

CREATING CLAUSTROPHOBIA IN CHRISTOPHER NOLAN'S *DUNKIRK*

Viktorija LANKAUSKAITĖ  *

*Faculty of Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, Kaunas University of Technology,
A. Mickevičiaus str. 37, LT-44244 Kaunas, Lithuania*

Received 13 September 2021; accepted 10 January 2022

Abstract. Christopher Nolan's cinema and its immersive quality is appreciated by audiences and critics alike, and already analysed by researchers, often mentioning "claustrophobia" as a feeling encountered in his films. However, a number of extensive explorations of his work, and filmmaking in general, leave the creation of claustrophobia in cinema undiscussed. Thus, the article aims to fill the gap and investigate his 2017's film *Dunkirk*, since this account of the historical event during the World War II has often been described as "claustrophobic". Cinematic space and time, the way the medium can be used to create certain feelings, as well as the properties of Nolan's work are examined. Space and time manipulation, the use of *IMAX* for immersion, interchanging aspect ratios, and the idea of contrasts are responsible for the claustrophobic atmosphere in the film. The study could be useful for filmmakers and creatives, as well as for audiences interested in what shapes their experience of the story they see on screen.

Keywords: cinema, claustrophobia, Christopher Nolan, *Dunkirk*, space, time.

Introduction

After developing most of his work based on either original or adapted fiction, Nolan surprised audiences in 2017 with his take on a historical event, the evacuation of Dunkirk. While some recounts can seem too romanticised, the importance of the event itself is undeniable, as many historians agree for it to be the pivotal moment in the World War II (WWII) that mobilised the British to support the war effort. Perceived as victory, the evacuation contributed to the civilian morale that was necessary in the Battle of Britain and the Blitz that followed (Summerfield, 2010). Although Nolan's version of the story is acclaimed by both critics and audiences, a number of reviews describe *Dunkirk* as claustrophobic, harrowing, tense, and similar: "[...] Soaring dogfights will give you vertigo. The crushing claustrophobia of sinking ships tilts the screen, and drowns your senses in rushing water", writes Roman (2017), pointing to the film's ability to immerse and affect the audience. Such a response highlights the possibilities of film, as a storytelling medium, not only to tell audiovisual stories but also

*Corresponding author. E-mail: viktorija.lankauskaite@ktu.lt

to evoke strong feelings while doing so. Furthermore, researchers looking at Nolan's work mention the "claustrophobic" nature of his films, but broader discussions are devoted to different properties, leaving this one behind, so it is important to investigate what conceptual and technical aspects help to accomplish that, both in terms of *Dunkirk* as a separate film, and in terms of the director's mark.

While a creative process is seen as mysterious, in general, despite various inquiries in some of its more important aspects, such as sequence, originality, and the role of constraints (Lubart, 2018), filmmaking as an art form has a relatively clear creative process – one that allows to determine the impact of certain creative decisions for certain outcomes. However, it is also understudied, as researchers focus more on single contributions that can make up a film later: script writing, image making, music composition, and theatre production, among other areas (Lubart, 2018; Daniel, 2020). From this perspective, a focus on the technical execution of the artist's ideas in a film could provide a glimpse into the way of creative thinking overall as well. Additionally, technology is often a significant factor when it comes to creative decisions, something that can be noted in research looking at other fields, forms of art, and the importance of the mastery of one's medium and its possibilities (Steinbach, 2018, p. 40; Wijngaarden et al., 2021). The outcomes of such decisions then shed light on the links between art and its ability to affect audiences and their emotions.

For the purpose of addressing these and other concepts, the paper aims to explore the ideas, creative decisions, and techniques behind the claustrophobic atmosphere and the feelings it accompanies in *Dunkirk*. This is led by the hypothesis that technology driven, or rather medium-specific, decisions, characteristic to the auteur, achieve the most of the emotional impact. The notions of time and space in cinema are discussed, together with the director's approach towards the medium and how it is manipulated to create the desired sensations. In light of this, the film undergoes a content analysis within a M.A.P. (means, axes, and properties, where means describe the tools for meaning making in cinema, such as language, sound, and image; axes describe time and space; and properties talk about themes, ideas, and other conceptual "properties" of cinema) model for analysing audiovisual stories (Martinelli, 2020).

