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Mr. Robot:

Schizophrenia, Paranoia and Corporate Greed

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Abstract

The following essay explores the first season of Mr. Robot (2015 –) that was available at the time of this writing from the position of Deleuzian symptomatology, what he calls the tensions between the «clinical and the critical». I attempt to show how this series offers us insights into our «society of control», also a Deleuzian development, through its main figure Elliot Anderson. A comparison is made with the film «Kein System ist Sicher», which raises similar social issues through its narrative. While I do not address directly pedagogical media concerns, the implications are that such televised narratives confront the general public, what I call «everyman», with the ethical problems and dilemmas of our globalized capitalist order.

Mr. Robot: Schizophrenie, Paranoia und korporative Gier

Zusammenfassung

Der vorliegende Beitrag untersucht die erste Staffel von Mr. Robot (2015 –) aus Gilles Deleuzes symptomatologischer Position, die sich auf das Spannungsfeld zwischen «dem Klinischen und dem Kritischen» fokussiert. Zum Zeitpunkt des Verfassens dieses Artikels war nur die erste Staffel verfügbar. Im Folgenden zeige ich am Beispiel der Hauptfigur Elliot Anderson, inwiefern die Serie Einblicke in unsere «Kontrollgesellschaft» – auch eine Deleuzsche Entwicklung – gewähren kann. Zudem wird ein Vergleich mit dem Film «Kein System ist sicher», der ähnliche gesellschaftliche Fragen thematisiert, vorgenommen. Obwohl ich auf medienpädagogische Aspekte nur indirekt eingehen werde, hebe ich im Laufe der Argumentation hervor, dass solche Fernseh narrative das allgemeine Publikum oder das, was ich als «jeder mann» beschreibe, mit ethischen Problemen und Dilemmata unserer globalen kapitalistischen Ordnung konfrontieren.

The Figure of the Hacker in Mr. Robot: A Deleuzian Perspective.

The figure of the hacker has emerged as the personification of the anti-hero in a world where secrets are no longer possible, yet secrets must nevertheless be kept so that there is some protection against complete exposure, making us vulnerable and transparent to the forces of a progressively hostile and precarious world of work and everyday life where information abounds. The collapse between private



and public presents a thin line along which to maintain a balance of existence. The hacker thrives in the dark and private recesses of anonymity, surfacing into the public light only as much as necessary. In these dark recesses of anonymity is where precisely corruption, conspiracy and corporate greed operate, away from the «eyes» of the law that blindly search the «common man» via surveillance techniques to stumble onto terrorist plots or financial schemes that are in the making. When news breaks out that a grievous crime has been committed, the preventative steps have already come too late. In a world of financial commerce that relies on the algorithms of coded information, data transference and exchange, tied to profit and «free market» competition where investments depend on trust and security, the need to stay one step ahead of competitors is the necessary presence of mind for any CEO worth the staggering bonuses earned for such foresight. Like the «cogs» in Philip K. Dick's *Minority Report* (Spielberg 2002) who foretell the future, «remediation» is the modus operandi of financial capital and nation states alike; Prevention first to ensure that the projected future is not disrupted.

Mr. Robot, the television drama series released by USA Network in the summer of 2015, introduces Elliot Alderson (Rami Malek), a thirty's something New Yorker as our urban anti-hero hacker. Elliot works for a cybersecurity company called Allsafe as a misanthropic security engineer. He hates being touched. E Corp, perceived as Evil Corp by Elliot, is Allsafe's biggest client. The clichéd signifiers present the symbiotic desire of a closed operating system: security creates trust, which in turn generates investment in a continuous loop for progressive corporate growth. Any breach in this assemblage of desire results in collapse and jeopardizes the system. The hacker is presented as someone who sees through this charade; He or she has X-ray vision in being able to penetrate the intricacies of any system, given that such systems are held together via circuits of exchange as well as by human maintenance. Both («man» and machine) are fallible, subject to manipulation and breakdown.

The supreme hacker fantasy, what «everyman» believes but is unable to act out, is introduced in the first episode (*Hellofriend*) via Elliot's private (and hence «true» secretive) thoughts as to what he «really» sees and thinks. This idea of reflective private consciousness that taps into the unspoken fantasies of a viewing audience establishes a sense of identification with Elliot as someone who «really» knows what is at play. It confirms that each of us possess such inner thoughts that we believe no one is privy to. Yet, throughout the series we come to realize that this is illusionary as well; What we think are our private desires and wishes are already exposed by our very actions. It is precisely because of this gap, which exists between (private) belief and (public) action that the «hack» can take place. In other words between fantasy and reality enables all sorts of forms of deception that come into play. The hacker is presented as someone who, like a con artist, is able to outsmart and out-

think the law. In short, the hacker is someone who is able to continuously «work» the gaps between the inside (belief) and the outside (the symbolic order with its rules) so they appear to be invisible and anonymous. Elliot is a figure of *resistance* that the «everyman» can secretly relate to and embrace in a capitalist system.

