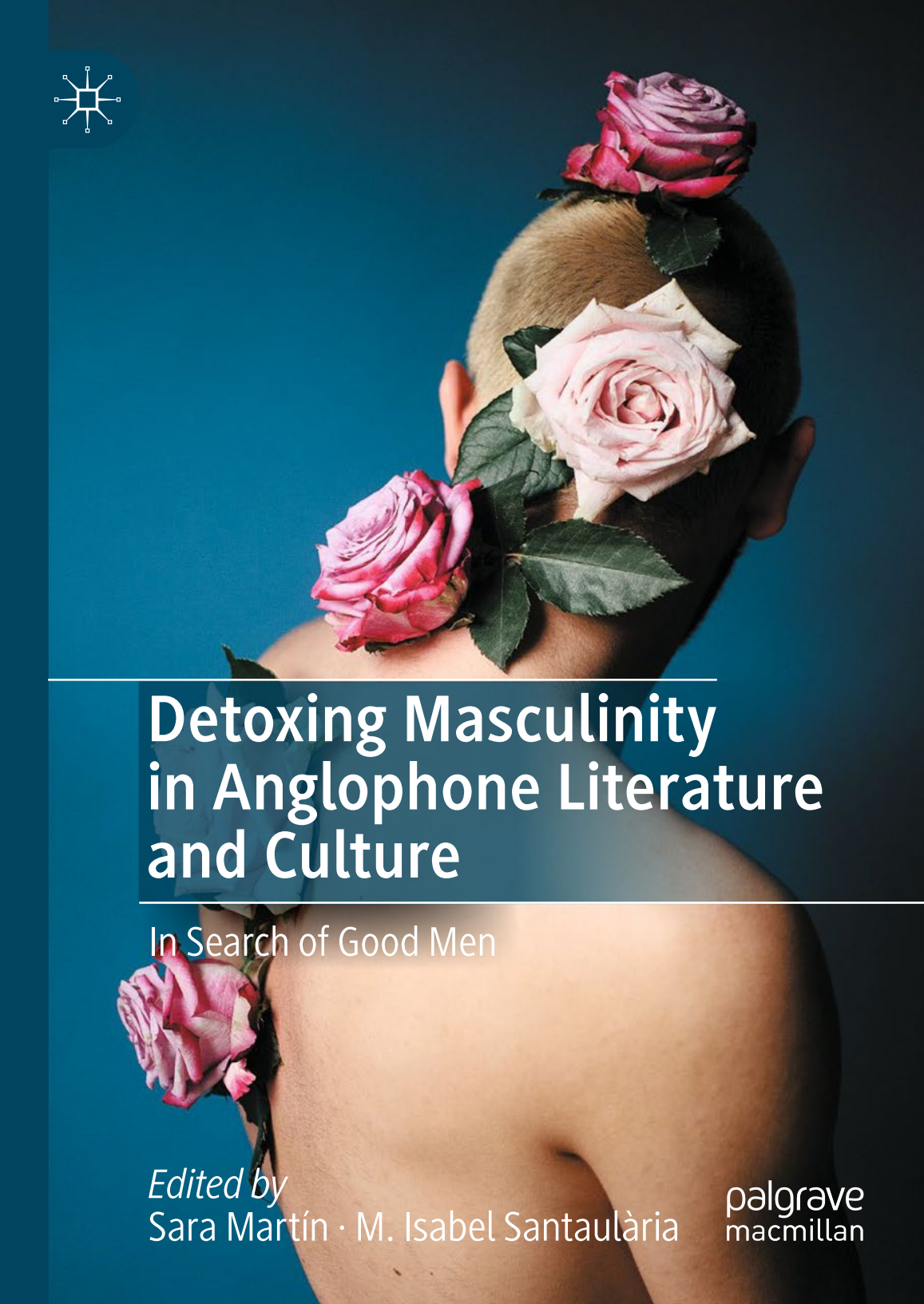




Detoxing Masculinity in Anglophone Literature and Culture

In Search of Good Men

Edited by
Sara Martín · M. Isabel Santaulària

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Detoxing Masculinity in Anglophone Literature and Culture

“A most timely contribution to Masculinity Studies. While most existing studies focus on notions of toxic masculinity, this collection adopts a truly refreshing approach to the subject by not only questioning hegemonic masculinity, but also by offering new and distinct possibilities of being a man in contemporary society. Drawing on cultural and literary representations, the book provides specific examples that show that “detoxing” masculinity in contemporary society is both possible and desirable, offering much-needed inspiration for change. A must-read for anyone interested in changing masculinities and thus gender relations.”

