

***Mr. Robot* and the Romantic Genius:**  
**The Figure of the Programmer in Contemporary Mass**  
**Culture**

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Modern Languages and Cultural Studies  
Digital Humanities

University of Alberta

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## Abstract

Modern visual culture and, specifically, popular TV-series place great emphasis on technology and its relationship with humankind. Issues such as codependency between technology and users, the boundaries of human potential with regard to artificial intelligence, and cognitive loss from the overuse of technology have all been covered by numerous scholarly articles in recent years. However, the scholarship seems to overlook a subject central to modern technology, that is, the programmer or creator. This thesis aims to fill this gap by examining the figure of the programmer in a TV-show featuring a hacker-programmer, *Mr. Robot* (Sam Esmail 2015-2019).

The major theoretical issue raised in this regard is the problem of an apposite approach. Traditional theories of technological determinism, as well as social determinism and Actor-Network theory cannot fully address the problem of an exceptional individual as presented in the TV-show. A robust analytical toolset for understanding the protagonist can be found in the concept of “genius” originating from European Romanticism.

This thesis brings together notions associated with the idea of genius and developed by 19-Century Romantics. I intend to demonstrate that despite its proclaimed modern view on technology, this particular show portrays a rather traditional image of the programmer as a modern version of the Romantic genius.

To support this argument, I explore the main properties of genius which were articulated by Romanticism – authorship, madness, and the notion of a Doppelgänger. I also invoke the concept of an American superhero as *Mr. Robot* was certainly influenced by this essential idea in American culture. However, I conclude that the programmer in *Mr. Robot* largely deviates from the classical American superhero. Using a neoformalist approach, I conduct an analysis of the show in order to demonstrate that *Mr. Robot* can be analyzed through the lenses of a Romantic idea

of a solitary genius. More generally, my work aims to refocus the scholarship of technological narrative from technology to the subject and creator of technology.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank my supervisors Astrid Ensslin and Daniel Laforest. I could not have imagined having better mentors for my thesis and I am grateful and indebted for their constant support and guidance throughout my years of study until the defence of my thesis. Thank you for always keeping your doors open for me.

I am also grateful to the members of my committee and especially to my external reader Elena Siemens for her feedback and insightful questions.

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my professors, Maureen Engel, Geoffrey Rockwell, Harvey Quamen, Lynn Penrod, and Anne Malena as well as my fellow students at the Digital Humanities program and the Department of Modern Languages and Cultural Studies for steering my research in the right direction and inspiring my interest in technology and mass culture.

Finally, I must express my profound gratitude to my spouse Oleg Snegirev for providing me with unfailing love throughout my life and through the process of writing this thesis. I am forever grateful to my parents Elena and Vadim who continue to be the most important role models for me. They have taught me more than I could ever give them credit for.

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	ii
Acknowledgments	iv
<b>Table of Contents</b>	v
<b>List of Figures</b>	vii
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2. Methodology	7
1.3 Chapters Overview	11
<b>2. “Top one percent of one percent”: <i>Mr. Robot</i> in the context of science and technology studies</b>	13
2.1 A TV-show of Choice: Synopsis	13
2.2 <i>Mr. Robot</i> : Influences and context	16
2.3. <i>Mr. Robot</i> within the context of technology studies: Technological determinism vs. cultural determinism vs. Actor-Network Theory	22
Summary	29
<b>3. The figure of genius: The Age of Enlightenment and Romanticism</b>	30
3.1. Genius: Origin and evolution	30
3.2. Authorship	34
3.3. Madness	38
3.4. Doppelgänger	42
3.5. Superhero	47
Summary	53
<b>4. <i>Mr. Robot</i>: Analysis</b>	54

4.1. <i>Mr. Robot</i> and social determinism	55
4.2. Authorship	64
4.3. Madness	72
4.5. Doppelgänger	79
Summary	84
Conclusion	85
<b>Notes</b>	91
<b>Works cited</b>	92

## List of Figures

Figure 1. The top one percent of the top one percent. Episode 1, season 1	56
Figure 2. Terry Colby, a tech-director of E-corp, visiting AllSafe. Episode 1, season 1	58
Figure 3. Angela staring at the paintings in Terry Colby's house. Episode 7, season 1.	59
Figure 4. Office space. Episode 1, season 1.	61
Figure 5. Elliot and Shayla in Elliot's apartment. Chiaroscuro technique. Episode 1, season 1.	61
Figure 6. A low-angle shot of Elliot with an image of Terry Colby. Episode 1, season 1.	62
Figure 7. Romero and Mr.Robot. Episode 7, season 1.	65
Figure 8. Trenton at a college campus. Episode 7, season 1.	66
Figure 9. Mobley. Episode 8, season 2.	67
Figure 10. Darlene and Cisco. Episode 10, Season 2.	68
Figure 11. Elliot with fsociety. Episode 4, season 1.	69
Figure 12. A terminal running the code. Episode 1, season 2.	70
Figure 13. Shoulder-level shot of Elliot having a panic attack. Episode 1, Season 1.	73
Figure 14. Elliot in a high-angle shot smoking weed. Episode 1, season 1.	74
Figure 15. Elliot in the overhead shot at his mom's house (turned out to be a jail). Episode 1, season 2	74
Figure 16. Elliot sees "the source code" of people. Episode 7, season 1.	77

## 1.1 Introduction

In August 2008, I was fortunate to read publications that followed the death of Alexandr Solzhenitsyn—a Russian novelist and prominent critic of Soviet crimes and atrocities. Almost all of those publications characterized his passing as the “fall of the prophet”, the death of the last intellectual leader in Russia, and, arguably, worldwide (Larin, 2008; Gazeta.RU, 2008). He was indeed a prophet and an idol for the Russian intelligentsia and many western intellectuals. And yet, at the same time, there were voices that expressed positive feelings regarding a final and ultimate loss of a spiritual leader (Morev, 2008). It seemed that the idea of a leader, a clairvoyant, a genius was coming to a natural end. The last genius passed away, and it seemed that Western society had reached that point of maturity when it did not really need the figure of a genius and prophet anymore. The future was pictured in bright, egalitarian colors where there was no need to look up to someone with awe.

However, a few years passed and I started noticing that the cultural climate in that regard did not seem to change not only in my home country but worldwide. National, political, intellectual, and spiritual leaders often referred to as “geniuses” never ceased to exist. Moreover, they continue to thrive more than ever before. The egalitarian hopes have never been realized. The current president of the USA does not hesitate to call himself “a very stable genius”. Film production companies keep releasing movies picturing superheroes, scientists, and inventors referred to as “geniuses”. In this regard, films and TV shows are among the most tangible examples of the notion of elitism and exceptionalism that still pervades modern culture. The idea of this thesis was conceived by virtue of my constant wonder over the omnipresence of the figure of genius in mass culture, and especially in those mass culture products that feature technology. What particularly surprises me is that the idea of an exceptional personality is present in those art



products that proclaim anti-elitism. As a case study for this thesis, I chose the American TV show *Mr. Robot*, which features a vigilant and extremely gifted hacker. The irony is that the show is full of anti-capitalist and egalitarian sentiment, but at the same time, it elevates an exceptional persona to the forefront. Thus, there is a clear contradiction between the projected ideology of the show and what is really being manifested in its storyline.

It is also fascinating that the role of a genius is given to a computer programmer. Given the fact that modern programming is a profession that, by definition, excludes exceptionalism and elitism, it seems especially paradoxical and intriguing. A starting assumption of this thesis is that we live in a world where computer programming is not as elitist as it used to be at the beginning of the modern computer era (see Jenkins 1992). The long-established division between high-tech professionals and technology users is no longer relevant. The slogan “Do it yourself”, calling for direct participation in those aspects of life that were previously delegated to professionals, is a clear embodiment of the emergence of so-called “participatory culture”. The term was coined by media scholar Henry Jenkins (1992) and has become a platitude in media and cultural studies.

Participatory culture is a concept that describes the interchangeable and contextual nature of the roles of a contributor and a consumer in the modern digital world where content is created collaboratively and often user-generated. It leads, consequently, to authorship concerns as sometimes it is next to impossible to ascertain the authorship of a given product, especially in instances where computer code is frequently created by collecting and assembling different pieces made by multiple people. Moreover, software engineering as a profession is losing its high-tech elitist spirit after the rise of self-taught or hobbyist programmers (Lee and Lin, 2011).

The phenomenon of participatory culture has been widely explored in multiple fields. In *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992), Jenkins analyzes the phenomena of fandom, fan-fiction, and vidding, using examples of fan reactions to *Twin Peaks*, *Beauty and the Beast* and a *Kirk/Spock* vid. Michael Graves (2014) follows Jenkins' approach, studying how an online fandom community influenced the storyline of the TV series *Lost*. Apart from television and fandom, participatory culture is a subject of various social studies research. Russo et al. (2010) explored the influence of participatory culture on the use of social networks in museums. Buckingham (2013) reveals challenges that the education system is facing in the age of participatory culture. McShane (2011) explores recent developments related to user-generated content in Australian public libraries. Finally, participatory culture was a focus in several studies of various media. Burgess and Green (2009) provide a profound analysis of how YouTube challenges traditional notions of consumption, production, and authority. Jacobs and Sihvonen (2011) show the changing role of a player in the popular Facebook game *Frontierville* where a player acts, essentially, as a game designer. Massanari (2013), finally, investigates the peculiarities of user interactions on Reddit.

However, despite the fact that participatory culture has become ubiquitous in new media studies, it has mainly been explored as an element of media but not as a part of the media content. Participatory culture as a topic of representation has received very scant attention both in cinema studies and science and technology studies. Scholarship does not seem much concerned with the presence of participatory culture in a piece of art as a subject or theme. One of few examples of such analysis is an article by Derek Johnson (2011) on the representation of neoliberal politics, media convergence, and the Do-It-Yourself movement in the TV series *24*. Johnson shows how do-it-yourself ethic forces characters to leave behind their reliance on the

government and take action. The show itself proclaims “citizen-participants in a ubiquitous war on terror” (2011:153). Johnson demonstrates in a compelling way how participatory culture (he affiliates it with political neoliberalism) penetrates not only the media —television— but the message of the show itself. However, *24* is essentially a political thriller and does not deal with technology. As participatory culture is mostly a product of new media and digital technology, it is vital to implement such analysis of films and TV-series focusing on technology. In fact, the presence or the lack of the theme of participatory culture in art products featuring technology could tell us a lot about the potential self-awareness of new media.

My thesis aims to fill this gap by looking at the figure of the programmer in television products featuring technology in the context of emerging participatory culture. If technology changes the way we see programmers and programming labour in real life, cultural products are supposed to reflect that shift as well. The idea driving my project comes from constant puzzlement over the contradiction between the omnipresence of participatory culture in all areas of life and the fact that pop culture products often seem to ignore the phenomenon of participatory culture. As this thesis is mostly concerned with tv-show analysis, it argues that contemporary television movies and series still zealously retain the idea of programming as an elitist profession. The thesis provides an analysis of the figure of a programmer in contemporary television, and particularly, in the television series *Mr. Robot*. I will be focusing on how the phenomenon of participatory culture is reflected in the representation of the programmer in the show. The programmer protagonist in the series does not tend to collaborate with others in the work process. He is also pictured as a highly gifted person and a genius, which provides an opportunity to consider him within the theories of genius that go back to the 18th and 19th centuries. I argue that *Mr. Robot*’s protagonist incorporates certain characteristics of the figure of

genius that were created and developed during the Enlightenment and the Romantic era. While the notion of genius as an exceptional person (as opposed to genius as a feature of every individual from the Classical era) is an invention of the Enlightenment, it was Romanticism that exalted the individual to the highest. Romanticism fully explored and established the characteristics of genius that have permeated both high-brow art and mass culture.

In my thesis I strive to situate *Mr. Robot* within modern debates in science and technology studies (technological determinism, social determinism, and Actor-Network Theory). But closer scrutiny of the show demonstrates that *Mr. Robot* does not really fit within these theories. The show inherits significantly older, pre-existing notions that come from 19th-century literature. This is not atypical of mass culture. In fact, “mad scientists”, “odd geniuses”, and “outcasts” have been plentiful in films since the beginning of the 20th century even though they were rarely reflective about their Romantic origin. However, given the above-mentioned, changing image of programmers in society it seems paradoxical for more recent films or TV series about programmers.

Another lacuna this thesis intends to fill is the scarce attention given to a persona, an actor, or a creator of technology in the extant scholarship on films about digital technology. With the emergence of films and series about computer technology, a large number of analytical studies have covered technological narrative in films. For instance, the HBO television series *Westworld* has been attracting scholars’ attention: apart from articles in various journals, two collections of essays were released on the philosophy of *Westworld*. Scholars covering technological themes in contemporary movies and TV shows tend to focus on the phenomenon of cyborgs in films (particularly *Westworld*) (Netolicky, 2017; Seaman-Grant, 2017), the dark effects of technology in *Black Mirror* (Boren, 2015; Singh, 2014), and the problem of morality

and virtue in the fictional world of, again, *Westworld* (2018). The figure of the creator—that is to say, the programmer—in contrast, remains overlooked. The exception is an empirical study conducted by García-Crespo et al. (2018) on the negative representation of IT professionals in the British TV show *The IT Crowd*. The authors examine how IT workers are portrayed in the show and what perception of the profession it gives to viewers. Although the authors provide statistical data, the study does not involve any theories or specific analytical methodology, and the analysis of the show seems vague and incomplete as the study focuses on the student perception of IT professionals in the show rather than on the show itself. It is necessary to fill that void by looking at these movies from the standpoint of subject representation.

In a broader sense, the main concern of this thesis is the role of the genius subject—a super-subject, an *Übermensch* in a way—in a TV show that is supposed to mitigate or exclude the idea of the superhuman. I intend to demonstrate that our modern notion of technology, and of the people who use technology, is still largely based on concepts that were invented in the 18th and 19th centuries. For that purpose, I involve the concept of genius as developed during the Enlightenment and Romanticism. The Romantic genius, with its stress on the primacy of the individual and with its eager embrace of exceptionalism, seems a possible origin of the figure of the modern programmer in the show. The Romantic genius is a central concept of my thesis since I intend to demonstrate its high relevance for modern mass culture. At the same time, the thesis aspires to show how the figure of the genius has been presented through lenses of a TV-show, hence, how the genius has been modified by the 20-th century media.

## 1.2 Methodology

I analyze *Mr. Robot* from the perspective of the theories and concepts of the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Hence, the methodology I apply is concerned with the rise of subjectivity and individualism. I draw on a number of studies on the concept of the genius from the Encyclopédistes to the leaders of Jena Romanticism, juxtaposing them with the way characters and ideas are represented in the fictional setting of the show. The theory is largely based on European literature, as the ideas I discuss were first embodied in the poetry and prose of European and specifically French, British, and German Romanticism. For example, the Romantic concept of madness is illustrated in Byron's oeuvre, specifically using his dramatic monologue *The Lament of Tasso* (1817). The concept of the Doppelgänger is reflected in examples from E.T.A Hoffman's novel *The Devil's Elixirs* (1815).

