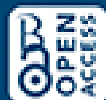

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Sincerity in Animation

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For **N**, ***M****, and* ***HB****, the lodestars.*

"Sincerity makes the very least person to be of more value than the most talented hypocrite."

—Charles H. Spurgeon

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In truth, the origin of this text can be traced through something resembling a genealogy of sincerity: back to afternoons in Form 3 and 4 when I laughed and was moved in Dexter's lab as the world outside turned from day to night. To the many nights in Victoria, British Columbia when I stayed up helping my friends Marc C. Junker, Denver E. Jackson, and the most sincere of us all Alain Williams, build dreams while *Samurai Jack* silently set the tone and showed the way in the background. To yet more long nights where sleep was unavailing and I would seek out and watch *Clone Wars* entire for the seventeenth or eighteenth time, closing my eyes, transported by the hush, the growl, the clamor caught and freed in thick line and fluid motion. Never had I ever been closer to a Galaxy Far, Far Away. To yet more nights where the scholastic impetus was incommodious and inconsistent and my doctoral thesis lay waiting, silently and indomitably staring at me, and I'd think of Lance, brooding in a moonlit room, a stranger in a strange land, pining for Galaluna. And yet still, these and many other moments notwithstanding, this text could not exist without the unyielding diligence, empathetic understanding, timely support, and inspiring aplomb of Katie Gallof, Erin Duffy, Chris Pallant, and all the production, editing, promotional, and accounting personnel at Bloomsbury. My sincerest thanks to you all.

1

On the Nature of Sincerity

"It's a Feeling"

—GENNDY TARTAKOVSKY

On the Problem of Sincerity

We tend to think of sincerity as an ephemeral albeit crucial feature of not only good art, but our experience of art as such. To most, "sincerity" often refers to a confluence of certain attributes that produce phenomena associated with concepts, feelings, and ideas including openness, authenticity, reciprocity, vulnerability, and honesty, to name a few. However, it is also true that the seemingly inescapably subjective nature of sincerity would suggest that performing an objective analysis thereof—let alone using the idea as an analytical frame in itself—would prove a very difficult task. So, let's set the tone by being sincerely simple and straightforward: what does the "sincerity" mean here, and how will this analysis of the life and work of Genndy Tartakovsky employ it?

In view of the mercurial nature of one half of the dual-fold topic of this analysis, perhaps it would hold both me, as the author, and you, as the reader, jointly in good stead to open with an attempt at a definition. What is sincerity? Sincerity is a noun. Among other things, it refers to the absence of pretense, deceit, and/or hypocrisy. Its synonyms include the following: honesty, genuineness, truthfulness, good faith, lack of deceit, integrity, probity, trustworthiness, wholeheartedness, seriousness, earnestness, straightforwardness, openness, candor, candidness, guilelessness, ingenuousness, and bona fides. Developed in the 1530s from Middle French, itself from the Latin *sincerus*, the adjectival form of "sincere" refers to such concepts as the unmixedness, wholeness, cleanliness, purity, and umixedness

of things. From this definition, it is clear, and perhaps even curious or strange to some, that sincerity is latently albeit ultimately concerned with *mixture* (Online Etymology Dictionary 2020).

My sensitivity to the etymology of the term inheres in my using it for the title of this analysis. Contained in my usage thereof is a play on the seemingly paradoxical, inter-indexical idea and tension between purity and mixture, hybridity and singularity at the heart of sincerity. My approach to Tartakovsky the man, his career, and artistic praxes, and the works that result therefrom is centered on the idea that all three are the product of *mixture*. I am looking at the man as a Russian-American immigrant. I am looking at the artist as one whose artistry manifests in a career composed of equally diverse and numerous interconnected component parts, roles, and purviews: director, producer, cinematographer, storyboardist, concept artist, and more. I am looking at his oeuvre as the product of multi-(sub)genre and epochal references, homages, stylizations, and reduxes. In this sense, Tartakovsky's individual and artistic identities are fundamentally marked by *impurity*, that is, by mixture, fragmentation, variance, multiplicity, and hybridity. Ironically, the paradox of sincerity in reference to Genndy's work is that, as I hope to show, the sense of his artistic agility, the range of his inspiration, and the myriad influences at the core of his corpus produce a *singularly* unique body of work that registers in all its aspects—from its humor, drama, action, themes, motifs, to its commentaries—as pure, true, candid, and truthful. In short, as *sincere*.

It is my contention that the sincerity of Tartakovsky's animated and artistic career is centered on this paradox of sincerity: audiovisual, thematic, and cultural mixture that produces pure art. Therefore, proposing an examination of Tartakovsky and his career through the lens of sincerity is intended to provoke discussions and considerations about mixture and artistic and cultural confluence that, in turn, produce animated art that forms not only a superbly unique mainstay or keystone of contemporary Western animation in the post-modern/late capitalist zeitgeist, but also art that *feels* sincere to a globally diverse and faithful audience spanning multiple demographics and epochs. I have chosen to deploy "sincerity" in this way because I believe that it serves to aid in prosecuting a *holistic* analysis that combines Tartakovsky the man, his career, and his individual works. I believe this approach is a robust and nuanced way to contextualize his major works in relation to not only one another, but to Tartakovsky himself as well.

At first blush, one might be inclined to suggest that "sincerity" makes for at least a strange, and at most a problematically naive analytical frame through which to analyze and explore the life and work of an artist. Or perhaps the latent critique or discomfort with the deployment of this term in this capacity would be that it is, ironically, too sincere a method. Here in late capital, in a global zeitgeist increasingly imperturbed by the intentional,

concerted, and open slippages of veracity—a sociopolitical and cultural phenomenon that has become one of the definitional taxonomies of this our age of so-called "post-truth"—the idea and experience of sincerity is as much subject to corrosive skepticism as it is secret desire and longing.

But to define sincerity seems, in many ways, a task as fraught as defining love. We know it when we feel it, see it, and receive it. We know when we give sincerely, apologize sincerely, hope sincerely, fear sincerely, and are made, for whatever host of reasons, singular or plural, sincerely upset, relieved, reviled, inspired, or put off. I would argue that we also experience sincerity in these aforesaid ways and many others during moments of heightened affective states. We feel the sincerity of anger and fear, of joy and desire, of doubt and hope and all the ancillary psycho-emotional affective states each subtends, influences, impels, or interrupts. We are, to varying degrees of discernment, affectively sensitive to insincerity too, to dubiousness, disingenuousness, and inauthenticity. At this preliminary point, it would seem, then, that there is an inextricable link between sincerity and truth. And though these terms and their ancillary concepts are made seemingly nebulous and imprecise by the myriad affective states and empirical measures they relate to, I can almost guarantee that you, the reader, know what sincerity is when you experience it.

For me, sincerity is a space wherein which numerous ideas and affects co-mingle and play. Within its lines of flight, sincerity demands vulnerability, trust, and a type of altruism—all of which enjoin and indeed invite me to resist my making recourse to my well-practiced propensities for cynicism, paranoia, and skepticism, or the urge to outrightly dismiss and disregard those phenomena that engender an experience of sincerity in me. In this way, sincerity is a type of bidirectional trust whereby the sincere phenomenon, in being sincere in itself, makes itself vulnerable to the insincerity of the individual perceiving and experiencing both its form and the sincerity thereof. Sincerity is for me, therefore, a type of openness, an earnestness, a willingness, and trust to reveal the truth as one understands it, without prevarication or guile; to do so in view of the fear of ridicule, persecution, disinterest, or misunderstanding.

This is not to say, however, that sincerity cannot be stylized or stylish, that it cannot be presented with flair, or disseminated with the aid of resources under the jurisdiction of conglomerate interests. In view of the seemingly inescapable press of capital and its sincere desire to reproduce itself and expand in sociopolitically, economically, and culturally supra-moral/ethical ways, contemporary sincerity finds itself in an interesting double-bind. On the one hand, late capital's audiences and participants in popular and visual culture's joy of art in general seemingly labor under/against the weight of their own distrust of the *possibility* of artistic authenticity of said art *in principium*. In this sense, the contemporary audience's ability to openly receive presentments of art disseminated using language or other symbols

of sincerity or designed to engender it as such is, to many, not unlike a half visible mousetrap, or a beleaguered castle set to siege by a foe that may or may not exist.

On the other hand, precisely because of this pervasive sense of seemingly irreducible disillusionment, of tempered, dulled, or imperfect enjoyment, of half-laughter, half-tears, and half-emotions, contemporary audiences are seemingly more hypersensitive and subsequently desirous to and of sincerity than ever. They continually seek it out in the hyperreal mass of audio-visual, mixed-media content and the ever-shifting structures of its archiving, production, and distribution. In the contemporary late capital Stream of data, of memefied art designed to incorporate capital's indefatigable will toward surplus and redundancy into the disposability of its production and consumption, user-viewers still angle the rods of their hearts into the Stream, hoping to catch something living, and vibrant, and true: something *sincere*.

Perhaps the problem of sincerity is indeed one whose primary or at least underlying exigency accrues with age. It is true for most individuals that the process of maturing is one that necessarily and inextricably involves the exponential increase in suspicion, paranoia, and other ostensibly exclusive and—perhaps if we're still being honest with one another—both prohibitive and defensive forms of circumspection. Perhaps "growing up" is, at its most fundamental, the increased, and indeed sincere, susceptibility and distrust of and against insincerity. Seemingly inextricable from this double-bind is the inescapable sense of the attritional cost of growing up, the loss of belief, wonder, joy, and trust; of hope, imagination, and not only creativity, but also the will to create itself.

Perhaps this estimation of the psycho-emotional aspects of maturation is too vague or perhaps too nihilistic in its tenor. However, the point I wish to make here is that in view of the seemingly dauntless oppressions, (micro)aggressions, repressions, and disappointments of growing up, there are truly few (and perhaps even fewer) avenues and safe and/or germane spaces for sincerity to not only emerge, but flourish. Looking to the preponderance of my peers, colleagues, and age-mates, those from Europe, North America, and Africa, the mention and/or discussion of cartoons/animation always typically results in fond wistfulness, sometimes nostalgia, all times laughter, and earnest appreciation. Simultaneously, however, the period of time within which this spark or glow illuminates their faces is always-Also typically short lived; as if they invariably remember their age, the steep gradients and hard inclines of their lives, and quickly try to catch that feeling of sincere warmth and joy before it runs away from them, knowing, fearing, and despairing that they will need it for harder days than these to come. This seemingly trans-cultural, trans-continental phenomenon caused me to think that of all the spaces of visual popular culture, of all the

tributaries of its Stream, animation seems to be one wherein which sincerity is not only expected, but radically accepted.

It is through the mechanism of the animated cel that the jaded adult allows her cold hard heart to soften, to giggle, chortle, and guffaw both at and with the fulgurant and funny figures on-screen. It is a space made safe by the fact that in it everyone—young, mature, and in-between—*expects* it to be "immature," which despite the term's associations with ignorance, inexperience, and excessive intemperance is, in my view, oftentimes simply another way of saying *sincere.* From the wide-eyed weirdness of Otto Mesmer and Pat Sulliban's *Felix the Cat* and Grim Natwick's *Betty Boop,* the strongman slapstick of *Popeye, the Sailor-Man,* the Fleischerean graceful and staggeringly believable elegance of *Superman,* leaping tall buildings in a single bound, to the endless climacteric and cacophonic chases between MGM's *Tom and Jerry*, and the Sisyphean pursuits of Chuck Jones and Michael Maltese's *Will-E Coyote* and *Roadrunner*, all the way forward to a future in which a samurai named Jack desires to return to the past, the spaces of Occidental animation have acted as homes, galleries, and factories for not only the greatest technical talents and abilities of acting, editing, directing, and draftsmanship, but also sincere approaches to themes ranging from violence, discrimination, community, loneliness, desire, love, and identity.

While this cursory range of themes and topics would seemingly be the remit of mature contemplation, the beauty and power of animation are its ability to engage with them in ways that are incomplete, that is, not bound fast to a particular ideology, agenda, or telos and can often act as spaces of their concatenation and critique through satire, parody, and humor. Animation reminds all who view it of how it felt to feel things for the first time, how sincerely startling, exciting, frightening, chaotic, bright, fast, surreal, nonsensical, and joyful said feelings were. Animation not only provides such sincerity, but simultaneously welcomes it. It is, therefore, to me, no surprise that an important aspect of the power of Tartakovsky's art and its sincerity emerges from a space which is ostensibly and often pejoratively—a pejorativness that oftentimes seems to be born of a fear of allowing one's self to shed, even for the space of a 15–20 minutes episode of a cartoon, the jaded plates of suspicion and paranoia that armor our mature daily battles in trying to survive—described or perceived as childish.

While often legitimized through pedagogical imperatives and goals, the spaces of animation oftentimes also comport themselves with the whimsy, freneticism, confusion, clutter, and clamorous play of youth itself. In this space, Tartakovsky's genius and technical prowess, both aesthetically and narratively, find freedom in both the reduced expectations and critical openness levied against and, paradoxically, afforded the spaces of animation.

In these spaces, ostensibly simple stories of hope, love, humor, fear, danger, family, and conflict are allowed to brim with a consistent display and level of sincerity whose reach and appeal with critics and audiences alike would arguably be impossible in any other form, in any other medium. It is for this reason that to me, there is an unbreakable triskelion between the art-life of Genndy Tartakovsky, animation, and the phenomenon of sincerity.

***

1.1 THE PLACE AND ROLE OF SINCERITY IN THE LIFE AND CAREER OF GENNDY TARTAKOVSKY

Summary

Born in 1970, in Moscow, Russia, Genndy Tartakovsky is a cartoon producer, artist, director, and editor. His parents were Boris, a dentist, and Miriam Tartakovsky. He was educated at Columbia College, Chicago, Illinois. He also attended the California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles, CA. He began his career in animation in 1991 as an artist on the celebrated *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992–5) series. He later served as creator, producer (and supervising producer), writer, editor, and director on a range of cartoons for the cable television channel Cartoon Network. Some of his most noted (co)creations include *Dexter's Laboratory* (1995), *The Powerpuff Girls* (1998), *Samurai Jack* (2001), and *Star Wars: Clone Wars* (2003). In 2000, he married Dawn David. They have a son named Jacob.

Selected animation credits:

2 Stupid Dogs, art director, director, 1993.

Dexter's Laboratory, creator, executive producer, producer, director, writer, 1995.

Cow and Chicken, writer, 1997.

The Powerpuff Girls, supervising producer, story, director, 1998.

Samurai Jack, creator, executive producer, producer, writer, director, 2001–19.

Clone Wars, creator, 2003–4.

Primal, creator 2019–20.

***

In order to discuss, in any way resembling an analytically adroit one, the place and role of sincerity as above described in the life and career of Genndy Tartakovsky, we need first consider the life and career of Genndy Tartakovsky. Even at this prefatory point, and in view of so long and illustrious a career, one cannot help but wonder as to whether the young Genndy could foresee the quiet revolution his immense stylistic auteurship would instantiate, or how Dawn David, or Jacob, his future wife and son, would play a part in its evolution and deepening. Perhaps it's a vapid speculation, but one is still invited to wonder: could he foresee the fact that

FIGURE 1.1 *The Tartakovskys*

the aesthetic and narrative singularity of this stylistic signature would one day become arguably the primary driving force behind Cartoon Network's sustained post-1994 success; a success noted in the fact that since 1994, Cartoon Network has remained among the top five ad-supported cable network channels?

From Russia with a Pencil

Tartakovsky was born to Jewish parents in 1970s Moscow, Communist Russia. His father, Boris, was a high-ranking dentist. His mother, Miriam, was an assistant principal at a school. While his father oversaw and supervised numerous other dentists at his clinic, his most exclusive duties included the care of the renowned 1970s Russian ice-hockey team. Later, Tartakovsky would recall how on one occasion his father had to treat an eminent member of the Russian cabinet while his security detail, composed of Russian soldiers, stood guard outside the consultation room (Notablebiographies 2020). While his father was by no means draconian in the rearing of his children, Genndy felt that he was indeed strict and old-fashioned. Still, they were close and, moreover, life was good—dare I say luxurious, by contemporary standards—for the Tartakovskys on account of Boris' government retainer (Wilkinson 2002: 76). They kept a three-bedroom apartment in central Moscow in which they enjoyed caviar for breakfast (Notablebiographies 2020). In view of its centrality in the current zeitgeist's accumulation of sociopolitical, economic, and cultural issues and

debates, it is an interesting point to make here—a question rather: what is the relationship between privilege and sincerity? I would wager that many view the wealthy and/or well-off as unwaveringly money-hungry, as being unflinchingly purer capitalists than the rest of us and therefore insincere in all ways save in their pursuit and maintenance of pecuniary endowments and fiscal increase. Such a supposition would of course be reductivist, an opinion predicated perhaps on the perspicacious circumspection that is also equally stereotypically attributed to the less fortunate. With regard to Tartakovsky and his career, the more pertinent question, in terms of privilege, becomes whether or not the early sociopolitical and economic advantages enjoyed by his family influenced, whether for the better or the worse, the sincerity of his professional and artistic output? Did it influence his approach to certain topics, his understanding of specific people, their experiences, privileges, and disadvantages? Or did his early privilege act as an insulating cocoon in which

FIGURE 1.2 *The Adventures of Genndy, the Young Dreamer*

he discovered his passions and germane talents gently, evenly, and slowly; one that safeguarded him against the necessity of having to contemplate these and other nuanced and indeed more difficult modes and aspects of life? If so, did his privilege not necessarily annul the sincerity of his artistic passions, but rather render them somehow superficial, or, ironically and paradoxically, cartoonish? It is my sincere hope that the close readings of his work to follow here will elucidate answers that will aid in the illumination of these and other subtle and complicated questions.

For the time being, however, we should acknowledge the fact that the young Genndy *did*, in fact, know hardship. For him, and by extension his family, it took the compound form of the pervasive psycho-emotionally and physically disquieting threat of discrimination. While Tartakovsky has described his youth in Russia as happy and joyful in the main, his Jewish parents felt that it would do far better to raise their children elsewhere, somewhere far less anti-Semitic than 1970s Moscow, Russia (Notablebiographies 2020). As a result, the Tartakovskys immigrated to the United States in the mid-1970s. The journey West was not entirely straightforward, however. It involved an unavoidable three-month-long sojourn in Italy in 1977, where the family awaited their acquisition of proper travel and immigration documentation. While the family waited, Genndy and his older brother Alex spent the preponderance of their time wandering the local markets, filled with other potential immigrants, many selling their possessions and wares to raise capital for the chance to reify their sincere desire to start a new life elsewhere, specifically in America, the land of potential, promise, freedom, and opportunity (Notablebiographies 2020). It was during these wanderings that the Tartakovsky brothers befriended an older Russian girl. Perhaps Genndy's first personal interaction/inspiration with/by an aspiring artist, he and his brother observed, admired, and emulated her work, talent, and methods, as she spent the better part of her time sketching scenes of the crowds and vendors all three saw, encountered, and co-mingled with. In an interview with Alec Wilkinson of the *New Yorker*, Alex Tartakovsky described the trio's friendship as follows: "we imitated her making sketches like you take photographs […] Then Genndy started drawing figures from American comic books someone was selling, and that was the main thing that became interesting to us. Just looking at the figures and then drawing pictures" (Wilkinson 2002: 76). Despite the sincerity of his passion for art, particularly drawing at that time, Genndy recalled a disjunction between his enthusiasm and his technical ability, even at this early point in his artistic development: "I remember, I was horrible at it. For the life of me, I couldn't draw a circle" (Wilkinson 2002: 76).

Following on from Genndy's first brush with what the famous auteur David Lynch calls "the art life," the Tartakovsky family subsequently made it to Columbus, Ohio, when he was just seven years old. At this time, his artistic verve was imbued with the inexhaustibility of youthful passion. In an

interview with Ali Sar for the *Golden Globes*, Genndy stated "I was drawing pretty much right away when I came here (America). So I've been drawing since I was probably about 8," also noting his early transatlantic influences stating "I think what affected me most was television. You know, in Russia we had, back in the 70s, very few animated programs. When I came to America there were a slew of TV shows that influenced me" (Sar 2015).

The Tartakovskys' immigration experience marks perhaps Genndy's first direct exposure to the trials and tribulations experienced by immigrants, and the sincerity of the panic, precarity, scarcity, and anxiety that oftentimes is inextricable from this subject position. While the Tartakovsky family had enjoyed comparative wealth in Moscow and Italy, the fact that Boris' dental license did not laterally transfer and was therefore not recognized in the United States meant that he could only find work as a technician manufacturing dentures. The remuneration he received for this job made it difficult to support a family of four, let alone one trying to establish itself in a new country. This necessarily effected a psycho-emotional change in Genndy's lived experience. He went from being the well-monied minister's son to the frugal immigrant latchkey kid, immersing—and in this way perhaps sublimating his fears and uncertainties—himself in American television, comics, and broader popular culture, his first purchase being an issue of *Super Friends* (Sar 2015). These early hardships and changes did not deter the sincerity of his passion for art, both still images and moving, as Genndy notes: "something happened to me where I just fell in love with it (cartooning) and never outgrew it [...] what started in Moscow never stopped" (Sar 2015).

The experience of acclimating to a new socioeconomic, sociopolitical, *and* sociocultural milieu meant learning from any and all available sources, the chief for Genndy being pop culture. The auteur often cites television, and specifically American programming, as his primary English teacher: "when we came here, my father bought a television [...] Every Saturday I would be up at 6:30 a.m to catch the Hanna-Barbera cartoons" (Sar 2015). As it is with many latchkey kids, their relationship with the television and/or popular culture as a result is one often marked by the indirect surrogacy of the latter for the former. When considering Genndy's career, his engagement with and through the medium of television most importantly also introduced him to American cartoons, which were foundational to his ethos and aesthetic as an artist. American cartoons enthralled him, compelling him to diligently spend every morning before school and every Saturday morning watching them, studying them, and being inspired to his own creativity by them.

At age ten, the Tartakovskys moved to Chicago, Illinois. There, Genndy and Alex attended Eugene Field Elementary School in third grade. They lived in an area with a noticeable population of Russian immigrants, some of which his father was acquainted with. Speaking to *Jewish Journal*'s Michael Aushenker concerning the persecution he faced in America where he was pejoratively branded a Communist, Genndy notes that "the kids at school

grip onto the easiest stereotype," in reference to his being singled out and targeted by others (Aushenker 2001). While Genndy notes that his "parents never tried to hide the fact that [they] were Jewish," he simultaneously states, "when I moved to America, I wanted to fit in and be American" (Aushenker 2001). In an interview with the *New York Times*' Thelma Adams, Genndy recalls the centrality this sincere wish for inclusion occupied in his early years as a newly arrived immigrant: "Definitely that was a big part of my childhood: wanting to fit [in]. As an immigrant, you talk funny, you look funny, you smell funny. I wanted to do nothing but fit in and talk English and sit with everybody else" (Adams 2001: 17). In an early display of the sincere desire of the youthful wish to distinguish and/or individuate oneself, Genndy quietly rebelled against his Russian identity and heritage. He refrained from falling into associations with other Russian children both at school and in his neighborhood. As testament to the other, sincere and nuanced desire of the immigrant, the *auslander*, the foreigner to assimilate, to fit in, Genndy sought to cast off the psycho-emotional distresses of his outsider status. He did so by concerted attempts to interpellate the ideology, ideals, and visions of success and happiness projected as available in and through his new homeland, intimated in and through its various tributaries of popular culture he was exposed to and eagerly consumed. Genndy imitated its gazetted styles in jeans and sneakers, chasing that globally recognized—whether hated or not—American standard of cool so effortlessly possessed by the American boys he emulated. Later, Genndy attended Chicago's prestigious Lane Technical College Prep High School where he recalls not fitting in until sophomore year.

His efforts, as well as his diligence in this regard, were indeed sincere. Genndy spent the lion's share of his youthful days in the United States watching television, preparing things to say to the American kids at his school the following day. He would spend time studying the television guide, mapping out and planning his morning cartoon schedule, like an explorer using the schedule like cartography, the guide like vexillology in order to familiarize himself with the contours, peaks, valleys, and the meanings of lines and colors of his new hyperreal American landscape.

The sincerity of this passion or preoccupation, depending on one's perspective, carried over into his teenage years which saw the young man stealing away to watch animated films like *The Jungle Book* (1967). The fact that he was much older and larger than the other moviegoers did not deter the sincerity of his early love for the animated medium and the stories it delivered. Later, Genndy would recall the experience in his comprehensive interview with *Polygon*'s Chelsea Stark:

> There's something that's so satisfying emotionally and maybe it's just a personal experience [that comes from "watching drawings on screen"]. I think when I was like, 13 or 14 and they used to rerun the Disney films,

> the classics, every seven years. So *Jungle Book* came out and I never saw it. And I went to a movie theatre and it was a sea of crazy children. And I was by myself. All of a sudden, the lights came down and the movie started and it was like one of the best drawn draftsmanship movies. And I just got captured by the drawings and by the art and I love that feeling. I felt the drawings move. And I think that was the beginning. I already loved animation secretly, I didn't tell anybody, but that was like what sealed the deal for me. It was like, yeah, I want to do this if I could.
>
> (Stark 2019)

The sincerity of Genndy's passion for animation was not entirely passive. While he spent a tremendous amount of time watching animation, he also spent as much time sketching, and copying figures from comic books (Sar 2015). This passion and its methodological manifestations seem almost cliché in their sincerity. Genndy filled notebook after notebook with stick figures, creating flip books with sequences of proto-characters who dunked basketballs or zoomed in circles when the pages were turned quickly. In these early experimentations, *movement* and its mastery were of prime importance. Speaking with the *Chicago Sun-Times*' Misha Davenport, Genndy describes his relationship with the creative process, particularly his presiding preoccupation with movement, a lodestar of his artistic praxis: "I've always tried to figure out where the idea to animate comes from. Something about watching movement you've created on screen still thrills me and there's something about telling a story through pictures that I find so appealing" (Davenport 2002). By the time high school came about, the sincerity of Genndy's passion for art, and particularly animation, was undeniable to those closet to him. Alex recalls this proximal perception: "Our parents noticed how much he liked to draw, so they brought him to an art teacher. After several classes they asked her opinion, and she said, 'Well, he's no Michelangelo'" (Wilkinson 2002: 76). This tepid and snide estimation of Genndy's talent, one buttressed by the sincerity of his passion, did not dissuade or annul it.

Following high school, Genndy enrolled at Columbia College in downtown Chicago, an institute known for its various avenues for specialization in art and film. At this time, Boris, his father, suffered a fatal heart attack. Genndy was sixteen years old. In the wake of the bereavement, Genndy decided to live with his mother in government-funded housing projects in order to comfort and support her. To support himself, Genndy followed the sincerity of his passion and appreciation for visual storytelling to the theater where he found employment as both an usher and as a cook in a local restaurant. Genndy's remaining family, presenting the oftentimes overwhelmingly sincere ambitions of foreign families' concern with diasporic success, pushed him to become a businessman. To appease them, he tried his hand at advertising. His enrolment was tardy, however, resulting in a lack of choice

in terms of the few classes that remained open to him. As if a happenstance of destiny, one of the classes he was assigned was animation (Feran 2003: 3).

Mobilis in Mobili: Moving, while Mastering Movement

Sincerity is a tenacious and pervasive force. It has the ability to refuse its denial, to cut through any attempts at its waylaying, to rupture its repression. This is certainly true of Genndy's college years. He had decided to major in advertising art at Columbia College under the auspices that such a move would result in job security upon its completion. However, his artistic sincerity, koshered in the crucible of youthful joy and imagination, one engendered in the cartoons he had so diligently, faithfully, and sincerely consumed as a child, burst through the insincerity of so-called "good sense." What resulted was Genndy's lifelong obsession with cartooning after taking a class from Stan Hughes, an instructor who also possessed a collection of 16-mm classic cartoon prints (Notablebiographies 2020). With access to these prints, Genndy would sequester himself alone with the cartoons for hours, using the schools editing machines to load and advance the prints frame-by-frame. He not only sought to study each frame in awe and indeed meticulous detail, but copy each one. Through this combination of sincerity and diligence, obsession and love, Genndy came to master the art of how to make a sketch come to life through movement. Genndy has often recalled his first complete work at this time:

> My first animated go was my first year in college I did an academy leader, it's a countdown from ten to one. Most people did something real simple, just the numbers kind of morph into themselves. Because I was so into animation, I did a tribute to Tex Avery that every second there was a gag. I was 18 and it was horrible, but it kind of began my overarching or attempting to do something that was more than I was really capable of […] they were just standard slapstick-y type of physical, Bugs Bunny, Tex Avery type stuff. It was a really like an homage to Tex Avery. There was a lion roaring, a cat and a dog getting bit, and there would be a gag literally every second.
>
> (Zakarin 2018)

Taking a shoebox full of his drawings along with his application, Genndy's sincerity followed him Westward when he was accepted into the prestigious California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles (CalArts) along with two other important figures in contemporary Western animation in their own right, as well as sincere friends to Genndy, Rob Renzetti, and

Craig McCracken (Sar 2015). Genndy states that this move and acceptance were instrumental in engendering a feeling that he was indeed on the right path, as an immigrant, man, and artist:

> that was like, because you just heard stories back then, 1989, '90, where once you get into CalArts, you can get into Disney or you get hired right from the school, right? It's like the NFL draft from college. You just get plucked out back then just like that and you start working. So once I got into that school, I knew that I was good enough. Before that, I had no clue if I could do it.
>
> (Stark 2019)

On his arrival, he was both humbled and inspired by the overwhelming display of talent he encountered in California. While he was already twenty years old at the time of his move out West, most of his peers were just eighteen. Two years ahead, but academically and technically two years behind, Genndy trusted his passion and dedication to the craft of animation, draftsmanship, character design, and motion theory—the core of his art, its sincerity—and pressed on, doubling his efforts to catch up.

While sincerity may be free, its application and growth are often costly, both pecuniarily and emotionally. For Genndy, this meant that he could only afford to attend school in Los Angeles for a total of two years. His sincerity took him back across the Atlantic to Europe where he found work in Madrid, Spain, at Lapiz Azul Productions. There, he found himself a part of another pop cultural classic. He worked as an artist for the seminal *Batman: The Animated Series* animated series created by the legendary cartoonist and artist Bruce Timm (Jubera 2001: 12). Industrially, it is common practice for large studios to delegate aspects of cartoon production for intellectual properties financed and created in America to outsourced labor contractors overseas, where artist wages and fees are lower. A recent example of this is the acclaimed Nickelodeon series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005–8) and *Avatar: The Legend of Kora* (2012–14) both of which outsourced work, particularly animation supervision and background art, to artists in South Korea. For Genndy, it was during his time at Lapiz Azul that he became acquainted with the sincerity of the labor intensiveness of TV animation at the studio level, replete with studio-level expectations in quantity, quality, and timeliness (Jubera 2001: 12). During this time, his mother remained in the United States and while Genndy was abroad, she succumbed to cancer (Wilkinson 2002: 76). That same year, his employer also filed for bankruptcy, forcing the already distraught Genndy to return to California.

Fortunately, Genndy was able to find employment at the legendary Hanna-Barbera Studios. It was his friend and early collaborator, McCracken, who had then just recently been offered the position of art director at the studio

on the beloved series *2 Stupid Dogs* (1993–5) who had recommended hiring both Genndy and Renzetti (Jubera 2001:12). This pivotal moment might, on the surface of it, seem rather banal—a quartet composed of Tartakovsky, McCracken, Renzetti, and Paul Rudish working in a trailer in the studio's parking lot. But it was in this ostensibly humble space, against the backdrop of this ostensibly puerile origin, that Genndy not only began creating his most iconic works, but aligned himself with a broader opportunity. Sometimes, it is true that sincerity synchronizes with fortuitous timing. For Genndy, this meant that at the time of his hiring at Hanna-Barbera, the studio was assessing the possibility of founding the modern pop culture mainstay that would come to be known as Cartoon Network. Genndy describes this time with a vivacity and detail that register as extremely sincere. Consider said description in its entirety:

> It was a great time. It was very … I was very, very, very lucky to be there. Before Cartoon Network was Hanna-Barbera so we just did *2 Stupid Dogs*, which was a slog and it was not that original. We're just trying to do what we do. And then they were starting the network at the time and they had the idea to basically say, "Okay. We're going to do 48 [episode] shorts and you do it, we're not going to give you notes, or we will, but it's up to you to listen to it. And if you succeed, you're going to succeed on your own. Or if you fail, you're going to fail on your own. That was their thought, to find the new creators." Now, this is 1994, 1005. So back then, there were obviously no *Steven Universe*, no *Adventure Time*, nobody young. Everybody was in their 40s, 50s making shows. And probably besides maybe like *Ren and Stimpy* or a few exceptions like that, it was a very different time in the industry. I had a student film that I made. They said, "Can you pitch as a seven-minute cartoon?" I was like, "Sure." I pitched it and they wanted to make it and of course, right after they said they want to make it, I got taken to the head executive's room and he gave me half an hour worth of notes on a seven-minute cartoon, and all of the notes were breaking what I wanted to do. And I was coming from where the producer of *2 Stupid Dogs* was changing all my stuff. So I was like, "I don't know if my things are going to work," the more cinematic camera, the melodrama, all that kind of stuff. He gave me all the notes, I walked out and my producer, and I said, "Do I have to do all these notes?" He's like, "Well, he's been in the industry a long time. You should probably listen to him." And I said, "Well, I don't *have* to do them." And he goes, "No. You don't have to [sic] them." So I didn't do one note and then basically, the rest is history. And the great thing is that they supported me and at the same time, it was the best timing as the network was growing, they're trying to figure out what Cartoon Network is. *Dexter* premiered to 12 million people. It was nothing.
>
> (Stark 2019)

His inspirations would become readily apparent on his first studio-produced and distributed show: “Bob Clampett, Tex Avery, Chuck Jones. Those guys were my number one. That’s kind of what I was drawn to. For me, it was the raw energy and the individuality that the Warner Brothers and Tex Avery stuff had—and Hanna Barbera also, *Tom and Jerry* was really big for me too” (Zakarin 2018). More recently, Genndy has also elaborated on the broader influences that came to bear not only on his aesthetic, but also on his approach to narrative, particularly his use of humor therein:

> There’s a lot of comic book inspiration and stuff I do that people probably won’t recognize. I grew up in the ‘70s, so there’s a lot of little things, like *Three’s Company* and *Gilligan’s Island*. Those shows were the foundation of my comedy in a way. Because as a kid, especially an immigrant kid, I would watch everything from *Wonder Woman* to *The Incredible Hulk* to *Three’s Company*, *Gilligan’s Island*, *The Munsters, Addams Family*. All those shows that were around in reruns when I was a kid, I would watch them religiously. Also Abbot and Costello and the Marx Brothers.
>
> (Zakarin 2018)

Later in his career, Genndy would further reflect on how these influences and their manifestations interestingly have remained, at their core, sincerely unchanged:

> Through the years, I’ve developed a style or a language that I like, even when it applies to action. All my action principles are very similar to my cartoony principles, because all the poses want to be really strong. And then through the years, Harvey Kurtzman became a big influence. Of course, anime came into the picture when I was a kid too. That started to inform it. Everything started to melt together.
>
> (Zakarin 2018)

A Cartoonist in a Studio’s Laboratory

In the early 1990s, approximately fifty animators were invited to produce seven-minute-long pilots at the newly formed Cartoon Network studios. Despite his talent and natural instincts and affinities for motion and timing, Genndy’s sincere passion did not insulate him from doubts and nerves. Simply put, he was, like all of us in whatever capacity, unsure as to whether his work was good enough. Genndy showed a few of his pieces to then studio executive Mike Lazzo. These early pieces featured two characters, one named Dexter, another named Dee Dee. The creations were the result-residue of a CalArts assignment which he dusted off and revisited (Feran

2003: 3; Lander 2001). In developing all his characters, old and new, Genndy has been consistent concerning the fact that for him, underneath it all, the sincerity of a feeling, ephemeral as it may be, remains his guiding principle: "The process is I think figuring out the tone and the field, like what am I trying to say, then I'll often start thinking about how am I going to say it? Is there a visual that pops into my head when I think of it? And generally, it's a feeling that I want to experience watching the show. So everything starts from there" (Stark 2019).

Referring to both older and newer texts, Genndy has also gone into more detail about the technical elements of this process, and specifically what aspects thereof engender or hinder the sincerity of this feeling, especially with regard to the importance of timing:

> Well with comedic timing, it's all about read. Read and rhythm, right? And that is the same thing with action. It's rhythm. So if an action sequence is done really well, like if you ever watched Bruce Lee, he has a rhythm. So you watch a fight that he choreographed, it's very rhythmic. If you watch something else, like some normal kung fu type of stuff, it just goes, but his stuff is very rhythmic. So you start to realize like, yeah, good action has good rhythm. You watch the beginning of *Mad Max: Fury Road*. That is such an amazing, beautiful sequence, but it's very rhythmic. There's short things and there's long things. The worst action is when it's just fast, there's no rest and you're just obliterated. Everything is at 11, right? Like *Jaws* of course, the highs and lows just ebb and flow, and it's just beautiful. The chase in *French Connection* and all these things—they affected me. And I remember how I felt about it and I'm always trying to capture a feeling with what I'm doing. It's never just about how simple it is or whatever it is, it's just about this feeling. I want you to sit down and watch it and I want you to feel this. And if I can get away with that, then I have succeeded.
>
> (Stark 2019)

This is an important point to stress because it is a point Genndy himself repeats, namely, the importance of the sincerity of a feeling in the developmental process of any animated work which, for Genndy, is as much a series of technical considerations as it is personal: "The process is I think figuring out the tone and the field, like what am I trying to say, then I'll often start thinking about how am I going to say it? Is there a visual that pops into my head when I think of it? And generally, it's a feeling that I want to experience watching the show" (Stark 2019).

These considerations all came to a head in Genndy's first original full series work, *Dexter's Laboratory.* Perhaps to the surprise of many both familiar and unfamiliar with Tartakovsky's debut, he created Dee Dee first. The character came to him in the form audiences eventually saw nearly unchanged: a tall, blond-headed, pigtailed, gawky, excitable, and hyperactive

ballerina. He made her seemingly unintelligent, nasally, purposefully grating and perhaps even annoying or charming, depending on one's disposition to the aforesaid characteristics. In contrast, he attempted to conceive her diametric opposite in all the aforesaid ways. Dexter was born: a small, squat, idiosyncratic boy genius in the mold of a pop culture stock character/archetype: the obsessively meticulous and seemingly diabolically secretive mad scientist (Notablebiographies 2020).

Genndy brought these characters to Lazzo in the form of a pilot episode he had developed. This pilot can be seen as a sincere display of his technical abilities, passion, and talent—covering a range of animation and narrative principles from character design to motion. In the pilot, Dexter creates a shape-shifting device in his clandestine laboratory. His sister, Dee Dee, discovers both the lab and the console of the central gadget. The two argue

FIGURE 1.3 *The Future of Cartoon Network*

and end up wrestling for control thereof. The result is that when either sibling activates the apparatus, it transforms the other into various animal shapes, including a whale, duck, and snake. The pilot also demonstrates a prototypical, albeit foundational, aspect of what would become *Dexter's Laboratory*'s overall narrative milieu, namely a subplot element involving the highly comedic obliviousness of Dexter and Dee Dees' parents. In this pilot, said subplot involves their mother being baffled as to why the children are not ready for school on time.

The mixture of sincerity and talent abundantly on display in the pilot struck Lazzo rather hard; as if Genndy had revealed how art and science can be alchemized in the seemingly incongruent but highly effective medium of modern cartooning. In an interview for the *New Yorker*, Lazzo recalled that Genndy's *Dexter* pilot was the first complete cartoon submitted for the call:

> It had all the key ingredients you need a cartoon to have—it had a funny premise, it had things you could do in a cartoon and couldn't do in live action … And, above all, it had genius timing. Genndy has a scientist's version of creativity. A cartoon can't just be a bunch of pretty pictures. In cartoons, you literally have to count frames per second to figure out when something should happen or not happen. He has a gift for that kind of delivery—it's musical. What he really has is art and science together. You never see that.
>
> (Wilkinson 2002: 76)

Dexter is a milestone not simply for its status as Genndy's first critically and commercially successful to-series show. It is also an important example of the essential play, the core mingling of Genndy's stylistic, genre, and technical abilities, preoccupations, and inspirations. Genndy has noted that at its most fundamental, animation is, like any other art or form of communication, a collection of ideas: "They're very simple ideas but it takes 22 minutes to fully realize them and fully communicate them" (Stark 2019). He elaborates on the differences and opportunities presented to the telos of the communication of ideas that are unique to the medium, describing in detail his understanding of the medium of animation itself—an understanding that reifies itself primarily in *Dexter*, but also throughout his entire professional career, and oeuvre as both artist and director:

> There's a big difference between animation and live action, but when you watch live action timing, you can hold on somebody's face and that actor's face can emote for 20, 30 seconds. In animation, we don't have a camera, we don't have a character, a live action person emoting. So suddenly, you want to just get off of him or her really quick, right? So our

> holds might be two seconds, three seconds at the most. And I've worked with other studios in my early days and everything is just zip, zip, zip, zip, zip, like a normal establishing pan, it's going to be 3.5 seconds, that's the formula and get out. And I'm like, "But you don't feel it. You just get it over." So from Jack, from Dexter, I started to really work on trying to communicate ideas, since my job as a director is to communicate and to make you feel something. So if you're watching a horizon, it's slow enough and the music is right or the sound effects is [*sic*] right that you're really feeling the wind and you're feeling the softness. And good cinema does that, but it's very rare in animation.
>
> (Stark 2019)

In another interview, he reiterates the importance of *sincere feeling* as *the* fundamental design structure to his work, regardless of how ephemeral it may be judged to be: "my goal is to always try to make you feel something, whether that's humour or sadness or excitement, and to try to manipulate screen space. Feeling is what's really interesting" (Stark 2019).

The sincerity Genndy brought to *Dexter* is in no small part a result of his honesty and vulnerability in drawing inspiration from his own life. "We never tried to be heavy handed with Dexter's," states Genndy, "but if you look at the underlying themes of the show, it's about a little kid trying to fit in" (Aushenker 2001). Elsewhere, he has admitted that the central premise of the show is predicated on his own childhood in which he grew up with an intelligent brother (who at the time of the show's creation was working as a computer engineer) who always had complicated and advanced toys he refused to share. In fact, Genndy has stated that Dexter represents his brother Alex, while he himself represents the whimsy, creativity, and adventurousness of Dee Dee (Notablebiographies 2020).

Dexter's Laboratory was officially released on Cartoon Network in 1995 and quickly became a keystone of the channel's original programming lineup. Airing from 1995 to 2003, the show was a resounding success, and earned both creator and the studio of his affiliation several Emmy nominations. While his work on *Samurai Jack* has garnered the accolade, Genndy himself has been nominated for an Emmy a total of eight times but has never won. The sincere joy he has for being involved in an industry that had had such a sincere influence and impact on his life, world-view, and vocation is clear when he states "I'd rather be nominated and lose than not nominated at all," adding that "a nomination means acceptance by your peers" he continued, going on to say "I don't get caught up on whether I win or lose. Besides, I'll take good ratings over an Emmy any day" (Davenport 2002).

For Genndy, the importance of *Dexter* inheres in its indexical quality. Remembering the first instance wherein which he felt that he was making something that audiences were responding to and resonated with, Genndy

recalls the significance of *Dexter* in this regard, both professionally and personally:

> Maybe it was the first screening of the very first *Dexter* short where we screened I think 10 or 12 of the shorts we made. Everybody was doing it. And when the *Dexter* short came out, people were laughing at the jokes and I was like, "Yeah, I'm doing it." It works, and I think that was a very satisfying, big confidence boost for me, that my ideas, properly executed, could emote a laugh. It's like I'm doing stand-up but I don't have to be there. It could all be through my drawings and the movement and ideas.
>
> (Stark 2019)

Bombay Black and a Samurai Named Jack

The year 2001 saw the emergence of another Genndy creation via Cartoon Network, one that would come to forever change popular culture and

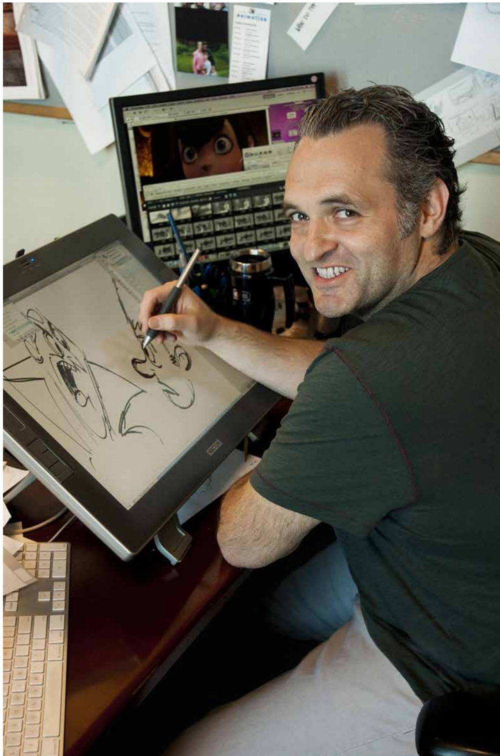

FIGURE 1.4 *Genndy, the Established Titan*

Occidental cartooning in the digital late capitalist zeitgeist. The creation was *Samurai Jack*, a sci-fi time-travel action-adventure series. It followed Jack, a samurai warrior displaced from his time and banished into the far future by a scourge on his home, family, and kingdom in the form of a shape-shifting demon named Aku. In the future, Jack discovers to his horror that Aku's malignancy has stretched across time and space and has taken root and corrupted both as past, present, and future. Throughout his adventures, Jack encounters an array of aliens, mythical creatures, and machines which both aid and impede his continued battle with Aku in his attempt to return to his time. Upon its release, the series was an instant success. While *Dexter's Lab* was underpinned by a semi-autobiographical sincerity, Genndy's seemingly inexhaustible creativity is perhaps at its most pure and robust in *Samurai Jack*. The series is brimming with passion, technical brilliance, and auteurial flair. From character design to background painting, Genndy fills each frame of the often silent series (typically featuring an average of only 2 minutes of dialogue in a 22-minute episode) with a latent affinity for visual storytelling, a broad knowledge and sincere interpellation of myriad pop/visual cultural tropes and iconography, and an immaculate presentation thereof that acts, in many ways, as a revivified redux of everything from Greco-Roman mythology, the legend of William Wallace, to the mythic mystique of the ninja.

Genndy is a staunch guardian of the medium and its capabilities, offering a sincere protectiveness of animation as noted in his comments about the denaturing force of (film) studio interest in (against) *Samurai Jack*. He notes:

> For a little while, they wanted to make *Samurai Jack* either a live-action movie or an animated movie and they came in with movie rules. That's what that was about. And basically, you have to follow the formula when you're making a movie. And I said, "But everything that brought you here to want this project, you want me to get rid of. So how does that make any sense?
> (Stark 2019)

While both *The Powerpuff Girls* (1998–2005) and *Samurai Jack* have repeatedly received Emmy Award nominations, only the latter won in 2004 in the category of "Outstanding Animated Program (for Programming Less Than One Hour)." This was the same year Genndy himself also picked up a win, in the cognate but antipodal category of "Outstanding Animated Program (for Programming One Hour or More)" for *Star Wars: Clone Wars*.

Chairman of the Bristo Board in a Galaxy Far, Far Away

Sometimes sincerity suffers under the weight of time, and can feel or appear to be prone to a seemingly inescapable diminishment under its inextricable

auspices. This was not the case with Genndy. The sincerity of his art in many ways manifests in direct contrast to the stultifying effects of time (a point I will return to in Chapter 3). His work ethic is as inspirational as it is staggering. Genndy works seventy hours a week, maintaining a sincerity of openness, seizing every opportunity as it comes. During his time at Cartoon Network, he grew as both an artist and leader. He moved on to become involved in numerous properties, occupying a multitude of roles, both administrative and artistic. For example, he served as both producer and director for one of the Network's highest rated series *The Powerpuff Girls*.

One such opportunity came from another luminary creative responsible for both the creation and laying of a great many cornerstones of global pop/visual culture. In 2003, the legendary creator of *Star Wars* George Lucas commissioned Genndy to create a series of animated shorts for Cartoon Network set in the *Saga*'s hyperdiegesis. *Clone Wars* had the daunting mandate of supplementing the entire *Saga* by exploring the events that transpired between *Episode II* and *Episode III*, the latter of which was then due for release in 2005. There were other stylistic and narrative challenges Genndy had to navigate. Each episode, for example, was to run for a total of only three minutes. Within this extremely tight remit, Genndy had to do two things simultaneously. First, he had to deliver a complete narrative that succeeded in stitching together two installments of a beloved and sprawling *Saga* in a different medium, under a different style. Second, he had to achieve this in a way that not only brought its revered characters to life faithfully, but also enriched their identities, goals, fears, victories, and failures. Genndy quickly realized that every frame in the few scenes he had to work within had to advance the plot. He was keenly aware that he had to combine aesthetics *and* narrative in a highly *concentrated* way. In an interview with Charles Solomon of the *Los Angeles Times*, Genndy described the paradox of the conundrum of opportunity contra pressure the series represented in its production:

> We played with the style a bit to make it fit, but the biggest problem was: Do we caricature the actors or do we caricature the personalities in the movies? It became less about how does Ewan McGregor look and more about how does Obi–Wan Kenobi look as an animated character. Once we made that leap, we felt comfortable with the look.
>
> (Solomon 2003: 31)

The series, composed of twenty 3-minute shorts, debuted on Cartoon Network in November of 2003. Lucas, in his taciturn way, was pleased. Despite the severity of the challenges the series represented and those, both seen and unforeseen that Genndy and his team faced, for Genndy, the recognition and adulation he received from Lucas, auteur to auteur, were of extreme personal importance. In an interview for the *Los Angeles Times*, Lucas stated that "*Clone Wars* is definitely *Star Wars,* but it clearly has

Genndy's style. Visually, it's like nothing else out there" (Solomon 2003: 31). It is in my opinion impossible for one to view the first series of *Clone Wars* and not marvel at how audio visually rich and narratively and emotionally complete and robust the content and its experience for so seemingly scant a total runtime. *Clone Wars* is not simply an innovative, careful, well-crafted cartoon series. It is also a series that undeniably showcases Genndy's sincerity and his skill for what can be accurately described as pure visual storytelling—action-packed, humorous, and moving. In this way Lucas is absolutely correct. *Clone Wars* is Tartakovsky's sincerely paying homage to a beloved and aesthetically, technologically, and artistically near sacrosanct *Saga*, and yet, at the same time, an example of the sincerity of the appreciation and skill necessary in advancing it, from originator *ostensibly* to torchbearer (I will go further into this in Chapter 4).

The following year, news broke that Genndy would continue his part of the *Saga* established in the first twenty episode microseries by writing, producing, and directing five 12-minute animated *Clone Wars* adventures. Most remarkably, the second series introduced the deviously brilliant cyborg

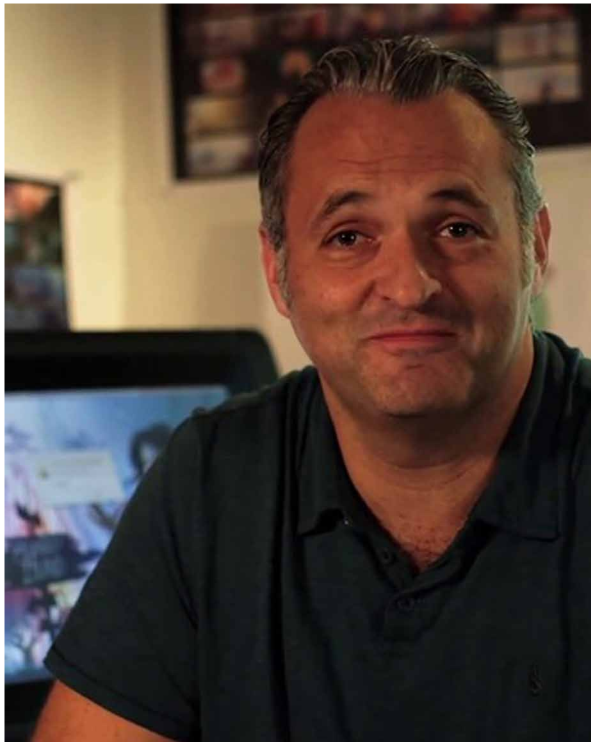

FIGURE 1.5 *Genndy, the Industry Veteran*

Separatist leader General Grievous to the franchise. The second season of Genndy's *Clone Wars* aired in March of 2005. *Clone Wars* went on to win a total of three Emmy Awards. Two in the "Outstanding Animated Program (for Programming One Hour or More)" category in 2004 and 2005, respectively. The other, in 2005, was in the "Outstanding Individual Achievement in Animation," the recipient being one of Genndy's team, Justin Thompson, a background designer.

Éminence Grise

Genndy has come to occupy an interesting interstitial subject position as an artist. While the sincerity he brings to his craft and passion has not been dulled by either the aforementioned failures or successes, misfires, and windfalls, it has, instead, morphed and broadened. This is manifest in the sheer range and scope of the creative projects he has been involved in since *Clone Wars*, as well as the roles he's occupied therein. Consider the following small selection. In 2005, Genndy was appointed creative president of Orphanage Animation Studios. The following year, he was tapped to direct the sequel to the 1980s classic *The Dark Crystal*. However, he was replaced before the film was subsequently discontinued before production began. Genndy then served as animation director for the pilot episode of Korgoth of Barbarian (2006). Though it aired on Adult Swim in 2006, the pilot was not picked up to series. In this time, Genndy also directed a series of anti-smoking adverts: two for Nicorette in 2006 and 2008, and two for Niquitin in 2008 (Amidi 2006; 2009). Returning to animation the following year, Genndy created and directed a pilot titled Maruined for Cartoon Network's Cartoonstitute. Again, the pilot was not picked up to series (Cone 2008). On the frequent starts and stops he has experienced on his "failed" series, Genndy gives a very sincere and honest response in describing how such occurrences affected him both personally and as an artist: "I think I'm not learning the right things from them. I get angry and I'm very competitive and I feel like it's disjustice [sic] and disservice and I never take it the right way. Sometimes, a show doesn't connect. Sometimes it's our fault as filmmakers, like we didn't do something right to have that show click" (Stark 2019).

These setbacks did not deter Genndy's seemingly insuperable amounts of passion and talent, nor did they impede on his opportunities to encounter and collaborate with industry legends. In view of the above litany of creativity and cancellation, one may be inclined to both admire and speculate as to how Genndy managed to continue being so productive and ambitious. The answer, in a word, is through sincerity. It is abundantly clear from all the auteur's statements that Genndy believes in the necessity of sincere belief

and conviction to carry one through various phases of indeterminacy that pervade the processes of animation production: “We used to say it takes six episodes to figure out what the heck you have, and then it takes a few years in replay and people really trying to find it to start falling in love with it” (Stark 2019). In 2009, for example, it was announced that Genndy would both write and direct a *Samurai Jack* film in collaboration with Fred Seibert’s Frederator Studios and J. J. Abrams’ Bad Robot Productions (Frappier 2009). Genndy had a completed concluding narrative for the series written and planned; however, the entire project was suspended when Abrams elected to direct *Star Trek* (2009). Despite this setback, Genndy remained involved in high-budget studio productions. The following year in 2010, for example, he worked as a storyboardist on Jon Favreau’s Marvel Studios project *Iron Man 2* (2010). That same year, he began production on a series that a loyal cohort of his supporters and admirers—myself included—might refer to as “the jewel to complete his crown.” *Sym-Bionic Titan*, which combined the humor and clandestine hijinks typical of *Dexter’s Laboratory*, the tripartite familial structure and coming of age/responsibilities of the empowered investigated in *The Powerpuff Girls*, and the aesthetic style, scope, and scale of *Samurai Jack*, was created between 2010 and 2011. While he had hoped to have been given a second season in which to expand the lore, characters, and narratives of the Galalunans exiled on Earth established in the first, the show was not renewed (Hulett 2011). Following this, Genndy returned to Hollywood, creating an animated expositional sequence for the critically lambasted vampire sci-fi action film *Priest* (2011) which was released online on April 7, 2011 (Gallagher 2011).

Genndy’s directorial debut for a full-length animated feature film came in early 2011 when he moved to Sony Pictures Animation. There, he directed the critically acclaimed animated feature-length film *Hotel Transylvania* which premiered in 2012 (Keegan 2012). The significant financial success of this endeavor led to Genndy signing a long-term production deal with Sony to develop original intellectual properties (Comingsoon 2012). This included the now fabled CGI *Popeye* feature Genndy was announced to be directing in June 2012 (Abrams 2012). Two years later, on September 18, 2014, he released an “animation test” exhibiting the style and sensibility he and his team had intended to bring to bear on the project. The test was well-received by admirers and critics alike (McMillan 2014). Despite this promising start, Genndy announced he was no longer involved with the project in March 2015. Yet another original story was announced in 2014, to which he was attached as director, titled *Can You Imagine?* Like *Popeye*, however, it too was cancelled (Han 2015; Koch 2014; Willis 2017).

The sincerity of frustration can itself be a powerfully inspirational force. In view of these numerous starts-and-stops, many creatives would have succumbed to despair and hopelessness. But, the conviction of Genndy’s sincerity compelled him forward. He went on to direct a sequel to *Hotel*

FIGURE 1.6 *Genndy, the Tenacious Stalwart*

Transylvania released in 2015. The same year, Adult Swim, the spiritual progeny of Cartoon Network-grown-up, announced that Genndy would return to conclude the *Samurai Jack* saga with a fifth and final season. At this time, he withdrew from his position at Sony Pictures Animation (McCracken 2016). However, he returned after the final season of *Samurai Jack* aired in 2017 to direct *Hotel Transylvania 3: Summer Vacation* in 2018, thereby completing the critically and commercially successful trilogy.

Following on from the *Transylvania* trilogy's box-office success, two original projects were announced in 2019: an action-adventure feature-length film titled *Black Knight* and an R-rated comedy titled *Fixed*. Genndy describes the former as "if you take any action movie you've ever loved and you add ninjas … you get *Black Knight*" while of the latter he said "its really funny and heartwarming, it's not all about balls, we're trying to make it a character comedy" (Hopewell 2019). *Variety* describes the respective films as "an action-adventure epic about a highly skilled and loyal knight who, after failing to protect his king, must transform himself into the Black Knight to save the kingdom," and a tale of an average dog "who learns that he is going to get neutered the next morning" (Hopewell 2019). Despite these live-action engagements, Genndy has (vehemently) never seen animation as a stop-gap toward a permanent placement in the live-action studio system:

> But to be clear, I do love animation and I'm not hunting for that live-action project. Animation isn't a stepping stone for me, it is what I love.

> So that's a big thing. I remember I had this meeting where I was getting a live action offer and the executive said, "All right. You're ready to graduate?" And I was like, "Fuck you." Sorry.
>
> (Stark 2019)

In May of 2019, Adult Swim commissioned yet another original property from Genndy. *Primal*, a ten-episode series that premiered on May 2019 about "a caveman at the dawn of evolution and a dinosaur on the brink of extinction finding common ground and allegiance in surviving the coming unknown new world" (Petski 2019). The first half of the series aired on October 7, 2019. In his own words, Genndy describes the show as "a kind of pulpy type of action-adventure story of a caveman and a dinosaur who share similar tragedy and it bonds them to survive the primordial world together" (Stark 2019). Genndy goes on to speak candidly about the style and ethos he brought to bear on *Primal* that, when the series is held in view alongside the rest of his oeuvre, accurately describes certain aesthetic and narrative passions that extend throughout the entire cannon of his work. Commenting on the saturnine violence of the series' opening episode, he stated

> I think it went there naturally where we wanted it to be very unique. And because there's no dialog, we want it to be visceral. And also, you just want to take your time. That was the biggest thing that I wanted to do. I didn't want to rush through everything because if you watch modern-day animation, it is an assault on your senses. There's talking, everybody is yelling, there's a lot of music and I feel like, maybe it just comes [*sic*] I'm an old man or something, but I can't relax. So this cartoon is really done in a classic sense where you really get drawn in and it sucks you in. And one thing that started to happen because of the lack of dialog, people are forced to pay attention. Half the time, I know people are texting or whatever they're doing. So you could hear the radio show and you could still keep up, but if you don't watch the show, you're not going to understand it at all. So we've had screenings where people are watching it and they forget that they're eating lunch or whatever and they're just sucked in. So I think the bleakness as you say, I'd like to say that it's clean. Through the years of doing everything, we've been able to focus in our storytelling better and let things relax and unfold.
>
> (Stark 2019)

I assert that it is both very telling and very fascinating to hear an artist sincerely describe their *own* work, impact, and their medium itself more broadly. When asked why nobody makes animation like him, why he thinks his style and aeutership are so distinct, Genndy gives a sincere, if not perhaps for some unexpected, answer:

> They're not good enough [laughs]. Directing is something that I've been learning through [sic] my whole career and making a lot of mistakes and watching something and realizing what makes it good and trying to dissect it. Especially like when we were doing *Clone Wars*. We had to ask ourselves, what *is* Star Wars? What is the essence of Star Wars and what is that feeling that we're trying to communicate? We were trying to give you the same feeling as we did when we were younger. So directing is that thing, is trying to communicate a feeling. Filmmakers in animation, they don't, a lot of times, come from live action and so we're doing a caricature. So number one, nobody is doing storytelling like [*Primal*] where you can really take time to breathe. Number two, it's nobody else in this industry would make this cartoon besides Adult Swim. And the only reason they're making it is because I have a huge relationship with them dating back from the beginning of Cartoon Network. So there's this trust, right? So maybe people want to make stuff like this, but they just can't because making films, making TV is a brutal fight to get your ideas across, right? And everybody's job that you're working with besides your team s to water it down and to change it even though they hire you, and this is just the reality, because they're worried about the business, you're worried about the creative. So your job is to have enough conviction to sell your ideas, right? And that is my job.
>
> (Stark 2019)

The Future Greatness

Throughout his entire career, Genndy has never relinquished his competitiveness, determination, and his desire for greatness:

> You want to go through your life without regrets, right? Even with something like doing these shows, and I've always wanted to work as much as I possibly can to make it as great as I could and so I could never look back and go like, "Oh, I wish I could have worked a extra week on this." It was impossible. And I can say that all the way from the first short of *Dexter.*
>
> (Stark 2019)

In this desire, Genndy is sincerely aware of the stakes and what is required to achieve them. In this way, sincerity, is, as we have discussed thus far, many things. Arduous can certainly be one of them. As Genndy notes:

> You've got to work. I'm super fortunate to be in this industry where I would be working for free and because this is what I love doing. I

> get up every morning and I am so excited to do this. And each drawing is exciting. It's definitely been easier because I've gotten better through the years. I struggled so much from my first, whatever, 15, 20 years just drawing. Drawing is hard and I hold myself to a high level than I try to get to. And sometimes, you just can't get there. And it was the most frustrating thing. Now I'm turning 50 and I'm starting to get it a little bit. And it's so frustrating because some kids I see who are 17, 18 can draw circles around me. And it's incredible and I never had that. I had to work at everything. Learning to draw was like learning to weld for me. It wasn't anything that came natural, it was brutally beating myself up and trying to again and trying to draw twice as much as everybody else just so I can get better and learn. It was a giant process that's still happening.
>
> (Stark 2019)

This speaks to his greater commitments to his own ambition and determination. On his doggedness, Genndy notes:

> I'm a very driven person for sure. I want everything to be at a certain quality. I want to be respected. I'm super competitive, I want to be the best. I want everything else to suck. I don't want anything to succeed besides anything that I do and have that spirit going into everything […] That is the inner me yelling at the outer me saying, "You better make this the best you could be or I'm going to be really upset. And if people shit on it, then I'm going to make you cry." This is my love. This is my passion and it's been since I was 10. And it has relented [sic]. Is that right? And it still drives me and I feel like I'm just starting my career. That's the crazy part.
>
> (Stark 2019)

He elaborates:

> I'm a fighter and that's what it takes. It takes the strongest amount of will and conviction to get something through and made. And it's hard because sometimes, you'll get fired. Sometimes, the people respect you. You're always walking that line between fired and respect. Like I fought with people for three hours and I'm like, I'm literally going to get fired after this meeting. And then they come back with, "Okay, we believe in what you're doing. No notes." I was like, "What? Then why did we spend three hours fighting about this?" And I started to realize, they were testing me on how much I believe. Because when you've got $80 million or $100 million riding on something, they want to believe that you know what you're doing. I totally started to understand it later. For them, it's a business.
>
> (Stark 2019)

FIGURE 1.7 *Genndy, the Great*

Relentlessness is yet also another thing sincerity can engender: "I'm a five, six-hour-a-night person of sleep. I'm not obsessed about sleep if I miss it. I work in the mornings, I work at night after dinner. I just work. It's not a secret. You just put in a lot of time and somehow, the shit gets done. I don't know what I've sacrificed. I want to say I haven't, right? My wife agrees, so no sacrifice" (Stark 2019).

After so long and illustrious career, a concluding question that can help set the frame of this opening overview of Genndy the man, the artist, and his work could be—what is most sincerely important to Genndy? In short, the answer Genndy consistently gives is to strive to be, as an individual and artists, constantly *new.* Aside from creating, airing, and having positive responses to shows like *Primal*, and the potential to have the same berth and artistic freedom with feature films, Genndy says that the underlying goal is

> not just to repeat, just do something different every time and see where it goes. Like I want to have a career like Miyazaki or whatever. He's got 11 films and they're all incredible in their own unique way. So I want to be a director that's respected, and you know if you're walking into a Genndy show or movie, you would expect a certain thing whether it be comedy or action of drama or whatever, but it's going to be something different. And I think I have to keep making shit and try to get better at everything. And then that one will hit in a huge way and see what happens. (Stark 2019)

Perhaps at its most simple, the success of Genndy Tartakovsky and the power of his art come from the ostensibly, albeit deceptively simple, ability to sincerely believe:

> You have to believe. The truth is you have to somehow convince other people to believe. I'm still learning how to do it. And sometimes, artistic integrity just shines and you're like, "Wow, that is a creative person and I'm going to give him money." Other times, you fight tooth-and-nail for it and if your one thing makes money or gets ratings, then you'll get the next thing […] Believe in yourself, believe in what you're doing, and have other people believe in what you're doing. Stay true to your gut and fight your way through. There is a fight coming.
>
> (Stark 2019)

* * *

1.2 HYBRID TECHNIQUE: AN OUTLINE OF THE FUNDAMENTALS OF GENNDY'S STYLE

I would like to spend a few moments here providing a brief excursus on the technical aspects of Genndy's style as a way of contextualizing my later discussions of Genndy's use thereof, and their relation to techniques of animation, pop/visual culture, and theory more broadly. Specific areas of focus here will be *sound effects*, *score*, *voice acting*, *structure*, and *mise-en-scène*.

Russian Visual Culture: Potential Influence of the Homeland

From the above analysis of the biographical aspects of the auteur's life and career, Genndy's North American influences are clear. However, Genndy came to America *from* Russia. Therefore, before describing the technical aspects of Genndy's style, I feel that it is important, in view of my recursive discussion of Genndy's status as both an immigrant and a Third Culture Kid which I will elaborate on later, to consider how the relationship between visuality and culture merge in Russia and, looking to Genndy's life and work, ask how or indeed if there are any traces of this "visual relational model," or what Victoria Musvik calls "the problem of cultural mediation on the physiological process of seeing" embedded, in some form, in Genndy's aesthetic sensibility (Musvik 2010: 83). Considering the fact that since the time of Ivan the Terrible, Russian visual culture has been marked by a play of opposites, a paradox between what Musvik describes as "the glamorous—even opulent—and its discouragement," I speculate that a not dissimilar paradox is at play in Genndy's ostensibly opulent use of an equally ostensibly simple, even humble, medium like 2D animation (Musvik 2010: 84).

