

## ***Flowers of Evil* to *Aku no Hana*: Baudelaire's Transculturation across Space and Time**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper deals with the event of transculturation as it reflects and adapts the decadent lifestyle and poetry of *fin-de-siècle*, exemplified by Charles Baudelaire's momentous and avant-garde work, *Flowers of Evil*, into the J-Rock music scene of Visual-kei, in the album of the band Buck-Tick, named *Aku no Hana* (Japanese for *Flowers of Evil*), its lyrics, music and sensibilities of the late 90's. The decadent aesthetics of Baudelaire is distortedly mirrored not only in the lyrics and musical arrangement of the songs, but also in the stylization of the band members, their make-up, hairdo, costumes and stage props and lighting. These artists are then, dichotomically enough, both consumers and producers of capitalism, men and makers of the "arcade" culture that Walter Benjamin and his notion of Baudelairean flanerier eulogizes and fetishizes as evidence of contemporary modernity, as well as legatees of Eurocentric modernism in the wake of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Gender-fluidity and androgyny being an integral component of the Visual-Kei scene, stemming from the pre-existing bishounen culture in Japan, as well as the Greco-Roman antiquarian or contemporary white "twink" subculture in male homosexuality; derives its derive their theoretical affirmation as an aesthetic expression from Baudelaire's own critical works.. In the course of this study, multifaceted views and implications of transculturation, involving reception theory, translation studies and adaptation theory, will be discussed. Baudelaire's 1857 book is twice mirrored in the music album *Aku no Hana*, where the rock band is both an audience interpreting the earlier artifact, as well as an artist, warping and moulding that influence into a different and original art-form, that of Visual-Kei J-Rock.

**Keywords:** Baudelaire, Buck-Tick, Visual-Kei, Decadent Poetry, Performative Arts

Transculturation was a term coined by Fernando Ortiz in 1940, which refers to the process by which a subordinate culture chooses the facets of the dominant culture that it wishes to assume. In this precursor to hybridism, the exoticism attached to the foreign cultural artifact remains, even as it becomes an integral part of the subordinate culture. In this medley of hybridity, mimicry, transdisciplinarity, transculturality and transtextuality, the zone of transmediality emerges wherein forms do not merely exchange their characteristics but also evolve into a multiplicity of possibilities. (Anderson 2010: E67-68)

This can be said to be quite true of the 1990 music album *Aku no Hana*, by the Japanese Rock Band Buck-Tick, which, as is avowed by the members of the band, is a result of their reading Charles Baudelaire's masterpiece, *Flowers of Evil*, in its French original. The phenomenon of transculturation then opens up the panoramic views involving reception theory, translation studies and adaptation theory to which we are going next.

The animation of the ending credits of the anime *Aku no Hana* (Japanese for *Flowers of Evil*), based on the seemingly perverted aesthetics of Baudelaire's notoriously famed collection of poetry of the same name, shows an eyeball growing out of a bulbous sprout, where the flower should have been. This mutation into the signifying symbol for the dichotomy of the cruelty of nature, as Baudelaire logically explains in his essay, "In Praise of Makeup" ("L'Éloge du maquillage"), versus its counter, art, and the latter's superiority to nature, grotesque and horrific, lays bare the pall of everyday illusion into the ghastly knowledge, of the tumorous eye-flower, the objective correlative of the malign canker of society and its diseased aesthetics. A grotesque form of the all-seeing eye is this Flower of Evil, a hybrid between an organic plant and the disinterested gaze of the flaneur, it symbolizes the decadent artsiness of a flower, grown out of the horrors of the cemetery, the deathbed of civilization at the *fin-de-siècle*. This illustration may as well serve as the hieroglyphic symbol for how this "sickly flower" has manifested time and again in ever-changing forms in accordance with the culturality of contemporary time and space.

Disillusionment and exasperation, characteristic of the *fin-de-siècle* mode of temperament, progressively growing gloomy from theories of entropy, regression and degeneration, comes through prophetically in Baudelaire's writing and is twice mirrored in the music album *Aku no Hana*, where the progenitor of the latter work, the visual-kei band Buck-Tick, is an audience of the prior, and uncannily enough, placed at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The second mirroring occurs through the bands' own sensibilities shaped by the globalization at the advent of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and its impact upon Japan's national cultural scene, in this case, rock music, with influences from the western brand of Glam-rock, (Auslander 2006: 39-70) as well as classical orchestral music, fashion and stylization of costume and performance (especially androgyny), among others.

