).

The first feedback from professionals in Dunkerque pointed to an increase in the number of foreign visitors who started extending their stay.

There was also an increased awareness and media exposure for the city of Dunkerque: between July and August 2017, we welcomed more than 70 French and foreign journalists who generated hundreds of articles and news reports in local and national French media (press, radio, TV and social media), as well as in foreign countries.

The 2018 season, after an exceptional 2017, confirmed the dynamic growth of tourism, and for example tourist attendance at Dunkerque seaside resort increased by 18% between 2017 and 2018.

REB: What about Dunkerque Tourist Office's attendance figures?

Dunkerque Tourist Office's attendance figures give us a good overview of our general tourist attendance. For 2018, they confirmed the increase in tourist attendance that had been a continuing trend over the past four years. After an exceptional year in 2017, the growing popularity of Dunkerque as a tourist destination resulted in 2018 in an 11% increase in the number of visitors at the belfry and seaside resort tourism information desks. In fact, this represented an 82% cumulative increase in attendance for both desks since 2014!

A new factor was the growing number of foreign tourists, who represented 49 % of our customers in 2018, compared to 35 % in 2017, and 31 % in 2016. Among them were nationalities we had hardly ever seen before.

It is indeed that increase in the number of foreign tourists that has fostered tourism growth in Dunkerque.

REB: What kind of figures did you get from tourism professionals?

For the 2018 summer season, approximately 65 tourism professionals responded to the online survey conducted from August 22 to August 24, and here are the results according to their fields of activities:

Hotels and Aparthotels: there was an increase in the number of foreign customers (86% were Belgian, 72% British and 50% Dutch)

Campsites: French customers from the Northern part of France (the Hauts-de-France region) were the most numerous, followed by our Belgian neighbours (80%), then French customers from other French regions (60%), British people (20%), Germans (20%) and Dutch (20%).

Restaurants: Belgians ranked high on the list of tourists who liked to go to the restaurants in the Dunkerque region, followed by tourists from the Hauts-de-France, and the British ones.

The increase in foreign customers was noted by 81% of restaurant respondents.

REB: So, can we say that there has been a Nolan/*Dunkirk* effect?

Usually, the weather constitutes one of the main criteria that helps people decide where to go for their summer holidays. Other factors having an impact on the choice of tourism destinations also include the organisation of events, together with the possibility of getting access to cultural and leisure activities.

In our case, Dunkerque has been committed for the past three years to revitalizing its territory. Developing tourism and hosting large-scale events is therefore part of our collective desire to present a new, more positive image of the city of Dunkerque. Our tourism policy is based on three key axes that are the seaside resort with its water sports, remembrance tourism and natural areas.

So the exposure Dunkerque got from Christopher Nolan's film, together with all the information we provided to understand *Operation Dynamo*, definitely contributed locally to the development of remembrance tourism, which led to an increase in the number of tourists, notably foreign ones, visiting dedicated sites and other places.

This was confirmed by a face-to-face survey of 803 French and foreign tourists carried out in the city centre and the seaside resort from July 7 to August 23, 2018.

People were asked the following questions: "Have you heard about or have you seen *Dunkirk*?" and "If so, did it influence your decision to visit Dunkerque?". 60% to 70% of French, Belgian and other foreign tourists answered "yes" to the first question. However, less than 40% of French and Belgian tourists answered "yes" to the second question, while about 57% of other foreign tourists answered positively. This shows that French and Belgian tourists were more interested in the seaside resort and its related activities, while other foreign tourists were more interested in *Dunkirk*-themed sites.

Between March 15 and August 28, 2018, 50,000 people visited *Dunkerque 1940 - Operation Dynamo* museum, with foreign tourists also representing a majority of visitors: British (30.78%), French (15.35%), Dutch (8.02%), Americans (7.25%), Belgians (6.96%), Germans (6.81%), and people from Scandinavian countries (6.40%). There were also tourists from New Zealand, Australia and Canada (4.96%), from the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland (4.34%), from Asian countries (2.55%), Italy (1.55%), Spain (1.13%), Latin America (1.09%), Switzerland (0.92%), Ireland (0.91%), and Portugal (0.22%).

Dunkerque 1940 -Operation Dynamo museum

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NOTES

1. A theme previously featured in *Week-End Á Zuydcoote* (Henri Verneuil, 1964) and *Atonement* (Joe Wright, 2007) for example.
2. Also known for its beaches, its big harbour and ferry line(s) as well as for its joyful and vibrant carnival where herrings are thrown to crowds. *Spirit of Dunkerque* homepage <https://www.dunkerque-tourisme.fr> <accessed on January 8, 2022>.

3. Preview screening of *Dunkirk* in London, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hkbl68gj_zk <accessed December 20, 2021>. Christopher Nolan is a British film director, producer and screenwriter who has managed to keep his own personal style (notably seen in *Memento*, 2000) in such blockbusters as *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Prestige* (2006), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Inception* (2010), *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), *Man of Steel* (2013), *Interstellar* (2014), and more recently *Tenet* (2020).
 4. The film eventually grossed \$527 million (\$190 million, i.e., 36% of its box office in North America, and \$337 million, i.e., 64% of its box office, in the rest of the world). https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt5013056/?ref_=bo_se_r_1 <accessed on December 20, 2021>.
 5. Direction des études, des statistiques et de la prospective du CNC, "Merci ! L'impact des tournages sur le tourisme," January 23, 2018, https://www.cnc.fr/cinema/etudes-et-rapports/etudes-prospectives/limpact-des-tournages-sur-le-tourisme_227677 <accessed on December 21, 2020>. The CNC study highlights the fact that every euro invested by a local authority in film shooting generates €6.62 in direct local benefits (50% in wages, 12% in technical expenses and 38% in other shooting-related expenses), as well as €1 in tourism-related activities (i.e. 33% for accommodation, 20% for catering, 20% for leisure and 24% for transport). So altogether, each shooting-related euro generates a total amount of €7.62.
 6. The Princess Elizabeth was a paddle steamer built in 1926 and that saved 1,673 soldiers in four crossings during *Operation Dynamo*.
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AUTHOR

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Raphaël Eppreh-Butet received a PhD in North American studies from the University Sorbonne-Nouvelle Paris 3. He is currently an Associate Professor of American studies at the University of Lille. He is a member of the Centre d'Etudes en Civilisations, Langues et Lettres Etrangères (CECILLE, Université de Lille, France). His research interests include immigration to the United States, American immigration policy, and American foreign policy.