



# MASSACRE GUN

MINAGOROSHI NO KENJŪ  
みな殺しの拳銃  
1967

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## CAST

Ryūichi Kuroda: JŌ SHISHIDO  
Eiji Kuroda: TATSUYA FUJI  
Saburo Kuroda: JIRŌ OKAZAKI  
Shirasaka: HIDEAKI NITANI  
Shino: TAMAKI SAWA  
Aiko: YŌKO YAMAMOTO  
Akazawa: TAKASHI KANDA  
Chico: KEN SANDERS  
Midorikawa: RYŌJI HAYAMA

## CREW

Director: YASUHARU HASEBE  
Script: RYŪZŌ NAKANISHI AND YASUHARU  
HASEBE (AS TAKASHI FUJII)  
Cinematography: KAZUE NAGATSUKA  
Music: NAOZUMI YAMAMOTO  
Songs Performed by: KEN SANDERS  
Art Direction: TAKEO KIMURA





# COLOUR ME BLOOD RED

by Jasper Sharp

The term 'Nikkatsu Noir', used to refer to a body of moody monochrome crime or gangster thrillers produced by Japan's oldest film studio from the late 1950s until the end of the 1960s, describes a genre defined and constituted retroactively, just like *film noir* itself. What now seem like obvious early models, such as Koreyoshi Kurahara's *I Am Waiting* (*Ore wa matteru ze*, 1957) and Toshio Masuda's *Rusty Knife* (*Sabita naifu*, 1958) – both starring Nikkatsu's top box-office draw of the era, Yûjirô Ishihara, and his regular onscreen love interest Mie Kitahara (at least until 1960 onwards, when she retired to become his off-screen wife) – were never officially marketed under this label at the time of their release.

Nevertheless, these and other B-movie offerings such as Seijun Suzuki's *Underworld Beauty* (*Ankokugai no bijo*, 1958) and Takumi Furukawa's *Cruel Gun Story* (*Kenjû zankoku monogatari*, 1964) are representative of a more hardboiled strain of Nikkatsu Action movie that became increasingly stylized and self-referential over the next decade. They often deployed the same acting talent, with male stars such as Jô Shishido and Hideaki Nitani moving from supporting to more centre-stage roles, and invoked *mukokuseki* ('borderless') onscreen worlds that, in their embrace of an aesthetic and iconography gleaned from the international language of foreign pulp cinema of the same vein, seemed more and more divorced from any recognisable lived-in Japanese reality, while simultaneously expressing a sense of cynicism and despair at the path up which modernity was leading the country.



When combined with some of the most striking and idiosyncratic monochrome widescreen scope cinematography seen anywhere in the world at the time, certain titles transcended their modest potboiler ambitions to find their place within the loftier echelons of cinematic artistry.<sup>1</sup> One such example is Suzuki's classic *Branded to Kill* (*Koroshi no rakuin*), generally considered the purest distillation of the *mukokuseki* essence.

While *Branded to Kill* is regularly described as something of a one-shot, its release on 15 June 1967 came flanked by two conspicuously similar-looking works that also adhered closely to Nikkatsu Noir's tropes: Takashi Nomura's *A Colt is My Passport* (*Koruto wa ore no pasupôto*), released but a few months earlier on 4 February, and Yasuharu Hasebe's lesser-known *Massacre Gun* (*Mina koroshi no kenjû*), also known by the alternative English-language titles of *Ruthless Gunman* and *Slaughter Gun*, which hit Japanese screens later that same year on 6 September.

Despite being more explicitly grounded within the world of warring yakuza factions, as opposed to the other two's tales built around fugitive hitmen, *Massacre Gun* is stylistically very much of a piece with its predecessors. The most obvious connection between the three is the presence of Shishido in the lead, an actor often characterized as "the face of Suzuki" due to his roles in the maverick director's *Youth of the Beast* (*Yajû no seishun*, 1963), *Detective Bureau 23: Go to Hell, Bastards!* (*Tantei jimusho 23: Kutabare akutôdomo*, 1963), *Gate of Flesh* (*Nikutai no mon*, 1964), and of course, his commanding iconic turn in

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<sup>1</sup> - Hollywood abandoned both the anamorphic CinemaScope format and the separate Academy Award for black-and-white cinematography in 1967, making colour the de facto industry standard for the global industry. Nikkatsu was still producing in monochrome up until the launch of its erotic Roman Porno line in 1971, one of whose main selling points were that they were in full colour, and its own NikkatsuScope widescreen format persisted until the early 1980s, a time when most Western producers had turned to the narrower and more TV-friendly 1.85:1 ratio



*Branded to Kill* – although in reality he appeared in a relatively small proportion of Suzuki’s sizeable body of around 40 titles for the studio.

