

# Branded to Kill (殺しの烙印, Koroshi no rakuin)

Japan | 1957 | 91 minutes

## Credits

<b>Director</b>	Seijun Suzuki
<b>Screenplay</b>	Hachiro Guryu/Takeo Kimura/Chûsei Sone/Atsushi Yamatoya
<b>Photography</b>	Kazue Nagatsuka
<b>Music</b>	Naozumi Yamamoto

## Cast

<b>Hanada Goro</b>	Jô Shishido
<b>Mami Hanada</b>	Mariko Ogawa
<b>Misako</b>	Anne Mari
<b>No.1</b>	Kôji Nanbara

## In Brief

A surreal, often barely comprehensible hit man Thriller about two rival assassins, no.1 and no.3 coming to blows. Hanada aka. No.3, is the third best assassin in Japan's organised crime sector, he also has a unique sexual fetish; he is aroused by the smell of boiling rice. Hanada meets a strange, beautiful, morbidly death obsessed woman named Misako, who sends him on a near fatal mission. Unfortunately Hanada misses his intended assassination target and finds himself on the run from his former employers, all of whom now want him dead, as does the mysterious no.1 killer, who begins a perversely unpredictable game of cat and mouse with no.3 in which the only winner will be the last man standing, if indeed there will be any winner at all.

Far stranger than it sounds, this film has a truly unique atmosphere and is stunningly shot in black and white widescreen format, as well as employing wilfully bizarre editing techniques which have no desire to stick to tried and tested standard chronology. Director Seijun Suzuki generates a disturbing, darkly erotic visual and thematic frisson, whereby the undercurrent of violence remains constant, seemingly able to break free at any given moment. The film continually develops in a wholly unpredictable and delightful fashion. A perversely unconventional treat of Japanese cinema.

- [www.thecultmovieguide.com](http://www.thecultmovieguide.com)

Branded to Kill ]is a 1967 Japanese yakuza film directed by Seijun Suzuki and starring Joe Shishido, Koji Nanbara, Annu Mari and Mariko Ogawa. It was a low budget, production line number for the Nikkatsu Company, originally released in a double bill with Shôgorô Nishimura's Burning Nature. The story follows Goro Hanada in his life as a contract killer. He falls in love with a woman named Misako, who recruits him for a seemingly impossible mission. When the mission fails, he becomes hunted by the phantom Number One Killer, whose methods threaten his sanity as much as his life.

The studio was unhappy with the original script and called in Suzuki to rewrite and direct it at the last minute. Suzuki came up with many of his ideas the night before or on the set while filming, and welcomed ideas from his collaborators. He gave the film a satirical, anarchic and visually eclectic bent which the studio had previously warned him away from. It was a commercial and critical disappointment and Suzuki was ostensibly fired for making "movies that make no sense and no money". Suzuki successfully sued Nikkatsu with support from student groups, like-minded filmmakers and the general public and caused a major controversy through the Japanese film industry. Suzuki was blacklisted and did not make another feature film for 10 years but became a counterculture hero.

The film grew a strong following, which expanded overseas in the 1980s, and has established itself as a cult classic. Film critics and enthusiasts now regard it as an absurdist masterpiece. It has been cited as an influence by filmmakers such as Jim Jarmusch, John Woo, Chan-wook Park and Quentin Tarantino. Thirty-four years after Branded to Kill, Suzuki filmed Pistol Opera (2001) with Nikkatsu, a loose sequel to the former. The company has also hosted two major retrospectives spotlighting his career.

