



A Comparative Study of Minimalism, Emotional Realism, and Postcolonial Spectatorship in Global Auteur Cinema and the Films of Balu Mahendra

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Abstract

This article offers a comprehensive comparative analysis of literary style and cinematic aesthetics in global auteur cinema and the films of Balu Mahendra, situating his work within broader traditions of cinematic minimalism, contemplative realism, and postcolonial visual culture. Major international auteurs such as Robert Bresson, Andrei Tarkovsky, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Yasujiro Ozu transformed cinema into a philosophical and literary medium through silence, visual austerity, fragmented narration, and contemplative temporality. Their films privilege stillness over spectacle, existential inquiry over narrative closure, and metaphysical reflection over melodramatic emotionality. Within modern film discourse, these auteurs established minimalist cinema as a serious artistic practice capable of representing memory, alienation, spirituality, and the phenomenology of lived experience. In contrast, Balu Mahendra localised and transformed these global minimalist traditions through a distinctly Tamil and postcolonial cinematic sensibility. Rather than employing minimalism solely as philosophical abstraction, Mahendra infused cinematic restraint with emotional intimacy, domestic realism, sensory immersion, and affective vulnerability. His films derive poetic significance from ordinary spaces, middle-class anxieties, interpersonal silences, and the emotional fragility of everyday life. Through natural lighting, ambient soundscapes, restrained performance, and contemplative pacing, Mahendra developed a cinematic language in which silence becomes emotionally inhabited rather than metaphysically empty. Through detailed comparative analysis, case studies, and theoretical interpretation, the article demonstrates that Mahendra expands auteur cinema beyond Eurocentric philosophical abstraction toward emotional ethics and postcolonial sensory realism. His films establish a uniquely Tamil cinematic modernism where realism becomes affective, minimalism becomes emotional, and ordinary life becomes poetically cinematic. Finally, this study affirms Balu Mahendra as a major contributor to global auteur discourse whose work offers an alternative framework for understanding cinematic minimalism, spectatorship, and emotional realism within world cinema.

Keywords: Auteur Cinema, Balu Mahendra, Cinematic Minimalism, Emotional Realism, Phenomenology, Tamil Cinema, Postcolonial Realism, Spectatorship, Domestic Realism.

Introduction

Auteur cinema emerged during the twentieth century as one of the influential artistic and intellectual movements in world cinema. It rejects the industrial logic of mainstream



filmmaking, auteur filmmakers transformed cinema into a serious philosophical and literary art form capable of expressing existential anxiety, spiritual crisis, emotional alienation, and subjective memory. Through visual restraint, contemplative pacing, silence, and psychological realism, auteur cinema challenged dominant cinematic conventions rooted in spectacle, melodrama, and narrative closure. The emergence of auteur theory, particularly through postwar French criticism associated with *Cahiers du Cinéma*, redefined the role of the film director as the primary artistic consciousness behind cinematic production. Scholars and critics increasingly emphasised recurring visual motifs, thematic consistency, and stylistic signatures as evidence of cinematic authorship. Filmmakers such as Ingmar Bergman, Robert Bresson, Andrei Tarkovsky, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Yasujiro Ozu fundamentally transformed cinematic language through minimalist aesthetics and philosophical introspection. Despite their cultural differences, these filmmakers shared several formal characteristics: sparse dialogue, slow temporality, fragmented narration, contemplative silence, and visual austerity. Their films often privileged psychological interiority over dramatic action and philosophical reflection over emotional spectacle. Cinema, within this modernist tradition, became an experiential medium through which viewers encountered memory, temporality, spirituality, and existential uncertainty.

Balu Mahendra occupies a uniquely significant position. Although deeply influenced by global art cinema and minimalist aesthetics, Mahendra did not merely reproduce European modernism within Indian cinema. Instead, he indigenized and transformed auteur minimalism through Tamil domestic realism, emotional intimacy, and postcolonial middle-class experience. His films localise contemplative cinematic language within ordinary Tamil social life, thereby creating a cinematic modernism simultaneously global in artistic sophistication and deeply regional in affective resonance. Unlike European modernist auteurs who frequently employ minimalism to evoke metaphysical abstraction or existential alienation, Mahendra uses cinematic restraint to intensify emotional realism and sensory intimacy. Silence in his films is not merely philosophical emptiness; it becomes an emotionally inhabited space filled with longing, memory, vulnerability, and interpersonal tension. Domestic interiors become affective environments shaped by care work, loneliness, aspiration, and emotional fragility.