—Josep M. Armengol, Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, Spain

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—Lynne Segal, University of London, UK

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Editors

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Between Therapy and Revolution: *Mr. Robot*'s Ambivalence Toward Hacker Masculinity

Miguel Sebastián-Martín

INTRODUCTION: *MR. ROBOT* AS CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL DYSTOPIA

Sam Esmail's four-season series *Mr. Robot* (2015–2019), a USA Network production starring Rami Malek and Christian Slater as co-leads, stands as one of the most relevant TV productions of the past decade¹ despite having attracted scarce scholarly attention (among the exceptions, see Volmar 2017; Smith 2019; and Lynch 2019). The series could be approached not only as another narratively intricate example of “complex TV” (Mittell 2015) but also as a particularly interesting example of “post-cyberpunk” (Murphy 2019: 530), or at least as an example of how cyberpunk has “become so ubiquitous as to be invisible” in the sense that we now “inhabit a cyberpunk future” (Vint 2010: 228)—another way of saying that we

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inhabit the historical moment of “digital” (Pace 2018), “surveillance” (Zuboff 2019), or “platform capitalism” (Srniczek 2017). Indeed, this series seems to be conceived primarily by means of relocating cyberpunk concerns, characters, and conflicts within an otherwise non-science-fictional contemporary world.²

Set in New York in the aftermath of the Great Recession after the 2008 financial crisis, *Mr. Robot* is the story of Elliot Alderson (Rami Malek), a two-faced character who is both a daytime cybersecurity engineer, profoundly discontented with society and utterly alienated from work and social life, and a nighttime hacker vigilante, struggling with mental illnesses and multiple substance abuse. Throughout the seasons, Elliot gradually (though not without setbacks) begins to process his traumas and psychopathologies thanks to his closest relationships and his therapist. At the same time, he joins F Society, a group of ‘hacktivists’ planning to dismantle the company that ultimately employs him, the almighty E Corp—and with it, the whole edifice of American capitalism. Dubbed “Evil Corp” by Elliot and F Society, this is a Big-Tech and Big-Finance conglomerate—a fictional combination of J.P. Morgan, Alphabet, and Netflix—which hegemonizes the world economy via monetary debt, high-tech surveillance, and media entertainment. Not only is E Corp socio-politically in the wrong: it has also personally wronged Elliot, as his late father developed leukemia due to hazardous working conditions at the company, and he died unemployed with no admission of wrongdoing or any compensation from the company. The series thus resituates the typical ‘cyber-cowboy’ protagonist of cyberpunk, as seen in William Gibson’s classic *Neuromancer* (1984), into the USA of the 2010s, positioning the hacker as a son of the American working class. By exploiting his voice-over narration, it emphasizes the most techno-dystopian aspects of the contemporary moment, explicitly antagonizing an already delegitimized status quo.³

Indeed, *Mr. Robot* attests to and dialogues with an overall climate of dissatisfaction, and it speculatively restages some of the main conflicts of post-Recession America, a historical moment in which the development and spread of new digital media correlated with (and partly contributed to) a dramatic rise in economic inequalities and political discontent across the globe.⁴ At first, social unrest of the 2010s was channeled in subversively creative ways by grassroots movements such as Occupy Wall Street—itsself inspired by movements across the globe, such as the Spanish 15M—whereas this decade also saw the rise in prominence of online hacktivist groups such as WikiLeaks or Anonymous (see Coleman 2014).

Nonetheless, popular discontent with capitalism was to be also instrumentalized by right-wing, masculinist leaders such as Donald Trump himself, with the invaluable aid of surveillance-capitalist corporations, which have been pivotal in the spread of reactionary ideologies and conspiracy theories (see Zuboff 2019 and Doctorow 2021). Accordingly, the series has been consistently marketed as explicitly anti-establishment—with promotional taglines and poster captions like “democracy has been hacked”, “corporations own your minds”, or, even more explicitly, “f**k the system”. This has led scholars to focus on *Mr. Robot*’s techno-cynicism (Volmar 2017), its apocalyptic undertones (Lynch 2019), or its Millennial-targeted branding (Smith 2019), thus taking approaches that illustrate how—to put it concisely—the series is essentially commodifying anti-capitalism, in line with many recent audio-visual dystopias (Sebastián-Martín 2021).⁵

