**No Alternative: Aborted Revolutions and Lost Futures in *Mr. Robot***

Whereas Mark Fisher characterised the capitalist realism of the twenty-first century as a resigned acceptance of perpetual neoliberalism and an inability to imagine a different way of governing society (2009, 2), Sam Esmail’s television show *Mr. Robot* (2015-9) seemingly dares to ask whether the system of late capitalism can be disrupted through an attempted revolution. However, instead of providing an alternative to capitalist realism, the showis haunted by failed and incomplete revolutions of the recent past. Produced in the wake of the revolutionary movements of 2011, it is inflected by the anti-austerity impetus that built after the global financial crisis of 2008. *Mr. Robot*’s protagonist, Elliot Alderson (Rami Malek), is a computer hacker who works for a cybersecurity company, All-safe, which protects E-Corp, a conglomerate that owns seventy percent of the global consumer credit industry. Elliot is drawn into the hacktivist group fsociety by the mysterious Mr. Robot (Christian Slater) with promises of changing the world. Fsociety perceive indebtedness to be central to the neoliberal condition, in which increasing numbers of people struggle through precarious lives with the hope of reaching an unattainable financial security. Fsociety plan and execute the revolutionary 5/9 hack that encrypts E-Corp’s records, but far from breaking the company’s grip on government and citizens alike, its stranglehold is strengthened as it enacts a form of disaster capitalism to reboot the economy. Utilising the trope of the Gothic double, Mr. Robot is another aspect of Elliot’s fractured self as he suffers from Dissociative Identity Disorder. When the revolution fails, it is principally due to the battle between the protagonist’s two personas, as Elliot decides to abandon fsociety in order to contain Mr. Robot, who he fears is out of control. Revolution takes on the guise of psychological horror when Elliot starts to question his own agency and we are presented with scenes of a new Great Depression as the initial support for fsociety following the hack dissipates. Despite what appears to be a reactionary narrative trajectory supporting Fisher’s thesis in *Capitalist Realism* (2009), this paper reads *Mr. Robot* as built around an aborted revolution rather than one that fails and, as such, it retains the ghost of the future lost in this act of abandonment. Instead of showing the negative consequences of revolution, *Mr. Robot* offers a metamodern narrative that focuses on the torment of a character torn between taking action to change the world and recoiling from the consequences. As such, it provides a provocative critique of a fractured left that cannot cohere around an alternative to neoliberalism.

In *Mr. Robot*,mental illness, hacking, and neoliberalism are all connected to the central idea of control. Elliot self-medicates using morphine to deal with the loneliness he feels after his father, Edward Alderson, died as a result of exposure to toxic waste dumped by E-Corp. Elliot is fixated on the immorality of a society motivated by ‘trickle-down greed’, a caustic reworking of the neoliberal argument that wealth creation for those at the top will inevitably trickle down to all levels of society. He sees no future in a world underpinned by the neoliberal logic, as David Harvey characterises it, that ‘the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions’, and a political system that ‘seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market’ (2007, 3). Given the show’s focus on inequality, political stasis, and precarity, it can usefully be considered as a form of what Linnie Blake and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet have termed neoliberal Gothic, deploying ‘gothic conventions specifically to expose and critique the material actualities of the present’ (2017, 3). From the use of the Gothic double to the protagonist’s unreliability, *Mr. Robot* destabilises the viewer, presenting a shifting reality that mirrors Elliot’s own confusion. Focalised through Elliot’s perception, neoliberal America is presented as a dystopian wasteland of the human spirit. We see individuals drowning in debts they have no hope of repaying, politicians unable or unwilling to hold corporations to account, and the systemic abuse of the poor. Despite the validity of many of Elliot’s criticisms, he starts to believe that every action he takes has been orchestrated by either his alter ego or a representative of the top one percent of the top one percent, who have co-opted his revolution for their own ends. Elliot becomes emblematic of the competing impulses of those crushed by late capitalism, simultaneously viewing it as immiserating and fearful that whatever replaces it will only further impoverish the downtrodden. Hacking provides Elliot with the means to disrupt the control of corporations and the governments they influence. However, in order to execute the 5/9 hack, fsociety need the help of the Dark Army, a mercenary Chinese hacker group that mirrors the amorality of the corporate world, relinquishing significant control before the revolution begins. Differing Gothic conventions layer upon one another to provide a complex and contradictory palimpsestic prism through which to read the present political moment as one in which change is demanded but accompanied by a countervailing fear that the system is irreversibly rigged and doubts about what, if anything, can replace it.

