

Visual Kei: Hybridity and Gender in Japanese Popular Culture

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Abstract

This article examines the Japanese pop music genre of visual kei, a genre marked by emphasis on elaborate visual display often involving cross-dressing of male band members. The genre, in addition, employs a variety of musical styles and influences that speaks to an underlying concept of hybridity in the construction of the visual and sonic image of both practitioners and consumers of the genre. In particular this article analyzes the practice of visual kei from the perspective of the bands and their music, fans of the genre and the relationship of visual kei to other forms of Japanese popular culture that involve androgyny and gender slippage. As such this article theorizes the importance of the concept of 'hybridity', as developed in postcolonial studies, to illuminate the liminality of recent Japanese cultural identity formation that is promulgated through visual kei.

Keywords

Japan, popular music, gender, hybridity, visual kei, X Japan, Malice Mizer, manga, young people

In the late 1980s and early 1990s several original trends in Japanese popular culture began to flourish. Anime (Japanese animation), manga (narrative comic books), video gaming and cosplay (costume role playing) were among the most prominent and specifically Japanese of these movements. Anime, for example, emerged as a global cultural product that is among the most popular and well-known expressions of Japanese culture. Similarly, though it is less well known in the West, visual kei (visual style) emerged from the J-Rock culture of the same period and has become one of the most important forms of Japanese popular music.

The most pronounced aspect of visual kei is the elaborate gender-crossing cosplay of band members, typically inspired by the visual and thematic elements of Goth, Punk and Glam Rock as well as by Japanese manga, anime and computer games. Despite the popularity of the genre in Japan and its increasing popularity in North America and elsewhere in the world, there has been almost no scholarly analysis of visual kei or its social meaning. The concentrated visual and musical dislocations central to the genre, however, make it an important although little understood locus for the contestation of gender and identity in Japanese society.

Hybridity and the Visual Kei Complex: Music, Fans and Performers

Hybridity is a central component in understanding visual kei and, indeed, the construction of emergent and fluid Japanese identities. The concept of 'hybridity' as developed in postcolonial studies illuminates the fluidity of national/cultural identity formation (Kraidy, 2005). Countering the exclusivist notions of imagined community and the essentialism of ideas surrounding cultural 'purity' and 'authenticity', hybridity creates a 'Third space' that, transcending binaries of East and West, us and them, male and female, enables other positions to emerge (Bhabha, 1990: 211). While other Japanese popular cultural products from manga to anime are all, at least to some extent, hybridized fusions of Japanese and Western models and practices, visual kei in its sonic and visual dislocations of time and place and male and female identities provides a particularly powerful platform from which to understand the complexity and fluidity of gender identification among Japanese youth.

Typically described as a musically diverse genre, visual kei artists are nonetheless unified through the desire to gain attention from, predominantly female, audiences through their visual images that typically include lavish neo-gothic costumes and elaborately detailed forms of male cross-dressing. Though there are some examples of women involved in the practice, such as the group Danger Gang or Kuroneko, the lead vocalist for Onmyo-za, the vast majority of visual kei musicians are men who either cross-dress as women or adopt flamboyant androgynous personae. The fascination with costume and masquerade in this genre additionally draws on the Japanese pop culture practice of cosplay in which participants dress as cartoon or fictional characters. Indeed visual kei fans often attend concerts dressed in imitation of their favourite artists. In this manner visual kei is linked to the somewhat fetishistic *otaku* culture. Visual kei consists of visual, conceptual and sonic components but also a network of commercial fashion stores, salons, fan magazines and club venues. Arguably visual kei can be thought of as more of a cultural complex than merely a musical genre.

Though it began in the late 1980s, it was not until the 1990s that visual kei became commercially popular in Japan with album sales in the millions and competing with major J-Pop artists.² Bands such as X Japan, Glay, Luna Sea and L'Arc-en-Ciel grew out of the 1990s visual kei boom and became highly commercially successful while other groups like Malice Mizer and Penicillin became internationally known and artistically influential despite their lower album sales. At the end of the 1990s, punctuated by the death of Hideto Matsumoto of X Japan in 1998 and the disbanding of the group Luna Sea in 2000, visual kei declined in popularity and many groups abandoned their lavish costumes and make-up. However, in 2006 and 2007, a new wave of visual kei groups arose, driven by reunion tours from Luna Sea and X Japan as well as multiple tribute bands and the international success of bands such as L'Arc-en-Ciel.

Visual Kei Music

There has been relatively little awareness in the West of specifically Japanese forms of popular music such as visual kei.³ Influenced by American and British glam and

heavy metal bands the band X, later known as X Japan, is widely credited for pioneering the visual kei movement (Strauss, 1998). X was known for incongruously combining typical heavy metal power ballads with an often feminine visual image. X initially appealed to boys who modelled themselves on their image and success and formed similar bands. In the wake of the commercial success of X, Japanese men's lifestyle magazines began to devote many pages to fashion, hairstyles and make-up and many beauty salons for men opened. Japanese boys thus gained access not only to what was formerly thought to be masculinity, habitually connected with powerful sound, but also to a 'beautiful' look usually considered only in a women's realm.

