



**Interview with Charlie Targett-Adams:
The Alternative Narratives of *PLACEBO: ALT.RUSSIA***

Questions by Celia Lam

The alternative is an almost ubiquitous notion that supports a variety of connotations. In opposition, the alternative presents subversive or resistive possibilities to political or cultural mainstreams. The alternative also represents choice: of direction; or of possibilities. The alternative is thus also innovative, signalling unconventional approaches to the status quo be they artistic, inventive or political. *PLACEBO: ALT.RUSSIA* (Targett-Adams 2016) explores the untold narrative of Russia's alternative cultures in an era when global attention is focused on Russia's politics and international relations. Taking the rare opportunity of documenting the band's twentieth-anniversary tour of ten Russian cities, the film follows Placebo's Stefan Olsdal as he encounters artists, architects, and musicians that comprise the creative cultures of Russia's major cities.

The film is punctuated by personal stories and Placebo's concerts, revealing the universal power of art. *PLACEBO: ALT. RUSSIA* has received exposure and prizes at international film competitions and was a category winner at the IAFOR Documentary Film Award 2016.

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Watch the trailer for *PLACEBO: ALT.RUSSIA* by Charlie Targett-Adams on [YouTube](#).

1. Please tell me about the concept behind *PLACEBO: ALT.RUSSIA*. How did you establish a connection with the band and what inspired you to tell this story?

I have been working with Placebo since 2008 and my career has grown with them. I was brought in by their manager Alex Weston to make an EPK out of home footage they shot and little by little they have given me more autonomy on each project. Since 2009 I have made everything from online films, DVDs, live concert videos, a music video and the first documentary, *Coming Up For Air*, that was shown at the inaugural Sundance London Film Festival in 2012.

In April 2014, Alex emailed me about coming in to talk about making a documentary about the Russian tour. They were playing 10 Russian cities, eight of which they had not played before, and travelling on the Trans-Siberian express. It was a different tour for them, and a great opportunity to make something unique. At the time Russia was all over the news with Crimea so I thought we should not concentrate on the politics and instead reach out to the people and see a different side to Russia.

I went away and wrote a treatment for the film setting out the approach: going out into the cities and meeting creatives on the way. I had the name from the start, *PLACEBO: ALT.RUSSIA*, because I always see Placebo being labelled as an ‘Alternative Rock’ band and thought that would be a good hook to look into alternative culture in Russia; the culture we rarely hear about in the mainstream media.

2. Please tell me about the technical process. How many cameras did you use during the shoot, and what was your plan for sound recording? Were there any challenging situations or interesting stories to come from production?

A rockumentary like this has a very rock n roll approach – get the best camera you can for the little money you have and make everything look great. The film was shot on one camera by myself, except for some footage that was shot by an incredible DP called Vanessa Whyte. We were filming for Nowness about the Arena di Verona and she shot the section in the documentary where we go to Venice. Sound was also a one-man job; I would stick a wireless lapel mic on anyone who would talk and that was it. Therefore, because the technical aspect was so crude it was all about how you use the tools and how you tell the story.

Thankfully I managed to get a producer to go out to Russia with me – Stephanie Fyfe. Stephanie has experience in filming documentaries around the world and in how to reach out to contributors and set up interviews in far-off locations. Like always in the world of rock’n’roll, money and time weren’t on our side, so we had two weeks for the pre-production to find out as much as we could about the places we were going and who we could meet up with. We spent every waking hour researching, emailing and picking up the phone trying to set things up before we left. We explored every angle we could and contacted everyone we came across including Placebo fans to help give us their ideas about their cities.

In the end a great resource for us was *The Calvert Journal* based in London. On their website they feature articles about the creative arts in Russia and Eastern Europe and it opened up a lot of angles on who and what to look out for. Once we had a list of people in each city we sent them over to Stefan Olsdal and Brian Molko from the band to ask who they were interested in

meeting. From there we narrowed down the choices and then the tough task of getting in contact with them. I think when we left to go to Russia we had only successfully secured three contributors – Fyodor Bukhtoyarov, Muddlehood and Recycled Group.

