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Transculturality as a Method on the Example of *Visual Kei*

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present the theory of transculturality treated as a method of researching Japanese contemporary culture. According to Wolfgang Welsch the essence of transculturality lies in transcultural networks which are built based on the category of fascination, presence and proximity. As I show on the example of *visual kei*, these terms are especially relevant in reference to Japanese culture which seems to be transcultural in its structure. Describing the characteristics of *visual kei* I show the way in which local elements are linked with foreign ones leading to the creation of a new network combining the elements from both of them, at the same time bearing a brand new quality. Presented example can be a starting point for future considerations in the field of Japanese culture.

This paper's problem arose when preparing for Students and Young Scholars Conference in Asian Studies which was held in Poznań in May 2014. The main topic of the conference was to show manifold methodologies which can be used in Asian studies. The importance of the issue lies in the fact that the array of possible methods has not yet been established. The aim of this article is to examine the theory of transculturality treated as a scientific method to study Japanese culture. As my own academic interests concentrate on Japanese contemporary culture I decided to show the method using the example of *visual kei*. As so far too little attention has been paid to *visual kei*, the significance of my research also lies in the possibility of showing the meaning and essence of this still unknown Japanese phenomenon.

The paper has been divided into three parts. The first one deals with the definition of transculturality mostly based on Wolfgang Welsch's theory. The next part refers the discussed issue to the specificity of Japanese culture which can be perceived as transcultural in its original structure. In the last section of the following study the phenomenon of *visual kei* will be regarded as a clear illustration of the earlier conclusions. Put together, these results suggest that transculturality can be used as an effective method in researching Japanese culture.

Transculturality

This part of the study will examine the concept of transculturality. Another term bearing the similar meaning is 'transculturation' which was coined by a Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz. Even though both terms have a similar meaning, I will not analyze it here in more detail as it lies outside of my area of interest at this point. However, it is worth mentioning that the term 'transculturality' was first used by Wolfgang Welsch who referred it to the field of aesthetics. I have also decided to continue using the word 'transculturality' as my considerations will apply to the area of aesthetics and related fields.

Welsch starts his reflection with the criticism of Johann Gottfried's Herder's conception of culture. According to this old theory, cultures were homogenous, national in its nature and ethnic boundaries between them were easy to identify. To describe it Herder used the metaphor of spheres which meant that different cultures are unable to communicate with one another and a mutual understanding is beyond their reach. The only way of contact that may exist between them is clashing without the possibility of exchanging or mixing (Welsch 2002: 85–86). What is more Welsch's criticism goes towards not only Herder's theory of national cultures, but also towards interculturality or multiculturality. It stems from the fact that according to Welsch, all such theories perceive culture as autonomous islands instead of transcultural networks (Welsch 1998: 200–203). Now we come to the essence of Welsch's theory which is based on the assumption of transcultural networks. Those networks do not run by national borders, but are created transnational leading to the existence of a new diversity. Every network is built from diverse components, and in turn various meanings can be attached to each of the components, creating manifold configurations. Therefore the new diversity does not emerge

from the difference between national or geographical areas, but is caused by the distinction between transcultural networks (Welsch 2002: 87).

In transcultural networks the relationship between cultures is subjected to change. They are no longer divided as in Herderian theory, but mixed – becoming inner-contents or satellites for each other. It should be noted that this hybridisation does not effect in chaotic mixing, but rather a mutual interpenetration resulting in forming new inner structures and relationships between networks. What is more, networks are involved in the process of continuous change. They never reach their final form, instead their dynamic nature forces them to the constant transformation (Welsch 1998: 203ff).

All these changes in the way in which we understand and interpret cultures and their relationships can be properly expressed in the already mentioned term – transculturality. Its linguistic structure suggests the multiplicity of culture, but what is more important – it also includes the meaning of transition. The aim of transculturality lies in transcending the border of traditional culture theories by showing the ways in which differential cultures tend to transgress one another to build transcultural networks. What is more, Welsch suggests that this kind of interpenetration is not the phenomenon that emerged lately, but was already present in the historical cultures. Surely the scale of diffusion was smaller as because of a less effective flow of information (Welsch 2002: 86ff). However, it is worth mentioning that the theory of transculturality is not concentrated on showing the change of culture relationships, but the way of understanding these relations – both in the presence, and in the past. This is especially meaningful when discussing the Japanese culture which according to Welsch tends to be transcultural in its origin. This tendency or even characteristic is not something that appeared recently as an effect of excessive contact with the West. On the contrary - it was already visible in the process of creating the Japanese culture that is now perceived as traditional and Japan-distinctive (Welsch 2002: 90ff). Therefore, here we reach part two of this paper.

