

The Narrative Structure, Urban Loneliness, and Identity Study of *Port of Call*: A Shift in the Type of New Hong Kong Mystery Films

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Abstract

This paper takes Weng Ziguang's work *Port of Call* as the research object, and comprehensively uses narrative and film sociology methods to systematically investigate the aesthetic and ideological connotations of the film in the aspects of "anti-suspense" and plate-based narrative, urban space representation and "loneliness" emotional generation, identity and social reflection, and genre film innovation. The article first defines the film's chapter-like structure and subjective viewpoint system based on "looking for plums, lonely people, stepping on blood, and a room with a view of the scenery", and points out that it shifts the audience's attention from "the case" to "human feelings" through the anti-suspense strategy of "removing the mystery" at the beginning. Then, from the perspective of film sociology, it reveals the survival dilemma, viewing system and power relationship of urban marginalized people, and discusses the shaping mechanism of "identity loneliness". In the genre research part, it is argued that *Port of Call* (《踏血寻梅》), *Night and Fog* (《天水围的雾与夜》) and *The Sparring Partner* (《正义回廊》) jointly promote the "New Hong Kong Strange Case Film" to complete the paradigm shift from sensory spectacle to humanistic reflection. Research shows that *Port of Call* connects individual ethics and social structure with cold realist brushstrokes, and achieves multiple breakthroughs in narrative, image and value in genre renewal.

Keywords: *Port of Call*, anti-suspense, urban loneliness, identity, strange case movies, viewing system

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Objectives

Port of Call (《踏雪寻梅》) begins with the dismemberment of a young girl and immediately reveals the "truth" of the incident, presenting both the details and the conclusion from the outset. Consequently, the audience's expectation of "Who is the culprit?" is transformed into the ethical inquiry, "Why did

this happen?" As the director notes, "The film is divided into four chapters... The audience already knows the truth from the beginning, so there is no need to create artificial suspense."¹ For this reason, the academic community defines this work as a model of "anti-suspense" narrative.

¹ Initium Media "Assigned Seats" Editorial Team. (2015). *Port of Call: Dismemberment and teenage prostitution, rooted in loneliness*. Initium Media.

At the same time, the film makes extensive use of voyeuristic scenes while deliberately erasing the narrative subject within, thereby constructing a meta-level reflection on “observation outside the narrative” and on the cinematic system itself. The audience, positioned as “the voyeur,” is compelled to experience consciously both the act of gazing and the state of being surveilled within the urban environment.

Furthermore, the work focuses on the formation of “identity solitude.” Female migrants, lower-class laborers, and women within institutional structures all undergo a dual collapse of emotion and society, ¹revealing the existential condition of the “stranger” in the city and the predicaments of cultural identity.

From a thematic perspective, Hong Kong’s new crime and investigative films such as *Port of Call*, *Night and Fog*, and *The Sparring Partner* dismantle traditional linear narratives and suspend the “certainty of story and narration,” liberating their works from the confines of original case-based structures. Their fragmented and de-mystified narrative constructions prompt deep reflection on the question “Why did it occur?” while simultaneously evoking renewed humanistic concern born from the resurgence of “Hong Kong-ness” (港味).

This study raises the following three central questions:

- (1) How does the film, through its combination of “anti-suspense,” stratified structure, and limited perceptual perspective, progress from mere storytelling toward a deeper understanding of the human condition?
- (2) In what ways do urban space and the visual system generate and reinforce an individual’s identity solitude?
- (3) What significant role does this work play in both the innovation of Hong Kong crime-investigation narratives and the revival of “Hong Kong-ness”?

1.2 Review of Previous Studies and Literature

(1) Pathways in Film Sociology and Identity Recognition: A large body of prior research, approaching film as a “mirror of society” and from the perspective of identity, exposes the plight of lower social strata through stark

realism and foregrounds discussions of plural recognition of Hong Kong local culture, humanistic concern, and social reflection.

(2) Narrative Trajectories: Scholars generally recognize the film’s formal innovations in subjective viewpoint, temporal inversion, and chaptered (serial) structuring. They further argue that the film’s four chapters remain mutually independent within the narrative field while preserving a unity, thereby realizing a narrative sequencing that can be summarized as “opening suspense—retrospective clues—moral focus.”

