



JAPANESE CINEMA:

texts and contexts

Edited by **Alastair Phillips** and **Julian Stringer**

COMMUNITY AND CONNECTION

Itami Jūzō's *Tampopo* (1985)

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In *Tampopo* (1985), directed by Itami Jūzō (1933–1997), a celebration of connectedness and consumption joins a celebration of the cinema in a 'comedy of manners' about Japanese society. Through parody and imaginative linkages, Itami attempts to gently illuminate underlying absurdities in contemporary Japanese social rituals.¹ The result is a surprisingly open-ended story which both satisfies and leaves viewers hungry for something a little more substantial.

A wide range of cinematic genres are celebrated in this story which is ostensibly about the remodeling of a noodle shop and its owner. From the opening moments, Itami gracefully manages to include aspects of the Western with its veneration of the tough-but-tender hero, as well as nods to the martial arts film, spy film, woman's film, romantic melodrama, instructional documentary, whimsical slapstick, buddy film, road movie, and *chanbara* swordfight film. There is even an element of sophisticated self-reflexivity with the inclusion of direct address to the camera.

Tsuji Nobuo has posited the idea that 'playfulness' is as much an intrinsic quality of Japanese art as the two other qualities delineated by the art historian Sherman Lee, namely 'decorativeness' and 'realism' (Tsuji 1986: 9–13).² Tsuji describes the Japanese sense of playfulness as childlike and free of ideology – a simple, and life-affirming optimism (14).³ *Tampopo* is firmly rooted in this sense of playfulness, and it is the very 'glue' that holds the diverse fragments together.

Itami often compared the plot of *Tampopo* to that of *Rio Bravo* (US, Howard Hawks, 1959), citing the John Wayne character as the prototype for Gorō (Yamazaki Tsutomu) (Glaessner 1988: 102).⁴ The framing stories in both films can be easily sketched out. In *Rio Bravo*, an honest sheriff tries to bring an impulsive murderer and his scheming, wealthy brother to justice while at the same time helping a host of secondary characters to improve themselves. In *Tampopo*, a resolute widow (Miyamoto Nobuko), who owns a failing roadside restaurant, conquers the highly competitive world of the small noodle shop with the help of a cadre of male *sensei* (teachers).⁵ These *sensei* arrive intermittently throughout the film but, in the end, they help form a supportive group



Figure 24 *Tampopo* (1985) gently illuminates absurdities in contemporary social rituals through parody and imaginative linkages. Itami/The Kobal Collection.

that transforms both the mediocre noodle shop and the somewhat dowdy Tampopo herself. A cross-section of contemporary Japanese society passes through Tampopo's world from the overworked salaryman and post-war entrepreneur to the dropout and proper young lady of a marriageable age.

Rio Bravo

If, as Itami has indicated, *Tampopo* is, in part, a parody of films like *Rio Bravo*, we can start to draw new insights into it from a consideration of Hawks' film. *Rio Bravo* starred John Wayne (Sheriff John T. Chance), Dean Martin (Dude/nicknamed Borachón, a deputy sheriff coming off a two-year drinking spree), Walter Brennan (Stumpy, a crippled old man with a fiery spirit), and Ricky Nelson (Colorado Ryan, a young gunman out to prove himself), with Angie Dickinson (Feathers) as the feisty love interest. Like *Tampopo*, *Rio Bravo* is also a genre hybrid (of the Western and police film, in particular), and a showcase for a host of well-known performers (a singer and a teenage idol as well as the star figure of Wayne). In the background of *Rio Bravo*, as in Itami's film, lie several central themes: the theme of transformation (Dude's transformation from drunk to respected deputy sheriff); the theme of romance between a tough, relatively inarticulate man and a woman; the theme of the group working together to reach a goal (in Hawks' film this involved bringing the evil Burdette family to justice); and the theme of how the 'little guy' must persevere, especially when

pitted against the mercenary outside world (in *Rio Bravo*, three men are pitted against a group of contract killers).

