

THE RESEARCH ON THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND FILM LANGUAGE OF TETSUYA NAKAJIMA'S FILMS*

Guanru Fang¹ and Chalongrat Chermanchonlamark²

College of communication art, Rangsit University, Thailand

Corresponding Author's Email: f_8888888202009@163.com

Received 5 July 2025; Revised 11 July 2025; Accepted 13 July 2025

Abstract

This study examines the narrative structure and film language of Japanese director Tetsuya Nakashima's films, focusing on six representative works released between 2004 and 2018. Renowned for his fusion of non-linear storytelling and highly stylized visual expression, Nakashima's films address social issues such as gender inequality, juvenile delinquency, and family disintegration. Employing a textual analysis approach, this research investigates character construction, conflict, thematic concerns, film language, editing, sound design, and symbolic imagery across selected films including Kamikaze Girls, Memories of Matsuko, Paco and the Magical Picture Book, Confessions, Kawaki, and It Comes. The findings reveal a clear progression from the director's early use of vivid, theatrical aesthetics to a more restrained and psychologically driven style in his later works. Recommendations for future research include categorizing Nakashima's early and later works, comparing them with the styles of international directors to better understand his unique artistic voice, and

Citation:



* Guanru Fang and Chalongrat Chermanchonlamark. (2025). The Research On The Narrative Structure And Film Language Of Tetsuya Nakajima's Films. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Development*, 3(4), 1072-1088.;

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.>

Website: <https://so12.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/JISDIADP/>

contrasting his adaptations with their source materials to fully grasp his interpretation of original texts and his approach to social critique.

Keywords: Tetsuya Nakashima, Japanese cinema, narrative structure, film language, social critique in film.

Introduction

Japanese cinema boasts a long-standing development trajectory, beginning with the introduction of the first motion picture camera in 1867. Over the decades, the industry experienced both golden eras and setbacks. In the 1930s, cinema flourished under government patronage as a tool for national morale, only to decline during the postwar economic downturn. The advent of television in the 1960s further challenged the industry, prompting new cinematic movements that embraced experimental narratives and critical social themes. Amid these shifts, the Japanese New Wave emerged, marked by bold explorations of violence, eroticism, and societal alienation. This wave laid the groundwork for a generation of filmmakers who broke from studio conventions to establish independent creative identities (Han, 2019).

Among these successors, Tetsuya Nakashima stands out as a director who fuses visually saturated aesthetics with intricate storytelling. Drawing from his early work in advertising and television, Nakashima developed a distinctive film language that combines heightened visual elements with layered psychological themes. His films tackle critical issues- such as youth crime, gender inequality, and familial disintegration- through nonlinear, multi-perspective narratives. As Zhang (2017) observes, Nakashima's storytelling often adopts a male narrative gaze to portray the struggles of female characters, reflecting both societal constraints and evolving gender dynamics in Japan. Thus, an in-depth analysis of Nakashima's narrative structures and audiovisual techniques not only enriches

our understanding of his cinematic style but also sheds light on the broader cultural and ideological undercurrents within contemporary Japanese cinema.

Objectives

1. To investigate the narrative structure of Tetsuya Nakajima's Films
2. To explore the film language of Tetsuya Nakajima's Films

Literature Review

Previous studies on Tetsuya Nakashima's films have focused on a variety of thematic and stylistic elements. Zhang Lu(2017) examined the portrayal of female characters from a male narrative perspective, noting that Nakashima often depicts women through stylized costumes and fragmented roles-ranging from submissive teachers to seductive dancers-reflecting entrenched patriarchal views. Zhang argues that although Nakashima attempts to reduce the influence of the male gaze by narrating women's stories through male characters, his films inevitably reproduce social discipline over female identity.