## Plot

Goro Hanada, the Japanese underworld's third-ranked hitman, and his wife, Mami, fly into Tokyo and are met by Kasuga, a formerly ranked hitman turned taxi driver. Kasuga petitions Hanada to assist him in breaking back into the profession. Hanada agrees and the three go to a club owned by the yakuza boss Michihiko Yabuhara. The two men are hired to escort a client from Sagami Beach to Nagano. After the meeting, Yabuhara covertly seduces Hanada's wife. Hanada and Kasuga pick up a car designated for the job which unexpectedly has a corpse in the back seat. They dispose of the body, then meet the client and proceed towards their destination. En route Hanada spots an ambush. He dispatches a number of gunmen while Kasuga panics and flails about in hysterics. Foaming at the mouth, Kasuga charges an ambusher, Koh, the fourth-ranked hitman, and they kill each other. Hanada leaves the client to secure Koh's car but hears three gunshots and rushes back to find the client is safe and three additional ambushers have been shot cleanly through the forehead. At a second ambush, Hanada kills more gunmen and sets Sakura, the second-ranked hitman, on fire. Sakura madly rushes towards the client but is shot dead by him. On his way home Hanada's car breaks down. Misako, a mysterious woman with a deathwish, stops and gives him a ride. At home, he has rough sex with his wife, fueled by his obsession with sniffing boiling rice.

Yabuhara hires Hanada to kill four men, the first three being a customs officer, an ocularist and a jewellery dealer. Hanada snipes the



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first from behind a billboard's animatronic cigarette lighter, shoots the second from a basement up through a pipe drain when the latter leans over the sink and, ordered to finish quickly, blasts his way into the third's office and escapes on an advertising balloon. Misako then appears at his door and offers him a nearly impossible contract to kill a foreigner, which he cannot refuse having just been told the plan. During the job a butterfly lands on the barrel of his rifle causing him to miss his target and kill an innocent bystander. Misako tells him that he will now lose his rank and be killed. Hanada makes plans to leave the country but is shot by his wife who then sets fire to their apartment and flees. His belt buckle, however, stopped the bullet and he escapes the building. He finds Misako and they go to her apartment. After alternating failed attempts by him to seduce her and them to kill each other she succumbs to his advances when he promises to kill her. Afterwards, he finds he cannot as he has fallen in love with her. In a state of confusion he wanders the streets and passes out on the side of the road. The next day he finds his wife at Yabuhara's club. She tries to seduce him, then fakes hysteria and tells him Yabuhara paid her to kill him and that the three men he had killed had stolen from Yabuhara's diamond smuggling operation and the foreigner was an investigator sent by the supplier. Unmoved, Hanada kills her, gets drunk and waits for Yabuhara to return. Yabuhara arrives already dead with a bullet hole through the centre of his forehead.

Hanada returns to Misako's apartment where a film projector has been set up. It depicts Misako bound and tortured and directs him to a breakwater the following day where he is to be killed. Hanada submits to the demand but kills the killers instead. The former client arrives and announces himself as the legendary Number One Killer. He says he will kill Hanada but, in thanks for the work he has done, is only giving a warning at present. Hanada holes up in Misako's apartment and Number One begins an extended siege, taunting Hanada with threatening phone calls and forbidding him to leave the apartment. Eventually, Number One moves in with the now exhausted and inebriated Hanada under the pretext that he is deciding how to kill him. They agree to a temporary truce and set times to eat, sleep and, later, to link arms everywhere they go. Number One suggests they eat out one day and then disappears during the meal. At the apartment, Hanada finds a note and another film from Number One stating he will be waiting at a gymnasium with Misako. Hanada waits at the gymnasium but Number One does not show. As a bedraggled Hanada rises to leave, a tape recorder switches on explaining, "This is the way Number One works", he exhausts you and then kills you. Hanada puts a headband across his forehead and climbs into a boxing ring. Number One appears and shoots him. The headband stops the bullet and Hanada returns fire. Number One slumps to the ground but manages to shoot him a few times before dying. Hanada leaps and staggers around the ring declaring himself the new Number One. Misako enters the arena and, crazed, he instinctively shoots her dead then falls from the ring.

