

eXtreme Make-up—eXpression(s) of a Culture? (The Faces of 'Visual Kei': Origins & Influences)

Johnathon John

Chitose Institute of Science & Technology

The Harajuku Jingu-bashi cosplay is a remarkable expression of youth sub-culture which, through Media attention inside and outside of Japan, has come to represent: 'The Face of Japan'. The sources of the cosplay are the costume, hairstyles and make-up of Japanese Visual Bands (Visual Kei). Though the use of eXtreme make-up by rock bands is not unknown outside Japan, and though the mimicking of bands' style by fans is nothing new, yet the Jingu-bashi phenomenon is unique in itself, and the Visual Kei trend is uniquely Japanese-not least in that Japan has a tradition of eXtreme make-up in Popular Culture: Kabuki, Geisha, Takarazuka. Though these have had and do have a strong following of dedicated-even fanatical-fans, none of them have had the direct spill-over effect of the Visual Kei.

Since my research interests lie in various aspects of 'face'-physical and metaphorical-and even though in actuality 'face' cannot be isolated from other aspects of human display, I was motivated to delve into the significance of the phenomenon in general and, more specifically, to search for meaning in the eXtreme make-up tradition:

- What is the significance of the eXtreme make-up tradition?
- Are Japanese Visual Kei a manifestation of this tradition?
- Is the Jingu-bashi phenomenon indicative of traits in Japanese self-expression?
- What conclusions (if any) can be drawn with regard to Japanese face, make-up, and self-expression?

It is a complex matter, overlapping several fields and eras. Simply:

- Traditional geisha and kabuki faces (modes of facial-display using eXtreme make-up) have come to be symbolic of Japan and Japanese-and they express certain ideals of demeanor and expression.
- Though the roots go back further in time, these faces are redolent of the Edo era-in particular the ethos of the 'Floating World'.
- Such ideals and ethos have been powerful influences on the cultural psyche of contemporary Japan, perpetuating traditions of facial-display in relation to status, gender, and emotions. These traditions seem to be based on the concept of 'ideals'.
- The Visual Kei ethos exhibits many parallels with that of the 'Floating World', but a sub-culture of young Japanese are using it to subvert the traditions of facial- display and self-expression.
- Though Visual Kei Cosplay is, in its entirety: 'copying'-yet it is seen as 'self-expression' by those who do it.

Though it is impossible to assess the historical or socio-cultural significance of trends and events while they are happening, my personal sense is that the Visual Kei / Cosplay phenomenon represents tradition in transition.