As opposed to these mostly hopeless readings of the undeniable dystopianism of the series, in this chapter I examine what I believe to be *Mr. Robot*’s most utopian aspect: its representation of an alternative and partially ‘detoxed’ model of masculinity as embodied in the development of Elliot’s characterization. Rather than simply dismissing the series’ bleakest aspects, I conceptualize it as a critical dystopia⁶ to bring to the fore how its dystopian façade of cynical hopelessness is driven by (and in dialogue with) a critical, speculative focus on more hopeful possibilities of social change. My argument is that this is indeed the case with the characterization of *Mr. Robot*’s protagonist: even though Elliot is far from being a blueprint utopian model of masculinity, and even though he is caught in a historical moment of anti-feminist backlash and resurgent reactionary politics, his character arc is nonetheless driven by a “Utopian impulse” (Jameson 2005: 1–9) which propels him both toward an anti-patriarchal self-transformation and toward an anti-capitalist transformation of society.

Just as Elliot is caught between cynicism and revolution, the series is caught between a dystopian critique of the already-existing, and a utopian impulse toward the not-yet existing—an ambivalence not to be dismissed, as it is precisely the series’ source of inspiration for real-world subversive efforts that consider *both* the potential pathways for change *and* the limits of our historical circumstances. Ultimately, *Mr. Robot*’s ambivalence offers a dynamic and dialectical representation of an alternative masculinity (and an alternative society) in the making. In other words, if there is a utopian, good, and detoxed masculinity in this markedly dystopian series, it appears

not as a blueprint, but as a horizon toward which its protagonist gradually, though not unproblematically, advances.

A NOTE ON SF AND THE (RE-)IMAGINATION OF MASCULINITIES

Science fiction is, by definition, constructed around the presence of a Blochian “novum” (see Suvin 1979)—an emergence of a not-yet existing novelty, potentially though not necessarily utopian—and as such, “it is always potentially a mode of authentic shift (...) a reworking, in imagination of *all* forms and conditions” (Williams 1978: 212, original italics). Thus seen, sf can also be a powerful fictional tool for the imagination of better anti-patriarchal masculinities, even if it (quite often) remains trapped within patriarchal imaginaries. A long thread of critical scholarship has indeed focused on the overall reinforcement of hegemonic masculinities in sf and in its cyberpunk sub-genre, although such critics have not failed to emphasize how hypermasculine characterization often ends up in a partial, somewhat inadvertent self-subversion—most often by caricaturing patriarchal fixations with power, social status, and technological mastery, and sometimes also by (inadvertently?) catering to a homosexual gaze, which disturbs the hegemonic association of maleness and heterosexuality (see Cranny-Francis 1985; Nixon 1992; Fernbach 2011; and Kac-Vergne 2018). Studies of alternative, non-hegemonic masculinities in sf, however, are much scarcer: Carrasco Carrasco (2006) has examined Lynch’s *Dune* (1984) and the Wachowski sisters’ *The Matrix* (1999) with a focus on their relatively ‘androgynous’ heroes—although, to my mind, these only seem very partially non-normative, especially from intersectional perspectives.⁷ Besides, much more recently, Pitts (2021) has studied the feminist sf of Dorothy Bryant, Ursula Le Guin, Marge Piercy, Octavia Butler, and N.K. Jemisin, focusing on how these writers’ critical dystopias confront readers with a considerable diversity of utopian models of masculinity.⁸

With this scholarly background, it is tempting to (very schematically) conclude that the most solidly hegemonic representations of masculinity would lie in the field of popular cyberpunk audio-visual culture, while non-conforming, non-patriarchal masculinities would be found mostly in the canon of feminist sf literature. Nonetheless, it should be clear—as any careful consideration of the above-cited studies should help us realize—that speculated masculinities, however overtly patriarchal or alternative,

are always somewhere in a spectrum between the two ideal poles of hegemonic conformity and utopian alterity. In this regard, masculinities in *sf* should not be examined from any dualistic perspective, but from a coherently dialectical perspective that keeps in mind the ambivalence and the contradictions that underpin masculine characterizations, in general and in the genre. Even in the case of the most seemingly counter-hegemonic examples of masculinity, it is still probably the case that—paraphrasing the theorist of hegemony Antonio Gramsci—the old man may be dying, but the new man struggles to be born (1971: 276). And conversely, as Raewyn Connell emphasizes, one should also remember that hegemony “is a historically mobile relation. Its ebb and flow is a key element of the picture of masculinity” (2005: 77–78)—that is, hegemonic masculinity is never static, but always shifting in an adaptative response to its opponents.

