

of independent feature films up until his death in 2017. The Taishō Trilogy especially marks a stark departure from the yakuza films for which he's best known. As historical fantasias, all three films take place during the liberal period of 1912 to 1926 (which corresponds to the reign of Emperor Taishō), when Suzuki himself was born.

“Suzuki does have a certain affinity for Japanese culture in the Taishō era,” Carroll writes, going on to describe how Suzuki's own peculiarities reflect those of artists from the era who inspired the trilogy.

Suzuki was unable to secure a traditional release for *Zigeunerweisen*, so the producer decided to exhibit it in an inflatable dome around Japan; the unorthodox strategy was met with great success. Based on writings by Hyakken Uchida, the film centers (if a Suzuki film could be said to center anything) on the relationship between two men and the geisha who passes in and out of their lives. Its title refers to a violin concerto by Spanish composer Pablo de Sarasate; on a famous recording of the piece from the early 20th century, Sarasate's voice can be heard faintly saying something that no one has ever been able to comprehend. Suzuki's protagonists discuss that recording in the film, but it has little connection to the story otherwise.

*Kagerō-za*, made in the wake of the first film's success and based on writings by Kyōka Izumi, follows a similar trajectory: in it a playwright encounters a mysterious woman who may or may not be the deceased wife of his wealthy benefactor. Indeed a supernatural element (largely absent from Suzuki's Nikkatsu films) connects all three films of the trilogy. As Carroll notes, “Suzuki's use of ambiguous and at times deliberately misleading practices in narration help to explain his proclivity for the supernatural in his later films, as well as an affinity to Taishō-era writers and artists, most fully realized” in this trilogy.

The concluding film, *Yumeji*, came out roughly ten years after *Kagerō-za*. It differs from the other two in that it's not adapted from literature; rather it's a surreal biopic about Japanese erotic artist Takehisa Yumeji starring boundary-breaking rock star Kenji Sawada (something of a David Bowie figure in Japan at the time). The film doesn't purport to be an account of Yumeji's life but rather charts a series of his romantic affairs, interweaving considerations of art and mortality. This feels the most merrily chaotic of the three, rather lavishing in its absurdity.

A lack of contemporary zeal present in his Nikkatsu films enhances the films' haunting nature, as well as relatively constrained color palettes; oddly, they invoke Raúl Ruiz by way of Luis Buñuel. But in terms of their general “incomprehensibility” (these are said to be among Suzuki's most impenetrable films) and the qualities that go into them being so, they are unmistakably Seijunesque. ♦

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# ABOUT THE FILM

In the 1980s, Seijun Suzuki reinvented himself as an independent filmmaker. Freed from the commercial obligations of studio work, he indulged his passion for the Taisho era (1912–26), a brief period in Japanese history likened to Europe’s Belle Époque and America’s Roaring Twenties. Though not linked by plot, these three films—*Zigeunerweisen*, *Kagero-za*, and *Yumeji*—embody the hedonistic cultural atmosphere, blend of Eastern and Western art and fashion, and political extremes of the 1920s, all infused with Suzuki’s own eccentric vision of the time.

Named the best film of the 1980s in a poll of Japanese film critics, *Zigeunerweisen* takes its title from a violin recording by Pablo de Sarasate. The piece haunts the film’s two main characters: Aochi, an uptight professor at a military academy, and his erstwhile colleague Nakasago, now a wild-haired wanderer and possible murderer. The movie’s plot is a metaphysical ghost story involving love triangles, doppelgängers, and a blurred line between the worlds of the living and the dead. “Underlying the teasing riddles,” writes film critic Tony Rayns, “is an aching lament for the sumptuous hybrid culture of the 1920s that was swept away by the militarism of the 1930s.” *Copresented by the Yanai Initiative for Globalizing Japanese Humanities.*

TRT: 145 min

## Comprehending the Incomprehensibility of Seijun Suzuki by Kat Sachs

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There’s a meme that circulates regularly among cinephilic social media accounts in which Japanese filmmaker Seijun Suzuki appears to declare, “I make movies that make no sense and make no money.”

