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## THE DARK REFLECTIONS OF MR. ROBOT, OMNI 2016

*One of TV's best shows presents an image of our world as seen in a warped mirror. It's not a pretty picture, but it just might help us see our own predicament more clearly— and maybe even do something about it.*

**By Jason Teich**

**Midway through *Mr. Robot*'s season two premiere, a middle-aged homeowner, eyes lined with worry, pleads with a helpless bank teller for justice.** She's been billed for mortgage payments she's already made. "Absolutely unfair, Madam. Absolutely unfair. We were done with our payments," the homeowner protests, hoping to overcome the bureaucracy and greed of a multinational conglomerate with righteous indignation, feigned incredulity, and, laughably, the moral high ground. If this conjures memories of families falling into ruin when the '08 housing bubble collapsed, after greedy investment banks gamed the system by selling crappy sub-prime mortgages to the ill-informed, the resemblance is 100% intentional. Of course, the world of *Mr. Robot* isn't precisely our own, and the corporation stymieing our desperate homeowner isn't Goldman Sachs . . . This particular conglomerate, the world's largest, E Corp, is the victim of recent, crippling hacks by incendiary hacktivist group, fsociety. Fsociety has destroyed E Corp's servers and erased 70% of the world's debt in one brazen, brilliant act, igniting what many term a financial "revolution" — unmistakably echoing the lofty rhetoric employed by a certain cantankerous, bespectacled senator from Vermont. The bank teller, faced with a mob of irate customers, falls back on the company line: "Ma'am, we are doing our best here. At this moment, we cannot verify that you paid all your payments." The homeowner came prepared — she's got paperwork to prove her claim — but E Corp has its bases covered. "People have been forging paper records," says the dutiful teller drone. "We haven't set up a system to verify these sorts of claims."

That's when the homeowner's well-rehearsed indignation gives way to authentic outrage. "I've been responsible for the last twenty years in paying off my home," she snaps. "Where's

your accountability? Yet if the tables were turned, you would've kicked me out of my own house." But it only gets worse. When she tries to close her E Corp account and retrieve her deposits, she's told she can receive only a fraction of her funds. As the camera pulls back, we get the full tableau: a sea of fuming, desperate customers waiting their turn to get screwed over. Whatever revolution fsociety had in mind, this isn't it.

Last year, writer/director/creator Sam Esmail's timely, audacious, convention-defying *Mr. Robot* was the ultimate zeitgeist show: a jarring, twisting indictment of corporate corruption, capitalistic greed, and cyber technology run amok, and a portent of the sweeping disillusionment with foundational Western institutions that has defined much of the past year, from Bernie to Trump to Brexit. Season one raged at everything from wealth inequality to white male entitlement, the opioid epidemic to unaffordable health care, all the while promising a "revolution" and "the single biggest incident of wealth redistribution in history." The show might as well have been called *Mr. Robot Feels the Bern*, except that the catchy slogan hadn't been invented yet when *Mr. Robot* debuted in June 2015, back when the Senator was still an Independent and polling 50 points behind HRC.

Season one had no qualms about shoving its politics in our faces, teeing off on our rigged system from the opening notes. The pilot begins with the central character, Elliot Alderson (played brilliantly and hauntingly by Emmy-nominated Rami Malek), delivering a simple but powerful voiceover directly to us: "What I'm 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 . . . The top one percent of the top one percent. The guys that play god without permission." Esmail gave voice to the frustrations at the heart of the Sanders movement and Trumpism, just as those forces were coming together; both candidates built their campaigns on promises of rescuing the masses from the corrupt, oppressive establishment interests weighing them down. Elliot's opening lines — the show's mission statement — were accompanied by a soulless image of corporate crony America: a room full of glad-handing, faceless, shadowy suits standing in front of a window displaying a backdrop of soaring Manhattan skyscrapers and swinging industrial cranes, the literal and figurative machinery of mechanized capitalism. *Mr. Robots* suggests that too many Americans, like those cranes, have been reduced to mere cogs in a corporate wheel. Reduced to robots. The word "robot," introduced to the world by Czech writer Karel Čapek in his 1920 play *Rossum's Universal Robots*, originally referred to a race of mass-produced workers devoid of personality, hope, or upward mobility of any kind. It's worth keeping that meaning in mind as a lens through which to view this series, because so much of what *Mr. Robot* rebels against is the soul-crushing lack of hope and self-worth engendered by our top-heavy hegemony.

