Hybrid Spectacle: Staging Cultural Fusion and Gender Performativity in Visual Kei

Wenqi Jia

MU518 History of Japanese Popular Music (Spring 2025)

Instructor: Makoto Harris Takao

Submission Date: May 9, 2025

Final Word Count: 4,936

Abstract

This paper examines the aesthetic logic of Visual Kei, a performance-driven genre in Japanese popular music known for its elaborate makeup, theatrical costuming, and hybrid musical arrangements. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the study analyzes how Visual Kei artists construct affective meaning through the recombination of traditional Japanese aesthetics and Western subcultural motifs. Through close readings of performances by X Japan, Malice Mizer, and others, the paper demonstrates how cultural references, bodily gestures, and sonic layering operate together to create stylized and unstable performance identities. Rather than interpreting these visual and sonic forms as symbolic supports for identity, the paper treats them as meaning-producing systems. It argues that Visual Kei is best understood as a hybrid theatrical practice where identity, gender, and cultural memory are performed through contrast, exaggeration, and aesthetic tension.

I. Introduction

Visual Kei is a distinctive phenomenon in Japanese popular music that brings together sound, visual style, and identity through highly theatrical live performances. Characterized by elaborate costumes, striking makeup, and a wide range of musical influences, Visual Kei goes beyond flamboyant appearance to construct a layered aesthetic that blends traditional Japanese arts with Western glam rock, gothic fantasy, and classical sensibilities. Through immersive staging and expressive physicality, it becomes a genre in which identity is represented and actively performed.

While existing scholarships often focus on Visual Kei's subcultural affiliations or its gender-transgressive tendencies, this paper highlights the genre's aesthetic construction as a hybrid performance language. It asks how performers combine elements from kabuki theater, Takarazuka gender stylization, glam rock fashion, and classical instrumentation to create cohesive yet fluid identities on stage. This paper analyzes selected performances and music videos from GACKT, Malice Mizer, and X Japan, exploring how hybrid aesthetics take shape through costume, gesture, stage design, and musical layering.

The analysis draws on Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity and Judith Butler's theory of performativity to examine how meaning is produced through the interaction of visual reference and embodied expression. Ultimately, this paper argues that Visual Kei should be understood not just as a space for rebellion or gender play, but as a complex mode of cultural and aesthetic synthesis that challenges fixed notions of identity through continuous visual and sonic performance.

II. Literature and Theoretical Framework

Scholarly discussions of Visual Kei have primarily focused on its role within Japanese youth subcultures and its negotiation of gender norms. Ken McLeod (2013) situates Visual Kei within a broader field of cultural resistance, viewing it as a response to Japan's social stagnation and rigid gender expectations. He argues that the genre offers both artists and audiences a symbolic space to experiment with alternative identities, using visual excess and theatricality as tools for subcultural differentiation. This analysis resonates with broader critiques of 1990s masculinity in Japan, particularly as economic decline and social precarity unsettled normative gender roles (Dasgupta 2009). Framed against Japan's shifting identity in the global music

landscape (Bourdaghs 2012), this rebellion is both inwardly reflective and outwardly stylized. In this view, Visual Kei functions as a form of rebellion, challenging dominant narratives through aesthetic deviance and fluid self-presentation.

This emphasis on resistance and transgression has been foundational in understanding Visual Kei's cultural significance. However, it often treats visual and musical elements as secondary expressions of identity politics but not as meaning-making systems in their own right. As this paper will argue, the aesthetic strategies employed by Visual Kei performers are not merely decorative but actively shape the affective and symbolic dimensions of performance.

A significant strand of scholarship examines how Visual Kei draws upon Japan's theatrical traditions of stylized gender performance, particularly those developed in kabuki and the Takarazuka Revue. Adrienne Johnson (2020) explores how Visual Kei performers engage in two distinct forms of gender expression: onnagata/josō, which adopts feminine-coded presentation, and "gender free," which fluidly disrupts gendered boundaries. Through close attention to both stage performance and social media presence, she shows how these modes construct ambiguous yet legible personas that challenge normative gender frameworks. As Jennifer Robertson (1998) notes in her study of Takarazuka, such theatricalized gender performances operate within tightly controlled aesthetic codes, suggesting that Visual Kei may draw not only aesthetic inspiration but also performance logics rooted in these traditions. In these theatrical forms, gender is not a reflection of inner identity but a codified performance that is rehearsed, symbolic, and often deliberately exaggerated. Johnson situates Visual Kei's gender performance within a longer tradition of theatricalized ambiguity, showing how gestures, costumes, and vocal affect become means of enacting femininity as surface performance. This logic of symbolic ambiguity also

connects Visual Kei to other Japanese subcultural forms, such as Boys' Love manga, where androgyny and gender fluidity provide narrative and emotional complexity (Welker 2006).

