



The Frida Zinema

# MAFIA Mayhem

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# The Godfather of all Genres

by Carolyn S.




When you think about mafia movies you may just think crime. However, when we watch these movies there's elements of several different genres depending on the storyline and the director. Drama, romance, comedy, action, and perhaps even a holiday movie is something we see in many different mafia movies. In *Goodfellas*, there is a Christmas scene, romance between Karen and Henry Hill, betrayal by several different characters, and the classic scenes of Joe Pesci making inappropriate jokes about situations like Billy Batts being buried or spider being told to wait on the boys at the bar. *The Godfather* shows romance in Connie's wedding (and later with Don Corleone in *Godfather Part II*), humor (leave the gun. Take the cannoli), and more. There's suspense, gore, and mind games the directors play on the audience in these movies. We laugh, cry, and scream.

Different directors can also choose to create their storylines to highlight these different feeling. Martin Scorsese in particular is capable of playing with audience emotions. Improvisation gives authenticity to the story and builds relationships with the viewer and the characters. Juxtaposition

of hand picked music with the scenes give the audience a feeling of unease, frenzy, or excitement. Another director, Francis Ford Coppola leverages cinematography to create a dark atmosphere which the audience is immersed in. In dark scenes, it is apparently that illegal activities or foreshadowing of impending doom of certain characters may take place. This is contrasted with the light cinematography and atmosphere of scenes that are happier or uplifting. Later, particularly in the godfather, we see a mixing of these with the death of Don Corleone happening with a child present and in the daylight which . This manipulation of the audience by musical score or tracks, building relationships with the viewers, leveraging lighting and film to create a certain atmosphere, and more is just another reason, in addition to genre mixing, that mafia movies are the ideal and most compelling genres of film.





An Ode to Joe Pesci

With all the names of Italian greats  
who more is there to celebrate  
than a man of no more  
than 5 foot 4

Wiser than most guys and  
funnier than *all*

Joe teaches us all there is no such thing  
as being too small.

And through all the broken noses,  
being battered and bruised  
Scorsese has taught us  
He's not the one to lose.

So to Mr. Pesci  
Thank you for your Italian ways  
and the bright light  
your role in cinema plays.

# The BABY ASSASSINS

## The Slacker Mumblecore Take on Action Filmmaking

### PHENOMENON

by Brian Ly

On the surface, the film franchise is about two slacker girls who can't pay their bills but also refuse to work and would prefer to laze around their apartment and mumble and whine all day (tbh same). They're also contract assassins who are surprisingly competent at their job when they find the effort to actually go out and do it. Hideo Kojima counts himself among the franchise's diehard fans, incessantly tweeting about Blu-ray sellouts and not being able to get his hands on product when he clearly has the clout to go on set, which he obviously has done and of course has the photos to prove it. It's been described as *iCarly* meets *John Wick*, and there probably isn't a more apt way to describe it. The premise is interesting enough, but what exactly is it about this franchise that has made it so captivating and charming to its devout fanbase that couldn't sing its praises enough? *Baby Assassins* is the brainchild of Yugo Sakamoto, one of the most exciting working directors in Japan today, who cites anime and video games as major influences, incorporating the more stylized action choreography from the stunt world with a very particular form of subtle Japanese comedy with stream-of-consciousness, incoherent, and mumbly dialogue that would normally be more at home in an indie mumblecore film. The film is at its core social commentary on the general economic situation faced by most working-class Japanese today, faced with the parallel forces of increased cost of goods and stagnating wages, leading to a natural existential ennui toward career and life as a whole when the daily grind has no real outlook of progression or acceleration and only serves as a form of self-preservation, which raises the question of what even is the purpose of this existence in the first place. The hyperviolent tendencies don't serve as any form of emotional catharsis, because it's just in service of a job to keep the debt collectors away, and rotting on the couch talking about your latest media obsession or anticipating the dessert you saved for later sounds infinitesimally more exciting than anything that involves getting dressed and going outside. It's this coalescence of sensibilities that seems to have struck a chord with a generation of disenchanting young adults finding the promise of success in life unmet by the societal realities that only serve to reinforce an attitude of apathetic remove.

