Seijun Suzuki was a Japanese filmmaker who found himself in a very similar position in the 1960s to the American film noir directors that came decades before him: he was under contract at a major studio (in his case Nikkatsu Studios) and expected to provide a high volume of B-List films to pad out the production. With a very limited budget, and strict time constraint, he made an astonishing 40 films between 1956 and 1967. Whilst at a forum honouring his work in Los Angeles in 1997, Suzuki spoke very frankly about his time at Nikkatsu:

Nikkatsu Studios released two movies per week. The scripts were already written and those scripts were passed down to the directors[...]. The schedule was [...], two movies a week. On average, we only had 25 days for shooting the film and three days for editing and sound mixing. A whole production usually took place in 28 days. (The Japan Foundation)

These constraints allowed Suzuki, like the noir directors that came before him, some space to explore the tropes in the genre films he was assigned. Whilst it could be argued that his earlier work with Nikkatsu was comparatively generic when put next to his last dozen or so films with Nikkatsu Studios, his latter projects were constantly pushing the boundaries of contemporary cinema.

These experimental films amazed a small audience and while profitable, made the studios executives increasingly nervous. Suzuki was finally fired from Nikkatsu after releasing Branded to Kill in 1967, and he retaliated by suing the production company. He won the court case, but effectively found himself-black listed for a decade from all the major movie studios in Japan.

His third to last film with Nikkatsu (and the beginning of the tipping point of his status at the studio), was Tokyo Drifter, a 1966 film that bent the expectations of the yakuza genre to breaking point. It was surreal in its use of colour, framing, and editing. It used exaggerated tropes from Western pulp fiction, while retaining a sense of being wholly Japanese. The lead character is silent, focused and untameable like a P.I. torn from
the pages of a Mickey Spillane book. However, this “Drifter” inhabits a world that is quintessentially Japanese, almost to the point of parody; in one scene, he strolls through the snow singing the film’s title song, like an *enka* singer or Japanese variety performer:

Tokyo Drifter took pop art’s sly appetite for pastiche and appropriation and spun it into a cool web of subliminal associations, a flabbergasting assemblage of tough-guy kitsch, poetry and self-mockery. (Hampton)

With the proliferation of the VHS and home cinema market in the 1980s, Suzuki found a growing audience of curious film lovers who came to appreciate his work, and Western film critics often refer to Tokyo Drifter as one of his most adventurous projects.

While everything in the film could be read as psychedelic and superficial, Suzuki took great pains to select the right sets, light them appropriately, and choose a costume for each character that not only reflected their personality, but drew the actors into the odd world Suzuki was constructing:

In order to make actors commit to play a character, the first thing you can do is to provide a costume[...]. Costume fitting is the beginning of character development[...]. Even actors have regular lives. So, when they walk onto the film set, if they see a normal, everyday setting that they would know from their own life, it wouldn’t be a surprise at all. But, if you make the set extraordinary, they go, “Woah this is wonderful!” Then they transform from everyday life to the character’s life. An excellent set gives them that. (The Japan Foundation)

While these details were important to Suzuki, and his unconventional approach added to his world building, Nikkatsu were becoming increasingly frustrated with Suzuki and did not approve of the direction in which the film was heading. One scene in which the studio demanded a reshoot was the grand finale, the original of which depicted a felled tree painted a garish red and a bold green moon hanging low in a night sky. Testuya (Watari Tetsuya), our drifter, simply walks off and returns to his life of wandering. Suzuki explains how Nikkatsu felt disappointment and disapproval in equal measure:

Nobody from the studio liked the movie and they said, ‘Why did you make this movie?!’ In the end they said I killed Watari’s career. So I had to re-shoot the last scene of the film because the company ordered me to do so. (The Japan Foundation)

The studio was extremely annoyed with the final scene and demanded something more action packed. What Suzuki delivered is a memorable and chaotic scene, which he hoped would appease the studio by supplying the action, yet allowed him to stick to his guns in providing a stylized and rich closing scene that is open to be read in a variety of ways.

Fig.1 | Tetsuya walking down the deeply shadowed white corridor. *Tokyo Drifter*. DVD, Nikkatsu, 1966. 1:17:30.

Fig.2 | The henchmen, clad in black, stand out in the all white set. *Tokyo Drifter*. DVD, Nikkatsu, 1966. 1:18:56.
As we explored before, set design and costuming were key foundations of Suzuki constructing the unique atmosphere in his films. The scene begins with a wide shot of Chihiro (Chieko Matsubara), our captured heroine, illuminated by a spotlight and standing below a red hoop-like structure in an otherwise pitch black set; the camera pans to show Tetsuya standing at the end of a long, narrow and angular hallway, which is as stark white as the suit he is wearing, but striped with deep shadows that cause Tetsuya to step in and out of the light.

