

# The Analysis of Hong Kong Gangster Films Directed by Johnnie To

<sup>1</sup>Liying Qiao, and <sup>2</sup>Chalongrat Chermanchonlamark

Communication Arts College, Rangsit University, Thailand

E-mail: <sup>1</sup>liying.q65@rsu.ac.th, <sup>2</sup>chalongrat.c@rsu.ac.th

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## Abstract

This article aimed to study (1) the narrative structure in Hong Kong gangster films directed by Johnnie To and (2) the film language in Hong Kong gangster films directed by Johnnie To. The sample was five representative gangster films—The Mission (1999), PTU (2003), Election (2005), Election 2 (2006), and Exiled (2006). They were selected by purposive sampling from different stages of Johnnie To's directorial career. The instrument for collecting data was qualitative textual analysis. Data were collected through repeated film viewing and supported by secondary academic sources and analyzed by descriptive interpretation and textual analysis. The research results were as follows: 1) For narrative structure, the findings suggested that Johnnie To's gangster films depart from traditional hero-centered storytelling by employing ensemble narrative structures and minimalist three-act frameworks. Settings carry symbolic meaning, expressing psychological states and social tensions. Conflicts were framed as moral dilemmas rather than binary oppositions, and themes of power struggle and brotherhood were reinterpreted through a fatalistic lens. 2) For film language, it was found that Johnnie To employs a restrained cinematic style characterized by precise cinematography, high-contrast and directional lighting, subdued color palettes, minimalist sound design, and controlled editing rhythms. These elements created a distinct visual and auditory experience that emphasizes tension and emotional subtlety over spectacle. These findings provided insights into narrative and stylistic innovations in East Asian gangster cinema and contribute to a deeper understanding of the identity of Hong Kong gangster films through Johnnie To's work.

**Keywords:** Johnnie To; Hong Kong Cinema; Narrative Structure; Film Language; Gangster Films

## Introduction

Hong Kong gangster films—commonly referred to as "Triad films"—have long been one of the most iconic genres in Hong Kong cinema. Since the 1960s, the genre has evolved from narratives centered on individual loyalty and violence to more complex portrayals of group dynamics and organizational conflict, marking a shift from hero-centered storytelling to ensemble narrative structures. Traditional Hong Kong gangster films usually focus on a single heroic protagonist, depicting characters as morally clear heroes and centering the narrative on the protagonist's personal growth. Johnnie To stands out as a pivotal director in this transformation. Known for his minimalist narrative structure and meticulously controlled film language, Johnnie To has contributed significantly to the modernization of the genre.

As Qian (2017) observes, Johnnie To consciously distanced his work from the violent, hero-centric style that dominated the 1980s, opting instead for narratives that emphasize collective agency and thematic depth. His gangster films demonstrate a stylized film language—through cinematography, lighting, color, sound, and editing—that complements and enhances his narrative strategies.

Despite the genre's popularity and critical attention, there remains a gap in studies that systematically analyze how Johnnie To integrates both narrative structure and film language to redefine genre conventions within the Hong Kong gangster film tradition. Recent scholarship has begun to explore the aesthetics and thematic richness of Hong Kong gangster films—for instance, Sun (2021) examines fatalism and noir aesthetics, while Ting (2022) and Chin-Pang (2024) explore spatial narrative and political symbolism in Johnnie To's gangster films. However, these studies often treat narrative and film language in isolation, lacking a comprehensive, integrated perspective. All of these themes directly reflect the article's core concerns, which are organized around the five keywords: Johnnie To; Hong Kong cinema; narrative structure; film language; gangster films.

This article focuses on five representative Hong Kong gangster films directed by Johnnie To—*The Mission* (1999), *PTU* (2003), *Election* (2005), *Election 2* (2006), and *Exiled* (2006)—which span different stages of his directorial career. The research aims to bridge the divide between narrative and stylistic analysis, offering a holistic perspective on Johnnie To's distinct use of storytelling and film language within the gangster genre. The intended audience includes scholars and professionals in the fields of Hong Kong film studies, narrative theory, genre studies, and film language.

Accordingly, this research aims to examine: (1) the narrative structure and (2) the film language in Hong Kong gangster films directed by Johnnie To. It analyzes five key dimensions of narrative structure—character, plot, setting, conflict, and theme—and five components of film language—cinematography, lighting, color, sound, and editing. Using qualitative textual analysis, the article explores how these elements work together to construct the distinctive style and genre identity of Hong Kong gangster cinema. The paper proceeds through a literature review, conceptual framework, methodology, research results and discussion, followed by conclusions and implications.

## Research Objectives

1. To analyze the narrative structure in Hong Kong gangster films directed by Johnnie To.
2. To examine the film language in Hong Kong gangster films directed by Johnnie To.

## Literature Review

This section reviews existing studies on Johnnie To's gangster films, focusing on two core areas—narrative structure and film language—corresponding to the research objectives. It identifies key findings, theoretical contributions, and research gaps that this article aims to address.