However, as I am dealing with a TV-show, I need a methodology that is designed specifically for motion pictures. For that purpose, I utilize a neoformalist approach that seeks to analyze how stylistic structures function within an entire film. Neoformalism came to be known by virtue of the theoretical works of David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, who applied a formalist method to film studies. A starting assumption of the neoformalist approach is that the artistic object should be approached differently from any other objects in the world. Cinema, like other art forms, constitutes a distinctive field. Neoformalism derives from the literary theories of Russian Formalists who explored the formal elements of poetic language in order to see how poets or writers use them in perceptually unfamiliar and fresh ways. The purpose of a formalist analysis is isolating specific devices of the artwork that constitute the "artfulness" of the object, and hence, convert the ordinary objects into a product of art. Formalists coined the term "defamiliarization", meaning that the main technique of art is making ordinary, familiar objects unfamiliar. However,

the artistic technique of defamiliarization is very quickly becoming automated. As Victor Shklovsky noted, “Automatization eats things, clothes, furniture, your wife, and the fear of war” (2015). The goal of a formalist critic is to restore the conditions of perceptions that have made the artwork unfamiliar. Neoformalists have proposed an approach of examining the concrete structure of films, that is to say, devices that create perceptual effects. The neoformalist approach constitutes a careful look at the aesthetic language of an artwork.

One of the most illustrative examples of a neoformalist analysis was performed by Kristin Thompson in the book *Eisenstein's "Ivan the Terrible": A Neoformalist Analysis* (1981). Thompson breaks down Eisenstein’s film into different cinematic devices (including spatial relations, floating motif, mise-en-scène, montage, the role of sound, etc.), placing them in the broader context of classic narrative cinema. She demonstrates that the key feature of *Ivan* is its discontinuities of editing, meaning that some aspects of the film are not used for narrative purposes, but to make some artistic devices perceptible by defamiliarizing them. Whereas classic narrative Hollywood film use sounds, dialogue hooks, and other aspects of narrative structure in order to make the film look more natural, organic, and smooth, *Ivan*, in contrast, deviates from this system. *Ivan* refuses “to provide more than artistic motivation for many of its stylistic devices” (Thompson, 1981: 287). Thompson calls this lack of narrative motivation “excess”, which shows the arbitrary nature of the narrative as opposed to the logical one.

I believe that Thompson’s observation is relevant to *Mr. Robot*, which extensively exploits excess. In fact, *Mr. Robot*, along with its thematic complexity, has a stylistic density that involves the use of a variety of artistic devices. Furthermore, the nature of TV-series provides equal opportunities to perform both logical narrative and excess. *Mr. Robot* has to be full of logically motivated details and scenes in order to maintain the audience’s attention across three seasons with

multiple episodes. It provides alignments between seasons, where characters that appear in the first season suddenly reappear in the final season. Indeed, *Mr. Robot* is dense in a narrative sense: most of the narrative lines merge and ultimately make sense at the end. However, the length inherent to the genre implies that some elements of the show cannot be motivated by strictly narrative reasons (some scenes in the office, parties, urban landscapes, the murder of some characters, etc.). It provides several possibilities for interpretative mode. As Thompson puts it, “the work becomes a perceptual field of structures that the viewer is free to study at length, going beyond the strictly functional aspects” (Thompson, 1981: 302). In my analysis I will perform a neoformalist reading of *Mr. Robot* that highlights only those devices that reveal my research object — the figure of the programmer protagonist. However, I will not limit myself to the strict analysis of cinematic devices, even though I indeed draw special attention to *mise-en-scène*, settings, lights, and types of shot angles. I also perform an analysis of narrative structure, elements of semiotic analysis, and, finally, I place *Mr. Robot* in a broader historical and cultural context involving certain facts about the actors, the director, and the time period when the series was created.

In terms of analytical method, I watched the full series taking notes of those cinematic devices that work towards depicting a programmer in his or her surroundings. In total, 32 episodes met this depiction criterion, and my analysis will focus on a selection of episodes from my research corpus: “eps1.0\_hellofriend.mov” (season1), “eps1.1\_ones-and-zeroes.mpeg” (season 1), “eps1.6\_v1ew-s0urce.flv” (season 1), “eps1.7\_wh1ter0se.m4v” (season 1), “eps2.0\_unm4sk-pt1.tc” (season 2), “eps2.1\_k3rnel-pan1c.ksd” (season 2), “eps2.2\_init\_1.asec” (season 2), “eps3.4\_runtime-error.r00” (season 3), “eps3.7\_dont-delete-me.ko” (season 3), “shutdown -r” (season 3). Finally, I examined the extent to which the series and especially its protagonist fall



within the main categories of the Romantic Movement and the Romantic genius. These categories are authorship, madness and the figure of a Doppelgänger.

### 1.3 Chapter Overview

The structure of the thesis informs the process of reflection on the figure of the programmer in *Mr. Robot*. The thesis consists of three main chapters (chs. 2-4): a first chapter embeds *Mr. Robot* in the context of science and technology studies, a second chapter scrutinizes the figure of genius at the Age of Enlightenment and Romanticism and, finally, a third chapter is devoted to a neoformalist analysis of the show.

Chapter 2 provides a general discussion of the theoretical issues raised in regard to *Mr. Robot*. The first section is a synopsis of the series which opens up a main theoretical issue raised in the thesis - relationship between the individual and the elite. The second subsection places *Mr. Robot* in the context of other films and serials that either have influenced *Mr. Robot* or develop similar problems; this subsection also justifies my TV-show of choice as a case study. The final subsection examines the main theories of science and technology studies (technological and social determinism, Actor-Network Theory) as they apply to *Mr. Robot*. The problem of the exceptional individual who implements technological development is, in fact, ties up with the question of the primary source of technology. Three main theories (technological and social determinism, Actor-Network Theory) traditionally suggest different sources: society, technology itself, and a network consisted of actors both from society and technology. However, my hypothesis is that the individual as depicted in the show does not fully fit in neither of these theories. He rather originates from much older concept - an idea of a genius as emerges during the Romantic movement. The chapter concludes with a brief summary of the main findings.

Chapter 3 is an overview of the establishment and evolution of the concept of genius and its characteristics in European culture. The first subsection is dedicated to the history of the notion of genius from Classical Antiquity to Romanticism. The second subsection depicts the

origins and particularities of the phenomenon of authorship in its relation to genius. The third subsection focuses on the origins of the concept of madness and its role in Romantic literature. The final subsection discusses the problem of the Doppelgänger in Romanticism. The final subsection gives a brief overview of the theory of the superhero in American culture in regard to *Mr. Robot*. The chapter concludes with a summary of the ideas discussed.

The fourth chapter is a neoformalist analysis of *Mr. Robot*. The first subsection concentrates on the representation of the social elite in the show and in its relation to the protagonist. The second subsection discusses how the idea of authorship is presented in the show. The third section deals with the presence of insanity in the show and juxtaposes it with the related romantic concept. The same technique is used in the final subsection where I explore the idea of the Doppelgänger in *Mr. Robot*. The chapter also ends with a brief summary.

In the conclusion, I synthesize the main findings of the study and provide suggestions for further research. The conclusion of my thesis is that the figure of the programmer in modern mass culture indeed resembles the figure of the Romantic genius as invented in the 18-19th centuries. In fact, *Mr. Robot's* protagonist incorporates all key traits of the Romantic genius: authorship, the concept of the double, and the idea of madness.

## **Chapter 2. “Top one percent of one percent”: *Mr. Robot* in the context of science and technology studies**

### **2.1 A TV show of choice: Synopsis**

*Mr. Robot* is a drama television series created by Sam Esmail. The series premiered on USA Network on June 24, 2015 and three seasons were released. The first season includes ten episodes and was first aired in June of 2015. The second season comprises 12 episodes and began airing in July 2016. The third season has 10 episodes and was released in October 2017. The official release of a final fourth season is scheduled for October 2019. In this thesis I intend to address the issues raised in all three seasons. However, the core of my analysis will be concentrated on the first and second seasons, since namely in these seasons the figure of a programmer at work is being fully exposed. In the first and second seasons Elliot works for AllSafe and later for E-Corp and at the same time he organizes the hacking revolt. In seasons three and four he is not an employee and he stopped cooperating within the group. Hence, while I peruse the entire show and consider all four seasons as a holistic art product, I will base my analysis on the first two seasons where the relationship within a network (a programmer with other programmers) is the most visible.

*Mr. Robot* has won multiple awards and nominations including the Golden Globe for Best Television Drama Series, a Peabody Award, and six Emmy nominations. The show has a large fan community on Reddit (over 150,000 followers) and an online encyclopedia on Wikia. The series is set and filmed in different locations of New York City. In the first season the main character Elliot Alderson (played by Rami Malek) is a cybersecurity engineer struggling with several mental health issues. In the first episode, Elliot is recruited by an insurrectionary anarchist known as “Mr. Robot” to join a group of hacktivists called *fsociety*. Later it turns out

that Mr. Robot is Elliot's dead father who only exists in Elliot's mind and Elliot is the real leader of *fsociety*. *Fsociety* aims to destroy all debt records by hacking the data of the largest conglomerate in the world, E-Corp. Meanwhile Elliot starts a relationship with his drug dealer Shayla but at the end of the season Shayla is killed by her supplier Fernando Vera. Elliot's sister Darlene is also an active member of the hacking group. Later on, Angela —Darlene's and Elliot's childhood friend—also participates in attacks performed by *fsociety*. Angela, Elliot and Darlene lost their parents due to a toxic waste leak. Tyrell Wellick, a fired top-manager of E-Corp, also helps Elliot to destroy the company after killing his boss's wife. In the first season they accomplish this together with another hacking group —*Dark Army*— based in China. The leader of *Dark Army* is a mysterious Whiterose who turns out to be a trans woman and the Chinese Minister of State Security.

In the second and third seasons the USA is struggling with the economic collapse due to the attack. A martial law is declared across the country. The second season starts with Elliot living at his mother's and maintaining a routine in order to reduce Mr. Robot's influence over him. Angela breaks up with her boyfriend and builds a respectable career at E-Corp. *Fsociety* becomes very popular and continues working under Darlene's leadership. FBI agent Dominique DiPierro conducts the investigation of the attack and eventually finds the *fsociety* arcade where the group was gathering. *Fsociety*, in response, hacks the FBI in order to remove the evidence. At the end of episode 7 the viewer learns that Elliot has been in prison the entire time. The FBI reveals an image of Cisco —Darlene's boyfriend— as a suspect. After a few hours Cisco is killed by *Dark Army*.

In the third season Elliot asks Angela to give him a job at E-Corp where he insists on the digitalization of all physical records of E-Corp in order to prevent Stage 2 which is destroying all

physical records of E-Corp and killing thousands of people inside the building. However, despite Elliot's attempts, Whiterose accomplishes Stage 2 and destroys 71 E-Corp buildings. Angela is bewitched by Whiterose who assures her that her dead mother will be resurrected. Mr. Robot realizes that the revolution happened because the elite wanted it, and the real goal of the attacks was the annexation of Congo by China. Dominique is kidnapped by her boss Santiago and reveals that the latter is a mole who is working for *Dark Army*. Finally, Dominique ends up working for *Dark Army* out of fear. At the end of the season Elliot decides to reverse the attacks. However, we do not know exactly how he is going to implement it.

## **2.2. *Mr. Robot*: influences and context**

Among the large number of contemporary mass culture products concerning digital technology, there are very few that give due prominence to the creator of such technology—that is to say, the programmer. Visual culture products tend to emphasize technology itself and its relationship with society, politics, and culture in general. The most salient example is a large-scale TV-series *Westworld* created by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy. The show explores the boundaries of human nature and the essence of artificial intelligence. However, it barely touched the problem of the creator of technology even though programmers and developer do present in the show. I argue that *Mr. Robot* represents a unique image of a programmer: here, the programmer has been put at the forefront of the story, he works with real (not fictional) technology, and the storyline is set in the present time.

In that sense, digital technology stands apart from potential future forms of technology because with the latter, the figure of a scientist has been featured much more prominently than the figure of the programmer. Starting with Dr. Frankenstein, Dr. Moreau, and Dr. Jekyll, the concept of the “mad scientist” has become one of the most widespread tropes in film industry, fiction, sci-fy and fanfics. The figure of a programmer, for its part, usually appears to be rather overlooked or oversimplified—that is to say, portrayed with a satirical or mocking tone (the best example is the British sitcom *The IT Crowd*, which was also adapted in the USA and Germany). Even when a programmer is the main character of a show or film, the focus is frequently shifted from the process of production to issues related to promotion and gaining socioeconomic status (as seen in the biographical film about Mark Zuckerberg, *The Social Network*, and the TV show *Silicon Valley* about IT start-ups). In modern films and TV series, attention is scarcely paid to the

job itself and the programmer's relationship with their technology. *Mr. Robot* is a rare example of a television show where the job of a programmer is the main focus of the story.

Director Sam Esmail was largely inspired by the Arab Spring (Stanhope, 2015) and the use of technology during uprisings. A revolutionary, anti-establishment, and anti-capitalist agenda encompasses the show. No wonder it was also influenced by movies that feature subversive activities and the spirit of revolt rather than technology. The most salient inspiration is David Fincher's *Fight Club* (in Season 1, Episode 9, there is an indirect reference to *Fight Club* when the song *Where Is My Mind* is playing). Like Elliot in *Mr. Robot*, the main character of *Fight Club* with an accomplice (who turns out to be a dissociated personality of the main character) tries to erase all debt records. *Fight Club*'s motifs of self-destruction and industrial urban aesthetics are also largely explored in *Mr. Robot*.

In terms of aesthetics, *Mr. Robot* even more closely resembles another cult film, *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976), where a narrator suffering from insomnia and mental disorder soliloquizes about the amorality of modern society. He drives around decaying New York (pictured in soft dark shades) very much like Elliot wanders the same city 40 years later, walking through fashionable Manhattan and the abandoned buildings of Coney Island. However, neither *Fight Club* nor *Taxi Driver* deal with programming or digital technology. In *Fight Club*, the characters want to explode a building containing physical copies of debt records. In *Taxi Driver*, the protagonist physically kills people in a brothel.

The nearest film to *Mr. Robot* in terms of its themes is the classic science-fiction film *The Matrix* (The Wachowskis, 1999), which depicts Neo, a hacker-by-night and a programmer-by-day, who finds himself involved in a war between machines and humans. *The Matrix*'s strong focus on a programmer, as well as its elements of the cyberpunk genre and philosophical



components, were extensively used in *Mr. Robot*. Neo, very much like Elliot, is presented as ‘the One’, a special, chosen person who is able to accomplish the mission at hand. However, *The Matrix* is set in a dystopian future, and Neo deals primarily with fictional technology—namely, artificial intelligence and simulated reality. Futuristic and high-tech aspects are essential for *The Matrix*, whereas *Mr. Robot* is intentionally set in present-day New York City and deals only with existing technology.

A hacker as a gifted person is also featured in the movies *War Games* (Badham, 1983) and *Hackers* (Softley, 1995). Created during the early-Internet or even the pre-Internet era, these films present the romantic idea that smart high school students could turn the world upside down by clicking and typing. Both films follow teenagers who break corporate or government systems. *Hackers* is especially peculiar since young hackers work as a group to resist another hacker. Also, this hacking group includes a woman who equally takes part in the action. However, the movie was criticized for the unconvincing picture of computing staff: “I took it approximately as seriously as the archaeology in “Indiana Jones”, critic Roger Ebert puts it.

Far more realistic movies on hacking and programming are *Sneakers* (Robinson, 1992) and *Office Space* (Judge, 1999). *Sneakers* follows a group of security specialists who are approached by fake FBI agents requesting to retrieve a “black box” that can break any encryption. *Sneakers* is a comedy that contrasts with the sombre overtone of *Mr. Robot* but its motif of a group of eccentric security specialists during the day and code breakers at night was definitely put to use in *Mr. Robot*.

