

Take Aim at the Police Van (Sono gosôsha wo nerae: 'Jûsangô taihisen' yori)

Japan | 1960 | 79 minutes

Credits

Director	Seijun Suzuki
Screenplay	Shinichi Sekizawa (writer) Kazuo Shimada (story)
Photography	Shigeyoshi Mine
Music	Koichi Kawabe

Cast

Daijiro Tamon	Michitaro Mizushima
Tsunako	Mari Shiraki
Yuko Hamashima	Misako Watanabe
Jube Hamashima	Shinsuke Ashida

In Brief

A sharpshooter kills two prisoners in a police van at night. The guard on the van is suspended for six months; he's Tamon, an upright, modest man. He begins his own investigation into the murders. Who were the victims, who are their relatives and girlfriends, who else was on the van that night? As he doggedly investigates, others die, coincidences occur, and several leads take him to the Hamaju Agency, which may be supplying call girls. Its owner is in jail, his daughter, the enigmatic Yuko, keeps turning up where Tamon goes. Tamon believes he can awaken good in people, but has he met his match? Will he solve the murders or be the next victim? And who is Akiba? J. Hailey [IMDB.com](#)



As Toshio Masuda's *Rusty Knife* draws to a close, Mie Kitahara and Yujiro Ishihara wander slowly into the distance, her a few deferential steps behind him, tracing parallel lines that ultimately converge somewhere far off along the horizon—far beyond the mound of mud into which that eponymous dagger has at last been ceremonially impaled. Two years later, this real-life couple would jet off to Hawaii for an illicit and semiscandalous premarital “honeymoon” of their own (they consummated the legal formalities in public, at the Nikkatsu Hotel, a few months later, and stayed together until Ishihara's death from cancer in 1987). So, too, in 1960—with the release of the at once literally and zaniily entitled *Take Aim at the Police Van*—was another sort of Nikkatsu honeymoon in full flower, as director Seijun Suzuki began to conclude the cycle of *kayo eiga* (pop song films) and occasional noirish crime capers with which he'd begun his career at the studio, and edge (along with the studio's new *mukokuseki* strain of action) toward the stormier phase of stylistic invention that would ultimately prove the breaking point in his relationship with the studio. (The divorce was finalized in 1968, when Nikkatsu boss Kyusaku Hori pronounced Suzuki's *Branded to Kill* “incomprehensible” and ordered the director off the lot.)

With its surfeit of blind alleys, sudden bludgeonings, and delirium montages, its Wellesian proliferation of parting-shot punks, shadow-masked thugs, and conveniently faked deaths, Suzuki's *Police Van* harkens distinctly back to his pre-*mukokuseki* ways, beginning with its fist-faced forty-eight-year-old leading man, Michitaro Mizushima—hardly the sort of matinee idol the new Nikkatsu action films were designed to feature, the so-called Diamond Line of mighty young guys like Ishihara and Akira Kobayashi (who quickly moved from *Rusty Knife*'s supporting role to the head of his own *mukokuseki* franchise, as a rambling guitarist and gunslinger in the *Wataridori*, “wandering bird,” series), and shortly thereafter, Tetsuya Watari and Joe Shishido. Mizushima—who had begun his career as a boy, making featurettes for Tomu Uchida well before the war, and worked for Suzuki on *Underworld Beauty* two years prior—plays Tamon, a prison guard who's suspended when the vanload of prisoners he's escorting is attacked by snipers and a con is fatally wounded, and who then begins an unofficial investigation of the case that leads him straight into the arms of femme fatale/Zen archer Misako Watanabe. But even as *Police Van* largely hews to Suzuki's earlier crime style, it springs suddenly and unmistakably to adolescent life during Tamon's encounters with a jukebox-intoxicated teenage sweater girl named Shoko. Mizushima would continue making movies, at Nikkatsu and elsewhere, for another thirty years, but after *Police Van*, Suzuki's films would feature almost exclusively younger faces.



There are just a few of the outré visual shenanigans for which Suzuki would come to be known after 1960 on display in *Police Van*: the faceless gunman who lovingly strokes his rifle's stock before sticking his bubblegum—for safekeeping—atop its scope; the onsen hooker who comes lurching out of the private show she's been conducting like some burlesque Saint Sebastian, an arrow lodged fatally in her tit. Suzuki's formative days at Nikkatsu would soon be over, but his wildest creations were still to come.