Hu Shanshan and Li jintao (2019) analyzed Nakashima's cinematic style through the lens of advertising aesthetics, pointing out his seamless incorporation of commercial techniques into narrative filmmaking. They argue that Nakashima adopts fragmented storytelling akin to serialized advertising, using high-contrast visuals and vibrant colors to create strong audience impressions. His reliance on repeated scenes and multiple perspectives allows for a deeper engagement with plot and theme, contributing to his recognizable authorial style and commercial appeal.

Qin Xiaojuan (2022) explored the cultural influence of Kamikaze Girls, emphasizing its impact on youth fashion and subculture through the protagonist's Rococo-inspired attire. The film not only reflects Japan's Lolita subculture but also serves as a channel for emotional identification among young

women struggling with social alienation. This illustrates how Nakashima's aesthetic choices contribute to both visual storytelling and broader cultural discourse.

Wang Yiqiao (2021), in a case study of *Confessions*, discussed Nakashima's use of reverse logic and collective psychology to reshape audience expectations. She highlights the film's departure from conventional suspense formats, showing how it uses nonlinear narrative and moral ambiguity to critique social issues such as juvenile crime and inequality. Wang concludes that Nakashima's psychological storytelling techniques deepen the interplay between narrative, audience perception, and sociocultural critique.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach to investigate the narrative structure and film language of Tetsuya Nakashima's films. The methodology is outlined as follows:

1. Research Design

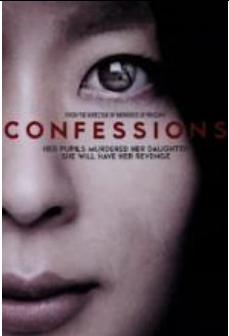
A qualitative research design was employed to examine the complexity of Nakashima's narrative structure and film language. The focus is on identifying how his films reflect both formal innovation and social critique through nonlinear, multi-perspective narratives and stylistic experimentation.

2. Sample Selection

Six films directed by Nakashima from 2004 to 2018 were selected as the core sample. These works reflect the evolution of his aesthetic and thematic style across two creative phases.

Table 1 Films by Tetsuya Nakajima from 2004 to 2018.

Film Name and Poster	Awards & Box Office
<p>Kamikaze Girls (2004)</p> 	<p>2004 Yokohama Film Festival: Best film; Best actress; Best director; Best supporting actress</p> <p>Nippon Academy Awards: The best newcomer</p> <p>2004 Daily Film Awards: Best actress; Best new artist</p>
<p>Memories of Matsuko (2006)</p> 	<p>Japan Academy Prize: Best Actress Award; Best Director nominees; Best picture nominees; Best screenplay nominees; Best Cinematography Award; Best Lighting Award</p> <p>Blue Ribbon Awards: Best Actress Award</p> <p>Hochi Film Awards: Best Actress Award</p> <p>Mainichi Film Awards: Best Actress Award</p> <p>16th Japan Film Critics Awards: Best Director Award</p>
<p>PACO and the magical Picture Book (2008)</p> 	<p>Japan Academy Prize: Best Editing award</p> <p>Japan Internet Movie Awards: Best director award</p> <p>Mainichi Film Awards: TSUTAYA Fan Award</p> <p>Blue Ribbon Awards: Best Supporting Actress Award</p> <p>Sitges International Fantasy Film Festival: Best Art Design Award</p>
<p>Confession (2010)</p>	<p>Japan Academy Prize: Best Picture Award; Best Director Award; Best Screenplay Award; Best Editing award</p> <p>Blue Ribbon Awards: Best Picture Award</p>

	<p>Japan Academy Prize: Top 10 movies of the year; Tokyo Sports Film Awards; Best Director Award; Asian Film Awards: Best Director Award; Best Screenplay Award; Best Actress nomination Sitges International Fantasy Film Festival, Spain: Special Jury Prize Fantasia Film Festival in Canada: Best Picture Award Hong Kong Film Awards: Best Asian Film Award</p>
Kawaki (2014) 	<p>TAMA Film Awards: Best New Actress Award</p>
it comes (2018) 	<p>Mainichi Film Awards: Best Supporting Actress Award</p>

3. Data Collection

Data was collected through repeated viewing of each film, supported by scholarly articles, interviews, film reviews, and public commentary from blogs and podcasts. This approach ensured a diverse set of perspectives on both formal elements and socio-cultural impact.

