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**MINIMALISM AND ITS CULTURAL CONTEXT
IN URBAN ENVIRONMENTS / FINAL REPORT
FOR THE JAPAN FOUNDATION**

Background: No description of the cultural landscape of today's post-industrial societies can be complete without a detailed explanation of how sub-cultural differences add up to what is generally seen as global uniformity. This more or less coherent intertextual net of sub-cultural signs and signifying practices is what has been in the centre of my research into literary and cultural studies for more than a decade now. Dealing with this topic has had one major conclusion: the experience that contemporary urban culture is a diverse sphere posing questions that need to be addressed from a comparative point of view in order to understand its complexity. This post-structuralist comparative technique in my practice has proven to be useful in theorizing contemporary fiction, fashion, popular music, and a variety of other phenomena characteristic of contemporary culture, or, rather cultures. Different topics as they might seem, a comparative approach brings these aspects of culture together and enables one to study and describe the intertextual structure, which provides meaning and form to these expressive practices and performances of everyday urban life. My four research trips to North-America and field trips to all major cities in Europe have provided me with first-hand experiences and in-depth knowledge of the urban sub-cultures of the Western world, their distinctive role and constitutive place in what is usually conceived as global culture. Published in English language studies and presented on conferences in Budapest, Cluj Napoca, and Szeged, the findings of this large-scale research have drawn academic interest. These findings, however, also led to the conclusion that most forms of contemporary urban art may be observed in, and, sometimes, indeed originate from, the urban environments of the East, particularly, Japan. It was this conclusion that highlighted Japanese urban sub-cultures as symbolic discourses of great interest, and, starting with an intensive research at the *Istituto Orientale Universita' degli Studi di Napoli*, I have studied the origins of global cultures in detail for the last five years.

Aims of achievement: In order to broaden my focus and gain a better understanding of the characteristics of representative practices at work in the contemporary urban cultures of Japan, I intend to carry out an intensive field

research into how the processes of meaning generating through non-verbal signs (fashion, brand names, style, etc.) are employed in urban cultures of Tokyo as well as how Japanese minimalist art interprets post-modern realities. My aim is to observe the differences, and, to interpret the similarities of how Western and Japanese urban sub-cultures and their art symbolize realities. Comparative studies on the subject are rare, and, for the most part, do not draw on first-hand experiences and observations. My research will describe components of contemporary culture in Tokyo not studied before, and it will detail how Japanese minimalism transforms and articulates the experiences of those living in urban Japan. Symbolic meaning generating processes in the dynamics of urban social interaction will be central areas of attention, and urban art will also be part of the examination of social life in Tokyo. These aspects of Japanese society and culture are little known in Eastern Europe, let alone in Hungary, yet there can be no doubt about it that a more detailed picture of contemporary urban cultures in Tokyo will contribute to a better understanding of Japan as a whole.

Research plan: Describing the ways in which discourses of popular culture position the consumer subject, and create subject-positions to identify with in contemporary Tokyo will be the most important aspect of the research into the signifying practices and interpretive strategies of the semi-institutionalized cultures in urban Japan. The objective of this research is to detail the differences in post-industrial urban societies and to describe the origins of the dominant symbolic meaning generating processes observed in global cultures. I will study the representative works of post-modern Japanese urban art, and my objective will be a detailed research into minimalism and other relevant forms of contemporary art in Japan. I will describe the forms of intertextuality in, and, the rhetorical characteristics of, the socio-cultural phenomena observed, and account for the role of these features in the meaning generating processes. In order to understand these phenomena I will carry out a detailed interpretation of Japanese minimalism with special attention to its intertextual characteristics by analysing dominant non-verbal signifying systems. Attending libraries and visiting professionals of the field at the *Tōkyō Daigaku*, *Waseda Daigaku*, and *Sophia Daigaku* are also part of my research plan.

