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Mini-theaters of Japan: Nostalgia as Perishable as Celluloid, but too significant to not preserve

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**Mini-theaters of Japan: Nostalgia as Perishable as Celluloid, but
too significant to not preserve**

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Introduction

Going to the movies in Tokyo is pretty much a similar experience to watching a movie in any large Western city. The films are advertised by neon lights and offered in large theaters with multiple screens. Most movies on offer are blockbuster movies originating from Hollywood or other international film studios.

As a movie lover and a student of Japanese language and culture I spent the last year in Kobe Japan. I wondered about the original Japanese film culture and what remains of it to date. Fortunately, a fellow student and film lover invited me to go to a film theater called *Motomachi Eigakan* in Kobe. Once I entered the venue, I noticed that the movies playing were more art-like, so I assumed that it was like an arthouse cinema in the Netherlands. As a frequent visitor of art house cinema in the Netherlands, of which I am a citizen, I was used to these kinds of cinemas. In the Netherlands, the arthouse theaters are very popular after all. Although, when I entered *Motomachi Eigakan*, I noticed that the entire theater was very small, had only one screen, and there were only a few people viewing the movie. Where in the Netherlands twenty people or more would watch a movie, here it was only four. Next to that I noticed the posters on the wall asking for donations to keep the theater alive.

After the movie, when I walked back home with my friend, I was told that these theaters are known in Japan as mini-theaters. These are movie theaters that are run independently without the influence of a major cinema organization or movie company. My friend also told me that these theaters were a very common thing until the nineties but have since then

been disappearing. She could not explain the decline in the number of mini-theaters.

Perhaps there was less interest in these theaters because of the rise of the internet and film streaming services, or a decline of guests because of the aging population in Japan. It was at this moment that I wanted to know more about the Japanese mini-theater. The mini-theaters reflect some of Japan its film history but also relate to how Japan reacts to a society where younger people leave the countryside for the big city. In a sense these minitheaters reflect the authentic Japanese film culture, both from the sense of film offerings as well as how films are enjoyed as part of the society.

Not only in Japan but across the world, the landscape of cinemas has undergone very big changes: The spread of the digital streaming technologies has redefined how audiences engage in watching movies. While one may prefer watching a movie in the dark at the cinema, another might prefer the wide catalogue they can choose from at home. The developments surrounding streaming services have not only reshaped the distribution of movies, but also the cultural and sensory experience of watching one (Tryon, 2013). Movies are now watched after they have become a big hit on social media. One example is the Minecraft movie which, due to a popular trend on Tiktok where people throw popcorn and scream during popular scenes, gained a worldwide total of 954 million dollars in box office revenue (Variety, 2025).

In Japan, there is one film venue that tries to stay as close as possible to the original movie watching experience: The mini-theater. The first mini-theater was called Wakaba bowl (若葉ボール) and appeared in 1968 as a project of the *Japan Art and Theater Guild (ATG)* to

make an exclusive place for Art movies which were less appreciated at the time. Nowadays, these theaters remain in existence thanks to curatorial programming, community engagement, and the preservation of film as an embodied and localized cultural experience. In this master thesis I will analyze the question: ‘How did the mini-theaters in Japan adapt to a changing cinema culture?’ Mini-theaters are a tribute to the experience of watching films in Japan; they give the opportunity to young directors to expose their work, and they preserve a unique venue for art-cinema customers to watch together and share experiences.

This thesis consists of 4 main chapters of which the first one gives a historical contextualization of the Japanese film theater landscape. The emergence and diversification of film exhibition venues in Japan cannot be separated from the broader evolution of film genres and audience practices and that is why there is a need to explain both. Early Japanese cinema saw the *benshi* who narrated movies as a central role in the movie theater (Inuhiko, 2019; 35). The phenomenon of the *benshi* shows that the Japanese film theater was a place not only for visual entertainment, but also live performances. The end of the period of censorship during the war period and the post-war period marked a beginning for multiple new film genres such as yakuza dramas, pink films and anime which also gave rise to specialized theaters which brought about the adult cinemas and, the mini-theaters (Gerow, 2010).

In the second chapter I turn to the contemporary functions of the mini-theater in Japan. As previous research has shown, the mini-theater’s position maintains a very complex position in Japan its cinema landscape. The mini-theaters have a very low market share in

the film industry, but they also hold a very important key to showing new movies in Japan its film industry (Kinoshita, 2021; 351). I argue that the mini-theaters are not surviving so they can make a lot of money, but because they are rooted in their local audiences that value personal connection (Coates, 2022) and niche interest (Inuhiko, 2000). The scale and local community-orientation is in very sharp contrast to the experience of the cinemas with multiple screens (the cinema complex), which have strong tendencies to show movies from the same film studios but do not focus on community-centered practices.

The third chapter focusses on a case study of the film *Your Lovely Smile* (Kah Wai, 2023). This is a film about and for mini-theaters. In the movie, an independent filmmaker's travels to, and shares experiences of multiple mini-theaters across Japan. As a bonus to the plot of the movie it also contains interviews with film experts. They analyze a series of documentary videos from The Japan Foundation made in 2023. With these two sources (the movie and the interviews), I analyze how mini-theaters are portrayed through the screen both by fictional work and work based on real interviews with mini-theater owners. *Your Lovely Smile* shows more of the difficult times that mini-theater owners face, as they struggle to cover the costs of the theater financially. The documentary videos show how the mini-theaters provide a very exclusive experience to the public by integrating flexible film programming and human networks of support.

Together these chapters argue that Japan's mini-theaters can survive by its ability to endure, adapt, and recover from challenges like the rise of streaming platforms, the COVID-19 pandemic, aging audiences, and economic pressures. By staying meaningful and valuable to their communities, they respond to them by programming diverse films,

focusing on local needs and emphasizing the aspect of watching films together. These strategies gave way for a new kind of cinema culture, which is more personal and focused on diverse groups.

Chapter 1: Historical divergence of movie theaters

To understand the unique position of the mini-theaters of Japan today, we must first look at how the film theater of Japan has evolved over time. This chapter traces historical developments examining how changes in technology, audience behavior, and film genres have created different types of screening spaces.

Starting with Japan's adaption of early cinema through shadow-plays and the introduction of *benshi*, the first section explains how Japan has built a domestic industry around cinema. It then follows with a more community-centered venue that takes inspiration from Western models after the Second World War.

The second section discusses the emergence of niche venues such as adult movie theaters and mini-theaters. These cinemas are independent and make for alternative watching experiences. Moreover, mini-theaters offer a platform for new filmmakers who operate outside of large production companies.

The final section looks at how different genres of films have influence the cinematic experience in Japanese history from silent films to New Wave cinema. It is crucial to understand this before discussing how mini-theaters continue to play a vital role in Japanese film culture as of today.

1.1 History of the movie-theater in Japan from 1895 to the 2000s

Cinema is the showing of moving pictures for which a crowd comes to watch. The history of cinema starts in 1895. Projectors that project light are known to have existed earlier though cinema as we know it today started with the presentation of the cinematograph projector

by the brothers Lumière. Their projector uses light and film rolls to give the illusion of a moving picture. The cinematograph with its film was later transported to Japan in 1897 (Inuhiko, 2000; 40).

