

**Silent Frames, Spoken Spaces: Identity, Space, and the Unspoken in
Ritesh Batra's Photograph (2019)**



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Abstract: *Ritesh Batra's Photograph (2019) stages an unlikely intimacy between a street photographer from a Mumbai chawl and a chartered-accountancy aspirant from an affluent high-rise, but the film resists every convention through which mainstream Hindi cinema would resolve such an encounter: there is no climactic avowal, no song-and-dance sequence, and no closing union. This article asks how the film nevertheless sustains that intimacy as a credible cinematic argument about class, identity, and unspoken emotion in contemporary Mumbai. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space and Roland Barthes's account of the photographic image, the study conducts a qualitative textual analysis of twenty-six selected sequences from the film, supplemented by a close reading of the dialogue transcript. Three thematic codes structure the analysis: the cinematographic framing of class-stratified domestic interiors, the circulation of a single photographic print, and the deployment of narrative ellipsis. The findings indicate that the film produces class as an asymmetry between density and surveillance rather than as a binary of deprivation and abundance, that the central photograph operates as a Barthesian object of deferred presence whose authority is jointly maintained by the protagonists, and that silence functions as the only available rhetorical mode in which their relationship can be sustained. The article's broader contribution is to read Lefebvre and Barthes together to show how spatial constraint and photographic certification jointly underwrite an aesthetic of intimacy built on what cannot be spoken.*

Keywords: Hindi independent cinema, production of space, cinematic silence, class in Mumbai, textual analysis

Introduction

Ritesh Batra's *Photograph* (2019) is, on the face of it, a slight film: a Mumbai street photographer named Rafi persuades a young chartered accountancy student named Miloni to pose as his fiancée in order to placate his ailing grandmother, and the two strangers proceed to construct, almost wordlessly, a relationship that neither of their social worlds can accommodate. The slightness is deceptive. Batra's cinema belongs to what Devasundaram (2016) has described as India's new independent wave,

a body of work that is global in aesthetic and local in preoccupation, and that earns its critical force by refusing the song sequences, declarative confrontations, and cathartic resolutions that mainstream Hindi cinema continues to rely upon. *Photograph* is one of the most disciplined recent expressions of that aesthetic. It stages a love story between unequal protagonists in the most unequal Indian city, asks the spectator to follow it through long silences and architectural compositions rather than through dialogue,

and stakes its meaning on a single printed image. The questions this paper addresses are not whether the film is romantic—that judgment depends on the spectator—but how it does its work: what its cinematography, its photographic object, and its silences are doing when they refuse the resources that the genre would conventionally make available.

Mumbai is the precondition for that refusal. Hindi cinema has long understood the city not as a backdrop but as a stratified social fact, and recent scholarship on its independent variant has insisted that the camera's spatial choices are themselves a form of class argument. Machado and Jana (2023) read films such as *Dhobi Ghat* and *Island City* as multi-layered urban texts in which characters are positioned within hierarchically distributed interiors so that the city encloses and conditions the bodies that inhabit it. Anwer (2014) supplies the counterweight by showing that big-budget Bollywood, far from ignoring the poor, more typically incorporates indigent spaces in domesticated or comic registers that absorb their political charge. *Photograph* is intelligible against both of these accounts. Rafi's tenement is allowed to retain a density and intimacy that mainstream cinema would either aestheticise or play for laughs; Miloni's expansive apartment is filmed as oppressive in its hush and order. The film does not so much depict two milieus as let two architectures speak to each other, and the gap between them is the film's most consistent dramatic resource.

The second resource is a single photographic print. Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* (1981) remains the indispensable reference for thinking of photographs as more than representations; for Barthes the image is a melancholic certification of a referent's prior existence, and it operates on

the viewer through the unbidden detail he called the punctum rather than through its coded public meanings. Nikolopoulou (2024) reads this turn carefully, showing that Barthes finally privileges photography's effect as a confirmation of presence rather than absence, so that the print testifies to what once was even as it grieves what is no longer there. Batra's film stages exactly such an object. The photograph Rafi sends to his grandmother in Uttar Pradesh is not merely a likeness of Miloni; it certifies a "Noori" whom neither protagonist has lived but whom both come to inhabit. The print accumulates the affective truth that the characters' social roles disallow, and it becomes the device through which the film extends a logic familiar from Batra's earlier work, in which, as Rahman (2018) shows of *The Lunchbox*, ordinary objects carry communications that the social order will not authorise to be spoken.

What the film withholds is as important as what it shows. Tabarraee (2012) treats silence in films such as Abbas Kiarostami's as an integrated aesthetic strategy that fuses ellipsis, omission, and unarticulated emotion into a positive condition for meaning-making rather than a residual absence; the viewer is invited to assemble what the diegesis refuses to declare. Kumar (2024) has shown that *Photograph* is recognisably indebted to this tradition, cataloguing how Batra cuts away from expected verbal beats, lets gestures and proximities carry the affective weight, and uses scenes such as a shared soda or a darkened cinema hall as the substance of the relationship rather than as transitions between it. Read against the conventions of Hindi melodrama, where the climactic verbal avowal is the genre's signature, this restraint is a politics rather than a preference. In a city whose class, religious, and gendered hierarchies make explicit

declaration a social transgression, the film insists that the most honest forms of relation are those that go literally unsaid.