These dynamics are precisely what *Mr. Robot* emphasizes through the struggles of its hacker protagonist: the complexities involved in any kind of utopian transformation of self or society away from established (patriarchal and capitalist) norms. Although, in so doing, the series to a certain extent reproduces “the myth of the lone hacker”, which “perpetuates the fantasy that the asymmetrical relation of individual to network can be creatively played to the former’s advantage” (Crary 2013: 46), my impression is that the masculinist-individualist power fantasies involved in hegemonic imaginings of the hacker are at least counterbalanced—if not partially overcome—by *Mr. Robot*’s more dialectical treatment of this lone hacker’s personality. What I propose to theorize as ‘hacker masculinity’ indeed evokes much more than quasi-criminal egotism and toxic power fantasies: it also evokes creativity and subversion, thus potentially inspiring viewers to hack patriarchal codes. In a sense, the hacker’s ambivalence as a popular icon seems to perfectly map onto the ambivalence of the critical dystopia, in such a way that this character type concretizes the genre’s dialectics. The figure of the hacker—in *Mr. Robot* and beyond—can accordingly be examined as (potentially) both a personified symptom of socio-technologically dystopian tendencies and a subversive hero, potentially in the vanguard of utopian transformations today. Accordingly, I shall begin by examining how the series’ whole premise entwines personal and political struggles through Elliot’s mental illnesses, and then moves onto the series’ dialectical representation of masculine (self)-transformation.

MENTAL ILLNESS AND CAPITALIST REALISM IN *MR. ROBOT*

In the first episode of the series, “eps1.0_hellofriend.mov”, written by Sam Esmail himself, Elliot Alderson muses:

Sometimes I dream of saving the world. Saving everyone from the invisible hand, the one that brands us with an employee badge, the one that forces us to work for them, the one that controls us every day without us knowing it. But I can't stop it. I'm not that special. I'm just anonymous. I'm just alone. (19:38–20:14)

Elliot, as the passage suggests, is a character who oscillates between a critical-utopian non-conformity and a hopeless sense of impotence⁹ in the face of the surrounding surveillance-capitalist dystopia. This ambivalent attitude is further accentuated by the fact that he suffers a series of chronic mental illnesses: persecution mania, social anxiety, delusional schizophrenia, but perhaps most tellingly, a bipolar disorder that makes him fluctuate between frenzied fits of hopefulness and much lengthier depressive episodes of drug abuse, paranoid obsessions, and feelings of loneliness. All his mental dynamics are mediated by his use and abuse of digital technologies: just as successful hacks are the most common trigger of his emotional ‘highs’, endless browsing through online media is what gets him caught in depressive loops. When asked by his therapist Krista (Gloria Reuben) in the same episode what disappoints him so much, Elliot goes on a hopeless rant:

Oh, I don't know. Is it that we collectively thought Steve Jobs was a great man, when we knew he made billions off the backs of children? Or maybe it's that it feels like all our heroes are counterfeit. The world itself is just one big hoax. Spamming each other with our running commentary of bullshit masquerading as insight, our social media faking as intimacy. Or is it that we voted for this? Not with our rigged elections, but with our things, our property, our money. I'm not saying anything new. We all know why we do this, not because *Hunger Games* books make us happy but because we wanna be sedated. Because it's painful not to pretend, because we're cowards. Fuck society. (12:20–13:13)

For greater effect, a montage of real-world footage is superimposed upon Elliot's voice, a series of images which reinforce the contrast between the glossy semblance of social media and the conditions of exploitation and

precarity of anonymous masses around the globe. The critical impetus of this scene is charged with such melodramatic excess that it seems almost certain that spectators shall be moved by Rami Malek's performance—yet, in a sense, it also seems almost certain that spectators shall feel hopelessly immobile in the face of the dystopian reality described, just like Elliot.¹⁰ Nonetheless, despite his position as a representative of working-class America, and for reasons that go beyond his non-white ethnicity,¹¹ Elliot is not a mere embodiment of those contemporary “angry white men” (Kimmel 2013) who are partaking in a revival of reactionary, masculinist politics. Immediately after the rant—after a jump cut and some echoing noise—we see an absent-minded Elliot sitting quietly, while Krista keeps waiting for an answer which Elliot, as is now obvious, only ever answers in his imagination. Therefore, it should be clear that Elliot's masculinity is far from hegemonic, at least in terms of his extreme introversion, his visible insecurity, and, most importantly, his evident vulnerability—something to which I return later.

