

CINEMATIC TAXONOMY

*An Introduction to
Film Classification*



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Cinematic Taxonomy: Summary Edition

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This book is a concise version of Alireza Kaveh's *Cinematic Taxonomy*, a theoretical framework that introduces a five-part classification of cinema: **Genre, Tradition, Style, Tone, and Medium/Format**. While the full edition develops a broader historical and analytical scope, this summary provides the essential definitions and illustrative examples in a compact and accessible form.

Introduction

In the 21st century, film criticism has entered a new phase. Authority has shifted from professional critics to users whose instant reactions—likes, comments, and hashtags—shape cultural discourse. Platforms like Instagram and Twitter now function as arenas of evaluation and debate, reducing the power of traditional “official” criticism.

At the same time, the **explosion of artistic production** has made criticism less about qualitative judgment and more about orientation: which works to choose among countless options. Festivals, multiplexes, and curators create *ensembles* of works, which audiences experience collectively rather than in isolation.

Against this backdrop, the **theory of genre (or tone)** emerges as a new paradigm. Genre theory shifts focus:

- from *evaluation* (good/bad) to *classification* and *interrelation*;
- from the authority of critics to the collective reactions of audiences;
- from the cult of originality to the cultural resonance of repetition and hybridity.

A film that mixes comedy, tragedy, horror, and melodrama is no longer seen as “flawed” but as responding to the diverse tonal desires of viewers. This hybridization, long visible in Bollywood cinema, has spread across global cinema.

Genre theory is thus **de-sacralizing**: it treats an Ed Wood film and a Buñuel film alike as nodes in a cultural network. Copying is not a vice but evidence of embeddedness. Quality is not measured by formal coherence but by the emotional and cultural reactions works generate.

Philosophically, genre theory confronts the old opposition of *objectivity* (Aristotle) and *subjectivity* (Kant). Cinema, with its capacity to embody multiple tones simultaneously, disrupts this dichotomy. Genre is neither wholly in the work nor wholly in the viewer but in their interaction.

In short, genre theory offers a path beyond evaluative criticism: a framework that prioritizes classification, tonal experience, and collective reception.

Cinematic Taxonomy

Cinematic taxonomy—encompassing art, medium, format, style, genre, and tradition—can be clarified through analogy. A tricolor composition that carries symbolic meaning provides a useful example. Consider the Iranian flag. As a **visual symbol**, it has been reproduced in tandem with the national anthem since childhood, rendering the communicative process inherently artistic through the interplay of image and music. At school, one may have waved it atop a matchstick; in military service, soldiers may have stood to attention before it; in the streets, it may be seen flying above a public square; athletes may embrace it in victory; women may paint it on their faces during elections; it may drape the coffins of the deceased. Each instance represents its appearance across different **media**: film, television, music video, video art, video games, mobile screens, and even forms of “cinema before film.”

The flag may be made of different **materials**—paper, fabric, wood, or stone—corresponding to what we call **format**. Likewise, although cinema is not perceived through touch, its audiovisual texture allows us to classify it according to such distinctions. The design of the flag—whether stitched or printed—represents its **style**, a product of technology, artistic method, and the prevailing conception of realism within its historical moment. Both format and style point to conditions of production, yet style further indexes the interpretation of reality, extending across multiple arts (for instance, expressionism in painting, theater, and cinema). By contrast, formats such as animation, documentary, experimental film, feature narrative, episodic film, or serial television are specific to moving images.

The **reception** of the flag is inherently collective. Migrants, for example, negotiate attachments to more than one national flag, experiencing complex allegiances. An individual cannot simply assign an entirely private meaning to it; perception remains shaped by group identification. In cinema, similar processes occur: a flag may appear in historical films, may be altered for fictional settings, or may evoke mourning, pride, or sacrifice. The **tones** of such experiences—joy, sorrow, fear, awe—are akin to the tonal registers of genres.

Flags share a single **tradition**: the composition of colors as emblematic design. Otherwise, Iranians might weave carpets, Cubans might raise sugarcane, Brazilians might brandish bananas, and Italians might bake pizzas as their national symbols. In the same way, **cinematic traditions** are closely tied to cultural taste. European art cinema embodies aesthetic reflection; Hollywood perpetuates the myth of individual adventure; Hong Kong cinema dramatizes mythic combat; Bollywood elevates melodramatic emotional excess. Crucially, these traditions are not geographically fixed—films produced elsewhere may nonetheless participate in them.

