



Faculteit Letteren & Wijsbegeerte

Mr. Robot's Elliot Alderson – The Hacker as a Vigilante Superhero for the 21st Century

*Characterization Through the Myth of the
Superhero*

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Introduction

Superheroes are all the rage these days. On the big screen, we can follow the exploits of Captain America, a super-soldier made strong by a mysterious serum or Thor, a Norse god wielding an all-powerful hammer. On the small screen, our world is being saved by Luke Cage, a man impenetrable to bullets, Jessica Jones, a woman with superhuman strength and Elliot Alderson...a thin man in a hoodie, who spends most of his days indoors behind a computer.

At first, it might not appear that the vigilante hacker protagonist of USA network's *Mr. Robot* (2015-), has much in common with the likes of the Man of Steel or the Batman. At first glance, a viewer would be more inclined to describe the show as a techno-thriller, a psychological drama or social satire. They would not be so quick as to give the moniker "superhero narrative" to a show lacking in athletic crime-fighters sporting tights. But critics like Victoria O'Donnell argue that the superhero myth permeating popular culture does not limit itself to stories about buff demi-gods: "Leading characters in television programs are often heroes with supernatural powers or superior abilities." This also includes characters who are "[neither gods nor Amazons] but [have] superior abilities that enable [them] to bring down criminals fearlessly." (83-4). And Elliot is undeniably qualified to bring down wrongdoers, from child abusers to cheating husbands and even major corporations. With a handful of commands, typed swiftly into his terminal, he can uncover damning evidence to bring criminals to justice or erase data and save people drowning in debt from I.O.U.'s.

Elliot follows in the footsteps of characters who are not traditionally thought of as superheroes but either draw heavily from the superhero myth or serve as an inspiration for the genre. As Marc DiPaolo, author of *War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film*, says:

To many genre critics, James Bond, Sherlock Holmes, the Doctor, and Harry Potter are as much superheroes as those that reside in Gotham City or the Baxter Building, and such a perception is far from inaccurate.

(3)

Why has the superhero myth been persistently present in American pop culture, to the point where its characteristics are also found in figures that do not fall into the traditional category of caped crusader?

Part of the superhero's power lies in that magical word: "myth". This simple, yet malleable narrative structure has been endlessly appropriated by societies throughout the ages for several functions. They inform us about our human nature, as influential mythologist Joseph Campbell wrote in *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*:

[...] through the wonder tales—which pretend to describe the lives of the legendary heroes [...] —symbolic expression is given to the unconscious desires, fears, and tensions that underlie the conscious patterns of human behavior. (237)

They also have a moralizing and explanatory function, as O'Donnell argues: "Myths offer examples of right and wrong, explain baffling or frightening phenomena, and provide models of good and evil." (81).

Myths are especially relevant for literary analysis, as "they have formed the foundation for narratives throughout the ages" (O' Donnell 81). They are even on our television screens, in televised sporting events or reality television.

Most cultures around the world have a treasure trove of myths to draw from. In Europe, we have the stories of gods and demi-gods inherited from the Greeks and the Romans. From the Middle East sprang forth what is considered one of the great first works of literature in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Ancient civilizations can boast figures from Horus to Krishna. But what about a young country like the United States? With the mythological heritage of their Native American predecessors mostly pushed to the background, the settlers had to come up with myths of their own. In *The New American Hero: Dexter, Serial Killer for the Masses*,

Ashley M. Donnelly gives several examples of historical American figures who have been mythologized:

We teach our children of the brave Pilgrims that fled persecution in Europe for their religious beliefs and established a new community against all odds, we celebrate Columbus Day and the idea that one man set out to prove the world wrong and not fall off the face of the flat earth. The Boston Tea Party is a simulacrum of vigilantism and the guerilla tactics of our fellow countrymen during the Revolutionary War are praised in schools across the nation. (16-17)

What these figures have in common is that they “[break] the rules for the good of us all.” (Donnelly 17). In other words, they pursue vigilante¹ justice. By being a self-sufficient rogue while at the same time devoting their time to helping others, these American mythical figure straddles what Ian Johnston calls “the American paradox” between “enlightenment ideals for social justice--resting as they did on a sense of duty, equality, public service, education, and so on--reconcile themselves with the romantic ideals of self-creation, individualism, and freedom” (Johnston).

This mythical figure, “the American Adam” (Johnston), is found in a lot of contemporary American culture, such as the Western, Rock ‘n’ Roll Stars and the Super Bowl. But this mix of the do-gooder and the rogue finds its heir apparent in the superhero.

¹ a person who tries in an unofficial way to prevent crime, or to catch and punish someone who has committed a crime, especially because they do not think that official organizations, such as the police, are controlling crime effectively. Vigilantes usually join together to form groups. (“Vigilante”, *Cambridge Dictionary*)

I have chosen the superhero as a basis for intertextual research because as Brian Robb says, in *A Brief History of Superheroes*: “The concept of the superhero is a uniquely American creation, born of troubled economic times, and forever changing to better fit with new audiences and new challenges.” (19) The “new audiences and new challenges” that I want to focus on are found in the new millennium.

The recent revival of superheroes is linked to its ability to reflect issues that are troubling the collective psyche:

As comic-book writer Mark Millar (*Wanted, Kick-Ass*) has observed, superhero stories are at their most popular and evocative when they respond to particularly turbulent political times, especially those marred by war and social unrest. (qtd. in DiPaolo 1)

And the 21st century, so far, has indeed been turbulent for the United States – and the world in general. The aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the economic recession of 2007-8 has given contemporary superheroes a lot to fight for. After all, the superhero myth has been known not to flourish in times of peace or social order:

In other decades, superhero adventures were out of fashion or subject to censorship that artificially minimized their influence and popularity. The McCarthyist sentiments of the 1950s saw comic books blamed for juvenile delinquency and saddled with censorship that undercut comic book creators’ artistic freedom and ability to produce worthwhile works. Notably, the Clinton years were good for the economy overall, but not for superheroes—the 1990s were the years in which Marvel Comics Group went bankrupt and the box-office mega bomb *Batman and Robin* made film studios swear off superheroes.

(DiPaolo 1)

To show how the ability of superhero narratives to portray the zeitgeist is reflected in *Mr. Robot*, I will be combining a narrative analysis with a contextual one, following the guidelines for television criticism, as described by Victoria O’Donnell in *Television Criticism*.

This involves an analysis of the intertextual relationship of *Mr. Robot* with narratives that fit within the superhero myth and the historical, societal and cultural context that shape the particularities of *Mr. Robot*'s narrative.

I will also analyze Elliot's characterization, with a method inspired by Lisa Weckerle, who conducted a similar research on Walter White from *Breaking Bad* within the superhero mythology. However, where she analyzed him as an example of the myth of masculinity on television, I will analyze the character of Elliot within the 21st-century American cultural climate created by the 9/11 attacks and the recession. Or to follow DiPaolo's method in *War, Politics and Superheroes Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film*, I will be "analyzing how" this specific iteration of the superhero myth "reflect[s] and influence[s] the hopes and fears of the average American during a given historical era" (3). In a similar vein, I will follow Benton's definition of a superhero, given in his work *The Comic Book in America: An Illustrated History*, which involves:

- (1) A distinctive costume or mask
 - (2) A type of superpower
 - (3) An alter ego
 - (4) The presence of a younger sidekick
 - (5) The motivation to perform good works in order to promote the common good
- (174-5)

In the opening chapter, I am going to focus on the final aspect: the drive to watch over the well-being of others. First, I will be using Brenzel and Fingerroth's explanations of superhero origin stories, as explained in *Superheroes and Philosophy* and *Superman on the Couch* to see how his backstory ties into Elliot's cause as a superhero. Then I will provide a historical, contextual analysis of Elliot's cause, by linking it to two works about literature and recession: *The Great Recession in Fiction, Film and Television: Twenty-first-century Bust Culture* by Kirk Boyle and Daniel Mrozowski, and *From Wall Street to Main Street: Tracing the Shadows of the Financial Crisis from 2007 to 2009 in US-American Fiction* by Judith Schulz. To close the chapter, I will research who the main villain of the show is and what the dynamic between the hero and his adversary is like.

In the second chapter, I will be focusing on the first three superhero traits: the attire, the heightened abilities and the alter ego. I will start off with the superpower, by arguing that Elliot's IT-related expertise counts as a heightened ability. I will also consider the historical

significance of hacking as a superpower. I will mainly be consulting Christian Fuchs' work *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*, to research the internet's sociocultural impact. Then I will move on to the alter ego. For the narrative analysis, I will analyze how the portrayal of Elliot's alter ego follows the tradition of superhero alter egos. At the same time, I will take a look at the formal narrative techniques used to portray the relationship between the hero and his alter ego. Then, I will relate this relationship to the differentiation in costumes between these two aspects of the superhero.

In the final chapter, I will look at the evolution of the superhero narrative and how it has become more complex than clichés about superhero stories will have audiences believe. This is to show that, despite his troubled and complex nature, Elliot still fits the mold of the superhero myth, in his own way. Then I will focus on the subversion of the apparent infallibility of the superhero and how this affects Elliot's progression as a superhero. Finally, I will explore how the question of morality is increasingly brought up in the superhero genre. Can citizens trust a superhero like Elliot to always use his heightened abilities in an ethical manner? As my analysis will focus on Elliot as a character, I will not go into the sidekick aspect of the superhero myth.

Chapter 1 – the Promotion of the Common Good

In *A Brief History of Superheroes*, Brian Robb describes the motivation to perform good deeds in superheroes as “a strong moral code and a selfless dedication to the public good: they’re usually out to do the right thing regardless of any possible rewards and often at the expense of their own personal lives.” (17)

According to Robb, “the motivation for this crime-fighting life is often deeply personal” (17). This means that a traumatic event can be the root of the need to help others. That is why I will start off the chapter by discussing Elliot’s loss of his dad, due to working conditions at the plant where he was employed. What is the link between his childhood trauma and his cause as an adult? Then I will move on to describe the cause itself: economic equality and government transparency. I will also research what links these causes to current issues in American culture and real life movements for social and economic justice. Finally, I will look at the antagonists of the show. Who are the major villains of the show? How are they depicted and how does their depiction fit in the current cultural climate?

1.1. Elliot's superhero backstory

Bruce Wayne became the Batman because he witnessed the death of his own parents by the hand of a violent criminal. Helpless at that moment to prevent their destruction, he ultimately devoted his life to preventing violence to others and to bringing criminals to justice. Superman is the son of a good and noble scientist on a planet doomed to destruction, who rockets the future hero to Earth where he is found and adopted by a kindly couple, Jonathan and Martha Kent. The Kents instill in the growing child the virtues and values of rural America, as incarnated in a town provided with the all too literal name of Smallville. The X-Men are teenaged mutants and therefore repugnant to normal humans, who both fear and loathe them. A wise professor, a mutant himself, gathers them together and trains them to work as a team for the good of humanity, in order that they may rise above their fates as lonely outsiders.

So it goes. (Brenzel 152-153)

Every hero needs an origin story. These examples all provide a “primal impetus” (Fingeroth and Lee 89) for the superheroes in question. They “serve throughout all story arcs as a kind of touchstone for the basic aspects of superhero personality or mission” (Brenzel 152), which means they give the audience a glimpse of what drives the superhero to promote the greater good.

Mr. Robot opens with the revelation of Elliot's “impetus”. In one of the first scenes of the very first episode, the audience is witness to an exposition of Elliot's backstory through a dialogue with Elliot's first hacking “victim”. His speech directed at Ron, the owner of an online child pornography ring exposed by Elliot, reveals an impactful event in Elliot's life: the death of his father.