Mahendra's cinema also occupies an important place within postcolonial film discourse because it challenges Eurocentric assumptions surrounding auteurism and cinematic modernism. His films foreground Tamil middle-class anxieties, women's emotional labour, domestic instability, and urban precarity, thereby rooting cinematic modernism within the lived realities of postcolonial South India. Through natural lighting, ambient sound, tactile imagery, and contemplative pacing, Mahendra constructs a phenomenological realism grounded in sensory experience and emotional embodiment. This article therefore investigates how Balu Mahendra redefines literary auteur cinema through emotional realism, domestic spatiality, phenomenological spectatorship, and postcolonial cultural specificity. Drawing upon phenomenology, affect theory, feminist film criticism, and postcolonial theory, the study examines how Mahendra transforms minimalist aesthetics into an affective cinematic language rooted in lived experience and embodied emotion. Through comparative analysis with major global auteurs, the article argues that Mahendra expands cinematic modernism beyond metaphysical contemplation toward emotional ethics, sensory realism, and affective intimacy.



Literature Review

The intellectual foundations of auteur theory emerged primarily through the writings of André Bazin and the critics of *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Bazin argued that cinema possessed a unique ontological relationship with reality due to its photographic basis and temporal continuity. Rejecting excessive montage and artificial manipulation, Bazin emphasised realism through long takes, deep focus, and observational continuity. His writings significantly influenced global cinematic modernism. Auteur theorists subsequently elevated directors as cinematic authors whose films expressed recurring philosophical and stylistic signatures. This framework transformed cinema from commercial entertainment into an artistic and intellectual medium comparable to literature and philosophy.

Bresson cultivated one of the most austere forms of cinematic minimalism. Rejecting theatrical performance and emotional excess, he employed non-professional actors, fragmented visual narration, sparse dialogue, and restrained soundscapes. Silence in Bresson's films functions as spiritual and transcendental space. Emotional expression is suppressed in order to intensify contemplative spectatorship.

Andrei Tarkovsky conceptualised cinema as "sculpting in time." His films dissolve linear temporality through long takes, dream imagery, and symbolic natural elements such as water, rain, and fire. Scholars interpret Tarkovsky's cinema as deeply phenomenological and metaphysical, in which spectators experience duration itself as an emotional and spiritual texture.

Michelangelo Antonioni's cinema foregrounds emotional fragmentation and existential alienation through sparse narratives, architectural emptiness, and visual abstraction. His urban landscapes symbolise emotional disconnection within industrial modernity. Silence in Antonioni often signifies emotional absence and existential emptiness. Yasujiro Ozu transformed ordinary family life into a contemplative cinematic experience through static framing, domestic interiors, and quiet emotionality. His minimalist realism privileges atmosphere, stillness, and emotional subtlety over dramatic action. Collectively, these auteurs established cinematic minimalism as a philosophical mode of artistic expression grounded in silence, temporality, ambiguity, and contemplative realism.

Phenomenological film theory shifted cinematic analysis from representation toward lived sensory experience. Drawing upon the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, phenomenological theorists argued that spectators experience cinema bodily and emotionally rather than purely intellectually. Vivian Sobchack conceptualised cinema as embodied communication. According to Sobchack, spectators do not simply interpret images cognitively but experience cinematic worlds through sensation, atmosphere, movement, and emotional immersion.

Laura U. Marks introduced the concept of "haptic visuality," emphasising tactile spectatorship and sensory perception. Her work demonstrated how cinema evokes memory, touch, and emotional texture through material imagery and audiovisual atmosphere.

These frameworks are significant for understanding Mahendra's cinema because his films privilege sensory realism, domestic atmosphere, tactile imagery, and emotional embodiment.

Laura Mulvey argued that classical cinema structures visual pleasure through the "male gaze," positioning women as objects of masculine spectatorship. Most of the feminist scholars examined how narrative structures and visual aesthetics reproduce gendered oriented power relations. In this context, Balu Mahendra's cinema occupies a complex position. His



female characters possess emotional depth, psychological interiority and narrative centrality that are rarely seen in mainstream Indian cinema. Films such as *Marupadiyum* and *Veedu* foreground women's emotional labour, domestic anxieties, and interpersonal vulnerability. At the same time, feminist critics note tensions in Mahendra's aestheticisation of feminine suffering. His poetic realism sometimes romanticises emotional fragility and melancholy, thereby generating interpretive ambiguity between empathy and aesthetic contemplation.

