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Suzuki Seijun and Postwar Japanese Cinema, by William Carroll. Columbia University Press, 2022, 286 pp.

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Suzuki Seijun's extensive filmography cuts across such a wide range of genres and styles that only his most extravagant films have typically stood out to Western programmers and audiences. The absurd and comical excesses of films such as *Tokyo Drifter* (*Tōkyō nagaremono*, 1966) and *Branded to Kill* (*Koroshi no rakuin*, 1967) have led to an image of Suzuki as primarily a purveyor of idiosyncratic provocations. His position within the annals of postwar Japanese cinema has perhaps been further complicated by his extensive genre work for studio Nikkatsu, despite the richness of many of these films; when placed alongside contemporaneous directors who were more explicitly experimental, political, or poetic, Suzuki's filmography has seemingly proven more challenging to assemble under a coherent authorial identity. William Carroll's *Suzuki Seijun and Postwar Japanese Cinema* offers an effective re-evaluation of Suzuki's career, presenting a lucid study of the work of a director who has often been dismissed as a "formally inventive but frivolous and nonsensical filmmaker", one whose innovations within a rigid studio system conflated genre filmmaking with avant-garde experimentation, and whose dismissal by his studio galvanised a politically agitated Left into active protest (128). Carroll positions the acrimonious firing of Suzuki by Nikkatsu at the centre of a complex entanglement of ideologies, movements, artists, and institutions that collided in Japan's postwar era. His survey of the New Left intellectual scene and the generation of cinephiles that would follow, establishes the foundation for the book's critical perspective on Suzuki's oeuvre, and places the director at the centre of major cultural, political, and industrial changes that took place at the end of the 1960s and after. Carroll's discussion of the work of theorists such as Hasumi Shigehiko frames the book's examination of Suzuki's filmography and its position alongside the work of more overtly political and experimental filmmakers such as Ōshima Nagisa. In addition, the book provides a detailed analysis of Suzuki's techniques as a director, explored though key scenes and sequences from his films and accompanied by a coherent dissection of the predominant features of a filmography that has often been regarded as erratic. In distilling the essence of Suzuki's style down to specific techniques and methodologies, Carroll steps behind the extravagant surface of Suzuki's films and catalogues the mechanics responsible for the director's unique style.

Suzuki's tenure with Nikkatsu coincided with a period of decline in the Japanese film industry, with collapsing cinema attendance in large part due to television's home invasion of an economically recovering post-war generation. These industry changes took place against a backdrop of profound societal upheaval: Japan's defeat in the Second World War, its subsequent occupation by American forces, and the removal or reshaping of key societal frameworks led to an ongoing cultural identity crisis. Postwar Japan was nonetheless a culturally fertile era, remarkable for a ferocious proliferation of artistic activity, perhaps most

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notably in cinema. This Japanese New Wave (a term Carroll disputes) was similar to other New Waves in Europe at the time in its mixing of leftist politics and experimental art. Cine-clubs and cinephile culture emerged on university campuses and in new independent exhibition centres, as part of an overall shift in how films were screened, distributed, and studied, coinciding with a reappraisal of the position of the film director and the emergence of independent filmmaking practices and structures. New strands of film theory came to prominence, building on poststructuralist thinking and increasingly cognisant of trans-media discourses. Suzuki's work, ostensibly mass-market genre entertainment, found appreciative audiences among this new generation of cinephile film enthusiasts and student political thinkers; he was celebrated on one hand as an exciting cinematic rule breaker and on the other as an anti-authoritarian figurehead. Key provocateurs such as Adachi Masao and others from Wakamatsu Kōji's independent production company became champions and programmers of Suzuki's films.

The conflation of social discontent and student protests with a politically committed cinephile culture meant that when Suzuki was unceremoniously fired from Nikkatsu in 1968, his fight against the studio became a *cause célèbre* that rallied various contingents of the Left who were fighting a range of political and social issues. What became known as the Suzuki Seijun Incident centred on the dismissive proclamation by Nikkatsu studio head Hori Kyūsaku, which denounced Suzuki as the maker of "incomprehensible films", going on to state that "to screen [Suzuki's films] publicly would be an embarrassment for Nikkatsu" (20). Suzuki's firing followed the release of what would become one of his most celebrated works, *Branded to Kill*, a bewildering deconstruction of the hitman film that Nikkatsu regarded as a failure, and which came after repeated warnings to Suzuki to curb his stylistic excesses. Carroll offers an interesting read of *Branded to Kill* as an allegory for the director's trapped position within the studio system (23–24). Suzuki, an efficient and prolific studio workman, may not have been the most obvious choice for artistic martyrdom but, as Carroll notes, the public announcement by Hori "reframed the dispute as one of artist versus studio and transformed Suzuki from a mere victim of his studio's financial problems into a kind of radical" (21). Protests ensued that put Suzuki's dismissal on the same stage as the anti-government Anpo demonstrations, and directors such as Ōshima and Matsumoto Toshio came to Suzuki's defence. Suzuki took Nikkatsu to court, an unheard of move in the rigidly hierarchical system of Japan's film industry. His partial victory (the court ordered a settlement) was somewhat pyrrhic, as the director was blacklisted and would spend a decade in the wilderness before returning as an independent filmmaker and art-house favourite.

