

Eastern Illinois University

From the Selected Works of Jinhee Lee

2008

Film review: Kamikaze Girls [Shimotsuma Monogatari]

Jinhee Lee, *Eastern Illinois University*

Kamikaze Girls

(Shimotsuma monogatari)

Friday, 10:00 pm

Sunday, 7:00 pm

2004, 103 min.

Directed by Tetsuya Nakashima



“Fashion became my teacher. It taught me how to live. The clothes made me want to be worthy of them.” To Momoko, a seventeen-year-old girl in her frilly dress complete with a lacy bonnet on her dyed hair, “appearance is everything.” She doesn’t mind travelling 2.5 hours to Tokyo to shop at her favorite clothing shop, Baby, The Stars Shine Bright (an actual shop and brand name) and she even sells the fake “Versach” shirts of her “useless” ex-yakuza (gangster) father to pay for her indulgences. Although Momoko may be a fish out of water living in Shimotsuma

—where nobody seems to care about fashion and one supermarket takes care of all clothing needs of the town—she is still happy as long as she can live in her French Rococo fantasy world. Her “Gothic Lolita” dresses and her habit of disconnecting herself from the reality of 21st-century Shimotsuma is made possible by consumerism, pretension, and her principle of life: “all humans are born alone, think alone, and die alone.”

But Momoko’s world of comfort is penetrated in an awkward encounter with Ichigo in her “kamikaze” jumpsuit and shaved eyebrows, a dynamic young woman who was once an emotionally repressed adolescent and now belongs to an all-girl biker gang.

Perhaps the English title of the film (*Kamikaze girls*) is misleading, if not ironic, for it is not the superficial “toughness” of Ichigo’s biker gang, itself a product of Japan’s postwar transformation, that Momoko and Ichigo turn to, but to the inner strength they see in their friendship and in each other to stand firm against social pressure to conform. Seasoned with animated scenes and based on a popular novel by Takemoto Novala in a country where nine out of ten women own at least one Louis Vuitton item, this film provides a window to changing subcultures of Japanese teenagers from eccentric fashion consumerism to the rise and fall of the motorcycle gang phenomenon.

Jinhee Lee is assistant professor of history at Eastern Illinois University

