

## ABSTRACT:

They are loners, outcasts, and criminals. They are Gods of the Machine, deviant junkies, and rebels with a cause – but they are never personable and certainly not friendly. Movie and TV hackers are a special class of characters, often used to spice up a narrative. And what purpose does a technobabbling hacker serve in a writer’s narrative? Writers hope to elicit two reactions – fear and faith - to the awesome power of technology: fear of deviant geniuses who can control the world and faith in the power of the unknowable force of technology.

Although representation of hackers in film and media may not be accurate, it is a good indication of the public’s understanding of hacking and computer security workers. Ultimately, this paper seeks to understand why the public adheres so rigidly to this marginalization of hackers and why hackers are inextricably tied to the idea of rebellion and ultimately revolution.

The hacking world is consistently marginalized in film and media, yet its portrayal has undergone an intriguing transformation over the past few decades. From the socially inept, yet mischievous young teenager to the dangerous cyberpunk criminal, this paper seeks to explore the different representations of hackers in film and TV. This will include the subjects of race, age, and personality, and how they all play an integral part in both shaping and enforcing the public understanding of hackers.

Melanie Belkin

Fall, 2016

Computer Security

## Lights, Camera, Hacktion

### *Introduction*

As a sensationalized form of media, film and television tend to exaggerate certain aspects of their subjects to entertain and enthrall the viewer. This is especially true for television and film representations of cybersecurity. Joceline Anderson identifies cyberthriller montages as making an “attempt at a boundless experience.”<sup>1</sup> This is demonstrably true when examining the rich collection of hacking scenes in various TV and movie scenes from recent history. They share visual excitement, often with shimmering 3D graphics, constantly shifting into different geometric forms. In a hacking scene from *NCIS* (2003 – ), the network hacking is demonstrated through a flood of windows, no doubt attempting to instill the image of panicked danger.<sup>2</sup> *Swordfish* (2001) involves a number of ludicrous scenes, including a montage of Hugh Jackman dancing in front of a seven-screen display while apparently creating a computer worm.<sup>3</sup> This is not including the infamous interview scene.<sup>4</sup>

What possible reason would the film industry have for subsidizing such laughable hacker feats? Quite simply, film is intended to relate to the haptic experience through auditory and visual cues. Understanding the inner workings of a process is incidental; far more important is watching the *progress* of that task as it approaches completion. It almost does not matter what is happening on screen so long as *something* gives a visual indication of the procedure.

Many ‘hacker’ thriller episodes focus on the archaic interaction of user and computer defined by mechanical commands and entering lines of code. In reality, more modern computer

---

<sup>1</sup> Joceline Anderson, “The Body of the Machine: Computer Interfaces in American Popular

<sup>2</sup> “Bone Yard.” *NCIS*, 2x02, (October 26, 2004), <http://bit.ly/18HemaO>

<sup>3</sup> *Swordfish*. Dir. Dominic Sena, Warner Brothers, 2001, <http://bit.ly/1XfNE75> (Be sure to check out Hugh Jackman’s hypercube computer worm dance)

<sup>4</sup> *Swordfish*, <http://bit.ly/2gLnFpm>

graphical user interfaces (GUIs) “need to be easy to understand and consistent” so that non-technologically adept users are able to intuitively navigate the program. In cinema, however, a computer “need only provide the likeness of interaction.”<sup>5</sup> Consequently, “[GUIs] in cinema [are] freed from any such functional considerations” and can even be used for the express purpose of confusing the audience to prompt a reaction of awe at the fictional hacker’s supposed prowess.<sup>6</sup> *The Matrix* (1999) is one of the most recognizable demonstrations of cinematic GUIs: the scrolling arrangement of random green letters and numbers has no real meaning and is intended to baffle the audience. Similarly, Hugh Jackman’s computer worm is demonstrated through the advancing images of hypercubes, a visually appealing but functionally useless depiction.

The shimmering imagery accompanying many cyber-thrillers is entertaining, but it also elicits a sense of fear in the audience. After all, people fear what they do not understand. Because hacking sequences are designed to confuse, audiences are willing “to believe that hackers possess unbounded, almost magical powers with computers.”<sup>7</sup> The result is a public fear concerning the hacking ‘underworld,’ which operates beyond an ordinary person’s understanding.<sup>8</sup> For instance, in *Superman III* (1983), the hacker Gus Gorman easily gains access to the entire city, including power over ATM withdrawals, billing statements from Bloomingdale’s, and the city’s traffic-light grid – whilst staggeringly drunk. At another point, Gus is hired to hack into a weather satellite and reprograms it to “make weather...storms and

---

<sup>5</sup> Anderson, 78

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 79

<sup>7</sup> Reid Skibell, “The Myth of the Computer Hacker” (Information, Communication & Society 5.3, 2002), 342.

