TABOO

The Journal of Culture and Education
Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education
Volume 11, Number 1, Spring-Summer 2007

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Publisher: Alan H. Jones, Caddo Gap Press, 3145 Geary Boulevard PMB 275, San Francisco, California 94118, USA. Telephone 415/666-3012; e-mail info@caddogap.com

ISSN 1080-5400

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Introduction

Shirley R. Steinberg

It’s been several years since Taboo has published a special issue. It is with pleasure that we bring you this issue on the character, the movie, and the messages of Borat. The Ali G Show was always a favorite of mine, and I was unhappy when I missed Borat at the theatre. A friend showed me how to stream movies, and one evening after class I sat at my desk and watched the show. I knew the film would extend the Borat character from Ali G, to that point I had always found the Kurdish journalist mildly amusing. The film had rave reviews and I expected a funny movie—it took about fifteen minutes for me to clue in to the fact that Borat was not just another comedy. I had to start the film over a couple of times just to make sure I was correct in assuming that this film was something. My read of the film took me far from the hilarious romp promised by critics and audiences. This something smacked of classism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and was insidious in its production.

The decontextualized clips played on TV had not revealed the film in any way which would have prepared me for my reaction to Borat. After my desk film session that evening I knew I had to talk to everyone I knew who had seen it and query the film, and its auteur. We all had differing opinions, but were agreed in the notion that indeed, Sasha Cohen did nothing by chance, mistake, or accident. Cohen’s Borat had multiple agendas. After placing a call for articles, reviewers for Taboo selected the following essays. Each author leaves a distinct narrative and research imprint and I invite you to enjoy this issue, and possibly disagree...I know you won’t be bored.
In the Shadow of Borat

Gayane Torosyan

Kazakhstan has become an international punch line thanks to Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan (Gregorian, 2007). But the Kazakhs “are not willing to let the joke be on them.” The tabloid New York Post and the Chronicle of Higher Education report that President Nursultan Nazarbayev’s relatives are buying multi-million-dollar apartments in New York City, getting into Ivy League schools, and suing American companies for underestimating their intellectual worth (Farrell, 2007). Aside from author Sacha Baron Cohen, the only people who seem to “make benefit” from this sort of “cultural learnings” are the former Soviet “oligarchs,” or tycoons, who harvest free publicity at the expense of the distorted images of their exploited countrymen (Lesova, 2006). Cohen’s documentary has been so widely publicized that the name “Borat” has come close to being perceived as a common noun. Because of this popularity, there is no question about the power of the film’s impact on audiences. Understanding the nature of that impact is the topic of this article.

I ideological criticism is used as a method of rhetorical analysis of Borat, with postmodernism as a theoretical framework that Foss (1996) recommends for its ability to explain the lack of unifying discourse and the fragmented nature of the context of this media text. Postmodern theory informs this study through the notion that contemporary culture has transformed radically by the domination of the media and technology that bring about new forms of communication and representation (Foss, 1996, p.293.). Fragmentation of individuals and communities, a consumer lifestyle, and a sense of alienation are the underlying canvas through which audiences perceive and process the message of the film. The hypothesis is that through his mockumentary, Cohen tackles a number of problems including racism, sexism, superstition, and poverty that truly exist in the countries of the former Socialist Bloc and worldwide, but because of its inaccuracy and factual frivolity, the film misses the point and remains overly superficial, vulgar and erroneous even for the genre of satire.
Preliminary Focus Group Analysis

Although the character of Borat Sagdiyev, a fictional Kazakhs television reporter commissioned to file features for his home network on “typical British life” emerged on Channel 4 Television in Great Britain in 1998 (Howell, 2006), the project materialized as a full-length film only a few years later. Directed by Larry Charles and distributed by 20th Century Fox, the film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* premiered at the 2006 Toronto International Film festival (Reuters Movie News, 2006). The technique used in the film is similar to Ali G’s: a series of spoof interviews with unsuspecting individuals who were “unaware that the whole thing had been set up and that it was they who were the real source of the comedy. The humor arose from the innocent confronting the expert and ending up in glorious and mutual incomprehension” (Howell, 2006, p.157).