*Office Space* is slightly different from all the other programmer movies, as it portrays programmers as ordinary white-collar employees who are stuck in a tedious job full of office intrigue and gossip. The movie does not emphasize the fact that the characters work for a

software company and treats them as any other office employees. There is no new fascinating technology or alternative reality; rather, programmers are presented as common people doing their common jobs in a stressful environment. The visual content is also remarkable, as the film creates an atmosphere of a typical American city landscape (somewhere in Texas) with parking lots, identical plazas, and grey office buildings where people have to work in cubicles. *Office Space* has become a cult classic, and even a mobile game based on the movie was released in 2017. Elliot in *Mr. Robot*, of course, is not a typical employee. He is, conversely, a highly gifted eccentric with mental health issues. However, the lack of fictional technology and the shift of attention from the technology to the person (i.e., the creator of technology) in *Office Space* was employed in *Mr. Robot*.

Turning to more contemporary examples, it is worth mentioning the biographical movies about Mark Zuckerberg and Edward Snowden. *The Social Network* (Fincher, 2010) and *Silicon Valley*, as I stated above, are more focused on the problems of promotion, finance, and networking within the tech field than on the programming itself. Although *Snowden* (Stone, 2016) technically follows an expert in cyber counterintelligence, it deals more with the political and moral issues of surveillance disclosure.

Probably the most influential contemporary film for *Mr. Robot* is a period TV show called *Halt and Catch Fire*, produced between 2014 and 2017 by Christopher Cantwell and Christopher C. Rogers. The show is set in the 1980s and 1990s during the personal computer revolution and the early first Internet era. The show revives and at the same time satirizes the “start-up garage” myth. The spirit of tech innovation pervades the series, and it involves strong female characters as well as a prodigy programmer. However, *Halt and Catch Fire* is meant to be a historical drama, which is evident in the effort put into creating a sense of history and

nostalgia: costumes, vintage cars, faded colours, music. These attributes help to engross the audience in the past depicted on screen. *Mr. Robot*, for its part, insists that the story is happening right here and right now (by referring to contemporary brands, for instance). In *Halt and Catch Fire*, the characters work on developing new technology as they try to outsmart rivals and appeal to customers, whereas *Mr. Robot* is more concerned with programming/hacking and existing technology.

In a survey of films and TV-shows featuring technology and a programme-protagonist it is impossible to avoid Charlie Brooker's science-fiction anthology *Black Mirror* (2011- present) due to its major influence on modern film productions that feature technology. Most of the episodes are set in an alternate present and are concerned with society's relationship with technology. Even though most of the technology is computational, only a few episodes incorporate the figure of a programmer in the show. *Black Mirror* is more focused on the dark, anxious consequences of technology and how the latter affects people's behaviour. The most prominent episodes that do include a programmer are the episodes "USS Callister" (2017) and a standalone interactive film *Bandersnatch* (2018), though both of these were released after *Mr. Robot* and it is more accurate to talk about the influence of the latter on these *Black Mirror* episodes. The first episode depicts a gifted but socially awkward software engineer, Daly, who abuses his colleagues. Though *Mr. Robot*'s protagonist Elliot is also quite reclusive, Daly is certainly an antihero, which makes "USS Callister" only slightly similar to *Mr. Robot*.

In contrast, it seems that *Bandersnatch* (2018) appropriated a great deal of the themes and issues raised in *Mr. Robot*. It also places a programmer, Stefan (who is a game designer, not a hacker), as the central figure of the movie. Stefan, very much like Elliot, deals with childhood issues, visits a therapist, and tries hallucinogens. The major point of the movie is when Stefan

decides to work on a game by himself without any help, which echoes Elliot's approach. However, *Bandersnatch* is an interactive movie mostly concerned with the question of free will versus determinism, the multiverse, and multiple narrative layers, whereas *Mr. Robot* spans issues of capitalism, corporations, and social elite. *Mr. Robot*'s narrative lines are also quite convoluted, but it does not give any choice to a viewer. It is also worth noting that *Bandersnatch* is set in 1984—the time of early personal computers. At that time, the figure of a software engineer was neatly aligned with the myth of a total recluse and outcast, unlike today, when programming is a common occupation. *Mr. Robot*, in contrast, has no interest in the past, but it is deeply concerned with the present.

Thus, *Mr. Robot* adopts a large number of themes, motifs, and visual elements from other films concerning technology (and is, in many cases, self-aware of that). And yet, *Mr. Robot* is a unique television series in terms of the position of a programmer: not technology but the programmer himself has been placed at the focal point of the story. In order to understand the figure of Elliot, it is necessary to place him into the context of the ongoing discussion on the influence of technological innovations on society.

### **2.3. *Mr. Robot* within the context of technology studies: Technological determinism vs. cultural determinism vs. Actor-Network Theory**

*Mr. Robot* focuses on the problem of personality at the expense of technology. Technology *per se* rarely appears in the show and exists only as a background to demonstrate people's skills. Given the context of recent mass culture products that, conversely, tend to emphasize technology at the expense of society, it is logical to consider *Mr. Robot* in the context of discussions regarding social determinism—the notion that society determines technology and spearheads technological innovations. However, I argue that the representation of the programmer in *Mr. Robot* has very little in common with social determinism (or technological determinism or Actor-Network theory) but rather inherits the notion of genius that comes from the Age of Enlightenment and Romanticism. While advocates of social determinism (see Raymond Williams, 1974) suggest that the social elite are the primary users and customers of technology, *Mr. Robot* claims that not a group but rather a single exceptional individual is responsible for technology and its effects on society. I believe that *Mr. Robot* does not fit either of these theories, as it focuses on the problem of personality rather than on technology and society in general. However, before we explore the concept of genius, we shall bring to light theories concerning the effects of society on technology.

It is widely recognized that the term “technological determinism” was coined by American economist Thorstein Veblen in the 1920s to refer to the reliance on technology as the primary means for progress. Of course, the notion itself is much older, as productive technology is at the core of historical materialism and Marxism. Moreover, the idea of technology as an agent of progress imbues all the stages of the Industrial Revolution and is still relevant today in all discourses that express the fear of technology shaping society. Essentially, technological

determinism assumes that technology exists and acts independently from society, and its properties are not affected by outside forces. As Murphie and Potts put it, “in removing specific technologies from their social and political contexts, this approach treats technologies in isolation, as if they come into existence of their own accord and proceed to mould societies in their image” (2003: 17). For the proponents of this approach, the technological impact greatly exceeds any possible influences that could come from society. No wonder then that technological determinism has been called a “reductionist theory” and that modern scholarship tries to be more nuanced when analyzing the relationship between technology and culture.

It is easy to exclude technological determinism from the context of *Mr. Robot*. The technology *per se* is not a primary issue of the show. Unlike *Black Mirror*, which is imbued with fascination over new fictional technology, in *Mr. Robot* we do not see any technology except computers and pieces of code on a screen. *Dark Army*—hackers for hire and antagonists of *fsociety*—is even known for hacking without any code. It is not a coincidence that the main characters of the show are hackers rather than software or computer engineers: the show is enthralled by people’s ability to use technology rather than invent or develop it. There is no competition between artificial and human intelligence as compared to *Westworld* for instance. A person is the one who always gets to run and manage technology in *Mr. Robot*, and technology does not determine human actions or behavior.

An alternative school of thought strives to place technology within a social context. The most common terms for this approach are “social determinism”, “cultural determinism”, “cultural materialism”, and “the sociology of technology”. I prefer using the latter terms as they lack the reductionist element and assume the existence of interplay between two agencies—society and technology. Probably the most notable advocate of cultural materialism is Raymond

Williams with his critique of McLuhan's technologically deterministic concept of media in the book *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974). According to McLuhan, media are desocialized and consequently shape the culture. Williams (1974:14), on the contrary, suggests that certain conditions and practices allow the development of technology. Similarly, other scholars explore the intertwining relationships between technology and society from different angles: MacKenzie and Wajcman (1985) and Green (2002) examine government control over inventions; Hill (1988) focuses on the changing nature of class relations in Britain and their effect on technology. All these theoretical approaches assert that technology needs to be considered within the context of multiple political and economic factors that determine the use of technology in the first place. Implementing or refusing to implement certain technology is always a matter of choice rather than a natural course of life: "Those theorists concerned to refute technological determinism affirm the importance of choice in implementing, or opposing, new technologies" (Murphie and Potts, 2003: 22).

What is important for this thesis is that cultural materialism supposes that the decision to adopt certain technology is endowed to a social elite. It could be a state or a corporate elite, or even one person as a representative of the elite. Before being put into production, technology needs to be sponsored, and the sponsoring decision needs to be made by a powerful and privileged group of people. It is not a certain individual but a group who is responsible for invention and adoption of technology. Cultural materialism insists on refuting the idea of invention as the insight of a single inventor. Mackenzie and Wajcman present the latter notion as a common myth, the "common but wholly mystified notion of a heroic inventor. According to that notion, great inventions occur when, in a flash of genius, a radically new idea presents itself almost ready-formed in the inventor's mind" (1985: 9).

Similarly, Lelia Green, in one of the earliest books on the incorporation of digital technology into culture, *Technoculture: From Alphabet to Cybersex* (2002), approaches technology as a sum of narratives we tell each other in order to accentuate the importance of technological progress in our life. Similar to Greek myths on the domestication of fire or creation, we tell stories about the invention of the light bulb, the computer, and the Internet that are far from reality. We tend to mythologize technology, excluding the social context of the development and giving all the credit to a single inventor: “What is rarely included in these myths of scientific and technological advancement is a sense of the social environment in which the discoveries are made” (Green, 2002:2). Green develops this idea further over the course of her book by looking at technology through the lenses of power and privilege—because technology, according to Green, is meant to express the priorities and preferences of a social elite. She is building her approach within the larger framework of cultural materialism by stating that the figure of a single creator-inventor appropriated by mass culture is essentially fallacious. The real picture of scientific invention and software development includes various agents and forces.

With regard to social determinism, *Mr. Robot* to a large extent deals with how society affects technology. The key themes of the show include the issues of power and privilege, and a secret group of people (“top one percent of one percent”) who rules the world. It is tempting to consider *Mr. Robot* as the embodiment of social determinism as it involves multiple social actors (business corporations, government, FBI, foreign countries, etc.) in the hacking process and subsequent revolution. However, as I intend to demonstrate in my analysis, *Mr. Robot* reverses social determinism: the programmer is shown as an exceptional genius who can outsmart the powerful corporate elite as well as any other agents and forces. Moreover, the programmer is



juxtaposed with the social elite. He is an outcast who strives to defeat corporate power. The major resistance of the show is the rivalry between the almighty power of the social and economic elite and the exceptional coding skills of a solitary genius. *Mr. Robot* widely explores the myth of a single inventor, which is considered fictitious by the advocates of social determinism (Green, 2002).

The approach that suggests a linkage of these two opposed schools of thought is Actor-Network Theory (ANT), developed by sociologists and philosophers Bruno Latour, John Law, and Michel Callon within the field of science and technology studies. ANT sees the world as a constantly developing network of actors who equally influence each other. ANT insists that external forces do not exist outside a network, and in fact constitute the network as well. Thus, social phenomena can be explained only by describing how the network is assembled. ANT is well-known for its non-discriminatory attitude to networks: it includes symbolic entities (such as ideas, thoughts, theories) as well as non-humans and humans. Technology, nature, society, humans, and non-humans are all included in a circle of networks. In essence, ANT is a reaction to a hierarchical nature of social theorists that used to describe the world in terms of scales and layers. Technology and society in the eyes of ANT do not compete with each other, which contradicts the typical representation of technology in mass culture products. Mass culture either puts the highest stress on a creator, or it shows how technology overthrows its creator. This is how Latour describes a common misunderstanding of the actor figure in ANT:

The word actor has been open to the same misunderstanding as the word network. “Actor” in the Anglo-Saxon tradition is always a human intentional individual actor and is most often contrasted with mere “behavior”. If one adds this definition of an actor to the social definition of a network then the bottom of

misunderstanding is reached: an individual human -usually male- who wishes to grab power makes a network of allies and extend his power -doing some

“networking” or “liaising” as Americans say (Latour 1996: 7).

ANT is essentially a structuralist approach that revokes the division between subject and object, suggesting instead a permanently shifting, non-hierarchical network of all items in the natural, material, and social world. Thus, a hardware component like a computer is as much part of an actor network as an organization like Google and its millions of users.

Media studies have recently adopted ANT approach applying it to different media products.

Markus Spöhrer, for instance, uses ANT in order to explore the process of production of the film *Barbarosa* by Paul Lazarus (2016: 114-141). He breaks film production apart handling production as a hybrid of networks and interconnections. Spöhrer argues that film production is not merely a prescription by humans for non-human actors. Instead, it needs to be considered as a reciprocal process. Similarly, Harald Waldrich involves ANT in the analysis of video games in their relation to the PlayStation system (2016: 174-196). Waldrich places the issue of existence of various actors in the home console video games within the background of historical development of the SONY Playstation system. It allows him to perform a detailed analysis of practices of the home console dispositive as well as its reciprocal impact on the dispositive.

Emma Louise Hemingway reveals the specifics of networks within ANT in local British television (2016: 96-113). Taking as an example a local television station in Nottingham, Hemingway creates a map of certain key actors and actor constellations in order to reveal the actors in the process of construction as well as in its stabilized state.

However, the storyworld of *Mr. Robot* does not fit within the conception of an anti-hierarchical network of Actor-Network Theory either. Elliot is indeed embedded into a network:

the hacking group *fsociety*, E Corp, *Dark Army*, Elliot's relationship with parents, Elliot and his ability to code, Elliot and his dual personalities, New York and the suburbs, New York and the rest of the USA, etc. However, the problem with *Mr. Robot* is that although initially all relations were aimed to be equally distributed in a network, it eventually all comes down to the dominance of personality. The protagonist does represent that "individual human—usually male—who wishes to grab power," mentioned by Latour. *Mr. Robot* maximizes the role of personality to a great extent, and the story is essentially built around Elliot. ANT definitely helps to identify the network and the relationship between its actors. Elliot has to be placed within the circle of human and non-human objects. However, this network cannot be considered anti-hierarchical by any means. Not only human beings are presented as owners and technology, in its turn, as possessions but the roles of humans are not distributed equally. A technologically savvy male breaks the chains of the anti-hierarchical system in order to establish the superiority and predominance. In my analysis of the relations within the hacking group *fsociety*, I will demonstrate how *Mr. Robot* tries to build that anti-hierarchical network but always fails.

It is fascinating that despite all the technical accuracy that the show provides, despite its allusions to real historical and political events, and despite all the effort put into being modern and looking authentic, *Mr. Robot* does not really fit within modern technological theories. The show cannot be understood neither within the frameworks of technological determinism or cultural determinism, nor within Actor-Network Theory. In the next chapter I offer the framework of the Romantic genius that seems to be more appropriate for the figure of the programmer in the show.

## Summary

This chapter provided preliminary considerations regarding the issues raised in this thesis. I attempted to bring together three theories from the fields of media, science and technology studies to demonstrate that neither of these theories seem suitable for understanding the role of a programmer in *Mr. Robot*.