Elliot's hopelessness appears first of all as an extreme example of what Mark Fisher calls “capitalist realism” (2009)—referring to how “[t]he dominance of capitalism, the inability to imagine an alternative to it, now constitute a sort of invisible horizon” (Fisher and Gilbert 2013: 90). Capitalist realism is thus understood not as a willful ideological endorsement of the system, but “more like a pervasive atmosphere” (Fisher 2009: 16), in which even “anti-capitalism is widely disseminated” and some “gestural anti-capitalism actually reinforces [the system]” (Fisher: 12)—something clearly illustrated by the online circulation of *Mr. Robot* clips.¹² In this light, Elliot's pessimism could seem a sort of self-reinforcing fatalism, a fulfillment of Theodor Adorno's old claim that “[t]oday self-consciousness no longer means anything but reflection on the ego as embarrassment, as realization of impotence: knowing that one is nothing” (2005: 50). Mark Fisher, who like Elliot suffered from chronic depression, and eventually committed suicide in 2017, denounced that “the vast *privatization of stress*” that has taken place during neoliberal times is a “mental health plague” which “would suggest that (...) capitalism is inherently dysfunctional, and that the cost of it appearing to work is very high” (2009: 19, original italics). Recalling Deleuze and Guattari's groundbreaking theorization of schizophrenia, Fisher demands that “what is needed now is a politicization of much common disorders” since “it is their very commonness which is the issue” (2009: 19). Thus, we can ask two interrelated questions: to what extent does *Mr. Robot* evoke mental

illnesses in a politicizing manner, one still guided by some utopian impulse and not mere fatalism? And how does this establish a dialogue with hegemonic masculinity?

Being understandably frustrated with therapy, given his difficulties with communication, throughout season one we see how Elliot instead finds solace and purpose in hacking child pornographers and drug dealers to hand them over to the police and, most importantly, in joining the secret hacktivist group F Society. Elliot's depression and his anger toward the system (toward E Corp in particular, given his father's death) are thus politicized as the main reason behind his revolutionary efforts. Thus, by trying to change his (and everyone's) economic helplessness in the face of capitalism, he also seems to hope for an end to his rooted feeling of helplessness. After the mysterious apparition of F Society leader Mr. Robot (Christian Slater), who invites him to join the group, the first season is spent in following F Society's successful hacks of E Corp's databases, guiding viewers through their plans of ultimately erasing the company's financial archives—and with them, erasing everyone's debts. Therefore, F Society's goal, as Mr. Robot puts it, is to cause “the single biggest incident of wealth redistribution in history” (“eps1.0_hellofriend.mov” 2015, 46:42–46:49). However ambitiously overreaching this may seem, it is nonetheless clear that Elliot is here joining an unambiguously good cause and thus trying to become a better man, one who tries to care for the collective, rather than conforming to hegemonic pressures for being an individualistic *homo economicus*.¹³

Nevertheless, in parallel, season one also narrates Elliot's increasingly self-isolating and obsessive behavior, since F Society's plan—sometimes his doubts about it and sometimes his devotion to it—makes him even more paranoid, and, consequently, even more distant from his friends, and even more defensive with his therapist Krista. Besides, to complicate things further, by the end of the season—à la Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999)—Mr. Robot (Slater's character) is shown to be an imaginary person: a dissociated persona with the semblance of his late abusive father—whose sexual abuse, however, Elliot does not remember at first. Apparently, Elliot suffers from a dissociative personality disorder on top of everything else. He has repressed childhood traumas of parental abuse by re-imagining his father—a toxically abusive masculine figure who died defeated (and literally killed) by E Corp—as a utopian character. The dramatized dissociation of Elliot and Mr. Robot thus creates a contrastive dialogue between two ‘versions’ of this male protagonist: the angry, depressed persona played by

Rami Malek, who is barely functional for work, socialization, or even basic survival, and the heroic revolutionary played by Christian Slater, who is devoted to F Society's collective hacking efforts against the system.

