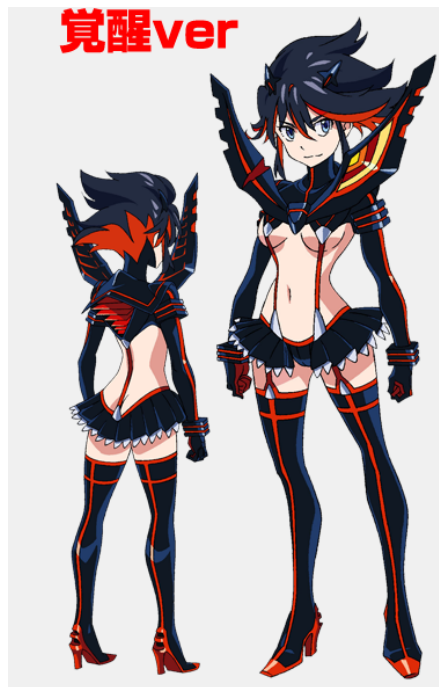


The Confusing and Bombastic Nudity of *Kill la Kill*

For several years now I've been watching and enjoying a variety of the most critically-acclaimed anime ever produced out of Japan. I enjoy the visual language common to many anime, the style of humor that stretches across many, and the diversity of topics—everything from high-intensity cooking to giant robots fighting to a music club at a high school. One of these many was *Kill la Kill*, produced by Studio Trigger and aired in 2014. While *Kill la Kill* shares many similarities with other anime, there are also many ways in which it dramatically differentiates itself. Of them all, one is most controversial: how it dresses its characters. Or, rather, doesn't:



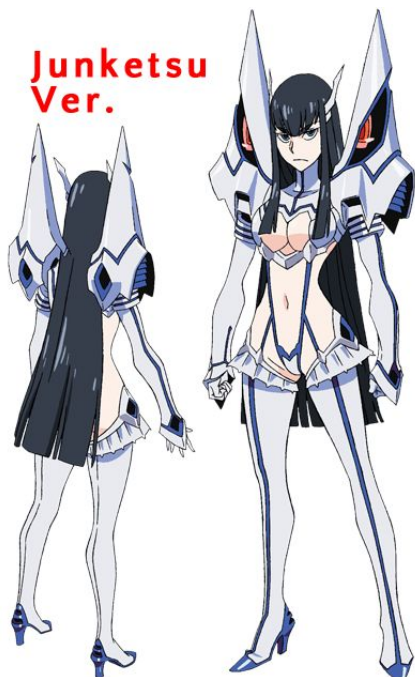
Kill la Kill's main character, Ryuko Matoi (17 years old), wearing her signature outfit.

As is evident, Ryuko isn't exactly fully dressed when she's wearing her *kamui* (magical outfits that give their wearers equally magic powers). While this isn't her outfit for the whole show, she does end up wearing it for a sizable percentage of nearly every episode. At first glance, it seems

like a deplorable hook meant to drag in heterosexual male viewers by being eye-catching and sexy. And it is, in fact, a deplorable hook meant to drag in heterosexual male viewers by being eye-catching and sexy. But at the same time, there's a depth to *Kill la Kill* that leaves me confused and wondering.

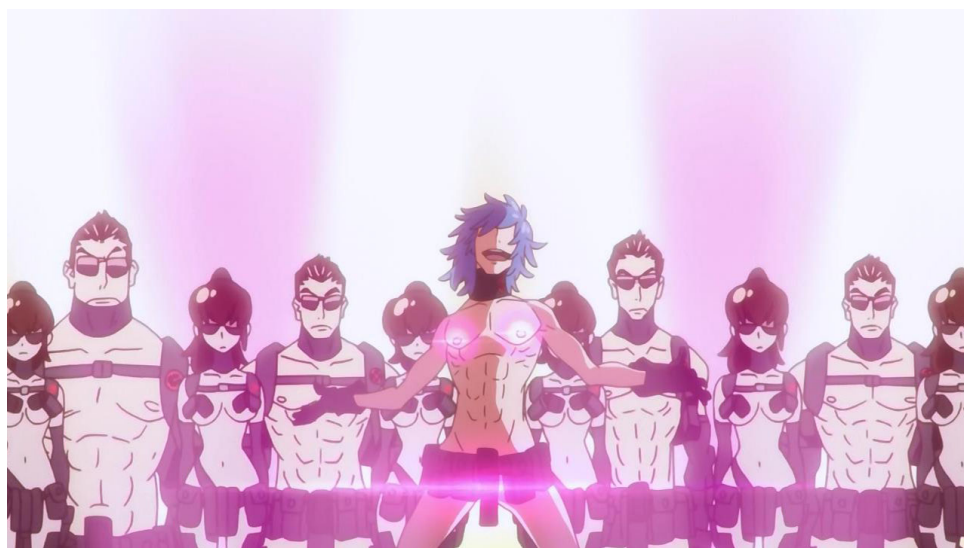
To digress for a moment, I was shocked when I learned that objectification theory—something accepted enough by the mainstream to have been taught to me in a high school english class (though it is worth noting that my teacher was certainly exceptional)—was only formalized in 1997. Nearly twenty years ago, sure, but it just feels like something that should have fallen out of the 60s or 70s. It seems impossible that the powerful effect of the male gaze on the female body could have gone undiscussed in depth for so long. Fredrickson and Roberts note particularly the way that “objectifying gaze infuses American culture [in]...visual media that [spotlights] bodies and body parts and seamlessly [aligns] viewers with an implicit sexualizing gaze” (176). Viewing these kinds of media—along with several other scenarios—creates the idea in the mind of the viewer that the object of their gaze can be defined entirely by the attributes of their body, and, given the sexual nature of the images, by the sexuality of their body. This effect can result not only in men sexually objectifying women, but women sexually objectifying themselves.