Sakamoto struck gold with the casting of Akari Takaishi and Saori Izawa, at the time virtual unknowns, allowing for the creative space for the characters to come to life without any prior expectations, and their awareness in the public consciousness is inherently tied to their personas in this film. It's a classic odd couple setup, with Takaishi coming from an idol background and Izawa from the stunt world. This made portraying the more conventional performative cuteness of the *burikko* role (though almost certainly with a level of sarcastic self-parody) a natural mode for Takaishi, in direct contrast to the more stoic Izawa as a non-actor. At the same time, they're not bound to their girly girl and tomboyish archetypes as fixed personalities and are complex characters that act as extensions of their real selves that allow them to be more fleshed out and fairly relatable, almost analogous to the concept of 2.5D idols where the lines between fiction and reality between

actor and character are blurred. While they themselves may not adopt the label of idols, they certainly have resonated in a similar way to a level of adoration by their fans.

The film series is a natural subversion of the contract killer genre, where the traditional structure of the crime organization is very much in place and embedded into a more grounded setting, yet by its very nature allows for the more heightened action and ridiculous situations the characters get into. Where it differs is in its intersection with the naturalistic realm of the slice-of-life genre, where the characters have real lives off-hours, and the real-world consequences of the ebb and flow of contract work are felt when the girls don't have consistent income but also have consistent bills that need to be paid. Whereas most organized crime films have some level of remove where the characters involved tend to feel largely disenfranchised and uninvolved with mainstream society, this film leans into it more heavily with the notion that they're just regular girls who happen to contract as assassins. The contrast between the violent actions that come with the trade and the seemingly innocuous image of the girls creates a certain *gap moe*, where their laid-back attitudes can instantly take a turn into cold-blooded assassinations.

The first film is very much an introduction to the absolutely wild premise and invites the first challenge faced by the duo, where the industry of contract killing isn't free from the economic struggles that plague any industry, and when the organization demands the girls pay for their own living expenses following their high school graduation as well as develop some life skills as contributing members of society, they're forced to seek outside employment in the form of *arubaito*, dead-end part-time jobs typically done by students and foreigners that are more often than not needlessly demanding and sometimes even demeaning for paltry pay. For Chisato, played by Takaishi, whose natural beauty belies her uncouth and lazy nature, the fast-paced, dynamic nature of the service industry proves to be exceedingly difficult despite her adept meticulousness when it comes to assassinations. For the tomboyish and awkward Mahiro, played by Izawa, just even getting through a job interview proves to be a nearly insurmountable endeavor, and when she finally lands a job by referral from Chisato, she finds herself in hell on Earth working at a maid cafe. For both of them, completing the workday without accidentally almost killing their employers or customers is all too challenging of an ordeal. Their approach to work is negligent in general, leaving mid-assassination because they're running late to their shift, where any form of labor is a minor inconvenience from their primary focus on life, which is doing nothing and eating. Their challenges aren't limited to the workplace, though, as they struggle to live together, accidentally breaking their washing machine due to the magazines and bullets left in their pockets, as well as more general roommate conflicts that arise with asymmetric levels of employment and general resentment that comes with naturally incongruous personalities. This first entry is admittedly steeped in the more slice of life elements of the franchise in its introduction of the lead characters and their dynamic as they evolve from reluctant coworkers forced to live together to inseparable friends throughout the course of the series, to the chagrin of many action fans who inadvertently came to this film from the genre space, but we see a melding of worlds when the yakuza inadvertently go to the maid cafe for lunch and when things turn sour and they threaten the workers, they find themselves suddenly and completely massacred by Chisato, giving birth to a personal vendetta between these two factions that culminates in the film's final act after the girls set aside their differences at home and learn to meet each other at the same level and team up to eradicate the remaining yakuza in direct hand-to-hand combat and an all-out shootout with a machine gun.

The exact structure of the actual assassin organization has always been somewhat cryptic, feeling almost more like an employment agency in nature, but we see that our girls had officially had membership in the actual guild with the introduction of two amateur assassins working part-time as subcontractors. If the first film was your typical origin story behind how the girls met and eventually became friends as they learned to better communicate and live



