

# Itami Mansaku, Contested History, and Editorial Interventions: Cinema and Our Understanding of the Past

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This paper is based on preliminary results of my research on the Japanese film director Itami Mansaku (1900-1946), whose work is centred in the late 1920s to 1940s. I first became interested in Itami while researching for my PhD thesis on the German-Japanese film coproduction *Atarashiki tsuchi*, in which Itami participated in 1936/1937. While watching Itami's films and reading his essays and articles, I became fascinated by this significantly underexplored film director and writer. I was also intrigued by the obscure and obscuring role of the film *Atarashiki tsuchi* in his oeuvre, and in recent appreciations of his public persona.

Here, I would like to share my observations, focussing on the seeming clash between Itami's public persona and his participation in *Atarashiki tsuchi*. The film's association with wartime Axis collaboration has retrospectively determined its place in academic and popular discourse on Itami. In extension, such interpretations were extrapolated on Japan itself, and on its role in the war. I will attempt to offer an alternative, cultural-historical reading, based on the production and Itami's writings, and conclude with some thoughts on the role of Film Studies for our understanding of the past, in Japan and beyond.

Itami Mansaku was one of Japan's top directors and scriptwriters of his time. His career path before eventually joining the film industry can only be described as colourful. After graduating from middle-school, he worked as a merchant in his family's business, concluded an unpleasant period of employment at the railway office, he illustrated youth magazines and children's books, gave up his artistic aspirations of becoming a Western-style painter and opened a soon-to-be bankrupt *oden* shop in his hometown Matsuyama, and also had two stints as an actor. He wrote his first script, *Hanabi*, in 1927, and directed his first film (*Adauchi ruten*) in 1928. During his relatively brief film career he wrote 34 scripts and directed 22 films, and his pieces of writing, be it articles, poems, or comments on film, society, politics are innumerable. Certainly, had he not died prematurely of tuberculosis in September 1946, there would be even more of his works for us to enjoy. Today, he is often mentioned as the father of film director Itami Jūzō (born Ikeuchi Yoshihiro, 1933-1997), and sometimes as the father-in-law of writer Ōe Kenzaburō (1935-). He is also known internationally as the author of an important essay he

wrote shortly before his death in 1946. In the piece titled ‘The question of those responsible for the war’ (*Sensō sekininsha no mondai*), he takes an early stand against the postwar ‘victim’ narrative, asking for individual responsibility instead of blaming others (Itami 1961[1946]).

With regard to cinema, Itami was the number one specialist of *nansensu* films that broke generic conventions and caricatured the classical *jidaigeki*, or period film, format. His *Kokushi musō* (1932), for example, depicts an impostor of humble background, aptly named Nise (fake). A carefully composed scene shows ‘the fake’ in his stolen samurai clothes, framed by reverent fake retainers. His pompous stance cites preconceived images of famous warriors, but is completely ridiculed by the large round lantern that sits on his shoulders instead of a head, inscribed with the word ‘Fake’ (*nise-mono*) in large letters. Furtheron, Nise uses a stick instead of a sword to defeat his legendary opponent. Ise no Kami, despite his lineage, fearsome reputation, and large number of followers, is hopelessly inept. The discrepancy between identity, iconography, and ability is a technique employed by Itami to criticise hereditary elites. Later, Itami often openly denounced the government for their actions and incompetence.

In the light of Itami’s postwar reputation as highly critical towards the wartime regime, as a ‘conscience of the prewar cinema’ (Yoshimoto 2000:236) and as a moralist, his involvement in the high-profile, politically overdetermined co-production *Atarashiki tsuchi* is puzzling and does not fit into the image. His participation, has therefore often been either omitted or treated sympathetically.

*Atarashiki tsuchi* is an intriguing example of how the research framework influences the outcome, that is, the interpretations of the film and its participants. In November 1936, Japan and Germany signed their first military agreement. In spring 1937, the film was released in Tokyo and Berlin. The focus on this specific context has led to predominantly political interpretations, and even some factual errors. Contrary to appearance and interpretation, the film was not planned a priori or in tandem with the Anti-Comintern Pact. This assumed causal relationship between political developments and the film project has for example been established by Anderson and Richie, straightforwardly and chronologically incorrectly: ‘Political co-productions officially began in 1936, just after both Japan and Germany had signed their Anti-Communist Pact’ (Anderson and Richie 1982:148; see also Hirano 2001:226 n.4; Shutsū and Nagata 2008:56; Yamamoto 2004:68).

When the Japanese producer Kawakita Nagamasa and German director Arnold Fanck signed their contract in Berlin, in August 1935, it was about a coproduction intended to fulfill three objectives: To present the ‘real’ Japan to the world, to do this in cinematic language that foreigners would understand, and to push Japanese film onto international markets. More formal negotiations about the

political agreement had not even begun. In February 1936, the German team arrived in Japan. Fanck was soon faced with the realities of having to direct in a foreign environment and in an unknown language. Itami became Fanck's co-director.

The Tokyo premiere took place in early February, and the German premiere in late March 1937. However, in Japan the project eventually resulted in two premieres, as Itami and Fanck could not cooperate. Fanck ended up directing a version in German and Japanese, and Itami directed the so-called 'international version', using Japanese and English. The main reason for their clash, which threatened the entire costly and high-profile project, was Itami's disapproval of Fanck's scriptwriting abilities as well as of his representation of "Japan" itself: 'In Dr Fanck's script we do not feel the Japanese of today, but of one generation ago' (Itami 1936).

