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## Mr Robot: Hacking the Apocalypse

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# MR ROBOT: Hacking the Apocalypse

## ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with the American TV series MR ROBOT (US 2015–2019) and its imaginative articulation of key theological and philosophical questions pertaining to authority, reality, and belief. MR ROBOT is subject to an analysis that reflects its intellectual sophistication, visual and philosophical density, and operationalizing of an active and reflective audience. The article will investigate the philosophical disposition of the series protagonist and those questions of transcendence, truth, and existence, he raises, to interrogate something of the ontological disruptions initiated by digital media technologies and the theological questions formulated within this process. The article considers the apocalyptic event around which the drama revolves as a system re-set and new beginning that is revealing of a certain kind of truth alongside the subject who speaks to this truth. It draws on theory from Gilles Deleuze and Pierre-Félix Guattari, Bernard Stiegler, Alain Badiou, and Catherine Keller.

## KEYWORDS

MR ROBOT, Apocalypse, Computer Hacking, The Event, Cryptography, Habit, Hope

## BIOGRAPHY

John Lynch is Associate Professor of Film and Media Studies at Karlstad University, Sweden. He has a forthcoming monograph to be published by Routledge on theological and philosophical themes in contemporary TV serial drama.

## INTRODUCTION

“I’m only supposed to be your prophet. You’re supposed to be my god!”<sup>1</sup>

This article is concerned with the American TV series MR ROBOT (US 2015–2019) and its imaginative articulation of key theological and philosophical questions pertaining to authority, reality, and belief.<sup>2</sup> MR ROBOT is a well-received and

1 Mr Robot to Elliot, MR ROBOT 1.10 (00:38:19).

2 At the time of writing three seasons have been broadcast.



Fig. 1. MR ROBOT 2.03 (00:45:50)<sup>3</sup>.

popular drama that is unusual in that it is a complex and challenging show, yet it consistently undermines its assertions of truth, both visually and textually. Such a show gives support to the argument for the rise of what is described within television studies as “quality television”,<sup>4</sup> which is characterized by, amongst other things, dramatic ambiguity, narrative complexity, and sharp social criticism, all of which is coupled with eloquent allusions to popular culture. MR ROBOT certainly exhibits these qualities and, I would argue, is indeed a quality television production. Such quality has been driven, to a significant degree, by shifts in media platform technologies such as cable and streaming that allow for greater economic investment supporting long-term series development, rather than the limitations of the traditional broadcast model with its brutal popularity index that could see shows cancelled before they had a chance to establish an economically sustainable audience. Arguably, this shift in investment has elevated the role of the series showrunner to a level comparable to the film auteur which posits a singularizing authorial vision as a key creative force, what could be described as a transcendent creator figure for the series universe.<sup>5</sup> As evidence of this, there is a growing number of high-caliber film directors who have moved across to television, bringing with them some of the best acting and technical talent currently available.

3 The numbering refers to Season 2, Episode 3, and the episode timecode. This may vary slightly depending on which platform it is viewed.

4 McCabe/Akass 2007.

5 See Molloy 2010; Redvall 2013, Chapter 5.

What all this points to in the case of *MR ROBOT* is a belief that it can, and should, be subject to an analysis that reflects its intellectual sophistication, visual and philosophical density, and operationalizing of an active and reflective audience. As a work of imagination and cultural critique it provides engaging and useful insights into the process of attempting to challenge the technological systems that have infiltrated all personal and social relations today and does so by drawing upon a range of key religious ideas and concepts. The analysis offered here will work with the philosophical disposition of the series protagonist and those questions of transcendence, truth, and existence, he raises, to interrogate something of the ontological disruptions initiated by digital media technologies and the theological questions formulated within this process. Within the drama itself, we follow the perspective of the central character Elliot Alderson, a cyber-security engineer who moonlights as a computer hacker and leader of an Anonymous-type collective operating under the name of *fsociety*.<sup>6</sup> Their target is a global tech corporation, *E Corp*, which is responsible for maintaining the vast majority of personal debt records across the globe. Hacking this system and erasing *E Corp*'s electronic archives is the motivation across Season One; Season Two deals with the consequences of this attack, and Season Three sees the attempt to reverse it.<sup>7</sup> The character of Elliot has a problematic relationship with another character named Mr Robot,<sup>8</sup> with whom he engages in an ongoing dialogue over the ethics of the intended hack and who is revealed by the end of Season One to be an hallucinatory manifestation of his deceased father. His father died of leukemia when Elliot was a child, an event attributed to the calculated negligence of an *E Corp* subsidiary.