### 1. Narrative Structure in Johnnie To's Gangster Films

Previous research has explored how Hong Kong gangster films transitioned from single-protagonist narratives to more decentralized ensemble storytelling. Bordwell (2000), in *Planet Hong Kong*, discusses this shift, emphasizing the adoption of minimalist three-act structures and character interactions within collective frameworks, rather than conventional hero-centered arcs. Teo (2019) further argues that Johnnie To's characters are shaped by institutional frameworks, with internal loyalties and external power hierarchies forming the narrative tension.

Sun (2021) highlights the symbolic function of setting in post-handover triad films, suggesting that locations are more than physical spaces—they metaphorically reflect political and social instability. Chin-Pang (2024) similarly analyzes how urban fragmentation is used to represent disintegration and systemic collapse. While these studies offer insights into character, plot and setting, most tend to treat each narrative component in isolation.

Moreover, fatalism, a recurring theme in Johnnie To's gangster films, remains underexplored. Teo (2019) defines it not just as a theme but as a narrative logic—where character agency is persistently undermined by procedural constraints and institutional forces. This article

builds upon these insights by integrating all four key narrative dimensions—character, plot, setting and theme—into a unified framework that reflects Johnnie To's distinctive storytelling approach.

## 2. Film Language in Johnnie To's Gangster Films

Johnnie To's visual strategies are widely acknowledged for their divergence from traditional genre aesthetics. Bordwell (2000) characterizes his cinematography as spatially controlled and rhythmically measured, relying on symmetrical composition and long takes over fast-paced action. Teo (2019) analyzes his preference for top lighting and side lighting reminiscent of theatrical staging, suggesting that light in Johnnie To's films functions to define spatial hierarchy, rather than to convey emotional tone.

Yau (2001) explores the minimalist use of sound in Johnnie To's work, showing how ambient noise and restrained scoring amplify urban tension and psychological unease. Teo (2019) notes Johnnie To's selective use of color palettes, in which cool tones dominate, and warm colors appear only symbolically—often signaling violence or fleeting warmth.

Although these studies recognize the aesthetic uniqueness of Johnnie To's work, they often treat lighting and sound as independent formal elements. This article, by contrast, examines how these two aspects of film language collectively contribute to narrative meaning—particularly in reinforcing themes of control, systemic disintegration, and the illusion of choice. It also incorporates the concept of procedural aesthetics (Fu & Desser, 2002; Teo, 2019), illustrating how Johnnie To's spatial configurations reinforce his thematic focus on institutional structures and fatalism.

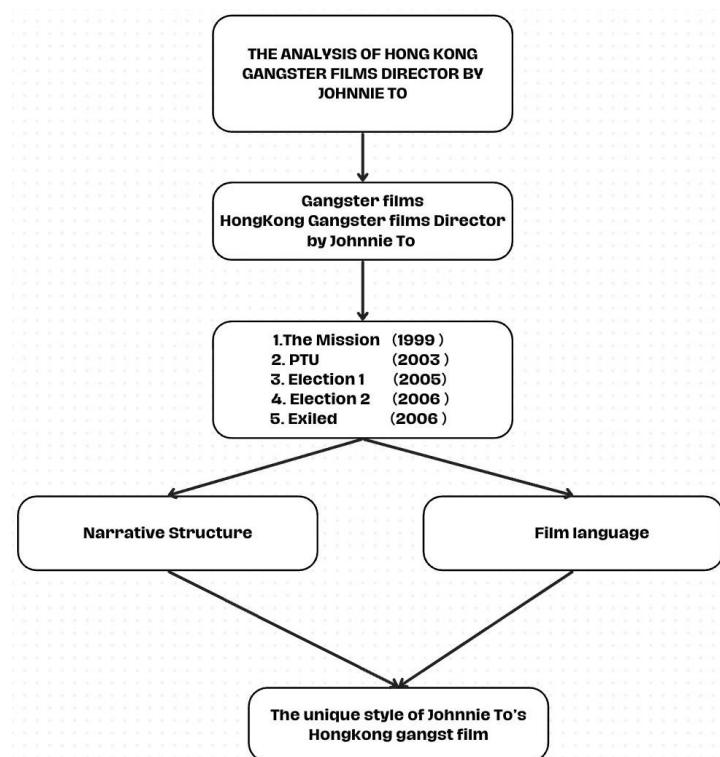
## 3. Summary and Research Gap

The reviewed literature has provided a valuable foundation for understanding the narrative and stylistic characteristics of Hong Kong gangster cinema. However, no prior research has systematically aligned the four narrative components with the two core elements of film language to analyze how they jointly construct Johnnie To's authorial identity. The dynamic interplay between his ensemble narrative logic and minimalist film techniques remains insufficiently theorized.

This article addresses that gap by examining how Johnnie To combines collective character structures, symbolic spatial design, and formalist precision to reimagine the genre's identity. By bridging narrative and stylistic analysis, this research contributes a new framework for investigating authorship, genre, and film language in postcolonial East Asian film.