Media

This chapter addresses the concept of *media* as one of the five foundational categories in cinematic taxonomy. It distinguishes between film as an **industrial product**, cinema as the **experience of the moving image** that creates an illusion of reality, and the broader field of moving images, which historically precedes industrial film.

The discussion emphasizes that media are not only technological channels but also **arenas of taste-making and cultural negotiation**: from commercial distribution and mass audiences to festival circuits, art-house groups, and alternative screening spaces. While film festivals and specialized circuits often claim to resist mainstream dominance, they remain part of the wider system of official culture.

Within this framework, the chapter revisits classic distinctions—art versus commerce, mainstream versus independent—but stresses that such binaries collapse at the level of **spectatorial reception**. Viewers interpret films through patterns of familiarity and unfamiliarity, taste and memory, rather than through production or distribution labels.

The chapter further explores how **formats** such as documentary and animation function not as genres but as *modes of cinematic expression* that can host multiple genres within them. Likewise, **styles** like expressionism, neorealism, and surrealism are examined as historical responses to reality, formed through the interplay of media formats and cultural discourse.

Ultimately, the chapter argues for the centrality of **tone** as the criterion that allows genre classification to extend across all media forms, styles, and traditions. By clarifying the borders between category, medium, style, format, and genre, the taxonomy enables a broader and more inclusive understanding of cinema—not confined to narrative film, but embracing the full spectrum of the moving image.

y: Criteria of Genre Classification

This section distinguishes between *methods of analysis* (theoretical frameworks for studying genres) and *criteria* (the grounds on which genres come into being). Genres emerge not primarily through theory but through recognizable criteria that precede analysis—for instance, the Western was named before it was theorized. Recognition of genre occurs at a minimal, shared level of understanding: viewers intuitively grasp a film's genre through tone, even prior to formal critique.

The text critiques attempts to treat documentary, experimental, and narrative as separate genres, arguing instead that tone underlies all films, including experimental works. Examples from Shahram Mokri and Mike Figgis demonstrate that even “experimental” cinema still conveys tones such as comedy, horror, or mystery.

Drawing on *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Film* (2009), several traditional criteria are listed: **setting** (Western), **theme** (war), **effect** (comedy), **form** (musical), and **style** (noir). These criteria can be expanded but not invented by theorists; they exist within reception. Every genre thus has a “prehistory,” in which its tone was perceptible even before formal codification.

The maturation of a genre is marked not by the absence of other tones but by the centralization of a dominant one. Tone thereby provides a unifying principle across otherwise disparate classification attempts and grounds genre recognition in the lived experience of audiences.

Genre

In cinema, **genre** means a way of grouping films that share recognizable patterns in story, style, or imagery. It is not just a label but a **shared contract** between filmmakers, audiences, and critics.

This book defines a cinematic genre as:

“A set of films based on a recurring, accepted, and unexpected visual pattern.”

Key Points:

- **Pattern:** Repeated elements that structure how stories are told (like the duel in Westerns or the love triangle in melodramas).
- **Accepted:** Recognition by audiences as a stable form, regardless of box office or critics. Genre emerges when viewers collectively agree that “this feels like a Western,” “this is a musical,” etc.
- **Unexpected:** Every genre also relies on surprise—moments that break routine and give freshness to repetition.

Un-Pattern (Naa-algo):

Not every detail of a film becomes a pattern. Some elements are neither repeated nor central, yet they shape the film’s tone and experience. These are **un-patterns**—small, often forgotten details that give films their unique voice.

Examples:

- A sheriff asking for help in *High Noon*, against the Western tradition of the lone hero.
- The quiet presence of Lili in *My Uncle Napoleon*, which subtly guides the story without fitting any fixed formula.

Why Genre Matters:

- Genres help audiences know what to expect, but they also allow filmmakers to play with those expectations.
- Genres evolve with history, technology, and culture: musicals emerged with sound cinema, film noir relied on black-and-white aesthetics, and new hybrid forms (like the road movie) developed out of older genres.
- Every genre carries an **ideology**: a system of values that frames characters, conflicts, and resolutions. In Westerns it may be the code of the lone gunslinger; in musicals the belief that every sorrow is temporary.