Given this issue's theme of apocalypse and authenticity, the article will, firstly, locate the series within a frame defined by the concepts of habit and hope, as a way of engaging with its form and content. Secondly, it will consider the apocalyptic event around which the drama revolves as an intended system re-set and new beginning, that is revealing of a certain kind of truth alongside the subject who speaks to this truth. Thirdly, Elliot's extraordinary ability for computer coding and encryption links to certain ideas about secrets and their role in a notion of authority as that which is sustained by the possession of a key that can unlock and, by extension, also lock the sanctified data. Finally, the article addresses perhaps the most powerful aspect of the drama: Elliot's paranoia and psychical fragmentation as he occupies this place on the edge of the system, where his mental and perceptual breakdown is the cost of his commitment to this act of erasure. The voice-of-the-Father that forcefully interjects into his stream of consciousness demanding that he "act" is understood here as a manifestation of

6 Anonymous is a loosely associated international network of activist and hacktivist entities.

7 Season one was broadcast first in June 2015, season two in July 2016 and season three in October-November 2017.

8 When referring to the character, standard type is used, when the series, italics.

what Catherine Keller describes as a crypto-apocalypse, something that emerges out of the amorphous realm at the subliminal margins of the mind, driven by a compulsive desire to fix meaning yet unable to ever fully escape the indeterminable nature of the psychosocial zone out of which selfhood is composed.<sup>9</sup>

## REPETITION AS DIFFERENCE: BETWEEN HABIT AND HOPE

What, then, does it mean to frame the analysis of the series between the concepts of habit and hope? Fundamentally, such an approach addresses the essential nature of the series as a series, that is, a repetition of an imagined world that the viewer returns to in a process of captivation and familiarity. It is possible to trace this conception back to the founding consciousness of human existence in myth, narrative, and the first visualizations of the world marked onto the walls and surfaces of the landscape. However, we can more recently locate the emergence of this process in the rise of the printed serial form in the nineteenth century, before it shifted into the media of cinema, radio, and then television.

One aspect of contemporary TV series much commented upon, is how this longer narrative form allows for deeper character development and more complex structures to be established, something that is more limited by the typical ninety minutes of a conventional feature film.<sup>10</sup> This follows a tradition within cinema of seeking to extend the audience engagement, something we can see in the feature-length film. This format emerged around 1912 as, in part, a struggle against the limitations of the ten-minute “one-reeler”, a duration that was deemed by industry organizations such as the Movie Trust to be the maximum length of time an audience could be expected to maintain their attention.<sup>11</sup> The introduction of the feature became an essential element in the development of a more sophisticated and middle-class audience for cinema throughout this period.<sup>12</sup> In a broader sense, such qualities point to how film and television function with an increasing level of creative crossover. For instance, one of the most highly regarded films of recent decades, the complex and challenging *MULHOLLAND DRIVE*, from 2001, written and directed by David Lynch, was originally written and shot as a pilot for a TV series before Lynch adapted it into a feature film after rejection from appalled television executives.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, Sam Esmail, the writer and director of *MR ROBOT*, originally envisaged the pilot

9 Keller 1997, 8.

10 see Mittell 2015.

11 The Movie Trust or Motion Picture Patents Company, was a trust of ten film producers and distributors who attempted to gain control of the motion-picture industry in the United States between 1908 to 1912. See Izod 1988.