According to Hawks, *Rio Bravo* was made in response to *High Noon* (US, Fred Zinnemann, 1952), a film whose premise he found patently ridiculous: 'Gary Cooper ran around trying to get help and no one would give him any . . . at the end of the picture he is able to do the job by himself, he argued (quoted in Bogdanovich 1996: 65). Yet as Robin Wood (1996: 100) perceptively points out, without the secondary characters the seemingly infallible Sheriff Chance would have been defeated. Calling the preservation of self-respect the central theme of *Rio Bravo*, Wood notes that it is precisely this sense of the self that makes up the foreground and core of this unconventional Western.

Strong women, weak men

In her article on 'The Hawksian Woman', Naomi Wise (1996: 115) notes the principle of feminine superiority in many of Hawks' action films by describing his female characters as having a combination of the decisiveness and courage of the male protagonists with an added sense of warmth and humor. Wood defines the Hawks woman as 'sturdy and independent yet sensitive and vulnerable, the equal of any man yet not in the least masculine' (1996: 89). Those exact descriptors could also be written for the character of Tampopo in Itami's film. Feathers differs in that she occupies an intriguing position on the cusp between virtue and deceit – she seems at first to be a dishonest gambler traveling from town to town, but later reveals herself to be loyal and steadfast, albeit prone to emotional outbursts. Like Tampopo, however, Feathers is the kind of woman who refuses to give in and take the easy solution.

But who exactly is this Tampopo herself? On one level, she is a shrinking violet turned successful entrepreneur. As Inouye (2001: 134) comments wryly: 'In the end, Tampopo realizes the capitalist dream of establishing a profitable business'. On another related level, she is also a highly motivated woman, full of initiative, yet also warm-hearted and somewhat hesitant. One wonders, however, if she is the true center of the story, or merely an excuse for a plethora of diverging narratives? Is she as uncomplicated as a dandelion (the literal translation of the word *tampopo*) or as artificial as a name no one would ever be given except in jest? Undoubtedly, she is not as strong as the protagonist of Itami's *Taxing Woman* (*Marusa no onna*, 1987) who aggressively hunts for tax evaders and manages to foil their clever schemes. Tony Rayns (1988: 102) offers a lukewarm opinion of *Tampopo* in this regard, writing that 'the film often loses sight of Tampopo's supposedly steady progress in her art'. What has happened then to the 'sense of self' noted by Robin Wood when it is transformed into the Japanese version?

Itami Jūzō: Writer, actor, director

Clues to Itami's construction of the Tampopo character can be found by looking at the arc of his career in the performing arts. Alan Stanbrook (1988: 9) has

compared Itami to a *rōnin* (masterless samurai) in that he was 'his own man'. Yet, as the son of distinguished classical director Itami Mansaku (who died in 1946 when his son was just 12), Itami Jūzō grew up under a large shadow.⁶ Mark Schilling (1999: 253, 257) has pointed out that Itami Jūzō's films are marked by didactic moments tempered with a concern for public appeal. Like Kurosawa Akira before him, Itami served as a point of entry into Japanese cinema for many non-Japanese filmgoers and he worked hard to reach both his domestic and his foreign public. He was the author of over 20 books, including *Listen Women*, *Nippon sekenbanashi taikai* [*A Panorama of Japanese Gossip*] and *Osōshiki nikki* [*The Funeral Diary*], this last being about the making of his debut film. He also served as a talk show host and was the author of a website which chronicled the progress of his filmmaking. As a fledgling director, Itami tackled the incongruities of contemporary Japanese society with a marksmanship that grew increasingly less precise with each subsequent film. At times this offered unwanted results: in 1992, following the release of *Anti-Extortion Woman* (*Minbō no onna*), he was attacked by the *yakuza* who slashed his face and neck.