<sup>8</sup> In 1995, the court ruling in the case of Kevin Poulson, a hacker, decided that he was not allowed to be in the same room as a computer, even one without a modem. The defendants were also banned from using phones.

floods...blizzards, heat waves,” something no satellite can actually do. When he asks how he is supposed to do that, his boss responds “like you do anything in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Gus. You push buttons.” This overly simplistic and reductionist understanding of the hacking tool is found everywhere in the film industry.

Studying film and television provides “an opportunity to analyze how our fears, anxieties, and assumptions about strange and unwieldy technology are represented in our entertainment media.”<sup>9</sup> In the opening of an episode of *Power Rangers Zeo* (1996), the scene demonstrates the advantages technology provides for us, while also alluding to the potential dangers of computer usage.<sup>10</sup> The world is dangerous, and in mass media, the only people who can protect the general public are computer experts. The anxiety bracketing technological development is also apparent in modern film and TV writers’ works. In a particularly amusing scene from *NCIS* (2003—), Abby and McGee attempt to stop a ‘hacker’ from infiltrating their system. An assortment of popups flood the screen, and McGee tells Abby, “I’ve never seen code like this before!” Their boss, an older gentleman who has less experience working with computers, then unplugs the monitor, apparently solving the problem.<sup>11</sup> This smug, self-satisfied clip demonstrates a desire for an older audience to regain control over the flashy technological problems that plague us today. Perhaps this is an ideal world for the writers, one in which their more old-school way of thinking is actually a benefit – a way of thinking outside the box.

Hackers are revered for their knowledge, and cast aside for their deviation from the norm. The simple fact that hackers are labeled “not normal” is indicative of public rejection. The film industry plays an integral role in establishing and reflecting the public understanding of different

---

<sup>9</sup> Lauren Rosewarne, *Cyberbullies, Cyberactivists, Cyberpredators: Film, TV, and Internet Stereotypes*. (Santa Barbara: an Imprint of ABC-CLIO, 2016), xii.

<sup>10</sup> “Mirror Maniac.” *Power Rangers Zeo*, 1x13 (May 8, 1996), <http://bit.ly/2gNmAM1>

<sup>11</sup> It would not. (See footnote 2 for episode information).

problems and shifts in social climate. Representation in the film industry is what continues to spark the interest of millions of young people to learn about computers. Unfortunately, it also spreads a lot of misinformation concerning the actual public image of what defines a *hacker*. The fear and awe of hackers permeates through the decades, and continues to shape hacker media today.

### *History of Hacker Representation*

The term ‘hacker’ did not grace the big screen until the 1980s, although the hacking community had already existed for some time before then. The absence of hacker movies from the 70s may have to do with the loosened content laws for film, “which resulted in fast-moving, ultra-violent, ultra-explicit movies. In such an environment, showing a hacker sitting in a stagnant fashion typing at a keyboard attempting to break into a computer system, may have been too inactive for the 1970s movie audiences.”<sup>12</sup>

Hacker movies became much more popular in the 1980’s, perhaps because “computer technology became available on a mass scale.”<sup>13</sup> In the 80’s, hacker movies tended to focus on teenagers. The younger generation found computers easier to understand than their parents. Their acclimation to computers was almost second nature, and “the carefully developed authority and power of the adult population was threatened by this new generation that could manipulate computers.”<sup>14</sup> In 1983, the general public had its first real introduction to the idea of hackers with the release of *War Games*, a film in which a young Matthew Broderick accidentally hacks

---

<sup>12</sup> Damian Gordon, “Forty Years of Movie Hacking” (International Journal of Internet Technology and Secured Transactions, 2010), 7.

<sup>13</sup> Debora Halbert, "Discourses of Danger and the Computer Hacker" (The Information Society, 1997), 362.