In the hands of the band members, the act of localized, urban, and very Eurocentric flanerier, mostly typical of the European city of Paris, changes into a globalized music act, their performativity spawning a whole new genre in the global rock-scene. These artists do not remain men of the arcade, as Walter Benjamin had perceived flaneurs to be in one of his books on Baudelaire (*Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in The Era Of High Capitalism*, written between 1937-1939), although they distill the essence of their music from the novelties of the postmodern, contemporary, commercialized world as well as a vague remembrance of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century flanerier and dandyism epitomized by Baudelaire (Baudelaire 1992: 192) and Walter Benjamin.

Rather they, in their performativity become products of commercial capitalism, their art sold as goods in the modern day equivalent of arcades—supermarkets and e-commerce. As Martina Lauster has observed (Lauster 2007: web), Benjamin indirectly refers to Karl Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, where the goods assume a certain sacred aura, a "magical status" conferred to them by the consuming mankind. In time, this fetish gains a larger-than-life immanence, an autonomy gained irrespective of the consumers, who perceive it in terms of a personal godhead. Baudelaire had his qualms about selling art, yet, as Lois B. Hyslop suggests, (Hyslop 1980: web) situations had forced him to be a hypocrite in using art as a means to livelihood.

The performativity of Buck-Tick both in their music videos intended for TV premiere as well as the live stage acts are hypnotic, either in somber mourning for the decaying world, echoing Baudelaire's observation of dandies in "The Heroism of Modern Life" as forever in mourning, as their black coat suggests, (Baudelaire 1992: 166) or the flashy, energetic performance onstage, involving, much in the manner of Baudelaire's own, in "To the Reader", the opening piece of *Flowers of Evil*, tempting and titillating the audience, both with their physically

suggestive swaying bodies, as well as the melancholy and flowery lyricism, into a mutual camaraderie of sinning together, in unison. Ennui and despair, the sins of evil are made attractive in this echoing call for fall, in an ode for the inherent awe towards the Satanic in man, as perceived by Baudelaire himself in "The Essence of Laughter." (Baudelaire 1992: 170-83) The songs, like the poems, are like dramatic monologues, with the audience as the intended interlocutor, all too eager to share their emotions with their objects of worship on stage. The concert-halls ricochet with the cacophonous display of an emotional chaos, ranging from laughter to tears, sheer joy of catching a glimpse or the despair of not being able to touch the object of adoration. These *Vates*-like figures on stage are the powerful ones, who, as well as Baudelaire's "three beings worthy of respect: the *priest*, the *soldier*, the *poet*" (BrainyQuote.com), command the emotions of the audience and hold them in a thrall akin to magic.

Baudelaire's poetry is an alibi both for and against the prevailing decadence of society, and in spite of his deep persecution complex, masochism, and troubled life of material and emotional poverty (the recurrent betrayals from his mistresses) he hopes, partly in vain (as reflected in the obscenity trials of his days) for sympathy and empathy on the part of his readers, even as he may be too proud to admit that (Hyslop: web). In a subtle twist to this method-in-madness, the band appears in world-tours, wide public connects in TV-shows and interviews (Buck-Tick 2014: web), both visual and written, where they lay bare (apparently) their motives for such art, and harkens for constant support and empathy from their fans. The souvenirs and mementos form part of the commercial strategy of fan-making, a form of display of affection from these mortal gods that makes the audience more prone to the intended level of intellectual and emotional connect. A once widely admired public figure such as Baudelaire (especially in the intellectual "happening" of his days, he had a wide acceptance, according to Hyslop's 1980 biographical notes) could not hope for such ambitious public-connect, and the "hero-status" that is attached to the modern-day media-mediated celebrity hood. He had almost no scope for defending his art, and his artistic glory has mostly been posthumous, though long-surviving, in contrast to which the music of Buck-Tick is far-reaching, as the audience desires them to speak of their art, as well as snippets of the private selves. For Baudelaire, the private was intensely private, and sacrificed in favour of his public image, he never even let his closest friends know that he had been fatally ill (Hyslop: web). For these artists, their private life is not hoarded like the treasure-chest of dragons, rather treated as distinct from their stage persona, and both are marketed in suitable ways. In this way, akin to Baudelaire's dandy, the man himself, in all his attributes, becomes a commoditized work of art, where the art and the artist blend as one in a Vinyl or a Digital Versatile Disc.

The need to be divine is reflected in Baudelaire's critical essays (Baudelaire 1992: 154-207), which are a more gentle accompaniment to the sensual violence of his poetry, in terms of make-up, language, aristocratic bearing, cultural superiority observations on Satanic beauty, agelessness, fashion, art, philosophy—which, by far, form the manifesto of the music of Buck-Tick and genre of visual-kei in general.