This lineage-based perspective reframes Visual Kei's gender aesthetics not as expressions of Western-style queerness or androgyny, but as extensions of Japan's own traditions of performative ambiguity. It emphasizes the need to read gender through culturally embedded modes of theatrical embodiment instead of binary identity categories. However, like McLeod, Johnson's analysis primarily centers on what is being subverted or reproduced, with less attention to how these subversions are materially realized through the aesthetic interplay of visual design, musical arrangement, and embodied performance.

To address this analytical gap, this study integrates existing scholarship with a dual theoretical framework: Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. These frameworks treat aesthetic forms not as symbolic ornamentation, but as active mechanisms through which meaning is produced via staged contradiction, sensory layering, and embodied repetition.

Bhabha's notion of the "third space" (1994) challenges binary models of cultural exchange by proposing that hybrid forms do not simply merge existing traditions. Contrastively, they generate new meaning through processes of negotiation, displacement, and creative recomposition. In the context of Visual Kei, this framework clarifies how kabuki-inspired gestures, samurai motifs, and traditional instrumentation are recontextualized within a visual and sonic field shaped by Western glam, gothic, and classical aesthetics. The result is not a collage, but a distinct performative language that emerges through friction and synthesis.

Butler's theory of performativity (1990) offers a complementary lens for understanding how gender operates within this system. Gender is not treated as an internal essence, but as something enacted through iterative, stylized acts involving dress, movement, voice, and physical presence. In Visual Kei, masculinity and femininity are not fixed categories but are actively performed through exaggeration, ambiguity, and theatrical spectacle. This perspective is especially useful for analyzing how gendered meaning is staged, destabilized, and re-inscribed through performance.

The same framework also helps clarify Visual Kei's paradoxical status within Japanese society. As Munia (2014) suggests, difference in Japan is often tolerated as surface-level display rather than fully integrated or embraced. Visual Kei's flamboyant aesthetics may therefore function as a cultural outlet for ambiguity, one that is visually celebrated but structurally contained. These frameworks collectively shift the analytic focus from what is represented to how representation is enacted through costume, gesture, movement, and sound. The following sections apply this lens to performances by major Visual Kei artists from the 1980s to 2000s, examining how their stages construct cultural memory, identity, and affect through layered aesthetics.

III. Staging Hybrid Aesthetics: Visual, Bodily, and Sonic Performance

III.1 Hybrid Aesthetics in Makeup and Costume: From Kabuki Whiteface to Rococo and Punk

Visual Kei's visual language emerges from the fusion of aesthetic codes across time and culture (Bourdaghs 2012). Its most striking expressions appear in costume, makeup, and hairstyling, drawing from three major sources: traditional Japanese theatrical forms, Western aristocratic fantasy, and modern subcultures like punk and glam rock. Visual Kei does not

resolve these references into a single unified style. Instead, it thrives on their tension, producing a layered aesthetic where identity is continuously constructed through contrast and artifice.

III.1.1. Japanese Theatrical Aesthetics: Kabuki as Visual Code

One of the most culturally resonant influences on Visual Kei makeup is the whiteface tradition of kabuki theater (*shironuri*, 白塗り). Unlike Western clown or corpse-paint aesthetics, which emphasize absurdity, horror, or grotesquery[1], kabuki's shironuri conveys ideas of nobility, purity, and elevated character. Rooted in Heian court beauty ideals and developed through Edo-period performance conventions, kabuki makeup served both practical and symbolic functions. It enhanced visibility under low lighting conditions while visually distinguishing heroic, supernatural, or high-status roles. This logic continues in Visual Kei, where whiteface often suggests aesthetic intensity, emotional detachment, or ritualized identity.

Many Visual Kei performers incorporate stylistic elements similar to *kumadori* (隈取), kabuki's codified face painting system. They use sharp eye lines, angular contouring, and vivid accents to transform the face into a stage. One notable case is X Japan, whose early-stage appearance included mane-like hair and high-contrast eye makeup. Their look visually resembles the classic kabuki archetype of *Renjishi* (連獅子), the lion spirit. Although likely jointly shaped by Western glam rock influences, their visual style shares formal traits with kabuki. These parallels suggest that traditional theatrical codes remain active in Visual Kei, not necessarily through direct quotation, but through cultural memory and visual convergence.