ELLIOT'S TRANSFORMATION: MASCULINE VULNERABILITY

Although for obvious reasons I cannot engage here in a satisfying close reading of all four seasons of *Mr. Robot*, a synthetic overview of Elliot and Mr. Robot's relationship is necessary if we are to extract some conclusions from this dialectical portrayal of masculine transformation. From the time Elliot gains an awareness of his dissociative disorder and almost until the end of the series, Elliot and Mr. Robot are caught in mutual distrust and, more crucially, in a struggle for power: specifically, for taking over Elliot's body without the other's knowledge—this, as we learn retrospectively, is how Mr. Robot had founded F Society in the first place and how he completed certain hacks despite Elliot's opposition. Since Elliot keeps having reservations about Mr. Robot's plans, the series repeatedly restages this conflict throughout the seasons—with the disagreements intensifying when F Society gets more and more entangled with the Dark Army, a hacker-terrorist group, and also when E Corp seems capable of surviving and even profiting from any shock. In these disagreements, Elliot and Mr. Robot thus find themselves defending two ways of being 'the good man' in a revolutionary struggle: while Elliot is committed to a pacifist rejection of violence, Mr. Robot is mostly guided by the desire to overthrow an exploitative system. In their own way, then, one could say that Elliot and Mr. Robot represent two quasi-archetypal forms of masculinity—the fatherly protector and the heroic avenger—although to some extent these roles are often switched and clearly overlap. Thus, perhaps one should consider above all what unites Elliot and Mr. Robot: both are similarly secretive and authoritarian in their ways of caring for others, and they mostly keep everyone else in the dark about their true feelings and intentions. In other words, they are both equally paternalistic in the word's most ambivalent sense, as their way of caring seems inseparable from their struggles for power—that is, theirs is a struggle for power over evil, but also for power over other people, beginning with each other.¹⁴

Nonetheless, my interpretation here, in a more utopian vein, is that precisely by staging this conflict between masculinities, the series is problematizing the instability of hegemonic notions of the good man—in particular, of patriarchal (over)valuations of paternalism—and it is also

systematically underscoring the profound vulnerabilities of the ‘real Elliot’ (i.e., the whole person composed of both Malek’s Elliot persona and Slater’s Mr. Robot persona). The series thus stresses the two personas’ interdependence, despite their conflicts—in fact, it is evident that they are at their best when they begin to collaborate. More broadly and perhaps more interestingly, the series also highlights Elliot’s broader networks of dependence and his personal need for contact, despite his self-isolating tendencies. The character only begins to grow past his feelings of loneliness and helplessness once he communicates honestly not only with Mr. Robot but also with his therapist Krista, with his sister and F Society co-hacker Darlene (Carly Chaikin), and with his lifetime friend and co-worker Angela (Portia Doubleday). Furthermore, the series gradually outgrows its initial Elliot-centric, unreliable narration, and instead juxtaposes his narrative viewpoint with those of other characters. Gradually, these are given a more nuanced characterization, narrative voice, and agency to become much more than just Elliot’s helpers. Thus, the series’ gradual turn toward multi-perspective character interdependence seems fully coherent with Elliot’s self-transformation, given how he progresses from a profoundly power-anxious narcissism toward a more communicative acceptance of his need for contact and vulnerability. In fact, Elliot has one of his most epiphanic moments when he uncovers his deepest trauma with Krista: in “407 Proxy Authentication Required” (2019) (E7S4), Elliot is finally able to recall the repressed memory of parental abuse that torments him, and he is therefore made aware of what led him to imagine Mr. Robot in the first place.

Of course, all this is not meant to imply that Elliot was at first invulnerable or wholly independent, but that his (and Mr. Robot’s) masculine obsession with control prevented him from overtly admitting his lacks at first—often adding to his own and everyone else’s suffering. By narrating Elliot’s growing self-consciousness, the series subsequently seems to move away from “the masculinist ideal” of “a political subject that establishes its agency by vanquishing its vulnerability” (Butler 2016: 24). That is, by confronting viewers with Elliot’s complex self-transformation, the series appears to challenge the masculinist form of political struggle for power that is represented by Mr. Robot’s and Elliot’s efforts, on the one hand, and by their antagonists, E Corp’s authorities, on the other—a struggle where both sides follow a profoundly patriarchal playbook. Instead, it is my impression that the series eventually offers an alternative understanding of political resistance, and in turn, an alternative understanding of

