Film Genre: **Tone and Ideology**

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Preface

To what extent can local or "native" film theory be taken seriously?

Undoubtedly, with some attention to the works of Iranian writers—both past and contemporary—we can identify elements of film theory that claim a native perspective. Farrokh Ghaffari and Fereydoun Rahnema, for instance, might be considered among the earliest of such thinkers. This book attempts to pursue and expand that kind of perspective.

In this light, one may argue that film theory holds significance that is, in a sense, even **prior to filmmaking itself**.

Not long after the invention of cinema, the word *genre* began to circulate more frequently. Today, categorization systems in

many disciplines refer to genre, and the term is no longer limited to the realm of aesthetics. It now represents an **interpersonal and cultural construct**, reflecting human perception and social connection. It may not be long before a philosopher laments how language and philosophy failed to recognize the importance and prevalence of genre before the emergence of the "image" highlighted it.

The frequency with which the term *genre* is used today—across social layers and age groups—is significant. If you've ever listened to two teenagers describe a movie, or bought a DVD from a street vendor, you've likely witnessed a kind of **filmic knowledge** that isn't confined to academic degrees or social class. A street seller might possess a level of understanding that even a university professor may need—or seek guidance from.

In fact, the word *action* might now be the most universally understood cinematic term, more recognizable than "click" or other high-frequency media words of the digital era.

If you're satisfied with the tone and style, I can continue with the first chapter next

Chapter One: Introduction

Genre is among the most essential conceptual tools in the **categorization of films**. To identify a film as belonging to a particular genre—say, comedy—means acknowledging a connection between that film and a wide range of viewer reactions, grouping it with other works perceived as "funny," and distinguishing it from those that are not. Such classification also implies **a set of viewer expectations**.

Producers (including directors, investors, and crew), distributors (such as censors, unions, and policy makers), exhibitors (cinemas, festivals, public screenings, TV, satellite, and home video planners), audiences, and theorists all refer to genre—sometimes in agreement, sometimes not. For instance, a film may be widely considered a "western," while another may defy easy categorization—such as David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (١٩٩۶), which at times is labeled horror, crime, thriller, fantasy, or a combination thereof.

This desire to “find a shared framework” reflects the commonly held assumption that **every film “must” have a genre**. Yet the very **absence of consensus** reveals that production and distribution motives alone do not determine a film’s genre or tone. In fact, there are many instances in which the audience’s reaction redefines a film’s intended genre. *Parkway* (Jirayi, ۲۰۰۶), for example, was made as a horror film but provoked laughter from audiences.

Such examples underscore a crucial insight: **a film’s genre emerges primarily through the viewer’s perception of its tone**—a sustained emotional atmosphere (e.g., joy, sorrow) that resonates with everyday human experiences and aligns or conflicts with recognized **norms and ideological values**.

Earlier film theory (pre-۱۹۹۰s) often assumed that each film must maintain **a consistent tone** throughout, and that any deviation would weaken the work. However, even before that, there were films—by Roman Polanski, Luis Buñuel, or Pier Paolo Pasolini, for instance—that successfully blended tones

of fear, humor, violence, and mystery. These tonal complexities defied the old standard of tonal unity.

Some theorists have linked this shift to the influence of **satellite and television culture**, where constant channel-switching encourages audiences to expect changing moods. Have you ever, mid-horror movie, changed the channel to a fantasy program with a remote control? Such habits arguably nudged producers toward creating **films with multiple overlapping tones**.

This highlights a vital point: until a film is viewed by an audience, it **is not truly "classified"**. More than any other medium, cinema has seen countless sequels, remakes, and serials fail due to unmet audience expectations—**viewers determine tone and ideology through their reception**.

Although some theorists argue that genre classifications are imposed by official culture and apply only to Hollywood, historical evidence suggests otherwise. Audiences do not follow films merely for their stars, stories, or music (though these factors help); rather, they pursue a **visual pattern**: the genre.

More than a dozen theories have tried to explain the success or failure of genre-based productions, but the central insight remains the same: **audiences approach films with unknown expectations**, and it is **the act of reception** that ultimately shapes the film's tone and ideological meaning.

While some theorists have claimed that genre is a cultural imposition—valid only in industrial Hollywood—the lived history of audience engagement challenges this view. Viewers don't always follow a film for its stars or soundtrack. In fact, large-scale screenings of recorded performances (concerts, plays, operas) have often failed to attract significant interest, despite high production quality. In contrast, theatrical screenings within a **cinematic space** generate a unique immersive energy—one that exceeds mere narrative, historical context, or celebrity appeal.

The **architecture of the cinema hall**—closed walls, a central beam of projected light, and a ritualized silence—resembles sacred spaces (temples, churches, mosques). Like the ancient

cave walls on which early humans painted symbolic images, cinema presents us with **moving archetypes**, shared across time and culture. This power of shared visual language allows cinema to **generate collective ideological meaning**.

That is why, in many cases, films have been censored or even banned *after* their theatrical release, when their tone or ideological message became apparent through group reception. A film may technically comply with regulations, but its **emergent values**, once experienced communally, can pose challenges to official systems.

This is the **true force of genre**—its ability to resonate with the spirit of its time. Films can fail or succeed depending on their alignment with public mood. A horror film released during Nowruz may flop, while a melodrama screened before an election might underperform due to contextual mismatch.

All of this reinforces the idea that **tone and ideological structure are not merely dictated by formal systems of production and censorship**. Instead, they are the result of a deeper dynamic: the interaction between a film and its

audience's collective **emotional and ideological consciousness**. Genres, then, are not fabricated from the top down but **arise from audience demand**—either in alignment or resistance to dominant cultural norms.

Importantly, the size of the audience doesn't determine the legitimacy of a genre's reception. *Citizen Kane* (Welles, ۱۹۴۱) failed at the box office during its original run, yet remains a landmark of cinematic value.

Genres can thus be understood as **frequencies** of visual perception. Just as we define a visual spectrum by dividing light into seven colors, **genres divide cinematic experience into recognizable tonal frequencies**. And just as the eye cannot perceive ultraviolet or infrared light, cinema also contains "**meta-genres**"—narrative spaces or visual structures that remain outside the visible spectrum but shape the experience of storytelling. These will be discussed in detail later.

Methods of Genre Analysis

Whether imposed intentionally by official culture or arising organically from audience reception, films are perceived within a **preexisting conceptual framework**—what we might call the genre spectrum. From a mythological or archetypal standpoint, this spectrum forms the essential terrain of genre.

١. Mythological / Archetypal Criticism

Psychological experiments have shown that even **abstract moving images**, such as the kinetic strands in Man Ray's films, are interpreted by viewers as **narrative experiences**—for instance, romantic (drama), comedic (slapstick), or thrilling (crime). This suggests that viewers instinctively seek **tone, ideology, and value systems** even in films without overt narrative cues.

Archetypal criticism aims to uncover these **preexisting symbolic patterns** within genres. A theorist using this method might, for example, interpret the entry of a cowboy

from the deep background of the frame—as in Ford's *The Searchers* (۱۹۵۶)—as a **myth of creation**, comparable to the cosmological Big Bang. The genre best suited to this approach is the **epic**, though others, including the action genre (*Rambo*, ۱۹۸۵), are also seen as fertile ground for archetypal readings. In this sense, **cinema becomes a myth-making machine**—much like the structural anthropological work of Carl Jung or Claude Lévi-Strauss.

۲. Structural / Post-Structural Approach

The second method focuses on the **structural differentiation** between genres. It assumes that if audiences perceive a spectrum of genre-coded images, then there must exist **discrete structural boundaries** that distinguish them. According to this model, genres are understood as systems of communication, composed of interacting elements—much like a language.

Inspired by Ferdinand de Saussure, early theorists tried to compare the cinematic "language" with linguistics. However, the idea of **cinema as a language** was eventually challenged.

Unlike words in language, **there is no universally agreed-upon "visual unit"** in cinema. While some equated this unit with the shot, frame, or scene, none provided an entirely adequate analogy.