It is part of what fuels his desire to fix what is wrong with society. Elliot's father passed away because of "leukemia, [which] he definitely got (sic.) from radiation at the company he worked at, though [Elliot] couldn't prove it." (1.01).² The company in question, E-corp, is one of the largest multi-national conglomerates in the world: it manufactures electronic devices, such as phones, tablets and computers, while at the same time providing banking and consumer credit services. Because of its large scope, it becomes a representation of all corporations. Symbolically, Elliot's father represents the little man being trampled by corporations. Subsequently, Elliot is extremely bitter about the unbridled power of corporations. And he is not alone in this anger against conglomerates. Elliot's backstory shows parallels with real-life companies with no regard for the human risk they create with their business practices. His story also reflects the untouchable position of real corporations, because as Elliot puts it: "now [his father is] dead. Company's fine, though." (1.01). This is especially relevant in the post-recession era, in which financial institutions and corporations play a big part in deregulating the economy, due to their track record of irresponsible practices. Meanwhile, it looks like the average American is bearing the brunt of the consequences of the recession:

While Wall Street has recovered, the American population is likely to be haunted by the long shadows of the financial crisis for the years to come. For many Americans, the abstract economic concepts of 'crisis' and 'recession' materialized in very tangible effects. In the end, a large segment of the population was not only facing fiscal loss but also the loss of those elements that afford stability, such as one's house and one's job. (Schulz 1)

² "eps1.0_hellofriend.mov" *Mr. Robot – Season 1*, written by Sam Esmail, directed by Niels Arden Oplev, USA Network, 2016.

Superhero origin stories also tend to appeal to more gratuitous desires of the audience:

Batman is fueled by a rage against criminals and an unquenchable thirst for vengeance. Is that a wish-fulfillment fantasy? Indeed. And a powerful one. Who doesn't want payback for injustices committed against oneself?
(Fingerroth 64)

This same wish-fulfillment can be found in *Mr. Robot*: many viewers of the series have probably dreamt about getting back at the companies that got them evicted, laid off or drowning in debt. The show allows them to live vicariously through Elliot's ability to hack into a major conglomerate.

Superhero backstories tend to have another theme in common: a sense of loneliness. Some superheroes are literally left to their own devices, after the death of their parents, like Batman. Others, like the X-men, are alone in the sense that they have been rejected by society. In the case of *Mr. Robot*'s protagonist, the death of his father also means that Elliot lost the only person he could connect to, causing a sense of isolation: "My dad was the only one I could talk to. But he died." (1.01). The "orphan" backstory, which is so common among superheroes, does give at least one positive trait to the superhero: a sense of self-reliance (Robb 16). This loneliness ties into the All-American value of individualism, which Fingerroth describes as "the idea, so emphasized and mythologized in American popular culture [that] we are all alone. We fight our own battles, make our own rules, defy those who would destroy us. We are alone to succeed or fail, to triumph or succumb. We make our own destinies." (70-71) As a superhero, Elliot is a lone ranger. Even though he has a hacking collective, fsociety, around him, he is the sole inventor of its plan to attack E-corp.

This loneliness, however, is also part of Elliot's motivation: while he paints himself as a loner, he has a need for connection. Starting a movement is a means to reach out to others. The future he is fighting for is not just one in which corporations are defeated, but also one where he can finally connect with the people in his life. He explains this in detail in a dream sequence of his vision of the future. While this vision includes the E-corp building exploding in the background, Elliot also muses about the improvement of his human relationships.

How would my future fairytale unfold? Will I finally connect with those I deeply care for? Will I reunite with old friends long gone? See the ones I love find true happiness? Maybe this future includes people I'd never dream of getting close to. Even make amends with those I have unfairly wronged.

A future that's not so lonely. A future filled with friends and family. You'd even be there. The world I've always wanted. [...] I would like very much to fight for it. (2.04)³

The trauma induced by his father's death is also the cause of other mental health problems, which birthed the Mr. Robot persona. The severity of the trauma causes him to imagine his dad, but at the same time forget that this is his dad. In an interview with Kenny Herzog, psychiatrist Paul Puri explains that "this disconnection in a conversion disorder is adaptive. It's attempting to deal with the trauma. Elliot locking away this history would be because all of these things about his father are too terrible to cope with, so he's kind of splitting it off, trying to hide it." (Herzog) It is no coincidence that he hallucinates his father. His father was a source of comfort and support in his childhood and in a twisted way, he plays the same role as Elliot's alter ego.

³ eps2.2_init_1.asec, <https://www.yeloplay.be/series/drama/mr-robot/seizoen-2/aflevering-4>

While Elliot's backstory gives some insight into his motivation, it cannot be used as the sole explanation of his actions. After all, his best friend, Angela, has experienced a similar childhood trauma: her mother also passed away due to leukemia, after working at the E-corp plant. Yet, Angela does not become a vigilante. Instead, she tries to seek justice within the system, first by suing E-corp, then by taking a job at the company and working her way up to risk management. Brenzel explains that the use of a superhero backstory as the conclusive explanation of one's actions has its limitations:

[...] when we seek to explain good or bad character in ourselves or those around us, we sometimes bring forward a particular factor, whether in our genetic makeup or in our upbringing, sufficiently noteworthy to play the causal role in shaping our "fates." Although we might use such stories either as inspirations or excuses, and though these stories may make good material for confessional talk shows, the problem with them is always the same. No single event or handful of experiences, however profoundly impressed upon us, altogether determines the choices we make or the attitudes we adopt toward those experiences. People are just not that simple. (154)

That is why my question is not why Elliot, as an individual, chooses to fight against a corporation. My interest in examining Elliot as a vigilante superhero lies in the ability of the superhero archetype to reflect societal needs.

1.2. Elliot's cause

1.2.1. Fight for economic justice

The United States is currently experiencing economically dire times. In fact, it is the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, i.e. the era in which superheroes were born. Even though the collapse of the housing market in the United States happened in 2007-8, consequences are still felt by American citizens. Schulz sums up the astronomical loss in wealth thusly:

The costs of this global financial upheaval exceed the human imagination. On a national level, approximately \$11 trillion in household wealth has disappeared (\$700 billion were spent in the context of TARP (Troubled Asset Relief Program), on an individual level retirement savings and life savings appear to have vanished into thin air (cf. FCIV xv). Here, the close interdependencies between Wall Street and Main Street become apparent. The bursting of the real estate bubble and the panic in the financial markets resulted in a massive reduction of business investment. Simultaneously, consumer spending strongly decreased (due to the recession-related insecurity among the American population). This combination of a drop in private consumption and business investment had substantial effects on the labor market. The results were high unemployment rates, which in turn further intensified the reduction in consumer spending. (29-30)

During these times of hardship, the public turns to cheap entertainment to escape the malaise. During the Great Depression, this affordable entertainment included cinema, pulp novels and –most importantly– comic books: “Kids across an America emerging from the travails of the Depression were keen on escapism wherever they could find it, and one of the cheapest and most regular forms of escape (along with the movies) were the four-color dime comic books.” (Robb 103)

This affordable escapism offered by comic books is, however, no longer available today: adjusted for inflation, comic prices have more than doubled (Cox).⁴ In this day and age, audiences tend to turn to television. Thanks to the fact that almost every household owns a TV set and that television shows are viewable on computers, tablets, or smartphones, television has become more accessible than ever.

But these narratives don't just serve as an escape. As I mentioned earlier, myths like that of the superhero provide a complexity reduction for the confusing events of the real world. Or as Fingeroth puts it:

The fictional representation of [conflicts] is one of the major appeals of superhero fiction. We enjoy seeing the conflicts and crises of our times enacted by characters [...] with superpowers. Seeing conflicts so represented makes them feel more comprehensible and manageable. It makes us feel that there are actual solutions to intractable problems [...] (164)

Plus, great historic shifts tend to leave a mark on popular culture. Hence, the Great Depression was reflected in these superhero comics, by including references to the plight of the working class:

Superman #1 (1939) contains a series of short stories that demonstrate how populist Superman's concerns are, thanks in part to his being a product of two creators from Jewish immigrant families working to earn a living during the Great Depression. Two of the short stories in particular are memorable for Superman's redressing of wrongs in the worlds of industry and college sports. In these two stories, Superman demonstrates a sense of New Deal and Square Deal fairness, if not a socialistic worldview.

(DiPaolo 151)

⁴ \$1.63 in 1938, compared to \$3.99 in 2012

This is also the case now: the recession of 2008 has ushered in a new cultural era. As Boyle and Mrozowski say in *The Great Recession in Fiction, Film and Television*, in this “distinct cultural formation”, audiences are witness to “a growing number of fictions, films and television that exploit the Great Recession as backdrop or plot catalyst.” (ix).

Mr. Robot addresses the current economic issues by giving Elliot and his hacktivist collective, fsociety, the goal of eliminating all debt. The current economic crisis and its causes do, after all, evolve around debt: the recession was brought on by subprime mortgage loans and debt is a more pressing issue than ever in the aftermath. *Mr. Robot*’s prime demographic, i.e. American millennials, are all too familiar with this problem: nearly three-in-10 young people who define themselves as just starting out cited paying off student loans as their biggest financial challenge (Cook). These millennials carry the burden of debt more than any other group, because they are forced to build their future while starting off in debt. On the show, this issue is referenced with a character like Angela: she mentions at several points that she is drowning in student debt. At one point, she is faced with guilt when she finds out that her dad has been paying off her debts.

But while most other superheroes want to make sure citizens are treated fairly, they still want to keep the status quo intact:

[...] superheroes generally agree that the laws of the land need to be upheld. They believe that democracy is the best form of government. They believe in racial, religious, and gender parity; judge each individual on his or her own merits. In other words, without being overtly ideological, superheroes champion the consensus views of most residents of Western democracies. They are not in favor of violent revolution to change political power. (Fingeroth 160)

Revisiting Superman #1, what does Superman do to address the concerns of the working man?

The first of these stories begins when coal mineworker Stanislaw Kober is trapped in a cave-in. A rescue party of twelve is sent after Kober, but they stumble into a chamber of poison gas and rapidly lose consciousness. Fortunately, Superman arrives in time to rescue Kober and the members of the rescue party, but the injuries Kober sustained in the cave-in have crippled him for life. [...] When the mine owner, Thornton Blakely, refuses to arrange a pension for the crippled miner, or to bring the mine up to reasonable safety standards, Superman chooses to intervene. (DiPaolo 152)

At the end of his intervention, he has changed the mind of just the one mine owner and changed the circumstances of one group of miners. Thus, his good deed does not have a large scope and does not change the general status quo. This is very much in line with the work of most superheroes, as Peterson and Park explain in their essay on *The Positive Psychology of Superheroes*:

Comic books have traditionally sidestepped the role of institutions. Consider that superheroes do not try to remake the world in profound ways. They do not try to cure cancer, eliminate poverty, or promote universal literacy. They are hardly revolutionaries. Superman and Batman fight corruption but not the system that allows it to exist. (13)

Reynolds sums this attitude up well in *Superheroes, a Modern Mythology*: “the superhero has a mission to preserve society, not to re-invent it.” (77) Elliot, however, thinks that there is something deeply wrong with society:

Krista: What is it about society that disappoints you so much?

Elliot: Oh I don't know, is it that we collectively thought Steve Jobs was a great man even when we knew he made billions off the backs of children? Or maybe it's that it feels like all our heroes are counterfeit; the world itself is just one big hoax. Spamming each other with our burning commentary of bullshit masquerading as insight, our social media faking as intimacy. Or is it that we voted for this? Not with our rigged elections, but with our things, our property, our money. I'm not saying anything new. We all know why we do this, not because Hunger Games books make us happy but because we wanna be sedated. Because it's painful not to pretend, because we're cowards. Fuck Society. (1.01)

Elliot has the ambition to change this “broken” society and unlike the traditional superhero, he seeks to change the world in a more systemic and revolutionary way. Elliot’s goal to erase all debt is very ambitious and radical compared to the fight of the classic superhero. While fsociety’s hacking plan may only target one conglomerate, its tentacles are spread so wildly that bringing them down will have global consequences. According to fsociety, “the people [...] don’t have freedom of choice as long as [E-corp] exists” and the annihilation of the corporation will “release all the people of the world from [their] illegitimate prisons of debt.” (1.02)⁵ This global reach is exemplified by a scene in the tenth episode of the second season. Philip Price, CEO of E-corp, asks disgraced CFO Terry Colby to pull some strings so China can annex Congo, prompting Colby to comment that “[Price is] trading countries like playing cards” (2.10).⁶

⁵ eps1.1_ones-and-zeroes.mpeg

⁶ eps2.8_hidden_process.axx, <https://www.yeloplay.be/series/drama/mr-robot/seizoen-2/aflevering-10>

1.2.2. The role of the government post-recession and post-9/11

According to Geoff Klock, “it is often the case that the superhero is a kind of criminal—a vigilante.” (125) This is because superheroes pop up where the traditional institutions, such as the government or law enforcement, fail to protect the people whose interest they are supposed to have at heart. In their article about *The Politics of the Superhero*, Costello and Worcester provide the following explanation of the relationship between superhero and state:

While superhero stories sometimes embrace the idea that the state is an instrument of legitimate authority, they often express the ambivalence and even hostility that many citizens feel toward their own government.