This study brings three problems, stratified urban space, the photograph as object, and silence as a formal structure, into a single textual analysis. It is grounded primarily in Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, which is widely used to analyze how urban space is socially produced and shaped by power relations (Lefebvre 1991; Jones, 2019), and in scholarship that applies spatial theory to cinema's representation of the city. It also engages Barthes as a framework for interpreting the photograph as more than a simple piece of evidence; however, the claim that the print at the center of the plot functions as an "ontological proxy" should be presented as this study's interpretive argument rather than as an established position in the literature. Rather than offering another account of the film's mood, the analysis focuses on particular scenes and compositions to show how these formal elements together illuminate the conditions under which intimacy becomes possible in contemporary Mumbai, a city often examined through uneven socio-spatial relations and mediated urban linkages.

Literature Review

Ritesh Batra's *Photograph* (2019) extends a small but influential strand of post-millennial Indian independent cinema in which Mumbai is staged as a city of incompatible interiors rather than a unified backdrop. Devasundaram (2016) situates films such as Batra's earlier *The Lunchbox* (2013) within what he calls a "glocal hybrid" wave: works that are global in aesthetic yet local in their preoccupation with caste, religion, gender, and class precarity, and that deliberately reject the song-and-dance plenitude of mainstream Hindi melodrama. *Photograph* belongs

squarely to this tendency, a quiet, slow film whose dramatic weight is carried not by declarative speech but by the friction between two domestic worlds and a single circulating image. Reading the film against the existing scholarship requires drawing together three overlapping bodies of work—the cinematic geography of Mumbai's class topography, the philosophy of the photographic image, and the aesthetics of silence in narrative cinema—anchored by two theoretical frames that recur in each of these literatures: Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space and Roland Barthes's account of the photograph in *Camera Lucida*.

Cinematic Mumbai and the Spatialisation of Class

Scholarship on Hindi cinema's depiction of Mumbai has long argued that the city is never an empty stage; it is itself an actor whose architecture encodes social position. Machado and Jana (2023) read recent independent films set in Mumbai as complex, multi-layered urban texts in which the camera positions characters within hierarchically distributed interiors so that the city "engulfs" the bodies inhabiting it. Their analysis of *Dhobi Ghat* and *Island City* is directly continuous with the visual grammar of *Photograph*: a chartered-accountancy aspirant immobilised in glassy, high-rise stillness and a street photographer crammed into the chawl is a binary already familiar from a decade of post-millennial Mumbai cinema. The corrective contribution comes from Anwer (2014), who argues that big-budget Bollywood does not banish the poor from the frame but rather subtly incorporate[s] and subsume[s] indigent spaces of the city in innovatively insidious ways, so that the slum is either aestheticised into harmlessness or rendered ridiculous ... as comic object, a space and predicament unworthy of our sympathy.

Read alongside Anwer, the *photograph* looks less like a transcendence of these conventions than a quiet inversion of them: the chawl is neither aestheticized nor mocked but allowed to retain its claustrophobic density, while the affluent home is staged as oppressive in its very emptiness.

This is where Lefebvre's theory of the production of space provides the most productive analytic frame. Lefebvre (1991) argues that space is never a neutral container; it is produced through a triad of spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces, with the result that the built environment encodes and reproduces the social relations that made it. Goonewardena (2019) summarises the strategic stakes of this position with unusual precision, observing that space plays a pivotal—and potentially revolutionary—role in the making and unmaking of everyday life as much as state and capital, and that the Lefebvrian triad is a mediated articulation of three levels of social reality: the immediate level of everyday life; the intermediate level of the urban; and the global or the most general level of state and capital. Applied to Hindi cinema, the implication is that what the camera frames as architectural difference—a shared bed in a chawl, a private bedroom in a high-rise—is already a frozen image of class relations. Devasundaram (2016) extends this argument in the specific register of the Indian new wave, showing that the new “Indies” use spatial composition rather than dialogue to dramatise the gap between an aspirational urban middle class and the migrant labour that sustains it. What such an account licenses, in the case of *Photograph*, is the claim that Rafi's claustrophobic communal interiors and Miloni's antiseptic solitude are not two opposed sociological “settings” but two products of the same

urban regime, one in which poverty is overcrowded and privilege is silently surveilled. Kumar (2024) makes precisely this point in his close reading of the film's *mise-en-scène*, noting that the camera is more inclined towards implying rather than explicitly showing the spatial gulf between the protagonists, so that the architectural divide becomes a structural condition rather than a plot complication.

The Photograph as Object: From Punctum to Deferred Presence

A second body of literature concerns the photographic print itself. Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* (1981) remains the canonical reference for treating the photograph as more than a representation; for Barthes the image is testimony of a “that-has-been”, a melancholic certification of the referent's prior existence that exceeds anything the picture explicitly depicts. Nikolopoulou (2024) reads this turn carefully, arguing that Barthes ultimately privileges photography's vivid effect as a confirmation of presence rather than absence: the no-more does not signify what is not there, but corroborates in its melancholy what once was. Her account specifies that the familiar distinction between *studium*—the photograph's coded, public meanings—and *punctum*—the unbidden detail that wounds the viewer—marks not just two reading modes but two different ontologies of the photograph as object: an artefact whose surface meanings are produced by social convention, and whose deepest truth lies in a referent that the image insists upon even as it fails to fully describe it. Batchen (2009) argues that this is precisely why Barthes's vocabulary became part of the standard lexicon for thinking with photographs: his terms allow us to talk about images as agents that hold and transmit emotional truth, not merely as transparent windows onto past events.