Transculturality of Japanese Culture

As mentioned above, the essence of transculturality lies in the change of interpreting cultures not in the way they create their mutual dependence. It is especially true in reference to transculturality of Japanese culture, because it seems that even if the term 'transculturality' may be new, the

Japanese culture was as transcultural in the past as it is today. The new way of culture perception allowed to get sight of its inner nature and the mechanism of action.

When considering Japanese culture we should be conscious that it is impossible to analyze its structure and characteristic without the simple fact that it was always closely connected with other Asian cultures; especially China and Korea, but also India. After the opening of Japan to the West in XIX century European and American influences joined earlier Asian waves. The cultural components which are considered Japanese are in fact very often of foreign origin and their Japaneseness lies in the way they were transformed and then adapted. The final product was very often so different from the original one that we can without a doubt conclude about its Japanese nature (Welsch 2002: 86ff).

Sergei Arutyunov indicates ways in which the foreign elements are transformed by non-European cultures. Japan can be treated as a very clear example of this process. Components can be either subjected to mutual mechanical penetration or synthesis. Other way of treating foreign elements may consist in adopting it and then using in a traditional way. Without going into details we can conclude that it is very rare that foreign elements remain in their clear form; mostly they are transformed and as a result they gain a new quality (Arutiunow 1984: 296ff). Later in this article I will refer to all these three methods.

Even in the beginning you can go as far as to claim that Japanese have not created anything new. However, they have created a better and more sophisticated version of everything (Welsch 2002: 96). Welsch quoted Ryousuke Ouhashi who said that the constant and stable essence of Japanese culture does not exist. It can rather be compared to the water which can be adopted to the shape of varied containers it is poured into (Welsch 2002).

Apart from the lack of essence of Japanese culture it is also worth mentioning that differential and seemingly contradictory components can co-exist accordingly. Adopting the new element from foreign culture does not mean that the old one must be deleted. Different styles and models can be actual at the same level – instead of being contradictory they can complement one another (Welsch 2002). Ortiz indicated the stages of the process of transculturation, which in sequence consisted of deculturation (the loss of previously actual elements) and neoculturation. The latter process should be understood as a creation of new cultural phenomena bearing the signs of all elements that took part in its course (Romanowska

2013: 144). An attempt to refer these stages to Japan can end in a failure, because Japanese can successfully execute the neoculturation without the preceding deculturation. All components can easily create one fluid, but the still distinct culture. Having this reflections in mind, we can easily understand Welsch's statement that Japanese culture can be treated as being transcultural in its nature. This might easily lead one to infer that Japanese culture is also especially well prepared for the increased degree of transculturality that is present in the contemporary culture (Welsch 2002: 92). These findings suggest a strong importance of transculturality for all Japanese culture researchers. Following that statement, the aim of this study is to investigate transcultulturality in link to Japanese culture leading to the conclusion that it can be treated as a scientific method during researches.

Nowadays the term Japanization is mostly referred to the popularity of Japanese culture (especially popular culture) in other Asian countries, but also in the West. Lately Japanese soft power in the shape of pop culture is spreading across the world. As this could be a topic of another paper I am not going to develop it here. My aim is to point out that Japanization can also be understood in another meaning which is connected with the way Japanese borrow foreign cultural components and then Japanize them – make them Japanese.

This raises questions about the way Japanese choose differential components to Japanize them. Welsch has introduced the term 'proximity' to demonstrate the way Japanese adopt foreign components. In fact, he states that Japanese does not make a distinction between foreign and own in reference to the origin. They have a tendency to concentrate on the sense of closeness and relevance that can be found in cultural phenomena of foreign origin. Instead of contrasting own – foreign, they rate cultural components by the category of close – far. What is considered as close can be easily adopted, Japanized and as a result is treated as Japanese in its characteristics (Welsch 2002: 92ff).

The meaning of proximity is related to two epistemic arguments which according to Welsch are responsible for transcultural flows between cultures – presence and fascination. The feeling of 'presence for us' of given cultural components leads to their adaptation. Their origin does not matter to us contrary to the personal feeling of importance which can be elicited even through seemingly far phenomena. The sense of presence goes hand in hand with fascination which draws the individuals or groups (both micro and macro levels are involved) to chosen works regardless

of their context and geographical origin. This mechanism is commonly at work nowadays, but seems that in Japan it was applied through all history (Welsch 2002: 90ff). The next part of this article will concentrate on showing the example of presence and fascination resulting in producing a completely new cultural product.