It has also been argued that the ‘the moving picture’ was in Japan before this. This was in the form of shadow-plays (*utsushi-e*) using lanterns as sources of light to display characters and *active pictures* (*katsudou-shashin*). Active pictures are like shadow plays in which 5 sources of light were used to give the image of moving pictures. According to Katou, the *active pictures* was Japan its film-culture in its earliest stage. In his view, this was the beginning of Japan its film culture as its industry could adapt itself very quickly to making a booming film-culture after the cinematograph was introduced (Katō, 1965; 23). The first Japanese feature film was released in 1898 and was about the dramatization of a robber’s famous arrest. It was an immediate success as it amazed people with the novelty of moving pictures (High, 2005). Soon after, the movie *Game of autumn leaves* (1899) was created, which is the oldest and still preserved Japanese film tape to date.

Like *Game of autumn leaves*, many films of this early stage in Japanese cinema show the movie without sounds. There are segments where text is displayed but a lot of the scenes are up to the interpretation of the viewer. To make the film understandable however, there were *benshi* (弁士) also known as ‘professional explainers’. The existence of explainers in light shows appear as early as 1886 with *active pictures*. Most Japanese were thus accustomed to there being an explainer. These *benshi* would dress in frock coats and silk hats like consummate Westerners. They did not only explain but also imitated the voices of

the actors (Inuhiko, 2019; 35). It is argued that in this age the quality of the movie was often dependent on the acting of the *benshi*. They would make the difference to whether the show was a success. What is also important to note about this is the fact that the movies in this period were quite short and never longer than a handful of minutes.

The short-film theater was a massive success with the Japanese public. Although popular as a form of entertainment, the average movie-goer would still refer to films as *reflected pictures* (*utsushi-e*). Taken inspiration from Western cinema, and to make more engaging scenes with experienced actors and scenes with different shots, the Pure Film Movement (*Jun eiga geki undō*) was established in 1912. In the eyes of the Pure Film Movement, the film was a text that did not change with a particular performance done by a *benshi*. Like this, more money was invested in films eventually changing the name from *reflected pictures* (*utsushi-e*) (写し絵) to *eiga* (映画) which is the contemporary word for movie and carried higher cultural connotations in this time (Inuhiko, 2019; 39).

With the film getting more and more investments, the first movie with sound: also known as ‘the talkie’, was introduced in 1927. Eventually these movies with sound would reach Japanese theaters in 1930. This caused a problem for the *benshi*, who now had less job opportunities, eventually leading to the disappearance of the profession. What changed the most for the watchers was the quality of the theater experience. The disappearance of the *benshi* swept away the character of improvised theatrical performance from film experience and transformed viewers into anonymous beings with no connection to the film-theater (Inuhiko, 2019; 61).

The movie theater now looked more like its Western counterpart, although the biggest difference that remained was that the Japanese public was not accustomed to dubbed movies in which the original spoken dialogue is replaced with a translated version in another language. The Japanese public would prefer subtitled movies. They would prefer extra text over the concept of a movie that is differently sounding than its original source (Standish, 2005). However, nowadays a large portion of movies that is displayed in Japanese theaters is available in both dubbed and subbed format.

What would follow in Japanese cinema history from 1927 to 1940 is known as the Golden age. This is due to the large success of films made in Japan. People would still have the possibility to view movies from other countries but the ones with the biggest public coming to the cinema were the movies made in Japan. New genres would rise one after the other such as the *Jidaigeki*: Movies with samurai and historical figures in the main lead. It was also the time in which a lot of famous Japanese directors started making movies like *I Was Born, But...* (Ozu, 1932). In these pre-television times, cinema theaters were packed with spectators. Then, when Japan started mobilizing for war, censorship was applied to most movies.

To promote nationalistic ideas and to ensure state-approved content there were only three major film companies allowed to make movies. These companies were Tōhō (東宝), Shōchiku (松竹) and Daiei (大映) (High, 2003). Many movies included themes such as loyalty, sacrifice, and military heroism. Any director who made movies outside of those themes had to re-edit them to meet government approval. During the war a large part of

Japan was bombed by US firebombing raids (1944-1945) and this destroyed studios and archives. When the US occupied Japan after the end of WW2, many Japanese movies were banned and destroyed. This is why so many Japanese film tapes made before the end of WW2 are lost.

After the war and due to the influence of US control, film-theaters in Japan started taking different shapes. As Coates (2022) writes in her book, the year 1945 was an important year for cinema in Japan as well as historically and politically as it not only ended the time to the wartime censorship, but it also altered the cinema landscape. A large portion of cinemas was destroyed due to the bombings. Now, theaters were rebuilt with concrete instead of wood, and the theater's rooms would now be equipped with widescreens, upgraded projection equipment and individual seats (Coates, 2022). In addition to these upgrades, snacks such as soda and popcorn were sold to consume during the movie.

The movie-theater was now a very communal place where people would meet up with their friends while watching a movie. People would react loudly to emotional scenes or when their favorite actor appeared on screen (Inuhiko, 2000; 110). It was now normal for children and families to attend together, which led to a very relaxed atmosphere compared to the cinema during wartime Japan.

After the movie theater peak in the golden age, in 1958 with 1.127.452 visits, the television started to become a normal object in Japanese households (Ishigaki, 2010). This meant that viewing film moved for a large part to homes. It did not mean that there was no meaning for movie-theaters, however. People still went to movie theaters though film was

now considered to be a serious form of art. According to a Japanese friend with whom I frequently visited film theaters in Japan, people do not talk during movies in respect towards the film and its makers. Next to this, he also said he did not want to be a bother to other people watching the movie (Kubo, 2025). In personal experience, this trend seems especially the case in the cinema complex though it is the norm in other kinds of theaters as well (Hamaguchi, 2022).

1.2 The Rise of the Adult Movie Theater and the Mini Theater

It was during this time that Japan saw the rise of several new cinema types which focused on specific movies. One of these was the adult movie theater (*seijin eigakan*) which focused on so-called *pink eiga* which were adult films typically featuring explicit sexual content mixed with softcore or hardcore elements. Adult movie theaters were often placed in narrow and discrete allies and were recognizable by their neon lights on the signs and windows covered in posters with naked women. The places often had simple seating arrangements with rows of chairs or plush benches. In some cases, they had private booths which were designed to cater to the individual and in other cases space would be divided by curtains (Yau et al., 2022). It was with the rise of the internet that these places ceased to exist, and that people would prefer watching these movies at home.

Another place for watching movies was the mini theater (*mini shiazā*). The Mini theater is a place that is run independently without the influence of a major cinema organization or movie company. Alternatively, movies that have finished their road show, or movies that are made by film-directors who have not made a name for themselves yet were also shown.

Often, through these mini theaters beginning film directors get a chance to show their film works. Mini theaters are comparable with smaller movie houses or arthouse cinema as known in Europe (Masuda, 2015). One important difference though, is that Japanese mini theaters are always run by individual owners. Because of this, advertising and commercializing movies becomes increasingly difficult as these places are not funded by any organizations. Mini-theaters keep their business alive through their own revenue or donations. Accordingly, the movies that are shown often do not have large enough funds to provide for proper advertising.