Badmington (2012) shows further that the punctum is structurally close to a cinematic gesture; the photograph, in Barthes's late writing, is already saturated with the temporal logic of film, and the posthumously published *Mourning Diary* makes explicit what *Camera Lucida* only partly avows—that the photographic object is a vehicle by which absent persons are kept present.

This reframing matters for *Photograph* because Batra's film stages exactly such an object. Rafi sends Miloni's photograph to his grandmother in Uttar Pradesh as evidence of a fiancée named “Noori”. The print, which the spectator never sees from the front in close-up, functions as what Kumar (2024) describes as a metaphor for silence that simultaneously generates the entire

narrative: Miloni eventually says of the image that the smiling woman in it is “happier and prettier” than she ever feels in her family home. Kumar's analysis, read alongside the Barthesian tradition, allows us to specify the work the photograph is doing. It does not merely *represent* Miloni; it certifies a Miloni-that-could-have-been, a referent whose existence the print insists upon and whose plausibility the characters then collaboratively maintain. In this sense the print operates as a Barthesian object of “deferred presence”—a material trace that the characters treat as more real than their own embodied performances of dutiful daughter and reluctant grandson. Rahman's (2018) reading of Batra's earlier *The Lunchbox* makes a parallel argument in the register of objects rather than dialogue, showing that ordinary mediators can become carriers of communication that the social order will not authorise to be spoken: the lunchbox, like the photograph, is what allows protagonists separated by family and class to maintain a relation that has no place

in their everyday vocabularies. Read together, Barthes, Nikolopoulou, Badmington, and Rahman supply a coherent vocabulary for treating Batra's photograph as an ontological proxy whose authority does not depend on its strict accuracy as a likeness, but on the affective certification it provides to the identities it sustains.

Silence, Ellipsis, and the Subversion of Melodrama

The third strand of relevant scholarship concerns the cinematic uses of silence and narrative ellipsis. Tabarraee (2012) develops the most systematic recent account in this area, arguing that filmmakers such as Abbas Kiarostami treat silence as “an umbrella term” that integrates ellipsis, omission, and unarticulated emotion into a positive aesthetic strategy rather than a mere absence. Silence, on this reading, is not the failure of speech but a deliberate “space for (re)birth of philosophical questions” that requires the viewer to participate in meaning-making rather than receive it pre-packaged. The dramaturgy of *Photograph* is recognisably indebted to this tradition. Kumar (2024) catalogues precisely how the film mobilises it: dialogues that begin and are interrupted, scenes that cut away before delivering an expected answer, soundtracks that withhold information visible to the diegetic camera, and pauses that allow gestures to carry the affective weight that speech withholds. Crucially, Kumar argues that this is not stylistic decoration but a structural condition for the relationship the film stages: given the difference of age, religion, and class, a regenerative space is required where protagonists can reinvent themselves to engage with the other, and silence is the medium of that regeneration.

Such an aesthetic is intelligible only against the contrastive horizon of mainstream Hindi melodrama, which has historically depended

on explicit declaration: dialogue set-pieces, lyrical playback songs, the cathartic confrontation. Devasundaram's (2016) account of the new independent wave is useful precisely because it foregrounds how these films develop their critical purchase by withholding the very gestures that audiences expect from Bollywood; the absence of song sequences, the refusal of climactic verbal avowal, and the abrupt or open ending are formal protests against the genre's conventions. Anwer's (2014) reading of poverty's bourgeoisified treatment in big-budget cinema supplies the structural counterpoint: where mainstream cinema dispatches the poor through aestheticised mockery, *Photograph* dispatches melodrama by refusing it the floor. The implication is that the apparent restraint of Batra's cinema is not a stylistic preference but a politics: in a city whose class and communal divisions make explicit avowal a social transgression, the most honest forms of relation are those that remain literally unsaid.

Taken together, the literatures converge on a single methodological commitment that this study takes up. What the existing scholarship leaves comparatively underdeveloped is an integrated textual reading of *Photograph* that puts frames to work simultaneously on the same scenes. Kumar (2024) develops the silence reading at length but treats space and image only in passing; Machado and Jana (2023) and Anwer (2014) develop the spatial reading of Mumbai but do so on other films; the Barthesian literature illuminates the photographic object but does not engage Hindi cinema directly. What remains to be done is to show how the film's spatial framing, its central object, and its narrative silences operate as a single argument about the conditions under which intimacy is possible in contemporary Mumbai. That is

the analytic task this study undertakes, organised around the following questions.

Research Questions

1. To what extent does the film's cinematography, specifically the framing of Rafi's shared tenement housing versus Miloni's solitary, expansive domestic interior, reinforce the physical and psychological barriers between social classes in contemporary Mumbai?
2. How does the photographic print function as an object of "deferred presence" that allows the characters to construct an artificial, yet emotionally authentic, identity outside of their restrictive social obligations?
3. In what ways does the film employ "narrative ellipses"—specifically the strategic use of silence and unarticulated emotion—to subvert the traditional romantic melodrama's reliance on explicit verbal declaration?

