Is this novel? Ideological antecedents of the
'hacker thriller'

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Summary

An old genre is rediscovered
in a modern entertainment form...

Introduction

Perhaps history would be better off if scientists only studied subjects they disliked.

A modern representative of the “hacker thriller”, *Mr. Robot* is not a work of art that is very likable : its overreliance on psychology recalls a sentence that Jean Cavailles wrote in the midst of fighting in World War II — not the one of movies —, referring to Kant : “*Relying on psychology is as absurd as drawing morals from life*”...

Two features of this work make it remarkable :

1. It pushed realism furthest than any media before it i.e. the accuracy of its technological scenes.
2. Its unusual popularity : millions of viewers during prime time hours, and presumably many more not accounted for, was unheard of for a series dedicated to hackers.

In the falsification of passages and footnotes that Panofsky may have written in boxer shorts and socks, some art historians now find life highlights and career-defining moments...

If left to these professors, the study of popular culture would be delayed by another century.

But, if journalists were trusted *Buffy* would mark the beginning of artistic television, while experts on hackers seem to have settled on *WarGames*.

Between the extremes of “going too far back” (the Mesopotamia where some historians of science always end up in) and “not enough” (the aforementioned pundits), the thesis defended was that this peculiar genre has its roots in the film noir and psychological thrillers of the 1940s-50s.

A flamboyant thesis? After all, some would and should question the links between computers, and Humphrey Bogart and whiskey; an unlikely pairing.

From the generic distinction of “dames” and wives, the dream sequences imported from surrealism, through the wine cellar of *Notorious*, to mental illness in Ray’s or Aldrich’s work, the various drugs present in *A touch of Evil*, a series of parallel sequences was used to defend it :

An old genre – we argued against common perception...

Hacker thriller = film noir + computers, is its equation.

L-t-r 0. Hidden camera (*The Big Sleep*); 1. "inner" monologue variant (*Double Indemnity*); 2. wife/dame juxtaposition (*The Big Heat* trailer); 3. Gangsters (*A Touch of Evil*); 4. *Dangerous...* 5. Lock (*Notorious*); 6. Nightmare (*Spellbound*)

Where do the constituting elements of this genre come from?

The clothing. The mysterious, and sometimes cool airs. The drug talk. The heavy psychology – in some instances. And, the rest of narrative and stylistic devices found in these various media.

Novelty? Accurate representation of hackers? Or, merely the continuation of a generic form :

The 1940's psychological thriller, represented by Hitchcock, film noir, by Wilder and others, starring Bacall or Mitchum ...

1. The representation of women

Even as few as two or three film noir should inform anyone of the existence of a specific figure of the woman in this genre : the so-called "dame".

Shortened terminology with a pejorative, diminutive notion attached to it, the "dame" is essentially a woman who cannot be trusted.

Often found in descriptions of these movies is the term "duplicitous".

Not always made explicit, a strong indication is nonetheless given that a lot of them work as prostitutes, or escorts.

At other times, it may be implied they are sleeping with many men; another faulty trait of character.

Promiscuity reinforces their reputation as not being trustworthy.

In *The Big Heat*, the scene at the bar and the female informant is typical of this feature of the film noir.

Figure 1: Bar scene in *The Big Heat*.

Dames are everywhere in those films, dangerous, or connected to danger...

Here, a bad wig already signifies a sense of bad character (*Double Indemnity*).

Yet: another figure of the woman, less visible, exists, but no less exaggerated : the "good woman" incarnated by either the wife or soon-to-be-wife of the – mostly male – protagonist.

In *Mr. Robot*, this dichotomy is found again in Angela ("one of the good ones"!) and Shayla (the drug dealer).

But, when Shayla switches roles her fate becomes that of the wife in *The Big Heat* (settings, car, unchanged).

Figure 2: Dame and sister in *Dangerous Ground*.

Being blind makes the romantic interest of the anti-hero of *On Dangerous Ground* doubly pure: A saintly figure in a world filled with lusty female characters (scenes above) and brutish, simplified men .

2. Psychology

The main references in this respect are no doubt Hitchcock's films : from *Rebecca* (a contested film noir) all the way to *Vertigo* (a late, closing period noir).

Dream sequences and symbolism, present in *Spellbound* ad nauseam, were exported to film noir from surrealism : it was Dali who designed the nightmare passage in the aforementioned.

Further, variants of the "inner" monologue – in a medium where sound had only been common for about 10 to 15 years – are found everywhere in film noir : *Double Indemnity* (and later *Sunset Blvd.* by the same director) make frequent uses of it, and flashbacks.

A *Mr. Robot* based on an outside perspective is not only thinkable but possible, yet the actual one broadcast to masses was full of psychology.

The obscenity of having constant access to someone's mind is no more natural than the product of a birth without parents.

But, from *Rebecca* ("I went back...") to it ("Hello friend"), introspection and psychology was pushed much further, not realism merely.

In *On Dangerous Ground* the sister (played by Ida Lupino) cares for her sibling while having some knowledge of his issues. Darlene inherited this (old)

role.

—
There are two psychologists in *Mr. Robot* :

Krista, the official, degree-holding psychologist. Her status is that of all psychologists, derived from the immanent authority of science.

To differentiate her we used the term "armchair" psychologist :

Vera, the "street" psychologist, and city gangster, is unlikely to own licenses for his rifles – this includes permissions to wield the gun of psychology, so to speak.¹

3. Drugs

Alcohol was the drug of the day :

The film noir is unthinkable without this other prominent figure, which is that of the alcoholic or drunkard – almost always male, this time.

The Lost Weekend (another Billy Wilder creation) was entirely dedicated to this topic while Bogart's film roles ranged all the way from including "social" to heavy alcohol drinking.

Figure 3: *Casablanca*.

In *Touch of Evil*, released in the ending period of classic film noir, they even went as far as to imply the big bad drug : marijuana.

[Forceful drugging in both.]

Following realism's ever increasing logic : the whiskeys and martinis lead to morphine in *Mr. Robot* (and whichever other drugs were featured in the creations of the Wachowkis, e.g. *Matrix* or *Sense7*, etc.).

¹We see no coincidence in that it was Krista who killed him. He had committed the biggest offense of all : he had robbed psychologists of their follies...

4. Spying, infiltrating, clues...

An old genre with a little twist : they added computers :

To the wine cellar of *Notorious* corresponds the data centers of various hacker thrillers (e.g. "Steele Mountain" in *Mr. Robot*).

The camera hidden in an antiquity, constitutive of a famous scene in *The Big Sleep*, prefigures various embedded devices found in those same dramas.

*. The black hoodie

Functional, or structural equivalent of the trench coat and hats worn by detectives (for men), or the head scarves and berets worn by women in film noir (*The Big Sleep*, Laurence Bacall, etc.).

Its function is unaltered : to hide the face of the character so as to enable their various escapes (to tropical destinations, in the film noir), investigations (inside of the city, in both), etc..

Do the literary references of Mr. Esmail include *Marie Claire* and *Psychology Today*; or *Playboy* and Jung? — remains the only mystery.

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Duration: 01:03:56.81

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Kiss Me Deadly (1955), dir. Robert Aldrich
Touch of Evil (1958), dir. Orson Welles
Various Lauren Bacall and Humphrey Bogart movies [e.g. The Big Sleep (1946)]

WarGames (1983)
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Mr. Robot (2015–2019)