The History of a Broken Blue *Fusuma*: Colour in Suzuki Seijun's Nikkatsu Films

William Carroll, University of Chicago

Abstract

This article traces the historical development of aesthetic practices of colour in the generic and industrial context of Nikkatsu Action Cinema of postwar Japan, and how they influenced the idiosyncratic style of Suzuki Seijun. Nikkatsu Action's needs as a genre devoted to a youthful and energetic subject matter shaped its colour design, and its filmmakers developed a bright, vibrant colour aesthetic by drawing on neon lighting and coloured light filters. It was within this context that Suzuki's colour style took shape. His earliest experiments take the Nikkatsu colour idiom and bend its diegetic pretexts to motivate sudden colour transformations. In his later Nikkatsu films, Suzuki elaborates on these experiments by transforming them into a critical component of his formal strategies. In *Gate of Flesh* (*Nikutai no mon*, 1964), he gives each of the four main female characters a colour-coded costume, and in each woman's internal monologue her dress colour becomes the colour of the entire background, suffusing the image with her subjectivity. Suzuki uses sudden colour transformations to punctuate violent action in his later action films, which this article considers in a reading of *Tattooed Life* (*Irezumi ichidai*, 1965)'s climax. Suzuki's experimentation gradually refines his colour design to an abstraction that belies its origins in popular genre cinema.

Suzuki Seijun's colour design appears briefly in many historical and theoretical accounts of colour in cinema, such as Richard Misek's[1] and Edward Branigan's;[2] there is a vague sense that his colour design is unique and worthy of study that has not been adequately developed. David Desser considers Suzuki's late Nikkatsu films, particularly *Gate of Flesh* (*Nikutai no mon*, 1964), in the broad context of colour filmmaking in Japan in the 1950s and 1960s. While Desser's work contains useful information about the introduction of colour technology

[1] Richard Misek, *Chromatic Cinema: A History of Screen Color* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 50, 100.
[2] Edward Branigan, *Tracking Color in Cinema and Art: Philosophy and Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 21.

into Japan around this time, his reference points speak to the limited number of films available when he wrote the essay in 1994: namely, the early colour films of Ozu and Kurosawa, and a handful of watershed films like *Carmen Comes Home* (*Karumen kokyō ni kaeru*, Kinoshita Keisuke, 1951) and *Gate of Hell* (*Jigokumon*, Kinugasa Teinosuke, 1953). Suzuki's immediate context of Nikkatsu's popular youth and action films of the 1950s and 1960s, which bears a more immediate relationship to his colour design, is not discussed.[3]

In an interlude on neon lighting in urban-set East Asian cinema, James Tweedie considers their role in Suzuki's colour:

> In films like *Tokyo Drifter* [*Tōkyō nagaremono*, 1966], the neon sign, cosmopolitan, uprooted, and floating above the banalities of the street, presents a vision of the city to come, a spectacular space where light is dedicated to the cause of commerce… Suzuki embraces this future and develops an aesthetic of ubiquitous and often uniform color, with images that look as though they were lit entirely by these same neon signs.[4]

Tweedie identifies several crucial elements of Suzuki's colour design at Nikkatsu: the prominence of neon lighting, their modern urban location, the tendency toward uniform colour compositions, and the connection between the three. Interestingly, however, several of these techniques are not particularly unique to Suzuki and were common in Nikkatsu's popular action films in colour at the time. In particular, the neon lighting montage sequence that Tweedie describes had been nearly ubiquitous in these films since Inoue Umetsugu's *The Winner* (*Shōri-sha*, 1957) and *The Stormy Man* (*Arashi o yobu otoko*, 1957), and remained so through the period of Suzuki's celebrated late Nikkatsu films.

Because Suzuki was famously fired in 1968 after multiple conflicts with the studio's management, he is frequently cast in a familiar role as an iconoclastic artist. However, when we look at the colour design of Suzuki's films in relation to those of broader Nikkatsu popular cinema from the same period, we can see Suzuki experimenting with a colour idiom that was common among Nikkatsu's popular action films. This is not to say that Suzuki's colour style is merely a product of the industrial context that he worked in; rather, he gradually refines an inherited colour idiom into *abstraction*, isolating colour from diegetic objects that possess it.