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Seijun Suzuki (鈴木清順)

Seijun Suzuki born Seitaro Suzuki on May 24, 1923, is a Japanese filmmaker, actor, and screenwriter. His films are renowned by film enthusiasts worldwide for their jarring visual style, irreverent humour, nihilistic cool and entertainment-over-logic sensibility. He made 40 predominately B-movies for the Nikkatsu Company between 1956 and 1967, working most prolifically in the yakuza genre. His increasingly surreal style began to draw the ire of the studio in 1963 and culminated in his ultimate dismissal for what is now regarded his magnum opus, *Branded to Kill* (1967), starring notable collaborator Joe Shishido. Suzuki successfully sued the studio for wrongful dismissal, but he was blacklisted for 10 years after that. As an independent filmmaker, he won critical acclaim and a Japanese Academy Award for his *Taishō Trilogy*, *Zigeunerweisen* (1980), *Kagero-za* (1981) and *Yumeji* (1991).

His films remained widely unknown outside of Japan until a series of theatrical retrospectives beginning in the mid 1980s, home video releases of key films such as *Branded to Kill* and *Tokyo Drifter* in the late 1990s and tributes by such acclaimed filmmakers as Jim Jarmusch, Takeshi Kitano, Wong Kar-wai and Quentin Tarantino signaled his international discovery. Suzuki has continued making films, albeit sporadically. In Japan, he is more commonly recognized as an actor for his numerous roles in Japanese films and television.

Suzuki was born during the Taishō period, and three months before the Great Kantō Earthquake, in the Nihonbashi Ward in Tokyo. His younger brother, Kenji Suzuki (now a retired NHK television announcer), was born six years his junior. His family was in the textile trade. After earning a degree at a Tokyo Trade School in 1941, Suzuki applied to the college of the Ministry of Agriculture, but failed the entrance exam due to poor marks in chemistry and physics. A year later he successfully enrolled in a Hirosaki college.

In 1943, he was recruited by the Imperial Japanese Army during the national student mobilization to serve in World War II. Sent to East Abiko, Chiba, he was assigned the rank of Private Second Class. He was shipwrecked twice throughout his military service; first the cargo ship that was to take him to the front was destroyed by an American submarine and he fled to the Philippines. Later, the freighter that took him to Taiwan sank after an attack by the American air force, he spent 7 or 8 hours in the ocean before being rescued. In 1946, having attained the rank of Second Lieutenant in the Meteorological Corps, he returned to Hiroshi and completed his studies.

Next he applied to the prestigious University of Tokyo, but again failed the entrance exam. At the invitation of a friend, who had also failed the exam, Suzuki enrolled into the film department of the Kamakura Academy. In October 1948, he passed the Shochiku Company's entrance exam and was hired as an assistant director in the company's Ōfuna Studio. There he worked under directors Minora Shibuya, Yasushi Sasaki, Noboru Nakamura and Oniwa Hideo before joining the regular crew of Tsuruo Iwama.

His directorial debut, credited to his real name, Seitarō Suzuki, was *Victory Is Mine*, a *kayo eiga*, or pop song film, part of a subgenre that functioned as a vehicle for hit pop records and singers. Impressed by the film's quality Nikkatsu signed him to a longterm contract. Nearly all of the films that he made for Nikkatsu were program pictures, or B-movies, production-line genre films made on a tight schedule and shoestring budget that were meant to fill out the second half of a double feature. B-directors were expected to work fast, take any and every script that was assigned to them and they refused scripts only at the risk being dismissed. Suzuki maintained an impressive pace, averaging 3½ films per year, and claims to have turned down only 2 or 3 scripts during his years at the studio.

His third film and first yakuza action movie, *Satan's Town*, linked him inexorably to the genre. *Underworld Beauty* (1958) marked his first CinemaScope film and was also the first to be credited to his assumed name, Seijun Suzuki.

Having enjoyed moderate success, his work began to draw more attention, especially among student audiences, with 1963's *Youth of the Beast* which is considered his "breakthrough" by film scholars and Suzuki himself calls it his "first truly original film." His style increasingly shirked genre conventions, favouring visual excess and visceral excitement over a coherent plot and injecting madcap humour into a normally solemn genre, developing into a distinctive "voice". This development was furthered with the assistance of like-minded collaborators. Suzuki considered his production designer, Takeo Kimura, to be among the most important.

His fan base grew rapidly, but did not extend to studio president Kyusaku Hori. Beginning with *Tattooed Life*, the studio issued Suzuki his first warning for "going too far". He responded with *Carmen from Kawachi* after which he was ordered to "play it straight" and had his budget slashed for his next film. the result was *Tokyo Drifter*, an ostensibly routine potboiler made into a jaw-dropping, eye-popping



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fantasia. Further reduced to filming in black-and-white Suzuki made his 40th film in his 12 years with the company, *Branded to Kill* (1967), considered an avant-garde masterpiece by critics, for which Hori promptly fired him.