4. Analytical Methods

Narrative Structure Analysis: Focused on character construction, conflict, thematic, setting, plot and narrative style.

Film language Analysis: Investigated audiovisual elements such as cinematography, editing, special effects, sound, and symbolic imagery.

5. Conceptual Framework

This study is structured around two main analytical dimensions-narrative structure and film language-to examine six films directed by Tetsuya Nakashima between 2004 and 2018. These dimensions guide the exploration of how Nakashima constructs complex narratives through non-linear, multi-perspective storytelling and supports them with highly stylized visual and auditory techniques. The research divides the films into two phases-early (2004–2008) and later (2010–2018)-to compare stylistic evolution and thematic depth. Through this framework, the study aims to reveal how Nakashima's filmmaking reflects and critiques contemporary Japanese social issues, including gender inequality, youth delinquency, and family disintegration.

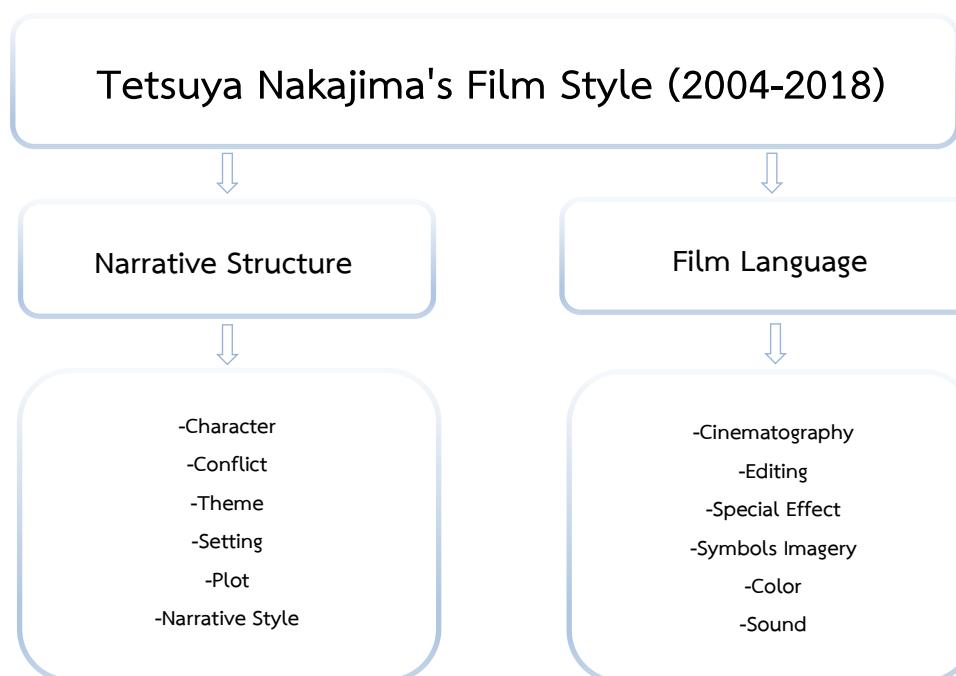


Figure1: Conceptual Framework (Source: Constructed by the researcher)

Results

1. To investigate the narrative structure of Tetsuya Nakajima's Films

Tetsuya Nakashima's narrative approach is characterized by its non-linear structure, multi-perspective storytelling, and strong thematic engagement with contemporary Japanese society. His six major films- Kamikaze Girls (2004), Memories of Matsuko (2006), Paco and the Magical Picture Book (2008), Confessions (2010), Kawaki (2014), and It Comes (2018) reveal a progression from colorful, exaggerated narratives to darker, more psychologically complex storylines. Central to his narrative style is the construction of characters that possess internal dualities and are shaped by deeply rooted social forces. For example, Momoko and Ichigo in Kamikaze Girls represent radically different cultural identities but share emotional tenacity. Similarly, Matsuko and Shouei in Memories of Matsuko embody the consequences of marginalization, while Confessions portrays dual female figures- Moriguchi and Shimomura- whose differing life choices reflect Japan's systemic failures in addressing women's roles in family and society.