The anonymity of Elliot's private thoughts are presented to us as «voices inside his head», the schizophrenia from which he suffers, which he calls a «friend», his «imaginary self». Elliot basically «talks to himself» inwardly rather than outwardly. He addresses the voices in his head that are presented at times as unsolvable dilemmas that he must grapple with. The schizophrenic as a «visionary» was developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1983) in *Anti-Oedipus* and then more fully in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) maintaining, against Freud, that the case of Judge Schreber's schizophrenia should be read against the backdrop of the politico-cultural context in which he lived, against the forces of capitalism and psychoanalytic normativity that structured him. For Deleuze and Guattari, Schreber's *Memoirs* are a testament to his resistance, and the centre of his psychosis, his «solar anus» is identified as the zone of intensity that is both productive and destructive; His struggles against the voices inside his head revolve around his ability or inability to shit. Elliot's schizophrenic condition is conflated with what Deleuze and Guattari call schizoanalysis in his ability to penetrate the «heart and soul» of capitalist society and its primary institutions of psychiatry and psychoanalysis (Elliot is undergoing therapy) and the nuclear family: the audience quickly learns that his father was mistreated at work and his mother mistreated Elliot and had no love for his father, while his relation with his sister becomes a startling revelation as developed in the first season. There is also an underlying queer discourse that runs throughout: Elliot's boss Gideon Goddard (Michel Gill) attempts to be more open about being gay, and a hacker mastermind, WhiteRose is a transgendered figure. In brief, family relations are «anti-oedipal» in ways that query the usual oedipal relationships we are grown accustomed to through television dramas or are related by Freudian if not Lacanian psychoanalysis. Here the «queering» discourse itself suggests that the outsiders in relation to the working of the law are the ones in the «know».

Deleuze and Guattari's thesis in *Anti-Oedipus* (1983) and completed in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) is to show the relationship between capitalism and schizophrenia. Their claim is that capitalism fosters schizophrenia via the quantitative calculations of the marketplace, which replace meaning and belief-systems as foundational to the social order. Much like the incessant semiosis that Elliot experiences, always unsure, hesitant, and careful in his moves, capitalism operates in the same way, constantly overcoming existing beliefs and meaning to open up new markets and introduce new marketing strategies to do so. More so, the new technologies have accelerated this process to such an extent that many are left with a «groundless ground». The lack of a belief in a «metanarrative» is one thing, but there is nothing

«truly» to believe in: the American dream is but a dying myth as the middle class shrinks, the richer 1% become richer, corruption of Wall street is a known exposed fact, more and more debt is accumulated by «everyman» presenting what is post-modern slave society of control.

The powerful counter-measure to such a schizophrenic process is paranoia, which is schizophrenia's opposite: the belief in a system where all meaning is permanently fixed, defined by supreme authority figures. The paranoid alternative is to turn to the ground of postmodern variations of tradition, from the most extreme possibilities such as the Islamic orthodoxy of ISIS to the most liberal such as different levels of western Buddhism. This turn to postmodern religious orthodoxies like Islam and Christianity find new ground and believers. Micro-fascisms abound as popular National Fronts offer comfort in the belief of a (purified and homogeneous) community in the name of the «citizen». The tensions between schizophrenia as visionary and open, and paranoia as closed and hierarchical characterize the kernel of capitalism in Deleuze and Guattari's terms. Elliot's «imaginary friend» as the voice inside his head presents this very tension between schizophrenia, the acts when he is most *free*, surfing the Internet, writing code, hacking into systems, and so on, and the overwhelming paranoia that grips him when he fears he is being followed by corporatist goons who are onto his antics or drug lords who are onto his game. The paranoia attached to totalitarian surveillance is very much a «reality» for Elliot for he knows precisely how the instruments of surveillance work, and he knows full well that those instruments can be turned on him just as easily as he turns them on others to extract a picture of behaviour.

Nowhere is this paranoia more on display as when Elliot believes his hack into a young rising CEO at Evil Corporation that wishes to «hire» him was just «too easy». The figure of Tyrell Wellick (Martin Wallström) whose life style resembles the CEO Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale) of *American Psycho* (Harron 2000) fame, is equally a competent and clever cyber-engineer, certainly an equal. Overcome with paranoia of being found out, Elliot proceeds to dismantle every bit of his computer apparatus: to perform a «wipe». The computer, like Judge Schreiber's «anus», which is where the judge is penetrated by the «rays» of an amorous but hostile deity to turn him into a woman so that he can serve his pleasure, is Elliot's libidinous body extension. It's what brings him life and death at the same time. It gives him power, and at the same time it can rob him of it. After each successful hack that forms one of his ongoing projects, Elliot transfers the data onto a hard CD disc, assigns it a name, stores it in a folder and then kicks it under his bed, his «digital cemetery». He then wipes his computer clean.