Prior to his firing, Suzuki was a hired director producing genre pictures on demand. Carroll sets out the prosaic realities of the assembly-line production of Nikkatsu's so-called "program pictures" in its waning days as one of the six film studios in Japan. During his employment at Nikkatsu from 1956 until 1967, Suzuki directed forty films across a range of genres—including *taiyō-zoku* (youthful rebellion) films such as *Everything Goes Wrong* (*Subete ga kurutteru*, 1960); *kayō* films contrived around pop songs; melodramas; and even westerns—but he was perhaps most often associated with the gangster films that were later grouped under the marketing term Nikkatsu Noir. The studio was releasing two films per week, with production schedules allowing for roughly one week of preproduction, twenty-five days of shooting, and as few as one to three days for editing and sound mixing. With such a relentless schedule, Suzuki was adept in "cutting with the camera" (65), shooting only what would be used in the final edit, a skill he had learned in his previous role as assistant director at Shōchiku. Carroll acknowledges that Suzuki's style was born in the furnace of the industrial studio system, noting that the director "picked up elements of a kind of house style that can be seen

operating in the work of other [Nikkatsu] filmmakers and modified them into the style we now know" (89), and that Suzuki took "generic tropes and technological shifts and incorporate[d] these into his formal experimentation" (10).

At Nikkatsu directors had little say in which projects they were assigned, yet once production began, they had as much room for personal expression as the one-month turn around these double-feature productions would allow. Working with scripts that were usually less than remarkable, Suzuki saw stylistic innovation not only as a sincere form of artistic expression, but also as a practical necessity to ensure continued employment, and a way to keep the studio happy by producing films that excited audiences and sold tickets. Yet his clear focus on generic entertainment and spectacle, as well as his self-effacing evasiveness when discussing his own work and others' attempts to frame it as auteurist art, have all helped to blur Suzuki's perceived artistic identity as a filmmaker. In the wake of the Suzuki Seijun Incident, Carroll notes the confusion: "Was Suzuki an ordinary studio director done wrong by his studio? Was he a stylist transforming studio projects into avant-garde pop art? Was he a covert radical bringing down the system from within? Suzuki himself never claimed any of these positions that activists or observers projected on him" (13).

In attempting to clarify the situation, Carroll's approach is to identify the specific methodologies, techniques, and repeated motifs that together add up to what is recognisably "Seijunesque". The book's fourth chapter carefully dissects how many of Suzuki's stylistic flourishes, which on first encounter may appear to be merely extravagant attempts to entertain or bewilder, are in fact part of a consistent approach that Suzuki applied throughout his career. Unifying all of these formal choices is Suzuki's fundamental interest in playing with the cinematic image, and the tension between its flat, two-dimensional surface and the illusion of three-dimensional space that it contains. Of the signature techniques Carroll identifies, particularly revealing is an exploration of Suzuki's imaginative framing, which made use of reflections, sliding doors, deep-space staging, and innumerable other methods of composing an image while playing with both its flatness and supposed depth. Carroll's discussion (101–103) of a heated dialogue scene in *Carmen from Kawachi* (*Kawachi Karumen*, 1966), which avoids a typical shot and reverse-shot set-up and instead uses a spinning mirror to portray multiple perspectives within a single frame, is one of several vivid examples of Suzuki's skill as a filmmaker that belie the supposedly whimsical nature of his work. Suzuki's often delirious use of colour in films such as *Gate of Flesh* (*Nikutai no mon*, 1964) and his approach to editing receive similarly detailed attention.

