

Document Citation

Title	Sex & death in Japanese cinema: the films of Seijun Suzuki
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Source	<i>Cinematheque Ontario/a division of Toronto International Film Festival Group</i>
Date	1993 Fal
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	3
Subjects	Suzuki, Seijun (1923), Tokyo, Japan
Film Subjects	Tsuigoineruwaizen (Zigeunerweisen), Suzuki, Seijun, 1980 Koroshi no rakuin (Branded to kill), Suzuki, Seijun, 1967 Kawachi Karumen (Carmen from Kawachi), Suzuki, Seijun, 1966 Tokyo nagaremono (Tokyo drifter), Suzuki, Seijun, 1966 Kenka ereji (Elegy to violence), Suzuki, Seijun, 1966 Nikutai no mon (The gate of flesh), Suzuki, Seijun, 1964 Yumeji, Suzuki, Seijun, 1991 Shunpuden (Story of a prostitute), Suzuki, Seijun, 1965 Kanto mushuku (Kanto wanderer), Suzuki, Seijun, 1963 Yaju no seishun (Wild youth), Suzuki, Seijun, 1963

Tantei jimusho 23: kutabare akutodomo (Detective bureau 23: go to hell, bastards!), Suzuki, Seijun, 1963

Akutaro (The young rebel), Suzuki, Seijun, 1963

Irezumi ichidai (One generation of tattoos), Suzuki, Seijun, 1965

Kageroza (Heat-haze theatre), Suzuki, Seijun, 1981

SEX & DEATH IN JAPANESE CINEMA II:

THE FILMS OF SEIJUN(SUZUKI

Long neglected in the west, the films of Seijun Suzuki have suddenly become a hot item on the international festival/cinematheque circuit. Recent retrospectives at the Rotterdam and Vancouver film festivals, and articles by such leading critics as Ian Buruma and David Chute, sealed Suzuki's reputation as one of the major discoveries of Japanese cinema. Cinematheque Ontario is delighted to be one of three venues to present the retrospective this year (the others are the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, England and the Walter Reade Theatre in New York). Here, finally, is Toronto's opportunity to acquaint itself with the works of the director the Japanese call "the magician of images."

Seijun Suzuki began his directing career in the Fifties at Nikkatsu, a studio dedicated to the emerging youth market in Japan. As what he himself calls "a studio hack," Suzuki churned out generic romances, war films, teen exploitation flicks, treating every project handed to him with a kind of anonymous professionalism. It wasn't until Suzuki began working in the yakuza (or gangster) genre that his individual style emerged. Subverting the assembly-line approach at Nikkatsu, Suzuki began to exaggerate, parody and travesty, then to bend, twist and break the conventions of the yakuza film. Suzuki turned out to be a nascent postmodernist. With extravagant irony and a cynical disregard for tradition, he jumbled tones and genres, mixed farce with violence, thriller with melodrama, comedy with cruelty (critic Tadao Sato calls Suzuki's films "masochistic cartoons"); and, in what was to become a Suzuki trademark, he perversely scrambled the Japanese codes for the four seasons—snow, rain, cherry blossoms, wind chimes—into semiotic chaos.

Suzuki also developed a singular visual style, characterized by aggressive artifice and theatrical excess. Kinetic, baroque, wildly expressive, his work became a seemingly ceaseless succession of set-pieces. Never merely "assertive," Suzuki's films push graphic embellishment into the realm of the delirious (or demented). The infamous GATE OF FLESH, for example, combines looming Scope close-ups and superimpositions, flagrantly fake, rawly lit sets, and garish, retina-ripping Fujicolor costume coding. Suzuki was fond of placing his camera where it had no business being (under a tatami mat peering up at the action in ONE GENERATION OF TATTOOS, for example), and for making it move in deliberately nonfunctional ways. (Lucky for him that his actors were so often affectless; his canted compositions couldn't bear the pressure of added histrionics.)

Unlike Nagisa Oshima and his compatriots in the Japanese New Wave, Suzuki was a rebel without a cause. His iconoclasm was never political, his aesthetic experiments motivated by nothing more than a desire to astonish and entertain. Impatient with intellectual discussion of his films, especially those which situate him as an auteur, Suzuki says, "I have always made films for entertainment; I believe that film is a spectacle." Nevertheless, Suzuki became a hero and martyr for the New Wave when Nikkatsu dismissed him in 1967 for making "incomprehensible and unprofitable" pictures. Despite mass demonstrations by directors and students, Suzuki was never rehired. His career languished for some years, but was renewed in the Eighties with an independently produced trilogy of strange, ornate films set in the Taisho period.