1. Claustrophobia on screen

As a backdrop, the ability of cinema to immerse and affect emotions will be discussed first, with a focus on technical aspects that help to convey feelings of claustrophobia, tension, and discomfort.

Remarking the impact of cinematic experience on its audience, Gallese and Guerra write that by transforming space and time, films change our daily surroundings, or rather impressions of it, as well as reality in general, and, above all else, not only alter our ability to perceive and understand fictional environments but increase our "psychophysical involvement with the virtual space that is typical of the big screen" (2020, p. 72). They also name fear and wonder as the most prominent feelings. In line with this, the claustrophobia and the sentiments that surround it are very much a part of the cinematic experience. In terms of discussing claustrophobia itself, defined in *Merriam-Webster* (2022) dictionary as "abnormal dread of being in closed or narrow spaces" and "a feeling of discomfort or discontent caused

by being in a limiting or restrictive situation or environment”, a clear starting point becomes apparent – a notion of space. Space and its different manifestations in cinema could be a never-ending discussion in a multitude of articles and books, yet it is possible to distinguish a few important ideas and their relevance here. First, the cinematic space can be diegetic and non-diegetic, inside and outside of the story on the screen, *i.e.*, diegesis for characters in the story, and non-diegesis for the audience (for more on this, see Martinelli, 2020, p. 104). Claustrophobia in film is often approached as a diegetic device, when characters are portrayed to be staying in a closed space, especially for longer periods of time (films such as 2002’s *Panic Room* (director David Fincher) and 2010’s *Buried* (director Rodrigo Cortés) fit the description). Similar situations can be perceived in works depicting space or ocean investigation, or explorations of unknown environments in general, both in terms of staying in confinement, such as a rocket or a space station, or a submarine, and because of the limits of the situation, as the environment around that confined space is dangerous, or at least uncertain. Then, of course, there are cases where claustrophobia itself is addressed, *e.g.*, when the characters mention having it, however, in rather many of such depictions, the feeling of discomfort, and the actual pressure of the space, escapes audiences, and is in many ways heard about and seen, rather than felt. Yet, films that can be perceived as having a claustrophobic effect on audiences often portray events that directly do not refer to claustrophobia or confined spaces and achieve confusion, discomfort, and the illusion of pressure with different cinematic techniques. This effect could broadly be attributed to the immersive quality of cinema in general, since, as Corbin argues,

“most narrative films encourage this ‘insideness’ or absorption into the cinema space, through photographic realism, camera movement and editing, and character identification” (2014, pp. 319–320).

A more specific use of some of the tools available for filmmakers that help in manipulating space and creating different sensations will be discussed in the next section. Another aspect related to space is how much of it there is on the screen, and how much is left out. While addressing the limited research of cinematic space beyond what is on the screen, Saxton (2007) builds upon the importance of off-screen space, and referring to André Bazin, Pascal Bonitzer, Noël Burch, and others, defines off-screen space as both representing blindness and concealment, but at the same time as having an undeniable presence too. Analysing Michael Haneke’s *Caché* (2005), she highlights how the information off-screen and the way it is hidden can be more informative than actually making it available. The knowledge that something else exists outside the image, visual or otherwise, adds to the audience’s confusion, tension, and immersion in the cinematic experience (Saxton, 2007).

Apart from the use of space, discomfort can be created in a temporal dimension. While storytelling and the tradition of narrative implies the need for events to move forward, *i.e.*, for the story to be told in a linear way, non-linear storytelling is no novelty in film, and is rather suited for it (in comparison to a book, for example), allowing to include flashbacks, flashforwards (as well as dream or hallucination type of material, that can add to audience disorientation in terms of both time and space), and tell the story from multiple perspectives. Sesonske identifies cinematic time the way he does cinematic space (as well as motion and sound): screen space and action-space parallels with screen-time and action-time,

where screen defines everything happening outside the screen and is more descriptive of the audience experience, *e.g.*, how long the film lasts, and action defines everything happening inside the screen (1980, p. 420). While screen-time could add more impact to the look and experience of the film in terms of montage, pace, and rhythm, a creative use of action-time could be more affective in terms of disorientation, discomfort, and claustrophobia. Time and space in cinema are also described as “axes” in Martinelli’s (2020) M.A.P. model. The axes are then the “axes” upon which the events of the film and the ways it is made are built. The story develops in time, at certain places, and is told in different ways (Martinelli, 2020, p. 98). This model will be used later for a deeper analysis of Nolan’s *Dunkirk*.