Elliot's own identity as a good man in the making. By moving toward an emphasis on the collective networks of personal interdependency (or, rather, collaboration) required for the anti-capitalist struggle, *Mr. Robot* seems to move—at least partially—toward an illustration of Judith Butler's insight that vulnerability is an undeniable feature of human bodies which does not contradict our agency and which can in fact be mobilized in political resistance—as illustrated by those peaceful, anti-capitalist protests of the 2010s that inspired *Mr. Robot*. Furthermore, the series not only emphasizes the vulnerability of the counter-hegemonic actors but also underscores how “paternalism itself is vulnerable to a dismantling that would undo its very form of power”, especially if it is resisted by those who are imagined to be “especially vulnerable” but who—in resisting—would “establish themselves as something other than, or more than, vulnerable” (Butler 2016: 23). From this perspective, the series not only offers a dialectical account of an alternative masculinity in the making: it also offers clues as to how and why to rethink masculinist ideals of political action, suggesting pathways for a politicization of mental illnesses that rethinks vulnerability from a non-patriarchal lens.

The series finale of *Mr. Robot* seems to redouble the hope involved in Elliot's long but gradually successful journey toward becoming a better man. As he and Mr. Robot eventually realize, the Elliot persona that viewers have known throughout the whole series is, after all, not the ‘real Elliot’ either, but another persona: in Krista's words, “[T]he personality created to carry Elliot's rage (...) the mastermind” (“Hello, Elliot” 2019, E13S4, 28:00–29:33), but also “the best part [of him], (...) the part that changed him” (46:05–46:16). Agreeing that it is time to stop controlling Elliot, both personas decide to let go, becoming mere film spectators that will live on inside his mind.¹⁵ In the end, then, it appears that the choice between Mr. Robot's and Elliot's power-centered masculinities was a false choice, because—even though much could be learned from the dialogue between them—their shared paternalism was to be transcended. The episode closes with an image of Elliot's tearful eye, followed by a point-of-view reverse shot of his sister Darlene, who is waiting for him, fully aware that she is welcoming back her real brother. Thus, with Elliot's tear and Darlene's heartfelt “hello Elliot”, the screen fades to black.

With such open, utopian ending, it would appear that—even though significant wealth redistribution is achieved in one last hack of the capitalist elites—F Society's struggle is clearly left in the background, and Sam Esmail's series seems to emphasize that the best and most utopian

achievement is Elliot's self-transformation. The impression that viewers are left with is that, after all, Elliot is about to awaken as a more wholesome, wiser, and better man—one that has probably forgone (or at least will keep trying to forgo) his obsessions with control, and thus one who is ready to go on living a relatively less patriarchal, more livable life.

CONCLUSION: THE AMBIVALENCES OF HACKER MASCULINITIES

This chapter has proposed to interpret the series *Mr. Robot* as a critical dystopia which focuses on a hacker-led anti-capitalist struggle, alongside—and perhaps most interestingly—a complex, dialectical, and ultimately utopian transformation of the masculine subjectivity of its hacker protagonist. *Mr. Robot* can obviously only stand as one specific case study, but I would like to conclude by suggesting how one could extrapolate from here toward a more comprehensive and dialectical theorization of 'hacker masculinities'—toward a conception that emphasizes the hacker's dystopian *and* utopian potentials. It is my impression that past approaches have either tended to emphasize the hacker's role in patriarchal imaginaries—given their fulfillment, via technology, of masculinist illusions of mastery and control (Nixon 1992; Fernbach 2011)—or, on the contrary, tended to emphasize the subversive position of the hacker vis-à-vis the contemporary apparatus of power, even theorizing hackers as the present-day equivalent of the proletariat (Wark 2004, 2019). It thus seems partially true that—like “the computer programmer” imagined by Joseph Weizenbaum—the hacker can position himself as

a creator of universes for which he alone is the lawgiver. So, of course, is the designer of any game. (...) No playwright, no stage director, no emperor, however powerful, has ever exercised such absolute authority to arrange a stage or a field of battle and to command such unswervingly dutiful actors or troops. (1976: 115)

In this sense, the hacker's position theoretically fulfills a very patriarchal power fantasy. Nonetheless, it also seems true that—like videogames in Colin Milburn's theorization—hacking poses

a provocation to treat the world itself as a game, learning its rules and protocols in order to master them, or tweak them differently, while at the same

time foregrounding the technical infrastructures, the material conditions, the platforms and systems that make the game possible in the first place. There is no escape, after all—the outside is nowhere, everything is inside out. So what else can be done, under the circumstances? Hack, modify, cheat, troll. Game the game. (Milburn 2018: 101)

