

TAMPOPO: FOOD AND THE POSTMODERN IN THE WORK OF ITAMI JŪZŌ

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Abstract: Itami Jūzō's film *Tampopo* possesses a structure and thematic richness that make it a prime example of postmodern film-making. Its use of food as visual metaphor and narrative device works together with its structure to privilege a decentred approach to plot, character, and story-telling. At the same time, the film's subject matter and the series of vignettes which interfere with – while equally creating – its narrative flow reflect a cultural cosmopolitanism common in Japan by the time of the film's production. This paper will argue that *Tampopo* can be read as a rebuttal of certain political attitudes that seek to present Japan as culturally homogeneous, socially stable, and ethnically unified. The film achieves this objective by offering a theoretically aware vision of Japan as composed of infinite and equal fragments held together only by convention, a vision of Japan as postmodern.

Food plays such a dominant, even defining, role in any culture that frequently when asked to name one's favourite food, one replies with the name of a nationality rather than a dish. Yet food also possesses the double-edged potential to demonstrate its consumers' sophistication and/or cultural appropriation. It is with this particular potential that Itami Jūzō's popularly successful though academically overlooked 1986 film *Tampopo* plays, for this work of comedy utilises food as a vehicle to subvert an orthodox view of Japan – or of any culture, for that matter – as a homogeneity. *Tampopo* focuses its audience's attention instead on the periphery of what it sees as a no longer dominant cultural hegemony. It does this by positing food as a metaphor for the changes brought by economic prosperity in modern Japan, and also by exposing along with those changes the speciousness of a prevalent view that holds the "nation" to be an a priori fact. *Tampopo*'s use of food allows it to demonstrate that, just as there is no "meal" apart from its "ingredients," no whole without its parts, there is never a "centre," or "nation," apart from the peripheries that define it.

Tampopo, itself composed of fragments, postulates the value of the fragment as opposed to the impossibility of the whole – an always-already fragmentary artefact – through its visual style, its defeat of the linear narrative, and its awareness of the venerable adage that variety is the spice of life. In this sense, *Tampopo* serves a complex purpose: it functions as a consumer product of the entertainment industry, but it also skilfully capitalises on its consumer status to critique consumer culture. Further, *Tampopo* explores two aspects of this consumer culture: does consumer culture per-

mit a society to define itself as *the same*, through the act of consumption; or does it in fact insist upon the privileging of *difference* within the products which form its object? This latter question allows *Tampopo* to engage with a political dilemma Japan encountered in the early 1980s, which Harootunian interprets as having specific social ramifications. Harootunian contends that the government at the time, headed by Prime Minister Ôhira, proposed to use consumerism as a vehicle to “meet the demands of culture and spirit [...] [to implant] in the folk the superiority of specific cultural values” (Harootunian 1988: 461). These values were to re-install “traditional” forms of social interaction into post-industrial Japan, thus recreating the idea of a homogeneous nation. *Tampopo* is a film that in contrast proposes the heterogenising force of consumerism as an entranceway into the decentralising world of the postmodern.

As I will later explain, the concept of the postmodern is controversial in the context of Japan studies.¹ The term does, however, possess a particular usefulness for describing the *type* of film Itami has created in *Tampopo*. Itami makes consistent use of such conventionally postmodern techniques as pastiche, parody and the subversion of the teleologically linear narrative in the process of his critique of Japanese consumer culture. He blends genres, characters, and visual echoes of earlier works to construct a dense surface held together not by a unity of plot or organic identity, but by the variety of foods that cross the screen. Further, this surface reflects a theoretical premise that supports its deconstruction of the “internationalisation” of Japan. In this sense, the film reaffirms Jameson’s observation that “the problem of postmodernism [...] is at one and the same time an aesthetic and political one” (1984b: 373), for Itami questions both the *styles* of the genres his film parodies, as well as the underlying social significance of the illusory view of Japan as a “whole.” This paper will explore Itami’s project of revisioning Japan, not as the unified culture officially held forth, but rather as a culture composed of always-already peripheral elements, as likely to be foreign imports as domestic products.

