

Aesthetics & Anxieties: Contemporary Dystopian Television

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It can be argued that American life has been held captive by an overwhelming sense of precarity, anxiety, and fear for the last several years, with a significant ramping up in 2016 corresponding with the culmination of an exhausting and mind-numbing presidential campaign and eventual election of Donald Trump. For some, this was a godsend, but for most it was most certainly the sign of the end times and the first domino to fall before the eventual descent into loosely connected ethnostates governed by petty tyrants. This is most certainly reflected in television. *Mr. Robot*, for example depicts society in the midst of collapse after a hack prevents financial institutions from accessing any of their records, grossly inflating the dollar and leading to the prevalence (and competition) of cryptocurrencies. As time goes on, there are further stages of the plan *Mr. Robot* is unique in that it does not take place in a speculative future, but a speculative immediate past, with almost all of the plot taking place in 2015, though with occasional nods to the timeline the audience is experiencing. The show constantly plays with time, partly by having an unreliable protagonist, and also with hidden (and not so hidden) references to time-travel and parallel timelines. So much of the first season set up the hack that sends the world into chaos and then portrays the aftermath and regret on the part of the participants, but a large component simultaneously is trying to rectify mistakes of the past that usually revolves around Elliot's childhood.

In a deleted scene from season 2, episode 9, Elliot is visiting his mother in what seems to be an extended care facility, but before entering her room, he speaks with his frequent companion/illusion/alter ego, Mr. Robot, who takes the form of Elliot's father.

Mr. Robot: We should go home.

Elliot: I'm reconciling the past. Home can wait.

Mr Robot: I'll go in with you.

Elliot: No.

Mr Robot: She's not the same. Not gonna be what you remember. You know that, right?

In the show, this holds special significance because the audience already knows not to trust Elliot's memories, but in the same instance, it is the inherent unreliability of memory that is a central issue of the show, and the steadfast dedication to memories that oftentimes are askew, or outright false. A lack of critical analysis of memory and the

nostalgia tied to memories oftentimes not even of our own experience or of our own time is a large component of the effectiveness of “Make America Great Again.” It’s the weakness of memory (and human nature) and the immediate, insidious connections made both consciously and unconsciously. When was America great? At some point before now, likely an imaginary time that gets cited by Trump voters that hews closer to Mayberry than the postwar adjustment period (that led into yet another war) it was meant to distract from. Racism, misogyny, and homophobia rely on these self-made memories, suggesting that America was great before all of that civil rights noise. So too, like Elliot, an inability to get out of the trap of memory and one’s consciousness and experience, however deluded, is a mass experience (certainly for about 30% of the country) and political beliefs are shaped by these cognitive distortions.

The motivations behind the nigh-apocalyptic hack on the ground were various levels of anti-corporatism, vengeance for a company’s malfeasance, and general anarchic tendencies. The actual powers behind the success of the hack were less scrutable, as it is the project of the Dark Army, a hacker group led by Whiterose, who is also China’s Minister of State Security (the show also implies that Donald Trump is inevitably elected because of Whiterose’s influence). Whiterose’s motivations are more or less global domination (starting, at least, with the annexation of the Democratic Republic of the Congo). So, what many of the hackers involved thought was going to set the world right and take down the oppressive political and corporate powers at large merely assisted in the consolidation of power for one entity that had planned it the entire time. As Elliot tries to reconcile the past, the present continues to wash over him and everyone else in the world.