Conclusion:

Genres are never fixed categories. They exist in the tension between **repetition and difference**, between **the expected and the unexpected**, shaped by the **collective gaze of audiences**.

Tone

Tone in cinema can be understood as a renewed perception of **time**. The spectator's pleasure arises from entering a new *rhythmic beat* (koobeh), different from the continuity of everyday life. This explains why audiences deliberately seek out horror films: tone provides the capacity to **disrupt ordinary temporal experience**.

Tone is thus the power of cinema to break the stable sense of time in daily existence. Just as in music, where rhythm transforms perception, or in philosophy, where Henri Bergson argued that cinema reveals different forms of time, tone lets the viewer step outside everyday temporality.

Tone therefore should not be reduced to "style" or "mood," but recognized as the **cinematic reconfiguration of time**, producing an intensified, often collective, experience of viewing.

Core (اصلی)	Genres Character-Centered (شخصیت‌محور)	Group-Centered (گروه‌محور)	Space-Centered (فضا‌محور)
Crime (جنایی)	Epic (عظیم)	War (جنگی)	Rhetorical (خطابه‌ای)
Comedy (کمدی)	Science Fiction (افسانه علمی)	Social (اجتماعی)	Nature (طبیعت)
Melodrama (ملودرام)	Adventure (ماجراجویی)	Disaster (فاجعه)	Pornographic (آخر وقتی)
Western (وسترن)	Children's (کودکانه)	Party (مهمانی)	Political (سیاسی)
Horror (وحشت)	Biographical (سرگذشت‌نامه‌ای)	Profession (حرفه)	Road (جاده‌ای)
Fantasy (فانتزی)	Mystery (اسرار آمیز)	Film-about-Film (در فیلم)	Symphony (سمفونی) (فیلم شهر)
Musical (موزیکال)	Sports (ورزشی)	Teenpic (تازمه‌باز)	Action (حادثه‌ای)

Style

In cinema, style refers to the organic unity of formal choices that shape the visual and narrative organization of a film. It can be understood in three main senses:

As a historical period in art or cinema (e.g. German Expressionism, Italian Neorealism).

As the signature of an individual filmmaker or artist (the notion of being “stylistic” or auteurist).

As a method of filmmaking—the technical and formal strategies visible in mise-en-scène, lighting, camera movement, editing, sound, performance, and design.

Unlike genre, which audiences immediately sense through tone (comedy, horror, melodrama), style often remains invisible to viewers, tied instead to production choices and cultural-historical traditions.

Cinema has engaged with many styles drawn from other arts—Expressionism, Surrealism, Impressionism, Realism, Modernism, Postmodernism—sometimes producing hybrid or short-lived movements like Neorealism.

While genre is linked to audience taste and market demand, style is linked to form, quality, and tradition. It functions across all arts, not only cinema, and often reflects broader aesthetic or ideological programs.

Tradition

Tradition in cinema refers to the deep cultural and historical currents that shape how films are made and experienced. Unlike genre, which classifies films by patterns of story and imagery, tradition connects cinema to broader practices of society—rituals, music, storytelling, and inherited forms of performance.

Examples include religious chants, Ashura laments, lullabies, or communal songs of work and poverty. Such traditions carry emotional weight across generations and reappear in cinema, especially in musical and popular forms. Tradition therefore anchors film within culture, reminding us that cinema is not only an art form but also a continuation of collective memory.

Format

Format in cinema refers to the technical and material shape of moving images—the “fabric” or “texture” of film. Unlike genre (which classifies stories) or style (which reflects artistic choices), format emerges directly from production tools and necessities: cameras, animation software, surveillance systems, or even mobile phones.

Formats shape how we believe in images. A selfie, a CCTV recording, or a viral clip carries its own authority, often changing how we experience truth and performance. Cinema today includes many formats: animation, live-action, documentary, episodic, newsreel, experimental, educational, home video, exposé, surveillance, and trick film.

