

博士論文

Historicizing Visual *Kei* in Post-Bubble Japan: The Fluidity of Subculture in Consumer
Society

(ポストバブル日本におけるヴィジュアル系とサブカルチャーの歴史化：消費社会の
流動性)

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論文の内容の要旨

論文題目 Historicizing Visual *Kei* in Post-Bubble Japan: The Fluidity of Subculture in Consumer Society
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Visual *kei* is a music-based subculture that coalesced from a myriad of influences developing over the course of the 1980s in Japan. These included foreign glam, hair metal, and gothic elements, a local “band boom,” and the overall logic of the bubble culture itself. Bands BUCK-TICK and X [JAPAN] are often credited as originators, and the phrase “visual *kei*” itself is widely believed to have been coined in 1990. In the contemporary Japanese context, the phrase typically conjures images of extravagant costuming, brightly dyed and heavily teased hair, and theatrical music performances by flamboyantly dressed men. Anyone familiar with Japanese music in the 1990s likely recognizes big names such as SHAZNA, LUNA SEA, and GLAY. Beyond these general images, however, people may draw a blank, and often assume visual *kei* is simply a past fad.

Visual *kei*, however, remains an active subculture in 2022. Far from finished, it is home to a wide range of performances, expressions, and practices. Rather than an isolated, idiosyncratic, flashy yet hollow oddity, it fundamentally operates under the same logic as ‘mainstream’ post-bubble Japan and has survived due to its ability to adapt. For the purposes of this thesis, how visual *kei* has grown, developed, and changed throughout its now more than thirty-year history serves as central focus.

Through historicizing visual *kei*, I aim to both unpack its meanings as well as open a new window onto broader sociocultural trends in post-bubble Japan. As a subculture, it is important to note that visual *kei* is not separate from or resistant to its ‘mainstream’ context, but

rather a firmly established sub-section of it. Value and meaning are not created as somehow distinct from mainstream structures, but as a part of them—subcultural practice can only be understood in relation to its broader systems of value. In the case of post-bubble, postindustrial Japan, this necessarily means a system of consumerism. Neoliberal capitalism has come to dominate daily life in contemporary Japan, much as it has elsewhere in the world. It has come to a point where the situation can be described as neoliberal capitalist realism (Fisher 2009; Hassler-Forest 2012)—neoliberal capitalism is not only the dominating economic system, but it has bled into our everyday sense of self and practice, and we can no longer even imagine a world that exists outside of this system. Value and meaning that operate outside of these dominating discourses, in effect, cannot exist. Moreover, in the wake of the bubble culture, this consumption has become increasingly *visual* and necessarily conspicuous in nature—a logic that remains to the present day.

The present state can also be described through Zygmunt Bauman’s metaphor of “liquid modernity” (2000). Meaning has become loose and untethered, capable of flowing from one structure to another, but importantly, *still meaningful*. In this way subculture too, rather than being fundamentally resistant or oppositional to mainstream ideologies, can easily flow and adjust to accommodate or reject them as necessary, demonstrating an inherently flexible nature which I argue is best represented through the concept of *fluid subculture*. Through analyzing visual *kei* as a fluid subculture situated in the liquid context of contemporary, post-bubble Japan, I show how the various shifts and changes in practice and meaning throughout visual *kei*’s history have in fact been deeply ingrained within and respondent to these broader structures. Namely, the subculture of visual *kei*, representative of broader shifts in Japanese popular culture and society, can be interpreted as fluid, apolitical, and utterly predicated on the logic of consumption.

In the introduction, I begin with Japan's bubble economy, painting the background into which visual *kei* was born. I then set the stage, outlining both the theoretical structure and methodological framework for my research. Chapter 1 delves more deeply into these theoretical foundations, establishing my arguments for interpreting visual *kei* as 'subculture' and, more specifically, a *fluid* subculture firmly embedded within the consumerist neoliberal capitalist system of post-bubble Japanese society. In Chapter 2 I illustrate this point through an examination of present day visual *kei*, and how it is fundamentally tied into mainstream systems of value and consumerism, apolitical at heart and yet still meaningful and possessing an internal, subcultural logic that mirrors mainstream structures. Chapter 3 returns to an earlier point in visual *kei*'s history, examining the 'boom' of the subculture's mainstream popularity and discourses surrounding the increasingly idol-esque performers as connected to the contemporary mainstream "crisis of masculinity" (Iida 2005). This period in visual *kei*'s history and its situation in an increasingly precarious, hopeless Japan, is examined more in depth in Chapter 4 through the discourse surrounding the death of a subcultural icon. I bring the chapter back to the present through an examination of how the dead 'lives on' to this day, reduced to a brand to sell ever increasing products. Chapter 5 then focuses on how visual *kei* has become even more idol-esque from the mid-to-late 2010s with an emphasis on matter-of-course affective, immaterial labor. The affective contract between performers and audiences is examined as emblematic of broader shifts in the Japanese mediasphere, focusing on how creative workers are particularly vulnerable members of the Japanese precariat. In Chapter 6 I examine visual *kei*'s success overseas in the 2000s onwards, focusing specifically on the domestic discourse surrounding this success. I show how this success has been used to effectually relegitimize the subculture to the Japanese public, transforming something formerly 'dead' into yet another example of Japanese exemplariness, and even potential fodder for nationalist sentiments. I wrap up in the conclusion by reaffirming that visual *kei* is not

something that can be boxed in or pinned down, but instead flows and shifts in response to its broader mainstream environment and can only ever be understood as a part of this broader context. In short, this thesis demonstrates the enduring legacy of bubble culture in contemporary Japan through a historization of visual *kei*.

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Author's Note

Original Japanese terms are Romanized following the modified Hepburn system. Long vowels are marked by macrons, e.g., ā, ē, ī, ō, and ū. Place names and other terms that have been adopted into common English usage are written using the English spelling without italics, e.g., Tokyo and anime. All translations of original Japanese in the text are mine unless otherwise noted.

List of Terms

bandman	(バンドマン) general term for musical performers, including in visual <i>kei</i> ; has developed into the slang term “noodle” (<i>men</i> , 麺) used in casual settings, often as part of the phrase “shit noodle” or “shitty performer” (糞麺, <i>kusomen</i>)
bangya	(バンギャ) the general term for a passionate female fan of visual <i>kei</i> ; a shortened abbreviation of the words “band” (<i>bando</i> , バンド) and “girl” (<i>gyaru</i> , ギャル) alternate forms: <i>gya</i> , <i>bangyaru</i> , <i>o-bangya</i> (for older fans) male version: <i>bangya-o</i> (バンギャ男) or <i>gya-o</i> (ギャ男)
cheki	(チェキ) small, individual polaroid photos typically taken on the day of a live and sold for extra profit by the band or performer in question
live	(ライブ, ライヴ) a term used for live musical performance or concert
live house	(ライブハウス) a small venue for live performances, generally standing only
visual <i>kei</i>	(ヴィジュアル系, ビジュアル系) a Japanese musical subculture known for performers’ flamboyant theatrics, costuming, and makeup as well as focus on “unreality” (<i>higenjitsu</i> , 非現実) and world-building

Introduction: Visual *Kei* as a Window into Post-Bubble Japan

“That there’s nothing,	「何もないって事、そりゅあ
That just means anything’s possible	なんでもアリって事
You can go wherever you want to go”	君の行きたい場所は何処でも行ける」

-hide with Spread Beaver, “ROCKET DIVE,” *ROCKET DIVE* (1998)

The late 1980s and early 1990s in Japan—otherwise known as the period of the ‘bubble’ economy—was characterized by energy, excess, and rapid change. In hindsight, it was “crazy time,” characterized by exceptional yet ephemeral monetary wealth (Kingston 2013, 24). The ‘bubble’ refers to the “asset prices” bubble following the Plaza Accords in 1985, after which a series of economic decisions led to a drastic increase in prices with “too much money chasing too few assets.” Japanese companies “[a]wash in cash [...] invested heavily in expanding capacity and speculating in lands and stocks” (Kingston 2013, 14–15). Confidence in “Japan as Number One” (Vogel 1979) for the first time since the Second World War and the speculative potential for unbridled, positive social change bled into the zeitgeist over the course of the 1980s. Women were entering the workplace in record numbers (Lam 1992, 10–12), and Japan “was ostensibly the world’s most successful economy” (Kingston 2004, xiv). This sense of (potentially misplaced) *optimism* became a part of daily life and Japanese identity.¹ The Japanese “bright society” between 1986 and 1992 was dubbed the “bubble culture” by some, linking the cultural mindset to the exuberant, conspicuous consumption of the economic ‘bubble’ (Hara 2008, 250).

¹ Indeed, the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEO) implemented in 1986 and tied to the increase in the female labor force, for example, has been regularly critiqued as ineffectual for actually improving women’s situations (e.g., Lam 1992; Gelb 2000).

This cultural mindset led to the youth population at the turn of the decade becoming “immersed in a euphoric sense of self,” with the mass media promoting this positivity despite already existing predictions of a grim future (Yoshimi 2019, 17). The economic ‘bubble’ as marked by the stock index peaked in 1989 (Morioka 1999, 9), at which point the government “popped” it by increasing interest rates (Kingston 2013, 15). The immediate economic effects lingered until the early 1990s, and the *cultural* effects—specifically, the dominating logic of conspicuous consumption as primary locus of Japanese identity and meaning making—remain to this day.

Recalling “bubble culture” today conjures images of an energetic nightlife spent in famous discotheques in expensive Aoyama and Roppongi, massive amounts of corporate and government money spent on “entertainment” from wining and dining to “company outings” in expensive hostess clubs (Allison 1994, 9–10), and a proliferation of easily identifiable brand-name goods. The “trendy” predominated and the “new” was universally desired (Hara 2008, 251). Conspicuous consumption could be a byline for this culture; the money being made (or indeed borrowed) was quickly back on the street, sometimes literally. Businessmen reportedly waved down taxis with 10,000 yen bills to catch their attention (Shino 2017; K. Shimizu 2020, 174) in a hyper-saturated consumer market—everyone had more important places to be, better things to be doing, other people to see and, more importantly, be seen by.

The youth population coming of age in this period of unprecedented wealth and optimism became so alien to their predecessors that they were labelled a ‘new breed of humanity’ (*shinjinrui*). They were “upbeat, unapologetically apolitical, and consumerist,” considered “self-absorbed, hedonistic, and often clueless about” what former generations understood to be “the basic codes and conventions of society” (Yoda 2000, 882) as well as “cheerfully complacent with regard to the status quo” (Yoda 2017, 175). Centrally, the perception of work was shifting; in the wake of the bubble, work was no longer focused on “building the nation,”

it was instead “undertaken for motives of consumption” (Clammer 1997, 56) and increased individualization. Indeed, consumption became the established method of “self-realization” for increasingly segmented, individualized youth groups (Yoda 2017, 175). Based on this conspicuous, surface level consumption, images and identities were broadcast extensively through explicitly *visual* media such as TV and magazines with increasingly compartmentalized targets (Hara 2006) with the aim of “selling ‘lifestyles’” (Clammer 1997, 56). For example, in 1985, the Saison Group, which often serves as another emblem of the “bubble culture,” specifically started pushing an individualized yet all-encompassing consumeristic cocoon of “overall lifestyle production” (*seikatsu sōgō sangyō*) for each member of the Japanese populous (Tsujii and Ueno 2008, 113–18). Even the change in imperial rule in 1989 was surrounded by luxuriant extravagance and consumerism, with the commemoration of the emperor’s death in January filtered through Japan’s enmeshment within capitalism. Respectful bank and stock exchange closures weighed against their impact on the economy (Field 1991, 21). The funeral itself became a “celebration of the successes of Japanese capitalism” through its pomp and circumstance, with his imperial reverence explicitly connected with Japan’s “economic miracle” (Field 1991, 25). In short, life and identity became objects of conspicuous, highly *visible* consumption, and this logic of the “bubble culture” was firmly established in Japanese society despite the bubble *economy’s* pop.

The gaudy, increasingly *visual* nature of the bubble period was not only demonstrated in the widespread use of material wealth on visible markers of status, but also in its music and popular culture. While MTV never reached the heights of popularity in Japan as it did in the United States, its connection of the *visual* with the musical was embraced readily, giving rise to a competitive local market for “music video shows” (Banks 1997, 47–48; citing Sanger 1991). Japanese music wholeheartedly embraced the visual aspects of television (de Launey 1995; Manabe 2008), and performances became increasingly showy. Colliding with the local punk

and glam-inspired performances from the late 1970s, the 1980s gave rise to the “band boom” and to television programs like *Ika-Ten* (shortened from *Ikasu bando tengoku*, roughly translatable as “Cool band heaven”). *Ika-Ten* promoted the possibilities of fame and fortune to any band who could hit upon the right combination of talent, looks, and, perhaps most of all, showmanship (de Launey 1995; Inoue 2003c; Morikawa 2003).

It was in this environment that BUCK-TICK and X (later known as X JAPAN), made their major debuts, with loud, rock and metal-based sounds, flashy costuming and makeup, teased up hair, and as much emphasis on their *image* as their *sound*. Having been active through the 1980s, drawing larger and larger crowds, the bands signed with major labels in 1987 and 1989 respectively. Many bands had struck upon similar combinations in the past, both in Japan and elsewhere; however, in the popular imagination, BUCK-TICK and X (and more often X exclusively) remain the ones who succeeded in combining all the right elements at the right time to start a musical subculture—albeit one that was not actually named yet.

The official (if roughly defined and tenuous) label ‘visual *kei*’ (*vijuaru kei*) was established in 1990, often discursively tied to the publication of subcultural magazine SHOXX (Yashiro and Yamaura 2012) and the tagline from X’s debut album: PSYCHEDELIC VIOLENCE CRIME OF VISUAL SHOCK (Oshima 2013b, 36–37). Visual *kei* performers and bands are typically recognized by their heavy emphasis on their *visual* performances, which merit as much attention and effort as their music. Otherwise, however, the defining features are quite vague and fluid. The very use of ‘*kei*’ is indicative of this fluidity. Nanba Koji, in his work on youth subcultures in post-war Japan, notes that there was a broad shift in the 1990s from more strictly defined “*zoku*” (tribe) type subcultures to loosely defined, ad-hoc, largely taste based “*kei*” (rough grouping around a central point) type subcultures (2007, 382–84), reflecting international trends of increasing individualization, segmentation, and fluid identification (2007,

384, 391–92) that are inherent to “bubble culture.” Visual *kei* can thus be said to embody this broader shift in Japanese subcultures, embracing ‘*kei*’ type ambiguity from the nominal level.

After visual *kei* became established as a meaningful label in the early 1990s, bands identified within it slowly rose in popularity over the course of the decade, a period coinciding with the broader Japanese music industry’s “unprecedented prosperity” and skyrocketing record sales (Yoshimi 2019, 198). With the addition of new performers came the addition of their distinct musical sounds and aesthetic performances, including elements of goth, punk, metal, pop, traditional rock, and electronic. At the same time, there was never a cemented, specific rubric to define what visual *kei* music actually *was* (or was *not*). Throughout its evolution, attempts to categorize and label the subculture as a unified, meaningful ‘genre’ of music has become more, not less, difficult.

This ambiguity and focus on non-musical elements is the main reason why I too reject the ‘genre’ label for understanding visual *kei* (see Chapter 1). Indeed, while the term ‘genre’ (through the katakana loanword *janru*) is occasionally used, subcultural members also explicitly *deny* the applicability of the concept of genre, stating that “anything goes with visual *kei*,” and that it “is not a phrase that represents a genre of music” (Oshima 2013b, 2, 9). It is probably due to this foundational fluidity and the “anything goes” (or “anything’s possible”) attitude that visual *kei* refuses the genre classification up to today. Indeed, rather than genre, it might be likened to Paul Gilroy’s proposed “changing same” of “black expressive cultures,” characterized by “breaks” and “interruptions” rather than any truly “fixed essence” (1993, 101).

Despite classificatory difficulties, more bands arose with the label visual *kei*, moving the subculture from minor and niche to a mainstream commercial success story. In 1997, “visual *kei*” was nominated to the list of 1997’s top “new vocabulary and buzz words” (Fujitani 2013), making its official break into mainstream discourse as a unique phenomenon to be recognized

and sold.² The late 1990s, particularly mid-1997 to early-1998, served as visual *kei*'s own bubble period when it reportedly “swept the charts” (Stevens 2008, 56). However, this period of success was not long lived. From 1998 onwards, potentially connected with the death of X JAPAN member hide in May (see Chapter 4) and the rapid oversaturation of the subculture with bands eager to capitalize on the mainstream success (see Chapter 3), visual *kei* entered a period of decline. While there was a brief resurgence in the early 2000s with “Neo Visual *Kei*” (Fuyu 2015), the subculture has settled as a relatively stable but niche section of the Japanese music market as of 2022. Large bands such as BUCK-TICK and L’Arc~en~Ciel still hold large performances at venues such as the Budōkan and Tokyo Dome, but they are the exception rather than the rule. The majority of performers work in much smaller venues, drawing small crowds and holding down outside employment to make ends meet in an increasingly precarious labor market (see Chapter 5).

Fans, too, have shifted. While the balance was (reportedly) more equal in the early years, audiences in present visual *kei* are predominantly filled with women. I have addressed this in other work in terms of gender dynamics (Johnson 2019), but what is relevant here is that this shift to overwhelmingly female consumers reflects the broader feminization of the Japanese consumer market, predating visual *kei*'s infancy and continuing throughout its life course. In post-industrialist Japan, women have been increasingly targeted specifically, and now serve as the primary consumer base for much of Japanese pop culture, particularly television (Karlin 2012, 77). Lise Skov and Brian Moeran, writing in 1995, specifically point to women as “Japan’s prime consumers” (1995, 5). While highlighted in the present era, this trend began in Japan from the late 1960s, when marketers began to target young, single women specifically (Yoda 2017, 178–80)—not coincidentally, an important demographic for visual *kei*. The

² This further cemented the label itself as dominant, as other labels such as “black clothing *kei*” (*kurofuku kei*) were still widely used in the early to mid-1990s to describe bands who would later be classified under the umbrella of visual *kei* (Ichikawa and Fujitani 2015).

concept of “feminized youth as consumers” has become a matter of course (Yoda 2017, 192–93). The overwhelmingly female audiences of visual *kei* therefore are not an anomaly, but rather indicative of how the subculture’s values and structures are inexorably tied to post-industrial, specifically post-bubble Japan, enmeshed with neoliberal capitalism with a feminized consumer base.

In short, visual *kei*, born out of the excesses of “bubble culture,” achieved peak popularity in the late 1990s as the Japanese music market boomed before rapidly diminishing back into a limited niche, supported predominantly by female consumers. Visual *kei* is, aside from everything else, a product of its time. Over the course of its history, it has evolved and changed, waxing and waning in popularity, but it has always been inescapably enmeshed with the broader mainstream, i.e., Japan’s dominant social, cultural, and economic mediascape and value system. Because of this dependent and reciprocal relationship, historicizing the subculture of visual *kei* opens a new window onto sociocultural developments in post-bubble Japan.

It’s All Fluid to Me: Historicizing Visual *Kei* as Fluid Subculture

In this thesis, I argue that visual *kei* is best described as *fluid subculture*, embedded within an increasingly fluid Japan overall that can only make meaning through neoliberal capitalist frameworks—specifically, consumption. This is a subculture that makes its meaning through these dominant systems of commercialism, rather than centering around political ideology or active resistance to dominant ideals (if ever subcultures could be defined in such ways). I make this argument by drawing from Japanese scholarship, established work on subculture as framework, and Zygmunt Bauman’s metaphor of liquid modernity (2000) as seen under neoliberal capitalist realism (Fisher 2009; Hassler-Forest 2012). These latter two frameworks are, I argue, vital for understanding Japan in a post-bubble context, and consequently the

subcultures within. Visual *kei*, as subculture, is necessarily *fluid*, melding together with its mainstream Japan with no clear boundaries between.

This is not a new conception. Gary Alan Fine and Sheryl Kleinman already argued for the necessary inclusion of “fluidity” in subcultural analysis as early as 1979, as subculture (and indeed any group) is subject to the whims of context and, arguably, impossible to pin down (1979, 6). This is apparent within visual *kei*, described already as relatively ambivalent in definition. Rather than pinned down or separated from its mainstream environment, it must be instead understood *through* it. An understanding of visual *kei*, therefore, necessarily requires and reflects an understanding of Japan, specifically the consumer society of neoliberal capitalist Japan in the post-bubble period. This is a Japan of “self-actualization through consumption” (Yoshimi 2009, 13), where the difficulty of even imagining “an identity other than being a consumer,” already established in the 1970s (Igarashi 2021, 3), has become a high impossibility. Japan is, in essence, a “society of consumers” where individuals interact with themselves and each other through their capacity as *consumers* (Bauman 2007, 52–53), and are in turn required to maintain *themselves* as “sellable commodities” to be “bona fide members of that society” (Bauman 2007, 12, 57). Visual *kei* thus offers a novel window into Japanese society and culture more broadly, specifically through its fluid absorption of mainstream values.

As I define it, a *fluid subculture* is a recognizable grouping of people and practices which, through its inseparable entanglement and dependency on the mainstream and its value systems, is in a constant state of discursive (re)negotiation of meaning making. I use *fluid* to emphasize the interactions and relationality *between* subculture and its context, as well as the lack of strict boundaries. Members may move in and out at will, and practice is both individualized and flexible. Established practices and performances are recognized as specifically subcultural, but these accepted forms are in contradictory *flux* (Fine and Kleinman 1979, 6), negotiated based on the temporal and individual situation, but *nevertheless*

recognizable and groupable by both members and the mainstream as one meaningful unit. Alternatively, I use *liquid* to indicate the inherent, *internal* nature of the subculture, specifically its lack of solid, boxable identity. Therefore, any strict definition or classification that withstands the passage of time and the passage between actors would only be a snapshot, a still image that does not account for the lived experiences, complexities, and ever shifting meanings of that unit.

This is not atypical of cultural forms in contemporary society, or what Bauman terms as “liquid modernity.” “[I]n liquid modern times, culture [...] is fashioned to fit individual freedom of choice and individual responsibility for that choice” (Bauman 2011, 12). This seems an apt description of Japan. According to Miyadai Shinji, after all, it is merely a matter of course that in a post-bubble world, the possibility of dividing and analyzing media by “genre” or “patterns” is no longer even a possibility. He argues this through the disappearance of widespread, household knowledge of the referents of any particular category (Miyadai 2007, 10–11); in other words, culture has become increasingly individualized. This is, essentially, why it is impossible to pin down visual *kei*—each participant will have their own, meaningful definition, which does not necessarily align with any others but *at the same time* is not invalid, and generally recognizable. Visual *kei* is, at its core, *liquid* in nature due to its inherent malleability and ad hoc existence.

While it may be tempting to tease out common threads from individual definitions and parse together a definitive ‘visual *kei*,’ this would be counter-productive, as it does not account for individual lived experiences and also significantly downplays the ongoing negotiations with mainstream media and neoliberal capitalist value systems. For example, definitions that focus on “world-building” (*sekaikan*) (Fujitani 2013) or the “unrealism” (*higenjitsu*) (“SNS Jidai Chōshinka! Ongaku SP” 2021) ignore the globalized and mainstream influences and reciprocal forces at play. Excessive focus on just make-up, costuming, and the attendance of passionate

female fans (Kani 2012, 7) ignores the neoliberal capitalist realities and also the influence of traditional norms and mainstream values on practice and meaning making. In other words, they ignore contradictory realities experienced by all subcultural members.

Instead of attempting to define the genre or sound of visual *kei*, then, I examine the connections between what can be recognized and discursively made meaningful *as* visual *kei* and place it in its sociocultural context. In short, I historicize it. Specifically, by analyzing visual *kei* as a *fluid subculture*, I can unpack various aspects of Japanese society and culture in relation to broader concepts of media consumption, creative practice, and globalization. Through visual *kei*, I reveal the fluidity of Japanese media discourse through its endless pursuit of profit and the connected acceptance and manipulation of whatever meanings serve this motivation at the contemporary moment, creating what has been described by Jason G. Karlin and Patrick W. Galbraith as “a disposable mass culture” (2012, 16). Through visual *kei*, I show the predominance of neoliberal capitalism as both ideology and driving force through its inescapable saturation of all practice, including ‘punk’-esque subcultural auteurism and ‘respect’ towards the dead. Additionally, I demonstrate affective labor’s increasingly vital role in the consumption economy, as well as how success within this economy can be and often is turned to divergent, even nationalistic ends. I can do this specifically because *fluid subculture* is, by definition, always operating within the same structures as its broader mainstream environment: visual *kei* offers us a microcosm of Japan more broadly.

Because of this approach, my research is qualitative at heart. Qualitative research is reliant on “the ability of the researcher to observe patterns” (Kalof, Dan, and Dietz 2008, 79), and further “emphasize[s] the essential role of subjectivity in the research process” (Hammersley 2013, 12). Given that I argue that visual *kei*, subculture, and indeed the mainstream are all inherently liquid, quantitative methods looking for fixed points are unsuitable. Additionally, due to the multifaceted nature of visual *kei* discourse, collecting data for analysis requires a

multifaceted approach. Therefore, I applied a combination of extended (auto)ethnographic fieldwork (both online and offline) and media discourse analysis on both popular mainstream and subcultural texts.

I speak of (auto)ethnography because as a self-identified *bangya* (the subcultural term for a passionate female fan of visual *kei*) I am a part of the subculture itself and engage with it as both researcher *and* as member. While I would never claim “master status” or place my own experience front and center as a source of data, it is important that I admit to my own “intimate familiarity” with the subcultural group itself (Hayano 1979, 100). To avoid either working my own biases into the thesis or being incomprehensible to those who have never heard of or are only loosely familiar with visual *kei*, I have had all my research in this thesis extensively read by non-visual *kei* subcultural members and scholars. Nevertheless, I always take part within the discourse and meaning making of visual *kei*, not only because of my subcultural membership, but also because I am a scholar.

As with ethnography more broadly, auto-ethnography draws a significant amount of contesting, critique, and debate (c.f. Denshire 2014). Engaging at length with this is beyond the scope of this thesis, and it is important to note too that I am utilizing ethnographic *methods*, and *not* doing an ethnography. Ethnographic methods, e.g., “participant observation, personal documents, vignettes, and discourse analysis” (Brewer 2003, 100), do not only aim to *describe*, but to find the foundations of *meaning making* within a particular group (Sara Cohen 1993, 124), or what I argue to be interpretable as the discourse of said group.

Many scholars have posited various definitions and usages of the term ‘discourse.’ While my use of discourse has many commonalities with Michel Foucault’s operative definition in that it “constructs the topic” and “defines and produces the objects of our knowledge [...] govern[ing] the ways a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about” (Hall 1997, 44), my focus is not so much on discourse in terms of power (McHoul and Grace 1993, 39).

Rather, I focus on discourse in terms of identity and meaning making. Thus, for my purposes, the definition set forth by James Paul Gee is the most suitable.

Gee states that “[d]iscourse is a sort of ‘identity kit’ which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize” (Gee 1987, 7). In this way, when I say that I am examining the discourse of visual *kei*, my aim is to determine how visual *kei* is meaningfully constructed, as a label, subculture, and identity, and further how subcultural members both make meaning of their membership and broadcast it to others. The boundaries of discourse are always in the process of being “pushed” and “contested” (Gee 2010, 37). It is this “pushing” and “contesting” that I argue can broaden understanding of visual *kei* as a meaningful signifier that has developed over time.

Crucially, I also engage with the sociocultural and historical *context* of the texts throughout the thesis—the text is thus not examined in a vacuum or anachronistically, but as part of broader society in which it was produced (Nealon 2018, 74); to reiterate, my goal is to historicize visual *kei*. As I argue throughout this thesis, subculture itself is always and inescapably enmeshed within this broader society—or the mainstream—and cannot be usefully examined as a separate entity. Particularly in our globalized liquid modernity (Bauman 2000), meaning making must always be positioned against the sociocultural and economic environment it originates from and operates within. In other words, this is not merely a study of visual *kei* but a study of the consumer society of post-bubble Japan.

“Anything’s Possible”—Researching Visual *Kei*

This thesis breaks new ground in terms of Japanese subcultural framing and research by arguing that visual *kei* is a subculture, rather than casually classifying visual *kei* without further unpacking my frameworks. As such, I engage with and synthesize existing frameworks, arguing

for subculture as fluid, and inexorably tied to its mainstream environment. Through this, I demonstrate that subculture is still a useful and meaningful tool for contemporary academia to understand lived practice and meaning making.

Additionally, by placing visual *kei* in the sociocultural and economic contexts of Japan and its value systems, I argue that Japanese subculture in the post-bubble period came to develop an explicitly reciprocal relationship with the mainstream. Subculture is not examined as a separate, politically resistant abnormality, but rather a recognizable subsection of broader society operating under the same systems of meaning and practice. This offers a new window into post-bubble Japan and the structures that frame it: namely, those of neoliberal capitalism and consumerist society. Possibly controversially, I take the position that exploring visual *kei*, or indeed any Japanese subculture, as ‘uniquely Japanese’ or somehow separated from globalized structures is unsustainable. This type of exploration is not only extremely limiting, but fundamentally obscures the structures that shape Japanese mainstream culture and values. As such, any insights in practices and meaning making resulting from such a limited approach are insular and hollow, separated from their origin, evolution, and broader impact.

In short, this thesis historicizes visual *kei* as emblematic of post-bubble consumer society in Japan. Visual *kei* shows how the very meaning of subculture and subcultural expression has changed in the Japanese context, becoming firmly entrenched in the mainstream logic of consumption. This shift in meaning, both in subculture and popular cultural expression more generally, is central to what Yoshimi Shunya has termed Japan’s “post-postwar society” (2009) or, more specifically for my purposes, post-bubble Japan. Visual *kei*, rather than resisting mainstream systems of value, flows *with* them, and survives because of this fluidity; thus, through an examination of visual *kei*, I demonstrate that the bubble culture has not died, but in fact that broader sociocultural trends in post-bubble Japan demonstrate its continued

existence and reciprocal relationship with today's neoliberal capitalist and globalized principles of consumerism.

The chapters that follow are thus not a history of visual *kei*, but rather a historicization of visual *kei*. In other words, I adopt an interpretative attitude towards changes that have taken place over time in the *meaning* of visual *kei*, as well as its transformations and legacy in the history of the postwar period.³ I examine how visual *kei* has been discursively constructed by both subcultural members and the mainstream, examining both contemporary texts as well as how visual *kei* is continuously being (re)created in hindsight, often through the public spaces of social media. This thus includes *affective* as much as factual recounting. I have chosen specific case studies from various key points in visual *kei*'s transformation that demonstrate the development of Japanese neoliberal capitalist consumer society in the wake of the bubble period, and explore these through an examination of the impact on subcultural players and discourses. These case studies are arranged to form a narrative that highlights visual *kei*'s relationship to its mainstream environment through vital turning points in the subculture's development, developing a framework for understanding visual *kei*'s place in post-postwar Japanese history. They are not, therefore, presented in strictly chronological order, as the *historicization* is the focus, not the historical progress. These case studies further serve to strengthen the argument for *fluid subculture* as a scholarly framework. The thesis overall presents original contributions to scholarship on visual *kei*, subculture, and post-bubble Japan. Future scholars of any of these topics may use this thesis to build on, ideally expanding these fields further into more useful applications.

³ While historicization may be interpreted simply as to locate a particular phenomenon within its historical context, in my interpretation it also crucially takes the present perspective into consideration. Drawing on Bertolt Brecht, Elin Diamond specifically states that "historicization" means "preserving the 'distinguishing marks' of the past and acknowledging, even foregrounding, the audience's present perspective" (Diamond 1988, 87, citing; Brecht 1964, 190). While this is drawn from and geared towards work on theater and performance, the description is apt.

It bears repeating that this thesis does not set out to outline the history and development of visual *kei* or map it as a subculture specifically because that would not achieve the desired goals. For a historical mapping of visual *kei*, a number of texts exist already, both subcultural (e.g., Ichikawa and Fujitani 2018) and academic (e.g., Morikawa 2003; Kashiwagi 2011; Muneaki Saito 2018). Additionally, I believe attempts to situate visual *kei* within meaningful generic boundaries and analyze it thusly is unfeasible at best, as I explained briefly above and elaborate further in Chapter 1. Therefore, I do not attempt an ethnomusicological analysis of the ‘genre’ of music which may be said to exist within the subculture. Neither do I attempt to work visual *kei* as a whole into the structure of musical genre, as other work has (albeit casually) assumed it belongs (e.g., Inoue et al. 2003; Hashimoto 2007; McLeod 2013; Muneaki Saito 2018).

Finally, I must reiterate that I do not set out to create new frameworks to explain the practices encompassed within visual *kei*, as I believe that the existing framework of subculture is more than sufficient. Despite using an existing framework, this approach is a relatively new undertaking, as at present there are still a relatively small number of English-language academic works specifically examining what may be interpreted as Japanese (music) subcultures. However, none of these explicitly use the framework of subculture to describe the music-centric groupings on which they focus. In dealing with similar issues as I deal with in this thesis, all accounts choose different or even invent entirely new frameworks. However, I believe this is unfruitful, and rather incomprehensible when a perfectly fine framework already exists. All it requires is some theoretical engagement.

What’s in a Name? Japanese Musical ‘Subcultures’

Although a few English-language accounts have dealt with what may be termed Japanese music-centered subcultures, none of these explicitly engage with subculture as a framework.

Similarly, work dealing with visual *kei* specifically also lacks this engagement. I believe, however, it is important to engage with subculture as a framework, particularly if one wants to apply it, which is what I do in this thesis. However, these previous works cannot be ignored, for they give valuable insight into the historical context of these ‘subcultures’ both in society and academia.

Earliest among the accounts dealing with Japanese music-centered ‘subcultures’ is Christine R. Yano’s work on what she calls the “popular Japanese ballad genre” of *enka* (2002, 3): *Tears of Longing: Nostalgia and the Nation in Popular Song*. As the title suggests, her focus is on how Japan is constructed through the performance of *enka*, particularly given its position as the “soul of Japan” (*Nihonjin no kokoro*) (Yano 2002, 4), and the strong focus on emotion within its performances and consumption. She uses something she calls “‘emotional style,’” which she attributes to Dwight Middleton, to explore the “the normative organization of emotions, their indigenous classification, form of communication, intensities of expression, contexts of expression and patterns of linkage with each other and with other domains of culture” (Yano 2002, 22; citing Middleton 1989, 188).

Essentially, Yano is describing subcultural meaning making. However, she appears to be more concerned with legitimizing *enka* as a form of high art and culture, positioning it as “the soul of Japan.” Yano aligns “[e]motional expression in *enka*” with traditional, high culture through the framework of “*kata* (patterning; patterned form)” which she pulls “from the traditional arts of flower arranging and tea ceremony, the martial arts, and kabuki” (Yano 2002, 24). Through *kata* Yano describes various established forms of *enka* practice and performance, and extends the concept beyond its original usage “to include patterning in Japanese culture in general” (Yano 2002, 24). The way she describes *enka* is as something one “does” in an understandable way albeit not a uniform one, but which is still meaningfully grouped together

by both insiders and outsiders with ties that “stretch and bind” (Yano 2002, 5, 11). She is, in essence, describing subculture.

The (over)use of the specialized term “*kata*” does not appear to be derived from *actual* use by *enka* performers or fans, and oftentimes seems interchangeable with “established performance/practice” or indeed “subcultural practice.” For example, practices of covering recent songs (Yano 2002, 49), established manners of dress and appearance (Yano 2002, 64), and ideal singing style (Yano 2002, 69) are all described as “*kata*.” To emphasize, I do not argue that *enka* should be restructured and analyzed specifically to fit within a subcultural framework, but rather that inventing new frameworks that separate practices from other, similar cultural groupings, seems counterproductive for exploring *enka*’s practices and meaning making.

The example of Yano’s *kata* can also be seen in other work on music ‘subculture,’ for example Jennifer Milioto Matsue’s 2009 work on hardcore. Matsue uses *kata* to refer to “codified elements within music itself or standardized, and therefore meaningful, behaviors on stage” as well as “social interaction” (2009, 26). Later, she broadens *kata*’s usage to “synonymous with any meaningful practice” (Matsue 2009, 110). In my interpretation, these uses strengthen the validity of the less localized alternative ‘subcultural practice.’ However, Matsue’s *Making Music in Japan’s Underground: The Tokyo Hardcore Scene* takes a stance against subculture from the title, firmly establishing hardcore as a “scene” rather than a subculture. Matsue’s reasoning for working within this framework is not convincing. She first dismisses “subculture” along with a number of other options due to its limitations of “exploration of the social interaction associated with the production, dissemination, and consumption of particular music,” but does not engage with what these limitations are (Matsue 2009, 40). She posits “scene” as a more “fluid term,” attributing this definitional fluidity to Will Straw’s work on music, but not unpacking the term itself (Matsue 2009, 40; citing Straw 1997,

494). Straw defines scene as “a cultural space in which a range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other within a wide variety of processes and differentiation.” He posits scene as an alternative to “older notions of a musical community” with a “relatively stable” population and “geographically specific historical heritage” (1997, 494). Straw never explicitly mentions subculture. However, his work is featured in *The Subcultures Reader* (Gelder and Thornton 1997), and often used by scholars to reject ‘subculture’ as a framework despite this (see, for example, Matsue 2009, 40; Novak 2013, 32–33; Bennett and Rogers 2016, 13).

Ultimately, Matsue argues that “scene,” despite its own problems, is the most suitable for hardcore due the word’s use within hardcore itself (or rather use of the Japanese *shīn*). This is a valid justification, as it builds on and emphasizes the lived experience of the subcultural members. However, she also claims “scene” is suitable due to “its current acceptance in pertinent literature” thanks to “its fluidity and malleability as a definition for both participants and theorists” (Matsue 2009, 39–40), which is a circular argument at best and suggests a lack of understanding of subcultural theory at worst. She correctly suggests an implied nuance of “resistance” to subculture and subcultural theory, but rather than exploring it, she uses it to further distance her work and hardcore itself from subculture (Matsue 2009, 45–46). Through this, she erroneously reaffirms the idea that subculture is somehow separate from and necessarily resistant to the mainstream and neglects potentially constructive engagement with a subcultural framework.

Moving on, Ian Condry’s *Hip Hop Japan: Rap and the Paths of Cultural Globalization* (2006) is likely the most well-known monograph on what could be considered Japanese music ‘subculture.’ Condry’s focus is on globalization and the meaningfulness structured around the central point within Japanese hip-hop, or what he terms the “*genba*,” or “sites that become a focus of people’s energies and where something is produced” (Condry 2006, 5–6). He casually uses “scene” throughout the work, but does not engage in depth with his reasoning. He

dismisses subculture briefly, again focusing on its so-called centrality of resistance, but notably cites only Dick Hebdige's (now routinely criticized) conception of the term (Condry 2006, 127). Given Condry's strong focus on globalization, however, it is understandable that he sidestepped the debate on what is or is not an appropriate classification for "hip hop Japan," as it would have derailed his main argument and potentially distracted from his extensive historical work on Japanese hip hop more generally. Nevertheless, the disregard of the subcultural framework is a point of contention—particularly as he cites a subcultural member using the term "subculture" explicitly (Condry 2006, 127–28).

Finally, David Novak's monograph *Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation* (2013) is notably music-centric. He states from the outset that he is not aiming to write an "ethnographic depiction of a contained music community" (Novak 2013, 6), instead focusing on Noise itself as it travels between Japan, the United States, and around various locals of discursive meaning. When he refers to the concept of "scene," he admits it is used by subcultural members (or what he terms "the subjects of Noise"), but dismisses this as too limiting (Novak 2013, 32–33), instead using his own definitions of "feedback" and "circulation" (Novak 2013, 16–17). Novak, like Miloto Matsue, points to Will Straw to claim his definition of "scene" allows him to capture "a fluid and flexible mode of performance that helps listeners navigate the industrial contexts of music production" (Novak 2013, 32–33; citing Straw 1991). Novak also positions "scene" against "earlier notions of musical subcultures," citing, once again, only Hebdige as an example (Novak 2013, 33). Much like Matsue and possibly Condry, Novak seems prefer scene due to its so-called fluidity, a concept I argue subculture already provides.

In other words, while the concept of subculture has existed for a long time, specifically examining a musical subculture in Japan *as* a subculture is a new approach in Anglophone research. While work on musical subcultures in Japan is limited, work on visual *kei* is even more so—at present, it is limited to one edited volume in Japanese, a handful of Japanese

university bulletins, and a scattering of tangentially related English publications. The frameworks and methods employed vary, if discussed at all.

Generally speaking, visual *kei* seems quite fluid within the limited literature. While it may be analyzed as a “musical genre” (Kashiwagi 2011) in some places, it is an “otaku subculture” (Hashimoto 2007, 87) in others; I have yet to find an academic work that specifically takes a well-argued stance on *how* visual *kei* should be classified and why. Moreover, much work focuses on the musical aspects of the subculture (e.g., Kashiwagi 2011; Muneaki Saito 2013, 2017), and many seem to prioritize its interpretation through a specifically musical lens by using the phrase “visual rock” (Inoue et al. 2003) or “visual *kei* rock” (Muneaki Saito 2013, 2014, 2017, 2018). Many of the methods used seem to be specifically textual and historical, with recordings, lyrics, and subcultural materials featuring prominently.

Work in English is very limited (but at least peer-reviewed), but still ambiguous in how visual *kei* can be constructively classified. Miyuki Hashimoto refers to visual *kei* both as a type of “otaku subculture” as well as a “genre of Japanese popular culture” and “movement in J-Rock” (2007, 87). She does then, however, state that it is “not so much characterized as a musical genre, but rather by its emphasis on visual expression” (Hashimoto 2007, 87). Overall, she is more focused on analyzing visual *kei fans* through the lens of “otaku” and “fetishism,” primarily through “yaoi” or “love stories about homosexual boys” (Hashimoto 2007, 91). Her methods are interview based with “fans” in Vienna and Tokyo (Hashimoto 2007, 92). While she is not clear when her research took place, it was likely in the mid-2000s.

In a later article, Ken McLeod refers to visual *kei* first as a genre, identifying it in the abstract as a “Japanese pop music genre [...] marked by emphasis on elaborate visual display often involving cross-dressing of male band members” and locating it as “one of the most important forms of Japanese popular music” (2013, 309). Later, however, he states that it is “arguably [...] more of a cultural complex than merely a music genre” (McLeod 2013, 310),

pointing out that “[t]he genre [...] 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” (McLeod 2013, 322). He does not follow this realization, however, with the conclusion that this indicates “genre” is not a suitable framework of analysis.

McLeod also addresses the concept of fluidity, but limits this to how visual *kei* “allows for and reflects fluidity in contemporary Japanese gender identity” (2013, 321). In other words, his focus is primarily on identity and “hybridity.” He mentions his methods partially in a footnote: “[r]esearch for this article was, in part, conducted through observation of *Visual Kei* [sic] concerts in Tokyo during the summer of 2009” (McLeod 2013, 322). An absence of Japanese sources suggests primary subcultural discourse was not referenced.

Finally, the most substantial academic work to date on visual *kei* is the edited volume *Vijuaru kei no jidai: Rokku, Kesho, Jenda* (Inoue et al. 2003), which has been positioned at the forefront of what might be loosely termed visual *kei* research. The volume deals with a variety of topics through their relation to visual *kei*, including broader practices of gender in the Japanese context (Inoue 2003c, 2003a), the Japanese music industry (Morikawa 2003), fan comic culture (Murota 2003), and cosplay among female fans (K. Koizumi 2003). Furthermore, aside from Morikawa Takuo’s chapter, the volume is heavily focused on gender as a unifying framework which, while an important factor in visual *kei*, is limiting in providing a broader understanding of the subculture.

While the introduction implies that visual *kei* will be analyzed as a “subculture,” with the volume “aiming to investigate its societal background and meaning” (Inoue 2003b, 8), subculture is not explored. To add further confusion, despite the title, the volume specifically uses “visual rock” (*vijuaru rokku*) instead of visual *kei*—subtly suggesting a central focus on music. Inoue Takako argues in the introductory chapter that this is to separate it from other uses of the term “visual *kei*,” including a series of manga based on office ladies or “OL” that was

popular at the time (Inoue 2003c, 27–28). She also points out, however, the broad range of musical practice present under the label of visual *kei*, and admits that her use of “visual *rock*” is not necessarily a decision that would be widely accepted (Inoue 2003c, 28). However, she leaves it at that.

Morikawa, in his historical exploration of visual *kei* specifically as tied to Japanese music and record companies more broadly, casually uses “popular music scene” (*poppyurā ongaku shīn*), but does not unpack this decision (Morikawa 2003, 45). He ends the chapter by classifying it instead as a “music culture” (*ongaku bunka*) (Morikawa 2003, 109), which comes closer to my interpretation but still neglects to engage with subculture as a meaningful framework. Murota Naoko and Koizumi Kyōko, through focus on specific subsections of fan practice (homoerotic fan comics and cosplay, respectively), deal not as much with visual *kei* as a whole, but rather with specific types of fan practices and meaning making within it (Murota 2003; K. Koizumi 2003).

Koizumi does briefly use subculture in her chapter, but it appears to be more in the general sense of a “sub” section of a broader grouping (K. Koizumi 2003, 240). This suggests a casual usage of the term, and that this interpretation may also apply to Inoue’s use in the introduction. Indeed, the blurb on the back cover refers to “subcultural critique of things such as *shōjo* manga, makeup and cosplay” (Inoue et al. 2003). While new frameworks do not appear to be invented, neither is visual *kei*’s subcultural nature fleshed out, nor indeed its broader connections with mainstream Japan aside from illustrating the workings of gender and the music industry.

In terms of methods, Koizumi specifically places her research as founded on fieldwork with high school students in the Kansai area (K. Koizumi 2003, 208), and Inoue references a small-scale survey and content analysis of a handful of specific sections in magazines in the final, fan-based section of her chapter focused predominantly on analysis of X JAPAN’s

performance (which itself includes musicological and lyrical analysis by inference) (Inoue 2003a). Otherwise, however, discussion of methodology appears largely absent from the volume.

In short, past work on visual *kei* and music ‘subcultures’ more broadly in Japan does not seem to engage with subculture as a meaningful framework. More specifically, work on visual *kei* tends to address it as a music genre in some sense, is sparse in its discussion of methodology, and uses methods that overall seem limited in scope. My thesis seeks to remedy this.

Not Just Going “Wherever I Want to Go”: The Thesis Structure

This thesis contains six chapters, each engaging with a particular case study, weaving a narrative of post-bubble Japan that demonstrates (a) visual *kei*’s position as a fluid subculture within the similarly fluid consumer society of Japan and (b) its thus inherently intertwined nature within the mainstream and, more specifically, liquid modernity and neoliberal capitalist realism. I have chosen these case studies for their historical significance and discursive resonance within visual *kei*’s development as uncovered through my fieldwork. These specific moments within visual *kei* demonstrate that it is not a static, codified phenomenon. They also firmly situate visual *kei* as a microcosm of post-bubble Japanese society and culture, therefore linking it into mainstream structures of meaning making, showing the continuing relevance of subculture as a framework. In short, these case studies combine to demonstrate the lasting impact of the “bubble culture” through the continued dominance of consumerism in post-bubble Japan.

In Chapter 1, I lay the theoretical groundwork, establishing why I believe that visual *kei* is best understood through the framework of subculture, using both Japanese and Anglo-American literature to establish precisely what I mean by *fluid subculture*. I also elaborate more

on why I do not use genre, despite its common usage as seen in previous visual *kei* literature above. I then situate my concept of *fluid subculture* in the consumerist Japanese context specifically, and Bauman's metaphor of liquid modernity (2000) more broadly to argue that both subculture and mainstream are tied together under the overarching framework of neoliberal capitalist realism (Fisher 2009; Hassler-Forest 2012), through which I argue *all* meaning is made—including the subcultural. Therefore, I establish visual *kei* as a subculture, *fluidly* engaging with broader structures of meaning within Japanese society.

Chapter 2 explores how present day visual *kei* has become inescapably enmeshed within the neoliberal capitalist consumer society of post-bubble Japan. Through this, I demonstrate the inherent fluidity of meaning within subculture more broadly, particularly through the performance of constructed binaries such as resistance/mainstream. As case study, I focus first on YOSHIKI, known originally for his punk-esque, rebellious founding position in subcultural pillar X [JAPAN], but now more for his hyper-commercialism and connections with mainstream systems of value, both economic and political. YOSHIKI's actions demonstrate "the most potent motive" of recognized members within the "society of consumers:" "becoming and remaining a sellable commodity" (Bauman 2007, 57). I then explore practice among minor, more precarious performers vying for audience attention and economic stability, and how meaning there too is negotiated through neoliberal capitalist structures, with the "daunting task" and eternal "uphill struggle" of maintaining membership within the consumer society (Bauman 2007, 60).

Moving back, Chapter 3 focuses on the peak of visual *kei*'s popularity in the late 1990s and the discursive negotiation of the subculture's consequent incorporation by both insiders and the mainstream media. Through a focus on the so-called "SHAZNA problem," I examine how this most successful band of the period and their idol-esque front man IZAM were scapegoated, tied in with narratives of subcultural decline as well as broader societal backlash against the

“feminization” of men and women’s (slowly) increasing societal status. Older generations despaired and accused as the youth failed to conform to established norms that, towards the end of the first “lost decade,” were proving no longer tenable. Visual *kei*, rather than separate from these negotiations, was embedded firmly *within* them. Moreover, SHAZNA’s significant standing within subcultural *and* mainstream discourse makes its investigation critical for any historicization of visual *kei*.

Chapter 4 briefly remains at this moment in history, focusing on a major death within visual *kei* sometimes linked to the overall subculture’s own ‘death:’ that of hide of X [JAPAN] and solo fame. hide’s music and message resonated with the despair of a Japan beginning to realize the “lost decade” was only the first, and the frustrations of youth left behind. His death—and its contemporary discursive production as suicide—served to highlight the zeitgeist, and further stigmatize similarly rebellious attitudes. Death, however, was not the end of hide. Instead, he has been endlessly reproduced, reduced to a superficial brand that can be affixed to anything from tributes to dolls to NFTs. He has even been ‘resurrected’ using technology to produce an entirely ‘new’ song posthumously. Subcultural reaction is not monolithic but remains overwhelmingly positive, highlighting how meaning and value can only be understood and perpetuated through neoliberal capitalism and consumerism—what does not fit is all that truly ‘dies.’ Indeed, if visual *kei* can be discursively said to have “begun and ended” with hide (e.g., Yamano 2018), examining the subculture’s continued existence through hide’s continued consumability demonstrates a crux of visual *kei*’s contextualization in post-bubble Japan.

Returning focus to the present day, Chapter 5 investigates visual *kei*’s connection to the broader affective shift in labor practices in post-bubble Japan. These shifts are emblemized by idols and their matter-of-course affective engagement with audiences in specifically non-musical capacities (Galbraith and Karlin 2019), and in visual *kei* through what I call the affective contract. This is a binding agreement between fans and performers to exchange

affective, immaterial labor specifically to obscure the (oftentimes unpleasant) economic and political realities of operating within neoliberal capitalist Japan. The importance of this contract is investigated through a noteworthy break: the subcultural backlash against minor level performer ryuusei, who candidly addressed the precarious economic realities of performers and refused to regulate his feelings about his own struggling career. The consequences of the backlash demonstrate the importance of the affective contract's maintenance and further the inherently apolitical nature of subculture more broadly in post-bubble Japan. Despite various reactions to the system, it fundamentally *is not challenged*.

In Chapter 6, I investigate visual *kei*'s domestic restructuring through global recognition. In the 2000s, Japan was eager, albeit not entirely sure *how* to effectively promote its popular culture overseas. This was demonstrated in part by the fact that visual *kei*, despite an increasingly extensive overseas fanbase from the 2000s, was not included in original governmental "Cool Japan" strategies. After visual *kei* proved successful, however, it was eagerly—albeit somewhat confusedly—reembraced by the Japanese public, rebranded from 'dead' subculture to something "Japan [...] can be proud of" (Y. Osawa and Shigematsu 2008, 74). Performers were able to benefit from this rebranding, but the broader implications are not without subcultural criticism—particularly their nationalistic potential. Visual *kei* is once again, therefore, firmly situated within its broader sociocultural context, where members can fluidly accept, reject, and even ignore these mainstream narratives, with no resulting internal break.

Finally, I return to the beginning—addressing what visual *kei* can tell us about post-bubble Japan and reaffirming my arguments for both the fluidity and usefulness of subculture as a framework for analysis. Visual *kei*, though difficult to pin down, *is* firmly 'pinned down' within broader Japanese history, and it is thus through historicizing visual *kei* this that we may begin to appreciate its broader meanings within Japanese society and culture, and even develop a better grasp of the bubble's legacy in Japan today.

Chapter 1: “It’s A Way of Life”: Situating Visual *Kei* as Fluid Subculture

“What the hell is subculture!

「サブカルチャーって なんじゃい

It’s a total contradiction”

全然とんちんかんちん」

-SEX MACHINEGUNS, “*Aijin 28*,” *MADE IN USA* (2006)

In the late evening of October 8, 2017, the Johnny’s group *Kan-Jani-8*’s program *KanJamu* introduced visual *kei* as the first installment of a longer series on “Music History.” *KanJamu* introduced visual *kei* through the previous year’s successful VISUAL JAPAN SUMMIT event (reportedly drawing 100,000 fans), stating that visual *kei* was now gaining attention “once again” (*futatabi*) in the aftermath. The online response to this program was generally positive, with many people expressing gratitude at having been the focus of a mainstream television program or using the opportunity to promote visual *kei*.¹ Two points within the program, however, stick out in particular as revealing about the place of visual *kei* in the Japanese cultural imagination.