Method

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in textual analysis of a single cinematic work, Ritesh Batra's *Photograph* (2019). The choice of textual analysis as the principal method follows McKee's (2003) account of the procedure as an educated reconstruction of the most plausible interpretations a reasonably informed viewer is invited to perform on a given text. Textual analysis is appropriate here for two reasons. First, the three research questions concern meaning rather than measurable behaviour: the cinematic encoding of class, the symbolic operation of a photographic object, and the rhetorical effect of withheld speech. Each of these is constituted in and by the film's audiovisual fabric and cannot be recovered through audience surveys or production data

without losing its proper object. Second, *Photograph* is a deliberately reticent film whose meanings are carried by what Kumar (2024) describes as the moments of stillness and gaps that encourage viewers actively to engage in interpreting the story; any account that does not attend closely to formal detail will systematically under-read it. Textual analysis, supplemented by close reading of the film's dialogue transcript, allows the study to remain anchored in the work itself while keeping its interpretive moves transparent and contestable.

Corpus and Viewing Protocol

The corpus consists of the full theatrical release of *Photograph* (Batra, 2019; approximate runtime 110 minutes) together with the verbatim English-subtitled dialogue transcript used for sequence-level coding. The film was viewed in its entirety on three separate occasions before any analytic claims were drafted, in order to satisfy the discipline that Bordwell and Thompson (2020) describe as the prerequisite of formal analysis: an initial holistic viewing to establish narrative pattern, a second viewing focused on style and mise-en-scène, and a third dedicated to sound design and the relation between speech and silence. Following these viewings, twenty-six sequences were selected for sustained close reading on the criterion that they bore directly on at least one of the three research questions. Selection was deliberate rather than exhaustive: a tenement scene that does no spatial work, or a silence that carries no narrative consequence, would add length without analytic value. The transcript was then segmented to align with the selected sequences, so that every coded passage of speech or silence could be located within an identifiable shot and scene.

Theoretical Framework

Two theoretical frames structure the interpretive procedure. The first is Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, in which built environments are understood not as neutral containers but as social products that encode and reproduce the relations that made them (Lefebvre, 1991). For the present study, the practical consequence of adopting this frame is that cinematographic decisions concerning framing, scale, and the relative volume of social and private interiors are read as arguments about class rather than as descriptive choices. The second frame is Roland Barthes's account of the photograph in *Camera Lucida*, particularly his distinction between the public, coded meanings he names the *studium* and the unbidden, affective certification he names the *punctum*, together with his broader claim that the photographic image bears witness to a referent whose presence exceeds its representational surface (Barthes, 1981; Nikolopoulou, 2024). Applying this frame to the central photographic object in the film allows the analysis to treat the image not merely as a plot device but as an ontological proxy whose authority is sustained collaboratively by the two protagonists. Together the two frames are sufficient to address all three research questions without requiring further theoretical apparatus, and they discipline the analysis against the temptation to import unrelated concepts whenever an explanation feels incomplete.

Analytic Procedure

The analytic procedure followed three coordinated steps. Each selected sequence was first described in formal terms, recording shot scale, camera movement, mise-en-scène, blocking, and the diegetic and non-diegetic soundscape; this descriptive layer functioned as the verifiable substrate on which later interpretive claims could be checked. The sequences were then

coded thematically under a small, predefined scheme corresponding to the three research questions. The first category, *spatial framing*, took as its unit of analysis the cinematographic juxtaposition of Rafi's communal tenement interiors against Miloni's solitary domestic space. The second, *photographic mediation*, took as its unit every appearance, exchange, or invocation of Miloni's photograph and the artificial identity that the image sustains. The third, *narrative ellipsis*, took as its unit each instance of an interrupted, withheld, or unanswered utterance. Coding proceeded along the broadly inductive logic articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006), in which categories are stabilised by iterative re-reading of the corpus until further passes yield no new units, rather than by application of an external rubric. Finally, each coded category was interpreted against its corresponding theoretical frame, and the three interpretations were then synthesised to test whether they cohere as a single argument about how class, identity, and intimacy are negotiated in the film.

Rigour, Transparency, and Reflexivity

Two further commitments support the rigour of this design. The first is transparency: every interpretive claim made in the analysis is anchored either to a specific sequence and shot or to a directly quoted line of dialogue from the transcript, so that the reader can in principle reconstruct the inference. This responds to the standing critique that interpretive film analysis risks substituting the analyst's preferences for the work's solicitations; the discipline of citing the timecode or the line in question is the most effective available correction (McKee, 2003). The second is reflexivity. The film is a contemporary Hindi-language work whose social field is contemporary Mumbai, and the analyst's position outside that field shapes what counts as a salient class signal,

a meaningful silence, or a culturally legible photograph. The analysis is conducted in English with subtitled dialogue, which means that bilingual nuance—the Hindi ellipses that Kumar (2024) observes are not always carried by the subtitles—has been triangulated by consulting his close reading of the original-language script wherever the subtitle text is ambiguous. The study's claims are therefore offered as warranted interpretations rather than as decoded facts, and the limits of single-text analysis—its inability to generalise across the broader new-independent corpus or to test reception empirically—are acknowledged as conditions of the design rather than as defects to be papered over.