In the first subsection I provided a synopsis of the series. Then I placed *Mr. Robot* in the context of movies and TV shows that feature technology and programmers. *Mr. Robot* stands apart from similar motion pictures, given its focus on a programmer who works with existing technology and lives in the present time, which is a key theme of the show. It appears that *Mr. Robot* does not fit neatly within technological determinism, cultural determinism, or Actor-Network Theory. *Mr. Robot* is not concerned with technology itself (as opposed to another related TV show, *Black Mirror*). The show also rejects the idea of a social elite that rules the world and manages technology for their own purposes. The idea of a network with an equal chain of actors is also missing in the series. The main actor of *Mr. Robot* overshadows any other actors. He is a solitary genius-programmer who outsmarts the social elite and takes advantage of technology.

## Chapter 3. The figure of genius: The Age of Enlightenment and Romanticism

### 3.1. Genius: Origin and evolution

*Mr. Robot's* protagonist Elliot has been called 'genius' several times over the course of four seasons. The show inherits the cultural archetypes of a misunderstood genius, a tortured artist, and a *poète maudit* from literature, cinema and other forms present in high-brow culture as well as in mass culture. That said, the modern notion of genius as an exceptional individual and an outcast is a comparatively new phenomenon. It emerged during the Enlightenment and was shaped by virtue of Romanticism. However, the term and the idea per se existed much earlier. The root of the word "genius" originates from the Latin \*gene- with meanings related to "being born", "beget", and "come into being". English words with the same root are "genetics", "engineer", "generate", "engender". The Greek and Latin concept of genius referred to a nonhuman personal protective spirit. According to this belief, everybody possessed genius and all achievements were ascribed to the genius rather than the person.

We can still spot such usage of the term "genius" in Shakespeare's "Macbeth" (see Paul Bruno 2010:9). Shakespeare was writing at the height of the Renaissance but it is apparent that the ancient idea of the genius as a personal guide was still deeply rooted in European culture. But Shakespeare's oeuvre contains another, more modern understanding of the genius. Paul Bruno notes that in "The Tempest" there is a notion of "worser genius", hence, somewhat "evil genius" (2010: 11). Therefore, "genius" had become related to virtue rather than to an attendant guide. Also, at that time the idea that one genius could prevail over others and one genius could be more powerful than another one was conceived. But genius was still perceived as an external force, separated from the individual. As Kineret Jaffe (1980: 581) puts it, the West had

appropriated the Latin notion of *ingenium* which refers to a distinguished talent or “wit” that belonged to a particular person.

Thus, ‘genius’ was understood as a virtue that comes upon an individual empowering him or her. The modern notion of the genius is, essentially, a gradual shift towards the subjectivity of the genius—from natural talents to the genius as a person. It is during the eighteenth century that “genius” underwent a major transformation. By the end of the century not only achievements made by an individual were considered genius, but *the* “genius” came to be understood as the highest human type. However, the Age of Enlightenment with its dominant notion of authority resting on reason and its insistence on the equal participation of everybody in it, seems somewhat opposed to the idea of “genius”. As Herbert Diekmann (1941:156) notes, the idea of a privileged individual contradicted the postulates of the Enlightenment which is equity and parity.

Only by virtue of the Encyclopédistes in France, Edward Yong in England and J.G. Herder, G.E. Lessing, and J.W. Goethe in Germany, did the “genius” acquire its modern meaning. The pioneering and the most frequently cited work on that problem is Edward Young’s “Conjectures on Original Composition” where Young touches upon the idea of intellectual property, praises originality over mastery and finds a source of poetry in one’s own genius. The French Encyclopédistes resumed Young’s undertaking by developing the idea of the genius as the acme of humankind. Herbert Diekmann (1941) argues that it was Diderot in the first place who contributed to the evolvement of the “genius” and, in turn, influenced German philosophers. As he puts it:

at the end of the eighteenth century, the artistic "genius" comes to be thought of as the highest human type, and thus replaces such earlier ideal types as the hero, the "sage," the Saint, the homo universale, the cortigiano, the honnete homme. Without this

transformation neither the use of the conception in France and in England at the beginning of the nineteenth century, nor our modern use of it can be understood.

(Diekmann, 151)

Diderot in his judgments on the “genius” managed to add “the virtue of feeling and imagination to the faculty of reason and judgment” (Diekmann, 1941:156). Even though he referred to the idea of universal reason, Diderot highlights the existence of inequality in mankind in terms of talents and artistic powers. In fact, Kineret Jaff even argues that Diderot builds his conception as an argument against “the majority of French philosophers who still thought of genius as a rational, potentially universal faculty” (1980:579).

By the end of the eighteenth century the French expression “avoir du génie” was replaced by “être un génie” which means that the “genius” has become a person with extreme powers. Diekmann affiliates this process with specific historical conditions: the emergence of a new occupation and rank— writers, philosophers, and homme de lettres; the new perception of art as a vehicle for emotions and delight; the awakening interest in the creative capacity of artists. Diderot’s conception of genius embraces these ideas and comes up with the notion of the genius as an individual with extraordinary talents and imagination. The elements of abnormality (sometimes regarded as evil oddness) as well as the depth of perception also took part in Diderot’s writing on the genius. Kineret S. Jaffe outlines that stating that Diderot pictures the enthusiastic, imaginative artist – a genius. The eighteenth-century artistic postulates thus came to a natural end by generating an image of the genius that was to be fully explored in the Romantic era (1980:599).

Essentially, Diderot created an image of the genius that outlasted the Enlightenment, Romanticism, *Fin de siècle* and even the experimental practices of the 20th century. Along the

way it was appropriated by mass culture where the figure of the outcast genius plays one of the most captivating roles. However, it is worth mentioning that the modern picture of the genius underwent a great deal of transformation over the course of history and remains, basically, a product of the post-Enlightenment era. In the next section I will discuss essential characteristics of the Romantic genius that are still relevant for its modern, 21th century version.



### 3.2. Authorship

One of the key issues related to the genius and, consequently, to the contemporary discourse on the programmer is the concept of authorship. How did the modern idea of being an author come into existence?

Michel Foucault in his famous work “What is an Author?,” which challenged the traditional practices of literary criticism, raises a legitimate question: “how the author became individualized in a culture like ours[...] how this fundamental category of 'the-man-and-his-work criticism' began?” (1980:141). Indeed, we tend to treat the idea of an author claiming his or her own intellectual rights as universal and immutable. However, the conception of a solitary author is socially constructed as well as the related ideas of copyright and authorship. The individualized author is embedded within the history of art which, in turn, came to be distinguished from other human activities only by the eighteenth century. Not only is the concept of the genius an invention of the 18th century, but the whole idea of the author per se as a person fully responsible for art production. It brought along the acknowledgment of the value of intellectual property as no less worthy than any tangible property. As Woodmansee puts it: “The notion that property can be ideal as well as real, that under certain circumstances a person's ideas are no less his property than his hogs and horses, is a modern one”(1984:42).

Essentially, the idea of authorship is connected with intellectual and technological development. First of all, authorship is related to the growth of liberal discourse on human labour and, as a result, to the changing roles of writers, poets, and philosophers. In fact, the altered status of an artist in this regard comes from the elevation of human achievements at the expense of God's bounty. On the one hand, it resulted in the rise of professional writing as a respectable occupation and, in turn, in the necessity to protect copyright. According to Martha Woodmansee

(1984) the author in its modern sense is a result of the intentions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century writers to earn money from writing (426). It had become necessary to confer a sublime status on the author. Since the Renaissance the concept of the author included two competing elements: crafting and inspiration. The craftsman is a professional who properly applies rules in order to make a product that retains a creative aspect. The modern era diminished the craftsmanship element and overemphasized the significance of inspiration. It is worth noting that neither of these conceptions determined a responsibility for the creation. Authors were considered as merely vehicles or instruments of the forces that existed outside them. But since the late modern period, the source of inspiration started to be regarded as resting within the creator himself (Woodmansee, 1984:37).

Secondly, with modern intellectual thought, the rise of authorship is related to the proliferation of print technology and affiliated with the growth of the advanced market society (Mark Rose 1995:6,142). Finally, the idea of originality and individualized authors as agents of originality raises the debates over what should be regarded as intellectual property and how it is substantially different from any other material property (see works by Rose (1995) and Woodmansee (1984) on the debates).

The genius itself cannot be considered separately from his/her creation which has become his/her property only by virtue of the invention of authorship, which was fully explored by the Romantic movement. Poems and essays by Wordsworth and Keats, and novels by Walter Scott seem inconceivable without the notion of author. However, a real picture of authorship and its perception by Romanticism and later, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is far more complicated and nuanced. Romanticism developed a new theory of writing that underscores the writer's subjectivity and uniqueness. However, as Andrew Bennett shows in his book on posterity in Romantic poetry

(1999), that was combined with constant subversion and self-irony. He states that the importance of textual afterlife in the long 18th century contributed to the dissolution of subjectivity by the Romantics (2). Surprisingly, the high-valued notion of subjectivity was, in fact, challenged by those who proclaimed the very idea.

Similarly, Margaret Russett (2006), in her work on the phenomenon of forgery in Romantic culture, shows how the epoch that invented authenticity was at the same time a culture of forgeries, imposters and plagiarism. Russett argues that widespread fraudulent practices were, essentially, a flip side of the idea of authenticity. Furthermore, inauthenticity conditioned genuineness and vice versa.

Martha Woodmansee (2000) also debunks the myth of a solitary genius stating that even during the long 18th century (when the idea of authorship was established), the writing process was still largely based on compilation and collaboration. She concludes by making a prediction that in the future most of the writing will be in fact collaborative. But what is important for us is that the corporate attitude will not override the value of authorship and copyright we have had kept since the 18th century: “as creative production becomes more corporate, collective, and collaborative, the law invokes the Romantic author all the more insistently” (292).

In fact, the myth of authorship created at the end of the eighteenth century is still relevant today. Modern print technology allows us to create thousands of copies, forgeries and fakes in almost any field, from literature to photography and music. It seems though that we are not ready to give up the idea of the single creator as we still keep copyright laws. Rose (141-142) argues that copyright as an embodiment of the idea of singularity defines us as society.

If we transfer the idea of authorship to the computer programming field, we will be surprised to see how reality is different from the view on authorship represented in mass culture:

movies and TV shows on technology still maintain the idea of the originator of certain pieces of programming work. However, software development is, essentially, a collaborative process and a final code is being assembled by pieces made by multiple people. Furthermore, code, frequently, is created by collaging of ready-made pieces. Thus, it is next to impossible to attribute original authorship to any particular individual. In the next chapter devoted specifically to *Mr. Robot* I will show how the idea of authorship has been used in the show. Prior to that, in the next section I will scrutinize another important Romantic notion closely associated with that of genius —the concept of madness.

### 3.3. Madness

Madness, mental illness, or insanity, along with drug addiction, are merely the displays of one of the most crucial characteristics of the genius—his/her social marginalization. The genius is by definition an outcast and insanity serves as a highlighter for this exceptionalism. However, Romanticism adorns madness with the idea of freedom from social constraints.

Mental illness as an indispensable property of the genius is not a new idea. Moreover, what has to be considered as deviation was changing over the course of human history (see Frederick Burwick 1996:3). In fact, the boundaries between the ideas of rational and irrational are constantly changing as well as tolerance and intolerance for aberration.

Madness has been going hand in hand with creativity and inspiration since Classical Antiquity. “In vain does one knock at the gates of poetry with a sane mind” (Phaedrus, 245a) - notes Plato. “Poetry demands a man with a special gift... or a touch of madness”, - echoes Aristotle (Poetics, 1455a). During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance madness was considered a privilege, a touch of the divine, but at the same time it did not guarantee safety and did not protect from ridicule. Burwick highlights that before the Age of Reason an insane artist could possibly receive admiration or scorn (3). Also, the figure of a deliberate fool (jester) plays a significant role in Renaissance literature. For example, the Shakespearean fool, being in the position of freedom from social conformity, makes rather bald remarks on human nature.

This dual but still tolerant attitude towards insanity changed dramatically in the Age of Enlightenment. The stress on rationalism automatically excluded the idea of madness as prophecy. As a result, the mad were highly marginalized. Tim Blanning, in his *Romantic Revolution* (2010), cites Roy Porter - a historian of medicine - who confirms that,

Those horror stories of lunatics chained in underground dungeons in France, whipped in Germany, and jeered by ogling sightseers in London's Bedlam - all are true. Manacled, naked, foul, sleeping on straw in overcrowded and feculent conditions, the mad were dehumanised (qtd. in Blanning 2010:86).

Hence, this brutal ostracism towards the mad was a direct consequence of holding the human intellect in the highest regard. Michel Foucault in his profound work on the history of insanity discourse (*Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, 1988) demonstrates that the process of the Great Confinement - casting madness away from the rest of the society - began only during the Age of Reason. The modern age, according to Foucault, began only at the end of the eighteenth century when insanity started to be perceived as an illness to be cured.

Even though Foucault rarely mentions Romanticism and focuses on madness in its relation to the institutions of power, it is assumed that the Romantic focus on irrationality was a basis for Foucault's criticism of reasoning and the Enlightenment. Foucault's long-term opponent Jürgen Habermas (1987) highlights the celebration of unreason in Foucault's history of insanity and sees the origin in Romanticism. Indeed, to some extent, Romanticism revived the approach to insanity that dates back to the Classic Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. However, the Romantics combined it with cherishing the idea of isolation and exceptionalism that insanity brings along.

Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Wordsworth's "Idiot Boy", Byron's "Lament of Tasso", works by W. Blake, H. Kleist (who committed suicide himself together with his fiancée due to the impulse of insanity) are examples of how appealing madness was for the Romantics. Apart from literature, the motif of madness pervades other art forms including opera,

music, and even ballet (see Blannung 2010). Certainly, this interest and sympathy towards mental illness originates from overrating the role of the individual. Insanity along with drugs was seen as means for alteration the state of consciousness and one once acquiring insanity, could reach some kind of mystical insight. Probably, the best example of this attitude towards insanity as a vehicle to the creative ecstasy is a poem by George Gordon Byron “The Lament of Tasso”. The poem is a monologue narrated by Tasso at the period the poet spent in the St. Anna mental hospital in Ferrara.

What exactly does Byron’s poetical subject find appealing and admirable in Tasso’s madness? The poetic language is quite peculiar: it is full of expressive metaphors, it is a “passionately tortured text full of agony and ecstasy” (Horova, 2013: 1). The state of incarceration is depicted in a quite vivid, dramatic tone highlighting the degree of physical suffering in the first place.

Long years of outrage—calumny—and wrong;  
Imputed madness, prisoned solitude,  
And the Mind's canker in its savage mood,  
When the impatient thirst of light and air

However, this picture of distortion, an absolute exile and banishment is complemented with the manifestation of the poet’s ability to overcome harshness and even gain from it. This is a declaration of invincibility of the mind that has transgressed certain constraints of normality:

But must be borne. I stoop not to despair;☐  
For I have battled with mine agony,  
And made me wings wherewith to overfly

Mirka Horova calls Byron's apprehension of insanity "the ambiguous sense of madness – as both a potentially inspiring creative force and, at the same time, a frequently self-thwarting one" (2013: 4). In fact, there is nothing original in affiliating insanity with creativity. As it has been said, this approach has been known since Classical antiquity. However, Romanticism adorned the notion with the idea of freedom of mind and even put mad people into a position of privilege (see Blanning (2010) on how madness has been transformed into the envy of the sane). No doubt, *Mr. Robot* inherits the Romantic conception of madness as it contains all the motifs mentioned above: mental illness in the show is a source of creativity, the state of freedom and the object of admiration. The next subsection shall be devoted to another Romantic idea that is strongly linked with madness - the idea of dualism.