Following on the initial success of visual kei bands such as X Japan, Malice Mizer became perhaps the most influential band in the genre. Their early music and image were characterized by strong French romantic and classical influences (visually influenced by the decadent lace collars, brocaded gowns and high-heeled boots of the court of Louis XIV), however, they later moved towards incorporating darker, less ornate Gothic-Victorian imagery including pleated black bustle gowns, trench coats, top hats and heavy silver jewellery. The band has gone through several major sonic and image changes. From their founding in 1992, they established their signature harmonized 'twin guitar' approach. Malice Mizer's sound with their first lead singer, Tetsu, was a mixture of rock, early 1980s Goth and strong classical influences. After the departure of Tetsu the band recruited Gackt as their new vocalist and their music became more influenced by Progressive rock, incorporating even stronger classical art music and electronic elements.⁴

Malice Mizer, like X Japan and many other visual kei bands, is often inspired by classical art music. In addition to traditional metal tropes (distorted guitar power chords, syncopated unison playing and aggressive gravelly-voiced vocals) their album *Bara No Seidou* (2000, re-released 2007), loosely translated as Cathedral of Roses, for example, is filled with dark orchestral soundscapes. A haunting pipe organ, harpsichord, string arrangements, choir and ethereal quasi-operatic vocals in addition to the band's traditional guitars, synthesizer and drums create a melancholic religious feel to the album.

One of their last and most popular singles was 'Beast of Blood' released in 2001. The song, sung in both English and Japanese, is essentially an ode to Vampirism:

Red drops on my greedy lips/Falls down on the freezing ground
 Get down limitless night
 Beast of Blood spills blood on me 'til it fills my body
 The scent of blood intertwined around my breath,
 Floats about the air on this night of ecstasy...

The song is marked by the continual presence of organ and harpsichord arpeggios that are periodically overlaid with aggressive death metal style power-chords and a catchy J-pop style chorus. As such the song is a hybrid fusion of at least three discreet musical styles, classical, metal and pop. The song is also rhythmically idiosyncratic, employing abrupt tempo changes between each shift in style and aggressive unison syncopations are found throughout. Evoking the late 19th-century imagery of the aristocratic world of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1898), the video for the song is filmed primarily in black and white except for images of red blood flowing over a

black and white chequered floor, and projects an image of historical opulence and wealth. Gilded mirrors are juxtaposed with lavish velvet curtains while the four band members are dressed in black gothic-inspired costumes and heavy make-up. All members in the band are shown wearing eyeliner, lipstick and elaborately coiffed hair. Mana, the group's songwriter, is the only member dressed unambiguously as a female. Though there are no strings in the arrangement of the song, the group is shown throughout the video playing classical string instruments, double bass, cello and violin. The lead singer, Klahe, is portrayed as an orchestral conductor.

In keeping with the lyric content of the song the video relies on recurring Vampire imagery. Likely due to their inherently protean and hybrid identities, Dracula and Vampires are common subjects in anime and manga. Well-known works based on the subject include the shōjo manga *Vampire Princess Miyu*, the television anime movie *Yami no Teiō Kyūketsuki Dracula (Dracula: Sovereign of the Damned, 1980)*, the television series *Don Dracula (1982)*, the manga and anime series *Hellsing (1997–2008)* and the Japanese novels *Vampire Hunter D (1985–)*.⁵

In the *Beast of Blood* video the notion of identity transformation and hybridity is underlined, not just by the gothic costumes of the band and the Vampire themes but also in a series of images that show children in various states of transformation. In one instance a featureless face emerges from blood to transform into a young boy. In another a young girl's eyes morph to a disturbingly large size—as if to comment on the large eyes of manga and anime characters that have also influenced the genre. As in the visual kei movement, the concept of liminal hybrid identity, as it applies to gender, race, location and coming of age, thus lies at the heart of *Beast of Blood*.

Such hybrid musical and stylistic attributes are found in varying degrees throughout the visual kei genre. The popular band Versailles, for example, draws inspiration from Riyoko Ikeda's popular manga series *The Rose of Versailles*. The manga is set in the pre-revolutionary French court of Marie Antoinette and centres on the adventures of Oscar, a girl who was raised as a man. Emulating the general aesthetic of the manga, the band wears elaborately brocaded period costumes with the lead guitarist Hizaki, in a reversal of the Oscar character, performing exclusively as a female. The historical aesthetic of the costuming, is, however, juxtaposed and starkly contrasted by the contemporary array of drums, guitars and keyboards that also inform their videos and live shows. Like Malice Mizer, the band sings in a mixture of both Japanese and English and their musical style continually juxtaposes and alternates symphonic classical arrangements (featuring violins, cellos, organs and acoustic pianos), with virtuosic aggressive metal (including harmonized twin lead guitars and frenetic double kick drumming) all intersecting with catchy melodic pop choruses. The song 'Masquerade' (2011) and the accompanying video overtly underlines such a hybrid style and directly comments on the liminal nature of identity. Featuring a continual exchange of masks at a court ball the chorus proclaims 'The world is like a masquerade'. Indeed the video manifests the transformation of a court period elderly Caucasian woman into a young girl and subsequently into a contemporary Japanese girl.⁶

The classical art music influences in visual kei bands, evident in X Japan, Malice Mizer and Versailles amongst many others, add an additional layer of Western

musical reference and further blur any fixed sense of time and location in this music. The general proclivity to adopt and merge new and different musical styles and references, like the employed fashion bricolage, serves to enhance a sense of fluid or hybridized transnational identity. In a general sense, the association with what some might regard as 'effete' classical music further identifies these bands with the feminine, not only of western culture, but also of Japanese.