Nakashima's films are driven by multidimensional conflicts, often positioned at the intersection of personal trauma and social dysfunction. His use of conflict is not only structural but also thematic. Confessions and Kawaki, for instance, explore how institutional neglect and parental failure give rise to youth violence and moral collapse. In Memories of Matsuko, the protagonist's relentless pursuit of love stems from familial rejection, leading her into a series of destructive relationships. Internal conflict is also a key narrative device; characters like Muromachi in Paco, who attempts suicide after losing his fame, undergo emotional redemption through community and compassion. Even in stylized narratives, Nakashima delves into psychological struggles, such as Shūichi in It Comes, who hides behind the mask of a devoted father but ultimately sacrifices himself in a moment of moral reckoning.

Social critique is embedded within each film's thematic core. Nakashima's stories reflect the tensions of a rapidly evolving society-whether through the critique of rigid gender norms (*Memories of Matsuko*), the dangers of youth alienation (*Confessions*), or the marginalization of subcultures (*Kamikaze Girls*). *Paco and the Magical Picture Book* employs magical realism to portray individuals deemed outcasts by society, creating a fictional space where broken people can support one another. In *Kawaki*, the plot uncovers the exploitation of minors and the existence of dark, hidden criminal networks, while *It Comes* uses supernatural metaphors to comment on emotional repression and the erosion of family structures.

Nakashima also highlights real-world problems by contrasting scene and time settings. In *Kamikaze Girls*, *Memories of Matsuko*, *Paco and the Magical Picture Book*, *Confessions*, *Kawaki*, and *It Comes*, temporal shifts between the present and past are established through the narrative perspectives of various characters, reflecting both character development and the unreliability of narration, thereby stimulating the audience's imagination. Simultaneously, in terms of scene setting, Nakashima contrasts the social treatment of characters through one or two key locations. For example, the contrast between Shimotsuma and Tokyo in *Kamikaze Girls*, the school and family in *Confessions*, and the family and workplace in *It Comes* all reflect differing family responsibilities across communities as well as the neglect of duty and the oppression of women in both domestic and professional spheres.

The films' plots are carefully constructed to reflect emotional development and moral ambiguity. *Kamikaze Girls* charts the evolution of an unlikely friendship; *Memories of Matsuko* traces the protagonist's tragic life through the recollections of others; *Paco* tells a story of emotional healing within a surreal hospital setting. Meanwhile, *Confessions* unfolds through layers of revenge and introspection; *Kawaki* depicts a father's realization of his daughter's secret life; and *It Comes* presents a narrative fragmented by horror, family

breakdown, and shifting perspectives. In each film, plot progression is non-linear, often relying on dramatic reversals, flashbacks, and narrative fragmentation to reveal deeper psychological and social truths.

A defining feature of Nakashima's Narrative style is his use of non-linear narrative techniques, including disrupted chronology, fragmented flashbacks, and multiple points of view. *Memories of Matsuko* is presented through the lens of several different characters who collectively reconstruct the titular character's life. *Confessions* utilizes five distinct perspectives to build a mosaic of guilt, trauma, and responsibility. Films like *It Comes* and *Kamikaze Girls* open with climactic events, then unravel the backstory in retrospect, creating tension and curiosity. This fragmented approach often includes elements of chance or exaggerated coincidence, particularly in *Paco* and *Kamikaze Girls*, reinforcing a sense of emotional unpredictability. Through this narrative complexity, Nakashima encourages active audience engagement and challenges conventional cinematic logic.