[1] Malice Mizer frequently employed whiteface makeup, especially Mana, whose look aligns more with European aristocratic fantasy and Gothic stillness than with kabuki's symbolic logic.

Some other artists make this connection more intentionally. Golden Bomber's drummer Darvish Kenji wears full whiteface that, while comic in tone, still follows the structural logic of kabuki makeup. The Kabuki Rocks has drawn more directly from kabuki, incorporating its costumes, movement vocabulary, and narrative themes into their performances. In these examples, white makeup functions not as neutral paint, but as a historically loaded visual sign, enabling layered identity play across cultural registers.

Figure 1. Visual Kei artists referencing kabuki aesthetics. From left to right: Toshi (X Japan) with high-contrast makeup and stylized spiked hair; a kabuki actor in *Renjishi* lion spirit makeup; Darvish Kenji (Golden Bomber) in mid-transition kabuki makeup; and Kabuki Rocks integrating full kabuki costume and face paint into rock performance.

III.1.2 Fantasy and Decadence: Western Aristocratic Influence

Another signature aspect of Visual Kei is its appropriation of the visual vocabulary of European aristocracy to construct elaborate stage identities. This influence is most visible in their use of powdered whiteface, curled or elaborate hairstyles, corseted bodices, lace trims, brocade fabrics, and religious motifs like crucifixes and roses. These elements do not aim for historical realism but assemble a fantasy of decadent nobility or vampires, suspended between beauty and ruin.

Even in Visual Kei's early years, such elements appeared. YOSHIKI of X Japan wore lace-trimmed blouses, sheer fabrics, and baroque accessories, paired with stylized blond hair and pale

makeup. Malice Mizer brought this aesthetic to maturity. The band's members often appeared in white foundation makeup reminiscent of 18th-century powdered faces, paired with symmetrical, doll-like contouring and heavily stylized brows. Their hair was sculpted into voluminous forms, resembling baroque wigs or mourning silhouettes. Costumes combined corsetry, crinolines, ruffled cuffs, and velvet cloaks, creating a visual world that echoes both French court fashion and Gothic romanticism.

GACKT, following his time in Malice Mizer, retained many of these visual motifs in his early solo work, in a more minimalist register. His appearance frequently involved sharply contoured faces, slicked or center-parted hair with subtle volume, and tailored garments featuring velvet, leather, and liturgical details.

Later groups, such as Lareine, Versailles and Raphael, further codified this visual language into a fully staged fantasy. Their members adopted long curled hair, militarized rococo jackets, ornate chokers, and angel-style wings, crafting a look that merged romanticism with metal theatricality. The consistent use of aristocratic dress codes across these artists underscores how Western fantasy served as a key visual archive for Visual Kei's experimentation with beauty, power, and artifice, eventually influencing performers beyond the genre itself.

Figure 2. Malice Mizer, Versailles, and Raphael exemplify Visual Kei's aristocratic aesthetic. Outfits feature corsetry, lace, velvet, and baroque silhouettes, drawing from Rococo and Gothic styles to stage fantasy identities of decadence and spectacle.

III.1.3 Subcultural Styling and Rebellious Identity Formation

From its inception, Visual Kei has drawn heavily from Western subcultural aesthetics, especially those rooted in youth rebellion, gender nonconformity, and theatrical excess. Among the earliest cited influences were KISS and David Bowie, both acknowledged by pioneers such as YOSHIKI and hide. These styles offered early performers a visual vocabulary for performing identity through distortion, exaggeration, and surface intensity. Smudged eyeliner, asymmetrical hair, distressed fabrics, and accessories functioned not only as stylistic choices but as visible acts of non-alignment with mainstream norms. These forms fused glam, punk, goth, and bohemian motifs into expressive, unstable personas.

Among the most distinctive early figures, hide of X Japan developed a hybrid style that drew from glam rock hair architecture, stylized theatrical makeup, and bohemian costume elements. Layered headscarves, ethnic-patterned robes, and beaded jewelry evoked the psychedelic fashion of the 1960s and 70s, while his hand-painted guitars extended this aesthetic into a total visual identity. In contrast, BUCK-TICK offered a more restrained and stylized approach: Atsushi Sakurai's fitted leather pants, long tailored jackets, and sculpted hair drew from post-punk and New Wave fashion, emphasizing silhouette over ornamentation. His dark, contoured makeup and minimalistic coolness projected theatricality without chaos, aligning Visual Kei with European goth and industrial lineages. Later artists embraced more confrontational styles. Kyo of DIR EN GREY adopted smeared makeup, partial head shaving, and costumes resembling medical or trauma attire. Drawing influence from shock rock figures like Marilyn Manson and Slipknot, Kyo expanded Visual Kei's vocabulary to include horror, abjection, and anti-aesthetic rebellion.

