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# Behind Anime Lines



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## Abstract

The misuse of soft power terminology for domestic political ends diminishes the complexity of the original concept and results in a simplistic “cool Japan” version of soft power. Despite numerous works acknowledging and discussing anime’s soft power, there is a lack of audience study in this existing discussion. Policy is being informed by these interpretations of soft power, the international effectiveness of which relies on audiences behaving as anticipated. The absence of research into a variable as central as audience limits our understanding of how soft power functions in practice. Whether anime’s soft power is articulated as cool Japan or as agitprop, assumptions are involved about audiences decoding anime according to the dominant-hegemonic reading. When audiences decode anime, they draw on their knowledge and experiences in ways which can result in negotiated or resistant readings. To test these ideas I have explored Hall’s encoding/decoding model. Using textual analysis and interviews with *Gundam*’s creator/encoder to identify a dominant, anti-war reading of *Gundam Seed*, I then conducted a focus group interview to observe the decoding practices of non-fan viewers. The focus group research presented in this thesis, although limited in scope, suggests that the assumptions inherent to the treatment of audience by popular soft power discourses are problematic, particularly when issues of warfare and memory are involved. I propose combining a cultural studies approach with existing research to achieve a more nuanced understanding of anime and soft power.

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I tip my hat to my family (who all now know what anime is and even sometimes watch it), and two members in particular:

My father, who always has a flash-card and an opinion, and who told me when I was ten and said I wanted to write a thesis to *read everything first*. I'm working on it.

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ソーフィア、発信します！

# Glossary of Terms

## **Agitprop**

Political propaganda disseminated through art, literature and cinema.

## **Anime**

Japanese animated television programmes and cinema. Although many anime share a distinctive look characterised by very large eyes, the term encompasses a range of genres from children's entertainment to romantic drama, science fiction and pornography. "Anime" and "manga" have not been italicised because both words are now included in most English dictionaries. As with all Japanese nouns, the plural form is unchanged (ie plural of anime is anime).

## **Gundam Seed**

2002 Gundam Series directed by Mitsuo Fukuda, based on the original concept by Yoshiyuki Tomino. The Japanese title (機動戦士ガンダム SEED [シード]) *Kidō Senshi Gandamu Shīdo* is commonly abbreviated in English to *Gundam Seed*. The series spans fifty episodes with a follow up film and sequel series (*Mobile Suit Gundam Seed Destiny*). *Gundam Seed* aired in Japan from October 5, 2002 to September 27, 2003 at 6:00 pm on the Japan News Network stations Tokyo Broadcasting System and Mainichi Broadcasting System.

## **Gundam, Series**

Anime Series have been produced under the *Gundam* title for around thirty years. *Gundam* refers to them all collectively.

## **Gundam, mobile suit**

The original series took its title from the giant mobile armour suits that it, and subsequent Series, were based on. To avoid confusion I have referred to the armour as 'mobile armour suits' rather than gundam.

## **LDP**

Japan's Liberal Democratic Party. The LDP has been in government since 1955, excluding 1993-1994.

## **Manga**

Japanese comic books. Stylistically and thematically related to anime. Many anime are based on manga, and manga versions of original anime are also published. The manga form is ubiquitous to the extent that company reports, textbooks and operating manuals are all published in manga formats.

## **SDF**

Japanese Self Defence Force. Use of the acronym in this setting encompasses Japan's army, navy, air force and, as of May 2008, military space program.

## **Militarisation/ Remilitarisation**

These terms are used to indicate the existence of a legally sanctioned national military and should not be interpreted as referring to militarisation of government or any other political or moral implication.

## **USA**

United States of America. America is a continent (which contains nations other than the USA), not a country.

# Introduction

Over the last thirty years and particularly the last fifteen years, the popularity of anime internationally has skyrocketed. This popularity has triggered discussion, inspired by the idea of soft power, about how Japan can benefit politically from anime and other internationally consumed popular culture. Ongoing debate about Japan's military status has tapped into soft power ideas, seeing soft power as either an alternative to military (hard) power or as a useful tool to complement a re-instatement of Japan's military. In this thesis I examine three key approaches to anime's soft power: cool Japan; agitprop and secondary texts questioning these two approaches. I use the anime primary text *Gundam Seed* and a focus group interview conducted with Australians after viewing *Gundam Seed* to complicate the Japanese government's articulation of soft power while proposing, through my audience focus, a new approach to the study of anime and soft power.

I grew up watching *Sergeant York*, John Wayne vehicles and numerous Second World War films in which plucky Brits and laid back Yanks used their superior wits and courage beat evil Nazis. I saw my first anime at nine and have been watching ever since, including active involvement in university anime clubs in Australia and Japan. When I saw my first anime depiction of war, with soldiers on both sides who were both aggressive and gentle, frightened and brave and repeatedly confronted by suffering civilians and the families of those they had killed, I thought I had discovered something new and excitingly different.

*Gundam* in its various incarnations epitomised for me anime's lack of moral distinction between friend and foe. Commencing this research, I assumed that a

close reading of *Gundam Seed* and interviews with viewers would support my initial reaction and show that anime had the potential to compensate for the negative associations many Australian still have with Japan as a result of the Second World War. As the research progressed, my results consistently undermined the assumptions I had set out with. As a result, the project became an interrogation of the assumptions I had made and how they had led myself and others astray. The format of this thesis reflects that journey, beginning with some of Japanese soft power's true believers before presenting a close reading of war in *Gundam Seed* that questions some of the anti-war claims of the *Gundam* franchise. Challenges to soft power are then considered, with an emphasis on the interplay between soft and hard power. Finally, I analyse a focus group interview to determine how these ideas about anime, war and Japan play out in an Australian case-study.

This paper's study of diverse readings of *Gundam Seed* examines deeper layers of interaction between cultures; producers and consumers of anime texts; and the impact of media readings on international relations. I describe the collision of two primary texts: *Gundam Seed* and reactions of an audience to it.

Competing readings of anime texts have produced the ideas of anime as soft power resource and anime as paving the way to increased Japanese hard power. How do these different interpretations locate audiences' readings of anime texts, and what assumptions about audiences do they make? Do the responses of Australian viewers support these assumptions? By focusing on competing readings of a single anime text, *Gundam Seed*, this study reveals complexities in audience decoding practices and meaning making which call into question previous assumptions about the international influence of anime.



In Chapter One I survey literature on soft power, Japan's hard power and anime. In this survey two dominant approaches to Japanese soft power are identified: cool Japan and agitprop, the more complex suggestion that anime is being utilised as a tool assisting military reinstatement. Both of these approaches rely on audiences interpreting anime in certain ways. I introduce Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model as a framework for examining audience interpretations (decodings). In the second half of Chapter One I outline the methodology for the audience research which makes up Chapter Three, expanding on Hall to include textual analysis, historical considerations and audience contextualisation practices. Chapter Two centres on a textual analysis of *Gundam Seed* utilising war cinema theory and establishes a dominant-hegemonic reading of the programme with which the audience discussion is later compared. Soft power is examined in greater depth, focusing on the example of former Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso and his promotion of anime as a diplomatic tool. The third chapter presents the results of my qualitative research and discusses the implications of these results for the two approaches to anime's soft power.

This thesis identifies a lack of systematic audience research as a fundamental flaw in existing discussion of anime's soft power. This lack is problematic because policy is being based on these discussions, and if audiences behave against expectations, as my research suggests it is likely that they will, the importance of questions about soft power may be undermined by problems of methodology. I propose a model to correct this problem by expanding on existing research to bridge the gap between anecdotal popular press approaches

to anime audiences and political and economic institution focused academic research. In a small and limited application the suggested method is tested and the results are shown to illuminate the intersection of hard and soft power and the impact of Japan's popular culture internationally. Based on these findings I make recommendations for a more targeted diplomatic use of anime and recommend the incorporation of well established methods of investigative audience study into subsequent soft power research endeavours.

# Chapter One: Cool Japan or Agitprop? Anime, Soft Power and Audiences



Figure 1 Prince Pickles (SDF Mascot and manga character) in Iraq

## ***Literature Review***

The term soft power was first published by Joseph Nye, who explains that it “co-opts people rather than coerces them. Soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others” (2004: 5). In other words, if I can convince you that moving out of my way is what you yourself want to do, I will neither have to bribe you to move nor use a bayonet to prod you out of my way. Although hard power is used in this paper to refer to military power, according to Nye’s definition economic power is also an aspect of hard power. This point is often missed in soft power discussion, which assumes economic exercises of power, such as foreign aid, to be soft power (see for example Lincoln 2003: 126). According to Nye, both “sticks” and “carrots” are hard power resources (2004: 5). Nye identifies three soft power resources of a state: “Its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)” (Ibid: 11). Of course there is interaction between these three, as in cases of governments funding cultural facilities, but for the purposes of this paper it is culture (specifically in the pop-cultural form of anime) and the attempts of foreign policy makers to take advantage of that culture’s popularity that are of interest. Nye cautions that although popular culture is “often a resource that produces soft power”, its effectiveness depends on context: “the popularity of Pokemon games [does not] assure that Japan will get the policy outcomes it wishes” (Ibid: 12).

Although dismissed in the past as having too insular a culture to generate soft power, Japan, through its popular culture, is now the focus of considerable

international attention. The three-hundred per cent growth between 1992 and 2002 in exports of “Japanese comics, films, art and video games ... where other sectors showed only 15 per cent growth” (Gravett 2004: 152) has resulted in Japanese optimism that cultural exports will result in a soft power boom for Japan. Foreign academics and journalists are publishing increasingly large numbers of articles and books about anime, games and manga. Even Nye himself comments that Japanese images dominate children’s dreams, and Japan’s popular culture “was still producing potential soft power resources even after its economy slowed down” (2004: 86). Importantly Nye refers to “potential” soft power; the difficulties in taking advantage of that potential are discussed in more detail in Chapter Two. Mark Katz states as fact that “millions of teenagers ... all around the world think positively about Japan because they love its anime” (Katz July 30 2007). Tamotsu Aoki, Japanese Commissioner for Cultural Affairs, sees anime as central to Japan’s soft power

Japanese anime, which have been named as Japan’s leading cultural export, have successfully raised an “anime generation” that is mainly responsible, both at home and abroad, for the emergence of today’s “Cool Japan” phenomenon (2004: 13).

The idea of Japan as a cool country gaining power through international prestige has proved extremely popular in Japanese international relations and academic circles.

Coined by United States journalist Douglas McGray in reference to Japan, the expression “Gross National Cool” is, according to David Leheny, “known to virtually every bureaucrat in Japan” (2006: 222). McGray’s 2002 article

contrasts Japan's economic stagnation with its growing cultural influence (48). However, his article is not as effusive as some of the Japanese rhetoric which followed it (Aoki 2004; Aso 2006). McGray comments on Japan's "economic mess and military angst" (2002: 48), and speculates whether Japan "will be content to remain so much medium and so little message" (Ibid: 54). These more complex considerations have been largely ignored by enthusiastic advocates of the idea of cool Japan, as discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Christine Yano describes a growing sense national pride in the idea of Japanese cool and soft power, writing: "The Japanese government, recognizing the place of such cute/cool-based soft power, is showing increasing interest in and support for these informal cultural ambassadors" (2006: 163). A number of government initiatives, including international competitions for manga and *cosplay* (costumed role-play) artists, have been established to assert Japan as the homeland for fans. Roland Kelts cites anime industry insiders who see McGray's article as a tipping point, pushing the Japanese government to form policies geared to exploiting the soft power of pop-culture (2007: 113). The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry has put "increasing stress on Japan's content business, now led by anime ... as a strategic industry" (Gerow 2006). What message the Government wants to transmit with these initiatives, and how they will interact with the existing international relations challenges lingering from The Second World War (hereafter WWII) are absent from this cool Japan version of soft power.

Other than sales figures, evidence is rarely produced to support the cool Japan concept. It may seem self-evidently true to authors who see the influence of Japanese pop-culture in Hollywood movies, their local street fashions and the tastes of their own children. Government initiatives seem to make the same assumptions. What meanings audiences make of the anime they consume is not a question being asked along side soft power literature and policy making. Analysis that assumes a linear flow of communication unaltered from sender to receiver cannot elucidate the experiences of fan communities, whose consumption of anime prompted the cool Japan idea, not the other way around. The research that has been done indicates that these communities do not automatically equate their enjoyment of Japanese media with attraction to broader Japanese culture, a distinction which has the potential to undermine soft power gains for Japan. Antonia Levi writes that when she first began publishing about manga and anime over a decade ago, she

cherished rosy dreams that as the popularity and availability of these Japanese cartoons spread, so too would the interest in Japan and its culture. To some degree these dreams have come true, but not to the degree I had hoped for, despite the fact that the awareness and availability of anime and manga in translation have far surpassed anything I had expected (2006: 43).

Her exploration of how her expectations came to be so different from what is occurring leads her to Stuart Hall

What I saw as a failure to appreciate the uniquely Japanese aspects of anime and manga can just as easily be seen as an example of the type of negotiated understandings that result from encoding and decoding. ...

Encoding/decoding is a complex and ongoing process, even before intercultural factors are introduced. In the case of anime and manga, where a product encoded by and for one culture is decoded by a different culture, the process goes beyond complex (Ibid: 44).