Despite this ambiguity, **the structuralist method remains influential**, especially when analyzing clearly defined genres like the Western, where recurring elements—such as cowboys, horses, landscapes—serve as strong genre markers.

۳. Syntactic Approach

When identifying specific "units" proves too difficult, some scholars turn to larger-scale narrative structures or **sequences**, akin to grammatical syntax in language. In this method, films are analyzed in terms of narrative **stages**—e.g., birth, childhood, youth, aging, and death.

In a Western, for instance, the syntactic structure might follow this trajectory:

- **A**: The cowboy enters in a long shot.
- **B**: Conflict arises within the first ten minutes.

- **C**: A struggle over a woman.
- **D**: A climactic duel.
- **E**: The hero rides off into the sunset.

This approach can be highly instructive, especially in **screenwriting and directing pedagogy**, where act structures like "First Turning Point" or "Climax" are emphasized. The ideal genre for this method is the **musical**, where clear structural shifts and narrative transitions mirror the form of literary or musical movements.

۴. Semantic Approach

The semantic method centers on the generation of **meaning** through genre elements—meaning that often draws upon established philosophical, religious, political, or psychoanalytic concepts. Visual symbols (index, icon, metaphor) are key here.

For example, the Native American vs. Settler conflict in Westerns is interpreted not just as historical but as **symbolic of primitivism vs. civilization**. This approach lends itself well

to **rhetorical or political genres**, where meaning is paramount. Though influential in the early days of film criticism, some, like Susan Sontag in *Against Interpretation*, criticized this method for being overly intellectualized. Still, meaning-making remains a crucial function of genre.

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۵. Historical Approach

The **historical method** examines genres in relation to the **time and conditions of their production**, observing how they emerge, mature, and transform. It studies how shifts in audience taste, industry practice, and social conditions influence genre evolution.

Genres are never static; they respond to **cycles**—periods marked by particular production trends, political climates, or popular sentiments. For example, the emergence of the **road movie** signals a transformation in the ideological framework of the Western, reflecting new societal values and modes of mobility.

Some genres arise from such cycles and persist even after their originating conditions fade. Others, like films about rural-to-urban migration (though widespread across Hollywood, Bollywood, and Iranian cinema), have never solidified into a recognized standalone genre.

This method places emphasis on **technological and industrial shifts**, such as the impact of **special effects** on the fantasy genre, or the role of studio systems in shaping genre conventions. The **fantasy genre**, in particular, exemplifies how production tools shape genre identity over time.

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۶. Ideological (Value-System) Approach

This approach centers on **ideological positioning**—how genres **reflect, reinforce, or challenge social norms**. Every genre takes a stance on key cultural values: family, morality, gender roles, class struggle, post-colonial identity, and more.

Originally, films were thought to adopt one of three positions: **conservative** (**status quo**), **progressive** (**transformative**), **or neutral**. But later theorists, particularly from an Althusserian perspective, argued that **"neutrality" itself is ideological**, often reinforcing the dominant status quo.

From this view, genre is fundamentally an **ideological apparatus**—a system of meaning and value production that shapes how audiences interpret social reality. For example:

- Musical numbers that burst into color are seen as **capitalist escapism**.
- Sentimental Asian family dramas may be read as **coexisting with Eastern authoritarianism**.
- Fantasy narratives that immerse us in dreams are interpreted as **distractions from industrial reality**.

Though at times overzealous, this ideological reading reveals that **no film is beyond value systems**, even if unintentionally. Genre both emerges from and is received within **ideological structures**, and this reception may not always align with state-approved narratives.

∨. Reception and Spectator-Oriented Approach

The **seventh method** centers on **audience reception**, drawing from psychoanalytic theory, particularly Lacan's

notion of the "mirror stage," where identity forms through **imagery and reflection**. The genre is the **first identity marker** for viewers—what a film “feels like” upon first contact.

This may come through:

- A friend’s recommendation: *“If you want to laugh for two hours, watch this.”*
- A parental warning: *“Let’s not take the kid—he’ll have nightmares.”*
- A film’s poster, soundtrack, or even its font and title sequence.

Even if a viewer avoids trailers and posters to watch a film with minimal preconception, **the opening moments—the music, the mise-en-scène, the first shot—immediately situate the film within a genre**. For instance, orchestral swells may suggest drama; a central crawl of text might cue science fiction; the appearance of Humphrey Bogart implies noir; and so on.

Genre tone thus **quickly envelops the viewing experience**, influencing not just individual response but shared **group emotions**—the reason why someone might say: *"I can't go see a Jackie Chan film with my fiancée tonight; I'm not in the mood for that kind of energy."*

This method also recognizes that **narrative is the core of genre**. Today, when digital tools blur the boundaries between live action and animation, genre has arguably become **even more central than form** in organizing cinematic meaning.

Finally, genre is defined by a **paradoxical tension**: it simultaneously *reveals* and *withholds*, rooted in both tradition and innovation. This ongoing negotiation leads to **hybrid tones** and **intersecting forms**, which are increasingly the norm in contemporary cinema.

The Main Genres

Film genres can be arranged along a **bipolar spectrum**, with **crime**/**thriller** at one end and **comedy** at the other.

On one side, we find films we follow with a sense of detachment and ease—**comedies**. For example, in a Harold Lloyd comedy, we know the hands of the clock will not break and send him falling to his death. These films represent the realm of **sweet dreams and joyful illusions**. If we consider the earliest narrative forms, comedy arguably marks the **first cinematic genre**—with Lumière's *The Sprinkler Sprinkled* (۱۸۹۶) serving as a foundational example.

From another angle, one could claim that **all films** in cinema history are, to some degree, attempts to **destabilize seriousness**—that is, to entertain, amuse, or relieve cultural formality. In this sense, entertainment is a universal cinematic drive.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, we encounter the **nightmare realm**: the crime genre, characterized by perpetual suspense, unpredictability, and violence. Consider *Frenzy* (Hitchcock, ١٩٧٢)—a world where no guess aligns with what actually happens, and only Hitchcock can lead the audience to resolution.

Between these two poles lie the many **hybrid forms**, but combining comedy and crime is particularly difficult. While "comedy/crime" hybrids do exist—e.g., Blake Edwards's *The Pink Panther* series or *The Ladykillers* (١٩٥٥)—they are often rare and structurally asymmetrical.

If we add a **third central genre**, it would be **drama**. Cinema began as drama—realistic, everyday, emotionally grounded representations of life. From this view, **all films are dramas**, since they construct belief and human relationships.

Genres like **horror** and **fantasy** emerged later to provide the kinds of astonishment and escape that early comedies and dramas could not fully offer. Horror engages fear; fantasy engages wonder.

With that, the count of **core genres** reaches five:

- **Crime/Thriller**
- **Comedy**
- **Drama**
- **Horror**
- **Fantasy**

Two more must be added:

- **Western**, for its **immediate visual recognizability**
- **Musical**, for its formal break from literary narrative through sound and song

These seven form the **primary cinematic genres**.

✅ **The Seven Main Genres**:

١. Crime / Thriller

٢. Comedy

٣. Drama

٤. Horror

٥. Fantasy

٦. Western

٧. Musical

Four Genre Clusters

If we accept the bipolar spectrum mentioned earlier, we can divide the seven main genres into two overarching clusters:

- **The Nightmare Cluster**: Crime/Thriller, Horror, Western
- **The Dream Cluster**: Comedy, Drama, Fantasy, Musical

This division, of course, is **not absolute**—genres often resist fixed boundaries.

Comedy, for example, has the power to parody or subvert nearly all other genres. Its reflexivity allows it to mock, destabilize, or hybridize any tonal system. Likewise, the rise of subgenres can challenge or even overshadow these seven "main" categories. For example, **religious cinema** (often categorized as a subgenre of the social or dramatic genre) may emerge as a dominant mode in particular cultural contexts.