Across these artists, makeup, hair, and costume function not merely as decoration but as instruments of subcultural expression. They enable performative identities that resist mainstream legibility and draw power from global countercultural aesthetics.

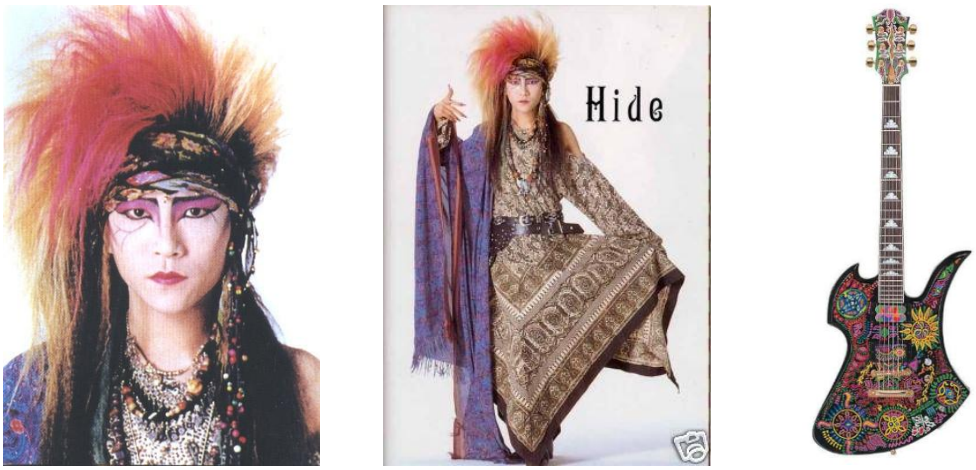

Figure 3. hide (X Japan) in a hybrid style combining kabuki-inspired makeup with psychedelic and bohemian fashion. His headscarf, robe, and hand-painted guitar evoke 1960s counterculture and visual excess.

Figure 4. Visual contrasts within Visual Kei aesthetics. From left to right: BUCK-TICK's minimalist post-punk styling; early Dir en grey with exaggerated color and makeup; and Kyo with horror-influenced distortion and medical motifs.

III.1.4 Layered Juxtaposition as Aesthetic Logic

What sets Visual Kei apart from Western subcultural style evolution is its refusal to operate through stylistic rejection. Whereas punk or grunge defined themselves by negating earlier aesthetics, Visual Kei embraces contradiction. Its logic is accumulative but not

oppositional, allowing radically different styles to coexist within the same performative space. A vivid early example is X Japan, where YOSHIKI's towering punk-inspired spikes appeared alongside hide's layered, psychedelic bohemianism—two styles that would have clashed in Western subcultural history, but here formed a shared visual language.

This model of visual construction, in which punk, glam, kabuki, and baroque references appear simultaneously, forms the backbone of Visual Kei's hybrid identity. As Fracchia (2022) observes, Visual Kei's aesthetic system integrates narrative, costume, and symbolic styling to produce identities that are not merely expressive but structurally performative. These visuals function as a cohesive subcultural language.

III.2 Performing the Body: Gender, Gesture, and Theatricality

If makeup and costume provide the first layer of Visual Kei's visual code, these visuals come to life through the body, through posture, movement, and expressive presence. Live performance is where the adorned body becomes a site of meaning, producing affect and ambiguity. This section explores how Visual Kei artists use bodily gestures, gender presentation, and theatrical conventions to construct dynamic, performative identities. The analysis unfolds in two parts. The first focuses on how gender is played with and destabilized through visual and physical expression. The second considers how stage movement and choreographic choices contribute to the genre's dramatic force.

III.2.1 Gender Performativity and Androgynous Play

In traditional Japanese theater, gender is not expressed as an internal identity but as a codified visual and gestural performance. In kabuki, male actors specializing in female roles *onnagata* (女形), communicate femininity through measured steps, lowered gazes, and softened

vocal tones. Similarly, in the all-female Takarazuka Revue, *otokoyaku* (男役) enact masculinity through widened stances, clipped speech, and controlled facial expressions. These are not mimetic portrayals, but symbolic embodiments built on culturally legible codes. This performance logic provides a conceptual foundation for Visual Kei, where gender presentation operates through costume, posture, and affective gesture rather than realist representation.