Itami Jûzô (1933–1997), son of the actor Itami Mansaku, began his nearly forty-year long career as an actor in films such as *Nise daigakusei* (1960, False Student), *Lord Jim* (1965), and *Otoko no kao wa ririkisho* (1965, A Man’s Face Shows his Personal History). His debut as a director came in 1985 with *Osôshiki* (The Funeral), a comedy written by Itami in less than a week and built around the circumstances of a certain family after the death of the wife’s father. This film is a gentle social satire: it analyses the dilemma of a modern Japan that still feels an emotional need to retain the spiritual

¹ For a provocative though all too brief discussion of this issue, see Miyoshi and Harootunian (1988).

traditions that mark the shared events in life. The family at the centre of the film is certainly not without its flaws: during the several days spent with the wife's mother, the husband's mistress turns up at the house and throws a tantrum when he attempts to persuade her to leave, virtually forcing him to have sex with her. The wife, meanwhile in a bitingly parodic scene, swings upon a child's toy, a suspended tree-trunk. And yet in the end, the members emerge as deeply attached and committed to one another as ever. Despite its affectionate portrayal of a family, though, the film does not show an awareness of the trend identified by Harootunian as "a relentlessly obsessive 'return' to 'origins': an orchestrated attempt by the state to compensate for the dissolution of the social by resurrecting 'lost' traditions against modernism itself, and by imposing a master code declaring 'homogeneity' in a 'heterogeneous present'" (1988: 448). *Osôshiki's* engagement with this trend is neither fully articulated nor sustained. Nonetheless, it presents a solid critique of an age in which grieving family members, cosmopolitan urbanites, must turn to the convenience of "how-to" videos to re-learn the traditions of their country. In this way, they perpetuate within their very real emotions the socially prescribed methods of self-expression, which in a truly "traditional" setting they would have learned close at hand. The presence of the funeral "how-to" video within this film about modern funerals underscores the cultural force with which film has been invested in a technological age: it is far easier for this family to seek advice from the TV screen than from family members of an earlier generation. At the same time, the advice so received is of a distinctly "homogenised" nature that even turns of phrase and "spontaneous" outpourings of grief are carefully scripted. Schematically, the film subtly underscores the paradoxes of the role of technology in the consumption of tradition.

After *Osôshiki*, Itami released nine more films until his self-inflicted death in 1997. They all starred his wife Miyamoto Nobuko. Most of Itami's films in fact utilise the same ensemble cast, featuring, among others, Yamazaki Tsutomu, Otaki Shūji, and Sakura Kinzō. Itami's first three films display a consistently critical attitude towards Japan, and though they lack explicit *political* profundity, they possess something equally if not more important: accessibility. These films were extremely marketable, both within and outside Japan, and they secured for Itami an international reputation as a comedic director while affording him tremendous opportunity for artistic development. *Osôshiki* is a film of emotional moments, of vignettes that reveal intercharacter relations almost organically; *Tampopo* permits these moments and segments to dominate its structure; and the 1987 *Marusa no onna* (A Taxing Woman) solidifies the evolution of Itami's central protagonist into a sensitive though powerful alternative to the Jap-

anese “salaryman.” However, while these earlier works were all popularly and critically successful, his later works fall into an identifiable trend started by *Marusa no onna*. The trend is indicated by the formulaic nature of the titles given to many of these films, in the pattern of “xx no onna.” While the subject matter of these later films varies, their underlying construction does not: they are vehicles for Miyamoto Nobuko, and pit a strong, sincere, determined female character against a male establishment, which she is ultimately able to best. Rather than making Itami a feminist, however, these films serve to identify him as a satirist.