The wide release of *Borat* on video happened at a convenient time during the Fall 2006 academic semester when Mass Communication students at the State University of New York College at Oneonta were viewing excerpts from various motion pictures as part of their learning about screenwriting and on-air use of language. Aside from a few laughs, the film did not trigger much reaction from the group of 40-odd students, let alone discussion or debate of any significance. The students said it seemed to lack a point, but even if it had one, cultural confusion and vulgarity prevented them from understanding it.

In September 2007, a series of focus group sessions were conducted with three groups of students at the same school, the average number of participants in each session was 15, and some of them also selected *Borat* as their topic of discussion in a short essay assignment. Focus group discussions and written responses show that while accepting the genre of the movie as satire, most students agree that it actually enforces racial and ethnic stereotypes such as “middle easterners have a hard time adjusting in a Western society because they are not used to developed technology,” “women in countries like Kazakhstan are treated poorly,” while in America women “have it really good,” and “men treat women as their property in those countries.”

The majority of students stated that the film did not teach them anything about the former Soviet Union, but some of them ended up extrapolating some of its satirical claims over their perceived image of that part of the world.

To a certain limit, my views of the former Soviet Union have changed. The quality of life was a lot more of a third world situation than I imagined. Women in Kazakhstan have very few rights and are treated more like animals than humans. Ethnic relations were rather disturbing and hateful. The comedy had a fine line drawn between humorous and offensive. The economy of Kazakhstan was a very poor one. I think that Kazakhstani people are primarily Muslim due to the fact of the hatred towards Jewish people.
Some students expressed more skeptical views, saying that the former Soviet Union was portrayed in an “over-the-top, exaggerated, mocking fashion.”

I think Borat was intended to lampoon the culture and perspective of Americans. The way Kazakhstan was depicted was intended to mimic the idea some Americans have when they think of a relatively unknown Eurasian country. Therefore, Borat did not affect the way I look at Kazakhstan because of the nature of the film and the motives behind it.

Most students said they believe Borat to be a Muslim, like the majority of the population of Kazakhstan. Others said the ethnic composition of that country is “unknown.” One of the students expressed concerns about the negative portrayal of Borat as a Muslim character:

In this post 9/11 era I think many Americans are hypersensitive about possible terrorists. Although it is unfair Muslims are looked at as evil and this is due to many factors.

Student responses also indicate that “Borat” skewed their views on intercultural communication and ethnic relations:

It made me think that Kazakhstan ethnic relations are not very strong. Especially with the United States. They have a different culture that is much more European, which is nothing like the American culture and the way we behave towards each other. For example the way we greet each other. They are unfamiliar with our way of life and we are uncomfortable with theirs.

Answering a question about Kazakhstan’s economy, the students unanimously classified it as poor:

I really never had any economic opinions about Kazakhstan because I didn’t really know anything about. However, after seeing the movie I feel that the economy of Kazakhstan is lacking. They are borderline third world country.

The film’s impact on the students’ perception of the status of the economy in the former Soviet Union can be summarized by this comment:

My opinion about economic conditions in Kazakhstan was again, not affected. It was just confirmed.

Other comments describing the film’s impact on the students’ beliefs included statements such as “It made me realize that Kazakhstan is very poor,” “It made me feel that Kazakhstan is against certain minorities,” “…that it was poor and behind in technology,” “It made me feel that their economy sucks,” “Ethnic relations in Kazakhstan were terrible compared to others,” “Mud brick houses are top of the line,” etc.

As a media scholar who was born and raised in the former Soviet Republic of Armenia, I was hoping that the film would provoke more questions among my students about the past and present of that part of the world. Instead of triggering discourse, the film appeared to cause only confusion and misconceptions, ampli-
fied by disgust from certain scenes including bathroom humor and nude wrestling. The exposure to the film resulted in confused and erroneous assumptions cemented in the young minds thanks to the world-wide reputation of the author, whom the students recognized as Ali G (Howells, 2006).