(3) Audiovisual System and “Voyeurism Outside the Narrative”: Many studies interpret the film’s recurrent “subject-less” acts of voyeurism not as internal focalization on characters but as devices that reveal the institutionalization of observation itself. This apparatus prompts the spectator to become aware of the social environment in which the observed are placed.

(4) Urban Solitude and Socio-psychology: Prior research explicates the general meaning of “solitude” in terms of urban malaise, social structure, and individual psychological imbalance, situating figures such as Wang Jiamei (王佳梅), Ding Zicong (丁子聰), and Chong Sir (臧 Sir) within a category of “strangers” and interpreting their estrangement and crises of self-esteem.

(5) Genre Studies: Concerning the “new Hong Kong police-procedural” trend, scholarship emphasizes nonlinearity and anti-suspense, humanistic reflection, and the return of “Hong Kong-ness”. Studies commonly place *Night and Fog* and *The Sparring Partner* in parallel to outline the overall trajectory of this type of film.

In synthesis, prior research establishes the theoretical groundwork for the present study but exhibits the following limitations. First, narratology, sociology, and genre studies remain largely parallel, lacking an integrated, conclusive framework that traverses the “observation system — narrative mechanism — identity solitude” nexus. Second, there has been insufficient attention to the interplay between anti-suspense and voyeurism, and prior work has not adequately explained how these elements converge to produce meanings that extend beyond the event itself at moral and social levels.

1.3 Research Structure and Methodology

¹ Du Xiaojie. (2023). *The Sparring Partner and the Breaking Point of Hong Kong Genre Cinema*. Guangming Daily · Literary & Art Criticism.

This study establishes a four-dimensional analytical framework—narrative, space, identity, and genre—based on close textual reading of the film.

(1) Narrative Analysis: This section investigates how de-mystification promotes moral orientation through three dimensions: limited perceptual perspective, dual retrospection, and stratified structure.

(2) Film-Sociological Interpretation: Grounded in a triadic chain of individual-society-culture in identity recognition, this analysis explores a series of interrelated reactions within a high-speed consumer environment, including the weakening of communicative influence, the obstruction of cultural sedimentation, and the confusion of social recognition.

(3) Observation System: Through the concept of “observation outside the narrative,” this section analyzes how non-subjective voyeurism exposes the relationship between image and power.

(4) Genre Comparison: By juxtaposing *Night and Fog* and *The Sparring Partner*, the study demonstrates that fragmentation, non-linearity, and humanistic reflection represent both a universal trend and a renewed return to “Hong Kong-ness.”

2. Narrative Strategies: Anti-Suspense, Serial Structure, and Subjective Perspective

2.1 The Narrative Orientation of “Anti-Suspense”: From “Who Killed” to “Why It Happened”

Unlike traditional horror or suspense films, which build tension through delay and gradual revelation, *Port of Call* discloses the background, process, and conclusion of the case from the very beginning. This immediate revelation releases the audience from the constraints of “investigative logic” and redirects their focus toward exploring the causes underlying both the characters’ psychology and the structural conditions of the event.

This anti-suspense technique becomes explicit at the level of dialogue. Within the first ten minutes of the film, Inspector Chong (臧警官) “reveals the entire story,” shifting attention—through the director’s moral and social lens—from the event itself to themes of affection, empathy, and society. In this research context, the film explicitly states at the outset that “the perpetrator has been identified and the truth is already known,” thereby refusing to construct the pursuit of motive as the central

axis of the narrative. Instead, it guides the viewer toward deeper contemplation and ethical reflection.¹

“Anti-suspense” in this context does not signify mere deviation from convention but rather a goal-oriented redefinition of narrative purpose. First, it redirects the driving force of “information distribution” from the propulsion of plot toward moral orientation, centering the narrative on the process of how the characters arrived at that point. Second, through a structure of knowing the result — retracing the cause, it breaks through the conventional equation of “revelation of fact = closure of narrative,” thereby opening interpretive space for considerations of identity, emotion, and social construction. From a reception-aesthetic perspective, the resolution of suspense does not weaken tension; rather, it transforms the external enigma into an internal predicament, making the “unbearable psychological burden” itself the source of continuous tension.