Esmail seamlessly uses setting to highlight his world's wealth gap. The haunts of our heroes — graffiti-streaked subways, barren apartments, abandoned Coney Island storefronts — offer a stark visual contrast to the lavish penthouses and sleek, sterile high-rises populated by callous E Corp execs like Tyrrell Wellick. Wellick, played with menace and a note of vulnerability by Martin Wallström, is a figure so sick with entitlement that he actually pays hobos for the pleasure of beating them bloody. Wellick announces his credo in episode two

of season one, while attempting to lure Elliot to the dark side: “Give a man a gun, and he can rob a bank. Give a man a bank, and he can rob the world . . . Power belongs to the people who take it. Nothing to do with their hard work, strong ambitions, rightful qualifications . . . The actual will to take is often the only thing that’s necessary.” Wellick’s sentiments echo our current suspicion that the American Dream is dying or dead in 2016, if it ever truly existed. “Debt Slavery, the New American Dream,” reads one newspaper headline in the pilot. Wellick aims to take full advantage of the wealth gap and ensure its expansion. As for the little guys squashed under his corporate boot? Wellick voices his thoughts on them plainly in the series’ fifth episode, at an upscale bistro, ruminating on the life of his waiter, “I couldn’t bear it. A life like that. The life of an ordinary cockroach whose biggest value is to serve me salad.”

Fsociety offers a satisfying rebuttal to creatures like Wellick in the form of anti-establishment propaganda videos unleashed over the web, featuring spokes-figure “Mr. Robot” in a mask that would best be described as Guy Fawkes crossed with Mr. Monopoly. These videos, which display background images of Occupy Wall Street protests, function as both a crucial plot device and a thematic touchstone for the series. In fsociety’s very first video, Mr. Robot, not yet revealed to us as Elliot’s alter ego, issues his demands of E Corp, giving voice to the bottom 99%: “Release all the people of the world from your . . . illegitimate prisons of debt . . . Dissolve your corporation, and donate your assets to charities around the world . . . The people are waking up, no longer accepting your economic slavery.”

*Mr. Robot* repeatedly addresses one of Senator Sanders’s favorite talking points: backbreaking student loans and lifelong debt slavery. “I’m late on my last two student loan payments, and I can’t get Gideon to give me a raise,” Elliot’s oldest friend Angela mutters to him at Allsafe, the cybersecurity firm where they both work, safeguarding E Corp. Not only is Angela being crushed under the weight of two hundred grand in student loan payments, but her dad is up to his eyeballs in debt too. It’s devastating to see how debt slavery can haunt multiple generations of the same family. Fsociety member Trenton muses in a similar vein: “My parents were born in Iran. They came here like everybody else, for freedom, but my dad works 60-hour weeks to determine tax loopholes for a millionaire art dealer. My mom, she ran up loans into five digits to get an online degree. They won’t shut up about how great America is. But they’re going to die in debt doing things they never wanted to do.” The show’s most tragic example of economic slavery is poor Shayla, Elliot’s sweet, socially awkward girlfriend and the only one who seems able to pierce Elliot’s defenses and connect with him during the first season. But Shayla is a drug dealer, economically dependent on a supplier who harasses and eventually rapes her. When Elliot wants to help, Shayla objects, “He gives me a really good deal. I need the money.” There’s little doubt from Shayla’s subdued reaction that she’s been raped before and is willing to tolerate this level of abuse in order to survive. In response, Elliot’s voiceover intones, “There it is again. The invisible hand at work . . . Controlling us even if it pushes us past our threshold of pain.” Elliot, a hacktivist who hacks bad guys and rights wrongs in his spare time, is unable to sit back and do nothing. He doesn’t grasp until it’s too late that Shayla understands her own world better than he does, and that her canny, deadly, street-smart supplier Vera is the wrong person to

hack. Elliot's rescue attempt goes terribly wrong — not even his illicit skills can save Shayla.

The impact of economic servitude is not just financial, but also psychological, and Esmail never loses sight of the damage it can do to a person's dignity, self-worth, and even identity. Elliot, whose own identity has fundamentally ruptured into a split personality, introduces himself early in the show's run as "Employee number ER280652," relegating himself to the status of a mere number. He doubts his capacity to change the system, even as he works with fsociety to do so. "Sometimes I dream of saving the world," he says (to us, in voiceover). "Saving everyone from the invisible hand, the one that brands us with an employee badge. The one that forces us to work for them . . . But I can't stop it. I'm not that special. I'm just anonymous. I'm just alone." Elliot's uncertainty speaks to something essential in today's American psyche: People are tired of feeling small. "You're a middle-aged man doing what my retarded nephew could do," a belligerent customer snaps at Elliot's dying father Edward in flashback, humiliating him in front of 8-year-old Elliot. Edward had been a brilliant engineer, fired by E Corp shortly after his diagnosis of terminal cancer. With no savings, Edward struggled to keep his family afloat in his few remaining years by operating a mom-and-pop computer repair shop that required almost none of his expertise and afforded him little respect. That shop was fittingly called Mr. Robot.