The student responses are only used as a starting point to ask further questions about Cohen’s film. A brief rhetorical analysis is conducted to show that despite its claims of “dramatic demonstration of how racism feeds on dumb conformity, such as rabid bigotry” (Reuters Movie News, 2006), the film does very little to support its ambitions as a critique of society at large.

Geopolitics

The first question to ask is what an American viewer can learn from the film: How does Cohen’s documentary “make benefit” wide American audiences?

The film aspires to make fun of racism, sexism, and ignorance in a fictional society that the author calls “Kazakhstan,” but the choice of this geographic locale leaves the viewer confused about who to condemn for those vices. Given a foreign target and an unknown country to demonize, the viewer’s own culture seems immune or at least better compared to on the one depicted in the film. Aside from alienating the so-called Kazakh society together with the entire former Socialist Bloc, the film does very little to support its ambitions as a critique of society at large. Adding to the ambiguity of the message is its lack of educational value. As someone born and raised in the former Soviet Union, I was hoping that the film would provoke questions among my students about the past and present of that part of the world. The results were disappointing.

The film is mostly shot desperately far from Kazakhstan, in Eastern Europe and the United States, with characters including Romanian Gypsies who later sued Cohen for discrimination (The Associated Press, 2006), and the Armenian-American actor Ken Davitian playing Borat’s middle-aged manager Azamat Bagatov. The popular Serbo-Croatian composer Goran Bregovic wrote the music for the soundtrack that revolves around Ederlezi, a popular traditional folk song of the Roma minority in former Yugoslavia.

Clearly, geographic correctness was not the purpose of the film, although the credits, unlike the maps, appeared to be in grammatically correct Russian. In fact, the point must have been the opposite—trying to make fun of a non-existing country that strangely resembles so many of the members of the former Socialist block. However, cultural and geographic misconceptions can pass as humor only when directed towards an audience that stands above such errors. A brief call to any of the American phone companies like Sprint, with a simple question such as whether text messages to Armenia are covered within the company’s flat-fee program, will reveal the degree of Americans’ geographic ignorance. Making subtle fun of that, as Cohen does, is the same as a slipping-on-a-banana joke in front of a person on
crutches. If anything at all, Borat deepens Americans’ alienation from the rest of the world.

**Economy and ideology**

In a “generous” gesture of sparing the feelings of one individual country—in this case, Kazakhstan—the over-generalized Eastern-European location of the film appears to be a statement about the economic conditions and cultural atmosphere prevailing in most of the nations that broke away from the Soviet Union only to find themselves in deeper misery, which came to replace the five-year plans and communist ideology.

The country’s economic problems are shown at the very beginning of the narrative, when Borat gives the viewers a tour of his native village, Kuzcek:

Here is my neighbor, Nursultan Tuliagbaev. He’s a pain in my assholes. I get a window from a glass—I must get a window from a glass. I get a step—he must get a step. I get a clock radio—he cannot afford! Great success!

Later at the end of the film when Borat reviews the changes that happened after his return, he refers to his neighbor again, this time—with a surprising turn in their competition in the realm of material well-being:

There Nursultan Tuliagbaev. Still asshole. I get iPod—he only get iPod-Mini. Everybody know it’s for girls!

This unexpected twist of the plot represents a postmodern technique illustrating the fragmentation of Borat’s reality between his country’s poverty and the accelerated advent of technology. It fits naturally with the “philosophical” climax of the film, where Borat revises his values by replacing his dreams of “plastic chests” with the real (pumpable) peroxide-blond beauty of the African-American prostitute Luenell. This foreshadows the grotesque finale of Borat and Luenell living happily ever after in Kuzcek.

While things are relatively simple with economy, it takes a little more effort to explain to American college students about the “Gypsy tears” contained in a vile that decorates Borat’s neck. Those superstitions are from the same category of alternative belief systems that have popped up like mushrooms, competing against science, in the former Socialist block. It requires a little more than a few vulgar jokes to explain to an American audience how after a long, heavy period of ideological pressure scientific determinism failed together with the socialist system. Free at last, some Soviet intellectuals threw themselves into a frantic and often ignorant mix of religion and superstition, using formerly reputable central media venues such as the weekly newspaper *Argumenti i Fakti* (Arguments and Facts), where “Professor” Ernst Mulshev (2007) claims that the idols of Easter Island are “death chips” sent to Earth by “gods from the underground Shambala” in order to influence the flow of life on this planet “through the introduction of
death.” (Borat one, Muldashev nil, as Cohen’s former countryman David Beckham would put it.)

