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The Portrayal of Claustrophobic Behaviours and Events in Film

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Abstract

The recent outbreak of Covid-19 as a global pandemic has taken a toll on people worldwide. Based on an article from Malaysiakini, the number of calls to the Crisis Preparedness and Response Centre (CPRC) increases significantly everyday indicating the large community who faces emotional and psychological distress during these hard times. Some have even related the situation as claustrophobic events. For creative content creators, claustrophobia can be an attractive story but requires different and complex techniques of presenting it. Therefore, in order to effectively inform amateur filmmakers on claustrophobia, this research focuses on the claustrophobic events portrayed in four nominated or award-winning films which simulates real claustrophobic events. The target audience for this research will be focused on amateur filmmakers and young content makers who are a vessel to help educate audiences on claustrophobia in a right manner. It is important to do a critical analysis on how successfully films have relayed this message to their audience with their visuals alongside with relatable stories and characters. Film has the ability to bring spotlight to claustrophobia for it is a perfect tool of education and definitely for entertainment, escaping from reality. This is supported in a Forbes article where it claims that there is an increased consumption of digital content from mobile apps to movie and music streaming due to the world's population under lockdown. By studying how films portray the message of claustrophobia, it will help amateur film makers and short film content makers to have further information to relay their message effectively to their audience.

Keywords Claustrophobia; Behaviour; Quarantine; Film review; Pandemic

Introduction

Claustrophobia is a situational phobia which is defined as an irrational fear or abnormal dread of being in confined places (Annamarya, 2017). It is classified as one of the common phobia and is typically developed due to childhood traumas. In the Healthline article, it also states that claustrophobia can be triggered by such common conditions like being stuck in a crowded elevator or even driving on a congested highway (Annamarya, 2017).

Films are used as a diversion where it gives people comfort and to escape reality, forgetting about their day to day worries. Good films are an effective and useful platform to teach the young and allow the old to relive their experiences through the screen. Filmmakers go to great lengths researching on current issues and effective ways to deliver beautiful stories for the audience to relate and learn from. It can be agreed that films are the perfect tool to reach out to the claustrophobic sufferers and make them understand that they're not alone.

This research focuses on how films portray claustrophobic behaviours in their story effectively. This research helps to raise awareness regarding claustrophobia as well as be a useful guide to amateur filmmakers who want to speak this message in their story.

What is Claustrophobia?

Before diving deeper into the well of claustrophobia, let's begin with the origin and the definition of the word 'claustrophobia'. In the dictionary, it is stated that the word claustrophobia is derived from the Latin word, claustr(um) which means "lock, bolt, barrier" and phobia, a Greek word which means "fear" (Anand, 2015). Combining these words makes claustrophobia, defined as fear of enclosed spaces. With researchers all around the world trying to understand claustrophobia in depth, claustrophobia is said to be reanalysed. Researchers propose that claustrophobics are not only afraid of the enclosed place but of what might happen to them being trapped (Rachman & Steven, 1993).

It is also suggested that claustrophobia comprise of two different phobias which is the fear of suffocation and the fear of restriction. Claustrophobics are frightened of suffocating when they are in an enclosed space for being trapped in a small place can pose a threat for one's air supply. On the other hand, claustrophobics also feel extremely terrified when they find themselves physically restricted, a reaction similar to animals going frantic when they are trapped in an unfamiliar closed place (Rachman & Steven, 1993).

Symptoms of Claustrophobia

As mentioned above, claustrophobia is a phobia that is poorly understood. Many may think that going in a lift is not as terrifying as standing on a high-rise rooftop. People often look down on this phobia, thinking what could go wrong being trapped in a place. However, claustrophobia is actually classified as an anxiety disorder with other underlying mental health issues.

According to the MRI and fear of confined space: a cause and effect, it is claimed that the first symptoms of claustrophobia are panic attacks accompanied with two other fears as stated above, suffocation which causes the fear of losing oxygen in confined space and restriction which causes fear of being trapped in confined spaces (Siddiqui, Singh, Sachin and Srivastava, 2017). These fears are further aggravated by panic attacks and triggers many other symptoms such as the Figure 1.

- sweating
- trembling
- hot flashes
- feeling intense fear or panic
- becoming anxious
- shortness of breath
- hyperventilation
- rapid heartbeat
- chest tightness or pain
- nausea
- feeling faint or lightheaded
- feeling confused or disorientated

Figure 1 Symptoms of Claustrophobia (Source from Healthline, 2017)

Film as a Platform

Films are considered as a source of entertainment. They satisfy various needs of an individual. It can be a source of laughter and some just want to cry their eyes out. This is because films are a visual platform which helps the audience to relate emotionally to the main character and the story. A good story with a meaningful message is a film that has an ability to impact generations from young and old. Films can and are being used as a tool to teach the young and old and also seen as medium to voice out. For example, the Black Panther movie by Marvel, although it was an adaptation from a comic book, it was revised carefully to educate the audience regarding the black community who still struggle in their society due to their history. The Black people found hope, strength and felt united as their struggles are voiced out visually and this is the power a film has, it has the power to change people's perspectives.