When it comes to time in cinema, it is almost impossible to talk about it without mentioning Andrei Tarkovsky, for whom, as Skakov (2012) underlines, captured time, in its natural state and appearance, is the basis of film art. As he is “sculpting in time”, he travels across the temporal dimension in leaps and shifts, thus creating a “cinematic labyrinth” with digressions that disorient the audience (Skakov, 2012, p. 12). The effect of cinematic time on the viewers could also be illustrated with the genre contemporary audiences are very familiar with – action cinema. The experience of time in action cinema is nothing like Tarkovsky’s long take. The pace of the stories is usually quicker, involves plenty of angles, and fast editing rhythm, and asks viewers to decipher the fast-changing images as one comprehensible sequence by filling in the gaps. In accordance with Furby’s (2015) statement that most of the film narratives employ a certain time travel, since they “reshuffle and reorder time, stretch and shrink duration, and alter the frequency of events” (2015, p. 249), time in action cinema is also manipulated – scenes are sped up or slowed down with the aim to move the audience (for more, see Wucher, 2019). Thus, such and similar representations and manipulations of time (*e.g.*, of a single sequence, or multiple timelines) can utilise action-time and screen-time for a disorienting effect.

While it is clear that audiovisual stories have certain effects on their audience, cinematic space and time appear to be the most influential, or rather it has the most potential, when it comes to feelings of discomfort, disorientation, and uneasiness that could lead to experiences similar to claustrophobia. Yet, the discussed notions only point to more conceptual ideas of understanding and experiencing cinema, therefore, the technical aspects that help to convey those ideas on screen will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

2. The possibilities of the medium

For a long time, cinema has been much more than moving pictures. When told right, audiovisual stories have an impact and remain with the viewers long after leaving the film theatre. While the stories told can be sad, happy, funny, tragic, and everything in between, with their messages strong enough on their own, the ways filmmakers use the medium to tell those stories are equally important. Different aspects come into play: camera work, sound, lighting, composition, and other qualities that can be highly informative and convey emotion. They, however, are not the whole picture, too, as filmmakers find even more detailed ways to use the technological possibilities of the medium to match their vision (falling into the category of technological properties, in Martinelli’s (2020, p. 262) M.A.P. model). One such

way is aspect ratio – the size of the image on screen. Wide screen (2.35:1 or 2.40:1) now is no surprise, yet historically it speaks about making cinema more immersive (as compared to 4:3) as it better replicates our wider vision, allowing to put and read more information on screen. Since now more aspect ratios are available, they can also be used to make meaning. For example, in Robert Eggers' *The Lighthouse* (2019) an almost square ratio (1.19:1) not only evokes a feeling of going back in time, but allows one to bring the two characters closer together and make the spaces seem more confined. The director in focus of this article, Nolan, is known for the use of IMAX, which allows to present a bigger image, reveal more space, and provide more information, resulting in, according to Nolan, more immersive experience (Whitney, 2015). Immersion can also be achieved by manipulating the already set aspect ratio. In *Life of Pi* (2012, director Ang Lee) some of the animals appear to be jumping out and crossing the black bars at the bottom of the image, making the audience feel as if the objects are moving towards them (similar to the effect of wearing polarised 3D system). Different aspect ratios within a single film can also often inform about the timeline or space changes, as well as the changes in the story or characters. In Trey Edward Shults' *It Comes at Night* (2017), the aspect ratio becomes wider as the film goes on (the image increasingly reduces in height and the characters are pressed into a horizontally narrower space) to show the worsening events of the film and the dark journey that the main character goes on. *Homecoming* (TV series) (2018–2020, directors Sam Esmail and Kyle Patrick Alvarez) uses square aspect ratio for events of the past; Nolan's *Dark Knight Rises* (2012) uses IMAX and 35 mm widescreen interchangeably for a variety of purposes, among them immersion, character development, anxiety, and others (Nolan's use of IMAX will be expanded in the later paragraphs), although Whitney (2015) reminds that the interchanging aspect ratios can be a challenge both for the filmmaker and audiences trying to decipher the meaning of the changes. The aspect ratio also directly speaks about the already discussed idea of space – both diegetic (within the story and the cinematic world), and non-diegetic (outside of it, in fact, it could be possible to think about the black bars as non-diegetic covers of the diegetic space). The aspect ratio determines how much of the image of the story one is allowed to see at once, and how limited or unlimited our sight is, or in other words, it plays with Sesonske's (1980) two previously discussed aspects, screen space and action-space, and manipulates the screen space to make action-space more effective.

