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Visual-Kei

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Azra Syakirah

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For almost everything, we notice the aesthetics of it first. The visual, defined as “a picture, piece of film, or display used to illustrate or accompany something” (Oxford Dictionary, 2016), is an important aspect in most subcultures. Likewise, with Visual-kei 【ヴィジュアル系】 , which literally translates to “visual style”, dressing plays a major role in the subculture. Visual-kei is a style of dress, there’s a lot of costuming and makeup and it’s uniquely Japanese. (Sollee, 2006) Originated in late 70’s and early 80’s when Japan’s rock scene began cultivating its own identity, Visual-kei became prominent with the dramatic outlook. Its name presumably came from the catchphrase of a famous rock band X Japan: “Psychedelic violence/Crime of visual shock”. In Fort Worth Weekly, Dave stated Visual-kei is “leans toward a more theatrical presentation emphasizing imagery as much as music.” The practice of costuming and wearing makeup are forms of individualism and freedom of self-expression. This essay will discuss the relations of Visual Kei to the rock scene and how dressing plays a part of their performance as well as the different visual subgenres that branched out from this particular subculture.

Music is a huge influence of the Visual Kei subculture. It was the prime factor pertaining to its beginning and creation. The roots of this subculture originated from the west, with bands like KISS, Mötley Crüe and Metallica that have a wave of stylistic creativity in their rock and metal music. Musicians were inspired to create their own take of it. The author of the book Jrock Ink, Josephine Yun, explains that Visual-kei was rock 'n roll, punk rock, glam and metal with a twist – a twist just as angry and rebellious as what came before it – but a poetic one, artistic, with painstaking attention to detail.

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(Reesman, 2006) Today, there are many types of rock music and some bands even mix other popular musical elements like techno, fusion or a combination of various style of music. In Reesman's article, Yun also mentioned that Visual-kei "spans a wide range of musical genres.; Musically, it can be anything: American rock, British punk, glam, metal, Euro pop, techno, new wave, electronica." Heavy metal band X Japan are widely considered the pioneers of the culture and are also credited with originating the name. GazettE, Dir en grey and Versailles are some Japanese rock bands that partake in this practice. These bands are important names in the Visual Kei subculture as they made an impact to the style aesthetics.



Figure 1 X Japan band

Although music may be where Visual Kei originated from, but the fashion of the followers is the main focus of this subculture. In chapter two of the book *vijyuaru kei no jidai*, author Morikawa listed some characteristics or special traits which a Visual-kei

should possess. Some of the points on the list are: the members are to have long hair with shocking colours or hair styles, put on very thick makeup and wear elaborate costumes that doesn't reveal gender, age and nationality. (Inoue et al., 2003, pg 50) All one needs to do is to watch just one of the band X Japan's videos to pick up on the decadent glam influences. The drummer is often decked in lace stockings and torn black vests. The band's androgynous looks can be attributed as much to kayou kyoku (traditional Japanese pop) as to the eccentric costumes of '70s David Bowie and '80s hair bands. (Gibson, 1998). Figure 1 pictures X Japan, an exemplary band of the Visual-kei, being the pioneers of the subculture. They are decked in extravagant hairstyles, dramatic makeup and androgynous clothing. The idea of not being able to define which gender being Visual-kei is one of the main key factor pertaining to this subculture. As most, if not all, bands consist of males, cross-dressing is the norm. In fact, the more feminine the cross-dress is, the more popular and the bigger the following the band has. In *Gender and Modernity, Kyoto Area Studies on Asia Volume 4*, on page 194, Inoue stated "today the term 'visual kei' has general acceptance and is being used in an extended sense, ranging from the narrow sense of rock bands wearing makeup to a broader sense that refers to men with good looks highlighting them by trimming their eyebrows or dying their hair." As the subculture evolved, so has its visual outlook over time. The classic "visual" look set by the pioneer band X Japan has since branched out to multiple subgenres in terms of its fashion. Even in its community itself, there have been discussions pertaining to the different subgenres of Visual-kei. There are so many subgenres that are always newly created when a certain band can't be classified under

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an already existing subgenre. The influences to these subgenres are diverse: traditional Japanese dress, S&M outfits, costumes made of vinyl, leather, lace and plastic. (Reesman, 2006). In the following paragraphs, I will discuss a few subgenres that are more commonly known and seen.



Figure 2 Kote Kei band: Dir en grey



Figure 3 Tanbi Kei band: Versailles

The Kote Kei 【コテヴィジュアル系・コテ系】 is considerably the oldest and most established form of Visual-kei. It means “over the top”. This subgenre could be considered as old school or traditional Visual-kei because it has been around for so long. Many think of this particular subgenre when they think about the subculture as a whole. The bands in this subgenre dress in elaborate, flashy costumes that are mostly in black. Figure 2 shows how a Kote Kei band dresses. Partly to note, this subgenre can be found in two sides: “Black” and “White”. The band can choose to portray a darker side or a lighter, more melodic side. In Figure 2, the band is wearing all black clothing, whereas for a “White” Kote Kei band, the clothings are white instead of black. For both sides, they match it with heavy makeup combined with big bright hair. The musical aspect of Kote Kei is often described as dark and intense. Dir en grey, D, Kuroyume, Lariene and Madeth Gray’ll are some bands in this subgenre. A subgenre – which

makes it a sub-subgenre – of Kote Kei is the Tanbi Kei, which gets inspiration from renaissance Europe such as the Victorian-inspired dresses, religious imageries and the influences of classical music. Figure 3 showcases Versailles, a very well Tanbi Kei band with a strong European renaissance influence in their dressing.