In sum, Nakashima's narrative structures are intricately designed to balance stylization with social commentary. His films explore how characters' inner lives are shaped by external forces, and how narrative form itself can be a tool for psychological insight and cultural critique. The interplay between personal transformation and collective dysfunction is a hallmark of his storytelling, making his work not only emotionally compelling but also socially resonant.

2. To explore the film language of Tetsuya Nakashima's Films

Tetsuya Nakashima's films are visually and aurally distinctive, marked by a personalized film language that blends surreal aesthetics with thematic intensity. Across his works, his style evolves from colorful theatricality to psychologically charged realism, while consistently employing expressive

techniques in cinematography, editing, special effects, symbolism, color, and sound.

His cinematography often utilizes symmetrical and asymmetrical compositions to underscore emotional tension or psychological states. In *Kamikaze Girls*, the contrast between Rococo fashion and biker culture is visually amplified through bold framing, exaggerated angles, and vivid colors. Nakashima uses symmetrical shots to suggest reflection or confrontation with the past, while asymmetrical framing, such as in *Confessions*, produces feelings of psychological instability. In *Memories of Matsuko*, the use of window bars and lighting evokes a sense of emotional entrapment, highlighting the protagonist's powerlessness in a patriarchal society. *Paco* and the *Magical Picture Book* mirrors emotional proximity through lighting contrast and frame instability, while *It Comes* employs brightened corridors and controlled lighting to emphasize spatial hierarchy and false domestic order. Throughout his films, Nakashima turns visual composition into a narrative tool.

Editing plays a critical role in enhancing narrative rhythm and emotional intensity. Techniques such as cross-cutting and repeated montage are prominent in his work. *Confessions* integrates multiple perspectives using montage to build psychological complexity and suspense. *Memories of Matsuko* juxtaposes scenes across timelines to highlight emotional contrasts. In *Paco*, editing transitions between fantasy and reality using emotional montage and stylized rhythm. As Nakashima's style matures, he incorporates more lyrical and rational montage to reflect character psychology and thematic ambiguity, as seen in *It Comes* and *Kawaki*, where nonlinear sequences blur time and perception.

Nakashima also relies heavily on special effects to craft a distinct narrative atmosphere. In earlier films like *Kamikaze Girls*, *Memories of Matsuko*, and *Paco*, CGI elements, stage motifs, and on-screen text add a playful, almost theatrical tone. These effects serve both narrative efficiency and visual entertainment. In contrast, his later works-*Confessions*, *Kawaki*, and *It Comes*- use digital effects to

enhance symbolic abstraction, reduce the graphic impact of violence, and amplify psychological dissonance. Stylized typography often visualizes characters' emotional states or thematic cues, contributing to his hybrid narrative form.

Symbolism through visual imagery is another hallmark of Nakashima's cinematic language. Everyday objects are imbued with emotional and cultural meanings. In *Kamikaze Girls*, retro items like pachinko balls and TV sets evoke nostalgia and serve as emotional proxies. In *Memories of Matsuko*, flowers symbolize purity and longing, while accessories like bags and trinkets reflect trauma from family neglect. *Paco* features objects such as lighters and toys to signify unfulfilled desires or repressed identities. *Confessions* makes frequent use of convex mirrors and reversed clocks to symbolize fractured self-perception and time-bound guilt. In *Kawaki* and *It Comes*, elements like water, school uniforms, or talismans highlight themes of exploitation, psychological repression, and the breakdown of family order.