12 Butsch 2000.

13 <http://www.lynchnet.com/mdrive/dffm.html> [accessed 12.09.2019].

episode of the series as a feature film but then opted for a serial form and has stated: “We’re making the show as if we were making a feature. Every episode is kind of a short film.”<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, the contemporary serial form is arguably more than just a longer and more complex narrative, even if enabled by the “catch-up” technology of streaming or box-set, which allows for a more complete viewer engagement. It also points to a kind of acceleration of the ritualized experience that defined the traditional format of the weekly show that was universal up until only a few years ago. Sitting down as a family to watch a scheduled TV show, or the earlier listening together to the radio, has, much like weekly attendance at church, largely passed out of Western culture. Its departure came with the vastly expanded technology of fragmented and privatized consumption, now further engineered by the algorithmic engines of platforms such as Netflix.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, we can look for traces that remain of the habitual practice of repetition and routine that enabled this process of engagement.

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in the dynamics of habit as a mechanism of consciousness and the question as to whether it should be considered as a limitation on thinking or, conversely, as the ground from which creativity itself springs forth.<sup>16</sup> It is useful to briefly consider this discussion in relation to recent neuroscience research that shows the powerful effects of the complex range of cerebral processes at work when watching something like TV serial drama.<sup>17</sup> Complex dramas stimulate multiple parts of the brain simultaneously to produce an exhilarating sense of being immersed in a fictional world.<sup>18</sup> In her book *What Shall We Do with Our Brains?*, Catherine Malabou provides a powerful critique of the ideological forces at work in the emergent network society, where neuronal functioning and social function become increasingly indeterminable. Today, there is a concerted struggle over the dynamic and creative aspects of the human mind, driven by its profound adaptability, to capture this potential and divert it exclusively to the needs of capital. On one side, Malabou proposes that capitalism seeks to define this redirecting as a personal responsibility for flexibility and adaptability, whilst on the other, she offers the concept of plasticity, with a transformative power able to generate a liberating pathway. As she says:

14 Barr 2015.

15 The map of contemporary viewing habits is a complex one with traditional broadcast of national events still significant whilst streaming platforms have a mix of staggered weekly release of shows, often on a provider such as HBO, even as others, such as Netflix, release entire seasons at once to foster a practice of ‘binge’ watching. There is no doubt, however, the traditional model of consumption has been superseded.

16 Grosz 2013.

17 Ellison 2015.

18 Gaines Lewis 2014.

Repetition and habit play a considerable role, and this reveals that the response of a nervous circuit is never fixed. Plasticity thus adds the functions of artist and instructor in freedom and autonomy to its role as sculptor.<sup>19</sup>

In the same way that the creativity of the worker is harnessed to the productive needs of capital through flexible working and “neural teams”,<sup>20</sup> the imaginative potential of the brain is being locked into a new pattern of consumption defined by streaming platforms. But this interpretation is not a simple argument against the technology as a new form of enslavement or the emergence of what Bernard Stiegler describes as “spiraling stupidity”,<sup>21</sup> for I believe that, at their best, such cultural productions can stimulate thoughts beyond a banal repetition of the same and, at the very least, they carry traces of past formations of socially transformative thinking about the future. The viewers’ habitual engagement with such creative work is also driven by a sense of hope, a belief in the possibility of developing a different existence within *this* world, and although no longer explicitly defined in religious terms, this desire echoes religion’s patterns and structures. MR ROBOT, a fictional work, positions the central character, Elliot, as essentially dynamic, someone whom we see oscillating between hope and despair, something articulated most clearly in his hallucinatory dialogue with the imaginary manifestation of his dead father. The strength of the show, as an exploration of the pressures exerted on the subject by technological transformation, comes from its staging of the instability of the relational self, an on-screen unfolding of a different and challenging type of subjectivity, one driven to the edge by the parallel forces of escalating hyperconnection and intensifying isolation. It draws attention to the necessity for habit as a strategy for navigating the increasingly complex world whilst simultaneously undermining the ontological and epistemological foundations that emerge, as these coping strategies become yet opportunities for further exploitation.