Much has been made of the variety of musical attributes found in visual kei music and that the form is largely only unified through its preoccupation with costumes and visual display. Yasser Mattar claims that the musical approaches 'range from heavy metal (such as Sex-Machineguns or X Japan) to darkwave (such as Velvet Eden and Shwarz Stein) to hardcore punk (such as Dokusatsu Terrorist and SADS)' (Mattar, 2008: 117). In addition to these harder edged modes, classical art and J-pop styles must also be considered. While attempts to universally characterize the sound of almost any musical style or genre are ultimately doomed to failure, some recurring characteristics of visual kei bands can nonetheless be identified.

As manifest in the sound of X Japan and Malice Mizer, visual kei bands tend towards playing relatively aggressive forms of metal and/or punk interwoven or juxtaposed with more melodic classical and J-Pop influences. They are largely guitar based with the standard lead/rhythm and bass guitar and drums supplemented by orchestral string and classical keyboard arrangements. Distorted, often unison guitar and bass lines accompany introspective lyrics that often trend towards ballad style. The lyrical imagery, as implied from the band names in and of themselves, is often brooding and angst ridden. The transgressive visual nature of these bands—the dark, gothic feminine imagery is typically mirrored in the dark, highly emotionally-wrought lyrics and sound. Thus there is often a strong interconnection between the musical and visual elements of these bands. The visual and gender fragmentation of visual kei bands is matched by a similar variegated musical approach that reinforces the hybrid visual image and vice versa. Furthermore the combination of stereotypically masculine coded sounds (heavy metal or punk) and feminine (classical and pop) creates a hybridized cross-performance of gender both musically and visually. Indeed the recurring juxtaposition of such gendered musical sounds provides a paradoxical consistency to the liminal and hybrid notions of gender and identity that are at the heart of the genre.

Visual Kei and Fan Culture

Fan culture is central to the cultural complex of visual kei. The consumers of visual kei are, unlike the almost exclusively male membership of the bands, almost entirely comprised female teenagers and young women.⁷ These young girls, in keeping with some of the genderless imagery associated with shōjo manga heroes, see the band members almost as fairy tale figures. In the words of one visual kei record executive 'the fans... want a dream, (not a man or a woman), they want a higher being' (Tokyo Damage Report, 2010). 'Fantasy' is often a part of pop music consumption by younger fans; however this view reinforces an almost stereotypical understanding of

the undesiring, asexual, innocent gaze of young Japanese women. As I discuss below, however, the female fans are far more integral to visual kei practice. Indeed, their participation should be understood as means for sexual empowerment as they are able, to, often aggressively, project themselves both with and as the male characters on stage.

Fan involvement in the concerts is central to a live visual kei experience. At the beginning of a concert band members are typically introduced individually to ever increasing fan approbation. Once all members are assembled onstage, the sound of the first chords immediately instigates wildly manic hair swinging (in the manner of heavy metal head banging) and aggressive synchronized dancing and arm and hand waving in the audience—the choreography of which changes from band to band and song to song. The intricate hand and arm choreography are influenced by *Para-Para*, the synchronized group dancing that emerged in the club scene of the mid 1980s. As such the audience becomes as much of the visual spectacle of the event as the bands onstage.

Audiences often appreciate the interaction of the band members onstage, and the bands oblige with various forms of ‘fan service’—particularly same sex (cross-dressed) hugging and kissing. Indeed, in keeping with the intensity of fan attention in many popular musical genres in Japan, visual kei artists receive an enormous amount of attention from their admirers. Often boxes will be placed at the club, smaller venues are usually referred to as ‘live-houses’, where the live performance (appropriately called ‘Lives’ which function differently than larger stadium concerts) is being held. These boxes are intended for gifts to band members brought by fans that can range from clothing to an item that their favourite artist might be collecting.

Fans typically report a very intense involvement in visual kei culture and often regularly wear costumes to concerts that either emulate their favourite band or take their inspiration from anime or manga characters.⁸ Indeed, visual kei has spawned a number of related businesses catering to fans of the genre. Fashion stores, such as Boutique-Sha, La Forest and Visual Shoxx and magazines such as *Gosu Rori*, *Fool’s Mate* and *Shoxx* are or have been dedicated to the genre and testify to the commercial impact of *visual kei* and the level of fan involvement.

