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CINEMA 1**Seijun Suzuki**
Branded to Kill
(Koroshi no Rakuin)

Japan 1967. Dir: Seijun Suzuki. Prod. Co: Nikkatsu. Script: Hachiro Guryu. Photo: Kazue Nagatsuka (b&w, Scope). Music: Naozumi Yamamoto. Art Dir: Sukezo Kawahara. Cast: Jo Shishido (Goro Hanada), Mariko Ogawa (Mami Hanada), Annu Mari (Misako Nakano), Koji Nanbara (No. 1 killer), Isao Tamagawa (Michihiko Yabuhara), Hiroshi Minami (Gihei Kasuga). 91 mins.

Hanada Goro is ranked 'No. 3 Killer' in the underworld. Gang-boss Yabuhara hires Hanada to pick up a mysterious man from a boat at Sagami Beach, and to escort him by car to a villa in the Nagano mountain area.

The mission turns out to be fraught with dangers, but Hanada accomplishes it. Yabuhara, meanwhile, seduces Hanada's wife. For his part, Hanada strikes up a friendship with a girl named Misako — who turns out to be working for Yabuhara too. Hanada next kills three men for Yabuhara: a customs officer, an oculist and a diamond seller. Then Misako asks him to kill a foreigner, and he bungles the job because a butterfly settles on his telescopic sight at the crucial moment. Failure cannot be tolerated in the underworld, and so Hanada faces execution himself. After some narrow escapes, he learns that he is to be 'hit' by the mysterious man he once escorted — the man who is ranked 'No. 1 Killer' . . .

This was the film with which Seijun Suzuki finally exasperated the production system at Nikkatsu: an absurdist thriller that 'de-constructs' the themes and rhetoric of the genre so thoroughly that it ends up resembling Godard's almost-contemporary *Made in USA*. Nikkatsu's president Hori announced himself "ashamed" that the company's trademark could appear on such a film, and promptly refused to supply the prints for a planned 'Suzuki Marathon Screening' organised by Tokyo students. Then Suzuki was fired, perhaps as an 'example' to other Nikkatsu directors, and his admirers organised a mass protest demonstration in the central Ginza district of Tokyo. The film is now widely accepted as one of Suzuki's best, a view shared by the present administration of Nikkatsu. — *Tony Rayns*