At this point we can consider whether the defining event for the series, the system re-set initiated by the data wipe, is more an act of wishful thinking than an authentic expression of hope. As Ola Sigurdson writes:

For hope to be hope, however, and not only wishful thinking, it is imperative that the discontinuity with what has come before is acknowledged, or in other words, that the darkness and despair of our current situation is acknowledged.<sup>22</sup>

Elliot is clear about the alienated and degraded nature of the contemporary world and is seemingly offered the chance to be involved in an act that will be “the biggest incident of wealth distribution in history ... the largest revolution

19 Malabou 2008, 24.

20 Malabou 2008, 43.

21 Stiegler 2015.

22 Sigurdson 2012, 196.

the world will ever see” (MR ROBOT 1.01, 00:46:44). How he responds to the appeals to the authority of transcendent figures throughout this process provides an insight into his own internal struggle and the implications of acting out such convictions in the wider social realm. Whether there is, in fact, any sense of discontinuity between the before and after of the system re-set draws attention to the fundamental weakness of the particular conceptualization of this event.

## THE SYSTEM RE-SET AS APOCALYPTIC EVENT

The opening scene of a television series is important in initiating the thematic core of the drama that will unfold over the course of the show.<sup>23</sup> Functionally, it works to quickly bring the viewer up to speed on what is at stake and to hopefully engage them enough to attract their continuing attention. With MR ROBOT, the voiceover device of addressing the audience as an imaginary “friend” immediately connects us to the world of the character and the fact that his communication is necessary yet also a sign of his mental instability. The premise of the drama is then laid out as we open to visuals of a group of businessmen silhouetted against the Manhattan skyline and a reversing rack focus that pulls the group into focus in the foreground (fig. 2):

(V.O.) 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.



Fig 2. MR ROBOT: 1.01 (00:00:21).

23 Mittel 55–85.



For Elliot, the computer hacker, there is a necessity to counter this conspiracy with a similarly secret cabal, *f*society, who can engineer a data wipe that will herald a new beginning. Traditionally, the apocalypse unveils and uncovers the hidden truth, and the narrative of *MR ROBOT* revolves around this world-altering event designed to both liberate us from the burden of debt and as such to reveal the reality of the world that is clouded by this. As stated, however, effecting this event produces increasing levels of psychological conflict for Elliot: initiating the system hack initiates his cognitive fragmentation into antagonistic personalities. The apocalypse will make a new world possible, but to whom or to what, can Elliot appeal as an authority that can validate his actions? The lack of such an authority threatens to undermine the entire process as he systematically retracts from trusting a smaller and smaller circle of people until finally in the last moments of the Season Two finale he cries out: “I am the only one that exists!”, at which point, unfortunately, he is shot by another character whom, in his uncertainty he has deemed be imaginary.<sup>24</sup>

Pressingly, he has bigger problems to address in relation to his apocalyptic hack of *E Corp* and its financial records. Predictably, the outcome of the data loss is a generalized state of economic chaos. Whilst the government struggles to achieve order and reassure a frightened public that it can resolve the situation, a return to a small-scale cash economy is put into effect. Rather than this leading to the expected collapse of *E Corp*, however, the CEO Philip Price actually uses the crisis to maneuver the company into a position of even greater dominance through the introduction of its own electronic bit-coin currency. The drama usefully stages the potential within any revolutionary event for forces of reaction to mobilize at the moment of radical reconfiguration, potentially ‘every bit as innovative’, as the Marxist philosopher Alain Badiou puts in his work *Ethics*, and further raises the question whether all of this ‘subversive’ activity is not potentially another level of manipulation by rogue capitalists.<sup>25</sup>

By the end of Season Two, Elliot and his alter ego Mr Robot are about to blow up the building that contains the, by now, reassembled paper records of the world’s debt, a sign that Elliot/Mr Robot seem condemned to an endless repetition of their actions. Evidently, at this point in the narrative, Elliot has so systematically exposed the falsity of the truth claims that have been used to justify the measures taken by *E Corp*, the government, and everyone around him, that he is effectively left without any stable position from which to secure his own sense of reality, there is no authority left to which he can appeal as guarantor of meaning. Whilst he is the singular mastermind behind the hack, even if his underlings provide labor for the task, Elliot is trapped within an unstable relationship with his dead father who appears in hallucinatory form, driving him to ever more destructive actions

24 *MR ROBOT* 2.12 (00:39:20).