It is noteworthy, however, that the film does not entirely abandon the formal heritage of the thriller. Textual analysis reveals that while *Port of Call* discards the suspense-driven structure of traditional horror and thriller genres, it nevertheless preserves many of their audiovisual devices. In particular, its frequent use of voyeuristic techniques stands out. Thus, the film’s “anti-suspense” can be understood as a shift in narrative gravity—a movement that expands the horizon of the work’s value while maintaining its generic aesthetics.

2.2 Serial-Episodic Structure: The Logical and Emotional Interlinking of Four Units

The overall structure of the film follows a serial-episodic (章回体, zhanghuiti) form, composed of four chapters: “Seeking Plum Blossoms” (寻梅), “The Lonely Ones” (孤独的人), “Treading on Blood” (踏血), and “A Room with a View” (看得见风景的房间). Each chapter is autonomous yet intricately interconnected, forming a tightly woven logical chain across the dimensions of theme, character, and plot.

“Seeking Plum Blossoms” traces Inspector Chong’s investigation, interlacing testimonies and memories to uncover the “true cause” behind the event. “The Lonely Ones” juxtaposes

¹. Kim Young Nam (김영남). (2018). Decentralized narrative and film aesthetics (탈중심적 서사와 영화 미학). *Film studies (영화연구)*, 24(3), 45-67.

the three protagonists, revealing the multilayered manifestations of “identity solitude.” “Treading on Blood” recounts the incident from Ding Zicong’s (丁子聰) memories, emphasizing the causal link between his actions and the evolution of his character. Finally, “A Room with a View” depicts Inspector Chong’s decoding of a “dialogic code,” elevating mutual understanding and misunderstanding among characters into a plane of moral reflection.

This episodic narrative achieves at least three key transformations:

(1) Reconstruction of the Cause-Effect Chain (“Result-Cause” Reversal): The film transforms the conventional logic of “discovering the truth” into one of process restoration. As this study points out, through the structural design of “presentation of outcome → retrospection → reenactment of process,” the film organically fuses the independence and intertextuality of each chapter, thereby avoiding the single linear progression typical of detective films while maintaining the aesthetic motivation of “inquiry.”

(2) Layering of Subjectivity: The four chapters mediate the themes of search, solitude, cruelty, and understanding, generating a viewing experience that deepens progressively from the psychological to the social level.

(3) Optimization of Visual Rhythm: Through free transitions among stages of testimony, recollection, and investigation, the film sustains a balance between informational revelation and emotional propulsion by cycling through fragmentation, retrospection, and reenactment. This process of “fragmentation and reassembly” symbolically parallels the film’s core metaphors of fragmented identity and fragmented life.

In conclusion, the new Hong Kong police-procedural films dismantle linear storytelling in favor of fragmented presentation. Among them, *Port of Call* stands as a representative example of this four-part structural form.

2.3 Subjective Perspective and Temporal Leap: Inquiry, Retrospection, and the “Dislocated Present Tense”

From the perspective of cinematography, the film adopts a subject-centered narrative viewpoint (restricted field of vision) centered on Inspector Chong. From the outset, the narrative openly reveals both the victim’s death and the

perpetrator’s identity, then immediately transitions into Chong’s perspective, clearly confining all clues and developments within the spatial and temporal boundaries of his investigative path. Within this restricted vision, the subjective memories of multiple characters are inserted, forming a cyclical pattern of “personal memory-investigation.”¹

Furthermore, the interplay between Chong’s limited cognition and others’ recollections constructs a dual perspective that sustains the narrative’s focus while generating tension through polysemy and irony among the various narrative subjects.

In terms of plot structure, the film employs the technique of retrograde narration (倒行逆施)—presenting the outcome of the case first and subsequently tracing back to uncover the true cause. Throughout the processes of inquiry and retrospection, the constant intersection and inversion of time and space give rise to a dislocated order between narrative time and cognitive time. Despite being drawn through these temporal and spatial distortions, the audience follows the trajectory of Chong’s perception, progressing from the unknown toward understanding, from superficial awareness toward depth. In this process, suspense shifts from “what has already happened” to a series of moral and existential questions: “Why did it happen?” and “How do humans come to understand one another?”