## Cast

- **Joe Shishido** as Goro Hanada, the Number Three Killer: a hitman with a fetish for the smell of boiling rice. He is gainfully employed by the yakuza until a butterfly lands on the barrel of his rifle during a "Devil's job". He misses his target and is marked for death—then descends into a world of alcohol and paranoia. Shishido has been called the face of Suzuki's films, owing in part to their frequent collaborations, this being among the most prominent. After middling success in Nikkatsu melodramas he underwent plastic surgery, enlarging his cheeks several sizes. He returned to tremendous success as a heavy and, soon thereafter, a star.
- **Koji Nanbara** as the Number One Killer: the legendary hitman whose existence remains a subject of debate. Incognito, he employs the yakuza to provide bodyguards. Later, he reappears with the intention of killing Hanada, first trapping him in an apartment, then moving in with him, before their final showdown in a public gymnasium.
- **Isao Tamagawa** as Michihiko Yabuhara: the yakuza boss that hires Hanada and seduces his wife. Upon the discovery that his diamond smuggling operation has been burgled, he employs Hanada to execute the guilty parties then adds him to the list when he flubs the job. His final appearance is with a bullet hole in his head.
- **Annu Mari** as Misako Nakajo: the femme fatale with a penchant for dead butterflies and birds. She picks Hanada up in her open top convertible when his car breaks down in the rain. Under Yabuhara's direction she enlists him to kill a foreigner. She attempts to kill Hanada but falls in love with him, which instigates her capture and use as bait by Number One. Mari has said she was experiencing suicidal urges at the time she first read the script and the character captivated her. "I loved her name, but it was her first line 'My dream is to die' that had a profound impact on me. It was like lightning."
- **Mariko Ogawa** as Mami Hanada: Hanada's wife who has a predilection towards walking around the house nude. Shortly after meeting Yabuhara she enters an affair with him. When her husband's career sours she attempts mariticide and flees—to be confronted later at Yabuhara's club.
- **Hiroshi Minami** as Gihei Kasuga: formerly a ranked hitman who lost his nerve and took to drinking. After introducing Hanada to Yabuhara he joins the former in a dangerous chauffeur mission. His nerves get the better of him and he experiences a short-lived mental breakdown.

## Production

The Nikkatsu Company conceived *Branded to Kill* as a low-budget hitman film, a subgenre of the studio's yakuza-oriented movies. Their standard B movie shooting schedule was applied, one week for pre-production, 25 days to shoot and three days for post-production. The budget was set at approximately 20 million yen. Shortly before filming began, with the release date



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already set, the script was deemed "inappropriate" by the head office and contract director Seijun Suzuki was brought in to do a rewrite. Studio head Kyūsaku Hori told Suzuki he had had to read it twice before he understood it. Suzuki suggested they drop the script but was ordered to proceed. The rewrite was done with his frequent collaborator Takeo Kimura and six assistant directors, including Atsushi Yamatoya (who also played Killer Number Four). The eight men had worked under the joint pen name Hachiro Guryu ("Group of Eight") since the mid 1960s. Nikkatsu was building leading man Joe Shishido into a star and assigned him to the film. They specified that the script was to be written with this aim. The film also marks Shishido's first nude scene. Suzuki originally wanted Kiwako Taichi, a new talent from the famous theatre troupe Bungakuza, for the female lead but she took a part in another film. Instead, Suzuki selected Annu Mari, another new actress who had been working in Nikkatsu's music halls. In casting the role of Hanada's wife, Suzuki selected Mariko Ogawa from outside of the studio as none of the contract actresses would do nude scenes.

Suzuki did not use storyboards and disliked pre-planning. He preferred to come up with ideas either the night before or on the set as he felt that the only person who should know what is going to happen is the director. He also felt that it was sudden inspiration that made the picture. An example is the addition of the Number Three Killer's rice-sniffing habit. Suzuki explained that he wanted to present a quintessentially "Japanese" killer, "If he were Italian, he'd get turned on by macaroni, right?" Suzuki has commended Shishido on his similar drive to make the action scenes as physical and interesting as possible. In directing his actors, Suzuki let them play their roles as they saw fit and only intervened when they went "off track". For nude scenes the actors wore maebari, or adhesive strips, over their genitals in accordance with censorship

practices. The film was edited in one day, a task made easy by Suzuki's method of shooting only the necessary footage. He had picked up the habit during his years working as an assistant director for Shochiku when film stock remained sparse after the war. Post-production was completed on June 14, 1967, the day before the film was released.