The only release from this extraordinary tension between schizophrenia and paranoia, his feeling of loneliness that brings on depression and violent headaches is an escape into heroine. But this too has its own embedded contradiction: to pre-

vent complete addiction Elliot limits it to 30 milligrams a day and then follows up with Suboxone, a drug used to curb heroin use so that he is able to maintain the impossible line between being a cybersecurity engineer and a hacker; The added irony being that Suboxone is more difficult to obtain as a street drug than heroine.

The Hacker Fantasy

What then is the hacker fantasy that we are introduced to? What is it that Elliot desires, that feeds his schizo-self – his «friend»? In Elliot's self-reflective thoughts that are presented as a voice-over we learn of the following paranoid image that supports Jacques Lacan's (2007) succinct definition that the paranoid believes in the *Other of the Other*, the final authority behind the scenes of the system:

What I am about to tell you is top secret, a conspiracy bigger than all of us. 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. And now I think they're following me. (*Mr. Robot*, Season1, Episode1. TC: 00:00:24 – 00:00:46)

Everywhere Elliot looks, he thinks he's being followed, surveyed by men in black suits.

We learn a number of things in the first episode (of ten) that sets the arc of season one, which crests in episode 9 that I develop latter. Elliot is a hacker, but a hacker with a consciousness that takes the moral high ground. His desire seems to be on the side of justice and fairness, protecting those he cares for, and concerned about a wide range of corrupt business practices. His character is quickly established as his ability to hack into hidden and illicit websites is presented in the very first scene. Elliot confronts a wealthy owner of a coffee chain who is a pedophile trafficking in child pornography over the Internet. His research, the demonstration of his technical ability, and know-how are amply delivered in the exchange; Being bribed with money so that he would stop leaking the hidden servers to the cyberpolice does nothing to prevent his action. Elliot remains steadfast in his convictions.

We learn as well that Elliot is «different», unable to relate to people, and that the only person he could talk to was his dad – but he died. The impression is given that Elliot's vigilantism against corruption stems from an injustice that his father suffered; He died of leukemia as a result of the radiation that the company refused to take responsibility for causing. As the story unfolds, Elliot becomes caught up in a hacker group called *fsociety*. Elliot is «recruited» by «Mr. Robot» (Christian Slater) to join this hacker vigilante group who is planning to take down Evil Corp. Mr. Robot is the name the audience assumes, not only from the television series, but also from the label on the jacket he wears: Mr. Robot - Computer Repair with a Smile. Elliot does not call him Mr. Robot. He is a figure that «stalks» him from the very first

episode when he suffers his fits of paranoia as hired corporate black suits follow and spy on him. We learn this as a ‹back story› that begins to unfold after the first episode. Elliot is approached by Mr. Robot, who appeals to his anarchistic desire for justice. The grand plan by this hacktivist group, *f*society is to target Evil Corp, and Elliot is absolutely essential to the success of their plan. As Mr. Robot explains, Elliot has access to their servers via being a trusted Allsafe employee.

The schizo-character in relation to the Deleuze and Guattari's attempt at schizo-analysis, is to maintain that ‹thinking› is what disturbs the unity of the transcendental subject. The hacker as schizo is able to see the world askew, a vision that penetrates the given world of doxa and business as usual. This contradiction as to what Elliot says and what he ‹truly› thinks via his ‹friend› is left with the audience to comprehend. If it were otherwise, were Elliot to speak his mind, expose his ‹friend›, the situation would be similar to what happens to Jim Carrey's character, Fletcher Reede in *Liar, Liar*. Elliot would immediately be fingered as disturbed or indeed mad: what he says is not to be believed, to do so goes completely against Elliot's anarchism as a form of resistance. Rather than turning to tradition or the emptiness of nihilism, Elliot sees the worth in fighting corruption that is embodied in Evil Corporation. The anarchistic fantasy is therefore to take down this corporation so that people become debt-free as all the data would be wiped leaving the world in a chaotic state to rebuild a different and hopefully better world. This would be an ontological Event, as Badiou (2006) would theorize it, a truly revolutionary ‹act› where the symbolic order comes crashing down. We have already witnessed a similar scenario at the end of the movie, *Fight Club* (Fincher 1999), directed by David Fincher. Elliot's uncanny insight often comes up when his ‹friend› relates aspects of the social order. The more insightful ones are directed at people he cares for as he is able to see through the daily binds that capture them. Elliot hacking technique requires that he looks for ‹the worst in them›, what might be considered the ‹obscene supplement›; That which is always hidden, secretive, and shapes unconscious desire and fantasy structures. Elliot is a ‹symptomatologist› of society, as Deleuze (1983) would say. He tells it like it is, but always to himself. When asked by his psychologist Krista Gordon (Gloria Rueben) as to why he ‹hates› society and becomes angry, he seems to be forthright in his response:

Is it that we collectively thought that Steve Jobs was a great man, even when we knew who made billions off the backs of children? [images of a computer assembly line is shown] Or, maybe it's that it feels like all our heroes are counterfeit [an image of Lance Armstrong is shown]. The world itself is just one big hoax [Bill Crosby's image is shown]. Spamming each other with our running commentary of bullshit masquerading as insight, our social media faking as intimacy [Facebook is shown]. 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* makes us happy, but because we wanna be sedated, because it's painful not to pretend, because we're cowards. Fuck Society. (*Mr. Robot*, Season1, Episode1. TC: 00:12:35 – 00:13:13.).