Beyond complex though it may be, the issue of how different groups decode anime is, following the logic of soft power, vitally important for Japanese foreign policy. Stuart Hall offers a theoretical framework which is ideally suited to achieving an understanding of the forces at work in the international reception of anime, and therefore the functioning of the soft power so generated. As cultures begin to absorb and co-opt anime, the pre-existing structures and ideologies will interact to make new meanings.

Soft power is an international relations concept and international relations is a field that does not often focus on actors smaller than nations and multinational corporations. Media theorists such as Hall provide the tools for examining the phenomenon of anime's intercultural appeal at the micro level. Hall not only offers a strong framework for audience research, his ideas about television in many ways pre-empt the idea of soft power. As James Procter summarises

televisual discourse plays a key ideological role in reproducing and securing, by *consent* rather than force, the values and meanings of the dominant cultural order. However, these dominant or preferred meanings are always open to *contestation* and transformation [emphasis in original] (2004: 72).

That fans around the world are watching anime does not guarantee that they are decoding that anime to conceptualise a cool Japan, as seemingly hoped for by Japanese policy makers.



In *Encoding/decoding* (1973, cited version in a 1980 collection), Hall outlines three hypothetical positions television viewers may adopt when making meaning from a programme: dominant-hegemonic; negotiated and oppositional (1980: 136-138). Viewers who decode a programme in the same way it has been encoded, that is, in terms of the dominant definitions “principally generated by political and military elites” (Ibid: 136), are adopting a dominant reading position (Ibid). To use Hall’s industrial relations example, if a news broadcast portrays lower wages and weaker unions as in the national interest, a view adopting a dominant reading position will accept this explanation as common sense. Viewers adopting a negotiated position accept dominant definitions in an abstract sense, but at a situational level see “exceptions to the rule” (Ibid: 137). For example, a worker may accept that low wages are important to combat inflation in general, but still strike for better pay (Ibid). The oppositional position “detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternate framework of reference” (Ibid: 138). In this case, the same news report’s use of the term ‘national interest’ may be decoding as ‘class interest’ (Ibid). *Encoding/decoding* offers a useful framework for the study of television reception, but also raises a number of important questions. Why do individuals adopt the position that they do? How do political and military elites promote certain definitions as dominant, and how aware are viewers of these influences?

Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin laments the lack of both empirical and discursive research regarding Japanese popular culture’s soft power, pointing out that a majority of scholarship on Japanese popular culture outside Japan “consist of a series of anecdotal case studies with a strong tendency to privilege the text and

its representational practices” (2008: 74). Although textual analysis is an important component in understanding international viewers’ attraction to anime, the text alone does not provide enough information to explain audience decoding. No television viewing experience is hermetically sealed. The viewer brings a lifetime of experiences and knowledge into which the programme is contextualised, and this background may explain the division of viewers into different reading positions. It is just this sort of background which has the potential to undermine soft power, as McGray alludes to with his comment about Japan’s economic and military issues.

Anime’s soft power and cool Japan seem to offer almost utopic possible alternatives to warfare and other hard power tactics when explained by the Japanese government. During his time as Foreign Minister, Taro Aso was vocal about the links between popular culture and soft power in democracies

What we have now is an era in which diplomacy at the national level is affected dramatically by the climate of opinion arising from the average person. And that is exactly why we want pop culture, which is so effective in penetrating throughout the general public, to be our ally in diplomacy

(Aso April 28, 2006).

Other commentators have retotalized this message to instead see soft power as a supporting act to hard power. Authors such as David Leheny point to messages about Japan contained in exported anime, specifically that Japan is a reformed nation whose military ought not be feared (2006: 224 and 232). Rather than the somewhat amorphous cool Japan, this is an area where soft power has the potential to affect quantifiable results for a specific policy goal. This aspect

of anime's soft power potential has not been lost on Japanese pro-remilitarisation reformers either. David Leheny suggests that government enthusiasm for anime and manga exports is, at least in some circles, driven by the desire to transmit a specific message about Japan's military potential

Japan needs to support the spread of its popular culture overseas in order for other countries to see what today's Japan really is. It is a changed country ... It is a country that would not hurt a fly (Ibid: 224).

Rather than an alternative to hard power, Leheny sees soft power as a public relations performance on behalf of hard power. In other words, he continues, soft power "offers the opportunity to convince other people that Japan's development... with a normal military, is not to be feared, because this is a nation that has only the best of intentions" (Ibid: 232). It can be argued, following this interpretation, that soft power a Trojan horse containing the resurgence of hard power. Whether soft power is an alternative to hard power, or a way of achieving hard power, Japan's current non-military status makes soft power a pressing issue.

Japan's post-war (1947) constitution includes a clause (Article 9) prohibiting the maintenance of a military and rejecting war as a right of the nation. Seven years after the constitution's adoption, a "Self Defence Force" (hereafter SDF) was created, the constitutionality of which continues to be debated (Saft & Ohara 2006: 84). Until quite recently, Article 9 has been protected from further amendment by the strength of public support for institutionalised pacifism, even in the face of often intense international pressure (specifically from the USA) to contribute troops to wars in Asia and the Middle East. However in 1992, in

response to the Gulf War, a law was passed allowing overseas deployment of the SDF in peace keeping missions, bearing arms only for self defence (Ibid). The following decade saw a shift in Japanese attitudes towards the SDF, especially among young people, many of whom now favour “normalising” the country’s military (Nye 2002: 24). In 1999 and 2001 further laws were passed allowing deployment of the SDF in the region surrounding Japan bearing offensive arms in support of US led campaigns (Saft & Ohara 2006: 85). The possibility of constitutional amendment begs, according to Paul Midford, the question of whether the “mass public” would be supportive; the answer having “big implications for US foreign policy, global politics, and regional politics” (2006: 2).

Twenty Japanese nationals were killed in the September 11 2001 attacks on New York (Ibid: 20). In the following weeks, a newspaper poll found that only 3.6% of respondents felt Japan was prepared to defend against a terrorist attack (cited by Ibid: 21). However, only 24.7% responded that Japan should actively co-operate with the US response (Ibid). In October 2001 another poll found global warming and international terrorism tied for the respondents’ diplomatic priorities (Cited by Midford 2006: 22). Support for the Iraq war was even less enthusiastic, with Midford contrasting public perception that the US invasion of Afghanistan was “an inevitable act of self-defence” (Ibid: 6) with a reaction to the invasion of Iraq which was, “from the beginning, overwhelmingly critical” (Ibid: 29). Midford suggests that the Japanese public “expresses skepticism about the utility of military force for fighting terrorism, countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, or promoting democracy” (Ibid: 7); a distinction which may explain the differing responses to the two invasions.

Despite this limited support, “Iraq became the most recent opportunity for conservatives in Japan to press to alter or reinterpret the constitution to permit dispatching soldiers abroad for combat” (Lincoln 2003: 123).

Then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi amended Self-Defence Force laws to allow SDF defence of US bases in Japan from terrorist attack and dispatched the SDF to provide logistical support during the Afghanistan invasion, with an extended definition of permissible self defence (Midford 2006: 23), and in 2003 introduced a bill allowing dispatch of the SDF to Iraq (Ibid: 24). Japan’s policy changes in response to the US led “war on terrorism” have gone beyond changes in public opinion, opening up a gap that Midford describes as having important implications for Japanese policy and politics (Ibid: 7). As long as the Liberal Democratic Party remains in government and retains constitutional revision as a policy objective, this public opinion gap will be problematic. Popular culture presents a medium for the transmission of positive messages about the SDF and constitutional reform with established domestic and international audiences.

It is not only Japanese youths whose attitudes towards the SDF may be altering as a result of anime. Saya Shiraishi writes

Japanese comics and television animations are spreading Japanese ideas about childhood, war and peace, science and technology, and the future world ... often without revealing their Japanese origin” (1997: 272).

Shiraishi’s interpretation of anime’s global role as transmitting ideas almost subliminally is particularly significant in the area of ideas about war, as anime and manga are becoming increasingly mainstream in parts of Asia traditionally

most resistant to the idea of Japanese remilitarisation. Guy Westwell writes that the cultural imagination of war

is shaped by myriad representations of war appearing in numerous contexts, ranging from television news broadcasts ... to film and television documentaries, comic books, novels, web pages, art exhibitions and war memorials. These representations provide the common ground upon which a collective, shared sense of war is worked out, articulated and sometimes contested (2006: 5).

This imagination of war, and what justifies war, is politically important because “in a democracy, the manufacture of popular support for war is a logical necessity without which the nation’s war making capacity is severely hampered” (Ibid: 2). As anime is consumed globally, and particularly in countries impacted by Japanese militarisation during WWII, the representations of war in that anime may have an important impact on the attitudes those countries will take to Japanese attempts to substantially revise (or abolish) Article 9.

Sabine Frühstück details the formidable PR machine at work on behalf of the SDF, focusing on SDF attempts to “manipulate and align themselves with popular culture” (2007: 117). These engagements with popular culture include producing an anime series and manga versions of white papers (Ibid: 119). For Frühstück, the trend of “an increasingly intimate relationship between the Self-Defence Forces and popular culture” in itself “constitutes a form of militarization” (Ibid: 148). Hironori Sasada sees manga as a significant contributor to youth nationalism in Japan (2006: 118), pointing out a recent

increase in the number of nationalistic manga published, some “achieving tremendous financial success. The most notable include *Sensoron* (On War) by Yoshinori Kobayashi (1998) ... *Sensoron* sold more than 700,000 copies” (Ibid). Including subsequent reprints, *Sensoron* has now sold over a million copies (Rosenbaum 2006: 10). Kobayashi is also a founding member of the *Japanese Society for Historical Textbook Reform*, an organisation which produced the history textbook protested against by South Korea and China with unprecedented violence in 2005 (Times April 10 2005). In turn, these and other anti-Japan protests have solidified support for constitutional revision as the Japanese public increasingly view their neighbours as antagonistic (Sasada 2006: 111 and 115). The increased interaction between the SDF and popular culture on the one hand, and popular culture and nationalist, military themes on the other, calls into question the utopic idea of cool Japan gaining international influence through the spread of innocent cultural merchandise.

In 2007 the Ministry of Defence publicised a presentation titled *Towards the Realization of Gundam*, detailing an armament system “designed with the Gundam anime series in mind” (*Defense Ministry's Gundam-Inspired High-Tech Infantry Kit Grabs Otaku Attention* November 15 2007). Far from consuming the toy weapons marketed by *Gundam*, this group of ‘fans’ working in the Ministry of Defence were inspired to create real weapons; instruments of hard power. Fruhstuck’s exploration of the SDF’s use of pop-culture provides a context to the creation of this armament system, making it a logical next step rather than the bizarre oddity it at first appears. If the SDF have long been producing anime and manga (and, perhaps most relevant to *Gundam*, models of

military vehicles (Frühstück 2007: 141)) based on their hardware, it is not such a leap to produce hardware based on an anime.

## ***Methodology***

Literature on Japan's anime and manga exports provides a wealth of quantitative research detailing industry statistics and the size of international fan communities (see for example Kinsella 2000). Writings around audience, in contrast, are often anecdotal and focus only on fan communities which, by their nature, do not represent a broad spectrum of Japanese popular culture consumers. The perspective of a teenaged fan who not only watches anime and reads manga but also attends conventions, writes fan fiction and socialises via online anime communities will surely be different from that of a child who loves *Pokemon* but is not aware of its Japanese origin. Different again will be the perspective of a middle-aged film critic whose exposure to anime is limited to cinema releases such as *Perfect Blue*. This is not to say that anime fan communities are not important subjects for study; simply that such studies must be contextualised rather than presented as representative of broader categories such as "teenagers" (such as Katz July 30 2007). It is unfortunately common to encounter a quote from a subject such as "Jane Smith, 14, anime fan" with no context as to why this person's opinion is meaningful, how s/he was selected for interview or what (if any) population s/he is presented as representing (for example Kelts 2007: 211).

In order to examine how viewers might read an anime text a qualitative approach is the most appropriate, because it allows the flexibility to follow unpredicted trains of (the interviewee's) thought. A method of instances study



sees each instance “as an occurrence that evidences the operation of a set of cultural understandings currently available” (Denzin & Lincoln 2000: 370). According to Jennifer Mason, qualitative research has “an unrivalled capacity to constitute compelling arguments about *how things work in particular contexts*” [emphasis in original] (2002: 1). The context for this method of instances study “is an example of the application of conventions of reading to a particular programme” (Bertrand & Hughes 2005: 65). More specifically, it is a study of how humanities students who are not anime fans read three episodes of *Gundam Seed*, explored through a focus group interview. Non-fans have been selected to test the implicit assumption this paper identifies, in soft power literature, that anime consumption creates positive associations with Japan; and that consumers will read the anime according to its dominant, encoded meaning. Anime fan communities often extend their activities and interests beyond anime to involve other aspects of Japanese culture, including popular music, fashion and martial arts. Since it is unclear whether so many fans become interested in Japan as a result of watching anime or if they watch anime as a result of an existing interest in Japan, members of fan communities are inappropriate subjects for an examination of the logic of soft power as it relates to anime.

