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“Do you trust the FBI to keep you safe?”: *Blindspot* and its “Jane Doe” perspective on national security.

When psychiatrist Robert Borden asks Jane Doe the question “Do you trust the FBI to keep you safe?”, in episode S01E03, the shot/reverse shot filming technique implies he is addressing the spectators at the same time. The FBI, along with other intelligence agencies, was indeed blamed by politicians and public opinion alike for having failed to “connect the dots” (9/11 Commission Report), in other words for having missed the leads which could have allowed it to uncover the terrorists’ plot. While some congressmen wanted to see the FBI dismantled, Robert S. Mueller, its director, impulsed a series of reforms to show them that the agency could actually adapt to the challenges of the 21st century. *Blindspot* was released in 2015 on the network NBC and perfectly illustrates those changes. The series, which ran for 5 seasons, revolves around the mysterious Jane Doe. Jane is found on Time Square in the pilot episode. She is naked, her body covered in tattoos, and she has amnesia – hence the name given to her. One of her larger tattoos reads “Kurt Weller FBI”, thus special agent Weller is asked to set up a task force to work on the Jane Doe case. They quickly understand that each of her tattoos points to attacks which are about to unfold, therefore turning each episode into ticking time-bomb scenarios: the agents need to crack the code in order to foil the terrorists’ plans. I will now ponder the question of the extent to which Jane could be said to embody the general public in the show.

Because of her name, Jane Doe could pass for “the woman in the street” – except of course for her many tattoos, which make her far from unremarkable. A recurring criminal in the series in fact gives her the nickname “painted lady”, and when she needs to go undercover, she actually has to cover her body with makeup to avoid drawing attention on herself. This clever reversal hints at the numerous hours of preparation Jaimie Alexander, the actress playing Jane, had to go through before shooting her scenes. Yet apart from her looks, Jane seems to be an ordinary citizen and is thus instrumental to the didactic aspect of the show.

Blindspot indeed provides a point of entry into understanding how the FBI handles the fight against terrorism. Baffled by a list of 200 suspects for the same case, Jane asks the team how they will know which one is guilty. Weller simply answers : “We follow the money.” This is one of the recommendations made by the 9/11 Commission to get a better grasp of how terrorist organizations work. Authorizing the circulation of money among terrorist

networks might seem counterintuitive to the general public, but the episode actually demonstrates the benefits of letting outlaws think they're making progress in order to catch not only the perpetrators but also the masterminds behind attacks. Had Jane not been there to ask the naïve questions, explanations as to the methods employed by the task force could have seemed artificial, and a lack thereof might have discouraged some spectators from following up on a show whose cogs they don't understand. The same goes for the technical vocabulary used by some agents. When Patterson, the team's analyst and computer genius, says she has "checked the signature elements in Trakzer's source code against [the FBI's] malware database", Jane, an IT profane, declares "I understood the word database." Most viewers being unfamiliar with computer programming, they would probably grasp as much as Jane does. Her line prompts Patterson to explain that each programmer has a distinct coding style which makes them identifiable. Jane then asks whether this could be considered to be their digital fingerprint, to which the analyst agrees. This serves to show the spectators that even though terrorist threats have evolved towards cybercrime, the method to track down the perpetrators remains the same: find their fingerprints.

However, it becomes clear very early in the 1st season that Jane Doe is no ordinary citizen: in the pilot episode alone, she reveals she has impressive martial art skills and can speak Whenzounese, a Chinese dialect so specific that no FBI translator could comprehend it. Within the same episode, Patterson notices a tattoo which seemingly hints at Jane being former Navy SEAL, which the analyst deems impossible because no woman has ever been part of the elite military force notably known for the assassination of Osama bin Laden in his Abbottabad compound, on May 2nd, 2011. Patterson's superior, assistant director Bethany Mayfair, notes that Jane could have been involved in special operations, which would explain why her name doesn't come out when they look up the Navy SEAL database. Later episodes reveal that Jane can also speak Bulgarian and fly a helicopter, making it clear that even though she is the inset audience, she is no regular spectator.