The film’s point-of-view design is intricately intertwined with its use of voyeuristic framing. According to the present analysis, many of the “peeping shots” deliberately lack an identifiable internal subject, thereby evoking the atmosphere of surveillance or eavesdropping. For instance, in the opening sequence, the “mirror-peeping” into Wong Ka-mei’s private space, along with axis-crossing effects, confuses both the camera’s spatial position and its narrative intent, leading the viewer to recognize themselves as situated within the apparatus of spectatorship. Similar shots recur in various spatial arrangements—inside the police station, along corridors, behind windows, railings, or between foreground and background planes.

However, this perspective does not belong to any specific character within the diegesis; rather, it originates outside the narrative, constituting a

¹ Loftus, E. F. (1997). Creating false memories. *Scientific American*, 277(3), 70-75.

form of “detached voyeurism.” The traditional cinematic pleasure derived from voyeuristic looking is thereby fractured. This technique deepens the dialectic of “observer and observed” and intertwines narrative strategy with visual ethics.¹ Consequently, the spectator’s own gaze becomes implicated in a critique of the institution of looking, wherein the question of “how it is told” is inseparable from “what is told.”

2.4 Narrative Rhetoric and Stylistic Elements: From “Spectacle of the Plot” to “Intensity of Thought”

In terms of visual and auditory design, the film retains certain expressive devices characteristic of the horror genre—such as depictions of violence and crime reenactments—but their spectacular quality recedes to a secondary role, serving instead to support character construction and ideational expression. From a cultural-sociological perspective, whereas earlier “crime case” films sustained their narratives through an “intensity of sensation,” *Port of Call* deliberately restrains itself with a literary-aesthetic discipline, transforming the “miracle of storytelling” into the power of reflection. In doing so, it establishes an aesthetic paradigm for the “return of Hong Kong-ness” within Hong Kong crime cinema.

From the standpoint of narrative rhetoric, the film’s greatest significance lies in its substitution of “delay in narrative exposition” with “delay in comprehension.” Although the audience already knows who committed the act and what happened, the film persistently reconstructs why it happened through a mosaic of divergent testimonies and fragmented memories. Two forms of disjunction—between knowledge and understanding, and between narrative and perception—generate interpretive tension, compelling the viewer to recognize the complexity of reality within the limitations of narrative representation. This is, in essence, the film’s anthropological orientation: a turn from mere storytelling toward the investigation of human understanding itself.

3. Visual Mechanism and Spatial Construction: Voyeurism, Confinement, and the Dilemma of Identity Isolation

This chapter moves beyond mere textual analysis to examine how *Port of Call* transforms

its “anti-suspense” narrative strategy into a powerful instrument of social critique and emotional empathy through its distinctive visual mechanisms and spatial composition. The film does not simply depict loneliness as a theme; rather, through a meticulously designed apparatus of spectatorship and a spatial rhetoric of confinement, it enables the audience to viscerally experience the states of surveillance, imprisonment, and alienation that the characters endure.

This chapter analyzes how “subjectless voyeurism” constructs a Foucauldian network of power and gaze, and how urban space evolves from a narrative backdrop into an oppressive modern prison. It further elucidates how this integrated visual-spatial system fuses with the narrative strategy to materialize and deepen the experience of identity isolation. Through this analysis, the chapter proposes an integrated framework of “observation system—narrative mechanism—perception of solitude,” illuminating the film’s synthesis of aesthetics, ethics, and social consciousness.

3.1 “Subjectless Voyeurism”: The Gaze of Power, Ethical Reflection, and the Removal of Pleasure

As noted in Chapter 2, the film frequently employs scenes of “voyeurism,” yet the crucial point lies in its intentional exclusion of an internal narrative subject, thereby constructing an “extradiegetic observation.” This *subjectless voyeuristic camera* forms the visual foundation of the film, and its mechanisms and effects can be analyzed on three interrelated levels.²

First, on the technical level, the film constructs an ambiguous and subjectless perspective through the strategic use of foreground elements such as door cracks, window frames, mirrors, and railings. For instance, in the narrow room where Wang Jiamei first settles in Hong Kong, the camera repeatedly captures fragments of her daily life through slivers of light and mirror reflections. This vision belongs neither to an omniscient narrator nor to Wang Jiamei’s own consciousness; rather, it evokes the hidden, ubiquitous voyeurism of an unseen Other. Similarly, in the scenes where Ding Zichong is interrogated, multiple interviews unfold within the same frame, yet the camera observes from a slightly elevated and distant position, simulating the detached gaze of a third-party

¹ Hwang Mi Yo Jo (황미요조). (2019). *Pleasure and Anxiety of Watching Movies. (영화보기의 즐거움과 불안)* Zoom (퍼쑈) ZOOM IN.,

² Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Penguin Books.

observer. Such a perspective weakens the traditional identification between the audience and the detective's authority commonly found in police films.