Superheroes regularly interfere with the normal prerogatives of states, implying that legal processes are insufficient, and perhaps even that inner-directed morality is superior to other-directed legality.

(86)

Elliot also circumvents the traditional institutions to achieve justice. The pursuit of vigilante justice remains popular in media of this era. In the wake of the recession, distrust in official institutions is, more than ever, at the forefront.

Though the role of the government has always been debated, there is one crucial difference now: the lack of trust. It is not only the fact that the actions of the government are disputed (especially among economists) – this has always been (and will probably always be) the case. What is different is the fact that there is a deep sense of distrust of authorities among the population. This distrust is a result of the insecurity, which materialized on account of the continuing failure of manifold institutions (including Wall Street) and the continuing list of severe crises. To name but two common examples, bankers, are constructed as culprits for the financial crisis and politicians are frequently accused of acting in their own interest or failing to fulfill their social responsibilities. (Schulz 44)

This ineptitude of the government is exemplified by a couple of scenes over the course of the second season, which directly refer to the bail-out of the banks after the recession. In one of the scenes, depicted in fig. 1 and 2 (2.02),⁷ Philip Price is asking government officials to lend his company money, after previously receiving funds from the feds. The relative intimacy of the meeting – one executive and three politicians in a dimly lit room – and colloquial tone suggest a close bond between government and corporation. It is a backroom deal, away from the public's eye. Furthermore, Philip Price has the upper hand in the conversation, as exemplified by the commanding tone he has at the end.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Later, he goes to his friend Jack again – the gentleman in the middle of fig – for another favor. This time he wants him to convince the president to allow him to take out loans in e-coins and effectively create his own currency. The way government lays in the fray for financial institutions is further exemplified by a monologue Price gives at the end of one of the exchanges:

In the fallout of the Great Depression, FDR closed all the banks for a bank holiday, and then he reopened them in stages when they were reported to being sound. Later, historians discovered what we in this room now know: that those reports, they were mostly lies. Nevertheless, it worked. It worked because the public believed the government had everything under control. (2.02)

⁷ eps2.0_unm4sk-pt2.tc, <https://www.yeloplay.be/series/drama/mr-robot/seizoen-2/aflevering-2>

This scene suggests that the government cares more about rebuilding the reputation of financial institutions, than making sure that the public can make use of reliable creditors. To sustain the current capitalist system, E-corp needs to be up and running again so people will have the confidence to consume again. The public is, therefore, right not to turn to traditional powers to oversee their interests, but rather turn to vigilante heroes, such as Elliot.

Not only does the government stay passive in the face of E-corps plans. They also become a direct threat to the freedom of citizens by participating in the surveillance of citizens. In season two, the FBI launches “operation Berenstein”, to stop fsociety. In the process, they spy on persons of interest. This is a clear reference to the Patriot Act and the recent NSA scandal.⁸

⁸ As this ties into the role of hacktivism in creating more government transparency, I will discuss this aspect in 2.1 – Hacking as a superpower.

1.2.3. Inspiration from real-life movements

The kind of causes that superheroes fight for do not just exist in fiction. Often, storylines are based on “real-life” heroes, protesters who rally behind movements for change. Moreover, the inclusion of these movements attracts young people, the target demographic of both comic books and the majority of contemporary television shows. In the sixties and seventies, for instance, Marvel cashed in on the popularity of comic books on college campuses by featuring student protest movements. (Robb 210-11) In creating its hero, *Mr. Robot* draws inspiration from real-life movements with similar motives and methods. The Arab Spring, for instance, was an important influence during the conception of the show.

Sam Esmail, who is of Egyptian descent himself, has explicitly stated that the Arab Spring was a direct inspiration for the show (Maloney). In an interview about the show, Esmail describes the plight of his family members during the upheaval in Egypt. The uprising in Egypt, which began after similar protests occurred in Tunisia, took place from January 24-29 in 2011. While Arab Spring may have taken place in a different cultural context – North Africa and The Middle East instead of the United States -, there are some obvious parallels between the protagonists of the show and the protesters. First of all, Arab Spring was mainly organized by youth. Esmail has explained, in an article by Darby Maloney, that he used his young Egyptian cousins – who were involved in the protest – as an example of “youthful angst” and “anger [used] for good”, Esmail continues:

That's when I really realized that anger doesn't have to be negative. It can be positive. It could be the thing that fuels something into positive change. It could be the thing that brings a community together to take something down and to overcome obstacles. It could be the thing that really inspires people to make a difference. That's the part of angst that really excited me and that's the last thing that really clicked for me in terms of writing this show. That's what Elliot's got to be about.

(Maloney)

The protesters involved in Arab Spring were also remarkable for their unprecedented use of technology to undermine dictatorial power. However, the Arab Spring protests were also dependent on social media, whereas the protagonists of the show use hacking and are, in fact, very critical of social media.

The interest in movements such as Occupy and Arab Spring has diminished over the years. This due to the very nature of traditional media – ideas can take ages to get picked up and developed - and the ever accelerating pace of historical events. However, new protests keep the flame of resistance against giant corporations and government opacity burning.

The recent protests against Trans-Pacific Partnership reflect some of the issues that the show brings up. Like the backroom deal between the CEO of E-corp and government officials, “the negotiations took place over seven years, in secret, and led to the suspicion that the agreement would largely benefit corporations and their shareholders.” ("TPP signing sparks dozens of protests across US over biggest trade pact.") Thus, the hacking collective depicted on *Mr. Robot* still resonates with a public that sees real-life examples of movements for the kind of change Elliot seeks.

1.3. Villains

While I have touched on the forces that Elliot must fight to achieve vigilante justice, it is worth delving deeper into the nature and representation of his adversary. In this chapter, I will focus on corporations as the “Big Bad” of the show. I argue that they are the most important villains of the show, because the plan to bring E-corp down is what sets the plot in motion. As I’ve mentioned before, the government are also antagonists – to a lesser extent – but I will discuss their role in detail in the chapter on hacking as a superpower.

In the very first episode, Elliot does not waste time announcing who he considers the enemy.

There’s a powerful group of people out there, that are secretly running the world. I’m talking about the guys no one knows about, the guys that are invisible. The top 1% of the top 1%, the guys that play God without permission. (1.01)

“The 1%” – and the opposing 99% - was a phrase popularized by the Occupy Wall street movement. It refers to a statistic that states that the top 1% earners of the United States are worth more than the remaining 99% of the country combined.

We are the 99 percent. We are getting kicked out of our homes. We are forced to choose between groceries and rent. We are denied quality medical care. We are suffering from environmental pollution. We are working long hours for little pay and no rights, if we’re working at all. We are getting nothing while the other 1 percent is getting everything. We are the 99 percent. (“We are the 99 percent”)

Schulz states that:

This introductory statement [...] reflects the development of an ‘us against them’ rhetoric. The opposition is clearly defined as the ‘other.’ [...] Remarkably, it is, in essence, a victimization discourse. As most sentences are written in the passive, agency is located outside the “we” of the statement.

(49)

The concept of multinational corporations as villains is nothing new, but the recent mishaps in the financial realms have brought the destructive potential of these conglomerates to the forefront. This polarization between citizens and the corporate world has become pervasive in American culture. Boyle and Mrozowski name several examples of “bust culture”⁹ documentaries that display the actions of corporations leading up to the depression as “grand theft America” (2013: xiii), i.e. banks and corporations are represented as criminals. *Capitalism: A Love Story* by Michael Moore is among them: “Moore likens subprime mortgages to Mafia deals you cannot refuse.” (2013: xvi)

According to Stiglitz, it is unfortunate that “attention is often shifted away from the battle of ideas toward the role of individuals: the villains that created the crisis, and the heroes that saved us. Others will write (and in fact have already written) books that point fingers at this policymaker or another, this financial executive or another, who helped steer us into the current crisis.” (17)

But as is the nature of the “thematic myth”: the age-old story of good versus evil (O'Donnell 83) is a form of complexity reduction. The reality of economic downturn is “dry” and “highly complex” so this kind of simplicity in the American “cultural production” is necessary to “[counter] the complexity” (Schulz 17).

⁹ “post-crash mass cultural artifacts inflected by diminishment, influenced by scarcity, and infused with anxiety” (Boyle and Mrozowski xi)

In *Mr. Robot*, to simplify the conflict between citizens and conglomerates, E-corp has become the alpha-conglomerate, by making it an electronics manufacturing corporation as well as a bank, capable of distributing loans and e-coins: “the firm’s main client is E Corp, which is something like General Electric, Citigroup, and Microsoft rolled into one (though its logo was lifted directly from Enron)” (Haglund). This way, one enemy is made up of all the characteristics that make banks and corporations “evil”.

The media representation of the culprits may be simplified, but the nature of the American economy and the decisions that propel it are represented as hopelessly complicated. *Griftopia* by Matt Taibbi is an excellent example of this trend – which Boyle and Mrozowski also include in their account (2013: xv-xvi). The title already villainizes the actors involved in the financial disaster: *Bubble Machines, Vampire Squids, and the Long Con that is Breaking America*. Moreover, he claims that “the bubble economy is hard as hell to understand.” (Taibbi 12). The complexity of their actions renders the organizations opaque, so Taibbi describes the banks and corporations as an “invisible hive of high-class thieves” (Taibbi 33). Presenting these economic decisions as unintelligible incites fear because people tend to fear what they do not understand. To get back to Elliot’s opening monologue about “the top 1% of the top 1%”: this monologue is placed over footage of white men in suits (fig. 3). They are filmed in a long shot,¹⁰ creating a distance between them and the audience. Low-key lighting is used so the men in suits are standing in the shadows. This renders their faces indistinguishable. According to Edgar, Marland and Rawle, this use of harsh light is also found in “horror films [, which] often use low-key lighting to hide monsters in shadows” (2010: 137). Their invisibility mirrors their lack of transparency: they make their life-altering decisions in the dark, away from the knowledge of the public.