According to Musvik, this tradition is old, predicated on a central oscillation between conceptions of Russian culture as being predominantly verbal as opposed to visual, specifically in contradistinction to the "ogarish Western tradition," a dialectic that also recurs in much of Russian philosophy and theology (Musvik 2010: 84). This strange background—strange in the sense that when considering the paradoxical and oppositional nature of Genndy's extensive and recursive use of dialogue with/against silence

throughout his oeuvre—is summed up by Russian artist Vladimir Fridkes, a leading contemporary artist and fashion photographer, who remarks:

> We call our work "digital painting." And some Russian critics have accused it of "spectacularity,"meaning that visuality prevails over ideas. It's, sort of, "too beautiful" … What is Russian culture? It is theatre, word, poetry, literature. And where is the visual? There is no visual. The Russian school of painting is fairly derivative. Even the Kremlin was built by Italians. I wouldn't like to belittle or berate anyone, but any Russian would say that this culture is mainly theatre, together with the great Russian literature and poetry— but never that the culture includes great Russian painting. A Westerner, on the other hand, is raised on painting and architecture. For a Westerner, the word "spectacular" isn't a curse. They look and say "Wow, this is beautiful!" and they are happy. A Russian looks and says "No, this is too beautiful." We are used to the idea that conceptualism is our main force.
>
> (Musvik 2010: 84)

Fridkes's comments offer some insight into the traditional cultural views of the nature of art in Russia, its relationship to spectacle, theatricality, opulence, and visuality itself more broadly. Based on the above quote, perhaps it would not prove too far fetched to suggest that the average North American child of Genndy's generation would be exposed to more art than a Russian child of the same cohort, particularly in terms of exposure to *contemporary* art. In this sense, the distribution of knowledge, affect, and sources of contemporary art would necessarily differ between average youths of both continents and countries. What Fridkes's statement also latently reveals is a specifically *Russian* separation of art elements and conceptions of visuality more broadly. While the issues, debates, and ancillary themes subtending terms like "visual" and "spectacular" are not, in themselves, somehow inextricable from art, for contemporary artists and aesthetes like Fridkes, the "visual" does not properly belong to the spheres of the of theatrical or the spectacular. As such,

> [t]he idea that the visual denotes just painting or photography—that is, it denotes art as opposed to more mundane and less sacred spheres of human life—seems to be a recurring one in Russia, and not only among artists. Paradoxically enough, Fridkes is also, as he himself points out, happy to do both practical visual things and contemporary art.
>
> (Musvik 2010: 84–5)

In many ways, the residues of this framing of the relationship between art, visuality, spectacle, and theatricality, being as fundamentally separate as

they are in Russian culture, does not exist in Genndy's oeuvre. Being that Genndy's central ethos and approach to art in general are, above all else, *combinatory* in nature, Genndy is, as a (part) Russian contemporary artist, atypical. It is this fundamental spirit of *bricolage* at play in Genndy's work that saves him from what Musvik calls "a dangerous paradox in Russian culture" concerning, specifically art and visuality, which she describes as follows:

> In the long run, it comes to the problem of the "inattentive observer," who lives in a culture that is deeply ritualized and theatrical, a society that uses the idea of the visual in a tremendously complex way that goes far beyond the concept of art as high art—and yet is unable to reflect on his own practices of vision because he is not taught to do so (or better, he is actually actively discouraged from any such analysis). The result is a person who either sees too little in the visual elements of culture or, if he or she is learned and socially active, reads too much into images but never sees enough. Such a person is unable to go sufficiently beyond a criticism of the regime (and sometimes such protest takes extreme and even shocking forms, as the work of AES+F shows) to find practical, everyday, individual ways of dealing with this spectacular, visually striking and even overwhelming culture that constantly proclaims itself to be nonvisual.
>
> (Musvik 2010: 85)

What is the underlying goal of this milieu? On an international, cultural level, one could suggest that the stereotype that Russia is more verbal than it is visual, sets Russia artistically and culturally apart from the rest of Europe. This distinction is specifically located in the difference in the *use* and *approach* to spectacle, with the former holding spectacle at a remove, while the latter incorporates it into the very matter of both contemporary life and art, specifically in entertainment and advertising. Such variance would suggest a latency of spectacle's deployment for the engendering and manipulation of political power. But what does this milieu mean on a *personal* level, for a young artistically inclined auteur like Genndy was? According to Musvik, because of this milieu,

> [o]ne is constantly taught either to overlook the role of the visual in Russia or, when it comes to reflection, to reproduce (or, to put it cynically, simulate) the Western discourse of contemporary art or the humanities [...] The issues that are supreme for us, including the specific role of the visual, are covered by a thick layer of alien problems and assumptions, a screen that makes our own past and present opaque.
>
> (Musvik 2010: 85–6)

In this way, the problem of the "inattentive observer"—a sociocultural and historical issue with roots stretching back to Russian ideology of 1917—at once relates to issues and debates concerning social realism, Soviet art, and everyday life in Russia. However, from an artistically praxialogical perspective, the problem of the "inattentive observer" also pertains to a primacy being placed on sequestration as opposed to combination, separation over fusion, still compartmentalization over flowing interplay. According to Musvik, the reality of the "inattentive observer" is problematic in terms of determining what visual literacy, visual studies, art, and spectacle should or will mean in contemporary Russia. "It is a very serious problem," notes Musvik,

> for a society that has not yet developed a certain level of individual visual competence based on the ability to rationalize and perceive details—a society in which has been not merely discouraged but at times severely repressed. Nowadays we live in a country that, after the collapse of communism, was immediately exposed to a heavy bombing of fantastic and surreal advertising and commercial images. Consumer products and political party images from cultures with very different histories and very different attitudes to the visual rained down on us. They were as odd to us as Villiard de Honnecourt's heraldic lions or the images of sixteenth-century locusts.
>
> (Musvik 2010: 92)

Interestingly, Genndy's own story as an artist and auteur matches the relationship between visuality and culture in Russia, both of which, boy and country, were changed by specifically *American* interventions into the Russian visual and artistic imagination.

On Lighting

In order to make salient commentary, even if only cursory, on the nature and effect of Genndy's style with regard to lighting, we have to turn away from animation for a brief moment and discuss one of its underlying art-forms, namely painting. Why painting? Genndy brings the same painterly sensibilities and design ethos to his own style that Brown describes of the fundamentals of cinematography:

> Studying classical art is useful in that the painter must tell the whole story in a single frame (not to mention without dialog or subtitles). Thus, the painter must employ every aspect of visual language to tell the story of the painting as well as layer it with subtext, symbolism, and emotional

> content. As with the films of Kubrick, Welles, and Kurosawa, it is also useful to study the visual design because nothing in the frame is accidental. Every element, every colour, every shadow is there for a purpose, and its part in the visual and storytelling scheme has been carefully thought out (Brown 2002: 46)

Genndy typically avails himself of strong lighting in most if not all his works; Anakin Skywalker's duel with Asasjj Ventress in the catacombs of the Sith temple on Yavin IV in *Clone Wars*, or Jack's battle with the shinobi in *Samurai Jack* being but two of many examples. Using light in this way creates "strong contrasts and clearly delineate the characters in sharp relief but the figures almost jump out at us. The strong directionality of the light guides the eye and unifies the composition. What is unimportant falls into shadow and thus does not distract the eye" (Brown 2002: 47). Under the pressures and auspices of contemporary animation production schedules means, or certainly has meant, that Genndy would not always have had time to devote to extensive background animation. Strong directional light allows that which is not important, and therefore not requiring of detailed rendering, to remain hidden in shadow, which not only saves the animator time, but also allows for a stylized and cinematic expression of creative storytelling, using negative space in an importantly compositionally narrative way (Brown 2016: 48).

On Sound: SFX

The technical DNA of animated products is necessarily combinatory by nature. Production is divided into various units, just as it is with film, book, or comics production. For animated products, the mise-en-scène is ultimately determined by a host of constituent parts, including sound and structure. In terms of the relationship between sound and structural design—a relationship whose physical properties are naturally incommodious to full description in strictly written form—subtends several key areas of Genndy's own praxis including but not limited to: dialogue, sound effects, and music. It would seem that latent to many award-winning films, their respective attentiveness toward the use and inclusion of specific aural elements, voice, sound effects, and music are consistent areas of focus. According to Maureen Furniss, this central trifecta is the predicate of what we can call a hierarchy of sound:

> Typically, the sounds deemed most important are made to be the loudest; in most cases, the dialogue is loudest in the hierarchy in order to effectively deliver narrative information, with effects and music recorded at a

> lower level as supporting elements. However, by changing the hierarchy, perhaps by swelling the music or by including sound effects that are so loud that the dialogue cannot be heard, one can manipulate the listener's perception of what is occurring within a scene.
>
> (Furniss 1998: 83)

This seems obvious enough. However, there are more specific elements or acoustic properties to/of sound, ones that Bordwell and Thompson identify in *Film Art*, including loudness, pitch, and timbre that are also essential elements in film and animation acoustics. If one recalls their high school physics lessons, loudness or volume is a determination of the amplitude, or breadth of vibrations in the air caused by a sonic source. Reterritorialized within a narrative/storytelling context, loudness is key in facilitating/influencing the viewer's perception of distance as the louder a sound is, the closer the viewer understands it to be (Bordwell and Thompson 1997: 318). Pitch pertains to the frequency of said sonic vibrations. Typically, we think of pitch in terms of high and low, the former being the province of the tintinnabulation of bells, the latter being the weighty sound and feel of a thud (Bordwell and Thompson 1997: 318). Timbre, perhaps the most mercurial of the three, is described by Bordwell and Thompson as

> the harmonic components of a sound give it a certain 'colour' or tone quality—what musicians call timbre. Timbre is actually a less fundamental acoustic parameter than amplitude or frequency, but it is indispensable in describing the texture or 'feel' of a sound. When we call someone's voice nasal or a certain musical tone mellow, we are referring to timbre.
>
> (Bordwell and Thompson 1997 319)

Throughout Genndy's oeuvre, these seemingly quotidian and self-evident principles of sound, the viewer's *expected experience* of volume, pitch, and timbre, are all used in ways that are never superfluous to the advancement of the narrative plot, nor impediments to other storytelling elements, specifically visual, being employed in the service of story. For example, the sound of crunching snow, footsteps, or the billowing sleeves of a samurai's *gi* blowing in the wind are often presented in a way that feels both too loud and just right, producing a sense of aural uncertainty, uncertainty which typically aids the static image in scenes in *Clone Wars* and *Samurai Jack* in which tension and suspense are paramount. Similarly, slapstick noises—the *boing* of springs, bursting bubbles, anime-inspired whooshing and sonorous clashing, the *shhhhing!* of metal-on-metal—are also used to prosecute a sense of levity and humor. Genndy does this perhaps most often in *Dexter's Lab* in scenes where the on-screen action appears highly dynamic, cinematic, and intense from Dexter's perspective, but, on pulling out, the viewer realizes that the action, from an external vantage of greater remove, is very simple. Such

perceptual inconsistencies and conflicts produced with/by sound engender humor. Therefore, the use and manipulation of sound in *combination* with the visual elements of the narrative as a whole, or specific scenes within it, often play on interdiegetic perspective: what the character does and expects contra what the viewer, watching the character, sees *and* hears them doing, and what she expects based on that observation. Genndy uses the oftentimes sense of disjunction between the two levels of sound-in-story (also known as diegetic sound) to elicit humor—a humor which is, as described, necessarily combinatory in nature.

In many ways, Genndy's visuality is primarily, and by definition paradoxically, sonic in nature. This is due to the overlap between his auteureal proclivities and the actual nature of the medium within which he works. In live-action productions, the recording of dialogue, for example, is usually contemporaneous with principal photography. Dialogue and voice are also recorded during post-production as and when necessary. In animation, however, while different in various global industries, American animations typically record voice and Foley (diegetic, that is in-story, sound FX) *before* the visual elements are finalized (Curtis 1992). The benefits of this method, which have existed since the earliest days of animation, are obvious in terms of heightened synchronization of lip movements, as well as action elements, to dialogue and movement. Voice and Foley tracks also allow for heightened specifications in terms of character design more broadly as well (Curtis 1992).

What I feel is important to note and centrally related to Genndy and his work, is the primacy of sound over dialogue in the determination and framing of action. In this sense, actions are derivations of sound and not the other way around. Consider a manual concerning sound recording from the legendary Fleischer studio. It advises specific approaches to the synchronization of lip movements and recorded dialogue. The manual instructs that once selected takes (in this case specifically referring to dialogue) have been placed in a general order of how they will appear in the film, the head animator (typically Genndy in his original texts) will "underline those syllables which he judges the most suited for accents in animation. The most emphatic accents will be underlined with red pencil and the secondary accents will be underlined with a brown pencil" (Fleischer manual N.D: 42). Most importantly, however, is the *combinatory* ethic emphasized in the manual pertaining to the interrelation of sonic and visual elements, especially concerning "preparatory" actions (e.g., a samurai drawing his sword) leading into an "emphatic action" (the same samurai issuing a battle cry) (Fleischer manual N.D: 42). To have both sounds—the sonorous *shhhhing!* of the sword being drawn from its scabbard, and the battle cry occurring at the same time—would weaken the affect of each individual action. In this sense, combination of sonic and visual elements of animated storytelling does not necessarily mean

that they are bound to *simultaneous occurrence*, but rather that they are thoughtfully *interrelated*:

> […] in animating a bit of dialogue or singing, the mouth actions are really secondary. To make it convincing, the action itself is the important thing. This does not mean that mouth actions should be slighted. They must be on the 'nose' (accurate) and convincing, but perfect mouth-actions mean nothing if the action itself is not convincing.
>
> (Fleischer manual N.D: 46)

The primacy of sound as non-dialogic is important to note as non-dialogic sound features prominently in Genndy's work, which stands as an index of both his inspirations and the pioneering work of his industrial forebears. As Furniss notes,

> Some of the most famous animated characters of studio animation—Tom and Jerry, the Pink Panther, the Roadrunner, Wile E. Coyote, and Gromit the Dog—have had no voices at all (at least for most of their careers). Like many comedians of the silent era of film, these characters tend to rely on physical comedy and facial expression to a great extent. In addition, music and sound effects also are vital to these characters' comedy routines. Sound effects in animation often are applied in an exaggerated manner, with no realistic congruity between an action and the noise created from it.
>
> (Furniss 1998: 87)

Genndy's often purposefully incongruent sonic-visual relationship draws from influential masters of sound like Tregoweth "Treg" Brown. According to luminary animation director Chuck Jones, he and Brown once collaborated on a coyote and sheep-dog film. In a particular sequence, boulders rolled toward the wolf. Instead of using a "realistic-in-context" sound effect, Brown opted for the sound of a locomotive which proved to be a far funnier, and therefore more effective, choice (Furniss 1998: 87). Similarly, on their collaboration in *Zoom and Bored* (1957) in which the Coyote has his foot trapped in Captain Ahab's hook, Jones notes how Brown "used every sound effect except the proper ones for this scene—he had horns, and oinks, and all kinds of things—[these exaggerated noises giving] his cartoons a great deal of subconscious humour" (qtd. in Furniss 1998: 87). Whether simple, layered, or complex, humorous or no, Genndy's use of sound provides the accompanying action a deep sense of meaning. From *Dexter* to *The Return*, Genndy often produces humor in the same non sequiter way as Brown, rupturing the viewer's audiovisual expectations and experience to elicit, amid shock, thrill, and the intensity of spectacle, a sincere *sense* of humor throughout his oeuvre.

Music

It should come as no surprise that of all sonic elements involved in the narrative and aesthetics of moving pictures, both live action and animated, music should be the category that has attracted the most critical attention. Aside from the studio imperative to both showcase and sell music via motion pictures, many types of artists, commercial and experimental alike (or an elision of both in such films as Walt Disney's *Fantasia*), have had a vested interest in music and its relationship with motion pictures.

Referring to notes in the score of the preface of composer Tibor Harsányi's sheet music, Jon Newsom gives an apt description of the interaction between music and visual images in animation, one that accords and reflects Genndy's usage of the same in his own work. Newsom states that the score has a "special musical structure, which corresponds to that of cinematic works: the unconscious gliding of scenery, the linking of changes of view, the mobility of clear outlines, the constant movement of the frame itself … [The piece's] characteristics are in opposition to the purely 'scenic' structure of symphonically conceived works" (Newsom 1980: 284).

Like Newsom, Norman McLaren has also commented on the combinatory potential inherent in the merger of sound, music, and moving pictures in specifically animated imagery. Following in the tradition established by such luminaries as Sergei Eisenstein, Oskar Fischinger, and many others besides, Newsom views all the various sensory components of a film as synesthetically *interdependent* (Furniss 1998: 88). In his own work, McLaren's interest in synesthesia resulted in interesting experiments that sought to elide shape/image and sound/music. Curtis notes how he was "intrigued by the idea that shapes produce particular sounds when placed on an optical soundtrack—another aspect of his interest in synesthesia. As a result, he conducted experiments with 'animated sound', to see how sound elements could be created by drawing (or otherwise fabricating) synthetic soundtracks" (Furniss 1998: 90).

Particularly in animation, which has a special proclivity with regard to the comprehension and detailing of movement, McLaren has also commented on the important correlation between the music and movement of visual imagery. For McLaren, he typically translated *fortissimo* (loud) with the movements of large images or objects, and *pianissimo* (quiet) with very small images or objects, or large images or object perceived at a distance. The underlying formula here is: "the amount one stimulates the ear-drums (dynamic-range) correlates with the degree to which one stimulates the retina" (McLaren qtd. in McWilliams 1991).

Traditional Western animation's use of music has been, by and large, influenced by conventions established by the short humorous cartoon. Luminaries like Jones have decried the limitations of the format and the

resultant uncreativity in the deployment and use of music in this limited way. In his essay "Music and the Animated Cartoon" (1945), Jones asserts that "only one serious danger confronts the animator: an under-evaluation of his medium" (Jones 1945: 370). Moreover, he argues in the essay that "all cartoons use music as an integral element in their format. Nearly all cartoons use it badly, confining it as they do to the hackneyed, the time-worn, the proverbial … many cartoon musicians are more concerned with exact synchronization or 'mickey mousing' than with the originality of their contribution or the variety of their arrangement" (Jones 1945: 370). Here, the term "Mickey Mousing" refers to Disney's first Mickey Mouse film, *Steamboat Willie* (1928) directed by Walt Disney, scored by Carl Stalling. In it, the relationship between sound and image takes on a largely predictable form in that the actions depicted are the predicates for their accompanying musical representation in and through the score. In this way, the film precipitated an interest in and subsequent capitalization upon close synchronization which, in 1928, was still something of a novelty. Over time, as Jones' statement and tone suggest, Mickey Mousing, as a procedure that places a high premium on the synchronous fidelity between image and sound over the creative and playful disruption or erasure of that relationship, actually describes a situation in animation in which sound and visual elements are *too* tightly matched. In much of Genndy's work, audio-visual synchronization is not the same thing as audiovisual *combination*. The latter signifies the drawing together in a state of experimental and narrative play of various, and sometimes extremely disparate, audiovisual elements. This is a staple of Genndy's stylistic treatment of sound effects, music, and moving images.

On Structural Design: Mise-en-scène

As noted above, animation is inherently a combinatory medium which brings together a multitude of artistic praxes: drawing, photography, sculpture, painting, music, acting, dance, and live-action motion pictures. As a combinatory aesthetic, animation has a peculiar and exciting mise-en-scène. In *Film Art*, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson offer a clear and concise definition of the term:

> In the original French, mise-en-scène (pronounced "meez-ahn-sen") means "staging an action," and it was first applied to the practice of directing plays. Film scholars, extending the term to film direction, use the term to signify the director's control over what appears in the film frame. As you would expect from the term's theatrical origins, mise-en-scène includes those aspects of film that overlap with the art of the

> theatre: setting, lighting, costume, and the behavior of the figures. In controlling the mise-en-scène, the director stages the event for the camera.
> (Bordwell and Thompson 1997: 169)

In the hands of a master artist like Genndy, mise-en-scène provides a powerful narrative and aesthetic backdrop against which an auteur can stage a range of storytelling elements and educe a range of affects in the viewer. In view of the fact that the overarching aesthetic marker of Genndy's oeuvre is silence, mise-en-scène becomes particularly important in eliciting a sense of scale, "epicness of action," and humor. Within the remit of Genndy's narrative use of silent action, the auteur is also able to simultaneously elicit not only a sense of grandeur, but also laughter from a wide audience precisely through the strategic use of mise-en-scène. In this way, Genndy's texts are, at any given moment of their narrative unfolding, able to effectively accomplish several aspects of storytelling at the same time. In *Dexter's Lab* or *Samurai Jack* for example, character development and depth emerge from the same aesthetic and narrative ground—or mise-en-scène—that the text's slapstick humor, nuanced comedic timing, and epic and highly intricate action choreography concordantly emerge from.

Humor and the Gag

The gag structure of animation—one in which a funny incident is followed on by another with little to no plot development between—emerged during the silent era of animation. In view of audience responses to legendary texts including *Felix the Cat*, *Out of the Inkwell*, and *Alice Comedy*, distributors like Margaret Winkler understood that the format, with its centralizing of humor, was the most commercially viable (Furniss 1998: 95). At a cursory glance, the gag format seems perfectly suited to cartoons, which have historically been pithy forms of entertainment. Ostensibly, gags provide "small units of action that do not require sustained concentration on the part of audience members or the retention of narrative information over a long duration of time. Instead, gags bombard audiences with aural and visual information intended to sustain laughter" (Furniss 1998: 95). In this way, animated gags have live-action corollaries in the slapstick comedies and physical humor of on-screen comedy legends including Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin. Even with comedic motion pictures, which are oftentimes almost totally reliant on the gag structure, gags—these component 'humor units'—typically coagulate around and through some narrative thread. In both live-action and animated productions, this narrative structure is typically linear (unlike Genndy, whose narrative sensibilities are both circular and disjointed, a feature which I will explore in more detail later),

progressing from a beginning through a middle to reach an ending in a mono-directional narrative flow (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985: 13; Furniss 1998: 95).

Narrative Structure

In a manual on scriptwriting, Dwight V. Swain (1977) posits that every film narrative must have a beginning, middle, and end wherein which the beginning establishes a character within

> the framework of his predicament … The middle reveals the various steps of the Character's struggle to defeat the danger that threatens him … The end sees the Character win or lose the battle. Remember, in this regard, the story doesn't truly end until the struggle between desire and danger is resolved, with some kind of clear-cut triumph.
>
> (Swain 1977: 90)

David Bordwell and Janet Staiger also write that this general structure pertains to other domains of popular storytelling including animation, stating "[t]he classical style extends its influence to other filmmaking domains as well. It has changed the history of animation; Walt Disney built his career upon transposing the narrative and stylistic principles of classical cinema into animated film" (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985: 379). This structure further subtends yet still other forms of interactive storytelling like animated video games, in which multiple storylines, operating under the same laws of conventional narrative movement, are available to the player.

Cyclicality, Episodicism, and Thematicism

In view of the seemingly inescapable dominance of linear storytelling in the history of Western narrative, it might be hard, if not impossible, to conceive of alternate narrative structures having as broad an appeal. However, in terms of engendering a *sincere* psycho-emotional or artistic effect, artists would necessarily be interested in experimenting and utilizing alternate modes of narrative in their storytelling. Doing so would rupture the viewer/experiencer's frame of reference, their expectations, and therefore make them more receptive to the aesthetic effects of the artwork. Three such alternatives which, as an animator of serial content Genndy avails himself of, are *cyclical*, *episodic*, and *thematic* structures.

Narrative cyclicality refers to narratives whose end points and points of origin are the same. In other words, stories where the protagonist(s) or

principal(s) end up where they started. It is a narrative structure that finds itself particularly amenable to narratives exploring or focusing on myths or natural cycles including life/death, cosmology, and, at a lesser scale, seasonal changes. According to Furniss, "a cyclical structure does not provide pleasure in the way that a linear one does: there is no goal to achieve, less emphasis on expectation and fulfillment, and no closure to signify an end to the experience. Its strength is in showing unity and renewal, as opposed to consumption" (Furniss 1998: 97).

Episodicism is most commonly encountered in serialized entertainment, the weekly television program, which involves a recurring cast of characters, settings, with or without the addition of an overarching narrative (Furniss 1998: 99). Episodicism emerges in all types of genres from dramas, to comedies, while in the latter, an overarching or recurring narrative line is not typically central to the action of each respective episode.

Furniss distinguishes these two common narrative forms from a third, which she refers to as thematicism. "A thematic structure," notes Furniss,

> creates an experience that can be quite different than that of a linear or cyclical production. Rather than moving forward, or even in a repeated pattern, thematic works tend toward stasis. In that respect, they can be described as meditative or poetic in nature, exploring an experience, emotion or other abstract concept in depth. They also tend to be highly subjective and often rely on abstract imagery, which might provide the only means of expressing an ineffable notion. However, even in ostensibly thematic works, there can be a sense of building toward a final moment in the film; for example, the meditational, relatively abstract films of Jordan Belson generally conclude with a circular mandala image that can be said to suggest a state of enlightenment.
>
> (Furniss 1998: 99)

This general outline of narrative structure offers an important way of thinking about how these elements, individually and *combined*, fuse in animation production. The medium, audience, and available methods of production all conspire to naturally influence the manner, pacing, look, feel, and sound of the complete animated product. Is the product being made for television or theatrical release or both? Subsequently, what limits or allowances does its method of presentation and dissemination present to its run time, and therefore, more fundamentally, its plot structure? An understanding of narrative structure and approach aids producers and animators understand and better design their animated products (Furniss 1998: 101). Let us now explore how all the above elements—both biographical and technical—come together in Genndy's work, starting at the beginning, with *Dexter's Laboratory.*

* * *

2

Dexter's Laboratory (1995–2003)

"I have no friends and I am totally unpopular."

—DEXTER

Dexter's Laboratory: Space, Agency, and Animation as Assimilation

2.1 "QUICKLY, TO THE LABORATORY": A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF *DEXTER'S LABORATORY*

The basic premise of *Dexter's Laboratory* (also shortened to *Dexter's Lab*) is sincerely simple. The series follows Dexter (voiced by Christine Cavvanaugh Seasons 1–3, Candi Milo Seasons 3–4), a self-confessed boy-genius and inventor who lives at home with his oblivious parents and sister in an average-sized house in a facsimile of suburban middle America. Not dissimilar to Abed and Troy's Dreamatorium in Dan Harmon's critically lauded comedy series *Community* (2008–15), Dexter possesses what many adults remember desiring as children namely, a secret—and paradoxically seemingly infinite—space wherein which imagination, agency, and desire know little to no bounds: an unrestricted space untethered in both its fundamental sense of play *and* legitimacy. For Dexter, this takes the form of a secret lab, hidden from his mother and father and, less successfully, from his older sister Dee Dee (voiced by Alison Moore in Seasons 1 and 3, and Kat Cressida in Seasons 2 and 4). As a direct result of Dee Dee's numerous discoveries and disruptions of Dexter's experiments, the aesthetically and temperamentally opposite siblings consistently find themselves at loggerheads over the lab, its space, and its capabilities.

When asked in a 2018 interview for *Petinsider* how Dexter came to be the main character of the series in view of the fact that Dee Dee was designed first, Genndy stated,

> well, I knew I wanted to do a brother and sister thing, and so I started drawing—I wanted to animate a girl dancing, that's how it all started. And so I animated this tall girl and I really liked her—as it was Dee Dee, the design was very similar. And I go, "I want to do my student film with her." So I decided, well she's all about art and fun, also what's the opposite of that? And that's how Dexter was born. He was the opposite of her and then I realized that that would be the basis for the show, that relationship. (157 of Gemma 2018)

In view of Genndy's illustrious career, there is another seeming opposite that defies expectations when one images what the auteur would consider to be a particularly important and deeply personal piece of work. One might assume it would obviously be the stylish expansive world of *Samurai Jack*, or the monumental pressure-privilege of contributing to the legacy of one of the most beloved franchises in pop/visual culture of all time with *Star Wars: Clone Wars*. I hypothesize that many would, if they considered this

vaunted spot to be occupied by *Dexter*, conclude that such an honor would simply redound to the fact that the series was the first of Genndy's major works to achieve international fame, laurels, and profits. I hypothesize that one would not assume it is because of the central relationship at the heart of

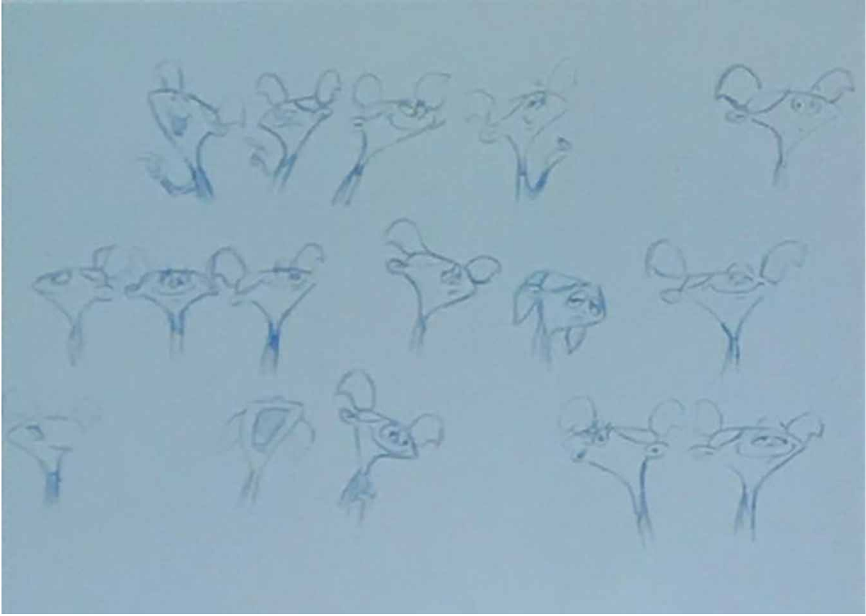

FIGURE 2.1 *Genndy's Early Dee Dee Sketches*

FIGURE 2.2 *Dexter Model References*

Dexter's Lab, namely the sibling relationship between Dexter and Dee Dee. I will return to this point in part 2.2 of this chapter. For now, hold in your mind how when asked which of the numerous critically and fiscally lauded original creations in his storied career that he may be particularly attached to, Genndy answered: "I mean I think, you know, for my career, I think *Dexter* is the one I'm still the most proud of because he was my first one. There was something about it where it connected with people because of the brother/sister relationship. And it feels great!" (157 of Gemma).

Despite the apparent sophistication of Dexter's laboratory, the equally ostensibly dim-witted Dee Dee *always* manages to find a way of discovering and (often unwittingly) disrupting Dexter's experiments, and, more broadly, the *sovereign singularity* of that space. She actively bifurcates it, along with all its seemingly inexhaustible potentials, meaning, and mastery. Dee Dee's inquisitorial nature, a mirror opposite to Dexter's own more scientifically minded, empirically portrayed curiosity, makes the lab a shared space between her and her brother. Through the seemingly chaotic and anarchic fancifulness of Dee Dee's imagination, the collision and indeed *collaboration* between the siblings' respective types or styles of imagination constantly turns the space of the lab into a site of struggle, play, and cooperation. While the space of Dexter's lab acts as one of internal conflict—one which oftentimes acts as a mirror to Dexter's own internal psycho-emotional landscape—it

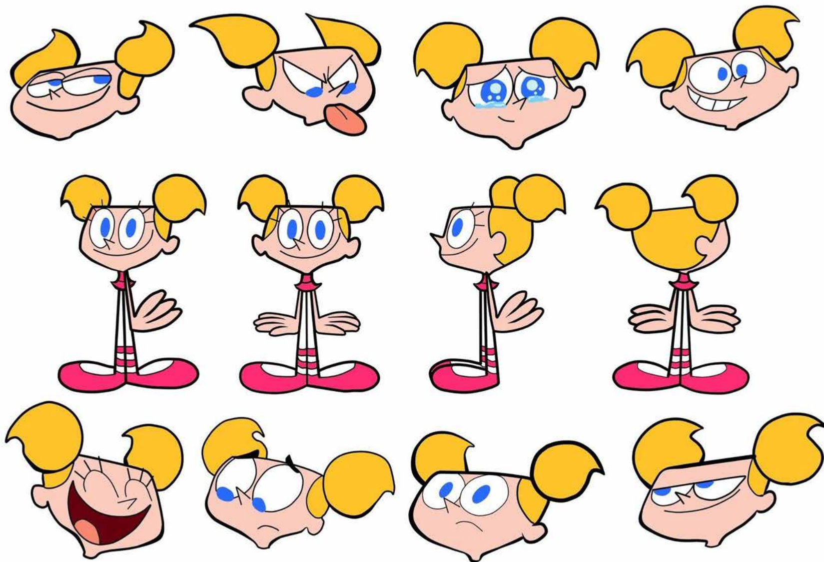

FIGURE 2.3 *Fully Realized Dee Dee Model Sheet*

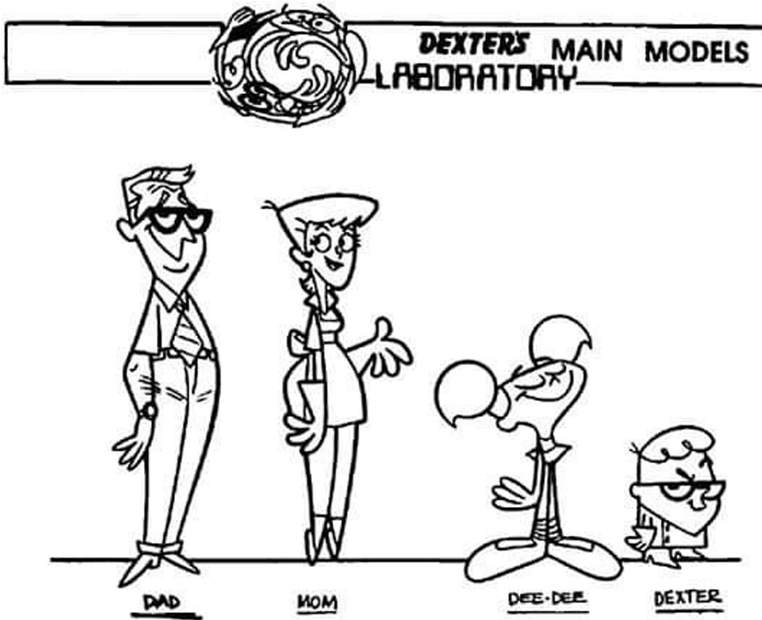

FIGURE 2.4 *Dexter's Family Model Sheets*

FIGURE 2.5 *The Central Relationship of the Series*

also acts as a locus of other disarrays, specifically as the epicenter of Dexter's rivalry with fellow boy-genius Mandark (Susan) Astronomanov (voiced by Eddie Deezen), his neighbor, classmate, and nemesis.

Dexter's lab, as a space, is not only saturated with imaginative power, but also the energy, directness, naivete, surprising resilience, and will of youth. Those one, few, or many who influence this space and are influenced by it—in its vastness, mystery, danger, and imaginative potential—also necessarily interact with a play of themes including family, love, identity, self-esteem, fitting-in, and foreignness. The confluence of said themes and many others come together in a way that not only depicts Genndy's talent for tonal management in the often surprising elisions of humor and tragedy, aesthetic flair, and comedic timing, but the series also manages to engage with the aforesaid themes in a distinctly *sincere* manner. This even extends to the parodies within the series' remit which take the form of two recurring subsections in the show's first two seasons. The first is *Dial M for Monkey*, which follows the exploits of Dexter's pet lab-monkey re-imagined as a superhero, oscillating, in the mold of Superman/Clark Kent, between his subject position as a lab-monkey and a superhero. The second follows the exploits of *The Justice Friends*, a trinity of superheroes sharing an apartment based on figures from Marvel Comics' superteam The Avengers.

Originally, Genndy pitched *Dexter's Lab* to Fred Seibert as a part of his first animated shorts showcase titled *What a Cartoon!* (1995) at Hanna-Barbera. In a 2017 interview with *The Dot and Line*'s John Maher, Seibert gives a very comprehensive description of this process which, for context, I will quote in full:

> *Dexter's Laboratory* was a show that when it was first pitched, a lot of people in the room liked it. And at the time, I was incredibly insecure, knowing that I knew nothing about cartoons. And if truth be told, while there were a few cartoons in the earliest days that I was adamant about wanting to do—*Cow and Chicken* would be one of them—when *Dexter's Laboratory* came, I didn't have a feeling one way or the other, but the room was into it, so I went with the room. So when the first pencil test for each show came up—by the time pencil tests happened on all these cartoons you sort of lost that first energy of, Oh this will be great—almost all of them were only OK. And so the *Dexter's Laboratory* pencil test was OK. Then, the next stage is called colour. When colour came out: OK, OK, it's OK. Then what was supposed to be the final cut, but what turned out to be the first cut, with music and effects, came in. I looked at it and was like, Oh, it's OK. I guess it's not a hit. The next thing I knew, a second cut was coming in, which never happened. And we all looked down and went, Oh my god, this is amazing! So I called Genndy Tartakovsky down to my office. I said, "Genndy, what's with this cut?" Now you have to understand that background-wise,

> Genndy was at Cal Arts but never finished his senior thesis film—as which was in fact *Dexter's Laboratory*—because he took a job with Rob Renzetti, the eventual creator of *My Life As a Teenage Robot*, in Spain, animating on *Batman: The Animated Series*, because both Ron and Genndy were really interested in animating. And by that point in the history of TV cartoons, no animation was being done in America. It was all done overseas. So these guys, in their senior year, took a job in Spain in a contracting studio to learn how to animate better. They were very dedicated animation directors. And it never occurred to Genndy that he'd ever have a chance to create a cartoon. So when we came up with the idea of *What A Cartoon!*, he just dusted off his senior thesis film, came up with a storyboard, and pitched it. So he had never, ever finished a film at this point in his life. So he comes down to my office, and I go "What happened between this cut and the first?" and he goes, "Well, the first cut didn't work." I went, "Uh huh … ?" He said, "So I threw it out. I threw out the second half and did it over again." I went "What do you mean?" "Well, the score didn't really work, the sound effects didn't really work," he said. "So I threw them out, asked the composer to redo it, and then I re-edited the end." I went, "You re-edited?" Remember, there's no extra footage in a cartoon, right? You only animate the footage you need for the film that you preconceive. Completely different than a live-action film where you have 15 angles, and 45 takes, and all that. He says, "Yeah, I redid it!" So I asked, "What did you do?" I don't know if you remember, but in the first *Dexter's*, there's this snail going for a big button and I guess Dee Dee also going for the button, and they're both slowly coming at the button. He said, "That wasn't exciting at all, so I intercut them so it looked like there was tension that went in there, and then I redid the score." And I'm like, Oh my God. This kid—at the time, he was, like, 23—who has never finished a commercial film, never finished any film in his life, had such high standards for himself that he didn't know that he couldn't red his film, and redid the whole thing, convinced the composer to do it for non [sic] extra cost, sat down with the editor, and reconfigured the whole thing. And that first *Dexter's Laboratory* short was just a pure piece of crystal genius. It was fantastic, and led to the series. So I had no expectation that that was going to be a hit series, and now Genndy is one of the leading lights of the industry to this day. (Maher 2017)

Even a cursory consideration of this lengthy description reveals an obvious fact: the contents of this initial pitch episode Genndy presented to Seibert were almost unchanged from an early student film he had created—produced, illustrated, animated, and directed—during his time at CalArts (see Chapter 1). Under Seibert's call, four original animated pilots aired between the consecutive years of 1995 and 1996. The feedback received from

audiences, both test and wild, was encouraging. Viewer approval of said pilots directly resulted in Genndy winning a commission to produce a half-hour series slated to have an initial run of two seasons, with a total episode count of fifty-two. The series was originally proposed to run from April 27, 1996, to June 15, 1998. Genndy produced a made-for-television film titled *Ego Trip* the following year, released on December 10, 1999, which was to serve as the series finale. Having completed his run, Genndy left *Dexter* and began work on the now legendary *Samurai Jack*. Genndy's departure did not lead to the end of *Dexter* but rather, I argue, that it did necessitate the end of *a Dexter*. After Genndy left the series, the show was revived in 2001, receiving a twenty-six-episode order to be split into two new seasons. These additional seasons ran from November 18, 2001, to November 20, 2003. Chris Savino (American writer, producer, director, cartoonist, and creator of *The Loud House*) took over from Genndy as series director, bringing with him a completely different (out)look to the series, reified by the efforts of a completely different production team that oversaw the series' continued development at Cartoon Network.

While it might sound a snobbish argument to make or point to raise, on viewing both the original and sequel series, the fundamental aesthetic differences in the production style of the squeal series raise questions, or perhaps even more vague but equally as pressing, feelings, that the revival was somehow not as *sincere* as the original. Such an inclination or critique would have to firmly couch itself in the fact that the revival's animation was created using digital painting techniques and not cel animation as had been used in the series' original two-season run. The result is a vastly different albeit simultaneously uncannily similar visual language, one in which stylistic elements are effected at all levels—encompassing everything from movement, fluidity, and timing of figures and as a direct and necessary result, the nature and efficacy of the show's humor as well. In this sense, one might argue that the true difference between the original and sequel seasons of *Dexter's Lab* actually inheres in the fact that the images Genndy drew came from his head, through his hand, onto the celluloid and because of this, makes them somehow more direct and also directly his own, than the seeming remove inextricable from the digital painting process brought to bear in the second half of the series overall.

Upon its release, *Dexter* was an instant success, garnering widespread acclaim in terms of both overall viewership numbers, and critical accolades and attention. It was one of Cartoon Network's most all time successful original properties. Merchandise of various kinds soon followed in myriad mixed media combinations, including home media in the forms of VHS cassettes and DVDs, music albums, video games, books, and collectable toys. The critical laurels were also plenty. During its original run, *Dexter* won three Annie Awards (and later nine others), was nominated for four Prime-time Emmy Awards, and four Golden Reel Awards. It is rather ironic

to think that the certainty, the seeming destiny of these accolades was ever in any sort of doubt for Genndy despite the paucity of feedback he received on the series during its original airing. In his 2012 interview with Michael Leader for *Den of Geek*, Genndy notes how difficult it was during the burgeoning days of *Dexter* to receive anything resembling real-time feedback about the viewership's consumption of the series:

> When we were doing *Dexter's Laboratory*, especially, this was before the Internet really got going … I had nothing. You then get a number the next day, a rating. And then you're like "what does that mean?" "Do people like it?" It's very difficult. It wasn't before I started going to conventions or something, when I started to meet people who watched the show, that I started to get the feedback. (Leader 2012)

Despite this initial consumer opacity, when asked how it felt to witness a school project evolve into one of the greatest and most beloved cartoon series of the twentieth century, Genndy stated:

> It felt great! I mean, we started the series when I was 25, you know, so I was just a kid. And back then, there were really no young creators. Everybody was 30 and over if not 40, so it was a very unique opportunity and we had no clue what we were doing. It was very exciting in that way because everything was an experiment. I knew that we wanted to do a different show than what was on the air. It was incredible, it kind of started my whole career. Luckily the show was accepted. Because you never know, you know? It was before the internet, so it was before any of those [streaming services] types of things. You would show an episode and it would get, like a 2.3 [TV rating] and everybody's excited, and I go "well it's just a number, what does it really mean?" And it wasn't until my first comic book convention that I went to and there all these *Dexter* fans, and people wanted me to draw Dexter, and it was also in the every beginning of Cartoon Network so there were only 12 million viewers.
>
> (157 of Gemma 2018)

While it is certainly easy and accurate to argue that there is no Genndy without *Dexter* (and equally no *Dexter* without Genndy), it is also easy to perhaps find it difficult to see beyond the legend Genndy has become and in so doing, run the risk of overlooking ancillary albeit important aspects the series precipitated besides the success and longevity of Genndy's career and auteurship. Therefore, it should be noted here that several other notable figures of contemporary Western animation of the past three decades also rose with the series including McCracken and Ruddish. It is for this very reason Genndy has also noted how *Dexter* brought *together* these various

voices, styles, and talents into a team that, for the preponderance of his career heretofore, has remained unchanged, specifically with regard to his preferred production crew which features McCracken, Rudish, and others: "we were the same crew from *Dexter's Lab* to *Powerpuff Girls*; we added some new people on *Samurai Jack*, but it was essentially the same core" (Thill 2015). In this way, *Dexter* was an instrumental point of germane growth both for contemporary Western animation as a whole, and for a brace of important and iconic twentieth-century individual animators, and future collaborators of Genndy's such as Seth MacFarlane, Butch Hartman, and Rob Renzetti.

"You would know I am a soul who requires peace, quiet, and most importantly, solitude": Themes of Imagination, Solitude, Siblinghood, Sadness, and Otherness in *Dexter's Lab*

In asking the seemingly broad question "what drove Genndy to create Dexter?" we find a more penetrating question in terms of the artist himself namely: how are Dexter and Genndy *similar?* The possible answers to these questions are interwoven into the very fabric of the series. As noted above, the series focuses on a young boy, a genius, albeit a genius whose genius manifests indirectly. It is a veiled, occulted genius: a genius hidden from adults and other authority figures, including his own parents. It is kept occluded by the very simple fact that the only other individual who bears witness to this genius, who experiences it, interacts with it (oftentimes in a cumbersome manner that serves to interrupt, but also safeguard said genius) is the ostensibly unreliable and scatterbrained Dee Dee, who is also a child. If *Dexter's Lab* is regarded as a series about a boy whose genius *is* his imagination, vociferous passion for creation and creativity, and the seeming character flaws of pride, ambition, and arrogance that often accompany said gifts, then the story of Dexter, the underlying concept that drives a character that could be comfortably described as the ambitious and talented other, is necessarily also the story of a young Genndy. This above observation and assertion may seem professedly commonsensical, worse obvious, to or for anyone with even a smattering of an inkling as to what the show is about. However, if one is to dismiss this observation of a core concept that inextricably binds both creator and creation as simple, then one also necessarily omits the nuanced manifestation of this link throughout the series as I will illustrate in part 2.2 of this chapter.

On the surface of it, however, the show *is* simple almost to cliché. Dexter, a bespectacled boy genius possesses a secret laboratory. Falling not far from

the tree of (mad) geniuses/scientists before him, Dexter borrows from the trope and post-industrial stock character in small ways, like having the entrance to said laboratory being hidden behind his bedroom bookcase, requiring a secret spoken access code to enter, or the manipulation of secret switches, as well as the cliché of pulling on a special volume on said bookshelf in order to release the lock. Unlike his (mad) genius/scientist forebears, the location and size of his lab differ, similarly in style as well. While the labs of such notable mavericks as Shelley's Victor Frankenstein, Weine's Dr. Caligari, Rains' Griffin, Lang's C. A. Rotwang, and even the likes of Humphrey Bogart's Dr. X, or Dan Harmon's Troy and Abed's aforementioned "dreamatorium"—all of which are in some way or other saturnine, secluded, and small—with Dexter, the seeming illimitability of his imagination is directionally proportional to the seemingly infinite space taken up by his laboratory. Along this line of thought, I hypothesize that perhaps a salient psychoanalytical reading of *Dexter's Lab* might offer up some interesting and useful insights into children's cognitive and creative development, and other germane and perhaps currently "mysterious" or highly contested aspects of child psychology.

Being that such an endeavor is beyond the remit of this analysis, what we can say here, however, is that while there may be an unavoidable metaphysical distinction, there is no *pragmatic* or indeed *aesthetic* or *thematic* difference between Dexter's laboratory as a reified "real" space and his imagination as an ephemeral space. In visually representing this abstract space, which is paradoxically nonpictorial by definition yet hypervisual in experience and representation, Genndy shows the space of Dexter's lab to be one *filled* with the creations of his imagination. While one might be inclined to describe them as cartoonishly mad-capped and childish, such an estimation has, in many ways, fallen prey to the *illusion* of the lab as a real space, bound by empirical rules of space and time, instead of what it is: a space of imagination in which a *child* uses his imagination to build, destroy, discover, learn, and fail at the very same ideas, concepts, and notions that a *child* would be, harebrained and hasty, immature and imprudent as may be. And it is in these failures that the importance of Dexter's puerility comes to the fore. His experiments often fail precisely because he becomes overexcited and careless, as a child would, despite (in spite of) his obvious intelligence, but also inevitably because of its specifically childish applications.

It is not Dexter's intelligence that Others him so much as his strange and decidedly non-Otherness does. Of all Dexter's family members, he is the only one to (consistently) speak with a thick indeterminate, albeit Eastern European-sounding accent of seemingly no obvious provenance—relational, circumstantial, or otherwise. However, according to Cavanaugh, Dexter's accent is "an affectation, [a] kind of accent, we're not quite sure. A small Peter Lorre, but not. Perhaps he's Latino, perhaps he's French. He's a scientist; he knows he needs [a] kind of accent" (Moore 1996: 6).

Genndy describes this ostensibly comedic, and I argue latently biographical, aspect of the character's design more precisely in terms of its geographic and genre derivations, stating that "[Dexter is] a scientist. All scientists are foreign and have accents … It's not really a German accent. It's just Eastern European" (Woulfe 2003). This affectation creates an interesting and humorous disjunction between Dexter's decidedly all-American family, life, parentage, and culture, but also immediately draws attention to questions of foreignness, assimilation, and the figure/subject position of the Third Culture Kid, to name but three. Moreover, while Genndy explores the psycho-emotional, cultural, and identarian indeterminacy of both youth and specifically his own transatlantic upbringing through the indeterminacy of Dexter's accent, such considerations are couched in what registers as Dexter's comedic mimicry and childlike emulation of the stereotype of the (mad) genius/scientist as foreign, specifically within the remit of the American science/weird fiction traditions.

Secrecy and isolation are the primary constituents of Dexter's lab. However, in their constant contravening, they are also the predicate elements of a running joke. While Dexter's mother (voiced by Kath Soucie) and father (voiced by Jeff Bennett) never discover his lab, nor ever learn of its existence, Dee Dee, Dexter's hyperactive and ostensibly doltish older sister, is keenly and comedically aware of Dexter's lab in ways that are also often surprisingly heartfelt. In flagrant disregard of the ostensible impressiveness of Dexter's lab—with the grandeur of its magnitude, the otherwise intimidating/awe-inspiring sophistication of its collection of apparatuses, and advanced technology—Dee Dee often literally and figuratively (and easily) dances past Dexter's complicated, albeit ostensibly spurious (and farcically porous), security measures. When inside Dexter's lab, Dee Dee consistently meddles with, disrupts, and interrupts her brother's "work" with an infectious *joi de vivre*. It is this seeming carelessness that oftentimes betrays the latent and powerful reservoir of Dee Dee's secret wisdom whose ethic of living-for-the-moment clashes with Dexter's pseudo-scientific (or at least scientifically inspired) meticulousness and rigor. Despite her ostensibly disorganized outlook, Dee Dee is not only always able to elude Dexter's security protocols, but she oftentimes provides valuable council and comfort to her younger brother in times of his most incisive psychological and emotional distress. On the surface of it, Dee Dee is an imperturbable menace to Dexter. However, throughout the series, Dexter often rescues Dee Dee or otherwise comes to her defense in a decisive manner in many instances in which she is beset by various hazards and dangers. It is in these instances that Dexter expresses his ostensibly reluctant, albeit deeply felt and indeed *recursive*, affection for his sister. In this way, the relationship between Dexter and Dee Dee can accurately be described as, among a plethora of other things, one of serendipity and fierce, albeit indirect, loyalty.

While the loving consternation between siblings was, for many of us with siblings, an essential aspect of growing up, the trials and tribulations of youth and burgeoning teenagehood would be incomplete without the sometimes overzealous passion we might have brought to our youthful rivalries. For Dexter, this aspect of his youth redounds entirely to one figure: Manadark (Susan) Astronomonov introduced in Season 1, Episode 3 "Dexter's Rival" (aired May 12, 1996) and later re-introduced in Season 3, Episode 6 "A Boy Named Sue" (aired March 29, 2002). As is often the case with the relationship between rivals, Dexter and Mandark are mirrors of one another. Like Dexter, Mandark possesses his own clandestine laboratory. However, unlike Dexter, whose laboratory does not seem to operate under any obvious overarching mandate, ideology, or telos, Mandark's lab is pointedly dedicated to evil enterprise, the accrual of power, and/or the destruction and undermining of Dexter's accomplishments. This evil injunction is a retaliatory response to the fact that Dexter's inventions are of an objectively higher quality and standard than Mandark's, the plans of which Mandark often makes it his goal to steal in order to even the state of play between the two boy geniuses.

While in Genndy's original run the evil of Mandark contra the general indifference or indeterminacy/multiplicity of interests and enterprises of Dexter never ossified into rote delineations of evil versus good, Mandark nevertheless assumed a far more quintessentially evil role in the revival series. In so doing, he transmutes, changing from Dexter's specular opposite into his categorically outright enemy. This relational change also manifests aesthetically in design alterations to the look and feel of Mandark's lab, for instance, which goes from being a brightly lit space with rotund edifices, to one that resembles a Calligarian nightmare: Gothic, industrial, cutting the space with slashing apexes and jutting, sharp coronae. In the differences between the original series and the revival, one thing does not change, however. It is another oftentimes essential, formative, and traumatic aspect of growing up: first love. For Mandark, it is a perennial weakness in the form of his unrequited love for Dee Dee. In this sense, Dee Dee, yet again, becomes not only an indirect psycho-emotional anchor for Dexter, but also a weak-spot for him in that Mandark's desire for her oftentimes leads to her imperilment which thus subsequently necessitates Dexter's intervention in the form of rescuing her. In this sense, Dee Dee is not only an anchor but also a (weak) link.

It is worth mentioning here that the theme of sincerity in the series is also a matter of aesthetic design. In Season 2, Episode 38 "LABretto" (aired May 6, 1998) in which both Dexter and his laboratory's origins are detailed through opera, Genndy offers a clever inversion in terms of the theme of sincerity (Tartakovsky 1998). Using Opera—an art-form commonly associated with bombast and excessiveness which renders its

dramatic affects insincere, to the average listener/viewer—as the narrative methodology through which to describe/detail the sincerely and perhaps arguably even singularly important event of Dexter's entire origin and that of his laboratory, Genndy plays on the viewer's expectations based on their preexisting prejudices or stereotypes for/against a particular aesthetic and narrative form. Re-imagined, retooled, and redeployed through the largely *refractory* medium of 2D animation in Genndy's style, both the origin story and opera by extension take on radically *new* signifying abilities, including opening up of humorous possibilities, while simultaneously engendering a broad range of overall narrative and aesthetic effects.

Parody as Homage: The Recurring Segments

The typical format every *Dexter* episode takes breaks down into various segments, each typically being eight minutes in length. The subject of these segments varies and can include a specific focus on a particular member of Dexter's family, or other characters from the series more broadly. Season 1 of the original series typically features one of two primary sub-segments: *Dial M for Monkey* and *The Justice Friends* (Boedecker 1997). The former appears as the middle segment through six episodes of the first series and is replaced by the latter until the conclusion of the first season.

Created collaboratively by Genndy, McCracken, and Rudish, *Dial M for Monkey* is a series of shorts that explore the misadventures of Dexter's pet lab monkey named Monkey (vocalizations by Frank Welker). In yet another display of the interesting, and indeed essential, paradox of the titular character's ignorant genius, Dexter assumes that Monkey is unremarkably ordinary. However, like the superheroes Genndy consumed, learned from, emulated, and admired as a child in Chicago, Monkey secretly is possessed of superpowers and uses them as a superhero named, consistently if not humorously uncreatively, Monkey. Monkey's clandestine superheroics are supported by ancillary team members: Agent Honeydew of an agency named Global Security (voiced by Kath Soucie), an imperious figure named Commander General (voiced by Robert Ridgeley in Season 1, and Earl Boen in Season 2), and a team of other assembled superheroes. Like Superman, the archon of dual-identifying super-powered crime fighters, Monkey's powers and abilities are myriad: superstrength, telekinesis, flight, super speed, as well as others.

The Justice Friends continues this pointed parody of comic book superheroes. Residing in an apartment called Muscular Arms, the segment follows the misadventures of a trio of superheroes composed of Major Glory (a parody of Marvel's Captain America and DC's Superman in terms of both personality and ability, voiced by Rob Paulsen), the Infraggable

Hulk (a parody of Marvel's the Incredible Hulk, voiced by Frank Welker), and Valhallen (a parody of Marvel's Thor by having the character bear the personality of the late glam rock icon Eddie Van Halen, voiced by Tom Kenny). Like *Dial M for Monkey*, which makes recourse to the trope of the superhero serial narrative in the mold of Superman evidenced in the mixed media of the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, the presentment and indeed humor of this running segment rely on the aesthetic and thematic tropes of 1990s situational comedy in the style of *Seinfeld* or *Friends*. As such, *The Justice Friends* is far less concerned with detailing any sort of action-packed account of the trios' superheroic lives, adventures, victories, and losses. Instead, the segment focuses primarily on the quotidian idiosyncrasy of the workaday aspects hidden behind the ostensible action acting as a veneer for the concept of the comic book superhero, which, in Genndy's imagination, involves numerous disagreements and conflicts between each member and flatmate. Harkening to its sitcom DNA, the comedic impetus in the segment is compounded and reified by the presence of a laugh track. Both segments are also a direct manifestation of Genndy's assimilative process of *becoming* American, first through learning how to speak English through reading Marvel Comics, second through all the soap opera, sitcom, and action-adventure television he consumed as a youth in Chicago—*Wonder Woman* to *The Incredible Hulk*, *Three's Company*, *Gilligan's Island*, *The Munsters,* to *The Addams Family* (Aushenker 2001; Zakarin 2018).

While highly entertaining and well-received, Genndy stated in an interview with IGN that he was ultimately displeased with the results of his work on the segment. For Genndy, *The Justice Friends* "could have been funnier and the characters could have been fleshed out more" (Plume 2001). Aside from the show's three main segments, Seasons 1 and 2 featured mini-segments which typically only featured either Dexter or Dee Dee. There were, however, also sub-sectional narratives exploring the lives of ancillary characters including "The Puppet Pals" who were two live-action puppets named Puppet Pal Mitch (Paulsen) and Puppet Pal Clem (Kenny), which had oblique references to the cultural, thematic, and aesthetic legacy of the work of puppetry pioneer Jim Henson.

The Laboratories of CalArts and Cartoon Network: A Closer Look at the Origins of *Dexter's Lab*

What if you turned left instead of right? What if you had spoken up instead of remaining silent? What if you had tilted instead of acquiescing? The speculative appeal of hindsight sits right alongside the speculative

possibilities opened up by the time-travel device in that it simultaneously engenders questions from the answers it seems to offer. For example, being that when at CalArts in 1990 Genndy wrote, directed, animated, and produced *two* student short films, could the history of Cartoon Network and Occidental twentieth- and twenty-first-century pop-visual culture be different in the least and most ways had he chosen the other unnamed short over "Changes," the precursor to *Dexter's Lab*? (Manley 2008: 136). It is unfathomably strange to imagine that the choice between two two-and-a-half minute pencil tests could change a man's life and, subsequently, the lives and childhoods of so many around the world over time. Genndy chose the short "Changes," the proto-Dexter which was subsequently shown in a university screening attended by the producers of *Batman: The Animated Series*. He impressed them so much they hired him almost immediately (Manley 2008: 136; Neuwirth 2003). This opportunity lead to Genndy working as part of the production team on *2 Stupid Dogs* alongside several important coworkers and peers, specifically McCracken, Renzetti, Rudish, and Lou Roman—all of whom had been his classmates at CalArts (Manley 2008: 138; Neuwirth 2003; Simensky 2011: 286–7). This intrepid and incredibly talented band of animators, directors, flat colorers, background and concept artists, timers, and editors went on to work with Genndy on the creation of *Dexter's Lab* (Seibert 2003; Tuchman 2008).

While working as a sheet timer on 1994's movie critic satire *The Critic*, Genndy was contacted by Larry Huber, the then producer on *2 Stupid Dogs*. It was Huber who had shown the soon-to-be archons of the burgeoning pop and visual culture powerhouse (the then prototypical Cartoon Network) Genndy's student piece. He also encouraged Genndy to develop the piece into a seven-minute storyboard that could be shopped around to prospective interested parties within and without the directly related cartooning industry (Manley 2008: 138; Neuwirth 2003).

Genndy, being dissatisfied with his position on *The Critic*, accepted Huber's proposal with little hesitation (Manley 2008: 138). This leads to a more sincere focus on "Changes" through, ironically, a change in his vocation. The short was produced for Cartoon Network's animation showcase titled *World Premiere Toons* (Manley 2008: 138; Moore 1996; Neuwirth 2003). Debuting on February 26, 1995, Genndy subjected himself to the oftentimes sincerely insincere reactions and feedback of the general public. The global viewership at the time was given the opportunity to vote for their favorite short via telephone, early internet, focus groups, and even consumer promotions (Moore 1995). The results were resoundingly clear: Genndy's sincerity in imbuing his first creation with the earnestness of his youthful admirations and emulations, alongside which stood his own experience, sensitivity, and familial situation as a Third Culture Kid, had come together in such a way as to produce the intimation of a global hit. *Dexter's Lab* was the first of sixteen shorts shown in the showcase to earn

an approval score (Flint 1995). This praise and seemingly unanimous appeal also came from high-ranking figures such as Mike Lazzo, the then director of programming for Cartoon Network. In 1996, Lazzo confirmed that *Dexter* was his favorite of the forty-eight shorts produced up to and including that point, stating that both he and his colleagues "loved the humour in the brother-versus-sister relationship" (Mifflin 1996).

Despite this support and outward show of appreciation and interest, Genndy thought little of "his initial short's" chances of being taken to series at network level (Neuwirth 2003). Much later, in 2018, Genndy noted how, retrospectively, the success and development of *Dexter*, let alone his involvement in it was, by contemporary standards, atypical. On account of his age at the time, and being given the opportunity to be showrunner on an original intellectual property financed and allocated studio network assets and priority, Genndy and those who came up with him realize that they were part of a unique crop: "Everybody before us were in their forties, at least, and so [our generation's experience] was a very different way to do something where we had no clue what we were doing and we were just trying to make each other laugh" (Sokol 2018). *Dexter* was indeed greenlit, making Genndy, at the age of twenty-seven, one of the youngest animation directors of that era (Lenburg 2006: 332–3).

The sincerity of earnest collaboration, and the desire to impress and entertain one's peers as noted above, can have cross-pollinating effects. *Dexter's Lab* could not have come to be were it not for the collective efforts between Genndy and his former classmates, particularly McCracken and Rushish, both of whom were instrumental in collaborating with Genndy on the design elements of "Changes." The service rendered was repaid in what would become a very big way as soon after the trio had concluded work on "Changes," Genndy aided McCracken with his own short for the *World Premiere Toon/What a Cartoon!* Showcase. This piece would later become the origin of the critical and commercial juggernaut *The Powerpuff Girls* (Neuwirth 2003). Once McCracken's project had been wrapped, the trio again turned their attentions toward creating a second *Dexter* short piece titled "The Big Sister" (Simensky 2011: 286–7). These collegiate creative endeavors were marked by a paradoxical, conciliatory kind of sincerity for Genndy in that the sincerity of Genndy's belief that *Dexter's Laboratory* would not be greenlit merged with a sincere enjoyment at having the chance to create and collaborate with his friends, at the very least.

Combined, *Dexter's Lab* and *Powerpuff Girls*, the products of these early industrial collaborations, not only ensured the commercial and cultural legacy of the Network, but changed the history of Western animation more broadly, presaging both aesthetic and narrative trends to come; many of which, particularly in terms of approaches to humor and action, have become staples of contemporary American animation to this day (Neuwirth 2003). Not only was this artistic camaraderie vocationally fruitful, it

engendered an abiding friendship between Genndy and McCracken. Having been roommates shortly after college, the pair would come to be consistent collaborators and contributors toward and within each other's projects (Fritz 2009; Perlmutter 2014: 269; Sokol 2018).

In *America Toons In: A History of Television Animation*, David Perlmutter asserts that it is this most symbiotic relationship between the two artists that accounts for the aesthetic, thematic, and narrative similarities between *Dexter's Laboratory* and *The Powerpuff Girls* (Perlmutter 2014: 269). While Perlmutter goes as far as to describe McCracken's role on the series as that of Genndy's XO, the collaborative aspects of the series bring together other notable luminaries. Aside from Genndy, McCracken, Renzetti, and Rudish, distinguished directors and writers on the series included Seth MacFarlane, Butch Hartman, John McIntyre, and Chris Savino. In addition to his various other contributions, McCracken also served as an art director on the series, thereby rounding out a plethora of skills, talents, viewpoints, aesthetic and narrative ethics, and roles brought to bear on the series (Bartlett 2007; Roffman 2010).

Hypothesis, Method, Apparatus, Results, Conclusion: How *Dexter's Laboratory* Came to Be

Turner placed an order of six half-hour instalments of *Dexter's Lab*, alongside which included two pieces of what would become one of the show's supplemental segments *Dial M for Monkey.* The original series concept was simple enough. At CalArts, Genndy had drawn numerous designs for a ballerina, tall, exiguous, dancing, twirling, carefree and in need of a diametric opposite in the form of a squat, blockish, and serious boy scientist. These prototypes of Dee Dee and Dexter would remain unnamed until Genndy revisited them for the showcase at Cartoon Network (Davenport 2002; Wilkinson 2002; Woulfe 2003). Besides their aesthetic variance, represented visually in the contrast between a tutu and a lab jacket, noodle-y expressive limbs and truncated appendages, the flowing lines of a dancer and the rigid determinacy, aspect and bearing of a scientist, Genndy promoted a sense of difference between the two characters by portraying Dee Dee as a fundamentally *artistic* force, while Dexter was depicted as an ostensibly rational and empirical one (Davenport 2002; Woulfe 2003). While the exact ages of the sibling duo are never revealed, Genndy has suggested that he intended for Dexter to be approximately six to eight years old, and for Dee Dee to be "a couple years older," stressing that his intention was never to specify Dexter's age thereby, along with his strange mercurial

accent, maintaining Dexter's idiosyncratic Otherness (Woulfe 2003). While the fact that Dee Dee is literally and figuratively older than Dexter, Genndy's preference, or rather most sincere identification between the two occurs with Dee Dee: "Dee Dee came first. She was really the star of the show to me. She was so much fun. Later on, I started on Dexter and he took over" (Woulfe 2003). Genndy got the names for Dexter and Dee Dee from name books, with the former catching his attention due to the scientificity of its sounding. Dee Dee was chosen because its isometric construction reminded him of Dee Dee's symmetrical ponytailed hairstyle (Davenport 2002). There were other options, however. Genndy had considered calling the series and its two principles "Dartmouth and Daisy," but decided against both, staing that "Dartmouth doesn't exactly roll off the tongue" and that the name Daisy oftentimes had inescapable associations with Disney and its intellectual properties (Neuwirth 2003). Interestingly, the title *Dexter's Laboratory* was not settled upon until midway through the production of the series showcase pilot "Changes" (Neuwirth 2003).

There are other ways in which Dexter is an obvious personal totem for Genndy. For example, while Genndy wrote Dexter to appear to be a diligent, hardworking, unspoiled "Midwest kid" with an ardent penchant for food, Genndy also acknowledges that he was not "saying [Dexter is] from Chicago, but there's a reason he's got his own burrito palace, just like I had growing up in Chicago" (Davenport 2002). These overlaps are important and will be discussed in more detail in part 2.2 of this chapter. However, we can suggest here that the intimated sense of sincere inter-diegesis, between the world of *Dexter's Lab* and the lived experiences from Genndy's own life, comes together to inform the underlying predicates of the sibling dynamic between Dexter and Dee Dee as well. This relationship was partially based on Genndy's relationship with his older brother Alex, but inverted in terms of both he and his brother's personalities, proclivities, interests, and talents (Lenburg 2006: 332–3). While in *Dexter* it is the younger who is the erudite genius, for the Tartakovskys, it was the younger Genndy who was the artist. Genndy has on numerous occasions likened himself to Dee Dee and Alex, who would subsequently become a computer engineer, to Dexter (Davenport 2002; Woulfe 2003). Like it is with the ostensible portrayal of what Dee Dee is to Dexter, Genndy has described himself as having been a "pest" to his older brother during their youth and young manhood (Woulfe 2003). Inversely, and equally true, is Genndy's recollection that as children, both Tartakovsky boys could be incisive "pains in the ass" to one another (Neuwirth 2003). Genndy has also noted another one of the parallels between his childhood and the series in the fact that Alex had always sought to prevent him from playing with his "intricate" toy soldiers, a prohibitive, protective, and ultimately self-interested stance that mirrors Dexter's oftentimes failed attempts at barring Dee Dee from entry and/or participation to/in his lab, its projects, and their resultant inventions (Davenport 2002; Woulfe 2003).