Transculturality of *Visual Kei*

In this part I shall describe and analyse the way in which the phenomenon of *visual kei* can be interpreted based on the method of transculturality and using concepts which are connected with it. After providing the conceptual theoretical framework I will attempt to show the chosen example of phenomenon visibly built as a transcultural network where every net was composed through the selection of relevant, close and fascinating elements.

Before I turn to further analysis it is necessary to clarify what is meant by *visual kei*. As the phenomenon is still new to the academic world it is especially important not to leave any uncertainty around this term.

Broadly speaking, *visual kei* is a specific style in Japanese alternative music. The word 'style' should be highlighted as this phenomenon is very often confused with a specific genre of music. In fact, bands which belong to this style can represent very different genres of music and they can change it during their musical career. The distinctive feature of the phenomenon is that all bands use visual effects understood in a very broad sense. They are visible not only in musicians' images, but also in their promotional videos, during concerts or even on CD covers. In *visual kei* music is equally important to the general image of the band or musicians. It is well reflected by the words of Takehito from the band Ayabie: „Well, the interesting part of being *visual kei* is that *visual kei* is a whole media. Of course music is important, but besides the music itself, *visual kei* has more ways to present itself – visually, the costume, the atmosphere" ("INTERVIEW ~ AYABIE").

The world 'visual' refers to the broadly developed visuality of Japanese culture which is associated with pop culture (anime, manga, games etc.), but also with the traditional culture (e.g. theater). Japanese tend to look for pleasure through art (regardless of its kind – the border between pop culture and so-called high culture has always been very fluent in Japan) through senses not the rational understanding (Kawatake 1990: 224).

This feature has led to the emergence of a refined visual culture. In reference to *visual kei*, word 'visual' is usually associated with the slogan of famous X Japan which was: „Psychedelic Violence Crime of Visual Shock". In fact, the word was used earlier by strongly glam rock – inspired bands like Visual Scandal or Murbas whose motto was Visual Violence. X Japan latter only followed that path ("History of visual kei").

The world 'kei' means a system, lineage or a group[1] and is used to classify different segments of Japanese pop culture. The phenomenon was previously known as visual or visual rock until it was gradually injected into the framework of popular culture gaining 'kei' in return. Even if I classified *visual kei* as a pop cultural phenomenon it is worth highlighting that the style is a part of an alternative culture (referring to Yoshio Sugimoto's division of pop culture into mass culture, alternative culture and folk culture) (Sugimoto 2003: 244). In the nineties *visual kei* has its golden age and was widely popular gaining millions of followers. However, nowadays it is mostly a niche music with an uncertain future. Not to lengthen the general introduction I will go to the last feature I would like to mention – almost all *visual kei* musicians are men. Women are really rare to find and when you finally do they are almost indistinguishable from men. I will come back to this feature in further analysis.

Even if I defined *visual kei* so easily, practically speaking the term is difficult to grasp and clearly indicate. The phenomenon consists of many styles which differ in quantitative or qualitative use of visual images which leads to the inability of defining distinct borders. Some bands represent very modest look, but their style is still classified as *visual kei* because of their origin, while others place themselves outside *visual kei* family as an effect of their reluctance to be explicitly classified. On the other hand, some bands represent a very heavy image with dark make-up, Goth clothes and a general gloomy aura and next to them we can easily find musicians with colorful images representing the spreading trend of *kawaii* (usually translated as "cute", when in fact this term is more ambiguous). There is no place in this paper to continue this matter, but it's important to bear in mind that the term *visual kei* is rather vague and difficult to clearly define.

Visual kei consists of two main waves. The first one was mainly present in the eighties and was strongly inspired by glam rock. In the second one starting from the nineties the most visible were Gothic-Victorian motifs. In

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[1] Based on wakan dictionary.

the beginning the aim was to be original and to shock the audience through a heavy use of visual effects. The second wave which emerged when the first one was on the verge of dying, exceled in showing visual beauty through refined and dark aesthetics. Good examples are images and music by the then very famous Malice Mizer ("History of visual kei").

