

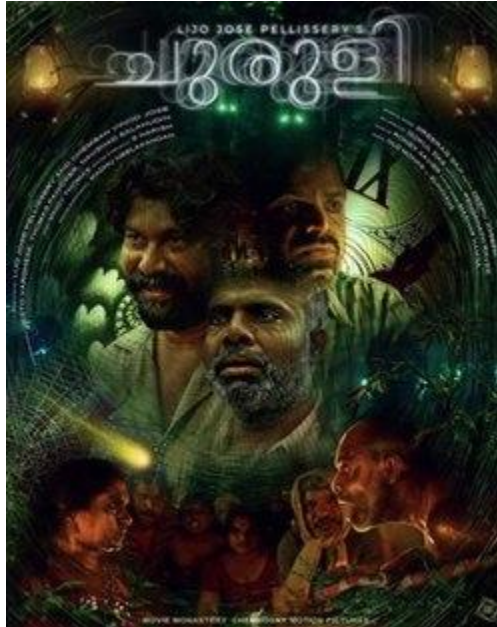
Watching *Churuli* as a Tale of Hybrid and Liminal Spaces

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Courtesy: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Churuli>

Abstract

This essay explores the relevance of spatiality in the Malayalam film "Churuli" directed by Lijo Jose Pellissery. The essay starts with an explanation of the spatial turn in film and literature, and how place affects the meaning of narrative. The author mentions James Joyce's attempts to contain Dublin in his writing as an example of the role of location in narrative. The study highlights how contemporary Malayalam movies move away from the conventional studio locations and bring in newer and more vibrant settings, which engage the audience more.

"Kumbalangi Nights" and "Angamali Diaries" are given as examples of how certain locations enhance stories.

In "Churuli," the dreamlike storyline traces the adventures of two undercover policemen, Shajeevan and Anthony, who are chasing a criminal. The location of Churuli itself becomes a character, taking an active role in shaping the unfolding of the plot. The author contends that the location gains meaning, turning it from a backdrop into an essential element of the film experience. Finally, the research assumes that investigating hybrid and liminal spaces in "Churuli" not only improves the viewing experience but also acts as a broader reflection of themes of identity and belonging across contemporary art.

Keywords: *Churuli*, Malayalam movie, Spatiality, Liminal spaces, Hybrid spaces

The question of where, now, more than ever, precedes the when and how in literature and films after the spatial turn that happened gradually. Where we live and when we live can be, at times, two of the most important factors when it comes to art. Take for example, James Joyce's works. In his words, "I want to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city suddenly disappeared from the earth, it could be reconstructed out of my book." Thus, when artists become conscious of a sense of the place they are attached to or are interested, a geography, real or imagined, it gets reflected in their works significantly.

It is only in the recent times that movies started moving out of the premeditated and closed spaces of studios. Places like Hollywood or Ramoji Film City in Hyderabad or Merryland studios in Thiruvananthapuram is still used, beyond a doubt. However more effort in terms of concepts as well as visuals has been undertaken to make the film experience deeper. This is true in the case of Malayalam movies as well. See for example some of the popular movies like Kumbalangi Nights or Angamali Diaries which have two places in its title itself which are Kumbalangi (a village in Ernakulam district of Kerala) and Angamali (a town in Thrissur district of Kerala) respectively. It is a matter worth noting and discussing that, movies are slowly shifting their gaze towards non-city areas.

Movies set in familiar cities have invaded our film viewing culture so much that every time a new movie that does not use erstwhile Victoria Terminus to represent Bombay or Chennai Central Railway station's heritage building to show Tamil Nadu gives a fresh relief. Not just as a mere setting, a place acquires layers of meaning when it becomes an integral part of a

movie. In this paper, the setting of *Churuli*, a 2021 movie directed by Lijo Jose Pellissery, is being analysed.

Centred in a place called “Churuli” this Lijo Jose Pellissery movie is a surreal tale of an absconding criminal followed by two policemen. Once they reach the place called Churuli things take a mysterious turn. It is this place that determines the narrative turns in the movie.

Set in the wild backdrop of Churuli, a remote village in north Kerala, the film begins with a woman (Geethi Sangeetha) narrating an ancient myth to Shajeevan (Vinay Forrt), one of the central characters. Shajeevan and Anthony (Chemban Vinod Jose) are two undercover police officers in search of an infamous criminal who is suspected to be in Churuli. The mystery deepens as both are clueless about his appearance. *Churuli* is all about the two police officers’ startling experience in the uncanny land and, magnificently enough, each viewer might have a different idea about what makes *Churuli* uncanny. (Bindu, 2021)

According to Mikhael Bakhtin’s carnivalesque theory, the dominant and authoritarian is subverted through art, especially rooted in folk culture, which uses laughter as the main tool. In Lijo Jose Pellissery’s *Churuli* too, such a carnival space is created. It is clearly demarcated by certain geographical boundaries, too. Once the bridge portrayed in the movie is crossed, one reaches a realm that is totally free of the laws of the land. What is profane and sacrilegious becomes normal there. Instance of people using profanities casually is portrayed in the movie which also stirred controversies. So is the case with the subtle indications of deviant sexual behaviours shown in the movie, which would have been a crime otherwise. Though Bakhtin’s carnival theory is related to the folk, here *Churuli* pertains to a forest’s raw and untamed instincts. Still, the carnivalesque nature has deep similarities as observed in the following excerpt:

Folk culture appears periodically as a culture of laughter by means of an ensemble of rites and symbols, a temporarily existing life-form that enables the carnival to take place. By contrast, the principle of law that organizes the carnival is transtemporal and universal. Laughter rises above and transcends the objects at which it is temporarily aimed: official institutions and the sacral. It is a laughter that shakes the specie-body of humanity, it is collective and directed at the “world whole” (Lachmann, 1988).

