

Space Battleship Yamato

Written by Jonathan DiCarlo

The single best theme song in anime history is the one that begins:

We're ooooooooooff to outer spaaaaaace

We're leeeeeeeaving mother Earrrrrrth

To saaaaaaaaaave the human raaaaaace...

or if you prefer

Sarabaaaaa, Chikyuu yoooooooo

Tabidaaaaaatsu fune waaaaaaaa

Uchuuuuuuuuu senkannnnnnnnnnnn

YA - MA - TO !!

Shown on American TV in 1979 under the name Star Blazers, this show was responsible for launching the previous generation of American anime fans, i.e. the one before ours. The Japanese run started in 1974, well before Star Wars, and before the Star Wars cliches were cliches. Wondering what it is that grumpy old-school fans love so much about corny, badly-animated old-school anime? Yamato will answer your questions. Yamato is pretty much the ultimate in old-school, hard sci-fi, space-adventure anime.

The story, which has part of Japan's modern mythology the way Superman's origin story is part of ours, is as follows. In the year 2199, humanity is in deep trouble. The evil planet Gamilon has attacked us, destroyed our space fleets, and bombarded the Earth with radiation bombs, destroying all life on the surface and evaporating the seas. The surviving humans have been forced to hide out in deep-underground cities. In one year's time, the radiation will seep through the crust and kill everybody.

But! There is one hope! We receive a message from the unknown planet Iscandar, which is outside our galaxy in the Large Magellanic Cloud, 144,000 light years away. They offer us a device which can cleanse the Earth of radiation and make it livable again (the device is hilariously called "Cosmo DNA" in the English dub), but we have to go to Iscandar and get it. Luckily Iscandar has also sent us plans for a "Wave Motion Engine" which can fold space, allowing us to make the journey, just barely, in one year.

But the Gamilons have destroyed our space fleets, so what are we to do?

Because humans are clever, tenacious, and resourceful, and because this show was written by ex-military man Leiji Matsumoto, what we do is to secretly burrow up through the seafloor near Kyushu, into the wreckage of the real-life Japanese battleship the Yamato which was sunk in World War II, and secretly retrofit it from the inside out into an intergalactic spacecraft before the Gamilons figure out what's going on.

Then we have one of the most inspiring scenes in all of anime, as the Yamato is reborn and it bursts out through the rock and rust and debris and blasts through the Gamilon siege and sets off on a desperate mission against incredible odds to save all of humanity from total annihilation! Man, I get chills just thinking about it. 144,000 light-years and back again, through enemy territory (Iscandar just so happens to be right next to Gamilon, of course), in just one Earth year. At the end of every episode there is a countdown, as in "Hurry, Star Force! There are only 274 days left!"

This is a show from a time before angsty, self-loathing, ironic, postmodern, or pseudo-Christian ideas existed in anime. This is a time when men were real men, and women were real women, or at least the one woman on the whole ship was a real woman. It's like she's Smurfette or something. But the blue-skinned people are not smurfs, they're Gamilons (they have caucasian skin tone in the first few episodes, then the animators suddenly decide to make them blue for the rest of the series, with no explanation). The Gamilons are lead by a deliciously evil villain named Leader Desslock (chant it with me: DEEEEEES-lock desslock desslock! DEEEEEES-lock desslock desslock!) who is condescending and decadent and arrogant and smarmy, the kind of guy who sips wine and fondles Gamilon arm-candy babes while putting his lieutenants to death as punishment for failure and revealing his latest plan to murder millions.

Watch the series. The first season, that is. Don't watch the movies. The movies (at least the ones I've tried to watch) really suck and will put you to sleep. The first season of TV episodes, however, is pure gold. Unfortunately there is no officially licensed version with Japanese dialog and English subtitles. Such a thing does not exist. I bought the dubbed Starblazers boxed set and I don't regret it, because even with cheesy American dubbing it's still (they gave the characters stupid names like "Wildstar" and "Captain Avatar" -- oh well, at least there's no "Dirk Daring" or "Ace Goodheart"!!)

Space Battleship Yamato is also fascinating as an oblique commentary on Japanese attitudes towards the memory of World War II. The fact that it is a Japanese WWII battleship which is going to save all humanity, and the fact that the bad guys attack us with radioactive fallout: these are not coincidences. The Yamato is now on a mission of peace for the entire world, not on a mission to subjugate one nation to others. It seems like an attempt to redeem Japan's military tradition by positing a future where it fights on the side of righteousness. You could read this as an honest attempt at atonement, or as apologia for a fascist culture, depending on your perspective. In the Americanized version they dodged the whole issue: they cut out the WWII flashbacks, the crew is given international names instead of all Japanese, and the Yamato is renamed the Argo (little Greek mythology angle there) when it launches.

To modern anime fans, Yamato may seem as corny as a 1930s pulp sci-fi magazine, with its blithe masculinity, its unselfconscious earnestness, its evil aliens, its questionable astrophysics, its Deadly Perils of Space that the crew faces one-per-episode, and also the absolutely ridiculous premise of a WWII battleship flying around in outer space. But man, that's exactly what I love about it. It's a show where the characters' success or failure means something. It's a show about normal people who volunteer to make the ultimate sacrifice, knowing that they're likely never to come back, just to have the tiniest chance of saving the people they love and restoring their beloved home planet to its former blue-green glory. It's a show about the true meaning of courage.

In conclusion, Space Battleship Yamato makes me understand why people volunteered to be kamikaze pilots.

(Edit: Um, understand, not condone. Don't think I'm a fascist or anything.)