Takarazuka's influence extends beyond theater into the broader field of pop aesthetics. Its iconic adaptation of *The Rose of Versailles* (ベルサイユのばら)—a musical based on the French Revolution-era manga—has become a cornerstone of its repertoire and a key visual reference for *tanbi-kei* (耽美系) Visual Kei bands such as Malice Mizer, Versailles, AMADEUS, and Raphael. YOSHIKI also adopted this aesthetic in the 1990s, appearing with long curled blond hair, pearl necklaces, tiaras, and ornate outfits evocative of Versailles-style femininity[2]. These artists draw heavily from their aesthetic: military jackets softened by lace, romantic silhouettes, hybridized gender styling, and youthful androgynous faces that echo the *bishōnen* (美少年) ideal.

In both Takarazuka and Visual Kei, gender is not mimetically imitated but theatrically constructed. O*tokoyaku* is not a literal male impersonator, but a distilled masculine ideal performed through a female body; similarly, gender ambiguity in Visual Kei can be understood not through Western models of queer subversion, but through a domestic performance tradition in which gender functions as an aesthetic surface that is layered, transformed, and consumed. Foreign visual codes, such as Rococo or Victorian motifs, are re-encoded through Japanese

[2] Interestingly, although not originally part of the movement, *Toshihiko Takamizawa* (高見沢俊彦) adopted Versailles-inspired imagery in the 2000s, standing out as the only member of THE ALFEE to embody a distinctly Visual Kei aesthetic.

paradigms of theatrical presentation, generating a localized fantasy language of sentiment, eroticism, and visual fluidity.

Beyond solo gender play, Visual Kei performances frequently stage homoerotic or romantically charged “yaoi-coded” interactions between band members. These gestures include lingering gazes, hand-holding, shared microphones, a piggyback ride, or suggestive touches. Those are not declarations of identity but stylized disruptions of heteronormative expectations. They deepen the genre’s investment in theatrical ambiguity, allowing gender and desire to function as affective spectacles, compared to stable, binary categories.

III.2.2 Staging the Body as a Site of Aesthetic Tension

Visual Kei performance frequently stages the body as a site of aesthetic tension, where movement, stillness, and spatial arrangement become tools for constructing theatrical affect. Artists use the body not to convey natural emotion, but to disrupt, stylize, and charge the atmosphere with symbolic contradiction, coordinated with sound, costume, and lighting to produce an immersive spectacle. In Malice Mizer’s performances, the stage often resembles a Gothic cathedral bathed in cold lighting, invoking European vampire mythologies. Band members are positioned like lifeless dolls, remain motionless for long stretches before abruptly animating in synchronized bursts. These mechanical transitions foreground the artificiality of movement, rejecting organic expression in favor of ritualized spectacle. Such choreography renders the body uncanny and theatrical.

Other artists exploit bodily contradiction more explosively. YOSHIKI, for instance, appears shirtless with platinum blond curls and black lace tights, garments traditionally coded as feminine, while engaging in highly masculine-coded rock gestures such as pounding drums,

smashing instruments, or unleashing fire extinguishers. On stage, his body oscillates between gendered codes, creating visual friction without resolving it. This simultaneous inhabiting softness and aggression produces friction that unsettles binary expectations. The body becomes both adorned and violent, beautiful and destructive. This tension lies at the heart of Visual Kei's physical language.

This aesthetic logic extends even to moments that evoke eroticism. Malice Mizer has incorporated latex outfits and riding crops as SM-coded props, transforming rhythmic whip strikes into percussive accents[3]. These gestures are not designed to titillate but to heighten sensory tension and parody erotic conventions. A parallel can be found in hide's solo performances[4], which at times featured near-nude female dancers climbing cages and encircling him on stage. Yet these scenes are carefully stripped of erotic charge: the dancers avoid eye contact, limit physical contact, and move with stylized, ritualistic precision. They were members of *Tomoe Shizune & Hakutōbō* (友恵しづねと白桃房)[5], a troupe rooted in the experimental *ankoku butoh* (暗黒舞踏) tradition descended from Hijikata Tatsumi. Butoh's emphasis on abstraction, bodily distortion, and surreal presence reframes these interactions not as sexual display, but as confrontations with spectacle itself. These collaborations between Visual Kei and butoh recontextualize eroticism as aesthetic artifact—estranged, uncanny, and deliberately unstable. Desire is no longer offered for consumption but rendered as symbolic gesture. In this

---

[3] Malice Mizer, "薔薇に彩られた悪意と悲劇の幕開け." (2000 live), YouTube, accessed May 6, 2025, https://youtu.be/KTKNgiTxtUU?si=xFOonBNKWt_gADMW&t=2140.