First, while the program ostensibly aimed to outline visual *kei* as part of “music history,” the convoluted nature of its evolution prompted the (somewhat joking) comment that “we don’t really understand what it is at all...” (*mou nan da ka wakaranai...*). This comment already emphasizes the inherent *fluidity* of visual *kei*, and the overall liquid nature of what I argue is a subculture and not simply reducible to a musical genre. The enthusiastic agreement online with *KanJamu*’s comment seemed to demonstrate great resonance with the subcultural members’

¹ See, for example, subcultural visual *kei* aggregation site VisuNavi’s (@visunavi) Tweet explicitly thanking “*Kanjamu-sama*” for featuring visual *kei* (<https://twitter.com/visunavi/status/917042394591199233>), @KAY0xxxGLAY’s Tweet thanking the program while happily pointing out that visual *kei* related topics dominated Twitter’s “hot word” lists (<https://twitter.com/KAY0xxxGLAY/status/917044520847413248>), Pentagon member Chizuru (@pentagon_chizur) screenshotting his band’s introduction on the program and using related hashtags to promote the band’s music with a YouTube link (https://twitter.com/pentagon_chizur/status/917052077682991104), or *Tensai* member Rinoa (@tensai_rinoa) taking advantage of the attention to advertise his band despite not being featured (https://twitter.com/tensai_rinoa/status/917045155336613888), all last accessed September 3, 2022.

own understanding of visual *kei*.² While the program attempted further categorization, ultimately, *KanJamu* stated that “visual *kei* isn’t a music genre,” it is a “culture” (*bunka*). This was later expanded upon, with visual *kei* being described towards the end of the program as a “way of life” (*ikizama*), encompassing a wide variety of practices and meaning making that reach beyond what is understood as a “music genre.” This assertion similarly resonated online with fans.³

Second, the program conspicuously did *not* include the popular band L’Arc~en~Ciel within their history of visual *kei*. This was also brought up repeatedly within the online discourse, with some people being confused and others seeing it as *KanJamu* respecting the band’s self-assertion that they are *not* visual *kei*. This assertion is often attributed to an “incident” (*jiken*) in 1999, when the band prematurely left the recording of an episode of NHK’s *Pop Jam*, an act which in the cultural consciousness was in offense to being introduced as visual *kei* (Shitaji 2016). This “incident” compounded the devaluation of “visual *kei*” as a label at the time as well as the struggle between the subculture and its mainstream understanding, which I discuss in Chapter 3. The fact that the discourse both *accepts* L’Arc~en~Ciel’s self-assertion, but *also* recognizes the confusion in their being excluded once again shows a *fluidity* inherent

² See, for example, the self-proclaimed “Visual *kei* doctor” Noru’s (@vr_noru) Tweet with a screenshot of the phrase as featured on the program, saying that the “most suitable words for visual *kei* in 2017 have appeared” (https://twitter.com/vr_noru/status/917038880246816769), or performer Riku of Jack Caper (@jc_riku) reporting that he laughed at the phrase, followed by “these words fit us perfectly” (https://twitter.com/jc_riku/status/917043210265837569), all last accessed September 3, 2022.

³ See, for example, the Tweet by Kani Menma (@kanimen), writer of the popular visual *kei* manga series detailing the experiences of *bangya* *Bangyaru no nichijō*, stating how “happy” she was to see the words broadcast over network television in her lifetime (<https://twitter.com/kanimen/status/917372590787661824>), or user @enyakoraaaaa’s Tweet that they were “touched” by the phrase, explicitly referencing how visual *kei* bands all have “different appearances and musicality” which can make things difficult (<https://twitter.com/enyakoraaaaa/status/917051392228868096>), all last accessed September 3, 2022.

within visual *kei*.⁴ The band exists within a flux—both part of visual *kei* and outside of it, invoked in both and neither sense at once.

As the *KanJamu* broadcast and response indicate, visual *kei* is difficult to define, both to outsiders and its own members. I believe, however, it can be categorized, in this case, as a subculture, which in itself has been a complex term since its inception in the early twentieth century (Jenks 2005). Subculture allows a focus on “criteria” (Hodkinson 2002, 29) or “characteristics” (Haenfler 2014, 16) rather than a rigid box within which to squeeze social phenomena, which I argue is unsuitable for understanding visual *kei*. Some scholars insist that the concept of subculture has been overused and that “[w]e cannot simply elect to define a group of people whose proximity or range of activities has fallen under our analytic gaze as a subculture unless we express a clear epistemological purpose” (Jenks 2005, 9). I seek to avoid this pitfall of “simply grouping together” here by outlining my reasoning for believing subculture is a useful framework.

Therefore, I begin this chapter by giving a brief critical overview of subculture as a theoretical tool. Following this, I propose that established conceptions of subculture as part of a binary system—firmly ‘bounded’ or ‘separated’ from the mainstream—insufficiently explain the fluid state of culture. It is not my intention to argue that the concept of a boundary is meaningless, but rather that boundaries are not static and fixed, but *fluid*, inherently permeable,

⁴ See, for example, this Yahoo!Chiebukuro question, in which the user asks: “I thought of this as I was watching *KanJamu*’s Visual *Kei* special, but is L’Arc~en~ciel not visual *kei*...?” (https://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question_detail/q13180531503). As of August 25, 2022, the question had 451 views.

See also the following blog post, which goes into the issue in more detail. As of March 31, 2022, it was linked in the first Twitter search result for the terms “#関ジャム ヴィジュアル系 ラルク” from a Japanese IP address; at the time, it had 223 retweets and 180 likes.

<https://noangryvision.hatenablog.jp/entry/%E3%83%B4%E3%82%A3%E3%82%B8%E3%83%A5%E3%82%A2%E3%83%AB%E7%B3%BB%E7%89%B9%E9%9B%86%E3%81%AB%E3%83%A9%E3%83%AB%E3%82%AF%E3%81%8C%E5%87%BA%E3%81%AA%E3%81%84%E7%90%86%E7%94%B1>

and constantly adjusting in relation to situation and interpretation—think again of L’Arc~en~Ciel. This is why I introduce Zygmunt Bauman’s conception of liquid modernity (2000) to my analysis of subculture. Throughout this thesis, I use this new concept of *fluid subculture* to help me effectively historicize visual *kei* by exploring how it operates within mainstream, dominant culture, and demonstrate how subculture as a framework can be used to describe many other such social groupings within liquid modernity. The epistemological purpose of this is to both (a) situate visual *kei* as a subculture and (b) evolve the concept of subculture to make it more useful for future researchers.

In short, this chapter essentially serves two purposes. First, it provides a critical overview of the concept of subculture as it applies to visual *kei*. Second, it provides an overview of Bauman’s concept of liquid modernity as well as the closely related neoliberal capitalist realism (Fisher 2009; Hassler-Forest 2012). Neoliberal capitalist realism, simply defined as the idea that meaning cannot be conceived of *outside* of the framework of neoliberal capitalism, provides a grounding framework through which to explain visual *kei* practice, as it is the ideology in which it has been enmeshed since its birth. I engage with these two concepts to *expand* upon subculture as a framework, providing the theoretical foundations for the following chapters.

“Subculture’s Not Dead!”

In 2018, J. Patrick Williams argued in a review article that subculture was “alive and well.” However, his assertion demonstrates a resistance to a common trend in scholarship to dismiss subculture as a “dead” framework (J. P. Williams 2018). Subculture, at its most basic, refers to a subset or social group within a broader culture which is defined by *some* deviation or distinction from those broader values and practices (Blackman 2005, 2; Haenfler 2014, 16). With the concept’s origination often assigned to the Chicago School’s studies of deviance in

the 1920s, the study of subcultures has an established academic history. This study evolved through the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (hereafter CCCS), who argued against the Chicago's School's assigned "deviance" of subcultures in favor of critique, or "resistance" to dominant culture. Despite this rejection of deviance, the CCCS remained fixated on a binary conception of subculture, "dividing society into two economic and cultural classes" and highlighting the barrier between them, moving from "criminal" and "deviant" resistance to "symbolic resistance" through style and consumption (van de Goor 2020). This reaffirmation of a binary existence between 'sub' and 'mainstream' culture has led to contemporary scholars often returning to the CCCS for critique, leading to a 'post-subcultural' turn in the late 1990s, which in essence argues that subculture, as a meaningful framework, is 'dead.'

This movement away from subculture as a framework has a long and complicated history and is predicated primarily on the critique and nigh-villainization of the CCCS conception of subculture. The interpretation and its repeated critique have resulted in a bit of a theoretical cul-de-sac from which no progress is possible. Ken Gelder puts it bluntly:

It seems as if every academic commentator on subcultural issues has – right to the present day – returned almost obsessively to the work of CCCS commentators during the 1970s, Dick Hebdige's especially, as if it constitutes a kind of ur-text that has cast its shadow over everything that follows. Since the responses are usually critical, perhaps we can put this another way: that is, it is as if the CCCS is like a (usually, bad) father with whom subsequent researchers are condemned to play out some sort of defiant Oedipal struggle. (2007, 100)

This constant "defiant struggle" even ignores much of the criticism of these original subcultural conceptions that spawned from within the CCCS itself. Williams, for example, points out how "[John] Clarke and his colleagues noted that the term 'subculture' always referred to a wide variety of cultural potentialities" (2011, 34–35) in the very volume that often serves as one of the two main representatives of the CCCS conception of subculture along with Dick Hebdige's

work—*Resistance through Rituals: Youth Sub-Cultures in Postwar Britain* (1975). Indeed, Clarke et al. specifically state that

sub-cultures [...] take shape around the distinctive activities and ‘focal concerns’ of groups. They can be loosely or tightly bounded. Some subcultures are merely loosely-defined strands or ‘milieux’ within the parent culture: they possess no distinctive ‘world’ of their own. Others develop a clear, coherent identity and structure. (2006, 7)

Clarke et al. continue to say that their volume focuses on the latter, whereas “[p]ost-subculture scholars tend to study the first type of socio-cultural phenomena that Clarke mentions,” which leads to their “jumping the gun,” to use William’s phrase, in arguing that “the subcultural concept is irrelevant altogether” due the ironic and unwarranted focus on this “basic (and false) dichotomy” (J. P. Williams 2011, 35).

Indeed, post-subcultural works that discard ‘subculture’ as meaningful tend to hypersimplify these conceptions and their usefulness. For example, to explain their avoidance of the term, Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson state that “subculture [...] presumes that a society has one commonly shared culture from which the subculture is deviant,” (2004, 3) citing the entirety of Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton’s 1997 work—*The Subcultures Reader*—for this assertion. However, in her general introduction, Thornton makes no such overarching definition. Indeed, she states that “[d]efinitions of ‘subcultures’ have shifted dramatically since the term was coined in the 1940s, to the degree that only the broadest and most basic of definitions would accommodate the rich range of theory and research included in this Reader” (Thornton 1997, 1). She continues to provide an extremely pared-down definition for the (over 600 page) reader: “our contributors would probably agree that subcultures are groups of people that have something in common with each other [...] which distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other social groups” (Thornton 1997, 1). She later continues:

[t]he defining attribute of ‘subcultures’ [...] lies with the way the accent is put on the distinction between a particular cultural/social group and the larger culture/society. The emphasis is on variance from a larger collectivity who are invariably, *but not unproblematically*, positioned as normal, average and dominant. Subcultures [...] are

condemned to and/or enjoy a consciousness of ‘otherness’ or difference. (Thornton 1997, 5, emphasis added)

The oversimplification by Bennet and Anderson is visible in their assumption that there is one ‘mass’ culture to which all subculture is uncritically compared. They also ignore the fact that subculture often positions *itself* against a (sometimes imagined) different or “larger collectivity” (or in Japanese referred to as *futsū* [“normal”] people or the “main” [*mein*] culture) regardless of whether or not such a collectivity exists.⁵ That is, its existence has no necessary connection to subculturalists’ relationality to it, which arguably should be the focus of any such study.

In addition, Bennett and Anderson also assert that they “avoid” the term “subculture” because it presumes that all of a participant’s actions are governed by subcultural standards” (this statement goes without evidence or citation), a “presumption” against which they position “scene” as a viable alternative due to its avoidance of such overarching presumptions (2004, 3). Their claim can again be discounted with Clarke et al.’s simple assertion that subcultures can also be “loosely [...] bounded” and “loosely-defined,” as well as Paul Hodkinson’s (2002) reformulation and Nanba Koji’s conception, which specifically posits that members can and do vacillate in their subcultural identification and positioning (2003, 108). While this is merely one case, it serves as example of the narrow and erroneous conception of ‘subculture’ against which post-subcultural arguments are situated.

It is not my intent to battle the ‘post-subcultural’ movement. Its claim that “no single mode of cultural expression is any more authentic—or inauthentic—than any other” (Gelder 2007, 105) can be useful, provided it does not lead to nihilistic meaninglessness. I have often struggled to find any concrete and valuable meaning in the inherently liquid signifier of ‘authenticity’ on its own, but its use within certain subcultural practices implies meaning does

⁵ Within subcultural collectives specifically, including visual *kei*, *panpi*—a shortened portmanteau of *ippan pīpō*, or “general people,” is also used. I would like to thank Shunsuke Nozawa for pointing out that this terminology is not limited to visual *kei* specifically.

matter. After all, as Joseph T. Nealon states using the example of pop music, “[m]usic of course can and does produce meaningful cultural authenticity-effects for its listeners and producers, but you’ll never find this representational thing called authenticity ‘in’ any music” (2018, 30). Furthermore, the post-subcultural appreciation of the fact that “social identities per se [have] become more reflexive, fluid, and fragmented due to an increasing flow of cultural commodities, images and texts” (Bennett 2011, 493; citing Muggleton 2000) is a vital point within liquid modernity, and fits with the fluidity of visual *kei*.

What these post- and anti-subcultural arguments appear to demonstrate is that ‘subculture’ in its original inception fails to account for the fluidity and reciprocity between practices denoted as either mainstream or subcultural. However, the scholars behind these arguments fail to make the final step to explore this failure and build a new framework, instead choosing to further deconstruct cultural meaning until said meaning is lost. In contrast, I firmly hold that practices do have meaning (if not to the scholar then to the individuals practicing them); as such, subculture is still a useful framework through which to examine the “agency and action belonging to a subset or social group that is distinct from but related to the dominant culture” (Blackman 2005, 2). However, I want to pair this framework with academic theory as to better adjust it to the twenty-first century and our contemporary state as enmeshed within liquid modernity (Bauman 2000) and neoliberal capitalist realism (Fisher 2009; Hassler-Forest 2012), introducing the aforementioned *fluid subculture*. This prevents the pitfall of reproducing the binary of us/them thinking and ignoring the complex and nuanced relationships between individuals and the broader structures they inhabit.

The reason I continue using ‘subculture’ (albeit *fluid*) as opposed to calling it something else is because while post-subcultural scholarship is rife with ‘new’ and ‘alternative’ (meaningless) terms and concepts, they offer nothing new and never engage critically with subculture’s various guises. Therefore, in the line of Hodkinson, I believe it more prudent to

develop a “more relevant, workable and up-to-date conception of subculture” (2002, 29). Hodkinson further argues for more flexibility in regard to identities, “recognition of the roles of the media and commerce in the construction of popular cultural groupings,” and the “severing” of subculture’s “automatic link with resistance, problem-solving, class conflict and spontaneity” (2002, 29).⁶ All of this combines to make ‘subculture’ still a very robust conceptual tool, and when combined with other frameworks it can bring nuance and understanding to practice and discursive meaning-making. Additionally, using it in combination with other frameworks will minimize the risk of placing subculture as a monolithic “master-term” (Hesmondhalgh 2007, 46), which I believe led to its negative reputation in the first place—we forgot that it was measuring something *fluid* and *ever-changing* (Fine and Kleinman 1979, 6). That is why I combine subculture with Fisher’s capitalist realism and Bauman’s liquid modernity, to demonstrate this fluid relationality with broader structures—in this case, with post-bubble Japan. As I will demonstrate through this thesis, subculture is “not dead.”

In the next section, I explain how visual *kei*, both as it exists today and has developed throughout its history, fits within the conception of subculture, introducing Japanese scholarship to further strengthen this argument. I also include a brief explanation of why I do *not* use ‘genre,’ which may appear similarly suitable at first glance. Then, I move on to explain with more specifics why I argue that visual *kei* can and should be considered a subculture, and how this helps to build and develop the broader conceptions of subculture within the academic field.

⁶ Hodkinson too, however, does not go far enough. He still focuses on the need to “differentiate” groupings based on assigned qualifiers (Hodkinson 2002, 24) and apply subculture only to “certain groups” based on these qualifiers, creating in Hesmondhalgh’s phrasing, a “narrowly defined category” that denies fluidity (Hesmondhalgh 2007, 43–44). Indeed, he seems to be only recreating a *new* binary that negates agency in different types of meaningful subcultural affiliations.

Situating Visual *Kei* as Subculture

Visual *kei*, from its widely accepted ‘birth’ in the late 1980s with the debut of founding bands such as BUCK-TICK and X [JAPAN], has continued to develop and evolve over the years, waxing and waning in popularity and mainstream recognition. Many attempts have been made to map and label visual *kei* to a framework—e.g., as part of rock or metal (e.g., Inoue et al. 2003), or as a musical genre itself, albeit still typically a type of rock or metal (e.g., Mattar 2008; Kashiwagi 2011; Muneaki Saito 2013, 2014). However, I argue instead that it is its own subculture, as the term is outlined in the above section and will be further elucidated below.

While it is extremely tempting to focus on the musical conventions, and thus attempt to box visual *kei* into a genre, I believe that this is unhelpful. It bears note, however, that the term is oftentimes used *casually* as a ‘genre’ (*janru*) or ‘genre label,’ in addition to the academic attempts mentioned above. Visual *kei* can also, for example, be used as a meaningful answer in response to what sort of music one likes.⁷ Additionally, it was promoted as a musical genre at the peak of its popularity in the 1990s—arguably part of the reason it was misinterpreted and ultimately suffered negative associations.

Specifically in terms of music, genre refers to “musical categories and systems of classification” (Negus 1999, 4) as well as “systems of orientations, expectations, and conventions that bind together an industry, performers, critics, and fans” (Lena and Peterson 2008, 698). In other words, ‘genre’ is used to help people distinguish between types of music and related identities. Another aspect of genres is that, regardless of the rules or “conventions,” they also “comprise expectations and audience knowledge” as well as those pieces of media that are labelled as officially belonging to the genre (Neale 2000, 162). Thus, genre is a tool that can be used by audiences to assist in finding more media that suits their tastes and determining what type of person they are dealing with, as particular genres are often associated

⁷ Whether or not it is typically given as an answer, however, even by fans, is less definite.

with particular tastes and, by extension, identities. This latter point may make genre seem suitable for analysis of visual *kei*; however, while members of visual *kei* subculture may like specific genres, people who like those same genres are not *necessarily* members of visual *kei* subculture themselves.

This explains part of why I do not utilize the framework of genre. The other part is that analysis of visual *kei* through genre *alone* would eliminate many aspects of the subculture which I focus on in this thesis, namely fan practices (which are not limited to musical appreciation), performed personae separate from the music (not limited to on-stage performance), and the overall focus on the performance and world building that is crucial to visual *kei* as a meaningful label. To be absolutely clear, music is ostensibly a ‘core’ of visual *kei* practice; I am not here to argue it is not. *However*, there are too many points that are crucial to visual *kei* subcultural identification and meaning making that go beyond generally accepted boundaries of ‘genre.’ Cross dressing, gender bending, and homoerotic play, all significant parts of visual *kei*, are not meaningful qualifiers when speaking about genre. However, each fits perfectly within the confines of subculture. I do not, therefore, argue that genre is too solid a framework, as it too is an inherently fluid category with change and evolution inherent in each generic iteration, but rather that it does not incorporate all that is visual *kei*.

On top of this, as of 2022, with the number of so-called ‘genres’ that are themselves *encompassed* within the larger umbrella of visual *kei*—from rock to industrial to rap to operatic—attempting to analyze visual *kei* itself as a ‘genre’ *as well* will only create misunderstanding and, once again, focus on attempts to fit it within a delineated box of meaning instead of focusing on the practices and meaning-making of its members. While attempting to define which traits might meaningfully illustrate visual *kei* as ‘genre’ in a musicological sense could be a fruitful study, it does not tell us about visual *kei* as a cultural force, nor about the

motivations, practices, and identities of its members. In short, it does not fit this historicizing project.

Notably, in Japanese scholarship, visual *kei* has *already* always been classifiable as a subculture, though treated slightly differently. While many Japanese works reference Anglo-American theories (particularly those of the CCCS and occasionally the Chicago School) as “foundational” (e.g., Nanba 1997; K. Koizumi 2002; Okada 2003)—indeed, the loanword “*sabukaruchā*” (“subculture”) indicates the assumed ‘foreign’ providence of the concept—some works use the term in a fairly straightforward manner, focusing on Japanese conceptions and only tangentially referencing Anglo-American theories (e.g., Moroi, Hanataka, and Odori 2010) or ignoring them completely (e.g., Matsumoto 2020). This suggests Japanese theorizations may offer a fresh angle on the framework of subculture, one that is embodied within visual *kei* as well as reasserting the framework itself is “not dead” yet.

Using subculture in its literal sense as a form of “subordinate” culture (often using the Japanese *kanji* term *ka'i-bunka*, which literally means low rank culture) seems to be fairly common within Japanese academic writing on the subject (e.g., Ina 1999, 2; Nakagawa 2002; Miyazawa 2014). Subculture also appears to be used without explanation, i.e., as synonymous for a smaller ‘sub’ culture within the larger popular culture of Japan (albeit associated heavily with “youth” and “young people” or *wakamono*) (Miyadai, Ishihara, and Ōtsuka 2007). This type of casual usage is common. For example, Azuma Hiroki uses the term as a throw-away to explain “otaku,” arguing that “[otaku] is the label for those people obsessed with the subculture group tied deeply together around comics, anime, video games, computers, science fiction, *tokusatsu* productions, plastic models and the like” (Azuma 2001, 8; cited in Nanba 2006, 163).

Nanba Koji, who has published prolifically on subculture within the Japanese sphere, lists various manners in which “subculture” or the shortened “*sabukaru*” is used in common Japanese parlance and popular press as introduction to his exploration of the subject. These

include (1) “some specialized contents and works aimed at young people (or children)” drawn from the broader “mass” or “high” culture, (2) “all youth culture” or some subset thereof, (3) “otaku-type contents” and, in contradiction with this, (4) opposed to “otaku” and instead representing a more typical street-fashion sensibility; or (5) a simple synonym for “mass” or “popular culture” itself (which he connects explicitly with the nuances born of the literal translation of “below” culture) (Nanba 2006, 161). He also points out in a footnote how Miyazawa Akio argues that the shortened “*sabukaru*” in Japanese discourse came to be interpreted as its own “genre” rather than as “sub” to any “high culture” (Nanba 2006, 161; citing Miyazawa 2006, 156), which deviates entirely from Anglo-American conceptualizations.

According to Nakagawa Hideki, subculture can simply be interpreted as a section of “differentiation” or “specialization” (*bunka*) of the ruling mass or popular culture (2002, 19). This “sub-section” interpretation is not uncommon; indeed, as explained above, in Japanese academic discourse, subculture is often used quite literally as “subordinate” culture (e.g., Ina 1999; Nakagawa 2002; Miyazawa 2014). According to these broad conceptions, any sub-section of broader popular culture that can be named can be a “subculture”—for example pornographic films or music enjoyed by young people (Miyadai, Ishihara, and Ōtsuka 2007). Indeed, as Nanba outlines above, the term “*sabukaruchā*” is often used within popular discourse to refer to such broad categories as “anime, manga, and video games” (e.g., Fuwara 2020; *Tokyo Shimbun* 2021), placing it as a sub-section of Japanese culture that the public is (potentially) unfamiliar with. This is visible in the introductory article of a series of columns in the newspaper *Tokyo Shimbun* called “*Sabukaru* World,” which states that although Japanese “subculture” is the most “vigorous” form of “Japanese culture and arts” that is “showered with attention from the world,” it is something that “people who don’t understand won’t get,” thus necessitating their “easy to understand” explanations of the “attractiveness” of “popular subcultural contents”

(*Tokyo Shimbun* 2021).⁸ Subculture, in common Japanese, thus seems to refer to ‘some subsection of culture or cultural practice within any larger grouping.’ While it does not engage any further, this does resonate with the fluid nature of visual *kei*.

Returning to Nanba and academic work, he asserts that “subculture” also defines *relationality* with some other culture (2006, 163, emphasis added)—another point that resonates with my analysis of visual *kei*, which as shown above is inescapably enmeshed within broader Japanese culture. Nanba lays forth four general “patterns” of this “relationality” in an overview of previous theorizations, both Japanese and Anglo-American. (1) “Subculture in opposition to upper culture,” (2) “subculture in opposition to total culture,” (3) “subculture in opposition to main culture,” and (4) “subculture in opposition to conventional culture.” Notably, his (brief) introductory explanations for (1) and (3) choose to cite specifically Japanese sources alone (Nanba 2006, 163), despite the original concept coming from abroad.

In short, subculture’s inherent and foundational relationship to the “main” or “broader culture” (or perhaps even “conventional culture”) appears to be taken as a matter of course within Japanese scholarship. Nakagawa puts it bluntly, saying that “subculture is not culture separated from the mainstream” (*shuryū*) but rather, “the same as a fad, something that a small number of people enjoy with each other” (2002, 71). In an earlier work, Ina Masato states that subculture is “to a certain extent independent from and maintains autonomy in relation to the ‘main’ [culture’s] political, economic, and social system,” but at the same time it is “dependent,” “subordinate,” or even “parasitic” to that same “main” culture (Ina 1999, 2–3).⁹ He also specifically places “flexibility,” or subculture’s ability to adjust to and deal with its environment or surrounding situation (which I argue can be similarly interpreted as fluidity or liquidity), as

⁸ *Sabukaru*, a shortened form of the loanword *sabukaruchā*, is often used within everyday discourse.

⁹ Note that Ina here specifically uses the katakana for “main” in parentheses, not “mainstream” or “dominant” or “upper.”

part of the reason for subculture's "sub" nature (Ina 1999, 150). These two points, (1) a vital connection, even dependence, on some "main" or broader concept of culture and (2) the inherent fluidity of subculture, particularly its ability to adjust to its environment, are vital in my own interpretation of subculture and the example of visual *kei*. These points also provide a framework for subcultural analysis that helps to contradict many of the critiques of the concept which I engaged with above.

Returning to Nanba, his (2003) basic definition of "subculture" appends personal meaning-making to this basic sense of differentiation and relationality, providing a more specific frame of reference. In Nanba's conception, "subculture" refers to the whole "way of life" (not unlike the final assignation applied to visual *kei* in the *KanJamu* broadcast) shared among a group of people who find a sense of belonging in a culture that assigns certain meanings to events, bodily adornments, etc. Participants take common, "partial ownership" of these meanings, and the subculture is recognized by both members and outsiders as in some way different from "the majority of society and the mainstream" (Nanba 2003, 108).

Nanba narrows his definition further by adding the following caveats. A "subculture" must (1) be linked to a recognizable and utilized identity with which the members label themselves and are labeled by others, and (2) have its members/parts/constituting elements exist in some way as "unconventional" to generally accepted ideas, marked as "not the norm" or default when compared to its broader society. However, (3) members are not limited to a constant, "around the clock" identification, and can instead identify within the subculture in certain situations only, but may also have their identification "cancelled" by themselves, other members, or even outsiders (Nanba 2003, 108). In a later work, Nanba outlines Japanese subcultures in more detail, specifically pointing to a turn from "*zoku*" or "tribe" type subcultures characterized by tighter unification, definite labelling, and a strong sense of "delinquency" or "deviance" to "*kei*" type subcultures characterized by looser ties and a central focus on taste

and interests, almost “equivalent with choosing a fashion magazine” (Nanba 2007, 388). Visual *kei*, as indicated by its name, is a part of this shift, firmly situated in the “*kei*” type of subculture as outlined by Nanba, and even included in his list of examples (2007, 106–7).

Overall, I believe these Japanese conceptions of “subculture” and Nanba’s more specific ideation fit visual *kei*. It is a music-based “way of life” with performers, fans, and specific, shared practices and tastes that are labelled and recognized by both members and the general population, which are recognized as separate and “unconventional” in some way from mainstream Japanese society. Members can join, leave, and join again, existing in a *fluid* state and constantly negotiating their own and others’ positioning in relation to both constructed ideas of the broader culture and their own practices. This is precisely why I append the qualifier *fluid* to my conception of subculture—*its liquidity is inherent*. For example, my research has demonstrated repeatedly that there are multiple forms of identification and practice that fit within the broader umbrella of visual *kei*. The terms “graduation” (*sotsugyō*) and “get out/go up” (*agaru*) for example—literally signifying a ‘moving up and out’ of the subculture or some part of it, most often used for *bangya*—indicates a transition from one state to another, with the jargon terms’ own existence indicative of the *matter-of-course* nature of fluid identification. In a more everyday sense, many established members are explicitly incognito in their everyday lives—*bangya* and performers both are not necessarily ‘obvious’ with piercings, tattoos, and wild hairstyles, but instead often put on and take off their visual *kei* identity to successfully operate within everyday Japan. In addition to all of this, visual *kei* is typically conceived of as “below” other, more popular forms of culture, whether in terms of economic stability, recognition, respectability, or any combination thereof. Recall too the shift in Japanese subcultural composition as outlined by Nanba, with his “*kei*” type characterized by fluidity and loose bonds. Nanba specifically locates the shift in the early 1990s (2007, 108)—not coincidentally when visual *kei* began to be recognized. Thus, within the Japanese conceptions

of subculture outlined above, there is little to no negotiation required as to visual *kei*'s subcultural status.

Finally, I proffer one final argument based on visual *kei*'s treatment within mainstream media, as exemplified by the anecdote that opened this chapter. This mainstream media presence further cements visual *kei*'s position as subculture, most clearly through 1990s Anglo-American conceptions—particularly those drawn from Sarah Thornton's 1995 work on “club cultures” and “subcultural capital” (Thornton 1995). As Thornton argues, “subcultures are best defined as social groups that have been labelled as such. [...] Communications media create subcultures in the process of naming them and draw boundaries around them in the act of describing them” (1995, 162). The mass media's incorporation of visual *kei* is thus what helped to define it, “draw[ing] boundaries” to stabilize it as a recognizable subculture. While the term “visual *kei*” itself was (theoretically) established in 1990 with the inaugural publication of niche media magazine SHOXX, it was the adoption of the term into the common vernacular—represented by its “new/fad word” nomination in 1997 (Ichikawa and Fujitani 2015)—and its widespread usage that solidified it as its own music subculture.¹⁰

I recognize that Bourdieusian theory has been used extensively throughout subcultural literature, perhaps most evident in Thornton's concept of “subcultural capital” (1995) and later works investigating it more deeply, such as Hodkinson's (2002), although some scholars

¹⁰ While the SHOXX story is generally accepted as the term's origins, it is likely an “urban” legend of the subculture, as pointed out by music writer Fuyu Showgun. He further points out that it is even dubious to assign specific credit for the mythical origin to X [JAPAN]'s promotional phrase “PSYCHEDELIC VIOLENCE CRIME OF VISUAL SHOCK” as its creation has been claimed by two members, hide and YOSHIKI (Fuyu 2013a). The “New/Fad Word Grand Prize” (*shingo ryūkōgo taishō*) is an annual Japanese “competition,” first held in 1984, that purports to “choose new and fad words that cause a stir in the general public” which indicate the social condition of the year at hand, as well as “honoring” those who brought the words forth or had some deep connection with them (JIYUKOKUMINSHA 2021). Visual *kei*, while making it into the ranking in 1997, with subcultural members often using this fact as a matter of some note, did not even make the top ten, nor does it bear any position on the official website of the prize (the website for the 1997 awards can be viewed at <https://www.jiyu.co.jp/singo/index.php?eid=00014>, last accessed September 1, 2022).

question whether it has been used correctly (Williamson 2005; van de Goor 2017). Specifically, subcultural works focus on Bourdieu's "capital," only loosely engaging with his concept of "field," which is the "competitive arena" (Swartz 2002, 655) in which "individual dispositions determine the value of capital" (van de Goor 2017, 54). In other words, "field" operates as "an imaginary social structure in the collective (un)consciousness therefore dependent on individuals (and their dispositions)" (van de Goor 2017, 54). This definition of "field" may be interpreted as similar in nature to what I have described here as subculture, but nuance exists: due to my focus on how visual *kei*'s practices and identifications are negotiated and made *meaningful* to practitioners through discursive construction, unpacking subculture within a Bourdieusian framework (although indeed a fruitful path for further research) does not suit my historicizing project. "Field" does not seem conducive to my argument for fluidity, as it would require boxing and labelling various types of capital before discussing how they are struggled over within or through the "social arena" of the "field" (R. Jenkins 1992, 84). "Field" seems to refer a virtual *space*, where historicizing visual *kei* requires a framework to accommodate the *process* of structuring and restructuring meaning and identity. Indeed, as visual *kei* aligns on a fundamental level with Nanba's conception of *kei*-type subcultures as well as being discursively produced *as* a (sub)culture, analyzing visual *kei* in terms of "field" seems unsuitable for this particular project.

Thus, I argue that visual *kei* is best situated as a subculture—specifically, a *fluid* subculture—and that this situation is *required* before meaningful analysis of visual *kei* practice can take place. However, this fluidity and its foundations within Bauman's liquid modernity merit further explanation.

Riding the Bubble: Japan and Subculture through Liquid Modernity and Neoliberal Capitalist Realism

Born in the late 1980s, visual *kei* coalesced during the peak of Japan's bubble economy, with oft-credited founding band X [JAPAN]'s major debut and the Nikkei Stock average peak both occurring in 1989 (Morioka 1999, 9). While consumerism and consumption had been building since the end of World War II, there was a shift to "individualized modes of consumption" building up to the bubble's affluence (Hambleton 2021, 382). At this historical juncture Japan became "home to millions of the world's most archetypal consumers" whose people were "thoroughly immersed in the business of defining themselves by means of the goods they acquired" (Francks 2009, 207). These goods included an increasingly individualized "variety of immaterial-image commodities" provided through popular culture, which now acted "as an ideological apparatus to differentiate people [...] so that they were made into better consumers" (Mōri 2021, 463), as discussed in the Introduction.

This veritable "society of consumers" (Bauman 2007) was built upon what has been labelled the "maturation" of the "consumer society" as "culture" from 1981 (Ueno and Komori 2008, 280), tying in with a significant shift in the cultural landscape. Writing in 1984, Fujioka Wakao argues that Japanese culture in this period was shifting towards fragmented "micromasses" (*shōshū*), with a focus on highly personalized consumption and leisure as opposed to socialized, "mass" (*taishū*) cultural tendencies (Fujioka 1984). He states that this led to conflict—the desire for individuality against the desire to not be alone, to have friends and allies—leading to the "micromass" being the "most comfortable place to be" for the Japanese public (Fujioka 1984, 19). These "micromasses" were "bound together by feeling," not by anything physical or external, and became "one's own world" in which to belong and be articulated (Fujioka 1984, 19–20). He summarized this trend as the "fragmentation of society," which combined with the "expanding role of intuition" led to the breakdown of the "masses" in terms of unifying, overarching trends or tastes (Fujioka 1986, 31). Others later would also

comment on this increased segmentation of popular culture and dissolution of mass, universal cultural objects in the Japanese sphere (e.g., Miyadai 2007). In another sense, I argue this trend can be interpreted as the *liquification* of both meaning and identity making in the Japanese cultural landscape from the 1980s through increasingly personalized, socially disconnected cultural objects.

This fragmentation and disconnection, in being encompassed into the mainstream neoliberal capitalist system, thus offered a significant increase in discreet, consumable products and services. This dovetailed with the increasing importance of consumption as meaning making; as Japan progressed into the peak of the bubble economy, *everything* became the object of consumption (Hara 2006, 126). This included music, which was quickly enfolded into the category of consumer object along with other “immaterial products” of the media industry which “became an increasingly important sector of the economy” (Mōri 2021, 463). Combined with the proliferation of television, which at the time had a significant impact on Japanese music tastes and consumption (de Launey 1995; Manabe 2008), this allowed for individualized programs to replace those with family-wide appeal (Mōri 2021, 463–64), including those with a music focus.¹¹ These provided a stage for more niche acts, allowing a larger variety of performers to reach an audience. Combined with a surge in technology that allowed music consumption practice to be individualized, such as the Sony Walkman and proliferation of affordable CDs and CD players, these factors compounded to add new demographics to the consumer audience of popular music as part of the “mass market splinter[ing]” and “increased specialization” throughout all popular culture (Bourdagh 2012, 224–25).

¹¹ One such program was “*Ika-Ten*,” briefly addressed in the Introduction. “*Ika-Ten*” was a late Saturday night program airing from 1989 to 1991 which introduced new bands weekly and was attributed with helping the “band boom” (de Launey 1995) which is often connected with visual *kei*’s beginnings (Morikawa 2003).

Importantly, these new consumer demographics were targeted as just that: *consumers*. Music became a means through which to express personal identity, but it specifically had to be *consumed* to fill this role—just as all other cultural objects. These objects too had to adapt a degree of *fluidity*: no longer everything to everyone, they had to be adaptable, malleable to the meaning making of each individual in question and, consequently in some cases, apparently hollow. The 1980s, therefore, saw a shift in the cultural landscape that both (a) increasingly channeled personal meaning making through consumption and, consequently, (b) provided more diverse and increasingly fluid options through which to practice said consumption.

Conspicuous consumption has remained strong in Japan despite the end of the bubble, and the ethos of the “society of consumers” (Bauman 2007) remains—the “ubiquitous mediascape which incited consumer demand for the latest trends” remains in strength, with the only difference notable in the price point (Hambleton 2021, 384; citing Richie 2003). Meaning is still made through consumption—and never-ending consumption necessitates a never-ending source of product. In this sense, subcultures were easily absorbed and used by the mainstream, cycled through as disposable consumer objects to perpetuate the “ritualized forms of consumption” through which Japanese subjects are articulated and perhaps subjugated by the state “to serve the policies of neoliberalism” (Galbraith and Karlin 2012, 19). The legacy of the bubble has, in short, fundamentally altered the cultural landscape of Japan.

Visual *kei* subculture, through its roots in Japan’s liquefying modernity and consumer capitalism, thus embodies a new form of culture that would become more common in Japan: culture that exists in a state of liquid intangibility, separate from inherent political and social meaning to be better absorbed into the mainstream system of consumerist meaning making. This ties too with the underlying uncertainty and insecurity of liquid modernity, which “shopping around” (futilely) aims to remedy (Bauman 2000, 81). Without its own inherent meaning, visual *kei*, as other subcultural and popular cultural artifacts, can only offer a

temporary respite at any time; allegiance and belonging require continual re-pledging (re-purchasing), and ambiguity and precarity are inherent, as they have become in Japan more generally in the wake of the bubble's burst (c.f. Allison 2013; Baldwin and Allison 2015b). Visual *kei* thus serves as an important lens for demonstrating not only how the music industry has changed, but also how popular culture and consumer culture have changed, serving as a critical marker throughout its lifespan of broader Japan—specifically of the increasing *liquidity* of Japanese cultural meaning. This, again, is why I aim to *historicize* visual *kei*, not to write its history.

Here and throughout this chapter, I have emphasized the *fluidity* and *liquidity* of visual *kei* and, arguably, subculture more generally, which I propose may be better articulated as *fluid* subculture. This inherent liquidity is why I utilize Bauman's metaphor of liquid modernity as part of the theoretical framework for this thesis. Further, as this liquidity predicates a relational, fluid existence with broader societal structures, it therefore *also* means that visual *kei*, and all subcultural practice, is further enmeshed within what has been identified as neoliberal capitalist realism (Fisher 2009; Hassler-Forest 2012). Simply stated, this is the current dominant reality in which we cannot conceive of our lives *outside* of neoliberal capitalism. This state of being necessitates that *all* individual meaning making, including the subcultural, is filtered through the neoliberal capitalist structure.

Neoliberal capitalist realism itself ties back to Bauman's liquid metaphor and its related "society of consumers," which I explore further below. In the remainder of this section, I explain the theoretical framework of liquid modernity and neoliberal capitalist realism, laying the groundwork for the case studies that follow and my situation of visual *kei* as a *fluid* subculture.

Put simply, liquid modernity states that present society is characterized by "liquidity, fluidity and drift," where the "frailty, fading and short-termism of social relationships" are a

mainstay (Elliott 2007a, 12). Importantly, this is not “a world where ‘anything goes,’” but rather one “where there is no one set of constraints, no definitive set of rules” (Blackshaw 2005, x; citing Bauman and Gane 2004, 22). People are now “players in a game that changes the rules as it goes—in an apparently whimsical and hard-to-predict fashion” (Bauman and Gane 2004, 21). Elucidating his choice to use the metaphor of “liquid,” Bauman points out that “fluids do not keep any shape for long and are constantly ready (and prone) to change it” (2000, 2). He later elaborates, stating that a shape change “can be triggered by even the weakest of stresses,” making it a fitting “metaphor for our times” (Bauman and Gane 2004, 18).

Michael Hviid Jacobsen outlines Bauman’s “five central features” of liquid modernity as follows: (1) “the dissolution of ‘society’ or ‘the social’, which is now increasingly deregulated, privatized, and individualized,” (2) “the separation and pending divorce of power from politics,” which unmoors power and makes politics “impotent,” (3) the dissolution of the “universal welfare state,” (4) “the breakdown of any long-term planning, thinking and acting and the subsequent lack of investment in the future,” and (5) the emphasis on individual’s responsibility for their own life and only their own life (Jacobsen 2017, 247). In other words, liquid modernity aims to represent humanity’s individualized, precarious, and above all constantly in flux existence through the metaphor of liquidity.

Under liquid modernity, society’s established and accepted “moulds that previously held things securely together are now rapidly disintegrating or are progressively dismantled and thus can no longer keep their content stable or solid for any substantial period of time” (Jacobsen 2017, 246). While this may appear to resonate with post-modern meaninglessness, recall Bauman’s assertion that there *are* rules, just *multiple* and *varied* sets. Similarly, visual *kei*, while something “we don’t really understand,” is still a *meaningful* label which its subcultural members use and identify with—even a “way of life.” This is not limited to visual *kei*, but rather applies to *all* subcultures. After all, “[s]ubcultures do not objectively exist; they

are not coherent, easily identifiable groups with stable memberships and clear boundaries” (Haenfler 2014, 24). Visual *kei* too exists in this *liquid* state, escaping firm definition and boundary-drawing while maintaining meaning—hence my utilization of *liquid* modernity. This meaning, however, in being liquid, *necessarily flows into the shapes of society’s structures*, which are in turn enmeshed within the ideology of neoliberal capitalist realism (Fisher 2009; Hassler-Forest 2012), inexorably tied with liquid modernity’s “society of consumers” (Bauman 2007), which will be explored below. Essentially, the practices of visual *kei*, while meaningful to subcultural members, exist and are expressed *through* these broader structures and under the logic of liquidity: meaning, too, is thus *fluid*. This does not, however, mean that it is *meaningless*—it simply is not *solid*.

Antony Bryant, in drawing connections between liquid modernity and turbulence theory, states that “[c]omplexity, chaos and turbulence are all associated with a breakdown of modelling, of prediction, of control; and Bauman’s idea of fluidity is that nothing ever solidifies at all” (2007, 133). Bryant’s summary demonstrates the usefulness of Bauman’s metaphor when discussing subculture. To reiterate, my goal is not to draw a shiny new box to delineate or “solidify” what visual *kei* ‘is,’ or indeed what ‘subculture’ can be, because the box would *always necessarily exclude*. Visual *kei* and subculture, following the metaphor of liquid modernity, cannot “solidify”—they are constantly in a state of “turbulence.” This is not a new idea, but one put forth in the 1970s by subcultural scholars who argued that subcultures “have cultural systems which are in a state of flux” and “each member's perspective [...] will necessarily be different from that of any other member” (Fine and Kleinman 1979, 7). Bryant provides the “evocation of liquid modernity” through the example of the “Klein bottle,” an analogy I want to extend to help provide a liquid understanding of subculture:

There is no distinction between the inside and the outside; and, being a bottle, it appears to be designed to contain a liquid or gas but it actually cannot do this. [...] here is something that is clearly liquid and, by design, can never exist in the first place—and so never has to be discarded or destroyed. (2007, 134)

While no “box” or “solidification” of subculture can exist, the concept in and of itself does still bear meaning—while subcultures “*are not real things*” (J. P. Williams 2011, 35, emphasis original) and do not exist, they maintain a *conceptual* significance to practitioners. Recall the example of L’Arc~en~Ciel, who can exist both *as* and *as not* visual *kei*. It is through this very inconceivability, or this innate liquidity, that L’Arc~en~Ciel can exist in this state of flux, and have their meaning and identity still tied into visual *kei*.

You Are What You Consume: Living in the “Society of Consumers”

When speaking of liquid modernity, we cannot ignore Bauman’s related concept of the “society of consumers” (2007). Jacobsen and Hansen summarize this concept as a society where “people consume everything—consumer items, experience, other people, even life itself [...] everything is saturated with insatiable consumer desire,” to the point where “access to consumption” is all that matters (Jacobsen and Hansen 2017, 116–17; citing Bauman 2007). This goes deeper than just the desire to “buy” or own things; it becomes all-encompassing, and the very core of being: “[t]oday, to be an individual, to feel like an individual, to behave as an individual and to be regarded and recognised by others as an individual means consuming” (Jacobsen 2017, 255). Indeed, according to Bauman, “consumer choice has become the meta-value of the ‘liquid modern’ world” (Davis 2013, 3), and “the freedom to consume and choose which symbols of self-identity are to be appropriated [...] constitute the central stratifying principle of society” (Atkinson 2008, 4). In other words, one’s position within society and the foundations of one’s very identity are predicated upon one’s consumption—both the choices one makes and the very ability (or lack thereof) to do so. This seems an apt description of Japan in and out of the bubble.

This consumption-based value system is evident within subcultures as well, which remain enmeshed within broader structure and thus cannot escape. This harkens back to Thornton’s (1995) assertion that subcultures exist *because of* mainstream economical values

and practices. Fans of visual *kei*, for example, demonstrate their loyalties and identities through *consumption*, be it of an album (or multiple copies thereof), a ticket to a live performance, limited time goods, or even re-compilation albums of a dead artist's work (as I discuss in Chapter 4). While individual meaning making without consumption is possible, it cannot be *recognized* as such within this "society of consumers."

Furthermore, this consumption is without end. Each act of consumption is necessarily "dwarfed, devalued, and stripped of [...] allurements by the competition of 'new and improved' offers. In the consumer race the finishing line always moves faster than the fastest of runners" (Bauman 2000, 72). After all, the end goal of consumption is gratification. However, in liquid modernity, this gratification never comes—there is always another album, another *cheki* polaroid from the next live, another key chain to purchase. Past purchases help build identity, but this identity cannot persist without continuous consumption. Recall that subculture, in my conception, is *not* defined by resistance, class-conscious or otherwise, although the concept may still be employed discursively (this will be discussed further in Chapter 2).

Liquid modernity (like any theory of modernity) is not without its critiques. It has been accused of containing ambivalences and paradoxes (Jacobsen 2017, 265). For example, the apparent existence and resilience of solid structures within supposedly liquid contemporary life appears paradoxical. Bauman counters this by saying that is the point of liquid modernity, particularly as opposed to postmodernity. Postmodernity simply deconstructs and then stops, "singing praise of the new brave world of ultimate liberation rather than subjecting it to a critical scrutiny" (Bauman and Gane 2004, 17–18). Liquid modernity offers a foundation upon which to continuously build an understanding of society. This has not stopped critics from asserting that "liquid modernity" is simply "postmodernity [...] renamed" (Rattansi 2017, 74). Most of these critiques seem to be based upon an unwillingness or failure to understand or engage with the concept of "liquidity" as a metaphor, resorting to binary conceptions of is vs. is not,

complaining about Bauman's lack of postmodern deconstruction (e.g, Elliott 2007b; Ray 2007; Atkinson 2008; Lee 2005; Rattansi 2017; Jacobsen 2017), ironically proving his point.

One of the prevalent and more serious critiques is that liquid modernity seems to deny individual actors agency (Lee 2011), as well as individual meaning-making and identification (Best 2013). Indeed, Anthony Elliot says:

Due to the generality and sweep of the theory of liquid modernity, what threatens to recede into the shadows is the point that all of us have multiple identities, some overlapping, some contradictory, and that at any moment these identities are interacting with –incorporating, resisting and transforming – broader social values and cultural differences, shaping and being shaped by modernity. (2007b, 59)

Relatedly, Rune Åkvik Nilsen claims that individuals within Bauman's work can be interpreted as “minions, idiotic consumers” (2017, 197), whose “capacity for commitment and [...] ability to uphold lasting social bonds” is undermined (2017, 185). Even in my example above, the visual *kei* fan may seem trapped within an inescapable cycle of consumption.

However, in my interpretation, this is less of a binary problem than they paint it to be. It is not ‘all structure’ or ‘all agency,’ as has been argued at length by structurationists (e.g., Anthony Giddens) who emphasize that the two exist in a symbiotic rather than an oppositional relationship, as structures are continually adjusted by agents, and agents are continuously adjusting to structures (Parker 2000, 35–36)—thus allowing for (social) change.¹² It is exactly because of personal meaning making that agency plays a role in structuring, as well as in being structured: “the subjectivities of liquid life [...] should not be approached as only epiphenomena” (Elliott 2007b, 60). Just because the visual *kei* fan is working within the structures of liquid modernity and the “society of consumers” *does not mean* she is without agency, nor that she does not derive *meaningful pleasure and self-affirmation* through her visual *kei* related purchases. The emphasis in this thesis lies on the fact that both structure *and* agency have weight

¹² The term structuration is credited originally to Anthony Giddens (Giddens 1973; cited in Parker 2000, 1), who also serves as a representational structurationist in John Parker's review of the subject (2000).

in the practices of the individual and, more specifically, the subcultural participant. As I stated before, practices have meaning—even if only to their practitioners—and the metaphor of liquid modernity allows for this.

Indeed, scholars seem to downplay or ignore in their critiques the neoliberal capitalist realism aspects of Bauman’s “consumer.” For example, Craig Thompson and Ankita Kumar argue against what they interpret to be Bauman’s contention that “liquid modernity mires consumers in an endless quest for wish fulfilment” and “consumption has become a ceaseless quest for placating experiences of novelty, distraction and future-be-damned excitement” (Caldwell and Henry 2020, 557; citing Bauman 2000, 2007). While they grant that some “forms of consumption” may “more or less align” with this idea, they follow this with a collection of consumers who do *not* in order to demonstrate that consumption is *not* just for pleasure or gratification. Their final example is consumers “seeking to escape the burdens of credit debt in hopes of creating a financially secure future” (Caldwell and Henry 2020, 558; citing Bernthal, Crockett, and Rose 2005).

However, this example of consumption itself is made necessary by the structures of liquid modernity and neoliberal capitalism. Alfredo Saad-Filho points out that in the US and UK in particular, “many workers were drawn into systematic borrowing” becoming “chronically indebted” and, relatedly, “maxing out their credit cards” due to a conglomeration of factors, namely the “replacement” of “traditionally relatively well-paid jobs” with “less well-paid service jobs” and “the retrenchment of the welfare state” (2019, 245). These factors are specifically indicated by Bauman as key points within liquid modernity (Jacobsen 2017), as well as a crucial part of neoliberal capitalism. Credit card debt is not a *natural* state of being, but one *inherently linked to the overarching structures* and further tied to individual agency. After all, the structures of society *and* their individual choices led these consumers to be in credit card debt in the first place. Similarly, in visual *kei* subculture, fans are not forced to

purchase additional goods and services related to visual *kei*. If some of them end up in debt, this is not a *natural* effect caused by identifying as or becoming a visual *kei* member, and additionally involves individual choice.

This difficulty to grasp the foundations and reach of underlying structural realities within critique of liquid modernity is reminiscent of Mark Fisher's concept of capitalist realism, or "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it" (2009, 2). In other words, capitalism occupies a natural, matter of course role in human society, and is therefore not even questioned. The perceived lack of agency by Bauman's critics appears to resonate with the naturalized structure of capitalism in Bauman's "society of consumers." This is why I believe that instead of immediately accusing Bauman's theory of being determinist, we should give the metaphor of liquidity and the fact that it is not a binary 'either/or' a chance to examine visual *kei* practices and lived experiences through the lens of capitalist realism.

Bauman's and Fisher's ideas have further been brought together through the concept of neoliberal capitalist realism (Hassler-Forest 2012, 2).¹³ While capitalism posits a "market [...]" as a distinct arena where goods are valued and exchanged," neoliberalism imagines that "the market is, or ideally should be, the basis for all of society" (Wilson 2018, 2–3). Importantly, this adds the foundations of the neoliberal political philosophy to the capitalist economic system, which expands its consequences to the social: "neoliberalism works aggressively to infuse competition" into "[e]very aspect of our lives" (Wilson 2018, 3) through consumerism. Visual *kei*, and many other subcultures, are within this same situation—hence the focus on

¹³ While David Hassler-Forest specifically locates his ideation with "postmodern theory," I agree with the critique that postmodernism represents an "attack on the power structures of modernity" without meaningful replacement, "adamantly anti-foundational" (Lee 2005, 62) and thus destructive in nature, and thus I remain with Bauman's liquid modernity.

consumption as devotion. This is why, throughout this thesis, I will specifically refer to neoliberal capitalist realism in relation to liquid modernity and visual *kei* subculture.

“What the hell is subculture?”

As this chapter has shown, the SEX MACHINEGUNS lyrics that I opened with hit the nail on the head: “What the hell is subculture! It’s a total contradiction.” Subculture as an academic framework has taken many forms and suffered much critique. Its very existence appears contradictory. It both *is* and *is not* part of the mainstream, and it *can* and *cannot* be defined—indeed, another fitting translation for the lyric is “it’s totally absurd.” Instead of a “total contradiction,” however, I argue subculture is *fluid*. This is the reason why I believe visual *kei*, first and foremost, must be established as a subculture before it can be meaningfully analyzed and historicized, which is what I have done in this chapter.

I began by outlining the relevant literature pertaining to subculture, arguing why I do not follow the traditional post-subcultural turn which insists that subculture is a “dead” qualifier. After establishing that it is, in fact, very much *alive*, I set out my reasoning for situating visual *kei* as a subculture in my analysis, rather than utilizing other frameworks, such as genre. However, subculture, as situated within liquid modernity, must similarly be understood as *fluid*. To support this, I offer the metaphor of Bauman’s liquid modernity, which states that society is in a constant state of flux, where boundaries—e.g., between meaning and identity, between subculture and general society—are *always* moving and *always* permeable. I also engaged with the critiques of Bauman’s metaphor, which accused it primarily of determinism, and explained why this is erroneous. I further pointed out that critique of the “society of consumers” seems itself mired within neoliberal capitalist realism, which demonstrates how Bauman’s metaphor is more apt than ever.

Neoliberal capitalist realism therefore seems a good lens through which to apply liquid modernity to contemporary subcultural practice and, more importantly for the purposes of this thesis, visual *kei*. A prime example of how neoliberal capitalist realism works in a fluid subculture such as visual *kei* is subcultural founder YOSHIKI's continuous and in-depth engagement with mainstream, neoliberal profiteering, which I extensively explore in Chapter 2. Another example would be the continuous use of the late hide's image and identity as a product, creating a perpetual cycle of consumption and reaffirmation in which fans either participate or risk losing identification as hide fans and, relatedly, significant visual *kei* "subcultural capital" (Thornton 1995)—I explore this in Chapter 4. In conclusion, this establishment of visual *kei* as a *fluid subculture* within neoliberal capitalist realism and liquid modernity will enable me to historicize the complex practices and transformations that make up the world of visual *kei*.