Identification with their favourite band or band member is central to the enjoyment of the genre by most fans. Fans not only wear clothes similar to their favourite artist but also often adopt a similar demeanour, body language, habits, tastes and ideology. One fan proclaimed that ‘When people tell her she looks like that star, she becomes happy’ (Hashimoto, 2007: 94). In responding to an online article on visual kei another Japanese fan (with the alias ‘visualKei’) described the all-encompassing nature of her experience with the genre and her infatuation with the visual kei group Luna Sea:

... the intoxicating fantasy undertakes you when you’re deep into the scene... I was a big Luna Sea fan ... After they broke [up]... it broke my heart. But I guess the magnetism of the scene itself can be derived from the unlimited amount of bands with the correct supplement of charisma and talent... But a lot of these guys are drug-addicts, anorexic, have a history of trauma and make some life choices that can confuse. Regardless of that, visualkei has

infiltrated parts of my mind that won't be erased, and at the end of the day I'm an audience to music that's delivered with theatrics that take imagination and a level of courage I probably couldn't muster. These people are passionate about their music, and they deserve the right into our hearts because they expose theirs in a vulnerability that I never before could've imagined.—visualKei 2006-06-07. (Solle, 2009)

The author outlines the addictive 'magnetism' of the scene and expresses her admiration for its originality and courage. The author of this post, however, also suggests that many practitioners may be 'drug-addicts, anorexic [or] have a history of trauma'. While the music and visual element of the bands is often extreme there is little evidence to suggest that such issues are greater in visual kei than in western popular music genres which have similarly traumatized or drug addicted stars such as Britney Spears, Michael Jackson or Amy Winehouse. Nonetheless visual kei would appear to offer a space in which some band members can openly perform something other than the relatively rigid stereotypes and expectations surrounding Japanese heterosexual masculinity.

The fan obsession with visual kei is an outgrowth of what cultural anthropologist Takie Lebra has identified as 'the Japanese concern for belonging... [that] fosters a taste for togetherness, intensive interaction, and gregariousness' (Lebra, 1976: 25–26). Certainly the aggressively synchronous movements of fans at live concerts attest to this sense of togetherness through gregarious participatory interaction.

There are a number of institutions in Japanese life that mediate individual fan participation in visual kei. School, family and local community are powerful intermediary sites of influence in the construction and reflection of youth identity. visual kei fans, for example, report a strong sense of interpersonal bonding and community as well as strong relationships with their family (Hashimoto, 2007: 95). Similarly Kyoko Koizumi claims that '... today, 'costume playing' is one visible aspect of an alternative female culture in Japan, since, in addition to attending favorite bands' concerts, they enjoy getting together in costume play gatherings and costume play dance parties where they chat or take photos of each other' (Koizumi, 2002: 121). Contrary to the often dark themes of social alienation and frustration expressed in visual kei lyrics, female fans of the genre clearly see visual kei as a means of constructing social integration and freedom.

Visual Kei Performers

While visual kei continues clearly appeals to a female fan base and is a site of negotiating notions of liberty and identity, the primarily male practitioners of the genre are often subject to stifling contracts and work regimes. Band members, many coming from economically challenged backgrounds, often see visual kei as a way to achieve fame and fortune. However, with the exception of a limited number of internationally successful acts, few achieve such a level of success. Many live-houses operate on a 'pay-to-play' basis and visual kei bands often become indebted to either the club owners and/or record companies that front them money for recordings. One

former visual kei record executive explained the situation and the typically constructed nature of the genre in an interview:

... Live-houses. If you're not on a label, you have to audition. That means you have to play on a Tuesday night to basically nobody, and the live-house guy sits and watches you. Maybe if you do this 3 or 4 times, at EACH of the main live-houses in town, one of them will take pity on you and give you a weekend gig. But you are now in debt to that live-house, and can't play anywhere else. It's a 'virtual contract'... But if you're on a label... you don't have that hassle. The label sets up the shows. The label gets you in magazines. They script your between-song banter . . . They take care of everything for you. It's like you are part of their family. So why would you ask for money? Why would you want to rip off your family, after all they did for you? (Tokyo Damage Report, 2010)

In addition to often working for very little but the hope of international stardom, the members of more successful bands are often expected to attend after-hours private parties for the benefit of the record label executives. Thus, in a genre that appeals to fans and practitioners alike for its appearance of liberation from conventional notions of gender and musical identity, the band members themselves are, ironically, often merely indentured minions of their record company and/or beholden to the live-houses at which they perform. They are often constructed confections of record executives who have a vested economic interest in maintaining the myth of the genderless heroic quality of the male band members in order to appeal to the teenage girl fans and their pocketbooks. As manifest in the fashion boutiques, magazines and even culture of fan service that surrounds visual kei, the genre is not so much transgressive in and of itself but rather consists of cleverly constructed commercial products that are intentionally designed to transgress normative boundaries of gender and sexuality, in part, to fulfil fan expectations.

Visual Kei and Gender Identity

As outlined, one of the most striking aspects of visual kei, and indeed of its appeal to its female fan base, is the elaborate cross-dressing of many male band members. Androgyny has often been used in Japanese culture, Noh drama and Kabuki for example, not only to explore the unconventional hybrid territories between male and female, or gay and straight, but also the juncture between expectation and reality, history and fiction, other and self. It is therefore not surprising that androgyny is frequently found in contemporary Japanese popular culture that explores the permeable boundaries between sex, gender and culture.