Suzuki's colour design was also frequently discussed by the critics who first championed him in Japan in the immediate wake of his firing. In 1969, Yamane Sadao wrote on the motif of red camellia flowers in *Youth of the Beast* (*Yajū no seishun*, 1963). The flowers function as a clue, identifying Detective Takeshita's

[3] David Desser, 'Gate of Flesh(-tones): Color in the Japanese Cinema', in *Cinematic Landscapes: Observations on the Visual Arts and Cinema of China and Japan*, ed. by Linda C. Erlich and Desser (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), pp. 299–317.

[4] James Tweedie, 'Interlude 3: Neon', in *Cinema at the City's Edge: Film and Urban Networks in East Asia*, ed. by Yomi Braester and Tweedie (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), pp. 89–92 (p. 89).

widow as the mastermind behind her husband's murder by their presence at the crime scene and on a tree in her backyard. Suzuki singles them out in their first appearance: in the film's prologue, the crime scene of Detective Takeshita's murder, they are the only part of the image to possess colour. There is a narrative motivation behind this decision: singling out the flower makes it easier to track where these red flowers reappear across the film, but the effect of singling out red in a field of black and white is excessive in a way that cannot entirely be explained by its narrative function. Yamane takes this a step further in his analysis: he points out that in the film's title card, a single character (the 'no,' or 'of') at the center of the screen is in red while the rest of the title card is in black and white. He argues that collectively, the title and opening sequence single out not just *red flowers* but *redness* as a quality of its own, distinct from the object that possesses it.[5]

Yamane's observation can be seen as part of a broader meta-cinematic celebration of Suzuki's films by a burgeoning generation of cinephiles, particularly at the newly formed film journal *Shinema 69*. In the same journal issue, Hasumi Shigehiko celebrated the visual tension between apparent visual depth and flatness in Suzuki's work; Hasumi argued that this articulated the inherent tension in cinema between the inherent flatness of the projected image and the appearance of depth that it produced, a tendency that can be seen in the abstract fields of solid colour that appear at once flat and infinitely deep in films such as *Kanto Wanderer* (*Kantō mushuku*, 1963), *Gate of Flesh*, and *Tokyo Drifter*.[6] Years later, Hasumi would argue that Suzuki's use of seasonal imagery, commonly used by other Japanese filmmakers as a naturally motivated stylistic flourish, isolates the imagery as a stylistic flourish devoid of representation of what could realistically be called seasons.[7] What these accounts identify in Suzuki's style is a move toward abstraction: identifying stylistic flourishes, gradually removing their diegetic pretexts, and distilling them into discrete stylistic elements. These moments appear fleetingly within individual Suzuki films, but looking at his Nikkatsu filmography as a whole, a sustained pattern of distilling and interrogating individual stylistic elements emerges. Suzuki stands at the crossroads between what David Bordwell has called the 'cinema of flourishes' and 'parametric narration'.[8]

[5] Yamane Sadao, 'Shudatsu-sha-Suzuki Seijun: Tsubaki no hana wa naze akai no ka?', *Shinema 69*, 2 (1969), 64–73 (p. 69).

[6] Hasumi Shigehiko, 'Suzuki Seijun to sono chinmoku no naritachi', *Shinema 69*, 2 (1969), 49–57 (pp. 50–53).

[7] Hasumi, 'Suzuki Seijun, mata wa kisetsu no fuzai', *Yurīka*, 4 (1991), 38–57. Hasumi points to *Kanto Wanderer*'s finale, in which Suzuki uses seasonal imagery for winter, summer, and fall in different scenes over the course of a single evening.