When Jean-Luc Godard announces in HISTOIRE(S) DU CINEMA that "the two great stories have been sex and death," he could have Suzuki's films in mind. (The two directors have often been compared.) Suzuki's comic/nihilistic vision was shaped by his experience as a soldier in the Second World War, which he found "very funny," and which gave him a taste for absurdity and annihilation: "I think that what remains in our memory is not 'construction' but 'destruction.' Making things is not what counts," he says, "the power that destroys them is." Suzuki recalls an incident in which he witnessed a soldier blown up while having sex during a bombing raid in Taiwan; all that was left, remembers a bemused Suzuki, was "his charred bottom half." A more vivid metaphor for Suzuki's subsequent linkage of sex and death is unimaginable. His GATE OF FLESH became a classic of the Nikkatsu sub-genre known as *roman porno*, which twists eros and thanatos into a double helix in stylized scenes of sexual cruelty. He described his late masterpiece ZIGEUNERWEISEN as "a mystery of eros and death." And his tellingly titled ELEGY TO VIOLENCE offers one of the more daring images of the Japanese cinema's ubiquitous association of sex with violence. Its protagonist, a young incipient fascist, masturbates by pounding out a song on his beloved's piano with his erect penis. Only after you immerse yourself in the chaotic, erotic world of Seijun Suzuki will you be able to Name That Tune.

■ James Quandt

This retrospective was organized by Simon Field, Cinema Director of the Institute for Contemporary Art, London; it has been generously supported by The Japan Foundation. Our thanks also to the Japan Film Library Council, and to Norio Furushima, Director of the Toronto office of The Japan Foundation.

A catalogue, designed especially for this retrospective and edited by Mr. Field, is available for \$5. Anyone who buys tickets to five or more films in the series will receive the catalogue free.

nary attention on lighting, texture, decor and staging, turning an otherwise ordinary genre movie into a spectacle to set the eyes on fire" (Tony Rayns).

Thursday, November 25 8:45 p.m.

TOKYO DRIFTER (TOKYO NAGAREMONO)

Japan 1966 ■ 89 minutes
Cast: Tetsuya Watari, Chieko Matsubara

Called "one of the most brilliant genre movies ever made" (Tony Rayns) and "Suzuki's most remarkable film" (Tadao Sato), TOKYO DRIFTER is "very popular today among [Japanese] students and film buffs, in somewhat the way Aldrich's KISS ME DEADLY was popular in France during the 1950s" (Noel Burch). (It is scheduled for release in Britain next year.) After drifting around on a short holiday from mayhem, "Ace Killer" Tetsu discovers to his dismay that the old way of gang warfare has been transformed by Japan's new corporate mentality. Clinging to the old codes of yakuza conduct, Tetsu soon finds himself on the run from every killer in the country. Suzuki pulls out all the stops, lavishing DRIFTER with some of his weirdest set pieces, including a brawl in a cowboy bar called Le Saloon Western and a musical number, shot from underneath the dance floor, in a mod nightclub called the Manhole. "Under company orders to 'play it straight' this time, Suzuki responded with this barrage of aesthetized violence, visual gags, incongruous songs and hair-dryers and mind-warping color effects" (Rayns).

Friday, November 26 6:30 p.m.

ELEGY TO VIOLENCE (KENKA EREJI)

Japan 1966 ■ 86 minutes
Cast: Hideki Takahashi, Junko Asano

Considered Suzuki's most important film by such critics as David Desser and the pre-eminent Japanese film journal *Kinema Jumbo*, ELEGY TO VIOLENCE enjoys cult status amongst Japanese cineastes. Set during the rising militarism of the 1930s, ELEGY centres on a delinquent teenager who boards with a good Catholic family, and who becomes obsessed with their piano-playing daughter. Suzuki makes a direct connection between the boy's sexual frustration—"my blood throbs at the sight of her white hands on the piano," he feverishly writes in his diary—and his violent behaviour. In one of the film's wildest sequences, the boy masturbates by pounding out a tune on the girl's piano with his erect penis. "Arguably Suzuki's first masterpiece, this is a subversively funny account of the making of a model fascist. It goes where no film had gone before in search of comic insights into the adolescent male mind" (Tony Rayns). "A memorable masterpiece . . . full of wild, entertaining fights, fantasy and humor" (Tadao Sato).

