

*Tampopo* (1986), directed by Juzo Itami  
Film Workshop by Caryn Cline

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With Tsutomu Yamazaki (Goro); Nobuko Miyamoto (*Tampopo*); Koji Yakusho (Gangster); Ken Watanabe (Gun); Rikiya Yasuoka (Pisken); Kinzo Sakura (Shohei); Manpei Ikeuchi (Tabo, *Tampopo*'s son)

1. The American scholar of Japanese art and culture, Donald Ritchie, observes that in Itami's films "Japaneseness. . . becomes the subject of his satire." Ritchie characterizes *Tampopo* as "a near anthropological comedy about Japanese eating habits" (83). In an interview, Itami has said that ". . . I have one theme that I have long pursued in my work. . . . That theme is what does it mean to be Japanese? Or Nihonjinron." (Schilling, 75) In what way does *Tampopo* address this theme?
2. *Tampopo* begins with a scene that calls attention to the cinema itself. The gangster actually "breaks the fourth wall," in addressing us, the film's audience. Why do you think Itami chooses to begin the film this way? How does this scene affect our viewing of the story (or stories) that follow?
3. Itami has also said that *Tampopo* was based on the American western *Rio Bravo* (Schilling, 75). In the latter, a sheriff played by John Wayne must defend against a gang of outlaws who are threatening his authority and the town he is pledged to protect. Four "outsiders" come to his aid: a former colleague who is now a drunken bum, the elderly, jailhouse cook (who limps), a baby-faced gunslinger who is new to town, and a woman gambler. Together, they form a "family" that protects the townspeople and keeps the villains at bay. Discuss the parallels you see in *Tampopo*. Even if you didn't know anything about the plot of *Rio Bravo*, you could probably recognize genre elements from American westerns in *Tampopo*. One of the obvious ones is the way Goro dresses. What are other elements of *Tampopo* that pay homage to American westerns? Other American genre films?
4. What other elements of mainstream American film is Itami using and satirizing in *Tampopo*? What, for example, do you make of Itami's musical choices? The style and approach to editing? His use of sound?
5. How would you describe the structure of *Tampopo*? The scenes between the gangster and his lover, and the other, "stand alone" scenes interrupt the main narrative line (the *Tampopo* narrative) at various points. What purpose do these scenes serve? How are they related to the introductory scene? How do they augment or comment on the *Tampopo* story?

6. In an article entitled “In the Show House of Modernity: Tanpopo (sic),” Charles Shirô Inouye situates Tampopo “in the 1980s, an era of *karôshi*, or ‘death by overwork’ ” (Washburn and Cavanaugh, 134). What might Itami want to say about Japanese society? (This question takes you back to question #1.)

Bibliography:

Richie, Donald. *Japanese Cinema: an Introduction*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Schilling, Mark. *Contemporary Japanese Film*. New York: Weatherhill, 1999.

Washburn, Dennis and Carole Cavanaugh, eds. *Word and Image in Japanese Cinema*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001.