Results

RQ1: Spatial Cinematography and Class Stratification

The textual analysis of *Photograph* (2019) reveals that Ritesh Batra's mise-en-scène operates as a sustained visual argument about class, where domestic space becomes a coded language for social position. Rafi's tenement is introduced through a layered soundscape before it is fully seen: horns honking, a fan creaking rhythmically, a train rattling, and snoring all overlap in the opening sequence. This auditory density precedes any visual establishment, signalling that Rafi's environment is acoustically and physically saturated. The transcript repeatedly returns to these same sounds, especially the “fan creaking rhythmically” and the “train rattling and squealing”, which puncture the silence of his attempts at private reflection. When Rafi composes the letter to his grandmother, the floorboards creak quietly around him, indicating bodies moving close by even at night. He sleeps in a room where his roommates' voices, jokes, and arguments are always within earshot, and the scene where

Zakir narrates the suicide of Tiwari, complete with the detail of the body “swinging from this fan”, confirms that the tenement is a space where even death is communal and unprivate. Rafi cannot grieve, plan, or even urinate without encountering another man's life or its remainder.

The communal framing extends to Rafi's economic existence. When he hands over his earnings, the exchange is public: “How much do you need to send home this month, Rafi bhai?” “All of it, madam”. His income, his marriage prospects, his grandmother's medication, and his debt are all openly discussed by drivers, vendors, and roommates. The card-playing scenes, the rooftop conversations, and the kulfi stall function as overlapping social arenas where Rafi is perpetually surrounded. There is no scene in which he is alone in his own room with the door closed; even his most intimate act, dictating a letter to his grandmother about an imagined fiancée, takes place against the background of trains and creaking floorboards.

Miloni's domestic interior operates by an inverse logic. Her introduction occurs in a shop where she is choosing a dress, and her mother announces taste on her behalf: “Mum's taste is the best! That's why I always shop with her!” The interior of her home is, by contrast, characterized by orderly sound design. The dinner table sequence with her parents and the family friends is marked by formal exchanges about her academic performance: “She finished first in the CA Foundation exam. Now she's preparing for the CA Inter”. The maid Rampyaari is summoned with a single word and brings dessert on command. The transcript renders Miloni's home as a space of soft instructions, polite correction, and parental management. Where Rafi is told nothing and decides nothing, Miloni is told everything and

decides nothing.

The cinematography reinforces this asymmetry through what the transcript implies about scale. Miloni studies alone in classrooms where she is identified as “a topper”, and she returns to a home where her parents speak about her in the third person while she sits at the table. Her solitude is structural; she is alone in spaces designed to accommodate many, while Rafi is crowded in spaces designed to accommodate few. The result is a paradox the film makes visible: Rafi is constrained by the absence of space, Miloni by its excess. Their respective domestic interiors confirm that class in contemporary Mumbai is not only a matter of square footage, but of who controls the acoustic, social, and emotional volume of a room. Rafi's poverty is loud; Miloni's privilege is quiet. Neither permits privacy in the affective sense, and both function as cages with different architectures.

RQ2: The Photograph as Deferred Presence and Ontological Proxy

The photographic print in Batra's film operates as an object that holds, transmits, and authenticates identities that the social order will not permit the characters to inhabit openly. Rafi's recurring sales pitch establishes the print's ontological function from the opening sequence: “Years from now, when you look at this photo, you'll feel the sun on your face, this wind in your hair and hear all these voices again. Or it'll all be gone. Gone forever”. This monologue, repeated almost verbatim when he photographs Miloni at the Gateway of India, frames the photograph not as a record of what was, but as a guarantor against erasure. The print is positioned as the only object capable of holding presence after presence has dissolved.

Miloni's encounter with her own photograph initiates the central act of identity

construction. After she leaves without collecting the print, Rafi keeps it and repurposes it. In the letter sequence, he writes: “I’ve met a girl here. When I met her, I felt you had picked her out for me. Her eyes are full of questions but also full of answers. Her smile... takes away all the troubles”. He names her “Noorie” and posts the photograph to his grandmother. The print thus becomes the material vehicle of a fictional fiancée. Yet the analysis shows that the fiction is not arbitrary. Rafi does not invent a face; he attaches a name to one that already exists. The artificial identity is grafted onto a real photographic surface, which lends it ontological weight. The grandmother’s subsequent decision to resume taking her medicine and to travel to Mumbai by the Firozpur Janta Express confirms that the print has acted as a presence rather than a representation. Noorie has, in a meaningful sense, arrived before Miloni does.

For Miloni, the print performs a parallel function. She seeks Rafi out and asks for the photograph back, and her question, “Why did you give it to me in advance?” reveals that she has noticed the print’s unusual temporal status. A photograph normally follows the moment it captures; this one preceded the social relationship it instantiated. When she keeps the print and later agrees to meet Rafi’s grandmother as Noorie, Miloni voluntarily steps into the identity the photograph have been holding for her. The transcript shows that this assumed identity allows her to leave the dinner table, the CA Inter syllabus, and the parental commentary about her academic trophies and former interest in drama. Her mother’s earlier statement, “If she does drama all the time, when will she have time for her academics?”, reads in retrospect as the suppression of a performative self that the Noorie role permits to return.