¹⁰ A camera shot taking in the whole body of a performer, or more generally a shot with a wide field of vision (Bignell 98)



Fig. 3

However, the same accusation could be made of the hackers in fsociety. They also act from the shadows, infiltrating people's lives without their knowledge. In saving people from the invisible hand, are they not becoming the invisible hand themselves? I will get back to this conundrum.¹¹

While the representation of corporations as villains may lack nuance in a lot of bust culture media, the feeling of us – the people – versus them – the financial institutions – is partially rooted in reality. Through organizations such as lobbies, corporations can wield a massive amount of power. As mentioned before, there is a sense that the power of government is being dwarfed by that of conglomerates – cf. supra. A theorist like Ralph Clare even claims that corporate power has grown in the wake of the recessions. For example, new laws have been voted in that will expand the political weight of companies, like “unlimited campaign contributions” (198) Schulz also subscribes to this conclusion:

The main problem with the current financial system is that it does not violate the democratic principle formally and is, therefore, difficult to change. However, it takes the principle of equality ad absurdum. While the democratic structure remains formally intact, it is effectively circumvented. (52)

While the polarizing nature of the show makes it clear that fsociety's convictions are righteous and E-corp is undeniably the villain, defining E-corp as a threat in the context of the

¹¹ See 3.3 – Ethics of hacking

monomyth is more complicated. Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence describe the American monomyth thusly:

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat [...] [the hero's] decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition

(Jewett & Lawrence, 1988, p. xxii)

Fsociety is the outside threat in this scenario. Is it still correct to label them as heroes? If myths are meant to uphold societal values, that everyone can agree on, which ones is this iteration of the superhero myth upholding? While freedom is a value that everyone can agree on, so is peace. That is why more traditional superhero stories start off with a balanced situation and do not engage until an outside threat shows up: people can be freed from the threat while they can still return to their comfortable status quo. As Reynolds says: “the events which lead up to the confrontation are normally initiated by the supervillain. The hero is in this sense passive: he is not called upon to act unless the status quo is threatened by the villain's plans” (50-51) Fingerroth and Lee supplement that “villains, however, are indeed proactive. They are never content with the way things are. And they plan to do something about it, whether or not their planned action is legal or generally acceptable.” (162) In the case of *Mr. Robot*, these roles are reversed: the conglomerates are the defenders of the status quo they helped create, while fsociety are creative radicals, trying to undermine the social order. While having corporations in roles of great power may not be an ideal situation, it was at least peaceful. Like Elliot said, it's “painful not to pretend” (1.01) we're satisfied with this status quo. The 5/9 attacks are experienced as chaos by the regular public. In the aftermath of fsociety's hack, the audience sees images of disarray on the news (fig. 4):



Fig. 4

And the daily life of citizens is disrupted. There is a stampede at an E-corp bank when citizens are unable to pay off their loans (fig. 5 and 6).



Fig. 5

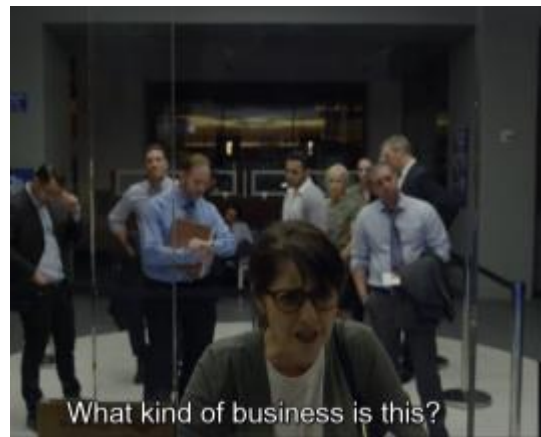


Fig. 6

But why would the people want to be ruled by what Elliot describes as “[the invisible hand] that brands us with an employee badge, the one that forces us to work for them.” (1.01)? The fact that, in the Mr. Robot universe – which partly mirrors our own reality – the villains are so entrenched in society and the purveyors of the status quo, complicates the traditional mythical structure. The reactive nature of the classic superhero does not lend itself to a revolution. Chaos is required to overturn a system that is inherently evil. I will discuss this in my section on subverting the classic superhero myth.

Chapter 2 – Superhero characteristics

Now that I've established that Elliot has what Benton calls a "motivation to perform good works in order to promote the common good", it is time to delve deeper into the abilities that set him apart from the average citizen. In this chapter, continuing Benton's definition of a superhero, I will argue that Elliot possesses "a type of superpower", "an alter ego" and a "distinctive costume or mask" (Benton 174-5).

Firstly, I will show that Elliot's expertise in hacking qualifies as a superpower. Moreover, I will discuss how having a hero with this ability fits into growing concerns about government surveillance and opacity in institutions of power. In this climate, hacktivists, whistleblowers, and watchdog organizations are hailed as heroes by part of the population, with the power of information gathered through technology. To gain more insight into this particular use of information technology, I have consulted two works: Christian Fuchs' *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* and Gabriella Coleman's *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous*.

Secondly, I will argue that Elliot's hallucinatory image of his dead father, a character dubbed Mr. Robot, is an alter ego in the tradition of superhero narratives. The relationship between Elliot and Mr. Robot exemplifies the contradictory reaction a lot of people have towards injustice: on the one hand, they feel too insignificant to bring about change in the world, on the other hand, they have a revolutionary streak they wish they could express.

Finally, I will look at how these two parts of Elliot's identity are differentiated through costume.

2.1. Hacking as a Superpower

Most people associate superheroes with superpowers such as flight or super speed. But some superheroes do not have powers in the supernatural sense. However, they still have heightened abilities and resources that set them apart from “regular” folks. For example, Batman is not supernaturally gifted, but he combines his drive to fight criminals and training in athletics and martial arts with a massive fortune. These elements combined help him create and use high-tech gadgets that make him exceptionally competent at fighting crime. In a similar vein, Elliot’s power consists of a love for and expertise in computers, inherited from his father.¹² The showrunner, Sam Esmail, also considers Elliot’s IT abilities to be superhuman:

[...] I always think hacking is a little bit of a superpower. ... You can see through everyone's personal lives. ... The fact you can manipulate people because you can hack them and learn everything about their personal lives — that's an immense amount of power.

(Esmail)

This ability to see into people’s lives and access hidden information can be likened to Superman’s X-ray vision. However, simply having the ability to hack does not fully describe what makes Elliot extraordinary. Because, even among his peers, Elliot’s hacking abilities are exceptional. He even manages to run circles around people with extensive knowledge of coding, encrypting and cyber security. The opening scene of the show, for instance, is a demonstration of this ability: even though the coffee shop owner uses “Tor¹³ networking to keep the servers anonymous, [making] it really hard for anyone to see it”, Elliot easily manages to take over this network.

¹² Elliot’s father owned an electronics store, called Mr. Robot, specializing in computer technology

¹³ Tor is a tool used to create content for the Dark Web, i.e. content that is not in the database of online search engines and therefore hard to track.

Even the Dark Army, the mysterious and powerful Chinese hacker collective – who cooperate with fsociety to attack E-corp’s servers – warn each other “to be extra careful” (2.09)¹⁴ when it comes to Elliot. Another ability that sets Elliot apart is his almost supernatural insight. He is very paranoid by nature, describing events that arouse his suspicions as “[scratching] that part of [his] mind, part that doesn’t allow good to exist without condition.” (1.01) This “sixth sense” is very reminiscent of Spiderman’s “Spidey senses”.¹⁵ Lastly, Elliot has an extraordinary vision. He is, after all, the inventor of the plan to erase E-corps records of debt and the one to rally the other fsociety hackers around him. Thus, the other members usually turn to him for guidance.

So long as there have been technological advances, they have been used to expose the abuse of power by dominant institutions. Fuchs, for instance, asserts that “During the Vietnam War, television made visible the horrors of the killing fields that would have otherwise remained invisible.” (219) Even hacktivism is nothing new, according to Coleman, “In the 1990s and early 2000s, the Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT), for instance, staged DDoS campaigns that they labeled “virtual sit-ins.” (136)

But in the past couple of years, hacktivism has been making headlines. As Coleman puts it, “never before have so many geeks and hackers wielded their keyboards for the sake of political expression, dissent, and direct action” (382). WikiLeaks has been in the news for exposing malpractices during the Iraq and Afghanistan war, and have recently even been accused of swaying the US presidential election by leaking Clinton’s paid speeches for Goldman Sachs (Cheney).

¹⁴ Eps2.7_init_5.fve, <https://www.yeloplay.be/series/drama/mr-robot/seizoen-2/aflevering-9>

¹⁵ The so-called ‘Spidey sense’ or ‘spider sense’ generally refers to an extraordinary ability to sense imminent danger, a kind of ‘sixth sense’ attributed to the comic-book superhero Spider-Man – though the term long ago escaped the confines of Peter Parker and his web-slinging alter-ego’s fictional universe to enter into popular usage and animate the popular imagination. (Mowbray)

Meanwhile, Anonymous' many subgroups have performed actions such as exposing police shootings (Harkinson) and lending early support to the Occupy Wall Street movement.

One factor in the interest in hacktivism is the growing amount of government surveillance. In 2003, the Bush administration introduced the Patriot Act to "expand the powers of the Executive Branch of government and to allow law enforcement more leeway in the fight against terrorism. Critics, such as constitutional law professor Susan Herman, warned that this would bring the U.S.A. "another step closer towards the totalitarian, Big Brother society predicted by George Orwell in 1984" (Qtd. In DiPaolo 98) This controversial amendment has already been critiqued in the comic book world, in the Civil War storyline of the Captain America series:

[...] the Civil War storyline portrayed the faction represented by Tony Stark (a.k.a. Iron Man), which favored national security over civil liberties in the style of John Ashcroft, as the villains. The group led by Captain America, which opposed the government's initiatives to limit the rights of the individual, in the spirit of Susan Herman, was portrayed as the story's heroic underdogs.

(DiPaolo 98)

The advent of the internet has intensified this fear of an Orwellian society. Fuchs argues that:

Today, we live in an age where the Internet shapes the lives of many of us.

The Internet has become a new key medium of information, communication and co-production. Therefore, paraphrasing Fiske (1996, 224f), we can say that the Internet extends the panoptic eye of power [...]

(217)

Fuchs' argument is based on Foucault's appropriation of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. In his Guardian article *-What Does the Panopticon Mean in the Age of Digital Surveillance?* - McMullan describes this architectural construction thusly:

The basic setup of Bentham's panopticon is this: there is a central tower surrounded by cells. In the central tower is the watchman. In the cells are prisoners – or workers, or children, depending on the use of the building. The tower shines bright light so that the watchman is able to see everyone in the cells. The people in the cells, however, aren't able to see the watchman, and therefore have to assume that they are always under observation.

(McMullan)

Foucault “used the panopticon as a way to illustrate the proclivity of disciplinary societies to subjugate its citizens.” (McMullan). Fuchs argues that online services such as social media and search engines have “[erected] a Panopticon that surveils all online user activities.” (134) These platforms create a database of information that they can access without the users' knowledge. The activities of the NSA are the most famous examples of information technology harnessed by people in power to exert control over citizens. In 2013, whistleblower Edward Snowden leaked a vast array of documents, revealing the government security organization's spying activities. Some of their actions include:

[spying] upon or directly surveilled thirty-eight embassies and missions; [harvesting and storing] vast swaths of American emails and metadata under a program called Stellar Wind; [compelling] tech giants to hand over data using FISA court warrants—while also covertly tapping into fiber-optic cables, like those owned by Google; ...

(Coleman 378-9)

However, citizens have been able to reclaim this power of surveillance:

[...] it also enables those who are normally the object of surveillance to turn their eyes, ears and voice on the powerful and reverse the power of surveillance. In such cases, we can speak of Internet counter-surveillance or “subveillance”. Whereas surveillance is mainly kept secret and unknown to those who are monitored, watching is a self-defence

reaction, on behalf of the dominated, to the accumulation of power and the surveillance and oppression of citizens, workers, consumers and prosumers.
(Fuchs 217)

This is where watchdog organizations, such as WikiLeaks, come in. They “exist because we live in societies that are shaped by asymmetrical economic, political and cultural power structures.” (Fuchs 218). One way in which powerful institutions, such as conglomerates and governments, try to hold on to power is secrecy. According to Fuchs, they “want to make their enemies and opponents visible, while they want to remain invisible themselves” (218), so they themselves can remain absolved from accountability. Fuchs argues that hacking, whistleblowing, and information gathering can “cut into the power dialectic of visibility of the surveilled and invisibility of the powerful by helping to make invisible power structures visible” (219)

Mr. Robot references the NSA surveillance tactics by having the FBI execute “Operation Berenstein”, to catch the hackers behind fsociety. fsociety reacts by hacking the FBI: the hackers tap into a conference call between FBI agents. Corporations cooperating. It reveals that the FBI is “warrantless[ly] wiretapping”, placing “three million Americans under surveillance for Five/nine” and getting “backdoor access to every [...] smartphone out there” (2.08).¹⁶ For commentary, a real quote from Edward Snowden is edited into the news story about the FBI leak:

When you say “I don’t care about the right to privacy because I have nothing to hide”, that’s no different than saying “I don’t care about freedom of speech because I have nothing to say.”
(Qtd. in *Mr. Robot*, 2.08)

Superheroes with powers like Elliot are needed in an era in which individual freedom is threatened by a government with authoritarian characteristics. With his hacking powers, he can see through the lack of transparency of corporation and government, and bring them to vigilante justice.