### 3.4. Doppelgänger

The concept of the Doppelgänger is strongly tied with the idea of brokenness and division, hence debasement of human nature. Yet, the Doppelgänger is an indispensable feature of Romantic art, which, conversely elevates the status of the individual to the highest point. Beyond that, in numerous cases the Doppelgänger is a marker of the genius as the genius tends to have the double. This subsection does not aim to give an overview of philosophy and theory of the Doppelgänger as this concept was widely explored in literary studies, philosophy, and psychoanalysis<sup>1</sup>. My goal is to identify the role and the meanings of the figure of the Doppelgänger in Romantic culture and place the Romantic genius within the theory of the Doppelgänger.

German literature was pioneering in exploration of the motif of the Doppelgänger, yet the motif is well-represented in English, American and other European and non-European Romantic literatures (see Vergeti 2017) on the double in a novella by E.A. Poe; Whitney May on the double in Stevenson's oeuvre (2018). It is needless to say that the Doppelgänger existed in culture and art before Romanticism and is definitely still very much alive in modern literature, cinema and mass culture.

John Herdman (1990) gives an exhaustive definition<sup>2</sup> of the phenomenon of the double in literature stating that this is a

device for articulating the experience of self-division. Its variations include the duplication, supernatural or phantasmal, or through likeness or affinity to another, of the individual; and the division of a personality, by supernatural or fantastic means, or through the opposition or complementarity of separate characters who can be looked upon as differing aspects of a sundered whole (2).

The types of Doppelgänger could vary considerably in literature, but what is important for us is that the double incorporates two interrelated meanings: self-awareness and the idea of division. A word *Doppelgänger* (literally “double-goer”) was coined by a German romantic writer Jean Paul and first appeared in his novel *Siebenkäs* (1796). Siebenkäs, a protagonist, who lives his unhappy life, consults with his friend and Doppelgänger who convinces Siebenkäs to fake his death and start his life afresh. However, the theme of the double vision appeared in his earlier works (*The Invisible Lodge*, 1793, *Hesperus*, 1795) though the Doppelgänger in early works had no bodily presence but was represented in a portrait. As Andrew Weber notes (2011), The portrait becomes an image of likeness between individuals, and thereby a figure of their substitution. Every Jean Paul text is a quest for identity and a ceaseless playing with identities and their counters.

The pursuit of identity is an essence of the concept of the Doppelgänger. The Doppelgänger is, on the one hand, the embodiment of estrangement and disunity. On the other, it is an agent of one’s true recognition and cognition.

Another famous example of the doubleness as a battleground of good and evil, division and unity, true and false self, free will and necessity is in the first Hoffman’s novel *The Devil’s Elixirs*, which is usually considered as a gothic novel. The conflict arises between a monk Merardus and his half-brother Count Victor who also represents the dark self of Merardus. Merardus tries the magical elixir and reveals his propensity for sin which is getting intense after his meeting with the double. Eventually, Merardus comes to remorse and redemption but with arising self-knowledge about evil urges that dwell in his soul. “My soul was divided within itself, and I was in the grip of a paralysing fear” - exclaims Merardus.

As John Herdman (1990) concludes based on comprehensive analysis of the 19th century literature, the double emerges out of tension between division and unity. “It stands for contradiction within unity, and for unity in spite of division (2). Thus, doubleness represents the everlasting division and a threat for a unique subjective identity. It is not coincidental that the figure of the Doppelgänger is also closely connected with the Romantic idea of dualism which is especially evident in Hoffman’s novels and short stories. In Hoffman’s works the double is complemented with the dualistic distinction between the ideal and the real which along with Hoffman’s irony, engenders reversible relations between the Doppelgänger and its host. Andrew Weber (2011) calls this phenomenon “chronic dualism”: “[...] the relationship between self and double is a dialectically riven one, projecting a master–slave relation within the subject”. Doppelgänger never ceases to express the ambiguity, the contradiction and the ambivalence of human nature.

Anastasia Mikhaleva gives intriguing insights comparing Hoffman’s later short story “Die Doppelgänger” (1821) and his novel *The Devil's Elixirs* (1815) with a novella “*The Double*” and a novel *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoevsky. She finds that within the genre of novella the concept of the double has a catastrophic meaning that jeopardizes the idea of being itself. The emergence of the Doppelgänger has become a trial for a hero because the Doppelgänger, supposedly, competes with the hero striving to take the unique place of the latter. Following the Doppelgänger is always baleful. Alternatively, in the novel genre the Doppelgänger is the one who helps to reveal a true self of the hero and break the deadlock like Raskolnikov’s Doppelgänger Porfiry. The Doppelgänger in the novel is the representation of one of many possible paths the hero could take. Of course, Mikhaleva doesn’t compare different historical types of the Doppelgänger (romantic versus realistic) but compares different genres

(novella versus novel). However, she accentuates two important characteristics of the Doppelgänger that encompasses the Romantic literature: its perilous nature, fear of self-division and its cognitive self-aware potential.

Thus, the general framework of considering the Doppelgänger in scholarship is the idea of compromised individuality and a crisis of subjectivity. As Andrew Webber (2011) expresses, “The Doppelgänger acts here as a particularly strenuous test case for the reliability of subjective identity in the literature of the period”.

However, not many critics note that this crisis of subjectivity practically coincides with the major rise of subjectivity. It is worth repeating that Romanticism is the age of the glorification of individualism when the idea of genius was elevated to the highest possible level. At the same time, Romanticism is also the epoch when the figure of the Doppelgänger - a figure of division and brokenness - begins to flourish.

The answer to the dilemma lies in the Romantic attention to nuances, complications, contradictions and convolutions of human nature. Romantic Doppelgänger does not jeopardize subjectivity. Instead, the occurrence of the double becomes the indispensable property of the individual, which highlights one’s singularity. A figure of the genius plays a significant role in this regard as the appearance of the Doppelgänger is often a marker of the genius.

In fact, the motif of the Doppelgänger could appear in Romantic art independently from the figure of genius: even side characters could sometimes have their own double. However, in numerous cases this is a prerogative of a protagonist who is often presented as a genius.

Hoffman’s characters who resist the influence of Doppelgängers are not typical philistines. They are students, poets, talented priests, that is to say exceptional individuals.

The TV-show *Mr. Robot* which is a key object of this thesis also plays with a motif of the double. In fact, *Mr. Robot* adopted the Romantic notions of the double by incorporating multiple Doppelgängers in the story. The stress on division, brokenness and self-awareness is especially evident in the relationship between Elliot and his Doppelgänger Mr. Robot. This double, on the one hand, is an illusion and a product of mental illness. On the other, the Doppelgänger is the one who helps Elliot accomplish the revolution. In other words, by virtue of the double, a genius could find fulfillment. In fact, the doubleness is one of the crucial devices that reveals the nature of human characters in the show. This issue will be discussed in the next chapter that is devoted to the analysis of *Mr. Robot* and a figure of the Romantic genius in the show. In the next subsection I will discuss how the figure of the Romantic genius is connected with the phenomenon of a superhero.

### 3.5. Superhero

*Mr. Robot* opens up with an episode where Elliot hands Ron—the owner of a child pornography website—over to the police. When Ron tries to bribe Elliot, the latter pulls up his signature black hood and utters “I don’t give a shit about money”. It seems that the show sets the scene as a classic superhero opening: a vigilante hacker, a heroic character, a modern Robin Hood who battles ordinary crimes and, possibly, supervillains, without demanding a financial reward or commercial gain in return. It is very tempting to consider Elliot as a modern tech-savvy version of an American superhero, and a superhero, in turn, as a 21<sup>st</sup> century genius. However, the origins of these two phenomena are quite different. Moreover, the phenomenon of a superhero emerges as a response to challenges arising from the pessimistic, chaotic spirit of the turn of the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Alex Boney (2013) states that the superhero was, essentially, a cure of nihilism and apathy that pervaded the world at that time:

Confronting the depravity and growing worldwide sense of crisis in the 1930s was enough to lead many authors—as well as the protagonists of their fiction—toward pessimism and nihilism. [...] The superhero was intended to provide a remedy for this fear. [...] The modern world was an overwhelming place, one of doubt and uncertainty, chaos and disorder. But rather than allow their characters to fall into the wells of despair and yield to the temptations of corruption that had enticed the protagonists of many modernist novels, the superhero creators tried to forge characters who could transcend the limitations of contemporary existence and stave off the chaos of the modern world.

Thus, the superhero represents an order, a hope and a possibility to take matters in one’s hands. The superhero is intended to give one an illusion of control in the midst of great disappointments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Romantic genius, in contrast, absorbs a romantic perception of the world

that, in essence, constitutes a very different worldview: romantic dualism, irony, ambivalence, transgression and disorder. The above-mentioned characteristics of a Romantic genius -insanity and dualism – declare the exact opposite ideas of what the superhero is supposed to represent.

Even a storyline of Elliot has very few similarities to classic American superheroes. The classic definition of a superhero is given by Peter M. Coogan—a comics scholar—in his book *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*:

A heroic character with a selfless, pro-social mission; with superpowers—extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically express his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero); and who is generically distinct, i.e. can be distinguished from characters of related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective, etc.) by a preponderance of generic conventions. Often superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret (2006: 30).

Of course, this definition does not do justice to absolutely all superheroes, and many do not fall within all of these categories. Batman, for instance, was originally designed without superpowers. Hulk, inspired by Frankenstein and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, does not have a well-defined pro-social mission. Sometimes he is quite anti-social and anti-police. However, Coogan (2006) asserts that if superheroes have other generic characteristics, they should still be categorized as superheroes. He argues that mission, power, and identity compose the core of a superhero genre.

Richard Reynolds (2013), in turn, gives a much more nuanced definition:

1. The hero is marked out from society. He often reaches maturity without having a relationship with his parents.
2. At least some of the superheroes will be like earthbound gods in their level of powers. Other superheroes of lesser powers will consort easily with these earthbound deities.
3. The hero's devotion to justice overrides even his devotion to the law.
4. The extraordinary nature of the superhero will be contrasted with the ordinariness of his surroundings.
5. Likewise, the extraordinary nature of the hero will be contrasted with the mundane nature of his alter-ego. Certain taboos will govern the actions of these alter-egos.
6. Although ultimately above the law, superheroes can be capable of considerable patriotism and moral loyalty to the state, though not necessarily to the letter of its laws.
7. The stories are mythical and use science and myth indiscriminately to create a sense of wonder (107).

If we apply both of these sets of characteristics to Elliot, we come up with the following:

***Pro-social mission:*** Elliot has a mission, but it cannot be considered altruistic or pro-social because, except for the first episode with Ron, he is not really interested in the ordinary lives of people. He is concerned with a global revolution and the issue of inequality. Also, the measures he himself considers indispensable could contradict with a common understanding. By destroying all bank records, he frees some people of their debts, but this results in anarchy that spreads across the country.

***Superpowers extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills:*** Elliot does not have any mystical skills or superpowers, but he is extremely gifted intellectually and professionally.



***Codename:*** Elliot uses his own given name and does not have any codename. However, his Doppelgänger acts under the name Mr. Robot.

***Iconic costume:*** Elliot wears his signature black hoodie, which is to some extent an iconic costume. However, it is not by any means a costume reflecting the outfit of Batman or Superman. Moreover, it is a programmer outfit cliché.

***Dual identities:*** Elliot has a Doppelgänger, but it is not a traditional dual identity of superheroes, where they live their ordinary life but act in disguise and keep it a secret. Elliot always acts under his own identity and does not keep the secret of Mr. Robot.

***Growing up without parents:*** Elliot has an abusive mother and a father who died in Elliot's childhood.

***Earthbound gods in their level of powers:*** Elliot has been called God several times over the course of the show, and the show also contains a few Christian allegories and symbols which are going to be discussed in the analytical chapter.

***Devotion to justice overrides even the devotion to the law:*** Elliot does not express any devotion to the law and definitely places justice above the law.

***Extraordinary nature of the superhero will be contrasted with the ordinariness of his surroundings:*** Elliot is largely contrasted with others.

***Mundane nature of his alter-ego:*** Elliot does not have an alter-ego, and his Doppelgänger is not mundane, but rather more extraordinary than Elliot.

***Patriotism and moral loyalty to the state, though not necessarily to the letter of its laws:*** The issue of patriotism is not discussed in the show, but it is implied that Elliot has no sentiments to the state and its laws.

***Use science and myth indiscriminately:*** Elliot only uses science.

In many ways, Elliot does fall into the category of a superhero, especially when it concerns his extraordinary abilities and his controversial relationship with the law. Some details also coincide with Elliot's portrait (although with a bit of a stretch), such as growing up without parents or a costume. However, he does not use any fictional technology, and the element of fantasy is completely absent in the show. Elliot does not hide his extraordinary abilities or oddness, and they are exposed to everyone. Finally, the ultimate mission for Elliot is not so much helping ordinary people on a daily basis as it is overthrowing a particular corporation - E Corp. He wants to take revenge for the death of his father and, at the same time, he strives to erase all debts and establish economic equality. At the end of Season 3, he and his cohort are quite disappointed in the idea itself and want to bounce the economy back. Superheroes, in contrast, could also have ambiguous deeds, but their good intentions are never questioned. Ultimately, a superhero (with a few exceptions) is a guardian of a status quo. He or she never challenges an existing state of affairs. A superhero does not challenge the morality, virtue, or a system of society *per se*, whereas Elliot deals with existential problems.

Significantly, these characteristics of a superhero do not cover such essential themes for *Mr. Robot*, like the idea of authorship, mental illness, and the motif of a Doppelgänger. Fundamentally, without these issues, the figure of Elliot cannot be fully understood and analyzed. None of these traits belongs to the archetype of the American superhero. Of course, given the major influence of superheroes on American culture, the figure of Elliot was certainly affected by it. In fact, the image of a programmer as a superhero could become an important topic for another dissertation. Yet, in this thesis, I will concentrate only on those characteristics of *Mr. Robot* that are connected with the rise of European individualism in the 18th and 19th centuries. I argue that the genius in *Mr. Robot* largely deviates from the classic American

superhero and the concept of genius as invented in the Age of Enlightenment and fully developed in Romanticism is the most apposite framework for analyzing Elliot in the show.

