

Visual kei: visuality, narratives and textuality in a musical sub-culture

Visual kei: visualidad, narrativa y textualidad en una subcultura musical

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to show how narrative, textuality, and visuality are essential elements of a music genre, going to reinforce its style as much as its symbolism and perception. The visual kei genre, a popular music style in Japan, is used in the article. Although it is often considered a style of hard rock or heavy metal, the article will emphasize how the use of narratives (the characterization of performers), visuality (fashion, make-up, coloring, etc.) and textuality (lyrics, symbolism, language) make this genre a true sub-culture. Through hermeneutic analysis and taking phenomena as examples, it will show how music can thus become a form of expression of those people who feel excluded from Popular Culture and find in one of these mentioned elements a way to express their identity. It will then show how the sub-culture is inclusive for those people whose identity is not reflected by Popular Culture.

Keywords: Sub-culture; symbolism; visual culture; narrations; hermeneutics.

RESUMEN

Este artículo pretende mostrar cómo la narrativa, la textualidad y la visualidad son elementos esenciales de un género musical, que van a reforzar tanto su estilo como su simbolismo y percepción. En el artículo se utiliza el género visual kei, un estilo musical muy popular en Japón. Aunque a menudo se considera un estilo de hard rock o heavy metal, el artículo hará hincapié en cómo el uso de la narrativa (la caracterización de los intérpretes), la visualidad (la moda, el maquillaje, el colorido, etc.) y la textualidad (las letras, el simbolismo, el lenguaje) hacen de este género una verdadera subcultura. A través del análisis hermenéutico y tomando como ejemplo los fenómenos, se mostrará cómo la música puede convertirse así en una forma de expresión de aquellas personas que se sienten excluidas de la Cultura Popular y encuentran en alguno de estos elementos mencionados una forma de expresar su identidad. A continuación, se mostrará cómo la subcultura es inclusiva para aquellas personas cuya identidad no se ve reflejada por la Cultura Popular.

Palabras clave: Subcultura; simbolismo; cultura visual; narraciones; hermenéutica.

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1. Introduction

This article is about a music and visual genre that has become a real sub-culture in Japan: visual kei. As the name indicates, it is a genre that makes visuality an important feature. The term kei, meaning system or group, emphasizes how inclusive this genre is. It thus emphasizes a sense of affiliation of some individuals to the genre. This paper will discuss three fundamental aspects of the genre beyond the actual music, visuality, narratives, and textuality. Taking some groups as examples, an attempt will be made to explain how these elements are fundamental in reinforcing the message and symbolism of the music genre. Visuality, through fashion, color, make-up, becomes a distinctive uniform of the band. This uniform should not be understood as something limiting the freedom of fashion style choice, but as an identity symbol and visual expression of personality. Narrative, on the other hand, refers to the story enacted by the artists. It is the story of the band's characters and not the artist's real life. These fictional characters, often known only through the stage name, make the genre turn into a kind of play, carried on both on and off stage, on sites, with events or with merchandise. This narrative helps create the hyper-reality that the audience needs to engage fully with the genre. Finally, lyrics will be briefly analyzed. How language and symbolism, being the simplest media of expression and communication of emotions, are important in reinforcing the audience's idea of self will be explained here. In particular, it will emphasize how the themes of lyrics, taking from Romanticism, become a means of reclaiming one's emotions, idealizing death, morbidity, melancholy and the supernatural. In this sense, the poetics of the lyrics, like Romantic literature, violently and melancholically claim a space for emotions in a world that is less and less emotional and increasingly cold and rational, in which even love has been taken for granted.

2. Methods

The approach used in the article is phenomenological and interpretive. It uses methodologies taken from anthropology and literature studies. As will be specified in the article, it is incorrect to universalize the genre style as it is very broad. Furthermore, a key aspect is that the combination of textuality, narrative, visuality, and music reflects the identity of the artist, and not the other way around. This makes it difficult to delineate general characteristics through quantitative or qualitative analysis. Therefore, it was chosen to use some well-known artists as examples and then interpret them as a text according to the hermeneutic approach. These phenomena were analyzed by interpreting the views of some fans through comments on social media or forums, so they are not intended to be universalizing. The result therefore exposes only a small part of the phenomenon. However, this suffices to delineate some characteristics and allow a basis for possible future research, including taking advantage of qualitative research and fieldwork. These could strengthen the academic study of the genre, and investigate more deeply the link between music, narratives, visuals, and textuality in this sub-culture.

