

# Branded to Kill – Arrow Blu Ray

— *Written by John Parrot On 29th August 2014*

The 60s were the highpoint of 'cool' in movies – before flares and then big hair ruined it all. The decade was also the peak of 'weird'. Mostly 60s cool tends not to be that weird, think *Bullitt*, *À Bout de Souffle* or *Alfie*.

1967's *Branded to Kill* is a key exception.



Goro Hanada is a hitman – ranked third best in all Japan, in fact – and he is one cool cookie. In a natty suit and with a taste for danger, Hanada brings to mind an outlaw Harry Palmer. Although married, he lives the isolated life of a classic hired killer or existentialist hero. Hanada is also a bit of an oddball – the smell of freshly cooked rice turns him on.

Joe Sushido, an actor who made his name playing Yakuza gangsters in the 60s, having previously remade his looks by having cheek augmentation surgery in the 50s, plays Hanada. It is generally reckoned that Sushido's surgery made him look like a chipmunk and it wouldn't come as a complete surprise if he did turn out to be carrying around a hazelnut snack in his **cheek pouch**.

Hanada's first job is to escort a man across Japan, a plan that, of course, goes awry when his alcoholic colleague loses his head in a theatrical fashion during an ambush. Next he's back in his lovely minimal flat having a marathon sex session with his wife. This is a small detour from the **Yakuza genre** into **Pink Film**, the Japanese softcore porn genre.

Then a femme fatale Misako (Annu Mari) pops up and proceeds to hire Hanada to carry out a series of ingenious but bizarre assassinations. Jim Jarmusch fans will notice that two of these cropped up in *Ghost Dog*. After spending some time in his girlfriend's butterfly bestrewn apartment, there's another shootout after which Hanada ends up back in his place with hitman #1 where they both hang about waiting to see which one will strike first.

This gives an idea of how eccentric the plot is, but the film is actually stranger still. There is usually little explanation of transitions from scene to scene – why for instance Hanada is hanging around in his flat at one

moment and driving in a car with a mysterious woman the next. The series of assassinations are only explained after the event and even then this doesn't quite make sense.

The film has a dream like quality. It's often not clear what is real or what things mean. The recurring butterfly motif must have some symbolic meaning, but it is never made clear quite what. The scene towards the end, where Hanada shares his apartment with the most lethal killer in Japan feels like it might be a study of madness, sleeplessness, or possibly alcoholism.

Director Seijun Suzuki made *Branded to Kill* for Nikkatsu Studios, Japan's oldest, where he had been working since 1956. The film was his fortieth for the studio and they didn't like the weirdness one bit. In fact, he was fired for 'incomprehensibility'. Suzuki responded by suing Nikkatsu. He won a settlement, but also earned himself a blackballing by the Japanese film industry. It was ten years before he made another film

*Branded to Kill* is certainly strange, possibly incomprehensible in parts, but it is terrifically fast moving. The story kicks off as soon as the credits have rolled and there are numerous episodes crammed into the film's hour and a half running time. And despite the oneiric quality, there's enough action that it does still qualify as a proper gangster film.

Nikkatsu composer Naozumi Yamamoto's harpsichord-driven theme tune perfectly sets the moody, melancholy tone. Finally, any description of this mind-bending film should not forget to mention that it looks amazing. Scene after scene are as eye catching as any film you'll see. Incomprehensibility never looked so good or so cool.