Ashish Rajadhyaksha argues that Indian cinematic modernity emerges through historically specific social conditions shaped by urbanisation, linguistic identity, and postcolonial transformation. Mahendra's cinema exemplifies this postcolonial modernism. His films engage with bureaucratic instability, middle-class aspiration, urban precarity, and emotional repression within Tamil society. Domestic spaces become emotionally charged environments reflecting postcolonial anxieties and fragile modern identities. Unlike European existential cinema, Mahendra grounds emotional experience within concrete social realities rather than abstract metaphysical inquiry.

Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are:

- To examine the literary and cinematic aesthetics of global auteur cinema and Balu Mahendra's select films.
- To analyse how cinematic minimalism functions differently within European modernism and Tamil postcolonial realism.
- To investigate Mahendra's concept of emotional realism through silence, domesticity, and sensory atmosphere.
- To evaluate phenomenological spectatorship and embodied viewing experience in Mahendra's cinema.
- To estimate the feminist representations of emotional labour and female subjectivity in Balu Mahendra's films.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and comparative research methodology grounded in interdisciplinary film analysis.

Comparative Film Analysis

The study comparatively examines selected films of Balu Mahendra alongside the cinematic practices of global auteurs including Robert Bresson, Andrei Tarkovsky, Michelangelo Antonioni and Yasujiro Ozu. This comparative framework identifies convergences and divergences between global minimalist aesthetics and Tamil emotional realism. The study focuses primarily on the Tamil films *Veedu*, *Moondram Pirai* and *Marupadiyum*. These films were selected because they exemplify Mahendra's auteur aesthetics, including silence, domestic realism, emotional vulnerability, and contemplative temporality. The study analyses silence and non-verbal communication, domestic spatiality, temporality and pacing, natural lighting, ambient sound, emotional realism, gender representation, spectatorship and postcolonial realism.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws on significant theories for analysis and uses them as a theoretical framework. Auteur theory enables the analysis of Mahendra's recurring stylistic signatures including silence, emotional restraint, domestic realism, and naturalistic cinematography. Phenomenological theory explains how Mahendra constructs embodied spectatorship through sensory atmosphere and tactile realism. Affect theory examines how Mahendra's films evoke



emotional intensities through pauses, silence, soundscapes, and visual textures. Feminist analysis examines female subjectivity, emotional labour, domesticity, and patriarchal structures in Mahendra's cinema. Postcolonial theory situates Mahendra's realism within Tamil middle-class experience, urban instability, and regional cultural identity. The Tamil films *Veedu*, *Moondram Pirai* and *Marupadiyum* are selected for the study.

Comparative Analysis

Global auteur filmmakers frequently use minimalism as philosophical abstraction. Bresson's silence signifies spiritual transcendence; Antonioni's spaces represent existential alienation; Tarkovsky's temporality evokes metaphysical contemplation. However, Mahendra, transforms minimalism into emotional realism. Silence becomes affective intimacy rather than metaphysical emptiness. Domestic spaces become emotionally inhabited rather than existentially abstract.

Table 1: Stylistic Features of the Select Films and its Directors

Parameters	Bresson	Tarkovsky	Antonioni	Ozu	Balu Mahendra
Cinematic Style	Spiritual Minimalism	Metaphysical Realism	Existential Modernism	Domestic Minimalism	Minimalistic Hyperrealism
Narrative Structure	Sparse	Contemplative	Alienated	Domestic realism	Emotional realism
Silence	Spiritual transcendence	Philosophical reflection	Emotional emptiness	Familial intimacy	Emotional vulnerability
Space	Ascetic	Memory landscapes	Urban alienation	Domestic interiors	Tamil domestic spaces
Spectatorship	Reflective observer	Philosophical interpreter	Detached witness	Emotional observer	Embodied participant

Table 2: Spectatorship of Global Auteur Cinema and Balu Mahendra

Analytical Dimension	Global Auteur Cinema	Balu Mahendra
Spectatorship	Intellectual contemplation	Emotional embodiment
Temporality	Philosophical duration	Emotional duration
Realism	Symbolic	Sensory realism
Silence	Abstract	Relational
Viewer Experience	Distance	Immersion