But what of the series' sense of Otherness and the tropes it relies on to depict it? So many of Genndy's explorations into these topics and those ancillary to them take place in absolute silence, presented in exclusively visual terms. In this sense, *Dexter* predicts certain aesthetic precedences in contemporary Western animation and cartooning, particularly in terms of the spoken word and its lack. In his 2019 interview with Nick Romano for *Entertainment Weekly*, Genndy notes that "[g]oing back as far as *Dexter's Lab*, we've always had these sequences with no dialogue. The interesting thing is those sequences got the biggest reactions" (Romano 2019). These positive reactions to the experimental spirit of his wordless sequences were impetus enough to engender their development into a particular auteureal trope that would become particularly resonant throughout Genndy's entire subsequent oeuvre in both its most robust and refraining instantiations of silent, and pure visual storytelling. His use of silence, in conjunction with pure, physical, well-timed, humorous, epic-cinematic action, has led to his reputation as an animator of loud silence and also a *visionary* visual storyteller more broadly.

This same ethos and its results apply to the relationship between Genndy, Dexter, and Otherness in the series to a greater extent as well. In *Dexter's Lab*, Genndy successfully manages to imbue the character with the sincerity of his own experiences as an Other in America during his youth, as well as pay tribute to the sorts of pop culture scientists he had encountered in his cartoon and comic book regimen growing up, themselves typically outsiders in some or many ways. Genndy deemed it necessary and appropriate that Dexter should have an accent on account of the fact that the character "considers himself a very serious scientist, and all well-known scientists have accents" (Adams 2001). Elsewhere, Genndy is far more nebulous and even evasive about the presence of a thick, albeit ultimately indeterminate accent, in a six- to eight-year-old American Midwestern child, stating that it was left to the viewer to determine whether or not Dexter's accent is genuine or an affectation. Regarding said accent, Genndy states "[n]obody knows" and further, "I really don't like to answer those questions because it's a question that whether the character is 'pretending to be a German scientist' or is speaking naturally" (Sokol 2018). While Genndy mentioned in another interview that Dexter's accent is not meant to denote any specific nationality, during a Reddit AMA he conceded that it was partially inspired by "a funny French accent" done by his college roommate (Tartakovsky 2012; Woulfe 2003). In this sense, Genndy gestures to the stereotype only to simultaneously undermine it in the same move.

Of course, in view of the outline of Genndy's life provided in Chapter 1, it is clear that the most resonant and sincere influence on Dexter's idiosyncrasies coming from Genndy, including his un-placeable accent, stem directly from Genndy's experience as a Third Culture Kid. He necessarily drew from his experiences as an immigrant child growing up in

Chicago in the creation of Dexter and his world (Sokol 2018). Like Dexter, Genndy had a "very thick accent" growing up for which he was teased and ridiculed in many ways, despite the fact that he was raised in typically diverse neighborhoods and communities which, on the surface, might be expected to offer a greater allotment of inclusivity and tolerance than Genndy and his family received therein (Woulfe 2003). Genndy has definitively expressed the influence of these experiences on his psycho-emotional make-up elsewhere, in an interview for *The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angles*, for example, where he stated: "When I moved to America, I wanted to fit in and be American … We never tried to be too heavy handed with Dexter's, but if you look at the underlying themes of the show, it's about a little kid trying to fit in" (Aushenker 2001). Unlike Dexter, however, who has a latent and seemingly unsuppressed brio and confidence interwoven into or indeed resulting directly *from* his idiosyncrasies, Genndy was far less confident than his creation when he was a child. He noted in an interview with *The New York Times* that "the one thing about Dexter, if he doesn't fit in, he'll start his own club. He's not afraid to be an outsider" (Adams 2001). In this sense, Dexter is in numerous and indeed subtle ways related to Genndy himself as an *aspirational* character that cannot be separated from Genndy's powerful and indeed puerile desire to fit in.

While such a reading might, despite the evidence provided to the contrary, seem reductive, the aesthetic logic brought to bear in the character's design certainly was. According to Linda Simensky, who served as senior vice-president of Original Animation for Cartoon Network during the production of *Dexter's Laboratory*, Dexter was designed "to be more of an icon in some ways," and moreover, that, "his body was short and squat and his design was simple, with a black outline and relatively little detail … Since Tartakovsky knew he was developing Dexter for television, he purposely limited the design to some degree, designing the nose and mouth, for instance, in a Hanna-Barbera style to animate easily" (Simensky 2011: 286–7). This simple, easily reproducible style was highly influenced by UPA shorts, as well as by the Merrie Melodies cartoon *The Dover Boys* (Simensky 2011: 287). According to Simensky, unlike these cartoons, however, *Dexter* was consciously "staged cinematically, rather than flat and close to the screen, to leave space and depth for the action and gags in the lab" (Simensky 2011: 286–7).

What raises the question of the centrality and approach to humor in the series? Unlike *Samurai Jack*, *Clone Wars,* or *Sym-Bionic Titan*, *Dexter's Lab* is the only original television series created by Genndy designed to be experienced purely as a comedy. When asked about whether he prefers to work on something with more or less humor in it (in reference to his 2012 feature film debut *Hotel Transylvania*), Genndy stated:

> I mean, they're both enjoyable. For sure comedy's more difficult. Especially for the theatres because these movies are so big, you want *everybody* to

> go see them. You want *everybody* to laugh. How do you make a six year old laugh and a 25 year old? Or a 35 year old? A parent and a child. That's difficult. Where, in action, and especially in the Samurai Jack [5th season] that I did last year, it was adult. And so I was able to be more experimental and very creative. And people will understand, they can fill in the lines a little bit, you know? That was fun in a very creative way. [Humour] is more challenging, but also more rewarding. Because when we do a preview screening and there's a joke that I write, storyboard, and then we animate it, when the whole audience is laughing? That's like, amazing.
>
> (157 of Gemma 2018)

It is clear from the above quotation that the presence, affectivity, timing, and nature of humor are a chief consideration that subtends all other thematic, aesthetic, and design elements of Genndy's projects. Genndy has even gone as far as to break down and describe the component elements of his approach, ethic, method, and philosophy concerning the nature and effective deployment of humor in cartooning, stating that "[a] good cartoon is always good on two or three levels: surface physical comedy, some intellectual stuff—like Warner Brothers cartoons' pop-culture jokes, gas-rationing jokes during the war—and then overall character appeal" (Adams 2001). Aside from Marvel Comics, it was specifically Warner Bros. Cartoons, Hanna-Barbera cartoons, and Japanese anime that inspired the aesthetic and visual storytelling elements of the series (Simensky 2011: 286–7).

Prototypes, Feet-Finding, and the Breaking of the Fellowship: The Original Run and End of *Dexter's Laboratory*

The first in a truly innovative and now legendary cohort of series known as Cartoon Cartoon—which also included such notable series *Cow and Chicken*, *I Am Weasel*, *Johnny Bravo*, *The Powerpuff Girls*, *Ed, Edd n Eddy*, and *Courage the Cowardly Dog*—*Dexter's Laboratory* premiered on TNT on April 27, 1996, and on April 28, 1996, on Cartoon Network hosted by TBS. A second season of the series comprising thirty-nine episodes was ordered and premiered the following year on July 16, 1997 (Boedecker 1997). Following the airing of these first two seasons, which comprise the original run of the series, *Dexter* went on hiatus in 1998 (Brooks and Marsh 2007: 250–1). Genndy had intended to see the episode "Last but Not Beast" as the series finale, which took an atypical form in that it was a single 25-minute-long episode without any of its shorter supplemental segments.

It is a common adage often said by those practitioners of occult sciences that the first rule of magic is that real magic, true magic, comes at a cost. At the point of the end of *Dexter's Lab*'s original run, the sincerity Genndy had brought to seeing the show come to fruition, brimful of aesthetic and storytelling fecundity, style, innovation, and humor, did not come without sacrifice. Not only did Genndy find himself bowed by abject exhaustion that resulted from his work on the show's original two-season run, he had to endure the fact that the very same passion and sincerity in his focus and determination on the show had cost him two romantic relationships. He would later come to jest that the entire experience of being showrunner on *Dexter's Laboratory* was tantamount to "giving birth to ten children" (Jubera 2001). After instigating an intermission on *Dexter*, Genndy turned his attentions and talents to McCracken's series *The Powerpuff Girls*, on which he became supervising producer. His efforts here also included directorial work on several episodes as well as aiding McCracken on the 2002 *The Powerpuff Girls Movie* (Lenburg 2006: 332–3; Perlmutter 2014: 269).

Once McCracken had finished working on *The Powerpuff Girls Movie*, he went on to create and develop 2004's *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends* for Cartoon Network. Others of the original cohort of creatives and showrunners of Cartoon Network also began to disband and pursue alternate interests, collaborations, and projects within and beyond the thematic, aesthetic, and budgetary remit of the Network. By the time McCracken had begun work on *Foster's*, Hartman and MacFarlane had left Cartoon Network altogether, the former moving on to create 2001's *Fairly Odd Parents*, the latter the immensely popular, zeitgeist-marking *Family Guy* in 1999 (Bartlett 2007). Elsewhere, Renzetti would subsequently go on to create and develop *My Life as a Teenage Robot* for Nickelodeon in 1999. Genndy would return to the Network, however, to direct an hour-long television movie titled *Dexter's Laboratory: Ego Trip* in 1999 (Bernardin 2000). For Genndy, this production symbolized not only the intended conclusion of the series, but also his final contribution to and participation in the legacy of *Dexter's Lab* he himself had created and developed. The hand-animated film follows Dexter on a time-traveling quest to discover all his future triumphs, a theme Genndy would return to as the linchpin of his magnum opus *Samurai Jack* (Bernardin 2000).

Revenant Laboratories: The Dexter Revival

Cartoon Network announced a *Dexter's Laboratory* revival consisting of a single thirteen-episode third season on February 21, 2001. At the helm was a whole new production team at Cartoon Network Studios, with Chris

Savino—the future creator of *The Loud House* for Nickelodeon in 2016—taking over as creative director from Genndy, who was at this time deep in preparation for the debut of his next series *Samurai Jack* (Aushenker 2001). Later, a fourth season was developed over which Savino, then promoted to producer, exerted more creative and budgetary control (Neuwirth 2003). In so many ways, the revival seasons could be argued to be insincere or an evolution, depending on how one approaches Savino's treatment of the original blueprint of the series laid out by Genndy. Savino arguably undid the series, refashioned it into something that was *Dexter* only in name and not in *spirit*.

The revival episodes featured revised character designs, sound effects, recast voice actors, disrupted continuity, and perhaps most egregious/bold of all, a transition from traditional cel animation, which Genndy had, despite his fatigue, sincerely and painstakingly brought to the series up to and including *Ego Trip*, to digital ink and paint which became a permanent production technique beginning with the premiere of the third season of the show. Dexter's original voice actor Christine Cavanaugh voiced the character until the early episodes of Season 3 before retiring from voice acting in 2001 for personal reasons. She was replaced by Candi Milo while Allison Moore, a college friend of Genndy's, was cast as Dee Dee (Brooks and Marsh 2007). Later, Moore's role was recast with Kat Cressida (Listen Notes 2011). The third season saw Moore briefly return to voice Dee Dee before Cressida again took over the role for Season 4. While Savino produced and oversaw the show, Chris Battle, known individually for acting as character designer for Nickelodeon's *Aaahh!!! Real Monsters* and Cartoon Network's *The Powerpuff Girls*, was assigned character designer on Seasons 3 and 4 of *Dexter*. In terms of the revival season's writing staff, notable figures included Aaron Springer and Chris Reccardi.

As It Was with Victor and His New Adam: *Dexter's Lab* and Controversy

Being as exploratory and thematically and aesthetically diverse as it was in its ambitious engagement with various themes, both droll and deep, it is no surprise then that the original run of *Dexter's Lab* was not untouched by controversy. In Season 1, 1996, an episode of "Dial M for Monkey" titled "Barbequor" was removed from syndication after being initially broadcast in the United States. The reason for its removal from rotation was dual-fold. First, the episode featured a character named the Silver Spooner (a parody of Marvel's Silver Surfer) which itself was not the point of contention. However, many viewers, commentators, and critics including Cartoon Network itself were disturbed by the latently prejudicial stereotype

of gay men the character embodied, reinforced, ridiculed, and disseminated, particularly to the Network's impressionably youthful demographic. Second, in the episode, Krunk appears to get drunk, have a subsequent hangover, and vomits off-camera as a result. Here again, these intimations of mature themes of substance use and abuse made Network executives, parents, and other supervisors and watchdogs uncomfortable (Anderson 2015; Belonsky 2008). "Barbequor" was later replaced by "Dexter's Lab: A Story," a Season 2 episode, in both later broadcasts and its Season One DVD (Region 1) release (Lacey 2006).

Season 2 saw its fair share of controversy as well. The season featured an episode titled "Rude Removal" (1997). In the episode, Dexter creates what he refers to as a "rude removal system" whose purpose is to reduce his and Dee Dee's rudeness. As is a common occurrence in *Dexter*, the inverse results. The system produces two extremely rude clones of both siblings. While never having been officially aired on account of characters swearing (despite the fact that their obscenities were censored), "Rude Removal" has been shown during certain animation festivals to the much delighted shock of attendees (Pierce 1998). Genndy has commented that the department of broadcast standards did not like the episode, while Simensky has stated: "I still think it's very funny. It probably would air better late at night" (Pierce 1998; Seibert 2010). Similarly, Michelle Klein-Häss of Animation World Network described the episode as "hilarious" after a viewing at the World Animation Celebration in 1998, while simultaneously opining that the episode would "never be shown on television" (Klein-Häss 1998).

Interest in the episode has far from waned, and its continued popularity has most certainly been engendered by the controversy surrounding it. During his Reddit AMA, Genndy was queried about the episode to which he replied "next time I do a public appearance I'll bring it with me!" (Tartakovsky 2012). As if in confirmation, Adult Swim, the second phase evolution of the original Cartoon Network, later took a survey of interest in "Rude Removal." The response generated was "overwhelming" (Adult Swim 2012). The episode was eventually uploaded to Adult Swim's official YouTube channel on January 22, 2013, and has garnered over a million views since its uploading (Tickle 2013).

While controversial, the creation of Victor's New Adam in Shelley's *Frankenstein* is truly astounding. Similarly, despite these examples of controversy the series had to endure, *Dexter's Lab* was and remains one of Cartoon Network's all-time highest-rated original series (Bevilacqua 1998). Both its appeal and recognition have engendered international praise. For example, it received specific mention for best script at the 1997 Cartoons on the Bay animation festival in Italy (Bendazzi 1997). The cultural accolades the show achieved are just as myriad as they are diverse. For example, in 1998 and 1999, a Dexter balloon was even featured in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. However, the key aspect of *Dexter's* acclaim is

the importance, said acclaim exerts, over the broader success of the house under which it emerged. Without *Dexter*, Cartoon Network would have not experienced a 20 percent ratings surge in mid-1999 (Furman 1999). The statistical evidence of the show's success is clear. The series' July 7, 2000, telecast was the network's highest-rated original telecast among households (3.1) with children 2–11 (7.8), and children 6–11 (8.4), with a broadcast delivery of/to almost 2 million homes. Similarly, on July 31, 2001, it scored the highest household rating (2.9) and delivery (2,166,000 homes) for a Cartoon Network telecast for that year. While I have suggested above that the departure of Genndy from the series not only essentially altered the series' aesthetic but a sense of what I like to think of as the "cel-sincerity" so inextricable from Genndy's methodology, his departure most certainly did not hamper the show's continued success. So much so that *Dexter's Lab* was still one of the network's highest-rated original series of 2002.

The Legacy of *Dexter's Laboratory*

Of all of Cartoon Network's most profitable shows, *Dexter's Lab* remains one of the network's most highly lauded. Betty Cohen, Cartoon Network's president, declared that *Dexter's Laboratory* was one of her favorite shows (Furman 1999). The show's supporters and patrons come from far afield and represent a truly diverse and, perhaps even for some, surprising cohort. Rapper Coolio, for example, has not only voiced his admiration and enjoyment of the show, but gladly created an original song for its soundtrack at Cartoon Network's request. Coolio stated "I watch a lot of cartoons because I have kids. I actually watch more cartoons than movies" of which *Dexter* was a staple in his household (Hay 2002: 12). It is important to keep in view the immediacy of this critical adulation. Indeed, it was only very shortly after the series premiered its first season that it was hailed as one of the best new original series on Cartoon Network by Ted Cox of the *Daily Herald* (Cox 1996). More superlatives were heaped on the series in the period leading up to and including the show's second season. Nancy McAlister of *The Florida Times-Union* described *Dexter's Lab* as Cartoon Network's most imaginative series (McAlister 1997). Even its unimaginative aspects stand as indexes of broader phenomena associated with the show. For example, while McAlister has rightly critiqued the show's use or reliance on gender stereotypes, particularly with regard to Dexter's parents, she simultaneously acknowledged that such a critique was the direct result of the fact that *Dexter's Lab* had aided in instigating a shift in perspective in her, one that convinced her that viewers, of all ages, can and should "take animated programming seriously" (McAlister 1997).

The show has also appeared on many top [insert number] lists over the years. In 1997, for example, the *Star Tribune*'s Bill Ward named *Dexter's Lab* to his Critic's Choice list under the recommendation that it was essential viewing for the "young of all ages" (Ward 1997). In *Entertainment Weekly*'s 2012 top 10 list, *Dexter's Lab* was ranked the fourth best Cartoon Network series of all time (EW Staff 2016). Likewise, IGN named the show the 72nd greatest animated series of all time in its 2009 ranking. The editors of this list described *Dexter's Lab* as follows: "Aimed at and immediately accessible to children, *Dexter's Laboratory* was part of a new generation of animated series that played on two levels, simultaneously fun for both kids and adults" (IGN n.d.).

The show's numerous aesthetic and narrative innovations have gained scholarly attention as well. Giannalberto Bendazzi describes *Dexter's Laboratory* as "visually and verbally innovative" in his 2015 book *Animation: A World History Volume III: Contemporary Times* (Bendazzi 2016: 8–9). He went on to praise the show as a groundbreaking work of pop art, drawing comparisons between its visual style and both street art and the designs of Takashi Murakami (Bendazzi 2016: 8–9). Similarly, in David Perlmutter's *The Encyclopedia of American Animated Television Shows*, all three segments of *Dexter's Lab* (the main scenario, along with *Dial M for Monkey* and *The Justice Friends*) are hailed for revaluing stereotypically quotidian ideas through an approach that contains "verve and originality," also for how the series is more "complex" than it initially appears to be (Perlmutter 2018: 153). Here, Perlmutter draws particular attention to Genndy's expert staging of action sequences throughout the series, going on to note the importance of sincere passion at the root of the project in stating that *Dexter's Lab* is "much more effective (and funny) than it would have been under a director less *committed* to the project [than Genndy]" (Perlmutter 2018: 153: emphasis mine).

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2.2 GENNDY AND THE SINCERITY OF A THIRD ART: DEXTER—A TOTEM OF A THIRD CULTURE KID

Is it a cliché or expected feature of the relationship between art and sincerity that the consumer expects *something* of the artist to be obviously manifest in the work they consume? Put slightly differently, is the detection of said presence an inextricable aspect of the determinant factor of sincere art, whether good or bad? On the surface of it, there seems to be much in terms of the amount of self in the work when it comes to Dexter and Genndy which this second part of the chapter seeks to explore, referring particularly to the latter's experiences as a Third Culture Kid and how these manifest in *Dexter's Laboratory*. To set up this discussion, consider the following exchange between Genndy and Thelma Adams of *The New York Times* concerning the creation of the series and, more importantly, the possibility of sublimated elements of the auteur in the work:

ADAMS (A): "Dexter's Laboratory" your first series, was an almost instant hit. For those who don't know him, or just think they do, who is he?

GENNDY (G): Dexter is a dork. He's part of everybody: the little kid who just wants to do science but who's frustrated. It's what everybody deals with. That's what makes it funny. If you have a character who wins all the time—well, if you have a character that loses and wins, it makes him more alive. Bugs Bunny, for example, didn't always win.

A: Dexter speaks with a *Russian* [italics mine] accent.

G: He considers himself a very serious scientists, and all well-known scientists have accents.

A: Come on. He's an outsider who speaks Russian-influenced English with a Russian accent. Your family emigrated from Moscow when you were 9. Isn't Dexter your Mini-me?

G: Definitely that was a big part of my childhood: wanting to fit. As an immigrant, you talk funny, you look funny, you smell funny. I wanted to do nothing but fit in and talk English and sit with everybody else. The one thing about Dexter, if he doesn't fit in, he'll start his own club. He's not afraid to be an outsider. He's much more confident.

A: So, O.K., an upgraded fantasy version of your boyhood self. And it's hard not to notice that Samurai Jack […] looks an awful lot like you as an adult.

G: Someone else told me that. I definitely don't think he looks like me. But as an artist, sometimes you can't help yourself. If you're a tall guy, everything is lengthy. If you're short and fat, you draw things that are squat (Adams 2001).

I do not wish for this part of the chapter to read as a psychoanalysis of Genndy. However, there are certainly numerous pieces of compelling evidence that would allow a rather clear prosecution of a psychoanalytic reading of Dexter more so than any other of Genndy's original characters. Here, I am inclined toward the opinion that perhaps the truest underlying thematic attribute of the character is that Dexter, in all his creativity and Otherness, clearly mirrors Genndy's youthful aspirations to assimilated inclusion after moving to the United States from Russia. And though I have said that I do not wish to psychoanalyze Genndy's experience as an immigrant in America vis-á-vis Dexter's mercurial "foreignness," I feel that a theoretical framework is both necessary and helpful in thinking about Genndy in and around this way, without becoming immured in the sometimes dense thicket or quagmire of psychoanalytic theory. To this end, I invite you to think of Genndy as a *Third Culture Kid* (TCK henceforward).

On the *TCK World: The Official Home of Third Culture Kids* webpage, researcher Ruth Hill Useem describes a third culture kid or TCK as follows:

> A third culture kid is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside their parents' culture. The third culture kid builds relationships to all the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the third culture kid's life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of the same background, other TCKs.
>
> (Useem 2018)

In view of Genndy's international, transatlantic upbringing, the appellation certainly fits. Even more so when one considers Pollock and Reken's discussion of the term "third culture kid" which to them refers to individuals who have been raised in cultures and/or societies other than those of their parents, or cultures and/or societies other than stated in their legal documents (passports, for example) to which they are considered natives (Pollock and Reken 2009).

It might seem strange to refer to Genndy as, even indirectly, a "kid." Certainly, the preponderance of his creative output has ostensibly been oriented around the proclivities, interests, attentions, comprehension, and entertainment of children. However, as an auteur, his identity is typically sublimated in his work, his name becoming synonymous with the brand, the character, and/or Network under whose industrial and fiscal aegis it is created and disseminated. Backgrounded are the experiences of the child who *learned* and *experienced*, who *observed* and *persevered*, who stoked a sincere love for line, color, sound, and motion into an entirely original style and approach to moving pictures. Therefore, it is important and deliberate on my part to simultaneously isolate and invoke or, at the very least, draw your attention to the third word in the term "Third Culture Kid," to remind

you that here, the word "kid" refers to the condition of the TCK being raised as such for a significant portion of their developmental years: a childhood that can and often does involve precarity and uncertainty, but also one that fosters adaptability, independence, diverse observational outlooks, and psycho-emotional agility and maturity.

The latent implication of the inescapable sense of liminality in this definition is that TCKs' development, that is the confluence of onto-existential and psycho-emotional processes involved in an individual's development of a personal and cultural identity as sequestered to a single culture or society, is in some way disrupted (Moore and Barker 2012: 553). Equally, with the plurality of roles he has played in his creative endeavors, on both his own original projects and those of others, as well as the myriad accreditations, laurels, styles, influences, and acolytes he has garnered, inspired, or otherwise influenced over his career heretofore, it would almost seem a disservice to limit anything related to Genndy to just three. However, from a psycho-emotional and developmental perspective, the word "third" implies a personal and cultural triad as much as it does an Other space, be it an in-between between two countries and their respective (and antagonistic) cultures, or the space of the imagination visualized as an infinite laboratory. The individual's first culture refers to the TCK's parent's culture of origin. The second, the culture where the TCK currently resides, and the third a fusion *and* re-making of the two, to varying degrees and in various ways (Schwartz 2013). In this sense, the predicate triad for Genndy would be Russia, America, and the Genndyverse—the satirico-surrealized facsimile of America in *Dexter*, the retrofuturistic omniverse of *Samurai Jack*, the ambitious homage and encomium of one of the central ventricles of contemporary Western popular and visual culture in *Clone Wars*, and the probing, contemplative psycho-emotional investigations of the shadows of the *innenwelt* in *Samurai Jack: The Return*.

As a TCK myself, it is often the case when I relay or describe something of the mercurial trajectory of my life and upbringing to others that I am met with praise or interest, commended for courage and independence. It also so happens to be a common occurrence that a type of pity and concern is expressed at the imagined difficulties of being, in a radically interior way, "homeless," so to speak. While traditionally TCK's are deft at being able to foster various types of relationships with a broad spectrum of individuals hailing from a variety of different cultures, the very culturalessness/hybridity/nomadism that facilitates their own fluidity, is a phenomenon both affirmed and undermined by Genndy himself.

The benefits to being a TCK outlined by Moore and Baker indeed apply to Genndy as an artist and certainly can be described as helpful with regard to his discovery and development of both art in general and his own artistry, visual language, and the grammar of his style. The development of his auteurial voice (which ironically is marked by expert use of voicelessness)

arguably owes much to the aforesaid endowments TCKs stand to gain as such, who typically possess a broad worldview through which they are able to countenance and concatenate the various psycho-emotional and experiential phenomena they encounter without reverting to limited purviews of sociocultural absolutism and/or essentialism(s).

To a TCK, the world is multifaceted both conceptually and experientially. In so many ways, for Genndy, this conceptual stretching and range were exacerbated, directly and indirectly, by being pulled upon by not only two Western powers, but two *antagonistic* world powers vying for sociopolitical and economic global supremacy at the time of the most formative years of his youth. It is clear in the thematic range and aesthetic execution seen in *Dexter's Lab*, therefore, that the cultural intelligence a diverse cultural experience can imbue a TCK like Genndy with manifests as a type of worldliness that allowed him to function successfully—albeit not without setbacks and difficulties—in various ethnic, cultural, and national milieus.

As such, Genndy was able to alchemize this underlying national, cultural, geographical, sociopolitical, economic, and identarian tension, to adapt, strategize, and execute what is tantamount to the establishment of an aeon of contemporary Western animation all but single-handedly. It is this lateral, critical, and creative thinking that allowed Genndy to re-work and re-draw, as it were, the sociopolitical and cultural line, the differences and similarities he observed between his native Russia and his adoptive America.

This theme and its underlying tensions emerge in interesting ways throughout the show's first two seasons. For example, Season 1, Episode 9 "Dollhouse Drama" (aired December 4, 1996) sees the theme of paranoia addressed, however through the device of spying which is itself pertinent to Genndy's status as not only an immigrant, but a specifically *Russian* immigrant. In the episode, Dexter, spying through Dee Dee's keyhole, comes to believe that his sister is plotting against him. In view of the fact that Dee Dee, unlike her strangely non-American brother, is in many ways a caricature of the epitome of a North American girl, the tension between Dee Dee (a surrealized version of America and American braggadocio) and Dexter (a parodic take on the stereotype of Russia and its proclivity for espionage propounded in and by Western media) is also in this way latently nationalistic. It is a type of Red Scare on a small scale whereby the paranoia of the spying immigrant clashes with the notion of a sincere attempt at establishing contact, relationships, and community in the foreign land. Thus, while it is perhaps fair to refer to this tension as rootlessness and turmoil, one has to also acknowledge that it is also predicated on a greater sense of cultural scope.

For Genndy, there certainly was a painful coming-into-awareness of certain aspects of the global myth of the American sociopolitical situation that typically shatters or, at the very least cracks, when directly experienced

by immigrants who, compared to their American counterparts, are often sociopolitically and economically disadvantaged. Thus, when Genndy and his family arrived in America, with its promise of cool, of art, movies, girls, and an experience like he had internalized and integrated into the framework of his imagination vectored by American pop and visual culture, the socioeconomic and cultural hardships and prejudices he had to endure affirmed for him and his brother that they stood out starkly from their homogenous and indeed pre-naturalized imaginations and "American-view."

However, Genndy's desire to create art, a sincere desire, to establish his identity not as an American or Russian artist *in principium* but a Great Artist *in toto*, also made his outlook more in line with the capitalist competitiveness at the bedrock of American conceptualizations of success, its rubric, and attainment. In this way, and indeed perhaps unbeknownst to him at the time, this desire to succeed in America made him equally complicit in both the dream and reality of the so-called "American Dream." He was as homogenous, as American in his thinking about his own *personal* outlook, his individual desire to use his skill with a stylus to strive and compete, a desire predicated on the single-minded focus on success, as much as those *in* America who, for various reasons that may have directly or indirectly impeded its successful outcome, viewed him under the undifferentiating, reductive, and totalizing lens signified by the term "immigrant."

While the sincerity of his art and his desire to create it remained undimmed, from the biographical information available, it is clear that Genndy also experienced the same or similar difficulties encountered by TCKs. The primary challenge Genndy faced in this regard pertains to the sense of identarian bifurcation he experienced as a youth. The move from the luxury, comfort, and sociopolitical and cultural import of being the "Kremlin dentist's son," a life of caviar and the privilege of insider-status, to the competitive, highly individualist sociocultural hustle of the immigrant experience in/of the United States exacerbated his identarian uncertainty and perhaps even precipitated ardent feelings of loss in him.

In terms of pathetic fallacy, Genndy's identarian disequilibrium, his crisis of self mirrors various themes of displacement, identarian tension, and the erasure of the self which manifests in *all* Genndy's original work. In this sense, the artist's experience as a TCK appears in the art the TCK produces in some form. This is not to say that it is an inescapably defining feature, but that it *is* a feature none the less, albeit one among many others. His experience as a TCK is a source of both artistic strength and personal consternation, a dual-experience that produces work concerning characters defined by duality: a strange, squat boy genius with a giant secret lab, a sword-wielding samurai from the past fighting robotic firearm-wielding robots in the future, a troubled albeit passionate Jedi on the cusp of both communal knighthood and spiritual nightfall, and that same samurai balancing on the fine edge of nihilism's first and final question: to be or

not to be? In this sense, Genndy's status on the interstice of "foreignness," "mixedness," and "impurity" allowed him to draw on the fecundity of the energy of these tensions, and in so doing, to transgress and elevate the form of Western (and particularly American) 2D animation in ways unseen since the bravura creative force and clarion voices of geniuses like Tex Avery, experimenters like Otto Messmer, humorists like Jack Mercer, and pioneers like Max Fleishcher.

Many of the psycho-emotional concerns regarding the developmental arcs of TCKs also redound to questions of agency. A range of scholars have theorized the various associated issues and debates concerning the relationship between youth and agency, many of which hold that there is a need for further scholarship dedicated to the conceptualization of "agency" specifically in relation to concepts including youth and child agency (Castro 2016, 2017; Prout 2000). As one of the foremost scholars in the field, Castro, describing children and their displays, pursuits, and explorations of their agency, its availabilities, avenues, facilities, resources, and limits, notes that "children will find ways, through employing agentic strategies to air their thoughts and feelings even when adults do not provide structural opportunities to do so" (Castro 2017:151). Similarly, Esser and colleagues posit that a central consideration of children's agency that should be taken as a fundamental precept in its exploration and theorization must necessarily be an appreciation of "children's active contribution to the shaping of their social worlds and to society" (Esser et al. 2016: 1).

Based on this postulate, there are necessarily two aspects concerning youth agency. First, one that refers to children's abilities to enact change and exert control within and over their own lives and environments within which their lives develop and unfold. Second, one that refers to adult's comprehension of the psycho-emotional and physical abilities of youths. This refers to the capabilities of the physical body, but also of said bodies within broader sociocultural spaces. Similarly, as Green notes, inherent to considerations of the relationship between place, youth, and agency is the fact that oftentimes "children's spatial autonomy is also constrained by adult permissions and restrictions" (Green 2018: 67).

When applied to the series, it is through Dexter's inventive and creative capacities that Genndy complicates the notion of children being understood as a minority group, necessarily marginalized in sociopolitical, economic, and cultural spaces on account of their psycho-emotional and physical status as "developing," and, most pertinent to Dexter, as experiencing a fundamental lack regarding opportunities for "articulation and not (only) skills related to development or socialization—in an adult-dominated society" (Esser et al. 2016: 3).

It therefore also necessarily follows that a child's sense of situated agency and experience of place are determined or at the very least influenced by physical and behavioral boundaries imposed on them by adults, all within

spaces that purportedly facilitate interactive possibilities between adults and children (Valentine 1996). The space of the laboratory, for both Dexter and Dee Dee, acts as a sovereign space of specifically *youth* agency, a bastion in which both youths can act beyond the remit of adult supervision/restriction, as well as the limits of space and time more broadly. In view of its relationship to youth and space, as well as its figuration in Dexter's relationship with his parents and sister, agency is also a fundamental concept in *Dexter's Lab*, one which I understand "in terms of children's navigations and negotiations of their own lives but its operation [as being] placed in the context of the intergenerational relationships which are part of their everyday experiences" (Hacket, Proctor, and Seymour 2015: 12).

In terms of youth agency and particularly space, Green draws attention to an ostensibly obvious albeit extremely important point, namely that "spaces and places do not only influence children, but children also influence and shape places [whereby] this constructing and claiming of place, is an important part of children's enactment of spatial autonomy, and plays a significant role in children's discovery of their sense of self" (Green 2018: 66). Care is another ancillary yet important component of the above issues and debates concerning youth agency, particularly with regard to what and who Dexter uses his lab *for*, and moreover, particularly in reference to his relationship with his sister. In many ways, while I construe the laboratory as a sovereign space of imagination for Dexter, its use, both successful and not, is oftentimes the result of (intra)dependency and vulnerability, between Dexter and Dee, most recursively. In this sense, regardless of their age and gender differences, co-operation, collaboration, honesty, commitment, and effort are essential to the agency afforded either sibling by and through the lab itself. It is an effective space because it is a *shared* imaginary space. As such, it necessarily functions and requires-to-function both parties giving and accepting care to and from one another (Castro 2017).

Within the remit of *Dexter's Lab*, and indeed vicariously through the concept and experiences of TCKs like Genndy himself, there are numerous ways in which youth agency is stifled, re-purposed, or lost in the face of other socioeconomic and cultural demands. As it was for Genndy, the loss of caregivers like his father who acted as the primary provider of financial means and stability necessitated the repurposing of whatever agency he might have otherwise developed that had nothing to do with employment, job security, and securing a source of income robust enough to provide for his surviving family. In other words, the socioeconomic situation Genndy and many TCKs find themselves in is one of necessary and nonnegotiable *substitution*, whereby the quintessential whimsy, imagination, and play seemingly inextricable from the Western *imagination* of childhood and youth are replaced with more adult-oriented agentic concerns, typically of a vocational/economic nature. Gone in such arrangements is the sincerity of play within any experiences of play and necessarily the spaces in which play

FIGURE 2.6 *Dexter's Lab as Space of Sovereign Play, Infinite Possibility, and Youth Agency*

occurs. Instead, play's antipodal opposite—namely labor—subtends all like a benighted, inescapable background. In this way, Dexter's lab can be read as a riposte, valorization, nostalgia, and protection of the sincere sense of play (with play itself being seen as a manifestation of child agency) and, by extension the imagination, as a sovereign and foundational space of youth and childhood agency distinct and safe from the repressive and exhaustive forces of both capital and labor.

The capitalist-influenced conceptualization of the imagination as a productive space, as one that dreams up, extrapolates, collates, devises, and eventually reifies its imaginings through processes of production in the form of the laborious manufacture of goods and services to be subsequently consumed, is a framework that seems to be, in its very premise, *anti-play*. It is a rubric that seeks to elide and fuse industry and imagination, play and production, dreams and death in the form of spirals, overwork, and of course debt. I assert that the imaginative conceptualization of space, youth, agency, and play at the heart of *Dexter*, and the manner in which Genndy brings it to life, bespeaks not only the sincere wish to decouple, re-familiarize/de-alienate youth, agency, and the space of the imagination to and from one another, but also the sincere skill and desire for the celebration of the infinite possibility of the imagination that the *space* of Dexter's lab represents.

It is through this space that Genndy presents viewers with an alternative to the "capitalist imagination" in the form of the "sincerely youthful imagination," one freed from the fiscal-focus of the productive aspects of

the former which forces the imagination and all it creates in that direction. Genndy offers an elevation of the range and variety of the latter. While indeed the space of the imagination is, perhaps by its very nature as a space in which one "comes up with things" necessarily productive, the products of the boy genius's imaginative labor are not alienated from him. He revels in his imaginative laboratory; he shares the space, its means, scope, aptitude, *and* products. He also oftentimes uses that space in the service of others, to explore or redress injustices perceived and experienced to/against himself, his loved ones, or strangers in a genuinely, and childishly—sincerely—altruistic fashion. He uses the space to *learn*, to *test*, to *try*, to *fail*, to *succeed*, and most importantly, to *grow*. In and *through* his lab, Dexter learns about himself and who he is *becoming*. He learns about fear, love, death, family. He uses his mental acuity and indomitably sincere spirit of curiosity, alongside his faith in the scientific method, to meet a range of psycho-emotional experiences and challenges, scientific and ephemeral alike—from social ostracization, haunting, nightmares, infatuation, familial exclusion, and agential frustration predicated on everything from his physical stature, to his accent, and his age. The latent point and most important feature of *Dexter's Laboratory* is not Genndy's ability to render idiosyncratic characters in whacky situational comedy frameworks in a sincerely funny way. The sincere genius of the series lies in its understanding and overarching commentary on the nature and value of the imagination in itself, but also in relation to both youth and adulthood. Because the truth is that Dexter would be nothing without his lab, and his lab would not exist without him *or* his youth. In other words, we cannot grow to become all we can be *without* the imagination and its youthful experimentation; that the laboratory-like space of the imagination is perhaps one of, if not the most, important psycho-emotional spaces we, both as children and adults, have. This reclamation of the imagination is what makes the series not only sincere or genius, but important, both in and beyond the auteurial oeuvre of Genndy himself.

There are numerous moments throughout the series in which a clear personal and thematic resonance rings out between Dexter and Genndy. Take for example the series' very first episode, Season 1, Episode 1 "Maternal Combat" (aired March 24, 1996). The narrative of this episode focuses on a scenario in which Dexter's mother is injured in a fall. Dexter takes to his lab, which more often than not doubles as a forge, to create a robot facsimile of his mother to stand as her *replacement* (Tartakovsky 1996). The basic premise of this episode seemingly opens the door to a psychoanalytical reading of both the episode and show more broadly as a direct manifestation of the fears, trauma, and experiences of loss Genndy has endured in his personal life. With Dexter "losing" his mother due to injury, can one not read a directly similar loss in and for Genndy, who lost his mother while abroad and had no way to replace her, let alone express the

severity and incisiveness of that loss, save through the most sincere medium and method available to him, namely the art of animation? The notion that this episode represents, in some sublimated way, Genndy's attempt at replacing his mother, redressing this most penetrating maternal wound and the incalculable but perhaps indirectly *aesthetically* representable sense of loss, is made all the more sensible when viewed alongside the sincerity of the attempt to replace her using aesthetic means themselves now imbued with a tremendous amount of pathos for the artist in question. In view of Genndy's personal history, should it really come as any surprise that the *first* episode of *Dexter* should have to do not only with Dexter's mother, but *specifically* her *replacement*? In this way, the connection between loss, replacement, mothers, and creative sons is apparent from the very outset of the series.

The theme of maternal resurrection through art emerges again in Season 2, Episode 2 "Mom and Jerry" (aired July 23, 1997). In this episode, Dexter's brain transplant experiment goes awry, resulting in his mother's brain being switched with that of a mouse. Here, the theme of maternal experimentation not only recurs but becomes also indexical of Genndy's perhaps subconscious wish to resurrect, a la *Frankenstein* with a stylus and an animation studio instead of a sullen laboratory, the *idea* of his deceased mother. The fact that Dexter's procedure goes wrong, like the resurrectionary failures in *Frankenstein*, seemingly also expresses a subconscious limit or prohibition set against Genndy that, like it was for Joyce Summers in Season 5 of *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*, "bringing one back" always-already runs the risk of bringing them back *wrong*. The ethics, risks, and desire for the sincere wish for maternal re-connection are at the heart of the episode. The theme of maternal transformation occurs yet again later in Season 2, Episode 23 "Sister Mom" (aired January 21, 1998) in which Dexter, trying to waylay a scornful dressing down by his mother after she is called in to respond to Dexter having misbehaved at school, transforms Dee Dee into their mother instead (Tartakovsky 1998). Not only is the theme of maternal transformation literally explored here, but more subtly, the episode latently explores the recurrent theme of the fears of a foreign child in a new environment, and the pressure of excellence in lieu of the ability, or rather as inextricable from the ability, to assimilate many TCKs experience.

There are also a host of interconnected moments between artist and artwork in Season 1, Episode 2 titled "Dexter Dodgeball" (aired March 31, 1996), which sees Dexter take extreme defensive/preventative measures after being repeatedly battered in his gym class dodge-ball game. In response, Dexter returns to class prepared and fit for battle donning what he refers to as an Armoured Cyber-Sonic Exo-Jock Jumpsuit (Tartakovsky 1996).

Thematically, several interesting things are taking place in this episode that are directly related to Genndy's own experience as an immigrant attempting to assimilate into North American culture. The conundrum

Dexter finds himself in expresses a quintessence that verges on parodic. The notion of the nerdy weakling distressed by the seemingly outdated and violent base requirements of North American physical education is a staple of youth, teen, and young adult Western popular culture, particularly of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Examples here range from Steve Urkle in *Family Matters* to films like *Loser*, *American Pie*, *10 Things I Hate about You*, and *Transformers*.

Enmeshed in this staid scenario, one in which the sensitivity, creativity, wit, humor, and sorrow of the soft-hearted, smart, and charming "outsider/loser" is stifled by an environment that is supposed to be viewed by the audience as barbarically behind her/him in terms of nuance and value are, in themselves, important concepts of value and valuation. For Dexter, and by extension for Genndy, these include the issues and debates concerning the Un-Americanness of inferior physicality, the idea of the weakling foreigner contra the alternate theater of operation, the intellectual theatre, wherein the physically weak foreigner is contrasted with the cerebral indomitability of the genius foreigner. At play here are themes of intelligence and its relation to adaptation. In this regard, Dexter is forced to navigate a situation which places him on the downside of advantage in every ostensible *physical* way.

This theme of "the immigrant" as a subject position irrevocably marked by a sense of disadvantage is literalized in Season 2, Episode 36 "Blackfoot and Slim" (aired April 22, 1998). In this episode, Dee Dee and Dexter are the unwitting subjects in an animal mockumentary. During Dexter's "bathing ritual," the boy genius becomes aware that he is being observed. He is tranquilized as he attempts to flee, waking up tagged. The feeling of being a stranger in a strange land is amplified to humorous, albeit also horrific extremes, in the form of dehumanizing Dee Dee and Dexter altogether, setting the latter up as a type of symbol or allegory of the psycho-emotional stress, surveillance, and indeed oftentimes genuine dehumanization that comes with the feeling or experience of being, as a foreigner, perceived as a type of animal in a new environ.

However, on account of Dexter's near prideful intelligence, the situations in which he experiences these setbacks always engender an adaptive creativity, one which immediately directs his efforts to the pursuit of intellectual solutions. Not only does Dexter out-think the problem of dodge-ball in "Dexter Dodgeball" for example, he produces a solution that is so extremely overblown as to be the source of the humor of the episode. For Dexter to build himself an exo-suit through which he not only excels at the remedial task of P.T. class, but allows him to both express his creativity/intellect, and use the product of his creativity and talent to prosecute feelings of revenge, is not unlike trying to kill a mosquito with a cannon, as the adage goes.

There are other important, albeit extremely nuanced, symbolisms in the episode pertaining to Genndy's experience as a TCK. I am inclined here

to read the violence, discomfort, awkwardness, and ridicule that Dexter experiences in this most quintessential way, one that has become a shorthand in popular culture for the plight of the youthful Other and the sadistic exclusionary and violently prejudicial praxes of not just so-called jocks against so-called nerds, but the violence of the curriculum itself in producing and reproducing the conditions which necessarily engender such abuses and disadvantages, as a commentary of what I will call (and have personally experienced as) the cost of assimilation. The entire conceptual frame of the episode's narrative—the dodge-ball game—can be read as representative of the psycho-emotional "tax" of the American dream that the foreign loner must pay, one that is not unlike a brutal game of dodge-ball where the balls represent all the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural nuances, expectations, cues, and behaviors that the foreigner tries at most to catch, to avoid, rebuff, or at the very least navigate, but is ultimately painfully struck by, the blows and subsequent bruises themselves reminding her/him/them of the pain of their difference. It also highlights something that Genndy envies of Dexter, for which Dexter takes on the appearance of being an aspirational figure. The episode sees Dexter employ the very skills that cause his ostracization—ones that also produce both desire and fear in the assimilating culture—and bring them to bear in adapting to a new sociopolitical, economic, and cultural milieu.

These interconnections between Genndy and Dexter—with their often latent questions of assimilation and interpellation into American ideology, worldview, and history—progress apace throughout much of the first season. Consider Season 1, Episode 3, titled "Dexter's Rival" (aired May 7, 2011, 1996) which sees Dexter encounter a threat or encroachment toward/against his uniqueness in the form of a mirror or double. A new student, Mandark Astronomanov, enrolls at his and Dee Dee's school, who, like Dexter possesses a secret lab, albeit a bigger and more sophisticated one—3D to Dexter's 2D, so to speak. The new kid becomes not only Dexter's series-long rival, but also the source and literal and figurative locus of most, if not all, his ire (Tartakovsky 1996). Again here, there are numerous subtle forms of autobiographical commentary that are pertinent to Genndy's own experience of foreignness and attempted assimilation. I would hypothesize, in a negative dialectic, that perhaps the truest or surest sign of assimilation into a foreign culture is whether or not the assimilated individual shares the same hatreds and fears of the assimilating culture; that the assimilated individual is such only after they hate and fear just how their host culture does.

The proposition here is that the assimilated individual, as a result of their assimilation, regards the same Other as Other, thus becoming undifferentiated with the assimilating culture despite their own origins and interaction in and with the same space as Other themselves. Much in the

same way Genndy harbored a competitive disdain and trepidation against and for those students he encountered in both his time at CalArts and his early days at Hanna-Barbera and Cartoon Network, the rivalry between Mandark and Dexter is predicated on envy and ambition, a fear and disdain at being Othered but at the same time a deep belief and confidence in the Otherness of one's own abilities and talents. It should also be noted that the difference in accents between Dexter and Mandark is a physical trait or manifestation of this rivalry, as well as other aspects including the size and sophistication of each boy genius's respective laboratory, one which makes their rivalry appear as a sort of fun-house mirror of Otherness and assimilation.

The fact that this is the episode where Dexter has his first day at school also raises the issue of youth agency (in the form of perceived excellence, in this case) and the desire of individuation. Having had similar experiences myself as a TCK, the rivalry between Mandark and Dexter, one taking place precisely at the moment in which each is inaugurated into the psycho-emotional, physical, and cultural turmoil of junior school, the rivalry between the two is a manifestation of what I like to refer to as the "Otherness Olympics." It is a complex and oftentimes exclusionary set of unwritten but highly potent sociopolitical, economic, and cultural signs, tests, outcomes, and prohibitions—a largely or oftentimes antagonistic milieu in which foreigners often compete with one another not only to carve out a place in the assimilating culture, but also to keep their status as Other, the identity, and sometimes unlooked for opportunities it proffers them, sovereign from other would-be interesting, popular, or fascinating Others. It should also be noted here that an aspect of the youthful desire for individuation, immigrant or not, involves the sincere desire of youth to make, claim and own things, which emerges in Season 2, Episode 7 "Labels" (August 27, 1997). In the episode, Dee Dee and Dexter's quarrel over the best situated chair in front of the family television evolves, after some consideration from Dexter, into an attempt to label all of his possessions, which Dee Dee copies (Tartakovsky 1997). Underneath the idea that to name things is to claim things is the sincerity of the desire to own, to possess, and through one's possessions, one's sovereignty, personhood, and agency be recognized.

Beyond the seemingly obvious overlaps between Dexter and Genndy are other issues more pertinent to form and audience, design and reception. Take the notorious episode "Dial M for Monkey: Barequor" (April 14, 1996) which, in 1997, was banned from airing in America, Canada, Latin America, and the UK. The reason being that many took offense at what was widely considered to be the presentation of a parodic stereotype of a homosexual man in the form of Spooner, an unpermitted parody of Marvel's Silver Surfer. Moreover, the episode features Krunk getting drunk at the conclusion thereof. The full episode remained banned until 1999 when it returned to circulation but with the *Monkey* episode replaced with the episode "Dexter's

Lab: A Story" (Tartakovsky 1996). Thematically, this segment raises issues and concerns regarding the line between a sincere approach to humor and *attempted* humor contra insensitivity. While other Cartoon Network shows including *Cow and Chicken/I Am Weasel* and *The Powerpuff Girls*[1] have all encountered controversies in some form, controversy surrounding Genndy's output has been relatively negligible across the entire range of his original output and total oeuvre more broadly. In so many ways this fact points to the adage that holds that the thunder is made all the louder by the silence that precedes it. For the nuanced, and indeed expectedly sensitive ethics underpinning the manner in which Genndy treats Dexter, a foreign loner, nerd, and outsider with the confidence to overcome all the various *stereotypes* pervading such subject positions with aplomb, confidence, and unmeasurable creative talent, it seems a strange and egregious lapse in awareness and sensitivity on Genndy's part precisely to rely on stereotypes to bring off a gag.

There are two overarching ways of interpreting both the episode and its controversy. On the one hand, one could argue that Genndy did not think that the manner in which the characters were represented in the remit of the episode was prejudicial or prosecutorial in any sense. It could be that here, Genndy believed that the butt of the joke, and indeed the humor in the entire episode, functioned precisely in being first and foremost a parody of the hypertrophic machismo seemingly inextricable from the visualizations of masculinity as represented and reproduced by Marvel, DC and the figure of the costumed crimefighter/superhero they manufacture, reproduce, and disseminate in the minds of most readers/viewers.

On the other hand, there exists the possibility that Genndy found the humor of the episode to outweigh any potential distress, offense, or discomfort viewers might experience, perhaps even assuming that there would be aspects, layers, or entire senses of the jokes and humor on display in the episode that would be lost on its youthful target audience. The opposite is perhaps equally true, namely, that Genndy and his production staff perhaps thought that the hyper-effete caricature of male homosexuality would not only stand, in itself, as a humorous subject position for their youthful viewers, but as being understood as such *in principium*. In each case, there is an ethical question that demands voice here: where is the line between sincerity and offence?

Genndy also uses his parodies and satires of standing North American conventions of superheroism and the figure of the superhero more broadly to investigate other themes. In Season 1, Episode 7 titled "Star Spangled Sidekicks/Game Over" (aired November 20, 1996), Dexter and Dee Dee audition for the chance to become Major Glory's sidekick. Dee Dee, bringing her distinctive expressions of unadulterated self-hood to bear, wins. Through Dee Dee's example, Dexter comes to realize that eye-catching costumes are simply a part of a broader range of criteria for a superhero to meet

(Tartakovsky 1996). Here again, what I argue to be the perennial theme running through the entire series and its fundamental concept re-emerges. Central to this particular episode are issues and debates concerning the concept of assimilation, a concept which itself not only runs as a through-line subtending both seasons of the series in which Genndy was showrunner, but as one that also subtends the life and youth of Genndy himself.

Central to this episode is the theme of trying to fit in which manifests in differing ways, seen in such ideas as the audition of acceptance, access, superiority, and identity. I would go as far as to assert that the humor in this episode betrays not only a sense of anxiety, but also a sincere desire for precisely that which it humorizes, namely inclusion into the secrecy, exclusivity, purpose, and importance of an elite group; itself a reification of the sincerity of the wish to be seen a certain way, the sincerity of the masculine desire for a type of power, respect, and appreciation compounded by Dexter's status as a physically stunted youthful foreigner. Underpinning this desire is the desire for inclusion, regard, acknowledgment, and praise—things both the youthful and adult Genndy sought and seeks to this day. The object, apparatus, or means through which this desire is achieved or upon or through which it is located can take on comedically simple forms. For instance, in Season 2, Episode 31 "Framed" (aired March 18, 1998), Dexter experiences a sharp spike in popularity after his spectacles break (Tartakovsky 1998). Here, a simple object—spectacles—stands as the differentiating element between reifying or abandoning the sincere desire of an outsider to be an insider, and the latent sincerity of a wish/desire for popularity.

Another interesting theme in this episode points to the dissociative aptitude or byproduct of the fear, anxiety, and trauma of exclusion. The scenario which sees an individual trapped in a video game also indicates, indexes, or at the very least gestures toward the idea that there are real psycho-emotional dangers in the irrepressible vivacity of an active imagination. The "trapped-in-a-video-game" scenario, while having many storied philosophical precedents typically archived under the "brain-in-a-vat" or "other minds" problem, is not unlike a hypothesis I assert is supported by the entire premise of the series; namely, that Dexter's lab is itself a type of video game, a phantasy, a seemingly boundless imaginative and creative space in which he runs the risk of being trapped in; one that psycho-emotionally provides for a deceptively simple and sincere wish—despite the intricacy, variety, and exhorbitancy of the fantasy—harbored by individuals from youth to dotage: to be capable, powerful, and special. Ultimately, these desires are related to fear and, in particular, the fear of missing out (FOMO).

Whether controversial or not, Genndy should be acknowledged as taking risks in terms of the areas and subjects toward and into which he takes and directs his aesthetic and narrative abilities. Consider Season 1, Episode 8 titled "Babysitter Blues/Dream Machine" (aired April 1997)

which sees Dexter fall in love with his babysitter, Lisa. In the follow-up episode, Dexter suffers from frequent nightmares, prompting him to invent a machine that elicits only good dreams (Tartakovsky 1997). This episode touches on a specifically strange phenomenon in Western society, one which Genndy addresses again in *Sym-Bionic Titan,*[2] that has to do with the (aversion to the) artistic representation of youth sexuality or the burgeoning sexuality of youth. In this episode, Genndy couches the concept of youthful love, libido, or sexual development first in the ostensibly "safe" remit of infatuation. There is another evasion here which allows for the emergence of young love and youthful sexuality to be expressed as safe, that is, specifically *as* humorous and/or ridiculous. Genndy achieves this sleight of hand by depicting the sincerity of young love and burgeoning sexuality through Dexter's reliance on *stereotypes* of love as ways through which to express the sincerity of the same he is feeling for Lisa. Here, the pretense and performativity of Dexter's amorous expressions betray a lack of experience of what he feels is both requisite and effective mimetic behavior to staunch this lack of experience. But beneath it, however, exists a sincere desire and infatuation. Again, in Season 2, Episode 27 "Aye Aye Eyes" (aired February 18, 1998) with the helpful guidance and intercession of Dee Dee, Dexter, in this instance the target of young love after returning a little girl's lost stuffed bunny and being thanked to the point of stalking, is able to divert this exploration of the sincere intensity of young love. Moreover, the second half of the episode addresses an experience that many children endure, from restlessness to night terrors (Tartakovsky 1998). Genndy shows that Dexter's engineering prowess is not just limited to the conscious world, that his will, creativity, and almost arrogant sense of directness would lead to him try and "correct" nature in the form of engineered sleep. However, a more important theme is simultaneously being expressed. Here, nightmares speak to the sincerity of fear and the desire to be free of it in children.

Fear is yet another theme that recurs in the *Dexter* diegesis, one that is related to the notion of the safety and, ironically predictability, of imagination contra the danger and uncertainty of the world exterior to it. Dexter, in many ways like Genndy, uses the creative space of his lab to not only reify his sense of ambition, creativity, and talent, but also in doing so, to ameliorate any feelings of distress, discomfort, and fear that are inextricable from the subject position of the immigrant in America. The sincere fear of the foreign child disappointing their parents, for example, is again taken up in Season 2, Episode 22 "Topped Off" (aired January 1998) in which a distraught Dexter, who has thus far never incurred disciplinary action of any kind, has to have a "parent-principal" meeting at school (Tartakovsky 1998). The lab, therefore, and the concept of unlimited creativity it represents, simultaneously gestures to freedom *and* insularity, play as well as safety, exploration as well as protection.

Season 1, Episode 10 “Way of the Dee Dee” (aired December 11, 1996) addresses this very issue when Dee Dee accuses Dexter of not knowing how to live in the outside world—and only in his lab. In a rare, touching, and humorous display of Dexter’s humility, the boy genius asks his ostensibly “dim” sister to show him the Dee Dee way of knowledge (Tartakovsky 1996). Of course, Genndy uses the episode to parody wellness movements, Yoga, TM (Transcendental Meditation), and the entire sociopolitical, cultural, and ecological visualization of the 1960s Hippie Movement and aesthetic in North America. However, latent to this satire is Dexter’s sincere desire to assimilate, to join as opposed to flee or hide from the world, to experience nature and people via interactions outside of the controlled remit and austere albeit idiosyncratic protocols that keep him simultaneously safe but also sequestered from any and all experiences outside of his imagination and immediate environments. The theme is again taken up in Season 2, Episode 15 “Decode of Honour” (aired October 22, 1997) in which Dexter and Dee Dee mix up their respective action figure decoder rings (Action Hank and Pony Puffs respectively) resulting in each having to endure the other’s initiation ceremonies (Tartakovsky 1997). Here, again, Dexter is forced to take a sincere look at understanding the Other, even if that Other is localized in the literally familiar form of his sister. While in moments like Season 2, Episode 37 “Dexter vs. Santa’s Claws” (aired April 29, 1998), in which Dee Dee is a totem of the sincerity of youthful wishfulness, Dee Dee always-also occupies a strange mercurial position of periphery centrality, obstructive aid-fullness, and/or helpful incommodiousness. This is realized in examples such as Season 2, Episode 18 “Unfortunate Cookie” (aired November 12, 1997), in which Dexter and Dee Dee become joined together after getting trapped in a Chinese Finger Puzzle, and subsequently seeking a solution by tracking the manufacturer to Chinatown (Tartakovsky 1997). Here again, it is clear that despite his genius and acuity, it is always important to remember that Dexter solves most of his dilemmas and troubles *only* by the (un)timely intercession of Dee Dee. It is this fact, alongside the fact that Dee Dee is often also responsible for many of the shenanigans the pair find themselves in, that solidifies Dee Dee’s status as also Dexter’s most valuable asset, or rather, the sincerity of their relationship as the true underlying predicate of their connection. This is obvious in Season 2, Episode 19 “Picture Day” (aired November 19, 1997) in which Dexter is confronted by the fact that he is not photogenic ahead of picture day at their school. Dexter makes recourse to Dee Dee’s Teen Magazines in the hope of discovering tips and techniques to recreating his physical appearance, resulting in him becoming disturbingly attractive (Tartakovsky 1997). Here again, it is *only* through the intercession of Dee Dee, her knowledge, and her Otherness relative to Dexter that proves the most effective means through which to allow him to physically, and powerfully, *re-imagine* himself, in seemingly more incisive and successful broad sociocultural ways than any of his own lab creations

could, but also to incisively redress the sincerity of his lack of self-esteem and issues/complexes of self-worth, and the sincerity of the fragility of his burgeoning masculinity.

The TCK's desire for sincere appreciation predicated on mastery of a specific cultural artifact with a notable amount of social cache manifests in Season 2, Episode 3's "D & DD" (aired July 30, 1997). In this episode, Dee Dee wishes to play Monsters & Mazes (an obvious parody of the famous role-playing game Dungeons & Dragons) with Dexter and his other "nerdy," "outsider" friends. Outvoted after displays of her strange and sincere imagination, Dexter is relegated to the status of regular player and is replaced with Dee Dee as game master (Tartakovsky 1997). Gripped by searing chagrin at this demotion, Dexter experiences unrelenting *angoisse* seeing his friends having a more impactful and rewarding time in Dee Dee's world than those conjured by his imagination. Here, Dexter learns an important lesson with regard to the *power* and *attractiveness* of sincerity. Mastery, of any kind, be it vocational in the form of animation or symbolic in the form of a game, specifically a game whose action takes place almost entirely *within* the ephemeral albeit powerful space of collective imagination, is no guarantee of engendering a powerful result, nor emphatic, poignant, or meaningful participation in that space. For Dexter, the imagination, despite how mad-capped or zany, is a meticulous, scientific space. One which, in its first principles, accords with tidiness, order, and ambition. While Dexter might sincerely believe in these traits, the emotional resonance of their experience and reclamation typically occur *after* the fact of their disruption by Dee Dee. Dexter's imagination, as a laboratory, is also a space of creativity. It is the lodestar of his entire identity, his contrariness, his confidence, and his status as Other. Without it, Dexter does not know who he is, nor does he have a clear understanding of that which his notable imagination is, or should be, in its abilities and aptitude, directed toward.

Dee Dee, with her seemingly ersatz heedlessness of these values, appears in every way counterintuitive to Dexter. To be supplanted by one who seemingly *feels* more so than *thinks* is the ultimate condemnation and threat to/of Dexter's sense of self, as well as all that he holds as valuable, intellectually, and in terms of his identity. To be stripped of the title, even within the remit of what is ostensibly "just a game" has deep psychological resonances. Ones that question not only who he is but how *good* he is at being who he is. Moreover, how much he is appreciated as being *unique* in being who is. It is almost as if here Genndy is ventriloquizing a lesson to the viewer through Dexter. A lesson that emerges straight from his personal history and relationship with his brother Alex, whom he viewed and describes as the Dexter to his Dee Dee: sincerity wins out over mastery every time. To feel, play, and express without limitations, those external sure, but more importantly those self-imposed, produces the most sincere and worthwhile experiences in one's life. The lesson here is that while mastery is

typically lauded in most if not all its sociopolitical, economic, and cultural instantiations, sincerity is, however subtly, always-Also appreciated.

The tension between self and world, immigrant and adoptive nation, also emerges in Season 1, Episode 11: "Space Case/Dexter's Debt" (April 23, 1997). In "Space Case," Dexter gives Dee Dee over to invading aliens, only to subsequently be so overcome with guilt that he decides to save her. In "Dexter's Debt," Dexter discovers to his horror that he owes an astronomical debt to NASA and must discover some way to repay it (Tartakovsky 1997). Here, as it is with "The Way of the Dee Dee," the latent theme of the episode is Dexter's deference to his sister, the bright streak of respect and love he harbors for her that is ostensibly both obscured by their often antagonistic interactions but, at the same time, a confirmation of the *sincerity* of said love and respect precisely because and through said interactions themselves. "Dexter's Debt," however, addresses the theme of the literal and figurative *costs* of assimilation. In view of the themes of the conflict between foreignness and nativeness, particularly framed as a tension, in Genndy's case between America and Russia, it would seem that this antagonism between Dexter and NASA plays to the idea of Operation Paperclip-as-cartoon. However, in view of Genndy's life and youth as an American immigrant, there is something profoundly more personal being gestured to in this episode. This is on account of the fact that not only is it oftentimes the case that the immigrant experiences economic hardships and downturns when entering the new nation, whose socioeconomic situation may be at the most better and at the least different to the one from which they came, Genndy latently engages with the idea that not only is immigration, in terms of journeying to the new land expensive, but the process of establishing a safe and healthy life for oneself and one's family therein, replete with the appropriate amenities, is equally expensive as well. Genndy himself knew how difficult being a foreigner could be financially, having lost most if not all the socioeconomic comforts and security he and his family had enjoyed in their native Russia upon moving to America. So much so that Genndy had to work tirelessly in order to not only provide for his remaining family, but also see his education paid for.

It should be noted that Dexter's desire for inclusion manifests even in the most seemingly unrelated ways. Consider Season 2, Episode 4 "Hunger Strikes" (aired August 6, 1997) which sees Dexter denied dessert as punishment after refusing to finish his vegetables at dinner. In response, Dexter decides to use gamma radiation to alter the sensory perception of his taste-buds (Tartakovsky 1997). Here, themes of Otherness are immediately apparent in the fusion of the ideas of gamma radiation and a foreigner. The idea of "the nuclear foreigner" is imbued with the historiographic, sociopolitical, economic, and cultural fears of McCarthy-era America, the Red Scare, and the Cold War narrative of the "nuclear foreigner" and the immanent nuclear Russian threat more broadly. However, in his handling

of dangerous and volatile matter like gamma radiation, the threat Dexter poses in this episode is almost entirely self-directed. Dexter does not use his staggering intellect in combination with a dangerous substance to alter or dominate others, but rather subject himself to gamma radiation poisoning to scientifically alter his *own* body and the life of that body. On the surface of it, Dexter's goal here is hedonistic. It is predicated on appetative desire for an iced treat and seemingly little else. However, psycho-emotionally, the desire and the drastic degree to which he will go to attain that desire, is a desire for inclusion. It is not the taste of the dessert he desires, but being able, like the rest of his family, to *partake* of it. *That*, in the pleasure of communal *participation*, is where the sincerity of the desire truly lies.

For Dexter, this desire recursively orbits the dialectic of exclusion/inclusion. It is taken up yet again in Season 2, Episode 10 "Ewww That's Growth" (September 17, 1997) where Dexter's entire family goes to the carnival. Upon arriving and scouting the rides and other festivities, Dexter learns that he is unable to go on one of the rides on account of being too short. Making recourse to his most powerful resource, Dexter uses his lab to grow himself taller. His experiment, though initially successful, goes awry, resulting in him being unable to stop his growth (Tartakovsky 1997). Like it is with his other self-directed body modifications, whose goal is to alter his physical condition in such a way that allows him access to not only communal, but specifically familial activities involving dangerous substances like gamma radiation, the same sincerity of desire is expressed here. Dexter, seemingly at any and all costs, seeks to actualize his equally seemingly inexhaustible desire for inclusion and participation. This is a resounding theme with Dexter, to not be excluded from the family, from participating in things, from having access to people, experiences, and spaces *despite* his ostensible insularity, lonerism, and dogged insistence on privacy. Latent to this theme are questions of youth agency and the ability of youth to manufacture or in some way engender entry and participation to and within spaces overseen primarily by adults.

The theme of specifically familial participation and its relation to youth emerges in Season 2, Episode 20 "Don't Be a Baby" (aired November 26, 1997). In the episode, Dexter is barred from watching an R-rated film on account of being too young. Dexter uses one of his inventions to make himself and Dee Dee older than their parents (Tartakovsky 1997). While here the theme of familial participation is central, in this scenario, Dexter seeks to *include* as opposed to *exclude* Dee Dee. This inclusion is a sincere recognition that in terms of participation, he and his sister are ultimately undifferentiated by their age, that because of their shared youth, it does not matter that Dee Dee is "not" a genius or a girl. All that matters is that they *both* have been excluded from the activity desired for the *same* reason. This is also yet another subtle example of the sincerity of their relationship and bond.