Significance: Semantic structures of ever-changing discursive strategies and sub-cultures characterised by a dynamic signifying relation with the socio-cultural sphere of post-modernism are multileveled, complex sets of reference. This phenomenon has crucial consequences for the signifying practices and interpretive strategies of urban youth sub-cultures. This territory has always proved to be a border zone, even for cultural criticism. The sign-structures and meaning generating processes to be studied in Tokyo, for the most part, have

been described only in North-American and European urban environments so far, and their detailed analysis in Tokyo will be an invaluable asset to our understanding of how intertextual sign-sets are structured in contemporary urban Japan. The analysis of Japanese minimalism will be based on a comparative interpretation of intertextual characteristics of non-verbal art with references to other symbolic activities (advertisements, comics, etc.). This technique will enable me to interpret Japanese minimalism in a broader theoretical context, thus opening up the category of Japanese minimalism to the concepts of postmodernism and post-industrial culture. This will help me draw a general picture of contemporary urban cultures and art in Tokyo, most of which are unknown to professionals, let alone the general public. The findings will be published in English and in Hungarian in European literary and cultural periodicals (printed and web based), they will be presented on conferences, and will be added to my teaching practice.

Outline of the project carried out in Tokyo 01.09.05-30.09.05: In the initial phase of the project I postulated that no description of the cultural landscape of today's post-industrial societies could be complete without a detailed explanation of how sub-cultural differences add up to what is generally seen as global uniformity. In order to broaden my focus and gain a better understanding of the characteristics of representative practices at work in the contemporary urban cultures of Japan, I carried out an intensive field research in *Shibuya*, *Shinjuku* and *Ikebukuro*, and to a lesser degree in *Kawasaki* and *Yokohama*, in order to learn how the processes of meaning generating through non-verbal signs (fashion, brand names, style) are employed in urban cultures of metropolitan Tokyo. My aim was to observe the differences, and, to interpret the similarities of how Western and Japanese urban sub-cultures and their art symbolize realities. Symbolic meaning generating processes in the dynamics of urban social interaction were central areas of attention, and urban art was also part of the examination of social life in *Shibuya* and *Shinjuku*. Describing the ways in which discourses of popular culture position the consumer subject, and create subject-positions to identify with in contemporary *Shibuya* were the most important aspect of the research into the signifying practices and interpretive strategies of the semi-institutionalised cultures in urban Japan. The objective of the research was to detail the differences in post-industrial urban societies and to describe the origins of the dominant symbolic meaning generating processes observed in global cultures. The main objective of the trip was to describe the forms of intertextuality in, and, the rhetorical characteristics of, the socio-cultural phenomena observed, and account for the role of these features in the meaning generating processes. Attending libraries and visiting professionals of the field were also part of my research activities.

Results: Let me first state that it is hard to conclude a study of this kind at such an early stage: while the phase for obtaining data is over, organizing the material gathered and analysing the results will take months. It is nevertheless possible to put forward certain preliminary results (A–E).

- A) The sign-structures and meaning generating processes studied in Tokyo (including *fashion brands, leisure activities, reading and listening habits*) are for the most part different from those studied in Western European environments mainly due to their reliance on traditional cultural forms (mostly those of the expressive practices of *minimalism*) not readily available, and relatively new to Western urban subcultures. Traditional forms reinterpreted provide for much of what is seen as invention: a characteristic to be understood before the structure of meaning generating can be studied in youth subcultures. While “recycling” has been a key concept of most studies in the field, practices of “reinvention” remain to be fully understood: one aspect, which the publications resulting from my research will detail.
- (B) The intertextual net of reference between traditional meanings and contemporary signifying systems is very much present in Japan, and – as many scholars of the field note it – hampers comparing Western and Japanese youth sub-cultures. Understanding, and appreciating the consequences of which will result in inevitably linking a number of western signifying subsystems to Tokyo, as the intertextuality of these systems becomes evident.
- (C) The artistic freedom and intuitive play at work in subject constitution through style (especially vivid in *Shibuya*) form the base of several Western sub-cultural signifying systems and semi-institutionalised cultural structures. Most of these seem to originate from a certain sense of liberty in self-representation rarely seen in the West. It is indeed safe to say that strategies of subject constitution through style follow more intuitive paths in Tokyo than in New York, even if differences may be observed within Tokyo as well.
- (D) It is in the abovementioned respect that the projection of style takes place between the different subcultures, and it is through this projection that *Japanese minimalism* finds its ways to (seemingly discreet) subcultures of Japan (e.g. those of Osaka), and across the Western world.
- (E) Observation of non-verbal sign systems apparently used and perhaps invented by the target groups (youths between 15 and 30) led to the conclusion that in order for Tokyo youth subcultures to project style, it is indeed necessary to redefine traditional uses and values of signs readily available to them, and finally to relocate its meaning within a totally