The wide screen aspect ratio also refers to the anamorphic lens that historically allowed to achieve it by squeezing more visual information onto a square film that could later be stretched out onto wide screen. Thus, in terms of the visual experience of the film, different lenses also play a role. For now, the turf is shared between anamorphic and spherical lenses. While also similar, they both have their differences too, which have influence on the way image is produced. Spherical lenses provide a clearer, more realistic image, preferred, for example, by such directors as Terrence Mallick. Director of photography Roger Deakins also favours spherical lenses, and in terms of achieving realism, he stresses the avoidance of flares (unlike Mallick), vignetting, and other features that interrupt the clarity of the image:

"I want a lens that records the world the way I see it [...] I find any artefact that is on the surface of the images is a distraction for me. The audience or I am then aware that I am looking at something that has been recorded with a camera", he says (YouTube, 2019).

Anamorphic lenses produce softer, a more ethereal image that can be recognised by oval bokeh and “fallout” – blurriness and distortion at the edges of the image, encountered in films such as *Inception* (2010, director Nolan), *Moonlight* (2016, director Barry Jenkins), and *The Trial of the Chicago 7* (2020, director Aaron Sorkin), among others.

It is also important to note that by no means these points determine a set of rules to follow – the uses of the technical tools and their manipulation are often based on preference. As some directors prefer working with film over digital cameras (or both, like Danny Boyle in *Steve Jobs* (2015) using 16 mm, 35 mm film, and digital camera footage for three different sequences to show the flow of time), some might prefer one aspect ratio over another, some lenses over others, and so on. The variety of the choices that filmmakers have and employ for their own vision, and that each of them does it differently, only confirms how not arbitrary filmmaking is and how many different aspects need to be thought about when creating an audiovisual story.

3. Christopher Nolan's filmmaking

Before delving into how Nolan employs these technical aspects in his films, it could be useful to discuss some of the other tendencies in his auteur work.

Among the researchers looking into the director's work, one of the more prominent ideas is his ability to remove the opposition of commerce and art, as he can maintain his vision and creative control while working on Hollywood films, something other filmmakers would see as a binary situation. As Stuart Joy (2015) remarks, Nolan's inventive and original vision is what makes him unique and attracts audiences at the same time, making him both critically and commercially successful. More specifically, Joy (2015) notes a few aspects indicative of Nolan's work. One of those is the idea of building a story on certain rules. *The Prestige* (2006, director Nolan) follows the structure of a magic trick, *Inception* relies on a narrative similar to video games or assumes the structure of making a film, with director, actors, world-building and so on, and *Interstellar* (2014, director Nolan) is built around the laws of physics (Joy, 2015, p. 4). Another feature that distinguishes Nolan from other directors is his approach towards material aspects of filmmaking. Medium wise, he only shoots on film, 35 mm, 70 mm, and IMAX, and is an active advocate of maintaining the use of film. Connected to the idea of traditional filmmaking, he is almost notoriously well-known for trying to achieve as much of the final image as possible in-camera. Stunt work, rotating sets, and limited computer-generated imagery in *Inception* and *The Dark Knight Trilogy* (2005–2012, director Nolan) are building blocks for Nolan (Wucher, 2019, p. 203). The tendency to record reality continues with *Tenet* (2020, director Nolan), where an airplane crashing sequence is performed for real (IMDb, n.d.). While such practices sound impressive, they are also tiring and perhaps unnecessary today. However, Nolan tries to stay true to the camera and the audience in this way, which also focuses the discussion on IMAX, as a characteristic marking Nolan's work. IMAX records a bigger image, this way providing better quality that makes it more difficult to hide artificial content, computer graphics, and similar tricks, so the director chooses not to use tricks at all. Apart from his outspoken love for cinema and traditional filmmaking, IMAX helps him maintain the aesthetic quality and

