

Anime, Agency, and PC

Jack Jensen - 2015

Animated film has often been on the fringes of the cultures that it operates within. Its underground circuits, midnight theaters, and independent artists have had the autonomy to work outside of large companies, and so have been allowed to challenge conventions and provide social commentary. This has made animated film a particularly responsive stomping ground for the generation of and clash between cultural mores. In America this has been seen in the adoption and mainstreaming of socially-conscious film. Through the pushing of makers like John and Faith Hubley, Robert Crumb, and current independent animators, American animated film has been equipped to discuss ever more complex concepts. Hand in hand with this has been an increasing level of scrutiny regarding racist or sexist undertones in animated film. *Fritz The Cat* would be controversial if it came out today not because it depicts drug use favorably or law enforcement negatively, but because Fritz's relationships with female characters look misogynistic by today's standards. Meanwhile even mainstream animation behemoths like Disney have transitioned from conservative pieces in the style of *Cinderella* to films like *Beauty and the Beast*, where Disney "attempted to respond (albeit minimally) to feminist issues ... by de-emphasizing Beauty's breast size and turning her into a more assertive and intelligent character,"¹ and *Frozen*, which has been applauded for having empowered female characters that are not dominated by their relationships to male characters. But even a progressive work like *Frozen* is criticized for other problems, like making characters who historically would have had brown complexions seem white. This level of scrutiny often exasperates American commentators, who point out that this politically correct (PC) culture makes it seem impossible to make media without it being critiqued for not being sufficiently progressive. To what

¹ Newitz, *Magical Girls and Atomic Bomb Sperm*, 1995: page 5

standards then should we hold media? And, crucially, to what standards do we hold media that come from cultures other than our own?

Japanese animation is grappling with media that is wildly more problematic by American standards than American media typically is. “In Japan, feminist issues are less openly recognized as legitimate social concerns, and their popular culture reflects this tradition.”² Within Japanese Anime, sexism and misogyny have profoundly infiltrated narrative conventions, especially the conventions of “Magical Girl” anime. Magical Girl anime developed in the 1960s to be watched by an audience of adolescent girls, where it served as an affirmation of traditional gender roles and traditional sexuality. In these shows a young girl is granted superhuman powers that give her strength but only within the confines of Japanese cultural expectations: “simultaneously powerful and traditionally feminine.”³ Characters like Sailor Moon are constantly having their actions dictated by more capable and autonomous male characters (Tuxedo Mask) and are frequently concerned with hiding their powers from others (usually men) around them. These Magical Girls embody “*Kawaii*”, which is a strictly feminine sort of ‘cute’ which is innocent, harmless, and child-like, and the fact that such a person has super powers at all is itself a sort of quirk which is usually acquired by birth or by accident; never by conscious decision-making on the girl’s behalf. All of these conventions promote a Japanese model of girlhood that is meek, passive, and hyper-feminine.

These conventions were added to and complicated by the appropriation of Magical Girl anime by a Western audience of young men in the 1980s and 1990s. The increasing availability of anime allowed its messages to be consumed in the West as a throwback to pre-feminist times

² Newitz, *Magical Girls and Atomic Bomb Sperm*, 1995: page 5

³ *Ibid.* page 4

and its characters to be consumed as fetishized objects. This was the birth of “*Otaku*”; the 19-30 year old men who consume anime marketed to 4-9 year old girls, and “fanservice”; the animation strategies made by more recent anime to get the attention of *Otaku* and encourage their consumption. Magical Girls of the 80s and 90s are still driven by purity, virtue, and femininity, but are increasingly sexualized. The famous Magical Girl transformations of early anime became ever more revealing in this time, becoming a transition from weak and sexless to strong and sexful, while still retaining all of their girlish *kawaii* as is most recognizably the case with Sailor Moon.⁴ In this way Magical Girl anime has remained as sexually repressive as ever, idolizing innocence and youthfulness, but has also absorbed a significant audience that is encouraged to imagine that innocence and youthfulness violated, and fanservice that gives all of the visual and narrative tools to do so.

Throughout this time and into the twenty-first century, some anime studios have sought to critique and work against these trends in their programs. The most frequent strategies to do this involve empowering female characters and queering male ones. This queering had its origins in *Ranma ½*, where its female character of *Otaku* desire is the alter-ego of the male representative of the *Otaku* audience. Challenging binaries was continued and made more explicitly to do with Magical Girl anime in *Revolutionary Girl Utena*, the plot of which is driven almost entirely by female-female relationships, romantically and otherwise, and in which Utena herself adopts male clothes, male chivalry, and a male sense of purpose and agency. This is still in service of traditional binary male-female gender roles, albeit working in reverse, and truly queer Magical Girl anime was not break into the mainstream until *Kill La Kill* did so

⁴ Boyd, *Nonsensical is our thing!*, 2016: page 62

spectacularly in 2013. *Kill La Kill* is a very contemporary critique of magical girl anime that systematically queers all of the genre's typically gendered characters, that empowers its females both inside and outside their warrior alter-egos, and that uses the usual *Otaku* indulgence of fanservice to frighten *Otaku* and make them as aware as possible of how problematic their male gaze is.