[8] Bordwell defines a 'flourish' as a momentary stylistic device that stands out partly because of its uniqueness, whereas 'parametric narration' involves stylistic patterns across an entire film that function self-reflexively. Though there are clear stylistic patterns like this in Suzuki's work, they tend to function across films rather than within a single film. See: David Bordwell, 'A Cinema of

I argue that Suzuki's colour aesthetic has its roots in the colour idiom of Nikkatsu Action Cinema, but becomes distinct by a move toward *abstracting* colour. I do not use 'abstract' to mean necessarily non-narrative or anti-narrative; Suzuki's Nikkatsu Action films are all narrative films, and as with the flowers in *Youth of the Beast*, his colour design is frequently at least partly motivated by narrative concerns.[9] I use Paul Coates' definition of abstract: 'the complete separation of color and object'.[10] After experimenting with the possibilities offered by an inherited style in the early 1960s, Suzuki *abstracted* colour design from diegetic objects into a discrete element of film form.

The Nikkatsu Action Cinema Colour Idiom

Though there were practices of adding colour to black-and-white film in the post-production process in Japan in the silent era,[11] the Japanese film industry began its transition to colour in earnest in the 1950s. The colour processes used were largely determined by the studios: Shōchiku and Tōhō adopted Fujicolor, Tōei adopted Konishiroku's Sakuracolor process, while Daiei adopted Eastmancolor. There was widespread frustration in the industry with the colour palettes offered by Fujicolor and Sakuracolor: Fujicolor was inadequate for its reds, Sakuracolor for its yellows.[12] Eastmancolor offered a richer colour palette than either of these processes, and quickly became preferred; its one significant drawback was the tendency for colour values in prints to decay more rapidly,[13] but preservation was not a major concern for studios at the time. Nikkatsu released its first colour feature, *The Green Music Box* (*Midori haruka ni*, Inoue Umetsugu) in 1955, using Konicolor, a newer colour stock from Konishiroku.[14] Subsequently, Nikkatsu switched its colour process to Eastmancolor, and would take advantage of the latter's expanded colour palette for the films discussed here.[15]

Flourishes: Decorative Style in 1920s and 1930s Japanese Film', in *Reframing Japanese Cinema*, ed. by Desser and Arthur Noletti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 327–45.

[9] Laura Lee has argued that Suzuki's use of still frames in *Satan's Town* (*Akuma no machi*, 1956) and *Carmen from Kawachi* (*Kawachi karumen*, 1966) originates in a desire to mediate a character's subjectivity through unconventional means, but that its resulting effect also interrogates the act of representation and cinema's boundaries with other art forms. Suzuki's use of the solid colour backgrounds arguably function in a similar way. See: Laura Lee, *Japanese Cinema Between Frames* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 54–56, 70–72.

[10] Paul Coates, *Cinema and Colour: The Saturated Image* (London: BFI Palgrave, 2010), p. 30.

[11] See: Hiroshi Komatsu, 'From Natural Color to the Pure Motion Picture Drama', *Film History*, 7 (1995), 69–86.

[12] Okajima Hisashi, 'Color Film Restoration in Japan: Some Examples', trans. by Akiko Mizoguchi, *Journal of Film Preservation*, 66 (Oct. 2003), 32–36 (p. 33).

[13] For a technical and historical discussion of Eastmancolor, see: Heather Heckman, 'We've Got Bigger Problems: Preservation during Eastmancolor's Innovation and Early Diffusion', *The Moving Image*, 15.1 (Spring 2015), 44–61.

[14] Ivi, p. 35.

[15] Jasper Sharp, 'Japanese Widescreen Cinema: Commerce, Technology and Aesthetics'

What Watanabe Takenobu calls 'Nikkatsu Action Cinema' took shape in 1956, beginning with the films *Season of the Sun* (*Taiyō no kisetsu*, Furukawa Takumi) and *Crazed Fruit* (*Kurutta kajitsu*, Nakahira Kō), each starring Ishihara Yūjirō.[16] Ishihara's star, and that of Nikkatsu Action more generally, rose further the following year with the popularity of *I Am Waiting* (*Ore wa matteiru ze*, Kurahara Koreyoshi) and particularly *The Stormy Man*. Michael Raine has given a detailed account of how Nikkatsu promoted Ishihara's rise to stardom, emphasizing, among other things, the importance of the theme songs in Ishihara's films (particularly *The Stormy Man*), which were released by Ishihara as singles with a cross-promotion strategy.[17] This set underway a practice of multimedia stardom at Nikkatsu, and as a result of this practice, Nikkatsu Action films often feature musical performances in a nightclub stage space. The stage spaces of modern Ginza nightclubs would become foundational to other aspects of the genre's aesthetics, particularly as the studio adopted anamorphic framing (whose dimensions more closely mirrored stage spaces) and colour.[18]