Recognizing format highlights how technology, distribution, and everyday practices—like recording protests or taking selfies—reshape cinema. In this sense, film is no longer only a “movie” but part of a larger field of moving-image formats that structure our collective imagination

Case Study: Melodrama Across Traditions

If we want to show that Cinematic Taxonomy is not merely a set of rigid definitions but something that breathes within films themselves, melodrama provides a vivid example. As a genre, melodrama has always revolved around passion, separation, sacrifice, and emotional conflict. What keeps melodrama alive across different periods and cultures, however, is precisely its movement through diverse traditions, styles, tones, and formats.

In the classical Hollywood tradition, melodrama often unfolded against large and spectacular backdrops: civil wars, migrations, or historical upheavals. *Gone with the Wind* and *Casablanca* are celebrated examples. They illustrate how war or politics, though visually dominant, ultimately recede into the background while the audience is drawn into the tragic love stories of the protagonists. Even if much of the screen time is devoted to battles or social struggles, viewers tend to receive the film through the prism of romantic conflict. This is what we might call the **base tone**: the primary emotional quality that guides reception, allowing spectators to bypass many scenes and remember only those that resonate with the emotional backbone of the story.

In Bollywood, melodrama followed another path. Nature and lyrical landscapes became more prominent than social or political contexts, while music and dance remained inseparable from the narrative. *Sangam* (1964), with its triangular romance, introduces war and the motif of a plane crash, but these incidents remain secondary. The essence of the film lies in songs, colors, and lyrical moments. Over time, however, Bollywood melodrama also absorbed Hollywood influences: military or political backdrops grew stronger, leading to films such as *Dil Se..* (1998). Here the love story unfolds amidst insurgency and an almost apocalyptic atmosphere; the iconic train song sequence is both a musical number and a metaphor for death and revolutionary desire.

On the other hand, *Titanic* (1997) demonstrates that modern Hollywood is equally shaped by this cross-cultural exchange. James Cameron transformed a historical catastrophe into a spectacle through CGI, yet framed it within a melodramatic romance. Again, the **base tone** is melodrama: the sinking ship, mass scenes, and even the famous music-video-like sequence of “My Heart Will Go On” all serve the tragic love of Jack and Rose. The resemblance of these moments to Bollywood’s group dances or dream-like montages is no coincidence. Traditions travel across borders, answering one another in a shared cinematic language.

Across all these cases, the **format** remains the same: the feature-length narrative film. But within that format, each tradition highlights different units. In Bollywood, the song-dance functions as a narrative block; in modern Hollywood, music-video-like sequences fulfill the same role; and in the classical epic, continuous dramatic acts dominate. Style also plays its role: Douglas Sirk transformed social issues into intimate conflicts through *mise-en-scène* and color; James Cameron melodramatized disaster with CGI spectacle; Mani Ratnam fused music-video montage with political anxiety.

These examples suggest that cinematic tradition is not confined to its geography. Just as music or myth can travel from one culture to another, melodramatic traditions circulate between Hollywood and Bollywood. *Titanic* is as “Bollywood” as *Dil Se..* is “Hollywood.” Ultimately, what engages audiences is not the historical backdrop or technical spectacle but the **base tone of melodrama**—the tragic register of love, which continues to be heard at the heart of every disaster or conflict.

| Tradition |

|-----|

| Hollywood |

| - Casablanca / GWTW | - Titanic |

| Bollywood |

| - Sangam / Dil Se.. |

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| Style | | MELODRAMA | | Tone |

|-----| | (Genre) | |-----|

| Douglas Sirk | | Romantic |

| - Color, mise-en | | Tragic |

| James Cameron | | Apocalyptic |

| - CGI spectacle | | Heroic |

| Mani Ratnam | ┌──────────┐ | Lyrical |

| - MTV montage | ┌──────────┐

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| Medium / |

| Format |

| Feature Film |

| - Song-sequences |

| - Music-video seq |

| - Epic acts |

Explanation

- **Melodrama (Genre)** sits at the center.
- **Tradition** (Hollywood/Bollywood) flows into it, giving different emphases (war, nature, music).
- **Style** shows the personal signature of filmmakers (Sirk, Cameron, Ratnam).
- **Tone** captures the base emotional register (romantic, tragic, apocalyptic).
- **Medium/Format** explains how the film is structured (feature film with songs, video-like sequences, or epic acts).