On the other hand, the individuality of mini theaters provides an opportunity to select films based on one's own personal criteria. Extra facilities such as a shop or a café are also optional to the demand of the owner of the movie theater. This gives each mini-theater a touch of uniqueness. These factors provide for a loyal fan base, making the mini-theater not only a place for consuming movies, but also for the gathering of certain communities (Ishii & Miyata, 2020).

Available seats in a mini theater often range from 50 to 200. According to the Japan Community Cinema Center (2023), in 2021, 23 percent of the cinemas in Japan were mini theaters. Unlike adult movie theaters, they still exist, and they are often managed by volunteer workers. It is through the efforts of the mini-theaters that Japan still has a big variety of movies to watch in cinemas. Next to this, the mini-theaters give chances to new movies from independent creators (Hamaguchi, 2021).

1.3 From Benshi to Anime, How Film Types Reshaped Japan's Cinema Experience

As discussed in the sections above, Japanese cinema history has seen many different types of movie theaters. To fully understand the movie experiences from the past, it is important to look at how the content of a movie from each specific movie era has influenced the audience and cinema types. In this section I address the movie genres which are relevant per period of cinema.

1.3.1 Before and during the Silent Era 1897-1930s

The first screening of a movie in Japan was in 1897 with a kinetoscope and a *vitastope* which is a kinetoscope edited to project (Belton, 1990). The pictures shown were those of the Lumiere brothers and were supposed to give the Japanese audience a feeling of what film could mean for them. It was in that same year that Asano Shiro released 2 movies as the first Japanese camera film man. In his film, culture of Japan like geisha and sumo was shown. Only these scenes were filmed to give his movies a 'Japanese' twist and could thus be seen as something orientalist. These films were shown at so-called *Sōshi shibai* events within a chain of other kinds of side show entertainments. Here, screenings made by political parties were shown to gain popularity among the public (Inuhiko, 2019, 28).

Still in 1897, a new group of actors came up called the new wave (*shinpa*) (Gerow, 2010; 46). It is hard to understand nowadays how *shinpa* theater would be performed in the Meiji era though the movie producer Komada Kōyō decided to record one of the performances and screen it. In this movie, *Shimizu Sadakichi: Pistol Thief* (*Pisutoru gōtō Shimizu Sadakichi*, 1899), a detective and a police officer find a thief hiding behind a tree waiting to

rob a house. The entire performance is only done in one shot, and no more than a single, seventy-foot reel.

What is very significant for the silent age of film is the relationship between theater and cinema. When Kabuki emerged during the seventeenth century, it was the ideal theatrical form for representing the worldview of towns people during the Edo period. But in the modern era, by the end of the nineteenth century, Kabuki had come to take on the feeling of classical texts for the elite. In contrast to *shinpa*, which performances were now filmed and put in movies, Kabuki maintained a dismissive attitude toward the new medium and generally avoided collaboration. Since films were typically shot outdoors on the ground, rather than on Kabuki's traditional cypress-wood stages, Kabuki actors derisively referred to films as “mud plays.” It is for this reason that the *Game of autumn leaves* (1899), which was the first movie published in public theaters, emerged from these conditions of Kabuki's contempt for film and ignorance of it.

Movies in early Japan were thus often perceived as a form of theatrical entertainment designed for the general public rather than the elite. *Benshi* played a very important role in this. These *benshi* were not only skilled storytellers but also actors who typically wore formal Western-style attire which added a distinctive theatrical twist. Their performances meant that each screening was unique and gave every screening a personal twist (Bernardi, 2001; 24). It was during this time until the 30s that the cinema in Japan, even when they were showing Japanese movies, the experience would be seen as something Western.

1.3.2 Wartime cinema and the Post war golden age 1930s-1950s

During the 1930s Japan was driving towards militarism. This made the Japanese government also extremely aware of editing movies, thus proclaiming laws inducing censorship. While there were some people who still proclaimed that film was a lesser form of theater, to some it felt like the existence of laws around cinema would validate the films as a form of art. On the other hand, the government had total and merciless control. The cinema would remain popular however, and movies would switch from scenes of war victories to melodramas about personal loss. There were also producers who tried to find subtle ways to resist propaganda. One of these examples is Yasujiro Ozu, who focused on the individual, especially women, and the domestic life during national upheaval in his movies. While the cinema could be seen as a place for national propaganda, it was also a safe space for the people of Japan who were facing bombings, loss, rationing, and fear (High, 2003). With the role of becoming a shelter, and seeing movies that distract you from real life, I agree with High that the cinema was a place to escape from daily problems in life.

When the war ended, Japan saw a change in movie themes again. Due to the American occupation, strict censorship was still not gone, however there were now new opportunities for creative freedom. Themes like realist drama, postwar confusion, family disintegration, and ethical reconstruction were very popular. It was for the first time as well that Japanese movies received major awards abroad. So did Yasujiro Ozu with *Tokyo story* (Ozu, 1953) and Akira Kurosawa with *Ikiru* (Kurosawa, 1952). Movies like *Godzilla* (Honda, 1954) were inspired by anti-war feelings. Because of this change away from war themes, people started getting their family into the cinema and cinema-going was as much a social

ritual as an aesthetic engagement. As Hirano describes this; “Going to the cinema in the immediate postwar period was not the hushed, reverent affair it later became. Audiences often talked, moved about, and treated the theater as a communal gathering place.” (Hirano, 1992). The vibrant atmosphere gave the cinema a role as a space for social interaction and postwar rebuilding of a community. Rather than going to the cinema to only watch a movie, it gave families a shared experience of entertainment and social bonding.

1.3.3 *The New Wave and genre expansion*

The 1960s saw a rise in different views against cinema again. As screenings at Universities and Cine-clubs attracted more serious audiences, film started to be seen as a higher form of art that should be taken seriously. This made the movie a platform, not just meant for entertainment, but also for artistic and political engagement (Gerow, 2010; 3-4). These two themes came back in movies by directors like Oshima, Imamura and Shinoda. The 1960s was also the time where the television saw its rise in Japan’s general society. Not only that, but younger people also began to get tired of the older movie genres such as family dramas and samurai films. As a result, big studios like Toho, Shochiku, Nikkatsu, and Daiei cut production, laid off workers, and even shut down film divisions (Desser, 1988; 7). This made directors experiment with new genres outside of the bigger film studios, resulting in a need for new places to show these films and this is also the birthplace for mini theaters. Another place would be the adult movie theater. These places would show Japan the most interesting new genres. Some films were banned, controversial, or underground, but this only increased their appeal among cinephiles (Standish, 2005; 326).

Another important new movie genre of this time was anime. Anime movies were often based on *manga* and it became a huge hit for *otaku*, so called anime fans, to watch as many anime-movies as possible. On the other hand, J-horror saw its rise with *Ringu* and yakuza movies saw their rise from samurai movies with *Abashiri Prison* (1965). As the content diversified, so did the cinema experience itself. The rise of the *cinekon* multiplexes created a more regulated and polished environment as will be explained in chapter 2. Nevertheless, it is because of this period (from the 1960s) that there is a big diversity of Japanese movie genres till today.