<sup>14</sup> Skibell, 343.

into a military supercomputer and almost starts a nuclear war, as he is under the impression that he is playing a game simulation.<sup>15</sup> Despite the serious subject matter, *War Games* cast its protagonist as a slacker student who is simply looking to play a harmless computer game. Both *War Games* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986) – another movie featuring Matthew Broderick as a teenaged hacker – presented a “likeable young hacker... far more knowledgeable than the bumbling adults” who could change their grades in the school records.<sup>16</sup> The 1980s and early 1990’s movies seemed to “ [romanticize] hacking” in a way that appealed to people; hackers were seen as powerful individuals with a positive deviation from the norm.<sup>17</sup><sup>18</sup> Hackers in cinema were proud of their title: Young Lex Murphy from *Jurassic Park* (1993) enthusiastically tells her brother that she prefers to be called a “hacker.”<sup>19</sup>

The later 1990’s promoted a shift away from positive depictions of hackers. Instead, computer hacking became symptomatic of a psychological disorder, where hacking was “the product of a pathological addiction...[hackers] do it by spending prolonged periods locked away...in front of computer screens while their mentally healthy peers are engaging in all the social behaviour of normal adolescents.”<sup>20</sup> Because computers had become a more common feature of the professional landscape, television and film writers felt increasingly necessary to draw a distinction between a *normal* computer user and the *obsessive* computer hacker’s

---

<sup>15</sup> Skibell, 341.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 340.

<sup>17</sup> An arrest report from *The Times* describes the story of Kevin Mitnick, another hacker from 1995, in rather whimsical language: the arrest had “all the features of the classic Western: a colourful villain who...evaded the law for years, a loner determined to track him down and a cliff-hanging final reel when justice triumphed.” The language used to describe him evokes a sense of fondness for this outlaw.

<sup>18</sup> Halbert, 362.

<sup>19</sup> This film also features the classic line “It’s a unix system!” There is now an entire subreddit devoted to failed film representations of hacker culture called r/ItsAUnixSystem.

<sup>20</sup> Skibell, 342.

addictions. For instance, the blockbuster film, *You've Got Mail* (1998), tells a love story between two 'normal' technological users. A 'normal' "user is never presented cinematically as being absorbed into the technology he or she uses in the way that the hacker is."<sup>21</sup> In fact, although the two main characters in *You've Got Mail* are communicating through text, the film presents it as a conversation between two people by having the respective actors voice the messages as they read and write them.<sup>22</sup> Hackers, however, were described as obsessive computer users, to the point where the computer use became a fundamental aspect of their character. Douglas Thomas identifies this as the start of the cyberpunk era, where a hacker is "the fusion of programmer and computer...the ultimate cyberpunk fantasy."<sup>23</sup> A hacker image is overlaid with psychedelic visual animations, somehow suggesting an unspoken direct line connection between man and machine. This mechanizing of hackers, stripping them of their humanity, is a common trope in narrative media. The hacker's lack of social deference is often the source of hilarity because they are taken out of their 'natural environment.'

When it comes to studying the progression of hacker representation in cinema, "establishing abnormality [was] a first step in demonizing the hacker."<sup>24</sup> In fact, since the 90s, "if attention gets drawn to a character's Internet use, it's invariably a signifier of trouble."<sup>25</sup> The hacker's "prowess [has become] the result of inner weakness, seen almost as a form of addiction, and "not something to be envied."<sup>26</sup> Hackers are presented as "[socially] isolated" and as

---

<sup>21</sup> Andersen, 84

<sup>22</sup> In other films, such as *Mr. Robot*, and *Live Free or Die Hard* the conversation is portrayed as text appearing on screen to the clicking of a keyboard – as though the hacker is part of the machine.

<sup>23</sup> Douglas Thomas, *Hacker Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 51.

<sup>24</sup> Halbert, 365.

<sup>25</sup> Rosewarne, xi.

<sup>26</sup> Skibell, 343

“criminals and perverts *because* of their Internet use.”<sup>27</sup>

The later 1990’s and early 2000’s saw another shift in the cinematic hacking drama. Further distancing hackers from their original happy-go-lucky and mischievous position in the narrative, the hacker became a more threatening and dramatic role. Skibell attributes the movement “from disturbed youth to dangerous criminal,” to the new computer security industry, which relied heavily on the public’s fear of hackers.<sup>28 29</sup> Nevertheless, “the cultural glorification of the hacker as the mischievous antihero has found a home in cyberpunk genre films,” particularly with *The Matrix* (1999), which tells a story of technological rebellion and revolution.<sup>30</sup> Through the last decade, this rebellious attitude toward others carries through countless media representations of hackers.