Saturday, November 27 6:30 p.m.

CARMEN OF KAWACHI (KAWACHI KARUMEN)

Japan 1966 ■ 89 minutes
Cast: Yumiko Nagawa, Tomio Kawachi

Women do not figure prominently in Suzuki's cinema, though the feral heroines of GATE OF FLESH and the rebellious prostitute in SHUMPUDEN are amongst his most memorable creations. The stunning CARMEN OF KAWACHI seems to form a trilogy with those two earlier films. Like them, CARMEN features Suzuki's favourite actress Yumiko Nagawa, this time as a factory worker who, gang raped by fellow villagers, flees her home town for Osaka where she drifts through a series of jobs and liaisons: chanteuse at a "grope" bar, fashion model and mannequin, muse to an expressionist painter, concubine of a middle-aged roué, and object of desire for a lesbian dominatrix who runs the modelling agency. When Carmen encounters a Buddhist monk with whom her mother and her sister have both had affairs, she lures him to a mountain spring and takes revenge upon him as a symbol of male hypocrisy and brutality. In his trilogy of women-centred films, Suzuki celebrates his heroines's fierce sensuality and resilience as a kind of spiritual force in an otherwise amoral (indeed nihilist) universe.

Monday, November 29 6:30 p.m.



Seijun Suzuki's SHUMPUDEN

BRANDED TO KILL (KOROSHI NO RAKUIN)

Japan 1967 ■ 91 minutes
Cast: Jo Shishido, Mariko Ogawa

"One of Suzuki's greatest movies . . . A masterly thriller which rivals Orson Welles' LADY FROM SHANGHAI in its harsh eroticism and cruel humour, not to mention its visual fireworks" (Tony Rayns). BRANDED TO KILL is the film that pushed the Nikkatsu studio bosses over the edge. They fired the renegade Suzuki, and then had to face the ire of thousands of fans and colleagues who took to the streets to protest. BRANDED is a breathless, disorienting portrait of the Number Three Killer in Tokyo's underworld.

Pathologically afraid that he won't be respected as a hitman, and able to achieve sexual arousal only when he sniffs boiling rice, Number Three is scheduled for a full-scale crackup. And that's even before he slays Number Two Killer in an ambush, is set upon by Number One, and discovers that the women in his life also want him dead. At once dumbfounding and exhilarating, BRANDED TO KILL "feels like gonzo Sam Fuller, but sustained beyond belief: every moment is one of those moments" (David Chute, *Film Comment*).

Monday, November 29 8:45 p.m.

"The arthouse crowd that
chortled this year over
Kinji Fukasaku's campy
BLACK LIZARD should get
a load of the real thing:
Seijun Suzuki"

- David Chute, *Film Comment*

ZIGUENERWEISEN

Japan 1980 ■ 145 minutes
Cast: Toshiya Fujita, Naoko Otani

Recently voted the greatest Japanese film of the 1980s by Japanese critics, and winner of the Japanese Oscar as well as the top prize at the Berlin Film Festival, ZIGUENERWEISEN marked a major transition in Suzuki's career. His first fully independent film, it departs from the tone and genre of his commercial work, and, consequently, was shunned by Japanese exhibitors. (Tony Rayns reports that the producer resorted to showing it in an inflatable mobile cinema.) A luxuriant, hypnotic ghost story—billed as a "mystery of eros and death"—full of bizarre narrative twists and chic enigmas, the film is set

in the pre-war period of nihilism and decadence. It centres on a spectral *ménage à trois*: When one of two men marries a woman who is a dead ringer for the (long deceased) geisha they once shared as a girlfriend, old mysteries come back to haunt the trio. The title refers to Sarasate's violin music, which may or may not be the key to solve the film's central riddle....

Tuesday, November 30 6:30 p.m.

HEAT SHIMMER THEATRE (KAGEROZA)

Japan 1981 ■ 129 minutes
Cast: Yusaku Matsuda, Michiyo Ogusu

Even more erotic and ambiguous than its predecessor, ZIGUENERWEISEN, the middle film of Suzuki's late trilogy is set in 1926 at the crux of the Taisho and Showa eras. It concerns a playwright who becomes obsessed with the German wife of a rich businessman, and makes love to the ghost of the rich man's first wife. Suzuki's "decadent" late style, characterized by enigmatic narratives and lush, eccentric images, reaches a kind of apogee here. Grasping for comparisons, critics called KAGEROZA "orientalized Buñuel" (*Variety*) and "fantastic Pirandelloism," but, as Ian Christie points out, "the film's luminous images and fierce eroticism are unmistakably Japanese. . . KAGEROZA made a dazzling impression in Berlin as one of the most ambitious, if enigmatic, of all recent Japanese films. . . A fascinating find. Critic's Choice" (Ian Christie, *London Film Festival*).