Discussion of anime’s soft power often simplistically equates consumption of anime with positive feelings for Japan (Katz July 30 2007), neglecting possibilities of negotiated or resistant decodings and indigenisation practices. By interviewing a group with sophisticated textual analysis skills but no interest in anime, this research questions such an assumption and examines in detail the group’s decoding of a text depicting hard power to test the viability of current soft power discourse in a practical setting. Janet Staiger writes

contexts of social formations and constructed identities of the self in relation to historical conditions explain the interpretation strategies and affective responses of readers. Thus, receptions need to be related to specific historical conditions as events (2001: 282-293).

The text examined was produced in a militarily impotent Japan struggling to define its world role in the wake of the September 11 2001 attacks on the US and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan. How might Australian viewers, as debate continues over Australian troop deployments in Iraq, respond to Japanese representations of war?

This research attempts to realise Tulloch and Jenkins' search for "a way by which audience research may be coupled with alternate approaches to textual analysis and historical perspectives on the production process" (1995: 24) by examining writings around *Gundam*'s creator; the historical context of *Gundam Seed*'s production; analysis by academics and non-fan audience research. The audience analysed is composed of University of Tasmania students who have studied a textual-analysis based course such as English or History but are who do not have a specific interest in, or knowledge of, anime. The interview group is self-selecting in that only those who responded to my flyers of their own volition are included, and an element of snowball sampling (Bertrand & Hughes 2005: 68) occurred. The sample is not intended to be representative of any population, rather it is a method of instances study, with results not anticipated to be transferable (Ibid: 65).

The *Gundam* "franchise" is enduringly popular in Japan (a new series has been released more or less annually since 1979) and also iconic overseas. Because of

its large audience and interdependence with merchandise sales, *Gundam* provides a “main stream” text. *Gundam Seed* was released in Japan in 2002, at a time when the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York and international troop deployments in Afghanistan re-focused Japanese political attention to the restrictions on Japan’s Self Defence Force. Released in a year in which war and the military were politicised issues internationally, *Gundam Seed* depicts a detailed and transmutable (to reflect contemporary issues) war scenario. Although it is a science fiction series with a futuristic setting (including interplanetary travel), unlike other war television anime released in 2002, it does not feature aliens, magic or fantasy-feudal social settings. The science fiction elements (with the exception of *Gundam*’s Mobile Suits) are extensions of existing technologies such as genetic engineering. The problems driving the conflicts (terrorism, racism and the challenges of remaining neutral during world war) transcend the setting and reflect the political and social concerns of 2002. For an outline of *Gundam Seed*’s plot, characters and places relevant to the episodes screened to the focus group, refer to Appendix B.

A focus group interview was selected in favour of individual interviews for three reasons. Focus groups provide an opportunity to examine the social aspects of meaning making. As Kitzinger (cited by Ezzy & Rice 1999) points out, no-one is entirely self-contained; people contextualise their knowledge and create meanings through conversations with, and observation of, other people (Ibid: 93). Therefore, because this research explores how the interviewees understand *Gundam Seed*, “it makes sense to employ methods which actively encourage the examination of these social processes in action” (Ibid). The second reason I chose a focus group was that my questions ask for opinions on

topics I had no reason to suppose the interviewees would be engaged with or have thought about before. Although the pre-viewing questionnaire indicated the topics the interview would cover, I felt they would form opinions more comfortably and with greater depth in a group setting (Ezzy & Rice 1999: 91). Finally, as a student researcher I relied completely on the goodwill of the research participants and their generosity with their time. No incentives were offered for participation, and around ninety minutes of anime viewing time was required before the interview could begin. Holding a group interview allowed for a relaxed atmosphere while viewing *Gundam Seed* and interacting with other participants made the long time requirement less arduous for each individual.

Despite these advantages, there are also shortcomings to focus group interviews. Because of their social nature, group interviews may tend towards consensus forming (Ezzy & Rice 1999: 92). By including only university students with humanities majors I hoped to overcome this problem. The participants were all familiar with tutorial discussions and defending their positions in debate. At one point during the interview a participant began speaking then trailed off and looked uncomfortable. Another participant encouraged her to speak up, saying “dissent is good”, after which she was able to express her opinion. Nevertheless, it is still possible that the opinions expressed were moderated to be more acceptable in a group setting. For example, in response to the pre-viewing questionnaire question “do you see Japan as aggressive, neutral or neither” one participant responded that she “wouldn’t want to piss them off”. During the group interview she did not refer to this sentiment. Another concern was participants’ confidentiality. While they had the option of using a pseudonym they would still be identifiable to other participants by their appearance, and a

pseudonym would be difficult to sustain with many studying similar subjects in a small faculty. All participants were alerted to the possibility of assuming a pseudonym and warned about the lack of confidentiality; fortunately all consented to continue their involvement.

## Chapter Two: Shooting Blanks

### Soft Power, Hard Questions

Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes. In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.

(Article 9, The Constitution of Japan, 1947)

Orb will not attack another nation, will not allow another nation to attack them, and will not intervene in the conflicts of other nations.

(Principle of Orb, *Gundam Seed*, aired 2002)

Soft power is more than a theory for Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq war the Japanese government donated *Oshin* (a television drama about a woman's struggles to survive during the period around the Second World War in Japan) to the Iraqi Media Network (*Provision of the TV Program "Oshin" to Iraq* October 22, 2003) "to boost the morale of Iraqi citizens during the reconstruction" (Ruh 2006: 141). Characters *Hello Kitty* and *Doraemon* have been appointed "cultural ambassadors" (*Japan appoints cartoon ambassador* March 19, 2008; Hosaka May 19, 2008). In this chapter former Foreign Minister Taro Aso's articulation of soft power in policy provides us with an idealistic use of cool Japan ideas. Textual analysis of *Gundam Seed* establishes a dominant reading, which although supporting Aso's approach, is open to being retotalised by a resistant reading. Finally, I critique Aso's application of soft power through international commentators to suggest that the cool Japan approach to soft power has its roots firmly in nationalism rather than internationalism.

Attempts by the Japanese government to take advantage of anime's soft power potential at a governmental level coalesced around the figure of Taro Aso, who was a Cabinet Minister from 2003 to 2007, including two years as Foreign Minister. In 2007 Aso unsuccessfully stood as a candidate for Prime Minister<sup>i</sup> (Martig 2007). A self-professed anime and manga fan who gained a large youth following during his prime ministerial campaign by emphasising his involvement in fan culture,<sup>ii</sup> Aso launched an international award for manga (Bonisteel 2007; Yoshida 2007) and has also been involved with the World Cosplay Summit, serving as a judge in 2006 (*World Cosplay Summit 2006 Homepage* 2006). Following Abe Shinzo's resignation in 2007, when Aso

seemed the leading candidate for Prime Minister, share prices in the manga industry surged ( *Manga shares gain on leader hopes* 2007). His high profile within Japan; his active pursuit of pop-culture based soft power internationally and his personal identification with anime and manga fan communities make Aso an ideal case-study to highlight the complexity of governmental approaches to soft power. As Foreign Minister, Aso was active in promoting anime and manga as diplomatic tools, with his explanations firmly situated in the cool Japan tradition. He said in a speech to Digital Hollywood University

What is the image that pops into someone's mind when they hear the name "Japan"? Is it a bright and positive image? Warm? Cool? The more these kinds of positive images pop up in a person's mind ... Japanese diplomacy is able to keep edging forward, bit by bit, and bring about better and better outcomes as a result (April 28, 2006).

Aso's relationship with cool Japan is detailed further in the final section of this chapter. Japanese newspaper *Asahi Shimbun* pointed out during the 2007 resurgence of international pressure for Japan to acknowledge and compensate WWII "comfort women" that it can take years to cultivate soft power and only a single high-profile gaff to destroy it (Shimbun 2007). Can anime's grass-roots popularity undo damage done at the governmental level? For Er Lam, Japan's soft power continues to be undermined by the continued conflict over WWII memory (2007: 350). Not only are memories of past wars and debates about Japan's future military role issues around anime's soft power, they are also addressed within anime. By shifting focus from sales statistics and vague



feelings of warmth to textual analysis and audience decoding, a more detailed understanding of anime's soft power emerges.

### ***Textual analysis***



**Figure 2** Screen capture, *Gundam Seed* Episode Thirty-three (Miriallia confronting the POW she believes to have killed Tolle)

*Gundam Seed*, the 2002 instalment of one of the longest-running and most popular anime Series, is the story of a racially motivated war. It began airing in Japan a few days after the first anniversary of the US led invasion of Afghanistan, an event which had refocused Japan's attention on Article 9 and its impact on Japan's international role. Its themes, established popularity and the historical location of its production make *Gundam Seed* an excellent text to explore representations of war and pacifism. For *Gundam Seed* and other anime to effectively communicate reassurance about Japanese society (and military), viewers must understand the programme's meanings in the same way that the creators have intended. To use Hall's terminology, they must adopt a dominant-hegemonic reading position (1980: 136). As mentioned in the introduction, on first viewing *Gundam Seed* I made a number of assumptions about what I saw

as its anti-war stance, which are reflected in the following analysis. Three key reasons I made these assumptions are the emphasis on civilian suffering; the portrayal of authority figures as self-absorbed ideologues in contrast to the similarities between essentially defensive motivation of common soldiers on both sides; and the use of protagonists on both sides of the conflict rather than dehumanising the 'wrong' side. These thematic elements are common to *Gundam* series, and have also been identified by other critics as representative of an anti-war message.

Hall warns that polysemy must not be confused with pluralism or equality among connotative codes: "Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a *dominant cultural order*" [emphasis in original] (1980: 134). If a viewer "decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded" (136), the reading position is classified by Hall as dominant-hegemonic. In order to determine how *Gundam* is encoded, the following analysis focuses on the attitudes expressed by the creator of the original *Gundam* concept, Yoshiyuki Tomino, and David Vernal's extrapolations from his 1995 interview with Tomino. Although he created the original concept and programme, Tomino did not direct *Gundam Seed*, which was directed by Mitsuo Fukuda. As Tomino and Vernal's comments establish *Gundam* as an anti-war text, examples of negative representations of war are then identified in *Gundam Seed* specifically, establishing a dominant reading of the programme.

Vernal writes that “*Mobile Suit Gundam* is an expression of the contemporary Japanese anti-war ethic” (1995: 57). He sees Gundam’s underlying messages as deconstructing the “otherness” of the enemy, and teaching that war is only possible when individuals submit to ideology (Ibid). Ideology in the Gundam universe is, according to Yoshiyuki Tomino, more dangerous than weapons (Tomino interview with Vernal in Vernal 1995: 63). These messages are both present in *Gundam Seed*, particularly the humanisation of the enemy. The narrative tension is driven by the childhood friendship between protagonist Kira, who spends most of the series fighting on the side of the Earth Alliance, and Athrun, who fights for ZAFT. From the outset then, the protagonist is keenly aware of the humanity of his opponents. The immediate comrades of both Athrun and Kira are given back-stories and screen-time for thirty episodes before being killed by Kira and Athrun respectively. The consequences for the friends and families of the deceased are shown on both sides, with the mother of Athrun’s friend weeping over his piano (he has dreamed of being a pianist before the outbreak of war) and the suffering of Kira’s friendship circle driving several subsequent episodes.

*Gundam Seed* incorporates many elements associated with anti-war genres, such as a focus on civilian suffering and portrayal of the commanding classes (military and political) as indifferent to the suffering of the soldiers they send into battle. The Hollywood tradition of air force and technology/weapons focused films relies on “the impression of a ‘clean’ techno-war, almost devoid of human suffering and death, conducted with surgical precision by wondrous mechanisms” (Franklin 1994: 25-43 cited in; Slocum 2006a: 18). The setting of *Gundam Seed* provides the opportunity for completely clean battles, taking

place in space with giant mobile armour suits, not people being hacked to pieces, and when a pilot is killed it is in an explosion in which the human is invisible. Yet the programme makes a point of showing the screaming, bleeding pilots inside their cockpits (or more graphically, dismemberment: see figure 6). Both the dialogue and character development frequently center on the trauma of war and the inevitable impact on civilians.

The individual characters are shown fighting for very personal reasons: to defend friends and family or avenge their deaths. On a macro level, however, the war is explicitly racial. For ZAFT, the genetically enhanced co-ordinators are the next evolution of humanity who are being held back and persecuted by the naturals. For Blue Cosmos, the organisation behind much of the Earth Alliance's policy, Coordinators are an unnatural aberration, something unclean to be eradicated. The characters who espouse strong ideological motivations for the war are always shown removed from any actual fighting, sitting either behind pristine desks or in darkened conference rooms. These ideologies are shown in an entirely negative light, as ideas that are unsustainable when members from the two groups actually get to know one-another. Flay, a female school-mate of Kira, sees the extermination of all Coordinators as the only way to end the war, and uses sexual and emotional manipulation to encourage Kira (himself a Coordinator) to become more aggressive in battle. Her strategy backfires when she realises she has developed feelings for Kira and she loses the ability to generalise about all Coordinators through her personal interactions with individuals. For Vernal, *Gundam* is a teaching tool which may lead to a less violent future. "If the post-war generations raised with his [Tomino's] work

assimilate ... his lessons on universal acceptance, then perhaps the future will not resemble *Gundam* at all” (1995: 82).