The film ends with the protagonists emigrating to Manchukuo, the Japanese puppet state established in 1932. The fact that Manchukuo's new soil was acquired by force remains unspoken in both versions, contractually based on Fanck's script. The soldier in the final scene protects and guards; he does not conquer. In Fanck's version, the soldier faces the camera with a serious expression. Itami has him standing on a grassy hill and the actual spatial relation between the soldier and the protagonists remains ambiguous. This is just one of the many more, nuanced ways, in which Itami gave his own spin to the project within an extremely restricted framework. Itami's insights were dismissed by both sides: Fanck rejecting his input and the majority of his Japanese audience criticising his output. *Atarashiki tsuchi*, while breaking box office records, received praise but also much criticism. Despite Itami's use of opening titles that communicate to his Japanese audience that this 'foreigner's dream of Japan' was authored by someone else, the criticism was mostly directed against Itami, who 'misrepresented' Japan despite being Japanese (e.g. Uchida 1937; cited in Irie 1996:12).

Is it then the case that 'Fanck won out', as Peter High put it (2003:150)? Momentarily remaining within the schema of victim or perpetrator, we can certainly conclude that the project did not hurt Itami's reputation as much as it did Fanck's. Contemporary discourse confirms Itami's position as the moral winner and Fanck's post-war reputation as a collaborator. Considering that both directors intensely disliked the experience of their joint filmmaking, however, 'winners and losers' of history is an unstable category. Regardless of an understandable desire for clear demarcation lines, history as a lived experience is never just black and white.

Itami's astonishingly positive reaction towards political developments was published by *Eiga Hyōron* in January 1942, shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor:

With the outbreak of war, Japan suddenly became bright as if a light was switched on. ...The same can be said about half of the world. Japan has brought light to the globe. All I can see now is a bright and brilliant future opening up.<sup>1</sup> (cited in Salomon 2011: 170)

Also in 1942, Itami wrote a *tanka* that disturbs the general image of its author: ‘How happy and glorious am I! To be born and live in the land of Yamato. In the day of the Great War going. Under the glorious reign of the Emperor’ (cited in Hirano 2001:230-231 n.33). After his death in September 1946, Itami’s obituary in the *Yomiuri Shinbun* still listed *Atarashiki tsuchi* among his ‘representative works’. Yet, within a few weeks, the editorial intervention into his persona began. The *tanka* was deleted by the Occupation censors from an essay about Itami in 1946. *Muho Matsu no isshō*, had just been rereleased, freshly censored according to GHQ’s standards, and with ‘Sensō sekininsha no mondai’ Itami had already spoken out against brushing-off the wartime responsibility. The *tanka* obviously would have been detrimental to the Occupation authorities’ re-education efforts and to Itami’s persona as a positive, reinforcing example of a moralist. Neither the *tanka* nor the other problematic text is included in subsequent collections of his works. This shaping of Itami’s persona certainly was facilitated by his relatively early death in 1946, at a critical juncture between two ideological systems.

In the construction and assessment of Itami’s persona, *Atarashiki tsuchi* became either a memory to be repressed or an instance of victimisation. Some even consider the ordeal of his cooperation with Fanck responsible for his final collapse in 1938 and, by implication, his death in 1946 (e.g. High 2003:163). Fanck was built up – by himself and others – as a triumphant presence in the project, but Itami became discursively removed. This, as Yamamoto Naoki has noted, enabled his persona to act as a ‘redemptive’ factor after Japan’s defeat. It also added to the paradigm of Japan as a victimised nation (Yamamoto 2004:80). These approaches, in fact, run counter to Itami’s emphasis on taking responsibility for one’s actions. Moreover, it might be argued that reinserting the film into his oeuvre actually reveals it as a positive instance rather than a problematic moment. It would have been easy to join the bandwagon of ‘national policy films’ after *Atarashiki tsuchi* had been discursively connected to military cooperation. Itami’s position may not necessarily always have been anti-war, but, as expressed in his films and essays, he took a continuous, strong stance against authority for authority’s sake, against dishonesty and incompetence, thus keeping his critical distance from the regime.

Moving from this case study towards its wider implication in the fields: What can such film historical analysis bring to Japanese Studies and our understanding of the past? Undoubtedly,

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<sup>1</sup> Itami goes on urging the ‘bureaucrats’ not to shrink the film world further and to ‘develop the film industry in the correct sense’.

interpretations of the past remain a lingering issue of great impact within the ongoing discussions of Japan's place in the world. History is ultimately made by people in very specific personal and historical contexts, and here the notion of individual responsibility comes to the fore. Itami himself wrote about this matter early in the aftermath of war in 'Sensō sekininsha no mondai'. In this piece he also ponders about human nature and moral judgement:

Of course, theoretically, an intellectual problem should be treated as an intellectual problem throughout; there should be no scope for an intersection with concepts of right or wrong. It is impossible, however, to analyse the behaviour of human beings as living, organic entities in a purely logical manner. In other words, once an intellectual problem becomes connected to human behaviour, it changes into an intricate complex of intentions and emotions. (Itami 1961[1946]:209)

Film studies goes far beyond mere film appreciation. Film, as popular culture, is indeed widely accessible, but far from superficial. As a cultural artefact, it stands in constant discourse with society. Understanding it thus requires specialist area knowledge as well as film studies discipline knowledge. Examining those discourses through a deep engagement with films and the people involved, can enrich our understanding of the context of these productions and hence of the timeframe under observation.

In terms of the story of Itami Mansaku and *Atarashiki tsuchi*, it has become clear that, despite our understandable desire for clear-cut lines, historical, moral or otherwise, we cannot expect historical consistency from those we study, especially as we take our own changes of mind, in the light of new developments or finding, for granted. The study of film as cultural artefacts can contribute to such a conclusion, which, I believe, makes our approach to the past in the present a gentler, more nuanced, and ultimately humane one.

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