Tuesday, November 30 9:00 p.m.

YUMEJI

Japan 1991 ■ 128 minutes
Cast: Kenji Sawada, Tomoko Mariya

The final work in Suzuki's late trilogy is a hyper-aesthetic treatment of the life of painter and poet Yumeji Takehisa, who was Japan's equivalent of Aubrey Beardsley, leading a decadent western-style existence until his early death in 1934. As Tony Rayns points out, the film is "less a bio-pic than an extended fantasia on the erotic culture that Yumeji epitomized—and an elegant epitaph for a sensibility that died with men like Yumeji." Searching for his lover, Yumeji runs into and seduces another woman who is looking for the corpse of her husband, dead at the hands of her jealous boyfriend. Sumptuously designed and heady with sex, YUMEJI has a dream-like exoticism. "YUMEJI finds Suzuki still reinventing himself" (Rayns).

Friday, December 10 8:45 p.m.

YOUTH OF THE BEAST
(YAJU NO SEISHUN)
Japan 1963 ■ 92 minutes
Cast: Jo Shishido, Akiji Kobayashi

Suzuki's breakthrough film, in which he turned a standard Nikkatsu script into a perverse, over the top thriller, complete with cruel jokes, crazed visuals, and crackpot performances. Set in the aftermath of the double suicide of one of Tokyo's top cops and his mistress (a drug-addicted call girl), BEAST chronicles the brutal and inexorable rise of a yakuza to the head of the city's underworld. Hiring himself out to rival gangs, and using the Takeshita School of hitting as a cover, he muscles and manipulates his way to the top. "This is the movie in which Suzuki first asserted his 'voice,' and assertive is the word. You'll need to sit well back from the startling visuals, the *outré* designs and the florid action. Who but Suzuki could park a gay yakuza in his pink room under matching cherry blossoms? Or whip up an unexplained sandstorm outside the room where a sadist is indulging his vile passions? Suzuki recognizes the genre's inherent absurdity while raising its rhetoric to a new high" (Tony Rayns).

Friday, November 19 8:45 p.m.

KANTO WANDERER
(KANTO MUSHUKU)
Japan 1963 ■ 93 minutes
Cast: Akira Kobayashi, Hiroko Ito

Matinee idol Akira Kobayashi, recently described as "an almost languid tough guy, Elvis with a pinch of Mitchum, who seems to be nursing an inner wound" (David Chute), made his mark as a sullen yakuza loner in a series of crime films by Suzuki. One of Suzuki's most important works, KANTO WANDERER features Kobayashi as a bouncer at a gambling den. Bound to the gangsters's code of honour which forbids romance, he finds himself fighting his feelings for a woman who makes her living as a swindler. Extravagantly

ironic and visually flamboyant, KANTO WANDERER features some of Suzuki's splashiest effects: in the battle sequence, for instance, the sliding screens which form the walls of the club suddenly collapse, the screen goes blood red, and the flood of crimson just as quickly turns into a blinding white snow storm. WANDERER is a particular favourite of Japanese critics, including Tadao Sato who argues that its "histrionic effects" function as comic reminders of "the transience of all things," and Hasumi Shigehiko who calls the film "breathtaking," "enchanting," full of "surprising and avant-garde aesthetic effects."

Saturday, November 20 8:00 p.m.
(Note early start time)

GATE OF FLESH
(NIKUTAI NO MON)
Japan 1964 ■ 90 minutes
Cast: Jo Shishido, Yumiko Nogawa

Suzuki's most extreme film, GATE OF FLESH is decidedly not for the faint hearted, the politically correct, or the transcendently inclined: it lives up to its tawdry title in every graphic, eye-popping frame. FLESH is the unforgettable portrait of a group of prostitutes scrambling to survive amidst the corpse-strewn ruins of postwar Tokyo, where black marketeers battle for territory, and American soldiers and priests attempt to impose democracy and Christianity on the defeated nation. Suzuki's vision of decay and degradation is rendered all the more nightmarish by his exaggerated visual style, characterized by looming Scope close-ups and superimpositions; flagrantly fake, rawly lit sets; and garish, retina-ripping Fujicolor coding. Based on a notorious novel by Taijiro Tamura, FLESH is a prime example of the Nikkatsu "roman porno" genre, which made sex and violence not just similar but synonymous; three decades later, the film's scenes of sexual savagery have not diminished in their ability to shock.