Manifestations of gender instability in recent Japanese popular culture and society are well known. Performances by contemporary Kabuki actors, for example, have been described as using a 'Westernized style of female impersonation... so realistic that they sometimes seem as if they are real women' (Saeki, 2008b).⁹ In the 1990s the term *shōjo*, which loosely translates as 'a young woman who is not allowed to express her sexuality' (Takahashi, 2008: 115), was often used to refer to the rampant consumerism that some critics felt characterized Japanese society. According to Susan Napier,

shōjo represents the ‘perfect non-threatening female... whose femininity is essentially sexless’ (Napier, 1998: 94). Napier also relates the concept to the rampant consumerism of Japanese post-war culture (Napier, 1998: 94). Several critics in the 1980s and 1990s referred to Japanese society as ‘selfish, irresponsible, weak and infantile’ and in terms of ‘the ornamentality, passivity, and whimsicality’ associated with *shōjo* (Orbaugh, 2003: 204). That such negative attributes were summed up in the term *shōjo*, referring to young women, is typical of the patriarchal discourse of older Japanese society. The term *shōjo* itself, however, is somewhat fluid and though stereotypically associated with the female could variously embody a sense of sexual vulnerability or, more positively, a sense of unfettered freedom in society (Orbaugh, 2003: 204). Though such depictions of Japan were largely constructed by men they were nonetheless often problematic in terms of masculine concepts of the self.¹⁰

The feminization, and associated stereotypical deprecation, of mass culture is not a new idea. In 1986 cultural critic Andreas Huyssen in his essay ‘Mass Culture as Woman’ observed that the subsequent denigration of both was a characteristic of modernity in various cultural forms stemming from the mid-1800s (Huyssen, 1986). The belittling characterizations of Japanese *shōjo* by social critics echoes that identified by Huyssen. However it is also a more complex issue than what Huyssen might have us believe. Increasingly, and as underlined in the hybrid gender coding and strategies employed by fans and practitioners of visual kei, scholars are determining that youth and youth subcultures ‘utilize multiple gender strategies that may be complicit, resistant, or ironic of the prevailing gender order’ (Nayak and Kehily, 2008: 197). In its hybrid approach to feminized masculinity, both visually and musically, visual kei provides one more case study that underlines the ontological instability of gender itself.

While critics may decry the purported feminization of Japanese culture in general and though it is not uncommon in traditional forms of Japanese theatre, gender fluidity is also a particularly common feature of Japanese popular culture. Indeed many visual kei fans encounter the genre through anime communities and report close links to manga.¹¹ In their original incarnations girls’ magazines (*shōjo zasshi*) and comic books (*shōjo manga*) and anime were directly marketed to young girls. Manga, with its stylized wide-eyed characters (initially intended to show feminine innocence and vulnerability),¹² and complicated panelling was often a vehicle to represent same-sex desires between women and men (Shamoon, 2008: 139). Later the presence of male characters in *shōjo manga* of the 1970s in part domesticated the male body within the homogenously gendered world of *shōjo* culture. As Deborah Shamoon states, ‘in classic *shōjo manga*, the romantic couples, no matter what their biological sex, often share feminine features and have similar faces and bodies’ (ibid.: 143). The textual narrative of *shōjo manga*, often verge on abstract poetry and are characterized by aesthetically expressive adjectives, repeated words and dangling phrases. They also explore the interiority of the main characters and thereby invite the reader (male or female) to identify with that character. As discussed by Deborah Shamoon, ‘[t]he inducement of identification is an inherent part of the comics medium, which *shōjo manga* exploits’ (ibid.: 145). Indeed the plotlines of many of the most famous examples of *shōjo manga*, such as *Ribbon Knight* or *The Rose of Versailles*, feature young female main characters that have been raised as boys. Riyoko Ikeda’s *The Rose of*

Versailles (1971–72), for example, depicts the adventures of Oscar, a woman raised as a male working as a member of the Imperial Guards at the Palace of Versailles. As previously mentioned, the protagonist and the associated flamboyant trapping of court life at Versailles were the inspiration for the look and the cross-gendered lavish 17th century costuming employed by the popular visual kei band also called Versailles. Whereas Ikeda's character was a revolutionary shōjo manga icon of an independent and strong willed heroine (Saeki, 2008a: 189), though notably one who was French not Japanese, the band provided another layer of hybrid reference in their male cross-dressed interpretation of what had been a transgressive female character.

Manga about homosexual boys are also not uncommon. This genre is sometimes referred to as Yaoi, meaning 'no climax, no point and no meaning' (Hashimoto, 2007: 91). Regardless of their sexual identity male characters in manga are often depicted as highly feminine, with long flowing hair, large vulnerable looking eyes, and lithe body builds devoid of musculature. In her essay 'Little Girls were Little Boys' Midori Matsui argues that the feminine looks of boy manga characters represented 'the girl's displaced selves' (Matsui, 1993: 178). Similarly, Yaoi novelist Kaora Kurimoto explains the popularity of the genre as stemming from the fact that alienated young women in patriarchal Japanese society feel they are too weak to build an alternate, preferable, surrounding in the real world. Therefore they escape into the Yaoi fantasy world. 'In this world they can identify themselves with a beautiful boy and be loved by men. In this world there are no gender problems...' (Hashimoto, 2007: 91). As such, girls who are fans of *Yaoi*, similar to those of *visual kei*, are encouraged to identify themselves both with and in the male characters.