When Itami Jūzō released *Tampopo* in 1986, Japan was at the height of the so-called “bubble economy,” a time when the yen was strong, and Japan seemed to be the epitome of industrial wealth. Just six years earlier, the Japanese government had proclaimed a plan, which Harootunian identifies as aiming to institute a “new age of culture” (Harootunian 1988: 460). In this new age of culture, a superabundance of goods would permit the homogenisation of Japanese society so that the “promise of similitude” could be “secured against the spectacle of difference – history” (Harootunian 1988: 466). It would be a time in which consumerism would permit Japan the realisation of exceptional qualities: an “exemption from the uncertainties of change and the caprice of history,” and a position as a uniquely structured nation whose underlying social order stood unchanged from Stone Age times as the model of an extended family (*ie*) (Harootunian 1988: 466). This view of a unique Japan did not only prevail in Japan: Japanese management style and business models were receiving unprecedented and minute attention abroad as well, and seen as holding a powerful secret to efficiency and profit. Nonetheless, despite the apparent dawning of a “Japanese Age” on the international stage, domestically Japan was experiencing contradictory phenomena brought by consumerism. While the availability and quality of foreign products, tastes, and experiences were increasing at rates rivalling those of the Meiji Restoration over 100 years earlier, Japan’s *Japaneseness* was being critically re-evaluated by scholars and artists, sometimes with an intention of restoring the place of tradition in the modern world,² but often with an intention of *dismantling* a received view of that very tradition.³

Itami’s *Tampopo* has a great affinity with this latter intention in that its underlying premise is a dismantling of the orthodox view of Japan as culturally stable. Its story concerns its main characters’ search for the perfect *rāmen* recipe, that is, a (now) identifiably *Japanese* dish. This search, how-

² See for instance Suzuki Tadashi’s work in the theatre (Iles 1999: 60–67) and the program of the Ōhira government of 1980 (Harootunian 1988: 460–468).

³ See for example the work of Abe Kōbō or the social criticisms of Murakami Ryū.

ever, takes its participants through the entire gamut of world cuisine present in Japan. Ironically, *rāmen* is in fact an imported dish of noodles and soup popular throughout Asia, as *lo mien* in China, and *la myun* in Korea. Thus, from its outset the film exposes, however subtly, the fallacy of a view of Japan as homogeneous and unique, while innocently exploring the increasing availability of foreign foods in Japan: *food* is a wonderful commodity capable of being both comfortingly familiar and adventurously exotic, the very synecdoche of the cultures from which it stems. *Tampopo* revolves around both of these poles, the familiar and the exotic. While it engages its audience in debate as to the implications behind a cosmopolitan Japan, a Japan in which *kokusaishugi* (internationalism) has become a fashionable buzzword, it also questions the validity of the view of Japan as a whole. Instead it proposes that Japan is, and in fact *has always been*, composed of infinite peripheries held in place by a type of artificial centre that its government had sought to establish the model of the family or village structure, a “functional, household-type corporate body” where the “values of an agrarian order have been made to serve the requirements of a postindustrial society” (Harootunian 1988: 464–5). While Jameson suggests that “to grant some historical originality to a postmodernist culture is also implicitly to affirm some radical structural difference between [...] consumer society and earlier moments of the capitalism from which it emerged” (1988: 373), an understanding of Itami’s work invites a re-evaluation of this proposal. Itami’s view of an international Japan defined by its consumerism accepts the premise that Japan has always been a consumer nation – but that only now is it finally able to *enjoy* the products it consumes.

The sense of enjoyment obvious in *Tampopo* represents an important aspect of the postmodern, and for me serves as one of its most poignant distinctions from the modernist angst that preceded it. While a modernist view of the world is dark and filled with a certain *sturm und drang*, a constant struggle of the individual to maintain his autonomy in the face of a controlling political or cultural totality, the postmodernist has accepted his position of alienation from a cultural “centre,” his political disenfranchisement, his isolation from his fellow man, and his role as a consumer for the products of multinational capitalism. Modernism reflects the entrenchment of industrialisation and urbanisation as dominant social modes wherein the individual is subordinate to the *process* of production: the whole, the unity is more important than the parts. The problem for the individual in a modernist setting is how to regain for himself a sense of his individuality, how to maintain his identity against a machinery, bureaucratic or otherwise, that seeks to make of him an anonymous consumer.