achieve greater audience immersion, for the frame is around ten times the size of the traditional 35 mm, and used to be projected on extremely large screens (Whitney, 2015). Since now IMAX has to be experienced in special theatres, the difference in digital reproduction of the image is still visible through the changes in aspect ratio between the footage shot in IMAX and on 35 mm or 70 mm film. Whitney (2015) particularly notes the changes in *The Dark Knight Trilogy*, and while the interchanging use of differently shot sequences gains critique too, she distinguishes them as being used for different expressive means: character revelations, cognitive dynamics, IMAX for vertigo, 35 mm for claustrophobic effect, and, going back to the “truthfulness” with practical effects, to highlight the “realness” of the image. She also notes that while IMAX is used for more “expected” sequences, such as landscape or action, it can also be encountered in more confined contexts that talk more about the characters and their journey (Whitney, 2015, p. 34).

The director’s films are also recognisable by a non-linear narrative structure and temporal distortion, which Nolan himself also connects to traditional filmmaking by describing the physical representation of time on a film reel:

“two-dimensional representations of three dimensions printed onto a strip whose length adds the dimension of time. Time is strikingly represented by the rapidly unspooling rolls of celluloid on a projector” (Olson, 2015, p. 47).

Furby (2015), includes all of Nolan’s films into the concept of time travel of narrative, and emphasises the films that have time travel *in* narrative, like *Interstellar*. Although the narratives of *Following* (1998, director Nolan), *Memento* (2000, director Nolan), *Insomnia* (2002, director Nolan) and *The Prestige* and the way their plot is revealed on screen are described differently, a puzzle, a two-way unwinding rope, a matryoshka doll, or a simple flashback and flashforward inclusion to maintain suspension, all of them, among other Nolan films, manipulate time and create a complex story that increases audience understanding of the character experiences. While the latest at the time, *Interstellar*, is different from these and appears to follow a more straightforward narrative, time travel is at the centre of it; thus, the complexity remains, as does the title of Nolan’s cinema as “cinema of time” (Furby, 2015, p. 249, 264). This title is reaffirmed with his latest film, *Tenet*, which also plays with time travel in narrative, where the characters can manipulate time, and, instead of going forwards or backwards in time as is usual in time travel, can rewind or fast-forward certain events, which adds another level of complexity.

Finally, *Dunkirk* also has a time aspect to it, and although there are quite a few more variables going from film to film, that make Nolan’s cinema distinctive, the researchers and reflections mentioned above on his previous films and his approaches to creating an audio-visual story provide a lens through which to look at this particular piece and why it might evoke a sense of claustrophobia. Exactly that will be done in the next section.

4. *Dunkirk*: part of history on screen

Some of the heaviness of *Dunkirk* could be ascribed to the fact that the film depicts a part of real history. Films based on real events often have higher impact on the audiences, especially if the events are significant to the bigger group of people, the notion widely studied by

Trauma studies, cinema being only a small part of it (Blake, 2008). While Dunkirk, of course, is immensely important to British people, the event is well known to wider audiences too, for its impact in the WWII. The circumstances surrounding the event also contribute to the awareness of it – the famous speech by Winston Churchill was given just after it, so the chain of such memorable events can have a bigger impact overall, and despite varied accounts and different experiences, and opinions, the evacuation of Dunkirk has an “iconic status in British culture”, Summerfield (2010, p. 789) says. However, apart from the emotional impact the depiction of such historical event can have for itself, as discussed above, what makes *Dunkirk* (or possibly other accounts of the event too) potentially more claustrophobic is the idea that the portrayed events and their setting are claustrophobic as well – soldiers being trapped on the beach from which they have no way of escaping. While, as Summerfield (2010) accounts, different versions of Dunkirk and Dunkirk evacuation have seen authors choosing to highlight different aspects of the event and war effort – heroism of civilians, heroism of the higher-ranking officers, heroism of the soldiers, chaos, terror, and other associated ideas, Nolan appears to draw emotion from the situation itself and highlight its discomfort, tension, and, of course, claustrophobia, without necessarily indulging in supporting one or the other character, or one particular angle of the story.

The discussion can be continued with a more in-depth analysis of *Dunkirk*, following Martinelli's (2020) M.A.P. model, with a focus on axes – space and time of the film, and how they help to develop the feeling of claustrophobia. Also, some additional ideas are included on technical aspects of the execution of the story.