The music album through its twice filtered representation is a vehicle of metacriticism. The filtering is further osmoticized through the layers of reception via the audience which contains the author of the source-text as the audience, contemporary reception, the continuum of the difference audiences through time and space the adaptive artists as audience, the audience of these artists (both spatio-temporally contemporary and globalized review, also across time) and finally the critic as an audience to both works of art, trying to feign a critical distance necessary for the neutrality of scholarly review; in his essay, "What is The Use of Criticism", Baudelaire speaks of this pretension to be of lesser import than true, impassioned, personal criticism

(Baudelaire 1992: 154-57). This complex network of reception leads to various problems of interpretation, which shall be dealt with in the latter part of the essay.

Multiple levels of cultural reproduction occur in this musical act, where the performer is an artifact, performance, another, and the music and the lyrics, still another. Baudelaire's writing is staunchly heterosexual and masculine in all of its form, content and appeal, the hidden yet embedded, referential androgyny emerging mainly in two ways. The first is in his critical appraisal of make-up in prose, (Baudelaire 1992: 198) secondly, in his poetry, in the passivity of the male subject, who is at the receiving end of both women's affection and lust, the one to whom things are "done", rather than his active participation in the action, be it love, be it experience (one of many possible references is his poem, "Conversation"). His is the subservient will which makes halfhearted protests in its defence, yet is all too eager to comply to the more powerful, agential woman and the puppeteering strings of sin and evil impulses. Although he is the one that supplies her with the agency, and retains full control of it, summoning it back at suitable junctures, it draws open the doorway to the fluidity of the socially assigned gendered roles—and is akin to the Japanese concept of the "bishounen". A bishounen (roughly translated as "beautiful boy") is one whose charm transcends the binary of masculine and feminine beauty, as well as heterosexual and homosexual desire. (Bishōnen: web)

The poet, in his own admission, has been the object of desire of many a "maenad" (Baudelaire 2006: 61) whom, he like Dionysus has mesmerized with his performative life and art). Such can be said to be true of the Buck-Tick band members, especially the very handsome front-man Atsushi Sakurai, who, despite his aloof and dangerous aura - a pre-existing fictional stereotype in Japanese culture, both in theatre and Anime/Manga, which, due to Sakurai's immense popularity has been reinforced, even spawning many a character based on him, the most popular of him being Nanjo Koji the rock-singer from the anime/manga *Zetsuai* (Ozaki 1992)—is desired by innumerable women. This phenomenon is similar to the influential impact of the dandy culture, propagated by Baudelaire (Baudelaire 1992: 192-97) in Europe's cultural scene.

The dresses assumed by the band members in their PVs and live performances stress upon the performative androgyny, and the PV of the final track of the album, "Kiss me Goodbye", with its emphasis upon the showcasing of the nude—accruing to itself "modern beauty" (Baudelaire 1992: 169)—male torso (here a snow white, imitated androgynous one, reminiscent of both the Bishounen culture of the far-east and the staunchly homosexual twink culture of the west), finds multiple strong holds in Baudelaire's art criticism. His essays provide almost a manifesto for the stylistic devices assumed by the visual-kei subgenre of J-Rock. The emphasis is more subtly brought out by Hisashi Imai's composition and Sakurai's vocals—mellow yet masculine and darkly Romantic, Baudelaire himself having regarded romanticism as the most important contemporary movement in the field of literature and art. The Baudelairean hankering after the eternal, the veiled hope of fulfillment despite despair, the suicidal ennui, they all come alive in the performance of Buck-Tick.

In his essay, "In Praise of Make-up", for instance, Baudelaire talks about make-up being absolutely necessary to make substantial and divine the fragile beauty of woman. For him, it is a kind of duty for woman to appear supernatural and magical, "she should dazzle men, and charm them; she is an idol, who should be covered in gold in order to be worshipped." (Baudelaire 1992: 202) It would be a misreading to see this as misogynistic, and it is apparent that Visual-Kei drew its inspiration from here. The utter visibility of the facial make-up consisting of white face-paint done eyebrows, dark lips and kohl-lined eyes with mascaraed lashes; long hair; mohawks; manicured nails; high heeled boots, perfection in attire, gait; shy and soft-spoken in interviews yet