Chapter 2: Punk Rock and Private Jets: Fluid Subculture in Neoliberal Capitalist Realism

“I want to have value	「価値が欲しい
I want value to living”	生きる価値が欲しい」

-DIR EN GREY, “Devote My Life,” *The Insulated World* (2018)¹

YOSHIKI, a founding member of X [JAPAN], first drew public attention with his band’s major debut in 1989. The band is credited as starting the entire wave of visual *kei* with their “tempestuous advance,” and the phrase emblazoned on the cover of their major debut album *BLUE BLOOD* is often credited as providing the subculture its name: “PSYCHEDELIC VIOLENCE / CRIME OF VISUAL SHOCK” (Oshima 2013b, 36–37). Inoue Takako labels their music “metal” but their actions “punk” (2003a, 115–16)—an identity with significant importance in subcultural studies, serving as central focus for Dick Hebdige (1979) as well as numerous later scholars. Hebdige did not necessarily map punk, but rather used it as an analogy for his broader social class argument about youth rebellion. Inoue cites X’s destructive treatment of venues and vandalistic actions as evidence of their “punk” status (2003a, 115–16), focusing exclusively on the outward, visible practices and appearances as well as individual status rather than the underlying social class struggles Hebdige describes. The band became famous for their loud music, spiked hair, heavy makeup, and anti-social activities, not for their rebellious message nor rebellious members. More specifically, the mention of X conjures up images of YOSHIKI and his shirtless, violent drumming, often with his neck supported by a brace—evidence of his full-bodied devotion to the performance of “punk,” but not of his properly dressed, respectful off-stage persona.

Regardless of the true beginnings of the subculture, X remains “inseparable” from the story of visual *kei* (“SNS Jidai Chōshinka! Ongaku SP” 2021). They are lauded in subcultural

¹ This translation is my own, not the officially produced English lyrics.

media as not “following the rules,” the “summit of visual *kei*,” respected by all “Japanese rock musicians” who followed (Fujitani 2014b, 1), and bringing the idea of visual *kei* as “art you want to express with your whole body” rather than “just music” to the public consciousness (*Logmi Biz* 2016a). YOSHIKI himself contributes to this discourse, insisting that visual *kei* means having “freedom of expression,” and “carrying out one’s convictions” in whatever manner necessary. He positions himself and his subculture as an underdog, insisting that they were originally “disavowed by 99.9 percent” of the world, but that they persevered nevertheless (*Logmi Biz* 2016b). In short, X [JAPAN] and YOSHIKI occupy a subculturally venerated position in terms of artistic integrity, innovation, and rebellion.

This image, however, is not what the general public sees more recently. YOSHIKI has seemingly shifted in motivation: from “punk” legend determined to operate “freely” to eminent capitalist, desperate to maintain relevance.

From March 2020, YOSHIKI’s face and the X [JAPAN] brand featured prominently on WONDA vending machines selling his newest tie-up product, the black canned coffee X-BITTER. The campaign also involved a televised commercial, which implied YOSHIKI’s classical piano skills are connected to the product.² These promotions all included the band’s (and now YOSHIKI’s) symbolic ‘X.’ The campaign itself, however, promoted YOSHIKI’s more ‘acceptable’ face—playing a classical version of “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” in a suit as opposed to aggressive metal-style drumming shirtless.³ In 2022, a similar campaign began to promote Coca-Cola’s new energy drinks: “Real Gold X” and “Real Gold Y.” In the “teaser” promotional video, surrounded by Coca-Cola branding, he connects his ideology that “Nothing is impossible”—reminiscent of his feelings on visual *kei*—explicitly to the campaign, insisting

² See the official press release from March 10, 2020, here (last accessed September 6, 2022): https://www.asahiinryo.co.jp/company/newsrelease/2020/pick_0310.html

³ The commercial, as well as a short selection of ‘behind the scenes’ footage can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PyYmpmmMFVA> (last accessed July 10, 2022).

that the collaboration is creating “art” (*The First Times* 2022). The commercials boast new music composed by YOSHIKI, and each drink is tied a side of his persona: X the rock drummer, and Y the classical pianist.⁴ This incorporation of both images suggests that YOSHIKI now is fully commercially viable, while also maintaining the (constructed) binary of classical virtuoso versus punk rebel.

YOSHIKI’s commercialism is not limited to drinks. In spring 2021, YOSHIKI aimed to earn his character “yoshikitty” the top position in the “2021 Sanrio Character Grand Prize” election.⁵ He promoted this ambition heavily and encouraged his fans to vote actively. Ultimately, however, YOSHIKI’s 2021 campaign was not successful—yoshikitty placed 11th in the local Japan election.⁶ yoshikitty is basically Hello Kitty herself in a black costume, purple eyeshadow, and a hairstyle mimicking YOSHIKI’s own in the



Figure 1: yoshikitty, from the 2022 promotional site. The caption encourages fans to vote once per device per day. (<https://jp.yoshiki.net/info/1111/>) Screenshot taken July 10, 2022.

⁴ See the official press release from May 10, 2022 here: <https://www.cocacola.co.jp/press-center/news-20220510-12>. The commercials, including the imagery and new music, can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hcR-elcyYWc>, both last accessed July 9, 2022.

⁵ This popularity contest allows fans to vote for their favorite Sanrio characters. Sanrio, a Japanese company most famous for creating Hello Kitty, regularly holds this competition to rank properties by popularity. The 2022 promotional page on YOSHIKI’s website boasts that yoshikitty has been nominated eight years in a row (<https://jp.yoshiki.net/info/1111/>, last accessed July 10, 2022).

⁶ See <https://www.sanrio.co.jp/special/characteranking/2021/result/> for the full ranking. “yoshikitty” did win the top spot in certain overseas elections, taking 1st place in Italy, Germany, France, and Thailand, four of the thirteen total countries outside of Japan included (<https://www.sanrio.co.jp/special/characteranking/2021/result/world/>). All links last accessed August 25, 2022. For more on visual *kei*’s popularity overseas, see Chapter 6.

early days of X (Figure 1). The aesthetic is not uncommon but demonstrates again how YOSHIKI's 'rebellious' X persona has been accepted by the Japanese mainstream, here in the form of Sanrio characters. This is a series of characters that, essentially, exists to be consumed in as many contexts as possible, from toys to accessories to theme park tickets. Christine R. Yano states that "commercialism" is one of the traits embodied by the brand's flagship, the original Hello Kitty (2013, 25). Further, her consumption, and that of yoshikitty too, becomes a part of identity formation: part of a larger trend where consumption, at least partially "defines citizenship" (Yano 2013, 31).

YOSHIKI also, however, continuously works to maintain his subcultural relevance. On July 12, 2021, he tweeted what appeared to be a photo of himself backstage at an early X live.⁷ In the photo he sits shirtless, in stage makeup with tall, spiked hair (similar to yoshikitty's style), in what appears to be the small dressing room in the back of a live house. He is looking down and away from the camera with a small smile. In the Tweet, he comments, "No one believed that I was composing a classical piano song at this time...! (laugh)"⁸ The tweet circulated widely. Ikebukuro Chop, a specialized indies level live house that hosts many (older) visual *kei* bands and events, retweeted without comment. Daisuke, a minor visual *kei* performer, did comment, asking for confirmation that the photo was taken in the famous Meguro ROCKMAYKAN live house, a venue with a legendary subcultural reputation specifically due to its connections with X JAPAN.⁹ Overall, response to the Tweet seems affectionate, appreciative, and generally positive. YOSHIKI's attendant "subcultural capital" (Thornton 1995), then, remains (at least publically) strong.

⁷ See the Tweet here: <https://twitter.com/YoshikiOfficial/status/1414530914504241154?s=20>, last accessed August 25, 2022.

⁸ He provides his own English translation in the same tweet: "At that time, nobody believed that I was composing a classical piano song.."

⁹ See Daisuke's quote-tweet here, last accessed September 3, 2022: <https://twitter.com/daisukeeee108/status/1414553005114871813?s=09>.

His commercial intentions, however, are never invisible. As of September 3, 2022, the ‘pinned’ Tweet at the top of YOSHIKI’s official Twitter account (@YoshikiOfficial) is an advertisement for his own branded version of the Rakuten MasterCard. The card shows a monochromatic glamor shot of his own face, which is also his Twitter icon. The text asks, “Does everyone have this card?!” and provides a link to sign-up; the link is also in his profile text.¹⁰ The tweet was originally made on January 12, 2020, and written in Japanese and English, though guidance on how to actually obtain the card itself is only provided in Japanese. The positioning of YOSHIKI’s hands in the image is reminiscent of the famous ‘X’ pose.

I did not list the above recent events to explain YOSHIKI’s whereabouts in the early 2020s. Instead, I aim to begin my historicization of visual *kei* by demonstrating the inherently complex nature of the subcultural icon in the twenty-first century and use it to explain one of the tenets of this thesis: subculture is *fluid* and inexorably tied to its mainstream systems of value. I begin by outlining a core point of my research on visual *kei*, that subculture itself should *not* be understood as a binary, oppositional system with ‘mainstream sell-outs’ versus ‘authentic subcultural rebels,’ and by inference, as a binary of ‘dominant’ versus ‘subversive.’

YOSHIKI, importantly, is not an outlier in practice, only in level of success. He is exemplary as a case study of how visual *kei* and popular culture more broadly in post-bubble Japan is increasingly commercialized and necessarily perpetuates itself through this commercialization. As a widely recognized founding figure of the subculture, YOSHIKI serves as an exemplary case study of how visual *kei* is *not* separate from the mainstream in any meaningful way. Instead, visual *kei* is inseparably *intertwined* with it. Any boundaries or barriers between the two are also *fluid*—permeable and malleable at need and at will, both by subcultural members themselves and the mainstream.

¹⁰ In the original Japanese: “*Minna kono kādo motteru?!?*” The English reads: “Do you have this card?”

In his critical analysis of pop music, Jeffrey T. Nealon argues against using binary frameworks, asserting that binaries do not exist (in the same way that subcultures do not):

The seeming centrality of musical authenticity is [...] one of the primary reasons why writing about music has become so hopelessly stalled and repetitive: you say it's authentic, I say it's sold-out crap. Music of course can and does produce meaningful cultural authenticity-effects for its listeners and producers, but you'll never find this representational thing called authenticity "in" any music. (2018, 30)

Binaries are, in short, *negotiable*—as is authenticity. These binaries exist in their discursive conception and utilization by both subcultural and 'mainstream' individuals. As Nealon states with his example, the meaningfulness of 'authentic versus inauthentic' still exists for those involved in music(al subcultures), even though the binary becomes meaningless when one tries to 'box in' subculture according to strict labels.

YOSHIKI himself utilizes a binary of 'acceptable mainstream' versus 'unacceptable' or 'rebellious subculture,' (perhaps even an Adorno-esque "high culture" versus "low culture") in his backstage picture Tweet. He juxtaposes an epitome of visual *kei* physical performance against the more 'proper' composition of classical piano music, appealing to a discursive understanding of these two ideas as 'opposed' in some way, despite the fact that, clearly, they are *not*, as they are united within him. Recall also the contrasting images on the Real Gold X and Y products. YOSHIKI and other successful performers specifically help in constructing this binary to perpetuate consumption, potentially even a 'resistant' consumption with further meaning imbuing the consumer with their own 'resistant' or 'rebellious' identity. Through explicitly tying his promotions with ideals of "carving one's own path," YOSHIKI imbues consumption of these products, too, with similar ideals: one is not conforming, but rather becoming a "trailblazer" in her own right through drinking Real Gold X and Y.¹¹

Pointing out such binaries, however, is useless without a deeper investigation into the underlying meanings and motivations behind their deployment, including the positioning and

¹¹ See again: <https://www.cocacola.co.jp/press-center/news-20220510-12>.

the agency of the deployers. That is why in the following section I begin by dismantling one of the main binary conceptions of subcultural theory, and the one YOSHIKI invokes: subculture versus the mainstream.

Subculture vs. Mainstream: No Contest

The debate on subculture continues with each new entry into the field. As discussed in the first chapter, the overall consensus at present is that subcultures are not “fixed” or “homogenous,” but rather founded on “the shared beliefs and practices of the individuals” that compose them (van de Goor 2020). Identities, too, are “flexible,” with no one defining form established for subcultural participation. Finally, and vitally, subcultures are “inseparably linked with and dependent on” the larger cultures in which they are embedded (van de Goor 2020).

This second part is, essentially, what I argue does not receive sufficiently nuanced attention from previous work on subculture, nor does this work engage with the inseparable “link” with and “dependency” on the larger culture they are situated in (Ina 1999, 2–3). Subculture’s position within the broader structure of society and its rules and realities is sometimes explained as ‘resistance’ or as a desire to live apart from or oppose these rules and realities. This explanation has been debunked by multiple scholars, notably Thornton (1995) and Hodkinson (2002), who demonstrate that subcultural identification is not necessarily dependent upon resistance but rather on the ‘mainstream.’ Subculture’s theorization itself is also dependent on the concept of the ‘mainstream.’

In the twenty-first century, the ‘mainstream’ includes the practice of neoliberalism and the concept of capitalist realism. In short, this means that all values and meaning are derived from on the principles of the market and competition (Wilson 2018, 2–3), and a reality that is

not so constructed is impossible to even imagine, let alone enact (Fisher 2009).¹² Additionally, subcultures are situated within liquid modernity (Bauman 2000) (a society in negotiated flux) which is in turn a “society of consumers” (Bauman 2007). This is one point post-subcultural studies did accurately hit upon: “the centrality of consumption” (Haenfler 2014, 12), which suggests that subcultural allegiance is *determined* by capital, whichever form that may take.

Just as in this ‘mainstream’ culture, subcultural members show their allegiance through consumption, as there is no other viable option. As Bauman notes, this is “the kind of society that promotes, encourages or enforces the choice of a consumerist lifestyle and life strategy;” other options are discouraged or disavowed. Abiding by the rules and bylaws of this “consumer culture” becomes “the sole unquestionably approved choice,” and required for belonging (Bauman 2007, 53).¹³ Thus, this also demonstrates that *structure* is inseparably linked to *individual* actions. The “distinct” or “different” nature of the subculture (Blackman 2005, 2) or its “unconventional” nature (Nanba 2003) *does not necessarily indicate a schism on the structural level from the main culture*.

Following this, I argue that subculture and subcultural practice are defined specifically in relation to their broader context, and never on a fixed basis. Members actively and constantly negotiate both their own places as well as that of the ‘mainstream’ in terms of meaning, much as the broader sociocultural structure (what can perhaps be *labelled* the ‘mainstream’) itself fluidly oscillates between open-armed capitalistic incorporation and outright mockery and rejection (which I discuss in more depth in Chapter 3). While the meanings of these negotiations may waver from individual subcultural allegiance to (necessary) capitalist profit and the pursuit thereof, all operate within this same broader framework, and therefore *must* be interpreted,

¹² Indeed, this is why conceptualizing subculture as a part of and inexorably connected to its larger society is key to understanding the practices and meanings within, and why I focused particularly on Nanba and Ina’s conceptions of subculture in Chapter 1.

¹³ This point, while featuring throughout the thesis, will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 4.

analyzed, and explored in connection to it. While ideals of separation, resistance, and authenticity still hold weight within the subcultural discourse and should never be discounted, they must also not be mistaken for objective truth. In other words, and as Nealon pointed out, instead of determining whether YOSHIKI is a ‘authentic punk rocker’ or a ‘sell-out private jet owner,’ I want to incorporate and examine how it is valid and meaningful for subcultural members to see no contradiction between the two.

This duality and fluidity is what I have found to be a core element within visual *kei*, particularly on the performance side: if a performer or band states that they are visual *kei*, this appears to be (generally) accepted, and allegiance or ‘authenticity’ is approved.¹⁴ Understandings and potential definitions are then expanded accordingly.¹⁵ Similarly, among fans, there appears to be no set of fixed criteria to be within visual *kei* subculture, although certain different groupings exist (e.g., *bangya*). “Prohibition” on grounds of incorrect membership (not to be confused with improper practice in specific situations), which is one of Erik Hannerz’s main contentions (2016, 67–68), does not seem to be a dominant feature in visual *kei*. Once again we can return to Fine and Kleinman, who state simply that “a particular subcultural identification need not be total or all-encompassing for the individual” (1979, 13).

We can examine *bangya* here as example. A *bangya* does not necessarily have her status removed if she listens to other music as well, nor if she attends other concerts; though she may in some sense be an ‘outlier,’ these actions are not seen as exclusive to *bangya* identification.

¹⁴ The opposite is not always necessarily true, as I demonstrated in Chapter 1 with L’Arc~en~Ciel’s (non)presence in *KanJamu*’s visual *kei* history.

¹⁵ This is a major reason I also situate BUCK-TICK as a foundational member of the subculture, despite popular narratives often focusing more on X [JAPAN]. BUCK-TICK’s ever-expanding musical repertoire has had a significant effect on what is possible within visual *kei*, moving beyond the heavy metal, punk fundamentals of X [JAPAN] and incorporating a wider amount of musical practice and ‘genre.’ It is also notable that BUCK-TICK has remained active almost continuously since their major debut in 1987, whereas X JAPAN officially disbanded in 1997, and has performed and produced only sporadically since despite their apparently legendary status (this may be at least partially connected to member hide’s death in 1998, which will be discussed in Chapter 4).

The dichotomy of *bangya* versus ‘general people’ (*ippan pīpō*, or *panpi*) does exist, but appears to be *fluid* and negotiable, as I discovered when I failed to pin down a concrete barrier between the two through interviews with informants.

Additionally, while one *bangya*’s identification may not be necessarily ‘accepted’ by others, it is still meaningful to *her*. Relatedly, while *bangya* (and even certain subsets therein) are perhaps the most *conspicuous* group of (fan-aligned) subcultural members due to their overt consumption and participation, they are not therefore the *only* members worth focusing on, nor the ‘defining’ members of visual *kei* as subculture overall, which must be acknowledged in any investigation of subculture (van de Goor 2020). Multiple forms of identification exist and are meaningful for individual subcultural members, regardless of external ratification.

Moreover, there is nothing that separates a subcultural member from the broader structures their subculture exists within. If we take the ‘mainstream’ to be the neoliberal capitalist economic structure in which Japan, and more broadly most of the world, is entrenched, subcultural members *cannot escape the conditioning of everyday life in a subculture that is also shaped by it*. This conditioning is why YOSHIKI maintains his relevance to the present day through constantly rehashing his subcultural status from forty years ago as a new product to consume (e.g., Real Gold X). Another example is how larger visual *kei* bands often connect specific ‘goods’ or consumable objects to their tours, sometimes with staggered releases or even goods sold at random, encouraging fans to make multiple purchases to complete a full set.¹⁶ Indeed, it is common practice in Japan to offer ‘goods’ hours before the start of any concert,

¹⁶ This practice may extend to offering something new for each performance, such as the stickers offered by band DIR EN GREY which explicitly incorporate date and location and are available on the day only. This is not a concept that is limited to larger bands, per se, but the release of new and limited goods connected to specific tours is something that smaller bands often cannot accomplish due to various limitations, including economic infeasibility of rapidly releasing multiple new ‘goods’ or simply the fact that many performances are not grouped into discrete ‘tours’ as such, or at least not tours hosted by the individual band. Smaller bands do, however, often sell *cheki* photos at random, encouraging multiple purchases to obtain shots of a favorite member. *Cheki* will be discussed further below.

having fans line up for hours to ensure their purchase.¹⁷ This phenomenon of spectacular consumption is the epitome of Bauman’s “society of consumers” (2007). with profit elevated through the utilization of limited run items.¹⁸ This subcultural practice demonstrates again how ‘capitalist sell-out’ and ‘authentic subcultural member’ *are not in opposition*. Indeed, it is likely those who prioritize their subcultural membership, and treat it as a significant part of their identity, who engage in these specific practices, but again, those who do *not*—both fans and performers—are not excluded from visual *kei* membership.

This fluidity directly opposes definitions of subculture that position it as necessarily in opposition to nebulous ‘mainstream’ values—waiting in a long line for hours just to make a capitalist transaction is the very *essence* of the ‘mainstream’ Japanese consumer society. To situate subcultural participation as necessarily *oppositional* or *resistant* to broader structural determinants seems unhelpful at best, and negligent at worst. This is why I consider visual *kei* a *fluid subculture*, which fits *whatever its particular members define it to be*. To declare subculture through identification as “only another empty categorization,” as Hannerz does (2016, 63), is to speak of the subcultural members “as though they are not in the room,” to quote Sophie Charlotte van de Goor.¹⁹ As Patrick W. Galbraith states, “[b]efore stepping outside and standing above, we might try to understand what is being said, what is happening, and how it makes sense” (2021, 26). After all, “*without participants a subculture would not exist*” (van de Goor 2020, emphasis added).

¹⁷ It bears note that this practice was at times adjusted and adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic; BUCK-TICK, for example, briefly moved to an online sign-up and queuing system.

¹⁸ The sale of special, “limited run” items is a practice which has been common in Japan since the 1980s or early 1990s (K. Suzuki 2017) with some demonstrated positive effect on products already deemed “desirable” (Nishizaki and Nishiguchi 2019) (as ‘goods’ of a favored band may be assumed to be). This aligns with the “commodity effect” proposed by Timothy C. Brock (1968) which states that “any commodity will be valued to the extent that it is unavailable,” (Lynn 1991, 44, citing Brock 1968, 246); a proposition supported by later meta-analysis (Lynn 1991).

¹⁹ Personal Communication, May 17, 2020.

In summary, we *cannot* speak of subcultural participants as though “they are not in the room,” from “outside” and “above,” because academic analysis then amounts to nothing but a prescription pasted over the outside of a group which the scholar decided to box in, merely confirming Steve Redhead’s assertion that “subcultures were produced by subcultural theorists, not the other way around” (Redhead 1990, 25; cited in Blackman 2005, 8). This is why I maintain that, while binaries do *not* exist, in the same sense that *subculture* as concrete thing does not exist, and must therefore not be repeated as truth, they *are* tools for individual and subcultural meaning-making in visual *kei*, and must be acknowledged. Just as YOSHIKI can exist as *both* an ‘authentic subcultural member’ while *also* being a prime example of capitalist profiteering and success, visual *kei* exists as *both* a subculture with its binary-connotations of mainstream/other *and* as a prime example of Japanese consumer society. This brings us to the biggest binary of subculture, namely that of ‘mainstream’/resistance.

“Fuck the Police!”: Resistance and Negotiating Belonging

While resistance against an outside party—be it the ‘mainstream’ or some other object—is no longer a requirement for subculture (c.f. Hodkinson 2002), it maintains some traction within various interpretations of the concept (c.f. Haenfler 2014). Resistance has been debated at length (J. P. Williams 2011, 92), and indeed at times aligns with subcultural participants’ own reported practice and meaning-making. Therefore, the concept of resistance needs to be held up to the fluidity of visual *kei* I argue in this thesis.

Although resistance is difficult to prove, and certainly difficult to measure or single out, it still has meaning and significance within both broader discourse and personal allegiances. Indeed, exploring resistance in relation to the *fluidity* and *permeability* of binaries and boundaries in the field of subculture can help demonstrates how “[r]esistance [...] is not all or

nothing,” and that subcultures “both resist *and* reinforce dominant social relations and equalities” (Haenfler 2014, 50). Therefore, I believe resistance *too* is liquid in its practices.

The *liquidity* of resistance is prominent in visual *kei*. Take, for instance, performer Daisuke. He looks the part of a fairly typical subcultural Japanese rocker, which even in 2021 opposes traditional dominant cultural aesthetics of what a young man *should* look like in Japan (c.f. Dales and Taga 2021). As of 2022 his hair is long, partially dyed blonde, and shaved into an asymmetrical ‘two block’ cut where one side is long and the other shaved to the scalp. He wears leather and leopard print as well as the classic Doc Martens.²⁰ In his guise as a vocalist, he wears heavy makeup, teases his hair, and bares his chest onstage. He also maintains a cross-dressed alternate persona—known as his “twin sister” Jennifer.

In addition to personal aesthetic performance, Daisuke’s instruments are decorated with “fuck the police” stickers, and he uses the phrase with some regularity, but apparently only aimed at *actual* police officers.²¹ For example, he used it to speak out against Japanese police on Twitter on September 2, 2020, when he was pulled over with the excuse that the area was overrun with gang members (as reported by the police, but contested by himself).²² Implicitly comparing a random (and, to all appearances, harmless) search to racial violence, and adopting the catchphrase of a broader (presently Anglo-America centric) movement out of context could be said to be liquifying (and perhaps diluting) in practice, but certainly performative of a ‘resistant’ identity.

Only a few days prior, however, on August 28, 2020, Daisuke joined in on the mainstream discourse insisting that because former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo was retiring due

²⁰ These are widely recognized as *the* rock and roll footwear in Japan.

²¹ This may not be as resistant as originally suspected, as quantitative studies have found an overall low level of confidence in police from the Japanese public compared to Americans (Cao and Stack 1998, 2005).

²² See the original Tweet here: <https://twitter.com/daisukeee108/status/1301005297838747648> (last accessed August 25, 2022).

to illness, we have to be kind and forgiving of past actions and misdeeds.²³ Daisuke criticized Twitter users using the hashtag #jinintotaihohasettodaro (“Resignation and arrest are a set, right?”) for being “stupid,” deferring discussion of “various indefinite parts” and suggesting people should say “good work” (*otsukare-chan*) for the present.²⁴ This seems contradictory, and a notably apolitical reading, as Abe’s Liberal Democratic Party (hereafter LDP) is known for its neo-conservative policies. The party’s actions included, for example, local campaigns against Tokyo nightlife operations and businesses and their active vilification as responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic spread (*The Asahi Shimbun* 2020; Kyodo 2020). This directly impacted the visual *kei* subculture, which depends heavily on live performance, due to closure of venues and restrictions on assembly, labelling visual *kei* related venues as “dangerous places” in the Japanese discourse (Wada 2020).²⁵

In other words, Daisuke’s support is distinctly in line with mainstream ideals. It also appears to contradict his own attested position of being a rocker who “fucks the police”—itself a detached performance inspired by American hip hop culture (see Siliezar 2020). This suggests that subcultural conceptions of resistance and dissent are performed, to a certain extent, and considered negotiable by its practitioners. Daisuke is *both* a visual *kei* member but *also* an upstanding member of the mainstream, performing his support for the system, or at least remaining apolitical—itself a ‘mainstream’ position in post-bubble Japan. This heavily implies the *liquidity* of resistance as a practice in visual *kei* subculture but is not a solitary incident.

²³ This type of rhetoric was widespread, with Abe’s illness seeming to recuse him in many eyes of his wrongdoing and potential target for criticism (see for example Adelstein 2020). Similar responses followed his assassination in July 2022.

²⁴ See the original Tweet here: <https://twitter.com/daisukeee108/status/1299310339595493376> (last accessed on August 25, 2022).

²⁵ The Abe government’s stance was later amended to allow support for business which could show that they were “mainly providing food” to customers; in Tokyo specifically, they pledged to offer 500,000 yen “per outlet” provided “they close for at least 10 days” (Katanuma 2020; Shūkan Josei PRIME Henshūbu 2020; Nagano and Ogiwara 2020).

A more famous example of these fluid boundaries between ‘mainstream’ and ‘resistant’ subcultural practice would again be YOSHIKI. YOSHIKI is widely recognized as ‘rebellious founder’ of visual *kei* but is *also* the face of mainstream Japanese wealth and success. His transition from destructive ‘punk’ metal rocker (notorious for gender bending and trashing hotel rooms) to highly successful and Japan-approved capitalist (with a private jet and his face plastered on vending machines) is emblematic of the erosion of political values or typical ‘resistance.’ Additionally, he has performed for the Japanese emperor; spoken at LDP functions (*Sanspo* 2016); had his fashion brand YOSHIKIMONO used in the closing ceremonies of the 2020(1) Tokyo Olympics (*FASHIONSNAP.COM* 2021); and on July 30, 2021, he had a live broadcast one-on-one talk with LDP Lower House member and then Minister in Charge of Reform, Kono Taro.²⁶ He is, in summary, firmly entrenched in traditional respectability.

This present-day incarnation does not *appear* to inspire backlash within the visual *kei* subculture—at least not publicly. Anecdotally, one bandman confided to me he did not particularly like YOSHIKI after we discussed his receiving a bottle of “Y by YOSHIKI” brand wine, but this does not appear to be the norm.²⁷ Another bandman, for example, proudly displayed his own bottle in an Instagram post, incorporating it in his performed viewing of a YOSHIKI-led visual *kei* performer roundtable YouTube broadcast.²⁸ This implies that YOSHIKI’s duality is not openly questioned by visual *kei* members, and that the ‘resistance’

²⁶ See YOSHIKI’s Tweet where he reported “looking forward to it” on July 27, 2021: <https://twitter.com/YoshikiOfficial/status/1419843943861153796> (last accessed August 25, 2022).

²⁷ Even the branding of “Y by YOSHIKI” appeals to upper Japanese capitalist classicism by highlighting the “collaboration between Rob Mondavi Jr., the 4th generation of a Napa Valley wine maker family” as well as nationalistic pride, labelling YOSHIKI himself as “artist representative of Japan” (*nihon wo daihyō suru ātisuto*) (see <https://www.ybyyoshiki.com/>, last accessed September 3, 2022).

²⁸ See the original post here, made by performer Kawai Sou of *emmurée* on August 11, 2021: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CSbyqeFpWz4/> The image was also cross posted to his Twitter account (@emmuree_sou): https://twitter.com/emmuree_sou/status/1425438028181430277. Both links last accessed August 25, 2022.

performed within visual *kei* subculture is a far cry from the ‘resistance’ that was ascribed to original punk rock, and appears to be purely a performative aesthetic. This does *not*, however rob it of subcultural meaning—recall the subcultural praise sung for YOSHIKI’s rebellious nature introduced in the beginning of this chapter.

YOSHIKI thus demonstrates that the boundary between the mainstream and the subcultural cannot be upheld as rigidly as previous subcultural theory would have it. ‘Resistance’ is used as a tool or method for (sub)cultural capital rather than meaningful protest. In other words, visual *kei* uses resistance as *liquid* signifier, to be put on and taken off at leisure, like a stage costume.

There Are No ‘Sell Outs’ in Visual *Kei*

YOSHIKI’s transformation into a neoliberal capitalist deserves more attention here due to visual *kei*’s meaning making being heavily embedded in economic and capitalist value systems. Indeed, in visual *kei* as it has existed during my fieldwork (from the early 2010s onwards), notions of ‘selling out’ ring hollow at best, and they certainly do not bear the level of ideological power they maintain within imaginings of “fundamentalists” elsewhere such as the “various DIY and hardcore punk subcultures” discussed by Ryan Moore (2009, 59).²⁹ Even though there is a discrepancy between the large majority of performers who cannot support themselves through music alone and need to work side jobs and the few on the level of YOSHIKI’s wealth, this does not appear to cause even a performed schism within the subculture. After all, “sheer excess and pervasive commercialism have been normalized in Japan [...] as everyday consumer culture” (Yano 2013, 45). As visual *kei* has progressed along with Japanese media culture more broadly, commercializing the self, when possible, has become a matter of course.

²⁹ There was a period in which interpretations about ‘selling out’ were different. See Chapter 3 and its discussion of visual *kei*’s late 1990s incorporation for more discussion of this subject.

Indeed, YOSHIKI is not alone in his ability to profit without subcultural censure from mainstream exposure and neoliberal entrepreneurship. Nishikawa Takanori, founder of abingdon boys school who originally entered visual *kei* through his pop act TM Revolution, is contracted to advertise for the company *Esutē*, most notably as one of the spokespersons for a brand of deodorizers, *Shōshūriki*, also singing in television commercials (ST-Corporation 2021). GACKT, former vocalist of one of the “Four Heavenly Kings” of visual *kei*, MALICE MIZER, has appeared in numerous commercials and advertising campaigns including those for Okinawan Orion Beer; a clinic offering counseling for hair loss; chocolate supplemented with fiber and probiotics; and high-quality *hiratake* mushrooms (Nihon Monitor 2021; M-ON! MUSIC Henshūbu 2020). Perhaps most indicative of their neoliberal capitalist success, all three have appeared repeatedly on the New Year’s Asahi television special *Geinōjin kakudzuke chekku*—or “Celebrity Classification Check” to boast superior knowledge of ‘quality’ (or perhaps more accurately, expensive) products and performances.³⁰

This concurrent acceptance of *both* so-called ‘selling out’ and subcultural capital are not limited to the paragons of capitalist visual *kei* success. On the minor side of the subculture, worries about economic capital—vital for survival under capitalism—are of significant importance to subcultural members, both performers and fans alike. Indeed, a common (and potentially catastrophic) lament is that a band is “not selling”—or *uretenai*, a shortened, spoken version of the passive progressive negative form of the verb *uru*, ‘to sell.’ Two specific case

³⁰ *Geinōjin kakudzuke chekku* is a program where various teams of celebrities compete to judge the quality of various combinations of products or performance (including, for example, wine, woodwind instruments, beef, etc.), with the winning or “highest quality” team correctly choosing the ‘superior’ (more expensive) product the most times. Teams move up or down in “classification” level based on their ability to correctly determine the value of the options presented. See <https://www.asahi.co.jp/kakuzuke/> for more details, last accessed September 3, 2022. As of 2021, a year after the release of his book “GACKT’s Way to Win” (GACKT *no kachikata*), he boasted a 65 question long consecutive series of “victories” on the program, a fact used to promote his new book “GACKT: Super Thinking Techniques” (GACKT *Chō shikō jutsu*) (NORTH VILLAGE 2021).

studies from my fieldwork further emphasize how ‘selling out’ is no longer a concern in contemporary visual *kei*, and certainly not antithetical to any sort of subcultural ‘authenticity.’ This reemphasizes that boundaries between subculture and ‘mainstream’ meaning making are inherently *negotiable* and *liquid*, supporting my argument for a *fluid* conception of subculture to better understand the lived reality of contemporary subcultural members and their practices.

A Matter of ‘Selling,’ Not ‘Selling Out’

On March 15, 2020, the band UCHUSENTAI:NOIZ held a free, streaming live performance on the Japanese video platform Nico Nico in place of an Osaka show that had been postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This live drew over 2000 viewers, far more than a regular performance, which even in bigger venues tops out before 500.³¹ During the show, the band took a break to engage in MC banter (typical in their lives) and inspected the comments coming in from fans through the streaming platform. They expressed amazement at both the number and fervor, but especially at the repeated insistence from fans that this live was too good, too much fun, to be available for free. The consensus was the band should somehow collect money because fans desperately *wanted* to pay money for the experience as a kind of “thank you.”³² While the band seemed pleased with this message, they also expressed a degree of frustration—“so why aren’t we selling?!” (*Ja nande uretenain yarou?!*) the bassist exclaimed in his typical Kansai dialect, ostensibly joking yet also touching upon a serious concern.

³¹ In the chat, many compared this gradually increasing number to large halls, saying, for example, that it was like having a NOIZ live at Zepp Tokyo, a venue in Odaiba with a capacity of 2709. (The venue closed at the end of 2020, but at the time of the NOIZ performance this future closure was unknown.)

³² Sharing this sentiment, and also particularly aware of the difficulty of those in precarious situations during such a pandemic, I joined in, (comically) using extremely aggressive Japanese to emphasize our point: “*okane harawasete kure!*” (Let us pay money!) The comment was read aloud and laughed at by the members—likely due at least in part to the intentionally visceral language—perhaps suggesting the poignancy of this type of point to the visual *kei* subculture.

This event highlights a key anxiety in the subculture, one prompting not only fans but *performers* to invest significant economic capital into their performance, and meaning that performers are very rarely able to sustain themselves on their music career alone as noted above: namely, the anxiety of ‘not selling,’ be it tickets, goods, albums, etc.³³ The monetary investment by performers is visible in the clothing, makeup, and instruments, but also involves taking time from capital-earning work to practice their skill, rehearse, and perform, as well as engage in the increasingly commonplace affective, promotional work through social networking services such as Twitter (see Chapter 5). Furthermore, when performing at live houses, bands are often required to pay a quota or *noruma* to be included in the line-up.³⁴ This typically requires a certain number of fans attend and declare the band in question as their ‘purpose’ or *me-ate* for attendance in order for the band to break even. If this number is not met, the band owes the live house money. While this can sometimes be offset—a band can volunteer to perform first at an early show in exchange for having a quota, for example—it remains a hurdle for bands with fewer fans, less following, or who are newly formed.³⁵

Visual *kei* thus, instead of existing in some separate sphere, has become intrinsically embedded within mainstream neoliberal capitalist practice. In this case, we can see the prevalence of “competitiveness” which has become “a kind of governing ethic for all individuals and organisations” in capitalist societies (Eagleton-Pierce 2016, 33). Bands are required to accumulate the number of fans needed to survive and ascend the ranks of popularity, often directly through competition with others.³⁶ This is even reflected in the terminology used

³³ Notably, the live recording was made available for purchase on DVD later.

³⁴ See Chapter 5 for more on the implications of this type of requirement, specifically as reported by a performer.

³⁵ An early spot is an undesirable position because many fans cannot attend due to work commitments, thus harming a band’s ability to attract both their own fans and potentially attract those attending for others to future performances.

³⁶ This can also lead to active strategizing on the part of fans, who I have observed to actively engage in this competition. For example, inviting friends to attend events for free (providing

for live-attending, *me-ate* declaring fans, especially among smaller bands: *dōin*. The word is not translatable to ‘fan’ or even ‘supporter’ as such, but ‘mobilization.’ In other words, this is the number of people that a band can *mobilize* to come out in (economic) support of their performance. Artistic integrity (if such a thing bears any import at all in visual *kei*) or objective skill (another debatable concept) is no remedy to being unknown or drawing only a small, elite crowd. Indeed, maintaining such ‘integrity’ over more ‘selling out’ type activities (such as engaging in persona-building online, appearing in mass media when possible, or selling easy-to-produce items such as *cheki* instant photos as will be discussed below, etc.) could be the death knell for a band.³⁷

Dōin and the assembly thereof can even extend to the realm of the fans’ *responsibility*, becoming a major part of their own affective and economic labor performed for favored bands. For a portion of my fieldwork, I was part of a very small number of *dōin* for a struggling band I will call REVENANT.³⁸ The founder of REVENANT was not very popular, because he was seen as responsible for his former (successful) band’s indefinite hiatus a few years prior due to a dramatic drop in *dōin*—towards the end of their active period, the band could barely fill five-person front rows in multi-band event performances. While, musically speaking, this founding member’s abilities had not changed, and indeed he continued producing the same style of music

the ticket fees themselves) provided they report a certain band as their *me-ate*, or purchasing multiple tickets and entering the venue themselves more than once to ‘count’ for multiple bands.

³⁷ *Cheki* are instant photos taken by band members, typically sold for between 500 and 1000 yen a piece at random. They are a type of ‘good’ that is generally understood as primarily aimed at profit. In the past, among certain performers, the practice of producing and selling *cheki* was looked down upon and specifically avoided (Malick 2015), despite the quick and easy revenue they provide. Now, however, it is common practice.

³⁸ This is a pseudonym, which does not appear to be presently in use by any other visual *kei* band as of September 2022. Due to the exceptionally small number of fans, I will maintain anonymity of the band itself in addition to the anonymity I maintain for all informants. Certain details have also been edited in order to better maintain this anonymity, though crucial points for analysis have not been changed.

with REVENANT, the affective remnants of his past actions kept many fans from ‘mobilizing.’ This meant our group was small, but also instrumental in REVENANT’s survival.

For a time, we would celebrate if we, as REVENANT *dōin*, were able to claim more than ten members of an audience at a group performance. The fact that there were so few *dōin* was a constant source of stress and consternation, to the point where attending shows became akin to a duty to some, even when it required expensive cross-country travel and extensively negotiated work rescheduling—without our attendance, REVENANT would surely suffer. In addition to attendance, *dōin* felt pressure to purchase multiple, often overlapping ‘goods,’ including large numbers of *cheki* instant pictures which had never been part of the previous band’s repertoire. Supporting or ‘following’ the band (using myself and informants as an example) became a significant economic burden. ‘Following’ (*oikakeru*) any band includes, among others, burdens of basic travel fees; accommodation; ticket fees; taking time off work resulting in lowered income overall; and, of course, large amounts of money spent on ‘goods,’ *cheki*, and sometimes small gifts of food and drink for the band before or after a show. This, in the case of REVENANT, was all in the name of ‘support’ and directly tied to the fact that the band had so few *dōin*—and thus so little *capital*.

This burden extended, eventually, into affective dimensions as well. At one point, I chose to attend a performance of a larger, more successful band when it overlapped with REVENANT’s first ‘oneman’ performance. One informant appeared to take this action as a type of betrayal. While there may also have been various personal and psychological explanations for her actions, the structural aspects of the “work society,” as Japan is widely understood, may help to explain this response. In a “work society,” “[w]ork [...] is widely understood as an individual moral practice and collective ethical obligation” (Weeks 2011, 11)—in this case the “work” of being a *dōin*. Recall again that in neoliberalism, all of society is subsumed under the logic of the market (Wilson 2018, 2–3)—being a *dōin* is no different. I

was an important *dōin* abandoning a smaller band for the sake of a larger, already successful band, choosing *pleasure* over *duty*, and ignoring capital *need*. As a *dōin*, it was partially my *responsibility* to make sure REVENANT was able to ‘sell;’ to assert my allegiance through (appropriate) consumption.

Conversely, the more common response I received was that my choosing the more popular, more established band was understandable—of *course* the larger, more *successful* (under neoliberal capitalism) band would win in a contest. Success is seen more as the result of meritocracy, and therefore *deserved* (a band having ‘made it’). If REVENANT cannot ‘make it’ without support, it is not ready to do so—once again, this appears to be a contradictory, *fluid* position for a *dōin* to take. This response has been echoed in other venues, where fans and performers alike react with (somewhat) good-natured resignation when discovering that a larger, more popular band has a show overlapping with one of their own. In some cases, performers even seem to work specifically to *avoid* this. For example, minor band dieS regularly holds their year-end ‘oneman’ performance on December 30th, the day after the annual BUCK-TICK event held on December 29th at the Nippon Budōkan, allowing fans to attend both.³⁹

It is perhaps these negotiations of position and capital that best demonstrate how inseparable subculture is from the structures in which it is situated. This essential myth of meritocracy—“a key ideological term in the reproduction of neoliberal culture” (Littler 2018, 2)—is maintained as natural within visual *kei*. After all, bands do not ascend to levels of great popularity based on talent and ‘objective’ superiority alone. Oftentimes, as with all artistic success stories under neoliberal capitalism, it is a combination of economic backing, support, timing, and *luck*—with talent oftentimes specifically *not* being a requirement for popularity or ‘selling’ in the Japanese mediasphere (Galbraith and Karlin 2012).⁴⁰

³⁹ This type of strategy may also be due to the fact that performers often double as fans and want to attend the larger band’s performance themselves.

⁴⁰ See Chapter 5 for a more in-depth discussion of this subject.

DIR EN GREY, for example, one of the subjects of Chapter 6, would likely not have reached their level of popularity and success without the combination of backing by YOSHIKI and established subcultural record label freewill, as well as fortuitous formational timing at the peak of the ‘bubble’ of visual *kei*’s popularity (discussed in the next chapter). While the maintenance of said popularity is no guarantee, and indeed is likely contingent in *some* part on a band’s ‘talent,’ successfully managing to turn musical ability into long-lasting and profitable popularity is a hurdle that many (or indeed, most) can never overcome. Minor performers that last are generally those who appear to accept this and do not chase worldwide fame.

This is not something limited to visual *kei*, but visible throughout the music scene worldwide in the twenty-first century. Even artists who are signed to major record labels have no guarantees, as even in the mid-2000s it was reported that “only one in eight” artists signed would “achieve sufficient sales to recoup the original investment and start to earn money for the artists and generate profit for the company” (Shuker 2005, 174). This itself is another manifestation of the structural system of neoliberal capitalism that visual *kei* and broader Japan are a part of. Work is increasingly precarious and “full time” positions with benefits are no longer the norm in Japan (Allison 2015, 41–42) as well as the world more generally. To a certain extent, pursuing an unprofitable music career *in addition to* other work—attempting to monetize one’s passion—does not seem out of place within this constant struggle of neoliberal capitalist realism. In other words, visual *kei* is not *resisting* these neoliberal capitalist ideologies, but is instead *embracing* and *perpetuating* them.

“I want to have value”

To summarize, the subculture of visual *kei* is essentially, irrevocably enmeshed within the broader neoliberal capitalist framework of contemporary Japan—to neglect this point would be to fail to historicize it properly. It operates along and depends upon the very same structures as

the ‘mainstream,’ in spite of any so-called separation indicated or suggested by its ‘sub’ status or its ‘resistive’ elements. Authenticity, if it can be said to be a factor of any importance, would not be found in the rejection of these neoliberal values, nor in the avoidance of the pursuit of economic capital. I do not argue that the concept and importance of ‘authenticity’ versus ‘sell-outs’ does not exist within visual *kei*—after all, I was accused of ‘selling out’ in a sense, and the authenticity of my REVENANT *dōin* status was questioned. However, any analysis that attempts to align visual *kei* with some universal concept of ‘subcultural authenticity’ as tied to resistance to broader economic and political structures would be without point.

While variations on the interpretations of what is and is not acceptable subcultural practice do exist—see Chapter 5—this is more indicative of the *liquidity* inherent within subcultural foundations and less of its resistance and separation. After all, YOSHIKI can be *both* the founder of punk-rock-glam-inspired visual *kei* *and* a private jet owner with members of the ruling LDP on speed-dial. In a sense, the post-subcultural scholars were right to focus on the individual—many subcultural practices and meanings *do change* based on the particular individual, as well as the time and space in which it takes place (another key point to Bauman’s liquid metaphor). Importantly, however, these meanings *cannot be separated from their surrounding structures*. They are, after all, *fluid*. Neoliberal capitalism and the “society of consumers” therefore cannot be dismissed when theorizing subculture if we want to better understand subcultural meaning making and practice, or, more specifically, if we want to successfully historicize visual *kei*.

Chapter 3: The “SHAZNA Problem”: Subcultural Incorporation and the “Crisis” of Japanese Masculinity

“A bullshit degree of attention ... Money is	「ふざけた注目度…金は目安の
the standard Priority	Priority
[...]	[...]
If buying people off is the real deal	買収するのがホンモノなら
I’m a FAKE STAR covered in falsehoods	僕は偽りだらけの FAKE STAR I’m a
I’m a FAKE”	FAKE」

-Kuroyume, “FAKE STAR,” *FAKE STAR ~ I’M JUST A JAPANESE FAKE ROCKER~*
(1996)

“Can I say what’s really bugging me?” says Matsuko Deluxe, a highly popular Japanese male-to-female cross-dressed performer with a widespread media presence (Suganuma 2018).

Matsuko is addressing the guest expert on her program “The World Matsuko Doesn’t Know” (*Matsuko no shiranai sekai*), a weekly program that invites experts in various, niche fields to introduce Matsuko to their passions. This week’s topic is visual *kei*. Filmed in 2021, the program is predominantly a retrospective, spending much of its runtime on the history and legacy of the subculture. The guest expert is writer and *bangya* Fujitani Chiaki, who is currently presenting a timeline of late 1990s visual *kei* events. For 1997, below the “Breakup of X JAPAN,” the timeline reads ““Cute visual *kei*’ SHAZNA’s Big Break” (‘*kawaii visual kei*’ *SHAZNA ga dai būmu*).

“There’s the SHAZNA problem, isn’t there?” Matsuko asks (*SHAZNA mondai to iu no ha aru wa yo ne*).

While Fujitani’s expression is not visible, her answer sounds flat, without recognition: “Problem?”

The screen is then filled with the soft, heavily made-up face of SHAZNA's vocalist IZAM, who croons the opening words to "Melly Love" while staring directly into the camera. As the music video progresses, he is shown to be in a skirt, with his hair in pigtails; his persona is clearly cross-dressed. The song is the band's major debut hit, more pop than rock, and instantly recognizable to Japanese citizens old enough to remember the late 1990s. Matsuko, also in heavy makeup and a dress, comments over the music video: "I think this is a problem, this right here." (Figure 2)



Figure 2: Matsuko reacting to IZAM in the promotional video for "Melly Love."

"Why is that?" Fujitani asks, her expression neutral. She seems curious about Matsuko's idea but does not demonstrate recognition of any "problems" relating to SHAZNA.

"If you say, 'why is that,' it's a bit..." Matsuko covers her mouth as she responds, looking taken aback. "Why, I wonder." She pauses for a moment, then continues: "It was quite a shock."

Fujitani replies positively, saying it is indeed shocking that "such a cute man could exist."

“Is that visual *kei*?” Matsuko asks. Her tone seems incredulous. The screen now shows the cover art for “Melly Love,” again IZAM’s made-up face topped with high pigtails.

“That’s right,” replies Fujitani.

“But isn’t that... isn’t that *josō*?” Matsuko persists in questioning, using the Japanese term for men cross-dressing as women specifically.

“In the general public, he was generally referred to as *josō*.” Fujitani agrees.¹

“Right right right, so...” Matsuko interjects from off screen, but as the camera returns to her, she appears to become confused. “Ah...” she begins but then pauses, with the camera holding on her face, the cut conspicuously long during such a short program.² Finally, she exclaims, as her comment appears captioned on screen in bold, yellow letters: “Visual *kei* is difficult!”

This program, aired in April 2021, demonstrates the complicated position SHAZNA occupies in visual *kei* discourse, or the “SHAZNA problem,” as Matsuko dubbed it. Although they would be used as scapegoats and examples of so-called negative shifts from ‘serious music subculture’ to ‘cheap, flashy sell outs’ within visual *kei*, SHAZNA achieved massive commercial success and became one of the most well-known faces of the subculture—to the point of being known as the “SHAZNA phenomenon” (SHAZNA 2008; H. Suzuki 2009) and indeed as partially representative of 1997 in Fujitani’s timeline. This popularity was aided by IZAM’s multi-media, idol-esque presence, both during his band’s tenure and following the announcement of SHAZNA’s “hiatus” (*katsudō kyūshi*) in 2000.

¹ Due to the intensive editing and cutting that goes into these kinds of programs, the full context for this comment is unclear. Based on the phrasing used, and the information available, I believe there are two possible interpretations of Fujitani’s response: (1) Fujitani is implying that this is not the proper term, which would be *onnagata* as IZAM’s persona was primarily cross-dressed, or (2) IZAM may have *not* technically been cross-dressing.

² The program typically runs for an hour with commercial breaks, with the first guest allotted approximately thirty minutes of airtime, or the majority of the program’s airtime.

IZAM represented many things to different people. To established Japanese society, he represented a threat to established masculinity, tapping into larger fears of feminism, youth culture, and dissolving societal boundaries destroying Japan. To visual *kei* subcultural members, for better or worse, he represented a breakthrough to the mainstream, and an evolution of subcultural styles to encompass the “cute” (as referenced above) and poppy as well as the distinctly *feminine*. Through his multimedia presence, IZAM essentially enacted the role of female idol, thus performing and playing with mainstream norms and values about how men and women should behave. In his idolification, IZAM tapped into the cultural zeitgeist, allowing him to create a successful persona by embracing the resurging intertextual media system, where new images and personalities are constantly and readily circulated throughout various media for maximum exposure and profit (Galbraith and Karlin 2012, 23). This intertextual image helped SHAZNA to bring visual *kei* well into the mainstream, but also made it a target for the above-mentioned societal fears and ills as well as internal subcultural criticism.

SHAZNA’s popularity demonstrates both visual *kei*’s own evolution and its subcultural incorporation into the mainstream, but also illustrates an important “crisis” within the national cultural discourse. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Japan was in the midst of extended conservative backlash spearheaded by the Majority Coalition and Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) against feminist progress in general and “gender free” movements in education in particular (A. Shimizu 2007; Wakakuwa and Fujimura-Fanselow 2011; Yamaguchi 2014; Yamaguchi and Saito 2020). This backlash was directly related to the “crisis” of Japanese masculinity, stimulated both by sociocultural shifts encouraged by feminist movements and further by a trend towards male beautification which manifested in the fear of the “feminization” (*joseika*) of Japanese men (Iida 2005). SHAZNA combined these conservative fears, as IZAM appeared primarily in cross-dressed persona during his peak in popularity and the band was primarily supported by decidedly *not* home-bound women. SHAZNA’s central position within

the “crisis” is demonstrated in an extreme closeup of IZAM’s face appearing as the cover image of the August 1, 1998, issue of *BRUTUS* magazine, with the deliberately attention-grabbing title: “Are we [men] becoming feminized?!” [*Boku-tachi ha mesu-ka shiterun desu ka?!*] (Figure 3).

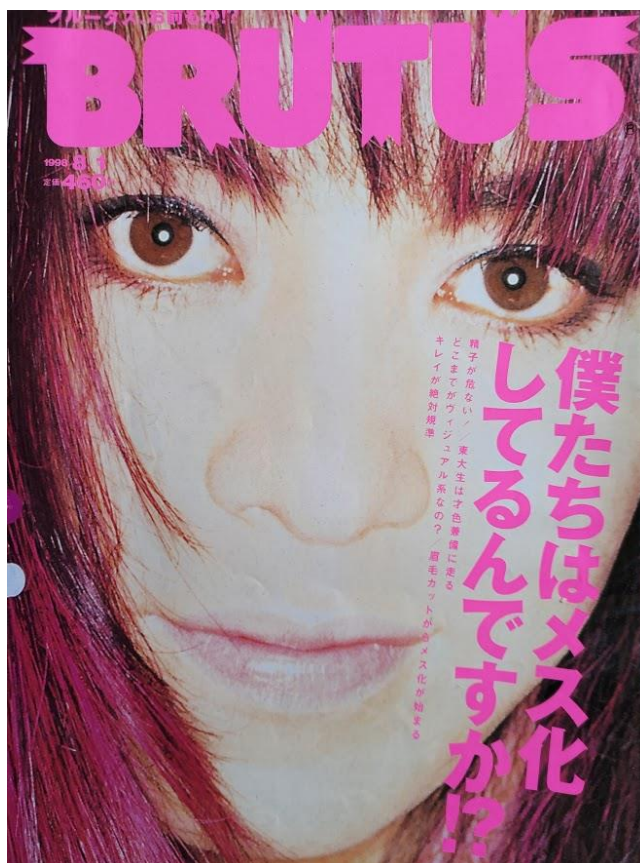


Figure 3: IZAM on the cover of *BRUTUS* (August 1998).

Visual *kei*’s own original connections with punk-like resistance and non-hegemonic expressions of gender might suggest a distance from conservative political movements tied to the LDP and their political allies focused on reinforcing

traditional gender ideals.³ After all, non-traditional gender expression has been and remains a staple of the subculture since its inception (Johnson 2019, 2020a, 2020b). However, similar criticism of IZAM’s appearance manifested *within* the subculture itself, where fans and performers also saw (negative) “feminization” as a sign of the degradation of the subculture. Additionally, IZAM’s appearance was blamed for the (negative) association between visual *kei* and *okama* in popular imagination (although IZAM himself is reportedly straight and married as of 2022).⁴ This demonstrates once again the permeability of any conceptual barrier between

³ Many LDP politicians specifically promote ideas tied to traditional gender roles, particularly that women should be mothers first and foremost. Perhaps the most widely known instance of this rhetoric was when then Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare Yanagisawa Hakuo equated women to “birthing machines” in 2007 (Fukazawa 2018).

⁴ *Okama* is understood to be a derogatory term as of the late 2010s (Fotache 2019, 34), and is described in research from the late 1990s as “extremely loose” and broadly applicable to “any man who displays transgender attributes” (McLelland 2000a, 461).

subcultures and the ‘mainstream,’ as well as the reciprocal flow of discursive meaning between them, as hegemonic perceptions of masculinity persevere in both.