Japanese cinema has produced numerous truly great critiques of the modernist plight. Chief among them are, for example, Kurosawa's 1952 film, *Ikiru* (English: *To Live*), in which a civil servant fights time, mortality, and tradition to produce something meaningful for the citizens of his ward; Mizoguchi's 1954 *Sanshōdayū* (English: *Sanshō the Bailiff*), in which the son of an exiled, pacifist governor rises to power to redeem his father's memory and crush the militarist opponents who caused the destruction of his family; and Teshigahara's 1964 *Suna no onna* (English: *Woman in the Dunes*), in which a protagonist, nameless until the final frames of the film, fights his kidnapping by a village attempting to hold on to its outdated traditions. These films, and in fact the majority of traditional works of cinema, drama, or literature written in Japan or throughout the world, regardless of their explicit content, are marked by certain shared structural features: a unified, teleologically focused plot that tells one story from start to finish; a view of character that sees the individual as irreducible and complete; and a sense of organicism that sees the "work" as a closed system, both distinct from and yet incontrovertibly a product of its "author," comprehensible according to its inner logic which in turn parallels the logic of "reality." This viewpoint reflects a view of the world that appears self-evident: the view of the individual *within* society. And yet from this viewpoint the individual seeks to define himself as unique in order to achieve the impossible: a rejection of the social oligarchy. This search for unique self-identification and rejection of the social is conceived of as a problem, an impossibility; for within the modernist world the individual can have no centrally important identity, only one subordinate to the process, the whole. The individual can be only what his social function requires of him, yet within the society that permits him that function, he will remain isolated from his fellows and from political control over his own existence. In Sartre's terms, it is within the democratic "trap for fools" that the individual exists (1977: 198–210).

The presence or absence of *modernity* forms for some a crucial factor in the debate as to the applicability of theories of modernism/postmodernism to Japan. Yoshimoto argues that "while modernisation can be achieved by acquiring advanced technology and by fostering the development of industry, Japan has been fundamentally excluded from modernity because the possibility of the latter is dependent on the success of colonialism dividing the world into the West and non-West" (1993: 106–7). Indeed, "the development of capitalism in Japan had been supported and facilitated by premodern institutions and communal ideologies" (Yoshimoto 1993: 112), which were not simply 'leap-frogged' over on the way to a suddenly modern construction – they were incorporated into the very fabric of Japanese politics during the first half of the 20th century to

such an extent that an effective resistance to Japan's military excesses was then precluded. Was Japan then ever in fact modern? While Yoshimoto may argue that "for the non-West, the coming of modernity and that of colonial subjugation have always been inseparable" (1993: 118), it is precisely its period of military expansionism that gives Japan its own colonial experience. Furthermore, Japan has the (unenviably) unique position of being both a colony and coloniser, not only in cultural terms but military ones as well. I fundamentally disagree that "the non-West can achieve the goal of modernising itself by advancement of technology, yet modernity remains always unobtainable to the non-West because what constitutes modernity is precisely the exclusion of the non-West from the modern, 'universal' West" (Yoshimoto 1993: 118). What constitutes "modernity" is an *attitude* that exists between social structures and individuals – even if not fully constituted as such in a "Western" sense. Modernity is a particular view of people as subjugated not to colonial powers, but to modes of production, and this view *did* in fact exist in Japan during its period of 'modernisation'.

In contrast to this view of life as a struggle against alienation, a constant flight towards an ever-receding time of integration in a nurturing and flexible social order built around the sanctified autonomy of the individual, the postmodern is a rejection of modernist struggle, an acceptance of fragmentation and a revelling in the peripheral position that previously marked the individual as *lost* in modernism. The postmodern accepts marginalism and makes that location the site of significance. It is a displacement of the centre, a negation of the importance of the mainstream – or, as Lyotard puts it, the death of the "metanarrative" (1984). Thus alienation is no longer an issue: in the absence of the metanarrative, there is no longer a definition from which to be alienated. For the postmodern, the individual need no longer seek his individuality, the sum of his parts – he finds himself as the "parts of his sum," as an ever-changing *collection*. The postmodern is therefore a liberation from structure, or the emergence in "consumer society [...] of the structure without a subject, and the play of signs without a meaning" (Karatani 1993: 188). Structure is thus now a loose paradigm, a fashion, a "sample" with which the artist may play.