In *The Winner* and *The Stormy Man*, Inoue took advantage of the films' exterior nighttime scenes in Tokyo's Ginza district and interior stage spaces in nightclubs as a pretext for intense colour design. Though the association between musical performance and colour would appear to replicate the prominence of colour design in Hollywood musicals, an important difference quickly emerges. Richard Misek makes a useful distinction between *surface color* (the colour of objects as they appear in white light) and *optical color* (colour created by lighting).[19] He argues that even within musicals, Hollywood films tended to use white light and to create their more elaborate colour schemes with *surface color*: the props, set designs, and costumes, as spelled out in the guidelines of Hollywood's Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers (SMPTE).[20] At Nikkatsu, however, Inoue and other filmmakers quickly began using coloured light filters in stage spaces, street scenes in the Ginza district (motivated by off-screen neon lights), and even in interior spaces in the Ginza district (motivated by off-screen neon

(unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sheffield, Department of English Literature, Language and Linguistics, 2013), pp. 213–18.

[16] Watanabe Takenobu, *Nikkatsu Akushon no karei na sekai* (Tokyo: Mirai-sha, 2004), p. 24. Mark Schilling has condensed much of the information contained in Watanabe's book in English, alongside new interviews and Schilling's own critical evaluations. See: Mark Schilling, *No Borders, No Limits: Nikkatsu Action Cinema* (Godalming: FAB Press, 2007).

[17] Michael Raine, 'Ishihara Yūjirō: Youth, Celebrity, and the Male Body in Late-1950s Japan', in *Word and Image in Japanese Cinema*, ed. by Dennis Washburn and Carole Cavanaugh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 202–25 (p. 214).

[18] Nikkatsu began incorporating colour and anamorphic lenses in the mid-1950s, and transitioned completely to anamorphic in June 1958. The colour transition was more irregular: after 1959, shooting in colour became more common but was not universal (Watanabe, *Nikkatsu Akushon*, pp. 24–25).

[19] Misek, p. 6.

[20] Ivi, p. 128.

lights coming in through windows).[21] Within a few years, Nikkatsu would begin increasingly shooting action films on location outside of Tokyo. In cases where the films were shot in other modern cities, filmmakers would simply use these cities' nightlife districts in a similar way to the Ginza in Tokyo-set films. Rural settings, like those used in Suzuki's *Blood-Red Water in the Channel* (*Kaikyō, chi ni somete*, 1961) and *The Man With a Shotgun* (*Shottogan no otoko*, 1961), offered filmmakers fewer pretexts for optical colour, and their colour design featured less formal play as a result.

The emphasis on optical colour had important implications for the colour design of Nikkatsu Action films. It gave sequences in nightlife districts a vibrant colour scheme, but one unlike those found in Hollywood musicals. Since colour-filtered light would function as the key light for an entire frame, the entire image would appear in subtle variations in hues of that colour. As a result, the colourful individual frames in Nikkatsu Action films tend to be either uniform in colour design, or to divide sections of the image into different colours using multiple coloured light sources (what Misek refers to as 'chromatic zoning').[22] It also allowed for more rapid transformations of the colour scheme of an individual shot without editing. In *The Stormy Man*, for example, Inoue uses multiple coloured light filters cycling over Ishihara during his performance so that he and his surroundings quickly change colours. Filmmakers also frequently use these rapid colour transformations to introduce kinetic energy, enhanced by the vibrancy of the colours, into scenes like Ishihara's drum solo. Many scenes incorporated coloured lights coming in through windows and alternating or cycling through different colours. A particularly baroque example can be found in *The Volcano's Wind* (*Umi o wataru hatoba no kaze*, Yamazaki Tokujirō, 1960), where Shishido Jō attempts to break into a safe in a nightclub at night, pink and green lights alternate shine into the room as the scene's key light, so that the sequence's light scheme in its entirety constantly shifts between pink, black, and green.