Another way in which SHAZNA became the target of attack was through their very idolification. Late 1990s Japan saw a resurgence in the popularity of idols, making idol performance economically viable and constantly visible in the mainstream (Marx 2012, 51). Idols are “highly produced and promoted singers, models, and media personalities” specifically “*not* expected to be greatly talented at any one thing,” “produced and packaged to maximize consumption” (Galbraith and Karlin 2012, 2, emphasis added).⁵ SHAZNA, with their massive popularity, poppy sound, and IZAM’s multimedia idol-esque performance, was attacked for their resonance with idols as de-valuing visual *kei* as a whole, and for dragging visual *kei* into popular service-level, economically motivated commodification.

While they are inseparably entwined, this chapter will examine the feminization and the idolification portions of the “SHAZNA problem” as separate topics due to their complexity. SHAZNA serves as a perfect case study for these two distinct phenomena, highlighting contemporary Japanese conservative backlash against shifting gender ideals and negotiations of the incorporation/cooptation of subculture by mass media into broader trends. I begin by giving a brief overview of visual *kei*’s boom period or “Golden Age” (*ōgonki*) in the late 1990s, concluding with a description of SHAZNA, the most commercially successful band from this period. I then move on to discussion of the late 1990s Japanese “crisis of masculinity” (Iida 2005), which appears to have had a reciprocal influence on visual *kei* subculture. Finally, I engage with discursive treatment of SHAZNA both within the subculture and the mainstream, including parallels to contemporary idol culture and an examination of visual *kei* counter

⁵ Another primary feature of idol performance, the matter-of-course performance of affective labor, will be examined in Chapter 5.

performances that are believed to target both SHAZNA and the broader commodification and feminization that they came to represent.

Visual *Kei*'s Big Break: "Mastering" the Visual, "Changing" the Subculture

The late 1990s is recognized as the height of the music industry, which reached "an all-time worldwide sales peak in 1998" (Baym 2010, 177). While this extended to Japan, the local societal outlook did not appear to reflect this musical success. Approximately a decade had passed since the bursting of the economic bubble of prosperity, a period referred to in hindsight as the "lost decade" due to its economic and societal turmoil (c.f. Leheny 2006; Yoda 2006; Brinton 2011).⁶ Japan's economic recession, along with tragedies such as the Great Hanshin Earthquake and Aum Shinrikyo terrorist incident in early 1995, combined to create a difficult period leading into the late 1990s. From the middle of the decade, the expression "vague anxiety" or "*aimai na fuan*" aptly described this growing sense of unease and uncertainty (Leheny 2018, 17–18). Regardless, the Japanese music industry too was at a peak, recording its most successful year in 1998 after climbing steadily from 1993 (Condry 2004, 351).

This was also the period where the idol once again began to dominate Japanese media, rebounding from its brief lapse in popularity during the late 1980s "band boom" (de Launey 1995; Marx 2012). "Trendy dramas," where plot and storyline were subsumed by the focus on popular idols or *tarento* and the parts written around their personae, were also highly successful (Lukács 2010, 60–61), suggesting a broader turn within the Japanese media environment to form over substance. Continuing with a domestic entertainment strategy, Japanese popular media was focused on national 'talent,' following a trend promoting domestic consumption over expensive imports to keep costs low in the continuing recession (Iida 2002, 214).

⁶ In hindsight, it was merely the first of a number of "lost decades" (c.f. Funabashi and Kushner 2015), a time period that still, arguably, has no defined end as of 2022.

It is in this environment that visual *kei* reached the general public, achieving peak popularity in 1997 (Inoue 2003c; Ichikawa and Fujitani 2015; Ohama 2015b) with a boom that lasted through 1998 before diminishing from 1999. Despite ‘officially’ having been ‘born’ more than ten years prior with roots in the afore-mentioned “band boom,” the late 1990s saw the subculture as classifiable and marketable commodity.⁷ This popularity quickly waned, as “[a] liquid modern, consumer-oriented economy relies on a surplus of its offerings, their rapid ageing and an untimely withering of their seductive powers” (Bauman 2011, 15).

Visual *kei*’s brief stint in the spotlight was not merely a turn of success, but fundamentally transformative: as with all subcultures, visual *kei* discourses and practices were irrevocably changed and shaped by their mainstream exposure and vice-versa. While many visual *kei* performers were able to take advantage of this mass media incorporation and commodification to make their debuts with major record labels, SHAZNA stands out. SHAZNA produced music and imagery that was considered to be more “easily accepted” by a mainstream population, “simple” and “familiar” to a general audience (Koji 2017, 2). In addition, IZAM’s “cute” cross-dressed persona set him apart from traditional dark, punk rock visual *kei* styles of the time. While SHAZNA was among the most successful bands in the contemporary market, they were also the most derided within certain circles of discursive negotiation. At the time of writing, however, they are once again fully normalized as can be seen in Fujitani’s confusion regarding the “SHAZNA problem” Matsuko brought up, clearly demonstrating through their discursive fluctuations the inherent *fluidity* of meaning making in visual *kei*.

Making their major debut with the single “Melly Love” in August 1997, SHAZNA were the most successful band of the boom—they won “unprecedented popularity” to the point of

⁷ Recall that visual *kei*’s birth has, at this point, likely been mythologized, and exact dates are debatable.

becoming a “phenomenon” (H. Suzuki 2009, 2). Active since 1993, SHAZNA originally represented a somewhat oppositional nature to the early visual *kei* subculture, which was trending towards its hard, dark heavy rock and metal roots. SHAZNA, however, focused more on styles tied to 80s glam rock. IZAM specifically recalls his early influence by DURAN DURAN and Culture Club, a complete lack of interest in local music, and a specific desire to do something different to the metal and punk sound that were more popular at the time he began trying to form a band (SHAZNA 2008, 27, 33). Despite this difference—or perhaps because of it, as discussed below—SHAZNA surpassed other bands in the Oricon single charts, with their major debut peaking at second place.⁸ They also earned the “Best Newcomer Award” in the 30th Japan Cable Music Awards (TBS 2021).⁹ SHAZNA’s remarkably successful debut also had parallels to popular idol music in terms of both lyrics and sound, being more pop than rock, and being more cute than dark.

Clearly, SHAZNA occupies a paradoxical position. The band often serves as representative of the “Golden Age” of visual *kei* (as I am doing here), but is also used to demonstrate the shift that is sometimes explained as the subculture’s decline (Ichikawa and Fujitani 2016). For example, Suzuki Pokkun, who was editor-in-chief of visual *kei* niche magazines SHOXX and Stuppy, suggests that SHAZNA “mastered” the visual aspect of the subculture, stating that they were the “completed form of this genre that X [JAPAN] created” (Ohama 2015a). Suzuki emphasizes SHAZNA’s idol-like sound and image diverging from the original “heretical” culture of X JAPAN, *but at the same time* maintaining that vital connection that positions SHAZNA firmly within the subculture. However, Kimura Shigeki recalls their

⁸ The band’s second single “*Sumire* September Love,” a cover of the 1982 song by synthpop band *Ippudō*, also reached second place; their third single, “White Silent Night,” reached number one.

⁹ Note that in 1989, X JAPAN (then X) won the same award for their single *Kurenai*—the only other visual *kei* act to win in the prize’s history. Visual *kei* bands have won the “Communication First Prize” (or grand prize within the competition) 4 times, between 1996 and 1999 (*SharanQ*, GLAY twice, and L’Arc~en~Ciel), demonstrating again the subculture’s “Golden Age” period.

victimization as a “poor makeup band” who “more often than not received attacks in the vein of ‘don’t lump us together with them!’ from visual *kei* fundamentalists” (Kimura 2003, 15), positioning SHAZNA as representative of the contamination of subculture with popular values. There are two interesting ideas at work here: the paradox, which I pointed out, which is once again indicative of the *fluidity* of subculture, as well as the inability to acknowledge that subculture values and mainstream values, if not intertwined, often have the same ideological foundations.

Indeed, negative interpretations of SHAZNA’s difference from forerunners such as X JAPAN ironically contradict prominent subcultural values of being *different* and *unique*. IZAM points out that his adoption of the cute *josō* style, at least, was done specifically in order to stand out in the subculture. He argues that while his band was accused of “messing around,” it was thanks to this atypical performance that “SHAZNA’s image became distinct” (H. Suzuki 2009, 1), arguably keeping the “soul” of visual *kei* alive. As vocalist Danchō of band NoGoD would later say,

Even though it was visual *kei* that began [the act of] wearing make-up because you want to stand out from others [around you], it’s come to the point where [performers’] purpose is wearing make-up to be like other people, so this genre’s soul is dead. (Fujitani 2012, 3)

In other words, SHAZNA became a signifier for the “always multiple and contradictory” nature of the “affective alliances and networks of affiliation” upon which claims of authenticity or cooptation are based in regards to audiences (Grossberg 1983, 116), paradoxically loved and derided for the same qualities.

Despite this potentially praiseworthy “difference” and their period of massive commercial success—a level of success which prompted tabloid media to label them an “ex-standard bearer” of visual *kei* (Maijitsu 2017), drawing in “general listeners” to the visual *kei* subculture (Itō 2008)—SHAZNA did not last. Their success rapidly declined, and in 2000 they went on indefinite hiatus. After its boom, visual *kei* too, much like the earlier Japanese economy,

soon burst. This period immediately after became known as the “glacial period” of visual *kei*, with many bands denying association with the label, potentially due to the desire to not be “lumped together with” bands like SHAZNA specifically. While the rapid decline of a popular mainstream product in itself is a fascinating example of the rapid turnover of consumer objects within the “society of consumers” in liquid modernity, and involved many contributing factors, the idolification of visual *kei* by SHAZNA is one important consideration.¹⁰

For a short period, the major problem of visual *kei*’s decline as expressed by subcultural members was the result or fallout of the incorporation of the subculture into the mainstream. This incorporation was thought to cause dissociation between musical talent and the label visual *kei* due to the sudden influx of acts attempting to capitalize on a demonstrably successful venture, basically by adopting the surface-level SHAZNA look. What persisted even more were critiques about the feminization of the subculture, particularly from “fundamentalist” subcultural figures (such as music critic Ichikawa Tetsushi), demonstrating the deep impact of mainstream, hegemonic ideologies on subcultural discourses, which I will unpack in the next section.

The “Crisis” of Japanese Masculinity and Encroaching Women

Although Japan’s position at 120th in the 2021 Gender Gap Ranking (World Economic Forum 2021, 9) may lead the reader to (reasonably) assume that there has been little feminist progress of note in recent years, at the turn of the millennium there was a significant shift in the landscape. Unlike the United States, where anti-feminist backlash began in the 1980s (Faludi 1991), in Japan there was an apparent delay. Similar backlash only “took hold at the end of the twentieth century after the implementation of the [...] Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society” (*Danjo*

¹⁰ The death of subcultural founder hide, which may be thought of as another main factor, will be explored further in the next chapter.

kyōdō sankaku shakai kihonhō) “in 1999” (Wakakuwa and Fujimura-Fanselow 2011). In the wake of the law’s nationwide implementation, there appeared to be some sense of impending change in the established patriarchal order—for better or worse, depending on the position of interpretation.

The backlash officially began in the late 1990s, “first [...] against the ‘gender free’ movement at schools and in local and national governmental administration,” but more generally against “any effort [...] considered to question the existing order of gender and sexuality” (A. Shimizu 2007, 504). The year 2001 found the backlash focused in attacks “on the teaching of home economics to both female and male students in schools,” and 2002 on “sex education;” however, the backlash is said to have “peaked in 2005 with the ‘anti gender-free’ policy of the then ruling LDP and the conservative faction” (Wakakuwa and Fujimura-Fanselow 2011). Another significant point of contention was the “crisis” of Japanese masculinity, explicitly tied to “fear and anxiety over gender boundary-crossing and the consequent loss of power of those who are included in the privileged half” (Iida 2005, 57). This ties in with the peak of anti-“gender free” rhetoric, which claimed that it aimed to create “a unisex [...] society through the destruction of gender differences [...] and the negation of the biological differences between the sexes” (A. Shimizu 2007, 504).

The term “gender free,” given a distinctly foreign air by being “written in *katakana*” (*jendā furī*) was “coined and disseminated” within Japanese discourse through an educational booklet for teachers published by the Tokyo Women’s Foundation in 1995 (Yamaguchi 2014, 546). While “gender free” originally “was intended to refer to freedom from compulsory gender roles,” it instead “became the target of antifeminist attacks” (Yamaguchi 2014, 541–42). The term was manipulated by media to be represented “as a series of malicious feminist schemes” including specifically “the destruction of masculinity and femininity, resulting in the erasure of the biological sexes” (Yamaguchi 2014, 559) or, put more bluntly in a later publication, the

goal of “hermaphrodization” (or literally “snailification,” [*katatsumuri-ka*]) of humanity (Yamaguchi and Saito 2020, 81). I argue that this particular “feminist scheme” was also read in *josō* and *onnagata* vocalists and their broader subculture known for men in makeup conducting gender bending performance—namely, IZAM and visual *kei*.

This suggests a connection between visual *kei*’s post-boom “glacial period” highlighted by “de-visual-ification” (*datsu vijuaru ka*, otherwise interpretable as *de-feminization*) and this broader, anti “gender-free” discourse. The term “gender free” itself did not become (apparently) incorporated into visual *kei* until the 2010s, when bassist Shindō Wataru began to use it to describe his performances (c.f. Johnson 2020b). However, the backlash against the concept of “gender free” demonstrates a social climate specifically inhospitable to blurring of established gender binaries, as performed by IZAM. Indeed, the “destruction” of the gender binary was one of the “major threats” identified by conservative publications *Jiji Hyōron* and *Sekai Nippō* (Yamaguchi 2014, 559). Recall also the 1998 issue of *BRUTUS*, where IZAM in particular was explicitly targeted as embodying the evocative question, “are we [men] becoming feminized?!”

While visual *kei* performers themselves were not explicitly part of this wider antifeminist trend, I believe that they were always part of the society in which it took place. The backlash *within* visual *kei* against SHAZNA bears similarities to the foundations of this conservative movement. For example, in the *Kuroyume* song “BAD SPEED PLAY,” analyzed further below, the negative phrase “fucking *okama*” draws upon similar foundational concerns about “destruction” of gender binaries, as does broader subcultural discourse which often dismisses SHAZNA and IZAM using the same word. Given the broad and fluid usage of the term *okama* in regards to sexuality and gender identity (Lunsing 2005), this phrase arguably connects also to another of the “major threats” identified by Tomomi Yamaguchi in the conservative “backlash” discourse against “gender free,” namely “the promotion of homosexuality” (2014, 559).

The “threat” presented by visual *kei* was not limited to its performers, but also extended to its fanbase. As of 2022, the majority of visible visual *kei* fans are women. Indeed, the subcultural term for a devoted, live-attending fan is explicitly gendered feminine: *bangya*, from an abbreviation of “band” and “girl” (*gyaru*) (Johnson 2019). While live audiences appear to have always been significantly female (for example, images of a 1991 X live show the audience to be largely composed of women) this reality did not become offensive until the boom period.

Another example is that Ichikawa Tetsushi and Fujitani Chiaki, the two representatives behind the subcultural volume *Subete no michi ha V kei he tsūzu* (*Every road leads to the v kei*), appear to be split not only between ‘past’ and ‘present’ but also ‘male’ and ‘female.’¹¹ They are notably separated in authority by introducing Ichikawa as a “critic” first and Fujitani as a “fan,” specifically aligning them on the performer/fan binary (Ichikawa and Fujitani 2018).¹² “BAD SPEED PLAY” *also* attacks women fans by using them as a point of criticism: the line “peeping women gave you rave reviews” implies that these female fans are perverse. This demonstrates a connection with Anglo-American metal fandom, where “objects of female fandom are [...] ignored or derided,” the inferiority of “women’s culture” as compared to “men’s art” is upheld, and potentially even its “dualism” which aligns male/female as analogous to “subculture/mainstream” or “authentic/mainstream” (Hill 2011, 306–8).

In addition to this devaluation of women’s desires, women’s economic demonstration of power through devoted fandom further connects with the “fear and anxiety” addressed above by “those who feel threatened by the erosion of the authority of the patriarchal economy” (Iida 2005, 57). The tendency to devalue female desires and practices is not uncommon in many

¹¹ This English title is the official translation written on the cover.

¹² While I argue that this, as all binaries, is an oversimplification and not truly accurate, it remains a strong conception within the discourse of music, subcultures, and fandom. However, as will be discussed in Chapter 5, understandings of this “binary” are further complicated within visual *kei*, where many performers are dependent on the good will of small, intimate groups of supporters to survive (as evidenced also in Chapter 1), engaging in an affective contract which binds all parties (albeit to different extents).

societies that are male dominated, as is the practice of “punishing” those who encroach upon this territory, i.e., women encroaching on a male practice, which raises concerns about the absoluteness of established norms and values (Manne 2018, 101; 129-130). While the true effect of this contemporary “crisis” on visual *kei* and its popularity is difficult to determine, visual *kei* can clearly not be considered outside of its contemporary social climate.

In addition to the antifeminist backlash, in the late 1990s Japanese “media were saturated with stories about increased youth crime” and regulations put in place against the proliferation of so-called casual sex work of minors known broadly as *enjo kōsai* (Leheny 2006). This apparent trend of young women selling their bodies for brand goods resonates with the “commodity fetishism of contemporary Japan and the ‘anything goes’ zeitgeist (some called it the ‘moral meltdown’) of the decade” (Yoda 2006, 21). This is in addition to the above-mentioned focus on the “punishment of ‘bad’ women and policing of women’s behavior” in order to maintain established norms (Manne 2018, 192). This is why I believe that the “moral meltdown” and collapse of traditional values are one and the same.

This collapse further ties into the younger generation’s growing consciousness of the post-bubble economic disaster which they were set to inherit, and their realization that acting in the same way as previous generations was no longer a guarantee for a secure life(style) (c.f. Inamasu 1998; Brinton 2011). These factors could have contributed to visual *kei*’s incorporation into the mainstream and ensuing boom in popularity, but also its subsequent “death,” or at least dissociation with value and legitimacy in the public eye—and certainly as contributing to a “crisis-ridden hegemonic discourse” (Iida 2005, 58).

According to Yumiko Iida, the discourse surrounding these “crises” were part of a larger “hegemonic discourse, which strongly reacts against the intrusion of what is different” (2005, 58) and indeed following from broader discourse of anxiety and fear about everything (economics, society, safety, etc.) present in Japan from the mid-1990s (Leheny 2006). Indeed,

this “crisis of masculinity” bears significant parallels to “moral panics” following the actions of subcultural movements or members as recorded in other studies (Stanley Cohen 2002).

While visual *kei*’s swift rise and fall from popularity may be seen merely as an embodiment of popularity fizzling out, I want to emphasize that nothing occurs within a vacuum. Visual *kei*’s fall from grace is explicitly tied to the social climate in turn-of-the-century Japan. As David Leheny states, “virtually nothing about Japan since the 1990s can be seen as completely independent of its long recession” (2006, 45). Thus, I believe that the rise and fall of visual *kei* was reciprocal with sociocultural events of the time. It both embodied the post-bubble youth generation spirit questioning established norms (e.g., men in makeup and cross-dressed persona), and the fears of the “crisis of masculinity,” making it a target and eventually effigy for the traditional order whose foundation of power appeared to be crumbling away. This is why I argue it is valuable to closely examine the gender bending aspects of visual *kei* because it will provide more insight into the subculture itself and the wider sociocultural situation of Japan.

Outstanding Androgyny and Ominous Gender Bending

Although the majority of performers identify as men, androgyny and cross-gender performance have been a staple of visual *kei* since its inception (Johnson 2019, 2020a, 2020b). This trend arguably extends even further back in the context of postwar Japanese music from Miwa Akihiro to the brief proliferation of “make-up” bands in the 1980s which served as visual *kei*’s predecessors. It is uncertain as to whether the contemporary political climate had a specific, causal effect on visual *kei*’s decline. Nonetheless, the prominence of men in makeup and explicitly cross-gender and cross-dressed performance within visual *kei*, exemplified in figures such as IZAM, resonates with perceived threats against masculinity and the patriarchal order—both under heavy scrutiny by feminism in Japanese society to the dismay of contemporary

conservative critics (Ueno, Kitada, and Editorial Staff 2006; Wakakuwa and Fujimura-Fanselow 2011; Yamaguchi 2014). SHAZNA and IZAM made cross-gender and androgynous expression a focal point of their performance. Furthermore, discursive representations highlight IZAM's cross-dressing as a main feature of the band (e.g., Oshima 2013b, 60; Gekkayo Editorial Room 2013). Indeed, it is this specifically androgynous gender performance for which SHAZNA is typically referenced in hindsight (and potentially noted by Matsuko in the introduction). Numerous academics looking at gender and specifically androgynous masculinities within Japanese media reference SHAZNA or IZAM specifically (e.g., Iida 2000; Holden 2000; McLelland 2000b, 2003). This focus ties in with visual *kei*'s mainstream incorporation, and even so-called *degradation*. While visual *kei* performers had long been performing in gender bending personas—YOSHIKI, for example, often performed in female roles, such as the role of Cinderella in X's promotional video for 1989 song “CELEBRATION”—IZAM was one of the first whose persona was constant, in the spotlight, and perhaps most importantly, explicitly addressed.¹³ Due to SHAZNA's popularity, IZAM was repeatedly put in a position to explain his gender performance. Furthermore, instead of performing an ethereal, gothic, or otherwise fantastic ‘femininity,’ IZAM demonstrated a ‘femininity’ that was more in line with images of idols, or what would otherwise be ‘desirable’ and ‘acceptable’ femininity to the mainstream—a femininity that was repeatedly compared to ‘real’ women for reference, even judged favorably in comparison (e.g., BARKS 2011; Koji 2017). This is exemplified in the February 15, 1998 issue of the Japanese version of *SEVENTEEN* magazine, which displayed IZAM not as a musician but as a subject for imitation and admiration by the female audience, particularly in regards to beauty regimens and

¹³ These performers are often known as *onnagata*, similar to the term used within kabuki, if the character is maintained over the long-term, and the act of dressing as a ‘woman’ (though such binary conceptions are difficult to assign within these performances) regardless of length, is known as *jōsō* (Johnson 2020a, 2020b).

appearances (Horie 1998b).¹⁴ A fieldwork informant postulated that IZAM was the first to create a completely “cute” *onnagata* persona. Todd Holden even claims that IZAM forever changed Japanese fashion, helping to make “androgyny [...] hip,” (Holden 2000) suggesting IZAM hit much closer to established norms than before.

This might be the crux of the so-called “problem” with IZAM’s femininity. MALICE MIZER, another popular band from the boom period, features the extremely popular Mana, who represents an alternative form of visual *kei* cross-dressing (Figure 4). Mana’s adaptation of ‘femininity,’ in the gothic, hyper-fantastic setting created by his extremely aesthetic-based band, remains discrete from the ‘real world;’ suitably fantastic for a separation from reality and,



Figure 4: Mana (left) and IZAM (right). (Images from https://twitter.com/M_d_M_official/status/1029578239897874432 and *SEVENTEEN* February 1998, No. 6)

¹⁴This is in contrast to fellow visual *kei* performers of GLAY, who in the same issue are presented as objects of fandom and adoration for young women, with four high school students serving as audience surrogates to explain the appeal of the band (Horie 1998a).

in a sense, representing a certain sense of *safety*.¹⁵ In its separation, it is rendered as unthreatening to the status quo. IZAM, however, performed a more (ironically) typical ‘femininity,’ and “held sway over the minds of the people with his cuteness that made girls feel embarrassed”¹⁶ (BARKS 2011), tying himself more firmly to reality. Through this, he implicitly tied himself to contemporary narratives of the erosion of masculinity and dissolution of all barriers between the sexes, which conservative political factions were using to counter contemporary feminist discourses (Yamaguchi and Saito 2020, 81).

Comparatively, MALICE MIZER retains the more respected reputation within subcultural discourse—the “change” affected upon visual *kei* by MALICE MIZER, primarily in terms of performance aesthetic and theatricality, is generally discussed in positive terms (Fujitani 2013), and Mana’s projects (such as solo band Moi dix Mois) continue as of 2022 with significant success. However, SHAZNA was the more widely popular of the two bands, and thus IZAM also experienced more widespread exposure. While it is debatable whether IZAM truly made androgyny “hip” in the mainstream (Holden 2000), he *did* influence visual *kei*, with later artists such as Ryōhei of *Megamasso* specifically citing IZAM in explaining his own *josō* persona (BARKS 2011; Fujitani 2014c). SHAZNA thus ultimately added to the diverse conglomerate of visual *kei*, allowing subsequent bands to adopt the persona of “cute” or ‘normal’ *josō* or *onnagata*.

As mentioned before, much of the criticism leveled at SHAZNA from within the subculture for exactly this display of femininity came from senior performers (e.g., Kiyoharu of *Kuroyume*), old-school male critics such as Ichikawa Tetsushi (born 1961 and known for his work in the late 1980s), and other subcultural members who assigned value to more ‘traditional’

¹⁵ Ideas of ‘safety’ in regard to visual *kei* performers and their discursive representations and management will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

¹⁶ “女の子顔負けの可愛さと妖しい雰囲気で一世風靡した。”

interpretations of the subculture—e.g., “fundamentalists” (Kimura 2003, 15).¹⁷ It could be said that SHAZNA represented an unreconcilable break from any (macho) metal-esque roots to visual *kei*, thus clashing with the ideals of those who valued these origins and did not want them to change or lessen in importance—an overall conservative sentiment. However, I would argue that SHAZNA was not a sign of inevitable and irrevocable *change* per se (metal-esque bands still exist), but rather an *expansion* and *evolution*, inevitable in the life course of any persisting subculture and indeed *integral* to certain subcultural understandings of visual *kei* (recall Danchō’s comment above). Such progress is even *necessary* in a liquid modern world, where “progress” has become a matter of “survival” (Bauman 2011, 24).

This constant need for *progress* and *change*, an inherently *fluid* identity, is demonstrated by SHAZNA’s first “revival” in 2006. For this event, IZAM retired his androgynous persona, “sealing” his “*onnagata* image” due to “simply being sick of it” (H. Suzuki 2009, 2). IZAM then, however, revived his *onnagata* persona for the band’s breakup live in 2009, reportedly intent on “creating the world of SHAZNA once again” (H. Suzuki 2009, 2). This later insistence on his *onnagata* self being vital to “the world of SHAZNA,” compounded by IZAM’s maintenance of his *onnagata* persona for the band’s 20th anniversary reunion (BARKS 2018) demonstrates both (a) this performance’s lasting impact on visual *kei* and, more importantly, (b) the inherent *fluidity* within subcultural discourse and, indeed, subculture more broadly. Meaning and significance is negotiated and re-negotiated to fit in and adapt to contemporary mores, personal desires, and market fluctuations.

¹⁷ Notably, Ichikawa has several predilections demonstrated within his writing which suggest a misogynistic sensibility, such as deliberately speaking down to junior (female) music writer and visual *kei* journalist Fujitani Chiaki (Ichikawa and Fujitani 2016). He also has declared the term “visual *kei*” itself as a “discriminatory phrase” (*sabetsu yōgo*) insisting on the abbreviated “v *kei*” in its place (Ichikawa 2008, 5). This position seems to be connected to a devaluation of aesthetics that does not appear to be widely held within the broader subcultural discourse.

Indeed, the brief retiring of IZAM's *onnagata* persona followed a wider trend within the scene of “de-visual-ification” (*datsu vijuaru ka*), briefly discussed above. This trend may be in response to the backlash against visual *kei*—specifically because it tended to significantly downplay or remove aspects of androgyny and femininity but also the link to (hollow) spectacle. As I explained above, I believe that this move to the anti-feminization is not coincidental, as the time period overlaps with the larger trend of resistance to “gender free” within wider Japanese society.

Further, this de-visual-ification was perhaps most prevalent from 1999 onwards when the label “visual *kei*” itself began to be used as an insult implying bands were “just for show” (*mikake taoshi*) (Inoue 2003c, 36). This ties into a larger argument about SHAZNA and post-SHAZNA bands simply focusing on popularity and money, using visual *kei* as a surface label to boost mainstream popularity and consequently twisting perceptions of visual *kei* into something reminiscent of popular idol culture: spectacle devoid of talent and meaning. Indeed, not only was SHAZNA producing music which sold well in the late 1990s, IZAM himself was also popular as a person(a), embracing the multi-media approach of the idol or *tarento* (Lukács 2010; Fujitani 2014c) through appearing on talk shows, dramas, and commercials (Kamata 1998), employing his looks and charismatic personality to help further promote his band and career. He was himself, essentially, an idol, thereby compounding the critique of the conflation of visual *kei* and idol culture.

Incorporation Through Idolification

The term “idol” in the Japanese media environment is distinct from its English usage. According to Patrick W. Galbraith and Jason G. Karlin, “idol” in this context refers “to highly produced and promoted singers, models, and media personalities” (2012, 2). Despite gender being unimportant, youth seems vital; idols “tend to be young, or present themselves as such”

(Galbraith and Karlin 2012, 2). Perhaps most importantly, idols are intertextual beings—they “perform across genres and interconnected media platforms at the same time,” such as television dramas, variety programs, music concerts, and film (Galbraith and Karlin 2012, 2). In the 1990s, visual *kei* performers were not typically recognizable outside of their band enough to “appeal to various demographics” or “broad cross sections of society” (Galbraith and Karlin 2012, 2), thus separating them from “idols” more broadly in this sense.

IZAM thus was the first to bring these two worlds together, openly and without shame, and thus the main target of critique for the conflation of visual *kei* and idol culture. The negative connotations of idol can largely be attributed to their sense of being hollow and talentless, more surface than substance, and distinctly separate from any sense of deeper meaning. Galbraith and Karlin point out that the term idol often overlaps in use with *tarento*, which Gabriella Lukács defines as “celebrities who perform in various media genres simultaneously” (Galbraith and Karlin 2012, 6; citing Lukács 2010, 13) and are known (ironically) specifically for their “lack of talent” (Lukács 2010, 46). IZAM’s presence in the wider Japanese media sphere was primed to be perceived negatively due to the idol or *tarento*’s intrinsic untalented nature (Lukács 2010; Galbraith and Karlin 2012). Further, idols are meant to be representative of “ordinary people” (Galbraith and Karlin 2012, 6), which in visual *kei*, arguably founded on the very concept of *unordinary* or *extraordinary*, is undesirable.¹⁸

Visual *kei* in general, however, has developed another parallel with idols—or more specifically, their music. Due to the sheer variety and lack of unifying qualities other than a

¹⁸ It is noteworthy that contemporary idol-like intertextual figures such as YOSHIKI and GACKT (see Chapter 2) may be thought to negotiate this aspect by demonstrating their distinctive *extraordinariness* in their media appearances—in the case of GACKT, for example, emphasizing his ‘high quality’ and ‘refined’ lifestyle and in the case of Nishikawa Takanori, emphasizing his bodybuilding.

general trend towards extravagant aesthetic performance and the wearing of makeup,¹⁹ the general idea of visual *kei* as it came to be known in the late 1990s is similar to the definition Ian Condry posits for the ambiguous genre of “idol pop” born in the 1970s and revamped during this period. Specifically, he calls it “less a genre of music than a category defined by an industrial approach to production and marketing” (Condry 2011, 242). As argued in Chapter 1, visual *kei* is similarly not easily defined in terms of music genre, despite often being treated as such. Arguably it was at this time that the name “visual *kei*” became solidified, and thus the term itself also became conflated with an “industrial approach to production and marketing” (Condry 2011, 242). In a wide view, this tenuous “label” status has certain benefits for what can be called visual *kei*—members can profess belonging without being restricted to particular music styles, allowing for a wide range of expression and performance and potentially endless diversity; after all, in visual *kei*, “anything goes” (Oshima 2013b, 8–10). Perhaps because of the liquidity of visual *kei*’s nature and its resultant difficulty to be boxed in, however, the surface-level link with idols provided a means for the mainstream to pin it down.²⁰ As a result, visual *kei* was reduced to its surface qualities, which, conflated with IZAM’s idol-esque presence, resulted in visual *kei* being swept up in the wake of idols’ cultural position as trivial, unserious, or otherwise lacking in value.

As stated by David Muggleton, subculture’s incorporation into the mainstream removes its undesired components: “the subversive potential of subcultural style is sanitized, commercially, through the commodification of subcultural forms” (2000, 132). The reduction

¹⁹ Although even that was a dubious definition during the mid-to-late 1990s, with bands such as GLAY and SOPHIA, while identifying within visual *kei*, were becoming increasingly ‘mainstream’ in terms of their physical appearances, with makeup and gaudy costuming giving way to ‘bare’ faces and casual, trendy clothing. Indeed, following the ‘burst’ of the visual *kei* bubble, there was a distinct *de*-visual-ification that swept the scene—a phenomenon discussed at various points within this chapter, and briefly within Chapter 6.

²⁰ Indeed, in outside academic analysis, visual *kei* has been conflated with idol musicians or “boy bands” (McLelland 2000b, 69, 153), and even used interchangeably with the term “pop idols” (Iida 2005, 59–60).

of visual *kei* to idol-esque meaninglessness is a clear example of this tendency. This was compounded by the broader success of bands following SHAZNA using the label “visual *kei*” and appropriating mainstream, idol-esque markers of success, thus creating a sense that visual *kei* too was meaningless spectacle. Vocalist Danchō posits this trend as the reason he too was “biased” against visual *kei*, again emphasizing the shift of visual *kei* from style or belief to replicable commodity:

But when I myself came of the age where people typically begin their own bands [after SHAZNA’s peak], I tried going to a famous visual *kei* live house near the vocational school I was attending at the time. Then, everyone had the same look, and was playing the same kinds of songs. I thought, “this is a 5-band event, but these guys are all just the same!” and because of that I began to be really biased [against visual *kei*.] (Fujitani 2012, 4)

A quote from John Lydon—Johnny Rotten of The Sex Pistols—about punk could just as easily be describing this discursive picture of visual *kei*:

What we did was we opened the doors, and so all these endless punk imitators suddenly flooded in and dissipated the whole point of it, because they became clone-like. Now they totally missed the whole point, that this was all about individual expression and personality. These are the things that count in life for me, but most of the punk outfits didn’t appreciate that at all. They allowed the likes of the *Daily Mirror* to dictate a uniform. (quoted in Muggleton 2000, 131)

These sentiments echoed by Danchō almost twenty years later regarding visual *kei* suggest similar processes for the incorporation or cooptation of music subcultures—or rather, similar discursive meaning making by subcultural participants.

In other words, the rapid influx of musicians labelled “visual *kei*” into mainstream media as well as the increasing idolification of visual *kei* performers demonstrate the commodification and cooption by mainstream Japanese media. It bears repeating that SHAZNA was not the sole cause of this incorporation, nor its sole benefactor, but they were a convenient scapegoat, especially as they had already transgressed on multiple other levels. This further emphasizes the importance and power of cultural imagination when assigning value in a subculture. Despite their place as prime example of mass media cooption in popular memory, in the 2000s

SHAZNA and IZAM were arguably in all ways *surpassed* in being “trivialized, naturalized, domesticated” and “transformed into meaningless exotica” (Hebdige 1979, 97) by a band that embodies idolification and derivation: the Golden Bombers.

Formed in 2004, the parody band Golden Bombers (known also as *Kinbaku*, from the kanji for “gold” and “explode”) are a literal *air band*—only the vocalist performs music on stage, and the other three members spend performances either pretending to play instruments or, in true idol form, dancing energetically. Their tagline as presented on their official homepage, is “good, fast, cheap” (*umai, hayai, yasui*).²¹ This phrase copies fast-food rice bowl chain Yoshinoya’s tagline from 1994 to 2005 (Fukui 2019).²² The Golden Bombers thus explicitly make a connection between their performance and cheap consumables, demonstrating their overall tongue-in-cheek nature. They do not appear to have garnered the same censure as SHAZNA. Indeed, they have maintained significant popularity, both in visual *kei* and the broader Japanese sphere.²³ This contrast in reception of bands with idol-esque traits highlights the fluidity in subcultural discursive negotiations, and how meaning is constructed through a series of highly specific and time-sensitive compromises. SHAZNA’s debut and rapid success coincided with the subculture’s boom and also a swell in broader conservative discourse, thus positioning them to not only accrue the benefits of this fad, but to also suffer its repercussions in terms of discursive value assessments. The Golden Bombers escape this fate despite their apparently more severe transgressions. Both are still looked back on fondly, with the Golden Bombers still performing at time of writing in 2022.

²¹ Their website, modelled after a Wikipedia page, can be viewed at <http://pc.goldenbomber.jp/>, last accessed August 24, 2022.

²² As of 2005 Yoshinoya’s phrase was slightly altered to “good, cheap, fast” (*umai, yasui, hayai*) to emphasize the “cheapness” of the amount of beef provided (Fukui 2019).

²³ Even as a non-major “indies” band, the Golden Bombers have produced 13 singles that charted within the top 10 weekly Oricon rankings, two of which reaching number 1. All four original albums have charted in the top 5 weekly rankings.

It is important to reiterate, however, that the Golden Bombers are clearly *intentionally* a parody.²⁴ Visual *kei*'s fluidity allows for this—parody, or more simply the internal ability and indeed *readiness* to recognize the subculture's potential to be read as ridiculous, by nature coexists with sincerity. After all, if it cannot for a second fool people into believing it is *real*, it has failed as a parody.²⁵ It may be said to represent what Fisher terms “a culture of retrospection and pastiche” adopted to make up for the increased (involuntary) individualization and uncertainty ushered in by neoliberal capitalism (Fisher 2014, 14). The Golden Bombers adopt a stereotypical look that conjures images of visual *kei*'s heyday of the 1990s.

In another sense, the wide popularity of a parody band perhaps demonstrates the process of “precoporation,” which Mark Fisher describes as the “pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture,” which means that the product (alternative, subcultural, or otherwise) does not need to be discovered and incorporated, as it already has proven marketability (Fisher 2009, 9). The Golden Bombers are, in essence, not meant to be taken seriously, and indeed deliberately attempting to draw laughs with humorous lyrics and comedic live performance—they embrace their place as “just another spectacle” to be bought and sold rather than lament it (Fisher 2009, 9).

²⁴ Furthermore, their performance demonstrates significant subcultural capital (Thornton 1995) and connection to fans experiences. With singles such as “I’ll never love a bandman again” (*Mou bandoman ni koi nante shinai*, 2009), and song titles such as “English is so cool” (*Kakkoi na eigo tte*, 2009) and “The Vkei-esque song” (†Za • Vkei-ppoi kyoku†, 2010), their consumption offers a significant amount of ‘fan service’ for the long time visual *kei* subcultural participant. They are also arguably able to play on stereotypes and broader (exotified) ‘knowledge’ leftover in the mainstream from the 1990s boom by presenting themselves as, essentially, a *joke*, and thus are able to appeal to a broader audience as well.

²⁵ Brief of *The Onion* as *Amicus Curiae* in Support of the Petitioner, *Novak v. City of Parma, Ohio*, No. 22-293 (U.S. Oct. 03, 2022) *SCOTUSblog*, http://www.supremecourt.gov/DocketPDF/22/22-293/242596/20221006144840674_Novak%20Parma%20Onion%20Amicus%20Brief.pdf, last accessed December 17, 2022, pp. 4-6.

The Golden Bombers are not the only band with a deliberately comic, parodic angle, nor were they the first. The SEX MACHINEGUNS, whose lyrics I used to open Chapter 1, are intentionally ridiculous from the start. Their name was reportedly chosen to show that they were “tougher than the SEX PISTOLS” (Eremenko 2022).²⁶ Their music may be typical metal, but their lyrics are intentionally parodic, recounting, for example, the everyday trials of a hard-working salaryman father in “*Tou chan*” (Dad) and lamenting their empty bank account (*zandaka zero*) in “ZERO.” One of their most widely known and loved singles, “The Mikan Song” (*Mikan no uta*), extols the virtues of the mikan from vocalist Anchang’s home prefecture of Ehime. Another band, JIN-MACHINE, whose name plays on the Japanese for “hives” (*jinmashin*), also performs with primarily comedic intent. Although they are less commercially successful than the Budōkan-experienced SEX MACHINEGUNS, they did warrant introduction on the *KanJamu* episode discussed in Chapter 1. Indeed, the minor side of the subculture contains many examples of performers who deliberately do not take themselves too seriously.²⁷

What this should tell us overall, then, is that there is *nothing inherently fatal* about the so-called loss of “subversive potential” within a subculture, if indeed such a thing could have ever been said to exist, as the subculture is already “precorporated” in the mainstream under capitalist realism (Fisher 2009, 9). While Paul Hodkinson proposed approximately 20 years ago now that the concept of subculture be separated from necessary ideals of resistance (2002), I

²⁶ While the veracity of this citation may be in question due to its unofficial nature, it has been cited in the Japanese Wikipedia entry for the band (albeit translated as “*yori sugoi*” or “more amazing” rather than “tougher”, https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/SEX_MACHINEGUNS), and widely spread throughout Japanese-language internet discourse, including the band’s HMV records profile (https://www.hmv.co.jp/artist_SEX-MACHINEGUNS_000000000092622/) and Weblio online dictionary entry (<https://www.weblio.jp/content/SEX+MACHINEGUNS>), both last accessed December 13, 2022.

²⁷ For example, the two-man unit DACCO, whose live performances are essentially aerobic workout sessions complete with back-up dancers and both singers using headsets to better demonstrate each move themselves.

argue that we take this even further—subculture and mainstream are *inherently cut from the same cloth*, and the absorption by the mainstream does not necessarily lead to any meaningful subcultural death. This demonstrates how *fluid* subculture is a better means of describing subcultural practice in the contemporary age of neoliberal capitalism, and further how SHAZNA was, rather than uniquely problematic, simply positioned in historical discourse to be blamed for this reality.

Discursive Negotiations, Past and Present

Briefly referenced above, “BAD SPEED PLAY,” released by *Kuroyume* in 1997, provides a poignant case study for textual and discourse analysis of the criticisms aimed at SHAZNA and their embodiment of both the incorporation/cooptation of visual *kei* and the resultant “changes” within visual *kei* overall.²⁸ As I mentioned before, the criticism represented in “BAD SPEED PLAY” was not universal; later performers reference SHAZNA and IZAM fondly (Fujitani 2014c), even covering their songs (BARKS 2011). This again demonstrates subcultural members’ “multiple and contradicting [...] affective alliances” in regards to judgements of authenticity and value (Grossberg 1983, 116). “BAD SPEED PLAY” does not explicitly use the name of SHAZNA or IZAM, and indeed the song was released before SHAZNA’s major debut. However, there is a widespread belief within the subcultural discourse that the song is criticizing both these two specifically as well as the wider trends within visual *kei* and Japanese

²⁸ First released on June 27, 1997 as the last song on the album *Drug Treatment*, the song just predated SHAZNA’s major debut, but the contents seem critical of the idol phenomenon in general, even if not directed at IZAM specifically. It is also a clear descendent of *Kuroyume*’s previous album, *FAKE STAR ~I’M JUST A JAPANESE FAKE STAR~*, released in 1996 with the title song “FAKE STAR” deriding the contemporary Japanese pop music scene with a specifically anti-commercialist message that was used in the opening of this chapter.

rock music. This positions the song as a potential demonstration of contemporary subcultural discourse.²⁹

While the entire song can be viewed as a criticism of visual *kei*'s incorporation/cooptation by mainstream media, various aspects of the following verse is considered to embody the work's main thrust:

盗みが上手い木偶の棒	A stick of a puppet good at stealing
人が創った君の個性	Your individuality that people made
節穴女絶賛した	Peeping women gave you rave reviews
オカマ野郎の 商法 商法	The business, business of a fucking <i>okama</i>

(Kuroyume 1997)

The phrase “fucking *okama*” (*okama yarō*) in the last line appears to be the main support for connecting the song to IZAM in particular. This phrase is further highlighted by a fan's blog post proclaiming to account for the “WORST 1 radical answer song” as the majority of the “slandorous phrase” in question (h-y 2009). Another fan recalls “BAD SPEED PLAY” as a “defamation song against an artist who was popular at the time,” laughingly stating that “there was a visual *kei okama*, wasn't there.”³⁰ Elsewhere, a fan states that the song was more broadly a “criticism of commercialism,” but specifies that “even SHAZNA was the prey.”³¹ One anonymous fan even proposes that SHAZNA's “ruin” was due to Kiyoharu's influence.³²

“BAD SPEED PLAY” and its connections to IZAM and SHAZNA also seem particularly well-trafficked within the (likely mutually reinforcing and circular) venue of *Yahoo! Chiebukuro*.³³ A question posed on May 29, 2010, asks “I heard that there was a

²⁹ See, for example, <https://music2.5ch.net/test/read.cgi/legend/1060357090/>, last accessed February 3, 2022. This thread points out the apparent temporal disconnect (with the song released before SHAZNA's debut), but one user also points out that SHAZNA sold well as an indies' band, suggesting the timeline was not necessarily relevant to their interpretation.

³⁰ See <https://ameblo.jp/zerozeroitisan/entry-12151347665.html>, last accessed August 26, 2022.

³¹ See <http://hvymental.com/65332.html>, posted October 17, 2005; last accessed March 2, 2021.

³² See <http://visual-matome.com/archives/1004720365.html>, last accessed February 27, 2018.

³³ Translatable as “Yahoo! Fount of Knowledge,” this is the Japanese localized version of Yahoo! Answers, a potentially anonymous and crowdsourced question-and-answer service.

Kuroyume song that criticizes SHAZNA, is there really?” to which the “best” (and only) answer states “It’s BAD SPEED PLAY. It’s quite an offensive song.”³⁴ In 2011, a user specifically asked for “*Kuroyume* songs criticizing *vkei*.” (a common abbreviation of visual *kei*). The “best” answer points out BAD SPEED PLAY as one example, connecting “*okama yarō*” to IZAM.³⁵ Finally, a question asked on April 4, 2013, viewed over 20,000 times, asks specifically if the song is criticizing IZAM and SHAZNA, to which again the “best” (and only) answer (with five *Nice!* reactions) responds in the affirmative, based on the user’s “own judgement after just listening to the song.”³⁶

Aside from these identifying lyrics, the core of the criticism seems to be the emphasis on a lack of difference and originality—“good at stealing” and an “individuality that people made”—highlighting visual *kei*’s commodification through idolification and consequent hollowness or dependence on mimicry and derivation. The shouted refrain of “business, business,” both preceded and followed in the song by multiple lines ending in the repeated phrase “daily use, daily use” (*jōyō*) both seem to address vital points of an idol’s existence: the “business” or commercial aspect of their intertextual performance, and the fact that they become every day, normalized, and “like anyone else” through their continuous exposure, appealing due to their very “ordinariness” (Lukács 2010, 46).³⁷

As mentioned previously, conceptually, “normal” could be interpreted as the opposite of what visual *kei* both is and aspires to be, which is “different” and being pure in this

³⁴ See https://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question_detail/q1341511843, last accessed February 3, 2022.

³⁵ See https://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question_detail/q1170473216, last accessed February 3, 2022.

³⁶ See https://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question_detail/q12105337792, last accessed February 3, 2022. The view count is as of February 3, 2022.

³⁷ “Don’t wanna become a lame figure / if you think about it daily use daily use (*dasai sugata ni naritakunai / omoitsumetara jōyō jōyō*)”; “Don’t wanna become like that / a new variety of daily use daily use daily use (*sonna fū ni naritakunai / shinju jōyō jōyō jōyō*)”; “Hated like howling garbage and dolls, daily use daily use (*tōboe kuzu ya o-ningō ni / kirawareru yō jōyō jōyō*)” (Kuroyume 1997)

difference—recall Danchō’s quotes above. This is reminiscent of beliefs held by Erik Hannerz’s “convex pattern” punk informants, who define punk as “going your own way, staying true to what you believe in, and remaining different than the mainstream” (Hannerz 2015, 78).³⁸ In a retrospective article, writer Koji Hei posits that SHAZNA had their “sudden break” (in terms of popularity) specifically due to their focus on “familiarity,” “simplicity,” and writing songs that “many people could sympathize with” in contrast to the “dark, heavy” trend of contemporary visual *kei* (2017, 1–2). Whether or not this is true, this image of SHAZNA that has been discursively created remains in the popular imagination, and by inference so does “BAD SPEED PLAY’s” aimed critique.

Contrary to familiarity and the everydayness of idols, subcultural discursive understanding of visual *kei* centers on themes of fantasy, unrealism, and specifically the “*non-every day*” (*hinichijō*). Indeed, in explaining visual *kei* to Matsuko Deluxe, Fujitani Chiaki highlighted *hinichijō* as a key word. The sense of being unbound by outside influence, often expressed as “freedom” (*jiyū*), is also key. Speaking of visual *kei*’s origins during a press briefing promoting the VISUAL JAPAN SUMMIT 2016, YOSHIKI states that “we were influenced by bands from various genres from abroad, but came forward expressing ourselves freely without being bound by [any of] that” (*MusicVoice* 2016). Recall also YOSHIKI’s ‘rebellious’ reputation in subcultural discourse discussed in Chapter 2. In this sense, the comparison to the everyday idol—who specifically has little creative control over their own expression (Marx 2012, 46)—may also have contributed to the negative discursive turn brought about by visual *kei*’s commodification.

It bears repeating that the comparison to idols explicitly positions visual *kei* performers as lacking musical seriousness or talent, and reducible to surface-level flash. For some, this

³⁸ According to Hannerz, punks following the “convex pattern” bend “*outwards*, defining the mainstream as external to punk,” as opposed to those following the “concave pattern” who bend “*inwards*, positioning the mainstream as internal to punk” (Hannerz 2015, 35).

indicated the problem might lie with the word “visual,” suggesting a need for a name change. For example, a later criticism opposes the name “visual *kei*” itself, arguing that the word “visual” is derogatory and arguing for the shortened “*vkei*” as replacement (Ichikawa 2008, 5). This alternative, however, is unable to escape the term’s subcultural credence and indeed does not really change *itself* beyond the surface level. For others, this comparison simply indicated a broader “uncoolness” inexorably tied to label of visual *kei*. At the same VISUAL SUMMIT noted above, post-boom band MUCC vocalist Tatsurō reportedly asked his audience: “since when has visual *kei* come to be considered so uncool (*kakko warui*)?” (Ichikawa and Fujitani 2017). This “uncoolness” shows how visual *kei* has been thoroughly “denigrated” and “devalued” in the wake of its being “hyped into the universe of the consumers’ desires” (Bauman 2007, 47), both within the mainstream and the subculture itself.

“BAD SPEED PLAY” thus, in its potential target, interpretation, and effect, demonstrates the fluidity within subcultural meaning making. Regardless of intentionality, it has been absorbed into and become partially constitutive of the “SHAZNA problem.” More broadly, the relevance of this “SHAZNA problem” in Matsuko Deluxe’s (mainstream) recollection and the simultaneous *irrelevance* Fujitani Chiaki ascribed to it also shows both the fluidity of these discursive practices as well as the reciprocal relationship with mainstream discourse. SHAZNA’s discursive positioning thus serves as a reminder of the continuously negotiated and temporally specific ways in which subcultures circulate and produce meaning.

“Visual *kei* is difficult!”

In this chapter, I examined SHAZNA as representative of the late 1990s boom of visual *kei*, its incorporation into the mainstream media sphere through idolification, and the resulting fallout; a crucial turning point in visual *kei*’s development and discursive historical reconstruction. Subcultural discourse has gone back and forth on the ultimate meaning of this incorporation

and SHAZNA's place in it, shifting from positive to negative and back again, demonstrating the *fluidity* of meaning making and discursive reckoning, and further the suitability of my conception of *fluid* subculture. Moreover, this point in history is significant for any historicization of the subculture as it represents the peak of visual *kei* and its marketability.

Critique of SHAZNA and visual *kei* more broadly stemmed from two main sources. First, it was tied to widespread antifeminist backlash and the related "crisis of masculinity" within Japan. While no direct, causal link between this "crisis" and visual *kei*'s mainstream devaluation and post-boom burst is postulated, I argue that any examination of visual *kei* should take this "crisis" into consideration. In the same way, any recent cultural phenomenon in Japan overall should be analyzed in tandem with the specific social climate that developed in the wake of the bubble economy's burst and ensuing recession—hence, again, my focus on historicization. Second, the critique was tied into the idol phenomenon that was in the process of re-dominating Japan's wider media sphere during this period. SHAZNA front man IZAM, through intertextual multimedia exposure, embodied a type of idol-esque celebrity, simultaneously increasing his own band's mainstream success but also collapsing "idol" and "visual *kei*" together in meaning in the broader consciousness, leading to significant subcultural criticism. I explored this criticism further through a textual and discourse analysis of the *Kuroyume* song "BAD SPEED PLAY." The lyrics are broadly understood within visual *kei* discourse as specifically criticizing SHAZNA, IZAM, and the trends in visual *kei* they came to represent, even though they historically do not, and have consequently served to help *shape* said discourse in popular memory.

Indeed, the idea that IZAM and SHAZNA "feminized" the subculture, while arguably exaggerated, is not necessarily false. As stated in the introduction and above, cross-dressing and gender bending have been staples of visual *kei* since its inception, and the steady presence of performers engaging in *josō* or utilizing an *onnagata* persona has been well documented.

However, there has also been a noticeable shift towards a largely female, highly consumeristic audience (much as SHAZNA's has been discursively constructed), as I discussed in the introduction. Contemporary cross-dressed performers are a well-established, respected part of the subculture, with solo artist Kaya (Johnson 2020a) and guitarist Hizaki of Versailles and JUPITER two prominent examples. Recall also that *Megamasso*'s Ryōhei explicitly cited IZAM as inspirational (Fujitani 2014c). Even the *okama* connection has been, to some extent, embraced. Sakurai Ao of cali≠gari, for example, is open about his homosexuality, and other performers such as Awoi Haru openly refer to themselves as *okama* on stage and social media.³⁹ While assigning IZAM with credit for this shift may be simplistic, the legacy of SHAZNA is an important thread in visual *kei*'s transformation to its present incarnation.

Overall, SHAZNA and their liquid discursive positioning serve as a case study of visual *kei*'s own fluidity, as well as the argument for *fluid* subculture as more representative of actual subcultural practice and meaning making. The "SHAZNA problem," regardless of its actual existence, highlights a key factor in subculture's constant discursive negotiations and their reciprocal engagement with mainstream structures. Such discursive problems exist throughout visual *kei*'s history in many forms. In the following chapter, I will engage with another: specifically, the death and negotiation of the posthumous career of a founding performer of visual *kei*, hide, and its repercussions on visual *kei* more broadly.

³⁹ Both performers are involved in multiple projects as of 2022, including band Hector for Sakurai and bands I hate your rules. and *Hitotonari* for Awoi.

