

Mobile Suit Gundam

Written by Dan H

Mobile Suit Gundam (Kidou Senshi Gandamu / 機動戦士ガンダム)

Director: Tomino Yoshiyuki

Production: Nagoya Broadcasting / Sotsu Agency / Sunrise

Episodes: 43

Aired: Apr 1979-Jan 1980

Premise

In the future, the Earth Federation has dealt with overpopulation by forcibly resettling people in space colonies. As so-called "spacenoids" thrive, their resentment of Earth control grows, and one of the colony groups declares its independence from the Federation as the Zeon Principality. Through indiscriminate use of WMDs and their revolutionary new Mobile Suits, Zeon is able to fight the numerically superior Federation forces to a draw. The Federation takes advantage of the ceasefire to jump-start their own Mobile Suit program, culminating in the development of the prototype Gundam suit. When a Zeon reconnaissance mission to the Gundam facilities escalates into a battle, a rag-tag crew of civilian refugees and low-ranking military personnel commandeer the Gundam and a powerful new battleship in order to escape the destruction. Now, though, they've officially stolen military secrets, and the crew find themselves caught in a renewed war between the Federation and Zeon.

Why It's So Damn Important

So here it is, the show that launched one of the biggest (the biggest?) anime franchises ever. It also arguably catapulted the career of Tomino Yoshiyuki from a minor figure in the anime industry to a star director. The Anno Hideaki of the 1970s and 80s, Tomino took the bright, jaunty "superhero" feel of '70s robot anime and worked it into something deeper and darker, all the while suffering from bouts of depression and earning the moniker "Kill-'em-All Tomino" for his at the time shocking levels of cast casualties.

Many previous shows, including Tomino's own *Zambot 3*, had featured variations on the "Gatchaman model" of a team of plucky youth banding together to fight off evil in their super-powered fighting machine. And of course *Space Battleship Yamato* had precedence for the "intrepid crew sets out in their lone space battleship against all odds" space opera premise. But what Tomino brought to sci-fi action anime with *Gundam* was context, complexity, and background beyond the norm for a genre that was still mostly about pseudo-magical fighting robots. Behind all the action in *Gundam* was a surprisingly deep layer of history, politics, ideology, and "hard sci-fi" physics that, even if only sparsely hinted at in the course of the show, made it more engaging than a simple battle between heroes and their foes.

And speaking of foes, *Gundam* offered antagonists so complex and thoughtful, they could at times become more sympathetic than any of the "heroes" of the show. Especially compelling was the portrayal of the self-crowned Zeon prince, not as a flamboyant madman with a chip on his shoulder or enigmatic, faceless "Leader X", but as a sad, exhausted, alienated old man who has lost all his hope in the cause of Zeon and is simply trapped by the momentum of the events he set in motion. It's an interesting contrast with the Federation, a bureaucratic entity whose faceless, nameless, invisible leadership sends out orders "from the top" to the protagonists to throw themselves in harm's way time and again.

And Amuro Ray, the main character and *Gundam* pilot, adds a new dimension to the "boy genius giant robot pilot" character through his Shinji-esque mental instability, at first deeply resenting being press-ganged into service as "everyone's last hope" before turning into a shell-shocked warrior his own mother can hardly recognize.

Eventually he gets over it. Sorta.

So What's Not To Like?

Obviously this show is very dated technically. The visuals are certainly far from "shiny", but the worst part of shows this old is definitely the soundtrack. *Gundam* has a very sparse, simplistic selection of short incidental tunes and mood music, and these little ditties get played every single episode. It will drive you nuts. Count on it.

Shows this old also don't have the best scene pacing. Episodes are full of short little side scenes that, rather than explore the characters or the story world more, serve to interrupt the flow, mood, and pacing of the episode and make one ask, "What was the point of showing us that little scene?" It's almost like filler, on a "meta" level. In that respect, there are a lot of filler episodes, especially in the middle of the show, that bog Gundam down to the point I put the series down for almost a year before finishing it.

I know Amuro's troubled and young, but some of his mood swings are implausible, childish, and annoying in the extreme and really make you want to see somebody punch him. Also, I know the protagonists' ship is something of a refugee vessel, but why oh why did they have to keep the little kids on board? It just ruins the tone and believability of the show to have toddlers running around on the bridge throwing tantrums.

So yeah, a great and ground-breaking show that's a tad dated and could have used a little less filler. When it's good it's pretty good, and the final ten episodes or so are amazing.

Similar Shows

Invincible Superman Zambot 3

Space Runaway Ideon

Super Spacetime Fortress Macross

Aura Battler Dunbine

Armored Trooper Votoms

Heavy Metal L-Gaim

Mobile Suit Zeta Gundam