In the mid-to-late 1960s, there was a broad decline in theatrical attendance across Japan and new competition from Tōei Studio's *ninkyō* ('chivalry') films, both of which hurt Nikkatsu's box office receipts.[23] That, along with Suzuki's declining stock at the studio, meant that the number of colour films declined toward the end of his tenure at Nikkatsu: between *Fighting Delinquents* (*Kutabare gurentai*, 1960) and *Our Blood Will Not Forgive* (*Oretachi no chi ga yurusanai*, 1964), fourteen of Suzuki's fifteen films were in colour; between *Story of a Prostitute* (*Shunpuden*, 1965) and *Branded to Kill* (*Koroshi no rakuin*, 1967), only two of his seven films were in colour. Suzuki had little control over whether

[21] Daisuke Miyao has discussed the practice of using isolated spots of light against mostly dark, shadowy compositions in what he calls 'street films' (urban films set mostly at night of the 1920s and 1930s); Nikkatsu Action films arguably update the aesthetic for colour by adding colour filters to the light sources. See: Daisuke Miyao, *The Aesthetics of Shadow: Lighting and Japanese Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. 235–336.
[22] Ivi, p. 143.
[23] Watanabe, *Nikkatsu Akushon*, pp. 24–25.

his films would be in colour, and the studio's decision-making process regarding colour could be nebulous and change very suddenly. His assistant director Sone Chūsei writes that Suzuki had believed, along with most of the film's cast and crew, that *Carmen from Kawachi* would be filmed in colour, only to learn that the film would be in black and white when the studio issued black-and-white film stock;[24] Suzuki recounts a similar occurrence with *Fighting Elegy* (*Kenka ereji*, 1966).[25]

Suzuki's Earliest Colour Experiments, 1960–1962

When Suzuki directed *Fighting Delinquents* in colour at the end of 1960, the Nikkatsu Action colour idiom had been firmly established. Suzuki's earliest colour films adopt aspects of this colour idiom: performance spaces as a pretext for coloured light filters, exterior scenes in nightlife districts with neon lights and key lights from coloured light filters implied to be from neon light sources, and the use of coloured light filters to facilitate rapid and shocking shifts in an overall colour scheme. However, even in *Fighting Delinquents*, Suzuki begins to experiment with this idiom in unconventional ways, and to push the ostensible diegetic pretexts of his coloured light cues well past plausibility. Suzuki films a conversation scene in a nightclub during a performance, and directly shows the coloured light filters it uses. After showing the transition between red and blue light filters, Suzuki cuts to a two-shot of a man and woman bathed in a blue light. The colour is uniform across the frame, but it shifts multiple times over the course of the scene: from blue to green, from green to yellow, from yellow to white light, and, finally, to a garish red (fig. 1). Though Suzuki takes the trouble to show the cycling light filter before the conversation, the uniform lighting across the frame, particularly as part of the nightclub that is not close to the stage, seems implausible. Even though the colour shifts are motivated by the cycling of a light filter, they are timed to turning points in the conversation: the blue-to-green shift takes place at the moment when the man tells the woman that her long-ago-abandoned son has reappeared, and the colour shift underscores the change in her facial reaction when she hears the news. Though the technique has both a diegetic pretext and a dramatic function in the scene, it is so overtly manipulative and unrealistic that it turns into a self-reflexive joke about the use of colour and light shifts within Nikkatsu Action Cinema.

Suzuki would continue to use similar lighting cycles to create major compositional colour shifts over his next several films: in *Tokyo Knights* (*Tōkyō naito*, 1961), in a car scene with a rear-projected background of a Ginza street, using the familiar process of passing lights across the car windows in combination

[24] Sone Chūsei, *Sone Chūsei jiden: Hito wa nanomi no tsumi no fukasa yo* (Tokyo: Bunya-sha, 2014), p. 105.
[25] Interview with Suzuki Seijun, *Tokyo Drifter* DVD (New York: Criterion Collection, 2011).

