

Memo: Feb. 25, 2018

To: Chris Donnelly

From: Martha Bayles

Re: Pitch for a long-Form TV series about Russia in the 1990s

Why long-form TV?

In proposing an entertainment-based response to Russian propaganda and disinformation, the logical first step is to ask where the audience is. In 2018 the answer is obvious: the audience is sitting in front of a TV or computer screen, watching a multi-episode, multi-season dramatic television series.

A useful term for this type of program is “long-form TV.” It was conceived in the early days of radio, then adapted for television, then transformed by the technology of the videocassette and DVD into a freestanding creative product, like a book. Today, long-form TV thrives as a staple of online video streaming, with an avid following among young and old alike. Indeed, its commercial and cultural dominance places it in the sweet spot between elite and popular taste once occupied by the best-selling novel.

If further evidence is needed for the wisdom of focusing on long-form TV, it can be found on both the Russian and the Western sides of today’s “hot peace.” On the Russian side, the Kremlin’s muted observance of the centenary of the Bolshevik Revolution was marked by a lavishly produced 8-episode series called “Trotsky,” which portrays the Bolshevik leader (all but forgotten in Russia) as a Western-leaning Jew responsible for the Revolution’s most fanatical and bloody acts, including the murder of the Tsar and his family. On the Western side, the new US-UK co-production “McMafia” draws on Misha Glenny’s 2008 book about Russian money-laundering at a moment when a great many people are likely to tune in.

Why Russia in the 1990s?

There are two compelling reasons for creating a series set in the 1990s. The first is that there is a hefty appetite out there for “period pieces” about the recent past, such as “Mad Men” (set in the 1960s), and “The Americans” and “Deutschland 83” (set in the 1980s). But as far as I know, there has not been a serious long-form TV series looking at Russia in the 1990s, the decade which in many crucial ways set the stage for the world we now inhabit, and about which there is a rich written record, including scholarly and journalistic accounts by both Russian and Western participants and observers. (Your own experience and knowledge of those years would also be invaluable.)

The second reason for choosing the 1990s is the need to avoid all taint of propaganda. For all its sophistication, the propaganda-entertainment now being produced by Russia (and China) skews heavily toward melodrama, with black-hatted villains and white-hatted heroes steering hearts and minds in clearly designated ideological directions. When this approach is used for cartoonish, crowd-pleasing fluff, it works well enough. But when used for weightier topics with grave political ramifications, it quickly becomes propaganda. Far better to produce a series that delves seriously and humanely into the moral ambiguity of both Russia’s post-Soviet struggles and the West’s noble—and ignoble—efforts to help.

Ambitious? Yes. But there are a lot of talented people out there who could bring this off. And the game would be well worth the candle.