THE AESTHETICS OF JAPANESE PUNK IN CONTEMPORARY CLOTHING DESIGN

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Abstract

The article examines how the aesthetics of Japanese punk has been formed, transformed and absorbed into contemporary clothing design. Japanese punk is treated not as a simple copy of the British and American movements of the 1970s, but as a hybrid cultural phenomenon in which the visual vocabulary of Western punk (tearing, safety pins, studs, slogans, the do-it-yourself principle) was reinterpreted through local ideas of imperfection, asceticism, craftsmanship and the street as a creative laboratory. Using historical-cultural, comparative and semiotic methods, the study traces three lines of development: the "anti-fashion" of Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto, the "street-to-runway" punk of Jun Takahashi (Undercover) and Takahiro Miyashita (Number (N)ine), and the youth subcultures of Harajuku and Kōenji. The analysis shows that in contemporary design punk functions less as a protest uniform and more as a system of design techniques and cultural codes – deconstruction, controlled destruction, sampling, layering and musical citation – which Japanese designers turned into a recognizable international language. The results may be used in courses on fashion history, design theory and cultural studies.

Keywords

Japanese punk, anti-fashion, deconstruction, subculture, Comme des Garçons, Undercover, Harajuku, street style, DIY aesthetics.

Introduction

Punk is usually described as one of the most influential youth subcultures of the second half of the twentieth century. Born in the mid-1970s between New York and London, it quickly went beyond music and became a visual system: ripped clothes, safety pins, chains, leather jackets, hand-written slogans and deliberately "ugly" hairstyles. In his classic study of subcultural style, D. Hebdige interpreted punk dress as a form of bricolage, in which everyday objects are torn out of their usual context and acquire a new, provocative meaning [1]. This idea remains central for understanding how punk entered the fashion industry: what began as a gesture of refusal gradually became a resource for designers.

Japan occupies a special position in this history. Punk arrived there almost simultaneously with its Western peak, but it met a very different cultural environment. The result was not a simple imitation of London streets. Japanese musicians, designers and young people reworked punk through their own aesthetic traditions and social circumstances, and by the 1980s–2000s Japanese designers had become some of the most important interpreters of punk aesthetics on the world stage. This is confirmed by the fact that the major exhibition "Punk: Chaos to Couture" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2013) placed the work of Rei Kawakubo (Comme des Garçons), Yohji Yamamoto, Junya Watanabe and Jun Takahashi (Undercover) alongside Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren [2; 3].

The relevance of the topic is determined by several factors. First, contemporary fashion is characterized by constant recycling of subcultural styles, and Japanese brands are among the main sources of this process. Second, in the 2020s there has been a noticeable renewal of interest in the Japanese punk heritage: Undercover marked its 35th

anniversary, Takahiro Miyashita relaunched his historic brand, and in 2026 a feature film about the first Tokyo punk scene was released [4; 5; 6]. Third, for design education, including in Kazakhstan, the Japanese case is a valuable example of how a borrowed global style can be adapted to national cultural codes without losing its expressive force.

The aim of the article is to identify the main features of the aesthetics of Japanese punk and to determine how they are realized in contemporary clothing design. To achieve this aim, the following objectives were set: to describe the historical formation of the Japanese punk scene; to analyze the role of Japanese "anti-fashion" in translating punk into high fashion; to examine the work of designers who directly connect fashion and punk music; and to characterize the role of street subcultures in the further circulation of this aesthetic.

Materials and methods

The research material includes academic works on subcultural theory and Japanese fashion [1; 7; 8; 9; 10; 11], exhibition catalogues and museum collection records [2; 12; 13; 14], as well as fashion journalism and designer interviews that document recent collections [4; 5; 15; 16]. Museum descriptions were used as primary sources about specific garments, since they provide reliable data on dates, materials and techniques.

The study relies on a combination of methods. The historical-cultural method made it possible to reconstruct the stages of the development of Japanese punk from the late 1970s to the present. The comparative method was used to correlate Japanese interpretations with British and American models. Semiotic analysis, following the tradition of Hebdige [1], was applied to interpret clothing details (holes, asymmetry, black colour, musical prints) as signs. Finally, elements of formal analysis of design were used to describe cut, construction and surface treatment.

Results and discussion

The formation of the Japanese punk scene

The Japanese punk scene took shape in 1978. A group of Tokyo bands, including Friction, Lizard and Mirrors, united under the name "Tokyo Rockers" and performed in small venues such as S-KEN Studio in Roppongi and the Loft live houses in Shinjuku and Shimokitazawa [17]. In March 1979 a live album "Tokyo ROCKERS" recorded at Shinjuku Loft was released by CBS Sony, which gave the movement wider visibility [6]. In the same year Kansai no wave bands came to Tokyo, and the band Anarchy, formed by high school students in Saitama, became one of the first widely known Japanese punk groups [17]. Later, more radical bands such as The Stalin provoked public debates about the moral danger of punk for youth [17].