## Summary

This chapter is a historical and a theoretical overview of the figure of the genius as developed and explored by the Enlightenment thinkers and Romantic movement. The modern notion of genius is a comparatively new phenomenon that was finally shaped only by virtue of Romanticism. I scrutinized the most salient characteristics of the genius: the phenomenon of authorship, insanity and the double. The idea of an individual author per se as a person who is fully responsible for art production is the invention of the 18-19th centuries and has to do with technological and intellectual transformations. During the Age of Enlightenment a figure of the author was endowed with a sublime status. However, in reality, the Romantics frequently used compilation and collaboration in their oeuvre. Hence, the idea of a solitary genius has been a myth from its very beginning. Similarly, Romanticism changed our perception of insanity as the romantics adorned madness with the idea of freedom from social constraints. Another important poetic device related to the genius is the Doppelgänger. The Doppelgänger leads a genius to self-realization and self-discovery. While striving to find the continuation of the figure of the Romantic genius, I discussed it in the context of the American superhero archetype, as *Mr. Robot* definitely uses certain characteristics of a superhero. However, a nuanced glance at the show suggests that some essential features of the protagonist could not be covered by a concept of the superhero. In fact, the idea of resistance against the state and status quo is missing in superhero stories. The essence of the superhero is connected with the establishing order and cosmos within the chaos. Elliot, in contrast, causes chaos and literally struggles with mental disorder. I argue that superhero can be seen neither as a modern version of the Romantic genius nor as a framework for my analysis, which follows in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4. *Mr. Robot*: Analysis

A primary goal of this chapter is a comprehensive analysis of the TV-show *Mr. Robot* with a focus on the issues I raised in the previous chapter. My central hypothesis is that the programmer in the show inherits some traits of the notion of genius that come from the Age of Enlightenment and Romanticism. I suggest studying some of the most prominent characteristics of the Romantic genius as applied to *Mr. Robot*: the idea of authorship, the notion of madness, and the figure of the Doppelgänger. First, however, it is necessary to examine *Mr. Robot* within the framework of cultural determinism as *Mr. Robot* is essentially a technological narrative that involves the intricate relationship between technology and the elite. In fact, *Mr. Robot* involves a great deal of conspiracy and paranoia regarding secret sinister groups of people that take advantage of technology. Thus, it is logical to assume that the show is, basically, the embodiment of cultural determinism. I argue, however, that cultural determinism has little relevance to *Mr. Robot* and origins of the programmer figure are to be found in Romanticism and the Enlightenment. The next subsection offers an analysis of *Mr. Robot* within the context of social elitism as elite is a primary source of technological development according to cultural materialists.

#### **4.1. Cultural determinism: Elite, power and privilege in *Mr. Robot***

Cultural determinism versus the Romantic genius constitutes a key conflict in *Mr. Robot*. The plot is premised as a permanent rivalry between a powerful group of people and a solitary genius. The more we learn about a secret class of people who rule the world, the more mighty and invincible they seem (at the beginning it was just the E-Corp, then we learn that the Chinese government secretly controls the E-Corp and, finally, we learn that there is a global government which conspires against citizens). Conversely, the more we learn about Elliot, the more vulnerable, emotionally and physically defenseless he appears. And yet, he ultimately prevails.

Cultural determinism treats the idea of a single genius as a myth and, instead, proposes to look at technological development as the combined effort of various agents and forces. This may include historical processes, social environments, even geographical discoveries but, more importantly, influences from the ruling class. Essentially, cultural materialists exploit a Marxist method that approaches technology from the position of power and privilege. The question they ask when considering the development of certain technology is: who profits from it? Who was a primary influencer and client of the technology? Of course, cultural materialism brings to the fore the ruling elite as it is the agency that creates technology and uses it. To some degree it is a reaction to the ubiquitous cult of genius that penetrates mass culture. It is also a reaction to technological determinism which minimizes the role of society on technology. Cultural determinism is an attempt to present life in a more convoluted and complicated way with multiple layers and actors. However, cultural materialism with its rigid focus on society reduces a figure of a single personality and, in some ways, becomes a reductionist theory (very much like technological determinism). In fact, the idea of a great individual that could outsmart not only technology, but the social elite is very much alive in visual culture. *Mr. Robot* is a prime example of that.

Social elite plays a major role in *Mr. Robot*. I argue, however, that one of the key messages of the show is the possibility of an individual outmaneuvering the elite. Nevertheless, social inequality, power, geopolitics, money, big corporations and privilege are placed in a central position both at a visual level and in its storyline.

“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” (Season1, Episode 1). This is how Elliot’s voice-over opens the first episode of the show. In fact, “the top one percent of the top one percent” is a recurring refrain of the show. The background picture of this monologue is an obscure silhouetting image of a group of people (fig.1) against skyscrapers of New York City. This opening episode immediately introduces us to the central theme of the show - secret power.

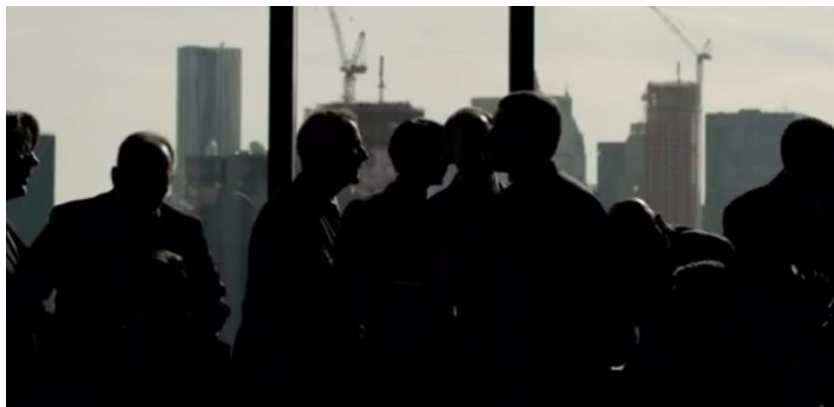


Fig. 1. The top one percent of the top one percent. Episode1, season 1.

In fact, the main intrigue revolves around the issue of identifying this elite. First, we find out that Elliot works for a cybersecurity company that provides support for E-Corp (“Evil-Corp” as he calls it) – one of the largest conglomerates in the world. E-Corp is the main target for *fsociety* - a hacker

group under Elliot's leadership. *Fsociety* performs attacks together with *Dark Army* – a group of “hackers-for-hire” known for its efficiency and ruthless approach. *Dark Army* is based in China and it turns out that their mysterious leader, White Rose, is a trans woman and the Chinese Minister for State Security. It means that both hacker groups serve the interests of the political and economic elite. At the end of Season 3 it appears that the secret goal of all attacks was the annexation of Congo by China. There are also hints on a secret “third force” that exists behind the USA and China.<sup>3</sup>

The irony of the show is that the protagonist along with his cohort attempts to overthrow the elite but it transpires that the revolution has been planned by the elite from the very beginning. However, it is fascinating how Elliot eventually manages to outplay his enemies by virtue of his genius, since at the end of the third season he claims the capacity to reverse the attack. It is even more fascinating that Elliot, essentially, becomes indispensable to the elite. *Dark Army* – a entire group of hackers – is not able to complete their plan to move a plant to Congo, whereas Elliot performs it in a few clicks. Essentially, a hidden conflict in the show is the rivalry between the powerful group and the solitary genius. Basically, it is a race between social determinism and the Romantic genius. This contrast is perceptible not only in the story line but on a visual level as well.

The omnipresence of the elite is particularly evident in office scenes. The arduous and toxic atmosphere of luxurious Manhattan offices, contrasted with tiny apartments and a dark room in Coney Island where *fsociety* gathers, symbolizes hypocrisy, ignorance and, more importantly, the offices are used to demonstrate power. In fig. 2 an abusive and arrogant boss of *E-Corp* Terry Colby, visits Allsafe and talks with Gideon Goddard - CEO AllsafeCybersecurity - a vendor that provides security to E-Corp. Gideon desperately tries to please Colby and keep E-Corp as a client. Colby takes up one-third of the shot while Gideon (the character on the right) stands in a half-turn



and the rest of the company is left by the wayside. Gideon looks slim and vulnerable, whereas Colby's looks self-righteous.



Fig. 2. Terry Colby, a tech-director of E-Corp, visiting AllSafe. Episode 1, season 1.

The dark side of power is also demonstrated by virtue of close-ups, which is the most typical shot in *Mr. Robot*. If I had to define *Mr. Robot's* cinematic language using only one word, I would definitely choose 'close-up'. A punctilious, meticulous and minimalistic style has made *Mr. Robot* a show of close-ups. If a subject of the shot is a single figure, it is never shown in a long shot. In other words, we rarely see a whole body of a person if this person is the only one in the shot. Hence, even on the visual level it is evident that the show focuses on the problem of the individual rather than technology: *Mr. Robot* is a show about the possibility of individualism in the highly-computational world that excludes the idea of individualism per se.

Frequently, close-ups are displayed from a high angle which makes a person look particularly vulnerable. In fig. 3 Angela is caught from a high angle in Colby's house. She has come to offer a deal to "a very powerful man with a lot at stake and asking him for something, that's always a dangerous proposition", as a lawyer explains to Angela.



Fig. 3. Angela staring at the paintings in Terry Colby's house. Episode 7, season 1.

No wonder, as Angela is worth nothing to Colby and he harasses, her offering an insulting deal:

Okay I'm gonna answer your question. But here's what I need from you first. So, I'm gonna pull down my pants. And then, I'm gonna need you to take that pouty mouth of yours and swallow up my balls. Now, they're big and hairy, especially the left one, so you're really gonna have to, I don't know, squish 'em up to get 'em inside there. You're probably gonna have to do one cheek at a time. But then, once they're all warm and snug in there, I want you to repeat your question to me as clearly as you can. Then, and only then, am I willing to answer.

(Mr.Robot, Episode 7, Season 1)

In fact, abusive and hysterical bosses, intense meetings where people are fired without any explanation, CEOs who exercise their power over a large number of people – these kinds of episodes pervade the show. The show tends to zoom in on specific elements such as street posters, random people, billboards, marquees, and poster pillars, etc. Computer and phone screens also sometimes take up an entire shot and the audience gets to see web pages with social media and pieces of code. Zooming-in works here as a device that exhibits inequality and intractable conflicts. The contrast between the elite and the rest of society is noticeable in numerous juxtaposed details: costumes (hoodies vs suits), food (popcorn vs shrimps), cars (Cadillac vs old beaten-up cars), tiny Brooklyn apartments and large Manhattan lofts, even operating systems (Android, Linux and iOS).

The crowdedness of New York also helps to create a suffocating atmosphere where a person is portrayed as a victim of ruthless and unjust power. Paradoxically, exterior scenes are typically darker and gloomier than interior ones, with the exception of nights and Elliot's apartment. Sun does not seem to appear in the show even in scenes on the beaches of Coney Island. Manhattan is also portrayed in dusty somber tones. In contrast, office scenes (compare fig. 4 and fig. 5) - places of power - are full of light and dominant office colors are cool, white and white-gray.



Fig. 4. Office space. Episode1, season 1.

When portraying apartments, *Mr. Robot* extensively uses the chiaroscuro technique - a bold transition of light and shadow.



Fig. 5. Elliot and Shayla in Elliot's apartment. Chiaroscuro technique. Episode 1, season 1.

Apart from original influences of that technique – the Renaissance and Baroque paintings by Caravaggio, La Tour, and Vermeer - chiaroscuro is the key mode of one of the classic genres of American cinema - film noir (see Hugh S. Manon [2007-2008] and Nicholas Christopher (1997) on the use of chiaroscuro in film-noir). In Fig. 5 scene chiaroscuro is combined with the large negative space from the right. Like chiaroscuro, negative space is used to isolate a character and create an atmosphere of despair. Significantly, Sheila is portrayed in a vulnerable position as she is placed on the very edge of the shot and, hence, left without any breathing room. In fact, Sheila is killed at the end of season 1.

However, even given that number of tools that have been used for creating an atmosphere of almighty power, *Mr. Robot* simultaneously proclaims the possibility of resistance. E-Corp is defeated, and all debts are eliminated (even though the USA has become, basically, an anarchist society). It is important to note though that the resistance in *Mr. Robot* is not the resistance of crowds. Revolution, public rallies and, eventually, anarchy are the result of an attack performed by Elliot. The shot in fig. 6 is very illustrative as it shows the transition of power from a business conglomerate (aka the economic elite) to a single person.



Fig. 6. A low-angle shot of Elliot with a screened image of Terry Colby. Episode 1, season 1.

Elliot is slightly to the right of the shot and shown from a low angle. Technically, it is a single shot but, in fact, he is making a victorious gesture under the image of Terry Colby - CEO of E-Corp. Given that low-shots emphasize power distribution, Elliot here symbolically gains power from the defeated Colby, who has been recently arrested.

Technology or technological skills in *Mr. Robot*, as the show does not feature any technology but rather the ability to use existing technology, is the property of the social elite but at the same time this is also the property of a gifted individual who can alter the course of history and overcome power. According to social determinism, technology is at the centre of competition between different groups or classes. *Mr. Robot*, in contrast, suggests that a single creator is a vehicle of power. In the next sections I will demonstrate how the characteristics of Romantic genius appear in the show.

## 4.2. Authorship

The phenomenon of authorship is closely connected with the idea of singularity. Authorship along with copyright was conceived in the Age of Enlightenment and was developed by Romanticism as a proclamation of individualism. The idea that a cultural product as any other product has a singular author is the invention of Romanticism. The Romantics insisted on the existence of a singular author even though there were multiple examples of collective work (see Chapter 1). The irony of *Mr. Robot* is that at the beginning of the first season the show seemed to feature a hacker group as a collaborative community. The attacks were initially designed collectively. However, over the course of the show, the idea of hacking as a collective process is gradually winding down. The focus is shifting from *fsociety* to Elliot. He becomes the single and the only creator.

This evolution is especially noticeable if we take a look at Elliot within the hacking group *fsociety*. The importance of other characters depends on how close they are to Elliot. Apart from Elliot, the group consists of two female and two male members: Darlene (Elliot's sister), Trenton (a Muslim woman, Iranian immigrant), Romero (a black hacker), and Mobley (a young hacker, played by Azhar Khan, Indian by origin). It appears that the creators of the show once aimed to display a socially inclusive picture in terms of race, gender and religion. However, this presumably diverse hacking group displays stereotypical views regarding these social groups. And what is important, they all cannot overshadow the protagonist who remains the central figure until the very end.

Romero (fig.7) is the only one black member of *fsociety*. He was charged for phone hacking, sentenced for six years, has been recently released from a prison and lives with his sick mother. He is a hacker and a drug dealer who is experimenting with growing marijuana. He is

also the oldest member of *fsociety* and he frequently makes judgmental statements about a young generation. He participates in attacks reluctantly and at the end he decides to leave *fsociety*.

Romero is also the only one member of *fsociety* who owns a gun.



Fig. 7. Romero and Mr. Robot. Episode 7, season 1.

Romero's character is made out of movie clichés regarding black people (drugs, jails, weapons, death). It is also worth noting that Romero is one of only two black characters in the show<sup>4</sup>.

Trenton (fig.8) is one of the few visible Muslim characters in the show. She was born in Iran and moved to the USA with her parents in search of freedom.





Fig. 8. Trenton at a college campus. Episode 7, season 1.

Trenton is an educated and highly knowledgeable tech woman. She also seems to be a devoted Muslim because she prays, attends a mosque and wears a hijab. However, despite the fact that Trenton is pictured in a profound and sympathetic way, the show tends to generalize Middle Eastern culture overlooking important details. For example, Trenton's real name is Shama Biswas which is a common name in Eastern India even though Trenton is from Iran. Of course, there is a possibility that Trenton is not ethnically Persian (as Iran is a multinational country) but it is not mentioned in the show. Probably, the confusion comes from the fact that Trenton is played by Sunita Mani who has Indian origins.

Another detail that looks like an oversight is that contemporary Iranian opposition movement (unlike protest uprisings in Egypt or Tunisia) lacks almost any religious element and is sometimes even considered anti-Islamic. Having this situation in Iran, it would have been more logical if Trenton had not worn a hijab. However, in the show she is treated as a random

immigrant from a random Middle East country with a common set of attributes: a poor family, a hijab, and devotion to Islam. *Mr. Robot* treats all Middle Eastern countries indiscriminately, making sweeping assumptions about them.