But, again, this is Elliot's «friend» speaking. Krista addresses him to snap back into «reality». Having hacked her life, Elliot succinctly points out why she has empathy for his loneliness as she too experiences this same feeling. When Krista presses as to how he would know or intuit such a thing he realises that he has crossed the line between private and public and quickly says, «I don't know» (*Mr. Robot*, Season1, Episode1).

Elliot's insight through his «friend» seem uncanny:

How do we know if we are in control? That we are not making the best what comes at us and that's it. We're constantly being asked to pick between two options: like your two paintings in the waiting room; or Coke and Pepsi? MacDonald's or Burger King? Hyundai or Honda? It's all part of the same blur, right? Just out of focus enough – the illusion of choice. Half of us can't pick our own cable, gas or electric, the water we drink, our health insurance. Even if we did, would it matter? If our only option is Blue Cross or Blue Shield, what the fuck is the difference? In fact, aren't they the same? Our choices are prepaid for us long time ago. (*Mr. Robot*, Season1, Episode2. TC: 00:35:46 – 00:37:09).

We cannot call this cynicism given Elliot's actions. Rather the insights are genuine. «What I wouldn't give to be normal», he «thinks». «To live in that bubble, the reality of the naïve. That's how I justify this [hacking]. To keep *their* optimism intact. To protect *them*» (*Mr. Robot*, Season1, Episode2. TC: 00:55:36 – 00:55:55). So, against this fucked-up world Elliot's attempt is to set things right, or what he perceives as setting things right. We can easily sympathize with his character. How could we not? Elliot even rescues a maltreated dog (Flipper) and gives him shelter. Eventually Elliot traces down Krista's boyfriend (Michel Hansen), who turns out to be married and is two-timing her by hiring prostitutes and seeing other women. As we progress into the season, there comes a time when Elliot must admit he has hacked her life, and face the consequences as he leaves her practice. In that last session it is Elliot who is the psychologist, providing a succinct analysis of Krista's life; he sees right through her, so much so that she is devastated.

[Elliot's Friend]. 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 ... [Evil Corp]; the one that controls us every day without us knowing it. But I can't stop it. I'm not that special. I'm just anonymous. I am just alone. (*Mr. Robot*, Season1, Episode2. TC: 00:19:40 – 00:20:14)

All Elliot has is his fish Qwerty, and then Flipper.

Elliot gets his chance of becoming «special» through a number of unexpected meetings with Mr. Robot, who seems to show up (and at times disappear) fortuitously. Mr. Robot seduces him to meet the members of *fsociety* who plan to erase Evil Corp's data banks to «free» people of their debt. Elliot is the key to their success as he has earned a place of respect in Allsafe for stopping *fsociety's* DDoS attack on Evil Corp's servers. A Distributed Denial of Services (DDoS) attack is an attempt to shut down online services by overwhelming it with traffic from multiple sources. *Fsociety* set up a «rootkit» inside of Evil Corp's servers (a rootkit is masked and invisible, forming a collection of malware codes impossible to detect) to get at unauthorized access. The only way to stop this rootkit was to shut down all the servers in the server farms, wipe them clean, and then boot up the system. Elliot spots an infected server that is still running. The boot would not work unless the info traffic is redirected, which is what Elliot manages to do. On discovering that this was an *fsociety* attack, Elliot is unable to delete the infected server. He does not know why he is unable to press the delete button. Instead he reconfigures the access to the root directly so only he would be able to access it on another occasion.

Mr. Robot seems to appear when Elliot is alone, especially travelling on subways and in desolated subway stations. But, at other times he pops up at his office. The tension between the two never leaves. Mr. Robot wants to «free» Elliot of his inability to make a «difference» in the world by becoming part of something bigger – a plan that will literally change the way the social order operates. To keep his hacker group «safe» all is done in IRL (In Real Life). There is no electronic exchange of traffic between the members. «Our encryption is the real world», says Mr. Robot. The proposal, however causes Elliot a major conflict as how he is to participate, continually struggling with what is asked by Mr. Robot for him to do, always searching for alternate solutions as a way out to achieve the same goals without hurting anyone. Such ethical dilemmas have to be constantly negotiated.