powerfully elegant stage performances that are in keeping with the androgynous style-- revealing shirts, flared pants, all in lightweight translucent or faux leather based fabrics, in solid colours, mostly in Red, White and Black, and styled in ways reminiscent of the 19<sup>th</sup> century make them suitable candidates for modern-day dandyism, whereas, according to Baudelaire ("The Dandy"), black plays a significant role in showing the despair-laden mourning for the world. In this subtle subversion of flaner<sup>ie</sup>, the flaneur's gaze is reversed, stripping some of his aloof and lofty, omniscient aura, as the crowd of the audience sees him better than he sees them; and while for the 19<sup>th</sup>-century counterpart, the moving crowd of the street was like an illusory pall, the audience here is far more agentive, living, breathing and engaging with both the concert-hall and the performers. Just as, according to Martina Lauster, the "surreal" potential of the industrial urban gaze was explored, through Walter Benjamin's idea of the flaneur, in this case, the concert-hall, in all the glory of lighting and special-effects, takes up the quality of the more manifest phantasmagoria, the dream-life. (Benjamin 1997: 50-51) As Lauster explains, "Phantasmagorias were a form of pre-cinematic visual entertainment, a sub-genre of the magic-lantern show ... creating in the audience ... a Gothic thrill through the illusion of an approaching or vanishing figure." (Lauster 2007: web) In this novelty of stagecraft, time and space collide as similar effects are brought forward by lights, lasers, liquid nitrogen fumes, shifting stairs and paraphernalia of stage props. The methodology of flaner<sup>ie</sup> is to observe, with a distant detachment, the urban crowd and establishment, in order to cull materials for art, a testimonial to the flipside of the seemingly bustling and prosperous urban life, of which the flaneur himself is a part, but a self-reflexive and wary one. And this method is followed just as well by these modern-day flaneurs, their flaner<sup>ie</sup> performed through the guarded tours of the urban space: while the restricted movement assigned to these celebrities do not stop their Olympian view of the metropolis, their songs brim with the fruits of such detached observation – chivalry, cowardice, romance, debauchery, dream, disillusionment, spectres and demons of modernity, in contemporary metropolitan urbanity, just as Baudelaire saw in his own time.

Working from within Hans Robert Jauss's reception theory, we may notice that there has been a Kuhn-ian "paradigm" shift in terms of the genre and intended audience for the adaptation of Baudelaire's poetry into the music album. The term 'paradigm' for Jauss, as borrowed from T. S. Kuhn (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1962), refers to the scientific framework of concepts and assumptions operating in a particular period. It would naïve to ignore the historical, sociological, demographical scenario of each age and the change in the "horizon of expectations" that limits the value-judgment of an artwork of that era, whether regarding genre or the extent of being intellectual, entertaining or artistic. The adaptation of the latter work into the paradigm of the popular culture of date makes it more publicly accessible, creating a greater number of audience, rather than being clustered inside the morals and ethics laden paradigm of the intellectual and literary. This view is in tune with the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer (*Truth and Method*, 1960), who argues that all interpretations of past literature arise from a dialogue between past and present. Our attempts to understand a work will depend on the questions which our own cultural environment allows us to raise (Selden et al. 2005 : 60-61). This then brings forward the issues involved with translation and adaptation.

Interdisciplinarity has become quite vital in the study of translation in a globalized context. Selectivity and performance are also essential for stage and screen translation. Misunderstanding of the concept of "faithfulness" impacts negatively upon productions of translated texts. In an increasingly globalized world, art and entertainment have become inextricably mingled and, as Christina Schäffner sees it, "processes of text production and reception are no longer confined to one language and one culture... This universality ... has

consequences for intercultural communication, and thus for translation” (Schäffner 2007: 135) (See also Kuhiwczak & Littau 2007: 10-11).

In the view of film semiotician Christian Metz, “There is a reason for the possibility as well as for the necessity of adaptations.” (Metz 1991: 44) However, for Linda Hutcheon, “the same could be said of adaptations in the form of... music... [which] relate stories in their different ways. They use the same tools that storytellers have always used: they actualize or concretize ideas; they make analogies; they critique or show their respect....” Unlike parodies, adaptations “openly announce” their “overt and defining” relationship to the source texts. (Hutcheon 2012: 3-4).