Saturday, November 20 10:00 p.m.



Seijun Suzuki's GATE OF FLESH

"One of the giants of Japanese cinema. To discover Seijun Suzuki is to rediscover cinema's elemental appeal." - Tony Rayns

**DETECTIVE BUREAU 23:
GO TO HELL, BASTARD!**
(TANTEI JIMUSHO 23:
KUTABARE AKUTO DOMO)
Japan 1963 ■ 89 minutes
Cast: Jo Shishido, Naomi Hoshi

The title is the mildest thing about this giddy gangster film, which, *Variety* claims, would make Sam Fuller jealous with its baroque nuttiness and kinetic style. A private detective, moved by a television report about criminal activity, joins the police force. He becomes involved in an investigation of arms trafficking at the Tachikawa military base, following a trail that leads from sleazy nightclubs to the offices of high-placed officials and politicians. Critics see DETECTIVE BUREAU 23 as a pivotal Suzuki work, whose extreme stylization is a prelude to the relentless parody of such later masterpieces as TOKYO DRIFTER and BRANDED TO KILL.

Monday, November 22 8:45 p.m.

THE BASTARD
(AKUTARO)
Japan 1963 ■ 95 minutes
Cast: Ken Yamauchi, Masako Izumi

As Tony Rayns has pointed out, the 1920s setting and theme of THE BASTARD designates it as a prefiguration of Suzuki's masterpiece ELEGY TO VIOLENCE. More lyrical than his concurrent work for Nikkatsu, THE BASTARD is nevertheless spiked with cynicism, and deals with a key Suzuki theme: the manifestation of sexual repression in violence. An adolescent boy, chastised for his libidinal aggression, "meets his match in the person of a young woman obsessed with Strindberg" (Rayns). Their escalating but unconsummated passion finds its metaphor in the floods that are devastating the countryside. "In its resolutely unsentimental way, it recalls the early romantic melodramas of Ozu and Naruse—and it's a measure of Suzuki's exceptional talent that his film isn't diminished by the comparison" (Rayns).

Tuesday, November 23 8:45 p.m.

STORY OF A PROSTITUTE
(SHUMPUDEN)
Japan 1965 ■ 96 minutes
Cast: Yumiko Nogawa, Tamiyo Kawachi

The overwhelming success of GATE OF FLESH dictated a followup, and this "relentlessly hard-boiled" (Tony Rayns) vision of hell on earth was it. Also based on a Taijiro Tamura novel and known in Japan by the torrid title JOY GIRLS, the film is set during the Sino-Japanese war. A young prostitute is dispatched to a village on the Manchurian border for double duty, serving the soldiers by day and the officers by night. (Critics cite the film's explicit sexual dream sequences as stunning respite from its grim vision of war.) When the "comfort girl" falls in love with a soldier and he deserts his post, the military hierarchy pursues the lovers with a vengeance. (Compare and contrast with Mizoguchi's CRUCIFIED LOVERS from last winter's Cinematheque season.) Suzuki focuses on the humiliation of the prostitute, but rejects the cosmic resignation of Mizoguchi's cinema, instead positing his heroine's sexuality and her ultimate act of self-destruction as repudiations of authority.

Wednesday, November 24 8:45 p.m.

**ONE GENERATION
OF TATTOOS**
(IREZUMI ICHI-DAI)
Japan 1965 ■ 87 minutes
Cast: Hideki Takahashi, Hiroko Ito

The film that elicited the first warning from Nikkatsu studio bosses for "going too far," TATTOOS took a generic yakuza plot and smashed it to smithereens. Set in the thirties, it tells the old tale of the gangster who wants to go straight, but has to make one last hit before being released from the brotherhood. (The title refers to the magnificent tattoo which adorns the body of the film's hero, known as "Tetsu the White Tiger.") Suzuki soups up the familiar and the formulaic with bizarre angles (including shots from under the floor, peering up through tatami matting), kinky compositions, elaborate effects—he's particularly proud of the rain storm—and frame-breaking fight sequences. "Suzuki lavishes extraordi-