

Cruel Gun Story (Kenju zankoku monogatari)

Japan | 1964 | 91 minutes

Credits

Director	Takumi Furukawa
Screenplay	Hisataka Kai Haruhiko Ohyabu
Photography	Saburo Isayama
Music	Masayoshi Ikeda
Cast	
Togawa	Jô Shishido
Rie	Chieko Matsubara
Takizawa	Tamio Kawaji
Shirai	Yuji Odaka

In Brief

Shishido plays a criminal being released early from prison after killing the truck driver who hit his sister and made her paralyzed. The early release comes from another gangster having pulled some strings to get Shishido out so he can use him for a job, to rob an armored car transport taking money from a race track to the bank. As always not everyone is what they seem. A typical heist movie, with the Nikkatsu Action borderless element coming down to the American fighter planes constantly flying above and the American GIs visible in bars and in the streets, and Shishido's wish to escape to Brazil along with his sister.

Even if it's not as entertaining as *A Colt Is My Passport*, *Cruel Gun Story* is still a great film. Shishido is as ruthless as ever and there are some great shootouts to go along with the beautiful black and white cinematography.

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CRUEL GUN STORY: OFFTRACK BET

The year before had been a momentous one: 1963. Seijun Suzuki had finally broken through as Nikkatsu's supreme B-level stylist with *Youth of the Beast*, while Shohei Imamura scrambled to the top of level A with his socio-entomological triumph *The Insect Woman*. Over at Toho, Akira Kurosawa released his final modern-dress masterpiece, *High and Low*, and in December, Yasujiro Ozu, who'd been making films for Shochiku since 1927, quietly passed away.

By 1964, Yujiro Ishihara had made close to fifty films for Nikkatsu, and had lately been mellowing into the melodrama-heavy "mood action" niche the studio was happy to tailor for him. Akira Kobayashi had risen to a stature almost equal to Ishihara's, even as the mukokuseki films themselves were beginning to fade. And while the studio's Diamond Line still shone brightly, increasingly it was the least likely of those mighty guys, Joe Shishido, who began to turn up in one stylistically distinguished "hard action" potboiler after another—regardless of whether the director was a known comic-nihilist aesthete like Suzuki or a little-sung studio workhorse like Buichi Saito, who catered to Shishido's surreal (and surgically altered) side in master-of-disguises mysteries like *Kaito X: The Man Without a Face*.

In director Takumi Furukawa, Shishido also seemed to sense a kindred soul, and their 1964 collaboration resulted in one of the hardest-boiled heist flicks Nikkatsu would ever produce: *Cruel Gun Story*, a seething denunciation of postwar American influence in Japan disguised as a tough-as-1930s Warner Bros. variation on Stanley Kubrick's *The Killing*, complete with a carefully designed (and easily fouled) plan to rob millions in horse-racing receipts, a crippled innocent in a wheelchair, and squadrons of Air Force fighter jets screaming overhead. Opening on a close-up of Shishido's dour countenance, tightly framed behind a mesh of barbed wire, the tale of greed and betrayal that follows—set largely in an abandoned, litter-strewn U.S. Army party town—takes a page from *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and a tip from Anton Chekhov: if Shishido finds himself brooding over past injustices next to an oil-fueled heater in the first act, it's a cinch he'll be having an even hotter time in old Yamato by the film's incendiary act 3.

Furukawa's debut feature had been *Season of the Sun* (1956), the taiyozoku scorcher that started it all, and he'd make another film with Ishihara before the year was through. But soon, management decided to pair young Yu-chan primarily with directors closer to his own age, and Furukawa, some twenty years the actor's senior, didn't fit the bill. (Neither did Suzuki, who never worked with Nikkatsu's number one star.) Furukawa remained at Nikkatsu for over a decade, working often with the other Diamond Line stars, before following Umetsugu Inoue and *Crazed Fruit* director Ko Nakahira, in 1967, to Hong Kong's Shaw Brothers Studio, which was willing to pay handsomely to import higher quality Japanese production standards. Once there, he changed his screen moniker to Tai Kao-mei, and promptly cranked out two glossy, gadget-laden espionage capers in the highest mukokuseki style, *The Black Falcon* and *Kiss and Kill*. Shaw's own top directors quickly began to follow suit. Internationalized in essence and from inception, mukokuseki action, just as its embers were dimming at Nikkatsu, had once again gone global.

Chuck Stephens