[4] X Japan, "*日本直撃カウントダウン X JAPAN RETURNS*." (1993 Live), YouTube, accessed May 6, 2025, https://youtu.be/PxhE77VGmDQ?si=0NROO0K4BrVWow0R&t=80.

[5] 週プレ NEWS. 2018. "永眠から 20 年となる今年は、お台場の野外で 2 日間にわたるメモリアルライブの開催…" *週プレ NEWS*. April 25, 2018. https://wpb.shueisha.co.jp/news/entertainment/2018/04/25/103550/.

way, Visual Kei incorporates avant-garde dance into its theatrical lexicon, expanding the expressive range of its stagecraft.

III.3 Sonic Hybridity and Emotional Maximalism

While Visual Kei's visual language is marked by theatrical hybridity, its sonic world is equally constructed through collision, layering, and expressive excess. The genre's instrumentation often begins from a Western rock template—electric guitars, bass, drums, keyboards, and vocals—but expands far beyond it. Bands such as X Japan, Luna Sea, and Malice Mizer incorporate classical and traditional instruments as structural tools for staging affect. These sonic hybrids mirror the genre's visual bricolage and become essential in crafting its emotionally charged, immersive atmosphere. X Japan's compositions frequently integrate extended piano solos, not merely as interludes but as emotional anchors within otherwise aggressive metal arrangements. YOSHIKI's dual role as pianist and drummer enables abrupt shifts between fragility and force, often within a single track. Similarly, Luna Sea has experimented with violin passages woven into their live sets, adding a lyrical, almost operatic texture. Malice Mizer takes this further, incorporating cello, contrabass, pipe organ, and various synthesizers to evoke both Baroque grandeur and gothic melancholy.

The most ambitious example is X Japan's *Art of Life*[6], which exemplifies this theatrical approach through long-form musical structure. This 29-minute piece is organized into distinct movements: it opens with a solo piano passage, expands into layered rock instrumentation, then suspends forward motion for a ten-minute piano solo before re-entering with intensified guitar and vocal

[6] X Japan, "*ART OF LIFE*.", YouTube, accessed May 8, 2025, https://youtu.be/qPKw_V_4pJI?si=DUxxAXf5OBRLDv7G.

segments. Rather than follow conventional song form, these transitions simulate emotional arcs: grief, rage, catharsis, closure. In live performance, lighting shifts and projected visuals accompany each phase, turning the music itself into a stage narrative. Here, musical form becomes a dramaturgical device, guiding the listener through an affective progression without reliance on lyrics alone.

These choices are not incidental. They reflect a deliberate pursuit of musical theatricality—an effort to stage sound as performance. In live shows, the transition from one affective register to another is often dramatized through instrumentation. For instance, in GACKT's performance of "Oasis"[7] begins with shamisen and taiko percussion, accompanied by back dancers dressed as hannya demons from Noh theatre, performing stylized movements inspired by kagura ritual dance. The ritualistic calm gradually escalates into the explosive energy of the rock arrangement, heightening the emotional arc of the set.

Malice Mizer employs a similar structure through different means. A performance might begin with choral harmonies or organ textures that simulate a cathedral-like soundscape. Strings and bells follow, laying a fragile, baroque atmosphere, before electric guitar and drums burst forth to destabilize it. These progressions do not simply mix genres—they stage genre collision as a narrative arc, drawing listeners through distinct emotional zones.

A reverse technique can be found where the integration of Japanese melodic forms is not merely symbolic but fully dramatized. A striking example appears in an X Japan live during the segment

[7] GACKT, "The Sixth Day & Seventh Night." (2004 live), YouTube, accessed May 6, 2025, https://youtu.be/OpqNuaZD080?si=uJLwKVZeIJgpyQKn.

"hide's Room."[8] The performance opens with the solemn chanting of gagaku *Azuma Asobi* (東遊 ~ 求子歌). As the traditional melody unfolds, a large white balloon slowly inflates on the darkened stage. Layer by layer, classical rock instrumentation begins to accompany the gagaku, intensifying the sonic texture without disrupting its ceremonial pacing. At the climax, just as the balloon reaches its full size, hide's voice joins the chant, echoing the original lyrics. The balloon then bursts, revealing hide in person and marking a dramatic shift. The gagaku melody is then taken up by guitar and bass, gradually evolving into a distorted rock adaptation of Sakura. This sequence uses contrast to amplify emotional tension and heighten theatrical impact.