Fig. 1: *Fighting Delinquents* (*Kutabare gurentai*, Suzuki Seijun, 1960)

with rear projection to suggest movement, he cycles through a series of colour filters so that the villain is bathed sequentially in orange, green, yellow, pink, and blue light. In a performance sequence in *Reckless Boss* (*Muteppō daisho*, 1961), Suzuki uses spatially discontinuous editing to show three performers suddenly shift to different parts of a nightclub so that they appear suddenly under purple, red, and yellow lights. In *The Wind-of-Youth Group Crosses the Mountain Pass* (*Tōge o wataru wakai kaze*, 1961), Wada Kōji fights with another man at a festival, and the other man throws three different coloured juices at him in succession. As each juice splashes across Wada's face, the lighting shifts: red light for the red juice, yellow light for the yellow juice, and green light for the green juice. Though Suzuki maintains a diegetic pretext within each of these sequences, the pretexts seem to become flimsier with each successive film.

These colour cycles in Suzuki's earliest colour films contain the seeds of what will become Suzuki's personalized colour style in his later films at Nikkatsu. First, the uniformity imposed by the coloured light filters would persist even as Suzuki incorporated surface colour in his colour design: rather than intricate colour patterns, Suzuki's colour design at Nikkatsu favored vibrant solid colours in lighting, costume design, and set design. Second, the sudden colour shifts would become important for his later action films, in which he often punctuates violent action either by similar sudden shifts in colour through lighting, or blocking and staging. Third, Suzuki is typically less interested in an individual colour *per se* than he is with colour vibrancy and with the visceral shock created by sudden colour shifts. In his later Nikkatsu films, the significance of colours will likewise not be found in the 'meanings' of individual colours, but rather in the ways that they repeat across a film as a motif, or shift suddenly in a scene.

Forging a Style, 1963–1966

Perhaps Suzuki's most famous use of colour is in *Gate of Flesh*. In a technique that grows directly out of Suzuki's colour cycles in his earliest colour films, Suzuki deploys a schematic colour design of solid colours, assigning one to each of the

Fig. 2: *Gate of Flesh* (*Nikutai no mon*, Suzuki Seijun, 1964)

four central women in the film who work at a cooperative brothel. The bright, solid colours of the women's outfits stand out against their drab surroundings in the bombed-out slums of Tokyo in the immediate postwar, and they also distinguish the four central women from the other sex workers in the film, who wear dresses in a neutral main colour with patterns or prints on them. By using a consistent colour for each of the individual women throughout the film, Suzuki creates a colour association with individual characters that he can draw on to provide subjective access to the characters at specific moments.[26] As each of the four women delivers an internal monologue in succession, the colour of her dress extends to the background set colouration (fig. 2). Though Suzuki develops this technique with surface colour in addition to optical colour, the emphasis on colour uniformity in the costume designs, and particularly in the frames overwhelmed by a uniform solid colour, derives from the effect of the coloured light filters seen in his earlier films. Using surface colour and post-production colour additions, Suzuki modulates the amount of colour at different moments in the film. The series of internal monologues is the most extreme example, but at other moments, such as when the three other women are torturing Maya, a gauzy green haze infuses the screen and surrounds her.

The internal monologues in *Gate of Flesh* point to another tendency in Suzuki's late Nikkatsu films, beginning with *Kanto Wanderer*: his tendency to use negative

[26] Desser reads the colours symbolically based on a misunderstanding of an interview in which Suzuki reads several symbolic interpretations of the film's colours by critics, though Suzuki has subsequently said that he only supplied these readings to mock them, and that his only intention was to pick colours that stood out from the background and were consistent across the film. Desser acknowledges that Suzuki's supplied readings do not map meaningfully onto the characters, but he supplies alternative symbolic readings ('red = leadership') that seem arbitrary at best. See: Desser, p. 315; 'Interview with Suzuki Seijun', *Eiga Hyōron*, January 1960, p. 20; 'From the Ruins: Making *Gate of Flesh*', *Gate of Flesh* DVD (New York: Criterion Collection, 2005).

space backgrounds with abstract colour design. In the climax, the protagonist Katsuta slices a man, sending him through a *fusuma* in the background. The set collapses around the man, revealing a solid red colour. Shot perspectivally, the red in the background appears to have no beginning or end, and becomes simply an abstract field of colour. In subsequent films, Suzuki would continue to use these abstract colour backgrounds, particularly in action sequences. In some cases, the colour of the background shifts to punctuate action, as in a scene in *Tokyo Drifter* where the background shifts from red to white as Tetsu shoots a gun out of an enemy's hand.