Composition Techniques in Films to Convey Message Effectively

What grabs the attention of audiences? For films, it is the composition. A good composition will make a scene memorable and be remembered. Through designing a composition, film makers will be able to create visually appealing shots than just capturing what can be seen. Composition helps to guide the audience attention to important details as well as information that is crucial for the story. John Francis McCullough insists that a good composition makes the audience pay attention to one single subject amidst a busy crowd or a busy frame (McCullough, 2018)

Composition plays a vital role in storytelling. Angles, color, subject placement, lighting and even shots convey a specific information or a deeper meaning to the audience. It helps the audience to be constantly engaged with the story. Following are some basic yet important techniques to be aware that will be useful to identify a well-constructed scene.

a) Rule of Third

Rule of third is considered as a golden guideline for all film and content makers. It is a simple rule to follow which elevates the quality of the shots. This rule is basically dividing the frame into 9 equal parts, 3 sections horizontally and vertically and placing the subject at one of the intersections. Figure 2 shows an example of Rule of Third used in the movie, Joker (2019).

Figure 2 Rule of Third (Film: *Joker*, 2019)

The Rule of Third works for it creates an asymmetrical image which portrays the natural and organic landscapes. The asymmetrical and uneven design and layouts feels more natural to human eyes than strict, perfect and arrangements (McCullough, 2018).

John Francis McCullough also talks about how placing the subject's eyes on one of the horizontal lines is a good rule of thumb. This is to create a natural feeling image and it also works for humans instinctively drawn to look for eyes in an image (McCullough, 2018).

b) Light and Dark

Lighting has the ability to instantly elevate your shots' quality by adding dimension and shadows. By having a high contrast of the character and the shadows, it creates more drama and mystery. Figure 3 depicts an example of Light and Dark technique used in Gran Torino (2008).

Figure 3 Light and Dark (Film: *Gran Torino*, 2008)

Other than just directing the audience's attention to the subject, each of the lighting techniques has a message and a meaning behind it. Different color, placement of lights as well as light and dark contrast speaks a certain message about moods and emotions.

c) Angles and Perspective

Angles and perspective helps the audience to experience the story in the view of the character. Angles also relays important messages. Figure 4 is an example of Angles and Perspective used in the film, The Raid: Redemption (2011).

Figure 4 Angles and Perspective (Film: *The Raid: Redemption*, 2011)

In John Francis McCullough's blog on what do filmmakers mean when they refer to composition, he claims that it is possible to play with the distance of the subject from the lens to show power and importance. For example, just by raising or lowering the angle to create different types of angles to make a subject look bigger or smaller is possibly one of the primal indicators of power.

Method of Data Collection

After understanding the importance and the power of film as well as its techniques, content analysis method is the fuel to carry out this research. Four films on claustrophobia were chosen as a medium to source for data. The chosen films were released in the year ranging from 2005-2019. It is also made sure that these films are nominated or won international film awards to justify the choices. This justification increases the credibility of these films to be used as a guide and for analysis purposes. In these films, a scene is chosen from each film and analysed based on the claustrophobic behaviours and symptoms as well as the composition.

List of Claustrophobic Scenes

After enjoying the films mentioned above, interesting scenes which represent claustrophobia are handpicked and analysed. Table 1 below shows the list of films that were chosen, the year released, name of the scene as well as the duration.

Table 1 List of films with claustrophobic scenes

Scene	Name of film	Year Released	Name of Scene	Duration (s)
1	Buried	2010	Pamela's Video	145 seconds
2	127 hours	2010	Don't lose it	82 seconds
3	The Descent	2005	I'm stuck	220 seconds
4	Escape Room	2019	Walls closing in	197 seconds

The above four scenes were reviewed one by one and were dissected by its composition techniques and claustrophobic symptoms and behaviours. The data is then used to review the similarities and differences in between the scenes. This analysis of data will be a great use of help to generate a guideline or a framework per se on how to portray the claustrophobic events in a scene.

Findings

By watching the film and understanding the scene further through technicalities, it gives a clearer vision on how to design a claustrophobic shot through the character's actions as well as shots. Table 2 is a cross tabulation table based on all the analysis done above.

By deducing the table below, it shows that it is not a must to include all the symptoms of claustrophobia in order to convey a claustrophobic event. Directors tend to include the symptoms and behaviours that are necessary and logical to the situation. For instance, 127 Hours (2010) ticked less than half of the stated symptoms for it is a mild event of claustrophobia, whereas Escape Room (2019) had almost all the symptoms. By including all the symptoms, it dramatizes and adds more intensity to the situation whereas 127 Hours (2010) had more natural feel.