Sometimes, Genndy thematizes the issues and debates concerning agency, youth, and participation in ways that express a latently psycho-emotionally damaging undercurrent. In Season 2, Episode 21 "Sports-a-Poppin" (aired December 3, 1997), Dexter's father attempts to teach his son how to play sports, like all other American fathers and sons are expected to do. Among the plethora of sports they try, Dexter has no facility for any—from baseball to football, soccer to badminton (Tartakovsky 1997). There are a variety of subsidiary/ancillary ideas orbiting the theme of participation being addressed in this episode. The episode explores the troubling sincerity of the 1950s American ideal, which the show deconstructs through the vacant and distant portrayal of Dad, alongside 1980s and 1990s tropes of youth and young manhood through the strange figure of Dexter himself. However, this episode, like Season 2, Episode 19, explores sincerity producing painful affects. While Dad is sincere in his desire to impart and participate in an American tradition as well as to interpellate his ostensibly un-American son into said tradition, there is an unadorned caesura between father and son, one which serves to solidify and compound Dexter's complexes about his burgeoning masculinity, isolation, and Otherness as he is not able to easily participate in this hallowed aspect of not only American masculinity, but American familial life both enshrined and resisted in the American popular imagination more broadly. Moreover, the tradition itself is anathemic to Dexter's ability to participate in *his* own, unique way, one based on curiosity, intellect, and compassion.

In view of the ostensible psycho-emotional advantages that can, but are not guaranteed to emerge from the very same psycho-emotional stresses placed upon TCKs in their adoptive environs and sociocultural milieus, Dexter's formidable intellect does not change or ultimately obscure the fact (perhaps, in its inordinate extremity and idiosyncrasy draws attention to) of his youth. Season 2, Episode 8 "Fillet of Soul/Golden Diskette" (August 27, 1997), which sees both Dexter *and* Dee Dee haunted, and thereby undifferentiated, across the "intellectual spectrum" they antipodally represent, by being haunted by the ghost of a dead goldfish (Tartakovsky 1997). The first half of the episode deals with the psycho-emotional experience of having to encounter and come to terms with death as a child. In the second half of the episode, with the diskette, the underlying desire being expressed here is the desire to be a winner, the Willy Wonka fantasy of being granted access, seemingly by Chance/Destiny, to be included in something special. The episode orbits what I like to think of as the irrational Disneyland sincerity that is so effective in its inculcation within children, latching onto and exacerbating their fantasies of other worlds in which reality is Othered, expanded, elongated, goofy, and/or more joyful. Ultimately, we are in some form or other keenly and perhaps even sadly always-Also aware that the fantasy, despite the sometimes overwhelming sincerity of its portrayal (or indeed pitch of sale), is not nor ever was real. Regardless, however, the

sincere power of our desire for *more* than base, concrete reality, compels the desire ever forward.

The theme of youthful fear again emerges in Season 2, Episode 12 "The Bus Boy" (aired October 1, 1997). However, instead of the fear of physical death, the episode pursues an exploration of social death in the form of radical anonymity in the form of being forgotten. In the episode, Dexter is harassed by two bullies and is subsequently forced to brave the rear of the bus in his attempt to find his precious #2 writing implement. To do so, he must also brave the terrifying legend of little Billy Blumberg who allegedly "disappeared" in the back of the bus years ago (Tartakovsky 1997). Not only does the episode shine a light, in a very direct way, on the antagonistic experience a TCK might have in so far as being bullied is concerned, but it shows what is most valuable to Dexter in the face of adversity, namely his pencil.

The theme of the sincerity of being a bullied child, and the sincere fear, and psycho-emotionally damaging places one's mind goes to when bullied are also addressed in Season 2, Episode 30 "Accent You Hate" (March 11, 1998). When a bully who hates kids with "funny" accents sets his sights on Dexter, the boy genius has until 3:00 p.m. before he receives an after-school beating (Tartakovsky 1998). It could be read here that through Dexter's sacrilization of his writing implement, which is a mark-making implement, one latently symbolizing the agential ability of self-expression, Genndy is simultaneously expressing the sanctity of his ability, regardless of socioeconomic or cultural background, to make a mark on the world, but also make worlds out of those marks, that the power of creativity is the most important thing in either of their lives, worth risking psycho-emotional and physical distress for, and even the fear of social death and radical anonymity represented by little Billy Blumberg, relegated to the "nobody cares" of the netherworld of the back of the bus. This episode performs the important task of answering the question: how does Dexter deal with being an outsider and/or being bullied directly? The answer, in a very important and pseudo-biographic way, is by protecting one's ability to both create and be creative.

Despite Dexter's ostensible megalomania, it is interesting to note that a large amount of the agency afforded him by his genius is spent in the service of others, human and nonhuman alike. Consider Season 2, Episode 16 "Techno Turtle" (aired October 29, 1997). In the episode, Dee Dee recovers and rehabilitates a wounded turtle that had been attacked by a hawk. Dexter agrees to help Dee Dee in her efforts; however, Dexter takes it upon himself to "rebuild" the wounded animal into an indomitable bionic hulk (Tartakovsky 1997). As said at the beginning of this **chapter**, the pervasive reason undercutting Dexter's experimental efforts throughout the series often redounds to his overenthusiasm. In this and many other instances, Dexter's sincere desire to help overheats and reverses into its opposite, namely impedimentary chaos. In his desire to aid growing out

of control, where in the wounded, confused, or addled being/creature/person, Dexter displays a sincere will to overcome himself, his own psycho-emotionally described limits, fears, misgivings, and complexes by using the one thing that not only recreates said issues, but also allows him to overcome them, through these beings he helps, in whose weakness and pain he sees his own. The sincere element beneath the humor and techno-intellectualism of his sci-fi genius, and the slapstick exaggeration of the bionic warrior the turtle becomes after being submitted to and re-imagined in and through Dexter's lab (his imagination), is a wish to not simply help, but through helping, improve, and in improving the being in question, reifying the ways he, despite his genius, cannot improve himself in any sort of lasting or, perhaps even meaningful, way.

* * *

Focusing on Genndy's characterization of Dexter in the series' first two seasons upon which he worked, the above analysis has been intended to draw your attention to the fact that there is a running undercurrent in much, if not all, of *Dexter* and that is the theme of the sincerity of youth. One might call this supposition vague, its critical points nebulous, its insights opaque and inactionable. But this is precisely the point. Youth is in itself a climacteric time, one of psycho-emotionally charged changes, cognitive and physical alike. It is a time of certain uncertainty, of wavering conviction, brave fear, saturnine joy, static exploration, and remedial discovery. It is a time of burgeoning agency and the delineation of its interruption, control, or loss. What Genndy captures so well about this time through Dexter, Dee Dee, Mandark, Olga, and all the other representations of youth present in the series' first two seasons is that it is a time of sincere fullness, a fullness represented by the variety and complexity of Dexter's adventures, but more so by the science fictional hyper-advancement of both his lab and his imagination.

Genndy also shows the viewer that it is also a time of sincere simplicity, symbolized by the fact that Dexter almost always employs his prodigiousness and virtuosity for very simple, childish tasks oriented around sincerely youthful outcomes. There are no tactical or strategic machinations, no imperial designs or desires substantiating his lab and what transpires within it. While a savant, he is also a child. Genndy's genius is his ability to sincerely capture the sincerity of this time, its developments, surprises, joys, sorrows, mysteries, disappointments, and hopes. But how does Genndy's treatment of youth line up with the life lessons expressed and explored in *Samurai Jack*? The next **part** will explore these themes and their associated issues and debates, aesthetic and narrative alike, in terms of the *lessons* the series imparts on its viewers, young and old.

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Notes

1 *Cow and Chicken* "Buffalo Gals," *Powerpuff Girls* "See Me, Feel Me, Gnomey," for example.
2 *Sym-Bionic Titan* Season 1, Episode "Lessons in Love" (aired November 19, 2010).

3

Samurai Jack: Seasons I–IV (2001–4)

"They Call Me 'Jack'."

—JACK

Samurai Jack Seasons I–IV: In Silence, Finding One's True Voice

3.1 FORWARD TO THE PAST: THE PREMISE AND ORIGINS OF *SAMURAI JACK*

It is a simple thing to miss or disregard outright, but I would have the reader remember: "Jack" is not even his real name. His real name is never spoken. It remains in silence. This interesting fundamental vacuity at the center of Genndy's proudest creation speaks to a type of radical openness he brings to bear on the project. *Samurai Jack* premiered on August 10, 2001. Its airing, production, ethos, aesthetic, and narrative sensibilities were like nothing that had come before it. Its initial three-part made-for-TV movie, titled *The Premiere Movie*, featured a first episode in which nine minutes of silence, with no dialogue, an unheard of approach to mainstream children's animation on American television at the time, not only became the definitive mark of Genndy's oeuvre *in toto*, but set the tone of his self and critically described greatest work. More so than the sweeping vistas, the gargantuan sprawls, and the intricately immersive background art or character design that did not feature the traditional bold solid black outlines, silence, in all forms, became a hallmark of Genndy's work in the minds of millions.

The series originally aired for four seasons, each comprising thirteen full episodes. The initial series concluded on September 25, 2004. While the initial run left the ultimate fate of Jack, Aku, the past, and the future unsettled, *Samurai Jack* was revived a dozen years later for a special fifth season whose narrative and aesthetic mandate sought to conclusively end Jack's story. The fifth and final season of the series premiered on March 11, 2017, airing under the aegis of Adult Swim's Toonami programming block, with the series finale airing on May 20, 2017. Genndy (who directed every episode) and his team's collective work is a masterpiece of both collaboration and visionary ambition. Because of this ethic, the series has become one of the most recognizable examples of contemporary cartooning in the late capitalist zeitgeist, where Aku and Jack stand as iconic foils of good and evil in the same way or, indeed, of a similar status as Superman and Lex Luthor or Luke Skywalker and Darth Sidious. Having come to receive critical and commercial acclaim in the form of eight Prime-time Emmy Awards (including Outstanding Animated Program), as well as six Annie Awards and an OIAF Award, the series has received much in the way of official plaudits as well.

Samurai Jack follows the time-traveling misadventures of the titular character, "Jack," an unnamed Japanese samurai warrior. Following a dire battle with a shape-shifting personification of ultimate evil in the form of the demon Aku, the nearly victorious Jack and his magically indestructible

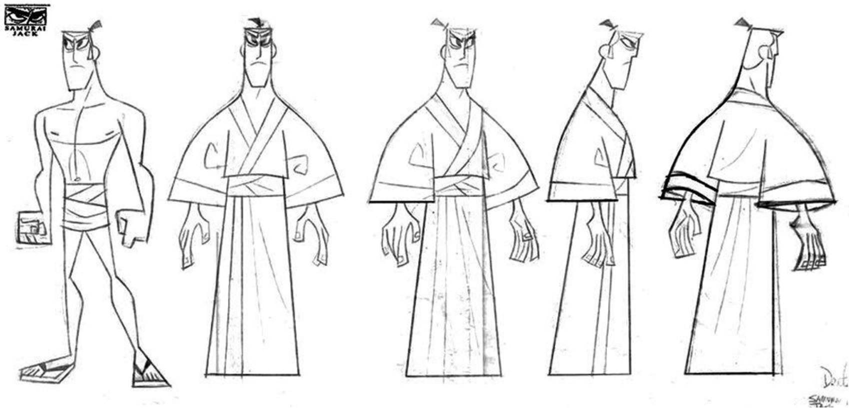

FIGURE 3.1 *Samurai Jack Model Sheet*

katana are flung into the far future. The inclemency of time-travel is rendered in stark relief; the warping of perspective and proportion; the sickening buzz and strobe of black and white flashing lights; the spiral motif in the center screen immersing the viewer into not only Jack's disorientation, but also the seeming insurmountability of the power wielded by Aku. The future into which Jack emerges is equally saturnine—a dystopian kaleidoscope of life-forms, palates, design aesthetics, cultures, praxes, powers, technology, and danger of all kinds. Jack finds that it is still not only a world threatened by Aku, but one ruled by him outright, where the demon's malignancy has spread into every form, facet, and flow of life. Jack, possessing only his geta, kimono, and katana, resolves to set off on a transtemporal quest, one whose goal is to get back to the past, to his own time in which the scourge of Aku ostensibly first emerged, defeat him, and prevent the decay of the world's past, present, and future. While the series is propelled by this relatively simple premise, its central conceit is always tantalizing in the etymological sense of the term. This is due to the fact that Jack's efforts, while spectacular in terms of displays of courage, creativity, Will, hope, camaraderie, altruism, wisdom, and self-mastery, are always in vain. Typically, instances in which Jack is presented with the means to return to his own time, a "daemonium-ex-machina," a tragic turn emerges to waylay the intrepid time-traveler even further by consistently pushing (and indeed keeping) his goal and the means of attaining it out of reach.

> Long ago in a distant land, I, Aku, the shape-shifting Master of Darkness, unleashed an unspeakable evil! But a foolish samurai warrior wielding a magic sword stepped forth to oppose me. Before the final blow was struck, I tore open a portal in time and flung him into the future, where

my evil is law! Now the fool seeks to return to the past, and undo the future that is Aku!

These words are intoned by Aku during the title sequences introducing every episode of the original four seasons, from Episodes 2 to 52. This deceptively simple premise belies a tremendous amount of forethought and consideration. Genndy draws from a range of sources to create Jack, his world of pseudo-feudal Edo period Japan, and the various pop-culture, art, and historical frames of reference he finds himself in the worlds of the future.

Jack's nobility, discipline, courage, and ardent distaste for moral turpitude can be said to be a result of the fact that Jack is a prince (voiced by Phil LaMarr), the son of a feudal lord (voiced by Sab Shimono and Keone Young). The sense of Arthurian legend and intimations of the Wagnerian high operatic are most obviously found in the symbol of an enchanted sword. Like Merlin's Excalibur, Jack's father's (and later his own) sword is also the result of magical provenance. It is given to him after being forged/created/willed by three principal deities from three well-known mytho-religious systems and pantheons: Ra of Ancient Egypt, Odin of the Norse traditions, and Rama of Hinduism. In the initial conflagration between Jack's father and the demon, the former proves the victor and, with the aid of his magical sword, succeeds in imprisoning the supernaturally powerful shape shifter Aku (voiced by Mako and Greg Baldwin) for a time.

However, Aku manages to escape eight years later. In doing so, he also manages to imprison his captor, holding the Emperor hostage, just as he decrees that Jack is to wander the world, learn, study, and once ready return, wield his father's magic sword, and defeat Aku once and for all. The mature Jack returns, faces Aku, and very nearly defeats him in single combat. However, before striking the killing blow, Aku uses his magic to open a time portal, flinging Jack into the far future under the assumption that when their paths would cross again, Aku would be ready to defeat the samurai warrior.

Jack emerges on a dystopian retrofuturistic Earth ruled by Aku. In a bricolage of slang and style, aesthetics and humor, the first people Jack encounters refer to him as "Jack," a slang term cognate with "man." Jack adopts this name, affirming, in many ways, his symbolic death and rebirth, his divestment of personal history, and his psycho-emotional and metaphysical stuntedness, vacuity, and central void in being robbed of his past, his family, his title, and lastly his name. So thorough and complete is this evacuation of his name and its totemic representation of his entire personal history that his given name is never mentioned in the entirety of the series' five seasons. In many ways, Jack is too busy, particularly in the first four seasons of the initial run, to ponder the philosophical implications behind his namelessness. He spends his future time overcoming various impediments to his retroactive journey to the past in order to defeat Aku, and thereby safeguard not only his past, but the future of the world as well.

While he, on occasion, comes tremendously close to achieving this goal, the entire first four seasons redound ultimately to the same conclusion: Jack fails. However, Jack's failure in this regard is precisely the point. The development of wisdom, personality, character, and empathy to and for himself and other forms of life in other times becomes didactic in nature. In watching Jack constantly try, to watch his nobility, sense of self, discipline, and care constantly subjected to hazards strange and brutal, bizarre and hilarious, tender and tragic, the viewer grows in step with the psycho-emotional expansion and refinement of Jack's self: his empathy as a human being, his acuity as a critical thinker, and his efficacy as a warrior for righteousness.

The inverse is also true of Aku who, like his foe, sometimes finds opportunities to nearly defeat Jack once and for all, only to be thwarted at the ultimate moment, in ways outside the power of the demon's skill or aptitude for surveillance, tactics, and foresight. More than the deeply penetrating questions inextricable from Jack's metaphysical condition as a symbol of the living past in a too-soon future, or the temporal issues and debates concerning both Aku's power and experience of time in turn, perhaps the most fascinating question the series asks pertains to time and suffering, and whether the latter is in some way transtemporal. We typically tend to think of the future as an imaginative space whose radical openness and unknowability beyond the predictive aptitude of future models and simulations is equally flooded with hope and despair, with possibility and the terminus of all possibility, a new world or the end of days. And yet, despite this undecided nature of the future, Jack makes one very simple and easy to overlook observation: it is not magic, Will, honor, desire, love, hate, or passion that the show depicts as being transtemporal. It is suffering: "50 years have passed, but I do not age. Time has lost its effect on me. Yet, the suffering continues. Aku's grasp chokes the past, present and future" (Tartakovsky 2017). Jack echoes this hypothesis albeit in far pithier form in the second title sequence used from Episodes XCII through to CI: "Hope is lost. Got to get back, back to the past, Samurai Jack" (Tartakovsky 2017).

Past, Present, and Future: The Aesthetic of *Samurai Jack*

While I have suggested that *Samurai Jack* offers an ultimately bleak take on the relationship between the past, present, and future, the series' aesthetic is anything but dour. In many ways, Genndy and his team take full advantage of this philosophical openness of the future to present truly spectacular imaginings of not simply one monolithic, monochrome future, but multiple futures, or types of futures. He and his team use the mercurial nature of

time's forward motion to develop aesthetic worlds, vistas, concepts, and themes that truly showcase Genndy's creativity, innovativeness, visionary approach to visual storytelling, as well as the commitment and skill of his team.

The retrofuturistic world(s) of *Samurai Jack* feature such a broad and multiform panoply of being: citizens and cutthroats, refugees and royalty, beings of peace and beings of violence. There are Scotsmen, Shaolin Monks, and Spartans, alongside robots, cyborgs, extraterrestrials, anthropomorphic animals that speak with wit and verve. There are monsters of every stripe, magical beings of every color, deities of every scale, creed, and tradition. Genndy and his team play in a way that is both sincere and frivolous, conscientious and improvised. They concatenate ideas, appearances, and functions. The retrofuturistic worlds of the future have their respective skies streamed with flying cars, while other tableaus feature ancient edifices, or the hyper-mechanicity of overblown industrial morbidity.

There is a decidedly interspecial ethic at play in the show as well. In the futures envisioned by Genndy and his team, Aku, having destroyed the habitats, civilizations, and xenospheres of alien planets, transplants numerous and various types of aliens to Earth. In this sense, Aku remakes the Earth into his own Earth, one in which heterotopic bricolage and play occur as a result of evil and malice. Genndy very cleverly crafts variety out of despair, innovation out of repression, scope out of subjugation. Despite this combination of themes, styles, periods, and forms, the preponderance of Aku's Earth remains mysteriously untouched by the corrosive forces of ardent (and evilly inspired) urbanization. As such, many episodes in the initial four seasons take place in forests, mountain ranges, the sea, and jungles despite Aku's attempt to tyrannize every sentient being and exhaustively exploit their respective environs and ecologies. As aforementioned, this reprieve extends to entire communities, the monastic tranquility of the Shaolin Monks for example, remains undimmed by Aku's shadow, having succeeded in retreating into hiding, and maintaining both their strength and numbers both outside and within Aku's ostensibly omniscient Gaze.

To think that *Samurai Jack* is Genndy's *second* show is remarkable in itself. But such considerations are made all the more astounding when one considers the range of influences, sources, and the success of their melding in the series. Following the critical and commercial success of *Dexter's Lab*, Genndy pitched the series to Cartoon Network executive and longtime friend and collaborator Mike Lazzo who recalls: "He said, 'Hey, remember David Carradine in Kung Fu? Wasn't that cool?' and I was like, 'Yeah, that's really cool.' That was literally the pitch" (Flaherty 2002).

The Network left much of Genndy's pitch unchanged in the marketing for the series, which was initially billed as a series "that is cinematic in scope and that incorporates action, humour, and intricate artistry" (Cartoon Network 2008). The sincerity of the series' youthful *joi de vivre*, its high concentration

and collection of ostensibly disparate themes, ideas, and interests—all under the aegis of Genndy and his team's artistic discipline and surefootedness—were drawn directly from Genndy's persistent childhood fantasies. In a 2017 Q&A for Adult Swim, Genndy revealed that the basic premise of the series came from his fascination with samurai culture and the Bushido code (Tartakovsky 2017). In an interview with Allen Newirth, Genndy reiterated this proclivity, declaring: "I've always loved samurais—I've always been influenced by samurais. I really wanted to do that" (Neuwirth 2003: 78). Combined with a recurring dream he had/has in which he finds/found himself wandering a post-apocalyptic Earth with a samurai sword, roving, and fighting mutants with a woman he was infatuated with, this is the base DNA of *Samurai Jack* (Chan 2017).

However, Genndy and his team's approach to the aesthetic and narrative treatment of not only the diegetic world(s) they created, but the stories taking place within them was inspired by a great many revered cinematic epics, specifically the expansive and awesome cinematography of the 1960s and 1970s. Classics including *Ben-Hur*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, and *Spartacus* were all great visual influences, as were the themes of comic book precedents such as Frank Miller's comic book series *Ronin* which featured the central premise of a masterless samurai warrior flung into a dystopian far future in order to battle a shape-shifting demon (Tartakovsky 2017). One could argue that Ridley Scott's rundown neon urban cityscapes in *Blade Runner* were also a source of inspiration, as was George Lucas' design ethos of lived-in and decaying futures in *Star Wars* and *THX 1138*. Moreover, the episode titled "Jack and the Spartans" was pointedly inspired by Miller's graphic novel *300*, which under the artist's hyper-stylizations retells the Spartan conflict with the invading Persian Empire at the Battle of Thermopylae.

More obvious examples of overall inspirational thematics also exist, specifically the Japanese manga *Lone Wolf and Cub* by Kazuo Koike and the films of Akira Kurosawa such as *Yojimbo*, *Seven Samurai*, and *Ran*. Interestingly, Kurosawa's influence resulted in a paradoxical problem for Genndy and his team. While the stoic, proud, and deadly warriors are depicted with aplomb, tension, mystique, and dignity under Kurosawa's direction, they are also shown to be extremely violent. The large amounts of stylized violence and bloodshed, even within the seemingly lax context of twenty-first-century animation, were prohibited by Cartoon Network's standards and practices (Perlmutter 2014: 333). Instead of abandoning the project, Genndy resorted to stylizing a stylization:

> I really can't *cut* anybody … and there's no real fun in doing samurai action if I can't … So I thought, 'What if they're all robots? … I can get away with some … hard-core fighting? That's where the whole sci-fi element came from. Like, 'Then maybe he's thrown into the future, and there's this wizard, and so on'. I knew that I didn't want it bound to one

> world … so the story started to come together out of the necessities that I needed to make the show [emphasis in the original].
>
> (Neuwirth 2003: 78)

Other notable and to some "quirky" recurrences find provenance in myth and folklore. For example, the episode "Jack and the Scotsman" is predicated on the legendary friendship between Robin Longstride (Robin Loxley, Robin Hood) and Little John in English folklore.

To consider the sheer economic and cultural difference between the conditions leading up to the first airing of the show and the context predicating its revival in the fifth season is rather staggering. When Cartoon Network announced the series at a press conference on February 21, 2001, so much ancillary activity was invested to generate interest in the series. This included weeks of sweepstakes giveaways sponsored by AOL. The grand prize was a trip for four to Japan. This gameshow approach was accompanied by more conventional means of generating interest for a cartoon series. These included behind-the-scenes model sheets, sneak peeks of the series, and exclusive Cartoon Orbit cToons. At last, on August 10, 2001, *Samurai Jack* debuted on Cartoon Network. The world was introduced to the world of Jack in a three-part special titled "The Beginning." So sincere was the impact of the series that not only did the premier receive tremendous critical attention and praise, it also won a quartet of award nominations, and was isolated in the form of special release VHSs and DVDs on March 19, 2002 (Flaherty 2002). After fifty-two episodes of *Samurai Jack* spanning four thirteen-episode seasons, Genndy and his team put down their brushpens and moved on to pursue other projects (Red Carpet Report 2017). Audiences bade farewell to Jack in a four-episode marathon which aired on September 25, 2004. This sense of abruptness was intentional. The original four-season run was purposefully left conclusively inconclusive (Anderson 2015). According to Genndy,

> coming close to [the end of] the fourth season, we're like, 'are we gonna finish it?' And I didn't know … The network didn't know, they were going through a lot of transitions also. So I decided, you know, I don't want to rush and finish the whole story, and so we just left it like there is no conclusion and then [the final episode is] just like another episode" to which Art director Scott Wills added, "we didn't have time to think about it, because we went right into *Clone Wars*. They even overlapped, I think. There was no time to even think about it."
>
> (Red Carpet Report 2017)

This openendedness was but one of two main ways Genndy, his team, and the Network had in mind in terms of concluding the series. A cancelled film intended to tie up the narrative of the series had, under the direction,

management, and financing of four separate studios, been in addled development for some time (Yehl 2016). The first inklings of a *Samurai Jack* live-action feature film, to be produced by Cartoon Network in association with New Line Cinema, emerged as early as 2002 (Seibert 2009). In a 2006 interview, Genndy noted how he was relieved at the fact that this particular live-action version of *Samurai Jack* never came to fruition, stating that the story and an *animated* feature film would be produced under his auteurship or not at all (Adler 2006). Genndy is a staunch guardian not only of his original IPs, but also of the medium of 2D animation and its capabilities, offering a sincere protectiveness of animation in general as noted in his comments, critiques, and concerns over the denaturing force of studio interest in (against) *Samurai Jack* in his interview with Chelsea Stark for *Polygon*, for example:

> For a little while, they wanted to make *Samurai Jack* either a live-action movie or an animated movie and they came in with movie rules. That's what that was about. And basically, you have to follow the formula when you're making a movie. And I said, "But everything that brought you here to want this project, you want me to get rid of. So how does that make any sense?
>
> (Stark 2019)

The sincerity of Genndy's attachment to the series, the characters, and the world he and his team created here is not fanatical or even particularly vociferous. However, it is present, steadfast, and quietly adamant, not unlike Jack himself. In 2007, Fred Siebert announced that the burgeoning studio Frederator Films was in the process of developing a *Samurai Jack* movie. The feature was to incorporate stereoscopic 2D and be produced under a total budget of 20 million dollars (Seibert 2007, 2009). In 2009, Siebert added fuel to the fire of expectation and trepidation in announcing that the film was to be co-produced by J. J. Abrams' famous Bad Robot Productions (Seibert 2009). Three years later, Sony Pictures Entertainment also expressed an interest in developing an original *Samurai Jack* feature. That same year, Genndy told IGN that the film was in preproduction, stating

> I've been trying so hard every year, and the one amazing thing about Jack is that I did it in 2001, you know, and it still survived. There's something about it that's connected with people. And I want it, it's number 1 on my list, and now Bob Osher, the president, is like "Hey, let's talk about Jack. Let's see what we can do." And I go, "You're going to do a 2D feature animated movie?" and he's like, "Yeah. Maybe. Let's do some research and let's see." So it's not dead for sure by any means, and it's still on the top of my list, and I'm trying as hard as I can.
>
> (Chapman 2012)

Following the death of the iconic Mako Iwamastu (the original voice of Aku), and a host of other setbacks, minor and major both, the *Samurai Jack* feature film was never realized. Instead, a third way emerged in terms of concluding the series, namely a fifth and final season (Loughrey 2016).

Samurai Jack returned to television over twelve years after its fourth season concluded, with the first episode of its fifth season airing on Adult Swim on March 11, 2017. Produced at Cartoon Network Studios and Williams Street with Tartakovsky as executive producer, the fifth and final season features more mature elements and a cohesive narrative arc that concludes Jack's journey through/out of time (Viscardi 2017). The story takes place fifty years after Jack was cast into the future. In a state of ardent depression and seemingly inescapable despair caused by the years of ceaselessly fighting Aku and from Aku's destruction of the remaining time portals, Jack—who has not aged as a side effect of time-travel—is haunted by warped visions of himself, of his family, and of an enigmatic, deathly warrior on horseback. In the fifth season, Phil LaMarr reprises his role as Jack, with Greg Baldwin providing the voice of Aku, as Mako, who voiced the character in the show's first four seasons, died before the revival was produced.

As I suggested, perhaps obliquely in the previous **part**, maybe a truer measure of sincerity has far less to do with the intentionality, skill, and praxes of the auteur or her team and rather the impact, in terms of legacy, their work engenders. Since its debut in 2001, just after the turn of the new millennium, *Samurai Jack* has become a mainstay of global visual and popular culture. While "Of All Time" lists may not be absolutely foolproof means of assaying the quality and impact of a piece of art, they oftentimes do serve as helpful indexes of impact. In 2004, for example, the British broadcaster Channel 4 conducted a poll of the 100 greatest cartoons of all time. *Samurai Jack* placed 42nd, within the top 50 of all time, a series made *after* the millennium (Channel 4 2005). More impressive an achievement perhaps in terms of rankings is the fact that the series placed 11th on IGN's 2006 Top 25 Primetime Animated Series of All Time list (IGN 2006). The new Ur-aggregator of critical and public opinion Rotten Tomatoes has given the series a 93 percent approval rating. Lauded critics, such as RogerEbert.com's Matt Zoller Seitz, describe the series in no uncertain terms, as a masterwork of visual style and exemplary American animated television, alongside Genny'd work on *Clone Wars* (Seitz 2014). According to Seitz:

> [A]lthough Tartakovsky is a good storyteller, in a silent-movie sort of way—expressing what's happening moment-to-moment through picture and sound rather than in dialogue—I never watched either of these programs for their plots, and I don't re-watch them for narrative, either. I re-watch them for the same reason that I visit art museums,

> attend live concerts, and pause during journeys from point A to point B in New York to watch dancers, acrobats, or street musicians: because I appreciate virtuosity for its own sake. And that's what Tartakovsky's Clone Wars and Samurai Jack give you, scene for scene and shot for shot … [T]he plot was never the point. It was always about the visual music that Tartakovsky, his designers, and his animators created onscreen.
>
> (Seitz 2014; Seitz and Sepinwall 2016)

Seitz would later include the series as an honorable mention after the ten greatest television series *in toto* in his and Alan Sepinwall's 2016 text *TV (The Book)*. While it would appear that *Samurai Jack*, its diegetic worlds, characters, aesthetic, and narratives are inextricable from post-millennium popular and visual culture, Genndy notes how

> Jack didn't really become popular until after [it aired]. It grew its audience so slowly. And they used to tell me when the DVDs came out, they were like, it's so weird every month, we sell more DVD's, and that's very unusual. And then basically, I think what that meant is there was word of mouth, like some people discovered it, they told their friends and they did … and they bought and so it went on and on like this. So by the time we get to 2011 or '12, there's like a fever. And no matter where I went in the world, it was all about *Samurai Jack*."
>
> (Stark 2019)

Sincerity oftentimes also takes the form of homage. Consider only the 3D animated feature *Kung Fu Panda* by DreamWorks Animation and their use of a stylized 2D opening sequence in the *style* of *Samurai Jack* (Garrett 2008).

No greater summation of the brilliance of both creator and show most likely has been written in reference to *Samurai Jack* than that of Perlmutter (2014), which I will quote in full:

> *Samurai Jack* is a superbly executed series that proves Tartakovsky is one of the living masters of the art of animation. Unlike so many other series of the time, which place a priority on dialogue and sound to carry stories, this series' story-telling is almost exclusively visual in a way not seen since the silent-film era. Influenced by both Japanese *anime* and the stylized Disney feature animation of the 1950s, Tartakovsky highlights the visual elements of his series in a way that is impossible for the viewer to ignore. Even simplistic-seeming material, such as having raindrops fall on a flower, is directed in such a way that its importance to the story is always maximized. Due to the above-noted issues of presentation, Tartakovsky tends to limit the most "violent" aspects of the series to cinematic fight sequences, but he builds toward them in such a way that they are the

> centrepiece of the stories, not simply a cheaply contrived excuse for the characters to drop the gloves with each other, as can happen on other series. Tartakovsky's work on *The Powerpuff Girls* had shown him how to balance action and story, and he applied this philosophy to *Samurai Jack*.
>
> (Perlmutter 2014: 333)

In the next part of the chapter, let us explore just how and why this may be.

* * *

3.2 BACK TO THE FUTURE: GENNDY THE BRICOLEUR, AND *SAMURAI JACK* AS RETROFUTURISM

If there is one single aesthetic style or ethic brought to bear in the visualization of the future-past/past-future of *Samurai Jack*, "retrofuturism" would certainly be in the conversation. Central to Genndy's audiovisual deployment thereof is a specifically dystopian retrofuturism in the show's themes, narrative approaches, and various design elements. What is retrofuturism? A term coined by Lloyd Dunn, retrofuturism "describes an 'ambivalent fascination' with past utopian visions of the future. In cultural production, retro futurism describes a distanced interest in past visions of the future" (Latham 2009: 340; Sharp 2011: 25). According to Sharp, the persistence of "the pervasiveness of retro futurism can also be attributed to the perception of the acceleration of historical time. That is, the persistence of retro futurism is a by-product, in part, of a new phase of global media communication technologies that have altered the perception of time and space" (Sharp 2011: 27). Relatedly, Rosenberg and Harding offer a detailed explication of the relationship between time and retrofuturism that is helpful here:

> historical time appears to be accelerating because "the event" and its representation, immediacy and its mediation, have moved increasingly toward "simultaneity". Similar to the way that history seems "to happen right now", producing "a novel form of historical consciousness" in Sobchack's view, the acceleration of historical time results in a perception that we are racing towards the future. In this way, retro futurism, which nostalgically appeals to familiar and comfortable images of the past to assuage uncertainty about the future, figures as a mechanism for dealing with this acceleration of historical time. Retrofuturism points to "a crisis in modern futurity", in which futures seem to be coming and going at an accelerated pace.
>
> (Rosenberg and Harding 2005: 6)

According to Kodowo Eshun, the politics of retrofuturism are such that their manifestation can represent an inversion of the avant-garde revolt "against a power structure that relied on control and representation of the historical archive" whereby instead "the powerful employ futurists and draw power from the futures they endorse, thereby condemning the disempowered to live in the past. The present moment is stretching, slipping for some into yesterday, reaching for others into tomorrow" (Eshun 2003: 289).

When transposed to the world of *Samurai Jack*, Eshun's assertions take on a broader thematic significance when one considers the disequilibrium in temporal power expressed between Jack and Aku. For Aku, temporal manipulation also gives the shape-shifter *time-shifting* capabilities. This allows his influence to not only stretch and slip into stark yesteryears and as such necessarily influence the hazy future and with it, the shapes of things to come, but the latent effect of all Aku's manipulations of time—for various reasons, primarily resource extraction on multiple worlds in multiple times—is condemning Jack to literally and figuratively live in the past. All his actions, learning, sacrifice, honor, victories, losses, friendships, the entire agglomeration of the predicates of his character and identity is entirely retrofuturistic in nature. Everything Jack *is, was, or becomes* harkens to a past that, based on Aku's omni-temporal abilities, never was. In this sense, Aku can be described as a powerful futurist. Jack, in this way, is neither a romantic nor a rebel. He is a nostalgic.

One of the greatest strengths of Genndy's thematic, narrative, and aesthetic sensibility is its underlying sense of play, omni-genre awareness, overall and successful prosecution of *bricolage*. Genndy has the uncanny ability to bring together seemingly antipodal or even clichéd ideas, styles, images, and symbols in a way that feels and reads as fresh, innovative, epic, exciting, humors, and tragic. This redux-ing of much of popular and visual culture makes Genndy not dissimilar to a remixer whereby music is substituted for still and moving images. The ethic of the remixer is the same ethic underpinning the ethic of the retrofuturist who "[rearranges] media into [their] own stories and memories" (Christopher 2014: 206). Genndy, like an audiovisual, pop, and visual culture sampler, produces a style of animation and auteurship with "a uniquely post-modern twist, turning [both] folk [and digital] heritage into a living [art], something that transfers more than just DNA. Through sampling, [bricoleurs] can literally borrow the [art] that influenced them, [redraw] it, reuse it, rethink it, repeat it, recontextualize it" (Weingarten 2017).

Christopher Weingarten describes the *bricolage* ethic, which Genndy brings to bear in his entire oeuvre of original creations, as one of both seamless consumption and production of multiplicity. As a direct result, the work of bricoleurs like Genndy is

> saturated with allusions that we scarcely think about them as such. A viewing of any single episode of popular television shows *Family Guy*, *South Park*, or *Robot Chicken* yields references to any number of artifacts and cultural detritus past. Their humour relies in large part on the catching and interpreting of allusive references, on their audience sharing the same cultural memories.
>
> (Christopher 2014: 209–10)

For critics like Eleanor Heartney, post-modern *bricolage* of the type that bricoleurs, samplers, and artistic *glaneurs* (gleaners), like Genndy, engage in is contemptible in the last instance. Heartney's condemnation of this artistic ethic is predicated on a critique of bricolage's seemingly inextricable relationship with nostalgia. For Heartney, *bricolage* is ultimately little else but an engine for "the empty nostalgia of our mediated memories holds no original and no original context" (Heartney 1954: 26–30). However, I contend that while engaging with themes of nostalgia and its danger and oftentimes futility in a nuanced, and in some instances outrightly critical way, Genndy bypasses the mytho-ideology of the authenticity of originality by flinging his bricolages into retrofuturistic futures. In this way, both despite and even through nostalgically mediated conceptions of the future, one can create one's own retrofuturistic authenticity. And Genndy achieves precisely this effect with sincerity, style, reverence, humor, and creativity.

Ostensibly, similar perspectives concerning a retrofuturistic ethic have also famously been espoused by notable philosophers and critical theorists like Fredric Jameson who in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* refers to cognate approaches to art and its consumption as "the random cannibalization of the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion" (Jameson 1991: 18). However, in *Archaeolgies of the Future*, Jameson does acknowledge the role of "collage" (what I understand as *bricolage*) as a principle of organization in postmodern science fiction. It is particularly defined as "the bringing into precarious coexistence of elements drawn from very different sources and contexts, elements which derive for the most part from older literary models which amount to broken fragments of outworn older genres of the newer productions of the media (for example, comic strips)" (Jamesson 2005: 263). It is precisely in this way that *Samurai Jack* is heterotemporal, but it achieves its heterotemporality through the collage of audiovisual styles.

Similarly, Simon Reynolds levels a cognate critique against the perceived dangers of the latent indenturedness/indebtedness of and to nostalgia, and the oftentimes still sacrilized relationship between originality and creativity in contemporary late capital. Reynolds, who calls our obsession with reproductions of the past "retromania," draws a parallel between nostalgic record collecting and finance, calling the praxis, and what it indexes more broadly, "a hipster stock market based around trading in pasts, not futures," in which a crash is inevitable: "The world economy was brought down by derivatives and bad debt; music has been depleted of meaning through derivatives and indebtedness" (Reynolds 2011: 419–20).

In response, I assert that what Heartney and Reynolds fail to acknowledge in their respective critiques is the *sincerity* and the experiential and creative freedom permitted by the so-called impurity of bricolage. The inaccurate assumption made above is that bricolage is easy, a pseudo-random and lazy

slapping together of disparate parts whose unoriginality can be explained away as an affectation of style over substance. Such a view reduces the sense of labor, visual, and thematic acuity, the sensitivity to aesthetic, narrative, and thematic epochs, the various patterns in their respective contents, and a multitude of other necessarily ancillary skills and abilities that make a bricolage piece like *Samurai Jack* not only possible, but deeply resonant with viewers and critics alike. Therefore, I argue in response that what makes Genndy a genius is in part his ability to exploit the *impurity* of contemporary media to make something perhaps not altogether new, but certainly something truly *sincere*. He achieves this by embracing the messiness, the play, the vacuity of art and culture in the digital late capitalist zeitgeist in order to experiment in these spaces, with heart, technique, and imagination, to create something out of nothing, in this way. I invite you to hold Guy Debord's prescient (and in many ways ancient) insight in mind, namely that when it comes to the issues and debates of mass media, the entire confluence of texts, images, artifacts, and their spectacularization have no historical context, no stable memory (Debord 1994). Invariably, then, to pine for a time of authenticity and originality is not only a waste of time, in my view, but itself a type of nostalgic indebtedness/indenturedness to a past that never existed *in principium*. It is, in the last instance, impossible to be a purist when nothing is pure.

It is important to state outrightly that there is an important and difficult to define difference between bricolage and pastiche. I assert that *Samurai Jack* is "far from reflecting any simple nostalgia for the bygone; nor does it provide the basis for 'postmodern' pastiche" (Cunningham 2011: 53). *Samurai Jack*'s unique brand of retrofuturism is paradoxically original if even a cursory glance at its trend-setting effects and the very sense of nostalgia it itself has engendered among audiences that was strong enough to precipitate the retrofuturistic (re)creation of the world in a fifth season that concluded the narrative in the past by going forward. In short, I believe that *Samurai Jack*'s "relation to the past" is far from "simple nostalgia," which, according to Cunningham, seems to equal a cheap sentimentality that exploits the emotions of loss and hope (Cunningham 2011: 53). Rather, *Samurai Jack* constructed a cultural and historical space that worked as an imaginary, both utopian and nostalgic refuge; one that sincerely acknowledges the fact that "nostalgia as a complex concept since it resonates with numerous ways of relating to the past, ranging from personal melancholy and home-sickness to a wide variety of forms of identity-making, retro-culture, entertainment, and the politics of memory" (Grönholm 2015: 373).

What Genndy is able to do is based on his understanding of what retrofuturism opens up for both creators and consumers alike. It is an insight imbedded in his entire aesthetic approach, which is not dissimilar to Susannah Radstone's important description of the relationship between nostalgia and progress, forward force contra backward gaze. For Radstone,

nostalgia is not an antithesis of modernism and progress, as it is so often understood. Rather, nostalgia, especially in its "creative mode," appears to be an alternative future, built into the core of modernity and modernism itself. Nostalgia brings to the surface alternative narratives and images from the past to which we feel attracted and in that way, it helps us adapt to ongoing changes in our present (Radstone 2007: 112–16). Similarly, for Svetlana Boym, nostalgia brings to the surface not only discontent with the present but also contemporary fantasies that can carry hope, utopian aspirations, and the seeds of change (Boym 1996: 512).

Boym provides a basic framework of not only thinking about nostalgia and its relationship to creativity and retrofuturism themselves, but, when transposed, how their underpinnings have a latent connection to Genndy himself as a Third Culture Kid. Boym divides nostalgic experiences into two main categories: utopian and ironic. According to her, utopian nostalgia derives from personal sensations of loss and longing toward a certain place or time. The object of nostalgic desire may be the childhood home, the motherland or a period of time that is impregnated with positive experiences and memories.

Utopian nostalgia expresses an endeavor in which the experience of *return* is central; it can be motivated by both emotional (recreation and pleasure) and/or cognitive (self-understanding) needs. Boym holds that the meaning and significance of the utopian type of nostalgia lies in its powerful restorative potential; nostalgia can reconstruct self-image and identity. Furthermore, utopian nostalgia does not limit itself to the individual sensations of yearning, familiarity, and identification but also covers the projections of the unrealized aspirations and shared hopes of the collective. According to Boym, restorative and utopian nostalgia is constructed upon absolute truths and underlines the timelessness of its subject (Boym 1996).

Here, Genndy's immigration from Russian affluence to American struggle, the change in sociocultural and socioeconomic station upon arrival in the United States, his sense and experience of abjection and Otherness that influenced his psycho-emotional landscape and therefore necessarily that which he literally and figuratively drew from this space, the death of his mother, struggling to provide for his remaining family and putting himself through school—these personal features would certainly serve to color not only the utopian aspects of the themes, aesthetics, and narratives Genndy produced (many of which are in fact the opposite, namely dystopian in nature), but rather influenced perhaps his utopian perspective toward art *itself* and the space of the imagination, as well as the tension between themes and concepts orbiting "escape" and "return."

In contrast to utopian nostalgia, ironic nostalgia is not bound to any time or place. According to Boym, the subject of ironic nostalgia is the sense of the distance itself; ironic nostalgia does not build on identification but on the experience of liberation and detachment. Ironic nostalgia is

reflective, singular, and personal; a strong collectively shared identity cannot be constructed upon that. However, the experience of alienation can be a source of artistic creativity and a foundation for a way of living. Apart from utopian nostalgia, ironic nostalgia contests all absolute truths and it does not maintain hope for the betterment of the world (Boym 1996: 512). Thus, ironic nostalgia can be understood as an extreme self-criticism that acknowledges the fragmented and subjective nature of the (post)modern narrative of identity and avoids attachment to any places and times said or sought to subtend or substantiate it (Grönholm 2015: 376).

In *Samurai Jack*, both forces come together, through Genndy's personal experiences on the one hand, and through his alchemization of the same through his work, to create a paradoxically detached referentiality, a liberated historicity, a hopeful dystopianism, on the other. In this sense, Genndy and by extension his work, are neither *fully* nostalgic (both ironically and utopian) nor fully retrofuturistic, neither are either fully bound to the ethic of futurism. Instead, both work and artist (re)deconstruct and draw from all three approaches. Genndy's work could be described in the same way Guffy describes the differences between utopian nostalgia, retrofuturism, and their distinction from futurism. According to Guffy, retrofuturism

> builds on the futurist' fevered visions of space colonies with flying cars, robotic servants, and interstellar travel but while futurists tool the promise of progress for granted, retro-futurism emerged as a more skeptical reaction. Indeed, retro- futurism makes no predications, nor can it be associated with claims for truth or honesty. Put simply, retro-futurism is a half-nostalgic, half-sentimental memorializing of popular futurism. It remains a sensibility, rather than a plan of action.
>
> (Guffy 2014: 254)

This reading, when transposed to the text in question, is, I propose, perhaps the most succinct and accurate description of Genndy's *style* on *Samurai Jack*, but also his style in general.

It is from these past visions of the future that Genndy draws from to not only create a world or worlds for his intrepid samurai to traverse, fight in, struggle, and learn, but also the atmospheres, images, styles, aesthetics, and general feel filling these worlds as well. In this sense, *Samurai Jack* is necessarily retrofuturistic in all ways if

> retrofuturism uses iconic imagery of previous visions of the future, such as jet packs, homes of tomorrow, ray guns and other space age manifestations of technological progress, because our sense of the future is often inflected with a sense of nostalgia for imaginings of the future that never materialized.
>
> (Sharp 2011: 25)

Genndy uses the seemingly inexhaustible creative potential of 2D animation to reify this nostalgia, but also to add to it, to re-imagine it, disrupt it, and in certain respects improve it. As a result, Genndy's brand of retrofuturism is not sequestered to a suburban and corporate "sense of nostalgia […] for yesterday's future," but rather a dynamically, pseudo avant-garde experimentalism to reify imaginings of the future using the ostensibly retro medium of 2D animation (Spigel 2001: 382). Here, Sharp's description of retrofuturism is importantly applicable to Genndy's approach to the same: "While retro futurism is frequently figured through representation of past iconic visions of the future, it is more than just a stylistic merging of past and future or a manifestation of Fredric Jameson's postmodernism as pastiche of anachronistic historical styles" (Sharp 2011: 26).

In view of the resuscitation of *Samurai Jack* in a fifth season, as well as rumors concerning the potential resurrection of the egregiously short-lived *Sym-Bionic Titan*, it could be argued that Genndy and his work have become swept up the same phenomena Scott Bukatman has described concerning media consumption and late capitalist audiences. Bukatman purported back in 2003 that contemporary audiences have entered a "seemingly inexhaustible period of meganostalgia" marked by an "obsessive recycling of the past," specifically in response to the psycho-emotional, political, economic, and ecological *angoisse* produced by the sense that the future is no longer distant and unattainable but has already arrived, and it is neither what we expected nor wanted (Bukatman 2003: 14).

Genndy takes advantage of the fact of what David Harvey and McLuhan describe as the compression of time and space in the hyperacceleration of contemporary communications technology which allows for the instantaneous sharing of images, as well as the superimposition of disparate spaces upon one another. This is the ethic of bricolage, of reterritorializing not only images, but also ideas, feelings, effects, affects, iconography, narrative, symbolic, aesthetic, and thematic elements to create something neither bound to that from which it draws, nor is entirely devoid of it either. In this sense, *Samurai Jack*, perhaps more so than any of Genndy's original works (although *Dexter* draws on tropes and stereotypes recirculated and disseminated in and by pop and visual culture), compresses time and space to develop an image of the future that is neither fully past, familiar, or iconic, that is strangely, uncannily (in the sense of *unheimlich*) Other to the imagined futures it deconstructs and re-imagines (Rosenberg and Harding 2005: 6).

Many of the tropes and stereotypes Genndy re-imagines or draws from are retrospective in that they gesture to historical periods, leitmotifs, iconography, themes, and narrative aspects throughout *Samurai Jack*. Season 1, Episode 5 "Jack in Space" (aired August 27, 2001) is an example of how Genndy uses the series to directly engage in the tropes of sci-fi/adventure films such as *Apollo 13*, *Armageddon*, *Europa Report*, *The Martian*,

and *First Man*. Almost in the complete opposite temporal and thematic direction, Season 1, Episodes 9 and 10 "Jack under the Sea" and "Jack and the Lava Monster" (aired September 3 and October 12, 2001, respectively) both draw on both Norse, Atlantean, and Theosophical (Edward Bulwer-Lytton's subterranean adventure *The Coming Race* specifically) historico-mythologies (Tartakovsky 2001). Season 1, Episode 12 "Jack and the Gangsters" (aired November 26, 2001) shows that Genndy's interests and range of influences are far broader than that which is limited to mythology (Tartakovsky 2001). In this episode, Genndy draws on the mobster, pre-Noir gangster and hardboiled tropes, while Season 2, Episode 1 "Jack Learns to Jump Good" (aired March 1, 2002) presents the viewer with overt and more subtle allusions to both *Tarzan* and *Planet of the Apes*.

In terms of other pop and visual culture references he avails himself of, in Season 2, Episode 3 "Jack and the Smackback" (aired March 15, 2002), Genndy relies in part on the gladiatorial/death-match tropes made famous by films such as *Spartacus*, *Gladiator*, and their retrofuturistic interpretations in *The Hunger Games*, *The Running Man*, and *Mad Max: Thunderdome* (Tartakovsky 2002).

The series' references include interpellations of cryptozoological creatures as well. Season 2, Episode 8 "Jack and the Dragon" (aired September 6, 2002) sees Genndy draw on the convention of the dragon-warrior action-adventure team up made popular in contemporary pop and visual culture by films such as *Dragonheart*, *Reign of Fire*, and *How to Train Your Dragon* (Tartakovsky 2002). One particular trope that recurs quite often throughout the series is that of the bounty-hunter. "Jack vs. the Five Hunters" (Episode 9, Season 2), "The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful" (Episode 3, Season 3), and "The Princess and the Bounty Hunters" (Episode 5, Season 4) all draw from the bounty hunter trope set to screen in such classic cinematic examples as *Repo Men*, *Star Wars-Return of the Jedi*, *Django Unchained*, *The Hateful Eight*, *The Good the Bad and the Ugly*, and *Pitch Black* (Tartakovsky 2002). Similarly, Season 4, Episode 11 "Tale of X49" (aired September 25, 2004) draws on the retired killer/hitman trope made famous in such texts as *This Gun Is for Hire*, *The Killers*, *La Samourai*, *Tokyo Drifter*, *A Fistful of Dollars*, *The Day of the Jackal*, *Yojimbo*, and later *Polar* and *John Wick*. In typical antipodal relation to the figure of the assassin or bounty hunter, "Jack and the Baby" (Episode 13, Season 4) draws on the trope of the solitary warrior forced to rupture their solitudinous ways by watching over a youthful ward, as seen in such classics from *Lone Wolf and Cub*, *Star Wars: Clone Wars*, to contemporary instantiations of the trope in critically lauded texts such as *Logan* (Tartakovsky 2004).

The truly impressive and imaginative scope of Genndy's referentiality naturally subtends humor. While Genndy avails himself of slapstick and situational humor in "Jack Is Naked" (Episode 11, Season 2) where the Episode's gags rely on the nudity of the titular hero who is subjected to the

observation of the beings he encounters, "Chicken Jack" (Episode 1, Season 3) uses anthropomorphism to prosecute the joke, relying also on the fish-out-of-water scenario but one taken to a greater extreme. In this episode, Jack is not merely naked, he is not even human. In this sense, in not being human, he is more naked than naked (Tartakovsky 2002).

No self-respecting pop and visual cultural bricoleur would consider a work as vast as *Samurai Jack* without even an oblique reference to the revenant. Here, "Jack and the Zombies" (Episode 4, Season 3) draws upon zombie tropes established and reproduced in everything from *Dawn of the Dead* to *Omega Man*, *Sean of the Dead*, *Zombieland*, *Resident Evil*, and *28 Days Later* (Tartakovsky 2002). Genndy extends his referentiality into more longstanding horror tropes as well. "Jack and Scarab" (Episode 5, Season 3) draws upon the haunted house trope, gazetted in such luminary works as *The Haunting*, *Haunting on Hill House*, *House!*, *The Others*, *Insidious*, *Poltergeist*, and *Amityville Horror* (Tartakovsky 2002).

Fear of the Other also manifests in the form of the figure of the extraterrestrial (which feature heavily in the *Jack* diegesis) is further explored in specific episodes. The trope of the sympathetic extraterrestrial seeking help after being marooned on Earth, expressed most iconically in texts ranging from *E.T.* to *K-Pax*, *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, to *The Arrival* is also taken up in numerous episodes. In terms of explorations of the Other, Genndy does not forbear gestures to more controversial literary and cinematic tropes of inclusion/exclusion. For example, Genndy draws on the white-man-in-Africa trope seen in texts such as *Tarzan* and *The African Queen* in "Young Jack in Africa" (Episode 12, Season 4) (Tartakovsky 2004). In this and other ways, some manifestations of Genndy's referentiality and retrofuturism are deconstructive. "Jack and the Annoying Creature" (Episode 7, Season 3), for example, shows that Genndy draws on and deconstructs more subtle genre tropes, in this case the annoying, bumbling, over-friendly sidekick similarly encountered in *Tintin* (Cptn. Haddock), *X-Men* (Toad), *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* (Dawn), *Pinky and the Brain* (Pinky), and *The New Adventures of Batman* (Batmite), *Power Rangers* (Alpha), for example.

Of course, it is plain to even the most sheltered viewer, that certain key texts in the broad genre umbrella of action-adventure find their way into the narrative and aesthetic approach to certain episodes in *Samurai Jack*. "Jack and the Labyrinth" (Episode 13, Season 3), for example, draws from the powered jewel-cum-booby-trapped course impeding its retrieval encountered in everything from *Indiana Jones* to *Relic Hunter* (Tartakovsky 2003). More personally for Genndy, the Mecha trope, established most consistently in anime from *Gundam* to *Evangelion*, is one the auteur avails himself of—a trope he touches on in *Dexter* and one that acts as the basis of the entirety of *Sym-Bionic Titan*—and finds expression in "Robo-Samurai vs. Mondobot" (Episode 2, Season 4) (Tartakovsky 2003). Similarly, Genndy's fascination

with the Bushido Code finds a concentrated expression in "Samurai vs. Samurai" (Episode 3, Season 4) (Tartakovsky 2003).

Some of Genndy's references are not primarily visual. "Jack and the Rave" (Episode 2, Season 3), for example, illustrates quite clearly the unencumbered scope of Genndy's influences, in terms of media and/or genre (Tartakovsky 2002). Here, as he does in *Dexter*, Genndy avails himself of the "vibe," so to speak, of contemporary music itself, as well as its subtending ancillaries, including dances, scenes, subcultures, lingo, and attires. Similarly, and even more abstractly, "The Four Seasons of Death" (Episode 10, Season 4) draws on the quartet of atmosphere, mood, style, and scope seen or expressed in other media, such as Antonio Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* (Tartakovsky 2004).

Aku's Earth: A Heterotopia of Timeless Artistic Ideas

In his essay "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopia," French thinker Michel Foucault discusses the concept of heterotopia by providing and analyzing various styles and principles thereof. While giving no clear definition of a heterotopia to encapsulate a latent principle subtending all six forms or instantiations of heterotopia he discusses, I offer the following working definition: *heterotopias are spaces wherein which the typified onto-existential, sociopolitical, and cultural praxes, as well as all flows of biopower, of a given culture break down at most, or are renegotiated at least*. Here, the term "heterotopia" describes the human geographical phenomena of spaces and places that function in non-hegemonic ways or conditions. Heterotopic spaces are, therefore, spaces of otherness, liminality, fusion, confusion, play, and dynamism. They can, furthermore, hybridize various modalities and states of matter, they can be physical and ephemeral simultaneously like the space of a telephone call or one's reflection in the mirror (Foucault 1984).

As Chapter 2's analysis of *Dexter's Lab* showed, Genndy's respective diegeses oftentimes act as a mirror for/of the auteur. A personal mirror in and through which the make-up of Genndy's psycho-emotional and personal memories and feelings, born of a variety of sociopolitical and cultural changes, boons, and mischances, are re-drawn and re-imagined. This is equally true of *Samurai Jack* in which Genndy subjects his entire experience as a TCK, along with all the pop and visual culture he consumed, to a sense of heterotopic dynamism and admixture, Otherness, boundary and genre-crossing, stylistic fusion, flair, and play. In this sense, the multi-genre world of *Samurai Jack* is in itself a narrative and aesthetic heterotopia.

By this I mean that Genndy uses the idea of a despotic dystopia as an artistic and thematic space of play; a play sustained and encouraged by the heterotopic nature of Genndy's style more broadly. In the magic realism of this world, he *mixes* together various disparate epochs, tropes, leitmotifs, genres, issues, and debates. This is a multimodal, multigestural approach. It precipitates, for example, the co-existence of mythological beings and advanced technology, which itself takes the form of a visual representation of the concept of the "ancient future" at play at many pivotal moments throughout the series and, in fact arguably underpinning it. Another important aspect of this aesthetic heterotopicality pertains to the concepts of an industrial underworld/otherworld in which squalor, crime, refugees, and fugitives vie for power and survival *beneath* or *beside* the hegemonic rule of Aku. These other spaces also exist in the series as secret places of sanctuary, such as the Shaolin temple where Jack learns kung fu (heterotopias within heterotopias). Furthermore, spaces within spaces that represent nature beyond corruption also exist in the *Samurai Jack* diegesis as anti-sites of Aku's hegemony (Tartakovsky's treatment of jungles, mountains, plains, and oceans untouched by Aku's evil and/or outside his quasi-omniscience fulfill this role).

Of all the specified forms of heterotopia Foucault describes, the one most pertinent to any discussion of *Samurai Jack* is the heterotopia of *time*. Foucault describes heterotopias of time as heterotopias of indefinitely *accumulating* time, for example, museums and libraries, in whose spaces objects from various points of time are brought together and though existing in time, are shielded from temporal decay by virtue of being housed therein. Museums and libraries are heterotopias in which time does not necessarily stop, but rather represent a "will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place" (Foucault 1984: 7). In this way, heterotopias of time are spaces wherein which objects from varying points of time (not unlike the spatial flux inaugurated, curated, and sustained by a garden, for example) can be physically dislodged from their original chronotopes. A second type of heterotopia of time concerns the opposite of infinity, namely, the brevity of time. Foucault refers to this as "the mode of the festival" (Foucault 1984: 7). Foucault chooses the fairground as an example of such a space, one that accumulates heteroclite objects and praxes which stand idle for the duration of the year, save on specified days/weeks where they teem with activity, albeit only for a truncated period of time.

Time, in its various modes, is central to *Samurai Jack*. However, in the series' multiform genre-crossing, stylistic experimentation, and narrative depth, it is easy to sometimes forget that the series is, in essence, about time-travel and *through* it, the ardors of time, home, love, journeying, loss, family, and many other themes besides. However, the show itself can and

must be thought of as temporally heterotopic. Like a museum-studio/studio-library, *Samurai Jack* brings together numerous genres, approaches, tropes, stereotypes culled from a range of cognate as well as seemingly antipodally disparate epochs and genres to form a pop culture library within pop culture, in this way; from the poeticism of the distant horizon *a la* Akira Kurosawa and David Lean in episodes like Season 2, Episode 12 "Jack and the Spartans," to the 1920s noir inflected Season 1, Episode 12 "Jack and the Gangsters" that relies in theme, narrative, and aesthetic on the seedy violence and organized crime of 1920s film noir tropes (Tartakovsky 2001). While Foucault's description of heterotopias of time suggests a latently preservative function, one predicated on a type of staticity, the opposite is true in *Samurai Jack*. The brio, speed, sincere attention to detail and expression of genre appreciation makes the series latently operate as a merger of both forms of heterotopic temporality Foucault describes. The series culls, reterritorializes, collates, and curates myriad aesthetic, narrative, and thematic times, epochs, forms, and tastes while simultaneously doing so in precisely *brief* episodic form. In this sense, the accrual of time is limited to episodic runtime, each episode, in a way acting as a brief 20 minute festival celebrating, engaging with, and re-imagining heteroclite artistic objects and sources thereof. The accumulation of these episode-festivals produces a series, a series which itself *in toto* can be read as a library or museum of organized multi-genre art.

A Hero on a Journey: Jack and the Hero's Journey

The "silent warrior" archetype has many storied examples in contemporary media. Even a cursory comparison between Jack and this type reveals many parallels between *Samurai Jack* and Westerns, Silent Films (both commercial and art-house), Science Fiction, and Samurai Films such as *Once Upon a Time in the West*, *Yojimbo*, *Star Wars*, *Logan's Run*, and *Mad Max*. To perform a close reading of such similarities in each of the aforesaid genres is beyond the remit of this analysis. Instead, here I will look at Jack's relation to the structure of the hero's journey and the Classic Monomyth. While on the surface of it, a comparison of Jack with the concept of the wandering warrior using, say, Max—who is portrayed as a post-modern redux of the archetype of the roving bandit in the tradition of the ronin, cowboy, or highwayman, can also be likened to Kuwabatake Sanjuro, the wandering master swordsman in *Yojimbo* (1961) or "The Man with No Name," the expert shot in *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964)—seems most obvious, it is the time-traveling ronin aspects of John Connor of the *Terminator* franchise

that makes for a more accurate comparison. Therefore, I will also compare Jack to John, both being expert survivalists who intercede in the oppressive regimes of fife-communities overseen by resource-hoarding overlords *across time*.

Jack against the Classic Monomyth

In view of the series' undeniable sense of style and flair, it is easy to overlook the essential fact that narratively speaking, the show is strangely atypically archetypal. Its governing précis, namely that of the mostly silent lone warrior traveling the land, engaging in duels, rescuing the helpless and the downtrodden, searching for a way home as well as the destruction of evil incarnate, is largely in keeping with narrative cycle-structure known as the *Classic Monomyth*. The entire narrative structure of the series conforms to the pattern of the Classical Monomyth put forward in Joseph Campbell's study of world mythology in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), a somewhat contested universal or archetypal plot for heroic narratives and action in classical mythology from cultures across the world. The pattern, at its core, is as follows:

> A hero ventures from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.
>
> (Campbell 1949: 80)

Classical examples of such a journey include those found in classic Occidental mytho-religious, legendary, and folkloric tales such as Hercules and the Twelve Labours, and Aeneas in the Underworld.

Across the series' first four seasons, Jack's story follows this pattern albeit with certain caveats. One of the central ideas behind Campbell's pattern is the hero/heroine's return and reintegration into/within the place and people of their birth. Yet, for Jack, the combination of the transtemporal malignancy of Aku's destructive evil and the samurai's pervasive displacement in time means that there is potentially no home or people to return to. Moreover, pinpointing the precise point in time to which to return to in order to ensure that the evil of Aku never has a chance to rise is a delicate point that is scarcely dealt with in the series' first four seasons but is, within the remit of the show's time-travel structure, a vital point nonetheless. Therefore, all the knowledge, wisdom, and experience Jack accrues literally and figuratively over (as in both across and skipping beyond) time serve only either himself,

or those people he directly saves and their respective societies/communities in the future. Here, Jack's inability to *complete* the heroes' journey by returning to his present, which is the past, makes the lone samurai a representation of what we could call the *disrupted* Monomyth. In this way, Jack exemplifies what Roger Abrahams calls the major type of American popular hero, that is, the hero-as-outsider:

> they exist apart from society because of the variance of their vision of what life should be from that of the city or town dweller [which is exacerbated in the difference between the comparatively bucolic/agrarian city-state and the hyperreal ecumenopolis across time both of which Jack experiences]; they must fabricate their own ethos and carry it around with them wherever they go. Because of their unbounded optimism, clear-sightedness and essential egotism whenever this ethos collides with society's, that of the hero prevails … whenever they enter a community, one can predict they will find its wound and cleanse it before they leave … They not never marry, they never find the real heroic culminating in death. They are permanently stuck in the hero role.
>
> (Abrahams 1966: 359)

In view of the narrative and aesthetic centrality of Jack's temporal displacement, this results in a permeative existential staticity, a never ending Today in which the decisive conclusions of either victory, defeat, or death remain intrinsically unavailable to the warrior, regardless of how close he comes to either or all three. Over four seasons, the viewer observes and concludes that in terms of his desire to undo the evil of Aku and return to not necessarily *his* time but *a* time in which the evil of Aku does not nor cannot exist, Jack cannot succeed, nor can he die and so the trials of the samurai's journey are essentially, fundamentally inconclusive.

What is the purpose of this myth? Why is it so ostensibly pervasive and diffuse in Global collective unconsciousness, ancient, and contemporary alike? The myth centralizes aspects of a fantastical journey that essentialize and reenforce the reproduction and maintenance of social bonds and the values and identities of whichever culture the hero represents. This is achieved through the myth and its structure which highlights "rites of initiation, in which persons depart from their community, undergo trials, and later return to be integrated as mature adults who can serve [the community] in new ways" (Jewett and Lawrence 1977: 6). In Jack's case, this takes the form of international travel, in which the hero enters, learns, and experiences different cultures all for one purpose: to prepare his mind, body, and spirit to challenge, defeat, and prevent the evil of Aku from arising, spreading, and ruling. Jack's journey is a preparatory one. One that psychologically and physically trains or prepares the hero for the task of a permanent social responsibility.

Lessons of a Call to Adventure: The Beginning of Jack's Journey

But how does Jack's journey actually begin? What is the origin of the journey, in its narrative and aesthetic, predicated on? In many ways, the first four seasons of the *Samurai Jack* diegesis are a literalization of the hero's journey which features each stage save the last namely, the re-integration into society.[1] Genndy sublimates the hero's call to adventure into a broader thematic framework which I call "lessons learned," coupled with a latent suggestion of the "immigrant's experience," both of which emerge at the very beginning of the series.

Perhaps the overarching theme of Season 1, Episode 1, Part I of III—"The Beginning" (aired August 10, 2001) is not the exigency of the need to defeat Aku, which is self-evident, but rather the pricelessness and patience required to learn the requisite lessons on the journey toward that confrontation (Tartakovsky 2001). Genndy presents the opening moments of this episode in his trademarked combinatory way. Without dialogue, the crashing diegetic sound of rending Earth and crackling wood depicting what audiences do not yet know to be the actual *re*birth of Aku combine with a more focused aspect ratio, as well as the parting of the screen into three panels/frames. At 2.75:1 and 2.39:1, the overall effect lends the action a simultaneously comic book and cinematic feel.

The episode precipitates the hero's journey Jack will have to undertake by delving into the details of the origin of its catalyst, namely, a contextual foregrounding of the malignant evil of Aku. The rebirth/return of Aku is portrayed as the result of a literal eclipse of evil. Ironically, it is a type of fecund evil wherein which the paradox of Aku inheres in the fact that he is reborn to become un-life. And it is shown to be a difficult, frightening, and very audiovisually tactile birth. It is set to the expert use of sharp, crisp, albeit generic sound effects. What makes their deployment and use so effective is Genndy's phenomenal sense of timing, pairing the crackling of magical electricity and lightning with the excrescent, cancerous growths of Aku emerging from the scorched and desolate Earth that marks the site of his original imprisonment at the hands of the Lord of the land, Jack's father, the Emperor. Aku is framed wide, displaying Genndy's penchant for angular character design, particularly with regard to Aku's horns/antlers that form a black crown whose tines bend at similar angles as his broad black shoulders—themselves resembling the eaves of an Edo period *shiro* (castle). The impression is one of strange simultaneity.