From the very beginning, punk in Japan existed in two dimensions: as music and as a style of appearance. Researchers and observers note that the visual side, connected with the image of the Sex Pistols and the shop of McLaren and Westwood, had at least as strong an influence on Japanese youth as the music itself [18]. This "visual priority" is important for the subsequent history: it explains why the Japanese reception of punk was so quickly absorbed by the fashion system. At the same time, Japanese punk was eclectic: alongside punk proper, the Tokyo scene included avant-garde, new wave and even reggae and dub, which many musicians of that circle actively absorbed [6; 17]. This openness to mixing genres became a characteristic feature of Japanese punk design as well.

The persistence of this heritage is shown by its current revival. The film "Street Kingdom: Make Your Own Sound" (2026), directed by Tomorowo Taguchi, is based on the memoirs of photographer Yuichi Jibiki, who documented the Tokyo Rockers [6]. Its release was accompanied by themed clothing collaborations, which demonstrates that

the historical punk scene is now perceived as a cultural brand and a source of design motifs.

Anti-fashion: punk as a principle of construction

The most significant contribution of Japan to the "translation" of punk into high fashion was made by designers who did not consider themselves punks. In the early 1980s Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto presented their collections in Paris and shocked the fashion establishment with black, asymmetrical, loose and seemingly unfinished clothes. The press called the Comme des Garçons debut "Hiroshima chic", and Kawakubo gained a reputation as a leader of anti-fashion [19]. Y. Kawamura analyzes this moment as a "Japanese revolution" in Paris fashion that changed the very criteria of what was considered beautiful and finished in clothing [8].

The key object of this period is the black hand-knitted sweater with randomly placed holes from the autumn–winter 1982–83 collection, which Kawakubo herself called "lace". The Victoria and Albert Museum describes this sweater as using the decorative potential of post-punk holes and notes that it was carefully hand-knitted, and that its design was quickly copied by mass-market producers [12]. The National Gallery of Victoria, which holds an item from the same "Holes" collection, emphasizes the intentionally distressed knitwear and the layered, asymmetrical silhouettes [13].

This example reveals the fundamental difference between Western punk and Japanese anti-fashion. For London punks, a hole in a T-shirt was the trace of a spontaneous act of destruction. For Kawakubo, the hole is planned, constructed and executed with the precision of craftsmanship. Destruction becomes a design technique. Researchers of anti-fashion stress precisely this paradox: the impression of the unfinished coexisted with thoroughly structured garments, and methods such as turning the garment inside out and blurring boundaries became systematic [20]. Scholars connect this approach with traditional Japanese ideas of beauty in imperfection and

asymmetry (*wabi-sabi*), with the practice of patching and repairing worn textiles (*boro*), and with attention to the space between body and fabric [9; 10]. Thus punk "destruction" found an unexpected point of contact with an old aesthetic of the imperfect.

In the context of contemporary design, this line has had a lasting effect. The deconstructivism of Martin Margiela and the Antwerp designers, the "dark" avant-garde of Rick Owens and the so-called "antagonistic fashion" of later generations are described by researchers as continuing the path opened by Yamamoto, Kawakubo and Issey Miyake [21]. Punk, filtered through Japanese anti-fashion, became not a set of symbols but a method: controlled destruction, asymmetry, monochrome, layering and the rejection of traditional ideals of the female silhouette.

Punk as citation: Undercover and Number (N)ine

If Kawakubo and Yamamoto turned punk into an abstract principle, the next generation of Japanese designers returned to its direct cultural sources: music, record covers, posters and the image of the band. The key figure here is Jun Takahashi. While studying at Bunka Fashion College in Tokyo in the late 1980s, he sang in the tribute band Tokyo Sex Pistols, and in 1990 he founded his brand Undercover [14; 15]. In 1993, together with Nigo, the future founder of A Bathing Ape, he opened the shop Nowhere in Harajuku, which became one of the centres of the Ura-Harajuku street fashion movement [14; 4].

Takahashi himself recalls that in his mid-teens he was struck by the collaboration between the Sex Pistols, Westwood and McLaren, and by the aggressive graphic design of the band's record covers [4]. The motto of the brand – "We make noise, not clothes" – directly links clothing to music [15]. The Fashion Institute of Technology Museum notes that Takahashi's Paris debut collection "Scab" consisted of garments that were violently deconstructed, torn and reassembled with haphazard red stitching, and that the designer described his own work as "cute but scary, beautiful but ugly" [14].