Anti-war films have been frequently challenged by resistant decodings, “reliant as they often are on spectacles of carnage and destruction, [they] can be approached as fantasies of militarization” (Slocum 2006b: 196). The anti-war reading of *Gundam Seed* introduced above as a dominant-hegemonic decoding, which, consistent with Shiraishi and Leheny’s interpretation, anime is disseminating internationally, is also vulnerable to a resistant decoding. Despite the anti-war elements discussed earlier, the quandary J David Slocum refers to “of whether any cinematic depiction of combat, with its intense, stimulating, even eroticized images of death and destruction, could be viewed as anti-war” (2006a: 20) is particularly relevant in the case of *Gundam*. The spectacle of battle, and the minutiae of each new mobile suit’s technical specifications, are a substantial part of what attracts fans to the show. Battles are typically quite long, some spanning multiple episodes, and are accompanied by faster-paced and exhilarating background music and split screens showing multiple sites of action simultaneously (see Figure 3), creating an atmosphere of excitement unmatched in the slower moving, less engaging moments of reflection about the nature of war.

In addition, there is a profound dislocation of responsibility for any of the suffering represented. When traumatised after killing others in battle, the characters are told that they had no choice, the culprit is war itself. Both Kira and Athrun are told by their superior officers that they must shoot without hesitation, or they themselves will be shot. The alternative, that if neither shot

both would be safe, remains unspoken. Although the diegesis suggests that the war was initiated in an attack on a civilian agricultural community by the Earth Alliance/ Blue Cosmos, a racist faction bent on genocide, a majority of the series takes place on an Earth Alliance battleship. Subsequent atrocities committed against the Earth Alliance are presented almost as balancing out past crimes, a feature of the series which echoes Japan's prioritising of a narrative of victimhood and downplaying of Japanese atrocities. Naoko Shimazu claims that "the postwar Japanese liked to portray themselves as victims of pre-1945 militarism. This victim mentality is pervasive in the three categories of popular representations -literature, films and television" (2003: 101). Alexander Bukh's comprehensive survey of history textbooks reveals

no doubt that depictions of Japan's national victimhood continue to play a central role in the currently dominant narrative, particularly in relation to the Asia Pacific War... Furthermore, the narrative does not provide any material related to individual responsibility for these atrocities committed by Japan; hints about collective responsibility are vague and few (2007: 702).

In *Gundam Seed*, tragic events unfold with little attention paid to agency. The idea that various individual soldiers, particularly Kira, are to blame for the deaths of those they kill is repeatedly undermined with "war" blamed for the suffering of both sides.

Shimazu reaches a similar conclusion to Bukh after examining Japanese film and television

In popular representations of the war, the state represented as the militarists and the people as victims remain completely separate ... Most of the

programmes contain the underlying message of pacifism - of a kind that does not question the responsibility of the Japanese (2003: 108).

*Gundam Seed*'s pacifist message is similar. War has awful consequences, but what can the common soldier do? Consequently what is presented is a "great man" attitude towards unfolding events. That is, the masses of civilians and soldiers have no power to alter the fates prescribed for them by their leaders. The ability to change the course of the war is restricted to charismatic leaders who are related to already powerful dynasties. Ultimately it is up to Kira and his sister, children of Orb's leader, and their lovers Lacus (daughter of PLANT's civilian leader) and Athrun (son of PLANT's military, ZAFT's, leader) to broker a cease-fire.

Yoshikuni Igarashi discusses at length in *Bodies of Memory* how the focus on the decisions of "great men" Hirohito and Truman in ending WWII, and the disregard that focus entails for all other factors, has allowed post-war Japan to abdicate responsibility, as a society, for the war (particularly the Asian theater) (2000: especially 24 – 28). In taking a similar approach to its fantasy world, *Gundam Seed* enters dangerous territory for politically aware viewers. If, as Vernal claims, "*Mobile Suit Gundam* is an expression of the contemporary Japanese anti-war ethic" (1995: 57), the 2002 instalment (*Gundam Seed*) does not necessarily convey reassurance to audiences who may be concerned that Japan's attitude towards WWII indicates an inability to control a constitutionally unleashed military in the future. Slocum comments on a scene in *Jarhead* (Dir. Sam Mendes 2005) where recruits watch *Apocalypse Now* (Dir. Francis Ford Coppola 1979) as a rallying exercise before deployment to Iraq

(2006a: 14). He suggests that the appropriation of scenes from *Apocalypse Now* by the younger generation of soldiers “at cross purposes with the intention of their original maker” calls into question the ability of any cinematic mediation of warfare to function as anti-war (Ibid: 20). With *Gundam* inspiring SDF armament systems in a similar appropriation, the same question arises regarding anime depictions of warfare. While *Gundam*’s international popularity supports cool Japan by contributing to sales statistics, alongside collectable robot figurines and sound-tracks audiences may be consuming messages about Japanese interest in military technology and reluctance to accept collective responsibility, in both past and imagined future, for the exercise of that technology.

Peter Katzenstein describes the deployment of Japanese troops (however heavily restricted their actions may have been) in Iraq as the crossing of “a post-war watershed” (2006: 21). While I do not wish to suggest that *Gundam Seed*’s representation of war led directly to Iraq, it is undeniable that if, as Westwell suggests, the cultural imaging of war is shaped by influences including entertainment media, and in turn this imagining shapes national policy, then manga and anime have an impact on Japanese policy. *Gundam*, voted in 2005 Japan’s favourite anime of all time in a nationwide survey of multiple age groups conducted by Asahi TV (*TV Asahi Top 100 Anime 2005*), is an important text in understanding the contemporary Japanese imagining of war. As this imagining plays itself out in the current debate over constitutional amendment in Japan, it could have a profound impact on the region Japan and Australia share.



## ***Questioning Soft Power***



**Figure 3** Screen capture, *Gundam Seed* Episode Eleven (example of split-screen technique used in battle scenes)

Contemporary international observers have been cautious about anime's soft power. The rhetoric from Japan is not devoid of nationalistic undertones and domestic political machinations, which does not invalidate soft power but does add depth and complexity to an otherwise seemingly utopic concept. For example, Taro Aso's push to recognise pop-culture's importance may have been as much aimed at convincing content producers (such as the students of Digital Hollywood University) as it was politicians and diplomats. Roland Kelts characterises the response of major anime studios to the US anime boom as "sluggish", particularly in their failure to secure international copyright protection (2007: 121). He describes studio professionals who produce titles commonly downloaded overseas as

genuinely astonished to learn that foreigners were interested in their products at all. Others wearily played down the interest, brushing it off like so much oppressive hype, a passing fad that would doubtless fizzle out (Ibid).

Aso's book *Stupendous Japan* (とてつもない日本) (2007) reassures Japanese voters, particularly young Japanese, that Japan is a nation to be proud of. Aso's promotion of Japanese pop-culture can also be seen as encouraging pride in Japanese culture and society. Aso's comment "[w]ith all due respect to Mickey and Donald, whether you look at J-pop, J-anime, or J-fashion, the competitiveness of any of these is much more than you might imagine" (Aso April 28, 2006) is self-conscious in drawing a positive comparison between Japan's pop-culture and that of Japan's former occupier.<sup>iii</sup> Peng Er Lam suggests a domestic as well as international audience for soft power, observing that

[a] cheerful "Japan Cool" thesis from the West which validates Japanese culture, albeit pop, is certainly reassuring and ego-boosting to many ... against the backdrop of a rising China and the negative portrayal of democratic postwar Japan as unrepentant and militaristic by the Chinese and Koreans (2007: 352).

While Aso's identification with fan communities has heightened his profile domestically and with international anime fans (English language "I Love Taro Aso" T-Shirts are available from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)), he is also an ambitious politician who continues to campaign for the Prime Ministership (Harris 2008). Following his 2007 defeat by Yasuo Fukuda, Aso's formerly intense focus on foreign policy has shifted. In 2008 he has reinvented himself as the voice of Japan's poor, focusing on pension problems and regional economic stagnation (Harris 2008). Aso's encouragement of pop-culture soft power was important domestically as well as internationally, and cannot be understood in isolation

from the context of his domestic political ambitions. Seen in this light, Aso's speech at Digital Hollywood University has as much to do with domestic morale boosting as it does with international engagement. Moreover, Er Lam's comment points to the complexity of Japan's relationship with China. Aso has made headlines for multiple controversial comments in international relations, particularly in relation to Japan's immediate region. He has angered China by praising aspects of Japan's colonisation of Taiwan (*Taiwan colonization was 'good': Aso* 2006), by referring to Taiwan as a "country" (*Japan-China row turns to Taiwan* 2006) and naming China as a threat to Japan (*Japan alarmed by Chinese 'threat'* 2005). Thus, when he told Digital Hollywood University students "[w]e have a grasp on the hearts of young people in many countries, not the least of which being China" (Aso April 28, 2006) his soft power rhetoric strikes a somewhat hollow note. From an Australia point of view, Aso has been accused of suppressing information about the use of allied prisoners of war, a majority of whom were Australian, as forced labour by his family mining business during WWII (Underwood June 26, 2007).

Peng Er Lam cautions "a liking for Japanese culture and society is not easily translated into support for the Japanese state and its foreign policy goals" (2007: 359). Many Australians enjoy eating sushi without supporting Japanese whaling in the Southern Ocean. Leheny and Shiraishi's comments about anime's potential to spread not only itself as an export but also a specific message about Japanese intentions and the SDF suggest a way to enhance the effectiveness of anime based soft power diplomacy, albeit with distinct overtones of agitprop. Rather than focusing exclusively on how many anime are being watched overseas, Japanese diplomats need to pay attention to which anime foreign

audiences watch and how they read them. Alan McKee suggests that it is common “to discover that audience members draw from publicly available knowledges [sic] in order to make sense of texts” (2003: 90). The cultural studies tradition of reception analysis “emphasizes media use as a reflection of a particular sociocultural context and as a process of giving meaning to cultural products and experiences” (McQuail 1997: 18). This implies that the same text will probably be read differently by the same audience at different times. A film that seemed cutting edge and futuristic maybe read as nostalgic and comical by the same viewer ten or twenty years later. Likewise, Australian and Japanese viewers may not read *Gundam Seed* in the same way.

*Gundam*, which Vernal characterises as “an expression of the contemporary Japanese anti-war ethic” (1995: 57), is a text with the potential to fit Shiraishi’s description of anime spreading Japanese ideas about war. Australia provides a good testing site for these ideas. Japan is an important trading partner and two-hundred thousand Australians visit Japan annually (*Australian-Japanese relations today* 2006). Former Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, when expressing support for Japan’s campaign to become a Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council, said “Australia and Japan believe in the same things, we are working together to achieve the same objectives” (Downer March 22 2005). However, some Australians also have negative attitudes towards Japan resulting from WWII. Memories of Australian suffering are kept alive in film and television, for example the ABC’s 2002 Logie Award-winning *Changi*, which depicts the highly traumatic experiences of Australian Prisoners of War in a Japanese concentration camp. Ben Hills writes that when Australian Alex Harper was asked to host Japan’s (now) Crown Prince Naruhito on his first

overseas visit, Mr Harper had to conceal the stay from family members who would have been unable to cope with the situation as a result of their experiences as prisoners in Changi (2006: 58). Although the Australian experience of war is not the same as China or Korea's, specifically given the absence of the experiences of occupation, Australia does provide a setting where wartime memory seems, from Downer's speech, to be superseded by contemporary concerns.

Taro Aso has provided the idealised government perspective on soft power, supported by the dominant reading of Gundam Seed I established through textual analysis. War film theory suggests that this reading is vulnerable to resistant decodings, particularly when contextualised in international debates about war memory. The criticism Er Lam makes of Aso's soft power discourse returns us to contemporary politics but from a more pessimistic perspective. In Chapter three I move beyond hypothetical critiques of soft power and apply the established theory to an Australian audience case-study.

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<sup>i</sup> The contest was for Liberal Democratic Party leadership following the resignation of the Prime Minister. Aso did not, in other words, face a general election but rather an in-party vote.

<sup>ii</sup> See for example <http://akiba.kakaku.com/event/0709/17/120000.php> where Aso is photographed addressing a crowd of around 1500 including young people dressed as anime and manga characters. Aso is referred to on the site as "Rozen Aso", a nickname derived from the manga *Rozen Maiden*, which he was seen reading in public. The street speeches and nickname are discussed in an NHK interview available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5UoOiqmf58o>. Aso's popularity with youth is further indicated by the 290 videos featuring him hosted on video streaming website youtube (searched April 2008).

<sup>iii</sup> The Allied occupation of Japan after WWII was led by the USA, which, although occupation formally ended in 1952, continues to maintain military bases in Japan.

## Chapter Three: Polysemy and Policy



Figure 4 Screen capture, *Gundam Seed* Episode Thirty-three (closing credits)

I use *Gundam Seed* to test ideas about soft power under the most challenging of conditions: representations of war. Through the examination of audience decoding in action I am able to move beyond assumptions and abstract critiques to gain tangible insights. By using Stuart Hall and reception studies approaches, I aim through my focus group research to show the complexity of audience decoding. Based on this research I offer ways to overcome a key limitation in the soft power discourse. That is, that soft power assumes too much about how the audience reads the text. The approach I suggest has the potential to realise a more nuanced understanding of audience and challenges soft power literature's (industry/political) institutional focus. The case study is contextualised below with an introduction to the group members and discussion of the limitations resulting from my selection on episodes to screen.