together, *Baby Assassins 2 Babies* begins with them as no longer reluctant roommates, enjoying and living life to their fullest until they find themselves suddenly with a massive debt they have racked up from gym memberships they forgot about years ago after signing up, insurance premiums they're behind on from not changing the payment method, and Mahiro's driving school tuition. Naturally, while waiting in line for insurance payments, they find themselves entangled in an incident that gets them suspended, and their attempts to strike, go independent, and cause a social media stink are all immediately shut down, forcing them to take a break and further putting their debt situation into jeopardy. This creates the perfect opportunity for the formerly introduced part-timers to take their spots as full-time assassins. True to their status, they prove to initially be unworthy rivals and are easily taken down without even breaking a sweat in subsequent encounters throughout town, yet their desperation and perseverance make them a nuisance and eventually formidable in their own right. It becomes a test of teamwork and fortitude to take them down, and when one of each goes down, it's about relying on your partner to get the job done. We don't actually see the real emotional weight of the film until the post-credits, when you see a real connection between the two as Mahiro finally uses the catchphrase that Chisato had made earlier correctly that she didn't initially get, with their conversation converging into a shared nonsense language that only makes sense between the two.

While the first two films feel like a solid two-parter that completes the story of the girls' friendship with their economic struggles as a comedic vehicle, the third film, *Baby Assassins: Nice Days*, feels more like an evolution than the finale of a trilogy, right down to the overall increased stakes within the film as well as the very obvious increase in budget and production value, evident clearly enough by the resounding declaration of optimism in the subtitle. You can really feel the independent film ethos in the first two films, where it's defined by the guerrilla shots of their daily life segments throughout their neighborhood, but this film takes a massive shift as more of a straight action film throughout, with Sakamoto citing the *Mission: Impossible* and *Fast & Furious* franchises as direct influences, while not forgetting the peculiar brand of humor that had made his franchise so iconic. The film opens with a heated assassination segment that transitions immediately to Chisato talking about wanting to get a wolf cut and their dinner plans to try some Miyazaki beef. Rather than the more mundane setting of everyday life in Uguisudani, they are sent on a special mission in Miyazaki, an island town where they're more concerned about how to spend their vacation time than actually accomplishing their task. Their first real threat in the entire franchise is introduced in the character of Kaede Fuyumura, played by Sosuke Ikematsu, a highly skilled lone wolf contract killer going after the same target. It's worthwhile to note that Ikematsu, along with Atsuko Maeda, is one of the first mainstream actors to have come into this world after largely working with relative unknowns and character actors working in the lower rungs of the industry. What makes the character played by Ikematsu rather compelling is as a natural progression of his on-screen persona, where he has the looks and charisma of a conventional leading man, but he has a certain dark aura and outsider flair, with one of his defining roles as Ryuzaki, the successor to L, in the *Death Note* sequel series *Death Note: New Generations*, and his style of assassination thus follows a more traditionally solitary model right down to the stereotypical inner monologue edgelord narration in direct contrast to the partnership of Chisato and Mahiro where they can really rely on one another and not a single brain cell is being used between them as they mindlessly kill of their targets and have fun doing so in the process. With the stakes being larger due to the threat of the freelancer on the reputation of the guild, more players from the organization join the fray, one of whom is the senior assassin Iruka Minami, played by Maeda, whose entire personality is being irritated at the behavior of her two juniors. This is one of the first weightier roles as of late for Maeda, who has been vastly underrated as an actor since her transition from the iconic center of AKB48 during their prime into a largely middling but admittedly underappreciated acting career that has generally leaned on her naturally cute and charming personality, used to particularly great effect to demonstrate a manipulative character in *Initiation Love* and in embodying a sort of existential unease in

an unknown place in one of horror auteur Kiyoshi Kurosawa's non-horror efforts that are still actually kind of horror in their own way, *To the Ends of the Earth*, where in this role, she gets to subvert her image as a more sarcastic character with her own flavor of humor while still playing to her long-established persona. In a similar way, Minami talks about her own lone wolf streak in her idolization of Ai Haibara from *Detective Conan* and how she learns about teamwork from the two girls when Chisato makes a joke about Mahiro's idolization of L from *Death Note*, from whom she's adopted her sitting mannerisms. There is a certain parallelism to the path that Mahiro could have walked in a world where she didn't have the right support system. Though ostensibly unincorporated, Fuyumura is sort of a walking contradiction with his alliance with the outdoorsy, organic, crunchy granola-themed co-op assassin group known as "The Farm" (this is literally what it is; I am not making this shit up), which he is admittedly just exploiting the resources of in service of achieving his long-coveted 150th kill. Despite being equally skilled in ability and despite sheer technical precision, Fuyumura is ultimately done in not purely due to falling short as an assassin but more due to the existential crisis of his worldview falling apart, seeing the two get along and succeeding at what he thought he could only uniquely do as a solitary existence. While the film has expanded in scope with a more exotic location, big-name actors, and a stark shift to a more serious film as a whole, it doesn't forget its tonal origins and appeal that had defined the franchise as a fan favorite, where, as much as it's about warring factions of assassin organizations, it's really about the girls forced to do work when they're trying to enjoy their vacation and get to eat their Miyazaki beef.