## Conceptual Framework

This article examines the narrative structure and film language in five Hong Kong gangster films directed by Johnnie To between 1999 and 2006. The conceptual framework is built upon two key analytical dimensions: narrative structure and film language, reflecting commonly used approaches in film narratology and film analysis. The framework consists of five narrative components—character, plot, setting, conflict, and theme—and five components of film language—cinematography, lighting, color, sound, and editing. The specific components are outlined as follows.



**Figure 1** Conceptual Framework

## Research Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach to examine the construction and distinctiveness of narrative structure and film language in Johnnie To's Hong Kong gangster films.

### Research Scope and Sample Selection

The article focuses on five representative Hong Kong gangster films directed by Johnnie To between 1999 and 2006: The Mission (1999), PTU (2003), Election (2005), Election 2 (2006), and Exiled (2006). The film selection criteria include:

1. Widely recognized by scholars and critics as representative works of Johnnie To's gangster films;
2. Covering different stylistic phases in Johnnie To's directorial career;
3. Possessing clear narrative structures and stylized film language, facilitating in-depth textual analysis.

### **Data Collection**

The data used in this article are entirely secondary sources. These include repeated viewings of the five selected films, as well as academic references such as journal articles, book chapters, and film reviews obtained from databases like Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Taylor & Francis. No primary data (e.g., interviews or audience surveys) were used, as the research centers on the internal structure and stylistic features of the films, rather than on authorial intention or audience reception.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher selected five representative Hong Kong gangster films directed by Johnnie To between 1999 and 2006. Based on the conceptual framework, the analysis was conducted from two main perspectives: narrative structure and film language.

To examine narrative structure, the researcher focused on five key components: character, plot, setting, conflict, and theme. Relevant theoretical principles and concepts were identified and used to interpret each component individually.

To examine film language, the analysis concentrated on five technical components: cinematography, lighting, color, sound, and editing. The researcher identified recurring visual and auditory strategies across the films, such as symmetrical composition, low-key lighting, limited color palettes, ambient sound, and procedural montage.

Each film was manually coded and compared across the ten analytical components to identify recurring patterns, stylistic variations, and dominant thematic concerns. The findings were then synthesized to outline the distinctive characteristics of Johnnie To's Hong Kong gangster films. As a qualitative textual analysis, this study prioritizes interpretive depth over generalizability, with inherent limitations in scope and subjectivity.

## Research Results

Objective 1. To analyze the narrative structure in Hong Kong gangster films directed by Johnnie To.

### 1. Character

The findings indicate that Johnnie To departs from the traditional Hong Kong gangster film model centered on a single protagonist. Instead, he adopts an ensemble narrative, where a diverse group of characters collectively forms the narrative focus. This approach shifts attention away from individual character arcs and emphasizes the interplay and collective evolution of group roles.

As shown in Table 1, Johnnie To assembles five-member teams in *The Mission* (1999) and *Exiled* (2006), where each member displays distinct personalities. While these teams exhibit strong internal loyalty, their character differences generate subtle frictions that shape cohesion and decision-making processes. These internal dynamics, rather than individual heroism, drive the development of the ensemble.

In *PTU* (2003), Johnnie To portrays a police unit marked by conflicting views and temperaments. Under pressure, the lack of consensus leads to fragmentation and disarray, highlighting how diverging worldviews—not personal skills—determine the group's fragility. In the *Election* series (2005–2006), Johnnie To further explores collective identity by showing how initial personality traits of gang members are gradually eroded and reshaped by organizational pressure. As power struggles intensify, characters adapt their roles to survive shifting loyalties and systemic demands.

Overall, Johnnie To's character construction does not emphasize the transformation of isolated individuals, but rather the negotiated balance of diverse personalities within collective structures. His Hong Kong gangster films redefine identity as a function of group negotiation, placing collective dynamics at the core of narrative progression.

**Table 1** Character in Hong Kong gangster films directed by Johnnie To.

Film	Characters	
	Ensemble narratives	Characteristic
The Mission (1999)	✓	Five-Man Team → Personality Clash → Brotherhood Struggle
PTU (2003)	✓	Police Ensemble → Hierarchical Structure → Rule Negotiation
Election (2005)	✓	Triad Ensemble → Power Struggle → Mutual Calculation
Election 2 (2006)	✓	Triad Ensemble → Power Radicalization → Relationship Disintegration
Exiled (2006)	✓	Five-Man Team → Fateful Bond → Code of Honor Dilemma

## 2. Plot

The findings reveal that Johnnie To deviates from the multi-linear and single-protagonist narrative patterns commonly seen in traditional Hong Kong gangster films. Instead, he employs a minimalist three-act structure characterized by compressed timelines, economical storytelling, and a tightly structured narrative rhythm.

