

Chapter 6

The Tsunami of the Pandemic in the Context of Japanese Cinema

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic severely affected the film industry in Japan. One of the main problems involved small cinemas in large urban centers. As soon as it became clear that the closure of the cinemas would lead to the collapse of the small ones, many directors and authors immediately mobilised with various initiatives aimed at raising awareness of the risk of this serious loss and urging the government to support them. The temporary closures of small theatres gave way to various alternative solutions, such as online projection channels and the revival of drive-ins, but the most interesting phenomenon is the intensification of film productions by mini-theatre operators themselves. Of the unstoppable Japanese film production of the last few years, some films have centered on stories related to the pandemic and have told of the discomfort during the emergency. This chapter aims to take a snapshot of the situation of Japanese cinema since the beginning of the pandemic, noting some of the main problems and elements of probable continuity in future productions.

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic severely affected the film industry in Japan, leading to both negative and positive consequences. The emergency immediately forced authors and producers to find useful alternatives on several fronts to return to previous modes. One of the main problems, as we shall see, involved small cinemas (so-called mini-theaters) in large urban centers. Between February and March 2020, restrictions imposed on cultural events intensified in Japan, culminating in April in an approximately two-month lockdown on public screenings, without, however, a clear government support plan. Fortunately, the lockdown and temporary closures of small theaters gave way to various alternative solutions, such as online screening channels and the revival of drive-ins. However, the most interesting phenomenon was the intensification of film productions, many of which were initiated by the mini-theater operators themselves, including various experimental operations — facilitated, for example, by the more wide-

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spread use of new digital technologies — undertaken to protect auteur cinema. These initiatives were complemented by a range of mobilizations among film industry players to ensure production continuity for national works, particularly in the form of successful fundraising or public awareness campaigns.

In the unstoppable Japanese film production of the very last few years — with an average of 600 productions per year — a portion of films have centered on events specifically related to the pandemic, depicting the country's new sociological context. Moreover, in the midst of the emergency there have been almost unprecedented box-office successes, and overall the Japanese film market has recovered at a faster pace than in the West, demonstrating that cinema remains one of the most vibrant arts in the archipelago.

The Effects of the Pandemic on Small Cinemas

Japan was among the first countries to register cases of Covid-19 as early as in January 2020. The state of emergency and the associated lockdown, initially applied only in some prefectures, was finally extended to the entire archipelago from April 16 of the same year. For about two months, movie theaters and film sets were of course closed as well. In many cases, this choice caused extremely negative fallout for the film industry; in others, it stimulated the emergence of interesting alternatives.

Mini-theaters (small art houses used for the distribution of non-commercial films and extensively present in major urban centers throughout the country) suffered a particularly heavy toll. Established in the 1980s, based on models formed in the previous two decades — the most famous example being the Art Theater Guild, known by its acronym ATG¹ — these small theaters allowed the viewing of newly released independent films, and organized retrospectives about little-known Western and native authors as well as frequent talks with the authors themselves. They opened the door to a broader and more multicultural world than the one offered by the mainstream theaters of large distribution circuits, soon stimulating a diversified and in many cases auteur production². However, these circuits went through several ups and downs over the years. An initial reduction in audiences had already occurred with the rise of the home video market, followed by that of digital technologies, multiplex cinemas, and video-on-demand³. The pandemic emergency dealt the final blow, as the government failed to respond with supportive actions, leaving operators at the mercy of an uncertain future and forcing them to look for alternative solutions that led to the proliferation of drive-ins and online screening channels. Among the latter, an interesting example is the “Temporary Cinema” experimented by director Sōda Kazuhiro with distributor Tofoo Films in the very early days of the lockdown: a circuit of about 40 mini-theaters and film distributors made available, through a streaming portal, some of the Japanese and Western films already scheduled for screening in the months of the crisis. As indicated by the name, the project was born as an interim solution in the hope of a return to physical viewing after the lockdown, and the cost of tickets for online viewing did not differ from the one normally charged in theaters⁴.

Fortunately, the actions of many private individuals, especially filmmakers and actors, contributed some form of aid to the partial survival of theaters. In particular, two campaigns launched since the beginning of the lockdown tried to curb the collapse of these venues. The first was the petition “Save the Cinema”, launched among others by director Koreeda Hirokazu and actor Arata Iura, which collected over 90,000 signatures asking the government to support mini-theaters. The second was the crowdfunding effort “Mini-Theater Aid”, sponsored among others by filmmakers Fukada Kōji and Hamaguchi Ryūsuke, and with the support of various video messages recorded by actors and filmmakers, which raised more than 330 million yen. Part of these funds was then donated to small theater operators, who

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