

Mark Brown

Satomi Saito

Japanese Film 4560

May 3, 2022

### The benefit of restriction and its effects on Seijun Suzuki

Suzuki Seijun, a master of the Yakuza film, is known for one of his most eccentric films, *Branded to Kill*, which came out in 1967. However, most people familiar with *Branded to Kill* are not aware that he created a sequel titled *Pistol Opera* in 2001, where his vision comes out more evident, but it may not live up to some of the aspects of its predecessor. This clarity is due to having significantly fewer restrictions placed on him during the production of *Pistol Opera* as opposed to *Branded to Kill*. *Branded to Kill* was restricted in content, actors, and budget by Nikkatsu. However, *Pistol Opera* was produced separate from Nikkatsu, with only the restrictions of budget and staying within the goal of becoming a sequel to the cult classic *Branded to Kill*.

Suzuki's style was born out of finding ways around restrictions, often having to do it quickly to keep up with his busy schedule. His sets were flimsy and easily disassembled, so Suzuki used this to his advantage, often disassembling the sets in the climax of his films and establishing colorful backgrounds that could display the chaotic manner he saw the world, especially in how he viewed acts of violence (Lund). It would be incorrect to believe that his restrictions were the only thing that made his films unique. However, many parts of his life and experiences created the basis of the themes addressed within his films, such as his time in the Japanese Imperial Navy shaped how he viewed violence, which became a central theme in many of his films (Rayns). However, these restrictions allowed these ideas to be displayed fully by

pushing him to find creative and exciting aspects of the presentation that he could use to bring to light the themes inside his works (Lund).

With each film he made, Suzuki's films with Nikkatsu gained a stronger sense of style, often addressing controversial topics such as sex work and violence through unconventional narratives similar to other New Wave directors. The significant difference between Suzuki and other New Wave directors was that Suzuki was working under the grindstone of Nikkatsu rather than making independent films (Bose). Suzuki kept working on his films, each film that came out increased tensions between Suzuki and Nikkatsu until it finally reached a climax of tension with the release of the film *Branded to Kill* (Lim). *Branded to Kill* was a culmination of Suzuki's disinterest in the classic Yakuza film, the inclusion of Joe Shishido, the B-Movie's budget, and the downfall of Japan's movie industry. *Branded to Kill* can be described as taking everything a Yakuza film should have and diverting all expectations and predictability (Rayns). His deconstruction of the Yakuza film was Suzuki's rebellion against the conditions that Nikkatsu forced upon him. In presentation and narrative, *Branded to Kill* was a deconstruction of Yakuza films as a genre overall becomes a stronger, more creative film because of it.

This rebellion against restrictions permeated every aspect of the film, especially *Branded to Kill's* narrative; every character is a distorted version of an archetype from a typical Yakuza film. The protagonist of the film Number 3 is inherently flawed and lacks the "*Giri*" (obligation) that typical Yakuza film protagonists have, such as Tetsu from Suzuki's previous film before *Branded to Kill*, *Tokyo Drifter*. Number 3 seems to have no real "*Ninjou*" (personal inclination) other than smelling rice and being Number 1. Though Number 3's goal of being Number 1 is unclear at best, it could be argued whether or not he is celebrating at the end or if he has become hysteric due to the intensity of the situation around him. Misako, the love interest,

does not provide a common theme among traditional Yakuza films: the conflict between *Giri* and *Ninjou*. Misako provides little motivation other than Number 3's intense lust for her, which creates a significant contrast between her and Chiharu, the love interest from *Tokyo Drifter*, especially in their interest in the protagonists within their respective films. These deconstructions of the typical Yakuza film archetypes and a primarily incoherent narrative structure create a unique film known for its narrative absurdities and interesting presentation (Nolletti).