3. Development

A straightforward development of the article was chosen. Starting from the definition of the music genre as a sub-culture, three key elements — narrative, visuality and textuality — will be addressed to show how these elements concur in defining the artist's identity. Emphasizing the impossibility of universalizing the visual kei phenomenon, only a few artists were used as examples. With visuality, the discussion turns to the androgynous character of some artists, using the Takarazuka Theater (Robertson, 1998) as a term of comparison. In narratives, the phenomenon of fairy tales was chosen, using the band Amiliyah and their narrative to show how this fiction can create a hyper-reality. With textuality the artist used as an example is Onmyō-za, as a connection between visuals, narratives and textuality, and a piece of the song “Last Letter” by Pierrot, to show the use of shared symbology's within the sub-culture.

The limitations of this work are clearly quantitative. The artists considered are not data on which to form a theory, but practical examples of theory based on phenomena. By increasing the number of texts or artists considered, it might easily be seen that while some of them support the thesis proposed here, many others would show the presence of different theses. Although this is a limitation to point out, it is not the aim of the article to show any universality of the genre. The article merely explains how within this sub-culture, the co-presence of narrative, textual, visual, as well as musical elements, besides being easily observable, aid in creating a hyperreality and can become, even singularly, tools for the identity expression of artists and audiences. This effectively makes sub-culture an inclusive phenomenon for those people whose identity cannot find a perfect match within Popular Culture, from which they therefore feel excluded.

4. Genre: defining *visual kei*.

There is a very strong interaction between music and visual arts. Live concerts are often true theatrical performances in which music almost seems to take a back seat, while lighting effects, choreography, and costumes become the real show. This visual aspect is also conveyed in the characterization of the artists and their fans, who find this marriage of music and visual interpretation an appropriate instrument of expression of their identity. Visual Kei is a Japanese subculture that developed in the 1980s and makes the aural-visual combination its most representative mark. Although it is often associated with glam rock, punk, or metal, it includes musical elements such as electronic or pop, making visual kei a genre on its own. Or, as suggested by Yoshiki (2011), drummer and frontman of X-Japan, one of the historical bands of this subculture, in an interview “visual kei is more like a spirit, it's not a music style or, you know... I think it is a freedom about describing myself, a freedom to express myself, that's what I believe visual kei is”.

Freedom of expression is one of those recurring themes within alternative and underground music currents. A factor mainly related to the difficulty of some artists and fans to connect with the standards and order of society. This difficulty is a gap between the culture of the individuals and the general Culture of the society in which they live. It is defined as sub-culture, a culture that however

much it may go against the dictates of Popular Culture (thus understood as the most visible layer, often with national character) is inscribed within it. For artists it becomes a way of expressing the rift between identity and society, while for the audience it becomes a voice capable of expressing a state of mind, a way of entering a group and a social place where one's culture can mediate between their identity and environment. Thus, it is not only a musical expression composed of melodies and lyrics but also a visual expression made up of fashions, symbols, and fetishes that go against what are considered as the social values of Culture, might it be order, or its categorizations. Thus, there are cases of cross-dressing or artists whose androgynous appearance defies society's gender dichotomy. Or the use of particular chromatics, either tending toward a monochrome or contrasting variants. There are also representations of particular narratives related to fantasy and gothic romance, or mythology, removed from the logical and rational narratives of modern society. The lyrics are not about happy love with the happy ending promoted by many modern narratives. It focuses on a thanatological relationship with eros, in which loss and sadness are not only crucial in love, but are precisely what makes this feeling something pure and worthwhile.

As mentioned, visual kei is itself a genre influenced by various genres. Usually, it is personal influences and a search toward particularity that defines what will be the artist's styles. Some groups have varied style over the years. This makes it impossible to generalize the genre to particular musical patterns. However, by following what are the archetypes of visual kei, thus relying on those most iconic bands, it is possible to notice recurring elements rooted in heavy metal and hard rock. There can be high vocal ranges and lines sung clearly and melodically, alternating with screamed or breathy vocals. The drum line is often fast, accentuated by the use of double pedals or a double bass drum. Guitars feature melodic power riffs and the use of distortion. Hooks are often melodic. Although guitar, bass, and drums can be said to be fundamental, other instruments, such as piano or violin, are often present as well.