An actor since the 1960s, Itami served as an apprentice under some of Japan's finest directors, including Masumura Yasuzō (*A False Student* [*Nise daigakusei*], 1960), Ichikawa Kon (*I am a Cat* [*Wagabai wa neko de aru*], 1975), and Shinoda Masahiro (*McArthur's Children* [*Setouchi shōnen yak'yūdan*], 1984). Itami also appeared in Nicholas Ray's *55 Days at Peking* (US, 1963) and in the cinematic adaptation of *Lord Jim* (UK/US, Richard Brooks, 1965). In Ichikawa's *The Makioka Sisters* (*Sasameyuki*, 1983), based on the novel by Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, Itami gave an impeccable performance as a mid-level manager, hemmed in by his role as *muko-yōshi* (a husband 'adopted' into a family where there are no sons). This patriarchal, but basically powerless, male role type was satirized again by Itami in the part he played in Morita Yoshimitsu's *The Family Game* (*Kazoku gēmu*, 1983). In addition, Itami acted in the theater in such plays as *The Strange Mandarin* by the avant-garde director Terayama Shūji.

Itami's directorial debut came when he was already 52 years old. 'Your father's profession is like a huge mountain in front of you. It took me fifty years to convince myself I could climb the mountain, too', he told Alan Stanbrook (1988: 9). A look at the titles of Itami's ten films reveals his concern with the institutions underlying superficial layers of Japanese society: *The Funeral* (*Osōshiki*, 1985), *A Taxing Woman* and its sequel in 1988, *Tales of a Golden Geisha* (*Ageman*, 1990), *Anti-Extortion Woman* (*Minbō no onna*, 1992), *The Last Dance* (*Daibyōnin*, 1993), *A Quiet Life* (*Shizuka na seikatsu*, 1995 – based on the book by Ōe Kenzaburō), *Supermarket Woman* (*Sūpā no onna*, 1996), and his final film *Woman of the Police Protection Program* (*Marutai no onna*, 1997). Itami once identified a common thread throughout his films: 'the concern with ritual, with the correct way of doing things . . . Rules are to do with the alignment of the self and the world, an alignment that often results in a sense of isolation' (quoted in Glaessner 1988: 102). His response to these rules was a form of satire that veered from the subtle to the exaggerated, but always with an eye to the human qualities of both extremes.

In 1997, following an indication that an article on an alleged affair would be published in *Flash*, a Japanese tabloid magazine, Itami Jūzō jumped to his death. As a Japanese artist who chose suicide, he followed a long line of contemporary writers from his country who include Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, Kawabata Yasunari, Dazai Osamu and Mishima Yukio. Now, as we view and re-view films like *Tampopo*, we cannot help but ask ourselves how the comedy in them is affected, in retrospect, by the vicissitudes in the life of the writer and director. Can we return to *Tampopo*, after its author's suicide, with the same sense of delight?

Links

Beyond the turmoil in its director's life, one aspect of *Tampopo* that *can* continue to delight is the structural underpinning of the film. *Tampopo* is clearly structured around a series of interwoven episodes and anecdotes. Characters in the different vignettes are linked by similar sympathies, as well as by similar cravings and appetites. A seemingly endless assortment of stories and diversions ricochet from the narrative framing device of the resuscitation of the failing noodle shop which call to mind the classical literary form of *renga* (linked verse). *Tampopo* herself can be seen as just one more link in this chain.

A brief digression to examine the 'game' of verse-writing in *renga* will provide an insight into the way Itami plays with linkages in *Tampopo*. *Renga* rose to prominence in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and is still practiced, to some extent, today. Nijō Yoshimoto (1320–88), the compiler in 1356 of *Tsukuba-shū* [*The Tsukuba Anthology*], the first anthology of *renga* in Japanese literary history, describes the three primary modes of linking in *renga* as: through word, through mood of nature, and through contrast and unusual associations (Ueda 1991: 46, 48). Ueda Makoto summarizes that the purpose of *renga* is to have 'the rhythm of actual human life, with its swiftly changing pace, its totally unpredictable turn, and its apparently chaotic arrangement of events' (Ibid.: 53).

In *renga*, poetic verses need not connect in some direct, obvious way, but may do so in a more oblique fashion to produce a sense of 'unity in variety/variety within unity' (Ueda 1991: 39, 46). The first stanza traditionally sets the tone – the season, the time of day, and so on – and the verses that follow may provide an indirect commentary on or extension of the one before. Like the initial stanza in *renga*, the first scene in *Tampopo* sets the stage. We are in a movie theater; we are an audience watching another audience gather. Or, more exactly, we are the screen, and the audience in the film is watching us. This playful sleight-of-hand reminds us that, right from the outset, we are part of the game.