Second, on the philosophical and sociological level¹, this subjectless voyeurism forms an intertextual dialogue with Michel Foucault's concept of Panopticism. Both Wang Jiamei and Ding Zichong, belonging to the lower social strata, are not only victims of economic precarity but also perpetually surveilled subjects within an anonymous network of observation. They inhabit an invisible panoptic structure, uncertain of when or whether they are being watched, yet compelled to act as if always under surveillance. Their solitude becomes a loneliness under all eyes—a state of objectification and reification in which no one can truly understand or empathize with them. Through this visual mechanism, the film translates abstract social oppression and psychological alienation into a tangible, experiential form of cinematic perception.

Third, on the level of audience reception, this strategy provokes both de-sensualization and ethical reflection. Traditional crime and suspense films typically offer scopophilic pleasure by inviting identification with either the detective (the possessor of truth) or the criminal (the possessor of power). *Port of Call* dismantles both pleasures: its anti-suspense narrative dissolves the detective's mastery, while subjectless voyeurism erases the criminal's allure. The viewer is thus suspended in an unstable position, unable to fully identify with any side, becoming aware that their own act of watching is itself an act of voyeurism. This self-awareness breaks the fourth wall, transforming cinematic pleasure into moral and ethical introspection.

3.2 *The Urban Space as a Modern Prison: Confinement, Alienation, and the Unattainable "View"*

In *Port of Call*, space is far from a neutral backdrop. The film constructs interior settings as cold, chaotic, and privacy-deprived prisons that mirror emotional and social confinement. Wang Jiamei's apartment—cramped and cluttered with belongings—is a quintessential migrant space symbolizing both material and spiritual poverty. Her bedroom, ostensibly the most private realm, is repeatedly intruded upon by subjectless

voyeuristic shots, revealing the absence of any true personal boundary. Ding Zichong's truck and dilapidated apartment also manifest loneliness and alienation; the spaces themselves become both the foundation of his actions and the externalization of his inner desolation. Similarly, Inspector Chong's office and home are portrayed not as warm or authoritative havens but as sterile, disordered environments, suggesting that even the supposed guardian of social order is ensnared within existential chaos. Altogether, these confined interiors serve as prisons of both body and mind, the tangible embodiment of identity solitude.

The external urban landscape of Hong Kong is likewise presented as an alienating, unreachable environment. Streets, overpasses, and neon lights do not celebrate urban vitality; instead, they are rendered through cold hues of blue, green, and gray, wide apertures that blur the background, and compositions that minimize human figures. This creates a sharp psychological distance between person and environment. When Wang Jiamei walks through the streets, she seems estranged from the city's bustle—her isolation underscores a dissonance between physical proximity and emotional detachment, capturing the profound alienation of urban existence.

The film's fourth chapter title, "A Room with a View," borrows E.M. Forster's metaphor but deploys it ironically. In Forster's novel, the "view" signified a broader and more beautiful possibility of life. In *Port of Call*, however, the room's view is blocked by window frames, glass reflections, and city streets, symbolizing a constricted field of vision. The title thus becomes an emblem of unfulfilled desire—for emotional connection, social recognition, and existential meaning. The "room with a view" where Ding Zichong ultimately resides becomes the site of both violence and death, embodying the culmination of despair within an illusory openness.

3.3 *The Triangular Conspiracy of Visual System, Narrative Strategy, and Identity Perception*

The visual-spatial mechanisms analyzed in this chapter and the narrative strategies discussed in Chapter 2 are not separate but rather interlocking systems that collaboratively construct the film's semantic network of identity solitude.

First, the fusion of anti-suspense narrative and

¹ Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), pp. 6-18.

subjectless voyeuristic vision fundamentally shifts the audience's attention. Narratively, by revealing the outcome at the outset, the film erases the detective's pleasure of discovery—"Who is the culprit?" Visually, it eliminates the safe perspective of observation, stripping away the perverse thrill of "How was it done?" Consequently, the viewer's focus moves from the crime itself to the socio-psychological soil of tragedy.