¹⁶ Eps2.6_succ3ss0r.p12, <https://www.yeloplay.be/series/drama/mr-robot/seizoen-2/aflevering-8>

2.2. Alter ego

Sometimes I dream of saving the world. Saving everyone from the invisible hand, one that brands us with an employee badge. The one that forces us to work for them...

The one that controls us every day without us knowing it. (1.01)

While Elliot clearly has the conviction and the hacking abilities to change the world, he is held back by his sense of loneliness and a defeatist attitude:

But I can't stop it. I'm not that special. I'm just anonymous. I'm just alone. (1.01)

Elliot is not alone in this cynical withdrawal from revolutionary action, motivated by helplessness. As Coleman writes, "cynicism has become a prism through which large swaths of North Americans and Europeans filter and feel the world." (397). These "feelings of dejection are not merely figurative shackles. Even when citizens are aware of the forces that fleece the majority, cynicism can disable political change. When this stance becomes prevalent enough, it settles into the sinews of society, further entrenching atomization, preventing social solidarity, and sharply limiting political possibilities." (Coleman 398) While the average audience member may not be able to relate to his more severe mental troubles, his anxiety and loneliness are relatable. The appeal of superheroes, after all, is that they are "both super and ordinary" (Peterson and Park 15)

This feeling is strengthened even further by the recent economic collapse and the 9/11 attacks, which give the impression that the United States, and Western civilization in general, are on the decline. As Bloch says in *The Principle of Hope*:

Function and content of hope are experienced continuously, and in times of rising societies they have been continuously activated and extended. Only in times of a declining old society, like modern Western society, does a certain partial and transitory intention run exclusively downwards. Then those who cannot find their way out of the decline are confronted with fear of hope and against it. Then fear presents itself as the subjectivist, nihilism as the objectivist mask of the crisis phenomenon: which is tolerated but not seen through, which is lamented but not changed.

(4)

Especially the current youth generation, Millennials, are often portrayed as being just as defeatist and – on the surface – indifferent towards the issues of today. But that does not show the big picture. This apparent indifference ties into the growing distrust of the government (cf. 1.2.2.): according to a study by Harvard University Institute of Politics, “Millennials’ level of trust in most American institutions¹⁷ tested in IOP polling continues to decline, even below historically low numbers seen last spring.” (Harvard University IOP). As a result, young people are less likely to participate in traditional forms of government; which shows in the low voting turn-out of young people in American elections.

However, Millennials do show high degrees of participation when it comes to grassroots activism. Most of the revolutionary organizations I mention throughout my research are mostly driven by young people. Elliot is similarly engaged when confronted with the possibility of revolution. Mr. Robot first shows up as a mentor. He initiates Elliot into the fsociety group, after hacking Elliot’s company, Allsafe, and convincing Elliot to leave the rootkit,¹⁸ used for the hack, in place.

¹⁷ This includes the President, the U.S. Military and the Supreme Court

¹⁸ Rootkit, a form of malicious software, or malware, that infects the “root-level” of a computer’s hard drive, making it impossible to remove without completely erasing the drive. Typically, a personal computer (PC) becomes infected with a rootkit when the owner installs some software obtained over the Internet, especially copyrighted software that has been distributed illegally. Infected computers are often used by cybercriminals for the distribution of spam and pornography. (Rootkit: Encyclopaedia Britannica)

Mr. Robot's mentorship proves to be a powerful antidote against Elliot's feelings of insignificance. Therefore, he represents the "friction and resistance [...] pushing against the emotional onslaught that can so easily lead to such existential traps." (Coleman 398)

This revolutionary hiding in the body of a scrawny hacker appeals to a fantasy that we, too, can be extraordinary. Fingerioth explains the appeal thusly:

What fantasy does the double identity appeal to? Perhaps, [...] it is to allow us to believe that, deep down, we are or could be so much more than we appear. [...] Don't we all have secret identities, those sides of ourselves we feel we dare not risk revealing? The secret identity is where our fantasies and ambitions take hold and ferment. We eagerly seek the time when we can give free reign to the "superhero within."

(50)

But heroes like Superman or Batman can change their identity at will. They are in control of their alter ego. Elliot, however, cannot control when Mr. Robot takes over. This relationship with his alter ego is very similar to that between Bruce Banner and the Hulk, i.e. one in which a kind-hearted nuclear physicist transforms into a giant green monster when he cannot contain emotions of anger and excitement.

There is another kind of appeal to this kind of alter ego, as Fingerioth explains:

Who would not want to give in to, and vividly express, anger and frustration at life's injustices, large and small? You say he needs a plan? A strategy? A goal? That's too hard, too difficult. Rage and destruction are the fantasies the Hulk appeals to. (125)

Mr. Robot's plans tend to involve more violence than Elliot's careful calculations. In the second episode of the first season, for instance, Mr. Robot urges Elliot to destroy E-corps data back-ups by hacking a gas plant and blowing up its offline storage facility. Elliot backs out of this plan because he does not want his plan to cause human casualties. In episode four, Elliot counters this with a more peaceful solution: hacking the climate control to raise the temperature and destroy the magnetic backup tapes. This is a perfect demonstration of the dynamic within Elliot's superhero persona: Mr. Robot's desire for revolution, at all cost, and Elliot's compassion for human lives.

As the show continues, however, the viewer finds out that this mentor is, in fact, hallucinated by Elliot. Mr. Robot has been an aspect of Elliot's personality all along. This is an instance of "unreliable narration", which Phelan and Rabinowitz describe as "narration in which the narrator's reporting, reading (or interpreting), and/or regarding (or evaluating) are not in accord with the implied author's¹⁹." (550-1)

I will refer to the narrator of a television show as a "cinematic narrator", in the same vein as Chatman (124), because like "cinema [, it] resists traditional language-centered notions of the narrator." (Chatman 124)

Chatman's describes this cinematic narrator as a "composite" of visual and auditory aspects of cinematic storytelling (fig 7). Their synthesis *as* the narrator, of course, is achieved by the semiotic processing performed by the viewer" (1990: 135)

¹⁹ not as the original cause, the original biographical person, but rather as the principle within the text to which we assign the inventional tasks. (Chatman 133)

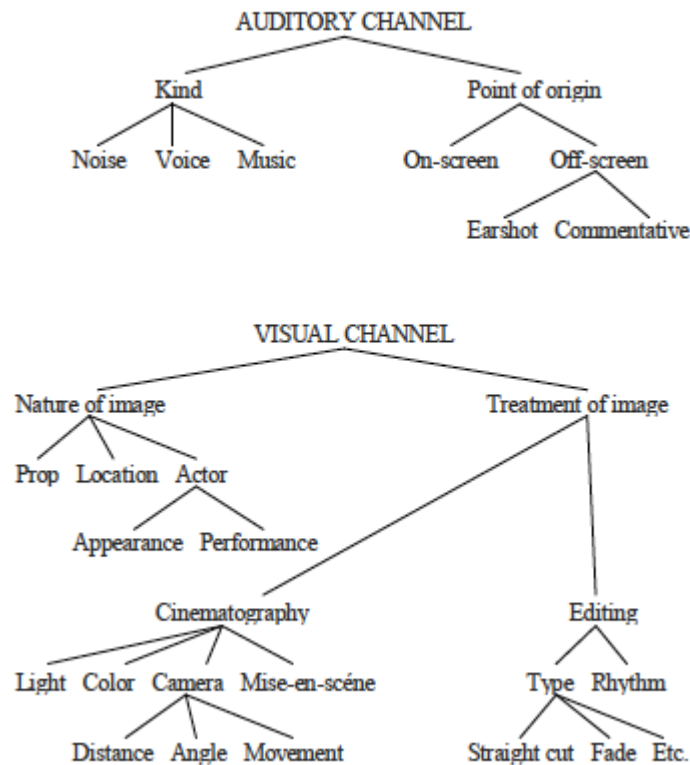


Fig. 7

Continuing Phelan and Rabinowitz' definition of unreliable narration:

There are six main types of unreliable narration: misreporting, misreading, misregarding; underreporting, underreading, and underregarding. The two main groups can be differentiated by the activity they require on the part of the authorial audience: with the first group – misreporting, misreading, and misregarding – the audience must reject the narrator's words and reconstruct an alternative; with the second group – underreporting, underreading, and underregarding – the audience must supplement the narrator's view.

(551)

Like *Fight Club* by David Fincher, a movie which involves a similar twist at the end of the movie, “the [show] is misreporting diegetic events [...] by adhering to cinematic conventions for storytelling while presenting” Mr. Robot “as though he exists”, as Anderson (2010: 92) explains about the 1999 movie.

The implied author gives signs of unreliability on Elliot’s behalf, from the beginning. In the scene where Elliot explains what is wrong with society, the audience finds out at the end that he just imagined the monologue and is, in fact, silent. The monologue is, in other words, shown as not being a part of diegetic reality. The audience, therefore, expects instances of misreporting to be debunked immediately.

One other technique used to trick the audience is the illusion of neutrality. Bignell describes two types of point of view: “the viewer is aligned with point of view shots of characters or performers, alternating with apparently neutral points of view that observe the represented space and the people in it.” (107)

This alternation between shots explicitly focalized through Elliot and apparently neutral scenes, contribute to the illusion of two separate characters. A scene in which Mr. Robot talks to Tyrell Wellick is initially seen as not being focalized through Elliot, as this character is absent (fig. 8 and 9). The viewer is tricked into being convinced of Mr. Robot’s existence because he is seemingly acting independently of Elliot.

Later, however, this scene is repeated (fig. 10 and 11), and the viewer sees that this was, in fact, Elliot transformed into his alter ego.



Fig. 8



Fig. 10



Fig. 9



Fig. 11

Partially due to his social anxiety, Elliot's body language is usually very closed and tense. But when Mr. Robot takes over, he takes on a more relaxed and traditionally masculine demeanor. In fig., both his verbal and body language exude arrogance. Compare this to Elliot's humble and nervous disposition upon meeting Tyrell for the first time (fig. 12 and 13):



Fig. 12



Fig. 13

The Mr. Robot character seems to show up when Elliot gets absorbed by his hacking work. In the first episode, after the scene in which Elliot exposes a coffee shop owner who deals in child pornography –cf. supra, Elliot describes himself in his day-to-day life as insignificant:

By day, just a regular cyber security engineer,
Employee number er28-0652. (1.01)

This all begs the question: why does Elliot use his dead father as an alternate persona? As mentioned in the chapter about Elliot's backstory, his mental illness transforms the nature of his trauma. He forgets parts of his past or modifies them in his head. After his leukemia diagnosis, Elliot's father chose not to act, as we find out during a therapy session Elliot has with his psychiatrist, Krista:

Krista: When we spoke about your father, you talked about how he chose to do nothing when he was battling his cancer. You told him he could have fought the company that caused it. He could have told people about it. He could have sought better care than what he was getting.
Instead he did nothing.
(1.02)

Krista goes on to theorize that Elliot's father might have felt the same helplessness Elliot feels: "After all, like you said, what's the point?" (1.02) That explains why Mr. Robot, the idealized version of Elliot's father, is a violent revolutionary. If Elliot's real father had had the same disposition, he might have survived – or at least lived longer. He could have warned others and saved lives. Now, with Mr. Robot as a mentor, Elliot is finding a way to fight back:

Krista: What's different is you've found options, Elliot. That's the power you have. That's the control you own. You don't have to just take what life gives you.