A chain-like, amoeba-like structure ties together the loosely linked sequences of *Tampopo* as well. The food motif is an obvious one, but what other unifying associative links are there? Is *Tampopo* just a random 'mix and match' or do scenes inter-relate and comment on each other, thus revealing a hidden complexity beneath the comic buffoonery? Serper (2003: 70–95) finds principles of juxtaposition (adult/young, reserved/outspoken, yin/yang) and symbolism (of

clothing and objects) in *Tampopo* that serve as a means of creating an 'aesthetic tension' as well as a sense of eroticism. Inouye (2001: 136) points out that additional scenes surround the framing story 'like charms added to a bracelet, like moments of play and festivity that punctuate the routine of economic production'. What helps tie together these 'charms'?

Food links

Food has provided the impetus for films from a host of cultures such as *The Scent of Green Papaya* (France, Anh Hung Tran, 1993), which lovingly recreated a Vietnamese courtyard kitchen, and *The Dead* (UK/Ireland/US, John Huston, 1987) which centered around an Irish banquet. In the world of Japanese cinema, Ozu Yasujiro's characters enjoyed *The Flavor of Green Tea over Rice* (*Ochazuke no aji*, 1952) or (literally) *The Taste of Mackerel (An Autumn Afternoon [Sanma no aji]*, 1962). The final link in *Tampopo*, as credits roll, is the primal eating scene of a child breast-feeding. As Itami Jūzō indicated in his interview with Tony Rayns (1988: 101–2), a 'ramen [*rāmen*] Western' such as *Tampopo* occupies an interim state where 'sex and eating are not yet clearly separated'. Itami also noted how food is tied into a series of rules and taboos, and how it holds out the possibility of ways to break the taboos (Glaessner 1988: 102). Serper (2003: 84–92) describes how Itami draws on associations from the traditional *shunga* (erotic woodblock print) and from popular *manga* (comic books) to remind the viewer that certain foods – the lobster, peach, oyster and conch, ice-cream cone and carrot – mimic the shape of human sexual organs.

Train links

The train is ubiquitous in Japanese cinema (and society). It runs through a wide range of films from Ozu's *Tokyo Story* (*Tōkyō monogatari*, 1953), where a train carries family members toward and away from reunions, and Toyoda Shirō's *Snow Country* (*Yukiguni*, 1957), with its famous train tunnel scene taken from Kawabata Yasunari's novel, to Kurosawa's *High and Low* (*Tengoku to jigoku*, 1963), where a train is used as a means of capturing the kidnappers. In *Tampopo*, trains travel through cinematic space, linking characters and vignettes. When trains appear, we are aware that some characters are moving on, and that new characters are appearing. High-angle shots of Tokyo are punctuated by the raised form of train platforms. Customers get off the train to enter *en masse* into a small *tachiguni* (noodle stand) where steaming bowls of noodles are consumed by people standing at the counter. A panicky husband runs by the passing train from the previous vignette as he hurries to his wife who is dying of overwork in their tiny, child-filled apartment.⁷ Trains pass by the amorous gangster and his moll while they are immersed in their culinary lovemaking. During Gorō and Tampopo's 'date', trains can be seen at a distance. The two potential lovers stare away from each other, out of the window, like trains passing in the night.

Teaching links

As one scene in *Tampopo* elides into another, knowledge is passed down. David Stratton (1986: 20) exclaimed in *Variety* that 'the viewer learns how to make noodle soup in three minutes flat, and how to make the best turtle soup. This is a film that's as informative as it is funny'. Gorō's young sidekick, the wide-eyed Gun (Watanabe Ken), is instructed by an imposing elderly *sensei* in the delicate ritual of eating *rāmen* (the lowliest of noodles and hardly worthy of such ceremony). Gorō and Pisuken (Yasuoka Rikiya), another of Tampopo's suitors, instruct Tampopo's timid son Ryūta how to stand up for himself in the face of bullies. A proper middle-aged Japanese lady tries to instruct her *ojōsan* (proper young girl) pupils how to eat spaghetti Western-style without making a sound, only to have her lesson subverted by the loud slurping of the Western man at another end of the restaurant. In the case of Tampopo herself, it becomes apparent that one teacher is never enough: a group is needed in order for the heroine to survive. In addition to the main actors, *Tampopo* offers a rich look at familiar faces, including Igawa Hisashi (the dying woman's husband), Okada Mariko (the spaghetti *sensei*), Hara Izumi (the crazy old woman) and Ōtaki Hideji (the rich old man).

