A Fatal Encounter in War. A Case of Impact of PTSD on Civilians in Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk*

By Gianluca Cinelli

Dunkirk (2017) as a war movie seems to direct itself toward a new way of representing war on the screen. No gore, no mangled bodies are to be seen. It seems as though the director meant to say that horror in war does not only depend on the amount of terrifying visions of slaughter, but rather on the psychological perception of fear as an overwhelming emotion that constantly drives the combatant to choose between two basic actions: fighting or fleeing.

Dunkirk tells a story of flight rather than fight. Between the end of May and the early days of June 1940 about 400.000 encircled British and French soldiers were evacuated in a few days from the beaches of Dunkerque, in northern France. Every available ship was employed for the rescue, including a number of private yachts and fishing boats. In the movie the crew of one of these private yachts play a major role, and their story suggests these few lines of reflection about a case of lethal encounter between combatants and civilians.

The small boat rescues a British soldier who has remained stranded at sea for some time, his boat having been sunken. This young soldier is affected by a serious form of PTSD. Fear has taken hold of his mind and he categorically refuses to be taken back to the coast of Dunkirk, insofar as this is the route and task of the small boat. He struggles with the captain and eventually with one of the two young boys who are sailing on the yacht from England to Dunkirk to rescue the stranded troops. In the fight the young boy, a captain's family friend, falls and is concussed. It is an ugly accident from which he will eventually die.

The British soldier will never grow conscious of the tragic aftermath of his revolt. He acted out of utter fear and his strong desire to escape the madness of being encircled, trapped between the German troops and the sea, bombed and chased like a sitting-duck. He meant no harm, but his action was violent enough to easily overcome the young boy. He does not acknowledge the death of the boy and will eventually leave the boat, after they reach the English shore, without being fully aware of the gruesome effect that war has been having on him.

In fact, in order to save himself he involuntarily kills one of those fellow citizens, to defend whom he had gone to war: a young brave man who put his own life at stake to

save him and his comrades from peril and death. How does it come to be? How does war change the mind and even the personality of those who are involved in it? Does war make people more courageous, morally stronger or ethically wiser? Such questions the movie raises that are worth answering.

And finally, how should we judge such a character as this young soldier? Is he vile? Is he a felon? Is he to blame?

In the end, the captain's son does not reveal to the soldier that his young unlucky friend died. He just says to comfort the traumatised soldier that his friend will be all right, and then he lets the castaway go to join his comrades. It seems a profoundly human action, full of piety and understanding. One could wonder whether some disguised rhetorical claim is embedded here. I do not believe it. *Dunkirk* is more than just a war movie, rather a work that chooses war to represent the wonder of human ethical response (in its broad variety) to a basically moral quest: what should one do, when the moment demands that everyone be involved into great and dangerous events, which the vast majority is not ready or willing to take part into? Although someone else is supposed to go abroad to fight and die, we could be called up to back those who are over there, because their failure could mean our doom as well. Being brave is not necessarily a matter of exquisite heroism. It could just have to do with taking up one's own responsibility, to the very end no matter what.