Some people we never managed to contact, others we did and they didn't show up at our meetings and others we met but we could not fit into the edit of the documentary. Thankfully, of the people we did meet, we were really blown away by what they did and each gave their own unique angle for the film. If we did this documentary again we could have ended up with completely different contributors. So for me it is about a time and a place that we capture in the film and a dialogue that Placebo had with the alternative culture in Russia at that time.

The band's touring format is normally one day travel, one day gig. Sometimes there are days off. Therefore, as soon as we arrived in each city we would either head straight out to meet someone or go in the morning before the concerts. Then for the first few cities we would leave straight from the gig venues onto the Trans-Siberian Express. The journey times would vary but it would normally mean an overnight journey to the next city. Stephanie and I would be preparing options and logistics of who to go out and meet. We would then shoot around the city, head to our contributor that day or the next and then I would shoot the concert footage. When I shoot a concert, I am always more interested in trying to capture what it felt like to be there than document what actually happened. Therefore, I normally make my way around the whole venue picking up moments from on or off stage, trying to capture people's reactions and emotions. Whilst I was doing this, Stephanie would be backstage continuing to contact people, trying to set up the next interviews. The tour lasted sixteen days and in total we covered just over 13,500 km.

3. Tell me a bit about the editing process. How did you find the narrative? Did the story of the band's encounters with Russian artists emerge after the shoot, or before?

The beauty of a documentary is you never really know what you're going to come across and how it is going to pan out. You start with a set of ideas to guide you but as you go the film takes you in different directions due to an infinite amount of variables. We returned from the tour with thirty-five hours of footage. All of this is boiled down to the one hour and seven minutes running time. The first process was remembering and then looking through everything and starting to pick selects from the footage. I did this during the tour to start thinking about what we had and where we could take things.

The main concept of the documentary was set out in my treatment and script. We knew the premise was to go out and talk to creatives to find out about living and working in Russia. We aimed to get a diverse mix of people into the film and not just the obvious type of creatives that people would associate with Russia. We wanted to get different opinions on similar topics from each of our contributors.

The narrative naturally evolved as we went and guided us from interview to interview. As a director I'm looking to create an engaging story for the documentary, crafting something together that people can watch. There is a lot that was said in the interviews that I would have loved to have included in the documentary but the mass of information would have been overwhelming and made the film hard to digest.

Therefore, the edit in a documentary is incredibly important and I would say the editor becomes a second director. Jerry Chater was our editor. He had edited music documentaries about U2,

Radiohead, Oasis and Joy Division and I knew he would bring so much to our film. He had the task of seeing the wood from the trees, really refining and honing the narrative and digging deep into the footage we captured. This was the first time I had worked with Jerry so I spent the first two weeks going through the footage with him and looking through transcripts. Then I left him to start putting everything together and see how he interpreted what we shot and what I had explained to him. I would then head back in every few weeks to see what he had done, discuss and give notes, and he would continue crafting everything together. This went on for about four months on and off before we had a first cut. Stefan from the band came into the edit on occasions and helped craft the narrative as we went. The themes and topics were all there in the footage and we told the story in a linear fashion so the task was stripping out what we felt wasn't relevant and really refining what we captured. We sent the first cut to the band and management and in total they only asked for four changes.

4. What inspired your stylistic choices for the film?

A director's role is about constantly making decisions and choices. What influences these choices comes from everywhere and mostly your own experiences. When talking about stylistic choices for the film it is hard for me to analyse those. They are techniques and styles that come naturally to me, that I have embraced over time. What I would say about this film though is we thought it should be led by Stefan from the band. The previous feature documentary was all led by a narration from Brian. Therefore, this time we chose to have Stefan lead it and instead of it being a film that looked inwards to the band we thought it should look outwards and be guided by Stefan. He really embraced the project and was very involved at every stage of the production. He was the best champion and driving force to make sure it would see the light of day.