Once she becomes truly part of the joint terrorism task force, Jane gets to see what has changed in terms of national security since 9/11. *Blindspot* likes to provide ripped-from-the-headline scenarios, the most striking of which would be the plot regarding Douglas Winter. Winter is a whistleblower who has been on the run ever since he revealed the depth of post 9/11 NSA surveillance. Winter is obviously inspired from Edward Snowden, and his name actually cheekily hints at that : "winter" and "snow" belong to the same lexical field. However, Winter's fate is quite different from what we know of Snowden's. The character

has indeed been framed by people with much higher security clearances than his who physically coerced him and used his laptop to leak the NSA files. They then offered him two alternatives : take the blame and be tried under the Espionage Act (1917) or flee to a country which will not extradite him. Winter chose the latter and thus became a prisoner of the Bulgarian government, which won't let him out of his hotel room. This rewriting verges on conspiracy theory because it plays on the gray areas of the case, such as how Snowden managed to leave the building where he worked with NSA files without drawing attention on himself. *Blindspot* therefore answers : he did not, he is the victim of a conspiracy.

What is also interesting with the Winter/Snowden storyline is that agent Nas Kamal - whose first name is an anagram for the agency which employs her, the NSA - asserts that Winter's revelations did not trigger any changes in terms of surveillance policies. The program went on to take a different name but otherwise stayed the same, just like the Obama Administration did not address most of the revelations made by Snowden. Kamal insists on the fact that "everything is being surveilled" because the intelligence community can't "miss" anything. The use of the verb "miss" immediately reminded me of a line spoken by CIA agent Carrie Mathison, the main character in *Homeland*. Blaming herself personally for not having discovered the plot of the 2001 attacks before it unraveled, Mathison declares "I missed something before. I won't... I can't let that happen again." Kamal thus shares with Mathison an obsession for 9/11 which appears to stem from a trauma and a feeling of guilt shared by the intelligence community. Each tattoo on Jane's body also makes the spectators re-live the trauma of 9/11 because each episode is centered on a different terrorist threat against the United States or even the world, whether it be a nuclear attack on Washington DC to wipe out the federal government, a deadly virus deliberately released by a pharmaceutical company in order to sell the cure at great profit, or the hijacking of the power networks by hackers causing a blackout for most of America and Europe. Because those attacks unfold on a weekly basis (at least for the spectators), they seem to justify the FBI's continued existence. The task force indeed always manages to thwart them, sometimes mere seconds before they were set to unravel. This notably happens when two agents defuse a bomb 5 seconds before it was supposed to go off during peace negotiations between two fictional African countries at the United Nations. The agents find the components for the bombs hidden in printer cartridges. This scenario could seem very imaginative on the part of the screenwriters, only they did not invent this plot: in October 2010, AQAP (al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) tried to mail bombs concealed within printer cartridges to two synagogues in Chicago. The plot failed

thanks to intelligence shared by Saudi Arabia which allowed airport security in the United Arab Emirates and in the United Kingdom to locate the incriminated parcels within cargo flights which had departed from Yemen and were stopping over before going to the United States.

Even though Jane recognizes the efforts of the FBI to protect American citizens and institutions, she also witnesses numerous abuses in the name of national security. The agents often complain about the bureaucracy which is literally central to the Federal “Bureau” of Investigation. Agent Reade, who is the most uptight in the task force, fulminates against “lawyers and redtape” which prevent them from leading their investigations at the pace they want to. Individual freedoms and rights are thus presented as obstacles to security, echoing President Obama’s statement after Snowden’s revelations that “You can’t have 100 percent security and also then have 100 percent privacy and zero inconvenience. We’re going to have to make some choices as a society.” *Blindspot* also depicts cooperation between the FBI and the NSA through a secret program ironically called Daylight which all but happens in broad daylight. The principle is as follows : NSA agents provide refined intelligence to FBI agents, who then pretend they obtained it through one of their informants in order to prosecute the suspects. This is actually a rewriting of “Stellar Wind”, a secret program implemented shortly after 9/11 which was cancelled in 2004 after director Mueller and Attorney General John Ashcroft convinced President Bush that this massive warrantless surveillance of American communications was in fact illegal.