Mobley (fig.9), another *fsociety* member, is pictured very similarly to Trenton. Apparently, he is also from a family of immigrants: his real name is Sunil Markesh. There is no articulate story about his origin but it is assumed that he is from India. Again, as with Trenton, Mobley's identity lacks accuracy: if "Sunil" is a common Indian name, the word "markesh" is a term from astrology.



Fig. 9. Mobley. Episode 8, season 2.

Mobley is a fan of an unknown DJ Mobley from whom he got his nickname. His appearance evokes stereotypical memes on fans and fan culture: obesity, large glasses, and T-shirts with obscure images.

Darlene (fig.10), Elliot's sister and also a *fsociety* member, is probably the most developed female character in the show. She is a self-taught programmer, a ruthless revolutionary and an organizer of mass protests that followed the attack. However, her line changes dramatically when her boyfriend Cisco is killed. She is grieving, disappointed in herself and the revolution she has performed. Darlene - initially a figure of a strong tech woman - at the end is shown only as insofar as she is related to men.



Fig. 10. Darlene and Cisco. Episode 10, season 2.

Elliot, in contrast, had a girlfriend at the beginning (she was killed in the first season) and does not have any sexual advances later on. Unlike other important characters who all have significant others. Elliot is the only one who remains single, which never concerns either him or others. He is affiliated with his skills, talents and technology rather than with people or relationship with

people. Given that *fsociety*'s functions as an active group only in the first season, the group essentially serves as a background for Elliot. In contrast, he is portrayed as the actual creator and the author.

Elliot's leadership and authorship are visible in multiple mise-en-scenes featuring *fsociety*. Other members always appear in the background (see fig. 11). The shallow focus is on Elliot who is the only one sitting and the light from his laptop illuminates him putting a shadow on others. They are just performers under his will whereas he is the creator.



Fig. 11. Elliot with *fsociety*. Episode 4, season 1.

Another Elliot's feature that is connected with the idea of authorship is endowment of a particular gift- a source of creativity. Programming authorship in the show very much echoes a romantic concept of inspiration as a driving force for creation. A creator is not merely a person who acquires a high level of mastery but rather someone stimulated by unnatural force. In *Mr. Robot* programming is depicted as a mission, almost a religious calling and programmers, consequently, ought to be special persons with extraordinary talents. The denser and more complicated a plot gets, the more Elliot grows from a nerd-hacker to a programming genius.

In the first season Elliot is portrayed as a talented, but asocial programmer who is not able to communicate with people in a normal way. As the show continues, the level of Elliot's eccentricity progresses and even acquires some magical connotations. In the last season he was figuratively endowed with superpowers as other characters refer to him as "God". Tyrell Wallek - a former Senior Vice President of Technology of E-Corp - tells his wife Joanna that he saw God in Elliot and later on he tells Angela that he loves Elliot. Biblical allusions continue in the show with Mr. Robot's phrase addressed to Elliot: "I was only supposed to be your prophet, you were supposed to be my god" (S1E10). Thus, Elliot is not merely a talented craftsman but he is bestowed with a sublime status. Significantly, we get to see Elliot's computer quite frequently: screens with some Internet pages he is browsing and a terminal running code. Code is a product for programmers very much like poetry is an art product for poets. His code could be read as a manuscript- a subject to copyright.

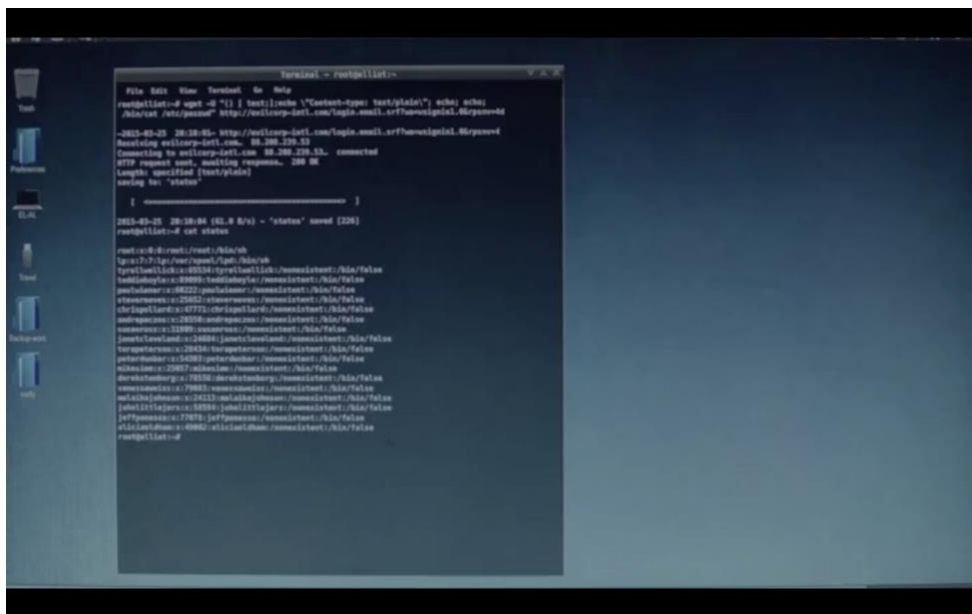


Fig. 12. A terminal running the code. Episode 1, season 2.

In *Mr. Robot* a programmer's job is represented as being highly individualized, which runs counter to how programming process is organized in reality. What is supposed to look like a collaboration, teamwork and joint effort in *Mr. Robot* is transformed into the classic 19<sup>th</sup> century image of the solitary genius. Elliot gets all the credits for his work as he is the main author and the creator. However, *Mr. Robot* initially intended to show a great deal of cooperation featuring *fsociety* but the way *fsociety* is depicted appears to be full of platitudes, generalizations and even mistakes. Moreover, the figure of Elliot is overemphasized to a large degree. He practically overshadows any diversity that was initially planned. The next subsection is going to reveal another salient attribute of the protagonist – his mental state.

### 4.3. Madness

The TV-show's protagonist Elliot Alderson suffers from Dissociative Identity Disorder (Multiple Personality Disorder) switching a personality from himself to Mr. Robot - his deceased father. He also experiences delusions and paranoia believing that he is being followed and watched, struggles with clinical depression and social anxiety. He has also forgotten some vital episodes from his childhood and does not recognize his own sister, so he has amnesia. After an aggressive episode in his previous job (he destroyed all servers in the office) he was sentenced to compulsive therapy for anger management. He must take prescribed medications but instead he tries to cure himself with morphine and suboxone.

Indeed, Elliot experiences a wide range of mental health issues. The most peculiar thing in that regard is a distinctive approach to the phenomenon of madness. In fact, *Mr. Robot* presents insanity in a highly ambiguous way: as an illness that has to be cured and, at the same time, insanity is perceived as a potentially creative inspiring force. Insanity somehow begets genius. As a matter of fact, these two conceptions mirror two opposite views on madness of Romanticism and the Age of Reason: madness as a mental disorder and madness as a gift. At a superficial narrative level, Elliot definitely struggles with his mental problems. He tries to fight his social anxiety and visits a psychiatrist quite eagerly (even though he repeatedly admits that she is not able to help him). He complains about loneliness and takes morphine as a medicine:

I'm just alone. If it weren't for Qwerty, I'd be completely empty. I hate when I can't hold in my loneliness. This crying's been happening too often. Every other week now. What do normal people do when they get this sad? They reach out to friends or family, I think. That's not an option. I do morphine. The key to doing morphine without

turning into a junkie is to limit yourself to 30 milligrams a day. Anything more just builds up your tolerance. I check every pill I get for purity. I have eight milligrams Suboxone, for maintenance, in case I go through withdrawal. (Season 1, Episode1)

Elliot delivers this monologue in his dark tiny apartment while having a panic attack (see fig.13).

In fig.13 Elliot is placed at the centre of the light and shadow transition and he is caught in a shoulder-level shot.



Fig. 13. Shoulder-level shot of Elliot having a panic attack. Episode 1, season 1.

Elliot is being frequently shown in shoulder-level shots and overhead shots: he is placed at the centre of the composition and at the same time his vulnerability and illness get more prominent.

The overhead shots are often set in a bed where Elliot is lying in a degrading and vulnerable pose taking drugs or having a breakdown (see fig. 14, 15).





Fig. 14. Elliot in a high-angle shot smoking weed. Episode 1, season 1.



Fig. 15. Elliot in the overhead shot at his mom's house (turned out to be a jail). Episode 1, season 2.

Hence, even on visual level, the show persistently highlights how excruciatingly painful and tortuous his illness feels for him. Elliot repeats a few times that his mental state is a deviation,

which very much corresponds with the view on madness established in the Enlightenment: his mental state is abnormality that must be surmounted.

Even psychiatry as a social institution is presented here in a quite positive way. He was forced to go to Krista - his psychiatrist- to work on anger management but these visits are not portrayed as punitive psychiatry. Elliot makes a few cynical remarks on Krista's ability to judge people's character comparing her professional competence with his hacking skills:

Though she's a psychologist, she's really bad at reading people. But I'm good at reading people. My secret? I look for the worst in them. I know she went through a divorce four years ago. I know she was devastated by it and has been dating losers on eHarmony ever since. (Season1, Episode1)

In two or three clicks he intrudes into her intimate life and now he is more familiar with her life than she has ever been aware of his. However, he is fairly lenient to the idea of treatment and does not consider it as an interference. He only acknowledges that his mental illness goes far beyond any possible treatment. Undoubtedly, he does not enjoy his mental state either and perceives it as an abnormality. Moreover, over the course of the series he strives to overcome it.

In that respect, the second season is quite peculiar as its intrigue is based on the confrontation between Elliot and his dual personality Mr. Robot. In other words, it is Elliot's struggle with his own illness. The season starts with Elliot living in mother's house and maintaining a routine (breakfast with a friend, house cleaning, lunch, watching a basketball game, house cleaning, dinner, a church group two days a week, no Internet) in order to weaken Mr. Robot's influence. However, Mr. Robot still frequently appears, takes over Elliot while he sleeps and continues to persuade Elliot to capitulate and work together. Elliot tries to resist hoping to combat the illness. Finally, Mr. Robot suggests making a deal: if Elliot wins a chess

match, Mr. Robot will leave Elliot forever. Unfortunately for Elliot, all three matches end with stalemates. He can neither win nor lose. Eventually, Elliot makes a truce with Mr. Robot who encourages him to be a leader in the next attack. In Episode 7 the viewer finally realizes that Elliot was in prison all this time and mother's house had been a figment of Elliot's deranged mind. This long-standing confrontation and the illusion lasting for seven episodes (until the very end of the season the audience is not aware that Elliot is actually in a jail) reveal that overcoming his mental illness is unfeasible for Elliot. Besides, Elliot realizes that he does not need an ultimate victory over Mr. Robot. Later on, in the third season Mr. Robot turns out to be the one who saves the day, since he has kept the encryption keys to make reverse attacks possible. Therefore, Elliot's personality disorder assists him in a very literal sense.

Ultimately, another side of madness is quite contrasting. While Elliot really suffers from his mental health issues, these issues are presented as means for intellectual insights and a celebration of otherness. Otherness here has very little to do with a negative term "othering" as labelling or a method of social subordination. *Mr. Robot's* characters take pride in being other and different from the rest of society. Mental illness plays a key role in that regard as it gives a person a freedom of being an outcast and opens up an artistic inner eye that helps to see a real picture. From the very beginning, Elliot juxtaposes himself with so called "normal" people listing all common attributes of normality:

I'm gonna be more normal now. Maybe Shayla could even be my girlfriend. I'll go see those stupid Marvel movies with her. I'll join a gym. I'll heart things on Instagram. I'll drink vanilla lattes. I'm gonna lead a bug-free life from now on. Anything to protect my perfect maze. (Season 1, Episode 3)

He itemizes the hallmarks of mass culture such as Marvel movies, vanilla latte, Instagram and some common “normal” activities, such as going to a gym, dating a girlfriend. However, after this monologue, Elliot learns that he cannot possibly live “such a normal life” because Mr. Robot still controls him. Moreover, he admits that these “normal” activities are not natural for him. He refers to common people as blind because they cannot see a real picture. “Normality” (aka mental health) here equates with blindness and ignorance while insanity affiliates with deep knowledge and insights. In Episode 7 (Season 1, see fig.13) there is a scene where Elliot is looking into a “source code” of people revealing their inner, intimate thoughts (“I am scared of sex”, “I pretend to love my husband”) that they cannot even confess to themselves. Elliot’s madness here is a tool that helps to question the mere surface of things.



Fig. 16. Elliot sees “the source code” of people. Episode 7, season 1.

Thus, the picture of mental illness is very much consonant with the ambiguous notion of insanity – a result of the transition period between the Age of Reason and Romanticism. Elliot's insanity, indeed, is presented as deviation that should be cured. However, at the same time, the show treats mental deviations as instruments of creativity. It opens a door to the deepest sources of knowledge and heightens comprehension. Insanity is being cherished and elevated to the highest position as an indispensable property of the genius. In the next section I will discuss another characteristic of genius that has similar meanings – a phenomenon of the double.

#### 4.5. Doppelgänger

The Doppelgänger manifests stress on the brokenness and division of human nature. Disunity and alienation, in turn, engender self-awareness thereby providing new knowledge of one's personality. It is compounded by romantic longing for paradox, contradictions and nuances. Essentially, the Doppelgänger shows division, complications and convolutions but, ironically enough, at the same time the figure of a double provides a sense of unity. As John Herdman (1990) said in the already cited extract:

In all its variations, the double arises out of and gives form to the tension between division and unity. It stands for contradiction within unity, and for unity in spite of division... (2)

The Doppelgänger seemingly imperils a figure of the genius given that the genius is the embodiment of subjectivity. The exceptional individual appears to be broken and crashed. However, paradoxically, the doubleness is an indispensable feature of subjectivity that highlights its exceptionalism.

The phenomenon of the double in *Mr. Robot* is especially intriguing since the show contains several double pairs that mirror each other in a quite peculiar way. The most captivating twosome is Elliot and his double personality Mr. Robot, who is also his late father. The relationship between them provides the main intrigue of the show. However, other characters also break up into pairs (i.e. Angela vs Darlene, Tyrell vs Elliot). The technique used in the show for Doppelgängers is setting two seemingly opposite characters and is gradually revealing their resemblance. At the end, it transpires that actually, they were not antagonists but rather, they complement each other, which allows to draw a more comprehensive picture of characters.

This principle applies to the pair - Tyrell Wellick and Elliot. They are also Doppelgängers. Wellek represents a successful bourgeois version of Elliot. Tyrell finds himself in a very different position at the end than at the beginning of the series. Tyrell is Senior Vice President of Technology for E Corp. He is a son of a Swedish immigrant and like Elliot had a difficult relationship with his father. Just like Elliot, he has problems with anger as he cannot control his rage. Unlike Elliot, he is very ambitious, and he is willing to do whatever it takes to get a successful career and power. However, at the end Tyrell is accused of murder and ends up working with Elliot in a hacking group. He has lost his career, a wife and a child but he remains loyal to Elliot whom he called "God". Their names also have a similar religious meaning: a Greek meaning of the name "Elliot" is "Jehovah is God"; the name "Tyrell" originates from Proto-Germanic language and means "god". Tyrell represents a potential life path that Elliot could take in different circumstances. Elliot could have put his talents in career climbing and eventually acquire a respectable life. However, the show quite cynically insinuates that Elliot and Tyrell end up in the same place regardless of the initial plan.