*Branded to Kill* was also forced to be in black and white as a form of punishment by Nikkatsu to limit Suzuki's freedom; however, it puts the beginnings of *Branded to Kill's* exciting presentation into motion. The film was restricted to be black and white, and the creation of the script for the film had set up the film for an odd story displayed in a twisted film-noir style, though very different than the traditional film-noir as previously discussed by the differences in the narrative before (Teo). This black and white presentation restricted one of the critical tenets of Suzuki's style, that being the interesting use of color and the dissolution of his sets into color fields. So, while the film could not rely on using these color fields, there is a more critical use of settings and locations, such as Misako's room which is covered in pinned insects, or Number 3's apartment. The use of black and white was not the only restriction placed on Suzuki; there was an even more important restriction placed on Suzuki, including pornographic scenes.

The story of this inclusion of pornographic scenes starts with the troubles in the Japanese film industry, specifically with Nikkatsu. Nikkatsu had been one of the big production companies in Japan and had been a reasonably big production company since the 1930s. However, when home video and cheap television shows started being produced, this caused a financial downturn in many of these large film production studios. This financial downturn

began Nikkatsu's shift towards a genre of pornographic film called "Roman Porno," short for romantic pornography ("About Us"; Hale). The beginnings of these types of films can be seen within *Branded to Kill*, with its gratuitous pornographic scenes. However, because of this restriction placed on Suzuki, one can see how he took the restriction, diverted expectations, and created a sort of parody of the "Roman Porno" within these pornographic scenes. This parody of the "Roman Porno" has to do with a large part with Number 3's fetish involving the sniffing of steamed rice, where he has to sniff freshly steamed rice to become aroused. Suzuki's message becomes successful within its presentation as it creates a mood devoid of eroticism and purposefully makes the viewer uncomfortable with these seemingly unnecessary scenes of excess (Williams 4).

*Branded to Kill* is a film Williams could describe as a film of excess or a gross film in almost every manner of the term (Williams 4). These excesses are due to Suzuki's defiance of his restrictions and how he wanted to create something new and exciting. The film is incredibly violent and pornographic in its presentation. However, even more than that presents its protagonist in a poor light, far from what Nikkatsu wanted him to do with budding actor Joe Shishido, whom Nikkatsu was trying to turn into a star. Shishido had gained a reputation as playing the hard man; however, Suzuki had him play a broken assassin with a rice scent fueled libido, which was far from Nikkatsu's goal of enforcing Shishido's role in the film (Rayns). Because of his stubbornness in working around these restrictions, Suzuki was fired for making "incomprehensible films," which would end up being a halt to Suzuki's film career for about ten years and would lead to Nikkatsu's path of "Roman Porno," and Shishido's departure from Nikkatsu (Monk 43; Casey; "About Us").

The content and Joe Shishido were restrictions placed on *Branded to Kill* specifically, but one restriction was enforced on all Suzuki's films. This restriction was the B-movie's budget. The budget was significantly lower than the A-movie's budget. However, Suzuki often had to deal with warnings and restrictions and even budget cuts, even more than the fundamental budget problem for B-movies (Djabarov). These budget problems led to key work relationships that allowed him to work around these binding restrictions. As mentioned earlier, the most important relationship he had made to work around these restrictions was certainly with Takeo Kimura, a set designer known for making flimsy sets. He began working with Kimura on *Youth of the Beast* made in 1963 and would work closely with him on set designs until 1968 when Suzuki was fired from Nikkatsu. This partnership paved the way for Suzuki's style to shine in those years and allowed him to work creatively around the restrictions Nikkatsu placed on him (Lund).

*Branded to Kill* had many restrictions due to Suzuki's bending of Nikkatsu's rules. Because of this, the film expresses its message uniquely and creatively through the mood initially set by the black and white and how he worked around not being able to use his standard color palette. Suzuki also took the forced inclusion of content by Nikkatsu and made it his own, using it to subvert expectations and deconstruct the archetypes he was expected to use. Suzuki had to work around many restrictions under the significantly smaller B-Movie budget. His method of working around the constraints and restrictions he was put under created a film that reveals his thoughts and themes behind the narrative using a presentation that undermines the studio he worked at. These restrictions contrast with the sequel's production to *Branded to Kill* made in 2001, *Pistol Opera*.

