

the Founders are unable to solve ('Winning was easy, young man / governing is harder'); Moana, on the other hand, is able to inspire Maui to be a genuinely admirable hero, freed from the egoism and pathetic neediness that previously tainted his deeds. At its conclusion, which sees the frontier re-opened and Moana's race of voyagers restored to its former greatness – weirdly, and despite the de-centring of whiteness and the surface-level focus on Polynesian myth – *Moana* is thus unexpectedly able to sustain a vision of renewed American greatness that *Hamilton* could not.



Mr. Robot: Season 1 (US 2015). Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2015.
Region 1. 1.78:1 anamorphic widescreen, US\$19.99.

Mr. Robot: Season 2 (US 2016). Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2016.
Region 1. 1.78:1 anamorphic widescreen, US\$19.99.

Matthew Flisfeder

One of the principal difficulties of the contemporary Left is its inability to represent the highly abstract world of global finance capital in the matrices of new media and algorithmic logic. If the global financial crisis of 2007–8 at least brought popular attention to *symptoms* of neoliberal banking deregulations, then the Occupy Wall Street movement helped to create a new language with which the people could locate themselves in the class struggle, i.e. the language of the 'one percent versus the ninety-nine percent'. Nevertheless, the complexities and abstractions of complicated information systems that now characterise the global economy – the kind of fusion of information technology and capitalism that Franco 'Bifo' Berardi refers to as 'semicapitalism' – present tremendous difficulties for the majority to subjectivise the ebbs and flows of wealth circulation, accumulation and privatisation. Sam Esmail's television series *Mr. Robot* (US 2015–) was born of this context, and the show at the very least attempts to provide a cognitive mapping of sorts for the semicapitalism that now exists. Much to its credit, the series provides a provocative translation of these complexities, one that creates a relatable and comprehensible narrative – at least, minimally, in the pilot episode. However, while the show may be considered a *conceptual* success, it also remains a dramatic failure.

The series begins with a simple interpellative hail: 'hello, friend'. Protagonist and narrator Elliot Anderson (Rami Malek) addresses the viewer directly, claiming his own story as one that speaks to the likeminded sympathiser

of anti-corporate dissension. From the outset, the series places the viewer in the subjective position of the postmodern anarcho-cyber proletariat (or 'cognitariat', or 'precariat') – the apparent political-critical basis of the series. The main premise remains intriguing for the way in which it dramatises the intersection of deterritorialised capital flows in the information age and the loss of the symbolic constitution of the subject in the hyperreality of postmodern culture. In this sense, *Mr. Robot* is a work of post-Fordist activist fiction that sees the computer and information technology – as much as it is a mechanism of our exploitation – as a tool of the revolution, where the factory has been subsumed by the corporation, and where analogue mechanisms of discipline give way to digital practices of control, as prophesied by Gilles Deleuze a quarter century ago.

In the series, members of the collective, fsociety, don a Mr Monopoly mask in their warning videos, mimicking the Guy Fawkes mask sported in the Anonymous logo, itself a reference to *V for Vendetta* (McTeigue US 2005). Guy Fawkes masks have become a staple symbol, worn by participants in Left demonstrations in the years immediately following the release of the film. fsociety also recalls the cell group, Project Mayhem, portrayed in *Fight Club* (Fincher US 1999). The show envisions the hacker (or the hacker collective) as the agent of the revolution, comparable to existing groups like Anonymous. But it equally riffs off other Leftist perspectives, such as Autonomist and Deleuze-Guattarian Marxism, which understands revolutionary agency in terms of the liberation of immaterial labour congealed in the objectified forms of cyber-capitalism's innate 'machinic enslavement': in *Mr. Robot*, the 'general intellect' fights back. Thereby, the series not only dramatises contemporary flows of deterritorialised capital and resistance; it also reflects theories of emergent radical subjectivity in the digital age. In this, it pays homage to films like *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese US 1976) and *Fight Club*, both of which reflect their own periods of crisis – the former marking the dissolution of the 'happy days' of the welfare state and the birth of neoliberalism, the latter a reflection of late-1990s' anti-consumerism encapsulated in books such as Kalle Lasn's *Culture Jam* (1999) and Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (2000), as well as the 1999 World Trade Organization protest in Seattle. Like these last two, *Mr. Robot* replicates the formal and subjective dimensions of neo-noir schizophrenic entrapment and anxiety, alongside the zeitgeist of cynical resignation in the face of the conglomerate mega-machine of late capitalism.

Diegetically, the series fuses the deterritorialised flows of capital with the decoded or unhinged agency of its protagonist – yet another obvious nod to *Fight Club*. Elliot's schizo-addict struggles, and the emphasis on the unfixed

flows of capital circulating within the semiotic organs of the machine recall the Lacanian metaphor of the 'breakdown of the signifying chain', famously used by Fredric Jameson in his essay, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' (1984) to describe the culture of postmodern late capitalism. The breakdown metaphor remains useful for the way it touches upon the historical, material, ideological and subjective dimensions of postmodernism. The troubling of the signifier – located in the Right's claims about the end of history/ideology; and, in the Left's traditions of ideology *criticism*, views perceiving the subject as mere fiction, from Althusser to Foucault, and the postmodern 'incredulity towards meta-narratives' – finds its equivalent in the show's registration of money in its dematerialised post-Bretton Woods form. As Mr. Robot (Christian Slater) explains in the pilot episode: 'Money hasn't been real since we got off the gold standard. It's become virtual. Software. The operating system of our world'.