This liberation from structure as a defining feature of the postmodern implies a particular attitude towards the world, "that attitude which would enable even a person who has lost all goals and ideals to confront reality without falling into despair or nihilism" (Karatani 1993: 184). This attitude is redemptive, a transcendence of modernist nihilism, and permits the postmodern to be a joyous exploration of *difference*, of eclecticism, of humour. It is "the reinstatement of various genres" (Karatani 1993: 187) excluded by modernism; but importantly, it is also the reinstatement of

one genre into every genre. Parody is thus a defining feature of the post-modern, and while Jameson may argue that pastiche is more correctly its hallmark (1984b), I would prefer to remark on the good-humoured wink that typically accompanies instances of postmodernist “borrowing.” Comedy plays a vital role in the postmodernist work, for comedy is a powerful tool against capitulation to a domineering social construct.

Thus *Tampopo* borrows from several distinct genres, yet always with the same sense of wonder at its very ability to do so: the detective film, western, gangster film, love story, and even soft-core *roman-poruno* find their echoes within its 114 minutes. Throughout this series of borrowings the thread of parody runs intact, however, and in fact verges on satire when the film approaches the notion of cultural homogeneity that forms the target of its ideological attack. In the Japan it represents on screen, *Tampopo* highlights the consumption of *foreign* products. On those rare occasions when it presents consumption of *Japanese* goods, it creates a strong association between this act and death. In one of the film’s many segments, a young housewife dies immediately after cooking her family’s humble evening meal, having been pulled from her deathbed by her husband, who is unwilling to accept the possibility of losing her. In another, a wealthy man dressed in a traditional *haori* [short over-jacket] nearly chokes on *o-shiroko* [sweet azuki-bean soup] in a Japanese restaurant. Later, at the home of this same man, a live turtle is slaughtered to provide the chief ingredient to a particular dish. Though each scene has its own emotional quality, the implications are politically rich: the cultural products of Japan are virtually malignant to its citizens. Consumption of typically “Japanese” products contains within it the potential for its own destruction.

Structurally, *Tampopo* mirrors its premise that Japan is a nation of peripheral fragments, rather than a unified cultural or social entity. To describe the “story” of *Tampopo* is to exercise one’s ability to think in fragments, for while the basic plot-line describes the relationship between Goro, a milk-truck driver (whose outfit is complete with authentic cowboy hat and bandana, and whose milk-truck sports the horns of a bull), and Tampopo, the female owner of a traditional Japanese noodle-shop started by her late husband, the film is composed of a series of vignettes and sketches that interfere with the forward progress of the story. These digressions all share several common threads, however, related to food, for each vignette depicts a particular aspect of a particular cuisine. As diverse as these segments and sub-stories are, the threads that bind them are strong ones – food shot in tantalising close-up; the myriad national cuisines that appear on screen; and the celebration of difference that informs every frame. At the same time, it is these threads that pull apart the fabric of the

“modern” in Japan, and reveal the marginalia as the true locus of significance.

Yoshimoto has pointed out that “postmodernism, understood simultaneously as a radical break from and as a reflection on the modern, is inseparable from the expansion of multinational capital and [the] global information network. [...] In the cultural sphere, Japan has transformed itself into a new type of audiovisual information society: constantly dismantled and reconstructed buildings [...] sophisticated television commercials [...] and new ‘high-tech’ gadgets introduced on a daily basis are part of what constitutes the imaginary landscape of the postmodern city of Tokyo” (Yoshimoto, 1993: 117). It is with this image of Japan that *Tampopo* plays. Reflecting the consumer culture that forms both its subject and its audience, *Tampopo* moves visually from vignette to vignette almost at the whim of the camera, as a bored shopper moves from store to store, or a *gourmand* moves from course to course. When the lens loses interest with the actions of one set of characters, it follows others as they pass into its frame to whichever destination awaits them, returning equally at whim to the story of the “main” characters, Goro and the noodle-shop owner. While the characters of these vignettes are all Japanese, they are not all of the culturally dominant middle class, and here *Tampopo*’s subversiveness becomes most apparent. *Tampopo* focuses on the culturally marginalised, the excluded, the peripheral human elements who form the bulk of capitalist, consumer-society Japan, but who find little voice in the political or economic arena. The female shop-owner after whom the film is named only barely manages to make a living for herself and her young son; Goro, the milk-truck driver, is a rootless drifter – a Tōkyō Clint Eastwood who goes from town to town along his delivery route; the vagabonds to whom Goro turns for help to teach Tampopo the secret of making the perfect bowl of noodles are precisely that – vagabonds, the homeless flotsam who populate the back alleys of the modern city. The character who introduces the film is a gangster – a member of the *yakuza* – who bullies a hapless movie patron in the film’s opening scene, and then dies in a hail of gunfire towards its close. These characters populate contemporary Japan, but are different from most others in contemporary Japanese cinema: even a film as anti-bourgeois as Tsukamoto Shinya’s *Tetsuo* (1992) still places its narrative firmly within the middle-class world of electronic gadgets and alienation that it seeks to negate, and still maintains an essentially unified view of the individual as, in fact, a traditional “identity.” While Kitano Takeshi’s work brings the ultra-violent underworld of drug addicts and criminals to the Japanese screen, it does so within the framework of traditional middle-class values. There is a moral sense of what is “obviously” right and wrong in these films, which is accepted without question.

