MATTERS OF STATE

Andy Fry looks at the rising demand for political dramas and espionage thrillers.

Politics and espionage are not new topics in TV drama, but there's no question there has been a resurgence of interest in both subjects. *House of Cards, Borgen, Prisoners of War, The Americans* and *The Night Manager* are just a few recent titles that prove that the right subject can generate audience interest both at home and on the international market.

One obvious question about the current wave of political dramas is whether they are a response to the times in which we live. With the 21st century characterized by complex geopolitical issues, widespread distrust of the political establishment and a 24/7 social-media current-affairs commentary, have audiences become super-politicized?

Fredrik af Malmborg, managing director of Eccho Rights, believes this is the case, especially among younger audiences who are politically engaged. They care about issues like climate change, sustainability and social justice, and I think this political awareness is reflected in a lot of drama."

Robert Franke, VP of drama at ZDF Enterprises, sees the new wave of political dramas partly as a reflection of current concerns in Western society. "There is a growing awareness that things are not right in our Western societies, that the divide between the rich and the poor grows and that there is a detachment of the political class from the needs of society as a whole. Fiction is a great way to poke holes in the image of political parties and the motives of politicians and ask the question, Are they working in our best interest?"

GLOBAL CONFLICT

Does it help to have a trope that everyone is already familiar with, such as terrorism or U.S.-Russian spy games?

"The more international impact the story has, the more widely relevant it seems," says Alex Fraser, the senior VP of acquisitions at Red Arrow Studios International. "Nevertheless there have been great local dramas, such as *Borgen*, dealing with very territory-specific politics that have worked well internationally. I think politics on any level is often synonymous with intrigue, conspiracies, scandals and threats, which is all fertile ground for drama. This can work on a local and international level if the story and characters are exciting and the subjects are universal."

This view is backed up by Atar Dekel, the head of global original drama at Keshet International. "The key to any politically themed drama is that you need great characters. *Prisoners of War* is a very human drama that also looks into the central characters' family lives."
The lead character in Red Arrow’s Stella Blömquist is a lawyer who often becomes embroiled in political conspiracies.

Moreover, the one-line explanation of the show—MIA soldier returns home after many years absence and is greeted as a hero, but may now be an undercover spy—is so compelling. “It’s such a relatable and transferable idea—it’s not particularly rooted in the specific Israeli experience,” Dekel notes. “We’ve also enjoyed a lot of success with False Flag, in which five ordinary citizens wake up one day to discover that they have been implicated in a high-profile political kidnapping.” Dekel continues. “That show was picked up by Canal+ in France and also by Fox [Networks Group], which acquired it for broadcast in 127 territories.”

REAL APPEAL
Again, says Dekel, part of the appeal of False Flag is that it operates at the intersection between politics and personal lives. “We were also very aware that this idea had international appeal—what would you do if you woke up and discovered your name, face and identity across all the world media?”

Red Arrow’s Fraser agrees with Dekel that good political dramas need layers. “Political dramas, especially when based on true events, can limit the way stories develop, and there is a danger that they can come across as history lessons rather than exciting dramas. So it’s important to introduce emotional depth and intriguing characters to find a way of guiding viewers through the narrative without losing the pace and excitement.”

Among Red Arrow titles with a political flavor, Fraser picks out “the politically charged series Cleverman, which continues to sell well internationally, including to the BBC.”

Set in Australia in the near-future and drawing on Aboriginal folklore, Cleverman blends indigenous mythology with a contemporary superhero arc and cutting political commentary, dealing with themes related to socio-political issues such as immigration.”

There is also Stella Blömquist, a new Icelandic drama from Sagafilm where the show’s protagonist, Stella, a smart and ruthless lawyer, often finds herself plunged into political conspiracies. “The show’s themes tackle political corruption at all levels in Iceland, sometimes mirroring major real-life political events,” says Fraser. “We are rolling Stella Blömquist out internationally and it is gaining lots of interest from broadcasters, with the political themes appealing to buyers as universal topics. The show premiered on Smírn TV Iceland and is now airing on SVOD platform Viaplay in Scandinavia.”

IN-FIGHTING
STUDIOCANAL’s Baron Noir has been referred to by international media as a “French House of Cards.” While and its focus is domestic—centered on a French politician and his mission to take down his enemies—the Canal+ commission has so far traveled to 85 territories around the world, including the U.S. (Walter Presents), the U.K. (Amazon Prime) and Australia (SBS).

Beatriz Campos, the head of international sales at STUDIOCANAL, says a big appeal of the series is its “style, tone and clever dialogue. Viewers enjoy being party to an intelligent series where they can see another angle of what happens behind closed doors—beyond what they see on the news. They are also then able to make comparisons between real life and fiction.”