### ***Interview and participant Information***



**Figure 5 Athrun and Kira, childhood friends become foes**

The interview was conducted on December 16 2007 with a focus group comprised of four male and three female students. Jim, aged 43, was the only mature aged student. Excluding Jim, the average age was 21. Conversation was dominated by Jim, the oldest member of the group, and Sarah, who at 19 was

the youngest. University humanities students are used to informal turn-taking and following up their own lines of thought (Tulloch & Jenkins 1995: 70). The focus group was semi-structured; although I had pre-written prompting questions they were intended to open rather than direct discussion and I allowed members of the group to follow their own lines of thought, attempting to introduce new questions into the flow of conversation “in order not to interrupt or cut across it” (Ibid: 90). The interview was not an ethnographic study attempting to create as “natural” a viewing environment as possible. The subjects would quite likely have changed the channel had they come across the texts on television (especially since the episodes they were asked to watch came from a long series). I made no attempt to minimise the interviewee’s awareness that they were in an institutional setting (the University campus), and the group discussion setting was modelled on a University tutorial (in which critical rather than affective responses are expected to texts) not on the informal discussions that may occur with friends after (and during) watching a television programme in a private home.

### **Group members**

Jim, 43, majoring History and European studies with a particular interest in military history.

Lisa, 23, majoring in Photography. Speaks a little German and Japanese.

Acquainted with Jim through role-play gaming.

Marina, 21, Majoring in History and Japanese. Speaks Japanese and a little Ukrainian. Has twice spent time as an exchange student in Japan.



Simon, 24, Honours student researching Japanese linguistics. Speaks Japanese and has studied in Japan. Acquainted with Marina through exchange to the same university in Japan.

Sarah, 19, majoring in Singing and English. Speaks German and a little Japanese. Acquainted with Simon and Marina through mutual friends in Japan.

Will, 20, majoring in Psychology and English. Acquainted with Sarah through English classes.

Sam, 22, majoring in Music and Philosophy. Speaks Spanish and French. Acquainted with Sarah through music studies.

### **Text**

The selection of texts for viewing posed a challenge. The anime selected to study was Gundam Seed (more details below), which is fifty episodes long. Only three episodes were screened to the focus group, and this selection has undoubtedly influenced the response of the interviewees. The episodes were selected based on the following criteria: They focus on the main characters and so would be easy for the viewers to follow without much background explanation; they are spread out across the series (episodes eleven, thirty and thirty-three); they include flashbacks to help the viewers catch up on plot and character development between earlier and later episodes; and each episode focuses on a Gundam “typical” theme (suffering on both sides of a conflict; distrust of authority figures and “protecting friends” as a motivation for fighting). This selection was highly subjective and may have introduced a bias regarding themes. During the interview, the interviewees were reminded that the

researcher chose to screen those episodes and not others. All episodes were screened with Japanese audio and English subtitles.

## **Results**

Aso's interpretation of soft power, much as does Aoki's, centres on creating positive associations with Japan in the minds of non-Japanese, specifically by associating Japan with a 'cool' image (Aoki 2004; Aso April 28, 2006).

Leheny's agitprop model, although he refers to a specific outcome to be achieved by the spread of such an image, also assumes that audiences' consumption of popular culture results in the creation of an image of Japan as "a nation that has only the best of intentions" (2006: 232). Having established that the dominant reading of *Gundam Seed* is as an anti-war text, will the focus group exhibit a positive attitude towards Japan?

### **Perceptions of Japan**

The questionnaire given to the focus group before they began watching *Gundam Seed* reveals mixed attitudes towards Japan as an aggressive or peaceful nation. Lisa's response suggests lingering unease over Japan's military potential. She writes: "For the most part these days they are perceived as peaceful, but I wouldn't like to piss them off". Sam is conscious of the influence of media images in shaping his perceptions, writing "I consider Japan as something of a dualism. Mostly due to popular depictions. Peaceful Buddhists juxtaposed with kamikaze/ war scenes". Marina responds that Japan is neither: the "[s]tereotype is of a "peaceful" people, which were "aggressive" during the war, whose government is now "neutral". I think, like every country, it can be all three".

Will (who is majoring in neither history nor Japanese related subjects) is the only respondent to mention Article 9, writing: “Currently peaceful nation, as to my knowledge they have not had an armed forces since WWII”. The other respondents answered “neutral”.

In the post-viewing discussion, the group attempts to draw on existing knowledge about Japan. Jim answers in the previewing survey that he expects the text to be devoid of reference to WWII, and judging from the following exchange his prediction is confirmed. For the others, particularly Lisa and Simon, their expectations of Japaneseness remain unfulfilled.

Sarah: I thought they made it so generic, I wouldn't, apart from the language I wouldn't really associate it with Japan particularly.

Jim: It's almost intentionally devoid of any references to any unpleasant Japanese behaviour... you could sort of say it was almost sanitised in a way, it's like, there's no overt Imperialism, there's no real sort of unterminch [?] for portrayal of some sort of enemy, because the bad guys are seen as superior if anything. And there's, it's, there's no torture or unpleasant behaviour towards civilians.

Lisa: But yeah, apart from the language I wouldn't have really picked it as being, uh, zoned into sort of Japanese culture. There wasn't even like, with when they're greeting or leaving each other in Japan they bow, and greetings and stuff like that, but there wasn't... I suppose military, slightly different perhaps, but um I just thought that there would have been some of that, and I didn't see any of that.

Simon: Yeah, I thought it was going to be more to do with Japan, I would probably expect some kind of reference to the nuclear bomb

Jim and Sarah: Yeah

Jim feels that there is something Japanese about the approach to war, but is not able to specify what it is.

Jim: I think that, you can really feel the fact that it didn't feel Japanese to me at all apart from the fact that the way they dealt with the whole concept of war. The way that when we tell a war story, it's usually about the experience of war, where this, their situation was basically just describing something different, and I think that was kind of interesting, like we tell it like there's always bombs and deaths and things like that but they're, they put it across differently. It's hard to put my finger on it.

Simon and Marina, who are both majoring in Japanese and have studied in Japan, also have difficulty identifying Japanese elements. Marina draws on knowledge about history education in Japan to locate her reaction, while Simon (who studied a Japanese film unit during his undergraduate course) gropes for another anime text that complies with his expectation of nuclear references.

Interviewer: For you two who've actually studied a lot about Japan (indicates Simon and Marina), would you agree that it was very non-Japanese?

Marina: With the war thing, like in schools and stuff obviously, they don't teach their children as much, especially twenty years ago, didn't teach them anything about it at all, so I wasn't expecting it to have any reference to contemporary war or forty, fifty years ago, so the way it was presented didn't necessarily surprise me too much but... I don't know, I can't put my finger on what was or wasn't Japanese about it if that makes sense.

Simon: Me either, like I said before, I think it's *Akira*, that anime... does that make reference to World War Two, is it that? I'm not sure but I just would assume that if it's about war and about Japan and war then it'd reference something like the nuclear holocaust or something like that, where this didn't really seem to have that.

That none of the group identified the anime they were shown as particularly Japanese seriously challenges both the cool Japan approach to soft power and Leheny's vision of anime as an agitprop medium for the dissemination of reassuring messages about Japan's military. The group's reluctance to identify Japanese elements in the text cannot be attributed to the fact that the group was comprised of non-fans nor to lack of cultural awareness; three of the interviewees had spent time in Japan, another had studied some Japanese language in Australia and a fifth identified another anime title (*Ghost in the Shell Stand Alone Complex*, then screening on free-to-air television) during discussion. Soft power as Nye describes it can function without the consumer recognising the culture of origin. As long as the state "can establish international norms that are consistent with its society" (2004: 32), it can effectively pursue its international goals. However, as the Japanese government has chosen to pursue anime's soft power, recognition of anime's Japanese origin is vital. Equally, for anime to soothe international fears about Japanese remilitarisation by portraying a peaceful Japan, it is a prerequisite that viewers identify it as such.

## Representations of War



Figure 6 Screen capture, *Gundam Seed* Episode Thirty-one  
(Tolle's death)

At the time the research was conducted, Japan's whaling activities in the Southern Oceans was focusing considerable negative media attention towards Japan. Would the anti-war message Vernal and Tomino ascribe to *Gundam* convince these Australians that, as Leheny puts it, Japan "would not hurt a fly" (2006: 224)? In the first episode screened to the focus group, episode eleven, a simple content analysis shows the emphasis on military protocol and battle scenes.

## Gundam Seed Episode 11

	Minutes.Seconds
Flashbacks: Reusing content from previous episodes	2.28
Opening/closing credits, mid-episode titles and preview of next episode	3.20
Battle scene	8.40
Plot/character development	9.32

Breakdown of plot/character development:

Court Martial proceedings	2.06
Military strategy meetings	2.27
Character development of characters from PLANT*	2.07
Character development of characters from Orb*	2.52

**Figure 7 Thematic Content Analysis, Episode 11**

Total episode time 24 minutes

\*Opposing factions in the story. Refer to Appendix B for more information.

Importantly, the battle scene is one continuous scene while character conversations and flashbacks are spaced throughout the episode. Although not necessarily representative of the entire series, the content analysis shows that for this particular episode the largest single event in terms of time is a battle, which if combined with other scenes of a specifically military nature (the Court Martial and strategy meetings), accounts for more than half of the total running time.<sup>iv</sup> This was picked up on by the group, with a majority seeing *Gundam Seed* as romanticising or glorifying war rather than portraying an anti-war message and citing the emphasis on conflict in support of their interpretation, as in Sarah's comment

Sarah: I thought it was almost, even though the content I felt was anti-war, very strongly, the way it was portrayed was very much pro-war, I mean that you'd only be interested in watching this if you were interested in it, in seeing the big weaponry

and the long fight scenes and so on [laughter]... I mean like it sort of drew you in with all this stuff that's associated with war as being enjoyable and fun.

Sarah adopted a negotiated position throughout discussion, acknowledging (as above) the presence of an anti-war message but questioning its effectiveness. Sam and Jim were less understanding, with Jim particularly condemning what he termed a romanticised, desensitising “glorified duel”.

Only Marina and Lisa mention finding the story moving, although Sarah suggests that if they had watched more than three episodes she may have become more involved with the story. This lack of enthusiasm among members of the “anime generation”, particularly coupled with the existing interest some of them have for other, non-anime aspects of Japanese culture, confirms that a cool Japan response from anime viewers cannot be reliably assumed any more than the message Leheny sees in anime will always be the same message decoded by viewers. For the Tasmanian focus group, revision of Article 9 is not an issue they draw on in discussing the meanings they saw in *Gundam Seed*. Instead, they adopt familiar media regulation terminology, expressing concern about violence in a cartoon, desensitisation, the effects on children and so on. The issue which attracted the greatest number of simultaneous interjections was censorship and translation. The group discuss the difference dubbing into English may make to the text, and Jim suggests that meanings apparent to Japanese viewers may have been actively suppressed in the international release. Lisa then draws on seemingly negative impressions about Japanese society and censorship



Sarah: But even with the translation, like someone commented, when there is swearing they use a much milder form in the subtitles than would have come across on the television, like on the original.

Jim: You can't really tell if they're translating for a different audience than might be watching in Japan

[Several people]: Yeah

Jim: You know there might be references there that we, that they don't want to be pushed out to a non-Japanese audience.

Lisa: But do they desensitize there, I mean, do they censor anything for the kids over in Japan? Do they?

Jim: It's generally assumed they do

Lisa: Is that just because we do? Or... is that just from our side of view?

Jim: Because, well people have had a very narrow exposure to Japan, like quite often World War Two, we go "well why don't you teach people about that?", there's all this history to teach but they just don't go into it.

Lisa: But I've just, from what I've found out about, on the news and in the papers in Japan, they don't censor gore.

Sarah: Do you mean like violence wise and language wise?

Lisa: I'm just talking about dismembered bodies being on the front page of a thing, it's not censored at all, and you're like "ok, so they don't mind their children seeing all this sort of stuff". Which brings me to why I'm questioning whether it's censored because our, our society doesn't... whether they censored it

Sarah: It's not for us

Lisa: Is it meant for their younger generation?

Although the overall tone of the discussion was not noticeably negative towards Japan, the above exchange reveals some underlying impressions of Japanese society that do not sit easily with either cool Japan or Japan as a changed country and innocuous country (Leheny 2006: 224). When the interviewer raises points in support of an anti-war position they are systematically undermined or negated by the group, as in the following exchange discussing the negative portrayal of authority figures

Jim: Quite often in war movies high command is often portrayed as unfeeling, unaware of the actual ramifications of actions on the ground and are just purely interested in their own viewpoint. And that's a pretty much across genre sort of trope I think.

Interviewer: So does that imply a certain kind of anti-war stance, or not really?

Jim: Well even in war movies you'll see it, in pro-war... war glorifying movies you'll see that same sort of... the gutsy guys on the ground go and do the job and the stupid high command just makes it tough for them.