These abstract colour fields are a perfect example of the phenomenon that Hasumi had described when he discussed the play between flatness and depth in Suzuki's films. The perspectival framing gives the impression that the red wall is not a wall but a vacant mass of red that expands outward indefinitely: it relies on perspectival framing and sets that are built, lit, and filmed to prevent a clear distinction between ground, wall, and ceiling. These bear a relationship to a common production technique in cinema to leave large empty spaces, usually to be filled in during post-production. These date back to the tendency in early cinema to leave a large, black field of empty space to be filled in by another superimposed shot later, and have a legacy through the use of chroma key effects.[27] However, Suzuki frequently leaves these spaces empty in post-production, filled only by bright colours that occasionally transform in response to actions that take place in front of them. In subsequent films, Suzuki continues to use these primary-coloured negative spaces in a variety of ways: marking out subjective spaces for characters to deliver internal monologues (*Gate of Flesh*), as backgrounds that shift colour, seemingly responding to the diegesis rather than being part of it (*Tokyo Drifter* and other action films), or exploiting the negative space for its ambiguity (*The Fang in the Hole*, *Ana no kiba*, 1979).

These fields in a solid colour derive in part from the way that the emphasis on optical colour within Nikkatsu Action Cinema produces uniform colouration over an image. There is, however, another influence that becomes significant for Suzuki in this period that we should consider in looking at this new colouration scheme. *Kanto Wanderer* and *Tattooed Life* (*Irezumi ichidai*, 1965) are both examples of Nikkatsu's attempts to compete with Tōei's *ninkyō* films.[28] *Ninkyō* films foregrounded both the conflict between *giri* ('loyalty' to the clan) and *ninjō* ('human sympathy'), as well as the conflicts between these values and the social transformations in the early modern era.[29] Instead of the modern urban

[27] Trond Lundemo, 'The Colors of Haptic Space: Black, Blue, and White in Moving Images', in *Color: The Film Reader*, ed. by Angela Dalle Vacche and Brian Price (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 88–101.

[28] Suzuki's *The Flowers and the Angry Waves* (*Hana to dōto*, 1964) is also a *ninkyō* film. Some Nikkatsu films also adapted *ninkyō* themes to the modern, urban settings of other Nikkatsu Action films, including *Our Blood Will Not Forgive* and *Tokyo Drifter*.

[29] Watanabe Takenobu, 'Ninkyō eiga sōmokuroku: 1961–1969', in *Ninkyō eiga no sekai*, ed. by Kusumoto Kenkichi (Tokyo: Arechi, 1969), pp. 212–35.

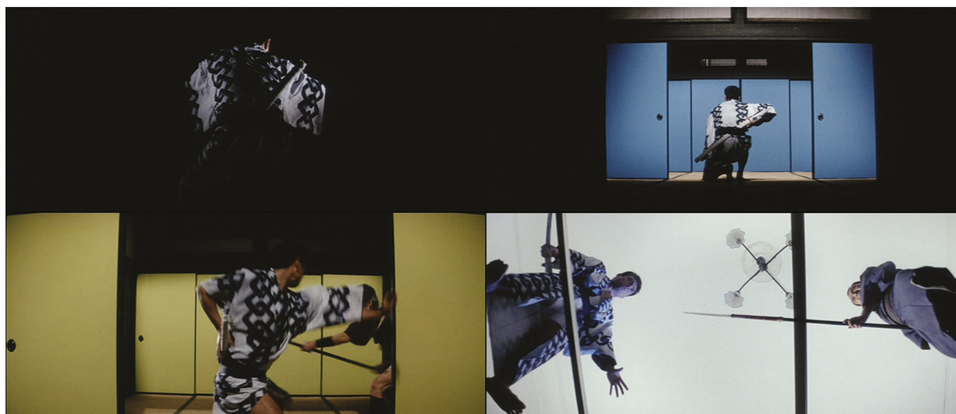

Fig. 3: *Tattooed Life* (*Irezumi ichidai*, Suzuki Seijun, 1965)

nightclubs that characterized Nikkatsu Action films, a more prominent setting for *ninkyō* films was the upstairs *bakuchiyado* (a secret gambling den). These incorporated Japanese architecture into their staging: *shōji* and *fusuma*[30] could be broken down in combat, or simply opened, to create a sudden, dramatic change in the composition.[31]