Suzuki v. Nikkatsu

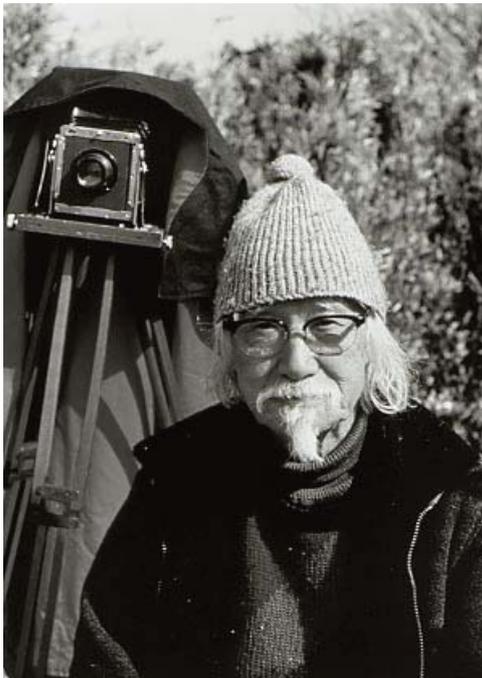
On April 25, 1968, Suzuki received a telephone call from a Nikkatsu secretary informing him that he would not be receiving his salary for that month. Two friends of Suzuki met with Hori the next day and were informed that "Suzuki's films were incomprehensible, that they did not make any money and that Suzuki might as well give up his career as a director as he would not be making films for any other companies." At that time the student-run film society Cine Club, headed by Kazuko Kawakita, was sponsoring a major retrospective of Suzuki's films; meant to be the first in Japan to honour a Japanese director. It was scheduled to begin on May 10, but Hori withdrew all of his films from distribution and refused to release them. The students were told that "Nikkatsu could not afford to cultivate a reputation for making films understood only by an exclusive audience and that showing incomprehensible and thus bad films would disgrace the company," adding that, "Suzuki's films would not be shown for some time in theaters or by the Cine Club."

Suzuki reported the illegal termination of his contract and the removal of his films from distribution to the Japanese Film Directors Association. Association Chairman Heinosuke Gosho met with Hori on May 2, but was unable to resolve the matter. Gosho then issued a public declaration condemning Nikkatsu for breach of contract and violation of Suzuki's right to freedom of speech. On the day of the intended retrospective, the Cine Club met to discuss the situation. Two hundred people attended, much exceeding their expectations. A three-hour debate ensued as to whether they should negotiate the release of the films, or confront Nikkatsu directly. The former was agreed upon and it was decided that efforts had to be made to keep the public informed.

On June 7, after repeated attempts to reason with Nikkatsu, Suzuki took the studio to court, suing for breach of contract and personal damages amounting to ¥7 380 000. He also demanded that Hori send letters of apology to the three major newspapers on account that Hori's statements gave the impression that all of his films were bad. He then called a press conference with representatives of the Japanese Film Directors Association, the Actors Guild, the Scriptwriters Guild, ATG and the Cine Club. Among the participants were directors Nagisa Oshima, Masahiro Shinoda and Kei Kumai. The only group not represented was the Nikkatsu Directors Association.

The Cine Club held a public demonstration on June 12, which resulted in the formation of a joint committee supporting Suzuki against Nikkatsu. The committee was composed mostly of directors, actors, large student film groups and independent filmmakers. This also marked the first time the public became involved in a type of dispute normally confined to the industry. The Cine Club, and other similar groups, mobilized the public, holding panel discussions and leading mass demonstrations against the studio. The public support, garnered at the height of student movement, was based on a wide appreciation of Suzuki's films and the idea that audiences should be able to see the types of films they wanted to see. This shook the film industry by the fact that the public was making demands rather than passively accepting their product.

Throughout the lawsuit, 19 witnesses were heard over a two and a half year process including directors, newspaper reporters, film critics and two members of the film-going public. Kohshi Ueno writes of Suzuki's own testimony on the making of *Branded to Kill*, "A film scheduled for production was suddenly deemed inappropriate and Suzuki was called in at very short notice to fill the gap. The release date had already been set when Suzuki was asked to write the script. He suggested dropping the script when the head of the studio told him he had to read it twice before he understood it, but the company directed him to make the film. According to Suzuki, Nikkatsu was in no position to criticize him for a film that he made to help them out in an emergency." Suzuki had never before disclosed this information or discussed any internal company affairs and his testimony exposed the fact that the major studios assigned films to directors at random, improperly publicized them and expected directors to carry any blame.