Color usage in Nakashima's films demonstrates a clear stylistic transition. In his earlier films (2004–2008), he employs high-saturation warm tones to construct whimsical, hyperreal environments. *Kamikaze Girls* uses vibrant palettes to simulate fantasy and youth culture; *Memories of Matsuko* juxtaposes bright colors with tragic content for ironic impact. *Paco* blends vivid hues with surreal imagery to convey emotional innocence. In his later works (2010–2018), such as *Confessions* and *It Comes*, Nakashima shifts to desaturated, cool tones to evoke a somber, eerie atmosphere. Color contrast between warm and cold palettes also marks transitions between psychological states and narrative layers.

Sound design in Nakashima's films similarly reflects his aesthetic evolution. In earlier works, exaggerated sound effects synchronize with visuals to accentuate comedic or theatrical beats. Multi-character narratives are supported by sound cues to differentiate perspectives and temporal layers. In *Paco*,

whimsical sound design enhances the fantasy framework. In later films, sound becomes more integrated with character emotion and narrative progression. *Confessions* uses ambient sound and slow-motion sequences to modulate tension. Kawaki and *It Comes* employ environmental sounds-wind, rain, insects-to heighten realism and psychological suspense. Music often contrasts sharply with visual tone, a technique Nakashima uses to underscore irony or emotional dissonance. His use of asynchronous sound, musical counterpoint, and ambient layering creates a sonic atmosphere that reinforces the psychological depth of each scene.

Overall, Nakashima's film language demonstrates an evolving yet coherent artistic vision. By blending expressive visual techniques with carefully constructed soundscapes, he crafts a cinematic experience that is both aesthetically immersive and thematically profound. His films offer not only sensory impact but also a nuanced exploration of character psychology and societal critique.

Discussion

The findings of this study affirm that Tetsuya Nakashima's films exhibit a sophisticated interplay between narrative experimentation and film stylization, serving not only as artistic expressions but also as critiques of contemporary Japanese society. His works blend non-linear, fragmented storytelling with visually saturated imagery and emotionally resonant sound design to interrogate issues such as gender roles, juvenile delinquency, mental health, and the disintegration of the family unit.

These conclusions are largely consistent with Liu Fei's (2018) assessment that Nakashima's films use a "gorgeous visual façade" to conceal and reveal the "cruel essence" beneath. Liu argues that Nakashima's early films rely on color, exaggeration, and theatrical montage to contrast stylized surfaces with tragic

content. Our findings support this, particularly in the analysis of *Kamikaze Girls*, *Memories of Matsuko*, and *Paco*, where vibrant palettes and playful effects are used to render harsh realities more digestible, yet emotionally piercing. However, Liu's interpretation focuses more on aesthetic paradox than on narrative structure; this study further demonstrates that Nakashima's formal innovation is not merely visual but deeply narrative- employing fragmentation, multi-perspective narration, and temporal disjunction to foster critical reflection.

Meanwhile, Han Jinyu (2019) offers a different angle through her study of *It Comes*, highlighting how the film exposes ruptures in Japan's traditional ethical framework, particularly in the portrayal of gender imbalance and the fragmentation of family roles. This observation aligns with the thematic findings of the current study, especially in the interpretation of male protagonists who project superficial integrity while evading domestic responsibility. Han views the emergence of the supernatural as a metaphor for psychological breakdown and societal disconnection-an insight that reinforces our conclusion that Nakashima's horror and fantasy motifs are not genre gimmicks, but deliberate vehicles for social critique.

Nonetheless, this study expands upon Han's interpretation by emphasizing the direct link between audiovisual strategy and thematic construction. For instance, it is not merely the narrative content of *It Comes* that conveys social dysfunction, but also the dissonant color tones, disorienting soundscapes, and fragmented chronology that embody this dysfunction in form. In this sense, Nakashima's films should be understood as integrated aesthetic systems where story, structure, and style are in constant, deliberate interaction.

conclusion

Tetsuya Nakashima's cinema is marked by a dynamic fusion of form and content. His early works use vivid visuals and media hybridity to depict marginal

voices with irony and empathy, while his later films adopt more restrained, psychologically complex modes to critique societal institutions. The use of non-linear narrative and stylized film language allows Nakashima to push beyond entertainment into the realm of cultural diagnosis. This study demonstrates that his films not only reflect evolving artistic trends in Japanese cinema but also provoke meaningful dialogue about the fractured condition of modern life in Japan.