As shown in Table 2, all five selected films follow three fixed narrative stages: the initiation of a mission, the escalation of internal and external tensions, and the final confrontation or resolution. *The Mission* (1999) and *Exiled* (2006) revolve around team formation, increasing interpersonal strain, and life-or-death decisions. In *PTU* (2003), the story unfolds over a single night, evolving from a triggering incident to escalating internal disarray, culminating in concealed consequences. The *Election* series (2005–2006) presents an internal evolution of gang leadership—beginning with a succession process, escalating through conflict, and concluding with a contested transition of power.

In summary, Johnnie To's minimalist three-act structure redefines plot development within the Hong Kong gangster genre. By replacing elaborate setups with streamlined, mission-oriented arcs, he creates a fast-paced narrative flow that immerses the viewer. This structure contributes significantly to the evolution of plot conventions in Hong Kong gangster cinema.

**Table 2** Plot in Hong Kong gangster films directed by Johnnie To.

Film	Three-act structure	Plot
The Mission (1999)	✓	Team formation → Internal conflict → Final confrontation
PTU (2003)	✓	Three phases in one night (loss of firearm → search → consequences)
Election (2005)	✓	Initial power transition → Struggle for power → Contested succession
Election 2 (2006)	✓	Initial power transition → Struggle for power → Contested succession
Exiled (2006)	✓	Team formation → Internal conflict → Final confrontation

### 3. Setting

The findings show that Johnnie To redefines the role of setting in the narrative structure of his Hong Kong gangster films. Unlike traditional gangster films that often use nightclubs or alleyways as mere physical backdrops, Johnnie To imbues his settings with symbolic meaning, reflecting the intensification of power struggles and the inevitability of violence in the triad world.

As illustrated in Table 3, Johnnie To's choice of locations carries unique metaphorical significance. In *The Mission* (1999) and *PTU* (2003), narrow alleys, stairwells, and empty urban streets convey a sense of spatial compression, where minor incidents can quickly escalate into major conflicts. These confined spaces heighten interpersonal tension and reinforce the inevitability of confrontation. In the *Election* series (2005–2006), Johnnie To employs remote natural environments—such as cliffs, forests, reservoirs, fishing boats, and ancestral halls—to symbolize instability and the covert nature of internal leadership struggles within triad organizations. In *Exiled* (2006), the desolate outskirts underscore themes of displacement and inevitable conflict, while the contrast between deserted hometown streets and vast cliffs intensifies the characters' sense of isolation.

In summary, Johnnie To's spatial strategy elevates setting from a passive background to an active symbolic agent within the narrative. Rather than serving as a vehicle for broader social criticism, his settings are deliberately designed to amplify narrative tension and highlight character interaction. Through meticulous spatial composition, Johnnie To embeds environmental constraints directly into the narrative structure, making setting a crucial component in shaping the narrative dynamics of his Hong Kong gangster films.

**Table 3** Setting in Hong Kong gangster films directed by Johnnie To.

Film	Location settings	Setting	
		Location	Symbolic Meaning
The Mission (1999)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Back Alley	Symbolizes the inescapability of triad conflicts.
		Tsuen Wan Plaza	Represents the fragility of public order.
PTU (2003)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Streets	Symbolizes the lurking danger.
		Cliff	Symbolizes the instability of power and the perilous nature of power struggles.
Election (2005)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Forest	Hints at the primal and chaotic nature of power struggles.
		Reservoir	Symbolizes the loneliness and destruction caused by power struggles.
		The Bar	Symbolizes the labyrinth of power.
Election 2 (2006)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	The Fishing Boat	Symbolizes the corruption of the soul and the destruction of humanity by ambition.
		Coffins And Columbarium	Symbolizes death and the end of rules.
Exiled (2006)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Streets	Symbolizes Wo's longing for a stable life.
		Cliff	Symbolizes having nowhere to go and isolation.

#### 4. Conflict

The findings indicate that Johnnie To's Hong Kong gangster films retain the traditional narrative model of internal and external conflicts common to the genre. However, rather than advancing the plot through a simplistic moral binary of good versus evil, Johnnie To refines the depiction of conflict as tensions arising between personal emotions, ethical dilemmas, and hierarchical pressures.

As shown in Table 4, internal conflict often stems from characters struggling between personal loyalty, moral codes, and emotional obligations. In *The Mission* (1999) and *Exiled* (2006), characters are torn between emotional bonds and their duties or moral responsibilities. In *PTU* (2003), To highlights the psychological pressure individuals face under institutional authority.

External conflict, on the other hand, revolves around asymmetrical power dynamics—for instance, the struggle between different levels of authority and control as portrayed in *The Mission* (1999), *PTU* (2003), *Election* (2005), and *Election 2* (2006).

Overall, while Johnnie To's portrayal of conflict aligns with genre conventions in Hong Kong gangster cinema, he places greater emphasis on how emotional struggle is intertwined with

systemic constraints. His nuanced treatment deepens the exploration of individual agency and institutional stability within the narrative structure of the gangster genre.