Though the action choreography and personalities of the girls are the defining marks of the franchise, it's the sheer mundanity of the dialogue that's the secret sauce of it all. Sakamoto has such a strong pulse on the randomness that defines the collective consciousness of the chronically online, with his constant pop culture references seamlessly introduced into casual dialogue and deep dive brain dumps that come out of nowhere. Most casual conversations by background characters involve the discussion of prices of food, such as being in awe about someone spending 1000 yen for lunch when you can be plenty full under 300 yen, and if you're spending 300 yen, you might as well go get gyudon for a filling meal, menu items that are priced in increasing 100-yen increments designed to match what the customer can afford, and the psychopathic mindset that goes into buying a plain salt onigiri during 100-yen sales when they are already 100 yen by default, reflecting the deeply frugal mindset of penny-pinching for the youth who have to plan out every meal so that they won't starve. The girls will frequently reference catchphrases from children's anime like *Crayon Shin-chan* and *Doraemon*, as well as a bit more obscure anime references like talking about the nail removal torture device from *Higurashi*, complaining about an annoying coworker who keeps on quoting *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*, or affectionately referring to one another as Aqua and Sapphire in reference to the main characters of *Oshi no Ko*. In one interaction with a random old man, he extols his love for *We Made a Beautiful Bouquet*, an award winning film that hit the zeitgeist directed by the similarly named Yuji Sakamoto, best known as a genius screenwriter and the writer for Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Monster*, that Yugo has certainly been mistaken for in his own life, and how he was moved by a character who bought *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* yet instead spends all of his time playing *Puzzle & Dragons*, capturing the sort of existential depression where you don't have the energy to do what you love and are instead just killing time on mindless disposable entertainment, which then goes into an entire tangent on how he bought his own pair of Jack Purcells because of the characters and continues to drone on about the style of actor Masaki Suda in another movie *Drowning Love*, his breakout role where he really established himself as a major star in the Japanese film industry for having a bit of a rough, yet lovable and artistically compelling image starring opposite Nana Komatsu, his future wife, and the Maison Margiela sweater he



wore on *Kohaku Uta Gassen*, the end of year music show aired on NHK that is analogous to the ball drop in Times Square, reflecting the celebrity worship culture where we want to own and wear the things worn by people we admire, which is completely jarring coming out of the mouth of Tetsu Watanabe, a character actor known for gangster roles who might be a familiar face to those who have watched Takeshi Kitano films or deeper into the dredges of V-Cinema. When a girl mentions that her hobbies are smoking hookah and playing *Catan* (tbh also same) because she's a *gyaru*, being met with bafflement by Mahiro, who merely utters a confused "*Gyaru?*," she is immediately hit with a retort of "*Cho Kawaii*," a *tsukkomi* of the *gyaru* TikTok trend as the punchline. There's definitely deep cultural context in the dialogue he writes, but Sakamoto has a certain brilliance in his writing that really captures the zeitgeist in such a compelling way by combining references with relatable themes and concerns in contemporary Japanese society.

Beyond its genre trappings, the film franchise is particularly steeped in socioeconomic commentary. The girls are perpetually broke, largely due to their own irresponsible spending habits, tendency to splurge, and negligence of their bills, but they do echo the concerns of an entire generation with such a deep level of pessimism and skepticism of the future with a contracting economic reality, stagnating wages, and decreasing purchasing power, valuing more to live in the moment rather than prepare for a world that's going to shit if it isn't already there. While they are talking about blowing a couple of fat stacks for yakiniku at the hotel while on vacation, many of their colleagues and members of society were having heated debates over 100-yen differences in prices, representing perhaps a more common working class that didn't have the windfall of lucrative contract work. While surely well compensated as assassins, and perhaps analogous to the high pay of prestige careers, there is still the economic reality where allegedly high earners aren't necessarily any more income secure, partly due to a level of indulgence, but trying to be a bit more responsible wouldn't necessarily lead to greater financial stability or future security so much as a delayed prevention of the inevitable should they too find themselves ultimately outpaced by the economy. Still, the franchise isn't entirely defined by a sort of economic nihilism, with the girls markedly not concerned for once while on vacation in Miyazaki, which is really just them misinterpreting the primary purpose of a business trip, even if you could perhaps attribute it to being removed from the situation of having to deal with their problems, and in a way reflect the current generation's increase of vacations as a sort of escapism and living in the moment.