In these ways and more, hacking thus seems to have a profoundly dialectical relationship with masculinities: potentially a refuge for patriarchal drives, but potentially also a subversive and transformative practice. Further studies which consider other representations of hackers should help us in theorizing how this underlying ambivalence is concretized in different fictions—but this chapter can only gesture toward it. Nonetheless, if there's one thing that *Mr. Robot* should have shown us is that, even under the pressure of the most dystopian environment, masculinities can be and should be hacked for the better. Eliot is, clearly, not *the* good man, as he is neither blueprint nor model of utopia, but his development gives us glimpse into a much-needed journey from actually existing hegemonies toward a less patriarchal horizon. In this sense, *Mr. Robot* teaches one key lesson for the present: that masculinity needs to be decoupled from patriarchal ideals of individualism and paternalism, both in 'personal' and in 'political' spheres if it is to be detoxed at all.

NOTES

1. As an index of its popularity, among other awards, the series received a total of thirteen Primetime Emmy nominations, with three accolades: Rami Malek as outstanding lead actor in a drama series (2016), Mac Quayle for outstanding music composition for a series (2016), and Roxanne Paredes and Jeff McKibben for outstanding interactive extension of a linear program (2020).
2. Of course, the plot dynamics (primarily, the character's revolutionary efforts) gradually move *Mr. Robot*'s diegetic universe away from its initial correspondence with the contemporary, thus making it a peculiar form of science fiction: one that departs from a strictly 'empirical' real world to gradually extrapolate into an alternate future.
3. It is this sense that, as Murphy suggests (2019: 530), *Mr. Robot* can be usefully categorized as post-cyberpunk, especially in light of its "[punk] attitude: an adversarial relationship to consensus reality", an attitude which "is just south of cynicism but well north of mere skepticism" (Kelly and Kessel 2007: xii).

4. In this sense, this chapter could be read in dialogue with other approaches to US culture of the mid-2010s which symptomatize “a populist moment of repudiation of the elites amidst the fraying of American neoliberalism” (Orán Llarena 2018: 249).
5. For other approaches to the critical vein of recent speculative fiction, see also Combe (2021) or Workman (2021).
6. In this I am following Moylan’s well-known theoretical elaboration (2000: 183–221), which proposes that dystopias, far from being the simple negation of utopia, allow for a constant, dialectical contrast between the anti-utopian and the utopian: in other words, they abstractly stage a conflict between the bad and worsening state of societies, and lingering impulses toward a better state of thing.
7. For some critical approaches to *Dune*’s and *The Matrix*’s heroes, see Pearson (2019) and Bould (2009), who, respectively, consider Paul Atreides as a “proto-neoliberal” subject, and Neo as a cyberpunk version of the white savior.
8. Besides these, there are academic works of a broader scope which devote sections to masculinities in sf culture, such as Cornea (2010) and Baker (2015).
9. Berardi (2019) aptly calls our era “the age of impotence”, thus implicitly interrelating the era’s political sense of hopelessness with its ongoing crisis of masculine identity.
10. For a provisional attempt at theorizing the interplay between dystopian sf and melodrama, see Sebastián-Martín (2021).
11. As an American son of Egyptian parents, Rami Malek is evidently not a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) representative of the American working class, although to a certain extent he may ‘pass’, especially in the series’ context, where white Christian Slater and Carly Chaikin play his relatives. This blurry or perhaps blurred ethnicity could be considered by comparison to the much more studied racial ambivalence of Keanu Reeves’ Neo in *The Matrix* franchise, as a presumably white character played by a white-passing Canadian actor with a very diverse ethnic background.
12. Home-edited cuts of Elliot’s rant went viral on social media—thus fueling anti-capitalist sentiments while also contributing to quench surveillance-capitalism’s endless thirst for what Zuboff (2019) calls surplus data. More tellingly, Amazon Prime Video uploaded onto YouTube a promotional compilation entitled “Rami Malek Ranting for 10 Straight Minutes in *Mr. Robot*” (2020).
13. In this regard, I am thinking through Connell’s concept of “transnational business masculinities” (2005: xxiii–xxiv) and Brown’s argument that neo-liberal capitalism “transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor,

along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic" (2015: 10).

14. This clearly illustrates how, as Connell insists in her definition (2005: 77), hegemonic masculinity emerges from the interplay of competing forms of masculinities, eventually leading to a favoring of the one form that most contributes to patriarchy's legitimation.
15. The episode literally visualizes this metaphor, and Rami Malek and Christian Slater are last seen on screen as film spectators, in a movie theater presumably inside Elliot's mind.

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