As shown above, both waves were strongly based on Western motifs – glam rock music and Goth-Victorian aesthetics. Later, when *visual kei* took on new faces the source of inspiration was enriched by many other motifs which are now present in the phenomenon. To anyone who had even a fleeting contact with *visual kei* the presence of Western motifs seems an obvious fact. Japanese are under a strong charm of the West, especially Europe, and tend to idealize or even romanticize it. As Asagi from band D stated: „Forests or impressive castles, wine or dresses. The image of the Middle Ages is still strong in me" ("Interview with D" 2011). Japanese *visual kei* is inspired by European languages, stories, characters – both real and historical; even the look of Caucasian people strongly attracts them as indicated by their often appearances in *visual kei* promotional videos. A country that is particularly popular among European countries is France. It's perceived as the center of European culture and the capital of elegance and grace. Reasons for such a perception can be found in the popularity of „The Rose of Versailles" manga or in the *chansons* performed by a famous cross dresser Miwa Akihiro. Combined, it all suggests that *visual kei* remains strongly influenced by foreign motifs. It was not only created as an effect of fascination by Western glam rock and then Goth rock music, but later on foreign elements were constantly present, too. The situation we meet here is not a simple adaptation, but rather a process of creating transcultural networks composed from foreign, Japanese and mixed components. As a result, it is no longer possible to easily differentiate one from another.

Such a fusion could have only been created thanks to the sense of proximity that was found in the foreign elements chosen to be incorporated. Welsch's keyword – 'proximity' enabled glam rock, Goth-Victorian aesthetics and many other Western-based themes to become a part of Japanese culture. The only question that remains now is to ask: where exactly was this proximity found or rather felt and how did it shape a new quality that was later taken as Japanese?

The first thing to start with is the fact that *visual kei* is sometimes called Japanese Kabuki Rock or straightly kabuki rock. It has its origin in the album of *visual kei* singer Miyavi „This Iz the Japanese Kabuki Rock". Kabuki appears to be a crucial word here. Kabuki is a classical Japanese

theater established in 17th century during Edo period. Its distinctive characteristic lies in the sophisticated aesthetics and elaborated costumes and make-ups. A spectator who is used to a Western theater could be rather surprised as kabuki is far from the coherent action of Western plays. The course of the performance is rather developed through the succeeding dances and songs building a general atmosphere that should be felt rather than understood. An introduction, a body and finally conclusions – typical to European plays – cannot be found here as kabuki's plot puts emphasis on inner experiences. It is achieved thanks to the sophisticated aesthetics of Japanese theater which is based on the principle of *youshikibi* – the beauty of forms. All elements of performance must be strongly stylized and unnatural – as detached far from reality as it is only possible. This artificiality comes from the aesthetic ideals of Japanese townsmen from Edo Period when this kind of theater was created. The performance is generated through *kata* – memorized patterns of acting which used on stage create a sense of exaggeration and redundancy (Mezur 2005: 25ff).

The presence of such an aesthetics enabled *visual kei* to be created and then adapted to Japanese culture. It is also worth mentioning that *visual kei* musicians straightly use the term *youshikibi* to describe their aesthetics and visual goals, to name Versailles – *visual kei* band currently on hiatus – as an example. Both kabuki and *visual kei* builds their aesthetics on an ideal of *jinkou no bi* – artificial beauty which should be incorporated not only into a general look, but also to all stage behaviours. Apart from *youshikibi* other elements of kabuki aesthetics are also present in *visual kei* as I discuss it in detail in my book *The Image of Man in Visual Kei* (Adamowicz 2014). What I wanted to state here is the strong meaning of kabuki to *visual kei* in all its aspects. Quoting a musicians Kaya: „I simply like *visual kei* music, and actually I also like kabuki, and with both *visual kei* and kabuki, I think Japan has a culture the world can be proud of. I try to have an appreciation of live kabuki, and learn from the colours they use, the production, and the story formulas" ("Sapporo Music Naked Full Interview" 2008).

When talking about the theater it is necessary to mention the character of *onnagata* – a man who plays the roles of women in the kabuki plays. The new aspect of closeness appears at this point – in kabuki as in *visual kei* all roles are played by men. When Japanese had an opportunity to see David Bowie wearing a dress on the cover of „The Man Who Sold the World" album in the seventies they were able to perceive it as being close, because of the image of *onnagata* they had in mind. What is more, cross dressers were also present in media and were not seen as transvestites,

but as *neo-onnagata* – people rated them through visual not sexual cate-
gories, as Westerners tend to (previously mentioned Miwa Akihiro is the
best example of a so-called *neo-onnagata*) (Armstrong 2002).