A regular player for Nikkatsu since entering the studio through its “New Face” open auditions in 1954, by the mid-60s Shishido had moved on from his early bit parts as bad guys and heavies and hit his stride playing more anguished, brooding roles as men who reluctantly (more-or-less) make their livings plying their trade in violence, his cold and impassive onscreen presence bolstered by a legendary set of collagen cheek implants. Other roles in this mould include playing alongside Akira Kobayashi as one half of a pair of pistol-toting wide boys in Haruyasu Noguchi’s *The Drifters* (*Kenjū buraichō: Nagaremono no mure*, 1965); as the villainous “Georgie Eaton” in *Asiapol Secret Service* (*Ajia himitsu keisatsu*, 1966), a Bond-inspired spy thriller partly shot in Hong Kong and directed by Akinori Matsuo; and Mio Ezaki’s *Return of the Filthy Seven* (*Shichinin no yajū*, 1967), another gangster tale that takes its cues from the *Seven Samurai*/*The Magnificent Seven* plot set-up.

In *Massacre Gun*, Shishido plays Ryūichi Kuroda, the eldest of the three sharp-suited brothers who, at the beginning of the film, are serving as members of the Akazawa yakuza gang. A merciless order from above to put a bullet through the heart of the woman he loves severely tests his gang loyalties, however, not to mention that of his younger siblings. These are the hot-headed Eiji (Tatsuya Fuji, some years before gaining a certain notoriety playing Kichi in Nagisa Ōshima’s sexually explicit *In the Realm of the Senses* [*Ai no korīda*, 1976]) and the more idealistic Saburo (Jirō Okazaki), who is being groomed as a boxing champ at a gym managed by their ruthless gang boss (Takashi Kanda). When Saburo returns back home to the nightclub the brothers use as their base of operations, his hands shattered and his promising career in

the ring ended following his denouncement of Akazawa’s tyrannical, controlling behaviour, the Kurodas decide to go it alone, initiating an all-out turf war on their former patron.

While Suzuki and Shishido remain the best-known reference points for most non-Japanese viewers approaching Nikkatsu’s incredibly prolific and diverse output during this era, there are a number of further connections between *Branded to Kill* and *Massacre Gun* beyond their shared acting talent. The two films also both feature art direction from Suzuki’s regular collaborator Takeo Kimura, the startling compositions of cameraman Kazue Nagatsuka and a sultry lounge jazz soundtrack from Naozumi Yamamoto.<sup>2</sup>

More crucially, however, is the fact that *Massacre Gun*-director Yasuharu Hasebe had begun his career as an assistant to Suzuki. In this respect, there’s something almost ironic about the fact that these two films under discussion are shot in monochrome, as one of Hasebe’s most obvious stylistic debts to his early mentor is an expressive and decidedly non-naturalistic approach to colour. This can be seen throughout Suzuki’s oeuvre – in fact some have seen the striking monochrome aesthetic of his later works for Nikkatsu, such as *Carmen from Kawachi* (*Kawachi Karumen*, 1966) and *Fighting Elegy* (*Kenka erejii*, 1966), as very much imposed by the studio’s management in an attempt to rein in the garish excesses of earlier titles such as *Kanto Wanderer* (*Kantō mushuku*, 1963) and *Tattooed Life* (*Irezumi ichidai*, 1965), just prior to his legendary sacking for his ‘nonsensical’ *Branded to Kill*.

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2 - The otherwise stylistically similar *A Colt is My Passport* utilized Toshiyuki Matsui, Shigeyoshi Mine and Harumi Ibe respectively as art director, cinematographer and composer. All full-time contracted staff during this golden age for Nikkatsu, Mine also lensed a number of Suzuki’s films including his vibrantly coloured *Kanto Wanderer* (*Kantō mushuku*, 1963), *Gate of Flesh* (*Nikutai no mon*, 1964), and *Tokyo Drifter* (*Tōkyō nagaremono*, 1966), while Ibe contributed another Latino-tinged score to an earlier Shishido Western, *Mexico Wanderer* (*Mekishiko mushuku*, 1962), as well as numerous other films for the studio.



A prismatic abundance of colours is also very much in evidence in Hasebe's directing debut *Black Tight Killers* (*Ore ni sawaru to abunaize*, 1966) and, to a slightly lesser extent, in later films such as *The Singing Gunman* (*Bakudan-otoko to iwareru aitsu*, 1967) and *Bloody Territories* (*Kôiki bôryoku: Ryûketsu no shima*, 1969). Indeed, Hasebe's style as a whole might be seen as fusing Suzuki's stylistic flamboyance and eye for absurdity with a more gritty, almost documentary approach utilising long-lenses and on-location shoots, as best showcased in his three entries in the *Stray Cat Rock* (*Nora neko rokku*) series, released in 1970, and his later more vicious offerings in the Nikkatsu's erotic Roman Porno line, which include *Assault! Jack the Ripper* (*Bôkô kirisaki Jakku*, 1976) and *Rape: The 13th Hour* (*Reipu 25-ji: Bôkan*, 1977).