About 34 years after the release of *Branded to Kill*, Suzuki released a sequel titled *Pistol Opera*. *Pistol Opera* has a strong feeling of a love letter towards Suzuki's time making films for Nikkatsu rather than being as unique as a film such as its predecessor, *Branded to Kill*. It had not warranted many of the restrictions that had caused several aspects of *Branded to Kill's* exciting presentation. *Pistol Opera's* only restriction was the budget restriction of the standard film, not entirely on the level of budget restriction that was enforced on *Branded to Kill*. *Pistol Opera* was not produced through Nikkatsu, and that provided Suzuki much more freedom to make something that he may have wanted to make. Freedom also allows for more flexibility within narrative telling, themes, and presentation; however, it is easy to fall back on what one already knows.

*Pistol Opera's* presentation is a conglomerate of all the techniques that made up Suzuki's well-known style. It displays these attributes in a referential way rather than creating something entirely unique. Several aspects of *Pistol Opera* contain references to Suzuki's older films, such as its predecessor *Branded to Kill* and even *Tokyo Drifter*. It is important not to undermine the general reiteration of his stylization throughout the film. *Pistol Opera* immediately references *Branded to Kill* just at the 00:00:47 second timestamp with the man falling off the roof almost the same way as *Branded to Kill's* man falling off the roof at the timestamp 00:12:05 (Mes). There is another reference, and this one is to *Tokyo Drifter* with *Pistol Opera's* set design for the scene at 00:03:47 mirroring the same type of styling as one of *Tokyo Drifter's* most famous scenes at 00:26:25. However, *Pistol Opera's* version is a little different and is used for a different effect, but the similarities between the sets of the two scenes cannot be denied.

*Pistol Opera's* narrative also takes many cues from *Branded to Kill*. Even though *Pistol Opera* is a sequel to *Branded to Kill*, there is a particular form of mirroring narrative-wise. *Pistol*

*Opera* follows Number 3, a female assassin who goes by the name "Stray Cat," who is ordered to kill Number 1 while killing several of the other numbered assassins along the way (Mes). This narrative is similar to *Branded to Kill*'s general basis, though they differ, especially in the way the narrative is presented (Mes). One thing to note is the aspect ratio of 1.33:1 in *Pistol Opera*'s production versus *Branded to Kill*'s and many others of Suzuki's films' use of the cinemascope. The most apparent difference in presentation between the two films is the use of color because *Pistol Opera* was in full color versus *Branded to Kill*'s use of black and white cinematography as Nikkatsu's restriction on Suzuki. The color featured in *Pistol Opera* allows it to pay homage to Suzuki's other films with Nikkatsu with the dissolution of sets into color fields, which could not be done in *Branded to Kill* due to its restrictions.

The differences between *Pistol Opera* and *Branded to Kill* are there but are outweighed by their similarities. The two stories have several differences in how the stories play out. *Branded to Kill* ends with ambiguity as Number 3 yells "I'm Number One" after accidentally murdering his love interest before falling out of the boxing ring (Suzuki *Branded to Kill*). *Pistol Opera*'s ending mirrors that as well to a certain extent, where *Branded to Kill*'s Number 3, now Number 0, yells "I'm Number One" before realizing that he does not match up to Stray Cat, who is now the current Number One (Suzuki *Pistol Opera*). These two endings can serve as a tool to describe the differences between the two films and how those restrictions benefitted *Branded to Kill*.

The black and white presentation of *Branded to Kill* allows for the shot of the boxing ring to use the darkness of the shot to take better effect, creating the feeling that Number 3 is the only person within this world created within the shot. The manic state of the protagonist is a clear display of Suzuki's deconstruction of the Yakuza protagonist. Number 3 does not care that he has

killed the one he shows attraction to, where he has no solid inclination for anything at all other than declaring himself Number 1. Number 3 himself falls from the bright lights of the boxing ring into the darkness of the arena, creating ambiguity in what happens to him in the end.

However, this ambiguity is removed with *Pistol Opera's* narrative. This empty boxing ring replaces the color fields that he is usually known for and instead focuses on the contrast between the bright ring and the dark arena throughout the scene (Suzuki *Branded to Kill*). This setting creates a compelling presentation by creating emotion within the scene's lighting, framing, and acting.