A similar device appears in BUCK-TICK's 1992 live[9] Climax Together, during the performance of "Victims of Love." In the middle of the set, the band introduces instrumental interludes based on the folk melody of Sakura, rendered with electric guitar and rock percussion. These passages serve not only as evocations of cultural memory but also as affective intermissions—moments that suspend forward momentum and allow emotional atmosphere to swell. Here, sonic hybridity becomes a technique of emotional fermentation, intensifying theatrical effect through lingering contrast and delayed release.

These examples illustrate that sonic hybridity in Visual Kei is not just decorative but dramaturgical. Each musical shift serves a narrative purpose, guiding emotion like a stage cue. As with costume and choreography, sound is stylized to construct affect, making the concert itself a total theatrical event.

---

[8] X Japan, "*破滅に向かって*." (1992 Live), YouTube, accessed May 6, 2025, https://youtu.be/NlECv5r0K-Q.

[9] BUCK-TICK, "*Climax Together*." (1992 Live), YouTube, accessed May 6, 2025, https://youtu.be/Ea2fi4q4XwI?si=5KRuH5HN5SKMUDxB.

IV. From Style to System: Cultural Hybridity and Identity Construction in Visual Kei

Visual Kei constructs its hybrid identity through the convergence of visual spectacle, sonic design, and gendered embodiment. Rather than blending cultural elements into a seamless whole, the genre embraces aesthetic contrast and symbolic layering as its core expressive strategy. This process is not incidental but central to how meaning is generated in performance. Artists deliberately juxtapose traditional Japanese references with Western subcultural motifs, creating tension across costumes, movements, and musical structures. This interplay of friction and layering echoes Klaudia Adamowicz's (2014) reading of Visual Kei as a transcultural site, where proximity and fascination generate new meaning across aesthetic systems.

Visually, performers draw from kabuki makeup, aristocratic fantasy, and punk styling to create stylized personas that resist easy classification. These visual codes do not fuse into a single system, but remain in productive friction, forming what Bhabha (1994) calls a "third space" of cultural negotiation. On stage, bodies enact this hybridity through stylized gesture, posture, and presence. Gender is not presented as stable identity, but as a performative surface—rehearsed, exaggerated, and contextually fluid. Echoing Butler's concept of performativity (1990), masculinity and femininity are repeatedly invoked and destabilized through gesture, dress, and interaction.

Sonic elements reinforce this strategy. Music functions not as neutral accompaniment but as a tool for emotional modulation and symbolic collision. Performers such as GACKT and X Japan integrate shamisen, gagaku chanting, and taiko percussion into rock and metal frameworks, dramatizing affect through tempo shifts, tonal layering, and cultural contrast. As with costuming

and gesture, sonic hybridity operates as a deliberate aesthetic device that amplifies theatrical intensity and encodes cultural memory. It extends the logic of hybridity into auditory space.

Taken together, these modalities—visual, sonic, and gender—form a performance system in which hybridity is not simply thematic but structurally embedded. Visual Kei does not merely represent alternative identities; it enacts them through stylized excess, affective modulation, and culturally specific design. The genre invites audiences into a space where identity, emotion, and tradition are performed through contrast, repetition, and symbolic density. It is in layering that Visual Kei locates its expressive power.

V. Conclusion

Visual Kei is not simply a flamboyant musical subculture but a complex aesthetic system that fuses diverse cultural sources into a distinct mode of performance. Through layered costuming, stylized gestures, and hybrid sound design, it constructs a theatrical space where identity is assembled, refracted, and performed. By drawing on both Japanese theatrical traditions and Western fantasy aesthetics, Visual Kei artists create visual worlds that resist fixed categories and instead foreground artifice, ambiguity, and transformation.

This study has shown how Visual Kei performances do not just borrow from kabuki, Takarazuka, glam rock, or baroque iconography, but recombine them into a new symbolic language that operates across visual, sonic, and embodied dimensions. In doing so, they open a cultural “third space” where familiar signs are displaced and recontextualized, in line with Bhabha’s notion of hybridity. At the same time, gender in Visual Kei is enacted not as internal truth but as theatrical repetition, echoing Butler’s theory of performativity. Masculinity and femininity are destabilized

not through explicit rejection, but through their stylized exaggeration and fluid recomposition on stage.

By shifting focus from subcultural identity or gender politics alone to the aesthetic mechanics of performance, this paper has reframed Visual Kei as a deliberate practice of cultural synthesis. Its power lies in how it performs contradiction between tradition and modernity, beauty and distortion, intimacy and spectacle, and transforms that contradiction into affective experience. As such, Visual Kei invites us to reconsider how identity emerges through visual tension, symbolic layering, and staged ambiguity.