The popularity of Gothic-Victorian elements since the nineties until
now can also be explained through the terms of transculturality. Japanese
are prone to horror stories from Buddhist and Shintoist tales to contem-
porary j-horror movies. *Hyakumonogatari kaidankai*[2] – a parlour game
from Edo Period is a clear example of this matter. A specific characteris-
tic of Japanese scary stories is the strong presence and meaning of visual
images building an atmosphere of terror. In Japanese horror fear is not
evoked through frightening action, but is caused by mysterious and in-
comprehensible images, a slow culmination of suspense which leads to
the audience's sense of discomfort and insecurity. The same mechanism
is present in kabuki and in *visual kei*. The pleasure Japanese had in ghost
stories made them adopt the same genre from abroad which they found
close to their own tastes (Adamowicz 2014).

It is also worth mentioning that Gothic elements after being trans-
formed into their Japanese versions are not the same subcultural trends
we know from our European ground. It is a clear example of using foreign
elements in a traditional way which was described by Arutiunov. All styles
not only goth, but also punk for example, were visibly redefined. Japanese
tend not to concentrate on ideologies or rebellion typical for subcultures
in the Western understanding, but rather make efforts to create an elabo-
rate image or even kind of colourful masquerade (Ohanesian 2009). For-
eign subcultures were used according to the local characteristics – they
were adjusted to be experienced through the senses. Such an approach of
individuals is typical for subcultures in postmodern understanding, but
seems that in Japan the cause does not lie in postmodern changes, but
rather in their original tendency to trigger emotions through senses in-
stead of generating additional meanings.

Strongly stylized aesthetics, dark elements, cross-dressing or even ho-
mosexualism which has its long tradition in Japanese history (also in me-
dia and pop culture) can be easily associated with incorporated foreign
components. In fact it is impossible to indicate where a Western motif
ends and a Japanese one starts – boundaries have been erased. Analo-

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[2] The game consists in lighting 100 candles and then extinguishing one of them
after telling one ghost story. When all candles were finally put out ghost were expected
to appear.

gies in Japanese and Western cultures networks brought to existence the sense of proximity which caused the emergence of a new, completely different network. At the same time, it could be easily adopted and treated as Japanese in its nature. *Visual kei* followers are not only fascinated by something new and fresh – as Japanese were by glam rock in the eighties (to point Mana's devotion to Motley Crue as an example) – but also are able to find elements that bear meaning and importance for them as individuals. Additionally, this feeling of proximity allows them to see the phenomenon as a local one.

However, the Japaneseness of *visual kei* does not only lie in incorporating relevant components and mixing them with Japanese ones or in using foreign elements in a traditional way. Mechanical connection (according to Arutiunov's division) is also widely present – Japanese motifs are directly included in images and music and are easy to distinguish and indicate. It is especially visible in the substyle of *visual kei* – called *wa kei*. As the name suggests, it mostly concentrates on Japanese motifs. They can be presented in musicians' clothes, accessories, scenery, stories, but also in music through using Japanese melodies and instruments like *koto* or *shamisen*. Those *wa-* motifs are very often linked (and easy to distinguish) with the foreign ones – a traditional *kimono* matched with elaborated glam rock- inspired hairstyle is one example. Some bands, like the non-existent Kagrra, build all their concepts on the idea of showing Japaneseness through rock music, but many bands have a *wa* period or a *wa* album, while rest of the time they concentrate on other sources of inspirations. Apart from *wa kei* two other Japan-inspired styles can be found in *visual kei*: *angura kei* and *ero guro kei*. They are both based on 20th century Japanese artistic movement showing a more recent side of Japan's problems and its way of artistic expression.

This study has shown the way in which the transculturality can be treated as a method of researching Japanese culture – in this case, the pop cultural phenomena. Many components of different origins can be joined into a transcultural network and in effect it is impossible to clearly point the boundaries between them. Foreign elements can also be used in a new way creating a new quality. The concepts of 'presence', 'fascination' and 'proximity' can be very useful to understand the flows between cultures which are nowadays significantly more frequent than ever in the past. Simultaneously, ideas of transcultural networks, flows, components, analogies and variances should be developed to help interpret not only Japanese culture, but also the content of all contemporary culture.

Following examples of coherent fusion of cultures the mechanical connection was also illustrated. It is important to mention that the situation of a clear mechanical juxtaposition is very rare and usually it is a case of mixture of elements. The transcultural network is finally built.

Visual kei is constantly changing and developing – new sub styles arise. *Kawaii*, *wa kei* or the outwardly distant aesthetics of French aristocracy – different models can smoothly coexist and complement each other. The transculturality of *visual kei* lies in flows of close elements and japanizing the foreign ones resulting in the creation of a new quality. Even if components can be taken from the West, the final product remains Japanese. When we name it transcultural instead, it makes it even more Japanese as Japanese culture tends to be transcultural in its structure.

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