*Pistol Opera's* ending section creates a setting with an open field with a singular tree. It shows off a duel between Number 0, and Stray Cat, where there is an even more ambiguous ending, which allows for discussion of the ending, but the ending comes off more confusing than ambiguous than in *Branded to Kill*. The audience is left on the note of Number 0 yelling "Idiot" into the sky and wondering what happened. It is a Suzuki-style ending where it is interesting to watch but does not make much narrative sense, even more so than *Branded to Kill's* ending. Which had a compelling presentation through the display of the madness within the narrative and presentation, but *Pistol Opera's* narrative comes off as less effective due to the similarities in the narrative to *Branded to Kill*. *Pistol Opera's* presentation comes off as a conglomerate of Suzuki's techniques, only updated for 2001, without really providing anything new.

*Pistol Opera* is generally received reasonably well by critics for its use of color and other forms of Suzuki's stylization and storytelling; however, it does comparably less well when rated by the general audience (Schwartz; "Pisutoru Opera"). While *Branded to Kill* shows a higher rating among the general audience, showing that the general audience can see a difference between the two films whether or not they know how to identify what makes the difference



between the two films (*Branded to Kill*). The difference between the two films is the benefit restrictions have on creativity. Many studies have found that creativity is nurtured by the limiting factor of restrictions which lowers the number of choices for solutions, making it easier to think of a creative solution (Scopelliti et al.). This benefit of restriction, along with Suzuki's attitude towards films and Nikkatsu, brought *Branded to Kill* to life and inspired *Pistol Opera*. However, the latter presents itself as a love letter to the old rather than a more potent addition to the new, which could be argued due to a couple of factors such as an overwhelming number of choices or simply preferring to make something more reminiscent of older works than the creation of something entirely new (Scopelliti et al.).

*Pistol Opera* had the problem of almost too much freedom, where the movie comes across as a plainer movie than *Branded to Kill*, despite the strong use of color. *Branded to Kill* may appear to be a more compelling film due to Nikkatsu's restriction on *Branded to Kill*, making the film have to be black and white. This use of black and white may have caused Suzuki to find other ways to create a visually stunning film by using and making stunning sets that become important to the narrative. Misako's apartment is one such set for the visual shock of seeing hundreds and hundreds of insects pinned on the wall, where color would not matter because of the sheer number of insects. Misako's apartment contrasts Number 3's apartment with his wife, which is this stunning minimalist piece of modern design, almost showing the mental states of the two characters and using those sets to their advantage. This focus on sets most likely came about because of the lack of color, so Suzuki could not fall back on his usual color fields. The lack of color also may have helped him save money within his budget (Suzuki *Branded to Kill*; Scopelliti et al.).

*Pistol Opera* did not have to worry about dealing with restrictions, so there was no need to think about better ways to create a strong presentation. Instead, the film used the techniques that Suzuki was known for rather than experimenting out of necessity like Suzuki had to with *Branded to Kill*. *Pistol Opera* is enjoyable for any members of the audience who are aware of Suzuki's style and common techniques, but rather in a referential sense rather than a completely objective sense. This referential enjoyability is because of the similarities in the narrative to *Branded to Kill*. However, it causes *Pistol Opera* to not stand out in comparison to the rest of Suzuki's filmography. *Pistol Opera* comes off as watered down as opposed to *Branded to Kill* (Suzuki *Pistol Opera*).

Suzuki Seijun is a director known for his unique stylization in his films that become instantly noticeable to anyone who knows what they are looking for and even to those who do not. His style was created out of his experiences and the need to express his artistic vision despite the restrictions he was placed under for most of his directing career. His time at Nikkatsu was full of rising tension as he rebelled and worked around his restrictions, eventually creating the film, which is considered his magnum opus, *Branded to Kill*. This film was bred out of stacking restrictions and warnings placed upon Suzuki, which he then used to his advantage. *Branded to Kill* can be described as deconstructing the Yakuza film genre that Suzuki had been making for Nikkatsu before then. *Pistol Opera* was a sequel to *Branded to Kill* that came out in 2001 that displayed itself as a love letter to the style formulated by restrictions during Suzuki's time with Nikkatsu. This love letter stylization causes the film to come off not as unique as its predecessor because it had no reason to try anything new. Its lack of restrictions hinders its ability to create an outstanding film. *Branded to Kill* became an outstanding film because of the restrictions it had to overcome, which allowed it to work outside the standard for even Suzuki's films.