In contrast, *Tampopo* follows the lead set in *Osôshiki*, and subverts any sense of bourgeois “correctness.” While *Osôshiki* did this through its exposure of the “younger” generation’s loss of traditional awareness, *Tampopo* does this through its wholeheartedly sincere presentation of the vagabonds and marginal people who are its main concern. While portraying the vagabonds as true *connoisseurs* of fine cuisine, *Tampopo* dissects the seriousness with which the middle-class pursue their roles as consumers of international products, and satirises their obsessive need for precise mimicry of foreign manners or tastes. In one biting vignette, a group of finishing-school girls who are learning the “correct” way of eating Italian pasta furnish the film with an opportunity to expose the superficiality of this mass-market appropriation of a so-called “internationalism.” The girls’ exasperated instructor discovers that her insistence on manners and propriety stands no chance of acceptance when her young pupils encounter a real, live foreigner noisily enjoying his own plate of pasta. She herself succumbs to the obvious pleasure with which he is eating, and begins to slurp her own dish with joy as her pupils indulge their hunger without the least reserve. Postmodern consumerism defines itself through nothing less than this exuberant self-abandon – not in order to reaffirm a national identity, thus overcoming modernity to reintroduce a “traditional” social homogeneity, but to permit the individual his or her own *joie de vivre*.

Tampopo finds its interest, and in fact its “story,” within the collection of its peripheral characters. Avoiding the relentless linearity of, say, Kurosawa’s films, *Tampopo* tells its story through loops and meanderings. Its “story” is no longer teleological and focused on a unity of character and meaning, but rather is open to the interruptions which its view of reality invites. Although it comes to an end when Tampopo’s noodle-shop is reopened (the perfect *râmen* recipe having been found), stylistically it could easily carry on into another segue. Almost free of its own metanarrative, save for its commercial necessity to “make sense,” the “unity” of the work comes from its opening and closing credits rather than from a singularity of structure. In fact the greatest feeling of closure comes from the presence of the gangster character at its outset and near its end: *Tampopo* thus permits its margins to dictate its story in a fashion that adheres to the post-modern acceptance of the periphery.

How, though, does this happen? I have already mentioned one visual “trick” that the camera uses to move from story to story, in pursuit of a character who seems more interesting than the ones on screen at the moment. But even from its outset, the film frustrates its own narrative flow by offering three “false starts” to its action. The first of these introduces the audience to the gangster character as he settles into his seat at a movie theatre. He addresses the camera directly, instructing the audience to be silent

during the screening, since nothing bothers him more than interruptions. As “his” movie begins, the film moves to its second false start: the screen fills with the image of a younger man seated next to an older man at a noodle restaurant. The older man is instructing the younger in how to eat noodles properly. While the instruction continues, the camera quickly cuts to the third starting point, this time the “true” one: the inside of a truck’s cab, as Goro and Gun, the “main” characters of the “main” story, drive towards their destination on a rain-filled night. Gun had been reading to Goro, and the audience comes to realise that the scene in the noodle restaurant is the subject of Gun’s narration. The film proper begins with Goro and Gun themselves arriving at a noodle-shop, where they meet Tampopo.