**Table 4** Conflict in Hong Kong gangster films directed by Johnnie To.

Film	Conflict	
	Internal Conflict	External Conflict
The Mission (1999)	Conflict between personal emotions and duty	power asymmetries
PTU (2003)	Personal and moral conflict	power asymmetries
Election (2005)	The conflict between personal feelings and code of honor	power asymmetries
Election 2 (2006)	Conflict between freedom and interests	Conflict between different power systems Conflict between power and destiny
Exiled (2006)	Personal emotions and moral conflict	Personal fate and historical change

## 5. Theme

The findings reveal that Johnnie To's Hong Kong gangster films retain several traditional genre themes, such as loyalty, brotherhood, power struggles, and moral dilemmas. However, these themes are reinterpreted through a fatalistic lens. In Johnnie To's narratives, characters do not achieve transcendence or redemption through personal effort. Instead, they are repeatedly drawn into cycles of failure, compromise, and identity erosion under the constraints of triad hierarchies and organizational codes.

As shown in Table 5, *The Mission* (1999) and *Exiled* (2006) focus on the tension between personal emotions and collective duty, where characters remain loyal yet cannot escape the fate assigned by the organization. *PTU* (2003) depicts the breakdown of group coordination within a single night due to power imbalance and failed communication, highlighting how institutional stability overrides individual choice. *Election* (2005) and *Election 2* (2006) portray betrayal and escalating violence as consequences of power transitions, where loyalty is gradually replaced by ambition, and moral boundaries dissolve under the pressure of succession.

In Johnnie To's films, fatalism is not only a recurring theme but also a structural logic. Characters may pursue loyalty, power, or a sense of belonging, but their efforts are consistently thwarted by organizational constraints, inevitable compromise, or existential failure.

Overall, fatalism in Johnnie To's works functions as both a thematic focus and a narrative framework. No matter how characters struggle, their destinies seem predetermined. Acts of defiance or allegiance are ultimately absorbed, sacrificed, or replaced by the system. This creates a distinct

fatalistic logic: effort does not guarantee change, and choices are often reduced to limited adjustments within rigid institutional frameworks. Despite the illusion of agency, characters' fates remain tightly confined—rendering fatalism a defining force throughout his Hong Kong gangster films.

**Table 5** Theme in Hong Kong gangster films directed by Johnnie To.

Films	Theme				
	The Mission (1999)	PTU (2003)	Election (2005)	Election 2 (2006)	Exiled (2006)
Triad Code of Honor	✓		✓	✓	✓
Group Solidarity	✓	✓			
Sense of Belonging		✓			✓
Power Struggle			✓	✓	
Corruption of Humanity			✓	✓	
Collapse of Moral Codes			✓	✓	
Political Metaphor		✓	✓	✓	✓
Fate				✓	✓
Choice Between Honor & Brotherhood	✓	✓			✓
Attachment to Homeland					✓
Era of Transition					✓

**Objective 2. To examine the film language in Hong Kong gangster films directed by Johnnie To.**

## 6. Cinematography

The findings indicate that Johnnie To's Hong Kong gangster films make use of traditional cinematographic techniques commonly seen in the genre, such as push–pull zooms, symmetrical composition, and overhead shots. However, Johnnie To adopts a more restrained approach to these techniques. He tends to favor slow–paced camera movements, long takes, and symmetrical spatial arrangements to create a sustained sense of tension and isolation, rather than relying on dynamic action sequences or exaggerated violence.

As shown in Table 6, To carefully applies cinematographic strategies to enhance spatial pressure and emotional atmosphere. In *The Mission* (1999), he frequently uses push–pull zooms, symmetrical composition, and wide–angle shots to modulate the rhythm of group movement and emphasize spatial compression. In *PTU* (2003), he employs anamorphic wide–angle lenses, barrel distortion, and long takes to twist the urban space, externalizing psychological pressure. In *Election*

(2005) and Election 2 (2006), close-ups, overhead angles, and static frames are used to intensify the emotional impact of power struggles and betrayal. In Exiled (2006), the contrast between static framing and sudden overhead shots underscores the fragility beneath surface calm in moments of conflict. These visual choices contribute to a coherent visual rhythm that complements the narrative pacing.

In summary, Johnnie To treats cinematography as a central component of his film language. Through meticulous framing and deliberate camera movement, he reinforces both spatial dynamics and emotional undercurrents, establishing cinematography as an independent and essential element within his broader film language system.

**Table 6** Cinematography in Hong Kong gangster films directed by Johnnie To.

Cinematography		
Film	Cinematography	Function
The Mission (1999)	Tracking Shots	Creates precise visual rhythm, heightens spatial tension, and reinforces character dynamics.
	Symmetrical Composition	
	Panoramic Shots	
PTU (2003)	Anamorphic Widescreen Lens	Enhances immersion, distorts urban space, and externalizes psychological tension.
	Barrel Distortion	
	Long Take	
Election (2005)	Tracking Shots	Emphasizes power transition, highlights ambition, and visualizes the brutality of leadership
	Close-Up Shots	
	Overhead Shots	
Election 2 (2006)	Rotating Shots	Symbolizes the cyclical nature of power struggles and foreshadows inevitable conflict.
	Close-Up Shots	
Exiled (2006)	Static Shots	Contrasts tranquility with violence, reinforcing fate and existential themes.
	Overhead Shots	

## 7. Lighting

The findings reveal that Johnnie To's approach to lighting in his Hong Kong gangster films departs significantly from the traditional genre's reliance on emotional amplification. Conventional films in this category often use high-contrast lighting, vivid color tones, or spotlights to heighten dramatic tension and emphasize heroic figures or sensational moments of violence. In contrast, Johnnie To employs lighting strategies that prioritize spatial order and rhythmic control, creating a restrained and oppressive visual atmosphere.