## Style

Like many of its yakuza film contemporaries, *Branded to Kill* shows the influence of the James Bond films and film noir, though the film's conventional genre basis was combined with satire, kabuki stylistics and a pop art aesthetic. It was further set apart from its peers, and Seijun Suzuki's previous films, through its gothic sensibilities, unusual atonal score and what artist and academic Philip Brophy called a "heightened otherness". The result has been alternately ascribed as a work of surrealism, absurdism, the avant garde and included in the Japanese New Wave movement, though not through any stated intention of its director. Suzuki employed a wide variety of techniques and claimed his singular focus was to make the film as entertaining as possible.

Genre conventions are satirized and mocked throughout the film. In American noirs, heroes, or anti-heroes, typically strive to be the best in their field. Here the process was formalized into a rankings system obsessed over by its players. The femme fatale—a noir staple—Misako, does not simply entice the protagonist and bring the threat of death but obsesses him and is obsessed with all things death herself. She tries to kill him, wants to kill herself and surrounds herself with dead things. Hanada's libido is as present as that of the protagonists of similar films of the period, such as James Bond, though perversely exaggerated. Reviewer Rumsey Taylor likened Hanada's boiled rice sniffing fetish to Bond's "shaken, not stirred" martini order. The film also deviates from the opening killer-for-hire scenario to touch on such varied subgenres as psychosexual romance, American Gothic thriller and Odd Couple slapstick.

The film industry is a subject of satire as well. For example, Japanese censorship often involved masking prohibited sections of the screen. Here Suzuki preemptively masked his own compositions but animated them and incorporated them into the film's design. In the story, after Hanada finds he is unable to kill Misako he wanders the streets in a state of confusion. The screen is obscured by animated images with accompanying sounds associated to her. The effects contributed to the eclectic visual and sound design while signifying his obsessive love. Author Stephen Teo proposed that the antagonistic relationship between Hanada and Number One may have been analogous of Suzuki's relationship with studio president Kyūsaku Hori. He compared Hanada's antagonizers to those who had been pressuring Suzuki to rein in his style over the previous two years. Teo cited Number One's sleeping with his eyes open and urinating where he sits, which the character explains as techniques one must master to become a "top professional."

The film was shot in black and white Nikkatsuscope (synonymous with CinemaScope at a 2.35:1 aspect ratio). Due to the wide frame, moving a character forward did not produce the dynamic effect Suzuki desired. Instead, he relied on spotlighting and chiaroscuro imagery to create excitement and suspense. Conventional framing and film grammar were disregarded in favour of spontaneous inspiration. In editing, Suzuki frequently abandoned continuity, favouring abstract jumps in time and space as he found it made the film more interesting.

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## Reception

Branded to Kill was released to Japanese theatres on June 15, 1967, in a double bill with Nishimura Shōgorō's Burning Nature. The films were financially unsuccessful and the former fared likewise among critics. Kinema Junpo magazine reported that the films "resulted in less than 2,000 viewers at Asakusa and Shinjuku and about 500 at Yurakucho on the second day." Both Joe Shishido and Yamatoya Atsushi later recounted having seen Branded to Kill in practically empty theatres, the latter on its opening night. Iijima Kōichi, a critic for the film journal Eiga Geijutsu, wrote that "the woman buys a mink coat and thinks only about having sex. The man wants to kill and feels nostalgic about the smell of boiling rice. We cannot help being confused. We do not go to theaters to be puzzled." Nikkatsu Studios had been criticized for catering to rebellious youth audiences, a specialty of contract director Seijun Suzuki, whose films had grown increasingly anarchic through the 1960s. This had earned him a large following but it had also drawn the ire of studio head Kyūsaku Hori. On April 25, 1968, Suzuki received a telephone call from a company secretary informing him that he would not be receiving his salary that month. Two of Suzuki's friends met with Hori the next day and were told, "Suzuki's films were incomprehensible, that they did not make any money and that Suzuki might as well give up his career as a director as he would not be making films for any other companies.