Bibliography

Cited Sources

Adamowicz, Klaudia. 2014. “Transculturality as a Method on the Example of Visual Kei.” In *Facing East: International Scholars on Japanese Culture*, edited by Kamila Sosnowska. Nowa Strona.

Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.

Bourdaghs, Michael K. 2012. *Sayonara Amerika, Sayonara Nippon: A Geopolitical Prehistory of J-Pop*. Columbia University Press.

Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.

Dasgupta, Romit. 2009. “The ‘Lost Decade’ of the 1990s and Shifting Masculinities in Japan.” *Culture, Society & Masculinity* 1 (1): 79–95. https://doi.org/10.3149/CSM.0101.79.

Fracchia, Roberto. 2022. “Visual Kei: Visuality, Narratives, and Textuality in a Musical Subculture.” *Religación: Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 7 (33): e210949. https://doi.org/10.46652/rgn.v7i33.949.

Johnson, Adrienne R. 2020. “Josō or ‘Gender Free’? Playfully Queer ‘Lives’ in Visual Kei.” *Asian Anthropology* 19 (2): 119–142. https://doi.org/10.1080/1683478X.2020.1756076.

McLeod, Ken. 2013. “Visual Kei: Hybridity and Gender in Japanese Popular Culture.” *Young* 21 (4): 309–325. https://doi.org/10.1177/110330881302100403.

Munia, Rafael. 2014. “Tolerating Difference: Japanese Experiences with Difference and Multiculturalism.” In *The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies 2014: Official Conference Proceedings*, 0083. IAFOR.

Robertson, Jennifer. 1998. *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan*. University of California Press.

Welker, James. 2006. “Beautiful, Borrowed, and Bent: ‘Boys’ Love’ as Girls’ Love in *Shōjo Manga*.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31 (3): 841–870. https://doi.org/10.1086/498987.

Consulted but Not Cited

Boles, Coleton. 2022. “Westernization and Its Effects on the Sound of Japan.” *Global Insight* 3: 22–28. https://doi.org/10.32855/globalinsight.2022.003.

Hashimoto, Miyuki. 2007. “Visual Kei Otaku Identity: An Intercultural Analysis.” *Intercultural Communication Studies* 16 (1): 87–99.

Inoue, Takako. 2003. “Constructing Male Aesthetics in Rock and Makeup: Gender Strategies by Musicians and Fans of Visual Rock in Japan.” In *Gender and Modernity: Perspectives from Asia and the Pacific*, edited by Yoko Hayami, Akio Tanabe, and Yumiko Tokita-Tanabe. Kyoto University Press.

Johnson, Adrienne R. 2019. “From Shōjo to Bangya(ru): Women and Visual Kei.” In *Shōjo across Media: Exploring ‘Girl’ Practices in Contemporary Japan*, edited by Jaqueline Berndt, Kazumi Nagaike, and Fusami Ogi. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-01485-8_13.

Malick, Mira Gayatri. 2023. *Modes of Play: Playwork and the Prosumption of Visual Kei*. PhD diss., Waseda University, Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies.

Stevens, Carolyn S. 2008. *Japanese Popular Music: Culture, Authenticity, and Power*. Routledge.

Media Content List

BUCK-TICK, “Climax Together.” (1992 Live), YouTube, accessed May 6, 2025, https://youtu.be/Ea2fi4q4XwI?si=5KRuH5HN5SKMUDxB.

GACKT, “The Sixth Day & Seventh Night.” (2004 live), YouTube, accessed May 6, 2025, https://youtu.be/OpqNuaZD080?si=uJLwKVZeIJgpyQKn.

Malice Mizer, “薔薇に彩られた悪意と悲劇の幕開け.” (2000 live), YouTube, accessed May 6, 2025, https://youtu.be/KTKNgiTxtUU?si=xFOonBNKWt_gADMW&t=2140.

X Japan, “ART OF LIFE.”, YouTube, accessed May 8, 2025, https://youtu.be/qPKw_V_4pJI?si=DUxxAXf5OBRLDv7G.

X Japan, “破滅に向かって.” (1992 Live), YouTube, accessed May 6, 2025, https://youtu.be/NlECv5r0K-Q.

X Japan, “日本直撃カウントダウン X JAPAN RETURNS.” (1993 Live), YouTube, accessed May 6, 2025, https://youtu.be/PxhE77VGmDQ?si=0NROO0K4BrVWow0R&t=80.

週プレ NEWS. 2018. “永眠から 20 年となる今年は、お台場の野外で 2 日間にわたるメモリアルライブの開催…” 週プレ NEWS. April 25, 2018. https://wpb.shueisha.co.jp/news/entertainment/2018/04/25/103550/.