In *The Mission* (1999), To uses stark contrast between light and shadow to heighten tension through sharp visual opposition. In *PTU* (2003), localized side lighting places characters in dimly lit environments, emphasizing their isolation. In *PTU*, *Election* (2005), *Election 2* (2006), and *Exiled* (2006), he frequently uses top lighting to evoke a stage-like quality, underscoring the hierarchical and performative aspects of institutional power.

Overall, Johnnie To's lighting design moves beyond the conventional use of lighting as an emotional enhancer. Instead, it functions as a critical tool for atmosphere control and narrative modulation. Through calculated lighting schemes, it becomes a central component of his film language, reinforcing the aesthetic precision and thematic restraint that characterize his Hong Kong gangster films.

**Table 7** Lighting in Hong Kong gangster films directed by Johnnie To.

Film	Lighting				
	<i>The Mission</i> (1999)	<i>PTU</i> (2003)	<i>Election</i> (2005)	<i>Election 2</i> (2006)	<i>Exiled</i> (2006)
Contrast of Light and Shadow	✓				
Dynamic Lighting	✓				
Side Lighting		✓	✓	✓	✓
Top Lighting	✓		✓	✓	✓
Rotating Lights				✓	✓

## 8. Color

The findings reveal that Johnnie To's Hong Kong gangster films predominantly employ a cool color palette, with black and blue as the dominant tones. This results in a visually restrained and meticulously crafted aesthetic. Unlike traditional Hong Kong gangster films—which often rely on saturated reds and yellows to dramatize themes of loyalty or violence—To does not entirely avoid warm colors. Instead, he applies red and yellow with deliberation and restraint, using them as visual cues to signify violence or fleeting moments of warmth.

As shown in Table 8, each dominant hue functions as a visual code. Blue appears in *The Mission* (1999) and *Election* (2005), creating a calm yet tense atmosphere that suppresses overt emotional expression. Black is widely used in *PTU* (2003), *Election 2* (2006), and *Exiled* (2006), symbolizing the harshness and opacity of institutional structures. Green, used in *PTU*, blurs the line between legality and criminality, evoking a sense of moral ambiguity. Red typically marks scenes

of chaos and violence, as seen in *PTU* and *Election*, indicating emotional escalation. In *Exiled* (2006), yellow is applied sparingly, injecting brief moments of warmth or ironic harmony into otherwise rigid environments.

Overall, Johnnie To's color design avoids visual saturation and emotional excess. Through a restrained yet intentional use of color, he constructs a coherent and tension-filled visual style—where color becomes a critical element of his film language.

**Table 8** Color in Hong Kong gangster films directed by Johnnie To.

Color	The Mission (1999)	PTU (2003)	Election (2005)	Election 2 (2006)	Exiled (2006)
Blue	✓		✓		
Black	✓	✓		✓	✓
Green		✓			
Red		✓	✓	✓	
Yellow					✓

## 9. Sound

The findings indicate that Johnnie To's sound design in his Hong Kong gangster films stands in stark contrast to that of traditional Hong Kong gangster cinema, which often relies on heavy musical scoring and exaggerated sound effects to amplify emotion. To favors ambient sounds and understated background music, deliberately avoiding continuous musical accompaniment. Instead, he selectively employs music in specific scenes to complement character movements or narrative shifts, creating a tense, composed, and rhythmically precise audiovisual style.

As shown in Table 9, ambient sound plays a central role in *The Mission* (1999) and *Exiled* (2006). Elements such as footsteps, echoes, and domestic noises—like boiling water or a baby's cry—generate a sense of pressure that ironically contrasts with the on-screen violence. In *PTU* (2003), the naturalistic soundscape—including whispers, wind, and silence—immerses the audience in a suffocating urban nightscape, reflecting both a realist aesthetic and emotional restraint. In *PTU* and the *Election* series, musical cues are used selectively and rhythmically, often synchronized with character movement or ceremonial sequences. In *The Mission*, upbeat cha-cha music subverts genre expectations, heightening tension through its stylized detachment. Background scores—particularly in *Election 2* (2006)—emphasize institutional control and

geopolitical pressure; for instance, the music during Jimmy's arrest in Shenzhen acoustically symbolizes Mainland China's dominance over the Hong Kong triad world.