In recent decades, **crime elements**—suspense, tension, violence—have infiltrated nearly every genre. It's not uncommon for a film to contain scenes of murder, threat, or assault, even if it is not a "crime film" per se. The key distinction lies in tone:

- In **comedy**, for example, accidents are humorous and consequences are minimal (e.g., cartoon-style injuries).
- In **crime**, even a polite greeting might lead to disaster (*Scream*, Craven, ۱۹۹۶).

With the diversification of tone, resonance, and rhythm, we now encounter over **۲۸ distinct genre models**, each possessing sufficient independence to be considered a cinematic **reality** of its own.

Take *Scream*, for example. While it contains elements traditionally associated with horror, its core construction is better aligned with **thriller**, a subgenre of crime. Merely referencing horror tropes is not enough to classify a film as horror; tone and audience reception take precedence.

Among all subgenres, **thriller**, **musical**, and **film noir** offer the most compelling challenges for genre theorists due to their tonal richness and resistance to narrow definitions.

Sub-genres and Cinematic Reality

In genre theory, the acknowledgment of **sub-genres** is essential to understanding how cinematic meaning diversifies within broader categories. For example, within the crime genre, we find identifiable sub-genres such as:

- Gangster
- Prison
- Spy
- Escape
- Heist
- Gambling
- Hostage
- Noir
- Police Procedural
- Thriller
- Investigative Journalism

- Medical Crime

Each of these constructs a **cinematic reality** of its own—distinct not only in theme but also in rhythm, tone, and audience expectation.

The process of crystallizing a "cinematic reality" involves both **abstraction and specification**. A sub-genre is not just a narrative variation—it **solidifies viewer perception**, turning a tonal possibility into an identifiable experiential model. For instance, although *Scream* borrows visual motifs from horror films, its structure and audience reception firmly place it within the **thriller sub-genre**, which is itself a subset of crime.

Not every film with horror elements belongs to the horror genre. The **audience's tonal reading**—the atmosphere they experience—is often more reliable for classification than production intentions or superficial tropes.

This is why **tone-driven genres**, such as thriller, noir, and musical, present rich terrain for genre theorists. They force us

to move beyond traditional taxonomies and embrace more fluid, reception-based models.

Farce, Irony, and the Comedy Sub-genres

Comedy, in particular, demonstrates how sub-genres become **tonal platforms** rather than merely thematic categories. Examples of comedy sub-genres include:

- **Character-driven**
- **Group ensemble**
- **Slapstick**
- **Screwball**
- **Farce**
- **Satirical or ironic modes**

These categories operate like **visual registers**—comparable to color variations in a spectrum. They allow the audience to **differentiate emotional frequencies**, much like the way our eyes parse shades of light.

Some theorists prefer to avoid labeling sub-genres, but the evidence of **field-level reception** makes it clear that these tonal distinctions matter. The concept of genre operates not unlike **color theory**—just as primary colors blend into secondary and tertiary shades, **core genres** blend into sub-genres and hybrids, enriching the visual and emotional lexicon of cinema.

Meta-Genres

Beyond sub-genres lies a higher conceptual category: the **meta-genre**. These are **ideational frames** that transcend individual genres and shape how we organize visual perception and cinematic narration. Examples include:

- **Nature**
- **Dream**
- **Mirror**
- **Myth**
- **Literature**

Mathematics / Geometry •

Music •

Meta-genres are not "genres" in the traditional sense. Instead, they represent **deep narrative logics** and **aesthetic grammars**—powerful cognitive metaphors that shape how we perceive cinematic reality.

For example:

- **Geometry** constructs the tension between interior and exterior, surface and depth.
- **Music** introduces rhythm, harmony, and emotional pulse.
- **Dream** represents the fluidity of temporal and spatial transitions.
- **Myth** provides archetypes and collective memory.

These meta-genres are the **architectural scaffolding** upon which genre experiences are built. They are the **invisible frequencies**, the cinematic equivalent of **ultraviolet or**

infrared light—imperceptible directly, but profoundly influential in structuring what we see and feel on screen.

Secondary Genres and Hybridization

The **second-tier genres**—those emerging from the blending or branching of primary ones—include:

- **Epic**
- **Science Fiction**
- **Adventure**
- **Children's Films**
- **Mystery**
- **Biographical (Biopic)**
- **Sports**

Each of these genres functions as a **hybrid**—constructed from elements of two or more primary genres, or in response to specific cultural and industrial needs. For example:

- **Science fiction** is often a hybrid of **fantasy** and **drama**, with scientific rationalization replacing pure mythology.

- **Biopics** tend to blend **drama**, **history**, and sometimes **political discourse**.
- **Children's films** borrow freely from **fantasy**, **musical**, and **comedy**, creating new modes of storytelling that cater to emotional and educational development.

What distinguishes these genres is not simply narrative content, but the **tonal register**—the emotional frequency they operate in—and the **expectational framework** they establish for audiences.

Hybridization and Genre Spectrum

Just as color theory includes primary, secondary, and tertiary blends, so too does genre theory. For instance:

- A **Western–Musical–Comedy** is entirely possible (e.g., *Paint Your Wagon*, ١٩۶٩).
- A **Horror–Sci-Fi–Thriller** has become a standard model in modern cinema (e.g., *Alien*, ١٩٧٩).

Hybrid genres are not exceptions—they are now **the norm**. This increasing intermingling leads to **blurred genre**

borders, making rigid categorization less useful than analyzing **tone**, **rhythm**, **and ideological stance**.

Some hybrids solidify into new genre identities over time (e.g., **Noir** emerged as a blend of crime, psychological thriller, and melodrama, yet is now regarded as a standalone genre due to its aesthetic and tonal consistency).

Third Genre Cluster: The Group as Hero

A third cluster includes genres where the **group—not the individual—is the protagonist**. These include:

War, Social Issue, Party, Profession, Disaster, Film-within-a-Film, and Coming-of-Age.

In these genres, group dynamics form the backbone of the narrative. Examples include:

- War films, which despite often serving state propaganda under the guise of nationalism or holiness, frequently offer critiques of war.
- Social issue films, which explore themes like immigration, racial tension, and religious devotion.
- Party films and profession-based stories often serve as ideal settings for comedies, dramas, or crime plots.

These genres interact directly with the primary ones. For instance:

- Most dramas require a **social backdrop**.
- Parties offer ideal environments for **crime tension**.
- Comedies often begin with workplace settings or professional clashes.

Fourth Genre Cluster: Genres of Atmosphere

This group includes genres where **atmosphere**, not character or group, shapes the genre experience. The fourth cluster comprises:

Political, Nature, Road, Disaster, City Symphony, Rhetorical, and Pornographic.

These genres are best understood not by their plots or protagonists, but through the **mood–space** they generate. A prime example is the **political genre**.

The Political Genre: Whispered Warnings

Watching a political film in a **non–democratic society** often resembles receiving a discreet warning from a friend—someone who quietly leans in, pulls out a hidden disc, and whispers, "Watch this, and we'll talk later." This is the **tone of politics**: hesitant, coded, atmospheric.

Even in democratic contexts, similar anxieties exist. Consider

the fear-driven discourse of **McCarthyism**—what we might call **Red Phobia**.

Political cinema often **extends beyond the theater**, merging **the ritual space of the screening room** with **the broader political life of the viewer**. Sometimes, even films with no overtly political content become political by **how they are watched**—films like *Seconds* (Frankenheimer, ۱۹۶۶) or ۳۰۰ (Snyder, ۲۰۰۶) acquire ideological meaning through reception context.

This reinforces an essential idea: **genre tone may arise from atmosphere rather than structure**. While the seven primary genres emphasize **character-based structures**, the fourth cluster depends on the **emotional air** surrounding the film.

Pornography and Shared Visibility

Pornographic films represent a unique case. They often lack narrative, mise-en-scène, or character development, yet they **generate communal response**. In this sense, porn may be the only genre **fully recognized by producers, viewers,**

distributors, and theorists alike, because it relies purely on **affective atmosphere and viewer identification**.