That the research participants focused on these elements so strongly indicates that in order for anime to assist in mitigating negative attitudes towards Japanese constitutional revision, the pro-reform lobbies and the Liberal Democratic Party (as long as reform remains a party goal) need to focus on the specific anime titles promoted and also on the context of distribution. Each culture importing anime has pre-existing memories of, and ideas about, Japan, which need to be taken into consideration and potential resistant readings considered. As shown by the responses of my focus group, resistant readings are easily adopted when there is a controversial theme such as war. Soft power has become something of a catch-phrase which needs to be addressed more

cautiously by research in this highly politicised environment. A strong body of audience research exists, which soft power theorists would be well advised to utilise. Even my modest application of Hall's encoding/decoding model has raised significant doubts about whether soft power can actually work in practice as it has been theorised.

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<sup>iv</sup> The definition of military scenes is complicated by the fact that the entire episode, as does most of the series, takes place aboard battleships. For the purposes of this content analysis "military scenes" refers only to the Court Martial and strategy meeting. Scenes in which past battles are discussed and characters appear in uniform or around weapons are not included.

## Conclusion

In this thesis I have identified the intersection of Japanese hard and soft power as a media issue. Yet, despite numerous works acknowledging and discussing anime's soft power, there is a profound absence of audience study in this existing discussion. How effective soft power can be in international relations depends on audiences behaving as they are expected to. The popular misuse of soft power terminology in domestic politics should not restrict the continued development of international audience discourse. Antonia Levi, who has been writing about anime in the USA for over a decade, recognises that fan communities have not behaved over that time as she had predicted and points to Stuart Hall as a theorist who may be able to explain why her expectations remain unfulfilled (2006: 44). If committed fan groups are enjoying anime without prioritising its Japanese origins, can non-fan audiences be confidently assumed to fit into the cool Japan idea of anime consumption? Are Japanese ideas about war being internalised by viewers unaware that anime is Japanese?

To answer these questions, and to explore the hard power connections audiences may make in more depth, I have explored Hall's encoding/decoding model. Using textual analysis and interviews with *Gundam*'s creator/encoder to identify a dominant, anti-war reading of *Gundam Seed*, I then conducted a focus group interview to observe the decoding practices of non-fan viewers. Although the group was small and the scope of the research limited, the rejection by the viewers of cool Japan and the dominance of a resistant, 'romanticisation of war' decoding question many of the assumptions I previously identify in soft power literature. Similarly, in a 2007 BBC vox pop featuring three Beijing school

children's attitudes towards Japan, all responded with condemnation of Japan's resistance to Chinese versions of wartime history but admiration for Japanese pop-culture, particularly manga (*Japan and China: Schoolchildren's views* 2007). While only a vox pop sample, the tempering of all of the children's negative perception of Japan, based on the history taught to them at school, by positive feelings towards contemporary culture suggests that neither Shiraishi's implication of consumers indigenising Japanese values unaware of their origins nor Aoki's "anime generation" absorbed by cool Japan give credit to the sophisticated decoding abilities of consumers. As Er Lam points out, viewers are capable of enjoying Japanese culture without necessarily supporting Japanese government policy (2007: 359).

Hall provides a framework which warns us against assuming a direct transmission of meaning unaltered from sender to receiver. His encoding/decoding model is well suited to examining the application of different ideas about anime's soft power. Extending this model to include a greater focus on the contextualisation of media by viewers in accordance with their pre-existing knowledge, interests and opinions will provide a deeper level of insight into inter-cultural decoding. As international viewers decode anime, they will bring their existing dominant cultural values and meanings to the texts. In the case of the Chinese children interviewed by the BBC, their dominant idea of Japan is one of hard power (war memory), negotiated by their experiences as consumers of soft power-generating cultural texts. The *Gundam* of this decoding will not be the same as the *Gundam* inspiring advancements in Japanese military technology. More recognition of the diversity and complexity

of audience reading positions is essential to the advancement of our current understanding of soft power.

As Japan moves to revise Article 9, the interaction between the SDF and popular culture assumes international significance. Media such as anime play an integral role in shaping attitudes of young Japanese towards Article 9, and the attitudes of other nation's youth towards Japan. For both states that support Japan's remilitarisation and those that do not, the attitude of Japan's youth towards the SDF is pivotal, and anime (and other pop culture) play a role in shaping that attitude. For Shiraishi, international youth are also consuming Japanese ideas about war (1997: 272). The SDF has been active in harnessing pop culture as a promotional tool (Frühstück 2007: 117), and military storylines are popular in anime. However, what Westwell calls the cultural imagination of war is constantly subject to contestation and negotiation. The global dissemination of anime and manga, and the ideas about war they express, cannot be viewed solely in terms of economics and sales figures, nor as soft power divorced from memories of the exercise of hard power and future military policies. When audiences decode anime, they draw on their knowledge and experiences in ways which can result in negotiated or resistant readings. Whether anime's soft power is articulated as cool Japan or as agitprop, assumptions are involved about audiences decoding anime according to the dominant-hegemonic reading. The focus group research presented in this thesis, although very limited in scope, suggests that the assumptions inherent to the treatment of audience by soft power discourses are problematic, particularly when issues of warfare and memory are involved.

For Japan to gain soft power benefits, rather than focusing on increasing export statistics, policy makers may find more success in attempting to guide international decoding of anime texts in ways favourable to Japanese interests. Rather than focusing exclusively on how many anime are being watched overseas, Japanese diplomats need to pay attention to which anime titles, and how foreign audiences read them, to maximise benefits to the national interest. Anime will interact with other messages about Japan, creating a context from which audiences will draw when interpreting new information. It is important for Japanese diplomats to pay attention to the existing contexts in the specific locations of distribution in order to target its message. To some extent this already occurs; Japanese embassies in Australia tend to promote screenings of Studio Ghibli's family friendly anime without mentioning more violent or sexually explicit releases. More can be done, however, to promote not only anime but ways of reading; the creation of dominant decodings.

Tulloch and Jenkins advocate coupling audience research with textual analysis and "historical perspectives on the production process" (1995: 24). In this thesis I have utilised all three aspects to explore the interaction between hard and soft power. Although the case-study I have used is limited, the topic itself is both broad and important internationally. In expanding Hall's encoding/decoding model in line with Tulloch and Jenkins' suggestions, I have proposed a model which, if applied to research with a wider scope, has the potential to answer conclusively the questions to which I have, herein, tentatively suggested a solution. Research comparing fan and non-fan reactions to anime in multiple international settings impacted by Japanese military and economic hard power could address specific situational contexts and establish which decoding

processes and contextual information, if any, hold constant across cultures. A comparison with the USA's popular culture soft power would provide theoretical depth. The research I have presented in this thesis is the prologue to a richer tale.



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## Appendix A: Transcripts

### *Interview*

Interviewer: Would you define what you just saw as being war genre, or anti-war genre or neither?

Sarah: I would say "space opera"

[Laughter]

Sam: I guess it's war genre in the sense that the entire scenario is based around war

Jim: It's a romanticised war genre. It's not... it doesn't strive to reflect anything that's got anything to do with current war, contemporary warfare.

Interviewer: So do you think there are any references to historical wars, or contemporary wars, or that is was entirely fanciful?

Lisa: Not that I could pick [laughter]

Sarah: I thought it was more a warning of future wars with the whole genetic engineering thing with the coordinators and so on.

Marina: I think it spoke a lot about looking at who is an enemy, and you know, what do you consider an enemy. You know, just because a person lives with a particular group of people but they're not of that race or ethnic group, do you automatically consider them your enemy? You know, that introduced some interesting ideas.

Interviewer: So you saw the genetic manipulation as a metaphor for racial conflict?

Marina: Kind of, yeah. But...

Sam: I saw that.

Will: It could also be, possibly, because the genetically engineered guys did seem to be kind of evil in some ways, that's almost similar to kind of like a Nazi thing, with the perfect ubermich.

Sam: But was not the main character also a coordinator? [Sounds of agreement] In disguise or something? So presumably...

Jim: It also give you a firm basis for creating him as an "other".

Sam: Yeah.

Marina: Well there's always the "other", you know, like in the literature say, it's automatically stigmatised as something different and something evil and stuff like that, so, yeah.

Jim: Or very different.

Marina: Just because you're someone else you're automatically evil. Especially with the interrogation thing at the end, in the last one. The enquiry, sorry, they were saying just because he's a kid he did this so he must [inaudible, possibly "be blamed"].

Jim: Well quite often there's generally an idea of an actual different [sic] of abilities or sort of personality or culture.

Sam: It's a very well defined difference.

Interviewer: So with the enquiry and the way that, like, authority figures are represented, did you think that that was usual for a, something that's about a war?

Sarah: I thought yeah, in that they were emphasising how different an authoritative body is to the individual characters, and that they're trying to manipulate the individual characters into their cause so it's very much putting the idea of the other country or the enemy as being one group pretty much to fight against, against the individual soldiers who have to fight that, and I think that's a fairly common thing in war films, is to look at how it affects the individuals and how groups, you know, segregate themselves and dehumanise each other. And they're willing to use people for that purpose.

Jim: Quite often in war movies high command is often portrayed as unfeeling, unaware of the actual ramifications of actions on the ground and are just purely interested in their own viewpoint. And that's a pretty much across genre sort of trope I think.

Interviewer: So does that imply a certain kind of anti-war stance, or not really?

Jim: Well even in war movies you'll see it, in pro-war... war glorifying movies you'll see that same sort of... the gutsy guys on the ground go and do the job and the stupid high command just makes it tough for them.

Sarah: I thought it was almost, even though the content I felt was anti-war, very strongly, the way it was portrayed was very much pro-war, I mean that you'd only be interested in watching this if you were interested in it, in seeing the big weaponry and the long fight scenes and so on [laughter]... I mean like it sort of drew you in with all this stuff that's associated with war as being enjoyable and fun.

Interviewer: So does that make the anti-war stuff a bit less believable?

Sarah: It just makes it more confusing!



Lisa: I suppose there's an aspect of it that is sort of anti-war, to drive you towards being anti-war, is the two friends on either side who are actually warring against each other, going "right, your going down", um, yeah, when there's conflict like that then people are going to go "hmm, war's bad, really really bad", when it's friends fighting against each other.

Interviewer: In the context that it's a Japanese show, and the things that we've talked about, does that have any meaning for any of you in impacting on your perception of Japan and Japan's sort of military past and future?

Sarah: I thought they made it so generic, I wouldn't, apart from the language I wouldn't really associate it with Japan particularly.

Jim: It's almost intentionally devoid of any references to any unpleasant Japanese behaviour... you could sort of say it was almost sanitised in a way, it's like, there's no overt Imperialism, there's no real sort of unterminch for portrayal of some sort of enemy, because the bad guys are seen as superior if anything. And there's, it's, there's no torture or unpleasant behaviour towards civilians.

Lisa: But yeah, apart from the language I wouldn't have really picked it as being, uh, zoned into sort of Japanese culture. There wasn't even like, with when they're greeting or leaving each other in Japan they bow, and greetings and stuff like that, but there wasn't... I suppose military, slightly different perhaps, but um I just thought that there would have been some of that, and I didn't see any of that.

Interviewer: and even the names weren't really...

[Some simultaneous talking and laughing]

Jim: Well they did say "HAI!" [Laughter]

Sarah: Well I actually was interested in that, the idea that actually the military way of doing things is quite universal, you know, the salute instead of the bow or the kiss or however different cultures greet, um, it kind of makes the ideas that were portrayed a lot more universal.

Simon: Yeah, I thought it was going to be more to do with Japan, I would probably expect some kind of reference to the nuclear bomb

Jim and Sarah: Yeah

Simon: Hiroshima and that kind of thing, but there wasn't really any, any of that. I don't know if it's in that further on in the story but, yeah.

Interviewer: Well, just, you said that was surprising... in terms of what you expected when I told you that you were watching a cartoon that was about war, was there anything about it being animated that was unexpected or that altered like, compared to if that has all been done with live actors, do you think it would have had a different impact?

Sam: My main concern with cartoons portraying war is that it creates a certain unreality, about a situation which, well, it's a very real thing.

Lisa: I think big differences, they can show it being more graphically real, um, in an anime, but I think it's hard for an animation to really express the emotional stress, uh, pressure, that all these characters are under. To really like draw you in I think this doesn't quite do what a real person could do.

Sarah: I think it kind of interacts like a, counteracts itself in that it can show things you could never do in live action, you couldn't show people being blown up like that and show it to a wide audience, the ratings would be too high and stuff, but at the same time because it's a bright cartoony kind of, and because the music is so cheesy and everything [laughter], you kind of expect it to be a bit kiddy, and so you're watching this horrific stuff with the attitude of it being a kids' cartoon

Jim: It's a filter

Sarah: Yeah, quite disturbing

Jim: It's a filter; it gives you a step of unreality to make it not quite so confronting [sounds of agreement]. Because if you saw that guy get hit with a sword in the stomach and he was crawling along with his intestines spilling out

Sarah: yeah

Jim: you'd all be going "that was a bit much" [laughter]. That way when they, when the deaths are done they're very clean and they're over [snaps fingers] like that, you don't see the corpse or anything like that, all you have to do is just agonise about it in some lengthy way

Sarah: and have a few flashbacks!