1.4 Conclusion: When the theater changes, movies multiply

The evolution of Japanese cinema has always been inseparable from the spaces in which films are shown. From *benshi*-accompanied silent screenings to the packed theaters of the postwar golden age. From the rise of adult cinemas in the 1970s to the emergence of mini-theaters in the 1960s (Inuhiko, 2020; Nornes, 2007). Shifts in content have reshaped the cinematic experience of Japan.

As Japan's film culture changed through state-sponsored propaganda, jidaigeki, experimental and independent films, and the global spread of anime, so too did the contents of the movies. Mini-theaters emerged as a response to this shift in contents, offering curated alternatives to the increasingly standardized commercial theaters and providing platforms for international, or artistic films (Miike, 2021; Standish, 2005). While the variation in movie genres expanded, so did the types of cinemas in which they are viewed and mini-theaters are an example of this diversification.

This chapter has shown how cinema in Japan developed not just through changes in cinema technology or the storytelling of a movie, but through evolving theater spaces that influenced viewing culture. In the chapters that follow, we turn more to the mini-theater itself, which is a unique type of movie theater in Japan. Although it stays central to Japan's contemporary film culture, it is both a platform for alternative cinema and a site of cultural resistance in an era increasingly dominated by streaming and multiplex movie theaters.

Chapter 2 Where Japan Still Goes to the Movies: The Significance of Mini-Theaters Today

This chapter explores the contemporary landscape of Japanese movie-theaters with a particular focus on the role of the mini-theaters. This to understand the influence of the mini-theater on the overall cinema landscape. It builds on the previous chapter which provided an overview of how the movie theaters in Japan looked like, and how they were influenced by the movie genres of their time. The goal of this chapter is to examine how mini-theaters function within today's film viewing system, and what makes them different in terms of programming and cultural significance.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section outlines the diversity of films circulating in contemporary Japan. The second section examines the current movie-theater scene of Japan and the current experience of 'cinema-going'. It also states the role of the mini-theater in the Japanese cinema landscape. The third section considers the unique role of the mini-theater as an alternative exhibition space. This in relation to the structural and cultural problems related to Japan's challenges such as COVID-19 and the aging society of Japan.

Together, these sections provide a framework for understanding the relative role of Japanese mini-theaters as a category in the total movie-theater landscape. It sets the stage for chapter 3 which exhibits the unique variation of mini-theaters and their challenges through an inside view by theater owners and independent film directors.

2.1 *How contemporary movies have changed the cinema*

The contemporary film watching scene in Japanese cinemas can be enjoyed through both domestic and global movies. Although the current availability of international content has gotten a huge expansion with the arrival of the streaming platforms such as *Netflix* and *U-next*, the film production landscape continues to privilege domestic productions (Ishigaki, 2010). In the context of these online services, mini-theaters play a substantial role in offering alternative experiences that feature not only foreign works, but also domestic Japanese independent works and non-mainstream anime and live-action productions.

As of 2023, at only 33 percent, Japan has one of the lowest market shares for foreign films (Japan Community Cinema Center, 2023). While the Hollywood franchises are widely released, their reach is constrained by Japan's distribution system which tends to focus on the Japanese movies. This focus is followed by the public who prefers to see Japan-made films. Iwabuchi argues that this preference is the effect of 'cultural odorlessness' with which he means that the Japanese media tends to prioritize domestic narratives and discourages engagement with foreign popular culture (Iwabuchi, 2002; 27). Consecutively, foreign film studios find difficulty in distributing their films inside Japan. As a result, the subtitling and dubbing market in Japan is not something as sought-after as it is in Western countries (Nornes, 2007; 143). Film festivals and mini-theaters have become the most important venue for these foreign movies. Films from Europe, Southeast Asia and Latin America are rarely shown in the cinema complex, but in the mini-theater they are screened as they often correspond with local film festivals (Sharp, 2011; 126).

Another kind of movie that is also exclusively found at film festivals and mini-theaters is the independent film. Independent films have limited funding, minimal advertising and are normally produced outside the major film studios. The lack of financial funds means that the opportunity for them to distribute their film is minimal, making the mini-theater another important player. The distributing opportunities of the independent filmmaker will be discussed more in-depth in chapter 3. The model, where the filmmaker depends on the mini-theater has sustained the career of famous directors like Kazuhiro Soda and Chie Hayakawa who initially started their career as an independent filmmaker. The award winning film *Plan 75* (Hayakawa, 2022) also received its fame through a network of mini-theaters ultimately resulting in selection for the Academy awards (Schiling, 2022) forming the beginning of Hayakawa's success.

The documentary is another form of independent film. Documentary movies like *Of Love & Law* (Toda, 2017) and *A.K.A Serial Killer* (Adachi, 1969) relied a lot on mini-theaters for their distribution, not because they are lesser well known but because they address certain unique themes. Documentary movies like *Of Love & Law* and *A.K.A Serial Killer* often use central themes such as lgbtq rights, labor abuse and state violence for which they are seldomly accepted into the commercial multiplex system (Sharp, 2011; 105).

Another kind of movie genre that continues to be very popular in this day and age is that of the anime film. Anime is one of Japan's most powerful cinematic genres, not only because of its consistent domestic appeal but also due to its international cultural reach and commercial viability (Napier 2005, 23). Although, standalone movies like *Your Name* (Shinkai, 2016) or movies, based on popular tv-series and manga like the movie *Demon*

Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba the Movie – Mugen Train (Sotozaki, 2020), are massive box office success. There are also more art-focused anime films which were originally screened in mini-theaters. Titles like *Mind Game* (Yuasa, 2004) and *A Silent Voice* (Yamada, 2016) became massive successes after getting their first screening in small-scale cinema.

In relevance to the topic of this thesis, anime brings a very dedicated fanbase to the mini-theater: The so-called *otaku*. This term refers to dedicated anime-lovers with obsessive interests in anime and manga or other aspects of popular culture. Although the title of *otaku* originally carries negative connotations, the term has evolved itself in recent decennia to describe passionate fans both in Japan and internationally (Azuma, 2009; 3).

The anime tv-series have a very unique business model. As production costs are normally not coverable by the amount of revenue made from broadcasts on tv, the anime production companies regain their profit by selling merchandise. It is because of the loyal *otaku* fans that this business model can persist (Denison, 2015). It is also because of these *otaku* that mini-theaters can contribute to this fandom (Sugawa-Shimada et al., 2022). I will show this in more detail below.

Foreign movies, independent movies and anime are all important types of movies that contribute to the popularity and diversity of the contemporary film of Japan. How mini-theaters contribute to the foreign films becomes clear when one examines the defining characteristics associated with them. Mini-theaters are not only a way to distribute films to the public, they are also places in which people can gather and learn about topics that are different from ‘main stream’ topics normally heard about in other public spaces like the cinema complex. In this way, the mini-theater also provides opportunities for certain

groups to gather and communicate. The next section further expands on the options of cinema-going in contemporary Japan. It focusses on the various physical characteristics of cinema types and how this relates to movie-types.