Branded to Kill first reached international audiences in the 1980s, featuring in various film festivals and retrospectives dedicated wholly or partially to Suzuki, which was followed by home video releases in the late 1990s. It garnered a reputation as one of his most unconventional, revered Nikkatsu films and an international cult classic. It has been declared a masterpiece by the likes of film critic Chuck Stephens and film director Quentin Tarantino. Modified comparisons to the films of a "gonzo Sam Fuller", or Jean-Luc Godard, are not uncommon. In a 1992 Rolling Stone magazine article, film director Jim Jarmusch affectionately recommended it as, "Probably the strangest and most perverse 'hit man' story in cinema." Jasper Sharp of the Midnight Eye wrote, "[It] is a bloody marvellous looking film and arguably the pinnacle of the director's strikingly eclectic style." However, the workings of the plot remain elusive to most. Sharp digressed, "[T]o be honest it isn't the most accessible of films and for those unfamiliar with Suzuki's unorthodox and seemingly disjointed style it will probably take a couple of viewings before the bare bones of the plot begin to emerge."

After another unrelated 10 year hiatus, Suzuki and Nikkatsu reunited for the Style to Kill retrospective, held in April, 2001, at Theatre Shinjuku in Tokyo. It featured 28 films by Suzuki, including Branded to Kill. Suzuki appeared at the gala opening with star Annu Mari. Joe Shishido appeared for a talk session at an all-night, four-film screening. An accompanying Branded to Kill visual directory was published. The following year, the Tanomi Company produced a limited edition 1/6 scale "Joe the Ace" action figure based on Shishido's character in the film, complete with a miniature rice cooker. In 2006, Nikkatsu celebrated the 50th anniversary of Suzuki's directorial debut by hosting the Seijun Suzuki 48 Film Challenge retrospective at the 19th Tokyo International Film Festival. It showcased all of his films. He and Mari were again in attendance.

## Legacy

As one of Seijun Suzuki's most influential films, Branded to Kill has been acknowledged as a source of inspiration by such internationally renowned directors as Hong Kong's John Woo, South Korea's Chan-wook Park and America's Jim Jarmusch and Quentin Tarantino. Jarmusch listed it as his favourite hitman film, alongside Le Samourai (also 1967), and thanked Suzuki in the screen credits of his own hitman film Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai. Most notably, Jarmusch mirrored a scene in which the protagonist kills a target by shooting up from a basement through a sink drain. He went so far as to screen the film for Suzuki when the two met in Tokyo. Critics have noted Branded to Kill's influence on the films of Wong Kar-wai, such as his hitman film Fallen Angels (1995), as well as Johnnie To's Fulltime Killer (2001). However, Branded to Kill was most influential in its native Japan. The film's premise, in which hitmen try to kill each other in competition for the Number One rank, is spoofed in films such as Takeshi Kitano's Getting Any? and Sabu's Postman Blues, which features a character named Hitman Joe. Branded to Kill played a role in the development of the long-running Lupin III franchise. It also had a profound impact, through Suzuki's firing and the resulting student uprising, in the beginnings of the movement film, usually underground or anti-establishment films which focused on issues of import to audiences, as opposed to production line genre pictures.

Thirty-four years after Branded to Kill, Suzuki directed Pistol Opera (2001), a loose sequel co-produced by Shochiku and filmed at Nikkatsu. The character Goro Hanada returns as a mentor figure to the new Number Three, played by Makiko Esumi. However, Joe Shishido was replaced by Mikijiro Hira in the role of Hanada. Suzuki has said that the original intention was for Shishido to play the character again but that the film's producer, Satoru Ogura, wanted Hira for the role. Reviews were of a favourable nature on par with its predecessor. Jonathan Rosenbaum supposed, "Can I call a film a masterpiece without being sure that I understand it? I think so ..." Although some, such as Elvis Mitchell for The Village Voice, felt its zeal fell slightly short of the original.

- wikipedia

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