On the one hand, this rebirth scene, whose purpose it is to impress upon the viewer the menace of Aku, does so startlingly, portraying the series' villain as a type of blight that will, unconquered, darken all he surveys. However, on the other hand, when Aku rotates to face the screen and

declare his return to the viewer and hint at the prehistory and preconditions of his initial entrapment/imprisonment, his bulging eyes and wide down-turned mouth are both disturbing and absurd, menacing and humorous. In this initial scene, without dialogue barring Aku's declaration of his return, Genndy draws the viewer in in two *combinatory* ways. The first pertains to the efficacy and power of his visual storytelling. The grandness of his scales, both of visual and figurative representation as well as sonic soundscapes, arrests the viewer and impresses upon her the severity and power of the return of this ancient evil being. But that being is also strange, absurd, almost goofy. The viewer looks on, her response oscillating between laughter and fear, an oscillation between morbidity and humor that can only be resolved or indeed further enjoyed if she continues watching.

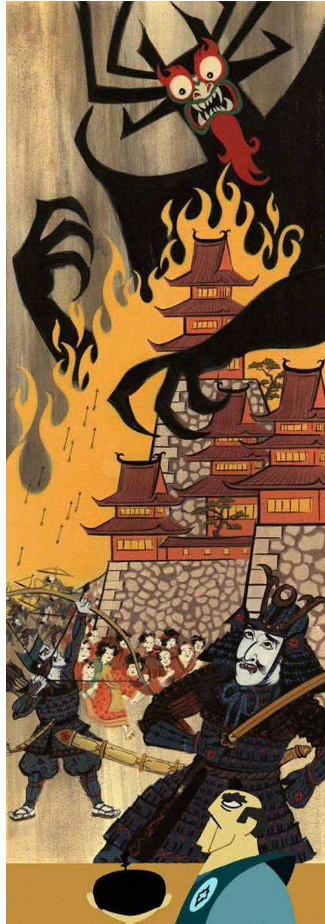

FIGURE 3.2 *Genndy's Intercultural Style of Aesthetic Exposition*

At this burgeoning point of the narrative, context is key. Context is typically, in most narrative structures, the province of exposition. Exposition is, however, also oftentimes a treacherous aspect of narrative. Too much and the openness for discovery, contemplation, and suspense are erased by inundation. The viewer sits bludgeoned with torrents of data, most of which they should discover through the unfolding of the narrative itself, by themselves. Too little and the viewer has scant bearings and less orientation going into the story, not knowing, even as an intimation, where it *might* veer and turn, what it *might* present or withhold. As seen in Figure 6.1, Genndy's use of Edo period water color woodblocks in the style of Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798–1861) as an expositional and narratively transitional tool has an extremely immersive effect, bringing the viewer into the world, and grounding its more fantastical elements, which almost immediately follow, within not only historical, but specifically *art* historical frames of reference. This ostensibly mixed-media introduction functions as both a diegetic and extradiegetic referent for the source/history of both Aku, and the entire series more broadly.

"The Beginning" attests to the sense of stylized *confluence* Genndy establishes as the overarching aesthetic ethos of the series. In this particular episode, particularly in the scene-setting opening exposition which takes the viewer not only on a tour through the history and *pre*-history of the series, but the aesthetic manifestations of that history, Genndy bases this entire expository moment of a confluence of Asian cultures. This *bricolage* also speaks to the range and depth of Genndy's own personal and artistic inspirations. Consider, for example, the fact that Jack's father's retainers are dressed and armored like Keshing warriors (imperial guards of Mongol royalty in the Mongul Empire, particularly for rulers such as Genghis Khan and his consort Börte) in the service of a Japanese king/emperor/shogun as his personal guard. Here is but one example of numerous instances and details of a masterful fusion of historical, aesthetic, and cultural cross-pollination that comes together to produce an aesthetic that is grounded by the sum of its constituent referents, but greater than any individual aspect thereof. In short, Genndy's sincerity and sense of play produce a world that feels both richly familiar, but simultaneously excitingly new.

The world the viewer is brought into features and indeed revolves around the perspective and experience of a young Jack, his father the emperor, his mother the empress and their entire kingdom, seen to be subject to beneficent rule. The emotional affectivity of the contrast between this paradisiacal rendering of the past, and its violent interruption by the demonic tyranny and wanton destruction of Aku makes its downfall keenly felt. In this way, the memory of a time and place free of the malignant evil of Aku is enriched and deepened by sorrow at the simultaneous recollection of its loss which, under Genndy's vision and technique, *feels* sincere, in the psycho-emotional weight of a nostalgia the viewer has for a diegetic place and time that never

were but *feel* real. In this way, Genndy imbues the diegetic milieu of the series, from its very beginning, with a sincere sense of history, of "world" (as the German ontologist Martin Heidegger might put it) which is both heavy and present to the viewer's psycho-emotional affectivity but also their imaginations.

The actual true origin of Aku is addressed in Season 3, Episodes 11 and 12 "The Birth of Evil" (aired August 16, 2003). It is interesting to note how Genndy goes about presenting the viewer with the full account of Aku's origin in this two-part narrative. The shape-shifting master of evil, with his concrete timbre, cadence, elocution, and overall personality is shown to have a rather abstract origin. Emerging from a Void in intergalactic space, Aku is shown to have always been a physically jagged entity, the consistency of Genndy's character design manifesting here in the character's origin and persisting through all the permutations of his shape-shifting, regardless of whether the form he assumes is anthropomorphic or not. In terms of consistency, it is also interesting to note how Genndy shows Aku to be both threatening *and* evil *in principium*. There is no tragic flaw or fall that precipitates Aku's denouement into evil. He is born/emerges into the diegetic universe of the series as being always-already evil and a threat needing expunging. From a nearby star, Egyptian, Norse, and Hindu gods ride out to meet and chase away the formless evil of Aku. Here again Genndy not only promulgates the presiding or recurrent theme of teamwork, but also aesthetic and thematic syncretism of sources from which he literally and figuratively draws.

To render the scale and intensity of the fraught cosmology of the series, Genndy once again employs cinematic 2.75:1 and 2.39:1 aspect ratio. He uses these cinematic ratios to revisit another recurrent theme here; namely, the *persistence* of evil *as* evil's true nature. While cutting off pieces of the formless evil, the trinity of gods do not notice that of those pieces—which are mostly shown to burn like embers at their edges and dissipate into nothingness—a single piece cools and remains intact. It hurtles through space, ostensibly inert, across vast leagues, ending up in the Sol system, and eventually prehistoric Earth. It crash lands on a facsimile of the ancient Jurassic past, and decimates the Earth, eradicating the dinosaurs as a comet, leaving in its wake a pit of oozing black tar, a fen, a living quagmire of pure evil from which the iconic Aku spires shoot out and up into the sky.

The entire origin of evil and the establishment of the *Samurai Jack* cosmology are completely without a single word of dialogue. Genndy shows his proclivity for using the 2D medium to prosecute perhaps the paradoxically incredible economic scale of the medium. Indeed, his cosmology is epic in scales of both time and space. It subtends prehistoric Earth, then follows the malignancy of Aku into the ice age in which early hominid bands encounter the evil of Aku, being separated, lost and ultimately consumed by it. Under Genndy's hand, evil is, at its core, about *time*. Over the ages of human history, Aku spreads like a tumor throughout the Earth, destroying animate

and inanimate objects alike. It destroys the land, enters, and devours whole villages, castles, kingdoms, their people, buildings, and livestock—all the way through time to Jack's father, mother, and his unborn self.

In the second part of the "The Birth of Evil," Genndy, manipulating the sense of physical scale, makes Aku appear to be kaiju-esque in size and scale of the destruction he unleashes on Jack's father's kingdom. Despite the seemingly inexhaustible and insurmountable threat Aku poses, the lesson or theme pursued throughout the episode is that of the power of the human spirit. Aided by the three gods from Part I, Jack's father is freed from his bondage to Aku and is taken (with the aid of magical beings like Sleipnir of Norse Mythology, Odin's eight-legged steed) to a temple above the clouds in which three monks reside. Using magical insight into his spirit, essence, and Will, they proceed to forge a magical sword from Jack's father's righteous energy. Arming him with the sword and a new suit of white armor, Jack's father rides a cloud (in the style of Sun Wukong, the Monkey King of the Hindu epic the Ramayana, and Song Dynasty legends) back into the apocalyptic tableaux of Aku's destruction to contend and do battle with him. Genndy symbolizes the scale of the conflict, the odds that righteousness faces in the world, by having an army of Akus, made up of parts of himself that spread and "infect" the armor of dead warriors on the field, face a

FIGURE 3.3 *The (Re)Birth of Aku*

FIGURE 3.4 *The Beginning of Aku's Reign of Terror*

single righteous man with a righteous blade. While much is often and rightly said about Genndy's visual prowess, this episode in particular showcases the auteur's sense of narrative forethought and planning as the banishment of Aku coincides perfectly with the birth of Jack. Throughout all his visual experimentation and artistic bravura, Genndy imbues every episode, even those that seem only tangentially related to the overarching premise of the series, with a sense of destiny.

Not only is this beginning episode crucial in its narrative and thematic approach, it is also essential in establishing Genndy's approach to style throughout the series to follow. While it is true that Genndy's animation is certainly stylized, a large proportion of that stylization depends on its synchronicity, *bricolage,* and syncretism. It seems a trite and perhaps even obvious observation to make. However, amidst the series' constant sonic, visual, and narrative stylizations—which can be described as stylization-through-simplification or abstraction whereby figurative fidelity to real life is eschewed and reworked in favor of evoking a sincere psycho-emotional response upon viewing the results thereof—the *detail* with which Genndy thinks through his style as well as presents it to the viewer risks being lost, paradoxically.

An essential part of the beginning of Jack's story pertains to both visual *and* sonic elements. Being that sound, more so than light and therefore color, is a matter of both space *and* time, it is interesting to consider Genndy's stylizations in the episode that include the sonic profile of the series and establish the use of generic sounds—rending, twisting metal, snapping wood, falling rock, crackling fire, the whine of a rising explosion, Wilhelm-esque screams cutting through the cacophonic arrangement of chaos and clamor, the clash of weapons in pitched battle—at once is both so startling and *cartoonish* and yet, their use is so expertly deployed and, more importantly, *timed*.

Amidst all this narrative and aesthetic flair, what is the place and role of sincerity in this opening? Sincerity is often perceived as a predominantly positive category, an ephemeral aspect of objects, encounters, people, and the various phenomena that subtend, motivate, and change them in ways that are often inextricable from a sense of authenticity. However, sincerity can also be authentically negative. Fear, pain, loss, and despair can also be just as authentic a form of sincerity as hope, justice, and redemption. In view of the thematic scope of sincerity, it is interesting to note how Genndy presents Aku in this opening episode—not so much as a villain imbued with a Shakespearean 4th wall-breaking Richard III-esque wit and candor that he becomes as the series unfolds. Rather, it is interesting to observe, in a naive and simple way, how Genndy presents Aku as a physical threat to human beings. As the viewer comes to learn, the battle and contestation between Aku and Jack is always framed under the aegis of a duel. Regardless of all the fantastical inter-temporal displays of Other beings, worlds, technologies, and more abstract concepts including decay, hope, good, and evil, the final confrontation between the series principals is always-already determined to conclude in a duelistic encounter: a lone samurai warrior (technically a ronin—seeing that Jack, who is not a retainer, has neither lord, master, or shogun) wielding a magical sword against a shape-shifting demon with magical powers. By showing the viewer early in the series that the physical threat Aku presents is impervious—in fact shown to physically absorb attempts to destroy him—to human weapons including spears, swords, arrows, bullets, and lances immediately establish a sincere *doubt* in the viewer regarding the possibility of Aku's defeat. While most commentary concerning the so-called darker elements of what I would call Genndy's sincere ethos are primarily limited to and expressed in *Samurai Jack: The Return*, an attentive viewer could hardly fail to notice that Genndy engages with sincerity in a three-dimensional way right from the very beginning of Season 1 by establishing a threat to not just the series principal, but every *world* and every *time* he encounters directly or indirectly based on a sincere sense of that threat's invincibility.

Symbolism of the Immigrant: Genndy, Jack, and the Call to Adventure

The symbolic registers Genndy hits in the series' opener are in themselves importantly specular upon closer consideration. Like it is with the Classic Monomyth, whose structure is circular and reflexive, Genndy shows the viewer what is actually the *end* of evil that is portrayed (and successfully, in terms of rupturing the viewer's expectations) as an account of its *beginning*. It is revealed in the episode that the only instrument capable of undoing Aku and his evil is a magical sword. The magical sword is in many ways an ironic weapon as much as it is a symbolic one. There are numerous parallels between the warrior's sword and the artist's pen/brush/pencil throughout the series that not only invite comparative readings between Jack and Genndy, but more so their experiences as individuals who find themselves in times and/or places within which they feel radically out of place. I will return to this point more closely later on. However, for now I will draw your to the fact that within this episode, the instrument of vanquishing (the sword) is shown to be paradoxically also the instrument of returning. While it might seem that the sword is the instrument that *implants* Aku into the very desolation he wrought three generations before the birth of Jack, viewers is told, it is simultaneously the means by which to destroy him. The magical sword is, in this sense, a symbol of not only a loop, but also a mirror. In it, through it, upon it, and because of it evil both arises and is destroyed in the *Jack* diegesis. This specular quality reflects the personal experiences of Genndy as an auteur in that the dedication and sacrifice demanded of a showrunner-artist, the brush would not only serve as an instrument of his success, but also one of his isolation, labor, and in many ways loneliness. The paradoxical nature of the weapon/implement/instrument is, in this way semi-autobiographical. By the seventh Episode of Season 1 ("Jack and the Three Blind Archers"), it is clear that there are numerous overlaps between Genndy and Jack, even down to physical resemblances (Tartakovsly 2001). In many ways, Jack is an aesthetic totem for Genndy. Not as rotund, or burly, not as cheerful of face and expression, perhaps. But, more so than Dee Dee in *Dexter's Lab*, the underlying spirit of the character is so richly and clearly imbued with Genndy that the resemblance cannot not be noticed.

Let us consider more closely the inter-diegetic relationship between Jack and Genndy in the series' opening call-to-adventure montage. In "The Beginning," Jack's father, the Emperor, is captured while trying to defend his kingdom and family (his queen and toddler son) against the onslaught of Aku. Jack, like Moses of Judeo-Christian mytho-religious traditions, is sent out on open water and taken in as a fosterling. He is taught to sail, navigate, learning mythology and cosmology through the sea-craft of stargazing. The mytho-religious parallels here belie a far more personal parallel between

Jack's story and Genndy's story specifically as an *immigrant*. Like Jack, Genndy crosses a sea, he enters into a multitude of lands, encounters multiple people from which he learns to hone his craft, but more so how to navigate the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural topography of foreign lands *as* a foreigner himself. Consider also the fact that Jack's powers, abilities, and skills—from tactics to physical martial prowess—with which he battles Aku are *essentially* and *sincerely* globalist and multicultural in nature.

All the skills Jack acquires, regardless of how successfully or not he employs them, necessarily emerge out of his foreignness, his experiences and interpellation into a range of foreign and unknown lands and environments and the charity and tutelage of various peoples. As the series progresses, Genndy extends this foreignness beyond the Terrestrial and historic and makes Jack's status as Other an inter-temporal, inter-planetary subject position. Before being flung into the far future as an adult, he begins as a youth in some facsimile of India which, aesthetically, Genndy smoothly elides with a nebulous "Arabia" where shamsirs, turbans, tapering turrets, bulbous cupolas, bright beit ash-sha'ar (desert tent in the Bedouin style) with thoroughbred stallions running before them, and minerets meet, mingle, and play to produce not a specific geo-historical locality, but the sincere *feeling* of the new, burgeoning, strange, and adventurous. The feeling of a Campbellian call-to-adventure here is compounded by James L. Venable's score which features heavily and performs much work in the initial establishment and expansion of Genndy's world building efforts. It includes kanjira (Indian tambourine), shannay or nadasvaram (Indian clarinet), ney (Middle Eastern flute), and an oud or dotar.

After opening in a fusion of Middle and South East cultures and aesthetics, Genndy shows Jack moving from the space predicated on an aesthetic of both desert opulence and hardiness to the open desert itself where the aesthetic recalls the epics of David Lean such as *Lawrence of Arabia*, but also sci-fi epics inspired thereby including Lucas' *Start Wars: A New Hope* and despite its unwarranted maligning and lampooning, David Lynch's *Dune*. It is here again where the viewer can note Genndy's influence in terms of the size and scale of the worlds he builds, literally and figuratively draws from, and subsequently presents to the viewer.

Next, Jack is taken to a facsimile of Africa where Genndy shows the boy to be a part of a tribe that is a stand in for a burgeoning sense of a global village and international community of integrated culture, mirroring an immigrant's experience of multiculturalism in themselves and in the spaces they finds themselves in. Alongside the huts, kraals, warriors, sages, elders, sand, sparse trees, the sound of African percussion, rhythm, and pulse, it is here that Jack is first *shown* to be *instructed* in the martial arts. In this scene, he is shown to be trained in the quarterstaff, a weapon that, in most martial systems employing weapons, is seen as the foundational *opposite* of the sword. His training here is portrayed as arduous but respectful and

disciplined. Through the repetition of the same selection of frames animated in the sequence of movements, the training Jack undergoes throughout the montage, but especially clear in this particular moment, is the stylization not only of action but also time and its elapse. The effect engendered here is paradoxical. On the one hand, rendering the action in this way suggests a significant length of time passing. On the other hand, it successfully reports to the viewer that Jack is a quick study. Upon mastering the staff, Jack is taken to a facsimile of Egypt (featuring harps voicing Phrygian scales in the non-diegetic music), a symbolic Alexandria where Genndy—being a master of the economical use of visual symbolism he is—shows Jack exchange the staff for a scroll. It is still also firmly within Genndy's stylized African milieu that Jack is also shown to learn both the arts of combat *and* of scholarship.

FIGURE 3.5 *Willis' Exquisite Rendering of the Retrofuture*

FIGURE 3.6 *Willis' Sumptuous Vistas*

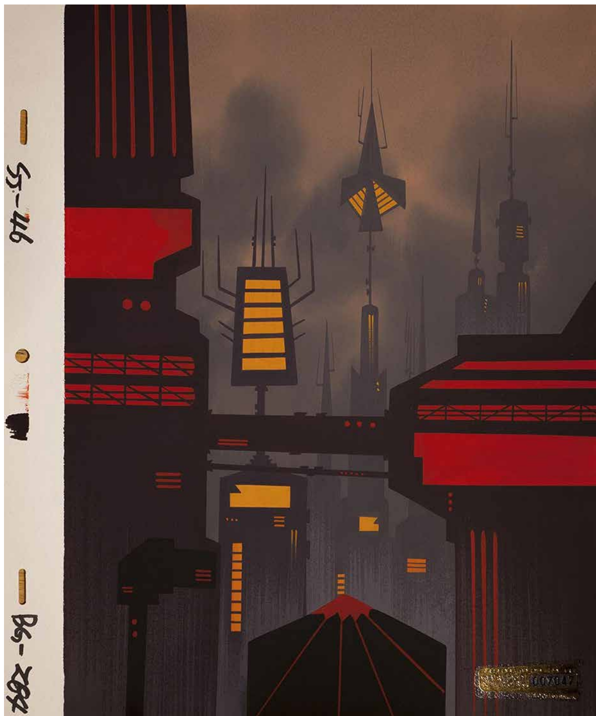

FIGURE 3.7 *Willis' Atmospheric Depiction of the Aku-Like Eaves of the Retrofuturistic Skyline*

FIGURE 3.8 *The Depth and Extent of the Aku-Industrial Aesthetic of the Retrofuture*

Next, Genndy sends Jack to a facsimile of Greco-Roman antiquity, replete with Doric columns used as scene transitions and screen framing, featuring a Colosseum. Here, Genndy uses universally recognizable audiovisual symbolism to press and ground and also invite the viewer into the scale and international scope of his world, a world in which his central protagonist must grow and learn enough of both mental and martial arts in order to face let alone overcome the mercurial malignancy of Aku. The bombast of the brass ringing in Dorian scales further aids the visual symbols in registering the shift in scene, and setting the stage for Jack's warrior development, the skills he acquires in each setting and how he grows physically, mentally, and psycho-emotionally, as a result. Venabale's musical changes, while all anchored and undifferentiated by the same relative tempo, serve as important scene signposting in ways as active and narratively crucial as the backgrounds designed and painted by the legendary trio of Bill Wray, Dan Krall, and Scott Willis.

In this setting, the now adolescent Jack learns to wrestle in Greco-Rome and is shown to best his instructor with ironically a hip throw (a common technique in various Japanese martial arts systems) to break a rear naked

choke hold. In this short and indeed comical moment, Genndy economically, albeit sincerely, telegraphs to the viewer not only the further passage of time, but also Jack's development, maturation, and learning. He also registers these changes physically in the individuals around Jack and his instructors. For example, in this wrestling scene, Jack and his instructor are shown to be surrounded with youths whose adolescence reflects Jack's own. In this way, Genndy registers the passage of time and development not just in Jack's own physicality, but how it is mirrored in its developmental stages in and through the children/youths Jack encounters in the montage. From Japan to Egypt all the children shown are pre-pubescent. In Greco-Rome, it is the first time any ancillary youths are shown to be teenagers. The community of learners, of Aku's potential foes, is not of a class or cohort distinct from him. Jack is of an entire generation learning and growing with and alongside them/him.

Next, Jack goes to a facsimile of Nottingham Forest where he encounters a Robin Longstride-esque figure who teaches him his stealth, cunning, and archery. Here, Genndy expands the remit of his influences and indeed through him, the influences on Jack by showing that he is taught by historico-folkloric warriors and sages as much as he is taught by completely fictitious characters both named and unnamed. In this way, Genndy offers both a homage and a sincere blending of the pseudo-factual with the outrightly fictional. It is here, after Loxley invites Jack to take a shot and split the arrows he has already embedded (and indeed, in legendary fashion already split) in the bulls-eye of a target, Jack hears the overweight gold-laden purse of an aristocrat ringing through the forest as the assumed land baron makes his way to a fine castle serenely situated on the fairytale ideality of a hill in the far distance. Jack fires his arrow, pinning the aristocrat's purse to the trunk of a tree. It is here that the audience witnesses Jack learn two lessons simultaneously. The first is an intimation of the origin of Jack's sense of altruism, which he fittingly learns from one of Western folklore, history, and legend's progenitors of the "steal from the rich and give to the poor" ethos. This is an important moment that refines and thematizes lessons Jack learns throughout the montage—how and when and for what purpose to use the knowledge and skills one has accrued. In stealing from the rich and giving to the poor, the second related lesson Jack learns pertains to the young hero coming to understand the fundamentally grey nature of morality as something that cannot be described or enacted in absolutes. Therefore, up to and including this point in his call-to-adventure, Jack has learned: psycho-emotional groundedness through family and culture in Japan, psycho-emotional balance in Arabia-India, hard work, discipline, and endurance in sub-Sharan Africa, scholarship in and the value of knowledge in Egypt, competition and striving in Greco-Rome, and moral nuance and altruism in England.

Jack then goes out on the open and stormy high sea and sails with Vikings, learning bravery, fortitude, and humility by being subject to the insuperable

power of nature, and teamwork on the violently dark and tossing waves. Here, the lessons Jack learns are predicated entirely on a natural element and not an animal, man, or tool, be it horse, bow, staff, or scroll. Next, Jack journeys to a facsimile of the Balkans. Here, Jack learns *precision* as he is taught how to throw axes well enough to precisely split Matryoshka dolls without damaging the smaller doll within. Jack returns to the East and rides with Mongolian/Tuuvan warrior horsemen. Here, precision, of horse and spear, combine and are refined. In this way, the lesson of precision deepens into one of refinement. Next, Jack travels to China, specifically, to a facsimile of the famous Shaolin temple. Learning from the warrior monks' skills and fighting techniques, with various weapons and the open hand, Jack masters adaptability, a refinement of his earlier lessons in discipline, nuance, and the range of the applications of each for purposes of combat. Next Jack travels far north to a Tibetan enclave hidden in the Himalayas. There, Jack finds his exiled and now elderly mother, and in their reconciliation, Jack learns respect as well as responsibility and the weight of both as he is given his father's magical sword and last heirloom of his house, along with his now talismanic gi (robe) and geta (wooden sandals). It is also in this scene that Jack learns the psycho-emotionally vindicating feelings of readiness and accomplishment.

Returning to the impetus of the journey thus far, Genndy shows the viewer the decay and evil in Jack's former kingdom. After all the years of his journeying, which in themselves comprise a type of micro-heroes journey, his hometown is shown to be ravaged by the idolatry and malignancy of Aku. Aku's reach and influence are shown to have spread like a virus, the milieu shown to be riddled with papules of jewel mines and furnaces spreading like an angry rash across the landscape, scarring it. Jack's father, the former Emperor of the land, is now aged, emaciated, and abased by the minion overlords who overwork him on a grind-wheel drill. Moreover, those survivors of Jack's people are shown to be enslaved, forced to dig up the riches of their land in order to empower Aku's quest for world domination, terrestrially and extraterrestrially. These same overseers deny Aku's slaves, including Jack's father, water after being given a minor reprieve from their arduous labor. Jack *returns* and saves his wasted and withered father, standing alone against an entire brigade of Aku's minions, which he destroys. The enslaved masses witness Jack succeeds. He cuts his father's chains with his own sword. It is perhaps here that Jack learns the most important lesson of all: *hope*. Jack vows to vanquish Aku with the sword. The Emperor intercedes and strikes it easily from his hand using wizened technique, thus giving Jack his *final* lesson: "the sword is just the tool. It's strength relies on the hands that wield it. Evil is clever. Deception is its post powerful weapon. Let the sword guide you to your fate, but let your mind set free the path to your destiny" (Tartakovsky 2001). The lesson from his final teacher? Faith *and* discernment.

Thus rearmed and prepared, Jack goes to confront Aku through a green mist of demons, enters his lair, and challenges him to a duel. Aku answers, showing forth his shape-shifting powers. Aku recognizes both the sword and the lineage of the wielder. Here Aku learns a lesson of his own; namely, that the human spirit is resilient and defiant against tyranny and oppression. It is interesting to note how Aku takes many shapes and demonic forms in the course of their battle, mostly in the shape of animals known for their intelligence and/or ostensibly subterfuginous behavior: a monkey, scorpion, octopus, goat, and lastly, a bat. In the heat of battle, Jack throws the blade, piercing Aku to the quick. Before the deathblow can be dealt, Aku opens a portal and sends Jack into the future. In this final act both Aku and Jack learn lessons that they will spend the entire journey-cycle of the rest of the series (re)learning: Jack learns that treachery and guile are surprising. Aku learns that in view of the indefatigable human spirit and the righteous truths it can attain, treachery and subterfuge are the only way to possibly prevail.

On Max, Jack, and John: The Time-Traveling *Road Warrior*

On the surface of it, it would seem that of all the silent road warriors of pop and visual culture culled from the past three or four decades, Max Rockatansky of George Miller's *Mad Max* franchise would make for an ideal comparison for and against Jack. Both find themselves in apocalyptic futures, roving, fighting, and surviving the strange and scarred landscapes as road-ronin. The opening narration of *Mad Max: Road Warrior* by Harold Baigent establishes the tone later entries into the franchise would take up and maintain (*Mad Max: Fury Road*), but also one that accurately describes the future worlds decimated or denatured by Aku that Jack journeys in and through. He describes the sequence of events that produced the post-apocalyptic setting of the Maxverse, stating

> To understand who [Max] was we have to go back to the other time, when the world was powered by the black fuel and the desert sprouted great cities of pipe and steel—gone now, swept away. For reasons long forgotten two mighty warrior tribes went to war and touched off a blaze which engulfed them all. Without fuel they were nothing. They'd built a house of straw. The thundering machines sputtered and stopped. Their leaders talked and talked and talked, but nothing could stem the avalanche. Their world crumbled. Cities exploded a whirlwind of looting, a firestorm of fear. Men began to feed on men. On the roads it was a white-line nightmare. Only those mobile enough to scavenge, brutal enough to

pillage would survive. The gangs took over the highways, ready to wage war for a tank of juice, and in this maelstrom of decay ordinary men were battered and smashed.

(Miller 1981)

Like Genndy, Miller fuses several genres in the Maxverse in ways that resonate broadly with the Jackverse. There are obvious aesthetic examples shared between both hyperdiegeses. The costumes, neo-Medieval armor, weapons, diction, and post-apocalyptic ritualistic religiosity in both *Road Warrior* and *Fury Road* present each film's diegesis as a neo-Dark Age, thereby casting Max as a roving bandit in the tradition of the ronin and cowboy who intercedes in the oppressive regimes of fifes overseen by resource-hoarding overlords. The same is true of the Jackverse, in which Genndy pits his intrepid roaming warrior against retrofuturistic cyborgs, assassin-bots, anthropomorphic animals, sentient aliens, and a host of other abstract albeit typically mechanical foes. Aesthetically, Genndy uses the visual language (symbols, iconography) of Vikings, knights, Spartans, mobsters, punks, cosmonauts, and ninja in a highly syncretic way similar to Miller, albeit with one *essential* difference: each text's relationship with/ to time.

On Jack and John: Time-Travel, Showdowns, Allies, and Enemies

The truer comparison between Jack and the silent road warriors of contemporary popular and visual culture is not between Jack and Max, but rather between Jack and John Connor. Within the hyperdiegetic worlds of the *Terminator* franchise, the future is jeopardized by Skynet, a national nuclear defense system designed by Cyberdyne Systems that eventually becomes a self-aware A.I. As a part of its awakening, Skynet becomes cognizant of humanity's threat to its continued existence and attempts to annihilate all human life on Earth. It falls to the collective efforts of humanity's would-be survivors, and in particular the strength and courage of a particular woman (Sarah Connor), to prevent such an armageddon. As the multiple converging and diverging timelines of the franchise develop, Connor would (and always-already has) become the mother of John Connor, the leader of humanity's resistance against Skynet's indefatigable army of robot and cyborg soldiers. In order to prevent the Resistance from ever arising, Skynet dispatches an android assassin called a Terminator back in time to kill Sarah Connor thereby preventing her son from ever being born. As a countermove, John Connor sends his most trusted lieutenant and best friend, Kyle Reese, back in time to protect her from said fate. When Connor and Reese meet in

Terminator (1984), the former is characterized as a timid waitress, the latter as the plucky albeit overwhelmed and tortured soldier. The pair fall in love, have sex, Connor conceives, Reese thereby becoming his future best friend's father. After losing Reese but managing to destroy the Terminator sent to kill her, Connor accepts her role as both soldier and mother, the burden of the survival of the human species and its future, drives off pregnant and alone into the Mexican desert to make her preparations for the inevitable conflict to come. Connor's characterization undergoes a total reversal in the sequel *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991). She is depicted as a stoic, martial, and violent survivalist. Linda Hamilton's performance in the second installment registers this change in the character physically as well as in Connor's deportment. Her focus is singularly dedicated to her mission. She is depicted as resourceful and ruthless in her acquisition of the requisite hardware and skills necessary to found and lead the burgeoning Resistance, as well as raise and protect her son, the future savior of humanity from the machine overlords of the future.

Within this narrative structure, Cameron portrays the mission as redemptive and as such, the *Terminator* franchise carries with it overtones of Judeo-Christian messianism. The viewer is shown John Connor as the messianic future savior of humanity whose coming is foretold by time-traveling disciple-prophet-soldiers. His redemptive aspects are indeed didactic. He teaches humanity how to not only resist but overcome their machine overlords by imparting the lessons to them his mother taught him. Sometimes, these lessons are depicted as literal. In *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003), Sarah Connor literally provides John with weapons cached in her own mausoleum, as well as the logistics of an escape plan from a nuclear attack. The didacticism of her motherhood extends to *Terminator Salvation* (2009) wherein which John Connor is shown to spend much of his spare time studying taped messages Sarah recorded for him, treating them with the reverential attitude an acolyte or believer might scripture or doctrine. He bases much of his understanding of the war, its causes, its solutions, and his own role in the conflict on said recordings. The messianic expectation placed on John's future, which is a significant aspect of the narratives in the first and second films, is bolstered by the similarities between John and Jesus, their initials most superficially, but the redemptive purpose both fulfill in their respective texts more specifically.

John and Jack differ in some obvious and important ways. In *Samurai Jack*, the destiny of all humanity both does and does not hinge on Jack's successful overthrow of Aku, and, more radically, is not necessarily guaranteed thereby. While in *Terminator*, John is attempting to pinpoint a specific moment in time to which to return, and, altering but one event in the past, redeem the entirety of the future, Genndy shows the malignant evil of Aku to be not only transtemporal in terms of human measures of time, but that it has always-already preceded humanity's *entire* experience thereof.

In this sense, while time in *Terminator* is engaged with as largely terrestrial phenomena, time, as measured by the a-historical existence of Aku, is cosmological in its scale. It is also interesting to note that both John and Jack are part of families whose entire legacy is circumscribed by its shared struggle against a single evil, a struggle with world-historical consequences.

However, the socioeconomic status of each son is inverted. While Reece/Connor comes from humble middle-class origins in his mother's time (a perhaps not dissimilar socioeconomic status Genndy experienced upon his arrival to his adoptive land after immigrating from Russia), Jack is of royal birth in his, prepared, trained, and taught the rudimentary lessons in preparation for his exile and eventual conflict with Aku, in his time or any other. In this sense, the provenances of knowledge and wisdom imparted to each emerge from radically different sources in radically different ways. While John has the epistolary tutelage of and by his mother, a series of lessons imparted over time, Jack has multitudinous sources of preparatory wisdom and knowledge, of a multiplicity of types and subjects which he acquires *before* being displaced in time.

On comparison, it is difficult to say with confidence which of the two time-traveling warriors is better prepared for the respective situations they face. On the one hand, Connor receives a limited albeit extremely well-informed and personal account of unfolding events, strategy, and goals (replete with a sense of connection and psycho-emotional closeness inherent in the voice of his mother), Jack's sources of knowledge resemble more closely those available to an immigrant TCK. Jack learns what he can from whom he can when he can.

The characterization of each warrior is also importantly different. While John is all but deified from the beginning of the franchise, and shown to bear the weight of the expectation of transvaluative redemption for all humankind, past, present, *and* future, a weight that has been thrust upon him, Jack's characterization is more akin to Moses than it is to Christ. He is spirited away under dire circumstances of calamity, death, and unspeakable/unstoppable violence. The only overriding telos governing the origin of his adventures is survival *not* redemption as it is with John. Redemption for Jack is a choice he makes, a burden he takes upon himself. In this sense, Jack's mission, which is to defeat Aku and return to his time and loved ones, is primarily personal in a way that it is not for John, that so happens to have with broader socio-global consequences. Through his uncountable altruistic deeds, Jack finds himself in the position of the reluctant savior, a subject position John occupies and inherits as iniquity from a time before his birth. In this sense, John is a messiah struggling to discover his own personal story and identity within the high-stakes remit of saving the future.

Perhaps most importantly of all, the enemies that define each hero differ not only in their approach to time, but their telos *in principium*. Skynet's goal of preemptively destroying humanity as an existential threat to not

only itself, but life on Earth more broadly raises questions concerning human nature, the rights of nonhuman life-forms, and more difficultly, the redemptive worth of humanity itself. In *Samurai Jack*, Aku, despite his undeniable charisma, personality, wit, humor, and even reliability, is unadulteratedly evil in the last instance. One could read these compelling character traits in the villain as deliberate in that true evil is, above all else, attractive. Aku's evil has nothing to do with philosophy, or any questions of ontology or existentialism. Aku's evil is, in many ways, "pure" in that it seeks nothing else but acquisition, expansion, consumption, and destruction of any and all life it finds.

That said, the expected clarity of Aku's evil is a theme Genndy plays with throughout the series. Perhaps the most radical rupturing of the audience's expectations in this regard comes in Season 4, Episode 9 "Jack vs. Aku" (aired November 24, 2003). Throughout the episode, Genndy misdirects and contravenes the audience's expectation concerning the long foreshadowed showdown between Jack and Aku (Tartakovsky 2003). The viewer expects a climactic and decisive battle in which the fate of hero and villain is ultimately, and definitively, decided. Instead, Genndy brings a tremendous amount of humor to bear, opening the episode with Aku making a pizza order to go over the phone.

The humor comes thick and fast throughout the episode, located in the surprise and novelty of the viewer witnessing Aku doing things that are so antithetical to his status as a self-confessed master of evil, a shogun of suffering. This pertains to the slapstick failures of his ogres, machines, and minions who end up destroying themselves before posing even the most remote threat to Jack himself. These include an ogre in a small Volkswagen, a giant mecha with feeble firepower, and a clumsy self-destroying army of drone bounty-hunters.

Interestingly enough, the humor presents Aku in a very charismatic light. He is snide, witty, cheeky, and *sincerely* funny. In this way, the contest between Aku and Jack completely *defies* expectations. Before engaging in any physical combat, they debate, discuss terms, and converse, which includes the stipulation of rules as a part of Aku's challenge to a duel with Jack. Aku's conditions are that Jack cannot use his sword, while Jack stipulates that Aku cannot (1) use superhuman powers; (2) employ the aid of evil minions; (3) shape-shift, and has to fight Jack in human form.

There is, even in the space of these negotiations, a tremendous amount of humor on display. For example, in response to Jack's stipulations, Aku remarks: "that was four things!" to which Jack retorts: "that last one was a two-parter" (Tartakovsky 2003). The banter between the enemies concerning the location and directions to the chosen battleground and the terms of their engagement is so riddled with gags concerning uncertainty and the possibility of trickery that the viewer all but forgets they are enemies determining how they might slay one another. Genndy puts a significant

portion of this humor across through their expressions of uncertainty and distrust for one another, which manifests in a way so far removed from the viewer's expected explosiveness and violence. While the tragedy of Hamlet is predicated on the Prince's delay, delay is precisely the cause of the humor in the episode. Aku watches Jack stretch and perform forms and katas in preparation for their fight. Not knowing what to do without his powers, Aku, whose human form is ridiculous, attempts to mimic Jack's motions to humorous effect. It is 12 minutes into the episode before the first blow is struck, 12 minutes of the long-awaited duel between the foes, 12 minutes of eye-watering, silent, and physical humor, 12 minutes that stand as testament of not only Genndy's visual but narrative prowess and sincere humor.

Jack, distrusting Aku to hold to the terms of their agreement, hides his sword in a preemptive move against his treachery. The fight itself is very scrappy, and slightly more elegant than a brawl. Jack, in feeling the weight of Aku's blows, suspects that Aku is cheating by drawing on inhuman strength. When truly level, it is clear that Jack possesses superior technique and overpowers Aku for the preponderance of the fight. In order to keep abreast, Aku cheats several times, seeing that he cannot best Jack one on one, fair to the rules.

It is revealed that Aku has broken not one but all of the rules ostensibly agreed to. Aku uses increased strength, he shape-shifts, and uses his powers to move objects, while also availing himself of the aid of minions. The entire design of luring Jack into a false sense of security in the duel is to steal Jack's sword. Jack knows that Aku will cheat and therefore plants a series of fake swords throughout the area of contest, which distracts both Aku and his minions. Before Jack can strike the killing blow Aku shape-shifts into a crow/vulture-like bird and flees, uttering the joke from the beginning of the episode, namely that he informs Jack that he would fly away uttering the words: "I will get you next time, Samurai!" (Tartakovsky 2003). Here, yet again, is another manifestation of Genndy's mastery of the inherent circuitousness of the journey-cycle described by the Classic Monomyth where, under his narrative prowess, incompletion can be many things and elicit many effects from tragedy to comedy.

Unlike Kyle Reece and John Connor, who are both shown to be resolute loners, Jack's solitudinous voyaging is sometimes interrupted by a recurring character or ally. The manner in which Genndy introduces the viewer to one of the most, and indeed few, recurring characters, namely the Scotsman, is a clear expression of the theme of teamwork and difference in Season 1, Episode 11 "Jack and the Scotsman" (aired October 29, 2001). Aesthetically, Jack and the Scotsman could not be any more different, and, in fact, present an aesthetic difference not too dissimilar to Genndy's original creations, namely Dexter and Dee Dee (Tartakovsky 2001). The Scotsman is rotund, tall, burly while Jack is lithe, comparatively petite, and lean. The Scotsman plays the bagpipes and is one-legged, with the other replaced by a machine gun.

Jack has no accessories save his hat, and is in possession of both of his legs. Even the appearance and style of their respective primary weapons, swords, are diametrically opposed as the Scotsman wields a gigantic enchanted claymore featuring magical runes etched into the blade worn on his back, while Jack wields a comparatively small katana worn on his hip.

The two also express a behavioral and cultural clash. The demure reserve of Jack clashes hard with the bombastic volume of the Scotsman's pipes, accent, and voice—all of which Jack cannot initially understand or tolerate. In essence, the first meeting of the two can be described as an unstoppable force meeting and immovable object. The inevitability of the conflict between the two is an atmosphere Genndy stokes through situational humor. Neither of the warriors is willing to give way so that the other may pass on a long, narrow, and structurally unsound bridge. The tension escalates from physical and cultural mismatching to verbal insults where the Scotsman mocks Jack's hat, sandals, sword, and robe in a seemingly endless tirade and litany of insults. This leads to escalation in tension after the Scotsman cuts Jack's hat in half. Jack retaliates by puncturing the Scotsman's pipes. Not only does Genndy use the humor of their ostensibly petty escalations to temper the tension of the inevitable showdown between the two warriors, but also to show the viewer that they are evenly matched. When the inevitable fight does finally occur, its intensity and length similarly speaks to each warrior's status as evenly matched, however, the fact that they fight for two days registers both the epic scale of their skills, will, and prowess, but also the ridiculousness and humor of their respective obstinateness. After a seemingly unceasing duel, the warriors are too tired to raise their swords.

Genndy both breaks the tension between the episode's protagonists but simultaneously re-instills it by having *both* be subject to potential destruction by Aku's evil via mechanical swamp bounty hunters. The symmetry of the episode even manifests in the bidirectional approach of this danger, with each warrior being pursued from opposite ends of the bridge. In pressing the humor and symmetry to perhaps its maximal possible expression, the bounty hunters' efforts to capture each or the other result in the Scotsman and Jack being manacled to one another. In this sense, though the conditions of their initial teamwork are forced, Genndy shows Jack and the Scotsman to be two types of related foreigner, but moreover, to be kindred in their infamy. They subsequently and concertedly team up to defeat the bounty hunters.

Much of the humor in this episode inheres in the idea of using a cannonball to kill a mosquito. This manifests as the pair's reliance on a gigantic artillery shell of cartoonish proportions to break their chains. Genndy also displays a sense of cultural awareness in prosecuting his many numerous moments of levity and humor in the episode. For example, he uses Highland log tossing as a martial technique of both attack and defense for the Scotsman. Genndy's reliance on slapstick and stereotypes is, in this

episode, also sincerely humorous without being offensive. It takes difference as *necessary* in effective teamwork, the source of the strength of the pairing, and a sincere mutuality of respect as inextricable from both the competition and collaboration between Jack and the first *sincere* friend he makes in the series.

The Time-Traveler and the Immigrant: Jack's Arrival in the Future

Jack travels to the future in Season 1, Episode 2 "The Samurai Called Jack" (aired August 10, 2001). The disorienting warp Genndy uses to illustrate Jack's temporal displacement seems, on the surface of it, rather trite and common, little more than a black-and-white spiral accompanied by the sound of a pulsing sine wave (Tartakovsky 2001). However, the bending of Jack's limbs, the length of the frames, the entirety of the sequence is imbued with a staggering and nauseating sense of pressure and vacuum. The physical and psychic warping rendered in this way is actually horrific when fully considered, whose disturbing nature is further compounded by the extremely pained albeit simultaneously vacant look on Jack's face.

I propose that if the first part of the first episode can be read, as I did, as a symbolic exploration of the immigrant's *preparation* to enter the diaspora via a contrasting of the hero's journey and the immigrant's journey, then this Episode is an exploration of the moment of entry which is also a moment of total displacement. Gone are all familiar touchstones and lodestars of sociopolitical, economic, and cultural certainty and identity. While the new land typically holds promise in quintessential accounts and presentments of the immigrant's desire and hope in leaving their homeland, it also necessarily demands an erasure, renegotiation, and indeed recreation of self, be it through vocational shifts, familial ties both old and new, or simply and most obviously, having to learn and negotiate a new physical and cultural topography, most commonly and fundamentally in the form of having to master a new or different language. In this sense, like it is for the immigrant, the future in which Jack emerges is completely foreign to him save for the fact that his conception of home and the foreign land of the future in which he finds himself are ultimately undifferentiated by a thematic and ideological through-line running across all lands, all epochs, subjecting all peoples, beings, and life-forms—mechanical and organic alike. That denominator is the strife, anger, malice, and violence engendered by the supra-temporal, supra-spacial evil of Aku. In this sense, Aku becomes a constant as space-time itself.

For the immigrant Genndy, as Chapter 1 discusses in more detail, the disorienting and traumatic experiences of displacement and readjustment

Jack endures in the future resemble Genndy's own experiences newly arrived in America in some form or other—from name-calling to faith-based bigotry and xenophobia. In many ways, the future is the *most* foreign, unpredictable and new land possible, a fact Genndy brings to bear in deft fashion, presenting a reflective and insightful (and in my own personal experience as an immigrant, *accurate*) exploration of the radical sense of *displacement* that results from and typically frames the immigrant experience and subject position.

In this sense two narratives are concurrently unfolding in this episode. The first appears to be an ostensible time-travel narrative. Latent to its central themes of displacement is a second and perhaps deeper narrative pertaining to the immigrant experience. Moreover, like the immigrant in a new land, many of which are largely required to, Jack has to take on a (new) name. And with the adoption of a new *nom de voyage/nom de guerre*, Genndy affirms that for Jack, utterly gone is the bucolic past despoiled by the greed and tyranny of evil. Come is the eccumenopolitain milieu of hyper-industry and technology, of urban futurity, of ecological decimation, of mechanistic clutter with its inevitable masses of smoke and waste as byproducts of the generation of capital-evil. Many immigrants' displacement from rural homelands necessarily leaves the idyllic past for a capitalist future, with its attendant *uncertain* promise of the *chance* for change, growth, and *multigenerational* prosperity. And like many immigrants, Jack finds the promise of the future dashed by the bleak reality of the seemingly unbroken systems of oppression and despair which affirm that old land or new, exploitation and despair still persist, let alone are oftentimes intensified. For an immigrant like Genndy, this takes the form of the survival-based *necessity* of hard work, focus, and dedication to countermand the realities of isolation (sociopolitical, economic, and cultural), persecution, and the ambient pressure experienced by the immigrant to succeed at every and all costs as a *necessity* of not only their inclusion, assimilation, or integration into their new land and its status quo, but simply to survive therein. In Genndy's case, it was a pressure to succeed within the capitalist frame-work (no pun, etc.) of Western late capitalist society. For Jack, that unbroken oppression and despair is Aku who, through his omnipotent evil, renders the situation of the past and the future ultimately unchanged.

It is also worth noting an interesting design element Genndy brings to bear in his conceptualization of an evil future. All the architecture Jack initially encounters in the future is psycho-geographically reflective of Aku himself, an atmosphere/skyline saturated with spindles and spires curling up from a center tap resembling the crown/horns of Aku. With names like The Pit of Hate, the entire landscape/municipalities/neighborhoods/cities of the future are, in their terror and hatred, designed to reflect Aku. He emphasizes this point himself, stating the importance of "statues in my likeness […] to remind all who is master of all" (Tartakovsly 2001).

Jack's arrival into the future is relentless in terms of initial action and disorientation. Genndy shows the viewer that the *first* thing Jack does in the future is not eat, converse, sleep, stand still, walk, or gather his bearings. He has no *time* for any of these things because the first thing he *has* to do is further add to his sense of disorientation and uncertainty by both *falling* (out of the time portal into oncoming air traffic *a la* Leeloo in *The Fifth Element*) and *fighting*. In contrast to this action-packed arrival, the first encounter with other living beings Jack has in the future is congratulatory. Jack encounters a group of wise-cracking future youths who excitedly sing his praises for destroying a tank-like trash machine. They adulate him for his skills, with a sword used in close quarters combat no less, which they regard as a spectacle, a type of ancient circus of both foreign and "backward" entertainment. Like the immigrant Genndy who had to learn English via immersion and exposure as discussed in Chapter 1, Jack barely understands the idiolects spoken to him by the beings of the far future. The fact that Genndy elects for them to use slang and idioms typically associated with so-called Ebonics and its persistent purchase on common discourse as a semiotics of "cool," represents/mirrors Genndy's own experience of encountering a different, perhaps even for him then, both *alien* and *futuristic* way of speaking and being. Jack's desire to learn also mirrors Genndy's initial desire for integration, but also more specifically the immigrant child's desire to be included/inculcated into the cool of his new homeland, environment, and sociocultural situation.

One of the youths refers to the city in which Jack finds himself as a "residential industrial space on Earth" which sets up the manner in which Genndy treats not only Aku in the future, but Genndy's latent commentary on the nature of evil itself. Jack's first encounter with Aku's evil in the future is at once radically indirect, but simultaneously radically omnipresent. One of the first things Jack learns in the future is the power of the disembodied nature of evil, one, which in Aku's case, has diffused and dominated the entire world. It is an expression of evil that is not limited to a single physical body, or even a corporeal form in any singular sense. Genndy shows the true nature of evil *and* its maximal expression as a type of omniscient, omnipresent *product*, a franchise, an *ideology* that, like French post-Marxist philosopher Lois Althusser's conception of ideology, is supra-temporal and therefore transhistorical in nature. The disorientation of this revelation is clear in the impasse between Jack's desire to fight a single foe, limited to a single body, itself limited to a single space and time contra the reality of an enemy that exists and influences his past *and* future *in medias res*. This clashes severely with the truth, as Jack's new associate says to him "it's *always* been that way" (Tartakovsky 2001: emphasis mine).

In this sense, from the perspective of the immigrant's narrative, the rules, ethics, morals, and entire systems of thought and behavior believed to be standard are typically undone, wholly or in significant part, upon entry

into the new land. It is the cost, the necessary erasure the immigrant must undergo to participate, let alone thrive, in the new milieu. The sounds and sights of a futuristic bar Jack encounters, with its blaring music and alien patrons, is as disorienting as the immigrant's arrival in a new country, with its strange, loud sounds, strange sights, and seemingly/comparatively alien peoples. As it is for the immigrant, the situation Jack finds himself in is ripe with potentially fatal misunderstandings. This takes the form of Jack gawking at the patrons and thereby causing involuntary offence. As a result, Jack is forced to apologize for his foreignness as many immigrants feel that they are forced to do. The difference for Jack is that he is more than capable of defending himself while many immigrants are not.

As a master of narrative pacing, Genndy tempers every theme, concept, and symbol/image with well-timed levity and a sincere sense of humor. There are more humorous albeit also simultaneously incisive moments in which foreignness/Otherness is explored in the episode. In seeking a drink, Jack speaks through a slot in a steel door of a bar and says, "excuse me, a few of the locals informed me that I could refresh myself here." He is met with puzzled and annoyed silence which is broken by one of his new associates yelling over his shoulder "Jack jus' want a drink, yo!" to which the bouncer responds "why didn't you just say so!?" (Tartakovsly 2001). This exchange latently speaks to immigrants being perceived as either well or ill-mannered in their "backward," "rustic," and/or "quaint" dictional choices, elocution, and deportment.

After having to fight a group of lizard cyborgs after allegedly offending them, Jack is saved from further trouble by a group of speaking dogs.

FIGURE 3.9 *Stranger in a Strange Land; or Jack in the Future*

It is revealed that the dogs are historians and archaeologists. The humor inheres in the fact that dogs, which are known to dig for buried bones, are archaeologists. It is also no coincidence that the first "people"/beings Jack, an involuntary time-traveler but a time-traveler all the same, agrees to aid are concerned with uncovering their *past*. Genndy continues to draw laughs from the fact that these erudite scholars and historians *are* dogs as Jack declares: "even dogs shouldn't have to live like dogs!" (Tartakovsky 2001).

Genndy's imaginative abilities are on full display in populating the future. In the second part of the first episode, Jack encounters a gang of uncertainly anthropic youths, three-eyed GO-GO dancers, a cadre of anthropic lizard cyborg reprobates, and a party of erudite British-American bipedal dogs accessorized with pith helmets and smoking pipes. The humor inheres in the disjunction between the aesthetics and types which leads Jack to call the dogs vile talking demons. The joke here is that the future dogs are the smartest beings in the room, stereotypical as their presentments might be (e.g., a sad beagle, a grumpy Scottish terrier replete with a thick Scottish accent and combative demeanor, and an effete Dachshund).

In view of the dogs' description of the situation with Aku that helps bring Jack up to speed on the state of the world, it is clear that Genndy presents Aku as a capitalist unhinged. Through his evil machinations, he is shown to change history into a chronicle of exploitative industry and callous resource acquisition. However, as Sir Rothschild, the perspicacious Dachshund, notes, the Earth was not enough and as a result, Aku built a space port "so that he might take the riches of other worlds as well" (Tartakovsky 2001). Aku seeks gems in all times, upon all worlds. In this way, Aku is not only a capitalist industrialist, but a colonialist. This interplanetary commerce has *syncretized* the Earth (displaying Genndy's combinatory style and ethos). It brings to both the Earth and the future all manner of people, beings, machines of which many are refugees, villains, heroes, and opportunists in the same way that both supporters and detractors of immigration describe the manner in which immigration mixes, increases, diversifies, strengthens, and/or sullies a population.

However, what Genndy shows is that Aku represents a corruption of the hopeful and aspirational impetuses and ideas of immigration. In Aku's future, interpersonal and cultural exchange is not an opportunity for the renewal, rebirth, learning, and rearmament of a population through diverse collaboration. It is an opportunity for the malignant spread of greed, dominion, suppression, and exploitation. As a result, Aku leaves the Earth in a state of negative chaos, a state in which he thrives. The effect for Jack is one of being dumbfounded. Jack describes the flying cars, the grandeur of hyper-industrialization, and the normalcy of talking dogs as "overwhelming," as Jack is not only displaced in time, but has First Contact with alien beings from other worlds. These experiences, initial, and introductory in terms

of Jack's arrival in the future, displace *all* his previously held frames of reference, the future making the present of his past unrecognizable.

However, the moments of temporal rectification, where past, present, and future seemingly cohere, are shown, initially, to be inextricable from a sense of trauma and pain. In this episode, this sense of haunting takes the form of the mine canines who, in their state of squalor and distress, rawboned and woe-worn by toil and slavery, resemble in kind the same people of Jack's former home he encountered before challenging Aku for the first time. Interestingly, Aku also experiences this sense of haunting, albeit in a way that unlike Jack, is temporally aware as indicated by Aku's acceptance of Jack's challenge: Aku: "So, my formidable foe. You shall pay for my pain in the past with your pain in the future" (Tartakovsky 2001). Jack is so disturbed by his encounter with the frail and worn out canine miners because they remind him of the bowed and lowly condition he saw in his father and the remnant of their people for the last time in one of Aku's mines. But there is another reading latent within the most ostensible one and it has to do with reading Jack as an immigrant. Jack is so disturbed by what he sees in the same way an immigrant who encounters another immigrant in whose new life old challenges are still manifest, whereby the new life is in reality just as odious and hard, just as keenly hopeless, oppressed, and destitute as it was in the homeland. In the canine's oppression, Jack sees the promise of the future fail just as an immigrant would see the promise of a better life betrayed by precisely a lack of change at all.

The samurai's onto-existential sense and experience of displacement is literalized when Jack is described as a "living fossil" (Tartakovsky 2001). So much so that he is "carbon dated" by Rothschild's futuristic console which discovers Jack to be 00025 B.A (twenty-five years before Aku's reign of terror began). Time, self, the ideas, and conceptions of this displacement are introduced in the opening of the series. The angst and dread precipitated by the displacement Jack experiences is softened by the surreal and humorous nature of those with whom he discusses his condition. However, the latency of a sense of loss is crystallized in the following declaration: "Not where I am. It's when I am" (Tartakovsky 2001).

The third part of the pilot ("The First Fight") introduces the viewer to the full display of Jack's learning and entry into the future. Genndy goes about this in the most explosive, action-driven way, and shows the skills Jack has acquired in his youth, doubly in the past in this way, come to fruition in helping the anthropomorphic canine people he encounters on his first day in the future defend themselves in pitched battle against Aku's army of beetle drones. From the immigrant's perspective, the scale, immediacy, and immensity of the odds presented by the drone army reflects the immensity of the odds against the successful survival let alone integration/assimilation of the immigrant in the new milieu. It is a testament, a symbolization of the odds immigrant's face.

When asked what he will do to defeat the onrush of Aku's mechanical army, Jack asks for weapons. The *first* thing, let alone weapon, Jack is given is a *pen* here recalling the legend of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's arrest in which he was asked by the arresting officers to surrender all his weapons to which he responded by handing over his pen, here gesturing to the adage that "the pen is mightier than the sword" and confirming something of the wisdom and strategy Jack had learned in the double past of his youth. The joke, however, is that Jack is shown to be unable to operate a mechanical pen or, by extension, the new weapons and battlefields on and through which to fight Aku.

The first thing Jack does is *draw* a battle plan. In Genndy's case, the pen *was* mightier than the sword, the bristo, the cel sheet his battlefield. It is, I suggest, no coincidence that the first fight Jack should experience should follow Jack's First Contact with the future. It is the immigrant experience to not be afforded a grace period in which to find one's feet: the exigency of the necessity of survival offers no reprieve nor quarter. Also, it is worth noticing how Jack uses the modern technology he encounters, both in working order and disrepair, to prosecute an *ancient* style of defense. This is not unlike Genndy using 2D cel animation and its various associated techniques and methods in an artistic milieu looking then ever increasingly toward the

FIGURE 3.10 *Assimilation as Violence*

future of 3D animation. Jack turns diggers into trebuchets, jewels into explosive/incendiary arrowheads, spears, and moats. He uses the metal of old buildings and trains and gangways to make full karuta (samurai armor) for himself. He uses the same metal to arm himself with traditional samurai weapons. These include a yumi (bow), a quiver of jewel-tipped ya (arrows), and yari (spear/lance) which he uses in combination with his sword against destroyer drones using rocket boosters and flame-throwers. Here too are the resourcefulness, adaptability, and improvisation both of Jack and Jack-as-immigrant displayed.

The final sequence of the battle, rendered in slow-motion, shows Jack to be covered entirely in oil (a substitute for the blood Genndy was prohibited to show), getting dirtied and drawn into a frenzied rage both by and because of Aku's future. It is the first intimation of *infection* by Aku that comes full circle in Season 5 with the character of Ashi. Here, Genndy shows assimilation and integration for Jack into the future, as well as the immigrant into the new homeland, to be a process predicated on disorientation *and* the messiness of struggle and strife. Jack is soiled, contaminated by the conflicts of a different time precipitated by the same agent, namely Aku as the source of something resembling a forever evil. He is assimilated into that milieu *through* violence, and his presence in the future is actualized by struggle.

Past and Future Colliding: Memory, Tragedy, and Time in *Samurai Jack*

The role of the past and its interaction and distance from and with the future is perhaps best explored in Season 2, Episode 6 "Jack Remembers the Past" (April 5, 2002). The episode begins with a pitched battle in which Jack contends against the tyranny of the Cozzaks (which, incidentally, is homophonic of "Cossacks," south Russians, which could be taken as a tongue-in-cheek homage/criticism of Genndy's homeland) (Tartakovsky 2002). As Jack manages to overcome his enemies who ride giant locust/cricket-like insects, Genndy uses the sounds of downed bi-planes and mechanical Foley to register their overcoming, instead of any insectoid sounds like the hum of beating wings the viewer might expect. The effect of this stylization is economic, intelligent sound design, and a sense of humor that balances out the scenes of violence and destruction portrayed on screen.

This episode makes tremendous use of Willis' staggering talents. At this point in the series, the scope and scale of the future in which Jack journeys, replete with its fossilization of a ruined past that was once Jack's future, is imbued with such a keen sense of sincere life and living that Genndy could have focused entirely on other story elements. However, as the title of this

episode suggests, Jack becomes an embodied temporal anomaly, a slippage, and elision of multiple times and places. One of the first and most effective ways Genndy engages with this idea is by presenting the landscapes of Jack's journeying. Without music or dialogue, Genndy juxtaposes the highly centered and embodied sounds of Jack's footsteps with the drone of cicadas, the sibilant waters of running lakes and rivers, the wind-swirled desert sands, chirping birds. The scale and variety of Willis' landscapes recalls epic Hollywood films of the 1960s and '70s.

Upon discovering the ruins of his old kingdom, Jack has flashbacks that offer the viewer a more detailed history of his father's kingdom, its life, people, pride, and beauty before the return of the evil of Aku. It is a strange and emotional scenario as Jack recalls a double-past. He discovers symbols and heirlooms of his house, the family seal for example, and everything it stood for fallen into disrepair and ruin. The steady stream of memories and flashbacks are traumatic in this way because his mind has to fathom a present of which he was robbed. For Jack, time and trauma are inextricable. One of the most emotionally resonant moments in the entire series unfolds in this episode when Jack throws himself on the overgrown ground of the ruined foundation of his home, declaring to absolutely no-one at all "my home" (Tartakovsky 2002). Later in the episode, Jack has vivid flashbacks of the assembled martial might of the old kingdom in full bloom, and the strong, welcoming, and loving faces of his mother and father. The experience brings him to tears.

The tragedy in this scene is compounded by both the beauty of Venable's score and the exquisite, serene, sublime, ruinous beauty of Willis' backgrounds. Aside from the obvious emotional resonances concerning themes of time, decay, loss, displacement, solitude, and the tragedy of time travel, why is this episode significant? It is significant because not only do viewers get a glimpse of Jack's carefree childhood, frolicking in the wheat-fields and wilderness, chasing grasshoppers and an instance of young amorousness between Jack and another young girl, Genndy shows a time *without* the evil of Aku as a time of sincere innocence. Far from the stoic warrior he *has* to become, the episode shows Jack as a sincerely happy, considerate, and most important in terms of the similitude it bears with Genndy's own self and life, it shows Jack to be an artist as he makes the young girl an origami grasshopper to replace the one that escaped them. In one of the rare instances in the original series where Jack is shown in an amorous light, he is shown affection, a peck on the cheek, *for/because* of his art, and not his martial prowess.

The viewer also sees a flashback to one of the precipitating moments leading Jack toward a warrior's destiny. The instant involves a ronin transporting a baby in a carriage who is stopped on a bridge by a quartet of swordsmen before dispatching them in a blur of motion and skill that is heard rather than seen. The clear reference to Kazuo Koike and Goseki Kojima's *Lone*

Wolf and Cub as well as Kenji Misumi's cinematic adaptations is a clear flashback into Genndy's own past, as an homage to all the samurai media he loved as a youth. The implication of this scene is that the confrontation Jack witnesses inspires him to take up the sword as much as it does Genndy to take up the pen/brush.

In his melancholy exploration of the ruins of the old kingdom, he finds the relic of his childhood, a weave ball he used to play with and was harassed by bullies for, who eventually absconded with it. While he is able to use guile and his intelligence to win it back, he remembers a lesson his father imparted to him when he was upset that also sums up Genndy's entire ethos as described in Chapter 1: "that which is worth having is not easy. Sometimes, you have to fight for what is yours and what you believe in. Remember, it is not one's outer brawn, but one's inner strength that makes them mighty" (Tartakovsky 2001). Resilience, righteous truculence, self-belief, faith, and hard work. This is the ethos of Genndy Tartakovsky. This is the ethos of *Samurai Jack*.

Genndy as "The Poet of the Far Horizon": Jack, the Epic, Kurosawa, and Lean

I would like to suggest here that there is an underlying aesthetic connection between Genndy's work in *Samurai Jack* and the cinematography, direction, and overall cinema of both David Lean, as well as classic Japanese cinema in the form of the work of Kurosawa. Included here are other texts and notable artists and creators from whom Genndy draws. For example, the influence of Frank Miller comics (specifically *Ronin* and *300*) are clear in some of the first four seasons' most notable episodes. Here, I will look at *Samurai Jack and Epic Cinema* in order to make the novel suggestion that because of and through *Samurai Jack*, Genndy Tartakovsky can be rightly thought of as the David Lean/Kurosawa of contemporary American animation. The relation between Genndy's aesthetic sensibility and that of 1970s epic cinema in the style of David Lean is clear, so much so one could go as far as to describe the entire diegesis of *Samurai Jack* as an animated chimera of David Lean, Ridley Scott, and Akira Kurasawa. With the sweeping vistas, the grandeur of scale in terms of both space and time, the expanse, and retrofuturistic detail brought to bear in developing and sustaining the Jackverse over its initial first four seasons are reminiscent of these auteurs.

In terms of Lean's masterpieces, including *Bridge over the River Kwai* and *Lawrence of Arabia*, Constantine Santas argues that Lean's epics can be viewed in broadly two ways. On the one hand, he proposes that Lean's epics can be viewed as genealogically linked to a Hollywood tradition primarily concerned with profit, seeing the epic as an effective vehicle through which

to exploit the medium of film and thereby draw to it a larger and keener audience. On the other hand, Santas proposes that Lean's films be regarded as a part of a literary tradition in which the production of epics has existed since antiquity (Santas 2012: xxxvii). For Santas, Lean falls squarely in the latter category, suggesting that

> Lean […] whether conscious or not, followed the literary tradition of the epic, and in the process set his rules in adapting a literary work: it had to be cinematically viable, for the film epic was a visual medium. The large canvas was there, but it was conceived as the context of the dramatic demands of the story, which remained the primary consideration. Once those parameters were set, he remained loyal to the spirit of the original. (Santas 2012: xxxvii)

Santas also goes to great lengths to ensure no misunderstanding on the point that Lean's approach to epics and the epic form of cinema was not an affectation, but a decidedly intrinsic aspect of his auteurship more broadly: "for Lean, epic-making was an act of the imagination. He regarded himself not just as a maker of movies that happened to be epic, but as a film-maker who wished to embark on a large venture in making a worthwhile and 'perfect' film. He thought the film form could uplift the human spirit" (Santas 2012: xvi).

Lean's acolytes and apologists are, unsurprisingly, not dissimilar from those auteurs Genndy has named as inspirations to and of his own style and approach to moving pictures. They include Fred Zinnemann, William Wyler, Akira Kurosawa, and Billy Wilder. More contemporary admirers include Steven Spielberg, Sydney Pollack, Martin Scorsese, and John Milius. Santas notes how, during Lean's Life Achievement Awards of the American Film Institute on March 8, 1990, Spielberg declared that Lean "puts pictures on the screen that not even imagination can anticipate" and, moreover, Gregory Peck quoted an undisclosed individual as having described Lean as "the poet of the far horizon," adding that for him, "Lean brings that horizon closer to us all. And then he sails right across it" (Santas 2012: xx).