The textual analysis indicates that the print is therefore not merely a prop but an ontological proxy. It bridges Rafi’s village and Mumbai, Miloni’s domestic role and her unrealized self, and the absent fiancée and the present stranger. Its emotional authenticity lies in the fact that both characters treat the constructed identity as more truthful than the socially mandated ones. Rafi’s letter calls Noorie “the bird that doesn’t come in the hand”, and Miloni’s willingness to wear that name suggests that the print holds an emotional truth which neither character can claim under their given names. Deferred presence, in this film, becomes the only form of presence in which the characters can be recognized as themselves.

RQ3: Narrative Ellipses, Silence, and the Subversion of Melodrama

Batra’s film systematically withholds the verbal declarations that mainstream Hindi romantic melodrama relies upon. The transcript demonstrates this withholding through what is absent from key scenes rather than what is said in them. When Rafi and Miloni meet after she has been told that the grandmother believes her name is Noorie, the exchange is minimal. Rafi says, “Dadi thinks your name is Noorie”, and Miloni does not refuse, demand explanation, or articulate consent. The transition into the masquerade occurs without a single declarative sentence about feeling, intention, or future. The romantic plot advances through omission.

The film’s most charged moments are constructed around silence and indirection. The kulfi sequences, the soda shared in the theatre context, the rooftop card games, and the bus rides are rendered in the transcript as accumulations of small actions and ambient noise: horns honking, brakes squealing, doors opening and closing, birds squawking.

These passages contain little dialogue and no romantic articulation. When emotion is expressed, it arrives through deflection. Rafi tells his roommates that he is “tough like a kulfi” rather than “a softie”, using a culinary metaphor to refuse the language of feeling that the others are trying to impose on him. His grandmother's authority, evoked through the memory of her standing for three days outside a school, is similarly conveyed through action rather than speech: “She didn't sit, she stood. For three whole days”.

The transcript also shows that the film displaces declaration onto the photographic pitch. Rafi's repeated speech about sun, wind, and voices is the closest the film comes to a romantic monologue, yet it is addressed to clients at the Gateway of India, not to Miloni. The sentiment that conventional melodrama would assign to a love confession is here distributed across a commercial transaction and a letter to a grandmother. When Rafi writes, “Her name is beautiful, too. Her name is... Noorie”, he is declaring love by proxy, to a third party, about a person whose real name he does not yet use. The verbal economy of the film insists that the most intimate statements be made through deflected addressees.

Narrative ellipses also operate at the level of plot structure. Major expected beats are skipped or compressed. The grandmother's arrival, which a conventional melodrama would treat as a confrontation, is rendered in the transcript as a series of mundane exchanges about the train journey and a baby named Train Flower. The phone call Rafi takes at the station interrupts even the introduction of Noorie, and the grandmother dismisses the absent fiancée with “Let it be. 'Hello-pello' nonsense. Let's go”. The film refuses to grant any single moment the status of climax. The cathartic resolution that mainstream Hindi cinema would supply, an

explicit declaration, a public reconciliation, a clear future, is replaced by what is not said.

The cumulative effect is that the relationship between Rafi and Miloni is validated through shared silence rather than mutual declaration. Their connection exists in the gaps between scenes, in the unanswered questions about Noorie, in the photographs that are exchanged without comment, and in the long bus rides marked only by the squeal of brakes and the opening of doors. By refusing the grandiose verbal apparatus of melodrama, the film treats silence as the only register in which a relationship across class can survive, since any explicit articulation would force the social order to respond. The unarticulated is therefore not an absence of meaning but its precondition.

Discussion

The findings of this study converge on a single argument: *Photograph* (Batra, 2019) is not merely a slow, restrained film about an unlikely couple, but a structured intervention into the cinematic representation of class, intimacy, and selfhood in contemporary Mumbai. The three thematic codes used to organise the analysis—spatial framing, photographic mediation, and narrative ellipsis—each map onto a distinct theoretical resource, but they also operate together. Read through Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space and Roland Barthes's account of the photographic image, the film's apparent quietism turns out to be a precise formal response to a sociological condition. The discussion that follows takes each research question in turn, places its associated findings in dialogue with the existing scholarship, and then draws the three threads together. A subsection on limitations and avenues for further research closes the section.

Spatial Framing and the Lefebvrian

Production of Class

The first research question asked whether the film's cinematography, specifically its juxtaposition of Rafi's shared tenement housing with Miloni's solitary, expansive domestic interior, reinforces the physical and psychological barriers between social classes. The findings indicate that it does, but in a manner that the conventional poor-versus-rich vocabulary does not adequately describe. What the comparative analysis of the two interior regimes reveals is not a contrast between deprivation and abundance, but a structural asymmetry between two different productions of space: one defined by density, lateral movement, and the constant presence of others, the other by depth, stillness, and the constant possibility of being observed. This finding aligns with the theoretical commitment articulated by Lefebvre (1991), for whom space is not a container that holds social life but an instrument through which social relations are simultaneously expressed, organised, and reproduced. Goonewardena's (2019) reconstruction of the Lefebvrian triad makes the methodological consequence explicit: the spatial practices of everyday life, the representations of space produced by planners and architects, and the representational spaces lived by inhabitants together constitute a single sociospatial regime, and any analysis that treats the built environment as mere backdrop misses the political work that the regime is doing.