Similarly, the carnivalesque laughter is aimed at something higher which happens in the movie as well. The toddy shop, which is considered as a cult popular place in Malayalam

culture, becomes the focal point for all the people in the place called Churuli. This same toddy shop becomes a church kind of space when there is a function in the shop owner's family. That the two policemen in mufti, who would have yielded the most power among others in a normal place outside Churuli becoming a target of jokes and bully is another indication that the space called *Churuli* is carnivalesque.

In *Churuli* space gets dynamized and time gets spatialised. The time and space dichotomy becomes a blurred amalgamation as one progresses in the narrative as well. This aspect of the space called Churuli lends it a surreal, mysterious, and sci-fi approach. To elucidate more on the landscape dimension of the movie Kenneth Helphand's four tier approach can be used which is mainly Landscape as setting, Landscape as character, Landscape as symbol and landscape as subject. All these four treatments of landscape is effectively implemented in the movie as well.

When it comes to Landscape as a setting *Churuli* lends a credible geographical point in Kerala which is quite far literally and metaphorically from the usual Malayalee social discourse. However, the people of the village *Churuli* were not at all happy with the portrayal of the place as a hub of criminals who abscond and live a lawless life. When the second aspect of Landscape as a character is considered, the place is very well characterised and established right from the beginning through sounds and visuals. Especially the folk tale narrated by actress Geethika and the spiral hairpins leading to the place.

Landscape as a symbol can be interpreted in many ways. *Churuli* can be identified with our own minds which has many layers. The journey that the policemen undertake can be considered as the journey towards dense forest like subconscious and unconscious within ourselves. The sexual encounters they face in the place can be read as discovery of their inner self, which makes *Churuli* a symbol for the unexplored libido in humans. If *Churuli* can be considered as a maze, it can be considered as a symbol of society, culture or even language. Landscape as a subject is beautifully conveyed through the surreal visuals as well as sounds that puzzles the two newcomers. The wide expanse that defines *Churuli* is beautifully incorporated into the narrative by having points of action dispersed throughout the place.

In Michel Foucault's heterotopias theory, an imaginary space reverses or problematizes the reality of the external world. In Churuli, the village is an uncanny, supernatural place that subverts everyday understanding of time, morality, and conduct. It dislocates the protagonists

(the two policemen), who get drawn into the village's disordered and primal existence, demonstrating a reversal of their civic roles as agents of law enforcement. The illusions of control and authority unravel as they immerse deeper into the environment, and the boundaries between the real and surreal blur.

A compensatory space, within Foucault's theory, generates an idealized or ideal reality. Churuli is a compensation for the absence of free expression in the external world in the form of a lawless, nearly mythic setting where the norms of society are suspended. The inhabitants move freely without fear of reprisal, engaging in violence, dishonesty, and basic instincts.

Anthropologist Victor Turner has described liminality as a period during a ritual when participants are "betwixt and between" states of the established norms. Churuli is an example of such as a place suspended between the mundane and an unpredictable, transformative experience. The village and forest also serve as a threshold space, in which the two policemen lose their selves and slowly let go of their hold on reason and logic. They are not quite in the "real" world and not clearly in an alternate one.

The hybrid status of Churuli comes from how it is the merging of mythical and real elements. It adopts folklore (legend of mischievous spirit Perumadan) while being an actual physical site. Its merging of concrete and abstract nature further reinforces its state as a space that lies across reality and fantasy. The corporeal journey into the jungle parallels the psychological fall into disorder. The maze-like roads and eerie atmosphere of the village represent a literal and symbolic maze, corresponding to Foucault's idea of the heterotopia as a "space of crisis" or deviation. Churuli is an expression of society's repressed desires and operates as a mirror reflecting the policemen's underlying inclinations, heightening the illusion of order within society and offsetting its rigidity.

Thus, the particular use of a landscape to explore the narrative capabilities or to establish a comfortable pad to pitch in the concept or to use it as a subtext to validate an idea that vaults into the infinity of fantasy, place becomes more than just a place. For a spectacle that film is, this becomes more emphatic and evident. Churuli, as a liminal hybrid space captures the dynamics of illusion, compensation, and transformation. The movie provides an opportunity for the viewer to interrogate the margins between civilization and primitive desire,

reality and myth, and order and randomness. In so doing, it captures the heterotopic and liminal qualities, thus becoming a fruitful site of interpretation

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