Jim: Yeah, and you don't have to see the flies and the blood, and you know that's sort of a way of, ah, desensitising, um, combat, in a way that

Lisa: romanticises

Jim: Romanticises it, to me anyway.

Sam: And the amount of grief involved as well, [inaudible], it does romanticise it to a certain extent.

Jim: That's what I say, they do get a bit upset [laughter]. He's fighting for his life in this giant robot!

Interviewer: Well they are in giant robots, and they could just show the robot exploding but they actually go inside the cockpit and show the pilot inside saying, you know, "it hurts, it hurts". You're saying that it kind of romanticises it, but isn't that zooming in on the human cost of it?

Jim: It does, and I think that's a really good point, but the medium also gives you a bit of distance. If it was a human face looking at you with blood coming out the mouth you'd be thinking, you'd identify a lot more than with a cartoon. but you are right, they do actually zoom in on the human side of it all.

Sarah: I think also having the gundams being so humanoid also makes you think about the kind of weaponry that we have, which is very not humanoid, I mean tanks. We just see them as machines, but having their weapons piloted by humans they're actually inside makes you kind of think a lot more about what we're doing with the weaponry that we have, kind of that we are actually shooting them, we are actually in that situation

Simon: And they're actually shaped like a human

Sarah: It's just more powerful.

Jim: A Falklands pilot actually mentioned that when he saw an Argentinean plane bomb a landing craft he actually went after the cockpit, and he didn't see them as a human before, but he actually went there to kill the pilot

Sarah: Yeah

Jim: And it was a very confronting thing for him. So yeah, I think it does make the war machine a bit more human.

Interviewer: A lot of the characters are quite young, it's a little bit hard to pinpoint the age, because they talked about them being technical collage students. Um, and they were caught up in the situation and then volunteered, does that make it a little bit confusing between whether they're civilians or military?

Sam: I found the whole, thing very confusing! [Laughter] But the characters especially, I, yeah, yes, the answer to your question is yes, I was confused [inaudible].

Sarah: I think because we didn't see when they decided to become, to join the military, we didn't really understand why there were hostages or what they were doing there and stuff.

Interviewer: What age would you've guessed for like Kira and Flay?

Sarah: Well they're engaged, to different people... so that's a bit confusing

Simon: I think maybe fifteen or sixteen for some reason.

Sarah: Teenagers.

Jim: Somehow I see Flay as a bit older; she was, sort of, a bit more manipulative but the younger ones were very young

Sam: That's something you learn with age? [Laughter]

Jim: Well, it's something you perfect. [Laughter]

Lisa: I do see them about seventeenish. [Sounds of agreement]

Jim: Definitely teens. Mid to late teens.

Marina: And that makes the whole thing with them fighting and killing their friends and that sort of thing much more poignant I think, because you've got the age.

Jim: yeah, it's the schoolyard sort of society blown large [sounds of agreement].

Interviewer: I'm just thinking, if it's a show that is aimed at teenagers that maybe by taking that analogy it's a way of making it more understandable to

Sarah: To that age group? It's quite an extreme way of doing it I would have thought, if that were your purpose. I suppose it's why they chose cartoon again.

Interviewer: I mean, that's an interesting question, what do you think the point of it was? Was there a point? [Laughter]

Jim: Well you got to have big giant robots flying with swords, that's always a bonus [laughter], but um, yeah, I don't think it would be a good way to educate people about what warfare is, not without smell-a-vision. It didn't really dwell, I think, too well on repercussions. Even though there were a lot of repercussions, like the deaths weren't as spread out as much as they might have been in reality. So I don't know if that would be how I would do it.

Sarah: Because the fight-scenes were a lot more interesting than the interpersonal angst over the deaths and so on, you kind of, if you were wanting to draw people in you would maybe draw them in with the fight scenes and so on then try and show them how it's not fun, it's not good, but I'm not sure it actually would work.

Interviewer: So when you go away you'll remember more of the fight scenes than the scenes where they're thinking about people that have died?

Sarah: [affirmative noise], just because they're more exciting.

Marina: I don't know [looks awkward and trails off]

[laughter]

Jim: Descent is good!

Marina: I think that, I don't know, the thing about the two friends fighting against each other, that kind of got me a little bit, 'cause, yeah, the fighting scenes I'm not particularly fond of too much, so the story kind of got me a little bit more, and I think if, I don't know if kids would see that? or like if they would just see the robots fighting against each-other and not realise that there were people inside them, I don't know if they would get those

Sarah: Make the connection

Marina: Yeah, get the repercussions. Especially young ones who were eight or nine, they probably wouldn't get it, where as ones who were maybe our age or 14, 15, 16 might see that. So it depends on what age you are as to what you'd get out of it.

Sarah: And also it might be different if you hadn't only seen three episodes, like if you'd been able to watch it you may have more, like I may have had more empathy with the characters and been more touched by what was happening.

Lisa: I did notice a bit of removal from the bad guys, um, were, like you didn't see, basically their inner workings. You didn't see hardly anything about them, or you know, what they're like when they're not in battle, and, ah, where the other side, they're like, um, you see them mourning more, and interacting more. You don't see the coordinators.

Jim: Yeah the different grief

Sam: yeah

Jim: You have, I've forgotten the first guy's name, the hero

Sarah: Kira

Jim: His grief is sort of like [quite easy to see? Inaudible] but with the other grief it's sort of violently orientated

Sarah and Lisa: Yeah

Jim: It's sort of like it's revenge motivated.

Lisa: But there was very little, you saw very little, of that side though

Sarah [talking over several interjections]: You do see it, little bits

Sam: When the music falls out of the locker

Jim, Marina, Sarah: Yeah

Jim: But it swings around to violence again. I guess it's driving the plot you know, so you really can't

[Several speak at once]

Lisa: But it's the only part that I could honestly say that you saw the interaction and emotion of the coordinators, was in the locker scene, when he's cursing and bashing his head against the locker. That was, you know, one, but I just don't recall seeing a lot of emotional interaction between all the coordinators, when you saw a lot of it with the other side.

Sarah: Yeah

Interviewer: That's partly my choice in the episodes that I showed you

Jim: [affirmative noise]

Interviewer: but there is obviously a lot more focus on the naturals. But I guess an important point is that it's actually the naturals that started the war by blowing up an entire space colony of the coordinators, so that's how the show starts out, from that perspective, but then you're right, as it goes on, you start out sympathising with them because they've been attacked as civilians, but then as the show progresses you do spend a majority of your time siding with the earth forces because that's where the main characters are.

Jim: That and I think it's a science fiction thing that anyone who's a bad guy always has Z as the first letter of their [laughter]

Sarah: But I think also that a very important point of what we were seeing was that it was not just earth against coordinators, but that you had these kids who were meant to be neutral, and it's the idea of can you be neutral in this situation, if people are dying, if your friends are dying... At what point are you attacking an enemy or just protecting a friend, you know, does protecting someone you love give you the right to kill someone else, and it's kind of dealing with the whole attitude of "this isn't my problem", um, and saying can you really do that?

Jim: It did sort of say that any war is a civil war, didn't it? The way that it said no matter who you're fighting you'll always have people on the other side who are people

[The girls make affirmative sounds]

Interviewer: The second last episode that we saw, where Athrun and Kira actually fight for real, and it's because Athrun's killed one of Kira's friends and Kira's killed one of Athrun's friends [laughter], do you think that summed up something about the way that war was going on?

Jim and Sarah: Umm.

Sarah: Very pointless.

Interviewer: Last point. If you were, I mean I know this is asking you to imagine a different scenario but, if you were say Chinese or Korean and you had a very vivid memory of Japanese invasion of your country, and you watched those episodes, do you think you'd react in a different way to the way we have today?

Sarah: I'd maybe find it a little hypocritical.

Interviewer: In what way?

Sarah: It'd be preaching about war and so on, and if I were bitter say about the war, about, you know, the Japanese, then I would maybe be offended by the squeaky clean image that was being portrayed.

Will: But if you had any kind of memory of a war you'd probably feel different about it to how we do though.

Jim: Oh, yeah, I've... I suppose I should say that I've got family who fought the Japanese and I, you just can't talk to them about it

Will: Yeah

Jim: The loathing is just insane. Uh, in that case I think they'd find the whole thing just basically offensive. But mainly due to the, looking through the lens of their experiences.

Sarah: Like the fact that it's so glamorised?

Jim: Well, it's the fact that the dirty part of the war is just not there at all

Sarah: Yeah

Jim: Everything's fought between... it's sort of that whole, you're down in the trenches looking up at the fighter pilots having their nice clean war while you're down there in the muck, the mud

Will: [Affirmative sounds]

Jim: You know, you can imagine the burnings and the rapings and the murders and just sit there going "it's not happening at all". You don't see, like, the other thing is you don't really see, because it's essentially two distinct units, the ships, you don't see them in amongst each other's civilian populations. Although there is those exploding colonies and things like that, atrocities in that sort of situation

Interviewer: But even then that's very removed, isn't it, the entire planet blows up

Jim: Yes, it's not the horrible

Interviewer: No-one's actually there, on the planet doing

Sarah: Being dismembered

Jim: A pile of dead children or anything like that, which is quite different

Interviewer: Any last comments before we retire?

Jim: I wouldn't say it was bad [laughter], it was watchable.

Sarah: I was just thinking it's more, I would see it more being like closer to a video game than to a live action film in many respects, like if I had to think of it, you know, why are we watching a cartoon, it seems ridiculous having that much violence in a cartoon, but then you think of video games that kids play, and who're taking active part in, it's kind of closer to that.

Jim: I think that, you can really feel the fact that it didn't feel Japanese to me at all apart from the fact that the way they dealt with the whole concept of war. The way that when we tell a war story, it's usually about the experience of war, where this, their situation was basically just describing something different, and

I think that was kind of interesting, like we tell it like there's always bombs and deaths and things like that but they're, they put it across differently. It's hard to put my finger on it.

Will: Actually that was one real difference between that and a kind of real war is that there was no sort of random deaths. Like they'd be firing off sort of thousands of shots and just deflecting them, it was only a few people that did actually die.

Jim: yeah

Lisa: It wasn't like a mass war

Will: Yeah

Lisa: It was only a war between like five characters

Will: Yeah

Jim: A glorified duel

Lisa: Just a duel in space!

[Laughter]

Simon: Yeah, it seemed to be more of a battle rather than a war, like a war's a massive thing while a battle's just a couple of people fighting against one another...

Jim: It was almost sort of stylised, wasn't it?

Simon: Yeah

Jim: Not actual, total warfare. It was just sort of like, you have clear cut fighters who have to be in huge robots otherwise, they don't fight at all.

Will: It's also funny that like there's the whole of space, but they're always like "I'm going to get you next-time!"

[Laughter]

Interviewer: For you two who've actually studied a lot about Japan [indicates Simon and Marina], would you agree that it was very non-Japanese?

Marina: With the war thing, like in schools and stuff obviously, they don't teach their children as much, especially twenty years ago, didn't teach them anything about it at all, so I wasn't expecting it to have any reference to contemporary war or forty, fifty years ago, so the way it was presented didn't necessarily surprise me too much but... I don't know, I can't put my finger on what was or wasn't Japanese about it if that makes sense.



Simon: Me either, like I said before, I think it's *Akira*, that anime... does that make reference to World War Two, is it that? I'm not sure but I just would assume that if it's about war and about Japan and war then it'd reference something like the nuclear holocaust or something like that, where this didn't really seem to have that.

Sarah: I mean the fact that they set it in space and that they didn't have different races, they had the enhanced people and not enhanced people, seemed to be a very very deliberate distancing from all that and kind of gave them an excuse to cut it completely clean.

Interviewer: So no-one's going to go away and say "wow, Japan's a really cool country because they made that awesome show"?

Jim: I think that that sort of genre now has become pretty much global. You see more and more giant robot cartoons made by everybody essentially. Not, probably, with the same depth of characterisation as that but.

Simon: I think it'd be interesting to see how it comes off if it was dubbed in English. To see if it'd have the same... if there'd be any difference.

Interviewer: Well Lacus is always speaking *keigo* [formal, old fashioned Japanese], and that doesn't come over in the subtitles.

Marina: That's the thing with the translation, because we're not seeing it from the Japanese... we're not obviously reading the Japanese language, depending on how it was translated you might get a completely different view of the characters and how they're presented and even the tone of voice has a lot of difference in how a person is presented.

Lisa: I'd agree, with minimal experience in Japanese animes and stuff, while the emotion in their voice is absolutely awesome in the Japanese language, when you convert it to English dubbed, just the effect is not there.

Sarah: It's just ludicrous, even if they try to put it in.

Lisa: It's like, "what? Why did they even bother?"

Sarah: But even with the translation, like someone commented, when there is swearing they use a much milder form in the subtitles than would have come across on the television, like on the original.

Jim: You can't really tell if they're translating for a different audience than might be watching in Japan

[Several people]: Yeah

Jim: You know there might be references there that we, that they don't want to be pushed out to a non-Japanese audience.

Lisa: But do they desensitize there, I mean, do they censor anything for the kids over in Japan? Do they?

Jim: It's generally assumed they do

Lisa: Is that just because we do? Or... is that just from our side of view?

Jim: Because, well people have had a very narrow exposure to Japan, like quite often World War Two, we go "well why don't you teach people about that?", there's all this history to teach but they just don't go into it.