Objectification theory is, for obvious reasons, exceptionally relevant to any feminist analysis of *Kill la Kill*. But while that first-glance thought of sexual imagery as a hook is nigh impossible to dispel, the show does seem to be doing something more than plain sexualization for viewers. For one thing, Ryuko is far from the only character going mostly naked:



Left: Satsuki Kiryuin, 18 years old, Ryuko's nemesis (wearing a kamui). Right: Aikuro Mikisugi, leader of a rebel faction. His nipples and pubic area glow inexplicably throughout the show.

And, indeed, by the end of the show essentially the entire main cast is mostly nude:



While this is not the main cast, these outfits are demonstrative of what they're mostly wearing by the end of the show. Aikuro pictured again as well.

It's these kinds of steps that make the blatant sexual nudity in *Kill la Kill* seem ever so slightly...dare I say justified? Were it just the main character running around mostly nude, it would seem as though *Kill la Kill* was simply pandering. But by using nudity as a theme tied to numerous story-vital concepts, the show seems to be making an attempt to desensitize the viewer to it, to normalize it—not just for the women, but for every character—and to promote what it sees as a potential positive side of nudity. To me, *Kill la Kill* very definitively doesn't succeed in actually managing to justify its obstreperous content, but it does manage, I think, to ask the question of whether or not it's possible to tell a story in a visual medium about people who are (mostly) naked without pulling punches and without objectifying its female characters.

In much the same way as it engages with objectification, I think *Kill la Kill* also engages with the sexualization of violence as described by Meenakshi Gigi Durham in *The Lolita Effect*. Durham's message is clear: putting sex and violence next to each other in media makes viewers think violence is sexy. *Kill la Kill* does just that:



But at the same time, the show doesn't tie sex and violence in quite the same way Durham describes. Instead of sexuality being disempowering for *Kill la Kill*'s characters, it's usually the case (at least for Ryuko and Satsuki, seen above) that the less clothing a character is wearing, the more powerful and capable they are. *Kill la Kill* goes out of its way in an early episode to have Ryuko come to the conclusion that in order to defeat her nemesis Satsuki she must overcome the embarrassment she feels at being made to wear her *kamui* and accept the way it looks. The show also explicitly states that the extremely revealing nature of the *kamui* is part of what makes them confer such incredible powers on their wearers. So once again, *Kill la Kill* seems to be asking a question: is it possible to tell a story where sex and violence are directly linked, but in a different way? Is it possible to make that connection empowering, rather than oppressive? Paralleling its interactions with objectification, I think *Kill la Kill* falls far short of this lofty goal, but that it even bothers to ask the question—and how it chooses to ask it—is interesting and worthy of note to me.

Overall, while *Kill la Kill* suffers, rather than benefits, from its attempts to recast and rebuke the forces of sexual objectification and sexualization of violence—largely due to a lack of tact and, at the end of the day, submission to the utility of showing viewers sexual images as a hook rather than using them artfully—it still does manage to hint at interesting questions that may be central to furthering positive depictions of both women and women's sexuality in media. *Kill la Kill* feels like a potential first step towards being able to create media that is capable of using women's sexuality in a way that does not demean, diminish, objectify, or dehumanize its bearers, even if the series does not manage to wield this powerful accomplishment for itself.