Though he has stated clearly enough that he was finished with the *Baby Assassins* franchise with the announcement of the television series, Yugo Sakamoto continues to be one of the names to follow in the industry in terms of action filmmaking, producing the film directed by *Baby Assassins* choreographer Kensuke Sonomura, *Ghost Killer*, also starring Akari Takaishi, while taking a bit of a stylistic reprieve in his own directorial effort with a new film this year, *Nemurubaka -Hypnic Jerks-*, featuring yet another blonde- and black-haired female duo in a more traditional pure slice-of-life setting. Following their natural trajectories, Takaishi has gone on to be cast in an upcoming asadora, a prestige serialized short-form morning television series that could probably be best approximated to daytime soaps that usually star the next up-and-coming female actors in the industry in a fairly competitive process. Meanwhile, Izawa has returned to her roots as a stunt double for Rina Sawayama in *John Wick: Chapter 4*. This entire ecosystem he has fostered from a simple, small-scale slacker action flick has been quite interesting to see grow and breathe new life into the genre for a more modern sensibility, with dialogue and character-driven storytelling in real-world settings on a small budget that's no slouch on the action choreography side of the house either.



# THE FACE OF

# RIKI TAKEUCHI



by Brian Ly

When it comes to the most iconic actors of the yakuza genre, some names that may spring to mind include Ken Takakura, perhaps the most canonical actor of the genre who is best known in the West for his appearances in the aptly named *The Yakuza* from Sydney Pollack as well as Ridley Scott's *Black Rain* (and perhaps to a more modern audience as the namesake for the lead of hit anime series *Dandadan*), Nikkatsu player and recurring Seijun Suzuki collaborator Joe Shishido of *Branded to Kill* fame, Bunta Sugawara of Kinji Fukasaku's legendary yakuza epic film series *Battles Without Honor and Humanity*, and Takeshi Kitano, the famed art house director and actor of more meditative yakuza dramas, but perhaps one of the most iconic faces of not only yakuza films, but Japanese film and pop culture in general, belongs to none other than Riki Takeuchi, known in his own right for his appearance in Takashi Miike's *Dead or Alive* trilogy but perhaps is the owner of a mug that outshines any of his individual roles, recognizable from a mile away for his piercing scowl even by those who may not have seen his movies but have encountered him through tangential interactions with Japanese media. It's a face that after seeing once you will never forget. What makes Riki Takeuchi rather fascinating is his particular persona throughout his career, from his early beginnings as an absolute heartthrob to memetic status through his storied career in V-Cinema to cameo appearances in mainstream film and other media, and charting this exact journey from looks that can kill to looks that can kill, in a completely different way, is a rather curious one.

It's almost criminal how ridiculously handsome Riki Takeuchi is as an early actor, and perhaps it's that particular juxtaposition to becoming an absolute dog, in the most respectful manner, that makes it particularly uncanny. He emerged on the scene in his debut performance in Nobuhiko Obayashi's *His Motorbike*, *Her Island*, and he was poised to be a teen idol of his

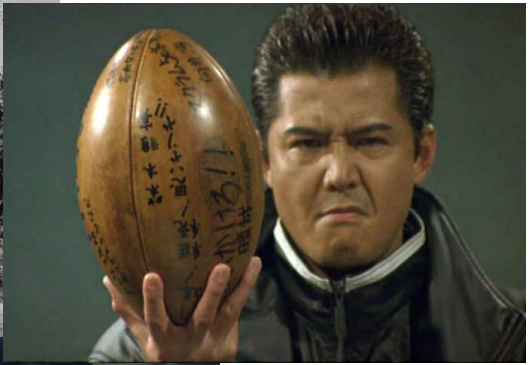
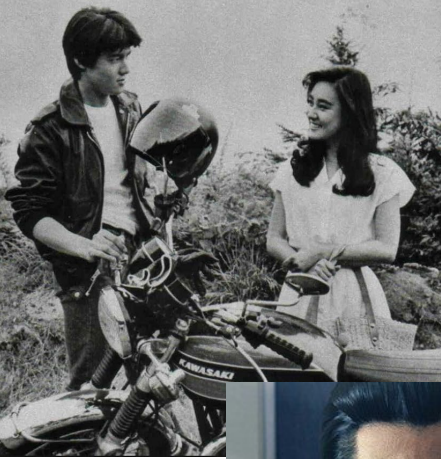
generation. Yet even in this film, it's pretty clear that behind his clean cut looks, the real Riki Takeuchi was not the handsome prodigal son everyone wanted him to be but the motorcycle riding bad boy, wearing a pompadour hairstyle even in his pre-entertainment career as a banker, and his rebellious nature surprisingly sooner rather than later matched his face in the coming years as his boyish features gave way to a more mature look, with just the right amount of edge that made him a natural star in the V-Cinema system, Japan's direct-



