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From Genre Flick to Art Film: Seijun Suzuki's *Branded to Kill* and *Pistol Opera*

Temenuga Trifonova

Insofar as serialization is premised on the reproduction of a common diegetic world, it limits the potential for the remaking of genre conventions. On the other hand, lacking the open-ended, hypothetically infinite nature of the film series, the film sequel is likely to throw the remaking of genre conventions into greater relief. A sequel recreates the diegetic world established in the original film and simply generates a new series of events/adventures/obstacles for the original characters. Inasmuch as it is mostly genre films that lend themselves to sequelization, one would expect a great deal of consistency between an original and its sequel, both of which are circumscribed by the same generic rules and expectations, regardless of specific differences in terms of storyline. This is not the case, however, with Seijun Suzuki's *Pistol Opera/Pisutoru Opera* (Japan, 2001), the long-awaited sequel to his incomprehensible *yakuza* film *Branded to Kill/Koroshi no rakuin* (Japan, 1967), for which he was fired by the Nikkatsu Corporation, the studio under which he made his first films.

Pistol Opera continues Suzuki's indirect critique of Japanese militarism in *Elegy to Violence/Kenka Ereji* (1966), which treated violence as a sublimation of the male protagonist's frustrated sexual drive. For whatever reason, Suzuki felt that a lesbian warrior (the Agent refers to Stray Cat's model gun as her 'lover' and there are several explicit and implicit references throughout the film to lesbianism) would deliver the strongest critique of militarism, conventionally aligned with masculinity, and of violence as a staple of the *yakuza* genre. Although *Pistol Opera* addresses the problem of violence in a much more direct way – characters within the film discuss responsibility, guilt and the uselessness of violence, the latter attributed to sexual repression – it would be wrong to argue that nothing in *Branded to Kill* prepared us for the sequel's politicized

reflections on violence. The sequel's aestheticization of violence was just the next logical step in the deconstruction of genre conventions that was already underway in *Branded to Kill* and Suzuki's other films from the 1960s. *Branded to Kill* remains within the orbit of the *yakuza* film: by foregrounding genre conventions, whether in a flattering, parodic or ironic fashion, Suzuki both *exposes* these conventions and, at the same time, makes use of them, i.e., *concealing* them again. *Pistol Opera*, however, suggests that a serious critique of violence would have to go beyond the playful subversion of genre conventions, in fact beyond film itself. Rather than playing with genre conventions, the sequel substitutes one set of conventions for another: it imports the conventions of other arts – *kabuki*, photography, installation art, performance art and modern dance – into the medium of film, ultimately reducing the *film medium* to just one *art technique* among the many used in the film.

In *Branded to Kill*, described as 'an unholy marriage of Robbe-Grillet, Robert Aldrich and Tex Avery' (Hunter 1998: 29), Suzuki freely indulges his fancy for dissociating the image track from the sound track, flaunting and parodying visual and narrative clichés, experimenting with the graphic properties of the film image, with temporal and spatial disorientation, odd camera angles, deliberately mismatched eyelines, a direct address to the camera, intertextual references, absurd characters and theatrical acting. The film tells the story of hamster-faced, rice-obsessed Hanada, a.k.a. 'No. 3 Killer' – a caricature of the stereotypical tough *yakuza* – whose loyalty to the gang becomes confused by his obsession with eliminating the phantom 'No. 1 Killer', the top gangster in the Guild's unofficial ranking of hit men, and by his romantic yearning for the inscrutable *femme fatale* Misako. Shot in crisp black and white, which gives it an improvisational, spontaneous feel and maintains an impression of realism even when the story veers towards the bizarre and the incomprehensible, *Branded to Kill* is a stylized genre flick, whose theatricality lies in foregrounding the conventions of the *yakuza* genre and of classical cinema.

Pistol Opera tells the same story, replacing the ridiculous, sex-crazed Hanada with the sexy, lesbian Stray Cat, a female assassin who tries to move up from her rank of 'No. 3 Killer' in the criminal underworld. To achieve her goal, she must eliminate '100 Eyes' and 'Useless Man', the top-ranked killers of the Assassins Guild. Occupying a tentative place in between experimental film, avant-garde film, experimental theatre on film, filmed performance, *kabuki* adapted for the screen and installation art, *Pistol Opera* might be more accurately described as – to use Bazin's term – 'mixed cinema'. Suzuki re-uses many of his signature