4.1. Space

The film covers the events of Dunkirk from three distinct places: land, sea, and air. The audience can see the perspective of the soldiers trapped on the beach, the civilians on their boat at sea, and the pilots in the air. Diegetically, the discomfort and a sense of claustrophobia is created by contrasting the appearance of those spaces and the experiences of characters. The beach, for example, is a wide, open, and light space that should offer a sense of freedom, yet story wise, it is the place where the soldiers are stuck, surrounded by the enemy, and with no means to return home, thus in a limited situation and helpless. Those same soldiers are subjected to claustrophobic conditions a number of times too: When they manage to get onto a ship taking the soldiers across the channel, they are all crammed together with the hatch closed above them. When the ship is hit by a torpedo and begins to sink, the tension becomes almost palpable; or when they hide in an old boat which is later shot at as the waves come in and the boat begins to sink. They cannot escape and show their face to the enemy, but they cannot stay there to drown either. Civilians at sea are also shown to be experiencing similarly contrasting conditions. The boat in which they are in is small and requires spending time in confinement. The contrast to this is a vast sea around the boat, and while it should provide a sense of freedom, compared to the closeness of the boat itself, it presents the characters with a limited situation as well, both in terms of the dangers of the water and being open to the enemy fire from the air. Finally, a parallel situation is represented in the air, where the pilots are similarly trapped into small bomber planes and the open sky around them provides no

comfort, since the enemy is flying around, and the fuel tank can only hold a limited amount. Conceptually, the idea of contrasts and limits in the action-space is what creates the sense of discomfort through all of those experiences – where the open space should provide a breath of fresh air, and free the characters from confinement, it, in turn, presents them with an additional challenge.

These challenges and discomforts are conveyed through screen space as well, with the changes in aspect ratio. Most of the film is shot on *IMAX*, and although the aspect ratio changes are not that frequent and sometimes, as Whitney (2015) warns, difficult to read, a few clearer ideas can be discussed. For example, all the scenes on the beach are intended to be shown in a 1.43:1 aspect ratio, but some changes occur (it is important to note here that “intended” means that the scenes are shot in this ratio on *IMAX*, but it depends on viewing technology how much of the image is actually seen. The Blu-ray edition, for instance, shows *IMAX* sequences only in the ratio of 1.78:1. This is where Saxton’s (2007) off-screen space becomes important, as the audiences watching different formats are still aware of a bigger image existing). The aspect ratio changes to standard 2.40:1 when the officers are shown on the mole discussing the situation: “How’s the perimeter?”, one asks, “Shrinking every day”, the other replies, reminding the viewers through language that the open beach is just a trap.

The shift in aspect ratio is also visible when the civilian boat rescues the pilot from his crashed and sinking plane. Once the pilot gets on the boat, the black bars appear. They squeeze the space the characters are in to show that it becomes more crowded, but at the same time, the sense of entrapment can be associated with the character of the pilot (played by Cillian Murphy, credited as a Shivering Soldier) and the way he is hurt and changed by the war and cannot escape it. This is also illustrated by the sequence of changes in aspect ratio towards the end of the film: when the soldiers from the beach are on the same boat already returning home and free from enemy fire, the *IMAX* sequences cover the screen, but when the scene cuts to the image of the Shivering Soldier in that same boat with them, the black bars appear again. This confirms the point Whitney (2015) makes about Nolan interchanging *IMAX* with other sequences to speak about the characters of the story too.

Of course, the changes in aspect ratio can also be influenced by the shooting conditions: the *IMAX* camera takes up a lot of space, so it seems sensible that the footage from under the deck of the boat is shot with a different camera. But the known examples of Nolan’s work also make one believe that he would not go the easy way – *IMAX* footage from inside the plane or in more intense action sequences confirms that. Therefore, while some changes visible in the sequences used can be hard to decipher, they do not seem arbitrary. As not arbitrary is the use of cinematic space in general, presenting the viewer with contrasts and different ideas of confinement:

“The film returns to Nolan’s oldest fear, that of being locked in – specifically, of locking yourself in, willingly submitting to structures designed to protect you that turn out, instead, to entrap you. Cockpits become coffins. The boat that saves you will also sink you. Your shelter is shrapnel-in-waiting. All three storylines trend toward enclosure”,

writes Shone (2020) of the film, perfectly describing the sense of claustrophobia it evokes.