I confess to being one of those who’ve shared this meme, enamored as I am with Suzuki’s so-called senseless oeuvre and the lore surrounding his dauntless iconoclasm. The latter peaked in 1967 with what came to be called the “Suzuki Seijun Incident”; the director was fired from Nikkatsu, Japan’s oldest production studio, after the release of his maximalist masterpiece *Branded to Kill* for allegedly making “incomprehensible films.”

“As such,” studio head Kyusaku Hori later proclaimed in a statement, “Suzuki Seijun’s films are bad films, and to screen them publicly would be an embarrassment for Nikkatsu.” (Hori went so far as to prohibit Suzuki’s earlier films from being shown in a local retrospective; it’s unlikely, however, that these are the real reasons Suzuki was fired, as the studio was in dire financial straits and needed to justify budget cuts.)

In his book *Suzuki Seijun and Postwar Japanese Cinema*, University of Chicago alum William Carroll explains the background of the aforementioned meme. In that widely quoted interview, Suzuki was actually revealing the reasons he’d been given for his termination, not making a declaration on how he perceived the coherence (or lack thereof) and financial success of his own films.

Carroll doesn’t disabuse readers of the notion that Suzuki was something of a cinematic apostate.

Rather, he challenges assumptions that westerners might have about his films by providing studied insights into Japanese history and cinema, which in turn allows for a better understanding of them. As with the above misconception, it’s often what surrounds oversimplified interpretations about Suzuki’s inarguably idiosyncratic style that makes this possible. But it’s the very act of misunderstanding, in fact, that Suzuki is attempting to accentuate in his work.

“Suzuki’s films are not ‘triumphs of form over content,’” Carroll writes, thereby challenging a commonly propagated idea in English-language criticism. He later elaborates:

Suzuki consistently finds ways to turn conventions of cinematic forms against themselves and mislead viewers in the way he constructs space and meaning in sequences before suddenly revealing them, in a shock, to be something very different. The effect . . . invariably forces viewers to reconcile their initial misunderstanding with the surprising revelation at the end, and in doing so to confront cinematic form more directly, and to rely less on the preconceptions that led them to misunderstanding in the first place.

Such radicality elicited two factions of supporters in the wake of the Suzuki Seijun Incident: one was an emerging cohort of young cinephiles and critics who appreciated Suzuki’s disruptive aesthetic qualities, while the other consisted of student leftists who saw the filmmaker as an anti-establishment figurehead whose formal audacity, they assumed, reflected a similarly radical philosophy. Carroll considers both groups extensively, charting how these contingents’ ideologies sometimes overlapped but were oftentimes at odds.

Originally starting as an assistant director at the Shochiku Company (another of Japan’s Big Four film studios), Suzuki eventually moved to Nikkatsu. After paying his dues in lower-level positions, he was given the opportunity to direct feature films, the majority of them under the auspices of Nikkatsu Action. Carroll included several of the director’s early films at the studio in a 2017 retrospective he programmed at Doc Films, and in his book he draws connections between them and Suzuki’s later, more characteristic films at Nikkatsu; he also illuminates how Suzuki’s films at the studio relate to the its other output of the 1950s and ’60s.

Suzuki made 40 films for Nikkatsu between 1956 and 1967; it’s the films from the last several years of his tenure—starting with *Youth of the Beast* (1963) and followed by *Kanto Wanderer* (1963), *Gate of Flesh* (1964), *Story of a Prostitute* (1965), and *Tokyo Drifter* (1966)—that have come to be readily associated with his overarching style, marked by impracticable compositions, bold colors with no apparent symbolic resonance, disjointed editing that disturbs any semblance of narrative continuity, and the frequent occurrence of events unrelated to the storyline evinced through a variety of formal techniques.

In a chapter on the emergence of the “Seijunesque,” Carroll writes that “Suzuki’s approach to cinematic form is critical to understanding his body of work and what defines him as a filmmaker, but it is also a moving target.”

“Rather than rigidly imposing preconceived formal parameters on his films from the outset,” Carroll continues, “Suzuki constantly absorbs and reacts to new developments, both generic-industrial and technological. [Critic] Ueno Kōshi wrote that the defining Seijunesque trait was not a sole formal device but rather *zure*, which could loosely be translated as ‘deviation’: the sense of sudden shock and confusion at what we see in front of us.”

After he was fired from Nikkatsu, Suzuki worked prominently in television, making only a handful