



Sensory Chaos and Visual Realism: A Study of Sound and Cinematography in the Movie Jallikattu

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Abstract

Cinema is a multisensory medium where sound and cinematography function as core elements of storytelling. Malayalam cinema has gained global recognition for its technical innovation and experimental narrative forms. The film *Jallikattu* (2019), directed by Lijo Jose Pellissery, stands as a landmark in contemporary Indian cinema for its radical use of audiovisual language. This research paper examines the role of sound design and cinematography in constructing meaning, tension, and sensory overload in *Jallikattu*. The study analyzes how handheld camera movement, long takes, natural lighting, and immersive soundscapes contribute to the portrayal of chaos, human instinct, and collective violence. Using qualitative film analysis, the paper argues that *Jallikattu* transforms sound and visual composition into narrative agents rather than supporting elements. The film redefines cinematic realism by creating an experience of controlled chaos and sensory immersion.

Keywords: Cinematography, Sound Design, Malayalam Cinema, *Jallikattu*, Audiovisual Narrative, Sensory Cinema, Realism

1. Introduction

Cinema communicates through a combination of visual and auditory elements. Among these, cinematography and sound design are essential in shaping audience perception, emotional engagement, and narrative structure. While traditional Indian cinema often relies on dialogue-driven storytelling, contemporary Malayalam cinema has increasingly explored experimental techniques that prioritize sensory experience over linear narration.

Jallikattu, directed by Lijo Jose Pellissery, is a unique cinematic work that explores human savagery through the story of a buffalo escaping into a rural village, triggering chaos among villagers. However, the film is not merely about an animal chase; it is an exploration of primal instincts, mob psychology, and the breakdown of social order. The film's impact is largely created through its extraordinary use of cinematography and sound design, which immerse the viewer in a state of controlled chaos.

2. Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the role of cinematography in constructing narrative meaning in *Jallikattu*.
2. To examine the use of sound design in creating sensory immersion.
3. To study the relationship between audio-visual techniques and thematic expression.
4. To understand how *Jallikattu* redefines realism in Indian cinema.

3. Research Methodology

This study is based on qualitative research methodology. The approach includes:

- Textual and visual analysis of Jallikattu
- Study of cinematographic techniques and sound design
- Review of academic articles, critiques, and interviews
- Application of film theory, particularly sensory cinema and realism studies

4. Overview of the Film

Jallikattu (2019) is based on a short story titled Maoist by S. Hareesh. The film revolves around a buffalo that escapes from a slaughterhouse in a remote village in Kerala. The villagers attempt to capture it, but the situation escalates into uncontrollable chaos, revealing human aggression and primal instincts. The film was India's official entry for the Academy Awards (2021) and received international acclaim for its technical innovation and bold storytelling approach.

5. Cinematography in Jallikattu

5.1 Handheld Camera and Movement

One of the most striking features of the film is its dynamic handheld camera work. The camera continuously moves with the crowd, creating a sense of instability and urgency. This technique removes the boundary between viewer and action, making the audience feel physically present within the chaos. The constant motion reflects the unpredictability of human behavior during mass hysteria.

5.2 Long Takes and Continuous Action

The film extensively uses long takes to maintain continuity and realism. Instead of frequent cuts, scenes unfold in real-time, allowing tension to build gradually. This technique:

- Enhances realism
- Maintains narrative flow
- Intensifies emotional engagement
- Creates immersive experience

The absence of conventional editing rhythm contributes to sensory overload.

5.3 Lighting and Color Palette

The cinematography uses natural and low-key lighting, often relying on firelight, moonlight, and darkness. The color palette consists of earthy tones—brown, red, and black—symbolizing violence, struggle, and primal energy. Night sequences dominate the film, reinforcing uncertainty and chaos. Shadows are used to obscure visibility, enhancing suspense and confusion.

5.4 Framing and Composition

Framing in Jallikattu is intentionally chaotic. Wide shots capture large groups of villagers, while close-ups highlight panic, aggression, and exhaustion.

The composition often places humans and animals within the same frame, blurring distinctions between civilization and instinct. This visual strategy reinforces the film's central theme: the thin line between humanity and savagery.

6. Sound Design in Jallikattu

6.1 Immersive Soundscape

Sound design in Jallikattu is not background support; it is a primary storytelling element. The soundscape includes:

- Animal noises
- Human shouting and breathing
- Environmental sounds (wind, rain, fire)
- Metallic and organic sound textures

This creates a dense auditory environment that reflects chaos and tension.

6.2 Diegetic Sound Dominance

The film heavily relies on diegetic sound (sounds originating within the film world). This includes footsteps, crowd noise, buffalo sounds, and physical struggle. The absence of constant musical background allows realism to dominate. The audience hears what the characters experience, intensifying immersion.

6.3 Minimal Use of Background Score

Unlike conventional thrillers, the film avoids melodic background music. Instead, it uses experimental sound design with rhythmic pulses, vocal textures, and noise-based composition.

This approach:

- Removes emotional manipulation
- Enhances realism
- Increases psychological tension

6.4 Sound as Narrative Driver

Sound is used to guide narrative progression. Increasing volume and density of sound reflect escalating chaos. Sudden silence is used strategically to create anticipation before violent sequences. The sound design mirrors emotional instability and collective aggression.

7. Synchronization of Sound and Cinematography

The most significant feature of Jallikattu is the synchronization of sound and visual movement. Camera motion and sound intensity are carefully aligned to create sensory overload.

Examples include:

- Fast camera movement paired with loud crowd noise
- Sudden silence followed by abrupt visual movement
- Rhythmic sound matching chaotic physical action

This synchronization transforms the film into an immersive audio-visual experience rather than a traditional narrative.

8. Thematic Interpretation Through Audio-Visual Techniques

8.1 Human Savagery

The chaotic visuals and aggressive soundscape represent the collapse of civilized behavior. Humans are shown acting more violently than animals.

8.2 Mob Psychology

The crowded framing and overlapping sounds represent collective hysteria and loss of individuality.

8.3 Primal Instincts

The buffalo becomes a symbolic trigger that exposes hidden aggression in humans. Cinematography and sound together reinforce this metaphor.

9. Realism and Sensory Cinema

Jallikattu belongs to the category of sensory cinema, where experience is prioritized over narrative clarity. The film creates realism not through simplicity but through controlled chaos. The audience does not observe the story passively; they experience it physically through sound and movement.

10. Audience Response and Critical Reception

The film received international acclaim for its technical brilliance. Critics praised its innovative cinematography and immersive sound design. Audiences described the film as:

- Intense
- Overwhelming
- Visually chaotic
- Emotionally immersive

Many scholars consider it a milestone in Indian experimental cinema.

11. Findings of the Study

1. Cinematography in Jallikattu creates immersive realism through movement and framing.
2. Sound design plays a central role in narrative construction.
3. The film rejects traditional storytelling in favour of sensory experience.
4. Audio-visual synchronization intensifies emotional and psychological impact.
5. Jallikattu redefines realism in contemporary Malayalam cinema.

Conclusion

Jallikattu is a landmark film that transforms cinematography and sound design into narrative tools. The film demonstrates how audio-visual elements can replace conventional storytelling techniques to create a deeply immersive cinematic experience. Through chaotic visuals, dynamic camera movement, and dense soundscapes, the film constructs a world of controlled disorder that reflects human savagery and collective psychology. The study concludes that Jallikattu is not just a film but an audio-visual experience that expands the boundaries of Indian cinema and redefines cinematic realism.

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