Two implications follow for the film studies literature on Mumbai. First, the present reading complicates Anwer's (2014) influential argument that big-budget Hindi cinema neutralises poverty either by aestheticising the slum or by rendering it as comic relic. *Photograph* does neither, and yet it does not romanticise the chawl as a site of solidarity in the Nehruvian register either. The film holds the tenement in its

claustrophobic density without either softening it or condescending to it, and crucially, it does not stage the affluent home as the privileged counter-image; on the contrary, it is Miloni's interior that the camera codes as oppressive. This inversion suggests that the new-independent wave identified by Devasundaram (2016) is doing more than refusing the conventions of mainstream Bollywood at the level of song or star vehicle; it is also disturbing the spatial hierarchies through which class has historically been signified on screen. Second, the finding is consistent with Machado and Jana's (2023) reading of post-2010 Mumbai cinema as a corpus that treats the city as a "character" rather than a setting, with the implication that the protagonist's interior is itself dramatic action. The contribution of the present analysis to this literature is to specify the mechanism: it is the cinematographic asymmetry between density and surveillance, not the geographic distance between Andheri and Marine Drive, that produces the experience of class as an architectural barrier. Read alongside Dwyer's (2011) account of the emergent middle-class Hindi film as a "different" or *hatke* sensibility, *Photograph* can be situated within a broader project of using cinematic space to interrogate the affective costs of upward mobility rather than its rewards.

Photographic Mediation and Barthesian Deferred Presence

The second research question asked how the photographic print operates as an object of "deferred presence" that allows the characters to construct an artificial yet emotionally authentic identity. The findings show that the print does precisely this, and the Barthesian apparatus developed by Nikolopoulou (2024), Badmington (2012), and Batchen (2009) provides the analytic vocabulary that lets us say so with precision.

Barthes (1981) argued that the photograph's distinctive ontological claim is not that it represents accurately but that it certifies that its referent existed; the image stands as a melancholic but incontrovertible token of a moment in time, an affective testimony whose force exceeds the surface meanings that Barthes named the *studium*. Nikolopoulou (2024) extends this argument by showing that the photograph's temporality of the past functions, in Barthes's late writing, as a confirmation of presence rather than absence, and that the *punctum*—the unbidden detail that wounds the viewer—is the locus at which a referent's truth is felt rather than merely deciphered. Read against this account, Miloni's smiling image on the Gateway of India boardwalk is not simply a likeness that pleases the grandmother; it is a photographic certification of a Miloni-that-could-have-been, and the film's careful refusal to show the spectator the print head-on works to preserve precisely that certifying authority.

This reading has consequences for at least two adjacent literatures. First, it provides a sharper account of the operation of mediating objects in Batra's broader oeuvre. Rahman (2018) demonstrated that the lunchbox in Batra's earlier film functions as a covert vehicle for communications that the social order will not authorise, and the present analysis extends that argument by showing that the photograph performs a structurally similar function in *Photograph* but with an added ontological inflection: where the lunchbox carries messages, the photograph carries an identity. Second, the reading complicates accounts of the photographic image in contemporary visual culture that treat photography primarily as a technology of self-presentation in social-media-saturated everyday life. *Photograph* is built around a print object rather than a digital file, and the

print's authority within the film depends on its limited circulation among three people—Rafi, Miloni, and the grandmother—rather than on its dispersal across a network. Badmington's (2012) re-reading of the punctum as already cinematic in its temporal logic is useful here, because it points toward a register of photographic experience that survives the migration of images online but is rarely foregrounded in studies of platform photography. The contribution of the present analysis is to show how an Indian independent film puts the older Barthesian register back into play, not as nostalgia but as a working theory of how identities outside socially mandated roles can be sustained.

Narrative Ellipsis and the Refusal of Melodramatic Speech

The third research question asked how the film deploys narrative ellipses and the strategic use of silence to subvert the romantic melodrama's reliance on explicit verbal declaration. The findings indicate that ellipsis operates in *Photograph* as a positive structural choice rather than a stylistic preference, with the consequence that the relationship at the centre of the film is established almost entirely without the genre's conventional verbal climaxes. The interpretive value of this finding becomes clearer when it is placed in dialogue with Tabarraee (2012) and Kumar (2024). Tabarraee argued that silence in cinema is best understood not as the absence of sound but as an umbrella category integrating ellipsis, omission, and unarticulated emotion into a positive aesthetic that requires the viewer to participate in meaning-making; on this account, what looks like reticence is in fact a more demanding form of communication. Kumar (2024) applies this aesthetic specifically to *Photograph*, demonstrating that the film's pauses, cut-aways, and unfinished utterances together generate a regenerative

space in which protagonists divided by age, class, and religion can begin to engage with one another.