Tied in with the theme of transmission of knowledge in *Tampopo* is the theme of the trickster – not only the con man, but also the noble trickster who knows how to work the system to his or her own advantage. In Japanese mythology, tricksters such as the *kitsune* (Fox), *Susano-o* (the Storm God) or *Momotarō* (the Peach Boy) are able to use their special powers to create open spaces where others only see restrictions.⁸ *Tampopo* is full of such fluid, liminal characters who expose hypocrisies underlying the surface level of society while simultaneously celebrating the reversals and triumphs of the underdog. Within an ever-expanding frame, the pompous are cut down to size and those without confidence are elevated to a more secure status.

Remaining links

Andrew Horton (1991: 9) has argued that comedy is 'plural, unfinalized, disseminative, dependent on context and the intertextuality of creator, text and contemplation'. How much context must one have then in order to interpret Itami's satire? A particularly difficult vignette for an audience unfamiliar with Japanese culture is the scene in which the men in suits order dinner. Why is it funny that the gaggle of older businessmen all order the same thing, and that the *kaban mochi* (the youngest employee) orders French delicacies with great aplomb? Also difficult for the novice audience seem to be the vignettes of the hobos singing goodbye to their teacher, and the one in which the elderly woman squeezes the soft (and expensive) peaches in the gourmet store, not to mention the 'Spaghetti etiquette' scene in the *manā kyōshitsu* ('Miss Manners' classroom'). Every episode in *Tampopo* is not equally transparent, and a good balance must be found between setting the scene and over-explaining.

An even more important concern is the question of why there is no strong

female voice in *Tampopo*. In contrast to this, we have the relatively inarticulate gangster's moll, the dying wife, the elderly 'food fetishist' and the seductive 'gold-digging' young wife. Tampopo's own initiative and drive cannot be overlooked, yet we always see her through the perspective of others. Had the protagonist in this film been male, and the horde of 'trainers' and mentors female, it would have been a very different kind of parody indeed. Why, as Serper (2003: 81) points out, are the men's bodies covered in the erotic scenes while the women's bodies are exposed? In a similar fashion, Robin Wood (1996: 101) notes the relative lack of female friendships in Howard Hawks' films and the way the Hollywood director tended to focus on the glories of male camaraderie.

With the protagonist Tampopo's dependence on a cadre of male *sensei*, *Tampopo* appears to be a reversal of Itami's subsequent tendency to portray strong women and weak men in his 'woman films': *A Taxing Woman*, *A Taxing Woman's Return*, *Anti-Extortion Woman* and *Supermarket Woman*. While Gorō evokes the archetype of the 'chaste warrior' that conjures up an image of Miyamoto Musashi,⁹ Itami described the character of Tampopo in the following way: 'a very jolly sort of person who dedicates herself to the perfecting of a particular task. The image I had in mind was the sort of woman who works in McDonald's. I tried to make her not too Japanese but more dry and less emotional' (quoted in Glaessner 1988: 102).

Concluding notes

Inouye eloquently sums up the mixed fare that makes up *Tampopo* by suggesting that

Seen at its best, the world of *Tampopo* [sic] represents an inclusion of the homeless and the wealthy, the female and the male. It is about cooperation, accomplishing good deeds, and the softening of hearts. Seen at its worst, it is about a fiercely competitive world of success at all costs, disrupted by occasional fits of irrelevant, excessive behavior that decorate the chain of work as it rules within one of the most productive societies on earth.