5. Visuality: fashion, makeup, chromatic choices

One of the most representative features of visual kei are the artists' outfits. These are not simply costumes used on stage, but proper symbols of the artists' identity. It is a dynamic identity that revolves around a style and always manages to change it to represent the artists' stage of evolution. As explained by Oliver Seibt "the elaborate costumes worn by the musicians together with the laborious make-up form the main instrument for the bands to evoke those fantastic imaginary worlds that for their fans serve as an escape from their everyday lives" (2013, p. 249). Although fashion does not follow adherence to established rules, such as for musical influence or lyrics, trends toward particular styles can often be seen. Perhaps the strongest image is the one that brings Visual Kei closer to the gothic milieu, with a predilection for chromatics tending toward black, leather or latex, marked make-up. However, there is no shortage of bands that opt for bright colors in a fashion more tending toward street wear, or a reinterpretation of traditional clothing such as kimono or outfits coming from the fantasy world. Part of this visuality is to break the gender dichotomy. Many artists adopt an

androgynous look that not only characterizes the identity of the individual artist or band, but is “a key theme that links bands that have divergent musical influences” (Johnson & Kawamoto, 2016, p. 210). Androgyny is not just a feature of visual kei among the performing arts. Anthropologist Jennifer Robertson, for example, explains how androgyny has identified actors in Takarazuka — a Japanese all-female musical theatre — who perform both male and female gender roles, without being restricted within them (Robertson, 1998, p. 48). Picking up from Butler (1990, p. 136), Robertson uses the term androgyny as a body surface policy that,

...involves the scrambling of gender markers – clothes, cosmetics, gestures, speech patterns, and so on – in a way that both challenges the stability of a sex-gender system premised on a male (masculine) / female (feminine) dichotomy and also retains the components of that dichotomy, now juxtaposed or combined” (Robertson, 1998, p. 47).

This is also often the case in visual kei where, if not for certain characteristics such as voice, gender differentiation is very difficult precisely because of the use of clothing and make-up, gestures, and characterization of the performer in a character also maintained offstage. In this sense, the androgynous character is not a masked part of the musical performance, of the show only. Black is not just a color. Accessories are not just accessories. Make-up is not just cosmetics. They become a uniform, a way of being sociologically defined, that is, of asserting one’s identity and belonging as a group. It is about being included in a sub-culture, alternative to that Surface Culture. In visual kei one finds an environment that allows the individual to express his or her identity, without necessarily having to be alone. However, it is not about conforming to what society demands. What visual kei in its musical and visual component does is to violently and aggressively, but at the same time wistfully, reclaim a space within that world within which it is inscribed. It thus offers alternatives to dualistic categorizations of gender, to the idea of how the individual should be, or to simply conforming or not conforming to Culture. By becoming a musical genre, it offers an aural medium to have one’s voice heard and to become a media for all those people who need to be heard. Becoming a visual genre offers a means to expose one’s unique identity, but without being ostracized from a group. Since fashion is not tied to a single trend, anyone can be visual. Since it is not tied to a single musical style, any auditory expression can be valid. Visual kei is a sub-culture capable of including all those identities that feel excluded from Mass Culture by unifying them through a sense of belonging, but not limiting their personal expressions.

6. Narratives: from fable to hyperreality

The use of visibility is not only related to fashion, but includes real narratives that bring the genre and performances closer to theater. Narratives, fashion, and music come together as in an opera in which musicians also become actors. even away from the stage. This is obviously not a general character of the genre, which — as specified — would be difficult and wrong to define properly according to standardized canons. However, theatrical characterization is a peculiarity present in several artists that

deserves consideration. In the case of some artists, these are in fact identity narratives. The artist is known only by his or her stage name, and for the audience the character in the narrative is the only one known. Within the band, the roles of each individual member are not limited to the musical role and the instrument used. Relationships and networks are thus created within the band between fictitious characters, but they are important both in the everyday life of the band and in the narrative associated with it. Narratives may involve a relationship between a character who characterizes masculinity and one who represents femininity instead. Not necessarily corresponding to the biological sex of the artist. This intimate relationship is not necessarily carried out outside the artists' hyper-reality. Other artists choose more elaborate settings, as in the case of the band Amiliyah. In this band, the artists perform the role of princesses and monsters, presenting a fairy tale-like narrative (*monogatari*) to be interpreted through images and sounds, in a stage that is on the borderline between music, a play, and a storybook in drawings. On their official website (www.amiliyah.com ret. 20/06/2022), members are introduced as the character they play. In the profile of kimi, the group's vocalist who plays a princess from the Land of Light, her background narrates that "she was hidden in a high tower to escape from the invading Dark Land, but was rescued by monsters after being imprisoned for a long time due to the destruction of the Land of Light".