2.2 Cinema going in contemporary Japan

This subsection considers what it means to go to a movie theater in contemporary Japanese society and how this practice interacts with evolving audience behaviors, spatial infrastructures, and cultural traditions. In this context, the term ‘cinema-going’ becomes important. According to Allen & Gomery (1985; 147) “Cinema-going refers to the social practice of attending a film screening in a cinema, encompassing not just the act of viewing but also the cultural, spatial, and temporal contexts of the experience.” The way of watching a movie, as of this day, has changed remarkably since the rise of the internet. Not only are we able to pay for movies online and watch them online, but a new model, the subscription model, has become apparent as well. As the subscription model of the streaming service became a big influence on the existence of the mini-theater, this topic will be discussed later in section 2.3. This section focusses on the audience behavior, multiplex dominance, film festivals, and the mini-theaters to map out the contemporary contours of cinema going in Japan.

Although the golden age of cinema in Japan emphasized the cinema as a place to interact with the screen by cheering at the screen, nowadays the cinematic etiquette has emphasized silence, stillness and personal discretion (Coates, 2016; 80). However, the last two decades have also witnessed the emergence of more engaged and participatory forms

of film engagement by the *otaku*. As mentioned in chapter 1, during the golden age of cinema, theaters were more populated and were a place to interact with the screen by cheering for favorite actors (Inuhiko, 2000; 110). What we see in contemporary Japan is that this phenomenon resurfaces in the form of cheering screenings (*ōenjōei*) where the *otaku* are allowed to cosplay as favorite characters, shout to the screen, and wave glow sticks as if it was at a music concert (Sugawa-Shimada et al., 2022). These screenings are limited and often organized by mini-theaters like *Uplink Kichiyōji* in Musashino, Tokyo (Galbraith, 2019). This means that the mini-theater acts in two ways different from the cinema complex. They have engaged audiences (and sometimes even participatory audiences like the *otaku*) and they are a gathering place for a community of people.

Where the public watches a movie does not necessarily have to depend on the personal interests of the viewer. Jennifer Coates argues that cinema-going in Japan is not a neutral act but a socially embedded practice which is shaped by gender, age, occupation, and geography (Coates, 2016; 80). Next to their personal interests, the experience of a viewer varies significantly in who they are and with whom they watch a movie. Coates further points out that these distinctions show how cinema-going is further influenced by the environment one finds itself in. Multiplex cinemas, for example, are in shopping malls, which may combine a cinema visit with shopping, dining, or family outings. In this way, the act of going to the cinema reflects deeper cultural patterns rather than serving as only a form of entertainment (Coates, 2016).

Thus, to understand how the audience of the mini-theater fits into the consumer culture of Japan, it is necessary to look at other movie exhibition environments as well. Most

importantly the cinema complex because it is most present. The cinema complex or cinekon (*shinekon*) in Japanese moved away from the traditional single-screen theaters to multi-screen venues making it possible to show multiple films at once. This means that a broader audience with different interests can watch different movies at the same time. The cinema complex also offers 3D and 4D screenings, a merchandise shop with products from ongoing films, and community events such as cosplay evenings. While the atmosphere of the cinema hall is quiet and immersive with the newest sound technology and a massive screen, the aspect of ‘cinema-going’ turns into a more aesthetic experience that is more or less the same in every place, rather than a communal and personalized one which the mini-theaters offer.

The invention of the cinema complex led to a big increase in the number of movie going opportunities. In other words the number of screens increased. Figure 1 below, shows how this increase went from 1997 until 2017. The contribution of cinema complexes (the orange part of the bars in Fig. 1) to this increase in screens has increased significantly at the expense of non-cinema complexes (the blue parts of the bars in Fig. 1).

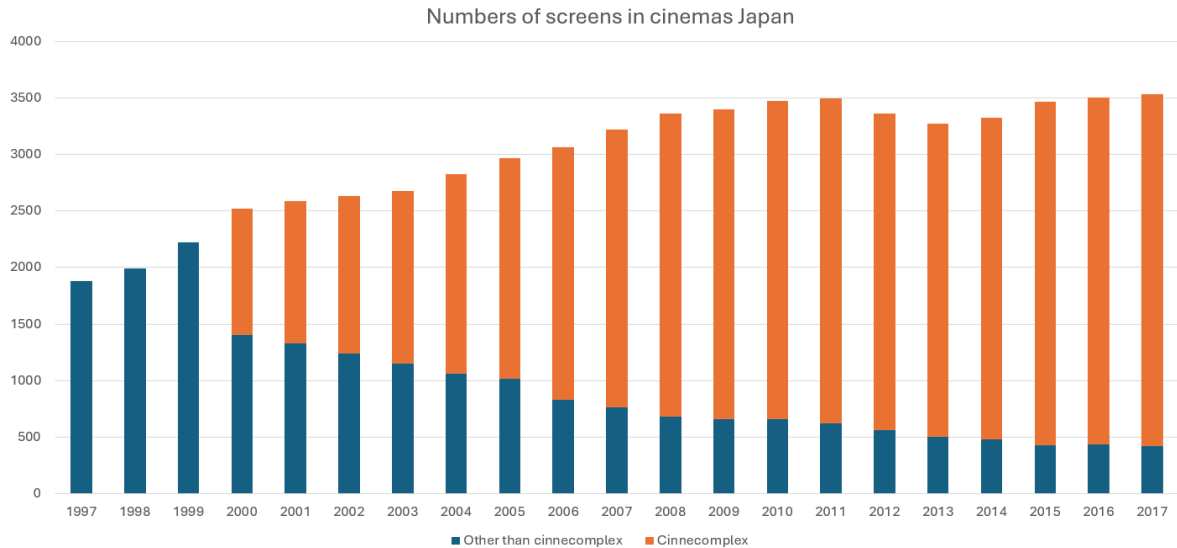


Figure 1: the number of screens in Japan (Japan Community Cinema Center, 2023).

It is important to note here that the number of theaters that did not have more than 2 screens saw a stagnant decrease in number. It was not only that the cinema complex was more attractive to cinemagoers, the rise of streaming services such as *Netflix* and *U-next* also altered viewer habits and expectations. These services offered convenience, flexible viewing times, algorithmically tailored recommendations, and a vast library of content that could be accessed at home or on the go. As a result, the need to physically go to a cinema diminished for many consumers, particularly younger people (Eda, 2021; 112-115). This shift in behavior led to a decline in overall cinema attendance.

Nevertheless, a different network of lesser known alternative screening sites also continue to flourish; Such are the *Kino Iglu* based in Tokyo which is a ‘nomadic’ cinema organization that organizes pop-up screenings (Kino Iglu, 2025) and the Kyoto Cine Club located in Kyoto that organizes their screenings exclusively with organized discussions about the movies afterwards (Demachiza, accessed June 13, 2025). These examples point to a trend.

Whereas the cinema complex emphasizes entertainment and market-driven spectacles, there is still a demand for localized engagement with film.

