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Review of Branded to Kill

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Branded to Kill (Blu-ray)

(Criterion, 12.13.2011)

A film doesn't have to make complete sense to be engrossing. Visual style and a striking central performance carry Seijun Suzuki's *Branded to Kill* despite the director's pronounced indifference to exposition. Hanada (Joe Shishido) is Japan's third-ranked hit man and not a bit happy about it. (Suzuki never explains who compiles such rankings.) He does not even believe the number-one assassin even exists. The film follows Hanada through several hits, leading to the inevitable showdown with his nemesis (Koji Nanbara). Along the way he indulges in some S&M with his wife (Mariko Ogawa) and meets a mysterious, strange young woman (Annu Mari). Some may be interested that *Branded to Kill* offers a lot more nudity than was usual in 1967. Suzuki's hyperkinetic style includes odd camera angles, the omission of transitions between scenes, a sex scene on a spiral staircase, and good old plain craziness, as with the unique way Hanada kills a dentist, his use of a Volkswagen, a symbol of sanity in the turbulent sixties, as a murder weapon, and a character who covers his head with his jacket while dying. It all has a dream logic that the Japanese seem to do better than anyone else, as with the animation of Hayao Miyazaki and the fiction of Haruki Murakami. Hanada's need to smell boiling rice to become sexually stimulated seems to be a typical Suzuki touch, until the excellent extras reveal the director had to include a rice cooker as product placement. *Branded to Kill* is clearly indebted to James Bond, while being both more existential and cartoonish, though it runs out of steam toward the end, dancing dangerously close to silliness, before what Suzuki proudly calls an ambiguous ending. All this was a bit much for Nikkatsu, Suzuki's studio, which refused to release the film until the director took his employer to court, an act of rebellion that resulted in his not making another feature for ten years. This Criterion Blu-ray does wonders for the black-and-white cinematography of Kazue Nagatsuka, especially in the otherworldly interiors, and Naozumi Yamamoto's jazzy score, which wouldn't be out of place in a Matt Helm movie, sounds wonderful. Extras include informative background in a booklet by Tony Rayns, an interview with Suzuki at a 1997 Los Angeles tribute, and interviews recorded in July 2011 with the very frail 88-year-old director, a lively and mischievous Shishido, and assistant director Masumi Kuzuu. The lovely interview with Shishido, who explains the odd plastic surgery he underwent to get better roles, includes the actor's delightful demonstration of improvisation.—Michael Adams

Movie: 8.8

A/V: 9.3

Extras: 9.4