In summary, Johnnie To transforms sound from a tool of emotional embellishment into a core mechanism for regulating narrative rhythm. His sound design is intricately linked with visual composition and character psychology, employing restrained and purposeful audio strategies to construct a distinctive film language.

**Table 9** Sound in Hong Kong gangster films directed by Johnnie To.

Sound	The Mission (1999)	PTU (2003)	Election (2005)	Election 2 (2006)	Exiled (2006)
Ambient Sound	✓				✓
Music	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Background Score			✓		

## 10. Editing

The findings reveal that Johnnie To's editing style in his Hong Kong gangster films diverges significantly from the fast-paced, emotion-driven transitions typical of traditional Hong Kong gangster films. Rather than relying on rapid cutting to create tension or elicit emotional responses, Johnnie To employs a stable rhythm and carefully crafted visual continuity to connect characters, spaces, and conflicts with narrative coherence. In his films, editing not only advances the plot but also maintains overall fluidity and visual clarity, making it a central component of his film language.

As shown in Table 10, Johnnie To applies various editing techniques to construct narrative rhythm and progression across different films. In *The Mission* (1999), continuity editing reinforces team coordination and spatial awareness, while jump cuts interrupt moments of calm with abrupt tension, preparing viewers for impending conflict. In *PTU* (2003), progressive editing builds suspense through gradual scene development, mirroring the unpredictability of night patrols. The *Election* series (2005–2006) features contrast montages and cross-cutting, alternating between ceremonial events and violent confrontations to highlight ideological tensions. In *Exiled* (2006), symbolic montage juxtaposes everyday sounds—such as a boiling kettle or a baby's cry—with scenes of imminent violence, heightening psychological alertness among viewers.

In summary, Johnnie To's editing is not aimed at visual spectacle, but at organizing character actions, guiding narrative rhythm, and amplifying cinematic tension. Through precise

control of shot sequencing and pacing, editing in Johnnie To's films serves not only as a narrative backbone but also as a crucial device for enhancing momentum and visual impact.

**Table 10** Editing in Hong Kong gangster films directed by Johnnie To.

Sound	The Mission (1999)	PTU (2003)	Election (2005)	Election 2 (2006)	Exiled (2006)
Continuity Editing	✓				
Jump Cuts	✓				
Progressive Editing		✓			
Contrast Montage			✓		
Cross-Cutting			✓	✓	
Symbolic Montage					✓

## Discussions

The results of Research Objective 1 show that Johnnie To's Hong Kong gangster films adopt ensemble narratives and minimalist three-act structures, which stand in stark contrast to the traditional hero-centered storytelling model commonly found in Hong Kong gangster cinema. His works do not focus on individual transformation or redemption but instead depict tightly coordinated group dynamics. This aligns with Bordwell's (2006) concept of "network narrative," which emphasizes how interrelated characters jointly drive the story—especially evident in the Election series. The compressed narrative structure also echoes Field's (2005) model, which favors narrative precision and avoids excessive emotional elaboration.

In addition, Johnnie To repositions setting from passive background to active narrative agent. Locations serve symbolic functions, embedding emotional tension and atmospheric pressure directly into the narrative. As Fu and Desser (2002) note, such spatial strategies reinforce institutional constraints—a technique that recurs throughout Johnnie To's films. Although he retains the framework of internal and external conflict, Johnnie To downplays emotional confrontation and moral opposition. Instead, conflict emerges from ethical ambiguity and structural pressure, rather than personal grudges. This is consistent with his fatalistic worldview and thematic treatment of loyalty and power. As Zhang (2007) observes, characters in Johnnie To's films face systemic inevitability, with personal choices constrained by procedural logic. Altogether, these strategies define the narrative identity of Johnnie To Kei-Fung's Hong Kong gangster films—marked by

collective perspectives, minimalist structures, and fatalistic themes—reshaping the narrative uniqueness of the genre.

The results of Research Objective 2 reveal that Johnnie To's film language, including cinematography, lighting, color, sound, and editing—forms a visually controlled and emotionally restrained system. His cinematography favors long takes, static compositions, and symmetrical framing, emphasizing group coordination rather than dramatic spectacle. Lighting frequently employs top and side sources to create theatrical spatial divisions and visual control, rather than emotional amplification, aligning with the aesthetics of film noir (Fu & Desser, 2002).

Johnnie To's color palette is dominated by cold tones—primarily blue, black, and muted green—while red and yellow are used selectively to symbolize rupture or fleeting warmth. This restrained use of color adds narrative value and fosters a subdued tonal atmosphere, resonating with Sun Wen's (2021) analysis of chromatic anxiety in post-handover Hong Kong cinema. His sound design similarly avoids expressive excess. Ambient noise and minimalist scoring prevail, emphasizing procedural rhythm and psychological pressure without becoming overly dramatic (Fang, 2024).