Elliot's Psychic Instability

Throughout the season the understanding that we live in a «control society» as developed by Deleuze (1992) comes across, mainly through the conversations with Mr. Robot, who articulates the way corruption works invisibly, and the virtuality of money that is exchanged daily, with the need to wipe out the data banks of Evil Corp conglomerate that controls 70% of the global consumer credit industry. The anarchist's dream is unveiled: the biggest single wealth redistribution in all of history, a technological hack that is revolutionary in every way imaginable. Elliot buys into this plot of destruction. He writes in Terry Colby's (a CEO of Evil Corp) terminal IP address in the data analysis file. Decrypted, this shows that he was the initiator

of the rootlink. Elliot presents this file rather than a duplicate file that shows it was *fsociety* who had initiated the DDos. Like the scene in *The Matrix* where Neo has to decide between swallowing the blue or the red pill, the blue pill ends the story, the red pill makes Neo aware of the Matrix, Elliot hands over the manipulated file only because Colby dismisses Angela from the meeting as being too incompetent as she was in charge of security at the time. Elliot is seen as the one with the technical savvy to report what had happened. The rest of the series unfolds with Elliot's involvement with *fsociety* and Evil Corp's Sr. Vice-President of Technology, Tyrell Wellick (Martin Wallström) who is suspicious that Elliot was responsible for the arrest of Colby for the cybercrime. As business goes, Tyrell sees this as a perfect opportunity to rise up in the company, which is developed as a side-story. Elliot in contrast is constantly struggles with his «friend» Mr. Robot to keep supporting *fsociety* or his loyalty to Gideon, Allsafe's CEO.

Three women are in play in Elliot's life: Angela (Portia Doubleday) who is a childhood friend, and works with Elliot in Allsafe. Both of their fathers worked for the same company and both suffered the same fate of leukemia. Angela is presented as someone who is very concerned for Elliot's health and behaviour. One gets the impression that there is an ambivalent sexual attraction by her for Elliot, which is not entirely reciprocal, although he clearly cares for her. Her live-in boyfriend Ollie Parker (Ben Rappaport) also works for Allsafe and has an uneasy and awkward relationship with Elliot. Elliot has hacked him as well and knows about all his infidelities with other women while being with Angela. Elliot is Angela's superior when it comes to cybersecurity issues causing a tension as she wishes to be independent and recognized for her own skills. The side story is developed in relation to Angela finding her own spine in relation to corporate greed, only to be challenged and be seduced by the world it offers.

Shayla Nico (Frankie Shaw) is Elliot's long-standing apartment neighbour, drug supplier, and turns out to be his girlfriend. Shayla, like Elliot has another side, she is artistic and wishes to develop her craft further. Shayla ends up being a casualty of Elliot's «help» as he puts her drug dealer, Fernando Vera (Elliot Vilar) in jail by hacking his sources and anonymously reporting them to the police. While in jail, Fernando finds out that Elliot is responsible for his arrest. Fernando's brother and his goons kidnap Shayla – her life in exchange for Fernando's release from jail utilizing Elliot's hacking ingenuity. But the price Elliot pays for his involvement with Fernando is the loss of Shayla's life.

The last female figure is Darlene (Carly Chaikin) who is a member of *fsociety*. She is equally brilliant at hacking, almost but perhaps not quite Elliot's equal. Darlene is absolutely driven to take down Evil Corp and to make the plan work. She seems intuitively to know Elliot, where he lives and his mood swings when it comes to doing *fsociety's* bidding. The «secret» of Darlene will be explained below.

The three female characters are related to Elliot's psychic stability. Angela (angel) is often dressed in white and gives him the encouragement to meet people so that he comes out of himself; Shayla helps him with his drugs, and for a time at least, gives him some balance in life as his steady girlfriend. With her he finds some peace. Darlene, on the other hand, is often dressed in black. Her character derails Elliot, not only as a member of *fsociety* who insists that the revolution happens, but also invading his apartment without permission.

Mr. Robot in relation to *Kein System ist Sicher*

Identity and deception are the two main focal points in the hacker's world. Although *Mr. Robot's* writer, Sam Esmail attributes some of his influences to *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*, the script is closer and in many respects uncannily echoes many of the tropes developed in the German hacker film *Kein System ist Sicher*, literally «No System is Safe» and yet translated as *Who am I?* as the English release's title. The question of identity and anonymity are front and centre. *Kein System ist Sicher* was written by Jantje Friese and Baran bo Odar who also directed the film in 2014. It would be unusual if Esmail was not aware of this brilliant film that reached the top of the German cinema charts, and given that screen writing requires research examining previous scripts of the same genre. *Kein System ist Sicher* presents a computer hacker, Benjamin Engel (Tom Schilling) whose profile is much like Elliot's: late twenty or early 30, hooded as «protection» against the world to avoid being seen, bulging eyes, and equally deceptive in the games Benjamin is able to initiate. The scene shifts from New York to Berlin as a major mega cosmopolis. Benjamin is presented as having lost his mother to suicide when he was 8, and his father died in the war, his grandmother raises him. He is also presented as a nobody, anonymous, and his last name, Engel (translated as angel) is another give-away raising questions of justice as he dreams of being a superhero since he is such a nerd at school – again a nobody, with invisibility being his superpower. Hints that Benjamin is also «disturbed» is shown in a back-flash where Benjamin's doctor stares at René Magritte's famous portrait *La Reproduction Interdite* (1937) where there is no reflection of the self in the mirror, only the reproduction of the person's back, hinting that he has a genetic multiple personality disorder. Most of all, the similarity to Elliot is that Benjamin tells his back-story to Hanne Lindeberg, the leader of the Cyber Division of Europol whom he has already hacked, and knows her psychological profile. This story intrigues us, and of course Hanne who is expecting him to reveal the cybercrimes of a hacker group known as FR13NDS and MR X an infamous hacker known around Darknet during the interrogation. The levels of paranoia and anonymity against the law as presented in both films are rated via other more-powerful hacker groups whose cooperation is crucial should the magnitude of «event» become newsworthy and profiled by the media as caus-

