

The Blacklist and *White Collar*: Once again, excusing the inexcusable

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The Blacklist

Created by Jon Bokenkamp, NBC's series *The Blacklist* (2013) opens as Raymond "Red" Reddington (James Spader) calmly turns himself into the FBI after decades on the run. At the top of the Most Wanted list, and considered highly dangerous, Red has come "in from the cold" to make a deal. But he insists that Agent Elizabeth Keen (Megan Boone)—who is only starting her first day as an FBI profiler—be his liaison. Reddington brings with him a list of "actually dangerous" criminals he wants the FBI to round up, and he snitches on these individuals to make their apprehension happen.

Spader's character is one of those quasi-psychopathic (and socially and psychologically implausible) master criminals—à la Hans Gruber (*Die Hard*) or Hannibal Lecter (*The Silence of the Lambs*)—for whom we are expected to root, however begrudgingly—or at least feel a certain fascination. Such figures have become so familiar (and tedious) in recent films and television series that Spader does not even seem to see the need to bring anything to his performance beyond the flat delivery of lines.

As the series has progressed, Red has predictably become somewhat fond of the FBI agents who've been assigned to him. There are a couple of running subplots, including one that involves the likelihood Red is Agent Keene's father.

One wonders how that element is not pieced together by Keene, who supposedly graduated at the top of her class as a profiler. Boone has some acting talent; however, the hackneyed back story (which surely would preclude her from FBI work, but which is brushed aside in the midst of the action sequences) beggars belief. The artistic deck is stacked pretty high against her.

Each episode involves a "criminal of the week"—i.e.,

some ruthless and greedy person who commands obedient minions with massive firepower and often has a personal vendetta against Red. These individuals are inevitably and very bloodily defeated when the FBI listens to Red, who apparently has engaged the Bureau operatives as *his* minions.

This show, as others in the genre, serves a certain, retrograde social function. It assists in presenting illegal, unconstitutional spying and other such police activities, like those routinely conducted by the NSA, in a positive light.

One of the recent episodes of *The Blacklist*, for example, depicted the sweeping capture of phone calls. These police-FBI-CIA programs manipulate events so that a given situation is such a life-threatening "emergency" that obtaining a warrant would merely put lives in danger. The information gathered illicitly is immediately life-saving (for the "good guys," at any rate, who are thereby given another location into which they can burst with guns blazing). Given enough "dots" to connect, obtained by no matter what means, it is implied, each and every evil mastermind can be thwarted.

White Collar

Now in its fifth season, USA's *White Collar* (created by Jeff Eastin) follows art thief and forger Neal Caffrey (Matt Bomer) as he cooperates with the FBI. Specifically, Caffrey works with Agent Peter Burke (Tim DeKay), the only person to have ever arrested the con man. Caffrey escaped from prison to find his girl friend with only months to serve in his prison sentence, and Burke found and returned him to jail.

The program is a take on the "buddy" genre, and the

two characters do have a chemistry that can be endearing. Caffrey's a dapper fellow who enjoys the finer things in life and knows how to get them, in contrast to Burke, who insists on living within his means as a government agent. This allows for plenty of "Odd Couple" moments.

Though far less bloody than *The Blacklist*, *White Collar* likewise makes the case that extrajudicial measures in the pursuit of criminals are not just acceptable, but a desirable course of conduct. In this series, where Agent Burke cannot go or look, Caffrey or his criminal associate Mozzy (Willie Garson) is sent in. Evidence gathered illegally is retroactively accounted for, a case built and the "bad guys" captured.

As we have noted before, the use of non-agents to circumvent constitutional protections has become nearly de rigueur in US police procedurals. The collaboration of the authorities with thugs and crooks in these shows and the variety of illegal activity carried out, which almost always goes unquestioned, are of a piece not simply with a trend in television, but reflect—and seek to justify—the criminalization of the real-world police and armed forces.

The undemocratic underpinnings of these programs—the assumption that the forces of "law and order" are always in the right and should face no obstacles in hunting down and punishing their targets—speak to the outlook of the wealthy, privileged and not terribly thoughtful layer that produces them. Such people at least feel comforted by the knowledge that police and government agents will not let the Bill of Rights stand in their way in the defense of the status quo.

It is not surprising, in the era of Edward Snowden and the NSA, that the "new normal" should find its way to the small screen. Whatever else they may do, shows like *The Blacklist* and *White Collar* join a growing list of productions that provide an entertaining (or not so very) cover for the excesses of various agencies in the pursuit of "justice."



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