Chapter 4: “Miracles” and “Money Grubbing”: The Posthumous Celebrity of a Subcultural Icon

“Erase my life, my memory	「Erase my life, my memory
If you can wipe the slate clean	白紙に戻せるなら
Erase my head Erase my mind	Erase my head Erase my mind
Sing a decent song	まともな歌 唄うよ
There’s nothing, don’t need anything	なにも無い 何も要らない
Just want to erase this memory”	ただ この記憶 消したいだけ」

-hide, “ERASE,” *PSYENCE* (1996)

On May 2, 1998, 33-year-old Matsumoto Hideto, better known as visual *kei* performer hide, was found dead in his Tokyo apartment. First reported as a suicide (*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 1998a), hide’s cause of death was later debated and believed to be an accident (Kijak 2016) potentially connected to jet-lag and/or excessive alcohol consumption (Stevens 2005, 144, 147). Through death, hide suddenly became an icon, spawning a massive media industry and receiving a significant amount of mainstream press throughout the rest of the year and even up to the present day in 2022.¹

News reports recapped the events on the dates following hide’s death, showing media clustered around his Tokyo apartment and cameras lining the streets as various reporters awaited updates. The media then moved on to showing fans, publicly and conspicuously mourning, with hide’s May 7 memorial service receiving significant coverage in both mainstream newspapers (*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 1998b) as well as broadcast news.² TBS reported that over 50,000 attended the service, and print media recounts lines of fans over two

¹ I am indebted to dr. Sophie Charlotte van de Goor, without whose help this chapter’s main arguments would have remained trapped in my brain, unable to be articulated effectively.

² Clips of a TBS report, for example, can be seen in the following YouTube compilation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ioszDtylpI0> (last accessed September 3, 2022).

kilometers in length waiting to pay respects (*Yomiuri Shinbun* 1998; *Asahi Shimbun* 1998). Much news footage focused on howling, sobbing fans expressing their grief, at times being restrained or carried away after collapsing. Masses of fans were shown surrounded by police forces maintaining the lines leading up to the memorial venue. Other clips showed massive crowds swaying and heaving, following the progress of the hearse carrying hide's remains.³ In short, hide's death caused a "media frenzy," temporarily inspiring what Carolyn S. Stevens recounts as a "non-stop coverage of fan grief" (2005, 144).

This "frenzy" may seem an overreaction, but that would be to underestimate hide's status and popularity. hide, original member of foundational visual *kei* band X JAPAN and later solo artist, has had a significant impact on visual *kei* and the broader Japanese media sphere. Both he and YOSHIKI are credited with the subculture's etymology itself, in addition to being recognized broadly as its founders.⁴ With an emphasis on freedom and living unrestrained by society's expectations or judgments, hide's message countered post-bubble Japan's values and found significant traction with younger generations. His hair was bleached and dyed, he dressed in garish neon colors or black leather, and he presented a punk-esque, unapologetically loud persona. On top of that, his music spoke explicitly of taboo topics, such as sex, date rape, suicide, but also the erasure of identity and the existentialist misery and hollowness of being restrained within society. Both his music and his untimely death spoke to the broader despair and hopelessness of a generation left behind in the first of many "lost decades" (Funabashi and Kushner 2015) following the bubble's burst.

³ Multiple compilations of these televised reports can be found on YouTube, with a strong focus on the overall spectacle and wildly lamenting fans in particular. See for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JlfFHCObsUs> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K919ElkOum8>, last accessed August 26, 2022.

⁴ There exists a complex etymological mythos, as briefly discussed previously in this thesis, but creator of subcultural magazine SHOXX, whose subtitle "Visual & Hard Shock Magazine" is generally credited as "parent" of the term "visual *kei*." He, however, credits hide with the term "Visual SHOCK" itself, and reports a conversation in which hide jokingly demanded compensation for the "theft" of his idea (Yashiro and Yamaura 2012).

In addition to his tenure with the massively popular X JAPAN, where he served as charismatic lead guitarist and sometimes composer, hide's solo career was equally successful.⁵ hide's first solo album, *HIDE YOUR FACE* (released February 1994), reached number one on the Oricon charts (*Oricon News* 2011) and achieved platinum status by January 1995 according to the Recording Industry Association of Japan (RIAJ).⁶ His second album, *PSYENCE* (September 1996), achieved similar success. Each single released before his death reached the top ten in the weekly Oricon charts.⁷ His first solo tour attracted approximately 70,000 attendees, which was reported as a significant number (*Oricon News* 2011), and reportedly sold out tickets for all 13 nationwide shows the day they went on sale.⁸

From X [JAPAN]'s major debut in 1989 to the time of his death in 1998 and even beyond, hide's career has been exceptionally long-lived.⁹ Indeed, while his major, mainstream news appearances may have dwindled in number, as of 2022, hide has not been lost to the mainstream media consciousness in Japan. Even in death, hide has remained a highly mediated presence, still active, profitable, and (arguably) exploited more than 20 years after his demise.

This is not atypical for deceased celebrities. Despite the obvious setbacks, it has been repeatedly proven that death is a profitable and almost guaranteed successful move for a

⁵ X JAPAN reportedly had “no precedent” in terms of CD sales and number of fans in attendance at their concerts (*Oricon News* 2010).

⁶ This was according to pre-2003 standards, which separated Western and Japanese music, requiring 200,000 for Western releases and 400,000 for Japanese releases to achieve platinum. After June 2003, both Western and Japanese releases achieved platinum status at 250,000 sales. (see <https://www.riaj.or.jp/f/data/cert/gd.html>, last accessed August 26, 2022)

⁷ See <https://www.oricon.co.jp/prof/27430/rank/single/>, last accessed August 26, 2022.

⁸ Three additional dates were added, presumably due to the tour's popularity (“BIOGRAPHY 1994” 2019). The original tour included two days at Yokohama Arena, one of the Kanto region's largest halls which holds between 10,000 and 17,000 audience members, depending on the layout used (see <https://10fmusic.net/yokohama-arena-capacity/>). The added dates included one show at the Yoyogi National Gymnasium, a venue originally built for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics which holds over 13,000 (see <https://www.jpnspport.go.jp/yoyogi/tabid/70/Default.aspx>). Links last accessed September 3, 2022.

⁹ For instance, hide's third album *Ja, Zoo*, released posthumously in 1998, went triple platinum, selling over 1,200,000 copies.

celebrity (Jones 2005). While living celebrities possess the capacity to change, surprise, and perform a complex, multi-faceted ‘life,’ in death their voice and agency are lost, and they are reduced to mere image—a simplified object. A youthful death such as hide’s has led to even more “idealization” and “romanticization,” even “spiritual status and power” (Stevens 2005, 143). The subcultural celebrity, despite potentially anti-consumerist and counter-traditional values, undergoes the same objectifying process (if indeed they had not been subjected to it already). This objectification, as well as the broader reaction to the celebrity’s death highlights the complex nature of subculture in relation to the mainstream.

Mainstream media, operating in a neoliberal capitalist environment, is by design always ready to capitalize on the spectacle of celebrity death and grieving fans. As discussed in previous chapters, subculture may always be destined for mainstream appropriation, a reality where all value is filtered through the meaning-making apparatus presented by neoliberal capitalism (Fisher 2009, 2; Hassler-Forest 2012).¹⁰ However, a celebrity who has died in their prime is particularly ripe for exploitation and redefinition in terms of their mainstream profitability while still maintaining a strong, meaningful connection with fans. In short, the capitalization of the dead subcultural celebrity and subcultural response demonstrates how *the worth of a subculture itself is defined by its mainstream worth*, or more specifically its worth within the neoliberal capitalist system. As such, in this chapter I examine how subcultural members negotiate the commodification of a celebrity in death as a case study of fluid subculture and its negotiations with mainstream neoliberal capitalist values.

¹⁰ In many cases, instead of a true alternative or presence “outside” the system, subculture (or “subversive potential”) is specifically supported and encouraged as something for capitalism, the mainstream media in particular, to “colonize” and “appropriate”—they do not “designate something outside mainstream culture; [...] they are styles, in fact *the* dominant styles, within the mainstream” (Fisher 2009, 8–9). See also Chapter 1.

Big in Life, Massive in Death

hide's death stood out in the broader social environment of post-bubble Japan. As I discussed in the previous chapter, visual *kei*'s imminent wider collapse was compounded by many factors, including the subculture's rapid commercialization and oversaturation by Japanese mainstream media. The widespread media attention or "frenzy" that hide's death garnered potentially also had an impact on this collapse. Narratively speaking, the parallel between these two 'deaths' is striking. This is why I examine hide's life and posthumous 'career' as a representative for the wider phenomenon of visual *kei* as a whole, and in turn use this analysis to demonstrate how subculture is entwined with mainstream media and meaning making.

hide's continuing influence on visual *kei* cannot be understated, to the point of being colloquially referred to as the beginning and end of the subculture.¹¹ Resonating with the importance of the live performance within visual *kei* (Johnson 2019), tribute concerts are annually held around both his birthday and death day, as well as larger anniversary events still in 2022.¹² Professing fandom of hide continues to double as declaring one's "subcultural capital" (Thornton 1995). Performers often reference their respect for hide both over social media and on stage, and despite the fact that bringing goods from one performer to the live of another is generally frowned upon, bringing hide's goods is acceptable. Fans and fellow musicians regularly make pilgrimages to his grave in Miura on the tip of Kanagawa prefecture, particularly

¹¹ The sentiment is attributed originally to music critic Ichikawa Testushi in hide's Wikipedia entry, and searching for the phrase "*v[ijuaru] kei ha hide ni hajimari hide de owatta*" turns up numerous message board discussions and Yahoo!*Chiebukuro* entries. The idea also appears to have reached mainstream popular press (e.g., Yamano 2018).

¹² Such as the "hide 20th memorial SUPER LIVE 「SPIRITS」" held over two days in April 2018 to commemorate the 20th anniversary of hide's death. The concert boasted performances by successful artists recognized by mainstream Japan such as BUCK-TICK, D'ERLANGER, and Hotei Tomoyasu. See the official website at <http://hide20th-spirits.com/> (last accessed September 5, 2022).

on anniversaries of his death. Visits are often explicitly recorded and publicized as signs of devotion and respect.¹³

Even after his death, hide helped provide continued mainstream support for visual *kei* through potential capitalization, helping secure both his own and his subculture's position in Japanese music history. When a celebrity, even a subcultural celebrity, is reduced to an unproblematic object of consumption, it is unremarkable—in the “society of consumers” (Bauman 2007), everything can be consumed, even a life event. Subcultural celebrities offer rich potential for commodification, due to the inherent amplification of artistry and meaning through posthumous mediated deification, even if the subculture itself is no longer profitable (Bennett 2015, 65). Problematic and nonhegemonic aspects, potential barriers to a fully commodified subcultural object fit for a broader audience, are now easily discarded or glossed over, applying the celebrity and their marketability with a sense of “safety” through their “assimilation” as the “wildness” of their “cultural difference [is] tamed” by death (Pauly 2005, 193).

hide demonstrates this process well, as his existence has persisted within the Japanese media landscape for more than 20 years after his death, propagated through the new production of music, videography, and tribute, along with a plethora of ever-renewing collectible minutiae.¹⁴ These both *create* and *capitalize upon* an environment in which demand for nostalgic objects of consumption is eternally unfulfilled yet eternally justified in the name of the fans. Similarly, hide's persona is altered by neoliberal capitalist discourse: reduced to unproblematic images separated from any irreconcilable political or non-hegemonic messages, while being elevated to deity or “saint” (Stevens 2005) status. This is arguably a logical

¹³ Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, hide's official social media accounts have begged fans not to swarm his grave on the anniversary of his death to avoid infection spread, which is a genuine concern due to the large amounts of pilgrimage to the site.

¹⁴ This includes stuffed dolls, cell-phone cases, reusable masks, and even solid gold guitar picks.

extension of how “[r]eligiosity permeates the production, exchange and consumption of celebrity culture,” and how “the famous are widely and automatically twinned with the status of transcendence” (Rojek 2012, 121). In death the celebrity reaches peak transcendence, uninhibited by earthly tethers. In other words, hide is secured as a safe, profitable object for capitalist exploitation without agency, disconnected from potential political messages or challenges to societal systems, *and further* immunized against criticism. He is no longer a dangerous punk with a problematic alcohol addiction and existential dread, but a simple, profitable logo to be applied without deeper consideration or meaning.

In the rest of this chapter, I demonstrate how hide’s posthumous cooptation and exploitation by the mainstream Japanese media becomes a safe product for profit. This commodification is not, however, a simple, monolithic process; it can only be done with fan cooperation. The negotiation of post-death commodification of the celebrity requires fan acceptance and perpetuation to persist, meaning subcultural members themselves contribute to this process of assimilation and reduction. Operating within the same neoliberal capitalist society of consumers as everyone else, subcultural members face a difficult choice: to protest this exploitation, or to accept the new celebrity status of their idol and continue to consume. First, however, I unpack the idea of celebrity ‘death’ and what it means within the contemporary hyper-mediated environment.

Death, Now Greatly Exaggerated?

The continuing profitability and presence of hide and the deceased celebrity more broadly resonates with Zygmunt Bauman’s argument that within the contemporary media environment, “[n]othing seems to vanish forever, ‘for good’—so that it cannot reappear again; objects seem to go lingering on, even if for a time they stay invisible” (1992, 173). In other words, the celebrity, even in death, maintains a presence due to their mediated nature, and is always

available for recall. This, in turn, is what allows them to be objectified for further consumption and profit—to remain “awfully noisy” even after death (Rodman 1996, 1).

With the recent explosive increase in the mediatization of everyday life, Bauman’s arguments expand to encompass all of human practice: the connection between the death of an individual and their ‘end’ has become increasingly blurry. Even non-celebrity individuals may have social media memorials. In the case of the celebrity, death can and does actually *strengthen* their presence. In terms of profitability, after all, death is considered a “good career move” in the music industry (Jones 2005, 3)—hide’s posthumous career has greatly exceeded the one he had in life, both in terms of fame and economics. In a broader sense, “the public’s attraction to a famous individual may [actually] intensify with death” (Radford and Block 2012, 138).

Furthermore, in the case of celebrity, it is more than the person themselves that is mourned upon their death, for no individual could bear the meanings and myths thrust upon them by media and fans alike. Rather, what is mourned as being “lost” is instead “the link between collective myths and ideals, and their embodiment in real flesh and blood people” (Gibson 2007a, 420). The public is in shock when it is revealed that “what seemed so fantastic” was in fact merely “mortal”—the “fantasies” are lost, and these are mourned *in addition to* the individual person (Gibson 2007a, 420). The death of a celebrity, therefore, is “powerful” due to its harsh disconnection from the persona’s (im)mortality and the expansiveness of the loss. hide, in death, has essentially become *more* than he could have been in life.

However, what *is* remembered, and thus what is recognized as having “died,” is also in some sense *less* than what the celebrity themselves encompass: “[t]ypically [...] memorial practices appear restrictive in reducing the full complexity of an artists’ life [...] with the tendency to ignore certain aspects and to essentialise others” (Lebrun and Strong 2015, 6). hide’s more complex relationship with the nature of existence and Japanese society have been overwhelmingly diminished, especially his alcoholism. The death of the celebrity thus

represents a paradox; both *more* and *less* imbued with meaning than that of a non-celebrity, celebrity death is both *more* and *less* impactful within their society than other deaths.

Continuing with the underlying ideology of death as impermanent, Bauman argues that “disappearance” has replaced “death,” given the retrievability of “beings” who have apparently died: “the resemblance to death is but superficial, since unlike death their departure is reversible and revocable” (Bauman 1992, 175). hide, for instance, has even ‘produced’ new music in death with the release of the song “*Ko gyaru*” (discussed below). Thus, the productive—and profitable—nature of the celebrity is, potentially, immortal, resonating with the connections between celebrity and religion drawn by numerous other scholars (see for example Frow 1998; Rojek 2001, 51–100; Doss 2005; Hopgood 2005; Coman 2011; Rojek 2012, 121–22). Lisa Bode expands upon Bauman’s arguments and connects them to celebrity, arguing that “the star’s biographical body, agency, and intentionality are seen as less important than the continuing capacity of their iconography to command public attention” (2007, 38). When this is compounded with how “capitalism subsumes and consumes all of previous history” (Fisher 2009, 4), the “star” may be dead, but they are never unavailable for capitalist exploitation. This is amplified by their inability to protest alterations to their message or art, or inability to influence their marketability—a lack of agency which I discuss in more detail later.

This paradoxical and productive nature of celebrity death is arguably why hide’s death never truly led to his “invisibility”—he never disappeared from the public eye and continues to command attention to the present day. The case study of visual *kei* demonstrates the potential versatility of subculture, adopting and adapting to foundational tenants of neoliberal capitalism to survive and perpetuate itself continuously within a climate of fluctuating tolerance and marketability (albeit to varying levels of success, and often dependent on accompanying affective labor to mask this fact—see Chapter 5). hide, or at least his image as promoted by

others, also turns to survival by any means—‘selling out’ yet sanctified, ‘safe’ yet subcultural, adapted and adapting to maintain relevance. hide’s death has, ironically, led to his survival.

Creating ‘Safety’ in Death

With a living celebrity, there is always the possibility of betrayal on the part of the celebrity—whether in terms of unsavory social conduct, perceived decline in artistic output, or the simple cessation of said output—which places fannish consumption into doubt. Contemporary visual *kei* fans are particularly at risk, as most artists and bands exist in a highly precarious state.¹⁵

With a *deceased* celebrity, however, the other side of the bond is a known and fixed entity; there is, ostensibly, no betrayal possible, as the celebrity is *permanently disconnected* while *at the same time eternally accessible*. One’s relationship to the deceased celebrity is thus, arguably, *safe*—particularly in comparison to a relationship with a living (fallible) celebrity. Furthermore, as all celebrity-fan relationships are predominantly “provided through the media” instead of “face-to-face” (Turner 2014, 105), “the deaths of high profile celebrities” (Turner 2014, 26) arguably crystallize relationships at this point of separation, creating a reinforced connection to what has now become a set, unchanging entity.¹⁶ This may be why fans are emotionally affected when celebrities’ failures are exposed posthumously: the betrayal comes from a party which was *supposed* to be beyond such damaging potential.¹⁷

¹⁵ This is due to a multitude of factors, some of which will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

¹⁶ Regardless of a usual lack of concrete response from a living celebrity, the existence of a *felt* bond on the part of the consumer towards their celebrity of choice is without doubt (Rojek 2001, 48–51)—with the advent of social media, however, responses from celebrities, which lead to a (sense of) strengthening of the relationship between celebrities and fans, are becoming increasingly common (Turner 2014, 76). Rebecca Williams further argues that the fan attachment demonstrates Anthony Giddens’s conception of the “pure relationship” due precisely to the lack of necessity of reciprocity (2015, 22). This type of “one-sided” fan-celebrity relationship is also known as “para-social,” a term recently challenged in scholarship as being too heavily focused on a compensatory nature, which is reductive of fans’ actual feelings towards celebrities (Turner 2014, 105).

¹⁷ This is exemplified in the case with Albert Goldman’s antagonistic posthumous biography, *The Lives of John Lennon*, which many fans attacked outright (Mäkelä 2005, 175–77).

Within hide's fandom, consumers are *safe*. With no major scandals during his lifetime and a continuous posthumous buildup of his reputation immunizing him against newly discovered issues, he is (thus far) unlike more controversial stars.¹⁸ hide's safety is particularly meaningful in visual *kei*, where short-lived bands composed of quickly recycled members breaking up due to personality clash or scandal is the norm rather than noteworthy (see Chapter 5). Compared to these precarious performers, hide cannot disappoint. Furthermore, fans have been provided with a wide and seemingly ever-increasing array of recordings and merchandise available for consumption—comparatively, many bands disappear before producing a single album. As referenced above, the consumption and appreciation of hide's artistry and work even now serves to lend credibility and authenticity to musicians and fans who never interacted with him in any capacity.¹⁹

Furthermore, as over twenty years separate hide's death from the present, he arguably falls within the realm of nostalgia, nestled 'safely' within ideas of a 'better' subculture of the past which did not suffer the multitude problems it is prone to now.²⁰ While the relegitimization of visual *kei* as a whole had to wait approximately another decade after hide's death (see Chapter 6), hide's own reputation bore a great deal of quick postmortem polishing and refurbishing. In death, hide has over time become defied, fundamentally separated from present day performers, even an extraordinary "genius."²¹ This makes it easier for his increasingly

¹⁸ Outside of Japan, an example would be Michael Jackson. See, for example, a *New York Times* critic's account of his difficulties negotiating his own fandom in response to the 2019 release of the documentary *Finding Neverland* "about Jackson's alleged pedophilia" (Morris 2019).

¹⁹ hide fandom tends to be explicitly demonstrated, and visual *kei* social media is regularly awash with messages to or about hide, which are not limited to but certainly swell around his birth and death dates.

²⁰ Subcultural members themselves sometimes explicitly voice this type of nostalgic reminiscence (Fujitani 2012), and it is shown more obliquely social media accounts focused on "visual *kei* of the 90s" (90-*nendai no vijuaru kei*) (e.g., https://twitter.com/old_school_vk, <https://twitter.com/90svisualizmbot>, last accessed September 3, 2022).

²¹ See, for example, a thread from subcultural amalgamation site *V kei matome sokuho* from 2016 which labels him a "rare genius" (<http://visual-matome.com/archives/1063157138.html>),

valuable and criticism-proof name to be used to sell increasingly expensive and tenuously related goods. Perhaps the most conspicuous example of this is an eighteen-karat gold guitar pick sold under the hide brand name tied with the 20th anniversary of his death, advertised with the tagline “the thoughts of all the people who love hide [last] eternally...” (Figure 5). His name, regardless of his punk-like message and subcultural origins, has become synonymous with a guaranteed sale and conspicuous



Figure 5: An advertisement for the hide-branded 18-karat gold guitar pick (2018, Tokyo).

must be, or it is worthless under neoliberal capitalist realism and will disappear.

Even more mundane human problems, such as the potential alcoholism which may have contributed to his death (c.f. Stevens 2005; Gotoh 2015, 10; Sato 2015), are only mentioned occasionally and generally remain undiscussed. Indeed, addressing the problem of alcoholism specifically potentially upsets the dominant order of regular and ritualized alcohol consumption in Japan, particularly among men (c.f. Borovoy 2005), creating a multifaceted motivation for

this thread from 2019 stating he “was seriously a genius” (<http://visual-matome.com/archives/post-61911.html>), and this post from the band-centric website *BanKatsu* posted in 2020 expressing that the author “just wants to talk about [the fact that] hide’s a genius” (<https://www.shellbys.com/entry/2015-10-25-213000>), all last accessed August 27, 2022.

‘safety.’ In a sense, the disruptive potential of stating that hide may have had a serious problem rather than an amusing personality quirk is discarded or ignored in favor of maintaining an uncomplicated purity and degree of ‘safety’ and the connected profits.²² This safeguards certain negative aspects of an entire culture that are best left untouched to maintain pleasant consumeristic feeling and continued profitability.²³

hide is thus commodified into a dominant, traditional, mainstream value signifier. The freedom and rebellion towards established norms and ideals central to the message of his music, what likely resonated with young fans who were also suffering in the difficult environment of the first lost decade, have been downplayed. He is used to encourage consumption, not rebellion or political contemplation. His name not only sells products, but also sells the status quo. hide has been managed and mediated to such an extent that his posthumous persona is a separate being than hide the man and performer—a being that is easily slotted into corporate boxes.

A Managed, Mediated Death

As I mentioned in the introduction, the aftermath of hide’s death allowed for a new vein of commercial viability for visual *kei*. “[T]he iconic status of many artists [...] become[s] increasingly magnified in the decades following their death” (Bennett 2015, 65), and hide was no different. His death, ironically, began a new phase in his mainstream ‘life.’

Contextually, the Japanese mainstream spotlight was primed for a more dramatic story of the death of visual *kei* at the time of hide’s death, as founding band X JAPAN had broken up

²² hide’s relationship with alcohol is often portrayed lightly—while his indulgences were well known and not hidden (one of his songs, for example, is titled “D.O.D. (Drink or Die)”), they do not appear to have been generally considered a problem within popular or even subcultural narrative (see for example Oshima 1999).

²³ Japan’s established dependency on alcohol is waning, reflecting a broader trend in the world after COVID-19. However, it still seems established as such a matter-of-course part of life that Japan’s National Tax Agency caused a minor controversy with a campaign aimed to boost young people’s alcohol consumption to increase tax revenue (Hida and Yoon 2022).

suddenly in December 1997. With speculation, mourning, tributes, and annual memorials that continue to the present, hide's death propelled him into an endless stream of media attention and acclaim that other performers of his generation, despite still being active today, have generally failed to achieve.²⁴

Additionally, the *manner* of hide's death has become a contentious point in hindsight. Officially, immediately following his death, hide was unambiguously reported by the mainstream media to have died by suicide. This was presumed due to the method of his death— asphyxiation by a towel tied to a doorknob—and not based on any clear mark of intentionality left by the artist. This narrative was, however, immediately called into question by family members and fellow X JAPAN member YOSHIKI, who argued his death was accidental.²⁵ Police investigation also revealed the death to be likely accidental (Stevens 2005, 147). For the mainstream media, however, suicide seemed a better fit with the subcultural celebrity punk, following a broader tendency to locate news value in the excessive lifestyles of “popular musicians” (Hearsum 2012, 182). The motivation appears two-fold. First, a story of death-by-

²⁴ This includes a museum in hide's hometown Yokosuka open from 2000 to 2005. The official copy implies that the closing was not intentional, prefacing the date with “regretfully.” A more temporary pop-up museum was scheduled for hide's 23rd death anniversary in May 2021, located in Ikebukuro, though its opening was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Both establishments are promoted with the phrase “the place you can meet hide” (HEADWAX ORGANIZATION CO. 2021).

²⁵ YOSHIKI stated this belief in a press conference in the wake of copy-cat suicides following hide's death (Stevens 2005, 147). Later, in the documentary *We Are X*, he stated that hide was employing a stretching technique that YOSHIKI himself has employed, which involves hanging by the neck with a towel tied around a doorknob. He uses this connection to support his belief that the death was accidental (Kijak 2016). This, combined with hide's excessive drinking habits (c.f. Oshima 1999; Sato 2015), as well as the jet-lag lingering after a return from Los Angeles reported by his younger brother, may have combined to lead to his unexpectedly falling asleep during one of these stretching sessions (reportedly witnessed by family and staff members on multiple occasions), and do suggest a complication of the interpretation of hide's death as explicitly intentional and suicidal. Indeed, hide's brother also explicitly put forth this potential explanation for the death in a press conference following hide's death, reportedly insisting that it was “a complete accident” by someone who, in his opinion, “would not intentionally take his own life.” A recording of this event can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yyjNhFbJorw>, last accessed August 27, 2022.

suicide is more conducive to mainstream media's heightening and amplifying tragedy in order to ensure coverage and greater profit. Second, similar non-conventional lifestyles are thought to be discouraged by their 'causal' connection with the same tragedy.

Furthermore, this suicide narrative resonated with the wider sense of despair and loss of hope that permeated Japan in the late 1990s. This was a "bleak landscape of national collapse" (Leheny 2018, 98) at the end of what would be only the first of multiple "lost decades" (Funabashi and Kushner 2015). Genda Yuji argues that this "loss" was not limited to the economic sphere, but that the populous "had been deprived of any faith in the future" (Genda 2005, x). The year 1998 seemed particularly dire: the late 1990s found a Japan, essentially, without hope. The suicide narrative, therefore, resonated with broader Japan at the turn of the century. hide's succumbing to this zeitgeist may have seemed a matter of course, particularly given the nature of his music and message—in short, it may have simply made more sense in the historical context.

This early and (likely) erroneous declaration of suicide, regardless of motivation, had repercussions outside of hide's reputation and that of visual *kei* as a whole. A number of copycat deaths among young fans were reported, and an impassioned plea was published in the *Mainichi Shinbun* for young people to overcome their sadness and not "follow after" hide (Amano 1998).²⁶ This plea followed four months after YOSHIKI's own press conference discouraging fans from harming themselves. These acts demonstrate an established idea of celebrity suicides influencing fans within the minds of the Japanese public. Historical record, additionally, shows a sudden spike in suicides among the general population, jumping from 24,391 in 1997 to 32,863 in 1998 with the spike significantly more prevalent among men (Ministry of Health

²⁶ Five youth suicides whose reports explicitly reference hide were found in a search of the Yomiuri and Mainichi databases (*Yomiuri Shinbun* 1999b; *Mainichi Shinbun* 1998c; *Mainichi Shinbun* 1998b; *Mainichi Shinbun* 1998a); a number of cases were also reported by Stevens in her analysis of hide's sacralization (2005, 147). This list is not exhaustive and serves only as a demonstration.

Labour and Welfare 2022, 2). The connection to hide specifically rather than the broader societal malaise is unprovable, but the spike, in conjunction with the broader societal downturn in hope, presents hide's death as particularly resonant with this point in post-bubble Japanese history.

Returning to the specific connection between celebrity suicide and copycats, it is not an abnormality—multiple studies have shown that media reports of celebrity suicides lead to an increase in attempts at suicide in others (see, for example, Stack 2000; Mesoudi 2009; Niederkrotenthaler et al. 2009; Jeong et al. 2012; Niederkrotenthaler et al. 2012). In addition to the warnings from YOSHIKI and the *Mainichi* above, anecdotally, an informant recalled her mother explicitly telling her “don’t do anything strange!” (*hen na koto shinai de!*) in response to hide's death during a discussion over dinner following our viewing of X JAPAN documentary *We Are X* in April 2017. Carolyn S. Stevens, who has done an in-depth study of the immediate aftermath of hide's death in the Japanese media, recounts a similar message as dominating media coverage (Stevens 2005, 148). At 33, hide further fit into the “youth” category, a group experiencing both significant consequences due to the economic downturn and scapegoating for so-called loss or change of “values and work ethic” (Genda 2005, 6). These warnings, along with this broader sense of disappointing “youth,” fit into the narrative of hide's death as cautionary tale.

The suicide narrative further interplays with other rock star death narratives and wider mainstream media messages. While perhaps not as publicly ‘tortured’ an artist as Nirvana's Kurt Cobain, the narrative portrays hide as a tortured artist, further authenticating the artistry of his work. Multiple songs of hide's, such as “Pink Spider” (*Pinku supaidā*) and “BLUE SKY COMPLEX,” arguably or explicitly deal with themes of suicide, in addition to the dark themes mentioned above. Thus, his death is arguably artistically portended, which “solidifies” and “stabilizes” his place within the pantheon of music stardom (Jones 2005, 13). Stevens also states

outright that “death, violence, and even suicide were constant motifs in X Japan [sic] songs” as well (2005, 146). This is further compounded by broader visual *kei*’s tendency towards dark and morbid themes in general.

The discourse surrounding the song “Pink Spider” in particular may also contribute to this suicide narrative remaining within the cultural imagination. The song, whose title also served as one of hide’s nicknames, was released eight days after hide’s death, which at the time was still widely believed to be a suicide. In addition, the lyrics have been interpreted as dealing with themes of suicide as mentioned above, and are recalled as lending credence to the suicide narrative around the time of hide’s death.²⁷ Additionally, the song has also been covered by numerous subcultural and mainstream artists since its release, firmly lodging the song in people’s minds as synonymous with hide. This timing, potential interpretation, and regularly reaffirmed importance through performance may potentially strengthen this discursive construction of hide’s death as a suicide.

There was, in short, evidence enough for the mainstream media to discursively create a suicide and explicitly tie it with hide’s artistic oeuvre and artistic ‘authenticity.’ For example, the official documentary film released for hide’s 50th birthday still—but not-so-subtly—suggested a tormented, potentially suicidal tendency within the artist, emphasizing his emotional struggles and inner turmoil leading to his final days (Sato 2015). Stevens reports that a tabloid special highlighting a collection of fan letters analyzed hide as “burn[ing] out psychologically, rejecting fame,” which in turn “served to heighten his spiritual presence”

²⁷ Numerous retrospective accounts recall Japanese talks shows explicitly analyzing the lyrics of “Pink Spider” as connected to suicide. See, for example, this blog entry: <https://ameblo.jp/astrobowie75/entry-12740589285.html>. The song’s Wikipedia page also references this, but the point has no citation: https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E3%83%94%E3%83%B3%E3%82%AF_%E3%82%B9%E3%83%91%E3%82%A4%E3%83%80%E3%83%BC. Both links last accessed August 27, 2022.

(Stevens 2005, 149–50). In other words, regardless of hide’s own agency in his death, it seems the narrative of an ambiguous suicide was more profitable both for media and record sales.

A second function of this discourse, already mentioned briefly, is its believed cautionary effects. By linking hide’s rebellious lifestyle to his misery and (potential) suicide, the suicide discourse perpetuates dominant values of conformity. hide’s life of danger and rebellion becomes neutralized, rendered harmless and unattractive by its self-destructive end. I would argue that hide’s image was posthumously managed by neoliberal capitalism for profit *and* Japanese conservative, traditional culture for maintenance of conformity through this suicide narrative. It further exemplifies how hide’s agency was denied in death. The suicide discourse and his mediated death are not, however, the only methods of hide’s posthumous commodification.

Unpacking Posthumous Production in Neoliberal Capitalist Realism

The seemingly inexhaustible wave of products put forth in the days, months, and years following hide’s death is an example of how, following a celebrity’s death, “the immediate overwhelming tendency is to pay homage” in various ways, be it through action or “objects” (Lebrun and Strong 2015, 6). Or, in a less generous interpretation, this wave shows that the “immediate overwhelming tendency” to show our grief necessarily happens through *consumption*, the only method of meaning-making valued under neoliberal capitalist realism. While the release range and relevance of hide-related products may be longer than some (though not as long as others), they remain typical of a music celebrity who died at the peak of their career (Bennett 2015, 66). Affective timing of releases (e.g., around noteworthy anniversaries) sustains continued and sometimes renewed interest in the consuming public, overall working to perpetuate and even boost deification or “sacralization” (c.f. Stevens 2005).²⁸

²⁸ Margaret Gibson explicitly calls the anniversary a “commercial opportunity” (2007b, 2).

This seemingly endless cycle of (re)production raises a question about the agency of a celebrity that can no longer express intent nor gain benefit from extended exposure. The matter is further complicated when productions move into derivative works, be they memoirs by related persons, documentaries based on the artist's life, or tribute albums and compilations. While these may be classified as tributes meant to honor, capitalist intent is always a factor—as well as intent founded on other forms of capital, in this case primarily subcultural (Thornton 1995). Fans and subcultural members may more easily reconcile derivative works with their own image of the celebrity, however, as they can place blame for objectionable content on the derivative author and not the celebrity.

In short, it remains difficult to assign singular intent to any product connected to a celebrity's name that is produced and sold after their death. Tribute albums, for example, both capitalize on the dead celebrity's image in monetary terms, but also serve as cultural capital and image boost to the celebrities as their value is multiplied due to the original artist's posthumous elevation and deification (Bennett 2015, 65–66). However, this does not mean that the contributing artists do not genuinely love and respect hide, and are choosing to demonstrate this through tribute. Fans, also, often desire these items as mementos of their beloved celebrity, which emphasize the deceased's artistic prowess through the respect of others within their field.²⁹ In other words, posthumous production is more complex than corporate greed versus genuine respect.

Additionally, connected to the deification of hide's persona following his death, any potential criticism of his image is met with repercussions (see *J-CAST Nyūsu* 2017; Henshūbu 2017). For example, in 2017 vocalist Mamo of band *R-shitei* responded negatively on Twitter

²⁹ Comments concerning fans' appreciation of respect from other artists appear frequently in reviews of hide tribute albums, for example.

to a quote which fans have often erroneously attributed to hide (Figure 6).³⁰ This single Tweet resulted in extensive harassment and a temporary freeze of his account, which may have been due to a sudden deluge of hide fans blocking him (Henshūbu 2017) and attempting to remove him from the service via false flagging and reporting, as some fans claimed to do (*Oto Wota* 2017).³¹ The severity of the event is undoubtedly tied to its affective dimensions, as fake news often is (Marwick 2018, 509). Considering such severe responses, new releases connected to hide's image, too, are more likely to be greeted with fanfare rather than cynicism, at least publicly.³²

However, following Andy Bennett's argument to balance both cultural and economic concerns (2015, 65), these types of tribute productions should *also* be interpreted as the mainstream capitalist media exploiting fan desires. Producers maintain a (hypothetically)



Figure 6: Mamo's Tweet. The text reads: “‘The today you’re living is the tomorrow people who died yesterday wanted to live’ Honestly, I don’t care that’s got nooooothing to do with me” (Screenshot taken July 29, 2022)

³⁰ View Mamo's tweet at https://twitter.com/mam0_Officialt/status/920928487602454528, last accessed September 3, 2022.

³¹ Additionally, fans of Mamo also received a significant amount of angry harassment for supporting him, which was interpreted as “dissing” hide himself. This again demonstrates Marwick's findings on the sharing of fake news, particularly how people may share *despite* knowing it is fake “for its identity-signaling properties” (2018, 509).

³² For a more in-depth explanation and interpretation of the event written by a subcultural member, see Kamiya Atsuhiko's report at http://blog.livedoor.jp/record_memory/archives/72790455.html, last accessed September 3, 2022.

eternally profitable cycle by perpetually keeping the fan object in circulation (Gibson 2007b, 2), using the knowledge that fans will likely pressure themselves and each other into purchasing new releases (including repeats and re-releases). This cycle is actively *strengthened* through and results in constant objectification and deification the dead celebrity, both by producers and fans alike.³³

Though it may appear that fans are painted as “cultural dopes” here, fan loss and mourning *cannot* simply be reduced to extractive capitalist processes. While these affective strategies are, on the one hand, exploitable for profit on the part of the mainstream, on the other hand they are based on truly meaningful affective connections on the part of the fans. Anniversaries and birthdays strike a particular chord even when celebrities are alive and still active.³⁴ Given the cultural weight these types of events hold in everyday personal relationships, their importance in mediated relationships with celebrities seems a matter of course. Furthermore, the affective nature of this cycle as used by the mainstream media *does not preclude awareness of the strategy* (van de Goor 2017). Katherine Sender’s (2012, 2015) studies of reality television audiences, for example, find that they express simultaneous enjoyment of the content *and* acknowledgment of its constructed nature. These posthumous products, therefore, are not immune to criticism, whether from cynical fans, critics, or academic writing.

³³ While specific profits depend on the product and related producers, it is likely hide’s management company HEADWAX that derives the majority of profits from hide’s branding, given their copyright credit on his official website and ties to later disputes. For example, HEADWAX reportedly filed a lawsuit against YOSHIKI’s management company in 2010 for using hide’s image in X JAPAN concerts without an established agreement in place, even threatening that hide would possibly “leave” X JAPAN (*Nikkan Sports* 2010).

³⁴ BUCK-TICK fans’ social media accounts, for example, are typically overflowing with messages, art, and even photos of actual cakes and parties on each of the members’ birthdays. More officially, the band’s mobile fan club explicitly solicits messages from fans to each member on their birthday through an online submission form. Smaller bands often hold birthday events or lives, and many bands, major and minor, also mark their debut anniversaries in some manner. In many cases fans often present large, standing bouquets to decorate the entryways of live venues at significant expense to demonstrate their appreciation on these dates.

Explicit awareness of affective strategies for capitalist profit more generally is also evidenced within subculture itself. Multiple fans over the course of my fieldwork have lamented a new release, good, or other purchase opportunity as “dirty” (*kitanai*) or “unfair” (*zurui*), before ultimately making the purchase. Others have explicitly prefaced a seemingly “needless” purchase with the “excuse” of simply doing it to “support” the artist in question. The products are explicitly connected to capitalistic intention, and purchased regardless, or indeed *because* of said intention.³⁵ The anniversary strategy, in particular, is explicitly called out (and criticized) by fans.³⁶ However, whether these critiques are given the same degree of credence or authority as the overwhelmingly positive discourse is more ambiguous.³⁷ Fans, in short, are

³⁵ This is particularly common with *cheki* or small, instant photographs of band members which are generally sold for between 500 and 1000 yen each at performances and are a relatively easy and cheap way for even small artists to make money—even fans who explicitly state they are “needless” (*iranai*) or even “trash” (*gomi*) make purchases regardless, at once both acknowledging and disregarding their affective exploitation, typically with the aforementioned explicitly expressed intent of “supporting” the artist, whether economically, affectively, or both. The author possesses a significant amount of *cheki* from various artists, demonstrating participation on multiple occasions in this ‘ritual’ of sorts. See Chapters 2 and 5 for more analysis of discourse surrounding this concept of explicit economic support.

³⁶ This is perhaps most evident in tangential releases connected with hide rather than music, such as books compiled by interviewers or other individuals claiming relationships with hide. In a review of the 2018 release *hide word FILE* by interviewer Ōshima Akemi, for example, an unnamed reviewer states that “Every year when May rolls around some kind of hide-related product comes out, but I really wish they’d knock it off” and that “there’s no meaning in putting out a book of this quality!” 26 individuals have marked the review as “helpful” as of September 5, 2022, suggesting their agreement or at least empathy. (https://www.amazon.co.jp/-/en/product-reviews/4860087666/ref=acr_dp_hist_1?ie=UTF8&filterByStar=one_star&reviewerType=all_reviews#reviews-filter-bar).

³⁷ For example, in the same product listing for *hide word FILE*, the overall rating is 4.8 out of 5 stars. 86% of the 27 ratings are 5 stars as of September 5, 2022. (<https://www.amazon.co.jp/hide-word-FILE-%E3%82%AB%E3%83%AA%E3%82%B9%E3%83%9E%E3%81%AE%E8%A8%80%E8%91%89%E3%82%B7%E3%83%AA%E3%83%BC%E3%82%BA-21/dp/4860087666>), One reviewer in November 2020 explicitly recommends its purchase to “hide fans” (https://www.amazon.co.jp/gp/customer-reviews/R3NFSB5SZZJYGC/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=4860087666), last accessed September 3, 2022.

not easily manipulated fools, but neither are they free from neoliberal capitalist realism, where their affective responses *must* be filtered through economic capital or rendered meaningless.

To this end, I will further unpack this discursive negotiation of posthumous commodification by subcultural members through two case studies: tribute albums and the creation of ‘new’ music under hide’s name.

“Sinful” Profiteering or “Miraculous” Homage? Negotiating Posthumous Works

Immediately after hide’s death, new musical recordings were released amid a rush of tribute that profited from the media attention. The release of two singles and an album in 1998 were originally planned before his passing, but these releases were not the last.³⁸ As of 2022, every single produced before hide’s death has been rereleased, both by itself and in two separate single collections. There are currently five different “best of” albums available, the latest released in 2014—the year of hide’s 50th birthday. A new hide-centric film was released in July 2022, in addition to the two hide-specific documentary films and three concert films already released. There is even a hide NFT series planned, with the first released in May 2022, demonstrating how no opportunity is wasted to profit from hide’s image.³⁹

Aside from these ‘originals,’ there have also been hosts of tributes, also in the forms of singles, albums, concerts, and even in live performances including artists’ own original work.⁴⁰

³⁸ “Pink Spider” (May 13th), and “ever free” (May 27th), two singles intended as a “coupling” release that were apparently separated out based on the record company’s desires (*BARKS* 2007) and *3 · 2 · 1*, an album released by hide’s American unit zilch, released in July after having been completed almost a year before (Tanaka 2018, 2).

³⁹ While “some” profits of the first two NFTs will reportedly be donated to the Japanese Red Cross Society specifically to support Ukrainian refugees, the specific amount is unclear. See more information at the official hide NFT website here: <https://special.fanpla.jp/hide/> (last accessed September 3, 2022).

⁴⁰ For example, band defspiral performed hide’s songs “Beauty & Stupid” and “DOUBT” together with the vocalists of Sel’m and DEATHGAZE, respectively, for a special encore at a group live they hosted in Osaka on November 16, 2012; band *Awoi* performed their cover of hide’s “BACTERIA” at their 9th anniversary performance in Osaka on October 20, 2013.

As mentioned before, tributes and works *devoted* to hide seem to be more easily accepted, where sincerity on the part of the artists appears to be assumed but still negotiated. This is visible, for example, in the response to the hide *TRIBUTE* series.

hide TRIBUTE SPIRITS, a 1999 tribute album later extended into a themed series, made news when it topped Oricon's "tribute album" ranking (*Oricon News* 2005), and is discursively constructed as the only million-seller tribute album ever produced (*Middle Edge* 2016).⁴¹ The album is a collection of popular contemporary Japanese rock performers. One could argue the album is based on honorable intent, as many contributing artists were personally connected to hide. The album was followed in 2013 by six more volumes released ahead of hide's 50th birthday, all bearing the *TRIBUTE ~ SPIRITS* moniker. *TRIBUTE IMPULSE*, the 8th release commemorating the 20th anniversary of hide's death in 2018 is the most recent installment. The series is significant enough that it has its own section in hide's official discography, with the original described as a "crystallization of soul" and "miraculous," by hide's official, label-run website.⁴²

This series clearly follows the strategy of capitalizing on fan responses through anniversaries.⁴³ This strategy proved successful, based on the sales figures, which likely led both to the continuation of the series and future installments' release schedules. This corresponds with marketing research indicating that "mood states exert an important influence on behavior, judgement, and recall," and the likelihood that "that associations between mood states and behaviors may be learned from repeated experience, socialization, or acculturation" (Gardner 1985, 283). More specifically, later research finds that experiencing sadness causes

⁴¹ Interestingly, this "public knowledge" cannot be confirmed via the RIAJ database, which lists the album as achieving only double platinum status. While a direct link to the listing is not available, searching the database is possible here through their website, last accessed September 5, 2022: https://www.riaj.or.jp/f/data/cert/gd_search.html

⁴² See the listing on hide's official website here, last accessed September 6, 2022: http://www.hide-city.com/discography/?category=album_others

⁴³ The first release date was May 1st, 1999.

consumers to spend *more* (Lerner, Small, and Loewenstein 2004)—sadness which would arguably be triggered around anniversaries of hide’s birth or death. I, however, recognize that sadness is not the only emotion involved in an anniversary. Indeed, other research indicates that consumption can not only alleviate sadness, but also maintains positive feelings (Kemp and Kopp 2011), which may include the positive feelings associated with being a fan and enjoying the music of a favored celebrity.

However, this TRIBUTE series is not without criticism. While the overall response has been mostly positive, negative reviews explicitly demonstrate subcultural negotiation between capitalist intent and affective, honorable sincerity and devotion. Reviewers appear aware of the capitalist strategy at play but use it as an interpretative weapon to attack artists the reviewers personally dislike. Three reviewers express explicitly critical interpretations on the *TRIBUTE SPIRITS* product page, demonstrating their awareness of the realities of capitalist manipulation.⁴⁴ One reviewer (one star, two likes) critiques the album’s content in terms of musicality and intent, stating: “I think that it’s a matter of course that hide’s originals are better,” and that the album is a “mix” of those “who can interpret [the songs] well and those who cannot.” He concludes with “I’d say that a work planned to whip on [exploit] fans and the deceased is considerably sinful.”⁴⁵ In other words, the reviewer splits the participating artists into those who are permitted to tribute, and those are not. This is not the only instance of this type of splitting.

Another reviewer (two stars, 13 likes) asks: “Who was it this album was dedicated to?” They commend certain selections by well-known veterans such as LUNA SEA and BUCK-

⁴⁴ This is based on an analysis of user reviews on Amazon.co.jp (https://www.amazon.co.jp/-/en/%E3%82%AA%E3%83%A0%E3%83%8B%E3%83%90%E3%82%B9/dp/B00005FRAI/ref=cm_cr_ar_p_d_product_top?ie=UTF8) conducted in February 2019 and re-checked in May 2022.

⁴⁵ Tomo [トモ], “Kikaku [企画],” review of *hide TRIBUTE SPIRITS*, by Omnibus, *Amazon.co.jp*, March 12, 2007. https://www.amazon.co.jp/-/en/product-reviews/B00005FRAI/ref=acr_dp_hist_1?ie=UTF8&filterByStar=one_star&reviewerType=all_reviews#reviews-filter-bar

TICK as “extremely well done,” referring to their arrangements as being liked by hide himself. However, they accuse other (unnamed) artists as only having taken part for “commercial reasons,” or “participating without knowing the true value [of the work].”⁴⁶ They label the contributions of this second group of artists as “blasphemy towards hide,” adding that they evoke a “strong sense of disgust” in the reviewer.⁴⁷ This demonstrates an explicit connection in the fan’s interpretation between capitalistic intent and lacking authenticity. Veterans and personal favorites are allowed to capitalize, newbies and disliked bands are not.⁴⁸ The reviewer closes by stating that they “wanted this kind of album, at least, to be made sincerely.”⁴⁹

No other reviews critique the album’s intent, instead referencing how the album shows love and respect for hide from his contemporaries. Follow-up installments each bear a significantly smaller number of reviews but still tend toward positive. The small number of negative reviews focus on performers’ skills or superiority of hide’s versions, but no longer intent.⁵⁰ It seems that the tribute album, as a form of posthumous production, has been generally accepted and negotiated positively within subcultural discourse.

However, there is another matter: namely, posthumous ‘performance.’ Alongside all the rereleases and tributes, in 2014 there also came a “new,” “original” song “by hide.” “*Ko gyaru*”

⁴⁶ This is another form of negotiation, where the (potentially imagined) agency of the artist is invoked to justify the fan’s feelings: the reviewer’s comments are strengthened through the invocation of hide’s will.

⁴⁷ Again, the artist is invoked to strengthen personal feelings—the album is not “bad,” but a “blasphemy against hide”—the insult is towards hide himself, an affective appeal to extend the effect of the commenter’s feelings.

⁴⁸ It is worth note that LUNA SEA and BUCK-TICK are, relatively speaking, some of the most economically successful visual *kei* artists still active as of 2020.

⁴⁹ china, “Dare ni sasageta arubamu datta no ka. [誰に捧げたアルバムだったのか。],” review of *hide TRIBUTE SPIRITS*, by Omnibus, *Amazon.co.jp*, January 3, 2007. https://www.amazon.co.jp/gp/customer-reviews/R3P078Y3TFIATU/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00005FRAI

⁵⁰ See, for example, Mukuro [骸], “Mazeru na chūi [混ぜるな注意],” review of *hide TRIBUTE VI- Female SPIRITS-*, by Various Artists, *Amazon.co.jp*, December 18, 2013. https://www.amazon.co.jp/gp/customer-reviews/R3K53ELH9N2W4N/ref=cm_cr_arp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00FYVMZ3C

(“Young girl”), a “new” song compiled into an eponymous “best of” album, was released sixteen years after hide’s death. The song previously existed only as a demo recording with rough and incomplete vocals. Originally (reportedly) planned to be compiled on hide’s third solo album, *Ja, Zoo*, “*Ko gyaru*” was deemed by the official press release to be “a phantom musical composition unable to be reproduced” due to its incomplete state.⁵¹ After the creation of Yamaha’s vocal synthesis technology VOCALOID however, its posthumous production was made possible.⁵²

“*Ko gyaru*” was released through the combination of a hide-programmed VOCALOID and the production work of I.N.A. (a D.J./musician who often collaborated with hide).⁵³ hide’s official website lauds “*Ko gyaru*” as a “miracle new song” (*kiseki no shinkyoku*).⁵⁴ The official press release states that the song would be released with remastered versions of 15 previously released “Bonus Tracks” described as “songs that could be said to be representative [of hide’s solo work].”⁵⁵ The album sold 34,000 copies in the first week, reached number 2 on the Oricon weekly charts (*Oricon News* 2014), and stayed within the weekly rankings for 20 weeks.⁵⁶ This padding of the new song with extra material, arguably to increase the price, already points to the capitalist intent of this “miracle” release.

⁵¹ See the official press release posted on October 23, 2014 on hide’s official website (<https://www.hide-city.com/information/detail.php?id=1177>), last accessed September 6, 2022.

⁵² This technology has arguably been made most famous through its virtual star Hatsune Miku.

⁵³ I.N.A. was also responsible for the number of posthumously released works discussed above (Tanaka 2018).

⁵⁴ See again: <https://www.hide-city.com/information/detail.php?id=1177>

⁵⁵ Prior to *Ko gyaru*’s release, four “best of” hide collections had already been released, as mentioned above: *hide BEST ~ PSYCHOMMUNITY* in 2000, *SINGLES ~ Junk Story* in 2002 (specifically collecting songs released as singles, and eponymously referencing another single that had not been released by hide himself), *KING OF PSYBORG ROCK STAR* in 2004, and *We ♥ hide ~ The Best in The World~* in 2009. While touted as “newly remastered,” all songs on *Ko gyaru*—aside from the eponymous title track—had been released in some capacity on these earlier albums, as well as on the original singles and albums released during hide’s life.

⁵⁶ See the official ranking data on Oricon (last accessed September 6, 2022) at: <https://www.oricon.co.jp/prof/27430/products/1101677/1/>

Subcultural media and music press were quick to pick up on “*Ko gyaru*”’s announcement. hide’s official website notes a number of television appearances in the month of the song’s release, including mainstream programs on networks such as NHK, NTV, and TBS, along with numerous radio and magazine appearances.⁵⁷ Response to the release was overwhelmingly positive, with many venues repeating the official press-copy from hide’s website.⁵⁸ Reports containing ‘critique’ actually reported on how critics were attacked *by fans*. Criticism is thus positioned as explicitly *against* fans’ interests and, therefore, both inauthentic and ‘against’ hide himself.

For example, a *NEWS Post Seven* article that specifically focuses on the 2014 youth quotes three young people with positive interpretations of the song. It emphasizes that the new song gives new and young fans the opportunity to discover hide, and to feel what a fan might have experienced before hide’s death. Based on their ages at the time of publication, the interviewed youth were indeed all too young to have experienced hide’s career firsthand.⁵⁹ Two of these explicitly reject criticism of the song, serving as subculturally-aligned defenders against negative responses. A 21-year-old male college student denies hide’s voice being used nefariously:

this didn’t use a [...] VOCALOID to recreate hide’s voice, but used hide’s singing voice as ingredients together with VOCALOID technology to recreate [the song]. When I heard “*Ko gyaru*” on a TV special, it was touching, almost like hide had come back in this age. At first I had doubts about the ‘handling’ of the voice of a deceased person, but the moment I heard [it] tears came to my eyes, so as a fan I want to give thanks. (*NEWS Post Seven* 2014)

⁵⁷ TBS’s *NEWS ZERO* dedicated a “special collection” to the release.

⁵⁸ The official designation of “miracle new song” in particular seemed to stick (e.g., Masuda 2014).

⁵⁹ This subgroup is ostensibly narrowing the demographic of an official yet unreferenced promotional video published by Universal Music Japan, the record label behind *Ko gyaru*, showing the opinion of the general public through “random” street interviews. The video can be viewed at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=17&v=eiM2Bd7ADpM, last accessed September 5, 2022.

A 19-year-old female college student, specifically introduced as a fan who “had never seen hide’s activity in real time,” says: “I thought it was the real hide-*chan*, not a VOCALOID. It seems there are opinions that this is making money from the deceased, but for me, who does not know [the real hide ...] it’s become a Christmas present I’m really thankful for” (*NEWS Post Seven* 2014).⁶⁰

This discourse reaffirms the hide website-dictated media narrative that the new song offers an ‘authentic’ fan consumption (not incidentally tied to purchasing a new product). Affect-based discursive strategies within the article seem to divert attention from the negative implication of voice manipulation and potential economic motivations behind “*Ko gyaru*’s” production. The discursive reception produced by the article, then, privileges the experience of the contemporary fan over the agency of the deceased artist.