4.2. Time

Corresponding to the three perspectives, the events of Dunkirk are told in three timelines as well. “The Mole. One week; The sea. One day; The air. One hour”, the titles announce as each place is introduced. Such manipulation of timelines situates *Dunkirk* among Nolan’s films that play with time travel of narrative, and corresponds to the director’s way of building a film around certain rules, in this case set by time itself and how differently it can be experienced based on a situation. The pilots with their bomber planes have a limited amount of time in the air because of the limited amount of fuel, thus only around an hour of their experience can be covered, and when time is limited, it also tends to appear as if flowing faster. On the contrary, when one is waiting for something, the time appears to slow down, and that is what the soldiers are experiencing while waiting for their rescue. The rescue then falls in the middle, with the length of the journey across the channel.

Different time frames also slightly add to the “unsteadiness” of the audiovisual text (Martinelli, 2020, p. 113). Even though generally the events are developing from point A to point B, from the point of entrapment on the beach to the arguably successful rescue of the soldiers, with some action in between, the fact that the stories of different time frames are situated evenly across the screen time makes it difficult for the audience to understand that some of the events are not actually happening at the same time. As the plot develops, it can be understood that the day of the sailing boat and the hour of the planes in the air take up the last moments of the week that the soldiers spend on the beach. The distortion of time and subsequent confusion is emphasised when the audience sees the Shivering Soldier character among one of the rescue boats, on which the soldiers on the beach are trying to get, after already seeing him with different demeanour on the sailboat of the civilians. It takes a few seconds to realise that the events on the beach are taking place earlier.

Furthermore, the situation of the event itself has a limited time aspect of it – when the soldiers are going to be rescued, and whether it will be on time to avoid the enemy. Such pressure of time is also illustrated by the soundtrack and the way it resembles a ticking clock. The ticking intensifies when the characters are put into high pressure situations – the sinking of the boat, the ship leaving the mole, the enemy fire in the air, and similar time dependent circumstances. Thus, the pressure of time, and a manipulated timeline within the film helps in creating tension, discomfort, and, in turn, a sense of claustrophobia.

In terms of narrative construction within the time of the film, one of the more affective aspects of it is that there is no clear hero, a protagonist, or an antagonist in that sense, although the existence of the “enemy” creates the conflict and adds the pressure to the event depicted. Usually, stories follow characters that audiences get to know, and various events happen to those characters; they grow, develop, and the story ends. *Dunkirk* is a story about the event itself and how different people experience it in different timelines and different spaces. The idea of there not being a single character as an anchor in a way can also provide a sense of disorientation and cause audiences to experience this film differently than others.

Conclusions

The ideas discussed allow to underline a number of things. First, more specifically, is that claustrophobia in cinema can take a variety of forms, and the sensations associated with it are often created by manipulating cinematic space and time, and creatively employing the technical aspects of the medium.

Second, the analysis of *Dunkirk* and its results provide points to understand and perhaps contemplate more. The sense of claustrophobia in the film comes from different sources that are complementing each other: confined spaces in diegesis are contrasted by open spaces that, as the audience is kept aware about the situation, are still limited. The immersion in those spaces and the feeling of discomfort within them is achieved by IMAX footage interchanging with a standard aspect ratio. Different timelines add a level of complexity and take audiences on the experiences of multiple characters and their different perspectives, creating a sense of disorientation but allowing to delve deeper into the events of the film. The importance and pressure of time is also conveyed through soundtrack. These aspects also fall into Nolan's auteur description, making this work a part of his puzzle-like, cinematic space and time manipulation film collection, with an added sense of claustrophobia.

Third, in a broader sense, while detached from the discussions about the creative process as such, the focus on a single project allows to judge that process and the aspects that are involved in making the creative decisions necessary to achieve the desired effect. In terms of *Dunkirk* and Nolan's work, the decisions are based on the possibilities of the medium and the way the director employs it, or, in other words, the mastery of the technology at hand, and on the artist's individual way of working (i.e., signature themes and ideas, and again, the use of the available tools), which corresponds with Steinbach's (2018) and Daniel's (2020) writings respectively. In addition, the film also serves as an example of how technological aspects can contribute to the experience of the audience.

