

TV Genre, Political Allegory, and New Distribution Platforms

“*Mr. Robot*: Postmodern Pastiche and Politics in the Streaming Era”

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Now in its second season and taking advantage of ubiquitous streaming accessibility online, USA Network’s broadly political *Mr. Robot* is a work of postmodern pastiche that includes intertextual references to several other film and television texts, and the program’s unconventional narrative structure also reflects home video streaming capabilities. The show borrows heavily from films including *Fight Club* and *American Psycho*, and also explicitly references *Hackers*, *Back to the Future II*, *JFK*, and *Blade Runner*. *Mr. Robot* is also strongly influenced by several conspiracy and surveillance-driven shows such as *The X-Files*, *Homeland*, and *The Wire*. Viewers are encouraged to spot these references and then watch the previous films and programs alluded to on *Mr. Robot*. As a work of postmodern pastiche, *Mr. Robot* also defies easy genre classifications. It is largely a thriller, but one that could fall into multiple subgenres including the cyber thriller, psychological thriller, corporate thriller, and especially the paranoid conspiracy thriller. This pastiche quality reflects the era of ubiquitous home video streaming that *Mr. Robot* exists in, and is also glimpsed in the program’s non-linear narrative structure. Just as video streaming, DVDs, and Blu-Rays offer the ability to rewind, fast-forward, or skip chapters, *Mr. Robot* does not have a clear chronological narrative and instead includes frequent flashbacks as well as gaps of missing story time. The big twists of the first season, that the titular character Mr. Robot is a figment of the unreliable narrator’s imagination and that he has forgotten the identity and existence of his younger sister, also benefit from streaming and other digital video options: viewers can re-watch the first season and rewind or pause to look for clues behind these major surprises. While new episodes of *Mr. Robot* are broadcast live on USA, the highly serialized narrative is conducive to binge-watching, whether the viewer does so through USA On Demand, Amazon Video streaming, or the first season’s DVD or Blu-Ray.

Just as the show’s hybrid genre classification and pastiche quality can appeal to fans of multiple texts and genres, *Mr. Robot*’s broad politics and conspiracy aspect can appeal to a wide political spectrum. The show’s tagline, “Our Democracy Has Been Hacked”, alone reveals *Mr. Robot* to be politically aware and influenced. Elliot’s primary motivation- a major corporation’s negligent decision to allow a chemical leak that killed his father- is steeped in the perspective that corporations put profit before human life. While the program’s depiction of corporate plunder for profits can be viewed as an overt critique of capitalism and neoliberalism more subtly, its reactionary politics might also connect with more conservative viewers. Elliot’s anti-authority and anti-government voice-over rants about the U.S. economy, government, and entertainment industry all being rigged shams that only benefit the powerful feel steeped in reactionary politics and might appeal to the disgruntled supporters of the politically opposed Donald Trump or senator Bernie Sanders. A raving and unstable main protagonist full of rage and cynicism, who attacks the system by taking things into his own hands, feels especially relevant now that the polemical Trump is the current presidential nominee for the Republican Party. The show’s frequent allusions to the Occupy Wall Street movement, the character Darlene’s constant calls for an economic revolution, the recurring presence

of the character Angela's crushing student loan debt and her father's bank debts, and most significantly Elliot's successful attempt at redistributing wealth through erasing consumer debt are especially in tune with Sanders' desire and platforms for creating greater economic equality in the United States. With conspiracy theories currently being bolstered by both the left and the right, the paranoid Elliot makes for a compellingly topical postmodern hero. Like with its predecessors *The X-Files* and *The Wire*, *Mr. Robot* presents no person or institution as being beyond reproach, and this catch-all cynicism easily lends itself to being appropriated by multiple political views.

Mr. Robot's presence on USA alone testifies to how networks are having to redefine niche audiences in the era of original streaming programming. USA has long been a channel with original shows that feature and even celebrate the very kind of corporate 'suits' presented as morally bankrupt on *Mr. Robot*. The channel is even responsible for the aptly titled show *Suits*, which follows a group of handsome and likable corporate lawyers. *Mr. Robot* goes against this grain through an awkward and conventionally unattractive main protagonist who fights corporations and openly mocks the kind of advertising that enables USA to fund a show like *Mr. Robot*. Popular with viewers and received with critical acclaim, *Mr. Robot* proves that complex, self-reflexive television does not have to be limited to the realm of film-savvy pop culture buffs or educated urban dwellers.