## Works Cited

- “About Us.” *NIKKATSU*, NIKKATSU CORPORATION, <https://intl.nikkatsu.com/aboutus/>.
- Bose, Swapnil Dhruv. “Seijun Suzuki: The Life of the Endlessly Influential Japanese New Wave Auteur.” *Far Out Magazine*, Far Out Magazine, 13 Feb. 2021, <https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/seijun-suzuki-life-japanese-new-wave-director/>.
- “Branded to Kill.” *IMDb*, IMDb.com, [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0061882/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_srsrg\\_0](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0061882/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_0).
- Casey, Chris, and Tatsuya Fukushima. *Shishido Jo*, Yaju No Yabai Gumi, 2001, <https://shishido0.tripod.com/shishido.html>.
- Djabarov, Aidan. “A Hell of a Guy: The Mischievous Legacy of Seijun Suzuki.” *Filmed in Ether*, Japanese Film Festival in Australia 2017, 22 Sept. 2017, <https://www.filmedinether.com/features/hell-of-a-guy-seijun-suzuki-tribute/>.
- Hale, Mike. “Drama, Humor and a Sex Scene Every 15 Minutes.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 28 June 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/28/movies/roman-porno-new-york-asian-film-festival.html>.
- Lim, Dennis. “Seijun Suzuki, Director Who Inspired Tarantino and Jarmusch, Dies at 93.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 22 Feb. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/22/movies/seijun-suzuki-director-who-inspired-tarantino-and-jarmusch-dies-at-93.html>.
- Lund, Carson. “Time and Place Are Nonsense! the Cinema According to Seijun Suzuki.” *Harvard Film Archive*, The Japan Foundation, 13 May 2016.

<https://harvardfilmarchive.org/programs/time-and-place-are-nonsensethe-cinema-according-to-seijun-su>.

Mes, Tom. "Pistol Opera." *Midnight Eye*, Midnight Eye, Oct. 2001,  
<http://www.midnighteye.com/reviews/pistol-opera/>.

Monk, Katherine. "Japanese Legend Sees Himself as Simple Chronicler." *The Vancouver Sun*,  
16 Oct. 1991, pp. 43.

Nolletti, Jr Arthur, and Keiko Iwai McDonald. "The Yakuza Film: An Introduction." *Reframing Japanese Cinema: Authorship, Genre, History*, edited by David Desser, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1993, pp. 165–192.

"Pisutoru Opera." *IMDb*, IMDb.com.  
[https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0285906/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_srs\\_g\\_0](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0285906/?ref_=nv_sr_srs_g_0).

Rayns, Tony. "Branded to Kill: Reductio Ad Absurdum." *The Criterion Collection*, The Criterion Collection, 3 Dec. 2011, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/2096-branded-to-kill-reductio-ad-absurdum>.

Schwartz, Dennis. "Pistol Opera." *Dennis Schwartz Movie Reviews*, Dennis Schwartz Movie Reviews, 5 Aug. 2019, <https://dennisschwartzreviews.com/pistolopera/>.

Scopelliti, Irene, et al. "How Do Financial Constraints Affect Creativity?" *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, vol. 31, no. 5, 6 Dec. 2013, pp. 880–893.,  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jpim.12129>.

Suzuki, Seijun, director. *Branded to Kill*. *Archive.org*, Nikkatsu, 1967,  
<https://archive.org/details/branded.-to.-kill.-1967.1080p.-blu-ray.x-264.-aac-yts.-mx>.

Accessed 3 May 2022.

Suzuki, Seijun, director. *Pistol Opera*. *YouTube*, Shochiku, 2001,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHGWhBMtxpc>. Accessed 3 May 2022.

Teo, Stephen. "Seijun Suzuki: Authority in Minority." *Senses of Cinema*, 9 June 2011.  
<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2000/festival-reports/suzuki/>.

Williams, Linda. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 4,  
1991, pp. 2–13.