Other genres in this group—like **action-heavy disaster films**, **nature documentaries**, or **road movies**—similarly **invoke atmosphere over causality**. For instance, why did audiences watch *The Matrix* (Wachowskis, ١٩٩٩) and its sequels with such devotion, despite repetitive action? Because the **atmosphere of conflict and hyperreal space** overwhelmed plot logic.

From Mothers to Derivatives: The Four Clusters in Perspective

The **seven primary genres** are like **mother genres**. The other three clusters derive from them but emphasize different centers:

- **Character** (e.g., Adventure)
- **Group** (e.g., War or Social Drama)
- **Atmosphere** (e.g., Political or Nature-based)

Of course, these categories **overlap**. An Adventure film may also emphasize setting or atmosphere. But the distinction lies in **which element dominates viewer experience**.

Authoritarian regimes often **criticize atmospheric genres**, especially those that bypass narrative control—e.g., action films affecting children, or spiritual nature films encouraging contemplation. These reactions **confirm the ideological power of tone**.

The **Nature genre**, in particular, is **morally and politically the most neutral**—yet still ideologically potent. Films like *The Revenant* (Iñárritu, ۲۰۱۵) derive their force from visual immersion in nature, not character arcs. *Avatar* (Cameron, ۲۰۰۹) exemplifies this binary: love for nature set against hatred for political and military systems.

Still, nature is not apolitical. It operates by its own **logic of power**: cycles, struggle, extinction. Even political theorists have used metaphors from nature—like the **Queen Bee model**—to argue for hierarchy and submission.

Genre Dualities: Bipolar Spectra

The range of genre experience cannot be reduced to a single spectrum—like Crime vs. Comedy. In fact, genre operates across **multiple dual axes**, each representing **a spectrum of tone, worldview, and narrative logic**.

One of the most fundamental binaries is:

- **Realism (Mimesis) ↔ Fantasy (Dreamlike States)**

At one end lies **Drama**, rooted in the textures of daily life. At the other, **Fantasy**, which dismantles reality's stable foundations.

But cinema always already disrupts reality to some degree. Even the most "realistic" films fictionalize ordinary life. Consider how a simple drama—say, about a non-royal girl marrying a prince—becomes socially implausible (*see: Princess Diana*). Cinema's realism often clashes with the

demands of **official culture**, which resists even basic fictional harmonies like cross-class romance.

The Shock of the Everyday and the Fantasy of the Real

Even the most ordinary cinematic moments can provoke **aesthetic astonishment**. A nature documentary such as *March of the Penguins* (Luc Jacquet, ۲۰۰۵) may mesmerize viewers by turning the real into a spectacle.

Fantasy, by contrast, deliberately **breaks the unity of cinematic reality**:

- It fractures space, time, and character identity.
- It enables multiple worlds or parallel timelines.

A flashback does not count as fantasy—it affirms a single time axis. But **parallel timelines** (as in *Back to the Future*, Zemeckis, ۱۹۸۵) are hallmarks of fantasy.

Thus, if fantasy were not defined by its break with "cinematic reality," then **all cinema would be fantasy**.

Further Dual Axes of Genre

Other genre binaries help clarify aesthetic tendencies:

- **Female vs. Male space**: Dramas often emphasize **female interiority**; Westerns highlight **masculine exteriority**.
- **Nature vs. Humanity**: The Nature genre foregrounds non-human forces; Drama centers on human agency.
- **Scale vs. Form**: The **Epic** genre privileges architectural scale and depth; the **Musical** emphasizes shape, rhythm, surface.

These dualities help **map genre territory**, even if no genre fits perfectly at either extreme. For example:

- **The Musical** is often seen as breaking narrative causality with song and dance.
- **The Western**, by contrast, is defined by strong cause-effect logic and moral structures.

Genres as Ideational Densities

Some genres can be **reduced to core narrative concepts**:

- **Crime**: To stay or to leave.
- **Road**: To go or not to go.

Once this core is understood, the genre's tone becomes more readable—and even other genres begin to **echo its logic**. For example, Road Movies often inherit the existential dilemma of the Crime genre.

Cinema Reality vs. Everyday Reality

Cinematic reality often **exceeds and transforms** everyday perception. Documentaries may falsely suggest objectivity, while using time-lapse or stylized framing to produce **a fantasy of the real**—e.g., clouds rushing unnaturally, flowers blooming in seconds.

Such techniques are not lies—but **formalizations of perception**. They remind us that **tone and genre are rarely pure**, and that **most genres are hybrids**.

Cinematic Reality: A World Unto Itself

Cinematic reality is not a copy of external life. It is a **constructed perceptual world**—a space with its own logic, values, and rules of coherence. It may resemble real life, but it is never bound by it.

What gives this reality force is **genre**. Genre provides the **emotional contract** between film and viewer, allowing us to suspend disbelief, accept impossibilities, and emotionally invest in invented lives.

Take, for example:

- A science fiction film where a single character survives in space for years (*The Martian*, ۲۰۱۵)
- A musical where crowds spontaneously sing in harmony (*La La Land*, ۲۰۱۶)
- A crime thriller where logic is fractured and subjective (*Mulholland Drive*, ۲۰۰۱)

None of these match empirical reality—but all are entirely **credible within their genre's logic**. That credibility is emotional, not factual.

Shared Image and the Communal Imagination

Genres also generate **shared mental images**—icons that persist across time and culture. These are not just memories of films; they are **cultural reference points**:

- The cowboy silhouette at sunset
- The murderer behind the shower curtain
- The romantic kiss in the rain
- The superhero landing in slow motion

These moments may be clichéd, but they are also **ritualized**—they form the **grammar of cinematic perception**. And they show how **cinematic reality is a collective construction**, shaped as much by audience expectation as by filmmaker intention.

From Sensory to Ideological Realms

Cinematic reality begins as **a sensory experience**: light, sound, rhythm. But it quickly becomes **ideological**. The way violence is framed, the role of authority, the depiction of gender or race—these are not neutral.

Genre mediates these transitions. It **naturalizes ideology**, embedding it in tone, rhythm, and atmosphere. And this is why studying genre is not just about storytelling—it is about **how stories become belief systems**.

Final Note: Genre as System and Experience

To understand genre is to understand how cinema **thinks, feels, and persuades**.

Genres are not just categories—they are **systems of expectation**, **archives of tone**, and **structures of emotional logic**. They help us make sense of cinematic worlds, and by extension, of our own.

They do not merely represent reality—they produce it.

Sub-Genres: Between Genre and Cultural Adaptation

The process of modeling viewer response across ۲۸ genres must not obscure the **diversity of perceptual experience**. Critical studies often aim to trace origins or archetypes. The identification of seven major genres and three structural axes, along with many additional branches or polarities, reflects that effort.

Still, no theory can fully encompass the vast **range of audience reception**, which varies with exposure, taste, background, and cultural context. This is where the concept of the **sub-genre** becomes essential.

The emergence of a sub-genre often reflects a **localized response** to cinematic conventions. For example:

- **Spaghetti Westerns**, as in the films of Sergio Leone
- **Iranian Noir**, such as *Goodbye Friend* (Naderi, ۱۹۷۱)

- **"Looti-style" films** in Iranian cinema, with their moral codes and hero types
- **Political thrillers** from ۱۹۷۰s–۸۰s Iran centered on SAVAK agents

These are not just minor variations; they embody distinct **cultural reactions** and narrative needs. A sub-genre is **rooted in cinematic reality**, yet distinct from broad aesthetic atmospheres like meta-genres.

The bond between a **mother genre** (e.g., Western) and a category like "Epic" may be tonal or symbolic (e.g., myth-making, heroic imagery). But a **sub-genre** reflects concrete **cultural-political specificity**—a grounded cinematic evolution.

Limits of Definition and Theoretical Caution

Drawing precise borders is nearly impossible. For instance, identifying *Noir* merely as a sub-genre of Crime is problematic. Its style, tone, and influence often exceed that

category. Media crossover and intertextuality blur genre identities.