Importantly, it was Kawakubo who supported Undercover and persuaded Takahashi to show in Paris in the early 2000s [16]. This shows the direct continuity between the two generations: anti-fashion provided the institutional platform, while the younger designer brought back the explicit punk vocabulary.

The second important figure is Takahiro Miyashita, founder of Number (N)ine. His autumn–winter 2003 collection, dedicated to Kurt Cobain and known as the "Kurt era", reinterpreted grunge clothing – faded mohair cardigans and distressed denim – through precise tailoring [22]. Miyashita's method may be called musical sampling: images of Cobain, Johnny Cash, Patti Smith and Ian Curtis appear on his garments as quotations, and the collections themselves are built like albums. In 2025–2026 Miyashita relaunched the brand under the name "Number (N)ine by Takahiro Miyashita"; the first release was a series of T-shirts with portraits of Patti Smith and Ian Curtis, and the press directly linked the return with the revival of the punk and grunge spirit of the brand's original era [5].

Both designers show a distinctive feature of Japanese punk design: deep, almost archival knowledge of Western music culture combined with Japanese perfectionism in fabric and construction. In contrast to the raw DIY of the 1970s, here punk becomes an object of connoisseurship. The historian of Japanese menswear W. D. Marx describes this attitude as a characteristic Japanese model of borrowing, in which a foreign style is studied in detail, reproduced with greater accuracy than the original and then transformed [11]. The punk aesthetic, therefore, is preserved not through spontaneity but through careful citation.

4. Street subcultures and the circulation of punk aesthetics

The third channel through which punk enters contemporary design is the street. Since the 1990s Tokyo districts such as Harajuku, Shibuya and Kōenji have functioned as open-air laboratories of youth style. Y. Kawamura, basing her research on

ethnographic fieldwork, shows that Japanese youth subcultures blur the border between professionals and amateurs: young people act simultaneously as models, stylists, photographers and designers [7]. Among the Harajuku styles she describes are varieties of Lolita fashion, including "Punk Lolita" and "Gothic Lolita", where elements of punk (tartan, chains, safety pins, black leather) are combined with the image of a Victorian doll [7; 23].

Kawamura interprets this diversity as a response of young people to unstable social and economic conditions, when traditional values no longer correspond to their real experience [7]. In this sense, Japanese street punk preserves something of the original protest meaning of punk, but expresses it not through aggression but through extreme individualization of appearance – what Kawamura calls "silent rebellion" in Harajuku as opposed to the more outspoken style of Shibuya [7]. Photographic projects such as S. Aoki's FRUiTS magazine documented this layered, self-made style and spread it internationally [24].

The relationship between street and designer is two-way. Brands such as Undercover grew directly out of the Harajuku retail scene, while street styles, in turn, borrow and rework designer pieces. Kawamura describes this through the theory of "trickle-up" or "bubble-up" fashion, according to which new trends come not from above but from youth communities [7]. Punk aesthetics in Japan thus circulates in a cycle: from Western music to Tokyo streets, from the street to independent brands, from them to Paris runways and museums, and back to the street through secondhand shops and remakes.

5. The main features of Japanese punk aesthetics in contemporary design

Summarizing the material, we can identify several features that characterize the aesthetics of Japanese punk in contemporary clothing design.

First, controlled destruction. Holes, tears, raw edges and frayed seams are used not as traces of wear but as deliberate constructive and decorative elements executed with high craftsmanship [12; 13; 20].

Second, deconstruction and asymmetry. The garment is shown "from the inside", seams and linings are exposed, proportions are shifted; this line runs from Kawakubo and Yamamoto to the deconstructed collections of Undercover [8; 14].

Third, monochrome and the semantics of black. Black, which for Western punk was associated with leather and aggression, in Japanese design acquires additional meanings of asceticism, shadow and depth [9; 12].

Fourth, musical citation and sampling. Clothes become a medium for quoting record covers, lyrics and portraits of musicians; the collection is built like an album or a concert [4; 5; 22].

Fifth, hybridization. Punk is combined with gothic, Victorian, military, workwear and sports elements (for example, Takahashi's running line with Nike), and in street style – with "cute" (*kawaii*) aesthetics, which produces the characteristic Japanese contrast of the sweet and the frightening [14; 16; 7].

Sixth, the transformation of DIY into craftsmanship. The punk principle "do it yourself" is preserved as an attitude, but in Japanese design it is realized through hand work, traditional repair techniques and very high quality of execution [9; 10; 11].