One other event that stimulates this demand and is also very important to the industry of importing movies from other countries is the film festival. Not only are they a platform for seeing new films or building a cinephile community, they are also the place where distributors choose which movies to sell to the cinemas inside Japan. Film festivals like the Tokyo International Film Festival and Tokyo FILMeX, have expanded Japan's arthouse and international cinema scene, bringing overlooked Asian and global directors into local circulation (Tokyo Art Beat, 2014). These film festivals function as centers for intellectual and political discourse. The mini-theaters of today continue this tradition maintaining the social and artistic dimensions of the film as a public experience (Nornes, 2007).

The audience behavior of Japan and the different venues of contemporary Japan shows that there are different venues for different interests. The most apparent one might be the cinema complex where only 'popular' movies are shown, which are almost all exclusively distributed by the bigger movie production companies. Next to this there is the 'artistic' movie showing venue. Here, most of the regular audience can be described with the words cinephile or community driven. The mini-theater holds the answer to why these audiences are given these names. This will be discussed below.

2.3 *The role and problems of the mini-theater*

Mini-theaters are unique, holding a crucial position in the Japanese film exhibition landscape. These independently operated, small-scale cinemas stand apart from the standardized, multiplex-driven commercial model that dominates mainstream distribution. Rather than targeting mass audiences, mini-theaters cater to niche audiences like seen in the last paragraph and sustain a space for independent, arthouse, and international cinema. These forms of expression are largely marginalized within the commercial sphere (Matsui, 2007).

The first mini-theater called Wakaba bowl (若葉ボール) appeared in 1968 and was a project of the *Japan Art and Theater Guild (ATG)* to make an exclusive place for Art movies which were less appreciated at the time. After the surge of the mini-theater they have become a place for cultural platforms, community hubs and places for cinephile engagement as seen in previous paragraphs. While mini-theaters are a place to see exclusive films, they do face multiple challenges like the rise of the streaming services to demographic shifts, the impact of COVID-19, and their (sometimes) rural locations.

The mini-theater's primary function is showing films that fall outside the production of the major production studios. These can include independent domestic productions, foreign films that are normally not seen in Japan and include no dubbing, and documentaries. This programming, makes the mini-theater stand out from the cinema complex, which model is largely driven by major distributors and box office performance (Sasaki and Kijima, 2024; 11). Because of this, Matsui argues that Japanese audiences would have significantly less

access to global cinematic currents if there were no mini-theaters (Matsui 2007, 178). This shows how essential the mini-theater is to the access of a wide variety of movies in Japan.

Next to their program, the mini-theater also shows the function of a community-oriented space. Although most mini-theaters often only hold one or two screens in a small building, it also fosters intimacy and familiarity as repeated guests are common and staff often recognize regulars (Coates, 2022; 62). This quality is especially common in regions outside of major metropolitan areas. In cities such as Takamatsu or Sendai, mini-theaters like Cinema Soleil or Forum Sendai play roles in cultural activity as they often collaborate with local museums or universities, trying to get younger audiences to come to the mini-theaters making the space an intersection between local identity and global imagination (Komatsu 2013, 92). Matsui adds to this that the theater's staff can also serve as a curator or educator as they are the ones that select the movies or organize talk sessions and guest lectures at the mini-theater (Matsui, 2007). This dimension makes the mini-theater stand out more in relation to the cinema complex.

As the owner of a mini-theater runs the program of her/his own mini-theater, the economic model of the mini-theater is also structured differently. The negotiation of screening rights is done independently, and as this is often done with very small distributors or independent filmmakers and this entails more financial risk (Japan Community Cinema Center, 2023).

To gain more income, many mini-theaters run alternative types of screenings such as marathons or thematic programs. Some even make a subscription model which ties a sense of belonging to the "cinema-going" experience. In the end, the goal of a mini-theater is more than often not to make a maximum amount of profits, but maintaining

sustainability while cultivating culture. According to the Japan Community Cinema Center, the financial structure of the mini-theater aligns with non-profit or semi-public organizations as it often gets private donations and gives work to volunteers (Japan Community Cinema Center, 2023). This points that the initial intention of the owner is different than only money making. The topic of the intention of the owner will be further explored in chapter 3. What is more significant for this chapter, is how the mini-theater is functioning within today's film exhibition ecosystem.

One challenge that the mini-theater faces in the world of movie-viewing, is the rise of video-on-demand streaming platforms. Some of these platforms also show movies that have previously been shown exclusively in mini-theaters, meaning that that they have arguably a similar audience. Because of this, some mini-theaters have tried partnering with these streaming models but this is still in an experimental phase and seems to not have brought any profit until now (Hjort, 2021; 206). The other way around, streaming services cannot replicate the communal and personal aspects of the mini-theater. In this way the mini-theater still holds an advantage.

The importance of the mini-theater becomes even more apparent in the countryside of Japan. They often function as informal community centers for the locals. Examples are the Kino Iglu in Chiba or Cinema Nezu in Daikanyama which both hold a library attached to the mini-theater. Other mini-theaters like the Sakurazaka theater in Naha have a café and a porcelain shop attached to the mini-theater where people can relax between the viewing of movies. The only apparent problem with mini-theaters in the countryside is a problem that goes for the whole of Japan and that is the aging society. As older people have no more

interest in going to the theater due to accessibility or digital literacy, visitors are becoming less and less. Adding the fact that younger people are hesitant to enter a field as financially unstable, succession of a mini-theater is also something that is seen less and less. This seems only logical as the Japan Arts Council also noted that “a lack of generational renewal is one of the most pressing issues for independent cultural venues” (Japan Arts Council 2022, 34).

Another recent threat to the mini-theater was the COVID-19 virus. When the pandemic significantly intensified, the challenges already facing Japan’s mini-theaters became even more crucial. When the Japanese government declared its first state of emergency and initiated a national lockdown in April 2020, many cinemas were forced to close, some permanently. While going to the cinema remains a popular cultural activity in Japan, the pandemic accelerated the trend of at-home film consumption through streaming services, which had already gained traction since the 1990s. With the rise of on-demand platforms, many audiences became accustomed to accessing new films online, further undermining the economic stability of physical theaters (Coates 2022).

As cinemas began shutting their doors, a grassroots movement quickly emerged to protect these vital cultural institutions. The hashtag #ミニシアターを救え (“Save the local-theater”) went viral on Japanese social media platforms, sparking widespread public attention. In response, a coalition of filmmakers, artists, volunteers, and cinema operators launched the *Mini-Theater Aid Fund*, which raised over 300 million yen to support more than 100 mini-theaters across the country (Cinema Today 2020). These efforts

demonstrated both the vulnerability of the mini-theater ecosystem, and the strength of the communities built around them.

Cultural groups and cinephile communities played a particularly active role. The *Kinugasa Eiga Kai*, which is a longstanding film circle in Tokyo, continued to meet and discuss cinema despite early warnings about the virus. Their commitment, and those of similar local networks, were instrumental in keeping many theaters afloat. Some theaters responded creatively, launching online platforms that allowed audiences to purchase merchandise, pre-order tickets for future screenings, and attend digital Q&A sessions with filmmakers (Kyodo News, 2020). An example was the UPLINK Cloud theater in Tokyo that curated independent films at home through their own streaming service (Ryall, 2020). These hybrid models of the mini-theater helped them maintain engagement even during closure.