This discourse ties in with “*Ko gyaru*” producer I.N.A.’s reported reasoning that the release of incomplete or discarded music after hide’s death is specifically for the sake of the fans (Tanaka 2018, 3). I.N.A. offers a casual, laughing defense of “*Ko gyaru*” when interviewed, stating that if his intentions had been purely monetary, he would have simply released the track in demo form instead of doing “something so tiresome and annoying” as re-creating it (Tanaka 2018, 4). This echoes the idea of work as “individual moral practice” (Weeks 2011, 11), an idea with particular resonance in contemporary Japan (see for example Nishiyama and Johnson 1997; Targum and Kitanaka 2012) as I briefly discussed in Chapter 2, and also bypasses the idea that the single could have been released for free or for charity instead. Regardless of anyone’s opinion, we will never know whether or not hide would approve—he is dead.

The discourse surrounding the “miraculous” “*Ko gyaru*” and its apparently “tiresome” production, then, seems to be similar to that which Lisa Bode suggests was produced for the

⁶⁰ The choice of a quote using the familiar diminutive “*chan*” subtly but clearly demonstrates the fan’s perceived closeness to the artist, despite her temporal distance, giving further ‘weight’ to her response as compared to the disembodied criticism.

resurrection of Marlon Brando in the 2006 film *Superman Returns*. This resurrection was promoted “as something amazing;” yet existing as “separate and autonomous from” the actual deceased individual themselves (Bode 2010, 69). The deceased person, therefore, becomes a “product,” an “*image* property” and an “*icon*” (Bode 2010, 69), while the viewer is encouraged not to think *too* deeply about agency and exploitation. “*Ko gyaru*” then, in this interpretation, truly becomes a “miraculous” product. It is separated from the connotations of the “corpse trade” (*shinin shōhō*), an evocative term used in negative interpretations of performers’ posthumous performances.⁶¹ While hide’s image is invoked to give the song its appeal and power, at the same time he is reduced to a (ironically) ‘voiceless’ product with technology, almost like a brand label to be stamped on and mass produced—eminently suitable for the broader shift to surface-level, conspicuous consumerism in the wake of the bubble.

The essence of neoliberal capitalist realism is that it is impossible to imagine a reality where labor or practice does not serve profit or monetary gain. As such, the technological exploitation required to produce “*Ko gyaru*” itself appears to fit perfectly within this discursive reality. Any and all technological advancement similarly will likely enable “the more effective exploitation of musicians’ posthumous careers” (Mäkelä 2005, 177). This, potentially, further contributes to the above discourse. The creation of the “new” song is easily negotiated under neoliberal capitalist realism as a ‘labor of love,’ and therefore true homage by its own producers

⁶¹ In March 2019, entering *shinin shōhō* (死人商法) alone into the Google search bar from Japan turned up two immediate suggestions: “hide 死人商法” and “zard 死人商法.” The latter refers to another successful dead musician: the often eponymously referenced Sakai Izumi of rock group ZARD, who died suddenly from a fall at age 40 in 2007 (*Asahi Shimbun* 2007). ZARD, at present more successful within Japan than hide or X JAPAN in terms of sales and general recognizability, has similarly continued to create profit after Sakai’s death. These same results appeared both on the author’s default browser, and on an ‘incognito’ browser from a different IP address.

As of January 9, 2021, only ZARD remained in these automatic suggestions (along with “what is *shinin shōhō*” and “*shinin shōhō* meaning,”) suggesting that furor around hide has died down.

and the media. This creates a complex foundation in which fans receive and are expected to reconcile “*Ko gyaru*.”

No Easy Choice: Subcultural Responses to hide’s ‘Resurrection’

The ambiguous nature of the posthumous performance offers the fan two choices: first, whether the performance lines up with what their own personal version of the celebrity would or would not do; and second, whether or not their devotion and desire to express it through consumption can overcome “anxieties” about “the vulnerability of the dead to exploitation” (Bode 2007, 37).

Despite attempts by the press, label, and producer to emphasize its authenticity and integrity, the production of something like “*Ko gyaru*” cannot escape questions of artistic agency in the “corpse trade,” and further the theme of commodification and exploitation that runs throughout this chapter. Along with the affective element, or the “uncomfortable morbidity” (Brunt 2015, 166) that might be invoked with the production of new words in the voice of a dead man, the fact is that the artist in question *is* dead and has *no* agency. They have no control over the release of their work, its mixing, editing, or the production and sale of it in general. This may also explain producer I.N.A.’s arguably defensive tone in a 2018 interview, where he references then explicitly denies the accusations of engaging in the “corpse trade” (Tanaka 2018, 3).

Again, this does not imply the release was met without fan critique. Indeed, compared to the *TRIBUTE* series, “*Ko gyaru*” had a significantly more negative reception, despite producers actively pushing their narrative of sincerity. This push may, however, have crossed the line. The Amazon.co.jp listing for the release, for example, has nine one-star content reviews (with a collective 96 customers marking them as “helpful”)—nine times more than the

original tribute album.⁶² The reviews criticize several aspects, including the incompleteness of the single itself, the unnecessary addition of an entire “best album” to raise the price, and the exploitation of hide for profit.

Multiple reviewers explicitly criticize the use of an incomplete song as objectionable. As one reviewer (1 star, 13 likes) states, “If you’re going to forcibly release a song using VOCALOID with provisional lyrics, provisional sound, and [...] provisional title, release it as a bonus track ...!”⁶³ Another reviewer (1 star, 18 likes, with the same username as the previous) notes that “[m]aking *Ko gyaru* (provisional title & provisional lyrics & provisional sound) is nothing more than blasphemy against the dead hide!”⁶⁴

Other reviews also explicitly target the producers, I.N.A. and hide’s brother Hiroshi of HEADWAX ORGANIZATION, hide’s management company who is credited with the production of the VOCALOID—focusing on their explicitly economic motivations.⁶⁵ One

⁶² There are 16 total 1 star ratings, and 13 total 1 star reviews as of September 3, 2022. However, four 1 star reviews refer specifically to physical problems with the product received. Three of these can even be considered positive review of the contents; one, for example, reports buying the copy in order for it to be “eternally preserved” (https://www.amazon.co.jp/-/en/gp/customer-reviews/R17N0P5BEJOZXT/ref=cm_cr_arp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00OSRMWPW); another is titled “The album is the best but...” (https://www.amazon.co.jp/-/en/gp/customer-reviews/RN0AEH582KULT/ref=cm_cr_arp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00OSRMWPW). All 1 star reviews can be viewed here: https://www.amazon.co.jp/-/en/product-reviews/B00OSRMWPW/ref=acr_dp_hist_1?ie=UTF8&filterByStar=one_star&reviewerType=all_reviews#reviews-filter-bar

⁶³ Kiduki [鬼月], “(-_-メ),” review of *Ko gyaru (hatsu kai gen tei han) (DVD tsuki)* [子ギャル (初回限定盤)(DVD 付)], by hide, *Amazon.co.jp*, December 10, 2014. https://www.amazon.co.jp/-/en/gp/customer-reviews/R2UVEMPMRVYP19/ref=cm_cr_arp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00OSRMWPW

⁶⁴ Kiduki [鬼月], “ジャケ写酷過ぎ!女子中学生が授業中に暇つぶしに書いた落書きをツイッターに UP したのを転載,” review of *Ko gyaru (hatsu kai gen tei han) (DVD tsuki)* [子ギャル (初回限定盤)(DVD 付)], by hide, *Amazon.co.jp*, December 29, 2014. https://www.amazon.co.jp/gp/customer-reviews/R20ICFC0K91617/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00OSRMWPW

⁶⁵ The company is ostensibly also the benefactor of hide’s continued marketability, as mentioned previously.

reviewer says: “If you’re going to celebrate [hide’s] last song, release it as a single! There’s surely no need to forcibly stick a best [album] onto it!”⁶⁶ Another pleads: “INA *san*, Hiroshi *san*, please stop doing business with hide!”⁶⁷ The reviewer above who critiqued the single’s provisionality bluntly ends their review with “HEADWAX Hiroshi, you money grubbing piece of trash!”⁶⁸ The review discourse actively demonstrates subcultural awareness of the capitalist motivations, this time labeling them as inauthentic, insincere, and offensive. This indicates that the problem does not lie with the agency of the star, but with the producers’ claims of sincerity.

The conflicting discourse surrounding “*Ko gyaru*” shows how “audiences, instead of being culturally duped, are—alongside the media—interdependently related in the reification,” or objectification, “of celebrity” (Black 2016, 207). Subcultural members here, both in negative and positive reviews, are “work[ing] to objectify the celebrity with” their own “cultural meanings” (Black 2016, 205), exemplified in reviews that explicitly invoke ‘hide’s’ emotions or reactions to the song. One reviewer (1 star, 24 likes), for example, states: “hide will be pissed!”⁶⁹ Another asks, “Do you think hide would be happy with your releasing anything and everything like this?”⁷⁰ Rather than being controlled entirely by mass media messages that are

⁶⁶ Anonymous, “シングルで。,” review of *Ko gyaru (hatsu kai gen tei han) (DVD tsuki)* [子ギャル(初回限定盤)(DVD 付)], by hide, *Amazon.co.jp*, July 18, 2015. https://www.amazon.co.jp/-/en/gp/customer-reviews/R39KPXJC9T9J5C/ref=cm_cr_arp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00OSRMWPW

⁶⁷ Marimo [まりも], “もうヤメてえ〜〜!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!,” review of *Ko gyaru (hatsu kai gen tei han) (DVD tsuki)* [子ギャル(初回限定盤)(DVD 付)], by hide, *Amazon.co.jp*, May 17, 2015. https://www.amazon.co.jp/gp/customer-reviews/R2BI5029OKCLD8/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00OSRMWPW

⁶⁸ Kiduki, December 10 2014.

⁶⁹ Yatta yo [やったよ], “ぼったくり商法,” review of *Ko gyaru (hatsu kai gen tei han) (DVD tsuki)* [子ギャル(初回限定盤)(DVD 付)], by hide, January 4, 2015. https://www.amazon.co.jp/-/en/gp/customer-reviews/R2LKWG56BOXEHL/ref=cm_cr_arp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00OSRMWPW

⁷⁰ Marimo, May 17 2015.

fed to “duped” consumers, then, “cultural representations of celebrity are embroiled within a complex dialectic” (Black 2016, 218). Framing this argument in terms of exploitative companies versus victimized fans would be to gloss over a significant agency that fans have within the exchange, as well as the inescapable influence of neoliberal capitalist realism’s structures of meaning making through consumption—importantly, to leave an Amazon review, *one must purchase the product*.

Despite these complex, sometimes paradoxical narratives, and whether or not the “corpse trade” can be reconciled morally speaking in terms of exploitation, its economic viability has been proven. This renders quibbles over moral reconciliation trivial or even pointless in terms of mainstream meaning. Subculture and subcultural celebrities are thus once again subsumed by the mainstream, demonstrating the inherent fluidity and negotiability of any barrier between the two, and indeed a deep and intrinsic *dependence* of subculture upon mainstream meaning making. hide’s death helped to propel visual *kei* into the mainstream media, and the extensive “corpse trade” built around him further cemented the connection between discourses of value and meaning *within* the subculture to mainstream neoliberal capitalist realism and the commodity-based value system of the “society of consumers” (Bauman 2007).

Once again, this does not mean that hide, in whichever form he exists, does not have meaning for the subcultural members, as it would be a mistake to assign any monolithic response or interpretation. While the mainstream media and his management company in particular are constantly reproducing hide’s image for profit, as well as explicitly taking advantage of affective marketing strategies, subcultural members can and do choose to ignore or renegotiate the wholly capitalistic interpretation of posthumous productions. Recall, for example, the partially positive acceptance of the second critical *TRIBUTE* reviewer regarding bands that they liked, and their discursive disconnection from capitalistic intent. Additionally,

fans can actively pursue the positive interpretations, showing how “[p]osthumous celebrity is a testament of, as well as illustration of, the extraordinary, remarkable power of the mediation of meanings” (Jensen 2005, xxiii), like the youth cited in the *News Post Seven* article saying they are “thankful” for the opportunity presented by “*Ko gyaru*,” or indeed the 84 percent of Amazon.co.jp reviewers that left five stars. In short, commodification of the dead celebrity deserves to be treated with nuance, as death has a “paradoxical power,” a “capacity to simultaneously restrict and expand meaning and possibilities” (Lebrun and Strong 2015, 1).

It bears further mention that reported feelings (particularly in public spaces) may have as much to do with a desire for increased subcultural capital as the poster’s ‘true’ feelings, similar to Sarah Thornton’s “taste cultures” (1995) in which subcultural identity is performed through public professions of one’s appropriate music and style preferences—recall Mamo’s censure for just being *thought* to speak negatively about hide. This is particularly relevant when the venue is as public as a newspaper article or an Amazon.co.jp review. Once again, fans and corporations, like broader subcultures and mainstream media, are part of a complex, *reciprocal* system of affective labor, exploitation, capital, and consumption, where both sides’ continued engagement is necessary for the system’s perpetuation.⁷¹ The system, like subculture itself, is *fluid*.

“Erase my life, my memory”

The celebrity in death is, in many ways, safe. They are both an easy target for commodification, where products tied to their image are automatically connected to affective fan reaction and therefore high profit potential, and a safe target for fans, in that the celebrity can no longer disappoint, decline, or otherwise degrade. The deceased celebrity exists as a permanent beacon,

⁷¹ Many thanks again to dr. Sophie Charlotte van de Goor for her valuable insight here in particular, which enabled me to put this argument into words.

crystallized, sacralized, and reified in death. Subcultural members negotiate their reaction and contribution to the discourse surrounding the posthumous celebrity's commodification, with their own personal reification of the celebrity's image as well as selective acceptance or rejection of future products adjusted in relation to their own personal connection to the celebrity in question.

Given his common discursive positioning as both the beginning and end of visual *kei* itself, no historicization of visual *kei* could be complete without incorporating hide. Rather than focus on his rise and life, I have focused on his posthumous 'career,' arguing that through death, hide has been reduced to a simplified, 'safe' version of himself to be better converted into capital. Problematic and complex aspects of his person and persona have been removed so he can be better assimilated into mainstream, traditional narratives. The misery, existential despair, and rebellion inherent in his music and message, emblematic of the first "lost decade" of the 1990s and the youth it left behind, have been washed away. Any political meaning has been lost or, rather, deliberately excised, to better serve consumer culture—hide has been reduced to an empty icon, or even a brand. This highlights another key aspect of subculture under neoliberal capitalist realism in post-bubble Japan—political possibilities must be neutered if the subculture is to survive. I explored these negotiations of commodification through the discourse surrounding hide's death and subsequent resurrection through tribute albums and products created using his image and voice. This discourse is varied, but the mainstream tends to disavow criticism in order to support its perpetual profit cycle. This in turn plays off of fans own motivations, developed within neoliberal capitalist realism, wherein they need to continuously *consume* in order to be interpreted (both by others and themselves) as fans and even societal members more generally (Bauman 2007, 28).

Just as "any other commodity that circulates in a global marketplace," subcultural products too "must provide a combination of the familiar and the new in order to remain

fashionable and thereby profitable” (Hassler-Forest 2012, 22)—a necessity which may be epitomized in the release of new products tied with the familiar dead celebrity (and maybe the reason they resorted to the incomplete “*Ko gyaru*”). While visible critique of this process does exist, it too is operating within the same system. Critical fans still objectify the agency-less celebrity, simply to different ends, and their criticism is simply exposure for the product in the society of consumers.

This, ultimately, is why hide being reduced to an easily commercialized commodity, and indeed why *any* celebrity or subculture being similarly reduced is worth study: to explore what the discourse *does not allow* (van de Goor 2017, 166). The mainstream discourse about hide obscures issues and historical facts, such as his alcoholism, the message of his music, and the manner of his death. It instead promotes him as image, as object, as *brand*, which is more easily turned to selling a never-ending series of new products. After all, the “artist’s death [...] often works by essentialising and generalising identity, with potentially negative social consequences,” and “the dead” are put to “‘work’ to stabilise the status quo” (Lebrun and Strong 2015, 11). hide, too, was put to work in much the same way—he lives on, but ultimately only on the terms of neoliberal capitalist realism.

Chapter 5: The Affective Contract: Working to Obscure Reality in Visual *Kei*

“I want you to offer me love
even if it’s a lie”

「愛を与えて欲しい
嘘でも構わない」

-DEATHGAZE, “grave,” *genocide and mass murder* (2006)

In present day visual *kei*, understood here as the 2010s onwards, to call performers ‘musicians’ alone would be to severely underestimate the requirements of their profession. Performers, just like the idols SHAZNA were disparagingly compared to in the late 1990s, engage in increasingly time and energy consuming amounts of immaterial, tangential, and fundamentally *affective* labor. This labor is specifically geared towards engaging with fans on an affective, emotional level so that they are “moved” to engage their economic capital in support (Galbraith 2020). As demonstrated by the success of groups such as AKB48, this “ingenious system” has proven highly effective, and become a domineering force in Japanese music from the late 2000s onwards (Galbraith and Karlin 2019, 45; Galbraith 2020). This extra-musical labor takes many forms, dependent on context, performer, and targeted audience, but is all geared towards the same goal. In three vignettes below, I open a window onto this labor as it is enacted within recent visual *kei*.

In 2019, minor visual *kei* band dieS hosts an event live with other performers in Meguro, Tokyo. After their (last in the lineup) performance finishes, vocalist and frontman Arase Dai rushes to the goods booth to greet fans and personally sign each individual *cheki* photo that a fan purchases. The pictures were taken today, offering a glimpse into the backstage and providing a memento of the performance (as well as a quick and easy way to exchange economic capital). Leftovers are often offered at later dates, sometimes at a discount. After signing the *cheki*, Arase passes them over, safely contained in a miniature envelope, along with a firm but gentle handshake and a warmhearted “thank you.”

In 2020 on Twitter, performer Kaya holds a “reply festival” (*ripu matsuri*), or a short time frame in which he will answer questions and comments sent in by fans directly through Twitter replies to the original post.¹ Kaya is quickly inundated and ends the short session by thanking everyone for their participation. Replies span a wide range, including questions about songs Kaya would like to cover, inquiries about things he is “hooked” on now, whether Kaya was self-taught in his makeup skills, to simple confessions of love. Kaya responds to each and apologizes for any missed.

In 2022, the vocalist of UCHUSENTAI:NOIZ releases a video of his visit to the local printing shop to make T-shirts for the band’s upcoming tour. In the video, he learns about the process, printing a T-shirt himself with great effort but little skill, and enthusiastically compliments the professional’s hard work and results. He presents the T-shirts to his fellow band members and the SEX MACHINEGUNS (a senior band touring together with NOIZ) who also praise the shirts before taking a group photo. The end of the twenty-minute video includes a ten-second instruction for fans who want to purchase their own shirt. These types of non-musical videos are often featured on UCHUSENTAI:NOIZ’s YouTube channel in addition to official music videos; at present they are the predominant form of content on the channel.²

Affectively Yours: Extra-Musical Necessities of the Performing Musician

Much as performers cannot be reduced to ‘musicians,’ the unsuitability of ‘genre’ to describe visual *kei* is evident in how *little*, comparatively speaking, the music is centralized in subcultural activity. Activities and engagement tangential or even unrelated to the music have become increasingly commonplace, even required for a band to succeed. In effect, *affect* has come to

¹ While this type of “festival” has been held on multiple occasions, one instance can be viewed here: https://twitter.com/Kaya_rose/status/1329416465418600451 (last accessed August 27, 2022).

² The T-shirt printing video can be viewed here on the band’s official YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LvzL0t6Etdk> (last accessed August 27, 2022).

dominate. This is particularly notable in but not exclusive to younger performers—all anecdotes in the introduction, for example, are of performers who have been active for fifteen years or more as of 2022.

This shift is not limited to visual *kei*. Rather, the idol, discussed above and in Chapter 3, has become the clear paragon in the Japanese music and mediasphere. Idols have been called “emblematic” of this dominance “of immaterial and affective labor in postindustrial Japan” (Galbraith and Karlin 2019, 65), although the strategy of utilizing “[a]ffective economics” to produce and engage “fan audiences” has existed in Japanese media from the 1980s (Karlin 2012, 86). AKB48 in particular, debuting in 2009, are almost notorious for the successful utilization of this strategy.³ What is particularly solicited and “capitalize[d] on” is specifically “attraction” and “affection” for the performers, who themselves are not expected to have any remarkable musical talent despite ostensibly being musical performers (Galbraith 2020; see also Galbraith and Karlin 2012, 2, 2019, 45). While engaging in affective, immaterial labor to connect with fans and encourage their support is not “force[d],” it is not truly optional if an idol wants to gain the “fans, followers, and supporters” (Galbraith and Karlin 2019, 50) necessary to survive. Importantly, idols are not the exception, but rather have become established as the rule; even artists with major record label representation are increasingly active on social media. Engaging with fans through affective labor has essentially become a core tenet within the Japanese music industry.

This is not, however, limited to postindustrial, post-bubble Japan. The work of the professional performer has never been easy. Especially today, being a talented artist is not sufficient to succeed in this highly networked, internet connected age (Toynbee 2000, 32–33). Musical performers must often perform a significant amount of specifically non-musical labor

³ Note that my fieldwork began in 2012, after the model established by AKB48 had become more widespread and accepted.

throughout their careers in order to survive. In the era of social media, live streaming, and music-on-demand, a performer needs to further stand out in some way in order to engender sufficient audience response in the over-saturated “attention economy” (Simon 1971; Humphreys and Kozinets 2009). This includes invoking the will to attend live performances, the desire to consume and provide support through economic capital, and the overall active return of affective labor. In short, many fans expect more than (subjectively) good music or an entertaining live performance, and the labor of the performer extends far beyond the recording studio and stage (Baym 2012, 2015, 2018).

In contemporary participatory culture, performers must convince the audience that they are worthy of patronage. With modern technology, audiences are now more than ever enabled to immediately retaliate to any assumed offense. In essence, performers are entwined in an affective contract—a system where fans have come to believe that they are owed affective labor on top of musical and stage production in exchange for their support. In other words, modern day performers are precarious workers who depend on the good graces of their audiences—or more specifically the small percentage of strongly committed, loyalist fans who can be relied upon to invest significant capital (see Galbraith and Karlin 2019, 27; citing H. Jenkins 2006a)—by not acknowledging the true conditions of their labor.

Previous research on the non-musical labor of contemporary performers confirms that there is an ever increasing demand on these performers to “connect” with audiences on multiple and ever increasing levels (Baym 2015, 2018), including collaboration and “networking” (Coulson 2012) as well as active self-promotion through SNS (Suhr 2010) and platforms such as Bandcamp (Kribs 2017). In a subculture such as visual *kei*, which exists in a constant cycle of renewal and decay, with new bands forming and older bands ceasing activity only to start again in new form on a regular basis, this adds even more extra labor. With the fast turnover,

the possibility of audience attention fatigue means visual *kei* performance relies on ever more non-musical, affective labor to stay relevant.

In this chapter, I unpack the affective labor that visual *kei* performers engage in, specifically during the period of my fieldwork from 2012 to 2022, focusing on what I call their affective contract with audiences. This is, notably, over a decade *after* visual *kei*'s short boom of popularity, in the wake of the Japanese music industry's shift to prioritizing the idol system of engagement. Post-boom visual *kei* performers essentially perform the work of a "micro-celebrity" (Senft 2008, 25), or indeed, an idol. They must appear, at all times, to be friendly, willing, and appreciative of their audience, and most importantly, they must never draw attention to the material, economic realities of their practices and the subculture. In short, they explicitly operate within neoliberal capitalism but at the same time have to deny that they do.

As such, in this chapter, I begin by exploring the concept of affective labor, before arguing that performers maintain an affective contract with audiences. An affective contract is, in short, an agreement that binds performers and fans into a relationship contingent upon the masking of economic and political realities through the performance and engagement of affective labor, the breaking of which results in potentially severe consequences. Given the overarching dominance of this contract within the subculture as I have observed it in over ten years of fieldwork, I believe examining and unpacking this contract is key in any broader examination of visual *kei* and how it exists in and connects to broader contemporary Japan. I then briefly engage with fans' position within visual *kei* subculture and how they both enforce and engage in the contract. After laying this groundwork, I explore the consequences of breaking the affective contract through a concrete case study of performer ryuusei, whose candid assertion of the precarity of creative labor rejected the obscuring nature of affect and repulsed both fans and other performers. This turned him into a subcultural pariah, to the point that his band broke up and renounced their personae due to their association with his. Through

this, I further cement my argument that subculture should be considered a *fluid* part of mainstream culture instead of a separate, fixed box, and reemphasize the importance of historicizing visual *kei* in post-bubble Japan.

Unpacking Affective Labor

Affective labor, a term originally coined by Michael Hardt, is essentially the personal “creation and manipulation of affects” for a specific purpose, which can be through either direct or virtual contact with another person (1999, 96). This includes a variety of practices that inspire “a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion” (Hardt and Negri 2004, 108), such as big brand advertising playing on moral and emotional responses, meet-and-greet events with celebrities, and politicians engaging with constituents through social media. In other words, affective labor is another consumer product in itself, commodified to such an extent it only has meaning in its facilitating of neoliberal capitalist exchanges.

Indeed, according to Hardt and Antonio Negri in a later work, the intangible qualities of immaterial labor have had severe effects on the value of material labor in that the latter too must now be affective. Immaterial labor has become “*hegemonic in qualitative terms* and has imposed a tendency on other forms of labor in society [...] today labor and society have to informationalize, become intelligent, become communicative, become affective” (Hardt and Negri 2004, 109). Affective labor has become bound to economic capital in that economic success (the only success valuable under neoliberal capitalism) has become increasingly difficult, if not impossible, without it. This helps explain why affective labor has become so important for performers—they too must “become affective” to succeed.

When a visual *kei* performer appeals to fans by tweeting that he is eagerly waiting at a venue for their arrival at a live performance, this is the type of labor he is performing. He is laboring to create a positive affective response in his fans, namely the feeling of excitement and

of being appreciated. This labor does not necessarily correlate on a one-to-one basis with the performer's own feelings. For example, he might have recently had a severe disagreement with a member from another band which is also scheduled to play that night and would rather not be participating. Thus, this labor often involves emotional labor as well, or the regulation of one's own emotions for economic ends (Hochschild 1979, 2012). In this example, the performer may have to suppress his own feelings in order to elicit the audience's desired feeling or response.

Indeed, the idea of emotional labor connects with Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt's argument that affect, far from a universally liberating aspect of labor, can in fact serve to "bind" us to capital (2008, 27). Hardt and Negri themselves point out the "extremely alienating" possibility of affective labor, stating that it "does not make all work pleasant or rewarding, nor does it lessen the hierarchy and command in the workplace or the polarization of the labor market" (2004, 111).

In other words, affective labor appears to be much more than an optional "positive" practice when it comes to achieving success or even sustainability in the world of performance. As performers too are held to neoliberal capitalist standards of value, a brief hiccup in their affective labor runs the risk of offending the audience and in turn losing not only their affective support, but their economic support as well. In fact, I would argue that performers are bound in an affective contract with their audiences, expected to deliver affective labor with all its prerequisites and become *worthy* of support.

The Affective Contract

Instead of focusing on the forms and types of labor performed in order to maintain social and economic success, Nancy K. Baym argues for a focus on the *relationships* created through these labors. Baym proposes the framework of "relational labor," or "ongoing, interactive, affective, material, and cognitive work of communicating with people over time to create structures that

can support continued work” (2018, 19). However, I feel this is insufficient for the subculture of visual *kei*, and indeed the broader context in which it survives, permeated by idols and the “ingenious system” in which they operate (Galbraith and Karlin 2019, 45). After all, fans do not only consume in response to or as appreciation for affective connections with the performer, but the purchase *itself* becomes the established expression of that support. In the case of AKB48, where CDs are purchased in order to vote in group elections and thereby support favored members, the nature of the purchase (i.e., creating profit) is obfuscated, and indeed the product *itself* often becomes trash, discarded in favor of the ‘actual’ value of affective expression (Galbraith and Karlin 2019, 45–48). Furthermore, in the same way that Gabriella Lukács argues that profit is generated in the Japanese digital economy by “dissociating what internet users do online from the idea of labor” (2020, 13), this affective labor is not interpreted as such, but rather as a matter-of-course necessity of the position. In terms of positioning all of these practices in relation to the mainstream neoliberal capitalist values they operate in and obfuscate, therefore, Baym’s “relational labor” seems too limiting. Instead, I want to propose the term affective contract to emphasize the economic and binding terms of this relationship.

In contemporary music (sub)cultures, performers are responsible for keeping fans affectively engaged on a variety of levels, entering into an affective contract with audiences where they exchange immaterial, affective labor in addition to music and performance for economic and affective support. In visual *kei* this takes many forms, such as taking and signing *cheki*, shaking hands, engaging on Twitter, and recording ‘everyday’ videos to both engage and reward loyal audience members—similar again to idols, and particularly the “idols that you can meet” model popularized by AKB48 (Galbraith and Karlin 2019, 21–26). Baym proposes a similar idea in relation to the purchase of musical recordings. She talks about “a hybrid between market and gift economies,” stating “the incentive to pay for music is increasingly motivated by ethical and moral feelings of relational obligation rather than economic and legal contracts

and constraints” (Baym 2010, 180). It is this “relational obligation” which performers are working towards by adhering to the affective contract, albeit to a much higher level. Recall that performers of visual *kei*, much like idols, are not selling only their music, but more often tangential products (e.g., *cheki*, event participation, goods), all increasingly necessary to survive in the present day mediasphere.⁴

The maintenance of this contract further expands upon and complicates Henry Jenkins’s idea of “fan culture” as “dialogic rather than disruptive, affective more than ideological, and collaborative rather than confrontational” (2006b, 150). Visual *kei* fans exist on both sides of the dichotomies Jenkins proposes. They can be “disruptive” through their “dialogic” practices when they protest performers’ actions, their “collaborative” nature may make them “confrontational” when performers fail to meet their expectations, and the “ideological” base upon which their fandom is founded can be combined with “affective” dimensions to inspire severe rebuttal to an artist’s assumed failures. While not necessarily enacting the “cultural jamming” (Dery 1993) which Jenkins is proposing these positions to contrast, fans nevertheless demonstratively hold this fluid capability.

The affective contract demonstrates the increasingly binding exchange-based nature of both fandom and cultural production in the age of new media, but it serves more than just economic and affective exchange. Indeed, one major function of the affective contract is to help maintain the *fantasy* of the subculture, and the obfuscation of real-world concerns. Visual *kei* is no different. While visual *kei* performers are expected to present intimate hints of their so-

⁴ As I was editing this chapter, I took a brief pause to purchase multiple *cheki* produced for a minor-level acoustic live performance I had watched the previous week. Notably, the purchase of these *cheki* in addition to the ticket for the live itself seemed a matter of course. Although I laughed at the irony while making the purchase, *not* making the purchase seemed out of the question; this is the established and, importantly, *necessary* means of demonstrating my support for the artist. Furthermore, these *cheki* are advertised as a “limited” opportunity to obtain pictures from the event; the economic realities motivating (even necessitating) these sales are *not* addressed, also as a matter of course.

called private selves, issues of finance, the difficulties of performing life, romantic engagements, and other potentially disturbing, realistic topics are eschewed, demonstrating an explicit preference for a non-realistic, fantastic performance.⁵ Or, as I would argue, downplaying the entire subculture's situation in mainstream systems of value. In short, they enact a performance of a "backstage" that is essentially still the "front stage" in Erving Goffman's terminology (1956). Fans understand that this is unrealistic, and often explicitly constructed, but nevertheless appear to value the maintenance of this mutually recognized fantasy over acknowledging the realities of neoliberal capitalism, and moreover actively "disrupt" and "confront" practices that break this illusion.⁶ In other words, the affective contract is a binding agreement between performer and audience to maintain the shared fantasy of both the persona and the subculture by actively courting the audience's moral and affective patronage, and be held responsible when they withdraw it.

Maintaining the Contract: The Affective Economy of Visual *Kei*

The negative aspects of the increasingly dominant nature of immaterial and particularly affective labor are readily visible in contemporary music subcultures, and especially in the affective contracts in visual *kei*. Visual *kei* can be described as an economy predicated on the fulfillment of an affective contract, though simultaneously flush with the exchange of physical products for capital (i.e., music CDs, live tickets, goods). Again, much like Japanese idols,

⁵ Notably, this taboo is lifted for mentions of saving money or "doing one's best" (*ganbaru*) to earn enough for something related to visual *kei* performance in some way, such as a new instrument or tattoo. These mentions are, however, typically relegated to a performer's own efforts, and are separated, even if only in presentation, from economic support from fans. Discussion of "selling," as discussed in Chapter 2, similarly narrowly avoids this topic by being restricted (in performers' discourse) to a passive, untargeted state of being rather than an accusation or request.

⁶ This is not unique to visual *kei*, and bears resemblance to the affective contracts of host and hostess cultures, where the host(ess) is being paid to maintain the illusion of a relationship with their customer (see Allison 1994; Takeyama 2016). This will be addressed further below.

visual *kei* performers “are fundamentally performers who appeal directly to fans for support” (Galbraith 2018, 159).

The idea of fans obtaining specifically affective rewards from their participation is not limited to music (see Gregg 2009; Hellekson 2009; Milner 2009; Chin 2014). Fandom itself can be arguably described as a system in which audiences maintain devotion to a particular fan object based upon the positive affect or emotional response they receive from it (Hills 2002, 186; Sandvoss 2005, 8–9; Duffett 2013, 138). However, fans of visual *kei* expect a significant amount of affective labor in exchange for their patronage in addition to the basic production of enjoyable music and live performance. This is especially true of *bangya*, passionate (predominantly women) fans who serve as the main foundation of the subculture in terms of affective and economic support.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, in visual *kei*, the idea of ‘selling out’ is not necessarily problematic. Affective labor is often entwined with or converted to material goods, working to shift immaterial work into tangible items for fans to consume—consumption, once again, is the only way through which value can be expressed and appreciated in the “society of consumers” (Bauman 2007). An example of this conversion is the sale of *cheiki*, a practice which borrows directly from underground idol culture in Japan (see *Nikkan Cyzo* 2017; Maffioletti 2019). While fans may conceivably purchase mountains of (often very similar) photos for personal reasons, many fans purchase *cheiki* specifically to support the performer in question. They are consuming, therefore *rewarding*, material forms of affective labor, which thereby become a significant means of economic support. Spending time posing for multiple pictures, sometimes writing personalized notes or signatures on each to increase their affective value for fans, is therefore just as much a part of the job of a visual *kei* performer as rehearsing or writing music. Affective labor, and by extension the fulfillment of the affective contract, bears just as much

weight, if not more, than being a talented and accomplished musician in terms of economic sustainability, further making the label ‘musician’ itself seem insufficient.

Affective labor is not limited to *cheki* sales, and outside of these materially concentrated forms the terrain becomes more difficult to quantify. Performers are judged not only on musical performance, but how they act in *all* spheres. Performers can be criticized for not being engaging enough via social media, or conversely with being *too* engaging in the wrong way. Certain degrees of intimacy are demanded and appreciated, such as photos of a performer’s pet, or reports on “dates” with other performers, while other forms of intimacy are not, such as information about a performer’s actual love life. Indeed, performers are, on the surface, *not* supposed to fraternize with fans in any non-official aspect (particularly romantic) and can be harshly penalized if they do—including forced ejection from a band or even total disbandment overall. This is despite fans actively soliciting this kind of attention, and performers’ atypical lifestyle making it difficult to maintain personal relationships outside the subculture (Malick 2016). While performers are encouraged to engage with their audience, it is a tightrope. Too ‘personal’ of a connection can be met with suspicion and runs the risk of alienating other fans. In other words, the demand is overwhelmingly for ‘intimacy’ that maintains the overarching fantasy of artists motivated by passion rather than economic gains, masking the realities of the dominance of neoliberal structures of meaning and value.

While the above discussion may seem to render the audience as adversarial and demanding, they should nevertheless not be dismissed as an unreasonable mob, nor understood as a monolithic mass. I specifically choose the frame of an affective contract to prevent painting the audience as a passive, unaware mob uniformly exploited by or exploitative of the artists.

Indeed, fans too participate in this affective contract and have terms and conditions they adhere to. This is demonstrated in the particular devotion of *bangya*. Understood as a large number of “fixed customers,” as referred to by vocalist Danchō of NoGoD when explaining his

band's move from metal to visual *kei* (Fujitani 2012, 4), *bangya* typically spend large amounts of time and money in support of their fan objects of choice.⁷ They are also expected to perform significant amounts of affective labor in the course of their fandom. Recall, for example, the REVENANT fans discussed in Chapter 2, who were upset when I chose to attend another live over REVENANT's. I was, essentially, blamed for potentially ruining the band by not providing my economic support, for choosing based on my own preferences rather than the needs of REVENANT.

This is not a limited case; *bangya* support for performers is extensive. They travel, sometimes cross-country, taking half or full days off of paying work, and organize their schedules around live performances. They actively like and retweet their favored performers and also follow lives with their own exuberant reviews on social media. They purchase multiple tickets to a single event, inviting potentially uninterested friends to attend for free; extra CDs, often purchased for various bonuses such as in-store event attendance (again, reminiscent of idols), are used similarly. They engage in extensive interpersonal communication both inside and outside of the live space to ensure that the front row of performances is filled with the most devoted fans. They may even completely neglect attending one live in favor of ensuring the purchase of a good ticket for another—I once spent the entirety of another band's live standing in the lobby in a long line of *bangya* waiting to purchase tickets to a later, multi-band event. While these examples are varied, the list is not exhaustive.

As already illustrated, however, this support is entirely dependent on the right type of and amount of affective labor on the part of visual *kei* performers. This is why I call it an affective contract—it is mutually binding. It is not, however, necessarily *equally* binding. Failing to uphold the affective contract for a *bangya* means that she might be ostracized from a

⁷ This is similar to the “core fans” of underground idols addressed by Patrick W. Galbraith, or a small subset of the audience that can be counted on both for economic support and engagement with other fans (2016, 233).

particular subgroup, but it does not necessarily impede her consumption and enjoyment of visual *kei*. However, failing to uphold the affective contract can have serious repercussions for contemporary visual *kei* performers, as demonstrated by the case of ryuusei, whose band was ended as a result.

“Bangya aren’t band’s wallets!” A Break of the Affective Contract

Kyogetsu was a minor visual *kei* band with a notably short career lasting from October 2016 to October 2017.⁸ Officially, they released only one single, and performed primarily at event lives with multiple other bands. Their first solo “oneman” (*wanman*) performance was their final before disbanding. Social media posts hint that they were desperate for economic support to the point of parody.⁹ Archival recordings suggest that they had fans in the lower hundreds, with far fewer generally in attendance at lives.¹⁰ Their most popular SoundCloud track (out of four total) has just over 1000 plays.¹¹ In short, they did not appear to be a successful band in any sense of the term. However, the actions of one of their guitarists temporarily put them center stage of the visual *kei* social media sphere.

⁸ While guitarist ryuusei intimated that he had been active for three years as of this event, belonging to Kyogetsu appeared to be only part of this active period. The date of the band’s formation has been referenced according to this English amalgamation site, as all official websites and social media accounts for the band aside from ryuusei’s have been removed from the internet: https://aminoapps.com/c/little-rockers/page/blog/band-introduction-kyogetsu-the-kiss-full-pv-etc/moKn_zY1HkuY4J513q3V242vgwP4RLz45Ph2 (last accessed August 27, 2022).

⁹ For example, guitarist ryuusei intimated that they would exchange sexual intercourse with fans who purchased 10 *cheki* (https://twitter.com/ryuusei_guitar/status/804207770559860736, last accessed August 27, 2022).

¹⁰ See, for example, the viewers on guitarist ryuusei’s live broadcast service Twitcast account (https://twitcasting.tv/ryusei_kyogetsu/show/) and the number of fans observed in recordings of band performances posted to his Twitter account, e.g., https://twitter.com/ryuusei_guitar/status/866295464534056961 (last accessed August 27, 2022).

¹¹ Their profile can be viewed here: <https://soundcloud.com/user-350674898> (last accessed August 27, 2022).

On September 5, 2017, at 14:29 (JST), Kyogetsu guitarist ryuusei Tweeted something that would earn the most attention he had yet experienced in his performance career.¹²

Everyone's sad about all these different bands breaking up but I want you all to be aware of the fact that one of the reasons [for these break-ups] is that *bangya* don't often go to lives or spend money anymore. (@ryuusei_kyogetsu, now @ryuusei_guitar)¹³

As stated previously, visual *kei* of the 2010s was (and remains) a fundamentally ephemeral subculture, populated by performers who move between bands that last anywhere from a span of months to decades. However, in 2016 and 2017, there were a particularly intense series of hiatuses and dissolutions, causing feelings of unrest and anxiety. Potentially in connection to this, early-career performer ryuusei made the above tweet, which appeared to be a critique of visual *kei* fans—especially the most active group, *bangya*. His tweet may also have been connected to a specific, personal problem or even part of his persona as a slightly abrasive, sex-focused performer. In addition to fairly regular posts making references to sex and “connecting” with fans (*tsunagari*, typically used to imply an illicit or somehow not above-board relationship between fans and performers), the day before, he appeared to insult *bangya* who did not like him.¹⁴ It is important to note that Twitter was, and remains, a primary source of engagement between performers, fans, and the visual *kei* subculture more broadly. While blogs, Instagram, and Facebook accounts are also used, Twitter dominates as a primary stage for engagement and affective labor—particularly between performers and *bangya*.

After ryuusei's tweet, *bangya* rebuttals began to appear en masse online. One of the most heavily circulated rebuttal tweets, made within one day and connected to ryuusei's original

¹² The band and performer's names are Romanized according to ryuusei's original twitter handle.

¹³ https://twitter.com/ryuusei_guitar/status/904924385982550016 (last accessed August 27, 2022).

¹⁴ “I think that those *bangya* who will never like me at all, they probably like guys like [unattractive comedian] Himura Banana-man, huh.” (https://twitter.com/ryuusei_guitar/status/904604349791215616, last accessed August 27, 2022).

tweet through Twitter's 'quote' mechanism, stated that any decline in *bangya* patronage was the fault of performers themselves.¹⁵ The tweet provided potential reasons, such as performers lacking "charisma," attempting to get too "close" to *bangya*, or relying too much on secondary goods connected to "session" performances instead of performances with bands producing original music.¹⁶ The same user, in response to a reply, reiterated that a performer's lack of fans could not be blamed on *bangya*.

Criticism of ryuusei's actions did not end with *bangya* but circulated throughout the online subculture for the next few days. Potentially in response, ryuusei wrote a follow-up blogpost to his tweet titled "The Money Situation of Bandmen" (*bandoman no kane jijō*).¹⁷ This post presents a detailed account of expenses incurred by performers, including the "norms" (*noruma*) on live performances where each band is required to draw in a certain number of fans or "customers" (*kyaku*) in order to break even and not have to pay back the venue or hosting performers.¹⁸ ryuusei points out that even if these norms are met, the band in question is only breaking even. Surpassing the norm, be it by five "customers" or fifteen, is necessary for a band to earn money from a performance itself.

Various other expenses follow (such as hair/makeup artists and equipment rental from the venue) along with calculations as to how many "customers" at an event would be necessary to earn money. This includes projections for bands connected to "offices" (*jimusho*), or an equivalent of record labels, and a request for more detailed money information from bands with

¹⁵ This tweet, within one day of posting (as of September 5th, 2017, MST), had 869 retweets and 487 "likes." While the numbers seem small, they are significant given the subcultural nature of visual *kei*, the non-performer status of the tweeter, and the (then) short period of circulation.

¹⁶ These are typically cover performances with groups composed of various performers from different bands, or performers whose bands have broken up, leaving them (temporarily) with no other venue of performance.

¹⁷ The post has since been deleted.

¹⁸ Norms can sometimes be negotiated, such as by a band volunteering to perform first in a performance with an early start time, essentially sacrificing fans' (unguaranteed) ability to attend to assure (guaranteed) economic security, as briefly discussed in Chapter 2.

these connections. He concludes with “[fans] should spend money on bands they really like”—using a form of “should” (*beki*) that implies a moral imperative or position of authority by the speaker. In short, ryuusei disrupted the fantasy by elucidating the material costs of engaging in the work of a performer within visual *kei*, and, ultimately, unmasking visual *kei*’s position as precariat in a mainstream value system which demands profit for survival.

The casual register of the blog post, as well as the overall tone, which may be interpreted linguistically as speaking down to the reader, serve to castigate *bangya* along the same lines as the original tweet. However, rather than vindicate his original statement in the eyes of the subculture, the blog post incited further negative response. Soon, other visual *kei* performers began to weigh in, including Rui of band Develop One’s Faculties, who commented at length on the situation, indicating the negative nature of his affective response and summarizing his opinions by stating that people “following” you (as a band) is something “miraculous” and should not be taken for granted.¹⁹

By the next day, performers from major bands had also weighed in with similar distancing sentiments, lending further weight to the castigation of ryuusei’s actions.²⁰ Other performers used the opportunity to promote their own “proper” actions—for example stating an explicit preference for fans’ emotional over monetary support.²¹ In a popular reply to

¹⁹ https://twitter.com/DOF_rui/status/905226942684643328, now deleted. Interestingly, most of his tweets from this incident had been deleted as of June 26, 2021, potentially demonstrating either ryuusei’s pariah status and/or a shift in Rui’s own feelings. One Tweet that remains from September 22 addresses the “loss” of fans to other bands specifically, stating that in these cases, it is the band who is at fault, and that becoming “more attractive” will bring back fans who have left for any number of reasons (https://twitter.com/DOF_rui/status/910907888834449408, last accessed August 27, 2022).

²⁰ Including, for example, R-*shitei* (@r_shitei_kd, “I read a suuuper uncool failure of a blog post. ...,” now deleted) and the GazettE, which is discussed below.

²¹ @ramiel_nozomi, “... you [fans] expressing your feelings via letters makes me the happiest ♥,” now deleted. This performance of “proper” scenic participation, much like that carried out by 4chan members in Sophie Charlotte van de Goor’s study, both “reprimands” ryuusei for “improper” behavior and at the same time elevates Nozomi—now Ichigo Jamu of band *Mathilda*—for performing the “proper” behavior (van de Goor 2015, 276).

ryuusei's original tweet, a fan performs similarly, posting a screenshot of their timeline in which a member of band SID (*Shido*) is shown thanking fans, immediately above ryuusei's inflammatory tweet. "This is a super major bandman," they say, emphasizing how their statements are "complete opposites."²²

In less than twenty-four hours, ryuusei had received over 200 direct responses to his original tweet (a number which continued to grow in the following days), all of which were negative. In particular, *bangya* appeared upset because ryuusei's tweet and follow-up blog post treated them as means to an economic end and failed to account for the necessity of inspiring affective response on the part of fans—effectively, violently breaking the affective contract. To employ one user's colorful phrasing, *bangya* are not "wallets" to be used by performers.²³ These responses are indicative of the predominant value placed on performers' proper affective engagement, with emphasis specifically on 'appreciation' from the performer, demonstrating the importance of the affective contract, particularly from the viewpoint of *bangya*. Recall that this is still an economic exchange, and that the purpose of the affective contract is to mask this through the (potentially superficial) performance of affect and intimacy, specifically here through 'appreciation' and gratitude. In a sense, by addressing the problem, ryuusei made it real, thus something the subculture had to acknowledge and engage with. While his tone may have been objectionable to fans, the economic realities he revealed were no less true because of his methods. As with the digital labor performed by Japanese women in Lukács's study, ryuusei's affective masking of this precarity not being "recognized as labor does not mean that" it is not *experienced* as labor (2020, 15).

Although the social and economic dimensions of performance, musical and otherwise, are not newly intertwined in the digital age, "the shift to media that enable continuous

²² https://twitter.com/93_Ono_4n/status/905342885922357248?s=20, last accessed August 27, 2022.

²³ https://twitter.com/koro_666/status/905136652791644161, now locked.

interaction, higher expectations of engagement, and greater importance of such connections in shaping economic fortunes calls for new skills and expertise in fostering connections and managing boundaries” (Baym 2015, 16). It may be argued, then, that ryuusei failed in “fostering connections and managing boundaries,” resulting in a breach of the affective contract. A blog response by “writer reading too much into visual *kei*” Kamiya Atsuhiko implies that ryuusei’s words are interpretable as “threats.” He paraphrases ryuusei’s Tweet as “if you don’t want [a band] to break up fork over your money.”²⁴ Kamiya connects this to “mafia” tactics, suggesting that ryuusei’s comment is “close to the idea” of threatening fans into paying more money, despite appearing to sympathize with the difficulties experienced by performers in the “musical (economic) slump” (Kamiya 2017). This focus on the interpretation of ryuusei’s words as a “threat” highlights the essentially affective nature of the problem; fans were incensed that they could be blamed for a favored band’s end. The appropriate “connections” and “boundaries” were not maintained by the framing of the situation. Again, the affective labor of the performer is specifically *disconnected* from “the idea of labor” (Lukács 2020, 13) and instead treated as a necessary matter of course. The situation suggests a false consciousness among fans, who misinterpret this affective labor as being ‘pure’ or somehow disconnected from economic ends.

The idea that a performer should not get “into” the music industry, and more specifically the visual *kei* subculture, for the money is mostly visible in the response from other performers. Rui of Develop One’s Faculties further stated: “[A band] is not something you do in pursuit of profit.”²⁵ Vocalist REN of QEDDESHET echoed the sentiment, suggesting “If you want to earn profit you should probably quit [your] band.”²⁶ This illustrates the overall affective nature of cultural industries and also the necessity of masking mainstream capitalist ideals. While being

²⁴ “Kaisan shite hoshikunakereba okane wo dase”

²⁵ https://twitter.com/DOF_rui/status/905226942684643328, now deleted. The prevalence of deletions of responses to this event suggests that ryuusei’s exile has become interpreted as damaging even by association.

²⁶ https://twitter.com/REN_QDST/status/905260353981841409, last accessed August 27, 2022.

a traditional ‘sell-out’ is not applicable in this situation, as has been discussed elsewhere, the idea is similar, with both fans and fellow performers alike criticizing the idea of performing visual *kei*, or indeed music in general, with only economic gain in mind.

While comparatively few, there were responses to the incident that suggested that, even if a performer held similar opinions to ryuusei, they should *not* post them to a public SNS account—again emphasizing the need to maintain the affective contract. This further highlights the importance of affective labor on the part of the performer—specifically, suppression of personal feelings or emotion (Hochschild 1979, 561). The role of the visual *kei* performer, then, is not just that of an artist, but also reminiscent of service work. He is not only responsible for attracting fans, but also for managing his own emotional expression, *particularly* when they may be negative in relation to said fans.

This does not mean that there is no place for negative feelings or expressions thereof with visual *kei*. Recall, for example, the dark themes of hide’s work, or Kiyoharu’s harsh lyrics. However, negative emotion specifically directed towards one’s fans or one’s own precarious position is apparently taboo. Vocalist Loki of Merry Bad End expounds upon the affective labor required of a visual *kei* performer, expressively illustrating his disdain for actions such as ryuusei’s in an evocative visual *kei* fashion:

In any case, being a bandman or whatever, on top of being on stage, being insulted and criticized is part of the job, so I really don’t mind no matter what’s said about me, but is there any reason to go out of your way to write bad things about your customers?²⁷ Looking back at the slander you wrote once you’ve calmed down, won’t you start to hate your own filth? (@world_is_mine_L)²⁸

²⁷ The notable exception to this taboo is the reprimanding of fans with poor manners, and this is predicated on the fact that the performer in question would, ostensibly, speaking for the benefit of other, manner-possessing (‘better’) fans as much as, if not more so, than for himself.

²⁸ https://twitter.com/world_is_mine_L/status/905033635501182978. The account is locked as of June 26, 2021, as Loki has retired from the subculture on a performer basis, but it was public and open at the time of quoting in 2017 when he was still an active performer.

ryuusei was not, then, necessarily criticized for feeling negatively about his economic situation, but rather for failing to perform the appropriate affective labor needed to fulfill the affective contract of visual *kei*. (Recall Kamiya's comparison to "mafia" tactics against fans.) Vocalist IZAM of 1990s band SHAZNA, for example, proffered similar sentiments about economic precarity in a 2009 interview, saying that "performing in a band is something that costs a surprising amount of money" (H. Suzuki 2009, 1). The difference, however, was the venue and affective structure. IZAM made the statement within an interview, a controlled and possibly provoked setting, in a response to a question about the hardships of his early career. More importantly, IZAM did not tie his economic struggles to his fans.²⁹

However, the "money situation of bandmen" is of real concern. In the next section, I explore the performer's difficult position in more detail, examining the various challenges faced by performers today, and the precarious situation that necessitate both social media presence and the obligatory performance of affect.

The Difficult "Money Situation of Bandmen"

As discussed above, performers in visual *kei* do not have an easy time pursuing their music careers—if indeed they can be called careers, given that the majority of performers need to hold down other jobs in order to support themselves. Although some performers manage to stay within the subculture to some extent, working at performance venues or live houses or as staff for other, more senior bands, visual *kei* in and of itself is not generally a self-supporting career choice. This is not a new phenomenon for artists of any kind, as "patronage has endured for as long as literature and art have existed" (Gold 1982, xi). Baym provides a particularly evocative quote from musician Roger O'Donnell which summarizes the situation: "You have a job. You

²⁹ It is also relevant that he made this statement almost ten years after his band went on hiatus in 2000, and that he was speaking of a situation even further in the past during the band's indie years pre-1997.

work like a slave, and you tour and don't make any money" (2018, 2). Recall too that the SEX MACHINEGUNS lament an empty bank account in one of their parodic songs, "ZERO."

Long-lived (minor) visual *kei* performers are those who have accepted this reality, for better or for worse; on the other hand, many young performers ultimately leave the subculture due to their desire for a more sustainable lifestyle. While the subculture took issue with ryuusei's describing performers' "money situation," he was not exaggerating, demonstrating a difficult way of life. In order to assuage the damages for their pursuit of visual *kei*, then, the performance of affective labor becomes necessary, although even this does not necessarily lead to being able to support oneself—at best it might simply help performers to break even. This is not a limited phenomenon, but visible worldwide in the increasing trend towards freelance, unsupported, or insecure jobs, leading people to work long hours, multiple jobs, and engage in exhausting amounts of labor simply to make ends meet, evidenced for example by the gradual expansion of the so-called "gig economy" (Woodcock and Graham 2020).

Furthermore, as stated in the introduction, contemporary visual *kei* operates in what is essentially an oversaturated "attention economy," a concept Ashlee Humphreys and Robert V. Kozinets (2009) attribute first to Herbert Simon (1971). Performers must strive to stand out from an ever-increasing mass of noise. In relation to the ryuusei incident, for example, a number of subcultural participants put forth the suggestion that he was aiming for "flame sales" (*enjō hanbai*), or notoriety-cum-fame garnered from the negative attention an inflammatory tweet was sure to garner. This strategy aims to exploit the fact that "the technical affordances of social media reward with higher social status the use of behaviors and self-presentation strategies that make people look" (Marwick 2013, 14). As the ever-increasing number of new bands and performers pursue success through producing vast quantities of self-promotional material, the subculture becomes "information rich," thus creating "a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might

consume it” (Simon 1971, 40–41). The first critique of ryuusei cited above tangentially recognizes this, implying there are simply too many performers for fans to efficiently determine who is worthy of attention.