Aside from a sometimes rather uncomfortable appetite for violence, Hasebe's signature hand is much less obvious in *Massacre Gun* than in these other works, not least because of it being his only monochrome work; although it is for this very same reason that we can retrospectively situate his third feature as a director within the 'Nikkatsu Noir' loose genre grouping.

Whether this was an aesthetic choice or one born of budgetary necessity is not entirely clear, but the fact remains that colour plays a surprisingly large role in Hasebe's script (co-written under his customary pseudonym of Takashi Fujii alongside veteran studio screenwriter Ryûzô Nakanishi), adding a further, slightly cryptic dimension to the film: It would certainly not have been lost on Japanese viewers that the first character of the family name Kuroda is 'black' (*kuroi*), nor that the name of Ryûichi's former best buddy and rival for their gang boss' crown, Shirasaka (Hideaki Nitani), is partly comprised of the character for 'white' (*shiroi*), while Akazawa's name begins with that for 'red' (*aka*). The symbolic

meaning is not so difficult to work out: friend against friends, black versus white, instigated by red.

The stylish Bar Black and White, run by Shirasaka and his wife Shino (implied to be a former flame of Ryûichi's) is a rather austere and subdued place compared with the Kuroda's far more vibrant and cosmopolitan Club Rainbow, which boasts exotic floorshows by semi-nude Caucasian dancers and a mixed race piano player (played by Ken Sanders, a half-African American singer-actor born in 1946, at the beginning of the US occupation, and later seen in Hasebe's *Stray Cat Rock: Delinquent Girl Boss* [*Onna banchô nora neko rokku*, 1970]). This latter space, subsequently trashed by Akazawa's thugs, seems a clear embodiment of Nikkatsu's *mukokuseki* ethos. But what of the other more oblique references, such as the Scarlet restaurant or the Emerald Bowling Club, which the newly-formed Kuroda group put under their protection?

This use of colour coding to identify and define separate locations, albeit in a monochrome production, is all highly typical of the abstracted cinematic universes created by Nikkatsu. *Massacre Gun's* milieu is an alien yet strangely familiar composite of underground bars, boxing rings and anonymous liminal spaces in which the boundaries between old/new and traditional/foreign are still being drawn, and with a number of exterior locations recognisable from other films made by the studio around this time.

Such modernist cosmetic elements are what set Nikkatsu's films in the yakuza genre apart from those of rival studios, most notably those of Toei, whose *ninkyô eiga* ("chivalry films") line of long-running serials such as the 11-part *A Story of Japanese Yakuza* (*Nihon kyôkaku-den*,