Sub-genres emerge in the **periphery** of genre systems—zones previously deemed secondary: national identity, literature, structural traits, and official culture. Like a **color gradient** radiating from a strong center, genre identity becomes dimmer toward the edges, where other tones and forces emerge.

Some interpret this dimness as **"poetic tone."** But calling a genre "poetic" (e.g., poetic cinema) is misleading. Just as in literature, **form** (**poetry or prose**) does not determine genre. A romantic novel and a romantic poem are different in form, not in genre. The genre is **"romance"**, not "poem."

Sub-Genres, Tradition, and Medium

The mislabeling of poetic films as a genre reflects confusion between **tone**, **tradition**, and **medium**. For instance:

- Art-house cinema is not a genre—it is a **cinematic tradition**, like Hollywood, Bollywood, or Hong Kong cinema.
- Documentary and animation are **formats or modes**, not genres.

Even **Dead Man** (Jarmusch, ١٩٩٥) resists singular genre classification:

- It's called "poetic" due to its symbolic tone and spiritual journey.
- It resembles a Western, but with a frail protagonist (Johnny Depp) and philosophical depth.
- It echoes *Noir* through its fatalism, offscreen menace, femme fatale, shadows, and a hero who exists in a state between life and death.

The film creates a **hybrid tone**—a *Noir Western* or *Mystical Western*—that pushes theory to its limits. In fact, many critics trace this lineage back to *The Ox-Bow Incident* (Wellman, ١٩٤٣), where justice and guilt collapse.

Poetics and Medium Crossovers

Throughout history, artforms have **borrowed from one another**. Poetry has long blended literary and musical modes. Ahmad Shamloo even attributed Persian poetry's evolution to Iranians' forced distance from music.

If this is true, might some films inherit **musical logic**? Consider:

- Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (۱۹۲۵), often edited rhythmically like a symphony
- Musical scores composed by Edmond Meisel or modern groups like the Pet Shop Boys
- Marguerite Duras's *cinéma musical* — poetic and image-driven cinema

Cinema can reflect **geometry**, **mathematics**, **dreams**, **nature**, and more. It is not confined to literary narrative. Just as painting or dance are expressive languages, **cinema, too, speaks through image, rhythm, and feeling**.

And yes, **tone may draw from other human forms of expression**: mathematics (geometry), literature (metaphor), music (structure), and even the logic of dreams.

Is *Dead Man* a mystical–poetic Western? Perhaps. But more importantly, it reminds us:

Cinematic tone can transcend genre, touch archetypes, and echo other media.

2

Tone

Tone

The Elusive Concept

In genre theory, **tone** is one of the most frequently mentioned yet least defined concepts. For many, it remains **too intuitive to theorize**, and for others, it is **so central** that all attempts at classification revolve around it. Scholars tend to approach it indirectly—through mood, attitude, stylistic tendency, or emotional resonance—but **what exactly is tone in cinema?**

Let us begin with a paradox:

Tone is the first thing a viewer perceives, and yet the last thing critics define.

We often describe films by their tone—"dark," "playful," "cold," "warm," "overwrought"—but these terms function **more like impressions than concepts**. They name **how a film feels**, not how it works. And this is precisely the challenge: tone is not part of the narrative; it **surrounds** the narrative. It is not a character or event; it is **how** the character or event is perceived.

Tone as a System of Feeling

Tone is the **emotional framework** of a film. It operates like the **key in music**: two melodies with identical notes can evoke completely

different feelings when played in different keys. Similarly, the same story told with a different tone becomes an entirely different film.

For instance:

- A man's suicide in a **melodrama** is tragic.
- In a **black comedy**, it's absurd.
- In a **thriller**, it's suspicious.
- In **horror**, it's terrifying.
- In **fantasy**, it may be sacrificial or symbolic.

The narrative event is identical; the **tonal field** transforms its meaning. This is why tone is central not only to **genre classification**, but also to **audience engagement**. It determines **how we feel**, **what we expect**, and **what we remember**.

Tone Is Not Genre—But It Constructs Genre

Tone is not the same as genre, but every genre **emerges through a dominant tone**:

- Horror: dread
- Comedy: incongruity
- Drama: emotional sincerity
- Thriller: tension

- Fantasy: wonder
- Musical: exuberance
- Crime: paranoia or pursuit

We do not understand these genres only by their **story patterns**, but by how they **make us feel**. In this way, tone **produces the genre experience**.

Some genres, like **melodrama** or **noir**, are defined almost entirely by tone. What makes a film “melodramatic” is not just a plot involving love or loss, but the **amplification of emotion**—the swelling music, the slow push-in, the tear-filled close-up. Similarly, **film noir** is built from shadows, cynicism, and moral ambiguity—tonal elements that override plot conventions.

Tone in Language vs. Tone in Cinema

In literature and spoken language, **tone** typically refers to the **author's or speaker's attitude** toward a subject or audience. It is identified through **word choice, rhythm, punctuation, irony, or emphasis**. A sarcastic tone, for instance, is evident from how a sentence is phrased.

But in cinema, tone **does not rely on language alone**. It is built through:

- **Image** (framing, movement, color)
- **Sound** (music, ambient noise, silence)
- **Performance** (gesture, expression, pace)
- **Editing** (rhythm, duration, transition)
- **Spatial relationships** (scale, perspective)

Tone in cinema is **multi-sensory and immersive**. It is not encoded linearly, like grammar or syntax, but **simultaneously perceived**, like atmosphere.

Hence, cinematic tone is **more affective than descriptive**, more **felt** than understood. It is often described in terms of **mood** or **energy**, because it **shapes perception at a pre-reflective level**.

Phenomenology of Tone: Before Meaning, There Is Mood

Tone belongs to the **phenomenological dimension** of cinema—it precedes conceptualization. Before we process narrative or character arcs, we are immersed in a **mood-space**. This is what allows tone to **bind disparate elements** into a coherent cinematic experience.

This also explains why two films with nearly identical plots may feel **completely different**:

- *The Elephant Man* (Lynch, 1980) and *Freaks* (Browning, 1932) both center on physical difference and social exclusion. Yet one is **tragic and lyrical**, the other **grotesque and confrontational**.
- *Joker* (Phillips, 2019) and *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976) share thematic DNA, but differ **tonally** in fatalism, performance style, and emotional pacing.

The **spectator's engagement** is therefore not rooted first in logic or plot, but in **how the film feels**—its rhythm, texture, pressure. Tone becomes the **threshold of cinematic experience**.

Tone as Cultural Code

Tone also serves as a **cultural signal**. It marks the difference between:

- Films for children vs. adults
- Mainstream vs. art cinema
- Hollywood vs. national or regional cinema

- Political engagement vs. aesthetic detachment

For instance, Iranian cinema has often used **muted tone, long takes, and narrative silence** as a form of **resistance**—both formal and ideological. In contrast, Bollywood musicals use **saturation, choreography, and exaggeration** to construct a tone of **spectacular emotionality**.

Thus, tone is not just a matter of style; it is a form of **cultural and ideological address**. It tells us **how to watch**, **how to feel**, and **how to situate ourselves** in relation to the film.

Tone as the Native Language of Cinema

Tone is not merely a **byproduct** of form—it is the **primary language** through which cinema expresses itself. In fact, before cinema tells a story or conveys a message, it **generates a tone**. This tone is not abstract; it is embodied in:

- **Movement**: the speed of a camera pan, the tension in a character's gesture
- **Sound**: a prolonged silence, a sudden cut to noise, an ambient hum
- **Rhythm**: editing pace, repetition, delay
- **Visual Density**: how much is shown, how much is withheld

Tone is thus **pre-narrative** and **pre-conceptual**. It is cinema's way of **being**, not just its way of meaning.

In this sense, tone is **ontological**: it shapes the kind of world the film is, not just what it says. Just as philosophy speaks of the "tone" of existence, cinema speaks through tone **before it speaks in words or plots**.