The early 2000’s cyberthrillers also saw a rise in the number of government conspiracy films. Movies such as *Enemy of the State* (1998) and *Takedown* (2000) featured a protagonist whose digital records were tampered with. Film writers did, more recently, take on a fantastical element in films such as *Inception* (2010). Up through today, films and shows continue to spout technical gibberish, featuring writers with little to no familiarity with the way computers or hackers work. *Swordfish* (2001) bemoans the lack of realism in Hollywood filmmaking before engaging in one of the most ludicrous computer security hacking scenes ever to grace the film screen. The details of the scene involve an interview in which the candidate is forced to break into the Department of Defense with a restricted access login screen, with a gun pointed at his

---

<sup>27</sup> Rosewarne, xii.

<sup>28</sup> Skibell, 345.

<sup>29</sup> Fear mongering (releasing publications that describe tens of thousands of malevolent viruses in circulation. The security industry tends to “advocate an image of hackers as a cohesive and coordinated social group with a dangerous agenda, and do not recognize distinction between different types of attackers” (Ibid., 346).

<sup>30</sup> Andersen, 81.

head and a girl performing fellatio on him.<sup>31</sup> Clearly, the film industry likes to make a spectacle out of a hacking sequence.

### *Attributes of a Hacker: Mr. Robot*

*Mr. Robot* (2015 – ) is a positive force for the entertainment industry in that its realistic use of technology and reasonable limitations of that technology are well informed. The technology is *part* of the story, not an embellishment as is so often the case with dramatic thrillers. However, *Mr. Robot* does little to break out of the hacker tropes so deeply engrained in popular culture.

### *Race*

The lack of diversity and presence of racial stereotypes in popular media is reflected in hacking films and television, and *Mr. Robot* is no different. Rosewarne comments on the emasculation of male Asian characters in film, claiming that “while there are indeed sexless and sometimes *asexual* Asian characters on screen, there is also a notably high number of sexually *deviant* Asian netgeeks.”<sup>32</sup> This pattern carries across into *Mr. Robot* in the form of Lloyd Chung, a crass employee working for the computer security company, AllSafe.<sup>33</sup> Here is an exchange between him and another employee during a security breach:

Angela: What’s a rootkit?

Lloyd: It’s like a crazy serial rapist with a very big dick!

Angela: Jesus, Lloyd!

---

<sup>31</sup> Because nothing encourages your hacking skills more than a gun to your head while a girl is giving you head.

<sup>32</sup> Rosewarne, 38

<sup>33</sup> I am making the assumption that Lloyd Chung is of Chinese or Korean descent, although the actor playing him is Japanese-American.

Lloyd: Sorry. It's a malicious code that completely takes over their system. It can delete system files and stop programs...

Lloyd's sexually charged and violent language creates a distinct barrier between himself and the more 'normal' characters who are unfamiliar with computers. The opening scene of *Mr. Robot* also introduces a coffee shop owner named Ron, or Rohit Mehta – as he used to be called. Rohit is not a computer hacker, but he runs his own Tor network, which implies he has a higher set of computer skills than the average person. The audience soon realizes Rohit exercises his skills to distribute 200,000 terabytes of child pornography to his hundreds of thousands of users. This revelation demonstrates Rosewarne's claim that "Asian netgeek characters are, sometimes, allowed a sexuality," but "one that perpetuates their *difference* from other characters and works to downplay their expertise as well as ensure their continued demonization."<sup>34</sup> Perhaps these deviated displays of masculinity are intended to be a way of compensating for the characters' emasculation. In any case, it is a damaging trend.

Although "there is a paucity of black netgeeks on screen, a number of black *hackers* can be identified: Nikon (Laurence Mason) in *Hackers*, Luther (Ving Rhames) in *Mission: Impossible...are examples.*"<sup>35</sup> In *Mr. Robot*, Leslie Romero is a middle-aged, black ex-con – and one of the key computer engineers of fsociety, a rebellious hacking group that aims to dismantle a large financial corporation. He seeks revenge against the system that imprisoned him, yet lacks a fervid commitment to the plans as a whole, suggesting that it is revenge he cares about, not the group's message. Romero also runs a side-business where he grows marijuana and manufactures a THC-infused lotion, unsurprising considering "the most common way the hacker is portrayed on screen...is the simple focus on criminality."<sup>36</sup> Rosewarne discusses how

---

<sup>34</sup> Rosewarne, 39.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>36</sup> Rosewarne, 121.