In *Kill La Kill*, like in *Utena*, female-female relationships drive the plot. Male characters tend to be bumbling fool types whose sexual advances are either barely acknowledged or violently put down at once. Certainly no heterosexual wooing of female characters is ever met with success or the gentle blushing rebuke that it might have merited in an earlier Magical Girl anime. Male sexuality is instead made to look ridiculous, either through homoeroticism or swift swordwork that leaves male warriors naked and pathetic on the battlefield. Another standard male character in most Magical Girl anime is the *Otaku* nerd-hero: “a sidekick, who would someday become the warrior woman’s object of affection”⁵ and who is a stand-in for the desirous but sidelined *Otaku*. In *Kill La Kill*, the *Otaku* nerd-hero is a girl named Mako, who is the only recipient of anything close to romantic affection from the protagonist Ryuko. Mako also gives passionate but absurd monologues to the camera at key moments in the show, of which Boyd says: “Mako’s zany intrusions consistently enframe and recentre entire action-set pieces in the series, as an almost anti-fanservice of campy queerness.”⁶ The other sort of anti-fanservice in *Kill La Kill* comes from its strategy of overloading the screen with fanservice imagery of Magical Girls who, once transformed, are dressed so revealingly that the lustful nature of the *Otaku* desire is unable to be ignored. When in combat, these girls are not at all *Kawaii*: they are

⁵ Boyd, *Nonsensical is our thing!*, 2016: page 68

⁶ *Ibid.* page 75

aggressive and powerful and send scores of nameless *Otaku* schoolboy onlookers flying whenever their swords collide. Despite their erotic attire, these action shots move too quickly for the *Otaku* gaze to linger: “Furiously bombarded by fanservice, the otaku viewer cannot seem to decide whether to be aroused or terrified by the excessive action-images”⁷ and must instead look on in horror as traditional methods of desire-production are turned against *Otaku* in rejection of their fetishization.

However, opinion of *Kill La Kill* in Western scholarship is still highly polarized. The level of nudity on display and the overt sexuality of the show makes it look very much like another step into the deepening role of fanservice in Magical Girl anime. It seems to be true that *Kill La Kill* is using extreme fanservice and other extreme incarnations of anime tropes to criticize and mock its predecessors, but how does the preservation of these norms weaken its critique? *Kill La Kill* does offend many female viewers and many *Otaku* have no problem consuming its characters as fetish objects. Would its makers have been better suited by excluding fanservice altogether? Would that have weakened the show’s visibility even as it achieved more political correctness? When interpreting the controversy of *Kill La Kill* it is important to consider where it lies within contemporary Japanese culture. Just like it took over 60 years of American feminist discourse for Disney to move from *Cinderella* to *Frozen*, it has taken 20 years of Japanese feminist discourse for anime to move from *Sailor Moon* to *Kill La Kill*. Perhaps Japanese animated film is too closely bound to its recent misogynistic history to make anime today that can withstand Western levels of scrutiny.

⁷ Boyd, *Nonsensical is our thing!*, 2016: page 74

Still, the fact that anime is still scrutinized in the West and that scholarship on anime is vibrant even in English is a positive thing. American viewers should not spare anime a feminist critique in the name of multiculturalism, otherwise American *Otaku* will be able to internalize the misogyny along with the art unchecked. But we should also not exclude anime from American audiences out of a fear of such internalization, since anime is an undeniably vibrant and unique form of animated film that deserves to be studied and enjoyed in the West. Where is this line to be drawn? It is a conundrum that has become problematic across many media from anime to rap music: how does one balance the universalist desire to critique all media according to the same standards and the multiculturalist desire to be lenient on media from cultures other than one's own? Leniency provides these cultures with a crucial access point into mainstream Western culture, but criticality could provide the external pressure necessary for cultures to eschew bigotry from their art.

The solution has been political correctness. PC culture is a manifestation of this threshold of tolerable violations of mores by media. From sources like Disney which are so close to the mainstream, tolerance is very low and media can be scrutinized intensely to seek out and critique lingering oppression. From sources like anime which is outside of mainstream American culture, tolerance is higher and Magical Girl anime can be enjoyed and studied and critiqued, but from a respectful distance that appreciates lingering oppression as an aspect of Japanese culture that is changing but is not yet ready for harsher scrutiny. This is the utility of political correctness; that it organically reconciles conflicting critical endeavors and allows scrutiny of media to keep apace with changing mores across different cultures. By this function, the same force that drove

so many young Western men to anime (“a culture not utterly poisoned by political correctness”)⁸ prevents misogyny from entering into mainstream Western culture and gives sources in the West with the greatest ability to shape mainstream culture the highest level of social responsibility.

⁸ Newitz, *Magical Girls and Atomic Bomb Sperm*, 1995: page 15

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