

**Kawamura Yuniya**, *Fashioning Japanese Subcultures*, Bloomsbury, 2012, 192 p.

The reason why I recommend *Fashioning Japanese Subculture* is the interest which I manifest, and share with the author, for the studies of subcultures from a perspective which differs from the Euro-american one. Continuing the work of Hilary Pilkington, this book seeks to be original both through the way in which it defines its theoretical framework (Part I and II), and through the underdeveloped research field which it targets (Part II): "Thus, the purpose of this book, is to fill the void between academic and nonacademic perspectives since Japanese youth subcultures and their unique stylistic expression as a research topic deserve scholarly and intellectual consideration..." (p. 1). Stated otherwise, we cannot apply the western conceptual framework for groups of youngsters in other areas than the West, taking into account the different socio-economic background of these societies. Most studies of anglo-saxon origin „ignore crucial components in the construction of social groups, such as: race, gender or sexual orientation" (McRobbie and Garber, 1993).

From the first pages of the paper, Yuniya Kawamura formulates her hypothesis, according to which "the Japanese subcultural phenomenon is an ideological one" ... "constitute an institution and establish an alternative fashion system that goes against the mainstream system of fashion". In the first part of the book, what is surprising is the theoretical component which draws on the neo-structuralist approach of the Birmingham School. The author intends to overview the fashion of CCCS<sup>1</sup>-like youngsters where bricolage becomes essential: "my task is to discern the hidden messages inscribed in code of the surface style, to trace them as symbols..."

What is surprising to a reader or researcher in the field of youth cultures or subcultures is the courage which the author has to use such an approach in post-modern times. CCCS is profoundly critiqued nowadays by more recent approaches, such as that of neo-tribalism (Mafe-

solli, 1996), Bennett (1999) or of liquid modernity (Baumann, 2000), which the author ignores.

She defines the term *subculture* as being "... constituted by groups of individuals who share distinct values and norms that are against dominant or mainstream society..." (p. 7). But the following chapters, and in particular those which target and describe cultural practices of certain groups (Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, 8) reveal that this definition is not in good fit with the realities studied by Kawamura. Thus, none of the groups described in the second part of the paper do not display any distinct subcultural characteristics, being specific to post-modern fluidity of neo-tribes.

None of the groups exhibit elements of class belonging or class subordination, a distinctive element for the neo-marxist interpretation of Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Although the book is riddled with numerous quotes on consumers of these cultures, what is missing are elements of ethnographic study, which would facilitate an "insider" explanation to more profound hermeneutic interpretations on the "subversion of senses" of objects which these youngsters fetishize, as Hebdige does when she refers to punk subculture in *Subculture: The meaning of style* (1979). In other words, the author builds a good description of the state of affairs of young Japanese fashion groups, without going into a deeper decoding of their potentially-subcultural signs.

At the same time, the author underlines the fact that belonging to a group is not grounded in structural determination, as is the case with skin-heads and a large part of the classical '70s subcultures, but in voluntary affiliation to a certain set of brands and consumer lifestyle, an element which is particular to neo-tribes. In some instances, even cases of "migration" from a culture to another are displayed (Mori Gyarū, Lolita and Cosplayers), which goes against the theory of subcultures that the author uses.

In the concluding remarks of the book, the author reminds us of the existence of “a strong, yet ironic, correlation between the growing number of subcultural groups with distinct appearance and Japanese long-lasting recession. Structural changes in Japan’s economy and labour market have contributed to this phenomenon”. Unfortunately, this hypothesis is not brought to the surface more throughout the work, and the argument which proves the existence of a clear correlation between these two variables is missing, as the large number of youth cultures can also be traced to a deeper globalization of Japan, a tendency to move closer to the Western World and an increase in media and socialization networks, or many other elements.

Also, the elements of rebellion and going against mainstream claimed by the author for the groups which she researches are questionable. From the standpoint of a rebellion against the dominant class, my intuition is that these are an integral part of it, as instead of being opposed to it. You cannot discuss subcultural affiliation, anti-system elements or silent revolt, when the

members of such a community (Lolita): “are from wealthy families, and the girls spend about 50.000-60.000 yen (aprox. 625-759 USD) per visit. Many of them attend private schools and take lessons in violin and piano” (p. 92).

For a better methodological argument, I consider that the theoretical component of the paper should be revised and the studied groups reframed in the area of neo-tribes, of scenes, or of youth cultures.

Beyond these remarks, the style is clear and easy to lecture, even for a reader which is not familiar with cultural studies or sociology.

Kawamura is a pioneer in the study of subcultures from a perspective which transcends the borders of classical theories, stimulating through this paper an important debate on the way in which we can sociologically look at subcultures. This is the reason why this book is important for researchers in the field, because it opens up an important field of interpretation and study of youth communities and cultures, from another perspective than the Euro-american one.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> One of the first theoretical approaches that have tried sketching models for studying youth subcultures is the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) that has emerged in Birmingham in the ‘70s. The concept of “subculture” that has developed throughout CCCS will usually represent a group of young people that are in class subordination to the dominant culture. Subcultures can be understood as collective answers to the working class communities break of the British post-war society, as a latent

function of subculture, as Cohen, (1972, 23) underlies as an “express and resolve, albeit “magically” trait, the contradictions which remain hidden and unresolved in the parent culture to retrieve some of the socially cohesive elements destroyed in parent culture”. The concept of subculture will replace the functionalist concept of “youth culture”, inadequate in explaining the diversities of youth cultures that emerged after the Second World War.

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