It was a constant dialogue on the road with Stefan, Stephanie and me about who we would meet, why and what we would talk about. However, when we got to each contributor we gave Stefan research and guidance but it was his own conversations and dialogue with the creatives that drove the interviews. From what I knew, he had never really done any work in front of the camera like this before, leading the conversation and giving personal insight into difficult subjects on camera. Usually people would be asking him questions instead of the other way around but I feel he managed to fall straight into the role and get his own naturally inquisitive and engaging character across on camera. Then when we came to do the voice over for the film, Jerry had written a guide dialogue and Stefan managed to spin it around into his own words to give it a real personal and engaging touch. I always love the collaborative nature of filmmaking. It is a great medium to bring many skills and talents together and the final piece is an evolution of all of those elements.

5. A common theme throughout the film is the need for art and artists to persevere, particularly when faced with political pressures, or even as an alternative to the mainstream. Do you think art is inherently alternative? Is it important that societies nurture alternative artistic communities?

To answer the first question, no. I wouldn't say art is inherently alternative. Art is in the everyday and is all around us. I feel art is impossible to define and comes in many forms. What can be alternative is how people engage and hear about art away from wider society. The internet age has given a voice to an incredible amount of people and alternative narratives are being pursued and told. This is what I feel the film is engaging with. Providing amplification of alternative narratives that make people think and engage. I feel it is very important that

societies nurture alternative narratives and alternative artistic pursuits. Life would be incredibly dull if everything was similar and the way we evolve and challenge ourselves is through alternative pursuits away from the status quo.

6. The theme for this issue of the Journal is ‘Alternative Narratives’. How important are alternative narratives to the artists featured in the film?

The arts are a great way to express thoughts that sometimes are too hard to directly say. Nothing is ever black or white so creating something that makes people sit up and listen and reassess what they know is something I’m always interested in. Being in the bubble of a band travelling through Russia we never got a real experience of what it must be like to live there but we asked everyone we met about it. Hopefully the documentary brings across what we found and what we thought.

From the limited time we spent with the artists we found each one led different types of lives. A country as vast as Russia has such a rich cultural mix and the lives of people like Rinat Kamalov, a Muslim traditional musician to Petr Pavlensky, a contemporary artist that uses his body as a form of political protest, could not be more different. What we did consciously seek out were people who were away from the mainstream. Hopefully by doing this we showed an alternative narrative to the mainstream reported in Russia. The film has gone down really well in Russia. I feel there is a great appetite for it because it is an alternative take on how Russians see their own country.

7. How important are alternative narratives to the band?

One of my favourite quotes from Brian is “Placebo attracts the misshapes, the square pegs in the round holes.” From hearing several interviews they have given over the years I would say alternative narratives are important to them. I feel they are writing their own one in the history of modern Western music. They are currently in their 20th year as a band and when they started Brit Pop had emerged, lad culture and crude rivalries between bands such as Blur and Oasis. Placebo decided to blur these false boundaries and were the antidote to that culture. Having come to fame in that way, I feel they are now put under that section of ‘alternative’ for people to easily categorize and digest their style in a single term. That is why I thought it would be good to play on that with the title of the documentary, *PLACEBO: ALT.RUSSIA*, and also the Alt on a computer keyboard that gives a nod to our internet age.

8. Finally, where have you screened the film so far, and where will you take it next?

The documentary has had a great response at several festivals and a theatrical release so far in Russia. We have won three film festival awards at present. To be recognised outside the world of music with the IAFOR award was incredibly humbling for us all. One aspect of a rockumentary that I love is how it is a document of that period in time. I remember the first one I watched was *Don’t Look Back* by D. A. Pennebaker about Bob Dylan’s tour in 1965 to the UK. Pennebaker was a pioneer of observational documentary filmmaking. Technology had appeared that allowed a film camera to sync sound and be light enough to film handheld for hours – it was still incredible heavy for today’s standards. When I watch that film now I am fascinated by the haircuts, clothes, accents, mannerisms etc. of the people. Every frame is rich in cultural history and it is presented in a topic that is incredibly interesting. I feel all music documentaries grow better with time as they capture the culture of that time. We want to get the film shown to as many people as possible all over the world through film festivals. We are

going to show it in as many festivals that accept us this year and then there will be a general release at the end of the year or next year.

References

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