Suzuki adopts this strategy in later action films, but he incorporates colour transformations into these spatial transformations. In the climax of *Tattooed Life*, the protagonist Tetsutarō moves laterally across a thinly lit trajectory in the foreground towards his enemy's house, and his movement is followed by tracking shots until he reaches the entrance. Tetsutarō then moves from a flat, virtually monochromatic image into depth and into colour. This incorporates the colour shifts into the action: aggressive movements forward into depth reveal new colours as he opens doors and reveals new coloured doors behind him, and aggressive movements outward towards Tetsutarō reveal new colours as they break down doors. Since *fusuma* are traditionally the colour of the paper from which they are made,[32] the blue and yellow colors are abstracted from the surfaces that they appear on; rather than blue and yellow *fusuma*, they are blue and yellow *on fusuma*. It culminates in a showdown with his opponent against a white ceiling (fig. 3). The sequence begins in a flat, nearly monochrome image of Tetsutarō and his black-and-white *kimono* against an all-black background.

[30] *Shōji* and *fusuma* are both rectangular screens and function as both doors and walls; however, *shōji* are translucent while *fusuma* are opaque.

[31] As Noël Burch observes, this use of Japanese architecture in fight choreography has been common since at least the *chanbara* ('swordfighting') films of the 1920s set in the premodern era; *ninkyō* films simply draw on this practice in their early modern setting. See: Noël Burch, *To the Distant Observer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 118.

[32] Some *fusuma* may be decorated by paintings, and there is also a tradition of *kinbusama* ('golden' *fusuma*), but the solid, bright colours seen here would be unusual even in these cases.

Opening the *fusuma* suddenly introduces both depth and colour into the image, and the colours shift as he progresses. After he and his assailants successfully break down all of the *fusuma* in combat, the sequence culminates in another nearly monochrome image of Tetsutarō facing off against his opponent, and the extreme low-angle through the apparent floor of the house throws the sense of perspectival space into confusion. There is a clear formal progression into and out of depth that Suzuki complements with sudden colour transformations as new spaces are revealed. To the sudden shifts in dominant colour that we saw in his earlier lighting cycles, or even the series of internal monologues in *Gate of Flesh*, Suzuki now adds not just a shift between colours, but a shift *into* and *out of* colour. In the more famous climactic shootout of *Tokyo Drifter*, Suzuki uses a similar progression of nearly monochrome to wild colour shifts to nearly monochrome again, though he uses lighting shifts rather than the play with blocking and depth that we see in the climax of *Tattooed Life*.

Conclusion

The personal colour aesthetic that Suzuki refined during his career at Nikkatsu grows out of a broader colour idiom that was commonly used by his contemporaries at the studio; it could even be seen as a distillation of these tendencies. The prominence of optical colour in the form of stage lights or neon light that were common across Nikkatsu Action films allowed Suzuki to isolate colour itself from the objects in front of the camera, and to shift the colour schemes of images very suddenly. Even as Suzuki makes films with settings far from the glamorous nightclubs of the Ginza district in Japan's high-growth period like the early modern era or the decimated slums of Tokyo in the immediate postwar, he builds on an approach to colour design that was shaped by these early experiments, and develops new ways to isolate solid colours in his compositions and to shift those colours unexpectedly. His approach abstracts colour in the sense that Coates uses the term, causing it to function as an autonomous stylistic flourish that could suffuse the screen with a character's subjectivity, underscore violent actions, or perform other functions while forgoing a diegetic pretext. In spite of these self-reflexive colour techniques, Suzuki's films are resolutely located in popular genre cinema. Through colour, he was able to prevail over the limitations of his industrial context and to abstract individual colours as elements of film form that could be isolated and transformed independently of any diegetic objects that might be said to possess them.