25 Badiou 2000, lvii.

in an effort to secure final closure. Here (fig. 1), he rages at attempts to naively appeal to a transcendent power, expressed in a sort of Karamozovian moment,<sup>26</sup> in a group therapy session, as they are sat underneath a figure of Jesus on the cross:

Is that what God does? He helps? Tell me, why didn't God help my innocent friend who died for no reason while the guilty roam free?

Okay. Fine. Forget the one-offs. How about the countless wars declared in His name?

Okay. Fine. Let's skip the random, meaningless murder for a second, shall we? How about the racist, sexist, phobia soup we've all been drowning in because of Him?

And I'm not just talking about Jesus. I'm talking about *all* organized religion. Exclusive groups created to manage control. A dealer getting people hooked on the drug of hope. His followers, nothing but addicts who want their hit of bullshit to keep their dopamine of ignorance. Addicts. Afraid to believe the truth. That there's no order. There's no power. That all religions are just metastasizing mind worms, meant to divide us so it's easier to rule us by the charlatans that wanna run us. All we are to them are paying fanboys of their poorly written sci-fi franchise.

If I don't listen to my imaginary friend, why the fuck should I listen to yours? People think their worship is some key to happiness. That's just how He owns you. Even I'm not crazy enough to believe that distortion of reality.

So fuck God! He's not a good enough scapegoat for me.<sup>27</sup>

Elliot can rail against the absurdity of a caring, purposeful God, but at the same time he never ceases to search for the truth in what is an increasingly feverish drive to establish something foundational. Yet this merely sees him wracked by doubt and perpetually tormented due to this irresolvable spiral of distrust. Likewise, the 5/9 hack, as the event is named, has apparently produced not a new world, but simply a degraded old one that is materially worse for the ordinary people it was meant to liberate. The primary outcome of all of this is that *E Corp* emerges stronger and takes even greater economic control by establishing its own crypto-currency.<sup>28</sup> Elliot can denounce God but the issue is whether he constantly shifts his appeal to authority elsewhere, never able to finally settle.

So how has philosophy addressed such questions as they relate to an explicitly resistant and political project of radical transformation? At this point, I want to turn again to Alain Badiou and his work *Being and Event* to unpack some of these issues and think through the relationship between event and subjectivi-

26 See Dostoevsky 1992, 237–246.

27 MR ROBOT 2.03 (00:45:04–00:47:39).

28 This raises the intriguing idea that, ultimately, Elliot himself is merely a manifestation of the abstract machine that is capitalism. Don DeLillo makes reference to the idea that protest plays a key role in the continuation of capital in his allegorical novel *Cosmopolis*, where the main character speculates on an anti-capitalist protest as a functioning as a form of 'systemic hygiene' that is revealed by 'shadow of transaction between the demonstrators and the state', DeLillo 2003, 99.



Fig. 3. MR Robot: 1.10 (00:45:12).

ty.<sup>29</sup> In this text, Badiou locates the human in an infinite universe, lacking any inherent meaning or value, where all we can say ontologically about the world is that it consists of what he describes as “multiplicities of multiplicities” that never finally resolve but, rather, operate as a fractal pattern, rejecting the assertion of any metaphysical moment of “One”. Badiou, therefore, posits mathematics as ontology, as this is what gives us our only access to being, for it allows a modeling of human situations via Cantor’s set theory. Into this realm erupts the event as that which is more than the sum of its individual actions, its emergence unpredicted and unforeseen by the instituted knowledges.