ing major disruption and devastation, like any terrorist group or graffiti artist who operates outside the law. In *Kein System ist Sicher* the small band of hackers need Benjamin's coding abilities and insight into system's operations so as to become noticed on the world stage. Here they try to get the attention of a Russian hacker mafia cell known as FR13NDS. As has become customary, the disguise of identity to assure anonymity is presented through the mask, famously now instituted by The Anonymous Hackers Group who wear the Guy Fawkes mask made infamous by the graphic novel and film, *V for Vendetta* (McTeigue 2005). Its shared identity («we are legion»), via a repeatable mask stands for the solidarity of the civil public, and like *Mr. Robot* and *Kein System ist Sicher* the sense of justice is front and centre via anarchistic but effective acts of data manipulation as forms of deception. This film and the television series attempt to develop sophisticated hacker ploys rather than the more common ones such as phishing, Trojan Horse, fake wireless access points (WAP), Cookie theft, operating system locations, file name tricks, malware to redirect host files, as well as bait and switch techniques. *Kein System ist Sicher* presents a mastermind hacker, whose mask has an X on it, also known as MRX, who Benjamin meets on Darknet, and becomes a hero for him, a hero he must latter outsmart. Benjamin, unlike Elliot joins a hacker group who are simply involved in having mischievous pranking «fun» – Clowns Laughing at You (CLAY). Elliot's involvement with a similar paranoid mastermind hacker, Rose (BD Wong), an affiliate of the Dark Army, a vigilant hacker group with no particular loyalty or ideology except perhaps profit, is a Chinese-American transgendered woman, obsessed with time and absolutely paranoid concerning her identity to the point of absolute fanaticism to erase all traces of her appearance. The building where Elliot meets her for the slated three minutes to present his «proposal» to get help for the major takedown of Evil Corp in China is set on fire to destroy any evidence that this meeting ever took place. This hyper-purging of data and all traces is shown over and over in hacker films. In *Kein System ist Sicher* all the computer data that would incriminate CLAY are burnt in a furnace, as they are in *Mr. Robot*, confirming that reproducibility and repetition lie at the heart of information technologies in terms of innovation of codes and chaining algorithms.

The Importance of Deception: Elliot Unveiled

Kein System ist Sicher is brilliant, developing plot changes and surprises that occur towards the film's end as Benjamin and Hanne apply their cyberknowledge to outwit and outplay each other. But it is the arc that develops in *Mr. Robot* that offers viewers a surprise – a «social engineering televisual hack» – provided they have not read the spoilers and were willing to follow the plot, much as when Benjamin tells his story to Hanne for the capture of FR13DS and MRX in exchange for a witness protection plan. The arc begins its crests with episode 8. We first find out that

Darlene works as a hooker to support herself, and that she and Angela know each other as childhood friends, made evident as both attend a New York ballet school-class together even twenty years later. Then, after Elliot's meeting with WhiteRose who gives him 50 hours and twenty minutes to make the revolutionary hackwork, Elliot has to remove a «honeypot» from the infected CS30 server (a honeypot is a security mechanism set to detect and deflect any attempts at unauthorized use). Then there is the meeting between Mr. Robot and Tyrell Wellick in his private car at night parked at Coney Island where *f*society hang out. Tyrell tells him they were meant to be allies, and that he knows his «dirty little secret», but Mr. Robot seems to shake it off and leaves the car. The last scene presents the first surprise. In an intimate scene with Darlene discussing Elliot's success in removing the honeypot, and his meeting with WhiteRose, he reaches over and kisses her. The shock is that Darlene turns out to be his sister. This pushes Elliot to a point of breakage, literally breaking the mirror as his identity crises comes to the fore. He hacks himself to find out who he is, the same scenario being played out in *Kein System ist Sicher* on another register. It turns out he is a ghost. Nothing is found out in this hack on himself. He then pulls out one of his CD discs from his «digital cemetery» with no name on it, opens it and finds images of Mr. Robot, his dad Edward Alderman, with pictures of him as a young boy.

