

Roller-coaster academic Malcolm Burt discovers why the world needs thrill rides

612 ABC Brisbane By Jessica Hinchliffe
Posted 29 Jan 2016, 12:01pm



PHOTO: QUT academic Malcolm Burt has travelled the world discovering why people flock to roller-coasters. (Supplied: Malcolm Burt)

Life can be full of ups and downs, but one Queensland researcher is discovering why people have a psychological need for roller-coasters.

Malcolm Burt based his masters on the thrill machines, travelling around the world and investigating why people pay to be scared.

His research has culminated in a documentary, *Signature Attraction*, which he filmed throughout the United States and Asia.

The Ipswich man said when he began the research not everyone thought the idea was a good one.

"It's a multi-billion-dollar industry and some people poo-pooed me doing this research," he told 612 ABC Brisbane's Kelly-Higgins Devine.

"It's not abnormal for people to wait hours to get on this 60-second ride to nowhere and I wanted to know why.

"When you think about it, it's insane that we do it without thinking about it."

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Academic Malcolm Burt

Finding that primal fear

Mr Burt's research at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) was video-based talking to park managers, sociologists, psychologists and roller-coaster enthusiasts.

"I found that the rides subject you to forces you can't get safely anywhere else," he said.

"The dropping is a primal fear and the sitting stationary but moving at extreme speeds is abnormal.

"They are designed to be intimidating and that's part of their appeal and to scare the pants off you."

Discovering when people are most scared on a roller-coaster's journey proved surprising for Mr Burt.

"People are often most scared in the queue because in the queue you are going through the fight or flight," he said.

"But when you get on the ride your physiological stage changes to fight, and the only fight you can do on them though is cry, scream or vomit."



YOUTUBE: Rollercoaster documentary

Escapism and 'profound release'

Mr Burt said due to people's busy lifestyles, excitement and escapism had to happen quickly in this day and age.

"People will always want this escape, and due to capitalism we have a small amount of leisure time so our experiences in that small amount of time needs to be compressed," he said.

"That's why theme parks enable you to go around the world in one day and I think their appeal will always be there."

He said roller-coasters offered peak experiences.

"It puts you in a zone of achieving something incredible ... you can get a rush of endorphins and you get that from climbing Everest," Mr Burt said.

"But you can also get a comparable biological sensation like getting on a big thrill ride.

"It's a way for us to go to a park and experience this peak sensation and we're wired for needing these profound releases."

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Academic Malcolm Burt

The future of roller-coasters

Throughout his research Mr Burt found that "launch" roller-coasters had replaced traditional chain hill roller-coasters.

"Top Thrill Dragster is my favourite and it's in Ohio and is 420 feet high and you go from zero to 190kph in less than four seconds," he said.

"In Asia it seems they are opening a new theme park every week."

Mr Burt will commence a PhD later this year, asking the question: "What is the future of theme parks?"

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