This series of starts displaces the action of the film, and defers the audience’s encounter with the “main” characters; but more importantly, it relativizes that story and shows it to be no more important than the marginalia that have preceded it. Significantly, the marginalia even from the earliest moments of the film are linked through the presence of different types of food in each shot: the gangster with the multi-course Western-style feast his accomplices serve while he watches his film; the noisy packet of crisps with which another audience member disturbs him; and the noodles on which the camera lingers so longingly in the narration of Gun’s book. Each type of food is as relevant as the next, despite its differences, and for the consumers, it represents the fulfilment of their momentary desires. But these different types of food also suggest their respective consumer’s character: the gangster revels in extravagance, the anonymous audience member enjoys the banality of crisps, while the main character is shown to be an honest man by his hunger for an honest bowl of Japanese noodles. Food here takes on an almost moral quality as it segregates these consumers into social strata. I say “almost,” for while the film allows one particular type of food, Japanese, to assume an apparently central role, it does so only to displace that centrality much as its opening sequence displaces the centrality of the main story.

The search for a perfect *rāmen* recipe does form an important layer in *Tampopo*, but it is a layer that the film’s structure relativises within a larger consideration of the many other layers that make up its whole. While this search continues, the camera takes the audience from the squalour of Japan’s homeless to the opulence of a wealthy man’s home. Yet in each of these diametrically opposed locations it finds true sensitivity to and appreciation of the beauty of food. The beggars (from whose midst arises an aged doctor who teaches Tampopo the importance of soup) are the true gourmets, able to speak poetically about the meals they enjoy, gathered from trash tossed out of the best restaurants in town. In fact they criticise the declining quality of these restaurants, and seem sincerely troubled by

this trend. As the aged doctor departs with Tampopo and Goro, the beggars with whom he has been living gather together to salute him with a valedictory song – their voices are superb, their intonation cultured and sentimental. This scene is clear in its implications: it is not among the mainstream that beauty can be found, but along the periphery of a culture that its measure can best be taken. While the film follows the progress of a Japanese woman in her quest to become a successful chef of an apparently Japanese dish, the people who assist her in this task, who in fact serve as the repositories of an authentic national identity – authentically national exactly because of their *international* appreciation of their country's position – are precisely *not* the ones from whom this knowledge is typically to be expected. Rather, they are the marginalised people whom the mainstream would prefer to exclude from its self-identity – the outsiders who have made for themselves a life outside the modernist system.

Moreover, Tampopo herself is a marginalised person, a woman forced to fulfil two roles, that of mother and homemaker, as well as businesswoman in a patriarchal society. Her shop was founded by her late husband, but his death has left her the difficult task of succeeding on her own merit. Itami's film is aware of the difficulty a woman would face in this situation; in fact, every other chef it portrays is male, and Tampopo herself implicitly recognises the unlikelihood of her success when she begs Goro to teach her the secrets she lacks. While it contains an awareness of a typically chauvinistic male attitude towards female entrepreneurs, *Tampopo* permits this woman to achieve her goal, and to realise her own strength in having done so. At the film's close, Tampopo is behind the counter of her newly rebuilt restaurant, at peace with her work and able to take pride in satisfying the demands of her customers. Goro takes his leave of her, driving off into the stylistically necessary "sunset" of the orthodox happy ending. Yet even this ending, so typical of the cowboy-story, has its measure of parody, for rather than Tampopo herself or her young son running after Goro as he rides away and begging him to stay behind and build a new life together, it is Pisuken, one of Tampopo's oldest customers, who tries to persuade Goro to stay. The cowboy story is here subverted one final time, and most effectively, too, in that these two characters were the ones who established the presence of that genre earlier on when they fought each other in a brawl of which even John Wayne would be proud.