They are supposed to become one, a united force to fight for a better world, as Mr. Robot says "When will you finally realize that I'm here for a reason? [...] Our fight for that future that you want isn't with me at chess! It's what you do out there with them!" (2.04) Mr. Robot is also there to alleviate Elliot's trauma when it all becomes too much due to his ailing

mental health: “You’re meant to know only as much as you can handle.” (2.12)²⁰ Another example of this is Elliot’s run-in with Ray, the head of a deep web human trafficking website. When he gets too curious and snoops around to find this inhumane activity, he gets caught out, beaten up and locked away. During this time, Mr. Robot protects him from the horrors of this violence committed against him. In episode six, Elliot’s surroundings are transformed into a 90’s TV sitcom, where current and past traumas are played up for laughs (fig. 14).



Fig. 14

Note the 90’s clothing and fake-looking background. Mr. Robot also assists Elliot while he is thrown in an isolation cell by Ray, saying “all [he] was trying to do, was to take those punches for [Elliot]” (2.06).²¹

Thus, Elliot’s alter ego is a very helpful tool in his fight against E-corp, supplying him with the revolutionary rage and bravery to translate his high ideals into concrete action. However, as I will discuss in my chapter on subverting the superhero trope, he is also fighting a constant psychological battle against his other identity.

²⁰ eps2.9_pyth0n_pt2.p7z, <https://www.yeloplay.be/series/drama/mr-robot/seizoen-2/aflevering-12>

²¹ Eps2.4_m4ster-s1ave.aes <https://www.yeloplay.be/series/drama/mr-robot/seizoen-2/aflevering-6>

2.3. Mask and costume

For the classic superhero, their “citizen” persona and their superhero persona are separated by a mask and costume. This “makes the demarcation so much easier for [them] as well as those to whom [they] want to project [their] identities.” (Fingeroth 50). The superhero truly becomes “super” when he dons the mask and costume.

Mr. Robot is Elliot’s mask. But Elliot’s situation is more complex, as his two personas tend to overlap and his alter ego takes over without his control: “Sometimes my mask takes over [...] How do I take off a mask when it stops being a mask? When it’s as much a part of me as I am” (2.02)

Despite the lack of clear demarcation between Elliot and Mr. Robot, the two personas are separated by differing costumes. On the one hand, Elliot’s ego is marked by his black hoodie. On the other hand, the Mr. Robot persona is marked by a Monopoly man mask and a jacket that literally says *Mr. Robot*.

The relationship between the costume of the superhero and its wearer can provide a powerful example of “syntagmatic metonymy”. In *Telling Stories: a Theoretical Analysis of Narrative fiction*, this “signifying configuration” is defined as “two textual elements [...] connected to each other because of position or association, and both appear in a segment” (Cohan en Shires 34) A famous example of this is Wonder Woman’s star-spangled costume. Because of its association with the flag of the United States, it signifies American patriotism; hence Wonder Woman’s patriotic nature is underlined by connecting her to these colors.

What does Elliot wear when he is just himself? He is recognized by the black hoodie. On the one hand, the hoodie is often associated with fringe figures and this is what Elliot considers himself to be: “stuck in the outer fringes” (1.03).²² He is, after all, a junkie, living in –what Angela describes as– a “bad neighborhood” (1.01).

On the other hand, this piece of clothing is a marker of vulnerability. The hoodie represents someone who wants to hide. This is exemplified by the fact that Elliot often puts his hood up

²² eps1.2_d3bug.mkv

when he feels threatened or unsafe. For instance, after he gets Vera²³ arrested and sees him sitting on the sidewalk in handcuffs (fig.15), he has every right to be scared. After all, if Vera were to find out that it was Elliot who put him in jail, he could come after Shayla and him. He consequently pulls his hood up to hide (fig. 16 and 17).



Fig. 15



Fig. 16



Fig. 17

Elliot does not necessarily require a costume to get into the Mr. Robot persona. Due to his alter ego being a figment of his own imagination, the mask is worn on the inside, so to speak. But the audience is provided with a visual representation, through a costume change, of the difference between Elliot and Mr. Robot, in a flashback scene (2.04). Elliot's sister, Darlene, shows up with the iconic mask. She proceeds to suggest watching the movie it is based on, *The Careful Massacre of the Bourgeoisie*. Later, Darlene laments that she barely has any memories of their dad. Elliot proceeds to show Darlene the jacket. Darlene pushes Elliot to put it on. While Elliot is wearing the jacket, she also makes him put on the Monopoly man mask. While Elliot is hesitant at first (fig. 18), his stance and demeanor change completely: he exudes more confidence, with a wider stance and his arms crossed (fig. 19).



²³ A gangster who works together with Shayla, Elliot's girlfriend. It is implied that he raped Shayla.

Fig. 18

Fig. 19

This abrupt change even scares Darlene. As he grows more confident, Elliot starts brainstorming his plan to erase all debt, by infiltrating E-corp through a job at its cyber security firm, All-Safe. This can be interpreted as the birth of the revolutionary Mr. Robot persona:

I could be a Trojan horse. Be a good way to take [Evil corp] down. With the right access, install the right malware...trash their backups, I bet it wouldn't even be that hard. No, the hard part would be after, during the fallout. That's the key [...] The public's confidence in them would have to be completely destroyed in order to really finish them off. That's the only way it would work. Change the world.

(2.04)

The scene that follows this flashback, serves as a contrast between the Mr. Robot persona the audience just saw and Elliot. Darlene needs Elliot's guidance during the fallout but Elliot is convinced they're in too deep. When Darlene brings up the monologue from the flashback, to convince him that they need to follow through, he replies: "That wasn't me. That was him." Darlene then responds: "Well, then maybe I need him right now, because what I'm seeing in front of me isn't helping." (2.04) What she sees in front of her is the usual Elliot, with his trademark hesitant body language (fig. 20).



Fig. 20

It is worth delving deeper into the outfit Elliot is wearing when he transforms into his alter ego. Wearing his dad's jacket around his shoulder provides Elliot with more self-confidence. After all, he was the only person with whom Elliot could comfortably talk and be open with. This is an example of a "mythical pattern of thought" (Keunen 182): invoking a deceased relative's essence through an object that once belonged to them. This kind of magical thinking remains pervasive in modern culture: Keunen says that, for example, no one "[would] be inclined to disfigure a picture of [their] mother without being forced to do so" (182).

The Monopoly man mask is a reference to the Guy Fawkes mask, popularized by *V for Vendetta* (fig. 21) and the Anonymous Movement (fig. 22). The historical figure it is based on was a catholic who plotted to blow up parliament. Since then, his likeness has undergone a change of symbolism:

Fawkes was once primarily known as a sort of mascot for seventeenth-century British regicide. His failed attempts at regicide are commemorated to this day in the form of a British holiday bearing his name, which celebrates the continuity of the monarchy through the widespread burning of bonfires. British writer Alan Moore adopted the mythologized figure into a dystopian comic book, which became a Hollywood film, which led to the reimagining of Fawkes's visage as that of the quintessential terrorist-turned-icon-of-resistance. (Coleman 281)

In *V for Vendetta*, the title character V, a lone anarchist, dons this same mask throughout the runtime of the movie. The origin of Elliot's mask is slightly less elevated: it is based on the killer in a B-movie called *The Careful massacre of the bourgeoisie*. The Monopoly man (fig. 23) is the ultimate incarnation of the venture capitalist. However, in the movie in question, the mask gets appropriated in a dark and ironic fashion. The killer in the Monopoly mask is out to get some rich, entitled white American kids. Darlene offers a very elevated interpretation of this mindless slasher fic: "I mean, clearly what the film is doing is debunking the notion that American society is classless. Meritocracy my ass. Long live the oligarchy!" (2.04) But even though the origins are different, they share the same spirit: overthrowing oppressing regimes through violent and anarchist means.



Fig. 21



Fig. 22



Fig. 23

As mentioned earlier, the superhero mask is often used to protect one's identity. Logically, an organization that calls itself Anonymous will also have its members wearing a mask to conceal their identity. Hacking itself is an anonymous form of protest:

There is the anonymity of [...] the Internet [...] where the cloak of mystery gives people the courage to do and say things-either socially accepted as "good" or "bad," "right" or "wrong" –without fear of repercussion. Again, depending on the context and the intent, the hidden identity can be used to positive or negative effect. (Fingeroth 48)

The Monopoly man mask serves this same purpose. Because, while most of the revolutionary work happens in privacy, behind a computer screen, fsociety – like anonymous – also sends video messages (fig. 24 and 25), giving E-corp ultimatums, striking fear in their hearts and damaging public confidence in them at the same time. Then it is important that the identity of the speaker is concealed.



Fig. 24



Fig. 25

The mask is also a sign of unity behind a common cause. Wearing the same mask creates a feeling of cohesion, that why the Guy Fawkes mask “functions as an eternal beacon, broadcasting the symbolic value of equality, even in the face of bitter divisions and inequalities.” (Coleman 75) This unity is emphasized by the tagline of both the fictional and real-life hacker collective: “we are Anonymous. We are legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us.” and “We do not compromise. We will not back down. We will destroy you. We are fsociety.” (2.08). This is underlined by Anonymous’ lack of a formal hierarchy: anyone can join, as everyone is faceless there is no one who will claim definite leadership. Fsociety, however, is hierarchical, with Elliot as its leader and visionary. But it still manages to incite protests and rally a large number of people behind its cause. This fulfills Elliot’s desire for a less lonely existence: he is finally part of something while knowing that his existence makes a difference.

Chapter 3 – Beyond the classic superhero myth

While I have uncovered many characteristics that Elliot shares with the archetype of the superhero, I have also encountered certain narrative and character traits that are not compatible with the classic superhero myth.

First, I will be exploring the latest developments in superhero storylines and characterization, that break with the traditional superhero myth. In doing so, I will be answering the question: do Elliot's complexities necessarily disqualify him from being a superhero?

Second, I will be asking the question if Elliot is failing as a hero. In a myth where good usually prevails over evil, Elliot does not seem to have the upper hand against his enemies.

It is also debatable whether Elliot can be characterized as "the good guy". To open this debate, I will be delving into the moral ambiguity of being a hacker as well as a superhero.

3.1. The trend of complex superheroes

The superhero genre has come a long way since the 1930s. Umberto Eco's vision of a fight against evil that "concludes within the limit of a few pages" (1972: 16) with the superhero always coming out victorious; this stereotype is outdated.

In 1972, the death of his girlfriend, Gwen Stacy, proved Spiderman not to be invincible. But Skoble argues that there are two works in particular to thank for revolutionizing the superhero: *Watchmen* by Alan Moore and *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) by Frank Miller. In his essay on *Superhero Revisionism*, Aeon J. Skoble argues that:

Many sophisticated elements of comics today that we now take as givens—the way they raise questions of justice and vengeance, their exploration of the ethics of vigilantism, and their depiction of ambivalent and even hostile reactions toward superheroes from the general public as well as from government—are largely traceable to these works. (Skoble 29)

The Dark Knight Returns saw different breeds of superhero morality being confronted against each other: the US government sends the reactionary, lawful Superman to stop the vigilante Batman. (Robb 240) *Watchmen* put superhero morality into question by dropping its super-powered protagonists in the real historical context of our world.

These works were not only revolutionary when it came to morality. One other important development is the depiction of psychological fragility in our superheroes. In *Watchmen*, "Moore's character Rorschach, for example, has been traumatized by an abusive childhood, and is in many ways emotionally and psychologically maladjusted." (Skoble 29).

But the addition of emotions to the figure of the superhero already started in the Silver Age, i.e. the era of comics production that stretched from the mid 50's to the early 70's. Mainly, with the introduction of *The Fantastic Four* in 1961, Stan Lee wanted to create heroes who “would be super-powered, they'd also be real, relatable people, unlike powerful figures such as Superman.” (Robb 162):

After two decades, Lee felt the superhero field had become complacent, the leading characters serving as idealistic role models with an unattainable perfection. There were no ongoing repercussions for Superman/Clark Kent and Batman/Bruce Wayne. Nothing ever really changed for them, and they seemed to have nothing but the most superficial of ‘real’ lives outside of their superhero adventures. Lee wanted to explore the consequences of being a superhero on a group of otherwise ‘ordinary’ people.