Tone as Temporal Emotion

One could say that tone is **emotion stretched across time**. It is not a discrete feeling (like joy or fear), but a **temporal atmosphere**—a sustained emotional resonance that flows through the film.

This is why we describe films with phrases like:

- "It left me with a strange feeling."
- "I couldn't shake the mood."
- "It felt off, even though I don't know why."

These are not narrative responses; they are **tonal impressions**. And they persist long after plot points are forgotten.

Tone and Ethical Structures

Tone also carries **moral implications**. A film that makes murder look stylish (*American Psycho*, *Pulp Fiction*) constructs a different ethical space than one that depicts it as horrific or tragic. The tone **frames the act**, shaping the viewer's relation to violence, desire, justice.

Tone can **justify or question**, **glorify or condemn**, **numb or intensify**. It thus serves as an **ethical lens**, even when the narrative avoids judgment.

This is why **ideology lives in tone**. A film may never state its beliefs—but tone reveals them:

- Is the suffering of others aestheticized or mourned?

- Is irony used to create distance or complicity?
- Does rhythm align with empathy or detachment?

Tone does not merely deliver ideology; it **structures how ideology is felt**.

3

Part III — The Value System (Ideology)

1. Ideological Codes in the Medium of Cinema

The notion of norm and value system in cinema can be explored at three levels:

١. The **medium itself**

٢. **Genres**

٣. A **single film**

At the first level, the cinematic medium seems to carry certain **inherent ideological codes**:

- **Heterosexual desire**
- The **acceptance of death as achievable**
- The presence of a **sovereign authorial power**

These values appear in films even when narrative, language, or conventional structures are disrupted. Consider *Last Year at Marienbad* (Resnais, 1961):

- It lacks a clear story.
- Spatial unity is broken (rooms morph into gardens).
- Time folds in on itself (windows show day and night simultaneously).

- Characters have no names unless addressed.
- Narrative continuity is shattered through the insertion of unrelated bright frames between sequences.

And yet—despite all this formal disruption—the film **cannot escape heterosexual desire**. It reasserts itself as the latent framework of the filmic reality.

Some theorists go further, claiming even **abstract experimental films**—like those of **Man Ray** or **Norman McLaren**—cannot fully escape gendered perception. Shapes, lines, and textures may still be subconsciously read as **gendered forms**. Even *queer* or *lesbian* cinema may remain entangled in the same deep-rooted symbolic structures.

Another such embedded value is **the acceptance of death**. Every film has an ending. The very notion of an end affirms death's inevitability. However, cinematic death differs from real-world mortality—it can move forward or backward, happen multiple times, or unfold outside the frame.

A third embedded ideology is the **sovereignty of the filmmaker**. Despite abstract structures or visual difficulty, audiences often feel compelled to **see the film to the end**—as if in submission to an **unseen higher authority**. This devotion extends to auteur theory: the idea that a film can be the pure expression of **a single creator**—even when that idea becomes a myth.

These three dominant ideological codes in the cinematic medium—**heterosexual desire**, **achievable death**, and **sovereign authorship**—seem nearly inescapable across most cinematic experiences.

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2. Ideological Patterns in Genre Structures

Each genre carries with it **a built-in system of values**. These values are not always explicit; they may operate as:

- **Normative expectations**
- **Narrative consequences**
- **Stylistic codes**
- **Emotional rhythms**

For example:

- In **the musical**, values like **joy, harmony, community**, and **emotional expressiveness** are emphasized. Dissonance must resolve into celebration.
- In **crime films**, we encounter a tension between **order and chaos**, **law and justice**, and the **individual versus the system**.
- In **fantasy**, **purity, heroism, innocence, and evil** are presented as stable symbolic categories.

These values are **genre-specific ideologies**. They are repeated so frequently that audiences begin to **internalize them as universal truths**. This repetition leads to **naturalization**—the process by which cultural constructs become **invisible and taken for granted**.

Genre as Emotional Encoding of Ideology

Genres do not teach ideology through slogans. They do so **affectively**—through tone, rhythm, music, framing. That's why genre is often more powerful than explicit political cinema: it **structures how we feel about ideas**.

Consider the **Western**: its emotional codes—solitude, honor, revenge, the journey—promote a worldview of **masculine individualism**, frontier justice, and moral clarity.

Or the **romantic comedy**: through light tone and narrative closure, it affirms the value of **monogamous love**, often paired with middle-class consumption (marriage, home, material comfort).

Even **satire and parody**, though subversive in tone, often **reaffirm the norms they mock**, simply by repeating their structure.

The Illusion of Neutral Genres

Some critics have proposed the idea of **"ideologically neutral" genres**—such as documentary, science fiction, or the road movie. But these too are value-laden:

- Documentaries often claim objectivity while shaping perspective.

- Sci-fi films mirror contemporary fears—of technology, invasion, surveillance.
- Road movies celebrate freedom but often reinforce male mobility and independence.

Thus, **no genre is ideologically innocent**. Even silence or abstraction can carry implicit values—of withdrawal, resistance, or aesthetic elitism.

Genres operate like **rituals**: they offer emotional safety, predictable structure, symbolic reward. But these same structures **regulate thought, feeling, and behavior**, often without viewers realizing it.

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3. Ideology as Experienced in a Single Film

Beyond the ideological codes embedded in the cinematic medium, and beyond the value systems reinforced by genre repetition, each individual film engages with ideology in a **unique and eventful** way.

Sometimes, a film may appear **politically neutral**, yet trigger profound ideological debates. For instance:

- A film may pass through official censorship and distribution, yet provoke such **intense public response** that it is later **banned or withdrawn**.
- Another film may be produced with **clear ideological intention**, but upon release, generate **unexpected audience reactions**, transforming its perceived meaning.

This reveals a crucial insight:

Ideology is not just what a film says—it is also how it is received.

In fact, many regimes and institutions **only recognize the ideological impact of a film after its public screening**—when its tone, symbols, or emotional effects provoke **collective interpretation and resistance**.

The Viewer as Ideological Interpreter

Viewers are not passive. Each viewer brings their own:

- **Cultural background**
- **Political history**
- **Personal associations**
- **Emotional predispositions**

These factors shape how ideology is **felt** and **decoded**. The same film can be perceived as:

- **Revolutionary** by one group,
- **Reactionary** by another,
- Or **existential and poetic** by a third.

This variability means that **no ideological message is ever fully stable**. Even within controlled systems, meaning can **leak, shift, or reverse**. A film intended to glorify war may end up generating **pacifist reactions**, depending on how its tone is perceived.

Genre, Tone, and the Emergence of Value

What ultimately emerges from this analysis is that **genre and tone** work together as **the emotional grammar of ideology**. A film may follow the plot of a crime story, but if its tone is ironic or surreal, its ideological impact changes entirely.

Genres provide **structure**, but tone injects **ambiguity**, **distance**, or **alignment**. The same genre can promote or subvert ideology based on tonal framing.

Thus, the **final site of ideological meaning** is neither the filmmaker nor the genre alone, but the **dynamic encounter between form, tone, and spectator**.

Conclusion: Ideology as Affective Structure

Ideology in cinema is not always a matter of what is said or shown. Often, it operates through:

- **Familiar genre structures**
- **Emotional tone**
- **Cultural rituals of viewing**

By understanding genre and tone as systems of **affective organization**, we gain new insight into how cinema **produces belief**, **shapes perception**, and **negotiates values**—even when those values remain unspoken.

The Bodily Ritual of Film Reception

The **value system** of cinema does not arise merely from repetition or content—it is also rooted in the **bodily, collective act of watching**.

Unlike reading literature, which requires **translation of words**, **cinema creates desire** through shared recognition. A film recommendation—"I won't spoil the ending, just watch it"—points not to content, but to **the experience**. Cinema invites **repetition**, not out of habit, but from a **need to feel again**. This is not a cognitive process—it is **embodied**.