Lisa: But I've just, from what I've found out about, on the news and in the papers in Japan, they don't censor gore.

Sarah: Do you mean like violence wise and language wise?

Lisa: I'm just talking about dismembered bodies being on the front page of a thing, it's not censored at all, and you're like "ok, so they don't mind their children seeing all this sort of stuff". Which brings me to why I'm questioning whether it's censored because our our society doesn't... whether they censored it

Sarah: It's not for us

Lisa: Is it meant for their younger generation?

Interviewer: Well I think on the information sheet, I'd have to double check but the one I gave you I think it says that in Japan it screened at 6pm and in America it screened at 1am, on TV, so maybe that's an indication of the difference.

Jim: I noticed that *Ghost in The Shell* is only on at 1am in Australia so...

Simon: But then the audience for anime in Japan is pretty wide anyway, like the amount of young adults watching it is pretty big, so...

Interviewer: Well it's just about 4.30 and Samuel has to head off, so thank you all very very much for your patience and for helping me out.

## ***Pre-viewing Questionnaire***

### **Lisa**

Question 1

[Blank]

Question 2

Yes, contemporary advances technology used in warfare- just more advanced

Question 3

Mercenaries, large scale battles between rivals. Advanced weaponry and armour. Cultural differences, which spark hate.

Question 4

For the most part these days they are perceived as peaceful, but I wouldn't like to piss them off.

Question 5

Show more in-depth truth to warfare- the good and the bad. But I expect it to be a little over-emphasised.

### **Jim**

Question 1

Step-father served as British pilot in SE Asia during WWII

Question 2

Any references are unlikely to allude to controversial Japanese involvement in WWII.

Question 3

War: Glorification of combat, clear resolution of problems, demonisation of enemy.

Anti-war: Fallout of violence, ambiguous nature of conflict resolution, disproportion of negative to positive aspects, collateral damage.

Question 4

Neutral

Question 5

Images not achievable through other means can show aspects of warfare at best light. Violent action removed from reality by stylistic filter.

## **Sarah**

Question 1

None

Question 2

No

Question 3

Depiction of graphic death and injury. Military activity, weapons, nuclear weapons. Orphans etc, large group fight scenes.

Question 4

Neutral

Question 5

Focus more on individual heroes/heroines, more character development because of longer time-frame. More fanciful weaponry and fight techniques and less realistic settings. Will look cleaner, less mud and blood. I think that it might distance the audience from the idea of war as horrific even if we might feel more for the characters. It allows war to become fantastic, rather than realistic.

## **Will**

Question 1

[Blank]

Question 2

No idea

Question 3

Depictions of loss of life, loss of friends and loss of innocence.

Question 4

Currently peaceful nation, as to my knowledge they have not had an armed forces since WWII.

Question 5

Graphically... and with much kaboom!

## **Marina**

Question 1

[Blank]

Question 2

[“possibly WWII” is crossed out] No

Question 3

War- violent, symbolic heroism

Anti-War – Excessive violence to portray a point, strong characters, possible remorse shown by characters/emotional conflict, anonymous characters

Question 4

Neither. Stereotype is of a “peaceful” people, which were “aggressive” during the war, whose government is now “neutral”. I think, like every country, it can be all three.

Question 5

Animation can make scenes shorter and cut very quickly to make a point. It may dehumanise a topic/scene such as a battle but can simultaneously generate images of death and loss which are not possible through the use of “real people”.

## **Simon**

Question 1

[Blank]

Question 2

WWII (Pacific War)

Question 3

The aftermath of war- famine, poverty, cities, villages destroyed, oppression, remorse for involvement in war.

Question 4

Neutral nation

Question 5

Japanese animation may depict, for example WWII, in their own way based on the experiences of the Japanese during the war. So animation may allow for the

Japanese to express their own feelings, ideas of true events, etc. in their own way.

## **Sam**

Question 1

None

Question 2

WWII spring immediately to mind due to the obvious reasons ie Japanese participation

Question 3

I would imagine a war (pro-war?) film to emphasise the “glory”/“heroism” – like a traditional Hollywood war film. The apparent ability of the individual to effect (positively) history. Anti-war typically portrays the brutality and inhumanity of war. I find the sound effects of anti-war movies are usually quite disturbing.

Question 4

I consider Japan as something of a dualism. Mostly due to popular depictions. Peaceful Buddhists juxtaposed with kamikaze/ war scenes.

Question 5

Due to its popularity, it could be a strong voice for war related opinions. A concern would be the unreality of the medium on a very real situation.

## Appendix B: Gundam Reference Materials

*The following information was given to the focus group before viewing Gundam Seed episodes. The information is slightly adapted from the Wikipedia "Gundam Seed" entry and [www.gundamofficial.com](http://www.gundamofficial.com). It is presented here as it was given to the interviewees, including some errors of grammar and spelling. My intention in using web resources was to minimise influencing the interviewees' interpretation of the programme with my own views.*

*Mobile Suit Gundam SEED is a part of the Gundam franchise that started in 1979, but takes place in an alternate universe called the Cosmic Era. The series spanned 50 episodes, aired in Japan from October 5, 2002 to September 27, 2003 at 6:00 p.m.*

The programme is set at the outbreak of war between ZAFT, an alliance of PLANT space colonies populated by Coordinators, or genetically enhanced humans, and the Earth Alliance, unmodified humans (naturals) who opposed to existence of Coordinators. In the first episode ZAFT forces attack the space colony Heliopolis, which although technically neutral is secretly manufacturing giant battle robots (gundam) for Earth Alliance. A group of students caught in the attack upon, and subsequent destruction of, the space station, escape on board a battleship named the Archangel. Also on board is one of the gundam, and ZAFT continue to attack the Archangel in attempts to retrieve it. In order to protect his friends, Kira pilots the gundam in battle, even though he is a Coordinator and his best friend Athrun is fighting with ZAFT.

### Organisations:

**Blue Cosmos** is the most radical of the anti-Coordinator activist groups formed by resentful Naturals and is the ruling force behind the Earth Alliance. Their aim is the death of all Coordinators.

**Earth Alliance** is the group of anti-ZAFT superstates on Earth. It is made up of four political entities: the "Atlantic Federation", the "Eurasian Federation", the "Republic of East Asia" and the "South African Union". The Earth Alliance also conquered the PLANT-friendly United States of South America, with its member states now engaged in a revolution to regain their independence. The Earth Alliance is headed by a moderate Secretary-General, but the real rulers of the Earth Alliance are Blue Cosmos.

**Orb Union** (also known as the United Emirates of Orb) is a small Pacific island nation, located to the east of New Guinea which has a tradition of neutrality and thus is neutral in the war between the Earth Alliance and ZAFT. Orb's government consists of both an elected legislature and an aristocracy of five noble families, and has a mixed population of both Naturals and Coordinators. Because of this, Orb has a non-discrimination policy against Coordinators. Though small, Orb is both wealthy and militarily powerful, one of the world's top producers of advanced weaponry. Orb also has, unusual for its small size, a considerable presence in space, including the space colony Heliopolis.

**ZAFT** (Zodiac Alliance of Freedom Treaty) is a political, economic, and military alliance of PLANT colonies. Specifically, ZAFT usually refers to the military side of organization. It was originally formed as a political organisation known as the Zodiac Alliance by Siegel Clyne and Patrick Zala in CE 50, to peacefully advocate the rights and independence of Coordinators.

Characters:



**Kira Yamato**

During the Bloody Valentine War, Kira is a student on the neutral colony of Heliopolis. He is a Coordinator. During the attack on Heliopolis by ZAFT, Kira is forced to pilot a mobile armour suit (Strike Freedom) to defend his friends and home but is traumatised when he encounters his close childhood friend, Athrun, in battle. Kira initially refuses to pilot the Strike again, but Mu, who acts as somewhat of a mentor in the series, tells Kira that he is the only one capable of piloting it and that if he has the power to make a difference, he should. After Heliopolis is destroyed, Kira and other refugees decide to volunteer aboard the Archangel until they reach a safe port. Despite his martial abilities Kira hates fighting. When he kills a close friend of Athrun, and Athrun kills Tolle, Kira and Athrun are finally forced into a real conflict and for a time everyone, including Athrun, believes that Athrun has killed Kira. It is later revealed that Lacus has saved him, and together they seek an end to the war.



**Athrun Zala**

A childhood friend of Kira, Athrun is a Coordinator, and a member of the Rau Le Creuset ZAFT special forces team at the beginning of Gundam SEED. He is the son of Patrick Zala, a member of the PLANT Supreme Council. His mother was killed in the Bloody Valentine tragedy, which was caused by the Earth Alliance. Engaged to make an arranged marriage to Lacus, he falls in love with Cagalli during the series and does not resent Kira and Lacus's relationship.



**Flay Allster**

Flay is the daughter of George Allster, an Atlantic Federation Vice Foreign Minister. She is engaged to Sai but doesn't know him or his friends (including Kira) well at the start of the series. It is implied that their engagement has been arranged by their parents. Although not a member of Blue Cosmos, she doesn't believe that their views are wrong because 'there is nothing natural about the Coordinators' existence'. After the death of her father, Flay uses her sexual appeal to manipulate Kira into becoming increasingly violent in his battles. She believes that the genocide of all Coordinators is the only way to end the war, and she will only forgive Kira for not saving her father's life if he dies in battle defending her. When she thinks he has been killed in action she realises that not only has she developed genuine feelings for Kira, but also that as a result of her



manipulation of him she is ostracised by the rest of the Archangel's crew. She enlists and is kidnapped by Rau Le Creuset. During their time together she comes to see Coordinators as human. She is killed by one of Le Creuset's men during a duel between Le Creuset and Kira, who tries unsuccessfully to save her.



### **Lacus Clyne**

The daughter of PLANT Supreme Council Chairman Siegel Clyne. She is a Coordinator whose career as a pop-idol has brought her enormous popularity in the PLANTS. She is engaged to Athrun Zala mainly out of political expediency. After her ship is attacked by Earth Forces, she escapes in a life-pod and is rescued by the Archangel where she befriends Kira. After Frey and Natarle use her as a hostage, Kira, Sai and Miriallia rebel and return her to ZAFT. She uses her influence to attempt a cease-fire (unsuccessfully) and by the end of the series she and Kira have formed a romantic relationship.



### **Sai Argyle**

A school friend of Kira, Sai is engaged to Flay at the start of the series. When Flay breaks off her relationship with Sai in favour of Kira, Sai, enraged, lunges at them, but Kira easily overpowers him. This prompts Sai to try moving the Strike Gundam, but he fails. Despite his humiliation, Sai does not try to win back Flay and tells Kira that he (Sai) is counting on him. When Flay later tries to resume their relationship, thinking that Kira is dead, Sai rejects her advances.



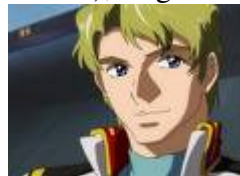
### **Miriallia and Tolle**

School friends of Kira, Flay and Sai. Tolle is killed by Athrun.



### **Cagalli Yula Athha**

The adopted daughter of Uzumi Nara Athha, Representative and "Lion" of the Orb Union. She is also Kira Yamato's twin sister, although neither is aware of this until late in the Bloody Valentine War. While Kira is a Coordinator (a person who is genetically-altered), Cagalli is a Natural.



### **Mu La Flaga**

Mu was born to an aristocratic family. However, his father, Al Da Flaga, believed he was "genetically impure" from the DNA of his "inferior mother". Seeking a new successor, Al cloned himself. Mu is a veteran mobile armor ace, and a longtime rival of ZAFT officer Rau Le Creuset, with whom he demonstrates a strange extrasensory connection. He is the only remaining pilot capable of handling the Moebius Zero, the wire-guided

gunbarrels of which require a high degree of spatial awareness not commonly possessed by Naturals.



### **Murrue Ramius**

Assuming command of the Archangel after the attack on Heliopolis, Murrue is more open to moral doubt than “bad-cop” First Officer, Natarle. Over the course of the war, Murrue forms a romantic relationship with Mu La Flaga. On the final day of the war, Mu is apparently killed protecting the Archangel from her sister ship the Dominion's attack. In grief and rage, Murrue orders the Archangel to return fire, destroying the Dominion and killing its captain, her former friend and first officer of the Archangel, Lieutenant Commander Natarle Badgiruel, along with Blue Cosmos leader Muruta Azrael.



### **Natarle Badgiruel**

Executive officer of the Archangel, Natarle is stern and operates by the book, though some incidents show she is willing to do almost anything to reach a certain end, even when it conflicts with Captain Ramius.



### **Rau Le Creuset**

A unit commander in ZAFT. Despite his allegiance to ZAFT, Rau bears no loyalty to it, or anyone, for that matter. Although Rau supposedly only answered to Patrick Zala, it becomes quite clear that Patrick was manipulated by Rau to the point that in all practicalities, Patrick was Rau's minion, and not the other way around. A failed clone of Al Da Flaga, intended to replace Mu, Rau has to take constant medication to halt premature aging. Because of the pain of his imperfection, Rau becomes mentally unstable, deciding that Naturals and Coordinators are both unfit for living, and sees to it that the imminent destruction of both parties, and all mankind, is accomplished.