The most salient double pair of the show is Elliot vs Mr. Robot. It is slightly different from other Doppelgängers as Mr. Robot exists only in Elliot's mind. Mr. Robot - Edward Alderson - is Elliot's father who died several years ago but he continues to appear as a symptom of Elliot's sickness. Sometimes he takes over Elliot and acts in disguise on his behalf. The whole show is organized around the tension between them. They appear as opponents and dialogs between them take a large amount of show time. In many ways these conversations are structured as temptations imposed by Mr. Robot. Given the amount of religious allusions in the show, no doubt, their dialogs are references to The Temptation of Christ - a biblical narrative depicting Satan and Jesus in the desert. Also, the real name of Elliot's father is Edward which

means “a wealthy guardian”. He sometimes really acts as Elliot’s guardian – and sometimes he is a force that torments and tempts Elliot.

Probably the most direct reference that illustrates the dialog scenes is a famous conversation between Ivan Karamazov and a devil from Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. In fact, Russian literature has a significant presence in the show. Mr. Robot appears a few times reading Tolstoy’s *Resurrection*. The copy of Nabokov’s *Lolita* lies on the table in the scene of Angela’s questioning. Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* juxtaposes opposite attitudes towards life. In fact, all major characters represent a unique life philosophy: Dmitry represents passion and divine miracle, Ivan - atheism and Alyosha - sincere Christianity. Ivan Karamazov very much like Elliot has very complicated relationship with his father and also sees a Doppelgänger - a devil who he has lengthy debates with. The devil is also a product of his imagination and mental illness. Ivan Karamazov is a cold intellectual and philosopher who keeps asking unanswerable questions regarding the nature of God and the existence of evil on earth. He cannot accept the fact that God created a world full of suffering. The conversation with the devil reveals that Ivan secretly blames himself for killing his father even though technically the murderer is his brother Smerdyakov. Ivan’s beliefs and phrases actually prompted Smerdyakov to kill the father but Ivan realizes that even he himself could have killed him as well.

In *Mr. Robot* this conflict is slightly reversed. It is Elliot who blames Mr. Robot for the attempt to kill little Elliot many years ago. At the end Elliot finds out that it was his own suicidal attempt and Mr. Robot had nothing to do with it. The irony is also that even though their relationship is set as a rivalry, temptation, debates, they actually share very similar views. The prominent monologue about “a kingdom of bullshit” that Mr. Robot gives on Times Square could have been uttered by Elliot as it asserts capitalist conformity that they both hate:



A world built on fantasy. Synthetic emotions in the form of pills. Psychological warfare in the form of advertising. Mind-altering chemicals in the form of food. Brain-washing seminars in the form of media. Controlled isolated bubbles in the form of social networks. You wanna talk about reality? We haven't lived in anything remotely close to it since the turn of the century. We turned it off, took out the batteries, snacked on a bag of GMOs while we tossed the remnants in the ever-expanding dumpster of the human condition. We live in branded houses, trademarked by corporations built on bipolar numbers jumping up and down on digital displays, hypnotizing us into the biggest slumber mankind has ever seen. You have to dig pretty deep, kiddo, before you can find anything real. We live in a kingdom of bullshit! A kingdom you've lived in for far too long. So, don't tell me about not being real! I'm no less real than the fucking beef patty in your Big Mac. (Episode 10, Season 1)

The real difference between them is that Elliot is not so sure that the end justifies the means and he tries to prevent Stage 2 attack because it results in many people's deaths. There are attempts to present Elliot as a reformist who takes more complicated but peaceful path and Mr. Robot as an anarchist who takes a route of violence. However, it was Elliot who planned the revolution in the first place and, apparently, his political views are not so different from Mr. Robot's. The only real difference between them is Elliot's ignorance regarding the outcome *of the attacks*. He does not expect that the revolution will turn out to be a national disaster whereas Mr. Robot apparently plans that disaster. However, it would be wrong to picture them as black and white antipodes. As with Elliot and Tyrell, Mr. Robot is an extended version of Elliot. The final episode of the third season is also significant since it pictures a reconciliation between them. Mr. Robot tells Elliot that "There was a part of you in me" and reveals that it was he who saved the

encryption keys that make reversing the attack. Mr. Robot is not Elliot's opponent but rather a guardian and a protector, who at the same time discloses Elliot's concealed features. The Doppelgänger helps to look at the character as a whole with all contradictions, nuances, bad and good sides. Paradoxically, while the idea of duality shows the brokenness of human nature, it states for unity and synthesis.

Thus, the romantic affection for paradox, oddity, and contradiction is extremely evident in the figure of the Doppelgänger that represents division and at the same time engenders self-awareness of characters.

## Summary

The chapter is a case analysis of *Mr. Robot* as applied to theories discussed in the previous chapter – cultural materialism and a figure of the Romantic genius. Cultural determinism supposes that technology is a product made by the ruling class and for the ruling class. In fact, the social elite is present in the show. However, *Mr. Robot* pictures a world where a gifted individual by virtue of his technical skills outsmarts the social elite. Essentially, the hidden conflict in the show is the rivalry between a powerful group of people and a solitary genius. Basically, it is a race between social determinism and a figure of the Romantic genius. Other romantic features (authorship, madness, double reality, Doppelgängers) manifest themselves in the show in quite a peculiar way. The idea of authorship is especially evident when Elliot gets all the credits for his work even though initially the show tended to feature a hacking group. Other members of *fsociety* are depicted with platitudes and generalizations. The process of programming is seen not as a collaborative process but rather as the work of a secluded artist. The conception of mental illness reflects both the notion of insanity as deviation that should be cured (that goes back to the Enlightenment) and the romantic perception of mental illness as an instrument of creativity. The romantic ambiguity has found expression in the phenomenon of the Doppelgänger in the show. The most salient double pair is Elliot and Mr. Robot. At the beginning Doppelgängers are set as opposite characters but eventually it transpires that they were not antipodes. The Doppelgänger helps characters to see themselves as full of contradictions and nuances revealing both brokenness of human nature and its wholeness.

## Conclusion

György Lukács, in his essay on German Romanticism, offers a quote attributed to Novalis: “genius is a natural condition of man” (qtd. in Lukács 46). While it is impossible to find a source of that citation and there is no evidence that Novalis actually said this, Lukács only grasped the gist of *Romantic* thinking. Surprisingly, this phrase also conveys a very *modern* notion of creativity as a common and routine activity. However, simultaneously, the phrase contains the sense of paradox penetrating Romanticism. Romantics strove to organize culture where a genius could become a natural, common phenomenon but, along with that, their literature elevates the figure of the genius to the highest point, leaving a wide gap between the genius and the rest of mankind. This dissertation aimed to show that this Romantic paradox still exists. Being modernized and transferred to a different time and a different art form, the figure of the genius now is not substantially different from its original form invented in the 18-19th centuries. In fact, *Mr. Robot*’s protagonist incorporates all key features of the Romantic genius – authorship, the concept of the double, and the idea of madness. He is indeed “mad, bad and dangerous to know”, - as Lady Caroline Lamb described Lord Byron.

Andrew Robinson (2011) in his *Genius: A Very Short Introduction* notes that “in the early 21st century, talent appears to be on the increase, genius on the decrease” (123). He links it with the recent expansion of knowledge that makes the required breadth of expertise harder to achieve. He also mentions “the anti-elitist Zeitgeist to consider. Genius is an idea that invites attack by scientific sceptics and cultural levellers” (125). Arthur Cropley (2018) echoes this by calling to “bring creativity down to earth” – not to put acclaimed people on a special position and treat creativity and talent as normal activities.

*Mr. Robot* is a show about an exceptional personality. All its artistic devices - cinematic and narrative - are used towards depicting this exceptionalism. Elliot declares his authorship asserting that he is the author and creator of codes, attack plans and, finally, the revolution. Authorship is essentially the acme of individualism. His suffering from mental health issues and in constant debate with the Doppelgänger picture about the abnormality that surrounds him.

*Mr. Robot* is also a show of recurrent contradictions. The show assimilates the Romantic sense of paradox and contradiction as it strives to present reality as developing, not static. Characters, settings, and conflicts never cease to show their ambivalent nature. His madness conveys liberating and creative meanings and his Doppelgänger appears to be his friend and a companion but not an opponent.

I have not mentioned some other contradictions that do not necessarily correspond with Romanticism but, in fact, a sense of incongruity imbues the show. Although fully immersed in and subjected to late capitalist media culture (?), the protagonist hates capitalism, bourgeois institutions and the establishment to the degree that he is ready to sacrifice millions of lives in order to destroy one particular corporation. Yet, he uses social institutions when he punishes those who breach moral laws. He utilizes the help of police forces and appeals to laws, apparently not considering it as a contradiction. He states that the digital world we live in was created by the elite to induce submissiveness and reconfirm inequality. And yet, the digital world is his primary occupation. He works as a cybersecurity engineer and uses social networks for social engineering; access to (?)technology is what makes him a gifted hacker. Finally, the show portrays a group of people who seek to overthrow elitism by any means but it is achieved by virtue of an exceptional genius, who is by definition the embodiment of elitism.

On the one hand, *Mr. Robot* can be seen as a response to those mass culture products that, by putting too much stress on technology, positively evoke technological determinism (as in the already mentioned anthology *Black Mirror*, which is frequently accused of spreading a message of luddism). In *Mr. Robot*, technology is inseparable from its social context and technological innovations are understandable only in relation to a creator. *Mr. Robot* shifts fascination with technology to fascination with a person. The Romantics did a superb job inventing the concept of an individual. It empowers creativity, innovation, and originality. *Mr. Robot* makes use of all these romantic concepts, hence, the show attaches a sense of artistry to a programming job. Unlike those TV-shows that picture programmers in a mocking tone, *Mr. Robot* depicts an extremely gifted and successful programmer who definitely debunks a ubiquitous myth about socially awkward nerds.

On the other hand, by featuring an exceptional personality who is capable of destroying or saving the whole world, the show certainly implies the idea of elitism and intellectual privilege. It does not portray a society where all humans have equal worth. This is quite a pernicious tendency since we still live in a world where inequality - intellectual, economic, social - is naturalized and acceptable to many. *Mr. Robot* indeed is guilty of promoting such a malicious idea.

Paradoxically, elitism is shown in apparently the most classless occupation, which is programming. Programming does not even require special education. As a matter of fact, a large number of world leading digital products were made by self-taught programmers: well known examples include video game developer John Carmack, Twitter co-founder, Jack Dorsey, Instagram co-founder Kevin Systrom, who, along with many others, had no or very little coding education before they created their products. Also, programming is usually a cooperative process where a large group of people are involved. The show runs counter to contemporary digital, participatory and cooperative culture. Given that the protagonist is not only a Romantic genius but

a white male, it implies certain limitations to the profession. The not-so-hidden message of the show is that programming is not accessible for everyone and one should acquire a certain level of genius in order to become a programmer.

A likely next step of this project would be analyzing all four seasons of *Mr. Robot* as well as other contemporary shows featuring programmers, such as *Black Mirror*, *Westworld* and, especially, the interactive film *Bandersnatch* as it depicts the early era of video game development. It would be beneficial to scrutinize other art products concerned with programmers and programmers - fanfiction, sci-fi, video games, etc. Case studies of particular art products involving the analysis of race, gender, economic status, even speech accents could also contribute to a more comprehensive, cross-media content analysis. I am positive that these studies could reveal a large number of insights regarding the world we occupy. Portraits of programmers as cultural heroes could tell us a lot about who we are, what we believe in and in what direction we are heading.

The irony of *Mr. Robot* is that elitism is being proclaimed in an anti-elitist show. Surprisingly, the idea of elitism does not necessarily come from the elite per se. It is not a top-down obtrusion from the state or from those who have gained social privilege. Quite the contrary, the idea of the genius is in demand from those who express their hatred towards elitism and classism. It would appear that our society still needs powerful role models who people can look up to with awe. A legitimate question is why the role of that exceptional individual is played by a programmer - one of the potentially most democratic professions.

One of the possible reasons for such a phenomenon is alienation that is closely connected with technology. The concept of alienation or estrangement was most clearly articulated in Marx's theory on political economy. However, the idea of estranging individuals from one another by external or internal forces existed much earlier. The term "alienation" in English and German

(“Entfremdung”) has been around since the Middle Ages and referred to the transfer of ownership. In the context of philosophy this idea is present in works by Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Fichte and Hegel. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the first theoretical work where a concept of alienation was used systematically, primarily influenced Marx (see Schacht, 2015 on the roots of the concept of alienation in the works of Hegel and Marx). However, even before Hegel one of early Romantic writers and thinkers Friedrich Schiller wrote about the state of alienation experienced by individuals under certain conditions. He also mentions the act of alienation between individuals and nature. This became one of the most essential ideas of Romanticism: the Romantics saw the solution in reconciliation with nature where a person could find fulfilment and unity lost in urbanization and industrialization. The figure of genius for the Romantics is, of course, a reaction to the Industrial Revolution when humans felt overcome with the rise of technology. Later Marx wrote about workers feeling disconnected from their production and losing control of their work and self-realization. The Romantic idea of an accomplished creative individual is an attempt to escape this technological alienation.

I would argue that we are facing a similar situation with regards to the digital revolution. Mass culture emphasizing technology over people or literally featuring the revolt of technology (*Westworld*) demonstrates a feeling of paranoia produced by the digital age. However, unlike the situation with the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries, modern culture does not offer a possible solution for escape. With a global climate crisis, nature cannot serve as the last Eden like it did for the Romantics. It is not a coincidence that the scenery in *Mr.Robot* is exclusively urban. The visual image of New York City, its boroughs, streets and apartments deserves special research as it plays a significant role in showing a suffocating, noire ambience of “no-escape”. The first season of *Mr.Robot* does a great job showing that any information is



hackable and any human deed can be made visible. Elliot is a master of hacking and yet he himself struggles with paranoia and illusions of being constantly watched. A reclusive occupation not involving the use of technology (like in the Romantic Age) is not possible nowadays. The realization that we are chained to technology and do not have control over it produces even more intense estrangement than what the Romantics experienced. The solitary genius who could act as a modern cultural hero and tame technology is very much a comforting and propitiatory idea that is in high demand nowadays.

## Notes

1. There are multiple theories concerning the issue of the double from Freud's classical essay "The Uncanny" (1919) where he explores the motif of the double in Hoffman's "The Sandman" to works that place Doppelgänger in the modern critical discourse (see, for example, Vardoulakis, 2010).
2. It is worth noting that there is an ongoing discussion regarding a proper definition of the Doppelgänger as it is not clear yet whether Doppelgängers need to be absolutely identical or just look alike. Some scholars claim that Doppelgängers do not necessarily have to take a physical form (see in details Mihaleva, Anastasia, 2006).
3. Probably, it will be revealed in the fourth season and given the abundance of Putin's photos in the show, I suspect it will be Russia.
4. The second one, Leon, a young criminal played by a rapper Joey Badass also collects the same stereotypes: jail, sex trafficking, and weapon.
5. A big part of recent 2017-2018 protests in Iran was women's movement against compulsory hijabs known as Girls of Enghelab Street where women tied a hijab to a stick and waved it as a flag in public squares. In fact, the overtone of the Iranian dissident movement is quite different from what was happening in Egypt, Libya or Syria during the Arab Spring.

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