(Robb 162)

This psychological complexity is also present in more recent iterations of the superhero myth. More recent examples include Tony Stark in *Iron Man 3* (2013). In the preceding *Avengers* movie, Tony is confronted with his mortality when he sends a missile headed for Manhattan back through the wormhole it came from. Psychologist, Travis Langley describes this moment thusly:

Having accepted that he will die alone in a nuclear explosion as the wormhole closes and his robotic suit expends the last of its power, he experiences what he truly believes to be his final moment of life before he falls back through the wormhole to be rescued by the Hulk. He has passed from the realm of his certain death and back into the land of the living.

(Langley)

Mr. Robot itself shows a high level of attention to detail when it comes to Elliot's struggles with mental illness, especially when it comes to dealing with the relationship with his alter ego. The nature of his hidden identity can be interpreted as a dissociative disorder;²⁴ a plot point inspired by *Fight Club*. But some critics, like Brogan Morris from *Paste Magazine*, argue that Mr. Robot handles mental illness in a more in-depth and sensitive fashion. Morris, for instance, says that "where Mr. Robot attempts to give the audience some understanding of social anxiety and mental illness, *Fight Club* uses it as a narrative device and—after the reveal—mines the Narrator's schizophrenia for comedy" (Morris 2015). This in-depth study of mental struggles in superheroes can also be found in the Hulk – whose alter ego is of a similar nature as Elliot's (cf. supra). In *The Avengers* (2012), Bruce Banner admits that his fight against the monster within him has driven him to attempt suicide. Similarly, in the third episode of season two, Elliot even goes as far as harming himself, by taking a massive amount of Adderall, to get rid of Mr. Robot. This attention to detail in presenting the inner world of the superhero is a powerful way of connecting with the audience. This way, the trope of the dual identity can connect with people's own inner struggles. When Elliot justifies trying to get rid of Mr. Robot, he says something that will resonate with a lot of people:

We destroy parts of ourselves every day. We Photoshop our warts away. We edit the parts we hate about ourselves, modify the parts we think people hate. We curate our identity, carve it, distil it.

(2.04)

We all have parts of us that we hide because we are ashamed or even afraid of them. But the result of Elliot trying to fight his own alter ego can also be a good reflection on human nature. He challenges Mr. Robot to a chess game, saying that if his other side loses, he will have to disappear forever. Match after match ends in a stalemate. The audience can draw a pearl of wisdom from this: it is impossible to destroy parts of ourselves, the best way to move on is to learn to live with every aspect of our personality.

And that is what Elliot attempts to do right after: accept that Mr. Robot is here to stay and continue his mission with the help of his alter ego. His realization pushes him to help Darlene after she asks for aid in protecting fsociety from being investigated by the FBI.

²⁴ A disorder that is colloquially referred to as "having multiple personalities", see Herzog: 2015 for more details on Elliot's mental illness.

I have touched on the influence the aftermath of 9/11 has on themes handled in Mr. Robot. This reflects an overall trend in superhero media. Jon Favreau, director of the Iron Man movies, says that the amount of time that has passed since 9/11 has created a climate in which the effects of the attack on American culture and politics can be reflected by superhero narratives:

I think that's become more and more complex as we become more and more comfortable with where we are in the world now, whatever it is, seven years later and you can have a movie like "The Dark Knight," where you start to deal with those things. You can show people on a battlefield in Afghanistan, like in "Iron Man." There's a line that you can't cross, but that line is moving and I think there's going to be a new thing here.

(Jon Favreau 2008)

Thus, there is more than meets the eye in the superhero genre. Superheroes are usually thought of, in the popular consciousness, as one-dimensional characters in spandex, who always save the day and automatically do the right thing. But superhero narratives can deal with complex issues and represent the inner turmoil of the protagonists.

3.2. A fight that never ends

As I have mentioned before, it does not seem as though Elliot and F Society are ultimately successful in their venture of freeing people from debt. Even though Mobley claims “[they] took them down”, Darlene counters: “Then why does it still feel like they’re winning? That what it did made it worse, not better?” (2.01).²⁶ In the wake of the 5/9 attacks, the fictional United States is descending into chaos. And it looks like this chaos is mainly affecting ordinary citizens, while E-corp mutates and adjusts to the new circumstances. As Philip Price, CEO of E-corp, puts it: “Whoever’s behind [the hack], they’re just people like you and me. Except, I have the full weight of the biggest conglomerate of the world behind me. You’ll come to realize that when you have that, matters like this, they tend to crack under that weight.” (1.10)

For civilians, resources become scarce as cash supplies dwindle (fig 26), making them dependent on E-corp’s own virtual currency: E-coin. People have lost access to the savings they spent years earning²⁷. Meanwhile, E-corp can count on the government to bail them out and even allow them to lend money in their own currency to sustain their business practices (cf. supra). In a very cynical scene, Angela’s father is seen selling five/nine emergency kits at his department store (fig 27-8), showing that E-corp is even cashing in on the panic following the actions of F Society. Even Elliot realizes it himself that he might have made matters worse: “Is this the future I’ve been fighting for? The system is hung, frozen in limbo. Did we lose the fight?” (2.10) This all begs the question: has Elliot failed as a superhero?

²⁶ eps2.0_unm4sk-pt1.tc, <https://www.yeloplay.be/series/drama/mr-robot/seizoen-2/aflevering-1>

²⁷ See 1.3: Villains



Fig. 26



Fig. 27



Fig. 28

Superhero clichés dictate that the protagonist in question always comes out victorious. And this was the case for a large part of the history of superhero comics. Superheroes were almost always depicted as infallible. That is, until the death of Gwen Stacy in *Amazing Spider-Man* #121 (June 1973):

[...] the Green Goblin – who knows Spider-Man’s secret identity – kidnaps Gwen and holds her captive on top of the George Washington Bridge. As most readers would expect, Spider-Man appears to save the day, defeating the Goblin and apparently rescuing Gwen by stopping her fall when he catches her with his webbing, exclaiming ‘Did it!’. It is only when he pulls Gwen back up that he realizes she is dead. In shock, Spider-Man attacks the Goblin, almost killing him but pulling back at the last moment. Neither Peter Parker nor the Goblin really know how Gwen died, with only the reader privy to the subtle ‘snap!’ sound effect suggesting her neck was broken when Spider-Man’s webbing abruptly broke her fall.

(Robb 219-20)

According to Brian Robb:

Superheroes had previously rarely been seen to fail, or if they did, that failure was immediately followed by a moment of triumph. Neither were characters close to the heroes, whether sidekicks or love interests, killed off in such perfunctory fashion. (2014: 220)

This moment completely subverted the all-familiar scenario of the superhero “saving the girl”. Elliot’s fallibility is introduced to the audience in a similar way. Until episode six of the first season, we get the impression that Elliot is not to be outsmarted. Then his girlfriend, Shayla, gets kidnapped by her former supplier and rapist, Vera. Elliot manages to achieve the almost impossible demand of breaking Vera out of prison. Seeing as Elliot has managed to hack himself out of the most hopeless of situations, the last thing we expect is for him to lose to a simple-minded gangster like Vera. When Elliot hacks Vera’s brother’s phone and takes over his entire drug trafficking enterprise as leverage, it appears our superhero has his opponent cornered. But then Vera kills his own brother, effectively destroying his own operation. Now that Elliot no longer has any power over him, Vera is free to show Elliot the body of his dead girlfriend. Elliot has not managed to save the girl.

In the face of a major institutionalized corporation, for Elliot to save those he set out to help becomes even more complicated. As E-corp is so ingrained in the system, destroying their records also hacks at a financial institution that citizens have been depending. This possible outcome of vigilante justice is not often found in superhero stories. In a lot of them, villains are fringe figures, coded as poor, queer or as ethnic minorities. And when corporate moguls are portrayed as villains in classic superhero stories, they do not tend to show how corporations are also part of the community.

There are exceptions in more recent, revisionist superhero narratives, like that of Lisbeth Salander from Stieg Larsson's *Millenium Trilogy*. DiPaolo argues that

What makes [heroes like] Lisbeth Salander [...] stand out from the others is that their attackers are [...] "Respectable" members of the community—including corporate executive, mayors, lawyers, social workers, honors students, professional athletes, judges, and even fathers [...] Their attackers also tend to get away with their crimes because they are unassailable public figures and are not immigrants or urban ghetto residents. They are protected by their suit-and-tie, a bought-and-paid for mass media, and a legion of high paid lawyers and lawmakers.

(DiPaolo 120)

This protection by status makes it "impossible [...] for anyone to take on an amoral, all-powerful corporate executive." (DiPaolo 121)

Another factor that complicates the act of saving the world, is fsociety's apparent lack of skills and planning when it comes to re-building facilities for citizens. Apart from a few off-hand comments about who will take which role after the revolution, the plan only involves the destruction of a system. In real life, a lot of grassroots movements have fallen into the same trap. As we have seen in the fallout from Arab Spring, for instance, protests and revolutionary acts do not seem to suffice in destroying and replacing major power structures.

As Stepanova puts it in her article on *The Role of Information Communication Technologies in the "Arab Spring"*:

[...] while effective as a grassroots tool to bring down an authoritarian regime, social media-based network activism may not be best suited for political competition at the stage of "post-revolutionary" state-building, governance reform, and institutionalized politics in general, compared to more institutionalized and better organized actors.

(Stepanova 6)

Apart from Tunisia, most of the countries involved have been left in disarray. Thus, it may have given rise to "internationalized (sic.) civil wars in both Syria and Yemen, the rise of Islamic State, authoritarian rule in Egypt, the collapse of central government in Libya, and migrants risking all to flee these horrors" (Roberts 2016). The protesters involved in Occupy

Wall Street have also found out that what they set out to achieve was more complicated than anticipated. Miriam Meissner explains that:

Protests against the financial system, such as the recent Occupy Wall Street movement, always had a metonymic referentiality, addressing the financial business by its central locations. As such, the idea of attacking or occupying the sites where finance supposedly ‘takes place’ is symptomatic of a more general confusion. How to boycott a business that works via digital networks, transferring values and complicated payment obligations at enormous velocities? How to demonstrate opposition against an industry whose workings neither adhere to a coherent chronology nor to a consistent logic of value creation? Wall Street and other stock exchange sites at least provided a physical target against which common anger could be directed. (120)

(Ctd. In Schulz 95)

Fsociety is right to target both offline and online databases of E-corp, but it is this lack of “a consistent logic of value creation” that contributes to E-corp’s adaptability. They can essentially just make their own currency, if they so please (cf. supra). “Destroying debt” proves to be much more complicated than originally conceived. Even Elliot foresaw this:

[...] the hard part would be after, during the fallout. That’s the key. The follow through. They’d have an opportunity to reset, rebuild their database. We couldn’t let them. It’d be tempting to lay off them afterwards, but that’s when you have to go in for more. The public’s confidence in them would have to be completely destroyed in order to really finish them off. That’s the only way it would work. Change the world. (2.04)

As the show is only in its second season, the audience will have to wait and see if Elliot can achieve complete liberation. But for now, it looks as if fsociety are still on their knees and way in over their heads.

3.3. The ethics of hacking

Another complicating factor in Elliot's fight for vigilante justice is the fact that the same powers he uses to free people could also potentially be used to oppress them. Can Elliot's methods be justified, even if his intentions are noble? This question has been coming up a lot in regards to superheroes. One recent example is the TV show *Luke Cage* (2016), in which the aftermath of the wholesale destruction of New York during *The Avengers* (2012) is addressed in the figure of Mariah Dillard, one of Luke Cage's main opponents. While the damage caused was a result of the Avengers saving the earth from alien invasion, it does make citizens fear what else superheroes with super strength are capable of. The title character of the TV show, Luke Cage, is impermeable to bullets. Mariah Dillard advances her political career by using the recent events in New York to paint superheroes as antagonists and incite fear for Luke Cage among citizens.

In the 80s, the revisionist era of superhero narratives, Miller and Moore were already bringing this issue up:

An interesting commonality of *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* is that, in both stories, public sentiment has turned against the superheroes, and their activities are explicitly criminalized, unless they officially work for the government.