Thus the pandemic highlighted the fragility of the management infrastructure supporting mini-theaters. Without more consistent public financial support or the establishment of specialized institutions to back them, the survival of small cinemas would remain uncertain. As the Japan Film Foundation (JFF Cinema) emphasized in a 2024 report, “Japan needs long-term strategies and policy frameworks to ensure the sustainability of these cultural spaces beyond times of crisis” (JFF Cinema 2024).

In this sense, the pandemic did not merely threaten mini-theaters—it also brought renewed visibility to them. The term “mini-theater” entered public discourse with a sense of urgency

and affection, highlighting these cinemas as fragile yet vital institutions that require both grassroots support and structural reinforcement.

2.4 Conclusion: How Mini-Theaters Sustain and Reshape the Japanese Movie-Going Experience

Mini-theaters in Japan can be defined as places that show films under a more personal and distinct tone than the cinema-complex does. Where these multiplexes are driven by profit and scale, mini-theaters sustain themselves through local engagement. They function as community hubs and organize screenings for groups with specific interests (for example the *otaku*) but are also places that harbor a sense of familiarity with the viewer as the owners of the movie-theater can decide the program of the cinema itself. Often located in aging or non-central urban areas, mini-theaters can respond more accurately to the needs of their local community. Through collaborations and a strong sense of place, they display an alternative model of cinema that not only resists the mainstream trends of streaming services but redefines what it means to go to the movies in contemporary Japan.

The next chapter will focus on showing examples of how the findings in this chapter correspond and differ with real life experiences of mini-theater owners and the individual film-artist as exemplified in the movie *Your lovely Smile* (Kah Wai, 2023) which is a movie made with and about mini-theaters throughout Japan.

Chapter 3: Mini-theaters through the lens of the film

The mini-theater in Japan is more than just a space for watching films; They are spaces for cultural memory, community building, and local identity. As discussed in chapter 2, the mini-theater emerged as a resistance to the mainstream dominance of the major film studios. This chapter focusses on the contemporary significance even more by combining a close reading of the movie *Your lovely Smile* (Kah Wai, 2023), with documentary material from The Japan Foundation's 2023 online series on mini-theaters. These two sources are both a fictional and factual complement that display the reality of the mini-theater through the screen.

The question at heart of the chapter is: What keeps the mini-theaters alive despite declining audiences, economic struggles, and the rise of streaming services? As this chapter shows, the answer finds itself not only in the way of economic management of the mini-theater, but also in the deep emotional attachment to the idea of cinema as a communal and alternative experience.

3.1 How the mini-theaters stay relevant to the audience

In The Japan Foundation's online mini-theater documentary series (2023), we are introduced to a range of independent theaters across Japan through multiple videos. Every video gives an interview of the owner of the mini-theater and shows their survival strategy which focusses on local community and creativity. *Forum Yamagata* (Yamagata), for example, hosts local film festivals and free community events to maintain engagement from the local community. *Cinema Amigo* in Zushi integrates a café with beachside designs

to create a social space for the cinema. The in the 2000s built *Motomachi Movie Theater*, which is placed inside a shopping arcade in Kobe, was built to show a modern version of Kobe in the 90s and focusses on tourists who are visiting the city for sightseeing.

One scene in the *Beppu Bluebird's* (Beppu) video shows the owner explaining how the second floor of the cinema stays open because of the revenue that is made by the laundromat below. The sounds of the washing machines are humming while the scene shows the stairway up the theater which is hung with film posters. This illustrates the survival logic of many mini-theaters: The theater space is, 'although modest' a place not only for cinephiles, but also for the surrounding community.

Shimizu describes these efforts made for the community, as the ethos of the mini-theater movement; A commitment to cultural diversity, localism and aesthetic risk-taking (Shimizu, 2021). Many mini-theaters, both in The Japan Foundation's documentary videos and *Your lovely smile*, are family-run businesses that have lasted multiple generations. In some cases, they have existed for more than 50 years. The fact that these places are still running shows that the owners run their business not primarily for profit but because of love for film, their theater and the audience: "Without the theater, my life would have no meaning anymore" is what the owner of *Sakurazaka Theater* tells us.

Yet, the videos of The Japan Foundation also highlight how the aging population of Japan's rural areas affect the mini-theater. The video of *Fukaya Cinema* in Fukuyama highlights this by saying that they, "keep showing films, but the audiences are disappearing." Furthermore, the pandemic accelerated this decline in theater visits. Although the mini-theaters

received government subsidies during COVID-19, the popularity of the theaters declined (Japan Community Cinema Center, 2023). Still, many mini-theaters decided to re-open their doors after the first lockdown in 2020. The main argument here is that the mini-theaters did not do this not for making any profit, but to maintain a vital cultural part to the Japanese countryside.

3.2 The Description and Themes of Your lovely smile

Your Lovely Smile (Kah Wai, 2023) is a fictional mockumentary that is built on ‘real life encounters.’ It follows the wandering filmmaker Hirobumi Watanabe who tries to find a film theater willing to screen his low-budget independent movie. The film is episodic in structure. Each segment shows a different theater, local characters and humorous encounters. While the actors appear as characters in the film, they are performing as people who have the same professions as themselves in the film. For example, Hirobumi Watanabe in real life is also an independent filmmaker. Next to this, the scenes were made unscripted. This means that a large part of the film is made by improvising (Kah Wai, 2023). Yoshi Yatabe, who is a programmer at the Tokyo International Film Festival and a figurant in *Your Lovely Smile*, says that these improvised scenes gain their authenticity through these improvised performances. One example is a dinner scene in which Watanabe eats with a family who owns a mini-theater called “*Daikokuza*”, which is a mini-theater is place in Urakawa, Hokkaido, in real life as well.

This dinner scene is an extended long shot, lasting over 30 seconds and reinforces the documentary-like realism of the moment through improvisation. In other words, the actors

in the movie represent what they are in real life. As they eat, Watanabe asks the daughter if she intends to inherit the theater from her parents. She declines, explaining that she prefers her work in Tokyo and the life she has built with her friends in the big city. Her response, understated yet emotionally charged, exemplifies the generational tension that haunts many mini-theaters today: the sense that while the parents are holding onto a past defined by the mini-theater, the children are moving on to lives where this no longer fits. The combination of realism and the actors' status as real people discussing real dilemmas emphasizes the fragility of the mini-theater.

Your Lovely Smile further presents a melancholic undertone. I argue that the sad atmosphere is present to show the struggling realities of the mini-theater. In an interview with the director of the movie, the reality of the mini-theaters in rural Japan were mentioned. As Kah Wai states: "While having success with my screenings in Tokyo, screenings that were made in rural areas would lead up to almost none to no visitors." (Kah Wai, 2023). This is accented in another key scene where Watanabe stands in an empty cinema space waiting for an audience that never arrives. The sound of the projector rolling in the empty screening space can be interpreted as a metaphor for the futility but persistence of the independent film; After all, it is not only the mini-theater that struggles, but the independent filmmaker as well.