As an orienting precept, we can say that epic cinema cannot be separated from its literary forbears. For Santas, there are specific elements of the cinematic form that refer to ancient precedents set by luminary figures like Aristotle. "For instance," asserts Santas, "the length of the epic film became a crucial factor, since more time and 'space' were required to accommodate battles, long treks, elaborate action sequences with special effects, and spectacle in general […] Today, the multiplex has put an end to this opulence" (Santas 2012: xxiii). While the average length of a contemporary epic film has *shrunk* to approximately two and a half hours, with no intermission and rarely exceeding that limit, the medium of serial television allows the epic, in all its forms to not only be extended, but also successfully capture and

present its ambitions. Similarly, the manner in which epics are made resonate with the manner in which 2D animation is made in terms of the required time, expertise, and commitment required to reify its central vision. The contemporary era has, in its digitalization of not just the epic but film itself, minimized the need for exterior shooting, thereby (mostly) reducing the cost of a film. According to Santas, "these technological developments have not strangulated the epic structure, for the modern epic, though still longer than the average film, might obtain a tighter plot. Structure, however, is mostly a matter of correct artistic design and may or may not be affected by actual length" (Santas 2012: xxiii). Similarly, the transition to 3D animation and digital production have not necessarily diminished the prosecution of an epic ethos in the medium. However, the manner which Genndy pursues it, in its specifically Lean-like aspects, is atypical. Genndy's big ideas make the small box in which they are shown feel infinite.

Genndy as the David Lean of Western animation seems a strange claim to make when his aesthetic is so obviously syncretic of multiple international, inter-medial strands of auteurship to create his own distinct style, particularly with regard to his approach to *scale*. Consider this:

> Whether films of great popularity can also be considered art works (or art films) is a question that has yet to provoke a satisfactory answer, and some consider it an impiety even to think of such likelihood, despite the fact that reputable art filmmakers—Kurosawa in Japan, Jean-Pierre Melville in France, Fellini in Italy, and Bergman in Sweden—had achieved both critical approval and a measure (and often more than a measure) of popular and commercial success. One cannot overlook the example of Alfred Hitchcock, who, while hailed as one of the greatest film-makers of the twentieth century, always had an eye on box office returns. But no other director could match the phenomenon of Lean, whose first three epics erupted on the screen, winning Oscars, amassing fortunes for Lean and his producers, while combining lengthy spectacle, intriguing storylines, and attention to craft that remain unrivalled.
>
> (Santas 2012: xxvi)

Genndy, like Lean in his own medium, has, since the beginning of his career as an auteur of animation, been able to merge critical praise with commercial viability, experimentalism with popularity, avant-garde sensibilities and seemingly universal humor. And like Lean with *Bridge*, *Lawrence*, and *Doctor*, when one compares his achievements on his first three extended works on *Dexter*, *Samurai Jack*, and *Clone Wars*, Genndy established a phenomenon in terms of contemporary Western animation's approach to action, scale, style, and humor in an unmatched way. Like Lean, Genndy has won praise and accolades, prizes, box office returns, admiration, inspiration, and influence—all on account of his syncretic approach whose

fundamentally *combinatory* nature brings together extended spectacle at series length, intriguing and diverse storylines, and an unrivalled attention to craft, but a craft that is in every way *specific* to Genndy despite (as a result of) all the sources from which he literally and figuratively draws.

The other notable auteur I would compare Genndy to in terms of style, particularly with regard to action, themes, and narrative pacing, would be Akira Kurosawa. This comparison is so natural that a not insignificant amount of things that have been said about Kurosawa can also be comfortably and accurately said about Genndy and his work. Consider Donald Richie's description of *Seven Samurai*, for instance:

> *Seven Samurai* is an epic all right—it is an epic of the human spirit because very few films indeed have dared to go this far, to show this much to indicate the astonishing and frightening scope of the struggle, and to dare suggest personal bravery, gratuitous action, and choice in the very fate of the chaos that threatens to overwhelm.
>
> (Richie 1965:104)

This description could read as a logline for the entirety of *Samurai Jack*. One of Japan's most important and influential film-makers, Kurosawa's thirty films across his diverse and replete career, one defined by a *combination* of "a dynamic and affective film style with an expressive and gestural aesthetic [...] an assured command of sound and image, a cutting-edge mastery of the tracking shot and an inspired deployment of multiple camera angles—these and other formal features lend his art a virtuoso technical assurance" (Burnett, Lehmann, Rippy, and Wray 2013: 54). Genndy, especially with regard to his use of silence, and pure visual (no diegetic dialogue) story-telling, reifies these techniques albeit within the medium of 2D animation.

Thematically, there are, especially in *Samurai Jack*, overlaps between Kurosawa and Genndy. Much has been made of the extent to which Kurosawa "has embedded, across his *oeuvre*, a humanist philosophy that privileges questions of conscience, fate, social relationships and self-knowledge" (Burnett, Lehmann, Rippy, and Wray 2013: 54). Like Kurosawa, Genndy imbues Jack with a deeply personal characterization in and through which audiences young and old necessarily grapple with questions of loss, love, family, hope, despair, joy, rage—fundamental existential questions that have troubled philosophers, scientists, and indeed artists throughout history. It is the specifically *combinatory* ability of each auteur that authenticates the comparison. Both are not only able, but renowned for combining ethical and moral questions and considerations with painterly art of an inalienably elegant and beautiful compositional style that sets each auteur clearly apart from their respective contemporaries (Burnett, Lehmann, Rippy, and Wray 2013: 54).

It is interesting to also note how, for each auteur, the question of style, in their own terms, is so evasive, mercurial, and multi-gestural. Both auteurs—regardless of whether such a mercurial ethos is a cliché of auteurship or not—are production ethos both share. Kurosawa's ideas on style ironically remained relatively unchanged through his own career. In 1963, Richie quotes him as having said that

> [n]othing could be more difficult for me than to define my own style. I simply make a picture as I want it to be, or as nearly as it is possible for me to do so. And I've never thought about defining my own particular style. If I ever did a thing like that, I'd be doing myself a grave disservice. (Kurosawa qtd. in Richie 1965: 42)

Here, there is obviously a clash in terms of the critical certainty of auteural style and voice and the nature of style itself as something mercurial, or as Richie describes of Kurosawa's own ideas concerning style, as "one of Kurosawa's strongest attributes as a director [being] that he knows not only that the style is the man, he also knows that the man is continually changing, growing, and that therefore, style itself grows, changes, and it is this metamorphosis, this continual adaptation which is most necessary, most interesting, and most rewarding" (Richie 1965: 42).

Genndy and Visual Storytelling

Of all the episodes of the first season, Episode 7 "Jack and the 3 Blind Archers" (aired August 20, 2001) in particular is a tour-de-force of visual story-telling (Tartakovsky 2001). The insistence on the acuity of Genndy's deft handling of the visual elements of the narrative seemingly makes utterly superfluous the need for spoken exposition. Every aesthetic decision propels the narrative forward. The sense of narrative flow and pace is imbued with a sense of taught expectation, danger, and eeriness, however the narrative pace never feels belabored or frenetic. Genndy draws the viewer into this moving, worldless picture-book with the use of near total silence. The opening shot of the episode, passing slowly on a smooth dolly through autumnal woods, features no extradiegetic music, a technique which draws heightened attention to the diegetic sound: the crunching leaves, the chirp of forest birds, the scurry of woodland creatures underfoot, the sibilance of babbling brooks. This peaceful, albeit simultaneously tense, atmosphere is broken by the tread of cyborg-demon Viking warriors, green-eyed, revenant, and tallow. Their destructive and vacant violence testifies to their thralldom under Aku.

Through Jack's foes, Genndy also brings a syncretic aesthetic to bear. The Viking cyborg demons drag with them, functioning as a command

FIGURE 3.11 *Genndy's Cinematic Depiction of Action*

post, fort, and battering ram, a modified Viking longship. The incongruous imagery of a Viking longship being dragged over land, through a sea of grass surrounding a lone stone tower in the middle of a clearing proves to be extremely evocative when fully realized under Genndy's vision.

From the first episode and throughout the rest of the series, Genndy often employs alterations to the aspect ratio, typically adopting a tighter, albeit broader 2.75:1 and 2.39:1 aspect ratios to capture action in a way that renders its scale in cinematic scope. In the episode, this occurs when the mecha-Vikings, who incidentally have only uttered one word ("CHARGE!"), attack the tower (Tartakovsky 2001). The entire force is destroyed by an unceasing rain of arrows which are shown in a three-way vertical split screen, another technique of Genndy's auteureal profile that also reflects the comic book influences on his style.

The lone survivor, the general of the cyber-Vikings, tells the story of his loss on a galley to a listener who asks him why he would sacrifice an entire army, revealing that the introductory sequence was a flashback. The Viking general answers: "the well of King Osteric. The well grants one wish, the wisher's deepest desire" (Tartakovsky 2001). Jack overhears this conversation and sees a potential way home through the well. Be it magical or mechanical, Genndy

shows that Jack has multitudinous means of attempting to return to the past that are themselves supra-temporal, folkloric, and science fictional both.

The tower is located on a mystical island, guarded by three archers whose aesthetic recalls, in a syncretically antipodal opposition to the Norse aesthetic of the cyborg-Vikings, the ancient Egyptian god Anubis. Jack sets off for the isle alone. Genndy displays his skill for visual storytelling by having Jack arriving in deep winter. The diegetic information presented to the viewer is, in its entirety, related to the narrative and its themes. Sound, and the lack thereof, is the entire focus of the majority of the episode.

Jack's arrival on the isle is a predominantly sonic affair. He and the viewer are met with the same milieu from the beginning of the episode, the change into winter registering the passage of time: howling wind, the sound of distant birds, a half-melted stream, and the crunch of Jack's tread in the snow. In short, winter is just as loud as autumn and it is the through sound that Genndy tells the viewer that time has passed whereby the same silence experienced at the beginning of the episode is also different. Having seen how that silence was broken and re-established, the viewer now fears for Jack—the silence becomes deadly. Soon after, Genndy concretizes this danger by showing the viewer a now snow-covered plain before the tower strewn with the decimated bodies of the cyber-Viking army.

Jack tests the archers who fire on the sound of his movement, in particular his footsteps which displace the snow with audible crunching. Genndy's Foley mixers Diane Greco and Monett Holderer seem to increase the gain on the sound of Jack's footsteps to heighten the tension, making the audience dread any and all movements Jack has to make. However, it can also be that the sound of Jack's footfalls is mixed exactly the same as they would be in any other episode. Regardless, the deafening silence against which the sound rings exacerbates not only their acoustic resonance but the psycho-emotional resonance of fear, trepidation, and anxiety in the viewer, thereby effectively, and economically, heightening the tension of the entire episode. This applies to a variety of sounds that Jack might neither be conscious of or in control over: the billowing of his gi sleeve, for instance. The viewer quickly learns and learns to fear anything on Jack's person or around it that can make noise.

The process of discovery and tactical adaptability unfolds without any dialogue at all. Genndy often presents the conflicts between Jack and his foes as puzzles which the viewer remains invested and as involved in the attempt to solve. Jack tries, for instance, to first blind his foes using his sword as a light mirror. Here already Genndy expertly foreshadows the denouement of the episode, the secret of the tower, and the curse of its guardians. He feints with his jingasa (straw hat worn by warriors), waving it gently in the air and notices that it is not fired upon until he drops it to the ground where it makes a sound upon landing.

Genndy does not shy away from tempering breakneck action with literal and figurative meditative moments. After encountering the impasse of the tower guardians, Jack withdraws to a semi-frozen waterfall under whose crashing spill he meditates. He has a flashback to his early training with the Shaolin monks in which he was blindfolded, recalling how he struggled and complained to the Abbot that no-one can fight blind. The Abbot responds by saying: "a true warrior is in tune with all his senses. Only then can he extend his awareness so that he may fight on any level" (Tartakovsky 2001). This prompts Jack to fight on the archer's level and reveal to the viewer the key to solving the puzzle the archers pose.

The scene involving Jack preparing to "fight on their level" is the centerpiece of the theme of the episode as well as the visual storytelling techniques brought to bear. Jack turning his gi into a blindfold coincides with the darkening of the entire frame. The darkness is broken by the sound and mental impression and emergence of the sources thereof—a foraging deer, birds, the creaking branches, drops of water, the river flowing over stones, the high-volume sound of both chime and shattering glass of falling snowflakes symbolizing the extreme acuity of Jack's hearing, and the wind as the cause of movement in the entire scene more broadly. It is a genius montage not only for the creativity and experimentalism through which it is rendered, but the fact that the audience is not bored by the fact that Genndy in essence shows them the same sequence three separate times. The repetition serves to enrich its narrative value precisely because of what said repetition allows both Jack, and the audience through him, to learn through the detail and scale of Jack's blind awareness. It is arguably one of the most genius visualizations of blind sight ever seen (no pun etc.) in contemporary Western cartoons.

While Jack's blind-sight places him on equal footing with the archers, it is not, however, a guarantee of a positive outcome, or his survival. Therefore his blind charge toward his foe's position is still, if not even more so, imbued with a sense of risk. Jack hears the drawn bowstrings twanging, the hiss of the flight of the arrows and is able to evade them at the very last second. In slow motion, he can hear the fletchings billowing like sheets on a line. In slow motion, he manages to evade the final arrows in such a way that they strike each of their respective bowmen positioned opposite one another. While not shown, the scene recalls the archery prowess Jack learned with Robin Hood in his preparatory, lesson-learning cosmopolitan upbringing. As a result, the archers are freed from their curse, they are restored as is their sight, and the malignancy of Aku, pictured like infectious oil, flows from the arches' bodies. Jack is given leave to make his wish, however, there is a drawback: the well grants the wisher their wish, but at the price of enslaving the wisher to become its guardian. Jack *sacrifices* his wish by destroying the well, plunging his sword into it and breaking its spell.

FIGURE 3.12 *Jack and His Epic Allegiance with the Spartans*

In terms of Genndy's relationship with epic cinema, perhaps no clearer example exists than Season 2, Episode 12 "Jack and the Spartans" (aired October 4, 2002). The fact that the Episode aired five years before Zack Snyder's *300* begs a few questions that can be asked as one (Tartakovsky 2002). The obvious similarities between the episode's narrative and the legend of Leonidas I and his brave 300 Spartans aside could it be that while Genndy drew from the legend via Frank Miller's own drawing from the legend, that Snyder drew from, like Favreau did after him, Genndy's work? A comparison between Genndy's approach to the topic in the Episode, Frank Miller's comic book approach, and Zack Snyder's adaptation thereof is unavoidable.

The rather Cubist hyperperspective of the themes, symbols, iconography, aesthetic, and narrative of the Battle of Thermopylae/Platea have three very interesting examples here. The first point to note that I feel necessary to make in order to clear off any questions of plagiarism or unoriginality in specifically Genndy's take, which is confessedly based on Miller's text, is the fact of how referential Miller's approach was *in principium*. The graphic novel *300* had a cinematic genealogy long before it was adapted to film itself. Miller has noted how he was inspired by earlier epic cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, in particular *The 300 Spartans* (1962), directed by Rudolph Maté, starring Richard Egan as King Leonidas. Miller describes his experience of seeing the film as a young boy as captivating and transformative, inspiring in its portrayal of powerful story concerning fearlessness, stoicism, courage, and camaraderie. In the Spartan's Alamo-like final stand against the invading

imperial Persian army, Miller's understanding about the ideological content of heroism was irrevocably altered: "I stopped thinking of heroes as being the people who got medals at the end or the key to the city and started to thinking of them more as the people who did the right thing, damn the consequences" (Miller qtd. in Grossman 2007: 10).

In terms of the episode's aesthetics, Genndy brings similar techniques to bear, or rather Snyder brings similar Genndy techniques to bear, in ways that accord perfectly with Monica Silveria Cyrino's description of Snyder's visual approach to his film adaptation of Miller's text:

> The film is spectacularly violent, but the violence reveals a heavy dose of post *Matrix* cinematic stylization: the battle scenes are dited in the now familiar slow-to-fast motion photographic technique known as "bullet time", where the frame slows down to capture a warrior lunging to hurl his spear and then speeds up against to show computer-generated blood gushing artfully from impaled torsos and severed heads [...] the overall choreographic effect, as described by the director's wife and producing partner, Deborah Snyder, was like "a ballet of death" (16: qtd by Daly, "Double-Edged Sword", p. 38). And the result is a stunning virtual recreation of this authentic yet highly idealized moment in history when a band of Spartan warriors refused to surrender their freedom and so saved the Greek-speaking world.
>
> (Cyrino 2011: 21)

Cyrino also draws attention to some interesting developments in contemporary pop and visual culture with regard to the presentation of heroes and heroism that Genndy's portrayal of Jack both adheres to and reneges. Referring to Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* and Wolfgang Peterson's *Troy*, Cyrino argues that

> spurred on by financial incentives and creative aspirations to express a more enlightened, global outlooks, contemporary historical epics [...] seek to reach the widest possible international audiences [and] so contemporary film-makers are now crafting their narrative strategies to engage with and promote broad cross-cultural and even universal structures of identification, affinity, and inclusivity.
>
> (Cyrino 2011: 28)

In short, Cyrino proposes that the contemporary manifestation and understanding of epic cinema has been made (reductively) synonymous with specific thematic through-lines that bind most if not all contemporary (war) epics to the same ideology. *Gladiator*'s hero Maximus, for example, embodies the precepts at the core of historico-mythical Rome in his undaunted belief in the ideals of personal honor, spirituality, and sacrifice—

ideals which he seeks and dies for in the hope of restoring them to and in Rome itself. For Achilles in *Troy*, centralized is the individual quest for undying fame as a specifically romanticized expression of the shared human aspiration to achieve immortality. "In the case of *300*," asserts Cyrino, "the film highlights as its main theme the unanimously aspirational ideal of 'freedom,' both of the individual and the society at large, and Snyder invests this theme with an updated, global spin to appeal to transnational audience" (Cyrino 2011: 28).

It is interesting to note that the Spartan king, who narrates the action of the episode, refers to Jack as a legend. Jack, a warrior from the ancient past, is a legend in the future, an inverse legend whose legend is established in the future as opposed to the past, one that antecedes its own precedence. Moreover, it is interesting to note how the king of the Spartans ages while Jack does not. The temporal displacement he experiences causes him not to age, in this sense, Jack's pseudo-immortality is not only established, but also experienced as a curse. This theme is explored in significant depth in Season 5.

When Jack oversees the battle between the Spartans and Aku's Minotaur drones, Genndy employs a 2.75:1 and 2.39:1 aspect ratio to capture and present the scale of the battle in cinematic framing. A perhaps ancillary point here, the episode draws attention to a recursive symbolism of trail and task in a significant amount of episodes which see or require Jack to climb mountains, cliffs, or negotiate elevated precipices. In this episode, the theme is reflected in the Spartans whereby the idea of a self-repairing mechanical army resulting in five generations of kings to war against a seemingly immortal enemy is the same as climbing a summit-less mountain. More centrally, the rendering of the battle in this ratio serves to not only impress the viewer, but the diegetic viewer too, Jack, who in a rare instance, is impressed with the skill of other warriors he encounters besides the Scotsman. There are so many impressive visual elements in this episode that make it a strong contender for the most cinematic episode in the series' initial four seasons. In each that can be named, Genndy uses silhouette slow motion, and aspect ratio to devastating effect.

As it is with Jack's partnership with the Scotsman, the instance of teamwork comes at the end of the episode, during the climactic fight between the giant mechanical spider monster controlling the Minotaur drones, the Spartan king, and Jack. Jack shows his ability to successfully and effectively join the ranks of another fighting force and adapt to their tactics, in this case symbolized by the fact that for a significant part of the battle, Jack uses a Spartan shield as his primary weapon. This is also the first time Jack willing gives his sword to an ally to use. Mixed in with the themes and ideas of adaptability and teamwork, the lesson of self-sacrifice is also addressed as Jack puts himself in the direct path of the blast caused by the felled mechanical spider monster to protect the king. Jack is described as "a

FIGURE 3.13 *Good vs. Evil, Light vs. Dark, Jack vs. the Shinobi*

stranger who became a brother and aided us in our time of need and made a difference" (Tartakovsky 2001).

Arguably more impressive still is Season 4, Episode 1 "Jack vs. the Ninja" (aired June 14, 2003) which, in my opinion, more than any single episode, is a perfect example of Genndy's capabilities in terms of visual storytelling (Tartakovsky 2003). The episode follows one of Aku's dark assassins, a mechanical shinobi (ninja) dispatched to use its impressive powers of infiltration to catch Jack at unawares and destroy him. As it is with "Jack and the Blind Archers," Genndy uses a combination of slightly heightened diegetic sound and silence to impress upon the viewer the tenacity and level of stealth of the shinobi's skill. The sounds of crackling fire, burning incense, or the hushing sibilance of a shallow breeze are used to create an excellent sound design laden with tension, anticipation, and danger. In this sense, the episode is a masterclass of the use of negative space, both sonically and visually to build tension.

From the character's aesthetic to its function, Genndy presents the shinobi as a *refinement* of Aku. Bombast and ego are replaced by a killer instinct and silence. Ostentation is replaced with subterfuge. Hubris is replaced with efficiency. The shinobi is a master of darkness in a way Aku can never be himself. The shinobi is a master of darkness *and* shadow, shape, pattern, and movement; elements of stealth which all come together in a startling manner, a silent manner in which the shinobi clings to surfaces like a gecko, shadows Jack unseen, moves in and among a populous undetected.

The aesthetic symbolization of the conflict between good and evil is literalized in this episode through ostensibly simple means: light, dark,

negative space, and silence. In the eventual duel of light and dark that results when Jack reveals that he has also been trained in the ways of the shinobi albeit trained to use light instead of darkness, Genndy abstracts the entire milieu, and every frame that makes it up, and turns the space in which the confrontation takes place into a latticework of positive and negative space made up of beams of light and shadow.

Combined with the crushing sense of silence and the stabs of Venable's industrial horror-inflected score (one that incidentally also shows off the composer's range), the tension in the episode is nearly unbearable. The creaking geometry of seen and unseen elements illuminated by counterfactual beams, whose stylization does not render the action that takes place upon and between them as unrealistic or cartoonish in a way that alleviates the viewer from said tension, is pregnant with a sense of danger. The shinobi appears suddenly, attacks, and subsequently vanishes, using the surroundings to overwhelm Jack with falling beams and impressive acrobatic and hand-to-hand combat skills. As night falls in earnest, the space is filled ever increasingly with seemingly inescapable shadow, leaving Jack marked, exposed, and struggling to find some light in which to (ironically if not conceptually brilliant) disappear.

At the last, the setting sun, which Genndy keeps drawing the viewer's attention to in the background, acts as a figurative and literal countdown. The encroach of gloaming darkness impresses on the viewer the increasing disequilibrium between Jack and the shinobi, with the odds and the darkness ever more in the latter's favor. Sunset eventually renders the space entirely black and white. Jack uses the white space as the shinobi uses the black and disappears into the light, the shinobi into the shadow. It is not only perhaps the most pure example of visual storytelling in the entire series, but also the most *abstract*.

Genndy on the Cost of the Journey: A Psycho-Emotional Precursor to the Return

While the general consensus holds that the fundamental difference between the first four seasons of *Samurai Jack* and its fifth and concluding is predicated on the overall tonal and thematic darkness of the latter over the former, to conclude at that is to do the leitmotifs Genndy explores in the initial run of the series a disservice. For example, the theme/lesson of Season 2, Episode 7 "Jack and the Monks" (aired April 12, 2002) excavates the unavoidable experience of frustration which pertain to warriors, artists, and viewers alike (Tartakovsky 2002). Latent to the themes explored in the episode is the psycho-emotional and indeed physical *cost* of Jack's

quest. The episode opens with the searing heat of frustration in the face of mischance and an ostensibly indefatigable series of inconveniences that make the attainment of a goal, no matter how lofty or base, seem impossible. In Jack's case, this takes the form of Aku's beetle drones destroying a portal with the potential to take him back to the past, thus preventing Jack from returning to his time. Not only does Genndy show Jack frustrated, but he also shows Jack succumbing to a very potent sense of despair in the face of crushing futility. Thwarted seemingly at every turn, Jack collapses onto his knees and declares: "it is impossible," flinging his sword in angry frustration (Tartakovsky 2002).

This episode is important because we see the burgeoning of not only Jack's depression and nihilism but also his rage that come to characterize the entirety of the fifth season. Jack's encounter with the monks, individuals like him who have trained their entire lives to be able to perform a single task which in their case is surmount a grueling peak, have a conversation with the wandering samurai that Genndy presents as a touch of destiny. After his hat flies from his head and is caught by one of the monks, Jack asks: "what is at the peak of the mountain?" to which one of the monks answers "truth" (Tartakovsky 2002).

The symbolism and visual metaphor is already abundantly clear in that the mountain represents the staggering totality of a seemingly impossible and impassable task. Moreover, such a symbol suggests a latent promise, namely, that should one's courage, tenacity, hard work, and faith hold, the surmounting of the seemingly insurmountable task will result in the attainment of truth and great power. The monks have dedicated their entire lives to seeking it out if it indeed exists. The theme here is not dissimilar to the theme in *Game of Thrones* Season 3, Episode 6 where Peter Beilish (Aiden Gillen) delivers his now famous "chaos is a ladder" speech suggesting that "the climb is all there is," that life is the mountain, the arduous climb up which represents the never-ending battle and trials of life with the promise, albeit one made with no guarantee, of a reward at the end of it (Game of Thrones 2013).

Tempted by the potential of a way home, Jack accompanies the monks on their climb. The process is better described as an ordeal. It is lengthy and arduous and beset with enemies in the form of goatmen guarding the mountain pass, mountain spirits like ogres, and of course, and perhaps most severe of all, the elements themselves. Through his conflicts with the mountain and its guardians, he loses his sword and hat, and his footing and is forced to make much of the climb again, descending to retrieve his belongings. He has to endure the cold of the snow on the mountain alone. However, the secondary spiritual climb he simultaneously endures forces him to come to terms with the idea of the abject futility of his circumstances: no food, no water, no shelter on the bare face of the mountainside overwhelmed by a seemingly never-ending blizzard. Without any guides or company, friend or foe, alone and disoriented, Jack has to fight at the very last a giant yeti. He is beaten, scratched, and stomped to a pulp.

FIGURE 3.14 *The Never-Ending Climb*

Genndy's talent for cyclical writing again manifests here as the scream of rage and anguish Jack lets sound at the beginning of the episode returns here and is the source of his salvation as it dislodges a stalactite hanging precariously over the yeti, crushing it. However, the same sense of futility that forced the scream out in the beginning of the episode also returns. Splayed out, helpless, and battered on the mountainside, Jack again says: "it is impossible" (Tartakovsky 2002).

Here, Jack has another vision of his father, withered and forlorn, digging with a pickaxe as he did when Jack last saw him and his mother alive, mining for gems for Aku's regime despite their severely haggard states. In this vision is also the face of one of the trio of monks whom Jack subsequently became separated from. It asks him if he intendeds to give up on the memory of his parents, whether he intends to abandon their hope, their desperation. The circumstances and necessity of Jack's continued fight are compounded by a further vision of Jack's former people breaking their backs in order to erect a statue of Aku, suffering as Jack has suffered in the snow.

The question the episode asks is whether or not frustration and seemingly impossible odds will ensure that evil remain in the world unchecked forever (Tartakovsky 2002). It also poses the question concerning the relationship between memory and trauma, of forgetting and frustration. This takes the form of visions of a young Jack experiencing the trauma of the loss of his

family, kingdom, and everything that has happened to him. Jack resolves, saying "no, I have not forgotten" (Tartakovsky 2002). Here, Genndy shows that the memory of an idyllic time, of love, life, and happiness, is not doleful antipodes of the harsh realities of the future, but rather inspirations, comforts, and re-affirmations of the necessity of *sincere* effort, *especially* in the face of staggering odds. Jack resolves to remember all that he lost, all that was taken, all the pain, despair, and hopelessness and uses it as inspiration to get himself up the mountain. Upon making the summit, Jack realizes that there is nothing but more mountain peaks beyond his. There is no singular, clear, magical, or mechanical solution to the trails and tribulations of life. All there is the one's will and one's memory to meet them. Jack thanks the Mountain Monks, who are now revealed to be disembodied guides and purveyors of an important and wise lesson: never give up. Nothing is impossible. It is here that Genndy teaches the viewer the importance of renewal, faith, and remembrance.

Similarly, well ahead of the theme's resumption in Season 5, Season 4, Episode 4 "The Aku Infection" (aired November 5, 2003) is the first instance wherein which Aku's evil is portrayed and visualized as virulent (Tartakovsly 2003). In terms of preempting this relationship between infection and Aku internalized in the figure of Ashi in Season 5, Season 1, Episode 6 "Jack and the Warrior Women" (aired November 19, 2001), the

FIGURE 3.15 *Genndy's Scale and Magnanimity of the Series' Central Deities*

episode shows that Jack has had dealings with strong warrior woman with problematic, or potentially treacherous and life-threatening ties to Aku since the very beginning of the series (Tartakovsky 2001). In this episode, for example, Ashi, as she is portrayed at the beginning of the fifth season, is interchangeable with season one's Ikra as both tread the line between companion and spy in relation to both Jack and Aku.

In this episode, Genndy approaches the concept of Aku as an infection and/or an invading entity in other ways through the visual language of virulence. For example, he also portrays Aku in a similar style—and subject to the same weaknesses—as most renderings of H. G. Wells's Martian invaders. In this capacity, Genndy also foreshadows the idea that while ostensibly indomitable, Aku is also susceptible to common terrestrial ailments like the common cold which render him feeble. There are also interesting instances of aesthetic callbacks here as when the flu-ridden Aku coughs up a piece of himself eventually inhaled by Jack, the shape and manner of transmission of that piece of himself recalls the piece of himself that was not destroyed millennia ago explored in the demon's first battle with the trio of gods in Season 3's "The Birth of Evil," again suggesting and indeed reinforcing the idea that Aku is a representation of the malignancy and tenacity of evil itself.

FIGURE 3.16 *The Malignancy of Aku*

Genndy makes the threat of the Aku-infection explicit in its setting: the preponderance of the episode takes place in the snow, conditions in which Jack's symptoms are exacerbated. There are other first instances in this episode that act as precedents to the themes and presentation thereof in Season 5, particularly concerning Jack's psycho-emotional world. As he gets more and more ill in this episode, he begins to hallucinate. He sees his parents, a recurrent image whenever Genndy portrays the goings on of Jack's kopfkino/innewelt, particularly in times of great anguish or duress.

The literal and figurative malignancy of Aku spreads through Jack's body and soul, first appearing as a black mark on his hand, and then morphing into a type of blight/rash that quickly spreads over his forearm, then the rest of his body. With its spread comes a direct proportionality between good and evil. The more the infection spread, the more angry, careless, violent, and in short evil, Jack becomes. He steals from a group of veteran miners saving their store of gems for retirement. He nearly lets a trapped mountaineer (again, mountains) fall to his death in lieu of being able to pay Jack for his rescue. This contest for dominance over Jack's body and soul in terms of good and evil is further literalized by Jack arguing with himself from the vantage of two ever increasingly distinct personalities. This is yet another moment of foreshadowing concerning the same theme in the first half of Season 5. Half of him becomes increasingly hostile toward himself, aggressive, agitated, itchy, and sick. The other half is still noble and selfless, uncertain, and even afraid. The failure of his goodness emerges most clearly when, under the influence of his infection by Aku, Aku-Jack mercilessly murders an innocent robot whom *he* bumps into. At this point, his entire right side is disfigured, black, half Aku, replete with claws and spiked shoulders, half sick samurai. This perhaps is the most important episode tying the Jekyll and Hyde dialectic in the original season with the presiding theme thereof in Season 5 whose central theme is fighting the evil within, the temptation of evil, its enjoyment, and its suffering.

The malignancy of Aku's infection impedes on Jack's mission as a monastery of Salamander monks who offer Jack the use of their interdimensional/inter-temporal portal is slain by the entity I like to think of as "Ja-ku," who is almost fully taken over by the infection at this point. In an effort to stop him, the monks attack and fail to subdue him. Aku *uses* Jack to defeat himself by destroying the time nexus and a certain chance to return to the past within his grasp.

The Abbott uses a special powder to put Jack under. Jack hallucinates, and sees his father who encourages him to rest. Abbot: "Aku's very *essence* is flowing through your veins, possessing your body, possessing your very mind. It means to devour you spirit […] you have been infected by pure evil which can only be purged by the good within you […] this is a sickness only you can truly cure" (Tartakovsky 2003). Consumption, possession, weariness, Jack hallucinating his mother and father who tell him he is never alone, that

they are with him, in his heart—these are ultimately trials and ardors, pains and odds Jack must face and face alone. This whole sense of solitude, self-blame, and guilt which his father counters by saying "Aku's victories are not your failures" yet again preempts all of Jack's world-weary suicidal ideation, fatigue, and *angoisse* in Season 5 (Tartakovsky 2003).

This vision of his parents reminds him of that all those he saved who appear as a seemingly unending row of ghostly shades that thank him for the spark of hope his victories kindled in their hearts. The aesthetic—a black field in which figures emerge in a spectral glow—could perhaps even be argued to be the aesthetic template for the Avatar state in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* acting as a psycho-spiritual and emotional guide and aid, as it also is in Rey's final confrontation with the Emperor in *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*. Jack sees in the innenwelt of his soul the entire line of those he has saved. Their blessings form figurative glowing bricks, that one after the other form a giant luminous white castle, a psycho-emotional bastion within his heart, strong, and impregnable, bolstered by all his allies and their appreciation and support. Not only is this moment a recognition and in some ways a reward for the warrior's selfless deeds, it is also a harrowing index of time and struggle inextricable from the range and scale of the entire line of those he has helped in the seemingly short-now of Jack's long, battle-worn future. Jack's father impels his son to wield what he has within himself in order to "break the siege of darkness" (Tartakovsky 2003).

Here, Genndy masterfully visualizes infection as a type of siege. Aesthetically, the stark contrast between light blue and white and pitch black recalls the visual language of good and evil as light and dark brought to bear in Season 4's "Jack vs. the Shinobi." However, in this episode, Jack uses a blade of pure light (not unlike his father does in "The Birth of Evil Part II") in an abstract black-and-white space to confront a shadow of a different sort, namely the literal and figurative demon within. This theme of the darkness within extends all the way back to the first season of the series. Season 1, Episode 9 "Jack vs. Mad Jack" (aired October 15, 2001) shows that from the very beginning of the series, the notion of the reflexive and potentially self-annihilating danger of Jack's inner torments is not only present from the onset of the series, but his torments are literalized in this episode in which Aku uses Jack's inner turmoil, a type of darkness, to create an evil clone designed to destroy him (Tartakovsky 2003). In the final part, I will explore how the character of Jack not only matures in addressing mature themes, but how Genndy offers a piercing examination of the cost of the journey, and both the hopeful and nihilistic desire for its ending. But before we explore how this both does and does not come to pass, we have to make a detour in a different albeit influential retrofuture, a different long time ago, in a different galaxy far, far away.

* * *

Note

1 In short, Campbell names the following twelve stages in the journey: (1) the ordinary/quotidian world, (2) the call to adventure, (3) refusal of the call, (4) meeting the mentor, (5) crossing the threshold, (6) tests, allies, and enemies, (7) approach to the inmost cave, (8) ordeal, (9) reward (also known as seizing the sword), (10) the road back, (11) resurrection, and (12) return with the elixir. See Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949).

4

Star Wars: Clone Wars (2003–5)

"And as the heat of war grows, so too grows the prowess of one most gifted student of the Force."

—MASTER YODA

Star Wars: Clone Wars: Animation as Legacy

4.1 SEEKING LEGITIMACY "IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY"

By the time Genndy set out to work on *Star Wars: Clone Wars*, he had already established himself as one of America's most revered contemporary animators. His up-and-comer status had consummately transformed into acclaim and renown by the critical and commercial success of his original work in *Dexter's Lab* and his hallmark follow-up *Samurai Jack*, but also indirectly through the various properties to which he was attached, including *The Powerpuff Girls* and *Courage the Cowardly Dog*. *Clone Wars*, an American animated micro-series set in what was once known as the *Star Wars* Extended Universe (now referred to as *Star Wars Legends*), represented a host of new opportunities and challenges for the auteur. Through the series, Genndy brought an array of innovative approaches, as well as new and lasting ideas, to the *Saga*. The task was rather a daunting one: Genndy developed and drew the series with a singular design and narrative mandate that sought to use the series as a bridge to link *Star Wars: Episodes II* and *III* (*Attack of the Clones* and *Revenge of the Sith*, respectively), the final two instalments of what has come to be known as the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy. Since its release, Genndy's *Clone Wars* has become one of the most unilaterally lauded texts of the *Saga*, but more specifically, one that deals with a pivotal period of diegetic *Star Wars* history known as The Clone Wars during which the Sith Empire arose anew in the shadow of the downfall of the Jedi and the Galactic Republic.

In terms of the visual techniques he brought to bear on the series, Genndy stated in an interview with *Reviewgraveyard* that "[m]ost of the visual elements in *Star Wars: Clone Wars* have been created through traditional cell animation" adding that he and his team "added CGI elements to the production, including computer-generated spaceships that help create the action and excitement of the dogfights in space that are so much a part of the *Star Wars* appeal" (Reviewgraveyard 2018). In a series which places a premium on visual storytelling, sound—both diegetic, that is within the story-world depicted in the narrative, and extradiegetic, that is soundtrack, score, and/or any other sounds not taking place within the story-world—naturally becomes one of the most important aesthetic elements of the storytelling in general. Genndy noted this importance, stating

> [o]ne of the signature elements to *Star Wars* is the unique sound Lucasfilm created for the motion picture series. We were extremely fortunate to have Skywalker Sound create the sound effects and background elements for *Star Wars: Clone Wars* as well. I was amazed that when the tapes came back to us from Skywalker the whole show suddenly seemed "legitimate."

> I mean it had the same recognizable sounds as any one of the feature films. We simply couldn't have reproduced this sound on our own. Every single sound effect in *Clone Wars* comes directly from the library comprised of the first five movies. And the best part is that we have several new individual sounds in our production that came from mixing two or more different sounds used in the films. And as for the music, we've been able to use the classic, Oscar-winning John Williams compositions that *Star Wars* fans expect to hear. Again, this familiar music just makes *Star Wars: Clone Wars* completely "legitimate."
>
> (Reviewgraveyard 2018)

To anyone even remotely familiar with the *Star Wars Saga*, its sociopolitical, economic, and global cultural significance, it is not difficult to imagine the immensity of pressure, expectation, and scrutiny Genndy and his team faced in the production process of the series. Chief among these concerns would necessarily pertain to how much fidelity Genndy's entire design approach would pay to not only the *Star Wars* films preceding and following it, but also other *Star Wars* related media more generally. For instance, how does Genndy's bold line, and angular style translate when creating animated representations of beloved characters, ships, planets, alien species, droids, powers, and every other visual element that has made *Star Wars* an aesthetic benchmark in the realm of global visual culture? When asked whether or not he tried to make the series an animated facsimile of the live-action films, Genndy stated:

> This actually presented our first stumbling block. Originally, Paul Rudish kept drawing the actors (or caricatures of them) who portrayed the roles in the motion pictures. But this didn't come out right-they didn't look like the essence of the character they were supposed to be. So we started experimenting and determined that our own versions of the characters, ones that merely resembled the actors who played them onscreen, and it worked better in the long-run. They still have qualities that reflect the actors who originally portrayed them, but there are also elements which are drawn from our thoughts about the character.
>
> (Reviewgraveyard 2018)

In terms of plotting, Genndy keeps the central premise of the series very straightforward. Its archetypal nature, typical of George Lucas taking inspiration from Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey, permeates its subsequent influence on the core premises and thematics of *Star Wars* in all of its manifestations. Following this template allowed Genndy room to centralize visual storytelling unencumbered by excessive jargon-heavy dialogue. As perhaps the most enduring example of contemporary space opera—far outpacing its important forebears including *Flash Gordon*, *Buck Rogers*, the

epic swashbuckling Romances of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, *The Sea Hawk,* and *Robin Hood*, and the dashing, honorable, pseudo-Byronic heroes played on-screen by Erroll Flyn and Toshiro Mafune—*Star Wars* is fundamentally concerned with *binaries* framed by relatively straightforward chronicles of the Skywalker dynasty's various family intrigues: ascension and fall, good and evil, Jedi and Sith, master and apprentice, the future and the past, free will contra destiny, biological contra mechanical, to name but a few.

More specifically, the series follows the denouement of Anakin Skywalker (voiced by Mat Lucas) in his transformation into the Sith tyrant Darth Vader, a process beginning after *The Clone Wars* and culminating in *Revenge of the Sith*. The series performs a type of warping of both time and space. Space, in terms of the aesthetic and narrative scope of the diegetic worlds of the *Saga,* to which Genndy's efforts, taking place within an exceptionally tight frame of production, add much; and time, in terms of the relatively little amount of it within which he achieves this.

The series' first two Seasons, which follow the Jedi and Clone troopers as they battle against Separatist droid armies across the galaxy, are a clear examples of this. Through the series' initial two Seasons, Genndy takes the viewer on a tour of numerous worlds, habitats, and peoples of the Galactic Republic scarcely, if ever, seen on-screen, and zones of space controlled by their rivals, The Confederacy of Independent Systems (and their Sith shadow benefactors). Moreover, he presents an ensemble cast while simultaneously giving the viewer exciting and rare insights into the inner worlds, conflicts, friendships, loves, and doubts of a variety of characters in a sincerely insightful and emotionally resonant way—ranging from the most notable including Anakin Skywalker, Obi-Wan Kenobi (voiced by James Arnold Taylor), Padme Amidala (voiced by Grey DeLisle), Mace Windu (voiced by Terrence Carson), and Yoda (voiced by Tom Kane), to Count Dooku (voiced by Corey Burton), Assajj Ventress (voiced by Grey DeLisle), and other figures who typically have not received speaking parts in the cinematic instalments of the *Saga*, such as Jedi Master Luminara Unduli (voiced by Olivia d'Abo), or Kit Fisto (voiced by Richard McGonagle).

In addition, Genndy shines a light on not just various planets and environments (space, *terra firma,* and sub-aquatic) including Munnilinst, Mon Calamari, and Quarren, but also literally and figuratively draws attention to other practices not seen on screen ever before in the galactic sprawl of the operatic Saga, and financial monolith that is *Star Wars*. Examples include Dooku's recruitment of Asajj Ventress as a shadow or pseudo-apprentice after witnessing her prowess in a gladiatorial contest in a secret facility of a planet called the "Cauldron." Genndy even shows the viewer Dooku training the cyborg warlord General Grievous (voiced by John DiMaggion in Seasons 1 and 2; Richard McGonagle in Season 3) in lightsaber combat, the Count's personal apartments, and new technology and weapons in the form of enormous seismic tanks (Collura 2008).

With an original broadcast run on Cartoon Network from 2003 to 2005 consisting of three Seasons, each containing twenty-five episodes, *Clone Wars* marked the first official *Star Wars* television series to air since *Ewoks* (1985–6). The series is typically packaged and sold as two complete Seasons composed of three parts. The first two Seasons, released on DVD as "Volume One," featured episodes that run between two and three minutes in length. The third Season, which featured five 15-minute long episodes, formed "Volume Two" (Collura 2008). According to Genndy,

> [b]ecause this project is composed of so many different short segments, I like compare it to HBO's *Band of Brothers* - a project I really admired that takes a huge story like the European Allied campaign of World War II and presents it in a series of "a day in the life of" stories. As I see it, this project mirrors that approach by showcasing several "days in the life of the *Clone Wars*." For instance, in the first few episodes, we're presenting a singular, but extremely important campaign, *The Battle of Muunilinst*, an all-city planet under attack by the Imperial separatist movement. We're able to explain the goals and obstacles the old Republic and Jedi must face, reveal important internal conflicts between the main characters, and still have time to highlight the action of the battle.
>
> (Reviewgraveyard 2018)

Similarly, when asked about how the experience of working on *Clone Wars* might have changed his approach to the craft, particularly in terms of storytelling, building action sequences, and altering and experimenting with the notion (and audience's expectations) of the "proper" length of cartoons, Genndy stated:

> I think that working in a limited time frame taught me how to really boil down storytelling to the most essential bits. Where we could stretch out in *Samurai Jack*, here we had to distil everything—to make it much, much shorter and have the same emotional impact. The ability to finesse dialogue was a big issue as well. We really had to be much more precise with the words to fit into the time frame. We had to condense it into its perfect form—to say nothing more than needs to be said, but also nothing less. It was also useful to work on someone else's characters. It was kind of difficult. For most of my career, I have worked on my own stuff or things I have helped create. This was hard—to do justice to *someone else's creation*.
>
> (Reviewgraveyard 2018: emphasis mine)

Like all of Genndy's work up to his most recent project *Primal* (2020), *Clone Wars* received much critical and commercial acclaim. It was generously recognized by the Primetime Emmy's, but also claimed victories and nominations in numerous categories from various other award-giving bodies.

These include: Saturn Award for "Best Television Presentation" in the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror Films in 2004; Emmy Award for "Outstanding Animated Program (for Programming One Hour or More)" in 2004; Emmy Award for "Outstanding Animated Program (for Programming One Hour or More)" in 2005; Emmy Award to background key designer Justin Thompson for "Outstanding Individual in Animation" in 2005; and an Annie Award for "Best Animated Television Production" in 2006.

Contemporary critical platforms and review aggregators, like *Rotten Tomatoes*, have also been laudatory to the series. Over 80 percent of critics on *RT* have given Season 1 a positive review based on five reviews. Not dissimilarly, *Clone Wars* was ranked 21st on *IGN*'s Top 100 Animated Series list in 2009. Beyond the release of four exclusive Walmart action figures by Hasbro, the series received "Commemorative DVD Collection" three packs, which ironically, did not include a DVD (Bellomo 2015: 121). This acclaim and notoriety had multimedia resonances as well. Dark Horse Comics, a subsidiary imprint of DC Comics, also published a ten-volume comic series titled *Clone Wars–Adventures*, which reproduced the aesthetic style of the 2D animated series and depicted original stories set during the era of The Clone Wars in the *Saga*. The final issue was published in 2007.

The craft and sincerity of not only due deference paid to the legacy of the *Star Wars Saga*, but the acuity of Genndy's innovative and deeply emotionally resonant visual storytelling is a germane phenomenon whose fecundity has, in hindsight, propagated some of the most well-received and popular instalments of the *Saga* to date. Without Genndy's work on *Clone Wars* and the success thereof, Dave Filoni would not have been able to make nor complete his seven Season CGI series *The Clone Wars* (2008–20) after The Walt Disney Company acquired Lucasfilm and the rights to the *Star Wars* franchise in 2012. Similarly, without Filoni's success on *The Clone Wars*, he would not have been given the opportunity to gather some of the greatest auteureal talent in Hollywood, including Taika Waititi, Jon Favreau, and Bryce Dallas-Howard, to create the most popular contemporary incarnation of the *Saga* in the form of *The Mandalorian* (2019–present).

Despite its popularity and critical and commercial success highlighted above in brief, as well as in its often unacknowledged importance in the greater history of the *Saga*, Genndy's 2003 series was (for some, including myself, unceremoniously) declared to be non-canonical. Whether preserved or relegated by its sequestration under the *Star Wars Legends* aegis is a matter of highly contested and revelatory opinion, which I will discuss later. However, at this juncture, what is clear is that the series still *ruptures* this restriction in the deceptively simple form of being referenced in other canonical works of the *Saga* (Starwars.com 2014).

Volume 1 primarily follows the exploits, adventures, trials, and tribulations of Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi and his Padawan Anakin Skywalker. The series begins with the former's assault on the strongholds of

the Intergalactic Banking Clan, financiers of the Separatists seeking to break from the Republic, on the planet Muunilinst (Collura 2008). The latter is appointed commander of the Jedi space forces by Supreme Chancellor Palpatine (voiced by Nick Jameson), the public alter ego of the Sith Arch-Lord Darth Sidious. Concurrently, Separatist leader and Sith Lord Count Dooku/Darth Tyranus takes on the Force-sensitive Asajj Ventress as his pseudo-apprentice after witnessing her prowess with a pair of lightsabers and Force abilities in a gladiatorial trial. With his master Palpatine's permission, Dooku dispatches Ventress to seek out and destroy Anakin. She appears in a fanblade starfighter in the middle of a space battle taking place over Muunilinst, taunting Skywalker in a daring high-speed, high-skilled aerial dogfight that foreshadows the close quarters engagement to follow. After an intense chase through the abandoned streets of the planet, she succeeds in baiting Anakin to pursue her through hyperspace to the planet Yavin IV (Collura 2008). Under the planet's crimson moon, the two apprentices engage in an energetic and brutal lightsaber duel. Anakin proves the victor by violating Jedi teachings and drawing on his anger and rage to savagely overpower his opponent (Collura 2008).

While this narrative concerning Anakin's disobedience, passion, prowess, anger, and flirtation with The Dark Side of the Force acts as Volume 1's primary storyline, interspersed throughout it are cutaways to other micro-stories occurring elsewhere and at other times in the narrative. These focus on the wartime exploits of other Jedi Masters (typically assigned the rank of General) and their apprentices as they fight in various parts of the galaxy, on strange never-before-seen planets and environments against the Separatists: Jedi Master Mace Windu fights near single-handed, and unarmed, against an entire battalion of super battle droids and their seismic tanks on Dantooine; with the aid of Padme, C3P0, and R2-D2, Master Yoda travels to the Jedi Temple on the ice world of Illum to rescue Jedi Master Luminara Unduli and her apprentice Barriss Offee (voiced by Meredith Salenger) who—having just claimed a Kyber crystal, built her lightsaber, and completed her training—find themselves in a cave-in caused by trespassing assassin droids; Master Kit Fisto, a Jedi of the Nautolan species, leads an amphibious regiment of clone troopers in an sub-aquatic assault on the aquaplanet of Mon Calamari; lastly, the season ends with a thrilling episode that follows a team of Jedi comprising Padawans and Knights led by Master Ki Adi Mundi (voiced by Brian George) as they face-off against the seemingly indomitable cyborg warlord General Grievous on the planet Hypori (Linder 2003).

Volume 2 resumes immediately after Master Ki Adi Mundi and his Jedi group's encounter with Grievous on Hypori, only this time opening from Obi-Wan's perspective. The Jedi Master dispatches his squad of elite ARC troopers behind enemy lines to rescue the Jedi from Grievous before he manages to injure or kill them all. Meanwhile, back on the ecumenopolis Courescent, the seat of the Jedi Order and main Jedi Temple, a desperate

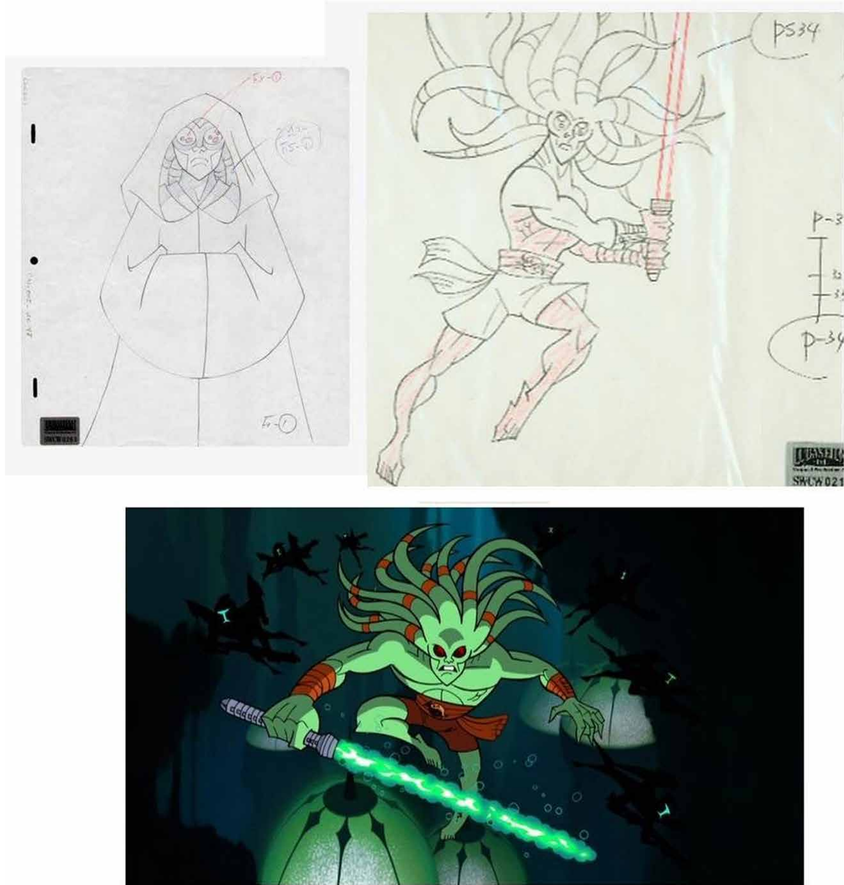

FIGURE 4.1 *Kit Fisto and His Aquatroopers Dramatically Lit by His Saber Underwater*

Jedi Council, whose numbers have been decimated and spread thin through various grueling battles across the galaxy, decide to promote Anakin to the rank of Jedi Knight (Collura 2008; Tartakovsky 2003, 2004). After this milestone, the series leaps forward in time.

In the second Season (or Part III), which takes place near the end of the Clone Wars, Anakin is shown to have become a formidable General, soldier, Jedi, and Force-user. These skills, alongside his wit, humor, and tactical mind, are on display when he aids Obi-Wan capture a fortress, rescue Jedi Master Saesee Tinn in a dire space battle, and aid Jedi who've been captured in gum-like spheres while battling crab droids. Subsequently, Anakin and Obi-Wan are deployed to search for Grievous who is believed to be hiding on the planet Nelvaan. What they discover to their shared horror are

FIGURE 4.2 *Luminara Unduli and Her apprentice Barriss Offee in the Crystal Temple on Illum*

Nelvaanians who have been subjected to slow and torturous mutations resulting in their psycho-physical augmentation and enslavement by/to the Separatist Techno Union. While attempting to liberate the enslaved Nelvaan warriors, Anakin has an ominous vision that presages much of his fate to come in the rest of the *Saga*: his eventual fall and resurrection as Darth Vader (Collura 2008; Tartakovsky 2004). Simultaneously, on Coruscant, Grievous mounts a major offensive against the Jedi Order. Despite the courage, skill, effort, and leadership of the notable few remaining Jedi Masters and Generals including Yoda, Windu, and Shaak Ti (voiced by Grey DeLise), Grievous manages to ostensibly "kidnap" Chancellor Palpatine for his master Dooku with the aid of his formidable IG-100 Magnadroids after a lengthy chase through the tracks, byways, and subterranean tunnels of the city-planet. Immediately, Anakin and Obi-Wan set out to rescue the Chancellor over Coruscant, thereby dovetailing and deftly joining the conclusion of *Clone Wars* with the beginning of *Revenge of the Sith* (Collura 2008; Tartakovsky 2004).

The Force Is in the Details: Details, Sincerity, and Bridging in *Clone Wars*

How can sincerity be said to manifest in such an ostensibly simple series? Not only this, but in a series that represents a significant deviation in Genndy's oeuvre. It is, to date, the only series on which he has been lead

director or animator that was not his own original creation. I suggest that the sincerity of Genndy's approach on the series manifests in its attention to *detail,* specifically with regard to the issue of continuity. The directive Genndy received from Lucasfilm was deceptively simple: bridge *Episodes II* and *III*. In so doing, Genndy and his team had to contend/please the infamously rabid/dedicated *Star Wars* fanbase whose attention to detail verges on either the reverentially spiritual or the abjectly pathological, depending on one's critical point of view. In this sense, Genndy and his team's attempt to ensure continuity did not only pertain to the two *Episodes* it was discretely instructed to stitch together, but rather it had the more scopic and subtle task of making various elements in the *entire Saga* logically cohere, be internally consistent, or, more simply, "make sense." In view of such a monumental task—one which I remind the reader he and his team executed within a *fortnight*—Genndy managed to execute its objectives and more, in the most emotionally resonant and sincere-feeling way.

There are numerous instances of such masterful bindings of themes, narrative threads, character arcs, and the entire gamut of psycho-emotional interiority with the exteriority of visual innovation and flair. An important and perhaps near imperceptible example of this is the fact that in the series, Anakin has a new lightsaber (as it would come to appear in *Episode III*) after having his first saber destroyed in *Attack of the Clones*. More ostensibly obvious examples can also be found, such as C-3PO appearing in full electrum plating for the first time in "Chapter 21" (Tartakovsky 2005). I contend, however, that the most emotionally resonant and sincere example of Genndy's continuity connectivity pertain to what I like to think of the failure of the redemptive power of love embodied by the tragic romance between Anakin and Padme.

FIGURE 4.3 *Obi-Wan Kenobi and Anakin Skywalker: Brothers in the Force*

FIGURE 4.4 *Generals Kenobi and Skywalker: Brothers in Arms*

While the love Anakin lost when his mother and first master Qui-Gon Jin died is somewhat replaced by the fraternal/avuncular/paternal relationship he has with his second and true master Obi-Wan, it is the forbidden succor offered by his deep bond with Padme that serves as both his potential redemption and his guaranteed fall—a theme to which Genndy would return in earnest in Season 5 of *Samurai Jack*. The bittersweet kernel of this relationship is, in many ways, the core not only of the character himself, but the entire predicating narrative of the Skywalker Saga more broadly.

Within the limits—few as they might have been—of Lucasfilm's mandate, Genndy pays both special and certainly due deference to the thematic and narratological importance of this relationship. He does so in a way that feels sincere, emotional, and unencumbered by the formal limits of temporal brevity, a narrative and aesthetic feature of the series as a whole. This can be noted when 3PO delivers Anakin's Padawan braid to Padme after he is knighted. Padme is shown to store the braid with the necklace Anakin gave her in *Episode I: The Phantom Menace* in a rustic box of keepsakes she stores in her private residences. It is also implied that Anakin and Padme may have conceived the Skywalker twins on Naboo in "Chapter 22," lending the long war and its toll and intensification of distance and anger and confusion in the field and in the Galactic Senate—arenas in which the respective lovers fight—a significant, elegant, and economical sense of pathos.

Another important detail pertains to the series antagonist General Grievous, which was lost on many viewers by the time *Revenge of the Sith* was released in theaters in 2005. In *Revenge of the Sith*, the character is

seen (and heard) to have a severe whooping, wheezing cough, a feature whose purpose was to impress upon or certainly suggest to the viewer that Grievous' is indeed a cyborg, and—not dissimilar to Darth Vader's iconic limited mobility and respiratory faculties that would follow/precede him—display in both a vivid and menacing way the hazards and imperfections of prosthetic technology as a recurrent theme throughout the entire *Saga*. However, such details were absent in the first Volume of *Clone Wars* wherein which many of Grievous' character traits and back-story remained as yet unwritten at that point. To bridge this gap, Genndy and his team added a crucial scene in "Chapter 25" in which Mace Windu uses the Force to crush Grievous's chest-plate under which were housed the remainder of his organic internal organs (Tartakovsky 2005).

Throughout this process of finding the frayed ends between *Episodes*, telling new and complete stories, as well as trying to stitch said ends together, Genndy and his team had to be mindful of the great panoply of *Star Wars*-related content being produced under Lucasfilm at any given time. Moreover, they had to remain vigilant as to whether those broader creative enterprises would impede and therefore necessitate alterations to their own project. In this regard, there are shared narrative aspects of Volume Two and the novel *Labyrinth of Evil* (2005) by James Luceno which was written at the same time as the production of the series (Wallace 2005: 81–2). In the last instance, however, it was originally reported that Filoni's *The Clone Wars* would not supersede the continuity of *Clone Wars*. In view of Disney's subsequent acquisition of Lucasfilm in 2014, it was announced that *The Clone Wars* was considered canon, while *Clone Wars* was strangely unmentioned (Cotter 2019; Sands 2008; Starwars.com 2014). According to *Den of Geek's* Ryan Britt, however, the final arc of *The Clone Wars* does not necessarily contravene the final arc of *Clone Wars* (Britt 2020).

In view of the seemingly undeniable importance of the series on the *Saga* as a whole, and the strange insistence and seemingly unflinching permanence of its de-canonization, it is both fair and exigent to investigate what the *legacy* of *Clone Wars* truly is. To many, it represents perhaps *Star Wars* at its purest since the opening act of *Episode IV: A New Hope* which liberally gave viewers the emotional resonance of the combination of diegetic silence and stalwart composer John Williams' swelling symphonic arrangements as Luke returns to the charred remains of the Lars's homestead to contemplate his tragedy, destiny and Campbellian call-to-adventure under the setting twin suns of Tatooine; or in *The Empire Strikes Back* where Luke struggles to survive on the ice world of Hoth, with no sound but the vicious sibilance of howling gales and Williams' score again; or when Luke later faces Vader in the tense, mostly silent duel on Bespin; or later when Obi-Wan and Darth Maul duel on Naboo against no sound save the grinding saw and motor hiss of clashing sabers, and the ominously vespertine and escalating voices of a choir, again arranged to potent dramatic effect by Williams.

To others, it represents little more than a serviceable pilot for the half-hour CGI *The Clone Wars* that followed two years later (Cotter 2019). Whichever of these two primary interpretations/appraisals one endorses, there is no denying that *Clone Wars* influenced the *best* of what followed after it. For example, Kilian Plunkett, chief character designer for *The Clone Wars*, obviously attempted and, to varying degrees of satisfaction, succeeded in translating various aesthetic aspects Genndy developed and brought to bear in *Clone Wars*, essentially attempting to convert the flat two dimensional style into a painterly texture, an angular appearance, and an overall similar affectivity in three dimensions of animation on the follow-up series. The *feel* or *affect* here is that of the aesthetic and narrative approach Genndy perfected in *Samurai Jack* (Cotter 2019).

In view of the expert handling of the legacy of the *Saga* as well as the dexterity with which Genndy told an oftentimes voiceless tale, perhaps the most staggering fact about the production of the series is that according to Genndy, it took him and a small crew only two weeks to develop and create (Chase and Opie 2020). He also made aesthetic choices that emphasized the sincerity of emotion over the "correctness" of representational adroitness and accuracy. I contend that it was a decision that in no way sacrificed either the various technical qualities of his draftsmanship, nor his storytelling acumen. For example, Genndy stated that he purposefully animated 3-PO with an exaggerated rotund pliability, movable limbs, eyes, and highly ductile facial expressions to pay homage to the character's appearances in *The Star Wars Holiday Special* and *Droids* (Tartakovsky 2005). The sincerity inherent in Genndy's attention to detail is again apparent, albeit subtly, in the fact that the name of the planet Nelvaan is an homage to Nelvana, the production company that had heretofore produced all previous *Star Wars* animated series (Tartakovsky 2005). Moreover, "Chapter 21" features the appearance of a Dulok, a species introduced in *Ewoks*. Lastly, according to art director and longtime Genndy collaborator and friend Paul Rudish, the Banking Clan planet of Muunilinst was designed, in its structural aspects and color scheme, to resemble a U.S. dollar bill (Starwars.com 2011).

Without Genndy, There Can Be No Balance in the Saga: The Sincerity of Fandom, Legacy, Innovation, and the Freedom of the Cage of *Star Wars*

I feel that it is important to preface the analysis of the legacy, opportunity, conflict, and confines that the *Saga* presented Genndy as an artist and storyteller to follow with a reminder to the reader that Genndy sincerely

loves the *Saga*. I feel that it is also important for me to say this in view of the latent tension, disappointment, and sense of hurt feelings that can quite readily be teased out from the comments Genndy has recursively made concerning his experiences in creating and producing the series, its critical and consumer renown, and its unfortunate relegation to the unclaimed (unclaimable) mass of non-canonical legendaria of the *Saga* over the years, and even as recently as 2020.

For example, when asked whether he was a fan of *Star Wars* as a child, he answered "[o]h yes, of course. Really, everyone my age grew up with *Star Wars*. It was definitely one of the first big movies I saw after immigrating to America. I think it truly is one of the most inspirational, most influential movies of our generation. It certainly inspired me to dream of worlds beyond the here and now" (Reviewgraveyard 2018). Similarly, in his interview with Stark, Genndy stated that: "When we were doing *Clone Wars* [...] we had to ask ourselves, what *is* Star Wars? What is the essence of Star Wars and what is that feeling that we're trying to communicate? We were trying to give you the same feeling as we did when we were younger" (Stark 2019). The sincerity of youthful love, wonder, awe, and appreciation developed over time. And in the shadow of the seemingly illimitable legacy of one of the most widespread modern cultural artifacts of popular and visual culture, Genndy also felt the *weight* of that legacy. When asked if he had any trepidations concerning taking on such a beloved and highly contested phenomenon as *Star Wars*, Genndy answers sincerely, stating:

> Oh, yeah, absolutely. At first I thought it really might be more fun for someone else to do it, and then I could just sit back and watch the show, because an animated Star Wars is such a cool idea. But then I thought, "what if they make it wrong?" Then I would be really upset, and I'd be left with nothing to do but complain: "Well, we should have made it!" So, because I'm a rather aggressive person, I reasoned that I'd better take the challenge myself. What I should add, though, is that once we accepted the project, literally everyone who was to work on it found themselves extremely hesitant to take the first steps. Paul Ruddish, the art director for the show, with whom I've worked for years on *Dexter's Laboratory* and *Samurai Jack*, is the type of guy who can draw anything, anytime and anywhere without hesitation-he's amazing. But on the first week of *Star Wars: Clone Wars* ... complete brain freeze at the drawing board! Absolutely nothing would come forth. He couldn't draw, couldn't come up with a palate, anything. And he knows *Star Wars* better than anyone on the team—could normally draw R2-D2 freehand in total perspective with all the mechanical gadgets ... now nothing! We finally had to take our minds off the enormity of it all and just approach this thing like any other project. At last, once we relaxed, it all began to flow naturally.
>
> (Reviewgraveyard 2018)

It also bears mentioning that despite the ancillary issues and debates pertaining to the series, its production and consumption, Genndy is also sincerely *proud* of what he and his team achieved on it. In an interview with *Digitalspy*'s Stephanie Chase and David Opie, Genndy noted:

> We developed it in two weeks, and we did it so fast with a skeleton crew. For it to have as much praise as it gets, its really great. I'm super proud of it and I know it's influenced a lot, as far as *Star Wars* going forward, which is great—whether people want to admit it or not [laughs]. But it is what it is. I know what we did, and I know the stuff that came after.
>
> (Chase and Opie 2020)

The narrative pertaining to the origins of how Genndy's *Clone Wars* started as a cohesive/adhesive piece, one whose very *raison d'etre* was to join, link, and secure the narrative centrality of two monumental parts of the broader cinematic *Saga*, began with *legacy* and to *legacy* returned. That narrative has been repeated in much the same form across numerous interviews and news sources online and off. In Genndy's *Reviewgraveyard* interview, the auteur states that the project emerged from discussions between Lucasfilm and Cartoon Network:

> [George] Lucas want[ed] to keep the Star Wars property robust and active between motion picture releases. So they approached me and asked if I would be interested in creating a one-minute program based on Star Wars. When we got the greenlight from Lucasfilm, I still wasn't really sure even three-minutes would work. So I took several existing 22-minute episodes of *Samurai Jack* and re- edited them into three-minute versions to see what I had. I wanted to know that in three minutes you could make sense, capture the viewer's interest and still tell a compelling story. And I found that it actually worked, particularly if each instalment worked to build upon the previous one, to offer an important piece to the overall story arc, then end with a cliff-hanger that would inspire the viewer to come back to see what happens next. I think you'll see that each episode, despite being only three minutes long, has a beginning, middle and an end that pulls the viewer in and makes him or her want to know more.
>
> (Reviewgraveyard 2018)

Here, perhaps the first surprise emerges. The fact that Genndy and his team were given a wide berth to execute the mandate, with ostensibly none of the micro-managerial pressures one might expect a team tasked with such an important goal to the greater *Saga* to unavoidably encounter, may seem unusual. This working situation was in no small part due to the sincerity of recognition of one auteur to another, of Lucas's respect for Tartakovsky as a storyteller, animator, director, and general creative. According to Genndy,

Lucasfilm was "remarkably hands-off" with him and his team regarding *Clone Wars* and that Lucas had given him

> his overall blessing or 'seal of approval' because of what we've achieved to date with *Samurai Jack*, everyone felt they could trust us to handle the property with the appropriate care and concern it deserves. So we went away and developed our own storyline, a new perspective and approach, along with character designs and production elements-all of which really excited us-and we brought it back and pitched the new scenario to them. And fortunately, everyone really loved it.
>
> (Reviewgraveyard 2018)

In an interview for the *Clone Wars* DVD titled "bridging the gap," Lucas goes on to acknowledge his own personal endorsement and appreciation of Genndy's work more directly: "The thing that attracted me to it was it has a slight anime feel to it, and I'm very interested in anime, and I was really interested [in] moving into a type of animation that was very different than anything we'd done in the past" (Tartakovsky 2005). However, such praise and admiration should not suggest that Genndy was not subject to any imperative prohibitions acting to contain or limit certain narrative and aesthetic avenues available for him and his team to explore, regardless of how adeptly, innovatively, or sincerely. Genndy notes how there was one area in particular where he and his team were told by Lucasfilm not to approach, and that had to do with the love-story between Anakin and Padmé. We actually had an idea originally where at some point in the middle of the war, Anakin would have a quiet moment and he would take out a small hologram picture of Padmé and reflect upon how much he misses her. But since we were told not to explore any romantic interest in the story, we had to let that go. You will see Padmé, though, in the very first episode as she waves goodbye and later on in the series (Reviewgraveyard 2018).