The void, a realm of pure multiplicity and a kind of sublime abyss that haunts all that can be counted in the Badiouan sense, is figuratively where Elliot is placed on the edge of as he brings into existence this particular event. This action, however, precipitates within him a fragmentation, as a result of the sheer scale of what he is attempting, and, in what can be seen as a compensatory gesture, generates the nostalgic hallucination of Mr Robot (fig. 3).

As he rails against the inauthenticity of contemporary life, “Is any of it real? I mean, look at this, look at it! 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! Brainwashing seminars in the form of media!”,<sup>30</sup> Elliot seeks to elevate himself into what Badiou defines as a subject, one who is driven by a fidelity, a faith, to the event as a truth procedure that is found at “the junction of an intervention and a rule of faithful connection”.<sup>31</sup>

29 Badiou 2011.

30 MR ROBOT 1.10 (00:43:12).

31 Badiou 2011, 239.



Fig. 4. Mr Robot: 1.02 (00:24:25).

Elliot lives in a world of code, connections, and the digital traces of human weakness through which he is able to manipulate reality, yet he can only do this by putting on a mask. The apocalyptic event that becomes the driving force to finally and completely reveal the actuality of the world to him and everyone else, ultimately fails to reveal its truth. The discursive oscillation between the characters of Elliot and Mr Robot plays out the tensions inherent in the militant-becoming that demands fidelity to the event, as the father-figure challenges Elliot to step up and act; to paraphrase Badiou, Mr Robot defies Elliot to “become the immortal you are capable of becoming”.<sup>32</sup> At the heart of this process is the paradox of commitment to an event, something that will change the world, but which requires for its initiation a certain kind of objectification, a process the event is paradoxically designed to counter. What the drama here plays out, I would argue, is a version of a Christian existential dilemma, or existential theatre, described by Gabriel Marcel as creative fidelity, where the slipping into dogma, seen in the figure of Mr Robot, is a loss of the response to the presence of the Other to which the cause is supposedly directed.<sup>33</sup> Elliot recognizes in Mr Robot what Marcel would call a kind of idolatry as he relentlessly pursues the effective destruction of the data and the effects on individual lives that go with that action. Here, Elliot is confronted with the binary thinking of the militant, Mr Robot, who in his fervor demands of him: “Tell me one thing Elliot! Are you a one or a zero? That’s the question you have to ask yourself. Are you a yes or a no? Are you going to act or not?” (fig. 4).

In response, Elliot expresses the doubts of those who ask: precisely why we should commit ourselves to this life of fidelity? By what or whom are we called?

<sup>32</sup> Badiou 2000, 51.

<sup>33</sup> Marcel 2002.

The rejection of an external transcendent agency plays out in MR ROBOT as an interior dialogue that fragments into endless, fractal digressions, unable to resolve into a final authoritative voice. This fits with both a contemporary cultural mood and the serial form itself, which operates with an open and deferred, never-finally-resolved, character motivation. Elliot and Mr Robot appear trapped in a zero-sum game where one seeks to initiate a radical change in the world with all its attendant violence, and the other shows signs of the exhaustion that hovers over any shift between event and void.<sup>34</sup>

At this point, we can ask the question of whether, in fact, this is an event? Stripped of any engagement with a wider collective, it is the action of a single mind, with the small group of *f*society hackers functioning as subdivisions of Elliot's personality. Waking up one morning to find that, without warning, the global records of debt have been wiped out, would propel us not into a new world of freedom or a fresh start but rather into a materially worse one, stuck in a state of limbo whilst the same powerful forces regroup, ready to emerge with even tighter economic and political control. An action concomitant with exactly how the State responds to any acts of terrorism that aim to destabilize it. To this extent, MR ROBOT fundamentally offers a liberal critique of the wish-fulfillment fantasies of this techno-anarchist idea of change that has nothing to with imagining revolution as a collective process of radical social transformation out of which something truly new could emerge.