Table 3: Feminist and Postcolonial Dimensions of Global Auteur Cinema and Balu Mahendra

Dimension	Global Auteur Cinema	Balu Mahendra
Women	Existential figures	Emotionally layered subjects
Emotional Labor	Secondary	Central
Space	Alienation	Domestic vulnerability
Modernity	Eurocentric	Tamil postcolonial
Realism	Intellectual	Csultural specificity



Discussions

Minimalistic Hyperrealism in the Films of Bala Mahendra

Mahendra develops what this study terms “minimalistic hyperrealism.” Through visual restraint and contemplative pacing, he intensifies emotional immediacy rather than diminishing it. Ordinary spaces acquire extraordinary emotional density, like rain-soaked windows, dimly lit interiors, empty hallways, domestic silence and ambient household sounds. These sensory textures create emotional immersion and phenomenological realism.

Emotional Embodiment in the Films of Bala Mahendra

Unlike classical auteur modernism that privileges intellectual distance, Mahendra cultivates embodied spectatorship. Viewers do not simply interpret emotion; they physically and affectively experience it. The scenes of waiting, loneliness, care, fatigue, desire and emotional repression among the protagonists portray silence in Mahendra’s cinema. This transforms spectatorship into phenomenological participation. Mahendra foregrounds women’s emotional burdens with unusual sensitivity. In the movie *Marupadiyum*, female subjectivity is represented through silence, domestic repetition, emotional exhaustion, relational vulnerability and psychological endurance. Unlike mainstream melodrama, Mahendra internalises emotional suffering through contemplative realism. Mahendra’s films archive the Tamil middle-class emotional life with themes of bureaucratic instability, housing precarity, urban transformation, economic uncertainty, and domestic fragility. In *Veedu*, the unfinished house symbolises deferred aspiration and postcolonial instability.

Domestic Architecture as Emotional Space

In the movie *Veedu*, the unfinished house functions simultaneously as an economic aspiration, an emotional burden, a spatial anxiety, and a symbolic incompleteness. Mahendra transforms architecture into affective space through silence, ambient sound, and natural lighting. The film’s realism emerges through Phenomenological Realism, including bureaucratic repetition, waiting, construction noise, domestic fatigue, and urban uncertainty. Viewers experience middle-class precarity sensorially rather than abstractly.

In the film *Moondram Pirai*, Memory, Emotional Fragility, care, and emotional incompleteness are conveyed through restrained visual narration. The final railway-station sequence exemplifies Mahendra’s emotional realism: silence replaces melodrama, gesture replaces dialogue, and emotional devastation emerges through restraint. This scene demonstrates Mahendra’s ability to intensify emotion through minimalism.

The protagonist of the movie *Marupadiyum* has an emotional journey that unfolds through domestic isolation, interrupted conversations, bodily stillness, and interior silence. One can see female subjectivity and emotional labour in the movie. Mahendran avoids melodramatic excess and instead constructs affective realism through contemplative temporality and domestic intimacy.

Conclusion

Global auteur cinema transformed film into a philosophical and literary medium through silence, abstraction, and contemplative temporality. Filmmakers such as Robert Bresson, Andrei Tarkovsky, and Michelangelo Antonioni redefined cinematic language through visual austerity and existential introspection. Within this global tradition, Balu Mahendra emerges as both inheritor and innovator. While adopting minimalist aesthetics, he transforms them into instruments of emotional realism, sensory intimacy, and postcolonial domestic experience. Mahendra’s cinema demonstrates that minimalism need not culminate in philosophical detachment alone. Instead, silence can become emotionally inhabited;



realism can become affective; domesticity can become phenomenological; and ordinary life can become poetically cinematic. His films redefine spectatorship through embodied emotional participation rather than detached contemplation. Through domestic realism, women's emotional labour, ambient soundscapes, natural lighting, and contemplative pacing, Mahendra creates a uniquely Tamil cinematic modernism rooted in postcolonial lived experience. Ultimately, Balu Mahendra expands global auteur discourse by demonstrating that cinematic modernism can emerge not only through metaphysical abstraction but also through emotional intimacy, sensory realism, and cultural specificity. His cinema therefore occupies a distinctive and critically significant position within world cinema as an affective, phenomenological, and ethically grounded form of auteur modernism.

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