Visual kei continues the cross-dressing tradition of Japanese pop culture, extending it into the realm of popular music. It provides a contemporary musical medium through which young Japanese women, rather than being the object of the male gaze, can in essence be the subject of their own gaze. The audience's enjoyment of the gender slippage in visual kei is central to the effectiveness of androgyny as a performance technique. The beautifully made-up male characters of the all-female Takarazuka musical revue, for example, are not meant to be mistaken for actual men but are specifically designed to be enjoyed as women. Female audiences thus identify with and enjoy the sight of a female performance of male power and freedom. Similarly, though in reverse, the popularity of visual kei appears, in part, to lie in the subversive pleasure female audience members receive as they witness male performances of female authority and liberation. In both cases, however it is a pleasurable experience of and identification with female freedom and autonomy.

While the female fans of visual kei may be empowered by looking upon cross-dressed males, the male band members also challenge their traditionally prescribed gender roles. The male impersonation of female characters, however, extends beyond visual kei and can be found, for example, in Japanese video game culture. The Lara Croft Tomb Raider character is just one example of a new breed of fictional characters in global visual culture whose hybrid characteristics permit heterosexual male viewers and players to assume her identity and simultaneously consume her as a sexualized object. As such male viewers (much as the female fan base of *Visual Kei*) experience the double pleasure of identification and desire.

As evident in manga and anime, Japanese popular culture is rife with examples of cross-dressing and gender fluidity. The extension of this culture into the realm of popular music, in the form of visual kei, is perhaps not surprising.¹³ However the precise reasons for the popularity of the practice among young men in particular are varied. Many participants simply enjoy the attention of the female fans and are attracted to the music. Recently young men have been rejecting the patriarchal company system that dominated their father's generation and are instead building their identity by exercising their freedom to choose alternate identities and associated communities. Often this involves joining a rock band, an alternate homosocial community to the company though one in which young males are much freer to choose and express their identity and companions and thereby actively actualize their sense of self.

In Japan it is common for men as well as women to seek to look beautiful. As visual kei performer Mahiro from *PureQ&A* proclaims, 'I don't have [a] passion to appeal to my feminine side; I just want to be seen as beautiful.'¹⁴ In the mindset of many Japanese, beauty does not equal femininity. It should be noted that, while there are undoubtedly homosexual visual kei performers and undoubtedly homosexual fans, the androgyny and cross-dressing of visual kei, while providing a potential platform for non-normative sexualities, is largely consumed by a heterosexual female audience that both identifies with and desires the beauty of the band. Indeed fans of visual kei rarely concern themselves with the sexual orientation of the band members.¹⁵

The hybrid pluralities of masculinities offered by visual kei performers—male/female, Japanese/Western, contemporary/historical, hard/sensitive—destabilize and challenge traditional concepts and categories of masculinity. As such they can provide potentially liberating images for both heterosexual and homosexual men. Simultaneously, in the case of the predominantly heterosexual female fan base, much as with other 'female texts' such as those found in *shōjo* manga, the band members provide objectified, if often effeminized, male bodies on to which women, and perhaps even homosexual men, can project and engage in safe sexual fantasies.

The popularity of cross-dressing in contemporary Japanese theatre, cosplay, manga and visual kei does not mean that Japanese society is a gender-free utopia. The active performance of and socio-economic rewards from visual kei, for example, are still largely confined to men. Rather, cross-dressing in these contexts is, in a sense, a reflection of the strong gender stereotypes in Japanese society itself. It can also be seen as a reflection of the homosocial characteristics of the society. However such cross-dressing challenges simultaneously traditional male/female and masculine/feminine boundaries and potentially illuminates a new flexibility towards concepts of gender in Japanese society in general.

Hybridism and Identity

Koichi Iwabuchi has argued that a 'process of... strategic hybridism' is a 'key feature of Japanese national identity' (Iwabuchi, 2002: 53). Particularly since the 1980s, Japanese assimilation of Western culture was positively embraced so much so that 'many people in Japan now hold the view that the capacity for absorption and

indigenization of foreign cultures is uniquely Japanese' (Iwabuchi, 2002: 58). Iwabuchi concludes that perceptions of Japan as a faceless economic power have been replaced by an image of a cultural power that strategically produces and disseminates 'cool' and 'cute' cultural products throughout the world such as animation, manga, fashion, food, video games and music. This implies a challenge to Western, particularly American, cultural dominance. The appeal of many of these products, however, often appears to rest on the impression, due to their hybrid fusion of Eastern and Western influences, that they are free of any particularly Japanese national, racial, or cultural characteristics such that they become perceived by consuming countries as culturally neutral. Such ideas might be viewed as somewhat problematic, particularly given that manga, anime and even visual kei are popular in West, in large part precisely due to their being associated with 'cool' Japanese popular culture.¹⁶

Nonetheless, as has been discussed in relation to the bricolage of musical and visual codes typically employed, visual kei directly embodies such Japanese hybridism. Cross-dressed participants subsume their physical identity in gender and locational hybrid identities. Bands sing in Japanese—though often with liberal amounts of English interwoven as in Malice Mizer's 'Beast of Blood'—and their sound is typically characterized by a fusion of western heavy metal and classical music styles. Perhaps even more indicative of the hybridism at work in visual kei, however, are the fluid gender identities that juxtapose heavy, typically aggressive masculine sounding music, against a stereotypically feminine appearance and emotional lyrical content. The genre mixes historical European costuming (often derived from contemporary hybrid manga influences) with a contemporary alternative rock aesthetic. As such the genre intentionally references various elements of historical and contemporary Western and Japanese culture.