black film hackers do not necessarily “possess the nerdy qualities normally associated with the netgeek”, and “while part of this is because they are framed more as outlaw than computer geek, another explanation may lie with them complying with the popular archetype of the black man as criminal.”<sup>37</sup> This underlying racism in which black characters are using computers as a tool for committing crimes is noticeable throughout film history. In *Superman III*, Gus Gorman is a black hacker who reprograms a weather satellite for his supervillain boss. When we first meet Gus, he is chronically unemployed – and very quickly turns his newfound computer skills toward embezzling funds for himself.<sup>38</sup> He is willingly blackmailed into helping the main villain hack into and control computer-based systems – for the right price of course. Although he is later redeemed by fighting back against the main villain, when Superman offers him a legitimate job he rejects the offer. The hacking characters found in film and TV are not extremely diverse in race or nationality, and there is a lot of room for improvement.

### *Substance Abuse*

Substance abuse and computer expertise go hand-in-hand on screen. Across the board, film and TV hackers engage in destructive habits seeking some sort of synthetic high, whether it is Abby’s obsession with the fictional caffeine drink Caf-Pow (*NCIS*), Ray Arnold’s ever-present cigarette chain smoking (*Jurassic Park*), or Darlene and Romero’s alcoholic tendencies (*Mr. Robot*). Mobley, another member of *Mr. Robot*’s fsociety, also engages in unhealthy eating habits, often shown shoveling fast food into his face. A more serious form of substance abuse,

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>38</sup> This is actually the most common form of insider attacks: “Insider attacks are more closely related to embezzlement or insider trading than to computer hacking, but they are grouped with computer crime because of the criminal medium” (Skibell, 353). For instance, in *Mr. Robot*, Angela’s inside work releasing a worm into the AllSafe computer network required her restricted employee access and knowledge of the company.

*Mr. Robot*'s protagonist, Elliot Anderson, relies heavily on morphine to escape from his tormented reality. Although Elliot convinces himself that he is not an addict by giving himself a strict regiment to monitor his drug use, he is also willing to ignore his regiment during moments of extreme stress. Even Tyrell, the sharply dressed Vice President of Technology at E-Corp, exhibits a violent streak that has all the trappings of addiction. He will occasionally purge these impulses by paying homeless men for the chance to beat them senseless. Wherever the computer enthusiast appears on screen, they often leave a trail of candy wrappers and junk food debris in their wake. *Mr. Robot* is doing little to disavow audiences of this image.

### *Social Awkwardness*

According to Rosewarne, “social awkwardness, an anachronistic dress sense, and general fanaticism are attributes frequently used in film and television to clue and audience in to the nerdiness or geekiness of a character.”<sup>39</sup> Often, hackers are depicted as machinelike and socially awkward – effectively less human than the more normalized characters. Differing speech patterns are a common identifier for movie and TV hackers, who are largely uncomfortable when it comes to interacting with other people: “One of the classic characteristics of the on-screen nerd is speaking in a voice that sounds *not quite human*: a robotic, flat-affect voice void of intonation or emotion.”<sup>40</sup> Elliot is a prime example of this. He describes himself as “different. Very different. I don’t know how to talk to people.” Elliot has extreme social anxiety, and appears to have a flat affect when interacting with others. Darlene, another hacker from fsociety, is an abrasive young woman. In the first scene we meet her, she calls Elliot a dickhead and tells him to “cut the bullshit.” She is loud and unapologetically rude to everyone else.

---

<sup>39</sup> Rosewarne, 1.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

This is not the first time film and TV audiences have been presented with an unpleasant hacker. In *Jurassic Park*, the audience meets Dennis Nedry, one of the computer security workers, as he's eating a meal at a café. When his contact, Lewis Dodgson, tells him: "you shouldn't use my name." Nedry starts shouting his name to the other patrons at the café whilst pointing at the man. He expressly ignores a request for discretion and privacy. At another point he also wipes shaving cream off his hand onto someone's dessert. This lovely meal ends with Nedry looking pointedly at the check, saying, "Don't get cheap on me, Dodgson." Hackers in films are not only socially incompetent; they deliberately try to offend outsiders, with little to no regard for social or emotional etiquette.