Figure 4: Oshare Kei band: An café

The Oshare Kei 【オサレ系・お洒落系】 is the most distinctive of all the subgenres of Visual-kei. It is also the one of the most well known. The subgenre originated from the band Baroque, who formed in 2001, under the name osare kei, which roughly translates to “fashionable” or “stylish”. The term was later dropped and is now just a parody term. Musically, their sound is more upbeat and has pop and techno influences. Oshare Kei isn’t as popular as it used to be during its peak era. There aren’t many bands left in this subgenre, but some named ones are An café, SuG, THE KIDDIE, Kra and Aicle. Figure 4 shows An café dressed in their subgenre Oshare Kei.



Figure 5: Angura Kei band: Kagrra

Angura Kei is a subgenre of Visual-kei. The name came from the English word “underground”. Angura Kei’s style derived from a cultural movement, particularly of the independent theater in Japan from the 1960s and the fervent political unrest from which the decade is known globally. The Angura theater is notably connected with the Japanese mythology – the beliefs, attitude and cultural values. This vibe of this subgenre is considerably darker and more formal, featuring the uses of Japanese uniforms, kimonos and other types of traditional garbs. Kagrra and Inugami Circus-Dan are examples of Angura Kei bands. The band Kagrra pictured in Figure 5 was photographed in front of the cherry blossoms in Japan, a visual aesthetics known globally that it is in Japan.



Figure 6: Nagoya Kei band: lynch

Another subgenre is the Nagoya Kei. Judging by its name, it is based in Nagoya, Japan. This is one of the more commonly known types of Kei. The outlook is darker and gloomier, with a much stronger Western punk rock influences. Silver~Rose is considered to be the forefather of the subgenre. Some other named bands are Laputa, Kuroyume, Gullet, Lynch and Deathgaze. Fans of Visual-kei would argue that this subgenre has less emphasis on the looks and pay more attention to the music. There is also controversy as to which bands are considered Nagoya Kei and which are not since being from that area does not denote the band as being such. Figure 6, showing lynch, a Nagoya Kei band, gives off a very strong dark vibe with all of them in black and leather. The gothic make-up adds on to that factor.



Figure 7: Soft Kei band: Glay

The Soft Kei or Sofubi 【ソフトヴィジュアル系・ソフビ】 , is a softer, more toned-down style of Visual-kei. The bands that are part of this subculture wear natural make-up and classy outfits. It was booming in 2000 – 2006, but it is nearly extinct of a subgenre nowadays. SID and Glay are a few bands that falls under this category. Figure 7 is Glay, a Soft Kei band. Their dressing, compared to the other subgenres, are extremely toned down with only their hair being prominent. Even then, their hair are not as flamboyant as the other subgenres.

The Visual-kei subculture evolved through the years. The 90s was the most unlimited era of the Visual-kei, as creativity really went booming. The public are more accepting and supporting of this genre, and then the foundations for the modern Visual-

kei were set. They were presented less through tacky 80s look but rather with a darker and modernized goth punk look or through intensely theatrical elements. Visual-kei reached its “golden age” through this new generation of visionaries. Throughout the 2000s, there have been many newer Visual-kei bands that came and went. They created imageries of Visual-kei that most people associated with now. Many of the better known names today are withholding to the imagery that was set. I believe this is just all part and parcel of the ongoing refinery of the subculture’s aesthetics. The “lighter visual kei” also known as the “sofubi” has become a trend as it fits better with the mainstream. The 2000s was also the rise of oshare kei, with bands like An Café and Psycho Le Cemu, creating a whole new subgenre of Visual-kei by pushing the extremes of colour and happiness. With the dramatic photography, teased hair and eyeliner, it has become hard to differentiate the more “visual” bands from the “non-visual” ones. I feel like the real gem of creativity still lies with the more dramatic and classic interpretations of Visual-kei.

In an interview with a Visual-kei band Angelo on JRock Revolution, they mentioned “the visual aspect is something for a band to set themselves apart from others, at least that’s what it was ten years ago. Now it’s more like people are dressing up a certain way because they want to be ‘visual-kei’ or look ‘visual kei’. They are doing it to look like others instead of doing it to look different. This is obviously very different from when we started out more than ten years ago.” I feel like this happens for most, if not all, subcultures where people who are not genuinely part of it using the general aesthetics to look “cool”. Cross-dressing and genderless dressing is not that uncommon

in the world today, especially with cosplay that is very much known. With the numerous comic-con in all parts of the world, as well as heavy metal bands like KISS that partake in make-up and costume dressing for their stage looks, the Visual Kei subculture does not come off as a shock now in the 21st century as compared to when it first boomed. The Visual Kei subculture has a loyal and supportive members and following. The subculture is the kind where it is appreciated by the massive public but most likely not enjoyed by, hence the ones that do enjoy the music and style are very dedicated to it. Followers of Visual Kei have the freedom to dress different ways while still supporting the methodology of Visual Kei. Thus, as discussed in this essay, a subculture can be branched out a variety of ways but still sticking to its roots.

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Figure 6: Nagoya Kei band: Lynch, viewed 8 October 2016,
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Figure 7: Soft Kei band: Glay, viewed 8 October 2016,
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