For some, as Robert Stam argues, literature will always be superior to any adaptation of it because of its seniority as an art form. But this priority involves what Stam calls iconophobia (a suspicion of the visual) and logophilia (love of the word as sacred) (Stam 2000: 58). A negative view of adaptation might be the product of thwarted expectations of audience seeking textual fidelity. But, as John Ellis suggests, there is a desire for the persistence of stories within a post-Romantic and capitalist world that values novelty: the process of adaptation should thus be seen as a massive investment (financial and psychic) in the desire to repeat particular acts of consumption within a form of representation that discourages such a repetition. (Ellis 1982: 4-5)

Even if according to people like Stam adaptations are inferior and secondary creations, they are omnipresent in the global repertoire of cultures. Recognition and remembrance are part of the pleasure (and risk) of experiencing an adaptation; so too is change. Thematic and narrative persistence combines with material variation (Ropars-Wuilleumier, Marie-Clair. cf. Hutcheon 31). And here then is what is different about this particular musical text. To judge it as an adaptation is a difficult task, since along with the genre and performative variation, there is no direct semblance between the two works despite their exact sharing of names, albeit in different languages. No direct translation or transliteration or even palpable carrying over of images occurs. Yet they meet this risk of infidelity towards such a famed text—“the first *voyant*, the king of poets, a true god”, as Rimbaud is reported to have dubbed Baudelaire in Fowlie’s Introduction to his translation—head-on, and therein lies the special novelty of their approach, one that spawned this whole new sub-genre of visual-kei.

The influence of Baudelaire resides mostly in the tone and the mood, ranging from the courteous, mellow baritone to the violent, psychedelic tenor, the softly thrumming nocturne of the bass and the keys to the adrenaline rush of the guitar riffs and the thumping drums along with the apocalyptic synergy of the clashing cymbals; just as the poems range from the darkness of despair to the horrors of visions to the grotesque and the macabre and the decadent and the diseased, the pervading ennui in both nature and mankind, the Satanism inherent in man, vampires and prostitutes, the uncanny round the corner of the street, the schizophrenic shocks. The concordance with the source text also lies in the constant symbolic significance of certain images, which though varied in form and content—referrals of the urban desolation, despair, a civilizational ruin that is beyond recovery, impossibility of constancy in love, blindness (spiritual and physical), darkness, failed wishes and eternity among others - concur in this re-creation of the forest of symbolic hieroglyphs, where the truth is more real than reality.

What Ross Posnock has claimed for novelist Henry James and philosopher George Santayana can be said to be true of Buck-Tick, “to create new forms of sexual identity, new configurations of mastery and passivity, femininity and masculinity;” in their work, “the androgynous becomes an alternative model of behavior,” (Posnock 1991: 194-95) in this expansive embrace of “poymorphous sexuality”, one that undercuts a binaristic, Freudian model of gender, which may be understood as a performance, as “a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as

the real". (Butler 1990: viii) Gender-bending drag-like performances such as Buck-Tick's draws our attention to what Judith Butler calls the performative nature of all gender identities, their dependence on respective and stylized actions: "the gendered body... has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality...[since] acts and gestures, articulated and acted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core" (136). Theatricality in performance becomes more important than music in the representation of the gender-blending. Following Susan Sontag (Sontag 2001), it is something ephemeral, a sensibility rather than a mode or style. Just as Carolyn Heilbrun defines it, "[androgyny is] a condition under which the characteristics of the sexes, and the human impulses expressed by men and women, are not rigidly assigned. Androgyny seeks to liberate the individual from the confines of the appropriate." (Heilbrun 1982: x) For a moment in performance, then, the socially defined rigid binary gets suspended, and power flows free into the hands of the performer. As George Piggford sees it, this deliberate period of "disorientation... encourages the viewer to question his/her assumptions about the relationship between gender performance and biological sex" (Piggford 1997: web) This phenomenon also has bearings upon, as Daryl Jamieson sees it, "[t]he trend in popular culture away from idealising mature strong 'men' in favour of young androgynous boys [which] can be traced to how... sexuality [is presented]... to their huge market of young listeners.... [influencing] the sexual development of millions of young women and men." (Jamieson 2007: web) The presentation and marketing of the band encouraged queer readings through the queer subtexts in their music and videos, and the audience too followed suit, in creation of fandoms, fan-fiction, fan-comics featuring their favourite fan-pairings through a permutation and combination between the all-male band members.

Samuel Johnson had once famously observed that the great works of literature are those "that stand the test of time". If that is to be the yardstick of the lingering life and artistic value of art, then the consistent sales of the album say it all. So does the overflowing excitement of the pouring audience in the most-recent concert-hall reproduction of the album in the year 2011. The tracks have already been through remastering twice and this year saw a new video for the title track. With popularity still on the rise, even after 20-odd years, Baudelaire's transculturation into the J-Rock scene has certainly made its foothold amongst the connoisseurs of decadent art.

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