*Swordfish* featured a protagonist who lived in a dump, miles away from other people. When the audience meets him, he is hitting golf balls off the top of a trailer. Film and television classify hackers as separate from "normal" people in subtler ways as well, as with Abby Sciuto from *NCIS*, the chief forensic scientist for the NCIS field team. Abby has visible tattoos on her neck and back, and she dresses in a Goth style, always clad in black chokers and heavy combat boots. She is the computer expert on the team, and her appearance is likely meant to further 'other-ize' her character. Timothy Mcgee is another member of the NCIS team, and although he is (supposedly) well-versed in computer forensics, he dresses in a clean-cut and professional style. Rosewarne attributes Abby's Goth style to the fact that "male hackers look very ordinary whereas their female counterparts often appear to be making a distinct statement through their attire."<sup>41</sup> Dressing anachronistically is yet another manner in which a film hacker can deviate beyond social norms.

---

<sup>41</sup> Rosewarne, 153

## *Religion*

God is noticeably absent from the cinematic hacking world; few discussions of religion seem necessary for shaping the ultimate hacker character. In *Mr. Robot*, Trenton is a quiet college student who joined fsociety, and the daughter of Iranian immigrants. She wears a headscarf and performs her daily Muslim prayers, despite pulling all-nighters for the good of the group. Religion is not a focal point of her characterization, but it is important to her as a person. Though religion is not a key aspect of her character, its inclusion in *Mr. Robot* is unusual. There is one appalling joke made about Trenton's religion that plays into the modern Islamophobia trend in American culture. But cyber-thriller hackers are largely Godless in their portrayal on-screen. This atheist trend may be a result of the questionable morals of hackers, which is often examined for the duration of at least one episode in crime dramas. Film hackers are also criminals, and as such, would have no place in a religious community.

## *Morals: Good vs Evil*

The creator of *Mr. Robot* credits the Arab Spring as a source of inspiration because it showed a younger generation, "dissatisfied with their society using technology to make a positive change instead of using it as a tool of destruction."<sup>42</sup> The show features a wide array of hacker characters, most of whom have a bone to pick with large corporations, as is evidenced by their hacking group name: *fsociety*. The self-purported mission of *fsociety* is to clear everyone of their financial debt.<sup>43</sup> The group seems similar to the hacktivist group Anonymous, right

---

<sup>42</sup> Allison Nellis "Hello, Friend: Cybersecurity Issues in Season One of *Mr. Robot*" (The Serials Librarian, 2016), 2.

<sup>43</sup> This is undoubtedly an homage to *Fight Club*.

down to their video messages to the public featuring a masked man making demands of certain powerful political players:

“We are malicious and hostile. We do not compromise. We are relentless. We will not stop until every tentacle of your evil monstrosity is sliced at the nerve. But we are also not without mercy. Our latest hack was our last warning. Meet our demands and we will consider not destroying you.”

This threat to social structure perfectly demonstrates the rebellious aspect of the film hacker.<sup>44</sup>

Hackers are often portrayed as having dubious morals and performing illegal or shady operations. Darlene’s on-again, off-again boyfriend actually has ties to the Dark Army, an influential and intimidating hacker-for-hire collective based in China.

Interestingly, when film hackers are depicted working against the government, many are shown to be appealing to a higher sense of morality. Hacking is their method of righting some wrong, either personal or on a grander scale. Elliot’s habit of monitoring his close friends by hacking them and invading their privacy is, in his mind, the best way to protect them.<sup>45</sup> He operates under the intent of being a sort of “information deviant,” who uses his powers for good. This is an individual level appeal, but many cinematic hackers also do what they do for ‘the greater good.’ Fociety is created to oppose a large financial corporation because its members feel that it is morally corrupt. Their rebellious actions are thus taken in order to fight E-Corp. Though certainly not the only moral appeal made by cinematic hackers, fsociety’s desire to even the playing field between large corporations and the ordinary person is echoed in other films and shows as well. While talking to his former partner, Cosmo from *Sneakers* (1992) discusses his

---

<sup>44</sup> There is a reoccurring theme in cyberthrillers of a protagonist who is awakened by a mentor, and taught to challenge the world they’ve grown numb to. Similar to *The Matrix*, Elliot in *Mr. Robot* uses technology to break free of his internal prison: “The invisible hand at work, controlling us, even if it pushes us past our threshold of pain.”