> Ostensibly, this cursory description of the working relationship between Genndy and Lucasfilm seems amicable and even uncharacteristically permissive. However, such an assessment belies the undercurrent of (seemingly idiosyncratic) stricture imposed on Genndy and his team by Lucas himself. While Josh Hilgenberg of *Comicsbeat* noted Genndy joking in a 2020 interview that "no one can ruin *Star Wars* in a minute", the mandated episode length presented a concrete challenge in the first principles of the series (Hilgenberg 2020). Genndy did not acquiesce or depart the project, but fought and negotiated for more space within which to develop a sincerely *Star Wars* narrative, with an aesthetic and narrative approach to its storytelling worthy of the *Saga*. He negotiated up to 3–5 minute shorts, notes Hilgenberg, after which

[a] third party took that back to Lucas, who only agreed because of his son's ringing endorsement of *Samurai Jack*. Lucas' only stipulation was that the story couldn't be progressed at all and that no one should bother him ever again. Until the season 2 finale, that is, when Lucas finally came around on the show and asked Tartakovsky to introduce General Grievous.

(Hilgenberg 2020)

Despite this seeming permissiveness, *Clone Wars* has since been de-canonized. From Genndy's reaction to this inglorious fate for what many consider to be his best piece of work, this remains a largely un- or certainly indirectly addressed disappointment. In an interview with Mike Ryan of *Huffington Post*, Genndy states, in clear terms, the feelings of disappointment and, I suspect latent within them, betrayal, in the (mis)handling of the influence, legacy, and importance of his work on *Clone Wars*. Consider the following exchange:

RYAN: Speaking of your version of Clone Wars, does it bother you that there's another one and that the one you did seems to no longer be canon?

GENNDY: Yeah. I mean, you know, of course it bothers me. But, you know, it's George's characters. It's his world and he has to do what he has to do. And the new ones are totally inspired by what we did: a lot of the same character designs and stuff.

R: Does that part bother you, too?

G: No, again, it's not my characters, so he can do whatever he wants. And the story was also that I was going to do it. I was going to go to Lucas and be their John Lasseter-type of person and do a feature and supervise the 'Star Wars' television show. And things kind of fell apart, blah blah blah. But, yeah, I'm super proud of what we did. And I felt like we did justice to Star Wars and as a fan.

R: I mean, people haven't forgotten them, even though we are supposed to.

G: That's the one thing that is kind of weird that he just wants to wipe it off. Because we used to be in the encyclopaedias, some of the characters that we created. And not they're gone. And you can't get the DVD and all this other stuff. And it's like, whatever. What are you going to do, right? It existed."

R: But it feels like its been thrown on the scrapheap with the *Holiday Special*.

G: I think George is brilliant. And I think he just want to … I don't know the reasoning, exactly. But from any sense that I can make out of it, he just wants it to be clean. But there's so much fiction that's out with Star Wars, I don't think it would matter. (Ryan 2012)

In a 2020 interview, Genndy reiterates this sentiment in a way part cavalier, unaffected, but also sincerely hurt, stating:

> It's frustrating that they tried to erase it from being canon. At first, it was canon. And then once George started doing the CG version, he wanted to clean the slate. And so they de-canonised ours. But you know what? The who *Star Wars* THING—I've moved on. Like you said, it is what it is. I don't lose sleep over it [laughs]. It's fun to have people still love it, and for new people to still discover it.
>
> (Chase and Opie 2020)

In view of the above exchanges and quotations, numerous, and oftentimes novel, ways of reading not only Genndy's *Clone Wars* as a closed text in itself, but also its various aesthetic and narrative influences and legacy within the *Star Wars Saga* more broadly have emerged since the series' airing. A common denominator binding them all is a deep and abiding appreciation of the series' narrative and aesthetic achievements, a pseudo-conspiratorial sense of sabotage against *Clone Wars*, and/or a type careless corporatism at the expense of adroit and sincere storytelling and art. Let us now consider some of these positions.

The laudatory register above mentioned is immediately apparent in *SyFy*'s Drew Taylor's description of the series as one of rare and seemingly inexhaustibly fecund creativity. Perhaps no single contemporary multi-platform commentator is as consistently adamant and passionate about the revival and rehabilitation of Genndy's *Clone Wars* in relation to the *Star Wars* franchise than Taylor. He describes the micro-series [as] "unlike anything *Star Wars* has seen before or since" (Taylor 2020). Taylor takes up this stance again writing for *Moviefone* when he states that "*Clone Wars* was rightly praised for the sophistication of its storytelling and design, winning two Emmys and further establishing Tartakovsky as a genius of his generation," going on to describe the first two seasons of Clone Wars as "brilliant" and that "they were arguably the greatest thing to come out of the entire prequel period; each one crackles with energy and inventiveness" (Taylor 2018). This laudatory tone is also taken up by Eric Kohn of *Indiewire* who writes:

> Tartakovsky uses these characters and situations to create a breathless action spectacle in which Jedi powers and imaginative weaponry yield visually intoxicating immersion into the Star Wars formula boiled down to its very essence. From the opening shot of a silhouetted Yoda barrelling into battle atop an armour-clad kybuck, Tartakovsky makes it clear that his take on Star Wars will be brilliantly operatic, attuned to the iconic nature of the material and willing to push it to expressionistic extremes. The saga never lets up, but it always comes equipped with engaging

> approaches that frame the spectacle in vivid terms and tie it into a complex world.
>
> (Kohn 2017)

In view of what Taylor, and typically all other supporters of the series, refers to as the *relegation* of *Clone Wars* and all other de-canonized/non-canon material pertaining to the property or its relational ancillaries to *Star Wars Legends*, most of said commentators both directly and indirectly view this fate as being tantamount to a demotion. This sense of demerit haunting the space of *Star Wars Legends* would seemingly offer an answer to the question "well, why is being placed in the space of *Star Wars Legends* seen or held to be such a bad thing?" Taylor and others not only see such a move as foolhardy, harsh, and corporately motivated, they see it as a dishonoring of the critical and commercial success, as well as the aesthetic and narrative achievements, of much of the offal-like content heaped in the attic/basement of the *Saga*. In this sense, the progression of the *Saga* from 2003 to present was, particularly following the acquisition of Lucasfilm and its intellectual properties by Disney, seen as a primarily *exclusive* process. As Taylor notes,

> a core of Lucasfilm creatives, dubbed the Story Group, were tapped to oversee any new *Star Wars* material going forward to make sure they properly aligned with carious future storytelling initiatives and, most importantly, didn't step on the toes of any other *Star Wars* project in development. In terms of preexisting properties, this left only the *Star Wars* theatrical feature films and the 2008 computer-animated series *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*—not to be confused with *Clone Wars* [2003]—as canon.
>
> (Taylor 2020)

This is further compounded by an official statement from *Starwars.com* in 2014 which describes "these stories [as] the immovable objects of *Star Wars* history, the characters and events to which all other tales must align" (S*tarwars.com* 2014; Taylor 2020).

For Taylor and many others, this relegatory move is, at its most fundamental, *spurious* in the sense that it has not prevented elements from *Legends* to permeate their sequestration and engage with/influence aspects of the *Star Wars* canon as it (re)develops and unfolds. Taylor notes how since the de-canonization of *Clone Wars*, *Legends* material has made its way into the canon proper, including the popular villain Admiral Thrawn, various aspects of the immensely popular and influential *Knights of the Old Republic* MMO computer game, including ships such as the Hammerhead Cruiser which appeared in both *Star Wars Rebels* (2014–18) and *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2016). Taylor rightly notes the oddity of the nature of exchange between *Legends* and canon, the predicates of the choices therein, as well as

the frequency and purpose thereof. Why should a character with tangential bearing on the core canon narrative like Admiral Thrawn occupy a position of greater narrative centrality than an emotional event such as Anakin's knighting, which has direct bearing and narratively greater significance to the core cannon narrative, be fated to, as Taylor puts it, remain "adrift in space, beyond the Outer Rim"? (Taylor 2020). In view of the fact that Disney and Lucasfilm's relegatory action seems to be as adamant and thorough as possible—the series' DVDs are no longer in print and haven't been for some time, nor is the series available or set to be available on Disney+, for example—it would seem that the status of *Legends* is utterly, and for Taylor unfairly, appropriate. The pseudo-mythic status that *Clone Wars*, not unlike the Jedi it discusses, has come to accrue is promulgated by its scarcity. As it currently stands, no HD versions of the series exist that can be legally purchased. When asked by Taylor if the Kathleen Kenndy-led Lucasfilm regime had contacted Genndy in any capacity, he definitively answered "No" (Taylor 2018). It would seem, then, that from Genndy's perspective at least, while the sincerity of his appreciation for the *Saga* still persists, his desire to be a part of its development no longer does.

The question the devil's advocate would be dying to ask at this point is, "well, beyond Anakin's knighting, and the series' conjoining of *Episode II* and *III,* why is it so *important* that *Clone Wars* be recognized beyond how it has been heretofore?" Taylor's summative answer to this question leaves nothing to doubt: "Tartakovsky's *Clone Wars* is a stunning tour de force, featuring bold stylization and assured, intricately staged action" (Taylor 2020). But beyond the intricacy of the action, the references to space battles from the original *Star Wars* re-dramatized in the prequel trilogy, Genndy's work on *Clone Wars* served the important function of providing added depth to Anakin and Obi-Wan's relationship. Moreover, it provided crucial contextual information for how this most monumental event came to be, or, as Yoda eloquently puts it in the first episode of the series, how "like fire across the galaxy, the Clone Wars spread" (Tartakovsky 2005). Lastly, the shows' aesthetic importance to Genndy is obvious in submitting himself to and meeting the challenge of creating a visual and narrative "style that spoke true to Star Wars but also had its own point of view" (Tartakovsky 2005).

So why does this negative sincerity in the form of a genuine sense of betrayal *persist?* In view of the ostensibly sincere effort and support Genndy put into the series and received from Lucasfilm and Cartoon Network at the time of its production and release, a more helpful ancillary question might be where does this negative undercurrent continually (re)emerge from? The answer to this question leads us to interpersonal as opposed to intertextual areas of consideration. It has been recursively well documented, by Taylor and numerous others, that at the time of the production and preproduction of the series, Lucas was, for all intents and purposes, grooming Genndy to

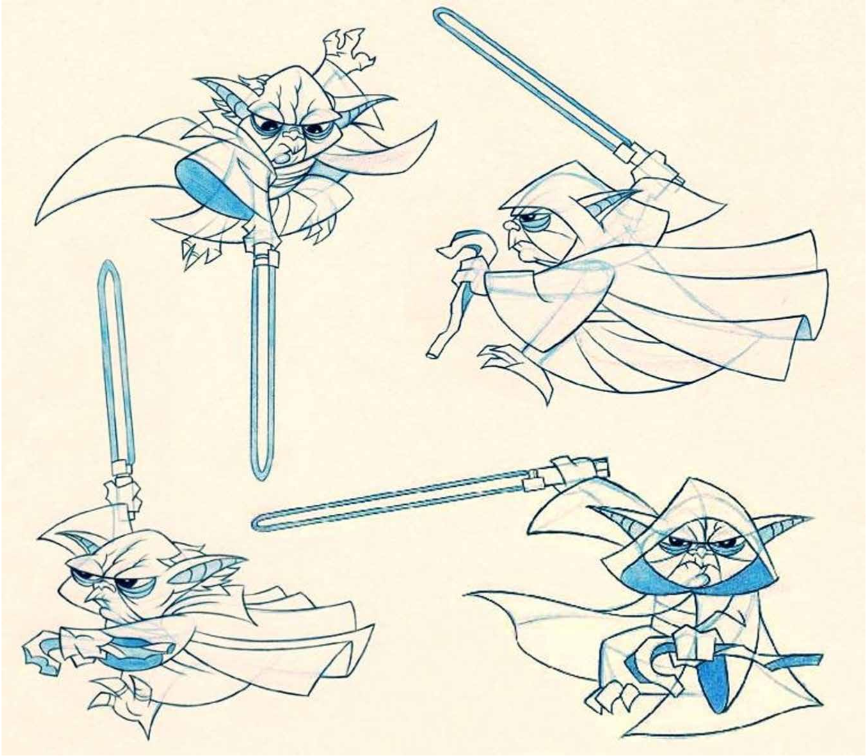

FIGURE 4.5 *Action Sketches/Poses of Master Yoda, the Warrior-Sage*

FIGURE 4.6 *Master Yoda Rides His Kybuck into Battle*

become Lucasfilm Animation's John Lasseter (Taylor, *Moviefone*, 2018). In his own words, Genndy describes the situation as follows:

> Basically after the second *Clone Wars*, Jim Morris—who was running ILM at the time—said, "George wants to make this a bigger studio and wants to bring you on as a John Lasseter-type." So I was like "Yeah!" Tartakovsky explained. "I said, 'I want to do movies. I'll supervise the TV shows.' But I knew "*Star Wars*" could be my life for the next 20 years and I didn't want to do that."
>
> (Taylor 2018)

Genndy's terms were straightforward. He agreed to oversee any and all TV shows, making himself amenable to the studio and company's demands, concerns, and open to their input. Part of his terms included the chance to create an original feature film. At this point, all seemed well, as Genndy recalls:

> We worked out a contract, my wife started looking for houses, and I had one more lunch—as like, the final lunch with George and Jim. We walked in and started talking and, all of a sudden, George goes: "I don't want to features. I just want to do TV. TV is the future." I said, "What?" And Jim was just as surprised.
>
> (Taylor 2018)

On the surface of it, such attention from one of cinema's most original and important voices would be nothing short of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. However, unlike the loose hand with which Lucasfilm guided the series as it developed, the personal caveats surrounding this offer were far more stringent not only against Genndy as an individual, but as an artist as well. When *suddenly* confronted with the caveat that Lucas insisted Genndy only produce *Star Wars*-related projects as a condition of the offer, effectively muting all other work Genndy was or wished to participate in and complete (including a Viking-based feature film he had been developing prior to *Clone Wars*), the arrangement dissipated and dissolved. In his interview with Taylor, Genndy recalls being told by Lucas that doing an original animated film was "too risky" at which point Genndy told Morris, "I can't move my whole family just to do '*Star Wars*'" (Taylor 2018). Heartbroken, Genndy left Lucasfilm. This departure created the necessary space for the hiring of Dave Filoni, who, like Genndy, was at the time a noted action-oriented animator, particularly for his work on the critically and commercially praised *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005–8). In many ways, Filoni became all that Lucas had wanted in Genndy or to shape Genndy to become. The two subsequently came to create a new series

predicated on the action, intrigue, and character development during the Clone Wars in the *Saga*. In 2008, *The Clone Wars* emerged as both successor and correction to Genndy's 2003 series, differentiating itself in all ways, primarily through the visual language it brought to bear, and having that style of storytelling presented in 3D as opposed to Genndy's traditional 2D animation (Taylor 2020).

Perhaps the most keen sense of betrayal emerges from the fact that it is widely held that Lucas was far more invested, as an artist and mentor, in Filoni's series, seeing the latter as a type of apprentice, instructing him, guiding him, suggesting various story elements, arcs, and so on. However, as Taylor points out a feeling that many feel, namely that this ironically Sith-like rule-of-two conflict between Genndy and Filoni "shouldn't be enough to blacklist the original series, especially given its unique place in the franchise both as a direct lean-in to one of the films and a source of inspiration for filmmakers working in the *Star Wars* universe today" (Taylor 2018, 2020). While some may read some conspiratorial undercurrents running throughout this entire situation, viewing Genndy as the aggrieved party, Filoni the usurper, and Lucas himself a self-interested mastermind, Genndy takes up a clearly hurt tone, but also one with latent acidity:

> "I don't think it was a personal vendetta," Tartakovsky said. "It was basically that they were going to do Clone Wars. They used all of our designs as the beginning of all that. They brought in a different crew. They wanted to own it. And this Clone Wars was the definitive Clone Wars. All that stuff that we did that was canon, that was part of the library and all of that stuff, got wiped out. They didn't own it and they just tried to sweep it under the carpet."
>
> (Taylor 2018)

Despite the ostensible attempts at differentiation mentioned above, many have noted how indebted *The Clone Wars* is to *Clone Wars*. Taylor notes that beyond the ostensibly bizarre design mandate Lucas gave Filoni that the characters should have the same painterly appearance and feel as the marionettes used in *Thunderbirds*, "looking at this new *Clone Wars* series, which just ended (for real, this time) on Disney+, you can get a sense of what it borrowed from Tartakovsky's project: the gruff characterizations of the Clone troopers, the push-and-pull interaction between Obi-Wan and Anakin, and the streamlined aesthetic" (Reynolds 2008; Taylor 2020). This influence reaches *well* beyond Filoni's work in *The Clone Wars* and touches almost every on-screen manifestation or instalment of the *Saga* since *Revenge of the Sith*. One can perceive the bombast, and ratios of humor, silence, and action Rian Johnson brought to bear in the controversial albeit

commercially successful *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017). When asked about specific similarities between *Clone Wars* and J.J. Abrams commercially successful and critical luke-warm adrenalized re-hashing of *A New Hope* in *The Force Awakens* (2015) during his *Digitalspy* interview, Genndy made the following astute observations:

> *The Force Awakens* opening scene with all the Star Destroyers crashed on the planet. That was literally, exactly the setting that we did for when we introduced General Grievous. It's even the same silhouette and everything. I mean, they could have come up with it without seeing ours. But it seems too suspicious, you know? And nobody credited us. A few people caught it, but it certainly, to me, was like "Wow! Hey! Look at that! That's exactly what we did!" Well, you know, yeah, I'll take it.
>
> (Chase and Opie 2020)

This influence runs even deeper. According to Kohn, while *Star Wars* on film "has made a comeback with movies more precisely engineered to please audiences eager to see the same formula rehashed with dazzling new effects," Genndy managed to "achieve something better than that: His Clone Wars gave viewers something they never expected, something that realized the potential of Star Wars beyond their wildest dreams, and it deserved to be recognized as such" (Kohn 2017). More recently, Jon Favreau's Disney+ live-action *Star Wars* hit *The Mandalorian*

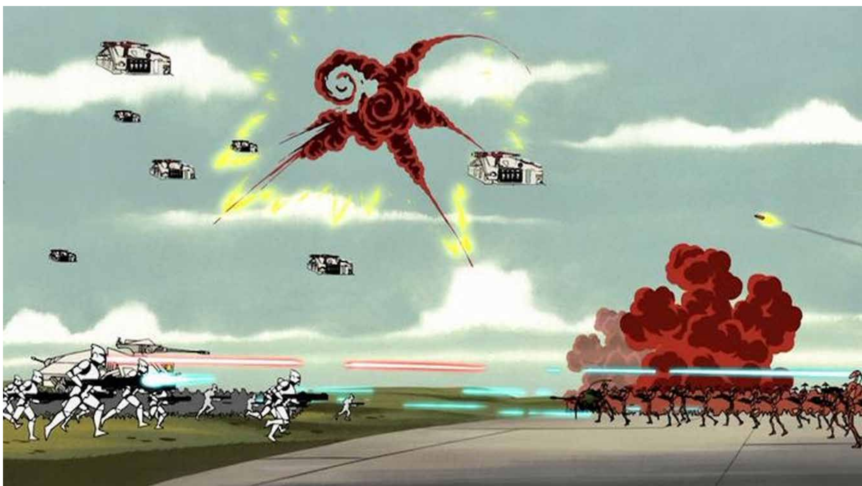

FIGURE 4.7 *Genndy's Rendering of the Scale of Action of the* Clone Wars

FIGURE 4.8 *Willis' Superb Sense of Scale, Which Influenced Similar Imagery in* Star Wars: The Force Awakens

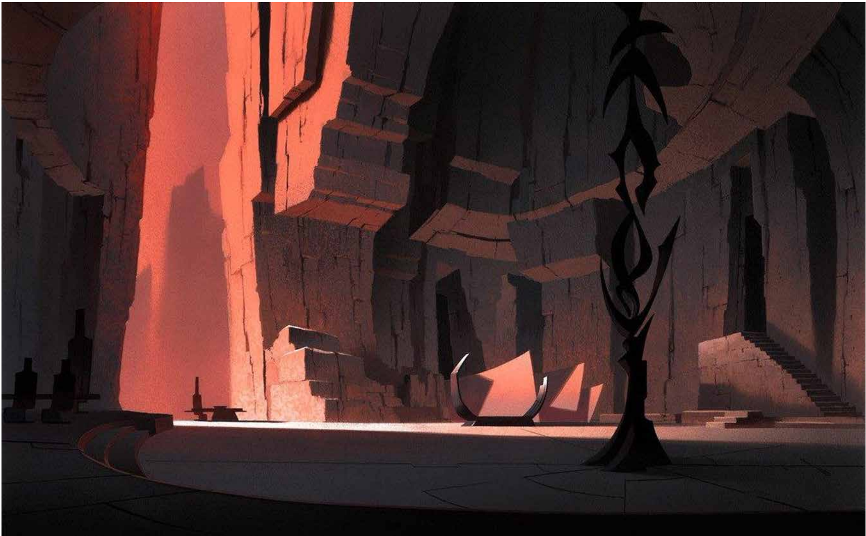

FIGURE 4.9 *Willis's Rich Depiction of the Rustic-Chic-cum-Retrofuturistic Minimalism of Count Dooku's Private Apartments*

(2019–present) has direct ties to the influence of Genndy's aesthetic and narrative sensibilities. In a 2019 interview with *Cinemablend*'s Jason Wiese, Favreau stated that he based the action of both the first *and* the second *Iron Man* films (in essence, the core of the Marvel Cinematic Universe) on Genndy's work in *Samurai Jack* (Wiese 2019). This went as far as Favreau

commissioning Genndy to stage, block, choreograph, and shoot the climatic battle scene featuring Tony Stark (Iron Man) and Lt. Rhodes (Warmachine) battling Justin Hammer's (Sam Rockwell) drones in a Japanese garden near the end of *Iron Man 2*. It therefore naturally follows that in view of clearly having found inspiration in Genndy's work in the past, he surely may have drawn from the same references in his present sensibilities concerning the use of scale, backgrounds, and silent visual storytelling—three prominent aesthetic and narrative features in the first season of *The Mandalorian*. In particular, the near completely dialogue-less second episode of *The Mandalorian* ("The Child") feels very much like the affective offspring of Genndy's *Clone Wars*. Similarly, when Genndy met with Kevin Feige in 2009, Genndy recalls that the entire meeting was an attempt to "sell him on doing animated Marvel characters. Like what we did on *Clone Wars*, do that for Marvel" (Taylor 2018). In that same meeting, Feige pitched the idea of Genndy directing a Thor film. In this sense, the influence of *Clone Wars* is clear, not just on the progenitor of the *Saga* itself, but on the birth of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (and by extension, the next ten years of superhero cinema) (Taylor 2018). With the considerable resources at Disney's disposal, it most certainly is not a case of limited means, reach, interest, or archival space preventing the re-cannonization of Genndy's *Clone Wars*. Ostensibly, this means that there is, in fact, little to nothing sincerely preventing a return to or reemergence of Genndy's *Clone Wars* in such a way that would not impede or erase Filoni's work, but would, in all likelihood establish a more direct symbiotic, co-constitutive relationship between both critically and commercially lauded takes on a lengthy and important period in the *Saga*'s diegetic history. As Taylor neatly summarizes:

> It's true that the 2008 *The Clone Wars* series has become a beloved, brilliantly sprawling part of *Star Wars* mythology, and its end is very sad for many fans the world over. But it shouldn't come at the cost of negating Tartakovsky's considerable accomplishment, or the silent influence he's had in other *Star Wars stories*. Maybe after the series finale, Disney will feel differently about the micro-series that started it all and throw it up on Disney+. If anything, the company's direct-to-consumer streaming platform is big enough for all the *Clone Wars*.
>
> (Taylor 2020)

While there is certainly enough space in the space of the period of the Clone Wars for both Filoni and Tartakovsky's respective voices and view points concerning this epoch to co-exist, in fact to mutually buttress one another, the space of the entire *Saga* was too restrictive for Genndy, despite its seeming vastness. Remember, for Genndy, the benchmark of his trade and enterprise is not Lucas but Miyazaki. Both auteurs are seen by all as extremely influential and original, but the latter is more so in terms of his

adamant focus on producing projects conceived of by himself. Therefore, it is, in the last instance, not too surprising that Genndy would walk away from Lucas' galaxy far, far away as a price, as a necessary aspect of his journey toward creating his own.

Edward Douglas of *Comicsbeat* offers an interesting, what I like to think of as symptomatic, analysis of what it is that makes *Clone Wars* not only sincerely special in its own right, but sincerely special as a *Star Wars* text. His analysis is retrospective. It takes Favreau and Filoni's approach to *The Mandalorian* as symptomatic of Genndy's own approach to the aesthetics and narrative of *Clone Wars* which permeated and influenced the animated and live-action *Star Wars* instalments to the *Saga* that followed. In this way, his analysis traces the artistic legacy of *Clone Wars* in the artistic features of all other on-screen manifestations of the *Saga* since. I think this analysis, though ostensibly simple, is astute because it uncovers an underlying truth about the sincere brilliance of Genndy's work: that these, let us call them symptoms of influence, cannot be drawn out if they do not exist *in principium*. Therefore, the relegation of Genndy's work to *Legends* status is a strange symptom of the paradox of its influence, the quiet centrality it occupied and still occupies in the *Saga* as a whole even to this day.

The first point he makes is one concerning the efficacy of simplicity. He notes how Favreau and his team brought a sense of expansiveness, depth, detail, and complexity in a very simple way on *The Mandalorian*. Douglas's thesis here is that one does not need a huge sprawling epic for "*Star Wars*" to function, in principle. According to Douglas,

> [w]ith Clone Wars, you had short episodic stories that didn't require a ton of backstory [sic], so that they worked well on their own merits. This was proved very early on with *Star Wars*: *The Clone Wars* when Cartoon Network began airing these short blips before their Friday night programming block. They were just long enough to get fans pumped but not long enough to wear out their welcome. They even worked well when edited together, as they were for the DVD release.
>
> (Douglas 2019)

In Jake Kleinman's interview with redditor u/onex7805 for *Inverse.com*, the user also remarks on the centrality of simplicity in the enjoyment of the series:

> I love it for the same reason I love *Samurai Jack* and *Mad Max*: *Fury Road*. Its simple, short, fast-paced, action-packed, and pure visual storytelling. *Clone Wars* is a series of serialized situations that rarely really connect to each other rather than an epic fantasy. It is the *Star Wars* instalment closet to *Flash Gordon*, even more than *The Mandalorian*.
>
> (Kleinman 2020)

The chief merit of such an approach for the above commentators is that it allows the aesthetic and narrative appeal of the world to cast a broad net, so to speak. For those with little to no memory, experience, or retention of the labyrinthine and detailed *Star Wars* hyperdiegesis, the pithiness, excitement, style, and execution of Genndy's *Clone Wars* successfully appeals to both lifelong admirers of the *Saga* who can appreciate its re-stylization, and those with dilettante enjoyment who can still appreciate the expertise imbued into every shot of the series. The key to achieving this ostensibly paradoxical feat is precisely located in the simplicity of Genndy's approach to both aesthetics and narrative in the series.

The second most effective aspect of *Clone Wars* is Genndy's use/non-use of sound, specifically dialogue. Douglas notices that another approach to the *Saga* carried over from Genndy to Favreau and Filoni's own approach in *The Mandalorian* is the effective use of the silence of absolutely no dialogue. He obliquely hypothesizes that this is a carry over from comic books into Genndy's creative sensibilities and from them into/to Favreau and Filoni's. The key to the successful use of no dialogue in Genndy's *Clone Wars*, particularly in the series' first several episodes, relies on the fact that there, the development and sense of narrative cohesion and momentum were not dependent on exposition, thereby expertly using the legacy and assumed knowledge, expert or cursory, to cover narrative ground economically (Douglas 2019).

Douglas views, in no uncertain terms, Genndy's ability to prosecute a specific mood and tone as compelling and engrossing as any such mood and tone found in the most laudable cinema. Aside from Genndy's Adult Swim work on *Samurai Jack* and *Sym-biotic Titan*, Douglas identifies *Clone Wars* as an Ur-example of precisely what it is that the simplest traditional 2D animation can achieve in terms of creating mood through the most sincere and conscientious application of the simplest techniques of visual storytelling: lighting and music, for example. According to Douglas, the first two Seasons of the series featured material that was "dramatic and filled with tension as anything from *Star Wars* movies. It was done quite brilliantly despite the simplicity of the animation, but that's become a bit of Tartakovsky's stock in trade" (Douglas, 2019).

Douglas subsequently draws attention to an important and liberating aspect of traditional 2D animation, namely its permissiveness in terms of pursuing size and scale of action. Due to the fact that 2D animation puts a considerably lighter strain on any project's overall budget, very much the antipode of the requisite $100 million dollars to make a single episode of *The Mandalorian*, Genndy and his team were able to choreograph and create some of the best action scenes and set-pieces in *Star Wars* history both cheaply and quickly. Moreover, the action depicted in the series was made all the more resonant and expansive in its affectivity by the ability of 2D animation to set it in expansive worlds whose scales felt truly galactic.

As Douglas notes, "[t]he environments created for the series, some new and some familiar, were expansive, and the war scenes depicted usually included hundreds and sometimes thousands of Stormtroopers or starships in the case of the space battles. It made these short TV 'cartoons' something that could have easily worked as a big-screen experience" (Douglas 2019). Beyond Mace Windu's iconic battle against a battalion of Super Battle Droids, Douglas highlights a scene where Republic stormtroopers "spacejump" from a Republic Destroyer onto a Separatist Cruiser as the sort of epic visual language that would translate perfectly to cinema, if permitted.

Aside from the aesthetic approach Genndy brings to the visual storytelling in the series, Douglas is also right to praise the internal, that its narrative, mechanics of the series. For many, including Douglas, the prequel characters were caricatural, stunted, and archetypal in uninteresting, unoriginal, and neutered ways (perhaps as a result of Lucas's reliance on the archetypal narratology identified and espoused by Campbell). For Douglas and others, perhaps the single most important thing *Clone Wars* was able to achieve was to make these ostensibly stiff and two-dimensional characters three-dimensional, ironically through a 2D medium and presentation. Douglas states that Genndy was able to do so much more with the character created by Lucas and his cast from the prequel trilogy. They became far more interesting and entertaining with what they were able to achieve in animation that they weren't able to do in live-action. Almost everyone who has seen the series has marveled at the episodes focusing on Samuel L. Jackson's Jedi Mace Windu, which show him in action far more than either of the two prequels [...] Being animated allowed the older actor to be far more active than he has been in other recent movies but also for us to see the extent of Windu's abilities with The Force. It helped Mace Windu be even cooler than just the fact he was played by Jackson (Douglas 2019).

Moreover, *Clone Wars* was able to add a much-needed sense of depth and color to the character of Anakin Skywalker. Hayden Christensen plays him as angst-driven, sullen, morose, and, even in the few moments of levity and romance his character experiences, haunted by the inescapable weight of the impending destiny to which the character is always-already darkening toward. While Genndy keeps most of these traits, he does soften the character and show his relationship with Obi-Wan to be based on a fraternal/paternal/avuncular sincerity that is far more inconsistent in the live-action counterparts of these characters (Douglas 2019).

According to Kohn of *Indiewire*, the underlying strength of *Clone Wars* rests in the manner in which it is and should be consumed; that is, the series be consumed in contrast to the brevity of its design mandate. For Kohn, *Clone Wars* should be both considered and consumed *as* a film. While the original series was broadcast as three- to twelve-minute episodes on Cartoon Network, Kohn states that "viewed collectively, however, these instalments amount to a tense, absorbing 130-minute action-adventure, one that uses

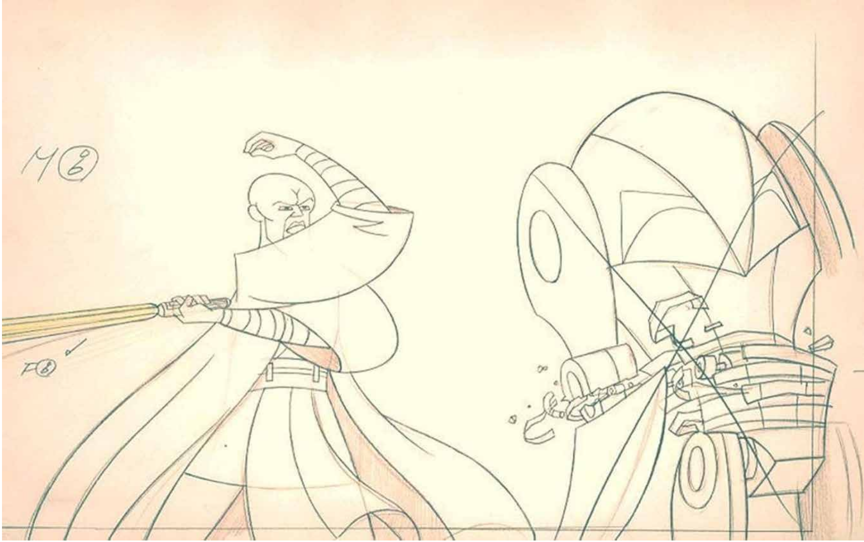

FIGURE 4.10 *Production Frame of Mace Windu Taking on a Battalion of Super Battle Droids*

FIGURE 4.11 *Mace Windu Displaying the God-Like Power of the Jedi in Pitched Battle*

the animated medium to liberate the possibilities of the *Star Wars* franchise by recognizing all of its strengths at once. In a just world, every *Star Wars* Day would pay tribute to it” (Kohn 2017). Like many other commentators, Kohn draws attention to the episode pertaining to Mace Windu. What

differentiates Kohn's analysis is the centrality emotional resonance takes up in his reading of the episode. In this sense, Kohn offers a pithy and robust analysis of the episode that takes into account both the masterclass of action, pacing, and audiovisual style Genndy brings to bear, but also the expert and economical narrative elements on display as well. According to Kohn, this is all contained in

> the astonishing six-and-a-half minute sequence in which Mace Windu single- handedly demolishes an army of droids with only a lightsaber and the powers of his mind. Even as Tartakovsky brings us into the action, shifting between busy images of robots and spacemen tumbling through sand as Mace Windu leaps and slides around them, he frames the scene around the perspective of a young boy watching the chaos from atop a hill. The moment ends with the boy handing the weary Jedi a drink of water, in a gentle exchange that suggests a semblance of humanity lurking beneath the constant mayhem. It's one of the most emotionally resonant moments in over 40 years of *Star Wars*, and it takes place without a single line of dialogue.
>
> (Kohn 2017)

Perhaps the most unique readings of the legacy of Genndy's *Clone Wars*, one that can only exist if either both or none of the *Clone Wars* animated series are taken as canon, can be found in Jake Kleinman's interview with redditor u/onex7805 for *Inverse.com*. Kleinman notes how an October 2017 post on Reddit's Fan Theories community titled, "*The Clone Wars* (2008–2013) is a Republic propaganda and *Clone Wars* (2003–2005) tells what really happened in *Clone Wars*" makes the following observation: "*The Clone Wars* intro, which sounds like an old-timey newscaster delivering news (and opinions) from the war. Compare it to the Genndy Tartakovsky's *Clone Wars*, which ambiguous sounds of battles without any music, enhancing the feeling that we're watching the records of war instead of dramatization" (Kleinman 2020). Interestingly here, what the user has really offered is a brilliant way of reading *Clone Wars* not as distinct from but rather as rhizometrically cognate with *The Clone Wars*. Again, this is because of the simplicity Genndy avails himself in his series. The user suggests that the survivors of the *Clone Wars* (as there were truly no winners in that conflict) could have their narratives told in something resembling the pithy albeit hyper-intensive, and therefore unreliable narration, of *Clone Wars*. This would be countered by the deliberately propagandistic accounts given in *The Clone Wars* as a type of spin on a totally meaningless and costly war none desired (save for the puppet-master who started it, Darth Sidious).

Lastly, Rafael Motamayor for *Collider* offers an important reading of how *Clone Wars'* legacy is not in small part composed of making the broader legacy of the *Saga* more cohesive and resonant, beyond stitching individual

Episodes together, introducing villains, and showing certain pivotal character moments. Firstly for Motamayor is the fact that *Clone Wars* helps embolden and reify the Jedi Myth. When viewers first encounter the sage and eccentric hermit on Tatooine in *A New Hope*, old Ben Kenobi does much to *verbally* impress upon the viewer the prowess, esteem, and illustriousness of the Jedi during the age of the Republic. However sincerely moving and compelling Sir Alec Guinness's historicization of the Jedi Myth may feel, its ultimate affects are similar to those of seeing an inert artifact brought to static life by an artist's rendering or a traveler's account of a bizarre, miraculous land. In this way, while one of the core mandates Lucas and Lucasfilm brought to bear in their depiction of much younger, less physically and psychologically damaged Jedi in their prime in *The Phantom Menace* (1999), Genndy performs a similar move which has the effect of not only adrenalizing one film, but all films in the prequel trilogy. As Motamayor notes:

> The prequels made it clear that the Jedi were in decline, their ways lost, and the Order corrupted by politics. Sure, we saw Jedi display impressive fighting skills, but mostly during duels, not on the battlefield. And they certainly weren't the stuff of legends. Tartakovsky's Clone Wars […] was different. From the opening shots of the first episode, which gave us the silhouette of master Yoda on a vast field riding on top of an armoured kybuck, the show let us know this is an operatic view of *Star Wars*. The Jedi of this micro-series were not warriors, not even myths; they were almost gods. This demonstrated Tartakovsky's ability to take full advantage of the animation medium to tell stories that simply couldn't be done in live-action. Where the expanded universe of the star wars video games, books, and comics have Jedi demonstrate the ability to jump incredible distances and use 'force dash,' the movies mostly shy away from visualizing these abilities. We only see a force dash when Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon escape from droidkas in *The Phantom Menace*, and force jump during special moments, like when Obi-Wan bested Darth Maul or during his duel against Anakin. In live-action, these moments have to be specifically chosen so as not to break with the reality of the situation. But in animation, the suspension of disbelief is inherent in the medium.
>
> (Motamayor 2020)

The fearful mystique and respect that the Jedi myth has attained in the time of the Republic are also evident in the duel between Asajj Ventress and Anakin on Yavin IV. Motamayor describes it as being

> like watching Superman fight Zod in *Man of Steel*. The two fight at incredible speed, running across a forest and then ancient ruins in the blink of an eye before taking giant leaps and bringing the fight to the top of trees or a temple […] It's a fantastic way of showcasing just how

FIGURE 4.12 *Skywalker and Ventress Duel under the Red Moon of Yavin IV*

> powerful Jedi were, and why anyone would be afraid of facing them in the time of the Republic.
>
> (Motamayor 2020)

This kind of display does come with own set of complications. If indeed Genndy's *Clone Wars* was intended to stitch together two *Episodes*, ones in which the prowess of the Jedi is, as much as the remit of live-action (and the bodies, fitness, and willingness of the cast involved and their stunt teams are concerned) allows, on full display, the fact remains that the levels of power shown available to fully and even partially trained Jedi and Sith in *Clone Wars* are completely incommensurate with those of their live-action counterparts. In this regard, *Clone Wars* fails. It is a victim of the success of its own flair and stylization. The live-action Jedi and Sith on screen appear radically weakened. While Samuel L. Jackson's Mace Windu has a stylish samurai-quick duel with the notorious bounty hunter Jango Fett in the arena scene on Geonosis in *Attack of the Clones* (2002), his animated counterpart *destroys an entire battalion* of Super Battle Droids with nothing but his fists and the Force.

This does not stop the action from being extremely effective, particularly in its timing and the rhythmic nature of its editing. Referring to the episode featuring Mace Windu, Motamayor states that the editing of the episode resembles an Edgar Wright film more than it does a *Star Wars* film. He notes how "the episode's action has a rhythm to it that picks up the pace as Windu runs through the droid-infested battlefield, and slows down as he takes a step back to quickly catch his breath before continuing the onslaught," further suggesting how "this style of editing is very characteristic of Tartakovsky's

work, and is one thing that sets him apart from other animation directors" (Motamayor 2020). According to Genndy himself, "[a] good action sequence is really like a good musical sequence. There' up sand downs, and there's a natural rhythm. Even where it's just sound effects and there is no music, it's still rhythm and pacing" (qtd. in Motamayor 2020). This is evident in Genndy's expert deployment of both visceral and cartoonish sounds that seem both so enmeshed into the audio profile of the *Saga* but also at once so distinct from it. Though there is no dialogue aside from the occasional "Roger, Roger" or "recharge accelerators" or "fire at will" or "what!?" from standard battle droids, and next to no musical score, this sense of rhythm comes across most clearly in the sound editing of screaming, twisted, bursting, tearing metal—when Windu dismantles a droid with the Force, and sends the dismantled pieces as a volley of shrapnel against other droids which sounds like a hailstorm on corrugated sheet roofing. The panoply of sound matches the variety of images in the sequence, so much so that one scarcely has time to realize that there is never a single repeated shot due to the editing changes in camera perspective through which the action is framed. The conglomerate effect is that "[t]he over-the-top, god-level powers of MasterWindu would not be possible to recreate in live-action, but the editing completely sells you on the legendary skills of the Jedi in animation" (Motamayor 2020).

This sense of rhythm would not work if Genndy also did not have a masterful approach to silence. While most Hollywood blockbusters, as well as anime's typically bombastic audiovisual sensibility have permeated the audiovisual approaches of many contemporary animation directors, Genndy uses silence to devastating effect. Many of Genndy's set pieces across his oeuvre, and in *Clone Wars* as well, relinquish altogether the sound of triumphant or menacing scores, the quips of hero dialogue, and the ear-ringing sound effects of bullets and explosions at high dynamic volumes. In vacating the moment of dialogue altogether, and even sometimes other diegetic sounds more broadly, Genndy purposefully and effectively builds near unbearable levels of tension. He "slows down right before a fight, and even during it, to let the action breathe and gain gravitas" (Motamayor 2020).

This is most effective in the scene joining the first and second Seasons of the series featuring General Grievous' assault on Ki-Adi Mundi and his group of overrun, outnumbered, and outgunned Jedi. The fact that he taunts and stalks them with a genuinely perceptible menace differentiates his portrayal under Genndy's brush all but totally from his depiction through Lucas' lens. In the latter framing, Grievous is a parody of the type of truly dangerous and evil-feeling villain Lucas established through Darths Maul and Tyranus in *Episodes I* and *II,* respectively. He is frail, annoying, silly, more menacing in appearance than in action. "But in the *Clone Wars*," argues Motamayor, "he's a terrifying presence that brings to mind Michael Myers in Halloween" (Motamayor 2020). Often in the episode Genndy stops the music, leaving only the sound of the breeze howling over the war-torn tableaux, the desperate

FIGURE 4.13 *The Seemingly Indomitable General Grievous Single-Handedly Taking on a Band of Jedi and a Heavily Armed Squad of ARC Troopers*

and startled breathing of the overrun and exhausted Jedi punctuated only by desperate, staccato, and frightened dialogue, while the ominous sound of Grievous' invisible steps ring out unabated seemingly from all directions as he approaches the trapped Jedi unseen. "The absolute silence," Motamayor notes, "and the inter-cut close-ups of the frightened Jedi only aids building dread, as the audience can only imagine what horror has the legendary Jedi in this state" (Motamayor 2020). Genndy has noted that "[i]t's always important to breathe in a sequence. We kind of build the action like a music sequence, and then we speed up or slow down accordingly" (Motamayor 2020). While in some episodes, Genndy avails himself of the Lucas formula for action which involves cutting between numerous concurrent battles, he typically allows each battle or action sequence to play out uninterrupted, pausing momentarily to depict the characters assessing their predicaments *in medias res*, regrouping, strategizing, and panicking. Not only does such a treatment of action play out rhythmically, but it also registers the stakes and potential dangers and errors the characters face with force and emotional resonance. Because of this, "it doesn't matter how big the budget is or how elaborate the choreography is [in any upcoming film], it's unlikely we will ever see action in *Star Wars* that is as good as what Genndy Tartakovsky's Clone Wars achieved seven years ago" (Motamayor 2020). Perhaps, at its most fundamental, the question of legacy is one of endings. Let us now turn to the theme of endings and legacy and how both play out, alongside other issues and debates, in the concluding Season of *Samurai Jack*.

* * *

5

Samurai Jack: Season V (2017)

"Without Aku … I would never … have existed."

—ASHI.

Samurai Jack Seasons V: The Cost of a Return to the Future

5.1 HOPE AND HOPELESSNESS: THE RETURN OF *SAMURAI JACK*

In her 2017 interview for *The Verge* concerning the fifth and final Season of *Samurai Jack*, Tasha Robinson asks Genndy: "there's a point in the first episodes where Jack is seriously considering suicide, because he's so tired of the eternal battle. Did you draw any limits for yourself in terms of how dark you could go emotionally or dramatically?" to which he responds

> No. Everybody asks me about gore. That's what they want to see in the new Season. It was the exact opposite for me. I said, "Let's dive into this mature level of storytelling, and the way people people think. Where would he go?" This inner monologue was such a great and exciting way to see how haunted he is by the past, by his father and all the people he let down. What's the point to going on? We deal with that through a lot of episodes. We want to break him, and then hopefully we can build him and see if he can come through it at the end.
>
> (Robinson 2017)

On March 11, 2017, the fifth and final Season of *Samurai Jack* had its premiere on Adult Swim via its famous Toonami programming block. After two months, the series concluded its run on May 20, 2017: a run that had been eleven years in the making following the final Season's announcement back in December 2015 after the first four Seasons concluded on Cartoon Network. Key members of *Samurai Jack Season*s I–IV production team returned to work on the final Season, with Genndy again at the helm as Season director, writer, and storyboarder. In this capacity, Genndy and his team produced a finale to a series that already had a tremendous amount of critical and consumer renown, one that had become legendary in its own time. Both in keeping with and deviating from the status of what came before, Season 5 is broadly and highly regarded for its outstanding visual prowess, as well as its dark themes, and intense and mature register.

There is much that the final Season manages to achieve that the first four did not. The depth of characterization both of Jack and his allies/enemies, for example, is significantly expanded. This is most notable in the fact and manner of how Genndy's expert and inveterate narrative skill plunge the recesses and dark corners of Jack's *innenwelt*. This narrative strategy is fundamentally revelatory in its approach in that Genndy manages to bring to the fore, particularly in the Season's first half, themes, issues, and debates regarding the psycho-emotional and physical maturation of Jack in ways that go beyond the salubrious remit of moral and ethical rectitude, but toward decline, paranoia, ennui, and suicidal ideations. Remarkably, Genndy manages to achieve this narrative depth without sacrificing any

of the series' visual acuity, flair, and style of his *visual* storytelling, made perhaps most famous in and through the *Samurai Jack* diegesis.

In this sense, Season 5 achieves its affects along two primary meridians of sincerity: first as a sincere, that is final, instalment of a quintet saga. Second, it cannot achieve these affects, and both the aesthetic and narrative aptitude through which it does, without a sincere character analysis of Jack at both his most irredeemable and redemptive. There was, in the production situation of this Season, a direct example of Genndy placing a premium on sincerity over much else. In view of the death of Mako, the original voice actor for Aku, Genndy was left with two options: completely alter the sonic profile of the character, or hire a voice actor to mimic Mako's voice. Considering the iconic nature of Mako's voice and its inextricabililty from the iconic status of the character of Aku himself, Genndy opted for the latter, hiring voice actor Greg Baldwin to simulate Mako's voice as near as possible (Robinson 2017; Wilbur 2017). Despite this drive to maintain the same production personal and conditions of the first four Seasons however, there were certain people, most notably Mako, whom Genndy was unable to work with on the final Season. Concerning this limitation, Genndy notes:

> There are a couple of people we wanted to get, especially for storyboarding. I wanted to have more people help up, but those people weren't available, of the timing wasn't right. A lot of people I know are working in features now, and it's hard to make that jump where you go from a super-lax schedule and good pay to—all of a sudden you have half as much time and half as much as money, you know? I'm exaggerating a bit, but generally, that's the tough thing about television. It's twice as much work as features, and you have to do it twice as fast. But at the same time, it's creatively very rewarding, because we get to try new things, you get to do more innovative storytelling. And we're a lot different than we were back in our early 30s, late 20s. I have three kids, I have a mortgage, car payments. [Laughs] Before, we would hang out at the office until 10 at night, we'd all have dinner together, and then we'd hand out and work, and talk about work. So the dynamics have changed. When I got back into this rigorous schedule, my back hurt. [Laughs] It's almost like I was out of shape for working this hard again. I used to work until two in the morning every night, then still get up at six. Now, I have to help my daughter with her homework, spend time with my wife. These are all good things, but you start realizing "My life is not the same as it was 12 years ago. I have to find a new way you do things."
>
> (Robinson 2017)

In view of the sincerity of Genndy's recognition and acceptance that skill, motivation, and the psycho-emotional and physical aptitude of the body are all ultimately subject to the immovable weight of time, let alone the requirements of the industry, Robinson asks Genndy how he got into (or

returned or rediscovered) the head-space to produce a concluding Season that is widely held to be so dark and grim. Genndy responds saying:

> [Laughs] I think it's always there! I don't think it ever went away! Jack came from … I had the same dream since I was 10, about the world being destroyed and run by mutants. I'd find a samurai sword, pick up the girl I had a crush on, and we'd go through the land, surviving. That was the initial spark to Samurai Jack. You know, I don't think of myself as a 47 year old with a mortgage and three kids, I think of myself as a virile young 25, at the beginning of my career. That place is easy to go back to. And it's the story we needed to tell for Jack now. It was fun to go into his mentality more, into his psyche, rather than keep it on the surface.
>
> (Robinson 2017)

For me, the meditative and interior qualities of the final Season are neither new nor surprising. I contend that there has always-already been a distinct feeling of seemingly inescapable solemnity running through the series, one coursing beneath the visual spectacle, style, and opulence of the *Jack* diegesis. *New York* magazine's Angelica Bastién also notes this pervasive sense and feeling of melancholy and fatigue, which for many feels most keen in the final Season, stating that there is a "distinctive undercurrent of loneliness stretching through the series from start to finish," especially in a Season in which Jack is often pictured alone, both smothered and soothed, by the "grand solemnity of nature" the Romantic poets like Keats, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Shelleys were so enamored, inspired, and reverentially terrified by (Bastién 2017).

When one appreciates and acknowledges this dark through-line subtending all Seasons, their arcs, and the characters, encounters, losses, and victories Jack experiences throughout the series, it is not unreasonable to conclude that one of the truest, most sincere concepts holding the series together is not time, but rather the inescapability of pain and loss in *being in time*. Looking back, it is clear that the entire series commences from a point of piercing loss and pain when Jack loses his home, family, birthright, and *time*. It progresses and deepens apace as Jack is succored from this loss and pain by the joy and hope he feels in the relationships he forges along his journey, relationships that themselves often end in tragedy or death for those whom he cares for, loves, or seeks to protect in some form. This tautological temporal circle is made full wrought in the same way, where overcurrents and undercurrents of the inescapability of pain and loss in being in time *return* with Jack to the past at the conclusion of the series. The last experience in the *Samurai Jack* saga the viewer sees Jack undergo is undifferentiated from the first albeit only made different by the participants involved. While Jack begins his adventure by losing his family and their love, he concludes his adventure by losing a partner, ally, lover, and bride.

In each instance, the only thing that does not change is the nature of the relationship between pain, loss, being, and time. When asked by Stark about the latent format of the adventure-romance and the aesthetic and thematic issues concerning the sincere depiction of stylized love, Genndy noted:

> It was always a love story because I haven't really done it for real in my career and I wanted to see if we could succeed in having it be guttural, like you really felt for them, you really felt for his loss and I want it to be really emotional. I don't know if everybody has seen *Love Story* with Ryan O'Neal way back in the day. But there's something very visceral about that story and it's like it's gut-wrenching. And that's what love is, kind of, right honey? [Genndy's wife and family were sitting in the front row of the Q&A, and he turned to address her]. But I wanted to do it. I want it to be a caricature of love. And to try to do it, it was really a big goal because to do it in animation, and especially with Jack, it's so stylized. Could I do it? Could I get away with it? So that was our challenge.
>
> (Stark 2019)

Despite the solemnity and existential weight pervading the final Season, the conclusion of the series puts forward a variety of dilemmas, conundrums, considerations, and philosophical approaches to the issues and debates concerning being and time. In the mode of Joseph Campbell, the series poses questions regarding the nature and value of the heroes' journey, precisely when that journey stagnates, ossifies, and in many ways thematically reverses. In the Season, the exteriority of what the viewer sees Jack, Ashi (voiced by Tara Strong), Aku, the Scotsman (voiced by John DiMaggio), and others do is arguably less important, both aesthetically and narratively, than what occurs in the liminal interiority of Jack's traumatized mind. The Season compels the viewer to ask: what happens to one's identity when the object/force/idea/action predicating or substantiating that identity (Jack's journey, in this instance) either dries up or becomes overtly hostile to the identity it forms, supports, and reproduces? Latent to this question are a host of metaphysical issues and debates regarding choice, free will, and a lack thereof.

Choice applies to every single character in the Season, from Jack's Hamletian Dilemma of the fundamental question of the human condition, to be or not to be; Ashi's choice to follow the imperative of her blood and breeding insisting she kill Jack, or her heart and feeling that invite her to try redeem him; the Scotsman's dilemma concerning the choice to keep fighting or not in view of insurmountable odds and a plethora of prior tragedies and defeats; and even Aku's dilemma, namely whether or not to continue the dogged pursuit of his enemy. In this way, choice and the nature of destiny, fate, and programming that bind human, nonhuman, organic, and cybernetic life-forms effect all Jack encounters in the Season (Romano 2017). Concerning the questions inherent to these ontological differences,

Genndy has stated: "I wanted to show the human side that's been treated like a machine. Aku builds robots and all these robots are singularly programmed to kill Jack. What if it's humans? What if the one purpose in your whole life is to kill this one person and you're raised from birth that way?" (Topel 2017).

The concept of return and completion are inextricably tied, at least thematically, throughout the series. In this way, the final Season can accurately be read as a protracted meditation on the interruption thereof. A not insignificant factor of interruption acting on these themes redounds to the medium and its method of delivery and dissemination to audiences. In her interview for *Verge* Robinson asks: "The show has always been about trying to get 'back to the past', but you've said now that's more metaphorical. Jack is trying to reclaim the person he used to be. Was that return to the past always metaphorical and personal for you?" Consider Genndy's reply:

> It was! One of the things we couldn't do in the first 53 episodes—it couldn't be episodic, which hinders your character growth. You can't have as many ups and downs, because if Cartoon Network aired the episodes out of order, he's super-dark in one episode, and cheery in another. So that forced us to make him more even-keeled, and we played him as a stoic samurai hero, unaffected by everything he's going through. We've seen some dips in him, but nothing to this level, where he's given up hope. So that was one of the exciting things going into this Season: "Let's bring him down." It's 50 years later, there's no way home, Aku won't even face him anymore, and he's lost hope. And what do you do if you're stuck in this eternal hell with the idea that you let all the people down in the past? It made all these ideas really rich for us. I think it will really enhance Jack's character as we see unfold through this Season.
>
> (Robinson 2017)

In the onrush of aesthetic and narrative variety, scale, flair, and sincere emotional weight that binds the aforesaid together into a potent animated television series, it is easy to forget the importance of the series' central premise: time. The fifth Season addresses this gargantuan and never-ending theme in numerous ways. Perhaps most subtly is the fact that the original four Seasons used Roman numerals to number episodes, the final one of the first four Seasons being "LII" or 52. Season 5, however, opens with episode "XCII" or 92, the difference of which demarcates the amount of time lapsed between Seasons 4 and 5 (Lesnick 2017). In this way, while Jack intones that "fifty years have passed, but I do not age. Time has lost its effect on me. Yet the suffering continues. Aku's grasp chokes the past, present, and future," both everything and nothing has changed (Tartakovsky 2017). Through the final Season, Genndy also ostensibly intimates the idea that while the conflagration between the forces of good and evil is transtemporal and in

this way static, eternal, unchanging, the internal landscape of a protagonist (and his arch nemesis) can and must necessarily undergo wild oscillations, set-backs, and discoveries. This is important to keep in view as the story takes place fifty years following Jack's marooning in the future by Aku. Moreover, Jack does not age as a side-effect of the time-travel phenomena, remaining in this sense ontologically unaltered, from day to day. Therefore, while the underlying milieu, world, and premise for the preponderance of the fifth Season seemingly remain identical to that of the first four, the ultimate lesson of both the series and the Season is that the more ephemeral alterations of the self are the only true index or litmus of true change.

For Jack, this takes the form of a dialectic between hope and despair and other related binaries: love and death, war and peace, home and displacement, for example. For Aku, this takes on the form of the burden of immortality as well, albeit in a slightly altered way. While Jack's sense of psycho-emotional distress is predicated on a distinction and tension between being (and being tempted/invited to remain) in the wrong time and returning (tragically, as the Season progresses) to the correct time, a tension the fulcrum of which is occupied by Aku, for Aku, the prospect of doing battle with Jack forever induces malaise and a discontinuation of his desire to destroy him. The seeming inescapability of despair, for both

FIGURE 5.1 *The Shape-Shifting Master of Darkness Reduced to Boredom*

FIGURE 5.2 *Jack vs. the Daughters of Aku*

protagonist and antagonist, is made all the more stark by the fact that Aku, perhaps in his haste and folly, destroyed all *existing* time portals over the first four Seasons. It would seem that the terror of this tautology made by and between the two characters ensures a necessarily existentially fraught, mature, and severe tone in the Season.

It is interesting to note how Genndy introduces Aku in earnest into the narrative of the fifth Season. While Aku and Jack seem to be sempiternally linked across time and space, Genndy also suggests that as a result, angoisse, ennui, and malaise are also bidirectionally shared between hero and villain. In Season 5, Episode 2 (aired March 18, 2017), it is revealed that Aku is and perhaps has been throughout the intervening fifty years, in many ways, just as depressed as Jack. Whereas Jack is clearly suffering from PTSD, ostensibly, Aku's depression predominantly emerges from a place of boredom. Aku's seemingly infinite, virile supreme evil is reduced to concerns about the cleanliness of his domicile-lair, more so than with tyranny and oppression as was his obsessive wont in the preceding four Seasons. Aku, unaware that his nemesis has lost the only tool that can destroy him, his magical sword, is shown to have grown wary of their inter-temporal rivalry, and given up hope, enjoyment, or the potential relief of pursuing Jack or finally defeating him. Even the possibility of out-lasting him is dashed as Aku discovers that Jack has stopped aging as a side effect of time-travel.

Because of the circuitousness that traps and links each character, Jack and Aku, together in this unending fashion, it falls to adjutants to not only emboy, but maintain this rivalry in action. This task falls to Aku's progeny, the septuplet Daughters of Aku (DOA henceforward), who track, locate,

and confront the way-worn samurai. After disarming him, they subject him to a thorough beating in the snow, forcing him to flee and hide. During his sojourn in a ruined temple, which for all intents and purposes is little more than a stay of execution, Jack has terse inner conflicts with and within himself. In this way, Jack's inner self or Mad Jack is undifferentiated from the DOA: both ultimately perform the same function namely, to berate, harass, demoralize, and eventually attempt to destroy Jack. He is eventually discovered again by the DOA. In a bloody and brutal second confrontation, Jack is stabbed in the side while killing all but one of the Daughters who, to his shock, are shown to be human and not robots as he had assumed. Using the verbose, musical bounty hunter droid Scaramouche's (voiced by Tom Kenny) tuning fork-like dagger, Jack causes one of the temple walls to explode, offering him an opportunity to escape into an icy river below (Metcalf 2017; Romano 2017; Tartakovsky 2017).

While much has been made of the dark tone of the Season, it should also be mentioned that the Season presents numerous moments of levity as well. As Genndy uses ruptured expectations as a source and vehicle for prosecuting humor, as he does in Season 4's long-awaited and surprisingly humorous showdown between Aku and Jack, in this episode, Genndy plays the depressed boredom of Aku for laughs, for example:

[Aku wakes up and laconically stretches]

Host: Master, new arrivals have come to offer tribute!

[Aku rises to see a group of mud aliens]

Mud Alien: O, Great Shogun of Sorrow, Master of All Masters, you have allowed us to inhabit this world, and for that, we are forever grateful.

[as the Mud Alien continues, Aku frustratedly notices the Mud Alien tracking mud into his lair]

Mud Alien: [as another mud alien presents a mud statue of Aku's likeness] We offer you a special tribute.

Aku: STOP! L-Look at what you are doing! You're getting yourselves all over the floor!

Mud Alien: Uh ….

Aku: I just had it vacuumed! Out! OUT! GET OUT!!

[as the mud aliens flee, a group of mad scientists appear]

Mad Scientist: Master … Master, we've done it. May I introduce …. the most epic version of the beetle drone yet!

[hologram shows a comically gargantuan beetle drone]

Aku: And I care because?

Mad Scientist: B-Because the samurai. You've wanted to kill him since forever. He's the bane of your existence.

Aku: Oh! That was the old Aku! This is the new Aku! And he really doesn't care about the pathetic samurai who wanders around like a mad fool.

> [laughs] It's hilarious. Really! Look, I tell you what. You want to destroy him? Go ahead. Who cares? I certainly don't. Not one bit at all.
>
> (Tartakovsky 2017)

Though humorized, Genndy also preempts the latently psychological themes of the Season early on in framing Aku's ennui in expressly *psychiatric* terms, specifically through the presentation of (speaking) therapy as a treatment for/against the onset of madness as a matter of schizophrenic self-dialogue, just as it is exactly for his nemesis Jack:

> [Aku is lying down on a chair talking to a psychiatrist version of himself]
>
> **Dr. Aku:** So, tell me what's been bothering you.
>
> **Aku**: Well, you see, Doc, it's been over 50 years already.
>
> **Dr. Aku**: It's been that long?
>
> **Aku**: Yes. You see, that's the actual problem. Once I eradicated all the time portals, I thought I would just wait it out, and then the Samura—
>
> **Dr. Aku**: We don't say his name here. It is a safe place.
>
> **Aku**: Yes, yes … sorry, Doctor. Well, I-I just assumed that eventually over time, he would just—
>
> **Aku and Dr. Aku**: DIIIIIIIIIIEEE!!!!!
>
> [Aku slumps down on the chair]
>
> **Aku**: But he hasn't even aged. I mean, like, at all. He just grew that stupid beard, and it looks like he'll be here forever!! I … I just don't know if I can handle that.
>
> [his eyebrows and beard are extinguished]
>
> **Dr. Aku:** Yes, it seems that the initial time travel has affected the aging process. It's quite the conundrum.
>
> **Aku**: Yes … Uh, what is that again?
>
> **Dr. Aku**: Just a confusing or difficult problem.
>
> **Aku**: Yes. Problem. I wish there was someone who can dispose of my problem.
>
> **Aku and Dr. Aku**: Yes. One can hope.
>
> (Tartakovsky 2017)

Despite the fact that Jack declares, in the show's opening sequence, that "hope is lost," there is, it should also be pointed out, a tremendous amount of hope on display in the Season. A hope of sincere desperation, and because of this, a hope that cannot be anything but sincere in view of the doldrums and dire conditions that necessitated it *in principium*. While Jack himself is clearly suffering from the psycho-emotional and physical effects of his forever-war and world-weariness, as well as his "future-shock," Jack's altruistic actions are also shown to have inspired a great many to oppose Aku's tyranny over the years. Here, yet another unchanged element

of the diegetic world remains the theme of loyalty in the face of seemingly insuperable odds. For example, the now elderly Scotsman remains a stalwart ally of Jack's (memory), the sincerity of which manifests in the fact of its existence in Jack's presumed *absence*. So sincere is their friendship, allyship, and the inspiration of the former by the latter, that the former leads three separate armies in a final battle against Aku. This heroism is in complete contradistinction with the Jack seen in the first part of the fifth Season, who is in no condition to lead or support an army, let alone even continuing to live. Not only is this Jack shown to be disarmed and reduced (in terms of both weaponry and spirit) as a warrior on account of the loss of his sword, he also experiences debilitating PTSD hallucinations of his deceased family in surreal, lurid, and hellish dreamscapes. In these torturous instances, Jack seems to occupy a permanently interstitial position between life and death, the past and the future (as his present is the future). The vector of these psycho-emotional trails takes the form of a malign avatar (Mad Jack) that resembles a younger version of himself who, along with an entire gallery of Jack's former victims, admonishes the protagonist, berates him, and pushes him slowly and steadily toward the edge of utter self-destruction as an only escape.

In Season 5, Episode 2 (aired 18 March, 2017), Genndy almost immediately introduces the viewer to the internal conflict between Jack and Mad Jack from the very beginning of the series:

> [after escaping from the Daughters of Aku, Jack hides and is confronted by a blue apparition of himself]
>
> **Inner Jack**: It's time to end it, don't you think?
>
> **Jack**: Never. They are just machines. I'll find a way. I always have.
>
> **Inner Jack**: When you had the sword, but now it's gone! There's no hope!
>
> **Jack:** I've been doing fine without it.
>
> **Inner Jack**: Well, listen to you. And what are you going to do when Aku finds you and realizes you have no sword?
>
> **Jack**: Aku doesn't know, and he hasn't shown himself in years. He keeps thinking that one of his machines can defeat me.
>
> **Inner Jack**: Maybe he's right. You haven't faced anything so powerful! How much longer can you keep this up?!
>
> **Jack:** It always seems bad at first, but then I find a way. They're just nuts and bolts …Just nuts and bolts.
>
> **Inner Jack**: Who cares anymore!? There's no way home! There's nothing to fight for! There's no more honour! Come to think of it, the only honourable thing to do is …
>
> **Jack:** Quiet
>
> **Inner Jack**: NO! I WON'T SPEND ETERNITY IN THIS FORSAKEN TIME!!

Jack: What do you want from me?
Inner Jack: I want it to end. Aren't you tired? Wouldn't it be great to be free of all of this? Our ancestors are waiting for us. They want you to join them.
[Jack sees through the crack; he sees the silhouette of the Omen in the green mist and a temple behind them]
Jack: There.
Inner Jack: You'll never make it! They'll get you!
Jack: I'll make it.

(Tartakovsly 2017)

To emphasize this sense of claustrophobic inevitability even further, Genndy and his team introduced a seemingly unrelenting and insuperable threat in the form of the DOA, the offspring of a mating of Aku's evil "essence" and a secret coven of female Aku worshipers. Not unlike Jack, the Daughters are raised their entire early lives to be deadly warriors whose sole *raison d'etre* is to kill Jack, whom they successfully hunt down and best in the second episode. After a gruesome and fearsome battle in which Jack is outnumbered 7 to 1, the beleaguered samurai, who looks more vagabond than warrior, more ronin than shogun, is still formidable enough, even without his sword, to kill all save one of his attackers, the eldest Daughter, Ashi. Over the rest of the Season, the two are forced by circumstance to make a tense alliance in order to stay alive as many dangers befall them. In Season 5, Episode 4 (aired April 8, 2017) for example, the pair are swallowed by a gargantuan monster, and, after a lengthy and arduous trek through its innards, make an escape through its bowels. As they make their way through the creature, fending off various other creatures within it, the two converse, Jack is tormented, and Ashi refuses to relinquish the idea that

FIGURE 5.3 *Ashi under Her Father's Thrall*

Jack is the true ultimate evil of the world while Jack concurrently attempts to convince her of the guile and subterfuge essential to the efficacy of Aku's evil. In time, over the course of their tandem adventuring, Ashi comes to realize that Jack is correct. She resolves to aid him on his journey, physical and spiritual, even preventing him from committing suicide and helping the samurai reclaim his sword, a recursive metaphor and symbol for his soul (and/or his father's) throughout the series as a whole.