The series reflexively adorns an anti-corporatist stance, pitting the fictitious E Corp (the not-so-subtly-titled Evil Corporation) as the primary villain, whose wealth is partially garnered through its ownership of 70% of the debt held by the consumer credit industry. Like *Fight Club*, the first political project of the hacker collective 'fsociety', is to hack and destroy the debt records of the people. In Fincher's film, as in the 1996 Palahniuk novel, the debt records are destroyed materially by blowing up the corporate offices of the credit card companies themselves. But in *Mr. Robot*, what is required is the hacking and destruction of the servers that contain the information – a project that Mr. Robot refers to as the greatest redistribution of wealth in history, and which we discover, in the final episode of season one, succeeds as Elliot pulls off the hack of E Corp – an act, he cannot even remember executing. But even though the series displays an acute sensibility regarding its mapping of our purely virtual economy, the show nevertheless remains a *dramatic* failure.

Elliot is introduced in the pilot and throughout the first season as a hacker vigilante of sorts, recalling somewhat Robert de Niro's performance of Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*. While he works as a cybersecurity specialist in his day job, he spends his nights fishing for information about his friends, acquaintances, co-workers and even his own therapist. At times, he randomly selects his targets, guided by a moral code aiming to bring society's hidden scum to justice, such as a child pornographer that he entraps in the first episode. As the show reveals, these are culprits that no longer hide out in the dark places of the urban underworld, but in the out of sight interstices of the web, which Elliot is keen to uncover and bring to the surface. Elliot's employer company, Allsafe, is subcontracted to secure the networks at E Corp, a conglomerate towards which

both he and his close friend and co-worker Angela (Portia Doubleday) hold a grudge due to the company's dubious toxic waste management activities, and which the two blame for the deaths of their respective parents.

Elliot, an addict with mental health issues, meets the secretive Mr. Robot on the subway, and learns that he has been following him. Mr. Robot invites Elliot to join fsociety, which he leads. During his first meeting with the group, he encounters Darlene (Carly Chaikin), with whom we later find out that Elliot and Angela both share a close relationship – though this information remains hidden from Elliot as well as from the audience. In this way, the series draws upon plot techniques developed familiar from *Fight Club*, but also from Christopher Nolan films, such as *Memento* (Nolan US 2000) and *The Prestige* (Nolan US 2006) – a technique that Todd McGowan refers to as the priority of the deception, where visual and plot devices are used to deceive the viewer. This technique allows the film to draw in the spectator by appealing to their sense of desire to uncover the mystery that was nevertheless apparent from the very beginning. The technique may have been successful in the Nolan films (and in films like *The Sixth Sense* (Shyamalan US 1999) and *Unbreakable* (Shyamalan US 2000)). But viewers familiar with these films (and even those unfamiliar with them) will most likely not be surprised by the revelations found in *Mr. Robot*, since these devices have by now become obvious and predictable.

Season two is no different. Again, it attempts to deceive the viewer in a similar fashion; and, although the deception is this time somewhat less evident, the second season of the show fails to deliver on the premise outlined in season one: that is, the conditions of possibility for conceiving a vision of the day after the revolution – a criticism articulated often and recently by Slavoj Žižek in his reaction to *V for Vendetta*: how do we conceive of the day after? (This is also a question intriguingly posited in the Žižek-inspired Father John Misty song, 'Things It Would Have Been Helpful to Know Before The Revolution'.) Following the successful hack of E Corp and the diffusion of its debt wealth, causing chaos and widespread panic alongside marches in the streets, the fsociety group appears to be left dangling, with Darlene in charge trying to hold the group together as they feud amongst themselves in Elliot (and Mr. Robot's) absence.

Although the narrative arc of the first season drew out the involvement of the shadowy figure Whiterose (B.D. Wong) – a transgender woman who leads another hacker group, the Dark Army – season two seems to displace its vilification of E Corp onto this parallel group. Whiterose, in her everyday life (and dressed as a man) occupies the dual position of equally dubious corporate leadership. But it remains unclear if this deception is meant to support the

existing system or the revolution. In the final scene of season one, Whiterose is seen speaking with the CEO of E Corp at a corporate party, suggesting some kind of alliance between the two (or, perhaps, yet another deception). This has the effect of complicating the initial interpellative hail of the series to the viewer. What is more, season two introduces a new character, the detective Dominique DiPierro (Grace Gummer), who oversees the fsociety hack investigation. Often, throughout the second season, our sympathies seem to fall towards DiPierro. Ultimately, these two plot perspectives appear to derail the radical intentions defined at the outset of the series. This, alongside the anxious dispersals of the fsociety members, works to (re-)territorialise the neoliberal cynicism characteristic of both the immediate post-Cold War period and the current state of Left impotence found in political failure of the so-called Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, the failures of the democratic socialism of Syriza in Greece and Bernie Sanders in the United States, and the recent election of Donald Trump. While some critics in anarchist circles often seem to scoff at radical criticism aimed at institutions like the state, *Mr. Robot* has the contradictory view that alternative practices, such as the formation of the hacker cell, are both the only way forward while still equally doomed to failure.

Despite these weaknesses, *Mr. Robot* partakes in a chain of relative equivalence with other recent products of theory and popular culture, that includes Mark Fisher's brilliant book *Capitalist Realism* (2009); other neo-noir series, such as Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror* (UK 2011–) and HBO's *Westworld* (US 2016–); and Father John Misty's album *Pure Comedy* (2017). From my own perspective, *Mr. Robot* undermines its own conceptual intuitiveness through the lack of innovation and cowardice of its plot, which in its most recent season activates the emblematic Thatcherite dictate that 'there is no alternative'. However, reading it in conjunction with some of these other contemporary cultural products allows minimally to be double-coded in a language that now allows us to better envision the deceptions of the semicapitalism at the centre of the post-crisis class struggle. This, at the very least, is what still makes the show worth watching.