Campos, too, believes political dramas do best if they focus on relatable characters. “Many of us are intrigued by and concerned with the personal issues and aspirations of those in power, wherever we are in the world, and the series delivers such insight into how things work inside the most powerful political parties. In Baron Noir there is a vast scope of characters—from political leaders to unionists to students to the press—all demonstrating the terrifying domino effect that politics can have throughout the chain of command. There is also a romance between two of the main characters, which adds an additional layer and complexity to the storyline.”

She also believes that the show benefits from its authenticity. “Baron Noir has the great advantage of being able to draw on the real-life experience of one of the writers. Eric Benzecri has an incredible political background and knows so much about behind-the-scenes dramas on many levels. He has 20 years of experience working in politics, having followed and participated in numerous election campaigns throughout his career. As a result, he has created a wonderful cast of characters to deliver the intriguing storylines that make Baron Noir so vivid.”

ZDF’s drama’s Franko says that the strength of political drama at the moment can also be attributed to its being used as part of hybrid scripted series. “There is a trend to blend political drama with other genres, in particular crime and thriller,” he says. “A good example from our catalog of a high-concept genre blend is Dengler [a Bavaria Fiction production], which is about a special type of German detective who uncovers a cover-up plot driven by the pharma industry and elite political circles, which try to protect their own dirty little
ZDF Enterprises’ The Fourth Man, commissioned by SVT, looks at the links between a politician and a decades-old terrorist attack.

secrets. It follows the proven formula of starting with a seemingly ordinary crime case and developing from there into a more political sphere.

Another example, says Franke, “is Watchdog, which we are developing together with Fisher King from Finland. This one is a political thriller about whistleblowing and excessive state-driven surveillance. This is arguably the most topical issue we have in our modern technology-driven society, where questions about the right of individual privacy collide with state interest in the name of security and protection.”

It is also a genre, Franke says, that tends to travel well. “Even though political dramas might be rooted in one country, the underlying principles of what makes a good political drama are pretty much the same everywhere. The problems are always related to power abuse and corruption, which pretty much all boils down to greed. If you look at the tropes being used in political dramas all over the world, you’ll find these issues in most cases are the core motivation of the characters involved, which is why the genre is so relatable.”

For this reason, he sees the potential for cross-border business models in the genre. “There is a growing trend in coproduction here because people have started realizing that patterns of power abuse are similar across all countries. The SVOD platforms are also a perfect environment to stimulate interest in this subject matter because they make content available which might not have been available to users before.”

PASSING THE CENSORS
To some extent, one factor that needs to be taken into account with political drama is that countries with a tradition of censorship are less likely to sanction the commissioning or production of contemporary political dramas, especially if they involve some commentary on the ruling class. Turkey, a prodigious exporter of drama, only tends to produce political series with a pro-government perspective (for example, Star TV’s The Reaction). Russia, another growing force on the international drama scene, deals primarily with political subject matter connected to the 1917 Russian Revolution, with occasional forays into the Khrushchev era (such as The Optimists, described as Russia’s answer to The Americans). By contrast, there is little commentary on the Putin era.

KEEPING AN OPEN MIND
That said, it’s important not to view all political drama from a rose-tinted Western perspective. Eccho Rights’ af Malmö points out that dramas regarded as pro-government spin in one territory might very well be viewed as objective truth in another. The company distributes Trotsky, a Sreda Production for Channel One Russia. As the name suggests, Trotsky is the story of Russian Revolution hero Leon Trotsky. The series explores various periods of his life from the late 1890s to his assassination in 1940. According to af Malmö, it is “a quite edgy series that introduces viewers to a side of the Russian Revolution they may never have seen before. It also tells the story of Trotsky’s inner life and love affairs.”

Red Arrow’s Fraser, meanwhile, believes there is also a degree of pushback among audiences. “I think interest in these subjects depends on the territory. Some U.S. networks seem to be turning away from political dramas while other territories are commissioning more, particularly as the political issues and themes seem increasingly global. The breadth and volume of drama being commissioned mean political drama is well and truly in the mix. But there will always be a big demand for escapist content that just entertains, offering an alternative to what we see on the news.”

ZDFE.drama’s Franke says producers are also attuned to the possibility of viewer boredom with such issues. “So I also see a trend to be more subtle in the way political dramas are told because there is a kind of fatigue when it comes to news—in particular, bad news. That is why genre blends that mix political drama with other genres like crime or thriller generate interest.” This may also explain the longevity of a show like HBO’s Veep, which gives audiences the chance to laugh at political machinations.