(Skoble 40)

Skoble argues that this raises interesting questions "about the ethics of vigilantism and the relationship between law and morality." (year: 40)

In terms of legality, Elliot's actions are against the law. Hence, the FBI is after fsociety during the second season. But what is lawful is not necessarily moral, and vice versa. The FBI, part of the legal branch of government, use similar tactics of surveillance and information gathering as the hacker collective. And judging from the secrecy of the FBI's operations and the public outcry afterwards, their actions are not considered ethically sound by most people.

The reaction of the public towards the five/nine is more positive. People think E-corp deserved what they got, even though the company's downfall has made daily life more difficult for them. During the scene mentioned in (1.3), where clients are unable to perform transactions at an E-corp bank, one of the clients snaps at the teller, saying: "I'm done doing business with you crooks. You deserve what you're getting." (2.01) Even on the international scene, the hack is regarded as a chance for world improvement:

Already, 17 governments are said to be in large-scale crises with some on the verge of collapse. [...] This faction has deemed the hack inflicted upon the world's largest conglomerate as an opportunity and a chance to start anew, building more egalitarian economies with lessons learned from decades of economic disparity.

(1.10)²⁸

Is the fact that they hack for the common good a defense of their illegal actions? DiPaolo would probably argue that it is. When he discusses Lisbeth Salander, a superhero with similar enemies as Elliot and fsociety, he justifies her methods thusly:

Salander [...] has no illusions about what it takes to defeat monsters in positions of authority: anonymity, social isolation, computer-hacking savvy, and a willingness to be as ruthless as they are.

(DiPaolo 121)

Similarly, Elliot turns the oppressor's methods around on them. As I have discussed before, turning around the surveilling eye, so it faces dominant institutions, is a way of reclaiming power for the dominated (cf. supra).

²⁸ eps1.9_zer0-day.avi

This kind of prying is easy to justify when aimed at an all-powerful conglomerate but becomes harder to defend when Elliot uses his hacking ability to micro-manage individuals. For example, Elliot hacks into Krista's account, to find out she is dating a man who has a wife and is using a false identity to cover his tracks. Elliot blackmails Krista's boyfriend into leaving Krista and steals his dog in the process. Even though Elliot believes he is protecting Krista, it is dubitable whether this justifies him manipulating her life without her consent. While Elliot is trying to save his fellow man from "the invisible hand", he is also acting as an invisible hand in other people's lives.

The ethical conundrum that watching civilians brings, even if this method is used to protect them, has also popped up in other superhero stories. *The Dark Knight* (2008) is one of the most important pieces of superhero media to bring up this issue of surveillance for safety.

[Batman] creates [a high-tech device] to monitor the private phone calls of every person in Gotham City. The device proves essential in finally tracking down and apprehending the Joker, but the scientist who inadvertently inspired Batman to create it, Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman), believes that it is fundamentally "unethical" and "dangerous," as it provides the user the ability to spy on thirty million people, affording "too much power for one person." Even though capturing the Joker is essential to preserving public safety, Fox feels that the device represents Batman's choosing to sacrifice freedom for security.

(DiPaolo 61)

Can we, as civilians, trust superheroes not to abuse their powers of monitoring? How much of our privacy are we willing to give up, to allow superheroes to protect us?

This is not a question with easy answers. The fact that a lot of American media, including those that involve superheroes, have been grappling with this question since the introduction of the Patriot Act, shows us that the fight against terrorism has brought this hot button issue to the forefront in America, and the world by extension.

Conclusion

The superhero myth, since its creation in 1938, has been a powerful tool to reflect the most pressing issues of the day. It is the ultimate culmination of two contradictory values that define the American psyche: that of the pursuit of social justice and that of individualism. While this appeal to basic values explains its staying power, the superhero myth is also very malleable. Due to its format, it has lent itself to many reboots and the possibilities to create new superheroes is endless. It has always been adapted to represent the values and issues of particular moments in American history. Thus, it is even applicable to a character more unconventional character like Elliot Alderson.

In researching what makes Elliot a suitable hero for the 21st century, I have combined a narrative approach with a contextual one. When it comes to narrative, I have focused on intertextual influence, myth, and characterization. For context, I have used two events that shaped the era of my focus, the 21st century: the 9/11 attacks and the recession of 2007-8. Because of myth's power of reflecting the values of the society the myth was created in, researching the superhero myth in the context of *Mr. Robot* also gave me insight into the issues of today.

The drive to promote the common good was the basis of my first chapter. I have elaborated this criterion by including two aspects typical of superheroes: the backstory, which partially explains the superhero's drive to promote the common good and the villains, as superheroes usually have well-defined antagonists. The formal aspects of the superhero – the superpower, the alter ego and the disguise – were the basis of my second chapter. For the final chapter, I have examined narrative innovations in the superhero myth and found out how they contribute to the complexity of Elliot's character as a superhero.

To start off the first chapter, I examined where his drive to promote the common good comes from, by comparing Elliot's backstory to theories on superhero origin stories. His father's death, caused by a corporation's negligence, is one of the driving forces behind Elliot's hate of corporations. Furthermore, it reflects the growing powerlessness the American people are feeling towards financial institutions. On a personal level, it explained Elliot's feelings of isolation. Thus, a more personal impetus for his cause consists of him believing that a future without economic injustice will also be a less lonely one.

Then I delved deeper into Elliot's cause and how his fight for economic justice reflects the economic anxiety the American people are feeling post-recession. Since the economic crisis was brought on by subprime mortgage loans, Elliot's focus is logically on corrupting E-corp's data and attempting to free people from debt. The focus on this aspect of finance is also a nod to the TV show's prime demographic, young people. This is mainly due to their confrontation with student loans. Furthermore, the concessions government has made to failing banks are also depicted in the show. The bail-outs that the American government gave to the banks that played a part in the financial meltdown are directly referenced in the show. This inability and unwillingness of institutions that are supposed to have citizens' interest at heart increase the need for people to take the matter into their own hands and pursue vigilante justice. Finally, I took a look at movements that inspired Elliot's cause and how these have influenced the American cultural psyche. As the focus was mainly on the recession, when addressing the central cause of Elliot as a superhero, I have consulted works which explain American cultural production in the aftermath of the recession.

To end the chapter, I focused on the villain of the show. I argued that the major conglomerate E-corp was the main antagonist throughout the show because Elliot's plan to take them down is what sets the plot of the series in motion. As I progressed, I found out that the relationship between Elliot and E-corp does not follow the traditional relationship between superhero and villain. Superheroes are usually passive and protect the peaceful status quo. It is usually the actions of the villains which set the fight in motion. Moreover, villains are usually the revolutionaries in this dynamic, because they are set on disrupting the status quo. In the case of *Mr. Robot*, these roles are reversed.

Then I focused on three other aspects of Elliot's superhero persona. Firstly, I argued that Elliot's superpower is topical in an era in which hacktivists and whistleblowers are hailed as heroes, exposing secretive institutions of power who use surveillance to keep dominated people in their place. For this part, I mainly consulted Fuchs' work on the role of watchdog organizations, like WikiLeaks, in reclaiming surveillance to revert the gaze from the powerless to the powerful, to decrease power imbalances between non-transparent institutions of power using surveillance and watched citizens. In the show, this is mostly reflected in the hack of the FBI by fsociety, revealing that they are monitoring millions of citizens, in the pursuit of the hacker collective.

Then I argued that Elliot's "regular" persona appeals to our anxiety that we are too insignificant to change the world. His alter ego, on the other hand, embodies the drive for change, at all costs, that a lot of us wish we could express. To explain this dynamic, I have consulted works that explain the appeal of the superhero alter ego and the fantasies it speaks to. Furthermore, the depiction of Elliot's relationship with his alter ego is depicted in an unconventional manner. Instead of the superhero deliberately changing his persona to fight crime, Elliot's alter ego is an involuntary side effect of his dissociative disorder. While there are other superheroes who cannot control their alter egos, like the Hulk, Elliot's other persona is a figment of his imagination. Therefore, I have also delved into the use of the unreliable cinematic narrator to portray this split in personality.

Finally, I explored how Elliot's black hoodie shows both his position as a fringe figure and his fear. The jacket of his dead father, which he wears as Mr. Robot, expresses the most basic of mythical thought patterns, in which we believe that the essence of a person is transferred into their belongings. This allows him to channel the characteristics he ascribes to

the idealized version of his dead father. His mask is imbued with references to real life iconography, by alluding to the use of the Guy Fawkes mask.

In the final chapter, I took a look at recent developments in the superhero genre and addressed common stereotypes associated with the genre. I argued that even the aspects that may, at first sight, make Elliot too complex to be a superhero, actually have precedence in the development of the superhero genre. To this end, I have first discussed the revolution of superhero media to a depiction of more complex and morally ambiguous superheroes. The growing complexity of the psychology of superheroes means that the universal nature of the superhero myth can reveal truths about our own inner workings. Then I have proven that Elliot's powerlessness in the face of institutions that are embedded in American society has precedence in other superhero stories. Finally, I have addressed the ethical conundrum that Elliot's hacking abilities pose and how these questions have especially become relevant in a post-9/11 and Patriot Act society.

Elliot makes a poignant superhero for the 21st century by symbolizing a consciousness that is both timely and timeless. He represents the rogue outsider who we simultaneously want to be and be saved by. His inner turmoil confronts us with truths about the human psyche while representing the turbulence of the current era. His cause of defending the weaker against the domination of the ones in power is one as old as time, but at the same time reflects Americans' current fear that their government and corporations are becoming more authoritarian. Thus, despite Elliot being troubled, audiences have embraced him.

What does the future hold for America's vigilante super-hacker? What can be said with certainty, is that the turbulent year that was 2016 should give showrunner Sam Esmail enough material for later seasons. On both ends of the political spectrum, the American people have been expressing frustration at "not having control". Sam Esmail has – jokingly – been hinting at the part Trump's recent election will be playing in the following seasons (fig. 29). With the new president-elect, it does not seem likely that the 99% will be freed from the clutches of Wall Street: Trump has left his businesses in the hands of his own children, has hinted at manipulating foreign policy to benefit his bottom line, and despite promises of "draining the swamp",²⁹ he has elected several corporate executives to his cabinet.

Hence, Elliot's goal of economic equality remains a faraway dream. As Elliot says himself: "Maybe wars aren't meant to be won. Maybe they're meant to be continuous." (2.10).

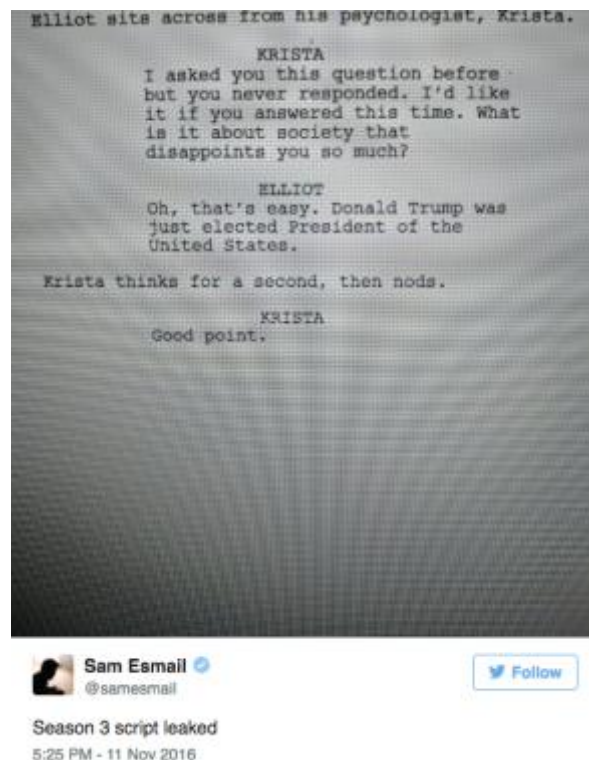


Fig. 29

²⁹ <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/12/trump-drain-swamp-promise-232938>

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