## CRYPTOGRAPHY

In this section, I address an aspect of the series that resonates greatly with religious notions of apocalypse, namely, the encryption process at the heart of the 5/9 hack. What we find in MR ROBOT is not an attempt at destruction *per se*, such as an attempt to simply delete the records, but rather the encryption of all the data using a highly secure 256AES key.<sup>35</sup> This key is then set to self-destruct, making it impossible for *E Corp* to retrieve the data through any later decryption. Therefore, to *encrypt* is to make hidden or secret. The word *crypt* derives etymologically from the same source and refers to ritual rooms found beneath religious buildings. This sense of descending rather than ascending is a useful way of characterizing Elliot's journey as he goes from the light of the cathedral into the gloom of the vault. In modern terms, a crypt is also a burial vault where family members are interred, hence the appearance of the ghost of his father.

Creatively, all of these associations become manifest in MR ROBOT, a series that is nominally about living in an advanced computer technological world of

34 S2:04 Elliot and Mr Robot play several games of chess to resolve the question of who is dominant. All end in stalemate.

35 Advanced Encryption Standard.

surveillance and control. Visually within the drama, this opposition between such spaces can be seen in the light and order of the official and sanctified spaces of All Safe and E Corp, with their corporate design and brightly lit offices, in comparison to the hacker collective *fsociety*, which operates out of a disused Coney Island arcade, a kind of crypt where Elliot's dead father is alive and, in his mind at least, acts as the leader of the project.

In an encryption process, the key is what allows the data to be de-ciphered; otherwise it remains meaningless. In the show, the key itself is destroyed, but Elliot remains as the agent of deciphering, the only one who can engineer a possible decoding. Being in possession of the key is therefore to have absolute power as a mediator. Partly, then, this is a process for establishing secure communication between parties who are aware of the presence of adversaries whose role is to hack into the conversations. In cryptography, this agent is given the designation "Eve", the one who accesses forbidden knowledge. For Elliot, possession of this key gives him power as he is able to intervene in a person's life and make changes that will affect them profoundly, as we see throughout the show, whether a coffeeshop owner exposed as a child-porn profiteer or the secretly-married boyfriend of his therapist. Each one is confronted by Elliot and presented with the hacked information, rendering them stripped of their authority and subsequently rendered powerless. But such dominance drives Elliot to ever-greater isolation as he draws away from social interactions and retreats into loneliness, paranoia, and hallucination, highlighting the social cost of such a process.<sup>36</sup> Ultimately, by Season Two, Elliot is literally in a prison of his own making, reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's words in "The Wasteland", a poem centrally concerned with the degradation of daily life because of technology:

... I have heard the key  
Turn in the door once and turn once only  
We think of the key, each in his prison Thinking of the key, each  
confirms a prison...<sup>37</sup>

## A CRYPTO-APOCALYPSE

At the heart of MR ROBOT is the idea of a secret and the role of the apocalypse in revealing it to the world, a revelation. Elliot is the decoder of the conspiracy that seeks to continue to hide this truth from the world, those powerful agents who

36 Dave Boothroyd writes of this process and the ontological uncertainties unleashed by it: "It is because the very idea of full and open disclosure is a logical impossibility that not only will conspiracy theorising dog those who claim to practise such a policy, but, may one not also ask in all seriousness: can anyone ever really know entirely whether or not by disclosing anything at all they have acted as someone else's stooge?" Boothroyd 2013, 120.

37 Eliot 1922, lines 410–416.



continue to “con people into believing something” as Philip Price puts it in response to the state of panic after the 5/9 hack.<sup>38</sup> But by seeking out and confronting this conspiracy, Elliot slips into paranoia – “I think they are following me” – because the machine that he confronts is already paranoid, it is what Deleuze and Guattari describe as the “paranoid social machine”.<sup>39</sup> Elliot channels the persecuting voices into the voice of his father, as the antagonist against his self. Paranoia is never straightforward, however, for it always asks: What does this mean? Similarly, Elliot constantly searches for the authority behind the signs he encounters in his pursuit of the event. Whilst his psychoanalyst attempts to map Elliot’s thoughts onto a concealed cause, an origin, a traumatic moment that is grounded on a One, he simply censors his spoken words and hacks her life, reads her secrets, identifies her sadness, and finds her point of vulnerability to manipulate her.