There is, of course, no 'real' or 'authentic' Japanese identity, although outside observers may try to constitute such an absolute. The spectacular cross-dressing of visual kei bands marks them as transgressively liminal representatives of Japanese society. However, in addition to the gender dislocation of visual kei bands, such artists are also fluid in terms of their representation of time and place. Many bands adopt costumes and imagery that are associated with and evoke various historical periods and places, drawing typically from European or North American history and literature. As evidenced in many visual kei band names, such as Schwarz Stein, Dokusatsu Terrorist, Versailles, or L'arc-En-Ciel, there is an attempt to evoke a Western, often Continental European zeitgeist that further dislocates these bands from being unalloyed expressions of a Japanese aesthetic. Indeed such cross-cultural references, when combined with the presentation of gender fluidity in the band member's costuming, reinforces the notion that while this movement is a particularly Japanese form of expression it is also simultaneously an expression of the protean identity of Japanese youth and society at large.¹⁷ Such expressions evoke notions, voiced by Frederic Jameson and others, of a postmodern pastiche of iconography and related dislocations of time and space. As traditional roles for men and women in Japanese society have increasingly broken down and Japan has been deluged by Western influences in the wake of the information age and globalization, the identity and self fashioning of Japanese youth has become evermore the product of hybrid cultural influences.

Nancy Rosenberger reaches a similar conclusion regarding recent changes in the self-identity of Japanese women who ‘negotiate the story lines of personal, local, national and global plays... the outcome is a hybrid sense of self, expressing an individual character while ultimately avoiding selfishness or isolation through strength of character that contributes to others’ (Rosenberger, 2001: 239).

The homogenous picture of Japanese society painted by stereotypes of its collective corporate culture is belied by the diversity of its popular music practices. In addition to visual kei, these include J-pop idols, alternative rock, techno, Japanoise and hip hop amongst many other styles and subgenres. Though these forms are typically predicated upon Western, often American, models it is impossible to state that an increasingly internationalized Japanese popular music and culture follow a singular aesthetic ideology, pattern or identity. Indeed varying degrees of hybridization is central to all of these styles. As Carolyn Stevens has recently claimed

... cultural identity in Japanese popular music has flowed in and out of history, filtered by both Asian and Western cultures... Music does not travel in a linear pattern from West to East; it travels from East to West, and back to East again, with a further trip back to the West, a conscious hybridity that spans both categories. (2008: 35)

Such a ‘conscious hybridity’ is particularly important feature of visual kei. To a large extent it appears to be a strategically indigenizing hybridity, constructed of creative re-uses of Western cultural products—products which were themselves originally heavily hybridized. All music is, at least to some extent, a hybrid accretion of various styles and influences—early rock ‘n’ roll, for example, is typically understood as a merging of R & B, Latino, Folk and Country elements. Visual kei, however, presents a consciously multilayered hybridity that includes a heavy emphasis on not just musical hybridity, which variously fuses elements of classical, metal, punk and pop styles, but also visual pastiches that often juxtapose contemporary and historical fashions and imagery. Yet a further layer of hybridity is found in the fusing of gender identities presented by the cross-dressing of male band members.

Conclusion

Visual kei is an intense public culture that allows for and reflects fluidity in contemporary Japanese gender identity. Unlike other popular Japanese cultural products, however, visual kei represents a hybridized version of gender-play that incorporates both musical and visual coding—a fusion of the aural and the visual. The musical sounds themselves are often stereotypically coded as both masculine (heavy metal influenced aggressive syncopated unison rhythms, distorted guitars and vocals) and feminine (classical string arrangements and catchy J-pop melodies) while the male performer’s costume is overtly coded as feminine. As such there is a cross-performance of gender at play on several levels, sonically and visually, that provides liberating and empowering possibilities for the male practitioners and female fan base and sets the practice apart from other forms of Japanese popular culture.

The seemingly fragmented musical influences and content of visual kei challenge its categorization as a distinct genre as understood in Western popular music scholarship. The genre, as such, might appear to be held together more by conventions of cross-dressing and flamboyant performance and personae than by a coherent set of musical characteristics. However, as mentioned, certain musical conventions do continually recur (heavy metal and classical music elements among them). It is precisely the mixing of masculine and feminine coded traits of these, predominantly Western, musical styles, that reinforces and, in what only appears to be a paradox, gives consistent sonic coherency to the gender fluidity that is central to the genre. The juxtaposition of seemingly disparate J-pop, classical, Goth and heavy metal musical styles essentially mimics and reinforces the visual pastiche and gender fluidity enacted on stage. Furthermore, though band members at times engage in the performance of same sex 'fan service', and though it may represent a liberating practice for some musicians and fans, visual kei is not primarily a performance of homosexuality per se but rather is a performance of liminal cross-gendered conceptions of male and female beauty, calculated to appeal to a primarily heterosexual female fan base.