In this sense, watching a film becomes a kind of **ritual participation**. It's not just the eyes that engage, but **the whole body**. Viewers:

- Shift in their seats
- Lean forward in suspense
- Hide behind a partner during horror scenes
- Squeeze a friend's hand during emotional peaks
- Experience physical fatigue or alertness after films

These are **somatic reactions**—not secondary, but **central** to the cinematic experience.

This bodily participation parallels **ancient rituals**, where group presence and shared rhythm produced emotional synchrony. Even **3D**

cinema can be understood not as a narrative evolution, but as **a continuation of this corporeal fusion**—the body merging with the screen.

Cinema as Collective Presence

When people go to the movies "**together**," it is not simply a social outing. It is a **sanctioned form of physical connection**. Holding hands during a sad film, nudging someone in laughter—these are forms of **embodied intimacy** enabled by cinema.

This physical engagement is not just a side effect—it is **a core mode of participation**. Like dancing at a concert, we **feel cinema with others**, even when not overtly expressive.

The experience of watching a film in a packed theater—standing, squeezed in a corner at a film festival, or hiding behind a loved one in a scary scene—produces **affective rituals** that are **ideologically charged**, even when they seem neutral.

Cinema is not like reading a book, where the process is more abstract, solitary, and symbolic. It is **a group act**, and thus **ideologically inseparable from the bodies watching it**.

Ideology and the Unneutralized Image

Unlike literature's ideal of "neutral language," film **cannot be ideologically neutral**. A film's value system is **activated through collective reception**. It cannot exist without spectators, and spectators—through bodily presence—**alter its meaning**.

For example:

- Viewers disturbed by excessive noise may demand a disruptive audience member be silenced—reminiscent of ancient rituals where nonbelievers were expelled.
- A film that offends or alienates may never be completed—**not because of its narrative**, but because the audience **refuses the ritual**.

This shows that cinema's **ideological force lies not only in what it shows, but in the shared act of showing and receiving it**.

Affective Structure and the Gaze

Cinema's "value system" also structures the **gaze**:

- Historically, male viewers are positioned as the **active "lookers"**, especially in films where female stars embody desire.
- Female spectators, by contrast, have often lacked the **gaze of power**, becoming **invisible** or **unrepresented** within the act of looking.

This has led scholars to discuss **“the missing female gaze”**, pointing to a fundamental imbalance in how films **structure desire and identification**.

Other groups have similarly been **excluded**:

- Queer viewers
- Non-dominant ethnic or racial identities
- Non-heteronormative sexualities

Although some films challenge this structure (*Blue is the Warmest Color*, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*), the dominant **value system of global cinema still reinforces heterosexuality**, especially through genres like crime, drama, and comedy.

The Apparatus and the Power of the Shared Image

Some viewers exist **outside the dominant value system** of cinema—they are **excluded, misrepresented, or assimilated** into the image of a generalized viewer. This exclusion is the essence of what is called **cinema's ideological function**.

Cinema—specifically through its **apparatus** (technical system, viewing ritual, narrative form)—presents a **constructed reality** and asks viewers to:

- Accept it as true
- Choose a hero
- See themselves mirrored in that hero
- Believe in the world of the film

This is how **ideological functioning begins**. Films produce values, and those values spread. A film may influence **fashion**, which becomes a **social value**, prompting others to imitate it. Gradually, entire cultural patterns form around such representations.

However, this **process of assimilation** also produces its **own resistance**. Marginalized viewers—those who do not see themselves reflected—start searching for an image that represents them. They await a **new**

narrative, a **new visual story**, a **new system of values** that will **give them back their image**.

Historical Ideology and Taboo

Consider how **anti-Semitism**, once dominant in Nazi-era Germany, became a **taboo** in global film production. Today, **few films dare to defend Hitler**, not because it's illegal in all contexts, but because the **global cinematic value system** has been shaped by the horror of that history.

Even **supporters of Nazi ideology** must wait for representations they can identify with, often turning to films like *Downfall* (2004), where Hitler is portrayed at the edge of defeat. The **desire of viewers** and the **power of cinema to normalize** excludes such ideologies—or at least, pushes them to the margins.

In newly cinematic societies, this power of **cinematic conformity** is feared. Some governments respond with **destruction, censorship, or gradual adaptation**. Cinema becomes a **ritual** that societies must **learn to accommodate**, often with suspicion.

The Long-Term Work of Ideological Naturalization

The process by which a genre becomes **internalized**—from unfamiliar to "normal"—takes time:

- Between **90 to 210 minutes** for a single film.
- Several **decades of broadcasting** to normalize genres across rural and urban areas.

At its strongest, cinema **does not merely teach values—it replaces other systems of value production**, like mythology, religion, or oral history.

And yet, even **dominant ideology** cannot fully control representation. There is **no major studio today that promotes cannibalism, polytheism, or erotic fetishism** as social norms. But **desires for such portrayals** still exist—in internet subcultures, psychological curiosities, or fringe cinema.

What the Viewer Believes Without Question

The most deeply embedded ideological values in cinema are not explicit—they are **structural assumptions**, such as:

- Belief in flashbacks as truth
- Trust in narrators and confessions
- Acceptance of the protagonist's version of events

A film like *Citizen Kane* (1941) is built on flashbacks—but what if every witness **lied**? We never question this possibility, because cinema has **trained us to believe the shared image**.

This shared belief is the **true ideological power** of genre: it makes even **narrative manipulation** feel natural.

The Hypothetical Viewer and the Invisible Gaze

In the end, film theory points toward a **hypothetical viewer**—an abstract gaze that sees everything and stands in for all spectators. This viewer:

- Creates genres
- Defines narrative legitimacy
- Replaces the “author” as the center of meaning

This is why sequels, reboots, and franchises persist: the **shared viewer expectation** is stronger than any individual author.

Genre persists because of the viewer, not the maker.

Interpretive Opacity and Ideological Systems

Cinema is often viewed as an **interpretable text**—something that can and should be decoded. But this presumes that **every film must have a meaning**, and that this meaning is either:

- Embedded by the director
- Recoverable through analysis
- Accessible to viewers via cultural codes

However, the experience of many viewers suggests otherwise.

Some films defy interpretation.
Some films resist ideological decoding.
Some images provoke emotion without yielding meaning.

This resistance is not a failure of the film—it may be the **core of its power**.

Not Every Image Demands Meaning

Viewers may enjoy films **without understanding them**. Children and nonverbal viewers respond emotionally, even to abstract or surreal cinema.

Thus, the idea that all films must be analyzed like literature or philosophy **misses the point**. Cinema is not a textbook—it is a **shared dream**, a **collective hallucination**, a **sensory ritual**.

Some films (e.g., *Jules and Jim*, *The Exterminating Angel*) offer **experiential heat** rather than narrative closure. They cannot be "compared" to life or reduced to moral positions. They belong to the realm of **untranslatable joy**.

Genre Names as Survival Codes

When someone says "This is a comedy" or "This is fantasy," they are not classifying—they are **coping**. Genre names help audiences **endure the intensity** of what they see, much like we consult a shaman after a troubling dream. The label gives form to the formless.

But what if some films resist even this? What if they belong to no genre? Or rather, to a genre **whose only rule is the absence of rules**?

Such films provoke both:

- **The elite critic**, who attacks the viewer's pleasure
- **The crude viewer**, who rejects anything they cannot label

Both responses **fail to embrace the radical openness of cinema**.

Cinema as Collective Trance

Cinema is **a ritual of spectatorship**. Its ideology is embedded not just in content but in:

- The act of sitting in a dark room with others
- The repetition of familiar images
- The bodily reactions we share (tension, laughter, tears)

Even films that reject official values participate in **this ritual of collective attention**. This is the **double nature of cinema**: it **escapes and serves ideology** simultaneously.

The system of values (ideology) is not merely political. It is:

- **Sensory** (music, light, tone)
- **Cultural** (rituals, habits)
- **Emotional** (nostalgia, desire)

And yet, cinema's power lies in its **resistance to capture**.