Because she witnesses the FBI protecting American citizens while also sometimes infringing on their rights, Jane has many changes of heart towards this agency, particularly in the first season of the show. The narrative arc for that season was meant to show that the heads of many federal agencies (including the FBI, CIA and CDC) were corrupt, which makes her wonder whether the people who tattooed her – who soon start to treat her as an infiltrated operative, asking her to steal from the FBI for instance – could actually be freedom fighters. This reminds the spectators that “terrorism” is a political label: the Mujahideens were known as “freedom fighters” in the United States during the first war in Afghanistan, when they fought the USSR (1979-1989), but then after 2001 when they resisted occupation of the country by the American military they became “insurgents” or “terrorists”, even though the methods applied in both cases were the same, only the enemy differed. Jane only clearly picks a side in season 2, when she realizes that Sandstorm, the terrorist organization to which she belonged and which wiped out her memory, is willing to launch a nuclear attack on

Washington to seize power. The spectators are most likely to align with her, not knowing during the first season whether they want the FBI or the terrorists to win because the stakes are still unclear – the same way as when one watches *The Americans*, they usually hope for the KGB agents not to be exposed by their FBI neighbour because that would cut the series short. Season 2 therefore builds trust towards the FBI but also resentment against the CIA, first because this agency tortured Jane in one of its blacksites during a 3-month ellipsis between the two seasons and second because instead of working hand in hand with the task force, CIA agent Jake Keaton repeatedly asserts that they are rivals. Since miscommunication (and complete lack of communication) between the FBI and CIA was highlighted by the 9/11 Commission as one of the major failures of the intelligence community before the attacks, the series implies that no progress has been made in this area. Jane has a final change of heart in season 4, when she suddenly reverts to her previous identity of Remi Briggs. She forgets the years she has spent with the FBI and is convinced she is undercover for Sandstorm, which has since been dismantled by the task force. She even tries to kill special agent Weller, whom she had married as Jane. Spectators are no longer encouraged to side with Remi, who is more clearly portrayed as a villain. Jaimie Alexander's facial expressions are much harsher when she plays Remi than when she is supposed to be empathetic Jane Doe. In that season, Jane/Remi is a double agent in the literal meaning of the word because she develops a dissociative identity disorder, with Jane struggling to reclaim power over Remi, and ultimately winning, as the spectators wished she would.

Even though the series ends up painting the FBI in a positive light through the portrayal of a set of gifted and dedicated individuals, it is still filled with conspiracy theories regarding evil-minded billionaires and politicians. The attack against the United Nations I mentioned earlier was devised by a businessman who wanted to sabotage the peace negotiations because a pipeline was going to be built across the two countries. He thus tried to escalate the tensions between them so that the pipeline's trajectory would have to be moved and go through his property, which would make him a huge profit. This should remind the spectators of the private military contractors which made a fortune out of the war on terror such as Halliburton, whose former CEO was none other than vice-president Dick Cheney. Terrorists in the show are therefore very unlikely to be Islamist and tend to be greedy White Americans resembling Bernard Madoff more than Bin Laden. Madoff is actually cleverly alluded to in the show without his name actually being used, which protects screenwriters from any lawsuits. As for politicians, they are painted as only interested in winning

elections and satisfying the lobbies financing their campaigns, even when their decisions are detrimental to national security.

To the question “Do you trust the FBI to keep you safe ?”, I would therefore say that *Blindspot*’s answer is “Trust no one”, which makes it a direct heir to the 1990s hit show *The X-Files*. Special Agent Fox Mulder’s motto is actually concealed within the title of episode S01E06, “Sent on Tour”, an anagram for “Trust no One”.