Finally, as Daniel (2020) notes the importance of tradition, trends, and audience expectations for artists in their creative process, the discussion about *Dunkirk* and its depiction on screen also aids in exploration of the relationship between art and historically and culturally important topics. This relationship, with the focus on specific creative approaches, could be one of the directions for such research to go next.

References

- Blake, L. (2008). *The wounds of nations: Horror cinema, historical trauma and national identity*. Manchester University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7228/manchester/9780719075933.001.0001>
- Corbin, A. (2014). Travelling through cinema space: The film spectator as tourist. *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 28(3), 314–329. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2014.900880>
- Daniel, R. (2020). The creative process explored: Artists' views and reflections. *Creative Industries Journal*, 15(1), 3–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17510694.2020.1755772>
- Furby, J. (2015). About time too: From *Interstellar* to *Following*, Christopher Nolan's continuing preoccupation with time-travel. In J. Furby & S. Joy (Eds.), *The cinema of Christopher Nolan: Imagining the impossible* (pp. 247–267). Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7312/furb17396-020>

- Gallese, V., & Guerra, M. (2020). *The emphatic screen: Cinema and neuroscience*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198793533.001.0001>
- IMDb. (n.d.). *Tenet* (2020): Trivia. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6723592/trivia/?ref_=tt_ql_trv
- Joy, S. (2015). Introduction. In J. Furby & S. Joy (Eds.), *The cinema of Christopher Nolan: Imagining the impossible* (pp. 1–16). Columbia University Press.
- Lubart, T. (Ed.). (2018). *Palgrave studies in creativity and culture. The creative process: Perspectives from multiple domains*. V. P. Glăveanu & B. Wagoner (Series Eds.). Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-50563-7>
- Martinelli, D. (2020). *What you see is what you hear: Creativity and communication in audiovisual texts*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-32594-7>
- Merriam-Webster. (2022). *Claustrophobia*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/claustrophobia>
- Olson, J. R. (2015). Nolan's immersive allegories of filmmaking in *Inception* and *The Prestige*. In J. Furby & S. Joy (Eds.), *The cinema of Christopher Nolan: Imagining the impossible* (pp. 44–61). Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7312/furb17396-006>
- Roman, J. (2017). *Dunkirk* review: Nolan delivers a lean, mean fighting machine. *Movieweb*. <https://movieweb.com/dunkirk-movie-review-2017-christopher-nolan/>
- Saxton, L. (2007). Secrets and revelations: Off-screen space in Michael Haneke's *Caché* (2005). *Studies in French Cinema*, 7(1), 5–17. https://doi.org/10.1386/sfci.7.1.5_1
- Sesonske, A. (1980). Time and tense in cinema. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 38(4), 419–426. https://doi.org/10.1111/1540_6245.jaac38.4.0419
- Shone, T. (2020). *The Nolan variations: The movies, mysteries, and marvels of Christopher Nolan*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Skakov, N. (2012). *KINO: The Russian and Soviet cinema series. The cinema of Tarkovsky: Labyrinths of space and time*. R. Taylor (Series Ed.). I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755698448>
- Summerfield, P. (2010). *Dunkirk* and the popular memory of Britain at war, 1940–58. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 45(4), 788–811. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009410375260>
- Steinbach, K. (2018). *Creative practices for visual artists: Time, space, process*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315098111>
- Whitney, A. (2015). Cinephilia Writ large: IMAX in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* and *The Dark Knight Rises*. In J. Furby & S. Joy (Eds.), *The cinema of Christopher Nolan: Imagining the impossible* (pp. 31–43). Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7312/furb17396-005>
- Wijngaarden, Y., Bhansing, P. V., & Hitters, E. (2021). Character trait, context or... create! Innovative practices among creative entrepreneurs. *Industry and Innovation*, 28(8), 1077–1097. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13662716.2021.1949964>
- Wucher, J. (2019). Translating the panel: Remediating a comics aesthetic in contemporary action cinema. In J. Kendrick (Ed.), *A companion to the action film* (pp. 187–206). John Wiley & Sons, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119100744.ch9>
- Youtube. (2019). *ARRI Interview: Roger Deakins about "1917"*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LC4eGpfhpm8&t=1s>