The situation is further exacerbated by low economic profitability and increasing dependence on limited numbers of *bangya*, leading to quick turnover in performers’ band allegiances or even names and identities when one venture fails to attract an audience, or inter-performer strife makes the low rewards seem not worth the hassle. It is thus possible ryuusei deliberately wrote his tweet to engender response, sacrificing positive affect for recognition in the attention economy.³⁰ Even if this was the intention, the attempt may still be said to have failed, as it led to ostracization and disbandment instead of popularity. While any performer dependent on affective contracts cannot afford to lose them, the subculture of visual *kei* is particularly open to the disruption of fans, particularly in that part which is conducted online, as ryuusei subsequently experienced.

On the evening of September 6, 2017, ryuusei posted an apology via screenshot to Twitter.³¹ This response too earned many replies, again over 200 within six hours of posting, wherein the overwhelming message was again both negative and critical. Many respondents explicitly suggested that ryuusei leave the subculture entirely, refusing to engage with him any more aside from their suggestion. Ultimately, this event is reminiscent of what is nowadays referred to as “cancel culture,” or “the withdrawal of any kind of support [...] for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable, or highly problematic” (Ng 2020, 623).

³⁰ On a larger scale, this type of attention-grabbing marketing was enacted by the band Rave (*reivu*) in October 2017, when a new single was “advertised” through a fake announcement of the vocalist’s arrest at 6:00am with the promise of more details at 8:00pm that evening, a method which also attracted both a great deal of attention and negative “flaming.” (See https://twitter.com/official_rave/status/915139405597179904, last accessed August 27, 2022.)

³¹ https://twitter.com/ryuusei_guitar/status/905406924971139076, last accessed August 27, 2022.

While I do not have the scope to unpack this complex topic here, it bears mention that the ryuusei event bears striking similarities to this broader phenomenon.

In terms of “unacceptable” behavior, ryuusei violated the affective contract in not performing suitable appreciation for fans and, relatedly, explicitly drawing attention to the fact that artists and audiences are engaged in an *economic* exchange. Repeated reference was made, both by fans and performers, to the “unpleasant” or “hurt” feelings or “trouble” *bangya* experienced as a major point of contention in the backlash—particularly those who had counted themselves fans of Kyogetsu. In return, therefore, fans too broke the contract, retracting their support and no longer acknowledging or engaging with ryuusei’s point, message, or him as a person, choosing to uphold the fantasy of visual *kei* over the economic realities of performers. This event truly highlights the main function of the affective contract: to not only uphold the fantasy, but to erase the reality that visual *kei* is situated within mainstream systems of neoliberal capitalist value. ryuusei too, in his addressing of these points (albeit in an uncouth manner), was essentially erased from the subculture.

“Why don’t you quit?” The Obfuscating Nature of Affect

As I argue, for the subculture of visual *kei*, the hyper-valuation of affect and its resulting contractual relationship operates to obfuscate the commodified nature of social relations. When the transactional nature of the experience between the performer and fan is openly acknowledged, the ideological veil of the performance of affect is lifted, revealing once again the omnipresence of neoliberal capitalist realism (Fisher 2009; Hassler-Forest 2012). Fans are drawn to visual *kei* at least partially due to the fantasy it presents. This is explicitly stated in the same episode of *Matsuko no shiranai sekai* introduced in Chapter 3, where expert Fujitani Chiaki purported “*higenjitsu*” (unreality) as the central point of visual *kei*. In the same way, the ‘safe’ fantastical, gothic gender bending and cross-dressing of Mana was more easily reconciled

than the mainstream-aligned femininity of IZAM. From the ancient vampiric claims of early-era Malice Mizer vocalist Gackt to the 2017 fantastic departure of band SHAPE SHIFTER who explained their disbandment as a “return to the underworld” (*makai*), the affective performance of “unreality” is both intrinsic to visual *kei* and deliberately cloaks realities such as capitalistic exchange and economic uncertainty.³²

It appears that ryuusei did not grasp this point. On September 7, 2017, ryuusei made a second blog post. In it, he stated that the basis of his being attacked was a misunderstanding, that the intent behind his original tweet was to encourage internet-based *bangya* (*netto-gya*) to attend more lives, and not to demand money from *bangya* in general. This explanation was prefaced with the blunt statement that, as he had been accused, he “had no intention to apologize,” but did so only following in his bandmates’ footsteps.³³ This was met again with overwhelmingly negative response, with replies both mocking ryuusei and further castigating his lack of remorse. Ultimately, the second post led to his final rejection from the subculture.

Indeed, on September 8, Kyogetsu announced both guitarist ryuusei’s departure from the band and the band’s own ensuing break-up on October 8, 2017.³⁴ Vocalist Masaki explained the band’s decision as ultimately stemming from ryuusei’s response to the uproar. In his announcement, Masaki expressed his own hurt at ryuusei’s apparent disregard for both his own band members and other subcultural members:

No matter how much of a beating he takes, he’s still the friend [we’ve worked together with] for a year
 So I can’t just cut him off or something like that so easily.
 I wanted to continue the band that we could be in together
 So that’s why I kept apologizing together with him.
 But after seeing that second blog post, we made the decision that it was impossible to be in a band together anymore.

³² SHAPE SHIFTER’s announcement can still be viewed on their official Twitter here: <https://twitter.com/shapeshifter930/status/847464450839859202> (last accessed August 24, 2022).

³³ <https://ameblo.jp/ryuseikyogetsu/entry-12308599651.html>, now deleted.

³⁴ https://twitter.com/kyogetsu_info/status/906021545067274240, now deleted.

I am full of regretsh [*sic*].³⁵

I apologize for all the clamor this has caused. (@cry7_cry)³⁶

The culmination of this incident, while clearly highlighting the importance of the affective contract, also emphasizes the disruptive power of fans and their unwillingness to acknowledge the labor of performers. The acknowledgement that performers and audiences are participating in an economic exchange, or a break of the fantasy, is interpreted as an attack or “threat” (Kamiya 2017). This in turn makes backlash, however disproportionate, seem justifiable. Much as Lukács argues for the critical importance of “women’s free labor” in Japanese society in general, “in which growing labor precarity and pervasive uncertainty about national and personal futures generate an ever-growing demand for emotional labor” (2015, 490), contemporary visual *kei* depends upon its performers’ ‘free’ labor in an economy that increasingly devalues cultural production *while at the same time disregarding the labor’s burden*.

Again, visual *kei* is not unique, but rather emblematic of a broader sociocultural shift in Japan. In an economy that is predominantly founded on the service sector, “creativity, communication skills, and *affective capacities*” have become increasingly “crucial” for workers in this sector, dependent primarily upon themselves for the production of value and profit (Takeyama 2016, 11, emphasis added). This becomes even more critical in the wake of Japan’s shift to precarious, nonregular employment and the focus on citizens being “independent” and “self-responsible” in the post-bubble period, as neoliberal reform by politicians in the late 1990s especially have only exacerbated Japanese “people[’s] feeling precarious and insecure” (Baldwin and Allison 2015a, 41–42). As of 2015, the so-called “precariat” made up almost 40 percent of the Japanese workforce, regularly suffering “low pay, dead-end jobs, and easy

³⁵ This translation attempts to capture the original typo of “*kimoshi*” instead of “*kimochi*” for “feeling.”

³⁶ https://twitter.com/cry7_cry/status/906108616842723329, now deleted.

termination” (M. Osawa and Kingston 2015, 58). This same description can easily encompass the typical visual *kei* performer in 2022.

Here, two responses interpreted as chastising ryuusei from Reita of major band the GazettE are particularly illustrative of the core of the affective contract and how it serves to mask the precarious situation of visual *kei* performers.

- 1) I think that fundamentally a band is something made from effort, so assholes who think about needless things will fail.³⁷
- 2) Inspiring the feeling of “Whoa! Cool! I want to be [like that]!” when people see us in person. That’s my band’s motivating force.³⁸ (@gazette05Reita)

the GazettE is a notably successful band signed to a major label, widely recognized as a success story of post-boom visual *kei* and are specifically (albeit coyly) addressed as such in ryuusei’s original blogpost. It seems easy for Reita to assert that bands succeed based on their “effort” and that failure can be blamed on a lack thereof, and that his band’s motivation is pleasing the audience—he does not have to worry about whether he can afford dinner. Recall the pervasive yet false belief in meritocracy referenced in Chapter 2: it is a matter of course that success is *earned*, always. Indeed, Reita too is engaged in upholding the affective contract by ignoring his own security compared to ryuusei. For the purposes of the contract, *they are the same*, despite stark economic differences.

Akiko Takeyama’s emphasis on the precarity and affective, fantasy-focused nature of the relationships between hosts and their clients is reminiscent of a visual *kei* performer and his audience. In particular, hosts and performers both work to obfuscate the essentially economic nature of the relationship. Hosts work to create the sense of being “a ‘real’ couple” with their clients, and are the more economically vulnerable party in any relationship engaged (Takeyama 2016, 12). In the same way, the performer affectively works to create the image of “not doing

³⁷ <https://twitter.com/gazette05Reita/status/905430460422995969>, last accessed August 27, 2022.

³⁸ <https://twitter.com/gazette05Reita/status/905453223846133761>, last accessed August 27, 2022.

it for money” and sufficient “appreciation” to fans, even in the face of dire economic realities. Again, this is not atypical, although hosts and visual *kei* performers may seem odd representatives for contemporary Japan. Takeyama points out that hosts highlight “changing forms of labor, consumption and value” in Japan’s increasingly service-based economy (Takeyama 2016, 11). Indeed, the emphasis on service, specifically surface-level, assigned, and performed service such as that emblemized by the (in)famous *omotenashi*, is predominant in Japan. From the automatic “welcome” spouted by convenience store clerks to the walking of freshly coifed customers to the door by hairstylists to the handwritten “thank you” notes included in packages from independent online sellers, the performance of affective, surface-level ‘service’ is everywhere and, importantly, *treated as a matter of course*. Hosts and visual *kei* performers, therefore, may be said to illustrate a broader shift in the Japanese economic landscape.

In short, the “precarity” and “pervasive uncertainty” that describe broader post-bubble Japanese society are exemplified in visual *kei*, where the average lifespan of bands is short and success is never guaranteed, regardless of talent. Performers engage in increasingly demanding forms of affective labor to make up for the devaluation of their ‘main’ cultural output. Even when apologizing, the management of emotion and affect is paramount: for example, subcultural members critiqued vocalist Masaki heavily for appearing to smile during his original apology video broadcast, an expression which could be explained by nerves as much as by not taking the situation seriously.³⁹ The disbandment of Kyogetsu following the break of the affective contract by one of its members is a stark illustration of how this subculture is inseparably, almost indistinguishably entwined with mainstream ideals of neoliberal capitalist

³⁹ The apology video and comments left through the broadcast service can still be viewed as of August 14, 2022: https://twitcasting.tv/cry7_cry/movie/401502083

realism. We cannot imagine a system of value *outside* of these structures, and thus to point them out is to be rejected and dismissed.

“This is the end, surely.”

In this chapter, I argued for an understanding of visual *kei* as a subculture founded upon an affective contract between fans and performers. One main purpose of this contract is to obfuscate the neoliberal capitalistic materiality of performers’ motivations. The subculture’s economic uncertainty helps, in no small part, to give fans considerable power, both over performers and the subculture as a whole—power which can extend to the ending of a performer’s career.

By examining the subculture’s aggressive response to an incident on Twitter in which a performer broke this affective contract, I argued that visual *kei* specifically values the maintenance of affect as paramount, policing those members who do not act in accordance with this value. While the case of ryuusei may be a particularly poignant example, it is not unique. Other breaks of the affective contract—whether justifiably so perceived or not—have left repercussions on the subculture. Also in 2017, a vocalist was ejected from his band based on vague “claims of improper actions from customers.”⁴⁰ In other cases, bands overall have collapsed due to response to a member’s personal, private life (specifically romantic engagements). Most recently, the affective contract’s broad reach to encompass uncomfortable political as well as economic realities became apparent when major band DIR EN GREY’s critique of the Tokyo Olympics was seemingly disregarded and brushed aside.⁴¹

⁴⁰ See the archived announcement here:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20170606152126/http://insanity-injection.com:80/>

⁴¹ During a live performance of the song “Devote my life” in June 2021, the video played behind the stage depicted overgrown golden babies fighting over money, and symbolism reminiscent of Tokyo before ending with the Olympic rings melting. While I was impressed by what I interpreted as stark criticism, counter to the predominant narrative promoted in mainstream

The case of contemporary visual *kei* demonstrates the precarity of performers in the music industry and laborers more generally, as well as the potential dangers for these performers engaging in ever more oppressive versions of the affective contract. In relation to more recent debates over “cancel culture” (c.f. Ng 2020; Clark 2020; Norris 2021) and the omnipresence of neoliberal capitalist realism, moreover, this incident once again highlights the necessity of interpreting subculture as intrinsically connected to its wider mainstream environment. The active performance and consumption of surface level, hollow affect is both a poignant demonstration of the bubble culture’s lingering effects and a clear reminder that visual *kei* is merely one sub-section of broader post-bubble Japan.

media despite the COVID-19 pandemic, it did not create the stir I expected. This was observed both through my participant observation and discourse analysis. First, when I stated that I wanted to Tweet “DIR EN GREY said fuck the Olympics!” a fellow attendee dissuaded me, intimating that the response would be negative. Second, mention of the criticism on Twitter was sparse. On August 14, 2022, conducting a retroactive search of the keywords “DIR EN GREY” and “Olympics” (in katakana) in the time period around the event reveals only a handful of Tweets with minimal response. An official live report on BARKS mentions the critique and its target obliquely, referring to “scathing” imagery including the “five golden rings [...] melting” before stating that “it is not as though DIR EN GREY is aiming to present a specific correct interpretation,” merely that those “in the know” may piece together certain ideas from their material (Masuda 2021). Notably, the term “Olympics” or other easily searchable keywords are not used. The Japanese used for “five golden rings” here is “5 *tsu no ōgon no rin*,” which when searched for exactly on Google on August 14, 2022, turned up only the BARKS article, the same article cross-posted to another website, and a third result unrelated to the Olympics.

Chapter 6: Dead Subculture to “Unique Japanese Culture”: Rebranding Visual *Kei* through Overseas Recognition

“This is the Far East Nonsense Market	「ここは極東ナンセンスマーケット
We sell anything and everything	どんな物でも売っている
From high-class items to junk	高級品からガラクタまで
Honor and love also follow the money”	名誉も、愛も金次第」

-MERRY, “NOnsenSe MARket,” *NOnsenSe MARkeT* (2014b)

In January 2017, I received a text from my American mother who lives in Arizona. “Do you know a rock star who was in a band called X JAPAN? His name is Yoshiki. Your dad heard him on the radio this morning.”

Sitting on the bullet train, in transit between my home in the Tokyo metropolitan area and Nagoya, I felt two different worlds colliding. I asked myself, how do my American parents, living in the US, suddenly hear about the famous founding visual *kei* artist YOSHIKI?

“He said he is really amazing. He apparently started off as a classical artist,” my mother continued. “Seems very nice and very talented. Your dad was very impressed. He was playing the piano on the radio, and he said he was very talented and well spoken.”

The fact that YOSHIKI is on the American radio is not particularly surprising—he has been actively promoting himself overseas since 2010. However, the fact that YOSHIKI has been actively seeking out this specifically *American* exposure is connected to the validation and value of this type of exposure in Japan. Success in the specifically American context still holds significant sway given the “symbolic cachet” of American “cultural industries” worldwide (Allison 2006a, 7), even if the US no longer serves as the “superior mirror” for Japan to emulate as in the immediate post-war period (Yoshimi 2003, 449). YOSHIKI’s American exposure includes hosting “Yoshiki Radio” on Sirius XM from 2011, which reportedly “spotlight[ed]

elements of Japanese pop culture—from sushi and anime to Hello Kitty and Wii” (Pedersen 2011), the signing of “a North American distribution deal with EMI” for X JAPAN in 2011 (Robson 2011), and his 2016 adoption of adviser role for the “Japan House” in Los Angeles, a base of operations for “Japan’s PR strategy” (*Sanspo* 2016). In other words, with the growing influence of Japanese popular culture around the globe, what I felt to be a clash of two different worlds was inevitable, and as discussed in Chapter 2, YOSHIKI’s self-presentation as a well-spoken classical pianist is no great divergence from his fluid present persona.

It reminded me, however, of the about-face reversal of visual *kei*’s journey of validation. Beginning as something globally influenced by glam rock and hair metal, visual *kei* then became a distinct subculture in Japan following a period of mostly domestic circulation within the increasingly more insular Japanese music market of the post-bubble period (de Launey 1995). Now, however, it has reversed once again, as visual *kei*’s cultural distinctiveness is validated through its popularity in the US and beyond. In other words, it reminded me of the chaotic “disjunctures” of global flows (Appadurai 1996, 37), and how visual *kei* perfectly embodies this phenomenon.

Visual *kei* fits in Japanese domestic discourse surrounding Japan’s increasing “global cultural power” (Iwabuchi 2002, 448) in the post-bubble period, specifically with its wider trends of popular culture globalization (see Storey 2003, 114, 117). While other studies have focused on the “success” of Japanese global cultural power overseas (e.g., Kelts 2006; Allison 2006a; Yano 2013), I believe it is worth looking at the domestic impact of this disjunctive flow of globalization. After all, global promotional activities of Japanese artists seem to be received and interpreted in Japan as signifiers of legitimacy and national worth, which appears to be contrary to traditionalist, nationalist frameworks of value.

From the mid-2000s onwards, visual *kei*’s increasing overseas popularity, despite lack of domestic success, has served to re-legitimize visual *kei* in its home territory, which makes it

a critical point to understand the subculture's broader historicization and especially its post-2000s position. This builds on the notion that global flows outwards can have positive rebound-effect on a product's—or subculture's—domestic value (Appadurai 1996). Arjun Appadurai argues that “particular conjectures of commodity flow and trade can create unprecedented changes in value structures” (1996, 72). Traditionally, media influence has been argued as an exclusively Anglo-American hegemonic system in which “globalization” is a one-way street running west to east and north to south (Gelernter and Regev 2010, 64). However, recent developments suggest that globalization operates instead through “networks,” or “interconnected nodes with no inherent internal hierarchy” (Gelernter and Regev 2010, 64). In other words, instead of regionalism and top-down dissemination of global consumption, contemporary culture works in “fractal” configurations (Appadurai 1996, 46).

Today, various aspects of Japanese popular culture, even ones that may have been previously unsavory to a general domestic public, have been re-worked using their popularity overseas to fit a wider, official narrative that promotes Japan as a “global cultural power” (Iwabuchi 2002, 448). This reverse flow of validation, in turn, creates a fertile ground for (re)legitimization and rebranding of popular, but also unpopular subculture within mainstream Japanese discourse. Think, for example, about the repackaging of *hide*, or *IZAM*'s fluctuating image, but this time on a cultural, global scale.

In the case of visual *kei*, the (re)legitimization is likely closely connected with its particular life course. Following the subculture's ‘boom’ and subsequent decline in the late 1990s and early 2000s within Japan, overseas recognition appeared the only path to legitimacy. Visual *kei*'s ‘boom’ coincided with post-bubble discourses of Japanese inferiority—particularly regarding cultural products, which even at the peak of bubble prosperity held little sway on the global stage (Allison 2006a, 5). Visual *kei*'s rebound construction as a “unique Japanese culture” (*Logmi Biz* 2016a) that “Japan [...] can be proud of” (Y. Osawa and Shigematsu 2008, 74)

following its accidental export (which I elaborate on below) is an example of both nationalistic rebranding and the lingering power of Anglo-American approval on the image of popular culture domestically. In short, the mainstream discourse surrounding visual *kei* from the late 2000s onwards demonstrates how

Western appreciation has power to determine the international quality of Japanese culture [and how] ‘cool Japan’ discourse [...] still testifies to Japan’s appreciation of the Western Orientalist gaze and its complicit uses of that gaze to enhance national pride both domestically and internationally. (Iwabuchi 2010, 96)

This was particularly important given how the success of Japanese popular culture internationally served as a “ray of hope in an otherwise bleak landscape of national collapse.” Regardless of the actual effectiveness of “cool Japan” initiatives or the degree of popularity of Japanese cultural products abroad, Japanese attitudes towards the narrative of “cool Japan” were ones of optimism and happiness (Leheny 2018, 98). Indeed, in the wake of successful overseas tours enacted by larger visual *kei* bands—such as DIR EN GREY—and the increasing ease of accessibility of global music through file-sharing, streaming, and more recently online services such as YouTube, visual *kei* has earned significant overseas success. This success, in turn, has been slowly acknowledged by the mainstream Japanese media. While not necessarily always directly benefiting performers themselves financially, especially on the minor side, the subculture overall has been able to utilize this discourse to reinstate its own legitimacy and to style itself as a “unique Japanese culture.”

This is why in this final chapter, I focus on this *domestic* revaluation of visual *kei*. I begin by examining how this process of globalization affected the domestic market and image of visual *kei* in Japan. I look at how Japanese artists who ‘make it’ overseas are rebranded and revalued domestically. I connect this revaluation to Koichi Iwabuchi’s conception of the “West” (specifically the Anglo-American sphere) as a metaphorical “other” by which Japan defines both itself and the meaning of success (2010, 96). Finally, I explore how this valuation of the Japanese self is repackaged as nationalist, domestic marketability through subcultural response.

Through this, I finalize my argument that visual *kei* is a *fluid subculture* whose systems of values are directly derived from and feed into those of the mainstream.

Flows and Contra-flows

Globalization, in whichever forms it takes place, has been massively impacted by the rise of the use of the Internet, which has “transformed the basic organizational structures of society” into a more networked existence (Gelernter and Regev 2010, 64). Networks have a “fractal structure,” they have elasticity, they compress distance and erase barriers, and these features have in turn “become the basis for the character of contemporary societies” (Gelernter and Regev 2010, 64–65). This supports the idea of an increasingly fractalized pattern of globalization—enabled by the Internet—rather than the strict one-way structure reminiscent of cultural imperialism which affords no alternatives.

The idea of a networked world based on “fractal” structures and “elasticity” also suggests the possibility of fan bases developing for media and content producers half a world away. There is no need for an intermediary link aside from the Internet, and producers and audiences are no longer necessarily dependent on cultural similarity or geographic proximity. While physical copies of CDs and books are (often prohibitively) expensive to ship across great distances, MP3 files and e-books are ‘shipped’ for free—and sometimes acquired for free. This allows audiences to instantaneously consume media regardless of its point of origin. Additionally, the globalizing nature of the Internet allows consumers to bypass “traditional [...] industry filters” (Mjøs 2012, 91), permitting more fractal flows.

It is worth reiterating that music in particular benefited from this new age of connectivity and (relatively) simple distribution. This was apparent even in 2004, before the ease of connection provided by social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook had become prevalent or widespread in usage:

The rapid development of the Internet [...] has facilitated the democratization of music making, its distribution, and increased fan communication. It has also made possible music file sharing among musicians and fans around the world. Internet [...] pages make it possible for any [...] band to get the [...] word out about upcoming appearances and to promote [...] self-produced recordings without having to sign with a major record company. (Peterson and Bennett 2004, 6)

In other words, thanks to the Internet, music artists are no longer limited to a geographical ‘place,’ and can easily reach the entire Internet-using world with a single upload. While success in numbers of devoted following or monetary terms is not guaranteed, independent artists can find audiences internationally, as is the case with visual *kei*. In summary, with the networked nature of globalized society, the idea that media circulates primarily (and best) amongst similar, geographically bounded cultures and locations is no longer sustainable. This is also true for Japanese popular culture.

While, in the past, popular culture migrated more easily between close geographical neighbors, this limitation has also been weakened through the network society. Anne Allison suggests that consumption of Japanese popular culture outside of Japan in the 1980s began in East and Southeast Asia (2006b, 13), and it has been argued that anime and manga in particular continue to be more popular in Asia than in the so-called “West” (Iwabuchi 2002, 459). Nowadays, anime and manga in particular are vastly popular in Anglo-America, as is evidenced by the popularity of English-language anime streaming sites and manga subscription websites such as Kissanime and Crunchyroll. While Iwabuchi has argued that Japanese media gains audiences primarily in Eastern and South East Asia due to “cultural proximity” and the preference of local populations for relatable “Asian” faces as opposed to those of more distant (non-Asian) protagonists (Iwabuchi 1998, 179), this no longer fits the contemporary globally dispersed fan populations, which increasingly make up the consumers of numerous forms of Japanese media.

In other words, regionalism and the sway of cultural proximity no longer account for modern audiences. Research also began to argue for a “move from densely-knit and tightly-

bounded groups to sparsely-knit and loosely-bounded networks,” grounded upon the idea of “networked individualism” in the early 2000s (Wellman et al. 2003). Andy Bennett and Ian Rogers also speak of “huge interconnected web of niche audiences” connected by YouTube (2016, 156); additionally, “popular music places [have become] more common and yet more diverse” due to the Internet and its connectivity (Lashua, Spracklen, and Wagg 2014, 5). In other words, Japan is not uniquely geared towards regional proliferation, and even if that had been the case, it would still have been lost in this increasingly expansive digital environment.

This is even more evident in communities based around active fandom as opposed to more everyday consumption, which, as Cornel Sandvoss argues, are specifically “*elective*”, and “reflect individual preferences,” regardless of origin (2010, 405, emphasis original). While he adds that “our initial choice of object of fandom, for all its seeming idiosyncrasies, is not coincidental,” (Sandvoss 2010, 405) it is not necessarily the case that this choice is limited to geographical location. Indeed, as opposed to Iwabuchi’s idea of regionalism, globalization no longer moves along predictable paths, and the meaning of products “is produced through a process of hybridization and convergence” (Gelernter and Regev 2010, 66; c.f. Appadurai 1996).

Visual *kei* exemplifies this globalized flow. At the time of writing, visual *kei* appears to have more fans *outside* of East Asia than within it. Fans in North America and Northern and Western Europe make up a large portion of the global audience, as increasingly do fans in Central and South America, to the point where multiple bands have successfully conducted tours throughout these regions.¹ Multiple online resources exist for fans abroad. For example, fans outside of Japan can access news through sites such as VKH Press, purchase goods and

¹ DIR EN GREY, for example, frequently adds tour dates in Europe and the United States—such as the 2018 “WEARING HUMAN SKIN” tour, which added a European leg after the final Japanese show—but *not* Asia, suggesting a much larger fan base *outside* of areas of regional similarity.

fashion through Chaotic Harmony, and read artist interviews on broader Japanese music sites with heavy visual *kei* representation such as JaME (Japanese Music Entertainment).² Notably, this list is not exhaustive, and these are specifically English-language sources; other languages, especially French, German, and Spanish, turn up even more information.

This global flow is not limited to Japanese artists producing and fans consuming—this too is no one-way structure. Self-identified visual *kei* bands have formed abroad, such as the Finnish KARMIA (Sophia 2012), Swedish Kerbera, Thai MaleRose, and Indonesian MEA (Fujitani 2016), as well as bands inspired by visual *kei* artists such as American Serafilia (Pfeifle 2011a). Oshima Akemi, in her 2013 edited subcultural volume *Visual Rock Perfect Disc Guide 500*, devotes a three-page editorial to foreign bands, including performers in Brazil, Italy, and Mongolia in addition to those countries already mentioned (2013a). Overseas fans create active communities, sharing information and actively discussing on forums and chat servers. These communities are particularly active in South America (see Reyes Navarro 2021 for discussion of fan subculture in Chile) and Europe (see Seibt 2021 for discussion of fan subculture in Germany). Finnish fandom was so pervasive in the late 2000s that it featured in an article written for the Finland Promotion Board (Jussila 2009).

In short, visual *kei* has travelled the globe and found audiences worldwide. Visual *kei* has therefore found international success, and through this gained attention and restored reputation domestically through its potential as a form of marketable Japanese culture abroad.

Re-appropriating ‘Deviance’ into “Unique Japanese Culture”

The idea of selling explicitly Japanese popular culture abroad, *particularly* in an Anglo-American context, has inspired a great deal of domestic excitement. The Japanese government

² <https://www.vkh-press.com/>, formerly Visual *Kei* Haven.
<https://www.chaotic-harmony.net/>
<https://jame-world.com/>, all last accessed August 27, 2022.

explicitly encourages domestic contents industries to this end (see Creative Industries Division 2014; Cool Japan Policy Division 2017), and even regular Japanese citizens have picked up on the buzz surrounding the foreign consumption of Japanese media, particularly in terms of “Cool Japan.”

Simply stated, “Cool Japan” is a Japanese “policy discourse” that “sought to capitalize on the popularity of Japanese media culture in global markets (notably Euro-American markets)” (Iwabuchi 2015, 422). As a concept, “Cool Japan” has been circulating since 2002, directly tied to the publication of Douglas McGray’s article on “Gross National Cool” (2002). Rearticulating McGray’s point that Japan somehow became popular “behind its own back,” Katja Valaskivi notes that “while Japan was focusing on its problems” during the 1990s, “the world outside of Japan was rediscovering the allure of ‘Things Japanese’ and once again began considering Japan as cool” (2013, 488). McGray’s article sparked considerable excitement among Japanese politicians and policymakers, who saw this as an opportunity to sell Japan’s image and products abroad—an especially attractive prospect after the lengthy economic downturn following the bubble economy’s collapse (Iwabuchi 2015, 422). Japanese politicians latched onto the potential of building rapport abroad through “the Cool Japan phenomenon;” soon, “anime and manga began to be used in cultural diplomacy” (Valaskivi 2013, 488). More concretely, this resulted in the creation of active policy focused on the promotion of Japanese popular cultural objects by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In short, a great deal of Japanese popular culture became officially branded beginning in 2005 in attempts to secure continued overseas consumption of Japanese media and turn it to beneficial ends for the state (Valaskivi 2013, 485). In many cases, these Japanese branded goods were not necessarily consumed by many Japanese citizens themselves, with selection instead based on overseas market(ability).

Thanks to the invigoration of national attention on cultural products consumed abroad, visual *kei* too was able to secure a position within the ranks of “unique Japanese culture.” This was despite any original or remaining connotations of deviance and non-traditional ideals (see Chapters 3 and 4), even to the point of being co-opted into nationalistic rhetoric. I have touched briefly on the idea of deviance being rebranded in my examination of *hide*, but now I want to focus on this tendency to overlook unsavory aspects for the sake of profit on a more national cultural and subcultural scale, demonstrating once again how subcultures truly only exist on the terms of the mainstream neoliberal capitalist value system.

At first glance, visual *kei*, with its dark themes and widespread use of gender bending and other forms of tradition-challenging expression, does not appear to be an ideal choice for government-sponsored overseas promotion of Japanese culture. However, it was not these elements that prevented the Japanese government from actively endorsing visual *kei* overseas, but rather its domestic demise. For example, anime and manga titles with controversial themes were nevertheless promoted as “Japanese culture” due to their overseas popularity. Valaskivi specifically states that this attempt to utilize the “rebellious cool” within official promotion potentially contradicts traditional values (2013, 494). In the case of Japanese culture, “the ‘scandalous’ features of [...] phenomena like *meido* cafes or the pornographic and violent side of *otaku* culture” were “suddenly promoted by diplomats and ministers” (Valaskivi 2013, 494). Patrick W. Galbraith shows how the *otaku* identity *itself* was given a new, positive spin after being “incorporated into the ‘cool Japan’ brand.” Despite seriously negative domestic connotations throughout the 1980s and 1990s, thanks to “Cool Japan” it was actively promoted and celebrated by government texts and officials from the 2000s onwards (Galbraith 2010).

Therefore, while no official statements to this regard exist, it is unlikely that visual *kei* was excluded due to its (relatively mild) unsavory elements, and more due to the fact that it was considered a dead industry. It was, after all, eagerly revived once it had found a concrete market

overseas without official, targeted assistance, and even addressed positively. In 2010 for example, a report for the Agency of Cultural Affairs proposed visual *kei* “cosplay” as a feature of an exhibition to “experience Japanese pop culture and the modern diverse culture of everyday life” (Humanmedia 2010). Additionally, at a House Committee of the Cabinet meeting in November 2014, Representative Hamamura Susume of the right-leaning, conservative Komeitō party (part of the majority block with the Liberal Democratic Party) pointed to positive coverage of a visual *kei* event in Los Angeles, asking “how are these visual *kei* individuals being put to use in Cool Japan?” In response, a member of the Vice-Minister for International Affairs, Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry’s office stated positively that visual *kei* was being included as part of the broader thrust to promote anime and music overseas. Hamamura then suggested that more aggressive promotion of visual *kei* would be beneficial for tangential industries such as cosmetics. After positing the lack of “organizational foundations” as a potentially “difficult” hurdle to overcome, he suggested that the government take a strong “leadership” position in promoting visual *kei*. Yamaguchi Shunichi, Cabinet Minister then in charge of Cool Japan Tactics, responded positively, if vaguely (Shugin 2014).³ Additionally, one of the 52 “Visit Japan Ambassadors” announced in 2021 was specifically visual *kei* focused (Japan Tourism Agency 2021, 11).⁴ This positive, albeit delayed adoption suggests that it was not a fundamental problem with visual *kei*’s themes that hindered its original active promotion through “Cool Japan.”

Indeed, controversial themes have not disappeared. They were merely plastered over after it became evident that while visual *kei* may have been considered dead domestically, it was clearly alive overseas. Instead of being first appropriated and manipulated into a type of

³ This exchange further suggests that lack of representative organization may have hindered visual *kei*’s original inclusion in “Cool Japan” strategies.

⁴ Interestingly, however, the English copy for the ambassador does not use “visual *kei*” but instead “visually striking rock bands.” See: <https://www.mlit.go.jp/common/001204099.pdf>

cultural product, visual *kei*'s unexpected success was seized upon by Japanese domestic discourse after the fact, and quickly rebranded as “unique Japanese culture.” Visual *kei* has thus used a foreign-led narrative of legitimacy to overcome its formerly negative impression within the domestic sphere.

If visual *kei*'s popularity was not originally pushed as a part of the “Cool Japan” initiative, and not necessarily intentional on the part of visual *kei* itself, this raises the question of *how* visual *kei* circumvented all of these structures and still reached an overseas audience. While there was no singular path, and an overseas “advance” *was* specifically calculated and carried out by some bands in the mid-to-late 2000s, such as DIR EN GREY, in many cases the subculture was able to, quite literally, tag along with more mainstream “Cool Japan” media: specifically, anime.

Not Cool Enough for “Cool Japan”: Coincidental ‘Tie-Up’ Exposure

Visual *kei* likely initially achieved international exposure through unofficial channels such as fan art and peer-to-peer file sharing.⁵ Another pathway was coincidence, with songs that were tied-up in anime productions (Galbraith 2009, 231; Muneaki Saito 2014, 22–23). Bands of the “neo visual *kei*” era especially drew numerous fans due to these anime tie-ups.⁶ A ‘tie-up’ is a marketing strategy originating in television, where many Japanese artists promote their singles by having their music “used in television commercials or as the signature tunes in television dramas and movies” (Asai 2011, 108). Domestically, tie-ups with television dramas have begun

⁵ For example, I was exposed to visual *kei* tangentially sometime around 2000 through an English-speaking artist's fan art of Dir en grey (now DIR EN GREY), which was posted on the former Science Fiction and Fantasy online gallery Elfwood—a site that has been offline since 2016.

⁶ This (roughly) defined era followed the boom and initial crash of visual *kei* and is generally dated to the mid-to-late-2000s. The period is also notable for producing the first bands who essentially “grew up” listening to visual *kei* instead of primarily Western music (Oshima 2013b, 122–23; Muneaki Saito 2013, 21–22). Bands such as Nightmare (*Naitomeā*), SID (*Shido*), and the GazettE tend to be used as representative.

to wane in recent years due to their declining economic success (Asai 2011, 113), and anime tie-ups reportedly have even less effect (Stevens 2011, 40). However, anime tie-ups still appear to work in exposing overseas demographics to visual *kei*.

While visual *kei*'s global popularity was not entirely predicated on these tie-ups, the connection between visual *kei*—particularly mid-to-late-2000s “neo visual *kei*” artists—and anime is significant.⁷ Further, it arguably served as a gateway to fans who would not otherwise have been exposed to the subculture, and overseas fans' reported experiences do provide evidence for this. Aforementioned Indonesian band MEA, for example, explicitly reference these anime tie-ups, stating that “there are many fans overseas who learned about visual *kei* through anime” specifically pointing to SID and ViViD (Fujitani 2016, 2). Additionally, in a 2011 poll of over 6000 worldwide visual *kei* fans, “anime/manga” was the third most common response to the question “How did you find out about visual *kei*?” (Pfeifle 2011c).⁸

More tangentially, anime also potentially served as an entry point in other ways, such as online communities, conventions, or tangential media which also included visual *kei* content such as magazines or fan-produced video compilations. In a Reddit visual *kei* fan thread from 2017, six of fourteen respondents explicitly tie their original exposure to anime or refer to anime as being some way connected; the ratio in a similar 2022 thread was lower, suggesting a downward but still present trend.⁹ Ten out of twenty-four fans make similar connections in a

⁷ For example, consider the resumes of four of the best-selling and most popular “neo visual *kei*” bands: SID has written and performed nine songs tied up with seven anime titles, including one film and the popular titles *Kuroshitsuji* (Black Butler), FULL METAL ALCHEMIST and BLEACH; NIGHTMARE seven songs with five anime, including the popular DEATH NOTE; A9 (formerly Alice Nine) three songs with two anime; and the GazettE one song with *Kuroshitsuji II*. For a longer list of anime and visual *kei* tie-ups, see Saito Muneaki's work (Muneaki Saito 2014, 22–23, 2018, 91).

⁸ This followed “A friend who listens to visual *kei*” (first) and “Internet” (second). An earlier installment in this “Globalizing Visual *Kei*” series states that “anime, manga and video games” introduced 20% of respondents to visual *kei* (Pfeifle 2011b).

⁹ https://www.reddit.com/r/visualkei/comments/6rnt5i/how_did_you_guys_come_to_love_visual_kei/

2019 thread on the (now defunct) Monochrome Heaven message board.¹⁰ Notably, there appears to be some sense of negativity towards so-called “anime bands” expressed by fans and even performers, so these numbers may be under-representative.¹¹

For those explicitly referencing anime tie-ups, *Kuroshitsuji* or *Black Butler*, broadcast in Japan in 2008, appears to have had a particular impact. Visual *kei* bands performed opening themes for all three seasons, and the series’ gothic aesthetics seem reminiscent of certain trends in visual *kei* performance, suggesting a likely connection.¹² SID, who provided the opening theme for the first and third seasons, explicitly references the first of these, “*Monokuro no kisu*,” as “especially popular overseas” (Yamamoto 2018); the song was also their major debut single.¹³ *DEATH NOTE* and *NIGHTMARE* seem another significant case, with the band providing the first opening and ending themes for the dark anime. A BARKS report on *NIGHTMARE*’s “first overseas” performance at the 2013 JAPAN EXPO in France suggests that their “performance was eagerly awaited” due to the European popularity of *DEATH NOTE*

https://www.reddit.com/r/visualkei/comments/wptgee/how_did_everyone_get_into_vkei/, last accessed September 1, 2022. The latter thread includes the reply “It was the usual for me... anime openings lol” by a deleted user, suggesting that the tie between anime and visual *kei* in English-language fandom is widely known.

¹⁰ <https://mh.jrockone.com/topic/55860-very-first-vk-band-you-got-into-and-how-did-you-get-into-them/>, last accessed September 3, 2022.

¹¹ See, for example, this thread, in which a fan with the username “Doesn’tEvenGoHere” attributes the band Nightmare getting “a lot of hate” on the message board due to “people not wanting to associate themselves with *anime bands*”: <https://mh.jrockone.com/topic/55860-very-first-vk-band-you-got-into-and-how-did-you-get-into-them/?do=findComment&comment=657734> (last accessed August 27, 2022). See also comments from Toshiya of DIR EN GREY, where he states the band “turned down [...] invitations to play at anime expos” due to the “image” associated with playing there (Pfeifle 2011b), also referenced below.

¹² SID provided the opening songs for the first and third seasons, the GazettE for the second. An overseas fan writing for a “visual kei webzine” proposes that the GazettE being tied in with the series “was a very good [idea] from a sales and exposure point of view” due to these thematic tie-ins (Hikaru 2011).

¹³ See <https://www.sonymusic.co.jp/artist/sid/profile/>, last accessed August 18, 2022. Another song referenced as “especially popular overseas,” V.I.P., was the opening theme for anime series *Magi*, and the band released an “Anime Best” compilation album in 2018 (<https://www.sonymusic.co.jp/artist/sid/discography/>, last accessed August 18, 2022).

(BARKS 2013). Fans online similarly reference *DEATH NOTE* as sparking their fandom for the band; one recalls that NIGHTMARE was “THE band (especially because of Death Note)” when they became a fan of visual *kei* themselves.¹⁴

Additionally, mainstream Japanese discourse often turns to its links with anime as at least a partial explanation in attempts to uncover some reason behind visual *kei*’s overseas popularity in the late 2000s (see, for example, Hayashi 2007, 64; Y. Osawa and Shigematsu 2008; Gōda 2009; Kanba 2011; Fujitani 2014a). Domestic academic coverage also points to these anime tie-ups as significant (Kato 2009; Muneaki Saito 2013, 2014, 2018).

International anime fans thus had an established, if tangential, connection to visual *kei* through this officially promoted media, and were perhaps more likely to accept and pursue the music independently. This is not to say that anime is solely responsible for visual *kei*’s overseas popularity—indeed, some bands explicitly did not want the connection, for fear of a lingering undesirable “image” left by playing at anime conventions, for example (Pfeifle 2011b)—but it certainly had an impact. Even older, more established bands, such as BUCK-TICK, were able to take advantage of this trend (although arguably not intentionally) and found new, international fans after providing music for anime series such as *xxxHOLIC* in the late 2000s.¹⁵ Therefore, although visual *kei* was not explicitly included, it was able to benefit from the “Cool Japan” initiative and was accidentally, indirectly, promoted.

This is no coincidence. In fact, the broader “Cool Japan” initiative did not *know* what would succeed overseas. This extended even to visual *kei*, where managers and label staff did not understand *why* their bands were popular (Researcher Risako 2008a, 2008b; Y. Osawa and

¹⁴ See user “otterducksake” for the comment on NIGHTMARE’s former popularity https://www.reddit.com/r/visualkei/comments/jqnznd/anyone_still_listening_to_nightmare_i_never_see/ (last accessed August 18, 2022).

¹⁵ This was not their first anime tie-up, which was in 1998 with the thematically-appropriate vampire-centric anime *Night Walker*—Mayonaka no Tantei— (Midnight Detective), nor was it their last.

Shigematsu 2008). While there were attempts to build and find patterns based upon former successes, both the government and the civilian population are regularly surprised by what ‘works’ as an overseas commodity. In the next section, after I delve more deeply into this general misunderstanding, I move on to discuss the “most famous Japanese band” overseas, DIR EN GREY—a band who achieved this status without any recognition or support from the “Cool Japan” initiative.

Building throughout the 2000s, 2008 is the year which is generally, domestically recognized to be when visual *kei* truly started to gain attention overseas (see Okamoto 2013). However, this was also the year in which the Japanese government realized their “Cool Japan” promotion of domestic cultural industries was stalling. Michal Daliot-Bul states that 2008 was when the Strategic Council on Intellectual Property noticed a “decline in Japan’s international competitiveness” and argued for the need “to review, from an international perspective [...] whether past strategic measures [had] sufficiently contributed to Japan’s competitiveness and sustainable productivity and growth” (2009, 251).¹⁶ Up to this date, I can find no official evidence of visual *kei* having been targeted by official government programs despite evidence of success being reported in mainstream press the previous year, such as the magazine *Cut* which discussed the international success of DIR EN GREY and covered visual *kei* more broadly (Hayashi 2007).¹⁷

This demonstrates the Japanese government’s inability to accurately predict what would sell overseas. However, given that the overall purpose of the Intellectual Property Strategic

¹⁶ The Strategic Council on Intellectual Property is a government agency established by the Koizumi administration in 2002 to “develop a national policy of intellectual property in the form of innovative and creative products such as content products”(Daliot-Bul 2009, 250).

¹⁷ Again, much later, this was changed, albeit slightly. In addition to the incidents discussed above, in 2016, YOSHIKI was called to the Liberal Democratic Party headquarters as a guest speaker for the Committee of the Mission to Promote Cool Japan Strategies (*Sanspo* 2016). However, in this case, it is unclear whether it was a move towards targeting visual *kei* specifically or Japanese music more broadly.

Program was focused on promoting media that would improve Japan's image and serve potentially as a "national symbol" (Daliot-Bul 2009, 252), it seems that there would have been an understandable reluctance towards utilizing a subculture that was, apparently, dead. Regardless, visual *kei* has succeeded outside of Japan, and DIR EN GREY has been said to be the biggest international success, making them a prime target for domestic rebranding and reappropriation.

DIR EN GREY: "The Most Famous Japanese Band Overseas"

As discussed, visual *kei* pioneer YOSHIKI has been progressively more engaged over the years with overseas audiences. X JAPAN's ascent to one of the most widely known Japanese rock bands worldwide is likely due to this engagement. However, YOSHIKI himself has spent the last thirty years building himself up as an international superstar in his own right. He was the first Japanese artist, for example, to be invited to perform at the "Classic Rock Awards" show in London (Matsuo 2015). YOSHIKI's presence at this specifically non-Japanese award show along with a number of other international achievements place him, and consequently visual *kei*, as a rare international success story within the Japanese music world.¹⁸ Despite this success, however, and YOSHIKI's decades-long self-promotion campaign, in the mid-to-late 2000s the attention shifted to one of X JAPAN's direct proteges.

DIR EN GREY, formed in 1997 and originally produced by YOSHIKI, was declared in a 2009 *Weekly Playboy* article to be "the most famous Japanese band overseas" (Takahashi 2009, 158–59). They also served as the only "music" example in a series of articles published on various success stories in a "Cool Japan" focused 2007 issue of *Cut* (Hayashi 2007). When visual *kei*'s international fanbase and marketability was noticed in 2008, mainstream Japanese

¹⁸ These accomplishments include the composition of the 69th Annual Golden Globe Awards Show theme in 2012 (HFPA 2012) as well as his performance to a packed hall of 8000 at the 2010 JAPAN EXPO in Paris with X JAPAN vocalist TOSHI (BARKS 2010).

press reported that DIR EN GREY achieved the “highest level of success” as a Japanese band in Europe and the US (*SPA!* 2009). DIR EN GREY was reportedly “showered in attention” from all over the world (*CD Journal* 2008), falling inside the “frame” of a “huge boom” of visual *kei* bands in Europe, able to “boast endless popularity in England and America” (Hayashi 2007).¹⁹

In hindsight, DIR EN GREY is specifically described as a band whose “reputation was later enhanced even overseas” (*ato ni kaigai demo hyōka wo takameru*) in a timeline published in the Asahi Shimbun’s weekly publication *AERA* (Okamoto 2013). The band’s formation was listed on the article’s limited timeline of visual *kei* for the year 1997, along with the recognition of “visual *kei*” itself as a “new word” in general Japanese discourse and X JAPAN’s break-up (Okamoto 2013, 43).²⁰

DIR EN GREY began their “advance” (*shinshutsu*) overseas in 2005, six years after their major debut and roughly three to four years after the ‘death’ of visual *kei* domestically.²¹ After a handful of shows in Europe in 2005, they made their initial US-based attempt with headline performances in March 2006. The officially labelled “Showcase Tour” included three US cities: first at the “South by Southwest Music and Media Conference” in Austin, then in New York, and finally Los Angeles; these latter two sold out. The official website introduces this activity as DIR EN GREY “charging ahead of others” (*sakigake*), and credits it as a “huge

¹⁹ Note that this section examines DIR EN GREY and visual *kei*’s success overseas through domestic discourse. For more information on earlier overseas activity by other bands, as well as their effects on visual *kei*’s overseas popularity, see JaME’s “Globalizing Visual *Kei*” series by Megan Pfeifle: <https://www.jame-world.com/en/theme/932-globalizing-visual-kei-a-web-series.html>, last accessed August 27, 2022.

²⁰ Interestingly, these highlights of 1997 are slightly different than those Fujitani presented to Matsuko Deluxe in 2022.

²¹ Two of these 2005 European shows (in Berlin and Paris) were extensions of the Japanese tour “It withers and withers,” while three others (in Eifel and Nuernberg, Germany and North Nivelles, Belgium) were larger festival events where DIR EN GREY participated as one of many bands—notably the only Japanese band at all three.

success” (*ōseikyō*) that led to further US based performances.²² In the same year, the band shocked domestic audiences further by winning first place in the “Top 25 Metal Videos” election on the American MTV program “HEADBANGER’S BALL” with the 2005 single “*saku*,” reported as the “first Japanese” to do so (Fuji 2007)—the official website embellishes, stating that “naturally” the success was “the first in history by Japanese” and emphasizes the band’s dominating competition with “European and American big names.”

The following year, DIR EN GREY was able to enact a full-length tour throughout the United States, entitled “OVERSEAS (U.S.) TOUR07 INWARD SCREAM.” The band performed 18 shows in 17 cities total—an “all-America” tour whose enactment is labelled as a “decisive action” (*kankō*) in the official website text and a significant event for US-based fans.²³ The tour was a success and followed by even more appearances both in the US and Europe which occurred semi-regularly until the band went on a brief hiatus due to vocalist Kyō’s health in 2011 and re-started in 2018 with a European leg of the tour “WEARING HUMAN SKIN.”

This success did not go unnoticed by the mainstream Japanese domestic press. Five of the eight mentions of DIR EN GREY in domestic magazines in 2007 referred to their success overseas, either as unique, or representative of a “boom” in visual *kei* popularity. Their Anglo-American success was singled out by the domestic press, which positioned this market as comparatively more important and difficult to enter than that of the broader “Europe” (Hayashi 2007, 65). This overseas popularity, along with boosting the band in a domestic setting, potentially opened some doors.

For example, in December 2009, the band appeared in mainstream rock magazine *Rockin’ On Japan* for the first time (Yamasaki 2009). This interview explicitly references their “high evaluation overseas” (*kaigai kara no takai hyōka*) in the title, suggesting that this is part

²² <https://direngrey.co.jp/bio/145/>, last accessed September 4, 2022.

²³ <https://direngrey.co.jp/bio/143/>, last accessed September 4, 2022.

of the reason they were chosen to be featured. The fact that they had not been featured before demonstrates the importance of this overseas success. After all, DIR EN GREY had a remarkably successful start in the late 1990s, when they famously “filled” the noteworthy Budōkan venue (with a maximum capacity of 14,471) *before* their major debut in 1999 (*SPA!* 1998; *Yomiuri Shinbun* 1999a). This first interview was even *after* the magazine’s contributing columnist Hidaka Tohru (2007) spent a full installment of his “free talk” series addressing why (he thought) visual *kei* was popular overseas in November 2007.²⁴

DIR EN GREY has gone on to perform multiple tours with dates in North America and Europe, essentially launching their worldwide career at a time that makes it reasonable to argue that they helped “visual *kei* gather popularity *even* overseas” in 2008 (Okamoto 2013, 42, emphasis added). While they were not the first band to perform overseas, their success appears to have been inspirational. From the mid-2000s onwards, other visual *kei* performers such as D’espairsRay, *Kagerō*, the GazettE, and solo artist MIYAVI, and recently even more minor bands such as Calmando Qual and DEATHGAZE, have also performed successfully overseas and outside of East Asia, along with large group events organized by labels such as PS COMPANY (despite staff’s initial incredulity) (Y. Osawa and Shigematsu 2008). These successes proved that visual *kei* had a viable fanbase outside of Japan capable of supporting semiregular performances. More recently, established first and second-generation artists such as X JAPAN and L’Arc~en~Ciel have sold out massive American venues such as Madison

²⁴ Hidaka hypothesizes that visual *kei*’s similarities to western “emo” music is perhaps the most plausible reason for the subculture’s current success overseas, as well as an audience that was “sick” of the “roughness” of grunge music and its related scenes (2007). While DIR EN GREY’s emotional music and lyrics seem to fit with this hypothesis, their contemporary look between 2007 and 2009, which was more reminiscent of “rough” western heavy metal bands, did not. Indeed, in the *Cut* article, author Hayashi Atsuko postulates a similar desire for beauty and “unrealistic” and fantastical performers reminiscent of the “2D world” of manga, despite the top image being of a *Los Angeles Times* article reporting on a local concert, showing DIR EN GREY looking distinctly *realistic* in no obvious makeup and street clothes (2007, 64).

Square Garden, demonstrating even a backwards-looking popularity which has possibly helped to revitalize these bands.

Due to the fact that visual *kei* was, domestically, something that lived in the past tense, its rebranding was particularly dramatic. Its domestic position, where the *term* “visual *kei*” still suffered negative connotations from its devaluation following the late 1990s, was reexamined. This fact was explicitly mentioned in domestic press concerning DIR EN GREY’s success (Hayashi 2007, 64). In short, foreign assigned (specifically Anglo-American) value inspired a domestic reassessment.

Despite visual *kei*’s origins in an explicitly inward-facing, domestically focused music environment, it may have been this significant international attention that saved the subculture from an untimely death in the wake of its 1990s ‘boom.’ Music industry director and writer Fuyu Showgun points out that in the mid-2000s, there was a movement towards re-defining bands who had up until that point been described as “visual *kei*.” There was even a suggestion that everyone should just be referred to with the general “rock” to solve any problems concerning generic definition and, most likely, the negative connotations that visual *kei* had been unable to shake—think back to the “de-visual-ification” mentioned in Chapter 3. However, at about the same time, visual *kei* was starting to rise in popularity overseas, allowing the Japanese music industry to see a legitimate chance for “overseas strategies” in promoting their artists who were, controversially or not, located under the umbrella of visual *kei* (Fuyu 2013b).

With a hint of derision for a “return to roots” based on commercial motivations, Fuyu states that there were a number of bands who, despite having “de-visual-ified” themselves earlier (see Chapter 3), returned to “makeup heavier than ever,” becoming “reborn” through overseas tours—although he “does not name names” (Fuyu 2013b). Indeed, this trend could be interpreted as an outside-in revitalization for later visual *kei* bands. Relative contemporary powerhouse Versailles, for example, is reported as having their popularity “sparked” *first*

overseas, followed by their major debut in Japan in January 2010 (Sakaguchi 2010, 47).²⁵ This reversed flow shows the significant influence exerted on both the subculture *and* its broader recognition in Japan by its international, specifically non-Japanese, fanbase.