different context. This shift could be very well observed in *Shibuya*, and consequent papers to be published on this aspect of post-industrial signification will discuss these results of the field research carried out there in detail.

Data collection: Data collection took place on three levels.

- (A) 1. Focus group interviews in *Ikebukuro* (2005. September 3 – 2005 September 5.) 50 interviews were conducted at and around *Ikebukuro* station in the said timeframe. Questions included those inquiring about (a) clothing choices /brand names, styles/; (b) listening habits; (c) reading habits; (c) anything else of interest /e.g. pastime activities/. The focus group was youths living in Ikebukuro aged 15-30. Male – female ratio: 42 – 58%.
2. Focus group interviews in *Shibuya* (2005. September 13, – 2005 September 17.) 104 interviews were conducted at and around *Shibuya* station in the said timeframe. Questions included those inquiring about (a) clothing choices /brand names, styles/; (b) listening habits; (c) reading habits; (c) anything else of interest /e.g. pastime activities/. The focus group was youths living in or passing through Shibuya aged 15-30. Male – female ratio: 50 – 50%.
3. Focus group interviews in *Shinjuku* (2005. September 20 – 2005 September 24.) 62 interviews were conducted at and around *Shinjuku* station in the said timeframe. Questions included those inquiring about (a) clothing choices /brand names, styles/; (b) listening habits; (c) reading habits; (c) anything else of interest /e.g. pastime activities/. The focus group was youths living in or passing through *Shinjuku* aged 15–30. Male – female ratio: 45 –55%.
4. Interviews in *Kawasaki, Yokohama, Ueno, Roppongi* (2005. September 27 – 2005 September 30.) 20 interviews were conducted at and around *Kawasaki, Yokohama, Ueno, Roppongi* stations in the said timeframe. Questions included those inquiring about (a) clothing choices /brand names, styles/; (b) listening habits; (c) reading habits; (c) anything else of interest /e.g. pastime activities/. The focus group was youths living or passing through these stations aged 15–30. Male – female ratio: 50 – 50%.
- (B) 1. Data collection from libraries (2005. September 7 – 2005. September 11.)
2. Data collection from professionals (2005 September 2; 2005 September 12; 2005 September 19; 2005 September 26.)
- (C) 1. Field study in *Ikebukuro* (pastime activities, shopping habits) 2005. September 6. Photo and film documentation.

2. Field study in *Shibuya* (pastime activities, shopping habits) 2005. September 18. Photo and film documentation.
3. Field study in *Shinjuku* (pastime activities, shopping habits) 2005. September 25. Photo and film documentation.

Further plans: As for my academic interests I would like to continue carrying out field research in urban environments with special attention on the characteristics of representative practices at work in contemporary urban cultures. My aim is still to observe the differences, and, to interpret the similarities of how different urban sub-cultures and their art symbolize realities. Symbolic meaning generating processes in the dynamics of urban social interaction will be central areas of attention, and urban art will also be part of the examination of social life in Eastern and Western metropolitan areas alike.

I would like to express my gratitude for the help of the staff at the Japan Foundation both in Budapest and in Tokyo; they gave me assistance whenever I needed: I appreciate their help and kindness – *dōmo arigatō gozaimasu*. The Japan Foundation grant was an invaluable asset to my work, and the opportunity to do field research in Tokyo was indeed an excellent chance for me to gain a better understanding of the post-modern. Also, I had a great time in Japan...