In episode 9 all things begin to completely unravel as all the secrets are exposed and Elliot has a psychotic breakdown. Elliot is on the search as to who he «really» is. This same character split as is found in the *Fight Club* where Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) and the Narrator (Edward Norton) are one and the same person. Mr. Robot, his imaginary friend, who lives both inside his head and is materialized on particularly difficult occasions where Elliot is at a loss as to what to do are one and the same persons: Elliot|Mr. Robot. Episode 9 has Elliot in search of lost memories. The episode begins with him as a child in 1994 helping his dad in the store. His father is Mr. Robot, the owner of a computer repair shop. An enraged customer returns and demands that he be given 20 dollars back, accusing that his son, the young Elliot, had stolen this money from his wallet when he paid 20 for a mouse. Rather than reprimanding Elliot they go to a movie. It seems that the ethical dilemma of the customer being a prick outweighs the stolen money. The value of financial equality prevails as the customer puts the entrepreneurial spirit of Edward down, calling him stupid and an imbecile. Judgment is based between what is worse or «worsen». In the next scene Mr. Robot appears in his apartment, the conversation that ensues amplifies Elliot's paranoia as Mr. Robot tells him of his meeting with Tyrell Wellick; he's being followed by Evil Corp goons so that Mr. Robot and him are prevented from working together, halting the revolution as planned by *f*society. The most crucial scene happens when Elliot|Mr. Robot go back to the childhood home. Committing a B'nE (breaking and entering) as no one is home, they go into what was

once Elliot's upstairs bedroom. Elliot then grasps Mr. Robot and is about to push him out a second floor window, re-enacting the trauma he experienced as an eight year old when his father pushed him out the window. But now the «secret» comes out. It was Elliot's own doing, a suicide attempt. It was an incident that he could never get over, blaming his father rather than himself for what had happened, causing (one assumes) the trauma. Elliot comes to realise that he *is* Mr. Robot.

Season one ends with the fantasy of the revolution coming true. Elliot is instrumental in achieving what Slavoj Žižek (2000) calls an act, while Alain Badiou (2006) would say an event. There is a fundamental change in ontology as the social order is transformed. «I wanted to save the world» (*Mr. Robot*, Season1, Episode9. TC: 00:48:20) says Elliot, as Evil Corp data banks are encrypted and the world is found to be «debt free». In a similar scene from *V for Vendetta* people in New York Times Square wear similar identical masks, with placards shouting revolution. The ethical resolutions to some of Elliot's ethical dilemmas are shown. Krysta breaks up with Michel Hansen, her boyfriend, refusing to turn Elliot in upon his request.

Elliot wakes up in Tyrell's car parked for two days in a parking lot not knowing what happened. The closing scene of episode 9 had him and Tyrell in the Coney Island hideout. Tyrell was onto Elliot as being the mastermind of the Evil Corp takedown. We know that Darlene gave Elliot a gun, which he hid inside a popcorn machine that stood in the Coney Island amusement centre: *f*society's headquarters. Did he use it on Tyrell when they went there? Elliot finds out that the global hack worked. Ultimately the last episode presents the struggle between Elliot and Mr. Robot, between Elliot's anarchistic ambivalence and Mr. Robot outright cynicism of the world that has been created. This is presented as two main opposing soliloquies – the first by Elliot as he walks through Allsafe and observes the turmoil that has been created by the «revolution». His thoughts present this ambivalence.

Elliot: Why did Tyrell let this happen? [Businesses are in chaos, banking is in chaos, images of finance ministers and world leaders urgently meeting as to what to do]. He was with me. I told him the whole plan. He was gonna stop it. A simple program, a worm that can make data unreadable, malware that took Darlene maybe two hours to code. Is that all it takes to kill the world? Shouldn't I be enjoying this? Why am I even looking for Tyrell? Isn't this what we wanted? So this is what a revolution looks like, people in expensive clothing running around. Not how I pictured it. I wonder what stage they're at. Denial. Muttering to themselves? No, this can be fixed; maybe bargaining, forcing their techs to work overtime to try to decrypt our data. Or, have they come to the realization yet that Darlene encrypted everything with 256-bit AES and it would take an incomprehensible amount of time to crack? That all their data is actually gone for good? (*Mr. Robot*, Season1, Episode10. TC: 00:14:37 – 00:15:46)

But Mr. Robot enters into the picture as Elliot is unable to find what happened to Tyrell. In the middle of Times Square, with the placards around, people wear the anonymous mask of *fsociety*, he gives his «speech».

Mr. Robot: Is any of this real? A world built on fantasy! I mean, look at this. Look at it! [Crowd going wild in the streets carrying signs]. A world built on fantasy! Synthetic emotions in the form of pills, psychological warfare in the form of advertising, mind-altering chemicals in the form of food, brain-washing seminars in the form of media, controlled isolated bubbles in the form of social networks. Real? You want to talk about reality? We haven't lived anything close to it since the turn of the century. We turned it off, took out the batteries, snacked on a bag of GMOs [genetically modified organism] while we tossed the remnants in the ever-expanding dumpster of the human condition. We live in branded houses trademarked by corporations built on bipolar numbers jumping up and down on digital displays, hypnotizing us into the biggest slumber mankind has ever seen. You have to dig pretty deep, kiddo before you can find anything real. We live in a kingdom of bullshit, a kingdom you've lived in far too long. So don't tell me about not being real. I'm [Mr. Robot] no less real than that fucking beef patty in your... As far as you're concerned Elliot, I am very real. Were all together not whether you like it or not [he cradles the family, Elliot's mother and himself as a young boy, plus all the demonstrators]. (*Mr. Robot*, Season1, Episode10. TC: 00:45:04 – 00:46:17)