Finally, Johnnie To's editing avoids rapid cutting, prioritizing continuity and rhythmic coherence. Scenes unfold at a deliberate pace, sustaining tension while reinforcing interdependence among characters. These techniques create cohesive film language characterized by restraint, repetition, and symbolic compression. Rather than amplifying emotion or spectacle, Johnnie To's stylistic system calibrates mood, clarifies spatial and social relations, and reinforces systemic order—ultimately shaping the distinctive audiovisual identity of Hong Kong gangster films.

## Knowledge from Research

This article establishes a dual-dimensional analytical framework to examine Hong Kong gangster films directed by Johnnie To. From the perspective of narrative structure, five core elements are identified: ensemble characters, minimalist three-act plot structure, symbolic settings, moral and institutional conflict, and fatalistic themes. From the perspective of film language, the article outlines five expressive strategies: composed cinematography, restrained lighting, a cold-toned color palette, atmosphere-centered sound design, and precise editing. These findings demonstrate how Johnnie To's films construct a distinctive genre identity—one that diverges from conventional Hong Kong gangster cinema by emphasizing control, ambiguity, and structural fatalism.

## Conclusion

Based on the research findings, the following conclusions are drawn:

- 1) Characters: Johnnie To replaces the traditional single-hero narrative with ensemble storytelling.
- 2) Plot: He employs a minimalist three-act structure to deliver tightly constructed narratives.
- 3) Setting: Space serves symbolic functions, often acting as a metaphor for emotional states.
- 4) Conflict: Emphasis is placed on moral dilemmas rather than binary oppositions of good and evil.
- 5) Theme: Classic triad themes such as power struggles and brotherhood are reinterpreted through a fatalistic perspective.
- 6) Cinematography: Long takes and symmetrical compositions are used to intensify spatial tension.
- 7) Lighting: The use of top and side lighting enhances the sense of ritual, control, and emotional detachment.
- 8) Color: Cold tones dominate the visual palette, while warm colors are used sparingly to imply rupture or ironic comfort.
- 9) Sound: Emphasis is placed on ambient realism and minimalist sound design.
- 10) Editing: Editing is rhythmically controlled and avoids fast-paced cuts, maintaining narrative clarity and tonal precision.

In conclusion, Johnnie To's Hong Kong gangster films construct a fatalistic world through ensemble characters, a minimalist yet compact narrative structure, and a restrained film language. Distinct from the individual heroism and emotional extremities of conventional genre films, Johnnie To's works define a unique stylistic identity marked by control, subtlety, and symbolic depth.

## Suggestions

Based on the findings, this section provides recommendations for filmmakers seeking to innovate within the gangster genre and scholars aiming to expand research on gangster films. These recommendations are categorized into theoretical recommendations, practical recommendations, and recommendations for future research.

### 1. Theoretical Recommendations

Johnnie To's gangster films show a huge gangster world with a set of independent operating systems by telling the story of gangsters' grudges and brotherhood. In his works, it is not just about the grudges and feuds of the protagonists in the gangs, but from a more comprehensive and higher perspective, it is about an institutionalized organization, where the power struggle follows specific rules of the game, which is highly similar to the operation system in the real society. Taking the "Election" series as an example, the process of electing "the man in charge" of a gang has a striking resemblance to a democratic election, which seems to be fair but is full of behind-the-

scenes deals and power manipulation. The change of power within the gangs is reminiscent of the way power operates in Hong Kong and even in the larger political environment. In this way, Johnnie To elevates the gangster film to the level of a social allegory, rather than just the traditional aesthetics of violence or brotherhood.

Future research could further explore how Johnnie To's films use the gangster as a vehicle to map the socio-political changes that Hong Kong faced after the handover. For example, the attitudes of various groups and organizations after the handover of Hong Kong, and the anxiety and confusion of the general public. Subsequent studies can consider the social significance of the gangster genre on a social and political level.

## **2. Practical Recommendations**

The researcher believes that Johnnie To's narrative structure and visual techniques are well worth articleing and referring to for film students and emerging directors. Johnnie To's narrative structure and visual techniques are minimalist, not relying on complex story lines or elaborate sets and props to achieve the final effect. For example, the silent shootout in *The Mission* (1999) and the long shot atmosphere in *PTU* (2003). These minimalist techniques are very conducive to the learning process of disassembling–imitating–re–creating for students and emerging directors. It allows students and emerging directors to truly understand Johnnie To's creative thinking, and to extend this creative approach from the gangster genre to other genres.

## **3. Recommendations for future research**

Future research should extend to cross-cultural and cross-genre analyses to explore the application of Johnnie To's narrative and stylistic techniques in different film traditions. For example, explore the differences and similarities between Johnnie To's collective narrative approach and the narratives of Takeshi Kitano's chilling style gangster films, Bong Joon-ho's crime thrillers, and even classic Hollywood gangster films. It further explores how directors of the same genre in different cultural contexts create gangster genre films based on their respective cultural contexts and different political and social backgrounds. Is there a tendency for these genres to merge under the globalized film market? How do the genre elements of gangster films mutate in different countries and regions? These discussions can help to understand the uniqueness of Johnnie To's films in cross-cultural exchanges and can further promote the globalization article of the gangster genre.

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