to-video industry that provided the start for many famous auteurs in the international scene and a home for genre films that gave way for creative explorations and less restraint than commercial film, not unlike the Roger Corman stable.

Some of his early defining roles in this space include *Jingi* and *The King of Minami: Ginjiro Manda*, both of which have become long-running series from the early 90s to the late aughts with a whopping 52 and 64 entries, respectively. With a seemingly endless number of credits that continue year after year, his career has an analogue with that of Hollywood actor Eric Roberts, who had a similar trajectory from teen heartthrob and rising star to carving out their own respective niches in the direct-to-video space. His defining work in cinephile circles comes in the previously mentioned *Dead or Alive* trilogy from Takashi Miike, where he stars opposite Show Aikawa, another V-Cinema titan of arguably equal status.

We begin to see the beginnings of the modern persona of Riki Takeuchi when he plays himself in *Battle Royale II: The Requiem*, the admittedly poorly received sequel to the iconic, arguable originator of the survival game genre directed by Kinji Fukasaku that was completed by his son Kenta. The personality extends beyond the confines of the film itself, where he fits seamlessly into the heightened sensibility of the film, and he would only continue to become a further caricature with a short



Despite some tangents throughout his career, although they are absolutely in service to this sort of amorphous yet somehow consistent brand of being a tough-looking guy that's surprisingly a softie on the inside, he continues playing yakuza roles to this day in the modern iteration of the V-Cinema space with his latest film series, *City of Desire*, streaming on U-NEXT with 8 entries and counting.

stint in professional wrestling as well as a novelty act where he claims to be his own twin (this is ignoring the fact that he has an actual legitimate music career as well), culminating in a cover of Morning Musume's "Love Machine" where he dons a sparkly pink robe that surely foreshadows his later appearance in the *Yakuza* game series as Awano, known for his flamboyant purple suit. This wouldn't be his last appearance in the J-Pop girl group idol space, with roles in NMB48's music video for their song "HA!" as well as in the video segments of Team Syachihoko's concerts. NMB48's Sayaka Yamamoto noted in her experience working with him that he was the consummate professional, who provided great acting instruction to her on set, and despite his appearance, had a rather cute personality. This can also be seen in his performances in the film adaptations of high school shojo manga *No Longer Heroine* and *Real Girl*, where he plays a cafeteria worker and the father of the awkward male lead, respectively, ignoring the fact that he totally looks like an intimidating yakuza boss, not dissimilar to when Arnold Schwarzenegger was often playing the American everyman in the 90s despite being a hulking Mr. Olympian with a thick Austrian accent.

Though instantly recognizable for his distinct facial features and iconic scowl, perhaps what makes him an enduring pop culture figure is the contrast between his seemingly tough exterior and generally amiable personality with a positive reputation for being someone who is pleasant to work with in the industry. There is something admirable in the level of consistency and his dedication to his authenticity throughout his career, whether it's from never allowing his good looks early on to hide his true personality to never being defined by his yakuza image and embracing his softer side, that has made him iconic within the yakuza career, not only for his appearance but for who he is as a persona both on and off-screen.





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The Frida Cinema is a gathering place for movie lovers of all kinds. The lobby is a place of film discussion and friendly gathering, a venue of its own where perspectives from all backgrounds are welcomed and engaged with. We have started the Frida Zinema to replicate this experience in printed form. We welcome all who love film to submit their artwork, writings, and thoughts, and to connect to other artists in a space of creativity and understanding. We love films, and we love people who love films. Please, share your thoughts and artwork, and enjoy the ones within.