Aware of genre, and aware, too, of its parody of these genres, *Tampopo* provides its audience with sufficient visual clues to understand its intentions, thus guiding the audience to an awareness of their own position as cultural progenitors. *Tampopo* accepts its position as an entertainment-industry artefact precisely for this purpose of questioning its status as a consumer product. Consumption of international goods alone is not sufficient

to create an “international” nation, Itami seems to argue; what is also necessary is a sense of national scepticism. As Najita Tetsuo has said, “[U]nder high-growth economics, technology has been ideologised with strong and pronounced references to distinctive cultural characteristics [...], one of the tensions that is likely to surface in the [...] postmodern context is the resistance to this ideological use of culture” (Najita 1988: 413). It is precisely toward this aim of resisting such an overtly distinctive cultural identity that *Tampopo* works. Rather than accepting a governmentally sanctioned metanarrative of Japanese identity proven through hyperconsumerism of foreign products, *Tampopo* does not allow its audience complacency in the act of consumption: with the increasing presence of foreign goods in Japan, the very *identity* of Japan becomes open to commodification as well, and to scepticism. In *Tampopo*, this commodification is not at all negative; rather, it recreates Japan as *relative* to the rest of the world, a margin able to revel in its own marginality. The value of the margin is the informing principle of this film, and one of its redemptive visions of Japan as a *construct* comes from this principle. Japan as a product of its own culture is able to change, and the commodification of that culture gives its participants the possibility of flexibility. They are now free to be “Japanese” at lunch and “Italian” at dinner – or “French,” “American,” or any other “identity” that suits their palate of the moment.

Once again, it is food that permits a fuller realisation of this view. In one particularly effective vignette, rich in its parody of the Japanese salary-man as well as for its confirmation of the value of the margin, a group of businessmen are about to order their lunch at an exclusive French restaurant. They have with them an obviously, and painfully, junior associate. The menu is in French, which the executives, again both obviously and painfully, cannot read. The first executive makes his decision: *sole meunière* accompanied by an imported German beer, without salad, but with *consommé*. In turn each executive repeats this order – but with the air of having arrived independently at his respective decisions –, till it is the junior office-clerk’s turn. He has travelled, and reads French fluently. He knows the exact restaurants in France from which the chef has learned his trade; he knows the perfect wine to accompany his meal; he selects the perfect salad to prepare his palate. He orders with pleasurable anticipation of the feast to come, despite the constant kicks to his shins from his embarrassed senior. It is this young businessman who succeeds in making a mockery of the executive culture for which Japan is widely known. It is this young man who single-handedly deconstructs the image of Japan as a conservative nation of tasteless businessmen, while demonstrating that image’s superficial veracity. The junior clerk demonstrates the vitality of the margin, the true centre of this decentred land, and demonstrates, too, that consumer-

ism *can* have its cultured and voluptuous sides. This junior clerk is a consumer, as are his companions, but *his* consumption is informed with pleasure: his consumption is postmodern precisely to the extent that he will enjoy his meal, content to be a peripheral member of the lunch party. Here, too, it is the periphery that supplies the standard by which the true depths of cultural sophistication and the true depths of both Japan's international sensitivity and identity, may be measured.

Tampopo is a visually rich, thematically clever film. Content with its commercial status, it nonetheless holds many signs of an important theoretical awareness, which still do not interfere with the integrity of its particular form of structural "disunity." This work challenges a view of the "nation" as solid and self-defining, in its place offering a flexible alternative built around a decentralised "individual" whose identity is as changeable as fashion, yet also is unassailable. The individual becomes free to pursue his individuality to the same extent that *Tampopo* is free to pursue the digressions that give it its substance, even if that individuality is to be defined through its absence. For the film, its "individuality" is defined as the frames that exist between its start and close, yet its ending intimates an eternal continuance: the final scene is of a mother breastfeeding her newborn child. This scene contains within it an *attitude*, for "the Japanese postmodern [...] is supremely indifferent to the possibility of an end" (Wolfe 1988: 587). While this may appear as a hopelessly pessimistic pronouncement, implying that "the semiotic overtones of [...] the postmodern convey to its advocates a claustrophobic sense that there is nowhere else to go except in circles, via [...] the endless circulation of increasingly unnecessary consumer goods and images" (Wolfe 1988: 587), *Tampopo* presents this attitude with far greater sensitivity. True, the child has been born as a consumer into a world of consumption, but his or her life will have the freedom to develop according to the whims of the individual living it. The child may grow as simply or as complexly as he or she may choose, and will enrich or diminish the society in which he or she lives in direct proportion. For, as *Tampopo* has demonstrated, the value of the whole is to be measured by the variety of its components.

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