The focus of this paper is on the ways in which *Mr. Robot* contains echoes of revolutionary images from popular culture in its visual narrative and the use it makes of these intertextual references, which I characterise as a form of haunting. Given Esmail’s statement to *Entertainment Weekly* that ‘I rip off of every movie and TV show I’ve ever seen in my life’ (2015), one could be tempted to situate *Mr. Robot* within the postmodern tradition, offering a pastiche of prior narratives. However, the show lacks the detachment that characterises the postmodern mode, simultaneously flaunting its metafictionality and demonstrating an earnest commitment to the protagonist’s ethical dilemmas. As such, *Mr. Robot* is better characterised as an example of the metamodern, as it ‘oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity’ (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, 5-6). *Mr. Robot* at once yearns for the narratives of revolution to be found in *Fight Club* (1999), *The Matrix* (1999), and *V for Vendetta* (2005), while also problematising the possibility of revolutionary action. Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker claim that, inspired ‘by a modern naïveté yet informed by postmodern skepticism, the metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility’ (2010, 5). In *Mr. Robot*, this impossible possibility is the task of replacing neoliberalism as a system of governance. Had Elliot fully committed to fsociety’s revolution and it failed, the show would serve as a reactionary warning against transformative direct action. However, instead, there is still space to consider what could have happened if he did not abort any planned follow-up to the hack, offering a hope that fades to melancholia as control slips further from his grasp. There is thus a possibility that change could be effected by individuals and collectives in a world that is increasingly bewilderingly complex. It is this lost future that haunts the show.

Esmail has cited *Fight Club* as a major influence on *Mr. Robot* and the similarities between the two are substantial. Fincher’s film also features a protagonist, the Narrator (Edward Norton), who feels alienated by consumer capitalism, in this case due to his own implication in its excesses as he assesses whether it is worthwhile for his company to recall dangerous products rather than deal with lawsuits resulting from preventable deaths. Like Elliot, the Narrator meets a revolutionary mentor, Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt), who builds a radical movement, Fight Club, albeit one focused on frustrated masculinity and primed for direct action in Project Mayhem, which culminates in the destruction of buildings belonging to the financial sector. As Mr. Robot is revealed to be Elliot, Durden is actually the alter ego of the Narrator, representing the traits he most wishes he possessed. However, beyond the parallels between the plots of *Fight Club* and *Mr. Robot*, there are very significant ideological differences in terms of where the protagonists’ anger is directed. Daniel Volmar traces an ideological shift from the identity politics of masculinity in crisis to a battle for economic justice:

[W]here *Fight Club* linked consumerism with emasculation and satirized a primordial, proto-fascistic form of manly violence, *Mr. Robot* may represent a generational shift toward the *systemic* causes of alienation. More than Project Mayhem, it is the idealism of Occupy and Anonymous that informs fsociety’s hactivist [sic] crusade. By reveling in technology’s seedy vulnerability—the corners cut in the interest of profit—they attack consumer capitalismalong with the sociopolitical structures that impose it (2017, 209).

Unlike the Narrator, who does not realise the end goal of Project Mayhem until it is nearly reached, Elliot is aware of fsociety’s aims and believes that he is an active participant alongside Mr. Robot rather than being kept in the dark until it is too late to stop the plans he set in motion. Whereas the Narrator wants nothing to do with Durden’s revolution, Elliot’s objections arise primarily from a strict ethical imperative to non-violence and a growing sense that the control he felt able to exercise as a hacker is unreal. There is a direct intertextual connection between *Fight Club* and *Mr. Robot* through the use of The Pixies’s track ‘Where Is My Mind?’. In the final scene of Fincher’s film, the Narrator has accepted his role as the leader of Project Mayhem and watches buildings tumble across the cityscape before him. Jeffrey Sconce characterizes the scene as the apocalyptic ‘opening salvo in a war on consumer capitalism’ (2002, 366). Despite the satirical edge to the narrative, there is a somewhat celebratory, carnivalesque tone as Kim Deal’s ethereal backing vocals underpin the explosions.