The apocalypse functions here in the way it has traditionally worked: as singularizing reaction against the sense of ever-multiplying states of being, as resistance against empire, a kind of counter-universality.<sup>40</sup> Sam Esmail, whose family is Egyptian, has stated that the show was inspired by the Arab Spring as well as Occupy Wall Street and public awareness of the reach of big data.<sup>41</sup> Whilst such social movements provide useful dramatic form for the series and its characterizations, there remains the question of the nature of the vision articulated through the series’ explicit formulations of something like the fictional 5/9 hack. The essential emptiness of the event – by necessity its secret and singular nature makes it devoid of any collective force – can be interpreted as a cynical response to the belief in radical change as its failures are revealed.

As we have seen, on many levels, MR ROBOT is concerned with secrets and it is precisely here that the notion of apocalypse as revelation gains its purchase. However, I would argue that the series has such wide resonance not so much because of the naïve idea of a conspiracy driven by the “1% of the 1%” but rather because of a growing awareness that the relatively slower unfolding technological apocalypse of contemporary society reveals that today there are actually no longer *any* secrets.<sup>42</sup> If there is a conspiracy, it is one organized around the storage of secrets as data for potential manipulation by subversive agencies.

38 MR ROBOT: 2.02 (00:08:09).

39 Deleuze/Guattari 1983.

40 Portier-Young 2011.

41 McAlone 2016.

42 Jacques Derrida writes in a text dated 1994, later published in the book, *A Taste for the Secret*, “I have a taste for the secret, it clearly has to do with not-belonging; I have an impulse of fear or terror in the face of a political space, for example, a public space that makes no room for the secret. For me, the demand that everything be paraded in the public square and that there be no internal forum is a glaring sign of the totalitarianization of democracy. I can rephrase this in terms of political ethics: if a right to the secret is not maintained, we are in a totalitarian space. Derrida 2001, 59.

This age is one where everything you think is private can be made public and whose mood is increasingly defined by a growing sense of widespread paranoia, as the absolute level of surveillance becomes apparent. This gives Elliot a God-like power, but as he pushes at the limits of human ability, in this context, he continuously breaks down. If there is a reality to MR ROBOT, it is this piling up of a compounded irreality where even perception itself is disrupted. Elliot might hate the world, try to turn away from it, but he is ultimately unable to escape it. The vision on offer here is not a utopian one but, rather, one of darkness, to the point where Season Two literally ends on a black out. As a cryptographer, Elliot prefers the dark seclusion of the crypt to the light of the chapel.

Finally, in this sense the apocalyptic script of MR ROBOT can be read as akin to Catherine Keller's "crypto-apocalypse", a counter-apocalypse as she describes it, which recognizes itself as an apocalypse but attempts to interrupt the interpretative habit through a shift from the sense fear to one of hope, one that remains open and ongoing rather than final and absolute. What holds the attention for a show such as MR ROBOT is precisely the oscillation between fear and hope that the creator of the series has so far consistently repeated and is similar to the functioning of the Book of Revelation, which in Keller's words, acts as "a counter-cultural code for dissent" as it moves from "secrecy into public forecasting and open defiance".<sup>43</sup> MR ROBOT is a contemporary manifestation of the impulse for thinking a possible revolution, yet, through its very dramatic staging as a consumable product of the culture industry, potentially functions to contain the movement for change it presents on screen. In this regard, this operative ambiguity that we see in MR ROBOT of 'presenting the unrepresentable' is thoroughly apocalyptic, an "apocalypse habit", as Keller describes it, one whose spiral of violence starts with a self-destruction, a destruction of self in the case of Elliot, yet requires possibilities for action beyond the attraction of a messianic solution.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Keller 1997, 10.

<sup>44</sup> Keller 1997, 11.



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