

Where is Cinema Today?: The Yamagata Asahiza and the Minamisoma Asahiza

Yoshida Miwa (Outousha Books)

If you go to the east of the Nanokama-chi intersection, you come to the Asahi Ginza shopping street. In this street which in the past was called “Cinema Road” there were movie theatres lined up in a row.

On the corner block of the intersection with Benibana Road, an imposing five-story building looked down upon passers-by. This was the Asahiza, a movie theatre that symbolised the heyday of Japan’s pre- and post-war (Showa era) film culture, which stood where previously there had been a play-house of the same name. In 1917 (Taisho 6), the Miyazaki Gomei Company refurbished the building as a movie theatre. That building was replaced in 1955 (Showa 30) with a reinforced concrete structure and then renamed Cinema Asahi. There are probably still many people in Yamagata City who recall the name “ASAHIZA” written vertically in big letters on the wall. Even after the building closed in 2007, the name of the theatre remained. However, eventually it was decided to pull the building down and as this essay was being written in September, 2013, little by little, the dismantling of the structure was underway.

From the late nineteen-twenties to the early nineteen-nineties (the early Showa era into the Heisei era), large numbers of movie theatres, including those which dotted the vicinity of Cinema Road, sprung up in quick succession. These included places such as Cinema Plaza, Muse (formerly The Kajou Theatre), and Cine Praca (formerly The Gin’ei), and, a little further away, Cine

Art, Yamagata Takarazuka, Scala-za, and Nouvelle F. Certainly, the memory that people have of both the theatre names and the streets where these theatres stood will differ according to their age and the time they went to the movies.

The movie theatres listed above have now all been closed down and people can no longer go to the cinema in those neighbourhoods. Film no longer a synonym for popular entertainment. This decline occurred at almost at the same time both that movies were being regarded as private, rather than public, art forms and that movie theatres were no longer able to attract the patrons who had previously flocked through their doors. This is a reflection of the definitive reality that there is no longer the least support for either the space of the movie theatre or the movie theatre precinct.

Throughout Japan there are many who lament the on-going disappearance of the movie theatre. *ASAHIZA*, directed by Fujii Hikaru and to be screened in “Cinema with Us 2013,” is a documentary about a movie theatre that has faced these historical changes head-on. This Asahiza is located in the Haramachi Ward of Minamisoma City in Fukushima Prefecture. While negotiating the trauma of the events of 2011 the theatre was subject to various difficulties and misfortunes, but eventually the decision was made to preserve the building. The people of Haramachi Ward well understood that there was no direct connection between the refurbishment of this

movie theatre and the need to attract more people to the area in order to re-create a vital community spirit. Nor would it help them recover from the Fukushima disaster. But they nonetheless strove, little by little, to do what they could. For this reason they decided to refurbish the theatre. The documentary is an account of the as yet incomplete process of the reconstruction of a movie theatre as a repository of local people’s hearts and minds.

While some might still long to save Yamagata’s own Asahiza, considering the building’s current state, this is clearly impossibility. Yet, as we can see from events such YIDFF where there are large numbers of films presented, rather than diminishing, everyday new films are being produced and clearly entertaining audiences all around the world. This is really the point that we should be thinking about: What, in fact, is the current status of film? Today, after having lost so many movie theatres, we are slowly shifting our viewing to sites other than these theatres. Shouldn’t the new direction for film culture be to discover the whereabouts of a movie spirit that can reside in a spaceless space? Perhaps all who long to see a movie are seeking an answer to this question.

The Minamisoma Asahiza and the Yamagata Asahiza both have had a similar process of decline from glory and both have had similar standing in their respective communities. Even so, their paths have parted and each has gone in its own way. But when we look more closely, perhaps they are not so different and it may be possible for their paths to reunite. It seems that we have not yet given up this hope.

(Translated by Barbara Hartley)

■ Screening

ASAHIZA 【CU】 10/14 13:10– [M1]

■ Lecture and Symposium

Striving to Become a Creative City of Visual Culture 【YF】

Speaker: Sasaki Masayuki (Graduate School for Creative Cities, Osaka City University)

..... 10/14 10:00– [M5]