Second, the four-chapter structure aligns precisely with spatial segmentation. Each part—"Seeking Plum Blossoms", "The Lonely Ones", "Treading on Blood", and "A Room with a View"—corresponds to a distinct spatial zone: the investigative sites (police station, streets), the protagonists' isolated dwellings, the crime scene, and the symbolic space of reflection. These spatial anchors serve as both narrative and emotional mediators, deepening the film's coherence between story and affect.

In conclusion, *Port of Call* embeds social critique and psychological introspection within a meticulously designed visual-spatial system. Through this interplay, the audience viscerally experiences the modern prison of contemporary life—a domain built from anonymous surveillance, sterile architecture, and emotional estrangement.

4. Genre Comparison: The Return of "Hong Kong-ness" and the Question of Identity Solitude

Building upon the detailed analyses of the previous chapters, this section situates *Port of Call* within the broader evolutionary context of the "New Hong Kong Crime Film" and compares it with Ann Hui's *Night and Fog* (2009) and Jack Ng's *The Sparring Partner* (2022). The goals of this comparative inquiry are threefold.

First, to demonstrate that the narrative and visual strategies of *Port of Call* are not isolated cases but part of a shared and deliberate movement of genre innovation.

Second, to analyze how, within this shared generic framework, each film asserts its unique authorial vision and deepens the exploration of identity solitude.

Third, to elucidate how this wave of innovation symbolizes a return and sublimation of the aesthetics of "Hong Kong-ness"—a transformation from superficial regional spectacle to a profound spiritual chronicle of

Hong Kong identity, ultimately expanding this local experience into a universal human resonance.

4.1 Common Features of the New Hong Kong Crime Film: From Spectacle to Human Inquiry, From Closure to Open Narrative

Through comparative study, we can extract the shared generic and aesthetic principles among these three films and thus define what the "newness" in the New Hong Kong Crime Film truly signifies.

All three works reject the linear causality and resolution-centered detective narrative of traditional Hong Kong crime films (e.g., *Dr. Lamb*, *Three Against the World*). Instead, they employ fragmented narratives, multiple perspectives, and anti-linear structures.

Night and Fog reconstructs the tragic disintegration of a family through the perspectives of police officers, social workers, neighbors, and relatives, arranging these viewpoints like puzzle pieces that inherently question the very existence of absolute truth.

The Sparring Partner destabilizes narrative objectivity through intercut flashbacks offered by defendants, witnesses, lawyers, and jurors, each recounting a subjective "truth." The result is a fractured, polyphonic storytelling that overturns the possibility of a singular, objective account.

Similarly, *Port of Call* employs a chapter-based structure and multi-perspective flashbacks (from Inspector Chong, Wang Jiamei, and Ding Zichong) to emphasize the relativity of truth and the limits of perception.

In all three films, the purpose of narrative is not to deliver conclusive answers but to provide an open, reflective arena for contemplation. The directors shift focus away from violence, sensation, or technical spectacle toward social, existential, and moral inquiry.

Night and Fog addresses the economic exploitation, gender discrimination, cultural gap, and institutional indifference experienced by new immigrant families in Hong Kong, expanding the source of tragedy to systemic social structures.

The Sparring Partner dissects the flaws of Hong Kong's legal system, media manipulation, familial dysfunction, and moral ambiguity, achieving a philosophical depth that transcends the genre's conventions.

Port of Call, in turn, faces the existential solitude, identity crisis, and emotional disconnection of young people within the globalized urban landscape.

In all cases, “crime” serves as a precise instrument of dissection—a scalpel used to expose the inner workings of Hong Kong society. Ultimately, the focal point of each film is not the act of crime itself but the human condition and the struggle for survival within an alienated world.

From an audiovisual standpoint, the three films also share a consistent aesthetic orientation. Through handheld cinematography, natural lighting, deliberate long takes, and minimal use of dramatic music, they achieve a texture that is tense, restrained, and unembellished. This realism harmonizes with the sobriety of their themes and distances them from the sensationalism and hyperbole characteristic of traditional genre cinema.