The same goes for the other band members, each with his or her own narrative and background. These narratives are not limited to the website, but are also visible in live performances and music videos, or gadgets related to the band. It is thus a hyper-reality of a fantasy world created by the merging of music, narratives and images, that is embedded in real world. Paraphrasing the Italian semiologist and philosopher Umberto Eco, in visual key the subjects' "imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake; where the boundaries between game and illusion are blurred, the art museum is contaminated by the freak show, and falsehood is enjoyed in a situation of "fullness," of horror vacui" (Eco, 1986, pp. 14-15). In visual kei, the art museum becomes the stage, the freak show becomes the performance, and the horror vacui all those phenomena that characterize the artists in every aspect of the show. In visual kei, however, subjects are not incapable of distinguishing between the real world and fiction. It is a matter of choice. The moment of performance is simply an escape from the real world, a moment of freedom. The side narrative simply helps the audience to become more immersed in the performance, not only by giving each performer his or her musical role, but also by sympathizing with one character over another because of how that character is portrayed on stage. In this musical performance, sometimes the music takes a back seat to the stronger narrative. By doing this you become a virtual part of the performance.

Connections are made between the audience and the artists following the dynamics of the narrative. If one character in the band, argues with another, that's when fans take sides, each with their own reasons. You root for romance between characters, as if it were a manga or a novel, and not musicians in the role of actors during a staging. Not that true romances cannot arise between band members. It happens, however, that it is the narrative that provides for a romantic relationship and that, as in a movie, this is portrayed by the characters. That is why it is difficult to separate the narrative and musical components in visual kei. Of course, the music is there, and often the artists are technically very gifted, so much so that the music alone is very valuable. However, the visual and narrative part offers something more to the whole performance, making it more enveloping even in those interludes where there is no music.

7. Lyrics: expression of identity through shared symbols

Another important aspect of the genre is lyrics. Again, there is often an agreement of this element with visuality and narrative, for example the band Onmyō-za. Despite not always being associated with visual kei, it has visual and narrative peculiarities in agreement with the lyrics. The name Onmyō-za is composed of two words, anemia indicating the principles of Yin and Yang, and the suffix -za which can mean “gathering”. All the members use names related to cats. The band’s catchphrase is “yōkai heavy metal”, with the word yōkai indicating monsters or supernatural creatures from Japanese mythology. According to their official website, yōkai reflects all kinds of human emotions, and this defines their narrative. This catchphrase also suggests the mixing of different traditions such as the syncretism of heavy metal, influenced by artists such as Judas Priest or Dio, and elements of Japanese folk music, emphasized by the vocal style of vocalist Kuroneko. From the very beginning, the band has used the kimono as its “uniform”. The make-up is not really marked, and their black color, long hairstyle has never changed much during the over 20 years of career. This appearance reflects their vision and the connection to classic Japan.

The album covers also feature elements related to Japanese mythology. For example, the 12th and 13th albums, called “Fujin Kaiko” and “Raijin Sousei”, respectively, and released simultaneously on Sept. 12, 2014, have as their cover a reference to the famous painting by artist Tawaraya Sōtatsu (1570-1640) “Wind God and Thunder God” belonging to the Kennin-ji Zen temple in Kyoto. This part of narrative, visuality and music is well translated into the lyrics of the songs. The themes covered do not skimp on references to Asian mythology. Many of the songs use yōkai precisely as a metaphor for human emotions. Themes related to (non-Japanese) mythology are also present in the lyrics of some European heavy metal bands. Thus, the choice of themes related to Asian and Japanese mythology comprises a conjunction between the musical and cultural traditions that characterize the band. The narrative is complemented by the language chosen for the lyrics, one of the band’s main traits. In fact, the lyrics mostly are not written in current Japanese, but in an archaic form of the language, also made up of linguistic borrowings from Chinese. Some lyrics include also the use of Iyo dialect, a dialect from Ehime prefecture, birthplace of some members. This makes the lyrics particularly complex to understand, but at the same time succeeds in emphasizing the connection to classical and traditional Japan and evoking a sense of nostalgia in the audience. Clearly, the band’s music can be enjoyed even without understanding the meaning or exquisite linguistic style of the lyrics. Yet, the combination of the modern sounds with the lyrics in classical Japanese or dialect allows the audience to have an experience akin to a temporal ubiquity in which they feel they are living as much in a remote and long-gone time as in the present.