Recommendations

1. General Recommendations

Based on the analysis presented in this study, the following themes emerge from the works of Tetsuya Nakashima, accompanied by recommendations for educators and community practitioners:

Nakashima's films consistently engage with deeply rooted social issues—gender inequality, youth crime, emotional repression, and family disintegration. Further academic attention should be paid to the socio-ethical dimensions of his work. His films can serve as valuable case studies for interdisciplinary research at the intersection of film studies, sociology, psychology, and gender studies. By analyzing how cinematic techniques shape public perceptions of social problems, researchers can assess the broader cultural impact of contemporary Japanese cinema.

From a pedagogical standpoint, Nakashima's representative works offer excellent material for teaching narrative theory and film language. Film and media educators can employ his films as case studies to illustrate techniques such as multi-perspective narration, non-linear structures, montage, color symbolism, and the interaction of sound and image. For example, *Confessions* can be analyzed to explore psychological pacing through sound design, while

Memories of Matsuko demonstrates how stylized color and framing reveal character psychology.

Additionally, film festivals, cultural institutions, and community organizations could curate retrospectives or discussion forums centered on Nakashima's works, engaging audiences in conversations about the societal issues dramatized in his films. His exploration of taboos—including youth violence, mental illness, and familial neglect—could inspire public seminars or workshops focused on media literacy, emotional awareness, and social responsibility. Such efforts would not only deepen audience appreciation of cinematic art but also foster critical thinking about the social realities his films seek to expose.

2. Future research Recommendations

Future research on Tetsuya Nakashima's films could benefit from cross-cultural and cross-media comparative studies. His early works, characterized by high-saturation visuals and theatrical stylization, provide a valuable reference point for comparison with other globally recognized "visual auteurs" such as Baz Luhrmann or Jean-Pierre Jeunet, who similarly blend aesthetics with narrative experimentation. Likewise, his later, more realist-oriented films may be productively analyzed alongside international social realist cinema—for instance, the works of Bong Joon-ho or Ken Loach—to explore how different cinematic traditions address themes of family, power, and psychological breakdown. Such comparative inquiry can enrich the understanding of how narrative form and film language are culturally specific yet universally resonant.

Regarding the narrative structure in Nakashima's films, future research could further examine how he selects themes and adapts them from outstanding literary works. By comparing his adaptations with their source materials—such as Kanae Minato's *Confessions* or Muneki Yamada's *Memories of Matsuko*—scholars can analyze differences in narrative focus and structure, thereby gaining a more

detailed understanding of his reflections on social issues in relation to their literary origins.

References

Han, J. Y. (2019). It Comes: The disintegration of the Japanese family ethical system. *Huanqiu Zongheng*, (23), 137–139.

Hu, S. S., & Li, J. T. (2019). The aesthetic of cross-boundary integration in Tetsuya Nakashima's films. *Chuanmei Guancha* (Media Observation), (5), 81–86.

Liu, F. (2018). The cruel essence beneath aesthetic beauty: A brief analysis of Tetsuya Nakashima's films. *Xijuzhijia* (Drama House), (19), 117.

Qin, X. J. (2022). The fashion communication power of cinematic art from a reception theory perspective: A case study of Kamikaze Girls. *Xijuzhijia* (Drama House), (3), 146–147.

Wang, Y. Q. (2021). The influence of reverse thinking and collective consciousness on audience psychology: A case study of Confessions. *Xijuzhijia* (Drama House), (31), 170–171.

Zhang, L. (2017). An analysis of female representation in Tetsuya Nakashima's films. *Xibu Guangbo Dianshi* (Western Broadcasting and Television), (119–120).