As perhaps the most blatantly Romantic gesture from Genndy before or since (although the redemptive power of love is a recurring undercurrent theme in parts of *Sym-Biotic Titan* albeit from a teenager's perspective), Jack's will to live and Ashi's desire for redemption are co-constitutive elements of the love that develops between them. Later, in Season 5, Episode 6/7 (aired April 22, 2017/April 29, 2017, respectively), Aku receives outdated intelligence regarding the loss of Jack's sword. Believing that he has the advantage, Aku attacks the samurai with confidence, unaware that Jack has, with the steadfast and patient aid of is former enemy now companion and love interest Ashi, in fact recovered his sword. In the process of their battle during the penultimate episode of the Season and series, Season 5, Episode 9 (aired May 3, 2017), Aku becomes aware of the presence of his essence within Ashi and uses it to control her, wielding her as a weapon against her lover and ally. Jack, because of the strong sense of love, camaraderie, compassion, and empathy he feels for Ashi, refuses to kill her and lays down his sword in surrender. Aku claims both the sword and Jack as his prisoner and prepares to destroy him once and for all time. However, his final act of evil is thwarted when the oppressed people of the future world rally around Jack, many of whom he has directly saved over the course of the series' five Seasons. And like the keen edge of his indestructible sword, Jack's declaration of love to and for Ashi cuts through the enchantment and blood magic binding her will to Aku, freeing her from his thrall and power. She manages to reclaim Jack's sword and use the demonic powers she gained from her father to open a portal and travel back in time with Jack to the moment of his banishment to the future in the past. Jack, using his magical sword, destroys a weakened Aku. Following the seeming final victory over the tyrannical, transtemporal evil of Aku, the audience, for the first time in the series, sees an adult Jack sincerely at peace. And sincerely hopeful, as he and Ashi make preparations to marry in the wake of their shared triumph and emancipation from the power of Aku, in their respective albeit cognate ways. However, the rules of time-travel and causality are sincerely unfeeling, adamantly impersonal. As Ashi makes her way down the isle to the altar to take Jack's hand in marriage, she collapses and begins to disappear as the death of her father in the future undoes the possibility of her existence in any time preceding her birth. The end of the series sees Jack, again depressed, though smiling ruefully, wizened, humbled, and ultimately quiescent to the various insuperable

FIGURE 5.4 *The Adamantine Laws of Time*

FIGURE 5.5 *Love and Loss in Time*

forces of time and its control of fate, as he has experienced it over five tragic, beautiful, hilarious, and penetrating Seasons. In the final scene of the series in Season 5, Episode 10 (aired May 20, 2017), a ladybeetle alights his finger. He watches it take flight again amidst the gentle sunbeams and the emerging blossoms of a solitary sakura tree.

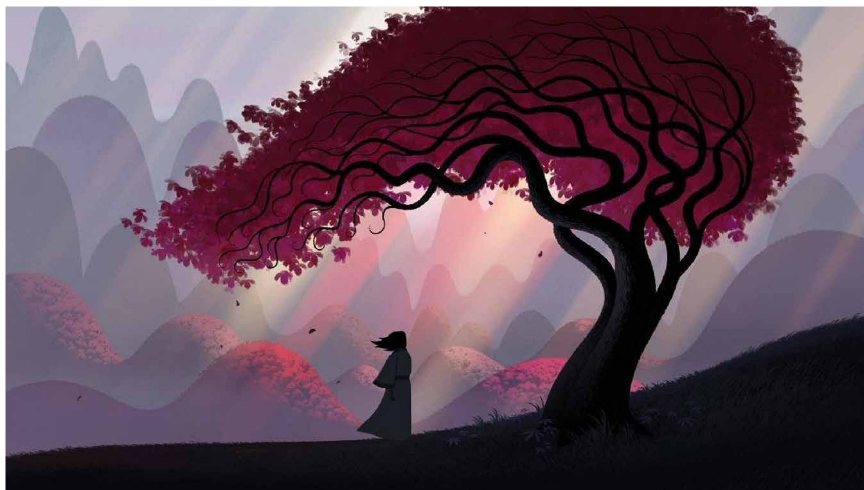

FIGURE 5.6 *The Bittersweet Ending of a Journey through Time*

Broken Down and Built Back Up: The Origins of the Return

The background concerning the origins of the fifth Season of *Samurai Jack* seems in so many ways inextricable from the failed attempts to develop a feature-length film based on the series following the conclusion of its fourth Season (Anderson 2015). Genndy, as well as Craig Kellman, character designer on the series, had expressed interest in this idea as a bridge (then well practiced at bridging as a result of the experience accrued during their work on *Clone Wars*) between the initial four Seasons and the concluding fifth. However, the technological variances that emerged and lengthened in that time were something both Genndy and Kellman were intrigued and concerned by: “Technology is different, we’re using computers now, instead of hamsters like the old days” (Adult Swim 2016).

The mandate of a feature-length film would have been ostensibly simple: provide a conclusive and satisfactory end for the series (Loughrey 2016; Yehl 2016). Being that this was not to be, the conclusion of *Samurai Jack* would have to later make recourse to the original medium and format of its four Season predecessors to prosecute its overall conclusion. It would seem that the fact that Toonami began airing reruns of the first four Seasons via Adult Swim beginning in 2014 signposted how creative executives at Cartoon Network were tilling the soil in preparation for new and concluding developments for and on the series. This preparatory hypothesis is compounded by the fact of how swift negotiations between Genndy

and Mike Lazzo were, the result of which was a commitment from both Network and creator to produce a final ten episodes for the series (Sarto 2017). Promotion for the new series began as early as December 2015 when the Network released a short teaser for the new series after negotiations had been completed and finalized (Petski 2015). The teaser was the product of a mixed media bricolage whereby images from the IDW comic adaptation of *Samurai Jack* were used alongside animated moving images (Dietsch 2015). This was accompanied by several media mentions, rumors, suggestions, and intimations ahead of the official press release announcement for the upcoming final Season, which was slated to run over the course of the 2016–17 (Chavez 2016; Milligan 2016). In 2016, promotional and behind-the-scenes artwork was debuted and shared at the Annecy International Animated Film Festival of the same year (Amidi 2016). Finally, on January 24, 2017, an Adult Swim bumper officially announced that Season 5 of the series would debut on March 11, 2017 (Amidi 2017). On March 9, 2017, the Season's first three episodes were screened at the Ace Hotel in Los Angeles to vociferous acclaim (Alexander 2017; Chan 2017).

In bringing the final Season to fruition, Genndy adopted a similar production approach he did on *Clone Wars*, precisely by maintaining a small production team. On reassembling the original *Samurai Jack* crew, Genndy notes:

> Part of it was pretty easy. I mean, luckily I found people that are so good at what I don't do [laughs] They make me look so good. We've been working with each other since the original days of *Samurai Jack*. Scott Wills and I have been doing stuff in and out. Craig Kellman, the main character designer; Darrick Bachman, who helped me write the stuff; and Bryan Andrews, who's been storyboarding with me from *Samurai Jack* through *Sym-Bionic* through the *Hotel Transylvania* movies—they also came back. That was kind of the core group. We had to get a little more support here and there, but generally, just me and Bryan did the storyboards. That part was easy, because at a certain point in your career, it becomes less about the project and more about the people you work with. We got lucky that the timing worked out for everybody, and also that we love working with each other. (Robinson 2017)

According to the auteur, this permitted more creative freedom under the auspices of a narrower budget and an enervated schedule. Lazzo himself also helped engender these conditions by allowing Genndy and his team a wide berth creatively, largely limiting all types of intervention into their production process, leaving the team free to work at their own pace, in their own fashion (Sarto 2017). Furthermore, the heightened sense of overall uniformity in the series is in part a direct result of alterations to production and consumption of visual media in view of the "Netflixication" of digital

visual media that has become the standard model of consumption of visual and pop culture in digital late capitalism; a development that occurred rapidly in between the airing of the original four Seasons and the final fifth. Being that the preponderance of the original four Seasons took place under the aegis of the "push" ethos of broadcast media, the "pull" of digital streaming services meant that the series, its aesthetic, and narrative were no longer bound to the disjointed continuities of episodic storytelling in which each episode in a series is (and in certain respects necessarily so) relatively independent from those before and after it. As a result of this extremely fundamental shift in production and consumption of media content, the series could employ a single, and indeed more cohesive serialized narrative approach to conclude Jack's tale (Adult Swim 2016; Amaya 2017). In this manner, each episode could be directly linked to the one preceding and anteceding it through a connective "reveal," one that not only propels the narrative in a variety of thematic and aesthetic directions, but uses said reveal to connect these changes in direction, and successfully take the viewer along with them (Yehl 2016). When asked regarding the change in format, and whether or not it was a challenging alteration, Genndy states:

> Well, 10 episodes, 30 minutes each, yeah, it was challenging and not challenging and it always was going to be a bittersweet end. There was no way a samurai is going to receive a happy ending. And I know a lot of people were upset or whatever, but this was my intent and that's the great thing about having your own show, I could do whatever I want. And I take the negative criticism and I take the positive criticism. I wouldn't have done anything different. You want to go through your life without regrets, right? Even with something like doing these shows, and I've always wanted to work as much as I possibly can to make it as great as I could so I could never look back and go like, "Oh, I wish I could have worked a week extra on this." It was impossible. And I can say that all the way from the first short of *Dexter*. (Stark 2019)

All of these innovations and alterations to the aesthetic and narrative approach to the series culminated in October 2016 when the final episode of *Samurai Jack* was storyboarded (Dueben 2016). Genndy hoped then that the series finale would be emotionally resonant with viewers (Chan 2017). When asked about the importance of furnishing the series with a definitive, satisfactory end, Genndy states:

> Yeah, even initially, because we made such a big deal about Jack's origin, and all these people in his life that were left to suffer and die, basically. He had to come back at some point if he had a hope of finishing his quest, and I always wanted to finish it [note how he interchanges "he" and "I"]. But at the end of the fourth Season, we were all burnt out. The network

> didn't know what they wanted to do, I didn't know what I wanted to do. And then we were getting *Star Wars* handed to us. I realized, "I don't want to rush out an ending." I didn't even know what the ending was back then. So we decided to just quietly finish the fourth Season.
>
> (Robinson 2017)

Robinson follows up by asking how long Genndy had the ending viewers experienced in mind, to which Genndy answers:

> It popped up first probably a couple of years after I finished the show. I realized, "Oh, this is the way I would want to do it." There was all this various interest in doing a Samurai Jack movie, where I would reinvent the show and finish it in the same movie. In the movies, especially back then, they wanted a completion. The same core idea I had then is what we're doing now.
>
> (Robinson 2017)

Since its release, *Rotten Tomatoes* shows the Season to currently hold an approval rating of 100 percent based on twenty-three reviews, with an average rating of 9.0/10. The critics' consensus for the show reads: "An increasing intensity and maturity are evident in Samurai Jack's beautifully animated, action-packed and overall compelling fifth Season" (Rotten Tomatoes). On *Metacritic,* the fifth Season currently holds an average score of 94 out of 100, based on six critics, the combination of which suggests "universal acclaim" (Metacritic). Reviewers like IGN's Joshua Yehl describe the Season as being "double-edged," a reference to the show's narrative and aesthetic presentation thereof. Yehl describes the Season's aesthetics, its draftsmanship, artistry, sound design, and animation as being overall masterful. He simultaneously also praises the Season for its thematic maturity and sophistication against the more straightforward action-adventure/comedy of the first four Seasons, though riddled with numerous examples of thematic depth and narrative nuance themselves. In contrast, he believes that the fifth Season's narrative was not of the same standard and failed, in the last instance, to satisfactorily address the questions that had accumulated over the preceding four Seasons of the series, including those same questions and also new ones introduced at the beginning of the final Season (Yehl 2016).

Eternal Return: Genndy against the American Monomyth

The predicate narrative of the Fifth and final Season is marked by an intensification of the sense of inescapability, of claustrophobia Jack experienced through Seasons 1 to 4. Season 5, Episode 1 (aired March

11, 2017) takes up the hero's journey fifty years into his future's future. After half a century in the future, it is revealed that Jack has not aged as a direct side effect of time-travel. Not only is it confirmed, in a far more incisive and direct manner (owing in large part to the alteration to the push toward a more overarching cohesive narrative structure in the *Return*), that time-travel necessitates an ontological and existential transmutation of the traveler through both displacement and reterritorialization, the episode also sharply affirms the psycho-emotional cost and weight of that displacement and reterritorialization. In the *Return*, Jack is shown to be mentally and emotionally scarred by his inability to effect a clear return to his former present, which is his present past in the future. He is rudderless, without even the central surety and salve of his sword to remind him of who he is, was, and wants to be. In a word, he is hopeless. Gone are the latent drive and exigency of returning to his time as the question of his time, fifty years on, means at the most less, and at the most something entirely different than it once did.

The through-lines of specifically psychological and emotional trauma linked to both time and loss persist in the *Return*. As he was in certain episodes of the series' initial run explored in Chapter 3, Jack is tormented by hallucinations of his ruined kingdom, his presumably deceased or, at the very least inaccessible, parents, and a mysterious and ominous armored, yari-wielding warrior on horseback. Rather startlingly availing himself of futuristic weapons and armor, including firearms and riding a motorcycle,

FIGURE 5.7 *Same Ethos, New Look*

Jack is shown to still adhere to his heroic ethos, for the most part. In the first Episode of the *Return*, he is shown rescuing a small family—a mother and two children—from the life-threatening advance of beetle drones. The fact that Jack's initial battle on his arrival in the future in aid of the archaeologist canines he encounters in Season 1 involve the same type of drones is not only an interesting symbolic gesture, but one that here again promotes a sense of narrative, thematic, and aesthetic cyclicality. On the one hand, the decision to show Jack in battle in this manner here could be read as an homage to the original run of the series, and, in particular, the episode in which Jack's adventure begins in earnest. On the other hand, the fact that the same or similar enemy recurs bespeaks a sense of inescapability, a circular as opposed to straight narrative development. In so doing, Genndy subtly, but effectively, inserts the themes of psycho-emotional distress, ennui, angoisse, and depression in direct narrative form. In many ways, therefore, Jack is not fighting the beetle drones. He is fighting what they represent specifically *as* the first enemy he faces in both his first foray into the future *and* as the first enemy he faces in the *Return*. He is fighting the symbol of his return to his first entry into the future. He is fighting a seemingly illimitable cycle, one in which he is seemingly forever trapped (Metcalf 2017).

Despite the overtly saturnine tone Genndy opens the *Return* with, there are character introductions that intermix tragedy with levity, harrowing violence with surreal humor. This paradox is located squarely in the figure of the new character Scaramouche, an assassin droid affecting, parodying, and performing and homage to the legendary entertainer Sammy David Jr. (Chan 2017). His wise-cracking, fast-talking antics cannot altogether distract from the fact that his introduction into the Season 5 diegesis is entirely genocidal. Scaramouche destroys an entire village, kills all of its inhabitants, for the chance that it might draw Jack's attention and subsequently, his presence. Arriving late to the carnage, Jack cannot save the villagers, thereby compounding his internal turmoil with more guilt, shame, and trauma. He does, however, manage to (apparently) best Scaramouche by decapitating the android. More importantly, in terms of character introductions, is the establishment of the elite, deadly DOA. Their unnamed leader and high-priestess (voiced by Grey Griffin) brutally and uncompromisingly hones the girls' (and eventually young women's) martial and tactical skills for the single and express purpose of killing Jack (Metcalf 2017; Tartakovsky 2017). As it is with the shinobi in Season 4, there is indeed a cyclicality inherent to the idea of beings, albeit not cybernetic in nature, being created in the anthropic likeness of Aku to perform and execute a task that Aku, in all his pomp and power, is unable to achieve. In this sense, while the DOA are, as dispatched facsimiles of the *refinement* of Aku's evil, neither new nor novel, Genndy brings a sincere depth of character and representation in the developmental arc Ashi undergoes throughout the fifth Season.

The theme or sense of cyclicality pervading the final Season is a narrative as well as aesthetic matter that harkens back to my discussion of mythical structures in Chapter 2. The American Monomyth is by and large the same as the Classical Monomyth. However, the divergence between the two structures centers around one stage of the journey in particular, namely on the point of the hero's integration back into the redeemed community, the most important and difficult part of the heroes' journey. While the Classical Monomyth emphasizes reintegration as the final stage in completing the heroes journey, the American Monomyth emphasizes the *absence* of this final stage and therefore, the incompletion of the Classical Monomyth. The pattern, at its core, is as follows:

> A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptation and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity.
>
> (Jewett and Lawrence 1977: 6)

When transposed to the narrative Genndy develops for Jack over the show's first four Seasons, the American Monomyth (or Disrupted Monomyth) framework only holds because two things do not occur: (1) Jack's victories over Aku or his minions, underlings, agents, heralds, or allies are never decisive enough, calling for the necessity of more victories and (2) Jack does not fade into obscurity because he is a temporally displaced being/object; that is, he is always-already both integrated and disintegrated, both inside and outside the community he serves specifically as an onto-existential temporal anomaly. Because a central tenant of Jack's story is precisely located in this imprecise temporal displacement, this nowhere/nowhen tension, this irresolvability between past, present, and future ensures that any kind of decisive vanquishing of Aku's evil does not necessarily guarantee that the incompletion of both the Classical and American Monomyth is resolved. As such, this essential incompletion of the heroes' journey means that this journey or framework can be repeated indefinitely. For Jack, this journey, its trails and tribulations, exist in both the past and the future, which, if looked at from a privileged position outside of time, might look like a flat circle that goes on forever. In this way, any and all senses, appraisals, critiques, and/or examinations of Jack's heroism must recognize it as, in the last instance, a heroism of cyclicality.

Therefore, while the Classical Monomyth emphasizes fundamentally pedagogical rites of initiation, the American Monomyth centralizes a narrative of redemption in the face of inalienable psycho-emotional incompletion, where the end of the journey is no real or perhaps satisfying end at all. In this way, it secularizes the Judeo-Christian dramas of

community redemption that emerged throughout American history that combine "elements of the selfless servant who impassively gives his life for others and the zealous crusader who destroys evil" (Jewett and Lawrence 1977: 7). As a result, it is not uncommon to hear/read silent road warriors like Jack and other similar iconic heroes of popular culture as being understood as functioning replacements for the Ur-Messianic figure. While the creditability of a Christ figure, for example, has experienced a consistent erasure since the Enlightenment, the seemingly superhuman abilities, dedication, indomitability, and quiet dignity of heroes like Jack across time reflect the public's pervasive interest in transcendent, redemptive powers that neither reason nor the scientific method has never totally extirpated from the popular imagination (Jewett and Lawrence 1977: 7).

In many ways, Jack reflects both ancient and modern heroic idealism inherent in to American Monomyth's freedom-to-rove, no-home-to-return-to ethos. Monica Silveria Cyrino asserts that

> this popular model of "freedom" is frequently interpreted in film through the prism of heroic independence and individual free will. By modern cinematic conventions—whether in westerns, cop movies, or comic book fantasies—the hero-protagonists are fiercely autonomous, often isolated from society; they tend to work outside the system, usually with violence, even breaking the law if necessary to achieve their goals and to reinstate social order [...] Hence Shane can ride into the sunset, but Oedipus cannot.
> (Cyrino 2011: 31; Woodward 2003: 51; *300*)

MacEwen also notes that a "fully heroic affect does not occur unless a hero fights both for a good cause and to avenge a personal outrage" (MacEwen 1990: 213). Jack is denied the heroes death, his death is Hamletian not only in its suicidal ideations, but also in its sense of delay and diffusion, not simply within a single scene, but across time. Here, Genndy's cyclical treatment of Jack, his journey, his struggle, and his indefatigable, heroic spirit resound with the heroic ideal that held that "an extended and painful death was the prerogative of a hero" (Woodward 2003: 52).

However, in Season 5, the only thing Jack seems to earn as a hero is extended pain over time. I argue that the ineluctable tragedy of *Samurai Jack* ultimately redounds to Jack's experience of ontological and existential stasis. He literally and figuratively *is*, in every way, time out of joint. He spends the preponderance of his life in a future marred by trauma and tyranny from the past, wherein which he has no access to his stunted present in order to try and rectify and/or prevent the former's development. His present is Aku's future, one in which tyranny runs roughshod and unabated, despite leaguers, alliances, friendships, despite tragedy, mirth, and discovery, wisdom, skill, and ultimately love itself. In this sense, Jack's journey is one of seemingly everlasting pain. Even in its final moments in which the redemptive power

of love and self-actualization in the form of turning away from nihilistic thoughts and suicidal ideations is shown to strongly contest against Aku's seemingly inescapable evil, the result is ultimately more tragedy. In the end, Jack is not beaten by Aku, nor betrayed by Ashi. Ultimately, Jack is *subject* to the indifferent albeit adamantine laws and power of time itself.

The Bittersweet Ladybug: Time, Trauma, and the Cost of the Journey in Season 5

At it most fundamental, "Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a chronic, often debilitating mental health disorder that may develop after a traumatic life event, such as military combat, natural disaster, sexual assault, or unexpected loss of a loved one" (Watkins et al. 2018: 1). In the extradiegetic world, PTSD is oftentimes associated with various types of socioeconomic and cultural impairments which range from difficulties at or finding work, social dysfunction, and various other health problems (Watkins et al. 2018: 1). In view of the four previous Seasons of the series, how, if at all, does Jack come to suffer PTSD? To answer that, we must have some sense of the diagnostic approaches and categories used to assess PTSD symptoms in extradiegetic patients. According to Watkins et al. (2018),

> in the initial formulation of PTSD, a traumatic stressor was defined as an event outside the range of usual human experience. However, with recognition that traumatic events are relatively frequent, this criterion was revised. DSM-IV and DSM-IV-TR required that intense fear, helplessness, or horror were present in the individual's response to the traumatic event, although it became evident that this was not universal, especially in military populations. The DSM-5 increased specification as to what qualifies as a traumatic event (Criterion A) and conceptualized traumatic events as exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violation, as directly experiencing traumatic events, learning of the traumatic events experienced by a close family member or close friend, or repeated exposure to aversive details of the traumatic events. DSM-5 removed the requirement that intense fear, helplessness, or horror were present in the individual's response to the traumatic event.
>
> (Watkins et al. 2018: 2)

From Jack's early boyhood, as the viewer sees, the Samurai is exposed to traumatic stressors wildly beyond the range of typical human experience. The emergence, violence, destruction, horror, and kaiju-like size of Aku's fiery, infernal rampage through Jack's father's kingdom are one of many

traumatic situations and experiences the character is exposed to for a prolonged period; a period that extends and covers his entire adulthood in the future which, though ontologically stayed in that he does not physically age, is subject to more than fifty years of recursive, seemingly unending violence, death, journeying, and frustration. While Jack is shown to be prepared to face the arduous task of trying to all but single-handedly vanquish the personification of pure evil from not only his time or any other, but the Earth itself more broadly, there are numerous moments where that training is not enough to prevent the samurai from succumbing to abject fear and horror. In particular, "The Aku Infection" is an episode that shows that aside from the fear and horror harbored in his memory, or the death and wanton destruction of innocents both directly and indirectly as a result of Aku's evil and/or attempts to resist it, *becoming* Aku is Jack's most searing fear. While this only happens once, it precipitates the emergence of lifelong personification of his trauma in specifically a *post*-traumatic way in the form of Mad Jack. Moreover, this ontological, physical, and psycho-emotional/spiritual violation is throughout the series more ostensibly coupled with myriad traumatic events that qualify as directly related to PTSD. Battling Aku across time, Jack is exposed to prolonged periods of threatened death, serious injury, traumatic events experienced by his closest family, his father and mother, the death of a close friend in the Scotsman's demise, and the circuitous recall of the moment of separation from not only his family and home, but his very *time* itself. Jack's personal response to all this trauma is, for the preponderance of the final Season, self-blame, doubt, *angoisse,* fatigue, and suicidal ideation.

My use of the phrase "prolonged exposure" above refers to Prolonged Exposure (PE) therapy which is based on emotional processing theory (Foa and Kozak, 1986), which suggests that traumatic events are not processed emotionally at the time of the event, and, moreover, that fear is represented in memory as a cognitive structure that includes representations of the feared stimuli, the fear responses, and the meaning associated with the stimuli and responses to the stimuli. Fear structures can represent realistic threats, which is normal. However, fear structures can become dysfunctional. According to Foa and Kozak (1986), fear structures may become problematic when the association between stimulus elements does not accurately reflect the real world, physiological and escape or avoidance responses are induced by innocuous stimuli, responses that are excessive and easily triggered interfere with adaptive behavior, and safe stimulus and response elements are incorrectly associated with threat or danger (Watkins et al. 2018: 2).

When transposed to Jack and his trauma, it is clear that Mad Jack is the result of dysfunctional fear structures. As explored in the previous Chapter 1, Jack's introduction into the future is traumatic and sudden.

There is literally no time or safety through or within which to process the phenomena. In this sense, he cannot process the traumatic event at the time of its occurrence as the direct result of the fact that inextricable from that event is the pressing and exigent need to protect himself and survive.

Taking a look at the entire series as a whole, amid all Jack's experiences, we should ask what the samurai's most pressing and indeed dysfunctional fear structures are. First and foremost is the Samurai's displacement in time and with it, the fear of the loss of his family through either the weariness of time itself or the evil of Aku which has *mastered* time itself. Second would certainly be Aku himself. Aku, in all of his literal and figurative mercurial malignity, represents all the ways in which Jack has been subject to keen experiences of loss and separation. It was Aku who destroyed his father's kingdom, forcing him to be raised as an immigrant in the diaspora of the *Samurai Jack* diegesis. It was Aku who forced his mother into exile and hiding. It was Aku who subjected his father and those of his subjects that survived the demon's initial onslaught to slavery. Aku's evil is a stain, a trace, a residue, index, and indeed an ideology that Jack experiences as omnipotent, both in the past of his present and in his seemingly unending future, precisely because it is supra-temporal. It is precisely because of this that Aku is able to take the most important thing to Jack from him in any and all times, namely, his *time* itself. Jack has no supernatural powers and the supernatural resources available to him are often offered at a steep cost and/or are fleeting in the nature of their efficacy (barring his magical sword, of course, whose only seemingly supernatural attribute is that it is unbreakable and can cut through anything). Third would have to be Jack's sense of guilt and shame he feels at having to (and, the recursive subject of his self-critique, failure) vanquish Aku nor save *every* being, community, town, city, enclave, ecosystem, or country from the tyrannical occupation and exploitation of his forces.

It is specifically on this third fear structure that Season 5 focuses in terms of Jack's PTSD. It is through the incessant and agonizing remonstrations of Mad Jack that Jack's fear structure becomes dysfunctional precisely because Mad Jack interrupts Jack's understanding of the real world, his role and future-history in it, and the panoply of his very real, very powerful heroic and selfless deeds therein. Mad Jack is a post-traumatic force of obfuscation, omission, and intensification. He causes Jack to forget how many people he has single-handedly saved, obscures the impact that his heroism has had (will have) on the future of the *Jack* diegesis as a whole, and intensifies feelings of shame associated with those whom he could not save. This is why in Season 5, Episode 5 (April 15, 2017), Jack's response to the stimuli of seemingly "dead" children precipitates such an easily triggered and excessive response, interfering with Jack's ability for adaptive behavior to the point of near suicide.

The Inner-voice and the Inner Critic: Mad Jack Contra Jack

In forcing Jack to review his past actions, albeit with an intensified focus on his so-called failures, is Mad Jack—as Jack's inner voice—demon or therapist? Is Jack's *innenwelt* in some way CPT? CPT refers to Cognitive Processing Therapy. It is a treatment that

> assumes that following a traumatic event, survivors attempt to make sense of what happened, often time leading to distorted cognitions regarding themselves, the world, and others. In an attempt to integrate the traumatic event with prior schemas, people often assimilate, accommodate, or over-accommodate. Assimilation is when incoming information is altered in order to confirm prior beliefs, which may result in self-blame for a traumatic event. An example of assimilation is "because I didn't fight harder, it is my fault I was assaulted." Accommodation is a result of altering beliefs enough in order to accommodate new learning (e.g., "I couldn't have prevented them from assaulting someone"). Over-accommodation is changing ones beliefs to prevent trauma from occurring in the future, which may result in beliefs about the world being dangerous or people being untrustworthy (e.g., "because this happened, I cannot trust anyone"). CPT allows for cognitive activation of the memory, while identifying maladaptive cognitions (assimilated and over- accommodated beliefs) that have derived from the traumatic event. The main aim of CPT is to shift beliefs towards accommodation. (Resick and Schnicke 1992; Watkins et al. 2018: 4)

FIGURE 5.8 *The Transtemporal Scourge of Aku's Evil*

FIGURE 5.9 *The Future Laid Waste*

In view of this description, what *is* Mad Jack, really? It would seem, based on the cursory list of traumas sustained and endured by Jack over a prolonged half century period of exposure, it could be that Mad Jack is a psycho-emotional attempt at the Samurai making sense of the strange and painful events associated with Aku and his life more broadly since he was a boy. Through Mad Jack, Jack draws himself toward distorted cognitions of himself, the world of the future, his place and role within and without it, and the value of his interventions in the lives of those he encounters and saves. It is also through Mad Jack that Jack assimilates, accommodates, and over-accommodates. While he resists Mad Jack's denigrations, in both Season 4 and, with the aid of Ashi, in Season 5 as well, Mad Jack constantly steers Jack toward the conclusion/belief that he did not do enough, fight hard enough to protect the downtrodden and innocent dead, nor vanquish Aku from the Earth once and for all. It is through his resistance to this idea that Jack accommodates his trauma; that is, Jack is, as a seasoned warrior, traveler, and victim-witness of Aku's omnipotent and transtemporal tyranny, aware that he, as one lone warrior, would be unable to save *everyone* he encounters and destroy Aku.

However, with the re-experiencing of certain stimuli, accommodation turns to over-accommodation in Jack which for him is not externalized as it is in the quoted example above, but *internalized* and keenly self-directed. It is not that Jack distrusts others, seeing and understanding that the behavior of most people he encounters, malicious or kindly, is in some way affected by Aku's evil. Instead, Jack distrusts himself as an able warrior and time-traveler who has the will, skill, and stamina to see Aku vanquished and him returned to his own time. For Jack, preventing further trauma from

occurring in the future takes a dark and self-capitulating bent in that he is lead, both figuratively and literally, by Mad Jack and The Omen (voiced by Aaron LaPlante) both, to preclude traumatic re-occurrence by killing himself and therefore his potential experience of *any* and *all* futures, good or ill. In this way, Mad Jack can be said to be, among other things, a personification of CPT in the fact that he consistently activates Jack's deepest, darkest, most painful, desirous, and shameful memories. Simultaneously, through his intensification of Jack's maladaptive cognitions derived from the traumatic events of his life, he also indirectly helps identify them. This perhaps most difficult and "dark" aspect of Genndy's characterization of Jack in Season 5 is done so in a way that certainly relies on tropes of the inner shadow and temptation to one's tragic fall, which are, in terms of mythic structures, familiar within Campbell's rubric. However, the weight and intensity with which Genndy imbues the series' exploration of the psychological and emotional cost of Jack's journey, in terms of pain, memory, and time, also with a depth of sincerity, are precisely the reason said exploration has been so universally resonant with viewers and critics alike.

Aside from the psycho-emotional resonances of Aku's boredom and Jack's suicidal ideation, Ashi's trauma is also clearly expressed as a primary subject of the Season from the very first episode—Season 5, Episode 1 (aired March 11, 2017). The immediate example of the trauma of her rearing comes to the fore. The only relationships of a pedagogical, parental, or sisterly nature available to the young Ashi are predicated on discipline, punishment, brainwashing, and violence. The initial profile of the character Genndy provides affirms these attributes through the punitive voice of her mother-traumatizer The High Priestess:

> **High Priestess**: [catches Ashi secreting a curious look beyond the coven's temple doors] Bask in the glory of what our master has created. Admire its beauty, but know that the samurai is out there leaving a wake of devastation wherever he goes. That's why, my sweet Ashi, the Daughters of Aku must stay focussed. Never relent, always attack [throws Ashi towards a giant lieutenant priestess] Teach this one a lesson [Ashi is severely beaten]
>
> (Tartakovsky 2017).

Later, the High Priestess chides and psycho-emotionally abuses Ashi further:

> **High Priestess**: Are you weak? Are you weak!? ARE YOU WEAK!? (Young Ashi gets up and continues) Good. The fire of Aku stirs inside all of you.
>
> (Tartakovsky 2017)

The remit of comfort, understanding, patience, and acceptance is absolutely non-existent for Ashi or her fellow sister-slaves:

> **High Priestess**: Any mistake is certain death, and death is their failure. (Tartakovsky 2017)

Lastly, any measure of self identity, worth, and/or individualism is, like the black essence of Aku, completely overridden, smothered, and smeared by the singularity of submissive servitude to the goals educed by Aku *through* the hardline fanaticism of the coven, which has infected each child and later assassin of the DOA with the psycho-physical means to all but totally control each and all of them:

> **High Priestess**: [After her daughters have completed their training] Your training is complete. Go! Kill! You are seven, but now you wear the face of one. One purpose for which you were born: to kill the Samurai! (Tartakovsky 2017)

While Jack deals with his own psycho-emotional stresses, it is through Ashi that Genndy explores another aspect of PTSD related to CBT. CBT refers to cognitive behavioral therapy for PTSD. According to researchers like Ehlers and Clark (2000), trauma-focused CBT holds that

> individuals with PTSD hold excessively negative appraisals of the trauma and that their autobiographical memory of the trauma is characterized by

FIGURE 5.10 *The Relentlessness of Ashi's Brainwashing*

FIGURE 5.11 *Jack's Relentlessness in Trying to Reach Ashi*

> poor contextualization, strong associative memory and strong perceptual priming, which leads to involuntary reexperiencing of the trauma. Ehlers and Clark suggest that individuals with PTSD engage in problematic behavioural and cognitive strategies that prevent them from changing negative appraisals and trauma memories.
>
> (Ehlers and Clark 2000; Watkins et al. 2018: 5)

FIGURE 5.12 *The Redemption of Ashi*

FIGURE 5.13 *Love as Healing*

In view of this description, in conjunction with the cursory outline of some of the sources and manifestations of Ashi's trauma, we should also ask: what is Jack to Ashi, really? It is here that Jack acts as something of a therapist for Ashi. It is clear from Genndy's characterization of the latter that her cultish upbringing has induced severe and deep brainwashing. Her understanding of the nature of her "mother" and "sisters," let alone her "father" and their combined *raison d'etre* as the destruction of the "evil samurai" are all warped and predicated on exploitative control of her body, skills, and will. In this way, Jack is the symbol of Ashi's PTSD that does not properly belong to it. As a result, the substitution that takes place causes Ashi to have excessively negative appraisals of the "source" of her trauma, namely Jack. In pursuing him, she loses her sisters, the abusive "protectiveness" of her coven, the brutalizing "love" of her mother, and initially worst for her, the *belief* founding her entire existence that Jack is evil and must be destroyed.

Her upbringing primes her for this cognitive disjunction, this false and/or double consciousness precisely because it did not prepare her to speak, interact, come to know, let alone fall in love with the very symbol-source of her trauma and, in doing so, challenge her entire world-view; her self understanding, her negative appraisals of Jack, her autobiographical memory of her childhood and training *as* traumatic within the new-found

context of her updated and more complete understanding and experience of Jack, and, through love, the disruption of her associative memory of Jack as the Ur-villain of her life. In changing her perspective toward Jack, she changes her understanding of herself and eliminates the violent and explosively remonstrative re-experiencing of her chief recursive trauma namely, her inability to kill Jack. In this way, it is through her prolonged exposure to Jack, the would-be source of her trauma, over the course of their shared journey in Season 5 that Ashi reviews, restructures, and rewrites, so to speak, the traumatic narrative of her life (Ehlers et al. 2005; Kubany et al. 2004; Marks et al. 1998). In the last instance, the latently CBT predicates of their relationship allow Ashi to reappraise her beliefs about herself, her trauma, and the world more broadly, in her time and Jack's (Ehlers et al. 2005; Kubany et al. 2004; Marks et al. 1998).

Loss, Guilt, and PTSD in the Return:
Pursued by the remaining six of the seven DOA in Season 5, Episode 3 (aired March 25, 2017), Jack floats down river, exhausted, battle-worn, and beaten (Tartakovsky 2017). He takes shelter in a cave while the DOA seek him out. It is in this episode where his grief, trauma, doubt, hatred, and nihilistic abdication of his mantle as warrior, legend, and hero are so clearly expressed as internal(ized) phenomena. In the cave (also a crucial stage of Campbell's hero's journey in which the protagonist confronts their inner fear, trauma, and their respective and conglomerate holds on and over them), Genndy shows Jack berate himself in an inner monologue. In both the literal cave and the figurative cave of the inner mind, soul, spirit, or *innenwelt*, a cruel, contemptuous, and condescending—who masks his sadism as pragmatism and egoistic self-interest—version of Jack who, unlike the external Jack in

FIGURE 5.14 *The Cruelty of Self to Self*

FIGURE 5.15 *Solitude and Loneliness*

the real world of the future, is clean, clad in Jack's original gi, his hair and face neatly barbered, condemns and criticizes his haggard unkempt and hopeless self. Though an aesthetic version of Jack in his prime (despite the fact that he does not age, here "prime" is meant in the sense of still being in possession of a fiery spit of hope), the manner in which Genndy renders Mad Jack's eyes, eyebrows, and mouth visually implies a latently sinister, sharp aspect, a malignity that may not be all the way evil, but it is certainly not far from merciless.

This version of Jack, this *innen*-Jack, is an emblematic and perhaps over-emphasized visualization of Jack's trauma in all its myriad forms. The symbolic value of *innen*-Jack inheres in the specular aspect shared by it and the real Jack. Because they mirror one another, the Jack who strove for over fifty years to return to his home time and vanquish the evil of Aku and thereby save the future from tyranny and decay is the same Jack, pursuing said course, who necessarily instantiates and precipitates the emergence of his own trauma in the form of *innen*-Jack. For *innen*-Jack, the goal is to push the real Jack to and beyond a point of suicidal ideation through an intensification of doubt and guilt he may feel. To embrace nihilistic self-capitulation as the only answer to his loneliness, hopelessness, immortality, the seemingly unending evil of Aku, and the adamant indifference of time itself. In this episode, *innen*-Jack pursues the concept and feeling of guilt most intensely, arguing with the real Jack concerning whether or not he has the fortitude, determination, and/or will to kill the rest of the DOA knowing

FIGURE 5.16 *The Inevitability of Death and Violence*

(a) that they're human and (b) aside from one of their sisters, Jack has never killed a human being before in his fifty-plus years of combat and violence (Metcalf 2017).

Within the story-world of Jack, Season 5 marks Genndy's most concerted effort in terms of pursuing themes across the entire Season in an overarching fashion. This particular episode and, indeed much of the Season, is concerned with mirroring, reflections, and specular relationships *in toto*. The theme of the wounded beast contra the injured warrior whose will to fight and potentially kill in spite of being benighted by thoughts of suicide is literalized in the episode in the specular relationship between Jack and the injured wolf that makes its way to his cave. As both man and wolf recuperate from their injuries, Jack and the wolf find a mutuality of trauma and recovery, of uneasiness and fatigue. However, the theme of mirroring is not limited to time or space in this Episode. As Jack rests, heals, and grapples with the possibility (inevitability) of having to kill the remaining DOA, he remembers an incident in his youth in which he and his family were attacked by assassins. Jack is drawn to this memory by virtue of the fact that his father then was faced with the same choice: to kill or not to kill. Genndy shows that it was a choice that he externalized to his enemies, offering *them* the choice: leave, or "face your destiny" (Tartakovsky 2017). Their choice results in their death. The reason Jack meditates on this particular memory is as a means of examining what to do when faced with the same dilemma in his inevitable confrontation with the remaining, unrelenting and vengeful, DOA. When they eventually do corner him, Jack offers them the same choice his father offered the pursuant assassins in his youth. History repeats itself as the remaining DOA choose to attack, resulting in Jack killing each of the remaining Daughters one by one, luring them over a precarious branch

overhanging an abyss. Before Jack is able to return to solid ground, the branch snaps, plunging he himself into the abyss after his fallen enemies (Tartakovsky 2017).

In Season 5, Episode 3 (aired March 25, 2017), Genndy shows the internal conflict to emerge at the most inopportune times, and gesture to multiple people in Jack's life who represent various aspects of not only of his complex self, but also his mission more broadly—his father the Emperor, and emblem of the inaccessible and fading past, as a last vestige of *bushido*, honor, duty, reserve, and courage; Inner Jack as a manifestation and mirror of the present, a symbol of torment, guilt, and hopelessness; Ashi, an inverse mirror of Jack's own state of disequilibrium and torment, and symbol of the potential for future redemption. The triquetra of past, present, and future represented by these characters in this episode also latently gestures to causality, choice, and consequence. Consider the advice given to him by the ghost-recollection of the Emperor when faced with the choice between violence and mercy:

> EMPEROR: The decisions you make and the actions that follow are a reflection of who you are. You cannot hide from yourself.
>
> (Tartakovsky 2017)

Central to this particular statement is the nature of the relationship between choice and the accounting thereof within one's self. The fact that Jack literally and figuratively cannot escape himself means that he has no choice but to analyze every single choice, good, bad, or middling, he has ever made, try and fathom the consequences of each instance thereof, and somehow draw some semblance of hope and psycho-emotional rearmament from them before the inevitable, incessant pressing of *angoisse* represented by Inner/Mad Jack destroys him:

> [Jack, freezing and sweating in the cold night, following his initial skirmish with the DOA]
>
> **Inner Jack**: Look at you.
>
> [Jack sees his blue self with a monstrous-looking face and pointed teeth; he points at Jack's face]
>
> **Inner Jack**: You survived worse. [Jack groans] This isn't about your pathetic little cut. It's about that girl you killed! [Jack keeps groaning] We've never killed a human before, have we? Sure, mountains of robot corpses. But this? This was the first human being. Real flesh and blood. [zips to the hole] What happens when the others find you? You'll have to kill them, too. Can you? [zips back to Jack] Will you be able to when the time comes? Maybe they will kill you … Or is that what you want?
>
> **Jack**: [groans] No ….

The episode also effectively registers the sincere difficulty of walking a righteous path in that one's choice to try and tread such a path is but *one* choice jostling, interacting, enervated, and impeded by a sea of others made by one's self, and those by other actants with wills just as free/not free. For Jack, at this point in the Season, there is still a shred of hope that negotiation, and stern reason can, in the long term, absolve him of any more weight of guilt. Despite the sheer, and indeed palpable, existential *weight* of the scenario Genndy chooses to open the Season with, he leavens the plot with insertions of humorously incongruent interactions between Jack and the DOA:

> [the DOA suddenly hear Jack's voice in the snowy forest]
> **Jack:** You have chosen this path. Life works in strange and mysterious ways. Your choices have clearly led you here, as have mine. I will give you a new choice: Leave here now and live … or stay and face your destiny.
> **Unnamed Daughter:** Our destiny is your death!
> **Jack:** So … I guess you're staying. Perhaps I was unclear.
> **Unnamed Daughter:** Enough words! Show yourself, Samurai, so you can die!
> **Jack:** Very well. The decisions you make and the actions that follow are a reflection—
> **Unnamed Daughter:** Shut up!
> **Jack:** … Of who you truly are.
>
> (Tartakovsky 2017)

While Jack acquits himself skillfully enough to survive the encounter and significantly reduce the threat of the DOA as a collective force, Jack still has to experience, witness, and *accept* the seemingly hopeless situation of something beyond choice, namely, the indoctrination of Ashi which Jack experiences like an impenetrable wall of a manic-obsessive will to violence that is simultaneously immune, deaf, and insensitive in all ways to all entreaty, supplications, or demands save those born or predicated on violence:

> [Jack is holding Ashi on her chain to a white abyss]
> **Ashi:** You worthless scum! I will kill you! You can never escape from Aku! You will die! You will die a horrible death! And Aku will sing, for he is free of the parasite that you are! Die, Samurai! DIE, SAMURAI!! DIE, DIE, DIE!! DIE, SCUM!! YOU WILL DIIIIE!!!
>
> (Tartakovsky 2017)

When considering the relationships between time and trauma, it is no surprise that the term "post" in post-traumatic stress disorder latently gestures to temporality. It may seem a trite thing to point out; however, it draws attention to the fact that Genndy's narrative treatment of the relationship

between time and trauma is, in the last instance, as much a temporal as it is a psychoanalytic one. While Jack indeed engages in the types of high action-adventure and comedy expected of a contemporary serial cartoon, he also engages in a very meaningful concept: to travel in time is to re-experience/preempt one's trauma. And Genndy does this in an extremely sincere manner. The visual language and thematic content of Jack's internal struggle would suggest that the intrusive and recurrent hallucinations the samurai suffers are the direct result of trauma and therefore symptomatic of incisive PTSD, and according to Zlomuzica et al. (2018), there is an interesting link between PTSD and time (Zlomuzica et al. 2018: 42–3).

PTSD is, in clinical terms, characterized by impairments in mnestic functions (those related to memory), specifically episodic memory. PTSD may effectively disrupt various aspects and operations concerned with episodic memory functioning. The results of Zlomuzica et al.'s trial, which sought to examine PTSD in relation to mental time-travel using a newly developed virtual reality episodic memory test (VR-EMT), a test for mental time travel, episodic future thinking, and prospective memory (M3xT), offer a particularly interesting way to think of Jack, time-travel, trauma, and PTSD. The researchers found that PTSD patients demonstrated impairments in episodic memory function and experienced mental time-travel, showing difficulties in using information from episodic memory to solve problems set by researchers in the present, but also in planning future behavior (Zlomuzica et al. 2018: 46). In this sense, the PTSD sufferer's relationship with time mirrors Jack in its purgatorial nature. Seemingly inescapably trapped by the past and unable to abstractly fathom the future, the PTSD sufferer exists in an unbroken Now, one marked by loss of time, visions in some instances, and revisitations of trauma.

But why is episodic memory so important? According to Zlomuzica et al., "the episodic memory system allows us to encode specific autobiographical information of events that we have experienced in terms of 'what happened,' 'where it happened,' and 'when it happened' Episodic memories also contain perceptions, thoughts, emotions, and feelings we had during that experience" (Dere et al. 2010; Pause et al. 2013; Zlomuzica et al. 2014). This information can lead to intrusions and flashbacks when related to PTSD which, according to researchers, could perhaps be a result of unsuppressed activation of a pathological episodic memory which, in turn, produces the trauma experience (Brewin 2014; Isaac et al. 2006; Moradi et al. 2008). It is not difficult to see why this may be the case. Emotionally relevant episodic memories, ones concerning guilt, violence, and loss for example, all relate to trauma-related content. These memories are highly vivid, "spontaneously" triggered or directly activated by trauma-related stimuli as a result of retrieval-cue generalization. This is what leads to a patient's experience of re-living the specific traumatic episode (Brewin 2015; Tulving 2001, 2002).

The link between episodic memory and time refers to an individual's ability to perform what is known as mental time travel (MTT). Inherent to MTT is an individual's ability to conduct episodic future thinking, as well as to establish prospective memories. (Blix and Brennen, 2011; Breeden et al. 2016; Brown et al. 2014; Suddendorf 2013; Suddendorf and Corballis 1997). According to Zlomuzicaa et al.,

> MTT is defined as the ability to recollect past events from episodic memory (MTT into the past) and to anticipate or imagine events in the future (MTT into the future). From a biological perspective, MTT seems to have evolved to serve a) the optimization of decision-making processes, b) efficient problem solving, c) the preparation for future needs, and d) the formation of intentions to perform actions at a specific time point in the future (Breeden et al. 2016). It is evident that patients with impaired MTT function would encounter problems in their social and professional functioning. Indeed, there is evidence that PTSD patients show difficulties in planning and structuring everyday activities and exhibit compromised social problem-solving abilities. However, it is unclear whether these difficulties can be attributed to impairments in MTT.
>
> (Zlomuzica et al. 2018: 43)

This is why not only the retraumatizing visions Jack experiences of those who died, those whom he killed, those he lost, and those, like The Omen, seeking to claim his soul, regardless of which time they belong to, are so

FIGURE 5.17 *The Omen*

important. When the insights of the above quotations are transposed to Jack's path and condition in Season 5, the preponderance of his ennui can said to be the result of his inability to continue on his journey, to perform his everyday activities which, for the past fifty years have redounded to two ideas; (1) get back to the past and (2) defeat Aku. In this sense, the functioning of his entire identity, purpose, and their related problems and their solving—as a warrior, son, lover, hero, and temporal-immigrant—cease in the self-capitulatory desire-suggestion of ceasing to live altogether, let alone striving for a way back to the past. With no way to re-access a past he can remember, one imbued with the bittersweet (and indeed perhaps blatantly nostalgic) combination of familial love and tyrannical destruction, and no desire to fathom a future worth living in that is somehow outside the sway of Aku's evil, Jack's internal condition is one of abjection and hopelessness for half the final Season. This is ultimately because neither memory nor projection, regardless of how spontaneous or controlled, detailed or vague, is shown to be able to furnish Jack with a *reason* to keep treading the same circuitous path he has for over a half century in a time not his own.

Seeing Oneself: Schizophrenia and Mad Jack

The internal struggle Jack endures with, for, and against himself in the form of Mad Jack, can be described as PTSD-induced schizophrenia. The fact that Jack is the only one who is able to see or hear his self critical shadow suggests that the latter and in fact the conditions of his (re)emergence are hallucinatory in nature. According to contemporary clinical research into the relationship between hallucinations and schizophrenia, it remains unclear as to why different rates of prevalence, extent, and modality or type occur in different patients. Of particular difficulty for clinicians and researchers is determining models of hallucinations in schizophrenia that account for why hallucinations in different sensory modalities—that is, auditory, visual, olfactory, and tactile—occur with varying prevalence.

Research into auditory modalities suggests that it is the most common form of schizophrenic experience (APA 2013: *300*), which have been found to consistently exceed the prevalence of visual hallucinations (Bowman and Raymond 1931; Jablensky 1997; Thomas et al. 2007; WHO 1975). Visual hallucinations, however, have been found to occur at a higher rate of prevalence than either tactile or olfactory modalities (Thomas et al. 2007). It would seem, then, that most research concludes that there is a type of "hierarchy of hallucinations" (Bulletin 2013; DSM-5; Jablensky 1997; McCarthy et al. 2017: 4; Thomas et al. 2007; Waters et al. 2012; World Health Organization 1975).

When applied to Genndy's treatment of Jack's hallucinations in Season 5, diagnosing a suicidal time-traveler based on the above hierarchy of

FIGURE 5.18 *The Monstrosity of the Inner Demon*

FIGURE 5.19 *Jack and an Unending Anguish*

hallucinations is made slightly easier. Referring to the chronic schizophrenia-spectrum of disorders, the fifth Season can be read as Genndy documenting the prevalence and co-occurrence of hallucinations across *specifically* the auditory and visual modalities, in terms of both lifetime and point prevalence

(McCarthy et al. 2017: 154). Even the study carried out by McCarthy et al. (2017) is inherently temporal in nature. Its focus on both lifetime occurrences and point prevalence of hallucinations is interesting when transposed to the life of Jack as shown over five Seasons. In the series' original run, it would seem that examples of Jack's audiovisual hallucinations, concerning his parents in particular, occur in *every* Season of the series' original run. It is a recursive narrative and aesthetic feature of Jack's entire story arc that spills into the fifth and final Season. It is also clear that across the series' five Seasons, the nature of Jack's hallucinations undergoes a process of intensification as opposed to abatement. While in Season 4, the ontological and existential borders between his conscious and unconscious selves, the latter of which attempts to berate, undermine, and depress the latter, the conflict between the two erupts physically only once. In Season 5, however, the consternation Jack experiences as a result of the remonstrations and criticisms of his shadow self is all but constant. Compounded by the fact that Jack does not age, nor has for the fifty year period between Seasons 1 to 4 and Season 5, this hallucinatory conflict has, for all intents and purposes, transpired over a lifetime.

According to McCarthy et al.'s study, there are some interesting thematic overlaps between Jack's hallucinations and those recorded of schizophrenic patients. With the goal of assessing and documenting the prevalence of co-occurrence of hallucinations across auditory, visual, olfactory, and tactile modalities in terms of both lifetime and point prevalence, the researchers looked at large samples from Ireland and Australia. Their Ireland findings are most interesting and relevant to Jack in Season 5. Of the 693 people with schizophrenia-spectrum diagnoses, the researchers found that 69.3 percent had hallucinated through at least one of the aforesaid modalities at some point in their lifetimes. While many of the hallucinations in this sample were of a religious nature, highlighting perhaps the effect of culture on hallucinatory content (Larøi et al. 2014), according to McCarthy et al.,

> many hallucinations had religious themes. Patients' auditory hallucinations included hearing devils marching from hell over stones coming to get them, a choir of demonic voices, the Devil telling them to burn down the house and go to the pub, and voices saying "the next time you see him he'll be half dead", "let her have her day in court", "get up whore", "keep going, keep going man". Visual hallucinations included seeing people change into vampires, hell, flames, rats, people's eyes gone black, wisps of smoke, ugly faces, Christ's face, the Virgin Mary, and visions of Calvary. Tactile hallucinations included sensations in the mouth, energies around their body, being poked gently, and a multimodal experience of feeling ash in the throat whilst seeing hell. Olfactory hallucinations included smelling a brewery, burning rubber, sewage, roses, perfume, and themselves burning. (McCarthy 2017: 10–11)

The *tone* of Mad Jack's remonstrations is comparable as the shadow version of Jack, along with the spectral appearances of The Omen, accord with schizophrenic hallucinations of marching devils over brimstone come to guide, capture, or retrieve the way-worn samurai. More specifically, Mad Jack's criticisms and Id-ish absolutism in terms of desire and pain similarly project the paradoxes noted above in so far as what the Devil told schizophrenics in their hallucinations. And that paradox can be described as a type of belittling encouragement, a grim optimism, and/or a vengeful psychological and emotional rearmament, one that Mad Jack seemingly offers/subjects Jack to as well.

The relationship between schizophrenic hallucinations and trauma, especially in a situation/case like Jack's, is key in framing a critical analysis of both their content and provenance. While clinical research suggests that early trauma is associated with hallucinations of both auditory and visual modalities (Bentall et al. 2012; Solesvik et al. 2016), specifically intrusive visual experiences, like the type Jack must endure from both The Omen and Mad Jack, are more commonly associated with re-experiencing symptoms of PTSD (McCarthy-Jones and Longden 2015). According to McCarthy et al., "this could lead individuals with visual hallucinations to be more likely to be diagnosed with PTSD than schizophrenia, leaving an excess of

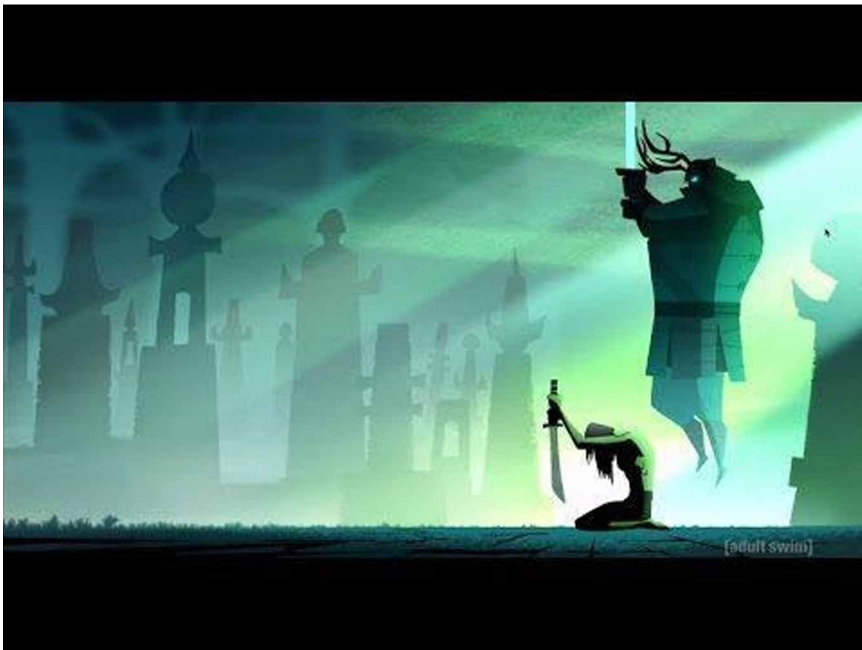

FIGURE 5.20 *Seeking Release through Seppuku*

auditory over visual hallucinations in people diagnosed with schizophrenia" (McCarthy et al. 2017: 17).

The key term here with regard to Jack is "re-experiencing." It is in Season 5, Episode 5 (aired April 15, 2017), the midway and volta of the season, in which Jack sincerely acquiesces to his suicidal impulses that the character's most traumatic re-experiencing occurs. It is the trigger of seeing corrupted, weaponized innocence in the form of mind-controlled killer children, let alone ones he has to fatally defend himself against, that pushes Jack closer to the abyssal plane of suicide. It is a short leap from a lack of desire in despair to a desire to death for Jack in seeing these same innocent children collapse as if dead, directly or indirectly, by his hand.

Jack's Innenwet as VR-EMT: Jack vs. Mad Jack

The specific test developed by researchers to determine the level of utilization of episodic memories in problem solving for PTSD patients, in the present and future, employed a VR environment to generate integrated memory "what happened, where, and when" (Binder et al. 2015; Kinugawa et al. 2013; Dere et al. 2010; Zlomuzica et al. 2018). This virtual environment, wherein which the ability to accurately draw from the past, let alone use it in current and future tasks and problem solving, resembles a supra-temporal space, a type of virtual laboratory not dissimilar to Dexter's discussed in Chapter 1, designed and deployed to counteract feelings of stagnation and entrapment in time. Jack's *innenwelt* functions in this way. In his interior world, the struggles of the past intervene and indeed interfere with his ability to continue prosecuting his duties, functions, and goals as a journeyman samurai, legendary folk hero, potential redeemer of the future, and time-traveler to the past. So impaired is his relationship with time, and so intensified are his episodes of re-experiencing trauma triggered by Mad Jack, that Jack's PTSD impels him toward suicide. The future, which is his past, is internally, that is virtually, disrupted by his trauma and the PTSD its causes (Zlomuzica et al. 2018: 43). It is not specifically that Jack cannot recall the events of his past future and future past. It is the specifically abusive nature of their recollection, vectored through Mad Jack, that has a disruptive force on the samurai's mnestic functions. For the VR-EMT test,

> 6 questions contained information about a person, an animal or a specific item (WHAT component, e.g. a butterfly) and the time point (WHEN component, e.g. Monday) related to these specific items. The participants had to indicate the missing component: in this case provide the WHERE information, e.g. the room number. For example: "Monday, you encountered a butterfly. In which room did you notice the butterfly?").

> While in the present example the WHERE information was the missing component, the 2 other question categories asked participants to provide the WHAT (six questions) or WHEN (six questions) information as the missing component. (Zlomuzica et al. 2018: 45)
>
> In Jack's case, WHERE and WHEN are, for the most part, not the problem. WHAT, however, is. It is specifically in the arena of WHAT that Mad Jack operates and sows the seeds of doubt, omission, and incompletion in Jack's recall, precipitating a warped sense of self in terms of worth and identity, personal history, as well as one's goals and the feasibility of their attainment.

Mad Jack makes Jack anxiously ask himself what he did or did not do to end up in the position he is in, who he helped, how well, how poorly, how fiercely, if enough at all. Mad Jack makes Jack doubt what and who he is, the content of his character, his altruism, courage, effort, and Will. In this way, Mad Jack's focus on omission is served by highlighting Jack's so-called failures as a hero of the people, a warrior, prince, a son, and a lover. As a direct result, without the timely intervention of Ashi *and* the testimonials of *all* the countless downtrodden who would have either continued to suffer or been destroyed outright by Aku's tyranny he saved from said fate in Season 5, Episodes 6 and 10 (aired April 22 and May 20, 2017, respectively), Jack has

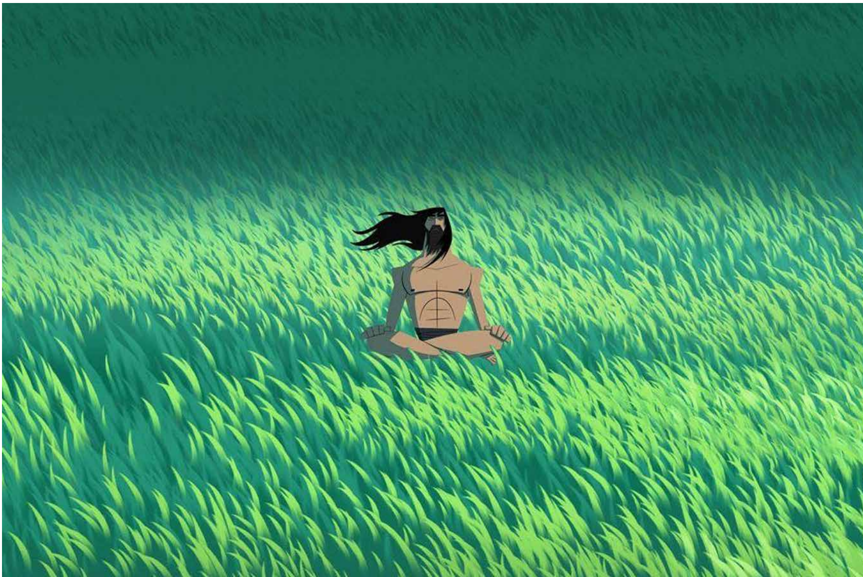

FIGURE 5.21 *Jack and Search of Solace and Redemption in Any and All Times*

a scant, jagged, and two-dimensional (WHEN and WHERE) understanding of his self and the history of that self.

Here, the omitted components *within* Jack are the most important in so far as tethering him to the world *without*, a world full of *reminders* which stand as surety against his annihilation under the weight of the self-critical interruptions to his mnestic functions in his episodic memory, but also his ability to solve his current (future) problems, as well as prepare for a future need (related to his past) (Atance and O'Neill 2001; Breeden et al. 2016; Suddendorf 2013). If both autobiographical memories and episodic future thinking in PTSD patients lack episodic specificity (Brown et al. 2014), then through Jack, Genndy latently suggests that specificity is key and that to forget is to die. To remember and be remembered is to be redeemed (Zlomuzica et al. 2018: 46).

* * *

Conclusion

In attempting to develop the idea that Genndy's revolutionary visual storytelling is bound to the paradoxical pure impurity of sincerity, this analysis has explored three overarching concepts: (**1**) the influence of a mixture of personal and biographical details on, first, Genndy as an individual and as an artist, as well as the projects he has chosen to (co)author. Second, on thematic, conceptual, and aesthetic leitmotifs recurring throughout his work; (**2**) the influence of the mixture of artistic and production roles Genndy has performed throughout his career on his narrative and aesthetic sensibility as a visual storyteller; (**3**) the influence of the mixture of audio-visual techniques, references to other visual storytelling tropes, and the multi-(sub)genre appeal of Genndy's visual storytelling. In so doing, this text has attempted to provoke in the reader discussions and considerations about mixture and artistic and cultural confluence that, in turn, produce animated art—whose side-splitting humor, surprising and heartfelt depth, tragedy, joy, and triumph, in whose narrative and aesthetic brio—always *feels* sincere to a diverse and faithful audience.

As a seemingly timeless pillar-producer and keystone-creator, it is somewhat strange to think that Genndy has been an active artist in the medium of television animation for over a quarter of a century. In that time, in which the auteur seems to have been, figuratively (no pun, etc.) in constant motion, what is perhaps most remarkable about both the man and his career is that neither seems to be dulled with a debilitating sense of exhaustion. Genndy's output, in current Emmy award-winning projects

such as Adult Swim's *Primal* (2019–present) for example, is still crackling with narrative depth, maturity, and subtlety as much as they are with a strong sense of surprisingly fresh aesthetic experimentalism that manifests itself in all facets of his work—from color, line, shape, figures, design, backgrounds, sound, and, as is his signature, silence. An established industry veteran, one whose personhood, physical voice, appearance, and words are for most either completely unknown or separate from his work or for others more familiar, so thoroughly sublimated in it, one of the main goals of this analysis has been to not only draw together auteur and artworks, but bring the man and his experiences to the fore of scholastic attention in a way that academic analyses of his work have not done heretofore. In taking these two broad analytical areas—artist and artworks—together as opposed to mutually suspended or sequestered from it, this text has sought to offer close readings of Genndy's four best-known television works, *Dexter's Laboratory*, *Samurai Jack* (original four-Season run), *Star Wars: Clone Wars*, and *Samurai Jack: The Return* (Season 5). In so doing, it has attempted to demonstrate various insights concerning the relationship between Genndy and his work, particularly in relation to his experiences as an immigrant; a topic I framed through the subject position of the "Third Culture Kid." The intention here was to illustrate how this subject position and the psycho-emotional experiences accrued under its aegis manifest in Genndy's oeuvre and influence it, more broadly.

Like so many of Genndy's original creations, this text has also tried to show that so much of what Genndy has been able to achieve in his various capacities and roles rests heavily on the fact that he is an immigrant. This extends to the successes, skills, charm, humor, and charisma of his original heroes and villains, from Dexter through to Aku. In this regard, this text has attempted to prove Mariani right, namely, that it is not only *Samurai Jack* but his entire corpus that is imbued with a sense of narrative and aesthetic multiplicity in terms of influence, style, genre, technique, or audience. Moreover, the ability to combine these into a type of contemporary animation that while familiar in appearance, still *feels sincerely* new in each iteration of Genndy's oeuvre, is an overall feature thereof, a through-line, a denominator grounding it but also at the same time elevating it far beyond the oftentimes subtextually pejorative or reductive expectations of the medium it emerges from as well. Like Jack, Genndy has managed to not only establish himself in a new world, country, and industry he helped shape all but single-handedly, he has also made entire new worlds through his work that draw, literally and figuratively, from his own experiences, various epochs, and diverse narrative and aesthetic traditions from all over the world. A truly global, cosmopolitan auteur, Genndy has clearly learned and absorbed as much as he has provided content to be learned from and absorbed in turn.

In view of this, this text has also attempted to show how the deep sense of aesthetic, narrative, genre, and stylistic concatenation that not only impels but is simultaneously produced by his work bears a strange, somewhat paradoxical relationship to the idea of sincerity. Through mercurial hybridity of story elements and the visual apparatuses, techniques, tropes, and ticks used to depict them, Genndy has not in any sense diluted the sincerity of either his own ethos and approach to his work in the past quarter century, nor the affectivity of his entire professional output itself. In other words, this text has tried to demonstrate that when it comes to questions of sincerity in animation, play, homage, re-interpretation, and admixture in the latter are not counterfactual to the conveyance of the former. It is my sincere belief that in view of Genndy's insuperable drive, seemingly inexhaustible creativity, professional discipline, personal resolve, collaborative efficacy, and cross-media adaptability, he will continue influencing, shaping, and reshaping the heart, eye, and mind—in the forms of line, color, and sound—of contemporary Western animation for years to come. Through his efforts, what the medium of specifically 2D animation, on television or cinema screens, can say *without* saying, can narratively *show*, in short what is still possible for the medium and both its artists to create and its consumers to discover, will continue to grow, play, and become in the most sincere way.

* * *

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