Shortly before executing the 5/9 hack in ‘eps1.8\_m1rr0r1ng.qt’, Tyrell Wellick (Martin Wallström) asks what Elliot hoped to accomplish while an elegiac, piano cover of ‘Where Is My Mind?’ plays in the background. In stark contrast to the Narrator’s confident assurance to his partner Marla Singer (Helena Bonham Carter) that ‘everything is going to be fine’, Elliot looks confused, hesitantly replying to Tyrell with ‘I don’t know. I wanted to save the world.’ The use of the past tense prior to beginning his revolution demonstrates Elliot’s fundamental doubts as to whether or not he is pursuing the correct course of action even as he goes ahead with the plan. The show appears to look back to the 1990s nostalgically as a time when radical narratives circulated within popular culture to the backdrop of the Clinton era’s centrism. However, *Mr. Robot* is not simply a copy of a copy. Esmail’s direct invocation of *Fight Club*’s ending repurposes it in contrast to the show’s exploration of self-doubt and uncertainty. The sadness evoked at Elliot’s moment of supposed triumph suggests that the future is lost before it could ever be claimed. Both Elliot and the audience are painfully aware that any chance of creating a new society is strangled at birth. This is not a democratic revolution driven by mass popular support. It is the plan of a small group lead by someone who is not able to determine what is real, without any sense of what will follow the hack.

Fisher developed the concept of lost futures in his reworking of hauntology in light of capitalist realism:

Haunting, then, can be construed as a failed mourning. It is about refusing to give up the ghost or – and this can sometimes amount to the same thing – the refusal of the ghost to give up on us. The spectre will not allow us to settle into/ for the mediocre satisfactions one can glean in a world governed by capitalist realism (2014, 22).

It is revealed towards the end of Season One that Mr. Robot takes on the spectral form of Elliot’s deceased father, urging him to commit to the revolution they devised. Beyond this overt haunting, the show itself is also haunted by revenants of past radicalism in popular culture. What can be construed as anti-revolutionary in the failure of fsociety is also simultaneously a potential indictment of the left for failing to cohere around a vision of what sort of system could replace neoliberalism. So often, images of mass mobilisation and defiance signify a symbolic challenge to authority only to provide no tangible redistribution of power. Fisher sees glimpses of lost futures as a more hopeful way of critiquing the inadequacy of the neoliberal present than left nostalgia for the post-war social democratic consensus:

What should haunt us is not the no longer of actually existing social democracy, but the not yet of the futures that popular modernism trained us to expect, but which never materialised. These spectres – the spectres of lost futures – reproach the formal nostalgia of the capitalist realist world (2014, 27).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Francis Fukuyama declared that we had entered the ‘end of history’, with liberal democratic capitalism as the dominant global ideology. Throughout the first season, fsociety is animated by the belief that history can be restarted. Their fixation on the fall of E-Corp is symptomatic of a left that prizes symbolic resistance over sustained support for a new system, unable to think through what will come after and then overtaken by the events they put into motion.

Despite Elliot’s immediate regrets over fsociety’s hack, the end of the first season and beginning of the second are replete with scenes of mass mobilization, as marches fill public spaces in support of fsociety. The effect created is one of jubilation at a tyrannical regime being overthrown, recalling both James McTeigue’s *V for Vendetta* through the unifying image of crowds wearing the mask that symbolises their movement and also the protests that characterised the Arab Spring. Discussing his Egyptian heritage, Esmail has spoken at length about how he found inspiration in the movement for change that swept across the Middle East (Maloney 2016), in which young people frustrated with their limited opportunities for building a better life utilised social media in order to effect change. The association with authoritarian governments ruling over deeply unhappy populations challenges the US’s self-image as an exporter of democracy, invoking the tagline for the show that ‘Our democracy has been hacked’. However, it is not the US government that has supposedly been toppled, but the overmighty E-Corp.

We can see echoes of the Occupy Wall Street protests. Who are the protestors appealing to, if not politicians? Beyond showing solidarity with fsociety’s actions, what can they achieve? Without campaigning for and electing advocates of alternative systems, how likely is change going to be? *Mr. Robot* pessimistically forces the viewer to reflect on the inadequacy of the revolutions circulating in popular culture, including its own. Too often we are mollified by images of mass mobilisation or symbolic protest as moments of cathartic spectacle, our attention moving on before we see them falter and neoliberalism reassert itself. Without a clear vision of how society could be reorganised, *Mr. Robot* suggests that we are simply left with no alternative.

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