4.2 The Uniqueness of *Port of Call*: An Ontological and Philosophical Turn Toward Inner Inquiry

Within the shared framework of genre innovation, *Port of Call* distinguishes itself from its contemporaries through a deeply introspective, ontological orientation that reveals both a unique authorial vision and a distinctly philosophical temperament.

Where *Night and Fog* directs its attention toward external, concrete, and social conflicts—domestic violence, immigration policy, and community governance—*Port of Call*, despite its clear social background of new immigrant struggles and lower-class precarity, ultimately turns inward. Its narrative momentum and emotional culmination stem not from the external circumstances of crime but from an introspective investigation of psychology, emotion, and existential thought.

The film transforms the urban solitude of Hong Kong into a universal condition of modernity, echoing Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of “liquid loneliness” from *Liquid Modernity* (2000). Like Bauman’s liquid society, where stable social bonds dissolve into fluid, transient connections, *Port of Call* portrays individuals adrift in a cityscape of impermanence and alienation. Its characters—Inspector Chong, Wang Jiamei, and Ding Zichong—do not merely experience isolation as a social symptom; they embody existential solitude as a philosophical state, suspended between visibility and erasure,

intimacy and distance, moral empathy and ethical fatigue. Through this inward gaze, *Port of Call* shifts the axis of the crime genre from the pursuit of external truth to a meditation on being itself—on how one perceives, remembers, and endures in a fragmented world.¹

The question “Why did this happen?” in *Port of Call* extends far beyond social policy critique, unfolding into a profound reflection on human communication failure, emotional deprivation, the disjunction between body and mind, and the metaphysical void of existence. Ding Zichong’s stark confession—“I hate people”—and his distorted attempt to “save” Wang Jiamei elevate the narrative motivation to a metaphysical inquiry, transcending the bounds of social or psychological explanation. Unlike *The Sparring Partner*, which situates its narrative in the public arena of the courtroom, engaging in a Rashomon-like contest of knowledge, logic, and moral reasoning, *Port of Call* retreats into the private and emotional interior. Its strength lies not in debate but in atmosphere—through an intense orchestration of visual and auditory language, the film envelops the audience within the characters’ subjective worlds. The experience privileges empathy over analysis, demanding that viewers not merely understand solitude but viscerally inhabit it. In this sense, *Port of Call* stands at the farthest and most introspective extreme of the new Hong Kong crime film lineage: pessimistic, meditative, and ontologically weighted. The solitude it explores is not a social condition but an existential predicament—Heideggerian “thrownness” into an indifferent world, and Sartrean hell, where “the Other” becomes both mirror and torment. Through this radical inward turn, the film transforms crime into a philosophical lament for being, where loneliness itself becomes the final, inescapable truth.

4.3 The Return and Sublimation of “Hong Kong-ness”: From Local Spectacle to a Record of the City’s Spirit

“Hong Kong-ness” is a complex and fluid notion. Traditionally, it evokes the brisk rhythm of city life, the humor of the working class, exaggerated dramatic conflicts, and high entertainment value. Yet *Port of Call* and its kindred works inherit the early Hong Kong New Wave’s concern for the lives of ordinary people and its sharp social realism, deepening

¹ Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid Modernity*. Polity Press.

and reinventing Hong Kong-ness in a reflective and mature form. The camera focuses on the city's shadowed corners and the voiceless individuals within them, preserving the resilient, rough-edged vitality that defines the Hong Kong spirit. This shift marks an evolution—from external spectacles of social confrontation (organized crime, police-versus-gangster showdowns, folk hero legends) toward internal and restrained explorations of psychological reality and the depths of human emotion.

In this transformation, Hong Kong-ness is no longer confined to neon lights, cha chaan teng cafés, or Cantonese slang. It manifests as an acute sensitivity to urban loneliness and identity anxiety born of Hong Kong's socioeconomic structure, cultural hybridity, and historical turbulence. The result is not mere regionalism, but a spiritual Hong Kong-ness—a nuanced record of the city's collective psyche, elevating the local into a spirit of place.

4.4 From Hong Kong Crime to the Universal Problem of Existential Solitude

Through its triangulated analysis of narrative strategy, visual mechanism, and genre comparison, this study demonstrates how *Port of Call* redefines moral focus through its anti-suspense narrative, constructs a critical viewing apparatus through its voyeuristic system, materializes the modern prison through spatial composition, and sublimates the aesthetics of Hong Kong-ness through genre innovation. Ultimately, the film transcends the regional boundaries of the Hong Kong crime genre to expand the exploration of identity and solitude into a universal human inquiry. It is not merely a meditation on the tragedy of a Hong Kong girl, but a profound question about modern existence: how can individuals, adrift in urbanization, global consumerism, and fractured social systems, build genuine connections—with others, with society, and with themselves?