These features show that the Japanese contribution consists not in inventing new punk symbols but in transforming punk into a design system that can be reproduced and developed. That is why punk elements in contemporary collections of global brands are often perceived as being "in the Japanese spirit", even when the designers themselves are not Japanese [2; 21].

At the same time, this transformation raises a critical question that has accompanied punk in fashion from the beginning: does the integration of punk into luxury fashion

mean the loss of its protest content? The curators of the Metropolitan Museum exhibition themselves noted the contradiction between the democracy of punk and the autocracy of fashion [3]. The Japanese case suggests a partial answer. Protest in Japanese design is shifted from the level of political statement to the level of form: rejection of conventional beauty, of the finished garment, of the predictable silhouette. This "formal resistance" has proved more durable than the original symbols of punk, which were quickly commercialized.

Japanese punk aesthetics in the fashion of the 2020s

In the fashion of the 2020s, the Japanese punk heritage is realized in at least three new contexts. The first is archive culture. Collections of Undercover, Number (N)ine and early Comme des Garçons from the 1980s–2000s have become objects of collecting and resale, and designers themselves increasingly refer to their own past. The anniversary collection of Undercover and the relaunch of Number (N)ine by Takahiro Miyashita, which deliberately opened with graphic T-shirts as the original brand did in the 1990s, show that punk aesthetics now functions as a form of cultural memory [4; 5]. Even contemporary pieces by Miyashita, such as the mohair cardigan of the autumn–winter 2025 season, were openly presented as a reminder of the "Kurt era" of 2003 [22]. Punk, which once declared "no future", has thus acquired its own canon and history.

The second context is sustainability. The punk principle of reworking old clothes, cutting, patching and re-sewing, together with the Japanese tradition of repairing worn textiles, is increasingly read today through the lens of responsible consumption. Secondhand shops and remake practices in districts such as Kōenji, which Y. Kawamura describes as a centre for lovers of used clothing [7], show how DIY becomes an ecological strategy: a garment is not thrown away but continues its life in a new form. In this sense, the "destruction" proposed by Kawakubo in 1982 can be reinterpreted as

an early form of thinking about the life cycle of clothing, in which imperfection and traces of time are valued rather than hidden.

The third context is the globalization of street style through digital media. If in the 1990s Harajuku styles became known abroad through printed photo magazines [24], today they spread instantly through social networks, where Japanese punk details – tartan, safety pins, layered black, musical prints – circulate detached from their original meaning. This creates a risk of reducing punk to a set of decorative signs, which Hebdige already described as the inevitable "incorporation" of subcultural style by the market [1]. At the same time, Japanese designers demonstrate a different strategy: they preserve the connection between form and cultural source through careful citation, documentation of musical references and high quality of execution. For contemporary design education, this is a valuable lesson: the borrowing of a subcultural style is productive only when it is accompanied by understanding of its history and meaning, and not merely by copying of external attributes.

These observations also have significance beyond Japan. Many national fashion schools, including those in Central Asia, face the task of combining global youth styles with local traditions of ornament, textile and craft. The Japanese experience shows that such a synthesis is possible when a traditional aesthetic category (for example, the value of the hand-made, of repair or of asymmetry) is used not as an exotic decoration but as a principle of construction. This approach allows designers to avoid both direct imitation of Western subcultures and a purely ethnographic use of national motifs.

Conclusion

The study shows that the aesthetics of Japanese punk is a hybrid cultural phenomenon formed at the intersection of Western subcultural style and Japanese traditions of craftsmanship and perception of the imperfect. Emerging in 1978 together

with the Tokyo Rockers, Japanese punk from the very beginning gave special weight to the visual side, which made it easily translatable into the language of fashion.

Three main lines of the influence of Japanese punk on contemporary clothing design have been identified: anti-fashion (Kawakubo, Yamamoto), which turned punk destruction into a constructive principle; the musical-citational line (Takahashi, Miyashita), which returned to punk its direct cultural sources while combining them with perfect execution; and the street line (Harajuku, Kōenji), where punk mixes with other styles and constantly feeds back into designer fashion. Together they formed a set of techniques – controlled destruction, deconstruction, monochrome, citation, hybridization and crafted DIY – that remain relevant in the 2020s, as shown by recent anniversary collections, brand relaunches and new cultural projects.

The practical significance of the study lies in the possibility of using its results in teaching the history of costume, design theory and cultural studies, as well as in the creative practice of young designers. The Japanese experience shows how a borrowed global style can be reinterpreted through national aesthetic categories. This perspective is also productive for Kazakhstani design, where the dialogue between global youth styles and national decorative and textile traditions is an important direction for future research.

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