The Viewer's Freedom, the Culture's Anxiety

Some cultural authorities—critics, politicians, theorists—fear this freedom. They want cinema to be:

- Morally instructive
- Ideologically clear
- Intellectually manageable

But the truth is that cinema, by nature, **overflows meaning**. Its pleasure is in its **ambivalence**, its refusal to settle, its **chaotic beauty**.

Thus, to accuse cinema of being “corrupt” or “trivial” because it fails to deliver clean meanings is to **miss its most profound dimension**.

Cinema is not a weapon, nor is it food. It cannot be “rotten.”

Conclusion: Toward a Cinema Beyond Interpretation

In the end, even when films serve dominant ideology, the medium itself remains open. The **power of genre**, with its tones, variations, and subversions, lies in its capacity to **challenge singular meaning**.

The greatest films **resist final interpretation**. They live **beyond ideology**, not because they lack values, but because they allow **multiple truths to co-exist**.

They are not literature, not sermons, not manifestos. They are **cinema**—and that is enough.

Genre as Incommensurable Experience

The political debate around cinema's ideological function has always relied on **comparison**—comparing one film to another, one system to another, one value to another.

But what if cinema **refuses comparison**?

The Politics of the Untranslatable

Genres often emerge from minimal consensus among viewers—**shared affective zones**, not clear meanings. Like color perception, they rely on a **baseline of recognition**, not full agreement.

Think of the color red:

- It can signify love (a rose), nationalism (a flag), sports (a team uniform), or childhood (in kindergarten decoration).
- Yet, **the feeling of red precedes all of these meanings**.
- Genre functions similarly: we **feel its tone** before we categorize or politicize it.

Cinema, then, does not require a **political reading** to have **affective power**. The ideological interpretations imposed from the outside—often by critics, festivals, or state institutions—are **secondary** to the **viewer's lived response**.

The Incommensurable as a Critical Mode

Some films **resist ideological capture** entirely. Take *The Big Feast* (*La grande bouffe*, Ferreri, 1973):

- Men eat until they die.
- Women survive.
- There is no moral resolution—only **embodied excess**.

Does this film critique bourgeois life? Perhaps. But after decades, **its emotional effect** remains clearer than its ideological message. The act of **eating on screen**, displayed to discomfort, carries an **emotive intensity** that exceeds political allegory.

Throughout film history, eating has been **ridiculed, repressed, or displaced**:

- In Westerns, heroes rarely eat.
- In children's films, villains are shown devouring sloppily.
- In comedies, food is often **seen, not consumed**.
- Even Iranian cinema (e.g. *Mother*, Hatami, 1988) shows endless **preparation for meals**—but not the act of eating.

This reflects a **cultural unease with embodied pleasure**, a refusal to stage the body in its most **animalistic form**.

Cinema Beyond Literary Models

Literary criticism has long sought **ethical form**—clear grammar, structure, and evaluative norms. But cinema cannot be **forced into literary logic**:

- It is not a language in the same sense.
- It doesn't have a stable syntax or moral arc.
- It offers **compressed visual/audio events**, not propositional truths.

You cannot write a dictionary for cinematic reception. Films are **not awaiting interpretation**—they are **being experienced**, with or without explanation.

The Ethics of Ambiguity

Efforts to define "ideal" cinema—pure, moral, or essential—are nostalgic. Cinema is **impure**, **hybrid**, **borrowed**, and **experiential**. It owes itself to:

- Theater (e.g. Olivier)
- Music (e.g. Kubrick)
- Architecture (e.g. Visconti)
- Literature
- Even computers and AI

This makes it **resistant to purity**, and **open to multiplicity**.

Final Insight: Genre Is Felt, Not Defined

Genres are like **colors**:

- Everyone can feel red, but not everyone can name it.
- You may sense "Western" in a film without knowing its conventions.

To feel genre is to be part of a **shared perceptual ritual**. Not because of critical consensus—but because of **minimal aesthetic commonality**.

Like recognizing the tone of grief, laughter, or desire, **genre precedes language**.

Appendix — Cinematic Taxonomies: From Flag to Form

To understand cinematic classification—**art, medium, form, style, genre, and tradition**—it helps to start with a **visual symbol**: the national flag.

Take the **flag of Iran**, for example. Most Iranians carry this **image in their memory**, reproduced since childhood through the national anthem and public rituals. It is not just an object—it is a **media-symbol**, shaped by **art and sound**.

As a child, you may have **waved a paper flag** on a matchstick at school. Soldiers may have stood upright before it during military service. You might have seen it flying high in a city square, or embraced it after winning a sports medal. Women may paint it on their cheeks during elections. It covers coffins at funerals. It appears across **multiple media**: film, television, music videos, video art, mobile screens, even **"pre-film cinema."**

Medium, Form, and Style

The flag exists in **various materials**—paper, fabric, painted on wood or stone. These are **forms**. Just as cinema, although intangible, can be experienced as having "texture."

The flag's colors and symbols may be **sewn or printed**—this is **style**. The mass reproduction of flags represents a kind of **industrial visual identity**.

Both **form** and **style** refer to **production characteristics**. Style is a reaction to cultural definitions of realism. It travels across art forms—Expressionism, for example, exists in painting and cinema. But **form**—like **animation**—is more specific to cinema, in contrast to other forms like documentary, episodic fiction, experimental works, or serial storytelling.

Reception as Collective Practice

The reception of the flag is always **group-based**. Upon migration, allegiance may shift to another flag, altering one's relational positioning. You cannot interpret a national symbol entirely on your own—it inherently refers to **group belonging**.

Even if you privately preserve a version of the flag with another symbol embedded in it—or use it in a historical film out of context—your **emotional reaction** to it is socially coded: crying over it, kneeling before it, swearing on it, or dying under it. Feeling pride as the wind moves it:

These are **"tones" of collective symbolism**.

Tone exists in life just as in cinema: joy, sadness, fear, awe.

Tradition and Taste

Flags are limited in symbolic variation—three-color combinations dominate. But cinematic traditions offer more diversity:

For Iranians, the carpet may be a more intimate symbol.

For Cubans, sugar cane.

For Brazilians, bananas.

For Italians, pizza.

These cultural symbols inform **cinematic traditions**:

European cinema emphasizes artistic construction.

Hollywood champions individual adventure.

Hong Kong cinema centers mythic combat.

Bollywood heightens emotional melodrama to near death.

A film in one tradition may be made elsewhere geographically, but the **tradition is perceptual, not merely spatial**. It resides in tone, structure, and affect—not in coordinates.

or Genre Theory

- Is **every funny film** automatically part of the **comedy genre**?
- Can the **subject matter** of a story alone determine its **genre**?
- Where exactly lies the boundary between **thriller** and **horror**?
- Are **documentary** and **animation** themselves genres?
- Is **art cinema** a **narrative model** or a distinct genre?
- How are **mystery** and **suspense** genres distinguishable?
- What distinguishes **tradition**, **style**, **form**, and **genre** in cinema—given that they often overlap and influence one another?
- Does every cinematic classification imply a genre?
- Do scenes of **song and dance** automatically classify a film as a **musical**?
- Are **science fiction** and **horror** subgenres of **fantasy**?
- Must the genre of **epic** always imply **heroic or historical tone**? Some documentaries about **the depths of the ocean** evoke a grandeur that rivals this tone.
- Are **all children's films** automatically considered **fantasy**?

- How can we create a **list of films in a single genre** without relying on flawed labels?
- To identify a genre, must everything be measured against one or a few **prototypical films**?
- Can we precisely explain the moment when a film's **tone takes hold** of the viewer?
- In the first minutes of a film, a certain **tonal expectation** appears—either the film builds on it or fails to fulfill it.
- Why is **cinema incapable** of producing a "historical tone" in the way literature or academic writing can?
- Why do viewers perceive **norms and value systems** even in **abstract films**, similar to narrative ones?
  Is this cinema's **ideological tendency** to structure perception?
- Why do some people assume **adventure** and **action** are the same genre?