In decoding Suzuki's formal experimentations Carroll, quoting Ueno Kōshi, roots the Seijunesque in *zure*, or "'deviance' from our expectations set up by generic or social conventions", noting Suzuki's "tendency to startle us, leaving us with 'the strange feeling of being attacked by confusion'" (52). This defining quality of Suzuki's work is not merely the result of "films that favour formal spectacle over narrative integrity", but is rather born out of a consistent cinematic grammar that aims "to conceal from the audience what is actually taking place in front of them, or to mislead them deliberately, only to have it revealed to them in retrospect" (92). Carroll offers several examples of *zure*, such as spatial discontinuity in Suzuki's editing, but the focus on technical aspects leaves aside discussion of other uses by Suzuki of this powerful technique, such as the surprising, sometimes shocking tonal shifts in the director's work. The gang rape implied at the beginning of *Carmen from Kawachi* is preceded by light-hearted comedy, the rapists portrayed as luckless adolescents pining for a childhood sweetheart they have failed to woo. The suddenness of the subsequent abduction is just as startling as any of the incongruous edits in films such as *Branded to Kill*, while also implying deeper subtexts relevant to the central character and her subsequent journey.

The book's final chapter explores Suzuki's relationship with narration and narrative approaches. An analysis of two sequences in *Young Breasts* (*Aoi chibusa*, 1958) leads to a wider discussion of subjectivity and meta-cinema, and Suzuki's deliberate use of visual ambiguity to blur the two. Carroll looks at how Suzuki played with diegetic and non-diegetic sound, a multitude of visual effects, as well as simple blocking within the frame, in order to dance across the line dividing subjectivity and objectivity. Suzuki's frequent use of film-within-a-film sequences displays a self-aware foregrounding of the film-making process, allowing the director to indulge in meta-cinematic commentary; in this respect, Carroll's discussion of a key sequence from *Carmen from Kawachi* lays out the connection between these impressive formal games and the themes of the film's narrative.

Of particular interest in the book's final chapter is the discussion of Suzuki's affinity for the Taishō era, which was the setting for several of his films, most notably the trilogy of *Zigeunerweisen* (*Tsigoineruwaizen*, 1980), *Kagero-za* (*Kagerō-za*, 1981), and *Yumeji* (*Yumeji*, 1991). The era's political realities—including Japan's imperial expansion and its colonisation of Taiwan and Korea—were (and frequently remain) typically hidden beneath nostalgic depictions of the period's decadent, erotic-grotesque, roaring-twenties cosmopolitanism. Parallels are drawn between writers of the era and key aspects of Suzuki's style, such as the presence of the supernatural, symbolism and the prominence of fetishistic objects, and a free-form approach to narrative and continuity. Suzuki's use of characteristic elements associated with the Taishō era can be interpreted as working alongside games of discontinuity of time and space seen throughout his work. Carroll notes that the flat, cipher-like protagonists of the Taishō trilogy add to those films' dream-like inscrutability and are thus key components of the Seijunesque.

The book's short coda skims over other aspects of Suzuki's professional life, including his acting career and his work in animation and television. The brevity here is a pity, especially when some of these works are described as "among the most fascinating films of his career" (156). Readers must make do with the brief synopses and descriptions in the complete filmography in the appendix, which is accompanied by a further appendix of tantalising projects that remained unrealised, and a third covering the filmography of the Guryū Hachirō scriptwriting collective that was associated with Suzuki. Some readers may also lament the dearth of biographical detail throughout the book, especially where it could have provoked further discussion of the films under review. While there is brief analysis of some of the political ideas present in *Story of a Prostitute* (*Shunpuden*, 1965) for example, we can only wonder how much Suzuki's own experience serving in the same war must have influenced his caustic portrayal of military life in the film, especially when comparison is made with an earlier, more sanitised adaptation of the same material produced during the US occupation (*Desertion at Dawn* (*Akatsuki no Dassō*, 1950), directed by Taniguchi Senkichi). Yet these are minor complaints, perhaps inevitable when engaging with a director whose *sui generis* work is so clearly informed by personal convictions, intuitions, and impulses. Carroll is explicit about his book's focus on the New Left and cinephile film theorists of the 1960s and the intersection of their discourses with Suzuki's films, as well as on the minutiae of Suzuki's formal techniques and his exploration of the material form of cinema. The analysis of Suzuki's films throughout the book is steadfast, and serves to reposition Suzuki within a critical framework he has too often been denied. Carroll's rigorous examination of Suzuki's craft provides abundant evidence of the intent and deliberation behind a body of work that has become known for eccentricity and offbeat abandon. This book offers an insightful appraisal of Suzuki's filmography and his methodologies as a director, and provides a clear and accessible overview of the tumultuous postwar context for Japanese cinema.

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David Franklin is a visual artist and film maker. He works at the crossroads of art, cinema, literature, and performance, utilising a range of media from painting to video. He has exhibited internationally and received grants from institutions in Spain and Japan, including the Institut Ramon Llull, the Japanese Ministry for Culture, and the Generalitat de Catalunya. His current research focuses on postwar Japanese art and cinema, and his ongoing film project "Out of Earth and Sky" is made in collaboration with members of the butoh companies Dairakudakan and Sankai Juku.