Your Lovely Smile is also an international success, having multiple screenings in different countries such as the Netherlands and Malaysia. Kah Wai claims that this success is mainly due to the love that people hold for the movie watching space as a social experience (Kah Wai, 2023), which is rare in a world of smartphones and streaming

platforms. This can explain why the film is called “*Your Lovely Smile*”; It is a love letter to Japan’s independent movie theaters accenting the enduring charm and vulnerability of these spaces.

3.3 *Mini-theaters on Screen: Commonalities and differences*

Both *Your Lovely Smile* and the mini-theater videos from *The Japan Foundation* present multiple independent film theaters, each with their own character. In *Your Lovely Smile*, theaters are often shown as quiet and dimly lit whenever Hirobumi Watanabe enters a movie-theater. In the scene where Watanabe visits *Daikokuza*, a grey filter is used to make the atmosphere even more deserted-looking. The managers on the other hand are shown as sincere individuals who listen to Watanabe whenever he visits a mini-theater to ask to screen his film. In the video documentaries from The Japan Foundation, theaters itself are depicted with a more upbeat tone as the videos use filters that adjust colors and make lighting brighter, emphasizing the outreach of the community and innovation. Although *Your Lovely Smile* and The Japan Foundation both show the mini-theater in different lights, it is important to see what kind of commonalities and difference they want to show.

Despite the difference of the tone of the mini-theaters, both *Your Lovely Smile* and the videos from The Japan Foundation share key themes: general continuity within families, hybrid business models, and the pursuit of cultural activity. For example, *Beppu Bluebird*’s combination of a mini-theater and a laundromat has its counterpart in *Your Lovely Smile* where Watanabe visits a mini-theater with a restaurant which acts as a similarly dual-purpose space for the theater. While the film portrays this place as a place to encounter

another character, the place also underscores a real economic necessity for the mini-theater.

Another common thread that keeps the mini-theater alive is nostalgia. This nostalgia is not a form of passive longing, but an emotional force that becomes the will to keep these mini-theaters standing. As the owner of *Sakurazaka Theater* (Okinawa) mentions: “mini-theaters are a part of Japan that is disappearing.” Mini-theaters like *Fukuya Cinema* (Fukaya) and *Cinema Onomichi* (Onomichi) keep organizing screenings with 16mm films and a silver screen to relive the screenings as how they were shown in the past (The Japan Foundation, 2023). This is a form of nostalgia which Svetlana Boym describes as reflective nostalgia: A form of remembering a fragment of the past that mourns loss but resists closure (Boym, 2001). This means that the nuanced longing for the thriving past of mini-theaters embraces the fact that their glory-time has ended but focuses on the act of remembering itself.

The message of *Your Lovely Smile* is not only simply about independent film-making and mini-theaters; It is about Japanese cinema itself struggling to stay relevant. In an interview with the director of the movie, both Kah Wai and Yatabe argue that Japan’s film system needs a structural reform (Kah Wai, 2023). Unlike in some other countries, where public agencies like France’s CNC or South Korea’s KOFIC allocate a portion of box office revenues back into production, Japan lacks such a mechanism (Itakura, 2024). This poses problems for independent filmmakers who have a hard time getting into the industry due to a lack of income.

In the end, the vital point that the videos from *the Japan Foundation* and *Your Lovely Smile* point to is the essential value of mini-theaters: Their unpredictability. Algorithm-recommendations are something that we often see in contemporary life through social-media and movie-streaming. Recent media research has shown that many viewers value this kind of unexpected encounter when choosing a movie to view (Sun et al. (2023). It was noted in this research that a significant number of users of streaming platforms use these services to explore unfamiliar content for their own sake. Mini-theaters, with their eccentric programming, fulfill this human need of surprise. They are not only places for viewing movies, but also for discovery while also providing a more communal and emotional experience to the consumer.

3.4 Conclusion: The value of looking closely

This chapter explored what keeps the mini-theaters of Japan alive despite existing in a time of aging audience, financial hardship, and the rise of streaming. As shown in both the documentary series from The Japan Foundation and the movie *Your Lovely Smile* (Kah Wai, 2023), mini-theaters keep existing through emotional attachment, creative community engagement and the belief of cinema being an activity that you experience with others.

The mini-theaters in the documentaries all show local strategies for survival such as combining cinema with restaurants or laundromats. This shows how their owners are motivated to retain their mini-theaters by passion rather than by financial gain (Shimizu, 2021; Japan Community Cinema Center, 2023). Although *Your Lovely Smile* is a fictional work, it adds a realistic image as it portrays aging theater owners and disinterested younger

generations. This emphasizes how fragile the mini-theaters are as they struggle to find people who can inherit the business.

Both *Your Lovely Smile* and the documentary videos show that mini-theaters are sustained through nostalgia, not only as a reflective memory (Boym, 2001), but also as a desire to preserve a part of Japan's culture that is slowly going away. They also stand out as spaces of unpredictability in contrast to algorithm-driven streaming services (Sun et al., 2023).

Chapter 4: Conclusion: How did the mini-theaters in Japan adapt to a changing cinema culture?

The evolution of Japanese cinema has always been dependent of the spaces in which a film was shown. This was seen in history from screenings with *benshi*, to the lively halls filled with family during the golden age, to the emergence of mini-theaters in the 1960s and the adult cinemas in the 1970s. Each shift in Japan's cinema-going history has gone together with shifts in social and cultural differences (Nornes, 2007). As Japan started making its own movies, ranging from propaganda movies during wartime, historical *jidaigeki*, and anime, the emergence of the mini-theater became a very crucial screening venue. While these spaces often did not have more than one screen, they were the space for viewing international, independent and artistic films (Miike, 2021; Standish, 2005).

As of today, Mini-theaters still continue to respond to Japan's changing media landscape. While multiplexes are often driven by profit, the mini-theaters have adapted by personalizing their functions by making community spaces and special interest meetings, and offering a sense of familiarity between the owner and audiences. The position of most mini-theaters in rural Japan makes them able to adapt to a specific demographic and the needs of most of their customers by for example mixing the theater with a laundromat or restaurant (Kah Wai, 2023; The Japan Foundation, 2023). These strategies in upholding a business demonstrate that the mini-theaters of Japan are not driven by economical profit, but by passion and nostalgia (Shimizu, 2021).

Your Lovely Smile (Kah Wai, 2023) and the documentary videos from The Japan Foundation are content made by mini-theaters to give a message to the audience of cinema-lovers: The culture of independent film making is very vulnerable but provided by a group of people who show big affection to the cinema-industry. They reveal the struggle for inheritance, tensions with the younger generation and the belief that cinema is an experience that you share with others. Both sources highlight how the mini-theaters are places where nostalgia does not function as mere memory, but as a desire to preserve as a form of human connection in a society dominated by online streaming services that tend to focus on algorithms and isolation from the world around the audience (Boym, 2001; Sun et al., 2023).

In conclusion, the mini-theaters of Japan have adapted themselves to the changing cinema culture by reframing cinema as a space of cultural and emotional engagement. This is done by embracing the locality of where they are stationed, memory to the past of Japan and resistance to the multiplex and streaming culture. They make the future for Japan's new alternative cinema, not by making new trends, but by the belief that films are meant to be seen together.

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