Table 2 Cross tabulation table

Symptoms of Claustrophobia	Buried (2010)	127 Hours (2010)	The Descent (2005)	Escape room (2019)
Sweating	✓		✓	✓
Trembling	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hot Flashes				✓
Feeling intense fear or panic	✓	✓	✓	✓
Becoming anxious	✓	✓	✓	✓
Shortness of breath	✓	✓	✓	✓
hyperventilation			✓	✓

Rapid heartbeat			✓	✓
Chest tightness or pain		✓	✓	✓
Nausea	✓			
Feeling faint or lightheaded	✓		✓	
Feeling confused or disoriented	✓			✓
Composition Techniques				
Rule of Third	✓	✓	✓	✓
Light and Dark	✓	✓	✓	✓
Angles and Perspective	✓	✓	✓	✓

All four of the movies have been consistent with the symptoms such as trembling, feeling intense fear or panic, becoming anxious and shortness of breath. This gives an outline of core symptoms that needs to be included when designing a claustrophobic event or shot. Other symptoms seem to be very dependent on the story, environment as well as the character's personality. This is because experiencing claustrophobia in a Grand Canyon is different from being buried underground or being stuck in a cave system. Having a strong personality also affects the amount of symptoms, this is proved by the characters in Buried as well as 127 Hours where they remained calm and rational compared to the characters in the other 2 movies.
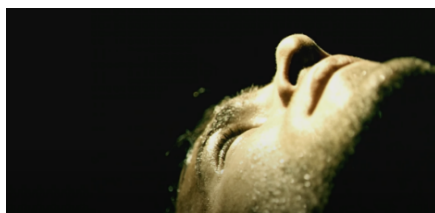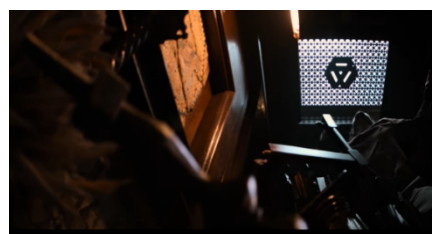

(a)

(b)

(c)

(d)

Figure 4 Angle and Perspective Analysis
(a) Buried (Versus Entertainment, 2010)
(b) 127 Hours (Danny Boyle, 2010)
(c) The Descent (Celador Films, 2005)
(d) Escape Room (Neal H. Moritz, 2019)

The Figure 4 gives information on the composition techniques where all the four films shared similarities in creating their scenes. Although they shared similarities, they definitely convey a unique message that is conclusive to the story. There were also different angles and perspectives which gives the audience more information on what the director wants to relay. For instance, a low angle in Buried (2010) gives the message of the character looking up in hope to survive whereas a high angle of character looking up in 127 Hours (2010) relays the message of helplessness. Seeing all 4 directors use these composition techniques, it encourages young and amateur filmmakers to include these elements to create an impactful claustrophobic shot or scene.

Therefore, a guideline has been formed where the filmmakers can use the stated symptoms to portray a claustrophobic event. Firstly, It is very important to be selective of the symptoms chosen to give an impactful scene as the movie Buried (2010), rather than a dramatic scene like the Escape Room (2019) which only exaggerates the claustrophobic event. In the cinematography perspective, it is important to follow the basic composition rules to master the art of storytelling. Filmmakers are allowed to experiment however amateur filmmakers are advised to master these techniques before spreading out your wings.

Contribution

Working on this research paper has provided tons of knowledge on claustrophobia. As a researcher, this paper was intended to be used as a guideline to amateur film and content makers in their attempt on creating a film or content on claustrophobia. The information in this paper is believed to educate the media society on claustrophobia especially during the pandemic season. This guideline will help young filmmakers be able to create claustrophobic events and scenes.

Conclusion and Future Work

To put in a nutshell, claustrophobia is a wide field and there is not a checkbox to tick in order to portray a claustrophobic story. However, it is very essential to get as much as information and knowledge regarding it before working on this topic. Through this paper, a guideline has been developed to help young film and content creators to follow so they do not fall off grid. This paper will educate content creators on how a basic camera work technique helps to deliver an impactful message as well as understand more on the symptoms of claustrophobia and how to use them in their scene in consideration of the environment and character.

As mentioned above, claustrophobia is a wide field, this research paper has only gathered data on developing a basic guideline. This means there are various interesting and creative ways to portray claustrophobia in films. By breaking rules and experimenting, introduces a fresh new perspective in which

interesting results can be achieved. Looking at creative ways of portraying claustrophobia will be a mission for our future work. So this does not end here!

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Acknowledgements

Authors' Bio

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Dr. Vimala Perumal is a Malaysian director and screenwriter who became one of her country's most successful filmmaker. She has worked on several independent short films and feature films throughout her career. Her first three films, *Vilaiyaatu Pasangge*, *Vetti Pasangge*, and *Vedigundu Pasangge* – also known as the *Pasangge* trilogy – became box-office hits. Graduated from Multimedia University, Cyberjaya, Malaysia, in the field of Film and Animation in 2003, she began her career teaching visual research and communication at Multimedia University, where she earned a Masters degree as well. She graduated with PhD in the field of film communication at University Putra Malaysia in 2016.

Dr. Koo Ah-Choo received her B.Sc (Hons) from Technology University of Malaysia (UTM) and her PhD on Educational Technology from Multimedia University (MMU). Her PhD area is "Online Collaborative Learning ". Her research interests are mobile and ubiquitous learning, digital creation of interactive

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