(Inouye 2001: 144)

In *Tampopo* – at its best – lessons of transmission and transformation fill the screen, as do lessons of reversals. There are hobos who are more elegant than well-padded businessmen in fancy suits, and tough men who are softer inside than noodle dough. Community is constructed on screen and craft is celebrated. A host of teachers – a truck driver, a failed physician who ministers to the homeless, a chauffeur-cum-chef – all appear at intervals to move the process of rejuvenation forward and – task completed – fade off into the sunset in the hallowed tradition of the Western. *Tampopo* presents a chain which is robust, yet with weak links. As we allow ourselves to be led along this chain, we sharpen our gaze outwards, in an irreverent look at the flipside of Japanese daily rituals. Skillfully, Itami also turns the camera on us, so we too might look inwards at

how we too could form some variant of this parodic chain. Theoretically, the chain could continue even beyond the last image on the screen. One of the weakest links in the chain, however, is the figure of Tampopo herself. Like the plant from which the film takes its name, the lowly dandelion, *Tampopo* is far from the elegant *sakura* (cherry blossom) of Japanese cinema, but it nonetheless has its own appeal.

Notes

- 1 Parody (in Japanese, the loanword *parodī*) calls to mind Edo-period works of art such as Shibata Zeshin's scrolls of badgers dressed up as priests or Itō Jakuchū's *Vegetable parinirvana* with a *daikon* radish taking the place of the deceased Shakyamuni Buddha surrounded by turnips, squash and eggplants as mourners.
- 2 The Chinese character for play includes the image of a child and of movement in an indirect, unhurried fashion.
- 3 For further reading on the Japanese sense of play, see Dalby (1986) and Hendry and Raveri (2002).
- 4 Yamazaki Tsutomu's early performance as an embittered young man in Kurosawa's *High and Low* (*Tengoku to jigoku*, 1963) was followed by his roles in Kurosawa's *Red Beard* (*Akabige*, 1965) and *Kagemusha* (1980), and his leading role as Hideyoshi in Teshigahara Hiroshi's *Rikyu* (1989). In addition, he has appeared in Shinoda Masa-hiro's *Demon Pond* (*Yashagaike*, 1979), a version of the *It's Hard to Be a Man* series (*Zoku otoko wa tsurai yo*, 1969), as well as Itami's *Shizuka na seikatsu* (*A Quiet Life*, 1995).
- 5 In 1969, Itami married the actress Miyamoto Nobuko. She starred in all of his subsequent films. For additional biographical information on the director, see Stone 1997: 441–4.
- 6 Itami Mansaku is best known as the director of *Capricious Young Man* (*Akanishi Kakita*, 1936), one of the most whimsical of the *chanbara* films. Only two of his films now survive. Anderson and Richie (1982: 91) described the hero of *Akanishi Kakita* in the following manner: 'not a hero in any conventional sense of the word, being instead a very ordinary man, weak in body if strong in spirit'.
- 7 Serper (2003: 72) compares this form of connecting scenes with the traditional word game of *shiri-tori* in which 'one takes turns saying a word beginning with the last syllable of the word given by one's opponent'.
- 8 These kinds of unexpected juxtapositions combined with a sense of playful transformation can be seen in Japanese folklore, with its tales of foxes that assume the form of bewitching women, or in prints such as Utagawa Kuniyoshi's *Composite Head* in which a fierce-looking man's head is actually made up of a series of male bodies. See Linhart and Früstück 1998.
- 9 Miyamoto Musashi (1584?–1645) was known as a great warrior and the author of *Gorin no sho* [*The Book of Five Rings*]. He is usually portrayed as a celibate fighter who turns his back on women for fear of their possible weakening influence (Barrett 1989: 43–57).

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Itami Jūzō Filmography

- The Funeral (Osōshiki)*, 1984)
- Tanpopo* (1985)
- A Taxing Woman (Marusa no onna)*, 1987)
- A Taxing Woman's Return (Marusa no onna II)*, 1988)
- Tales of a Golden Geisha (Ageman)*, 1990)
- Anti-Extortion Woman (Minbō no onna)*, 1992)
- The Last Dance (Daibyōnin)*, 1993)
- A Quiet Life (Shizuka na seikatsu)*, 1995)
- Supermarket Woman (Sūpā no onna)*, 1996)
- Woman of the Police Protection Program (Marutai no onna)*, 1997)