This is also notable as DIR EN GREY had, significantly, started moving *away* from their gaudy visuals as they moved overseas (though they have returned to them in essence as of 2022, their looks are markedly different from their ‘traditional’ boom-era visual *kei* aesthetics). Indeed, guitarist Kaoru was quoted in domestic press as being concerned about “just being called on [from overseas] as some sort of spectacle” (Takahashi 2009, 159), and bassist Toshiya stated that the band specifically rejected invitations from anime expos due to not wanting the consequent “image” associated with their band (Pfeifle 2011b)—potentially an image reminiscent of visual *kei* as hollow, talentless fad in the wake of its idolification in the early 2000s (see Chapter 3). These sentiments, not coincidentally, tie in with many domestic interpretations of visual *kei*’s international attraction as connected to their “cute” image and performers’ looks being reminiscent of “anime characters” (*J-CAST Nyūsu* 2008).²⁶

In other words, visual *kei* was, to some extent, revived by its overseas appreciation, at least as far as the general media public is concerned. The recognition abroad allowed visual *kei* to be reborn in the public consciousness as a “unique Japanese culture.” This domestic re-branding, however, has also potentially allowed visual *kei* to be co-opted into mainstream promotion of nationalistic narratives.

²⁵ The band is known both for charismatic vocalist KAMIJO and *onnagata* guitarist Hizaki, both of whom pursue solo careers outside of Versailles—KAMIJO as a solo artist and Hizaki as the leader of visual *kei* band Jupiter, among other projects. See Kato Ayako’s (2009) work for more information on Versailles overseas.

²⁶ In this sense, DIR EN GREY’s success may be seen as even more noteworthy—they were attempting to make their way overseas without relying upon promotion of flashy, obvious relics of their visual *kei* background, demonstrating that the subculture was *not* only attractive to large audiences for surface reasons—an argument which the subculture was already at a disadvantage to prove, given their domestic standing.

The Banal Nationalism of “Cool Japan”: “I find myself to be a nationalist, too!”

While the “Cool Japan” initiative may have intended to rebrand Japan in part specifically *away* from an imperialistic and nationalistic past, the remnants of this rhetoric still hold sway over the discourse. With the apparent viability of Japanese culture overseas, many saw an opportunity to promote the “Japan brand” in general, encouraging economic revitalization and increased tourism (see J. Koizumi 2006; Creative Industries Division 2014; Cool Japan Policy Division 2017). Importantly, however, this was based on fundamental, essentialist ideas of Japanese uniqueness.

Indeed, domestic discourse on the overseas popularity of visual *kei* tied its success causally to its Japanese origin, celebrated as a “unique” culture that could “only” come from Japan and be found “nowhere else” (Baba 2014). This extends to artists as well. YOSHIKI, for example, refers to visual *kei* as a “unique Japanese culture” (*tokushu na nihon no bunka*) in a panel interview about 2016’s massive three-day event live, VISUAL JAPAN SUMMIT 2016 (*Logmi Biz* 2016a). In the same year, Kiyoharu of *Kuroyume* and SADS (see Chapter 3) states that visual *kei* is a “culture that only exists in Japan” (Fujisaka 2016).

This discourse of visual *kei* as “unique Japanese culture” is linked to fundamental essentialist domestic assumptions about Japan and ignorance about the non-Japanese world. Visual *kei* is argued to be, for example, composed of elements such as “a type of constructed beauty” that “foreigners couldn’t create” (Hidaka 2007)—an interesting statement given visual *kei*’s own roots in glam rock. This assumption appears to be based on Japanese foundational beliefs about the uniqueness of Japanese aesthetic sensibilities, or false generalizations about the world outside of Japan. For example, as a partial explanation of visual *kei*’s international popularity, visual *kei* niche magazine *SHOXX* Chief of Editing Department Arasawa Junko writes that “overseas, where there are a lot of hard and big people, cute boys making music itself is rare” (Kanba 2011). However, Arasawa has completely overlooked phenomena like the

“boy band” boom of the 1990s, where “cute boys making music” was anything but rare. Similarly, in attempting to explain the appeal of the decidedly “cute” An Café (*Antikku Kissaten*), the band’s manager explicitly singles out the Japanese body type as unique and unattainable for non-Japanese. He states that “no matter how hard” men attending An Café lives overseas try, they “can never become Japanese beautiful boys” (*bishōnen*), leading his interviewer to conclude that visual *kei* boils down to Japanese “character” (*kyara*) culture specifically attached to the “Japanese body type” (*nihonjin taikai*) (Researcher Risako 2008b, 3).²⁷

This narrative is not necessarily malicious despite its nationalistic roots. Rather, it can be said to be an example of what Michael Billig has termed “banal nationalism,” or

the ideological habits which enable the established nations [...] to be reproduced. It is argued that these habits are not removed from everyday life, as some observers have supposed. Daily, the nation is indicated, or ‘flagged’, in the lives of its citizenry. Nationalism, far from being an intermittent mood in established nations, is the endemic condition. (1995, 6).²⁸

While not actively malicious, as Billig rightly stresses, “banal does not imply benign” (1995, 6). By reasserting the essential and *uniquely Japanese* nature of Japanese culture products promoted abroad, average citizens are actively reinforcing the nation-state of Japan without intending to, including shoring up an ideology that at best, can come across as arrogant, but at worst, has severe malicious consequences. However, as Brian J. McVeigh states, “a distinction should be drawn between habitual, implicit nationalisms”—such as those carried out by the

²⁷ This type of argument is highly reminiscent of *Nihonjinron* ideology, which “aims to demonstrate not only that Japan (and Japanese language, culture, people) is different (uniquely unique) from the rest of the world but also that it is superior or better” (Burgess 2012). Furthermore, “when *Nihonjinron* analysts refer to Japanese culture, they almost invariably mean Japanese ethnic culture and imply that the racially defined Japanese are its sole owners” (Sugimoto 1999, 82) —unable to be attained, for example, by non-Japanese bodies

²⁸ I have removed Billig’s caveat of “in the West,” due both to Japan’s position and my belief that this phenomenon is not limited to only countries traditionally thought of as “Western.”

majority of the citizenry in regards to “Cool Japan” and the promotion of Japanese media, for example—“and explicit nationalist movements or ideologies” (2006, 7).

Despite visual *kei*’s unofficial adoption into the “Cool Japan” narrative as an emblem of “unique Japanese culture,” not all artists support it. This demonstrates again the fluidity inherent within subcultural practice. One negative reaction appears to be addressed by band MERRY, whose work shows they operate in contrast to the blind acceptance of visual *kei* as a form of “unique Japanese culture” to be utilized in the promotion of nationalistic narratives.

MERRY formed in 2001 in a wave of bands who debuted in the “glacial period” of visual *kei*’s post-boom crash (Oshima 2013b, 98), in the generation of artists immediately following DIR EN GREY. MERRY helped establish a trend that specifically dealt with dark themes and harsh aesthetics together with two other bands of the period, MUCC and Kagerō. This movement could be seen as reflecting the contemporary atmosphere within visual *kei*, which was much darker than the bright and colorful “neo-visual *kei*” movement that would follow shortly, as well contrasting with the stylings of the band who had previously earned the highest mainstream accolades, SHAZNA (see Chapter 3).

MERRY in particular is further known for outlandish and elaborate stage performances, as well as dealing with explicitly political themes and actively criticizing Japanese society and government (Fuyu 2015). This tendency is very apparent in their 2014 album “NOnsenSe MARkeT.” While the eponymous track (quoted in the introduction) can be interpreted as criticizing the broad neoliberal capitalist nature of post-bubble Japan, the track “*Chiyoda-sen demokurashī*” (Chiyoda Line Democracy) appears to critique both broader “Cool Japan” narratives and their appropriation of visual *kei* (MERRY 2014a).²⁹ The criticism seems most

²⁹ The title is perhaps meant to refer to the fact that the Chiyoda Metro line stops at major points along the Tokyo landscape including both the cultural (Yoyogi Park, Omotesando, Nogizaka) and the official (the National Diet Building and access to the Imperial Palace), but is pointedly a very limited scope of the world’s largest city.

apparent in the “Chiyoda Line Democracy” ensemble music video, which debuted in April 2015 and is the band’s highest viewed video on their official YouTube channel as of August 2022 (Merī Channeru 2015).³⁰

Vocalist Gara spends the video being at first bemused by and repeatedly turning down attempts to engage with a collection of individuals he stumbles across in a broad, public space (Figure 7). These individuals appear to represent various aspects of Japanese culture both embraced by the “Japan Brand” (high school girls in uniform, a soba delivery man, AKB-like idols, men in yukata), those brushed aside (unkempt otaku, gender-free and cross-dressed



Figure 7: Gara (center left, blue jacket) being beckoned to join the group by the clown.
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzvrDLzsCqk>)

performers, tattooed individuals, and numerous other visual *kei* performers in various guises enjoying unproductive recreation), and those benefiting (a pair of shouting fictional politicians promising to turn this world into “heaven,” played by MERRY members, as well as a clown dressed in what appear to be American stars and stripes). The group can be interpreted as a wide swath of individuals who have been in some way affected by the “Cool Japan” strategy: those

³⁰ The music video is viewable on the band’s official YouTube channel, here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzvrDLzsCqk>

The band has also produced a “lyric video,” which projects the lyrics in time with the song onto a minimalistic background:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_UCZxdOQ6c, both last accessed September 5, 2022.

who have been promoted (the first group), those who have generally not been promoted but still potentially swept up and widely recognized (the second), or in a few cases those who are actively appropriating for their own benefit (the third).

Contrary to the cheerful-looking video, with a crowd of happily dancing individuals, the song's lyrics are decidedly grim and at all times visible on screen, overlaid on top of the images. The first line is a harsh illustration: "Every day is shit! This world, it's a bastard! Pointless [...] no matter what I do, pointless!" (*Kusotare no nichijō! Kusotare da kono sekai! Muda [...] muda Ore ga nani wo yattemo muda!*), with "pointless" repeated at a high pace eight times in a row, delivered as Gara nonchalantly licks an ice-cream cone. A group of stereotypical



Figure 8: High school girls chime in on the final "pointless!"
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzvrDLzsCqk>)

high school girls (reminiscent of AKB-esque idols) chimes in to shout the last "pointless," facing the camera for emphasis with large smiles (Figure 8) This seems to reflect Japan's precarious, nigh hopeless present, following what are now lost decades (Baldwin and Allison 2015a, 1), which the surge in popular culture promotion is failing to remedy or erase. It also addresses the general apathy and disregard for this process by the public, who choose instead to focus on small, ephemeral pleasures. In short, it is an alternative, grim interpretation of the means to which "unique Japanese culture" is so proudly promoted within "Cool Japan" rhetoric.

Indeed, it may even be pointing to a more ingratiated social reality: the fact that performers, the very ambassadors of “Cool Japan,” are often in particularly unstable social positions. This is especially true in visual *kei*, where performers are usually unable to support themselves solely with their subcultural activities (see Chapter 5). Indeed, the members of the crowd in the music video are all, in some way, lacking privileged positions within Japanese society, without hope of ever changing. It is also notable that Gara is dressed (relatively) plainly in everyday clothing, and wears no makeup, arguably positioning his character as his “backstage” self as opposed to his performing persona, or perhaps a more general Japanese citizen. This itself is an identity with an increasingly precarious societal position. As stated by Anne Allison in the same year as the video was released,

Japan is becoming a place where hope has become a privilege of the socioeconomically secure. For the rest of them—the widening pool of “losers”—even the wherewithal to imagine a (different) there and then beyond the (precarious) here and now stretches thin. (2015, 45)

For a majority of the producers and consumers of cultural objects appropriated by “Cool Japan,” then, life does indeed seem “pointless,” as “frustrations build up (*Zasetsu, zasetsu ga kasanariau!!*).” This appropriation and imbalance may even be explicitly resented: “The leading part is *them*, not me (*Shuyaku ha yatsura de Ore ja nai*).”

The social commentary does not end with the first phrase, and indeed continues non-stop throughout the song. At around the two-minute mark, after a few tenuous interactions with the larger crowd, Gara can be seen attempting to engage with a group of happily dancing, casually cross-dressed men. They welcome him initially, but become upset when he quickly gives up, appearing to be unable to relax enough to dance himself. Immediately afterwards, the overlaid lyrics say, “lured by hope” (*Kibō ni tsurare*) to something “on the brink of collapse” (*Boukaisunzen*), and Gara is successfully pulled into the group by excited, playing children. This leads to a change in his demeanor, and he begins clapping as his voiceover sings “Good-bye, friends Good-bye, tomorrow Good-bye, future Good-bye, sunlight” (*Saraba, tomo yo*

Saraba, mirai Saraba, taiyō) over a staccato choral refrain of “Aim for heaven, but once you realize it, you’re in hell” (*Tengoku mezashite, kidzukeba jigoku*).

Gara spends the rest of the video enthusiastically engaging with the group as a whole, and it ends as the crowd gathers around to lift Gara into the air while he laughs. The video ends on a freeze frame of his jubilant expression, surrounded by the happy, cultural crowd (Figure 9). While the imagery suggests that Gara has happily embraced (and been embraced by) “Cool Japan,” the harsh lyrics have painted a very different picture. Specifically, they highlight the potential dangers within this type of appropriation and acquiescence for both cultural members and the broader citizenry itself: “We’re all being capitalized on (laughingstocks, laughingstocks) (*Bokura ha minna ikasarete [waraimono waraimono]*).”



Figure 9: The final shot of the video, with Gara lifted above the crowd.
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzvrDLzsCqk>)

It is the last line of the lyrics that seems to blatantly hit the core of the nationalistic nature of “Cool Japan” and similar policies. After Gara has begun to engage (apparently happily) with this group of cultured individuals, at approximately 2:47 he faces the camera directly to deliver the following, final line of the song with a sudden, seemingly out-of-place graveness: “I find myself to be a nationalist, too!!” (*Kidzukeba ore mo nashonarisuto!!*), with the Japanese implying becoming aware of a fact that happened before one realized it (Figure 10). The line is emphasized by a choral effect but then cut off by a return in focus to Gara’s celebration with the crowd. The statement is arguably not meant to represent Gara’s literal position vis-à-vis Japan, but is rather meant to be ironic: it highlights the potential end results of taking the rhetoric of “Cool Japan” and Japanese uniqueness too far.



Figure 10: Gara, telling the camera “I find myself to be a nationalist, too!!”
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzvrDLzsCqk>)

This ironic nationalism resonates with the foundation of McVeigh’s argument that “in Japan, when the going gets tough [...] a common response is to bring up ‘culture’” (2006, 198). As stated above, the “Cool Japan” policies began after Japan had spent a “lost decade” dealing with various problems following the burst of the economic bubble. When the video for “Chiyoda Line Democracy” was released in 2015, mainstream Japan had recognized that it had become “lost decades,” with no real respite in sight. Despite taking place more than ten years

after the initial “Cool Japan” push, this song and the Japan it represents remains in a similar position: the “going” has remained “tough,” and “culture” is still utilized as both a feel-good bandage and “ideological smoke and mirrors” in lieu of real solutions (McVeigh 2006, 198). “Culture, whatever it may mean, is a favorite distraction of committed nationalists” (McVeigh 2006, 198), or as Gara put it: “The truth is all hidden (papier mâché, papier mâché) *Shinjutsu ha subete kakusarete [haribote haribote]*” (Figure 11).



Figure 11: The camera pans around the crowd, who both chime in and are potentially being labelled as the “papier mâché.”

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzvrDLzsCqk>)

In fact, as McVeigh asserts, “[n]ationalism works not because it is defined clearly and explicitly, but because it is unclear and vague. [...] [it] is a stealth ideology that shifts, mutates, and is difficult to pin down and define” (2006, 34). Indeed, “more than just concrete, nationalism is embedded in mundane practices. Such ‘banal nationalism’ gathers its charge from the way it shapes our thinking unawares” (McVeigh 2006, 35). Gara’s lyrics resonate with this phenomenon, thus illustrating a connection between the mobilization of Japanese popular culture to the notion of a “banal nationalism” which creeps up on a public, dominating their thought and practice before they “realize” (*kidzuku*) it.

I want to point also to Billig’s reminder that expository texts cannot be removed from the environment in which they are made, and can attempt only to “draw attention to the powers of an ideology which is so familiar that it hardly seems noticeable” (1995, 12). This idea is also demonstrated by the ending of “Chiyoda Line Democracy’s” music video. The progression of the action on screen demonstrates how visual *kei*, regardless of its potential different ideology, is easily (and perhaps happily) enmeshed within this “Cool Japan” narrative, and can even benefit from it, whether through simple joy, as in the video, or in more concrete economic profit. Indeed, Saito Muneaki points out that an “unconscious nationalism” has been an observable trend in visual *kei* since the 2000s. He references the emphasis on its framing as “Japanese culture,” focusing on 2012 comments from SUGIZO of LUNA SEA, another massively influential senior visual *kei* star. Saito suggests that this narrative may complement a broader conservative swing in Japanese youth through the “small nationalism” tied to ideas like “Japan is a special country” and “Japan is wonderful” (Muneaki Saito 2018, 203–4; referencing Kayama 2002), similar to rhetoric found in “Cool Japan” promotions. Gara may have noticed



Figure 12: Gara delivers the line “[We’ll] be made as dogs used to being tamed…”

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzvrDLzsCqk>)

something similar. At 1:43 in the “Chiyoda Line Democracy” video, he looks around at the crowd then smiles at the camera as he delivers the line “[We’ll] be made as dogs used to being tamed…” (*Kainarasarete inu ni naru*) (Figure 12) following the chorus “*Banzai!!* I’m a

buffoon! Stricken with Japanese fundamentals!” (*Banzai!! Ore ha dōkemono, I ro ha ni ho he to uchihihigare*). Subculture, again, is inexorably enmeshed within mainstream systems of value.

MERRY’s potential criticism is in stark contrast with the actions of other subcultural members such as YOSHIKI, who not only promotes these narratives himself, as discussed above, but actively engaged with the “Cool Japan” committee as organized by the leading (and conservative) Liberal Democratic Party.³¹ It is no wonder that YOSHIKI’s actions are actively endorsed by the Japanese government, while MERRY’s are not. While it is unclear if YOSHIKI was invited in his capacity as a visual *kei* performer specifically or merely as a representative of music artists more broadly, his position as a prime “founder” of visual *kei* (whether apocryphal or not) explicitly connects his appearances and actions to it within cultural and subcultural discourse. The presence of YOSHIKI at LDP political events, therefore, serves to represent some level of acceptance within visual *kei* of these narratives, as well as a distinct break between visual *kei*’s roots in punkish rebellion and its present figurehead’s “well spoken” and traditionalist image, despite both being encompassed in the same persona (see Chapter 2). The existence and popularity of MERRY, however, indicates that this acceptance is not universal or without criticism.

This seemingly irreconcilable contrast reaffirms the need to interpret the actions of subcultures and their participants within a framework that allows for both fluidity and the consumerist state of modernity. It cannot be said that visual *kei* as a whole either opposes or accepts its appropriation and relegitimization through the “Cool Japan” narrative, as it both does and does not, and indeed in many cases may not spare the issue a thought. Visual *kei* thus

³¹ For example, YOSHIKI attended a meeting at the party’s headquarters in 2016 as a guest lecturer to discuss the potential of “Cool Japan” strategies moving forward. He was quoted afterwards as being insistent on the need for a continuous, active push overseas from “Cool Japan” initiatives (*Sanspo* 2016).

embodies a need to interpret these types of (sub)cultural movements *without* resorting to binary conceptions. As there is no one-way, binary “west” to “east” movement within cultural globalization, neither is there one authority in the acceptance of the resulting narratives these cultural flows produce.

“Honor and love also follow the money”

In summary, visual *kei* is in part wrapped up within the larger “Cool Japan” narrative and, consequently, is complicit in Japan’s structured “banal nationalism” to some extent. Its participants, while perhaps appreciative of visual *kei*’s renewed place within Japanese society, are not entirely unaware of the environment in which it has been reinstated, nor necessarily uncritical of the broader movement itself and its potential for abuse. Visual *kei* thus exists in a fluid state, accepting, rejecting, and even ignoring its cooption by the mainstream.

In light of its recognition and success overseas, combined with a concurrent (and likely not coincidental) official push of Japanese popular culture abroad, visual *kei* has essentially been relegitimized within its native context, despite a distinctive whiff of nationalistic rhetoric surrounding this relegitimization. The general public may not be able to list many contemporary visual *kei* bands, but appears to generally accept its position within Japanese popular culture. This position is made more concrete every day by its continuing promotion as an expression of “unique Japanese culture” by the mainstream media and subcultural members alike. While it is unlikely that visual *kei* will ever reach the level of domestic popularity and widespread consumption as it did in the late 1990s, it remains a steady and (relatively) sustainable subculture, with regular, if few, major-level domestic events to match its global overseas success.

Broader Japanese discourse thus appears to take the success of visual *kei* personally—despite a relative lack of personal investment. Regardless of any former disownment or even

disparagement towards visual *kei*, it was quickly reclaimed and proudly put forth as yet another example of Japan's eminent "uniqueness" and as something "that the Japan of today can be proud of" (Y. Osawa and Shigematsu 2008, 74). In this sense, outside acceptance and popularity served to relegitimize visual *kei* in the domestic market—a relegitimization that, while not necessarily contributing to increased economic viability (aside from veteran bands with already established domestic records), *did* serve to provide a secured cultural niche in which to exist. More importantly, it added a respectability that had generally been lost with the negative connotations of the label in the wake of its downfall in the early 2000s. This change, and how it occurred, are vital to understanding visual *kei*'s contemporary discursive position within broader Japan.

This revival also demonstrates, however, the possible negative aspects, even as separated from media conglomerates and their ever-expanding control over the market: even an international, decentralized fandom that develops on fairly independent grounds can be utilized to bolster cultural nationalist narratives. While visual *kei* and its re-appropriation as "unique Japanese culture" may appear to demonstrate no immediately dangerous consequences, this relatively rapid shift towards realigning with a strict nationalism-based (consumerist) pride suggests that the boundaries between mainstream and subculture are truly *fluid*, as well as the ever-present legacy of the bubble culture. Japan may no longer be number one, but its eagerness to capitalize on surface-level understandings and images is certainly second to none.

Conclusion: Historicizing Visual Kei: It's All Fluid to Me (Futuristic Remix)

“Blow it up, don’t pull back, don’t flinch	「蹴散らせ 引くな怯むな
Go forward, it’s the future	進め 未来だ
Blow it up, burst through and show them	蹴散らせ 弾けて見せろ
That’s right, it’s the future”	そうだ 未来だ」

-BUCK-TICK, “FUTURE SONG -*Mirai ga tōru*-,” *Atomu mirai ha No. 9* (2016)

The bubble is not dead. More specifically, bubble *culture* is not dead. While the luxuriant wealth of the bubble period may have ended dramatically with the burst of the economic bubble, the culture has had a lasting and inescapable impact on Japanese lives to this day. From the hyper focus on obvious brand goods to conspicuous consumption as way of life to the increasing *visualification* of everyday identity—from music videos then to Instagram today—the bubble’s legacy is inescapable and has shaped the Japan that we know today.

When I say in this thesis that I am historicizing visual *kei*, in a sense I am also historicizing the bubble culture itself. While the cases examined within this thesis all occur after the bubble officially ‘burst’—in many cases *well* after—they are all firmly situated within the bubble’s legacy, whose neoliberal consumerist logic and liquid modern individualization permeates Japan to this day. Recall also that visual *kei* itself was officially born in the bubble period. The members of X JAPAN and BUCK-TICK are members of the *shinjinrui* and related “bubble generation,” creating the roots of the subculture that persists to this day in the Japan of the 1980s and achieving the ‘success’ of major record label deals during the height of the bubble itself. It is no coincidence that 1989 marks the year of bubble’s peak, the major debut of X JAPAN, and what the cover blurb of Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism* (2009) terms the turning point from which capitalism “successfully presented itself as the only realistic political-economic

system.” The foundations of visual *kei* are thus firmly situated in the bubble culture’s logic, and visual *kei* serves as a poignant case study of how the bubble’s legacy remains pertinent to the present day.

Therefore, in the same way, it is worth reemphasizing that visual *kei* is not dead. While the average contemporary citizen may consider it to be finished, visual *kei* persists—almost a concrete legacy of the bubble. It is a subculture that, essentially, had consumer society built-in from the beginning. This fits with Fisher’s concept of “precorporation,” the “desires, aspirations, and hopes” it aims to fulfill have already been *created* by neoliberal “capitalist culture,” not later incorporated by it (Fisher 2009, 9), though critics of SHAZNA may disagree. Visual *kei* has transformed throughout its life, always adjusting and molding itself to the broader structural discourse. Existing under neoliberal capitalist realism, it too follows the logic of the overarching structures. Like capitalism itself, it is an “infinitely plastic entity, capable of metabolizing and absorbing anything with which it comes into contact” (Fisher 2009, 6). This is not a bug, but a feature—visual *kei*, through absorbing the logic of consumerism, *has survived*. In making and remaking itself as a viable commodity, it persists (Bauman 2007, 12). Negotiations of meaning are not evasions but rather a fundamental aspect of the subculture’s *modus operandi*; it is fundamentally *liquid* in nature, and *fluidly* engages with meaning and broader discourses.

This is how SHAZNA can be completely rewritten in hindsight with no apparent friction, and MERRY’s blunt social critique can coexist with YOSHIKI’s hearty embrace of the status quo. Visual *kei* can and does adopt multiple positions simultaneously and maintains a fluid relationship with broader Japan to better adapt and survive. YOSHIKI *himself* can be both a rebellious, trailblazing punk, and *also* an unapologetic capitalist shill; importantly, the two identities are not in conflict because of how subcultural meaning has adapted to the contemporary post-bubble Japanese context. Identity is a visual, consumable object, and selling oneself as much as possible is a matter of course. After all, subjectivity *itself* has come to be

dependent on one's viability as a commodity (Bauman 2007, 12). So long as YOSHIKI is selling, is *visible*, be it through brand deals with Coca-Cola or publicized meetings with LDP members, he is relevant, and thus he survives to the present day. His subcultural, punk-esque roots become merely one more accessory to append to his fluid, chameleon-like persona—utilized when useful, brushed aside when not. In the same way, SHAZNA can be both talentless sell-outs and respected members of the subculture; hide can be both a tortured artist and profitable brand; the GazettE can be both 'pure' artists in it for the 'right reasons' and yet have a major label contract. Through historicizing visual *kei*, we can see how this might be the case, and come to recognize this logic as developed through the legacy of the bubble in the “culturally plastic” environment of Japan (McGray 2002, 50). Of course visual *kei* and subculture more broadly operate within the malleable, hyper-individualized structures of liquid modernity (Bauman 2000) and neoliberal capitalist consumer society, or more specifically neoliberal capitalist realism (Fisher 2009; Hassler-Forest 2012)—crucially, *we cannot imagine any other way of being*.

It also bears note that visual *kei* has, for the majority of its lifespan, existed in post-bubble, “lost decade(s)” Japan, despite its firm foundations in the bubble itself. It also absorbs Japan's gradual decline in hope, particularly evident from the early 2000s (Miyazaki 2010). While the economic downturn itself in the wake of the bubble's pop is the most obvious culprit, liquid modernity and neoliberal capitalism here offer additional interpretation. To use YOSHIKI once again as emblematic, he is notably lacking in anything truly *new*—his use of his 1980s punk self to sell products today could be said to embody Fisher's later worry, that the “destruction of solidarity and security” by neoliberal capitalism (also a notable trait of liquid modernity (Jacobsen 2017, 247)) has in turn engendered a “compensatory hungering for the well-established and the familiar” (Fisher 2014, 14). In a locale where this “destruction” is hyper-apparent, it seems logical that this “compensatory hungering,” too, would be inflated.

Indeed, the bubble itself serves as a target of this “hungering,” a site of longing and nostalgia for the glorified past, a “dream” to contemporary youth living in seemingly unending economic decline (Mari Saito 2018). It is therefore no leap to consider how the most obvious trappings of this short yet bright period in Japanese history would somehow manage to eke out a continued existence now that “many feel that Japan’s best days are over” (Mari Saito 2018). Visual *kei*, with its unapologetically loud and flashy looks, sometimes even to the detriment of all else, is almost a perfect representative for a public bent on consuming surface-level evidence of prosperity.

Fisher’s alternative proposition that “neoliberal capitalism has [...] deprived artists of the resources necessary to produce the new” (2014, 15) is also visible in visual *kei*, as well as the related, overarching individualization of responsibility for success and, especially, failure (Bauman 2000, 29–32). Think of ryuusei, his career cut short due to ‘inappropriately’ revealing his economic precarity, as well as the difficult negotiations taking place around bands’ ability to ‘sell’ in general. A pessimist would say that visual *kei* exists in a state of perpetually delayed collapse, matching a society permeated by “an atmosphere of hopelessness for the future” (Genda 2017, 103), or a “society in decline” (Murai 2022, xxiii), where Japanese people can no longer imagine a “future that might be better than the past” (Leheny 2022, 325). In this point of view, it is only a matter of course that hide’s label scrapes hide’s demo tapes to create something “new,” and that YOSHIKI tweets pictures of himself from the 1980s to reaffirm his subcultural status and keeps promising a new X JAPAN album that never comes. As Fisher says, “the past cannot be forgotten, the present cannot be remembered” (2014, 95): Japan focuses on a glorified, *discursively (re)created* past at the detriment of shaping the future.

However, an optimist would begin by pointing out that YOSHIKI and hide’s record label *are not the sum of the subculture*. MERRY highlights how visual *kei* is not blind to their sociocultural situation, and people can point and laugh at it. The various incarnations and forms

of visual *kei* demonstrate how their focus is always on the future, and the subculture gives pleasure to people for a variety of individual reasons. *Bangya* dedicate significant portions of their time, money, and energy to performers because they find *meaning* in it, meaning that is always deeply personal. In other words, visual *kei* subculture focuses instead on what *can* be enjoyed in light of the seemingly ‘hopeless’ present situation, instead of longing for a dead past and failing to move forward. If anything, visual *kei* subculture shows that people still have hope, and still believe that moving forward is worthwhile, even if only for the next live.

As I have stated, this thesis is a historicization, not a history of visual *kei*. Throughout, I have adapted an interpretive attitude towards past events, analyzing them from the perspective both of their contemporary moment and the present day, looking both at visual *kei* as it (reportedly) was and how it has been (re)constructed in public memory. Visual *kei*, more than an object of study, has served as a focus around which I have painted a picture of post-bubble Japan, focusing on how the logic of consumerism has come to dominate every facet of society. More specifically, in the wake of the bubble period, specifically *conspicuous* consumption coated with a thick yet hollow performance of affect, has become the predominant means of structuring identities—actions must be rendered *visible* to be meaningful. A performer cannot simply reminisce on his former punk days, he must post the memory to Twitter and elicit engagement with other subcultural members. People cannot merely be fans of *hide*, but feel the need to make pilgrimages to his grave and leave offerings to then Tweet about—even to the point of causing disturbances and ignoring health and safety guidelines. Even regular live attendance has become increasingly performative in the age of widespread SNS usage and constant connection—is a live truly attended without a picture of the signboard shared online together with emotional outpourings of excitement to gather ‘likes’ and comments? In the wake of the bubble, meaning and identity are not structured only through consumption, but through

the *visual* and the *performed*—it is therefore highly suitable that *visual kei* serve as emblematic of this period in Japanese history.

Historicizing Post-Bubble Japan through a Subculture

Throughout this thesis, I have based my analysis on the argument that visual *kei* is a fluid subculture firmly situated in its context of post-bubble Japan. First, I started with the initial claim that visual *kei* be considered a subculture, not a genre (or a scene), and that this subcultural framework be understood as fundamentally *liquid* in nature. Through engagement with both Japanese and Anglophone literature on the concept, as well as the incorporation of Bauman's metaphor of liquid modernity (Bauman 2000), I proposed the idea of *fluid subculture*. In short, this slight tweak to the subcultural framework puts fluidity at the forefront, forcing subcultures to be understood as inescapably enmeshed within their broader mainstream culture and value system, with all meaning making similarly entrenched in and only understood through these broader systems. In contemporary liquid modernity (Bauman 2000) and its "society of consumers" (Bauman 2007), this necessarily includes the structure of neoliberal capitalist realism (Fisher 2009; Hassler-Forest 2012). This system of value is so deeply ingrained that it becomes difficult even to perceive, let alone question. Subculture, situated as it is in the mainstream of post-bubble Japan, must therefore also assign and create value in ways that align with this system, or be rendered valueless.

Next, I used visual *kei* to challenge a particularly ingrained misconception within the field of subcultural studies: the idea that subcultures are inherently resistive to or separated from the mainstream. Primarily through the case study of YOSHIKI's career, I demonstrated that visual *kei*, rather than resisting the idea of 'selling out,' negotiates blatant profiteering as 'authentication' or, at the very least, not objectionable. In post-bubble Japan, everything is interpreted through neoliberal capitalism, and consumption is the predominant form of

engagement; political resistance, if it can be said to exist at all, is reduced to surface level performance. YOSHIKI, therefore, can focus on profiteering from his status as ‘punk’ and ‘founding member’ of visual *kei* without serious repercussion. Fans can be both upset by their fellows not properly ‘sacrificing’ in order to support a struggling performer and still understand how a bigger, more ‘worthy’ band might draw any fan away. Under neoliberal capitalist realism and its related ideals of meritocracy (Littler 2018), these seemingly contradictory ideas can be held simultaneously and in harmony due to the fluid nature of subculture and its reciprocal relationship with the mainstream.

Moving backwards in history, I then explored this connection to the mainstream through the anti-feminist backlash which took place in Japan in the late 1990s and early 2000s. More specifically, I explored the concurrent “crisis of masculinity” (Iida 2005), co-inspired by the promotion of women’s rights and the apparent “feminization” (*joseika*) of men. This feminization was seemingly personified in IZAM, frontman of successful band SHAZNA. IZAM, with his beautiful looks and idolized performances, became a scapegoat and even anathema within the subculture, emblematic of its degradation and dismissal by the mainstream. This scapegoating exemplified the broader rejection gender bending and androgyny in Japanese society in favor of maintaining traditional binaries. IZAM and SHAZNA’s later revival and appreciation within visual *kei*, as well as the popularity of more contemporary idol-esque band THE GOLDEN BOMBERS, demonstrate the fluctuations in the discursive constructions of meaning and historical memory of visual *kei*, which in turn demonstrates its fluidity and that of subculture more generally. IZAM is both a disgrace *and* respected senior, and these identities coexist without friction.

Following its initial rise, visual *kei* quickly declined in popularity, to the point where it was considered ‘dead’ at the turn of the millennium—also a particularly hopeless period for Japan more broadly. This was compounded by the literal death of founding X JAPAN member

hide in 1998, bringing a sudden end to a career that had already been established as addressing much of the despair and hopelessness experienced by contemporary Japanese youth (Genda 2005). hide's death was not, however, the end of his career. Not only has his image been used to sell more merchandise every year in the wake of his passing, the very narrative of his death itself was quickly coopted, used both to sanctify and sanitize the controversial performer posthumously. While his endless reiteration through ever multiplying products is, on the one hand, accepted as a matter of course under post-bubble Japan's neoliberal capitalist realism, it is not accepted entirely without contest. There was a line of exploitation crossed that created unease in the subculture, namely, the use of technology to create a "new" single in "hide's" voice. This product too was enveloped within the broader structures of meaning making, with producers invoking both the fans' benefit *and* the concept of work as "individual moral practice" (Weeks 2011, 11) to embed their actions firmly within comprehensible frames of meaning and legitimacy. This further demonstrates the malleability of subcultural discourses in response to pressure exerted from mainstream systems of value upon the affective meaning making of the subcultural member, as well as the predominance of bubble culture logic in contemporary Japan.

Moving forward in time again, I investigated what I have termed the affective contract, which I have observed in practice within the contemporary *bangya*-centered sphere of visual *kei*. I argued that affective labor more broadly has become a matter of course in the contemporary world, with affect being increasingly tied to other forms of labor to the point where it has become the dominant *form* of labor itself (Hardt 1999, 90). The trend is specifically observable post-bubble Japan where immaterial, affective labor has come to dominate. This is particularly evident in music, where the idol and their "ingenious system" of employing affective labor to engage audiences (Galbraith and Karlin 2019, 45) has become the prime model for success. This translates to visual *kei* and music subcultures more broadly, where performers are required to perform affectively in addition to their music and stage shows—to,

in effect, become more like idols. In the age of social media, this has only been amplified, with bandmen constantly posting glimpses into the frontstage-backstage (Goffman 1956) of their ‘personal’ lives to engage with the audience and convince them that they are worthy of patronage.

I specifically frame this practice as an affective *contract*, however, because fans too—especially *bangya*—are similarly bound and perform their own affective labor for the subculture’s perpetuation. They are not, however, as significantly impacted by a contract breach as performers, who can be ruined by it. This was demonstrated through the case study of ryuusei, a bandman who broke the affective contract through ‘inappropriately’ exposing performers’ economic troubles and chastising fans for not spending enough money, rupturing the fantasy by making subcultural members acknowledge the uncomfortable realities of the subculture. The swift reaction to this transgression, both from fans and other performers eager to assert their own proper conduct, demonstrates the power of this affective contract as well as another vital aspect of neoliberal capitalist realism. Namely, the idea that we cannot admit to, cannot *name* the structure that shapes our actions, for to do so is to admit subservience to it, and to *challenge* it. If consumerism is one keyword of post-bubble Japan, apolitical is another.

Finally, I explored visual *kei*’s global expansion from the 2000s onwards. While other scholars focus on the outward movement and global fan communities (e.g., Muneaki Saito 2014; Reyes Navarro 2021; Seibt 2021), I looked at how visual *kei*’s global success was received domestically. Although visual *kei* was never explicitly targeted by “Cool Japan” policy, it was able to piggy-back through anime tie-ups and the use of the Internet to spread overseas, developing an international fanbase without outside support or, in some cases, intention. In response, the Japanese mainstream discourse was quick to rebrand visual *kei* from dead subculture to “unique Japanese culture” worthy of respect and promotion. DIR EN GREY, for example, through their domestic interpretation as “most successful Japanese band overseas,”

was suddenly embraced by the mainstream. While this relegitimization was welcomed and explicitly attracted by certain parts of the subculture, others were both aware and critical of the ends to which this discourse can be used: specifically, nationalism. I explored MERRY's promotional video for "Chiyoda Line Democracy" as a form of critique, demonstrating how subcultural members may recognize the banal nationalism (Billig 1995; McVeigh 2006) which attends the discourse of "unique Japanese culture" while at the same time being wrapped up in it. While this globalized relegitimization has served to reestablish visual *kei* as worthy of attention and respect, the implications therein are actively negotiated and reshaped to become part of the subculture, cementing my argument that subcultures are *fluid*.

Through a historicization of visual *kei*, I have explored meanings within and around the subculture, engaging with how it connects to the broader spread of bubble culture logic in post-bubble Japan. Visual *kei*, while it is and can be many things, is ultimately a *liquid* signifier, highlighting a subsection of Japanese culture under liquid modernity that operates under its post-bubble logic and can be understood thusly. Ultimately, however, beyond this historicization, I would argue it is impossible to define once and for all, impossible to successfully box in due to this fundamental fluidity, which is why I have avoided doing so throughout this thesis.

Subculture: Now (and always) Available in Liquid Form

After I finished giving a talk on various "gender troubles" in visual *kei* in April 2021, the floor was opened to audience questions. One audience member prefaced her question with the statement that if we took a "little bit of time" to hash it out, the members of the room could probably define visual *kei* then and there. A bit taken aback, I laughed, and insisted that no, I did not think we could. She let it go, as it was not the core of her question, but this comment

has stuck with me. The casual insistence that we can quickly box a subcultural phenomenon, and by inference, that we *should* do so as academics, has been niggling me ever since.

As Matsuko Deluxe succinctly stated, and I have confirmed after more than twenty years' experience, "visual *kei* is difficult." It is above all else a *fluid* concept, with definitions and features adapting and changing regularly as it continues to evolve and grow along with mainstream value systems. Furthermore, this complexity and integral connection to broader structures and meaning is not something unique to visual *kei* but is to be found whenever one dives very deeply into one specific subcultural topic. This may explain the audience member's assumption above—without this deep dive, it may be relatively simple to be distracted by surface qualifiers and the "unrealism" of visual *kei*, accepting them at face value and situating it as somehow distinct from Japanese society more broadly, operating apart and perhaps even in resistance to it.

As I have shown, however, this is certainly not the case. I have made the argument that visual *kei* is a subculture firmly situated within its broader mainstream context of Japan, and that meanings must therefore be interpreted in relation to these broader structures—hence my focus on its historicization. However, past this foundational classification, exhaustive qualifiers become more difficult, as I have demonstrated throughout this thesis. Indeed, I do not think there is one authority that can definitively say, this is visual *kei*, and this is not. What visual *kei* is to me differs from what visual *kei* is to a performer, a fan, a music critic, a casual observer, or indeed any individual. What is most important is that visual *kei* has meaning to all individuals that consider themselves part of or engage with the subculture, and further that these meanings are developed through the broader structures of contemporary Japanese society. Matsuko Deluxe is not a subcultural member of visual *kei*, but her meaning making about visual *kei* is still important and contributes to its discourse. In fact, as an actor in post-bubble Japan, she too is embedded within the same structures of meaning, and thus is not as separate from visual *kei*

as an outsider may suppose. She operates in the same media system, where meaning must be interpreted through the lens of neoliberal capitalism realism (Fisher 2009; Hassler-Forest 2012) or, essentially, not exist.

The fluid nature of this discourse and how it flows around all actors in contemporary Japan demonstrates how inseparably entwined visual *kei* is with the world around it. Indeed, without a deeper understanding of post-bubble Japan, we cannot understand visual *kei*—it therefore is not something that can be accomplished in just a “bit of time.”

It is worth reiterating here that the idea of fluidity in relation to subculture is not a new one, nor one limited to visual *kei*. Indeed, the initial argument for fluidity was already made by Gary Alan Fine and Sherryl Kleinman in 1979, who I have quoted repeatedly throughout this thesis, and will do so here again at length:

Sociologists should not allow themselves to be trapped into reifying subculture so that it seems like a material thing. To think of culture as a corpus of knowledge may be heuristically valuable, until one begins to give this corpus physical properties. Both personnel and information flow across the boundaries of the subcultural system, entering and existing at irregular intervals, and this fluidity must be considered in analysis. (1979, 6)

Visual *kei*, as I have examined it in this thesis, serves as a case study not only of bubble culture’s legacy in post-bubble Japan, but also to support this broader argument about subculture. However, I took it one step further, and argued the concept of *fluid subculture*: the idea of a grouping that is always in flux, constantly in negotiation, shifting in meaning, boundaries, and values, but *never* separate from larger, overarching, dominant sociocultural value systems. This resonates with Zygmunt Bauman’s metaphor of liquid modernity, where society and cultural meaning within is malleable, ever changing, and shifting based on context and interpretation (2000). This idea of liquid modernity is critiqued by those who believe that it suggests that meaning no longer exists: the postmodern condition. This same argument has been used to decry the idea of subculture (e.g., Muggleton 2000). However, as I demonstrated in this thesis, both subculture and meaning making still exist, and have a function within mainstream society.

As Bauman states, “[w]hat sets liquids apart from solids is the looseness and frailty of their bonds, *not* their specific gravity” (Bauman and Gane 2004, 18 emphasis original). In other words, meaning is *fluid* and *negotiable*, *not* nonexistent.

Subculture, with visual *kei* as a prime example, exists precisely *because* of this fluidity. Without this ability to adapt and shift, change with the times, and incorporate new ideas while at the same time maintaining the ability to also reject them wholeheartedly, visual *kei* would have surely died out in the 1990s. Instead, it has adapted, incorporating the structures of broader Japanese society into its own discourses, working together with them to survive. As stated by Miyazawa Akio in his introduction to the NHK sponsored retrospective on post-war Japanese subculture (also here defined as “lower” or “secondary culture”), as conceptions of “high” and “low” culture change based on time and perspective, so too does “subculture.” “[T]he use of the word subculture is completely different depending on the person” (Miyazawa 2014, 8, 10).¹ This flexibility may lead to criticism. Artist Matsunaga Tenma, for example, laments the contemporary transformation of “subculture” (or specifically “*sabukaru*”) in Japan from something exclusive to a special few, who found it through chance and effort and engaged in depth, to something accessible, saccharine, hollow, and easily capitalized on by the mainstream (2021).² Indeed, as I have argued through this thesis, this transformation *must* have occurred for subculture to survive under neoliberal capitalism.

¹ Miyazawa does, however, emphasize a sense of exclusivity in his own discussion, specifically positing “deviation” (from the majority position) as fundamental to subculture at the end of his work (2014, 99).

² It is also relevant that Matsunaga specifically genders the modern consumer of this “sentimental, artificially sweetened” subculture in his closing vignette as female (2021)—recall the negative reaction to the so-called “feminization” of visual *kei* in Chapter 3. Matsunaga also has at least a tangential relation to visual *kei*. His Twitter account (@urbangarde) is followed by numerous visual *kei* artists, including Kaya, Sakurai Ao, and Awoi Haru. Fellow member of Matsunaga’s band urbangarde (*ābangyarudo*) Ookubo Kei (@keiookubo, identified on Twitter as “roughly a man” [*ōmune otoko*]) has also performed together with Kaya at multiple acoustic events.

Importantly, while subcultural value judgments regarding this transformation may be negative—in addition to Matsunaga, think of the reaction to the “money grubbing” production of “*Ko gyaru*,” or MERRY’s harsh criticism of contemporary Japan’s uses of (sub)culture—they do not *deny* its existence nor lead to any fundamental break. Furthermore, negative judgement does not negate other, potentially deeper meanings that subcultural members may find for themselves. *hide* fans are, vitally, still *hide* fans, and MERRY is still a popular visual *kei* band touring actively and beloved by many in the subculture. While Matsunaga “hates” *sabukaru*, he does not *deny* it (2021). Indeed, subcultures are not so fragile *because* of their inherent liquidity. To continue with Antony Bryant’s metaphor of the Klein bottle that I introduced in Chapter 1, visual *kei* and subculture can live on precisely because they “can never exist in the first place” (2007, 134)—at least not as a solid, “material thing” (Fine and Kleinman 1979, 6). Meanings and practices flow through visual *kei*, and through analyzing these meanings and practices we gain a glimpse into the broader mainstream sociocultural framework they operate in.

This implies that neoliberal capitalism, as the predominant sociocultural and economic structure of contemporary Japan (and indeed the world more broadly), also necessarily has a hand in structuring meaning within subcultural practice. This is *a matter of course* under neoliberal capitalist realism (Fisher 2009; Hassler-Forest 2012), because no other form of meaning can even be imagined. In neoliberal capitalist realism, all value is interpreted through the lens of neoliberal capitalism, in which “the market is, or ideally should be the basis for *all* society” and competition is infused into “every aspect of our lives” (Wilson 2018, 2–3). In other words, value is determined by market worth. Subculture’s fluidity means that it necessarily absorbs, negotiates, and is shaped by the broader structures in which it finds itself. To insist that subculture must in some way defy this is to demand an unreasonable and indeed untenable set of practices. In order to persist, a subculture must (to some extent) operate under the same

rules as society more broadly. To not do so would mean its demise. MERRY may paint a harsh picture of contemporary Japan, *but to do so they still have to sell the album and perform for paying audiences.*

In this way, my combination of subculture, liquid modernity, and neoliberal capitalist realism offers a framework to better study subcultural practice and meaning making. Visual *kei*'s position in relation to its mainstream is better understood through a lens that can constructively unpack its meaningfulness in context.

As such, in this thesis, I explored the discourse of visual *kei* and how it resonates with Japan's values, anxieties, and socioeconomic situation in the post-bubble environment. While work on visual *kei* as an object of study has been conducted in the past, this work has not placed visual *kei* in this specific societal and historical contextual discourse. Instead, it focused more on specific aspects of the subculture in isolation, such as gender performances by performers (e.g., Inoue 2003a; Johnson 2020a, 2020b), fans' activities domestically and abroad (e.g., K. Koizumi 2003; Murota 2003; Hashimoto 2007; Johnson 2019; Reyes Navarro 2021; Seibt 2021), performers' overseas activities (e.g., Kato 2009; Muneaki Saito 2014), musicality (e.g., McLeod 2013; Muneaki Saito 2017), or musical history and development (e.g., Morikawa 2003; Kashiwagi 2011; Muneaki Saito 2018). While gender related topics are certainly a popular topic, the over-focus on this one aspect of visual *kei* has limited past research.³ Moreover, fieldwork has been limited in scope, going as far as generalizing visual *kei* from an ambiguously defined "summer" in Tokyo (McLeod 2013) or fan meaning making from two magazine rankings and a single poll of students (Inoue 2003a).

Through my analysis, however, I did not aim to map or generalize, but rather to demonstrate how meaning making within visual *kei* discourse integrates visual *kei* fully within

³ I am not immune to the draw of gender as topic; to date, my publications on visual *kei* are all centrally focused on some gender-related aspect of subcultural practice (Johnson 2019, 2020a, 2020b).

its broader mainstream context of contemporary, post-bubble Japanese society, and how it regularly negotiates with this context throughout the course of its history. This investigation has not only submitted the subculture of visual *kei* to scrutiny (including gender performances, fan activities, etc.), but specifically *historicized* it within the context of Japan's bubble period and beyond. Visual *kei* provides us with a window into post-bubble Japan. It demonstrates how the bubble culture, including its conspicuous consumerist practices and neoliberal capitalist values, has penetrated every inch of Japanese life. It demonstrates how the legacy of this culture has extended beyond the economic and into the affective and emotional levels where it has become intrinsic to meaning making; how these systems of value are not escapable even in death; and how all practice can ultimately be turned to the ends of the broader, traditional, and even nationalistic apparatus. At the same time, visual *kei* also demonstrates how the participating individual is not necessarily ignorant of these realities (or a "cultural dope"), but instead negotiates and shapes their own meanings within this broader system. In short, visual *kei*, in addition to highlighting the lingering legacy of bubble culture, demonstrates the liquidity of modern society and the fluidity of subculture.

"Go Forward, It's the Future": In Conclusion

Ultimately, I hope that my work has done at least two things. First, I hope that my unpacking of visual *kei* throughout these pages has demonstrated that, rather than intriguing but meaningless ephemera, it is an established part of the Japanese (and increasingly global) sociocultural system. Specifically, it is a core case study of the bubble culture's legacy in post-bubble Japan's sociocultural development, and incorporates diverse, often contradictory negotiations within its ambiguous yet recognizable confines. Through this, I have aimed to open a new window onto post-bubble Japanese society, through which meaning can be examined and understood anew. Additionally, with regards to visual *kei*, I hope that I have convinced even

the most skeptical reader that it is most productively analyzed as a subculture and treated as the fluid entity that it is.

Second, and building upon this concrete foundation, I have aimed to expand upon existing subcultural scholarship through the introduction of *fluid subculture*, and hopefully prompted future scholars to embrace this framework as useful. It is my hope that instead of inventing new terms, scholars truly engage with academic historical attempts and works to place the phenomenon against existing frameworks, allowing a more cohesive and productive scholarship moving forward.

I made clear in my introduction that I entered my study as an established fan of visual *kei*. It was my inspiration not only to start this research project back in 2012, but also my broader introduction to Japan itself. It is no exaggeration to say that my entire life course was ultimately altered as a result of my introduction to visual *kei*, and this cannot help but affect my outlook. While I do not base my research upon my *bangya* identity, nor imply that it lends my work and interpretations any special validity, I feel it should be mentioned.

It is my hope that future scholars continue to work on visual *kei*, and cease treating it as “something that is finished,” as Professor Yasuda Masahiro said to me when introducing Inoue et al.’s *Vijuaru kei to jendā* as the only real established research on the subject. With more researchers invested, a better, more thorough (but again, never complete or definitive) picture might be painted, leading to more diverse and broader paths to knowledge. Research into other, various aspects of the subculture would also be welcome, including its domestic and global practices. While visual *kei* may be “difficult,” I believe that this is an opportunity rather than a stumbling block. “Difficulty” means that visual *kei* offers a plethora of angles from which to engage, and a multitude of meanings and implications to unpack for future scholars.

Indeed, this “difficulty” helps to remind us that the world does not exist in simple binaries, whether ‘subculture’ versus ‘mainstream,’ or indeed ‘visual *kei*’ versus ‘not visual *kei*.’

This is precisely why I embrace the metaphor of liquidity: it allows for flow, complications, and contradictions, all of which are intrinsic in everyday life. This is not a new phenomenon, although it can be misunderstood as such. This may in fact be part of the reason behind the rush for new, non-subcultural frameworks, connecting this fluidity to progress and contemporary society and thus established inherently in some way *different* from what had come before. Binaries, however, have never been true to life, nor were they ever true to subculture.

At the same time however, it is vital to remember that ‘binaries’ and ‘structure’ are not synonymous. Practice necessarily takes place within wider structures, and can only be meaningful through being interpreted along these pathways. Indeed, it is these structures that allow us to make meaning, and this meaning matters. It may seem that this thesis has placed the weight more heavily on the side of structure compared to agency, but I want to reaffirm here that this is not my stance. While my thesis does not attempt to solve the age-old debate of objectivism versus subjectivism, I *do* argue for the fundamental “interdependence” of structure and agency, and for taking them *outside* of a binary understanding and instead recognizing that they constitute each other (Parker 2000). In the same way, I do not argue that the condition of neoliberal capitalist realism in a liquid modernity renders us, as actors within it, without agency or, indeed, hope. Through analyses like this thesis, we can begin to recognize neoliberal capitalism’s “inconsistent or untenable” nature (Fisher 2009, 16) and start looking for paths to the future. Indeed, Fisher points to our present moment as an “enormous opportunity” (2009, 80). In the end of his work, which has had such profound impact on my own thinking and this thesis more broadly, he closes with a line fittingly reminiscent of the hide lyric that opened this thesis: “[f]rom a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again” (Fisher 2009, 81).

This is precisely why it is important to *not* codify subculture or to define visual *kei*, but instead to *historicize* the phenomena as a fluid process of contested meanings and symbols.

Certain aspects of subcultural meaning making, unavoidably, are negated by any strict boxing-in. To return to Bryant's metaphor of the Klein bottle (2007, 133) and to the SEX MACHINEGUNS lyric from Chapter 1, subcultures are a "contradiction:" they seem impossible, cannot exist in the sense that they cannot be solidified and boxed in, but at the same time they *do* exist and through that have *meaning*. Who is 'in' and what is 'out' is simply a matter of perspective, and the answers can be negotiated, adjusted, and changed. L'Arc~en~Ciel both *is* and *is not* visual *kei*, all at the same time; YOSHIKI is both a 'punk' and 'founder' of visual *kei* as well as a self-branded, shameless capitalist profiteer. This contradiction does not make these ideas *meaningless* but rather emphasizes the fluidity of the discourse in which they are engaged.

Visual *kei* may be "difficult," it may be a niche subculture with a tenuous position, and it may be something different depending on who you ask and when, but this is not important. What is important is the meaning derived from it, and how it fits into the broader context of post-bubble Japan. In short, it is the meaning *making* of visual *kei*, and what we can learn from it, that matters.

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