He blends in naturally with his surroundings and we cut to a close up of his calm demeanour before he ducks into the shadows of an archway, which leads into a large, dark set. Bright lights suddenly illuminate the set and we get a quick succession of close ups that show the panicked gang boss, Kurata (Ryuji Kita), the surprised Chihiro, the fearful piano player scrambling for cover, and a henchman clad in a formal black suit, who fires his gun at the intruder.
As Tetsuya shoots down each of the henchmen, a quick succession of shots show an open white room with white furniture, a white grand piano, our heroine, Chihiro, is clad in a white dress, and there are also free standing white pillars that support nothing but thin air. Contrasting heavily with this pure white atmosphere is the horde of gangsters clad in formal black suits, some with dark black sunglasses, another with a black eye patch, but all wearing black leather gloves and wielding black handguns. The only exceptions to this monochrome motif is an odd moon-like sculpture that hangs from the rafters and is a blood-red colour. There is also a glass set in front of the gang boss, Kurata (Ryuji Kita), which glitters very subtly, but still manages to draw the eye in the otherwise sparse setting. Everything that contrasts with the colour white is clearly visible and stands out, perhaps showing how easy these targets are for our hero to find.

From the slow and calm opening of the scene that gives us the lay of the land, the action becomes a mix of fast cuts and close ups as Tetsuya dispatches the gang members one by one. Almost every gang member fires at Tetsuya missing their target only to fall prey to his deadly accuracy and crafty ploys to trick them.

At one point, everyone clambers for cover, and the action grinds to a halt. We get extreme close ups of panicking gang members juxtaposed with the thoughtful and calm expression on Tetsuya’s face.

An example of this blend of slow and rapid editing sees Tetsuya sliding his gun into the centre of the room, disarming himself. Here the editing slows down, and a number of medium shots show the remaining gangsters closing in on their mark, surrounding him. A wide shot shows Tetsuya dashing for his gun, there is a quick cut to a close up of a gangster being shot, then a jump back to the previous wide shot where two more men are killed, and finally there is a close up of a gun which was inadvertently flung in the death throes of one of the gangsters and lands on the piano, striking a sudden and sombre note.
Tetsuya traps the hands of a would-be killer in the piano and we are presented with a wide shot, with Tetsuya in the foreground and the gang leader in full view in the background. The shot is held for almost 30 seconds, a rest from the break neck speed of the editing previous to this final stand-off, and a chance for our strong but mostly silent hero to confront his final foe.

Tossing his gun into the air and chasing after it, Tetsuya becomes a moving target, one too quick to be hit by the gang leader. Our hero catches his gun and shoots and wounds the gang leader, who slumps onto his table. Tetsuya then dispatches of the last of the henchmen and at the same time the unnatural red of the moon drains away and it too becomes white, blending into the rest of set. The danger has passed and there are no visual distractions to divert the viewers’ attention away from the dialogue that is about to unfold, apart from an array of bodies dressed in black strewn across the set.

Again, the pacing slows to a crawl as Tetsuya approaches his wounded rival. He then crushes the aforementioned glass and suggests Kurata commit suicide with the shards. Tetsuya strolls over to Chihiro, and they embrace, the moon turning a soft yellow while the music of the soundtrack slowly comes, the first nondiegetic sound in the scene. The piano player walks off unharmed, and we get a close up of Tetsuya who looks unmoved and uncomfortable in Chihiro’s embrace. A reverse shot shows Chihiro realising this is the last time she will see Tetsuya, the soft yellow moon shining over her head like a halo, just one indication that she is too pure for Tetsuya. Kurata then slits his own wrists, spurting red over the table, Chihiro turns away in disgust, and Tetsuya looks on unfazed.

Tetsuya cannot be with Chihiro, and instead must return to his life as a wanderer. A wide shot is held as Tetsuya leaves her, showing the carnage he has caused to secure her safety. The moon remains a mild yellow colour, functioning as a bold indicator of the action that unfolds during the scene; it begins with red to symbolise the danger, then drains of its colour when...
the danger is dispatched. In turning white, it shows that Tetsuya could stay with Chihiro, blend in and be safe, but that is not in his nature; nor is it in the nature of the moon to be a bleached white colour. The final yellow moon is normality returning, the natural colour of the moon coming back as Tetsuya realises he must return to his true calling: to be the Tokyo drifter.

We are shown the distraught Chihiro as Tetsuya leaves, and then we return to the same long corridor that opened the scene, as he walks off. This is a contorted reflection to the opening shot: Chihiro is now safe under a yellow moon, not standing in darkness under a red one, yet she is still distraught that Tetsuya is leaving. The same panning technique leads us to the angular hallway again, this time showing Tetsuya walking away from the woman that loves him; his way of saving her as he believes her to be much safer without his company.

This calm ending is juxtaposed with quick flashes of bold neon lights advertising companies such as Karaoke halls and steak houses, perhaps a nod to what Howard Hampton described as the film’s “appetite for pastiche and appropriation,” or perhaps Suzuki was again trying to appease the executives at Nikkatsu with visuals that are both entertaining and familiar.

Finally, we return to Tetsuya, again in his white suit, leaning casually on a staircase painted white. This exterior shot is painted to look like the sound studio in which the previous scene took place; some patches of paint are drier than others, giving the white wall an inadvertent texture. You can almost see the hurried brushstrokes used to prepare this final shot and squeeze it into the tight deadline. With the bleached white building on the left of the screen and deep shadows on the right, Tetsuya walks off into the morally ambiguous representation of his personality, never fully entering the darkness.

Before he disappears into the shadows, an end title screen appears with, “終” or “the end” in a bold green. Is this green merely a stylistic choice to counteract the crisp monochrome of the final shot, or was Suzuki sneaking in a subtle version of the green moon he initially envisioned for the finale? Either way, it is a striking ending to one of his most unique films.

WORKS CITED