Mr. Robot's speech presents the hyperreal simulacrum of signs that Jean Baudrillard (1988) developed, arguing that postmodernity is but the play of such signs, and that beneath those signs is the «really real». But the point is that there is no «really real». We can only speculate what that is. Elliot screams he needs to be alone, and suddenly he opens his eyes and he stands in the deserted square, only to have an advertisement screen appear with Mr. Robot and family telling him that being «alone» is what he doesn't want. As a family, they are with him, to which Elliot protests violently that they should leave. Mr. Robot however prevails telling Elliot to go home and watch the carnage unfold. And indeed we see nothing but violence and protest around the world as leaders scramble to calm the financial crisis. The season ends with a knocking on his apartment door.

But the most sinister scene is yet to be shown. After the credits role by we have a short scene that takes place in the late evening in what seems to be a private club in what appears to be a mansion. The exclusivity of this club cannot be mistaken. It is reserved for the 1% of the 1%. A conversation is exchanged between WhiteRose, now appearing much more business-like, short hair, suit and more masculine, asks Philip Price (Michael Cristofer), the chief CEO of Evil Corp about the Coltan mines in the Congo. Price brushes this off wanting to listen to the harp music, telling

WhiteRose that he knows who is responsible for the cybercrime, and will be dealt with accordingly. However, the implication is that the cybercrime aided by the Dark Army to wipe the Evil Corps duplicate data banks in China had another motive after all, part of yet another financial strategy for global supremacy. WhiteRose implies that Price is a bit like Nero, listening to the music of the lyre as Rome burns.

Some Concluding Thoughts

What revolution?

[Elliot]: I look for the worst in them. (*Mr. Robot*, Season1, Episode1. TC: 00:11:15)

[Elliot's Friend talking]: I remember when I was a kid, I got into web design by ripping of sites I liked. All you had to do was view source on your browser, and there it was, the code. You could copy-paste it, modify it a little, put your name on it, and like that, it was your site. View source. What if we had that for people? Would people really want to see? [Images of Allsafe workers are shown with signs around their necks that indicate their dark secrets: I am bulimic, I just had a nose job. I love feet. I pretend to love my husband. I'm scared of sex. I steal. I hate my family. I am empty inside.] Find someone to be your honest self with? Bullshit (*Mr. Robot*, Season1, Episode7. TC: 00:10:41 – 00:11:23).

I need to wipe again (*Mr. Robot*, Season1, Episode7. TC: 00:13:53).

Hacking, oddly, is a way to see through people, their other side, their obscene supplement, what they try to hide, keep secret, and their private lives. The unthought can be exposed presenting ethical and pedagogical problems. Should this side be exposed, the psyche becomes unravelled. No one is immune to such penetration as the seemingly unified core of the self is illusionary. From a Lacanian psychoanalytic position, exposing this «fundamental fantasy» no longer enables a «self» to cope with the symbolic order; This fundamental fantasy rather than being a lack in Lacanian terms, for Deleuze and Guattari, this stages, not a «theatre» as with Freud, but reveals the unconscious as a factory. Elliot is constantly in the Internet searching for information. As McKenzie Wark (2004) put it in his well-received *A Hacker Manifesto*, information articulates this play of information. Following Deleuze who writes, «We do not lack communication. On the contrary, we have too much of it. We lack creation. We lack *resistance* to the present» (para. 130, added emphasis), information exceeds communication, and Elliot's hacker resistance shows this. Information is at once this resistance that resists its own dead form, which is communication. In a complicated formation Wark writes, «Information is both repetition and difference. Information is representation, in which difference is the limit to repetition. But information is also expression, in which difference exceeds rep-

etition. The hack turns repetition into difference, representation into expression, communication into information» (para 130).

Elliot has this uncanny ability of resistance, working with difference while others see only repetition. This results in a reversal of the psychoanalytic situation as to who is the «one-who-is supposed-to-know»? Transference is generally directed to the analyst, but the analyst here is Elliot doing battle with his «friend», Mr. Robot, his ambivalence articulating the ethical dilemmas that present themselves in life. This reversal between analyst and analysand becomes most obvious when Elliot finally tells the «truth» to Krista, his psychologist, as to what she really doesn't want to hear. He deftly states all the contradictions of her life that she herself enacts unconsciously. In many respects, Mr. Robot is exemplary of schizoanalysis of the social order as developed by Deleuze and Guattari. It is perhaps an exemplary «media pedagogy». One hopes that season two, which has recently begun continues this critique of the control society we live in. Perhaps the «hacker class» as McKenzie Wark develops it, are the new visionaries? On the whole, the precarity of existence and the persistence of terrorism, along with seemingly a constant recurrence of psychotic breakdowns along with shooting rampages that have been occurring throughout the United States in particular, suggest that the global capitalist social order is indeed ill. Mr. Robot provides one such «clinical» examination of its psyche.

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