It's impossible to miss the show's disdain for corporate America. When Elliot's alter-ego waxes poetic about taking down "a conglomerate so deeply entrenched in the world's economy that too big to fail doesn't even come close to describing it," he means E Corp, but could just as easily be talking about Apple, Facebook, Google, or Microsoft. E Corp earned Elliot's nickname, "Evil Corp," by covering up a chemical leak that killed dozens, including Elliot's father and Angela's mom. In a powerful moment, Angela confronts Terry Colby, one of the men responsible for the decision: "So, you were drunk, eating shrimp cocktail, and it was raining when you decided my mother would die?" She tells Terry that she's willing to throw away her career to make sure "people like you won't keep sitting in rooms together." E Corp's disregard for the environment and human life has obvious parallels in real-life corporate malfeasance, like the Pacific Gas & Electric scandal. Esmail also highlights the sexism and white male entitlement of corporate culture: Terry makes crude sexual remarks; E Corp employees sit around like a good ol' boys' club, mocking women and gays; and Wellick brutally strangles a strong, intelligent woman who makes him feel small.

When it's not railing against powerful corporations, *Mr. Robot* shines a light on a host of issues plaguing contemporary America. Season one tackles the lack of affordable health care (young Elliot's dad can't afford treatment for his spreading cancer), inadequate mental health treatment (Elliot is mired in a severe psychotic break, and there appears to be no help in sight, even from his well-meaning therapist), and the sprawling opioid epidemic (highlighted by Elliot's addiction and easy access to morphine). When Elliot's therapist asks him, "What is it about society that disappoints you so much?" the question is being posed to viewers as much as to Elliot. "Fuck society," Elliot informs us. Isn't that what Trump stands for, with his rejection of political correctness, pluralism, and the underpinnings of America's corporate and political institutions? And like Bernie Sanders, fsociety (and by extension the

show itself) uses the recent surge of disaffected anti-establishment anger to issue a call to action, challenging viewers to shake themselves out of their apathy. Elliot learned the cost of inaction at a young age, watching his dad give in to cancer without fighting for survival or justice. As a result, Elliot became a man of action. His Mr. Robot alter ego is the manifestation of that call to action, urging Elliot onward at every turn. “We are malicious and hostile,” Mr. Robot hisses through his mask in fsociety’s first video. “We do not compromise. We are relentless. We will not stop until every tentacle of your monstrosity is sliced off at the nerve.” And in pitching Elliot on joining fsociety, Mr. Robot explains, “The world is a dangerous place, Elliot. Not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing.”

The season two premiere — which picks up one month after fsociety’s epic hack — raises the more unsettling questions of whether the right people were hurt by fsociety’s actions and whether a revolution has taken place at all. Despite fsociety’s claim that “Any money you owe these pigs has been forgiven by us,” the reality is far different for the homeowner at Bank of E forced to pay her mortgage a second time. The mob of people behind her is equally likely to get screwed, while the government bails out E Corp with taxpayer money. What was meant to be an act of reclaiming freedom seems to have enslaved the 99% even further.

The season two premiere also confronts us with the price paid by many of the characters and radical transformations to some of their arcs. Elliot has sworn off technology, moved in with his mom, and become a true robot with a rigorous daily routine of journal writing, watching pickup basketball, and eating three meals a day with his new, *Seinfeld*-obsessed friend Leon. Elliot ignores Mr. Robot’s threats and desperate pleas, refusing to return to fsociety or even to a computer screen. Meanwhile, Angela is thriving as an E Corp PR rep, but has let go of all meaningful relationships, instead propping up her self-worth with corny daily affirmation tapes. Elliot’s sister Darlene, his fsociety partner, at first seems the least affected, still at work on the revolution. But she is lonely and cracking, as revealed in one short but telling scene where she breaks down crying, alone with the burden of leadership now that Elliot has gone recluse. But Gideon Goddard, Allsafe’s CEO, and one of the few decent human beings on the show, is the greatest casualty of Elliot’s revolution. He has lost his career, reputation, and husband, and gets shot through the neck by a maniac in the closing minutes of the premiere.

Is Gideon really dead? It’s tough to believe, but he has at minimum been disgraced, abandoned, shot, and laid low in every way imaginable. Meanwhile, where are all the promised benefits and freedoms of fsociety’s revolution? If they exist, they haven’t been depicted on-screen. Instead, one gets the sense that the members of fsociety feel a bit like Brexit supporters who voted on the belief they’d get free trade with Europe and closed borders, only to learn it wasn’t true. What Mr. Robot says in his very first video is as relevant to our reality as his: “Exciting time in the world right now . . . Exciting time.”

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