It also came to light that, with the industry in decline since the early 1960s, by 1968 Nikkatsu was in the midst of a financial crisis. The studio had accumulated a ¥1 845 000 debt due to irresponsible management and was to undergo a massive restructuring. Film crew sizes were to be reduced, time cards introduced and advanced approval was required for all overtime.[18] Hori, known as a totalitarian figure, unaccustomed to retracting statements or granting requests, had made an example of Suzuki apparently on the basis of his dislike of the film. In a New Year's speech to the company he repeatedly emphasized that he wanted to make films that were "easily understandable".

On February 12, 1971 testimony was completed and a verdict expected. However, in March the court advised a settlement, explaining appeals were extremely time consuming. Negotiations began on March 22 and concluded on December 24, three and a half years after the case had begun. Nikkatsu paid Suzuki ¥1 000 000, a fraction of his original claim, and Hori was forced to apologize for comments he made while serving as president. In a separate agreement Nikkatsu donated *Fighting Elegy* and *Branded to Kill* to the Tokyo National Museum of Modern Art's Film Centre. At the time of settlement Suzuki expressed fears that if he had continued to fight he might not even be able to get an apology from the failing company. During the course of the litigation Nikkatsu was being slowly dismantled. Hori's plans to restructure the company were unsuccessful and

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Nikkatsu was forced to liquidate studios and headquarter buildings. It released two final films in August 1971 and by November began producing roman porno, softcore romantic pornography. Despite Suzuki's victory with wide support from the public and film world he was blacklisted by all major production companies and unable to make another film for 10 years.

Late recognition

To sustain himself during the trial and proceeding black list years Suzuki published books of essays and directed several television movies, series and commercials. The trial and protests had made him into a counterculture icon and his Nikkatsu films became quite popular at midnight screenings, playing to packed audiences. He also began acting for other directors in small parts and cameos. His first credited screen role was a special appearance in Kazuki Omori's *Don't Wait Until Dark!* (1975).

Shochiku, the company that started him as an assistant director, produced his return to film direction in 1977, *A Tale of Sorrow and Sadness*, a golf expose cum psychological thriller penned by sports-oriented manga illustrator Ikki Kajiwara. Joe Shishido appears in a brief cameo. The film was met poorly critically and popularly.

He collaborated with producer Genjiro Arato in 1980 and made the first part of what would become his Taishō trilogy, *Zigeunerweisen*, a psychological, period, ghost story, named after a gramophone record of gypsy violin music by Pablo de Sarasate featured prominently in the film. When exhibitors declined to show the film, Arato screened it himself in an inflatable mobile dome to great success. It won Honourable Mention at the 31st Berlin International Film Festival, was nominated for 9 Japanese Academy Awards, winning four, including best director and best film, and was voted the no. 1 Japanese film of the 1980s by Japanese critics. He followed the film with *Kagero-za*, made the following year, and completed the trilogy ten years later with *Yumeji*.

Italy hosted the first partial retrospective of his films outside of Japan at the 1984 Pesaro International Film Festival. The 1994 touring retrospective *Branded to Thrill: The Delirious Cinema of Suzuki Seijun* showcased 14 of his films. In 2001 Nikkatsu hosted the *Style to Kill* retrospective featuring more than 20 of his films. In celebration of 50th anniversary of his directorial debut Nikkatsu again hosted the 2006 Suzuki Seijun 48 Film Challenge showcasing all of his films to date at the Tokyo International Film Festival.

He made a loose sequel to *Branded to Kill* with *Pistol Opera* (2001). Makiko Esumi replaced Joe Shishido as the number 3 killer. This was followed by *Princess Raccoon* (2005), starring Zhang Ziyi, a musical love story. In a 2006 interview, he said that he has no plans to direct any further films, citing health concerns, however, he attended the 2008 Tokyo Project Gathering, a venue serving film financing and international co-productions, and pitched a film titled *A Goldfish of the Flame*.

Filmmaking technique

As a contract B director at Nikkatsu, Suzuki's films were made following a rigid structure. He was assigned a film and script, and could only refuse it at the risk of losing his job. He claims to have turned down only two or three scripts in his time with Nikkatsu, but always modified the scripts both in preproduction and during shooting. Nikkatsu also assigned an actor for the lead, or leads, either a (usually 2nd-tier) star or one being groomed for stardom. The rest of the cast was not assigned but typically drawn from the studio's pool of contract actors. Most studio A films had a set budget of ¥45 million where Suzuki's black-and-white Bs ran 20 million and his colour films were provided an additional 3 million. His films were scheduled 10 days for pre-production, such as location scouting, set design and costumes, 25 days for shooting and 3 days for post-production, such as editing and dubbing. Within this framework he had a greater degree of control than the A directors as the cheaper B productions drew a less watchful eye from the head office.

Taken from Wikipedia.



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