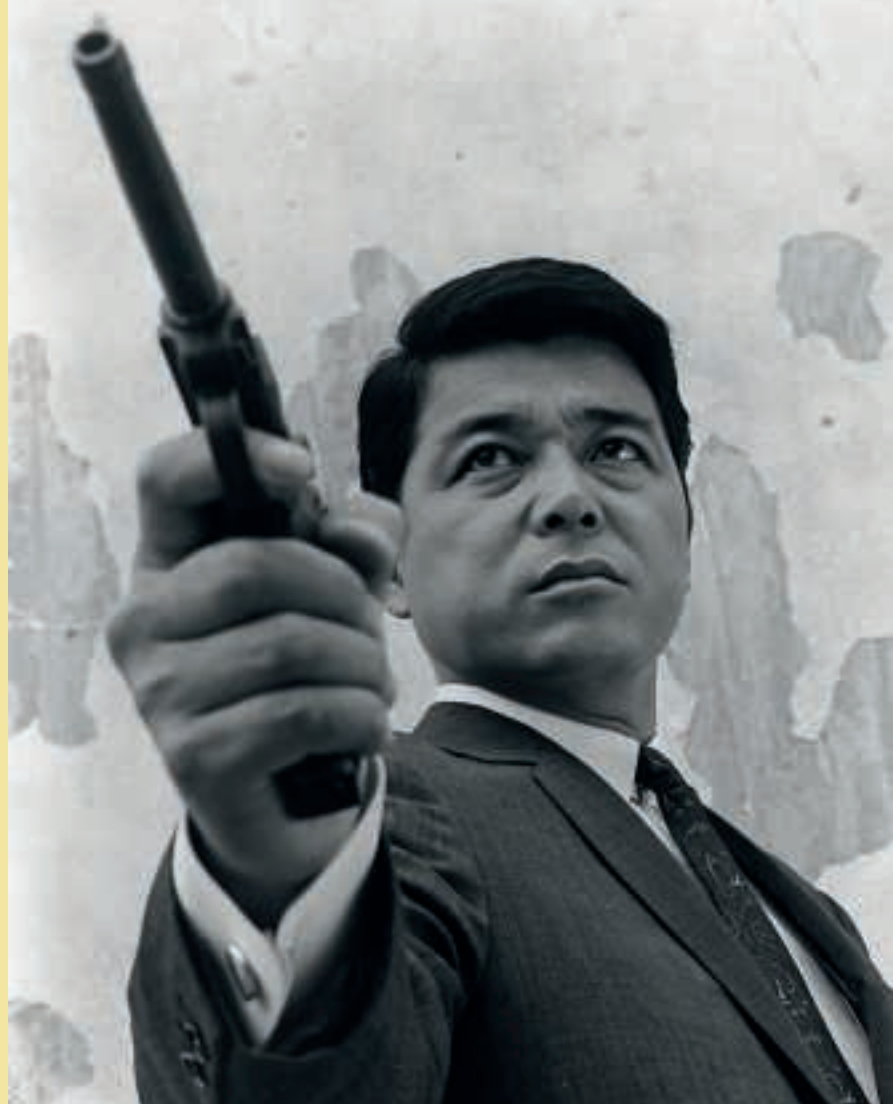
1964-1971) or the 9-part *Tales of Showa Era Chivalry* (*Shōwa zankyōden*, 1965-1972) starring actors like Ken Takakura, Kōji Tsuruta and Tetsurō Tanba were massively popular throughout the 1960s.

An essential element of Toei's films was the depiction of the dynamics within and between yakuza clans to explore the schisms arising due to the concepts of *giri* ("obligation to the group") and *ninjō* ("humanity or compassion") in a milieu highly regulated by traditional codes of honour. These were Japanese films made for Japanese audiences, and their messages about group loyalty were pretty clear to their viewers.

By contrast, Nikkatsu's gangster films tended to express wider existential issues through their baroque set décor and *mise-en-scène*. Their modern-day gangsters drink expensive imported brandy or scotch rather than saké, while seated on barstools, not squatting on tatami. They use fists and guns rather than *katana* swords, and wear crisp black suits instead of kimono.

This would soon come to change, as the popularity of Toei's films and the increasing political and social tensions of late-60s Japan saw Nikkatsu turning to a rawer, more stripped-down approach increasingly rooted in real world issues closer to home with the inauguration of their 'New Action' line the year after the release of *Massacre Gun*. Hasebe's subsequent yakuza films, most notably *Retaliation* (*Shima wa moratta*, 1968), are indicative of this change, presenting a far more direct attack on those held responsible for the breaks with traditional codes of morality and social behaviour. But that's a story best left for later.

*Jasper Sharp is a writer and curator specialising in Japanese cinema and is the co-editor of the website MidnightEye.com. His books include Behind the Pink Curtain and The Historical Dictionary of Cinema.*





## ABOUT THE TRANSFER

*Massacre Gun* was transferred from original preservation film elements by Nikkatsu Studios in Japan. The film was delivered as a restored file on a master tape to Arrow Films.

The film is presented in the original widescreen aspect ratio with original audio.

## PRODUCTION CREDITS

**Discs and Booklet Produced by:** Francesco Simeoni

**Film Credits compiled by:** Jasper Sharp

**Technical Producer:** James White

**Production Assistants:** Louise Buckler, Liane Cunje

**QC and proofing:** Anthony Nield, Francesco Simeoni

**Blu-ray/DVD Mastering and Audio Remastering:** David Mackenzie

**Subtitling:** IBF Digital

**Artist:** Ian MacEwan

**Design:** Jack Pemberton

## SPECIAL THANKS

Chichiro Abiru, Alex Agran, Tom Barrett, Michael Brooke, Stephen Ford, Andrew Heskins, Takako Hirayama, Graham Jones, Emico Kawai, Andrew Kirkham, Sigrid Larsen, Nikkatsu Corporation, Tony Rayns, Jasper Sharp, Jô Shishido, Marc Walkow

## FURTHER VIEWING

*Retaliation*, Jô Shishido and Yasuharu Hasebe's follow-up to *Massacre Gun*, is also available from Arrow Video as well as the Meiko Kaji-fronted *Stray Cat Rock* series, which features three entries directed by Hasebe.





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