<sup>45</sup> In one scene, he spits out the data he found on his therapist, Krystal, demonstrating his secret addiction for hacking people and his extreme violation of her privacy.

plan to crash large economic and political systems: “No more rich people, no more poor people. Everybody’s the same – isn’t that what we said we always wanted?”<sup>46</sup>

Even when hackers are shown “aiding law enforcement,” there is a trend of hacking being “presented as a valuable skill, but one invariably in the possession of underworld figures.”<sup>47</sup> For example, in *BlackHat* (2015), Chris Hemsworth portrays a criminal hacker, Nick, who is trying to negotiate a temporary release from prison in order to help an ongoing investigation. In *CSI: Cyber*, the ex-outlaw hacker, Brody works for the FBI as a part of his plea negotiation. Gavin from *House of Cards* shares a similar shady backstory. Huck from *Scandal* (2012 – ) is a reformed hacker who used to specialized in torturing people to get information for the CIA. Although these hackers are technically on the side of ‘good’, their behavior and motives seem to trend toward the darker side of humanity.

The *mythmaking* and *validation* surrounding the label of ‘hacker’ is really something that “only exists in the social consciousness.”<sup>48</sup> Halbert illustrates how the image of the hacker is created through *mythmaking* and *validation*. The hacker deviant is a way to “mark the boundaries of legitimate behavior. Hackers, constructed as deviants, help define appropriate behavior and appropriate identities for all American citizens, especially in a computer age where ethical guidelines are still ambiguous.”<sup>49</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Romero, while watching *Hackers* in a motel room, offhandedly quips: “I been in this game 27 years. Not once have I ever come across an animated singing virus.” His sentiment

---

<sup>46</sup> Cosmo also formed ties with organized crime members during his time in prison.

<sup>47</sup> Rosewarne, 122.

<sup>48</sup> Skibell, 337.

<sup>49</sup> Halbert, 362.

beautifully captures the general cybersecurity community's feelings toward Hollywood hacker films. The film industry has little to zero understanding for the hacker community. Hacking movies have people performing magnificent feats, or leaps of logic that just do not make any sense.

When “science is represented in the movies the objective is often to display spectacle and illusion, and not necessarily verisimilitude.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, fictional stories, even ones that are based on ‘true events,’ will inevitably distort reality. The screen is meant to titillate the audience and construct a narrative. But if there is a divide between the screen and reality, what is the value in studying film and television hackers at all? The benefit of this process is that television and film can “express current cybersecurity and privacy concerns” and, “along with thinking about them in a legal context, we can further appreciate...[how they] reflect the current social and political climate.”<sup>51</sup> Although the media is occasionally “credited with educating...the public about cybersecurity” by drawing attention to important questions and ongoing discussions, it may unintentionally “misrepresent what hackers do” in the process.<sup>52 53</sup>

Why does the public adhere so rigidly to their idea of computer hackers being outcasts? Perhaps this is an attempt to explain away what the general public does not understand. The hacker embodies the unbounded social fear of new technology. Marginalizing the hacking world allows the audience to identify a target to treat as a threat. This is especially important in the modern world, where “connectivity becomes more common” every day.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Gordon, 2.

<sup>51</sup> Nellis, 2.

<sup>52</sup> Rosewarne, 121.

<sup>53</sup> Gordon, 4.

<sup>54</sup> Rosewarne, 121.

### Works Cited

- Andersen, Joceline. "The Body of the Machine: Computer Interfaces in American Popular Cinema since 1982." *Projections* 5.2 (2011): 75-94. Web.
- Chandler, Amanda. "The Changing Definition and Image of Hackers in Popular Discourse." *International Journal of the Sociology of Law* 24.2 (1996): 229-51. Web.
- Gordon, Damian. "Forty Years of Movie Hacking: Considering the Potential Implications of the Popular Media Representation of Computer Hackers from 1968 to 2008." *International Journal of Internet Technology and Secured Transactions* 2.1/2 (2010): 1-30. Web.
- Halbert, Debora. "Discourses of Danger and the Computer Hacker." *The Information Society* 13.4 (1997): 361-74. Web.
- Nellis, Allison. "Hello, Friend: Cybersecurity Issues in Season One of Mr. Robot." *The Serials Librarian* (2016): 1-9. Web.
- Rosewarne, Lauren. *Cyberbullies, Cyberactivists, Cyberpredators: Film, TV, and Internet Stereotypes*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, an Imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2016. Print.
- Skibell, Reid. "The Myth of the Computer Hacker." *Information, Communication & Society* 5.3 (2002): 336-56. Web.
- Thomas, Douglas. *Hacker Culture*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2002. Print.
- Turkle, Sherry. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995. Print.