Song lyrics, as well as poems, have a strong emotional impact on people. This is because they say what the listener would like to say, or they tell of events with which one feels a direct connection; they speak of dreams and hopes, but also of disappointments and sadness. It is not only about the

use of language but also the symbolism within the texts that are capable of evoking emotions. This symbolism obviously makes more sense to that audience that shares cultural traits with the artist, thus the ability to interpret such symbols correctly. In Japan, for example, the symbolism of flowers, already well attested within classical poetry, is often used in lyrics as a metaphor for life. The lyrics of the song “last letter” (1999) by Pierrot open with these words:

*Mabuta ni ukanda kimi no haigo ni usubeni no hana ga saiteita/sugu ni iroasete kuchite ikunoni
an'nani mo inochimoyashite*

Behind your image that comes alive again in my memory, a crimson flower has bloomed./
Though at once the color fades-out and shrivels, its life burns so much

Although the translation cannot perfectly convey the symbolism, the idea of the flower whose color quickly fades and withers is a reference to the exaltation of the ephemeral nature of life. In addition, the idea of burning recalls the Japanese flower that most represents the metaphor of life, namely the cherry blossom, which although it has a really short life span, in that time “lives intensely”. The name of the song “last letter” also suggests the idea of life fading away. The music video puts the lyrics into a visual narrative. The band’s signature color scheme is dark, blackish-green, black and gray. There are then elements of light and pink that act as contrast and background. Many of these elements are cherry blossoms. Like the lyrics, the music, by contrasting the hard sounds of hard and gothic rock, with a sad melody, it helps to recreate that contrast between something that fades away and something that lives on in a resolute way. Here, each element helps reinforce another, and music, lyrics, narration and visuals work together to express emotions.

Symbolism, as mentioned, makes more sense for those who share symbolic meanings with the artist. This also allows for a different kind of emotional arousal. As Maja Djikic suggests:

[...] lyrics are often limited to verbal content of a personal nature that can often give us a stimulus with which we can identify or contrast ourselves, further cementing whatever ideas we have about our own personality. Although we still may experience emotion (e.g., remembering our own heartbreak when listening to a song about one), this kind of emotion would only help reinforce the views we have about our own personality. (Djikic, 2011, p. 239)

Visual kei with some of its lyrics, reinforces the image of a romantic world. The themes range from sadness, nihilism, morbidity to tragedy and melancholy. They thus represent those emotions and personalities of a Romantic world not totally compatible with the positivism and rationality of the modern world. And it is perhaps for this reason that those who find their personalities within the world of visual kei, both on the side of the artist and the audience, are those people who feel isolated from the Popular Cultural context. Visual kei thus becomes an alternative genre for those people who do not find in Culture and music, visuality, and the narratives that distinguish it, a point of emotional contact. Visual kei, being music and visuality, becomes a powerful medium to be able to cry out one’s discomfort and to be able to claim the need for some romance in one’s life.

8. Conclusion

In this paper, three key elements of a widespread musical genre in Japan were explored in a cursory form. It was explained how, despite being considered a musical genre, visual kei is in truth a collection of musical influences that find different developments in different bands. Music, despite being the key aspect, is not the only key to interpreting the genre. The artists' narrative, the visual components and the textual elements of the genre all contribute in reinforcing the image and the symbolism being communicated by the artist. Although it is difficult and certainly wrong to generalize about elements of the genre, one can definitely see a romantic component in the genre. The themes of the lyrics pick up from the world of the romantic literature, dealing with emotions, often in a very poetic fashion and with an idealization of the death and the supernatural. It differs with the genres such as pop, which treat emotions from a more realistic view.

It is perhaps for this reason that the genre, with its narratives, fashion and music, becomes the aggressive voice of an alternative scene, which claims the power of emotions. It does so by shouting, it does so by talking about death and melancholy, it does so with looks with a strong chromatic and stylistic impact, and it does so through narratives that break out of the normality of the Culture in which these voices are inscribed, but in which they do not recognize themselves. A subject does not need to be a musician to communicate anything in the visual kei environment. The visual part is more than enough. Not only those who are artists are part of this world, but also the audience who in the artists' themes and narratives recognize a familiar voice, a common theme. Visual kei is a sub-culture, but an inclusive sub-culture, capable of attracting all those people who feel excluded from Popular Culture. And within this sub-culture, those who are unable to make music can still communicate their thoughts, through the poetics of some lyrics copied on social media, through the use of fashion visuals, or even their own corporeality. One can do this through the narrative of one's life, which although it may be seen by many as a fictitious character, is in truth an intimate expression of one self.

The symbolism within this musical and visual genre is shared by all people who feel part of this world. For this reason, not all society will understand these narratives, this visuality or poetics. Just as not everyone understands music. But within the group that forms the sub-culture, where symbolism is shared, each visuality and narrative finds its space, its interpretations, making each subject who in music is audience, a possible subject as an artist. The music then is simply the perfect aural background to the genre's mix of narrative, visuality and textuality. And it is a powerful and poetic background, capable through music and words, of reclaiming a place in the world for those who feel excluded from it.

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