The film's greatness lies not only in articulating this dilemma with philosophical depth but also in enabling the audience to experience loneliness directly and uneasily through its integrated and original aesthetic form. *Port of Call* thus achieves the ultimate leap—from social observation to philosophical contemplation—offering a conclusive answer to the three central questions posed in this study. In doing so, it establishes a

milestone in Sinophone crime cinema, uniting humanistic insight with aesthetic mastery.

5. Conclusion

This study has undertaken a comprehensive examination of *Port of Call*, focusing on its narrative strategy, visual mechanisms, spatial construction, and the problematization of “identity-based solitude” that arises through their interplay. Furthermore, by comparing it with *Night and Fog* (2009) and *The Sparring Partner* (2022), the research aimed to situate *Port of Call* within the evolving context of the “New Hong Kong Crime Film” genre, elucidating its aesthetic innovations, cultural implications, and the renewed significance of Hong Kong-ness.

The findings demonstrate that *Port of Call* decisively departs from the conventional frameworks of Hong Kong crime cinema, achieving profound humanistic reflection through genre innovation. Its significance can be summarized as follows:

First, through its anti-suspense narrative strategy, the film shifts the audience's attention from the “mystery of crime” to its causes and contexts, and ultimately toward a philosophical inquiry into the conditions of human existence. By revealing the outcome of the case at the outset, the film renders the question of “who” meaningless and refocuses the narrative around “why”—a question that drives moral, social, and existential investigation. This transformation signifies not merely a change in storytelling technique, but a radical epistemological shift in the genre's cognitive horizon.

Second, the use of distinctive visual mechanisms—particularly the “subjectless gaze”—and the concrete representation of the “carceral urban space” enable the film to sensorially and critically embody abstract relations of social power, alienation, and solitude. The camera's anonymous perspective visualizes the Foucauldian apparatus of surveillance, confronting viewers with the dilemma of observer and observed, thereby transforming the structure of cinematic pleasure into a site of ethical reflection. At the same time, the claustrophobic interiors and estranged exteriors function as the material condensation of identity-based solitude, providing a compressed visual metaphor for the characters' inner desolation.

Third, comparative analysis reveals that while *Port of Call* shares the innovative tendencies of

the New Hong Kong Crime Film—fragmented narration, multiple perspectives, and a pursuit of humanistic depth—it distinguishes itself through its introspective focus on existential solitude. Whereas *Night and Fog* emphasizes social critique, and *The Sparring Partner* engages epistemological questions of truth and judgment, *Port of Call* probes the ontological loneliness and communicative impossibility of human existence, pushing the genre toward an unprecedented philosophical depth.

Fourth, these aesthetic and thematic innovations ultimately culminate in a renewed and sublimated interpretation of “Hong Kong-ness.” The film inherits the realist spirit and social attentiveness of Hong Kong cinema’s earlier eras, yet transcends mere localism or entertainment value. It elevates Hong Kong-ness into a psychocultural chronicle of identity solitude—a reflection of globally shared emotional conditions emerging within capitalist modernity and urban alienation. “港味” is thus reborn not as a surface marker of local flavor, but as an aesthetic sensibility attuned to both the specificity and universality of the Hong Kong experience within the globalized zeitgeist.

In conclusion, *Port of Call* borrows the structural shell of the Hong Kong crime genre, yet revolutionizes its interior through an anti-suspense narrative, a subjectless gaze, a carceral spatial aesthetic, and a philosophy of existential solitude. The film compels its audience—through the tragedy of a single girl—to confront the impossibility of connection and the crisis of identity that haunt contemporary life. Moreover, this act of confrontation, far from remaining passive observation, opens a path toward ethical praxis and social reflection.

It is hoped that this study has illuminated the landmark significance of *Port of Call* within Sinophone crime cinema and contributed to recognizing the film’s humanistic depth and aesthetic achievement as a vital milestone in the cultural history of Hong Kong film.

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