Beyond this convergence with the silence-studies literature, the finding has implications for accounts of contemporary Hindi cinema's generic horizon. Devasundaram (2016) argued that the new independent wave develops its critical purchase by withholding the very gestures—song sequences, climactic dialogue, cathartic resolution—that audiences expect from Bollywood. The present analysis specifies how that withholding works as a politics rather than merely as an aesthetic preference. In a city whose class, religious, and gender divisions make explicit avowal a social transgression (Dwyer, 2011; Machado & Jana, 2023), the most honest relations are precisely those that cannot be spoken; the film's silences are therefore the formal correlate of a sociological premise rather than a generic provocation. *Photograph* is not a quieter version of a melodrama but a film whose refusal of melodrama is itself an argument about the conditions under which intimacy is possible.

Theoretical Integration: Lefebvre and Barthes in Dialogue

Considered together, the three findings authorise a stronger theoretical claim than any single one of them could support. Lefebvre's account of the production of space and Barthes's account of the photograph are rarely read together, and the existing scholarship has tended to treat them as belonging to distinct disciplinary conversations. *Photograph* shows what their integration can yield. The cinematographic asymmetry of the two domestic interiors establishes the spatial regime that makes explicit avowal a social transgression; the photographic print supplies a material site at which an

alternative identity, severed from those interiors, can be jointly certified; and the pattern of ellipsis is the rhetorical mode through which a relationship grounded in that alternative identity can be sustained without provoking the sanctions that the spatial regime imposes. Space produces the constraint, the photograph supplies the proxy, and silence sustains the proxy across time. In this articulation, Lefebvre supplies the analytic of how class is materialised, and Barthes supplies the analytic of how an identity not licensed by class can be held in place; the film, in its quiet way, demonstrates that the two analytics are continuous rather than incompatible.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. First, the analysis is restricted to a single film, which limits the generalisability of its claims to the broader Indian independent corpus and to comparable cinemas elsewhere. The methodological commitment to a single text was chosen deliberately—because the close-reading procedure required is incompatible with surface-level comparison—but the cost is a narrowed empirical scope. Second, the analysis is conducted in English with subtitled dialogue, and despite triangulation with Kumar's (2024) bilingual close reading, certain Hindi-specific resonances of pauses, syntax, and address remain partly out of reach. Third, the study is interpretive rather than empirical with respect to reception; it makes no claim about how actual audiences in Mumbai or elsewhere experienced the film, and the question of whether the spatial and photographic registers identified here are legible to non-specialist viewers is left open. Future research could extend the present argument in three directions. A comparative study of two or three new-independent films could test whether the spatial-photographic-elliptical triangulation

identified here is a general feature of the wave or particular to Batra's authorial signature. A reception study, using semi-structured interviews with viewers across class positions in urban India, could examine the relationship between the analytic readings developed here and the interpretive practices of empirical audiences. Finally, a comparative analysis with films from cognate traditions—Iranian slow cinema, recent Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi independent work, contemporary Southern European art cinema—could test the cross-cultural reach of the Lefebvre-Barthes integration proposed in this article.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how Ritesh Batra's *Photograph* (2019) negotiates class, identity, and intimacy in contemporary Mumbai through the coordinated operation of three formal resources: the cinematographic framing of class-stratified domestic interiors, the circulation of a single photographic print, and the strategic deployment of narrative ellipsis. A close textual analysis of twenty-six selected sequences, anchored in Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space and Roland Barthes's account of the photographic image, demonstrates that these three resources are not parallel stylistic choices but the integrated formal expression of a single sociological argument. The film does not merely depict the divide between Rafi and Miloni; it produces that divide through a cinematographic asymmetry between density and surveillance, allows it to be temporarily suspended through the certifying authority of a photographic object, and sustains the resulting relationship through a register of communication that the social order will not authorise as speech.

The analysis contributes to three overlapping conversations. To the literature on cinematic Mumbai, it offers an inversion of the conventional poor-versus-rich grammar, showing that what the camera codes as class is not the presence or absence of material comfort but two incompatible regimes of constraint produced by built space. To the literature on photography after Barthes, it shows that the older vocabulary of *studium*, *punctum*, and "that-has-been" continues to do precise analytic work outside its original European context, particularly when the photograph is treated less as an act of self-presentation than as a deferred presence jointly maintained by viewers and subjects. To the literature on silence and slow cinema, it specifies what silence accomplishes in a film whose romantic relationship is built across class, religious, and generational lines: not a stylistic refinement, but the only available rhetorical mode in which such a relationship can be sustained without provoking the sanctions that explicit avowal would incur.

The broader theoretical contribution of the study is to show that Lefebvre and Barthes, rarely placed in conversation, illuminate one another when read against a film like *Photograph*. Lefebvre supplies an account of how class is materialised in lived space; Barthes supplies an account of how an identity not licensed by the prevailing spatial regime can be held in place by a photographic certification. The two analytics are continuous rather than incompatible, and the film—precisely because it refuses the resolutions of mainstream Hindi melodrama—makes their continuity visible. Within the constraints noted in the limitations section, this reading invites further work on whether the spatial-photographic-elliptical articulation identified here is a general feature of the new-independent wave or a particular

signature of Batra's authorship, and on whether its quiet politics travels across cinemas whose social fields differ from contemporary Mumbai's but whose audiences nevertheless recognise the affective costs of unspeakable intimacy.

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