While visual kei has been popular in Japan since the late 1980s, it has recently migrated to other Asian markets, including Korea and China and is also active in parts of Europe and North America including New York, Vancouver and Toronto. Though unquestionably a Japanese musical genre, the form is an increasingly transnational phenomenon and a general marker of Asian youth culture around the world. As it morphs and transmutes in new localities this musical genre, that takes hybrid identity as its premise, will doubtless assume increasingly heterogeneous characteristics. At the same time as the visual kei phenomenon grows in global context it nonetheless retains a particularly Japanese identity. The neo Romantic and Gothic costuming, cross-dressing and multiple musical modalities question the location of memory and history, offering multiple subject positions to both audience and band members. An idea of historical Japanese identity and context of production exists but only as a baseline for the establishment of multiple alternate possible identities. Thus, like anime, manga and other forms of Japanese popular culture, visual kei both asserts and challenges notions of individual and Japanese national identity while simultaneously reasserting a new and specifically Japanese inflected cultural product.

Notes

1. Research for this article was, in part, conducted through observation of *Visual Kei* concerts in Tokyo during the summer of 2009. I am grateful to the Japan Foundation fellowship that supported this work.
2. Based on rankings by Oricon, a Japanese corporate group that compiles sales statistics on the Japanese music industry.
3. Other forms of Japanese popular culture, however, are becoming increasingly evident in Western popular music. Gwen Stefani, for example, employs the 'Harajuku Girls', four young Japanese women who were hired as backup dancers for Stefani's album *Love. Angel. Music. Baby* (2004) and subsequently accompanied her on promotional appearances and in several videos. Kanye West's 'Stronger', from his *Graduation* album (2007), is a homage to the 1988 Japanese anime film *Akira* and the album art was designed by Japanese 'Superflat' artist Takashi Murakami.

4. Japanese copyright restrictions place severe limitations on the licensing and reproduction of cultural products, consequently reproducing images in this article is not possible. Pictures of Malice Mizer may, however be viewed at their official website. Similarly the video for 'Beast of Blood', can be viewed on YouTube: <http://www.malice-mizer.co.jp/> (Consulted June 8, 2010).
5. Susan Napier particularly identifies the role of the vampire, who never grows old and is frozen in time, to the image of young women and *shōjo* culture in Japan (Napier 1998: 94).
6. While it is impractical to provide multiple examples, it should be noted that almost all visual kei bands employ some form of a hybrid mixture of classical, pop and metal musical styles in combination with a similarly variegated visual style, often drawing from historical or fictional inspiration and that, to one degree or another, typically involves a stereotypically feminine look.
7. For a discussion of the construction of female fan identities in J-Pop see Toth (2008).
8. Kiyuki Hashimoto has surveyed the intensity of fan involvement in visual kei and observes a recent transition from fans dressing like their favorite band to fans who adopt a variety of costumes (Hashimoto, 2007: 93–94).
9. A notable example of a modernized style of female impersonation is provided by Studio Life, founded in 1985. Similar to visual kei bands, this company consists solely of male performers and is particularly popular among young female audiences.
10. A similar feminization of Japanese culture is found in the Japanese proclivity for 'Cute' culture, as manifest in the ubiquitous Hello Kitty brand marketing. Those skeptical of cuteness consider it a sign of an infantile mentality in keeping with previous comparisons of Japan to *shōjo*. Hiroto Murasawa, professor of beauty and culture, claims that cuteness is 'a mentality that breeds non-assertion' and many thus fear that 'Cute' culture represents an effeminizing erosion of Japanese strength and image in the world (Kageyama, 2006).
11. See for example a recent online poll at Hallyu8 (Asian Entertainment Community) entitled 'Visual Kei Listeners: Why do you like it?'. Nearly half of the respondents claimed manga and/or anime as influential to their encountering Visual Kei. <http://hallyu8.com/topic/7186-for-visual-kei-listeners-why-do-you-like-it/> (accessed June 15, 2012).
12. Wendy Hui Yong Chan has posited that the large eyes of Japanese manga and anime are evolved from Walt Disney; 'a citation of Mickey Mouse– or at the very least, an attempt at racial obscuring that makes Japanese-named characters universal' (Chan, 2006: 216).
13. Fabienne Darling-Wolf has noted a similar proclivity to cross-dressing and androgyny in the Japanese boy band SMAP (Darling-Wolf, 2004).
14. See Emily Brunelle (n.d.).
15. An exception to this is Mana from Malice Mizer, whose sexual orientation has been subject to considerable speculation by fans. See the discussion on Mana Forums (n.d.).
16. Iwabuchi's ideas, while provocative, have not gone unchallenged. See Brian Moeran (2004) and Daniel Black (2010).
17. Indeed Hiroki Azuma has recently identified Otaku culture as one that seeks 'multiple personality' (Azuma, 2007: 111).

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