Thus, Cohen fails to explain the real tragedy of steep intellectual decline that began in some Eastern European countries after the end of Socialism and its government-sponsored science programs by portraying it as primordial ignorance, or as a given. Combining witchcraft with incest and promiscuity, Cohen creates an appalling image of a society that leaves no room for compassion.

**Racism**

Borat’s self-proclaimed critique of anti-Semitism is lacking proper context for viewers as well. To audiences unfamiliar with the newly acute outburst of nationalism in Russia, it seems directed at racism and xenophobia in general (Tuminez, 2000). As a result of discrimination elevated to the level of national politics, minorities are finding themselves increasingly unwelcome in the former empire’s urban centers such as St. Petersburg and Moscow, where policemen stop dark-skinned or dark-haired individuals, especially men, for no reason other than looks.

In the episode of the film where Borat wants to buy a car, he rehashes a “bearded” Soviet joke that used to make fun of the hunting culture of the Chukchas—the inhabitants of the Chukotka peninsula (Russian Jokes, 2007). While the car dealer introduces the vehicle’s safety features, Borat inquires about the possibility of killing a group of Gypsies by running into them.

If I run into a group of Gypsies with this car, will I kill them? … What can I do to guarantee to kill them?

Proving Borat right at this particular point, an Armenian man whose name is kept confidential for reasons related to political asylum, got a piece of advice from a Russian woman on the matter of his immigration from St. Petersburg to Los Angeles: “That monkey house is surely the best place for you. A lot of your compatriots live there.” He was recently granted asylum in the United States as a victim of ethnic discrimination of minorities in Russia. It is doubtful that Cohen would understand the depth and complexity of ethnic prejudice penetrating Western societies through post-Soviet immigration. His oversimplified and generalized depiction of flaws in other societies gives American viewers a license to overlook their own problems concerning race and ethnic relations.

**Epic hero… NOT**

A syntagmatic analysis (Berger, 2000) of the film reveals the parody of its adherence with a typical fairy-tale narrative. The hero, Borat, lives with his family in a small Kazakh village, surrounded by family and friends like any epic hero at the start of the narrative. Borat is unhappy with his wife. At the age of 43, his mother
Gayane Torosyan

is the “oldest woman in all of Kuzcek.” His sister is “number four prostitute in all Kazakhstan.”

Together with his sidekick Azamat Bagatov, Borat launches a journey to the “U. S. of A.” with a quest for “cultural learnings.” During the trip, he discovers and tries to “rescue” (or, ironically, kidnap) the “princess”—Pamela Andersen, only to realize that true beauty does not have to be endowed with plastic breasts:

I was humiliated. It was time for me to return to New York, where a ticket was waiting for me to fly home. While sitting on the bus, I thought of my journey over the past few weeks. The great times, the good times, and the shit times. Many there were shit times. I’d come to America to learn lessons for Kazakhstan, but what had I learned? Suddenly I realized: I had learned that if you chase a dream, especially one with plastic chests, you can miss the real beauty in front of your eyes.

One important figure missing from this morphological picture is the villain. In the beginning of the film, while Borat lives in Kazakhstan, the villain has to be the system that created the bundle of problems including economic hardship, misogyny and promiscuity. However, its existence is never revealed or named in any way or fashion, which leaves the audience with the only logical conclusion that the misery is the people’s own fault. This assumption is reinforced by the image of a wild crowd beating on a symbolic Jew. The message is clear: the crowd is the villain, and it deserves the misery it lives in for the crime of misogyny against fellow human beings.

Things change dramatically when Borat comes to America, where he encounters a series of challenges, including dinner with members of “high society,” singing the National Anthem at the opening of a rodeo show in Texas, learning how to talk like a member of an African-American youth gang, and staying at a bed-and-breakfast owned by a mature Jewish-American couple.

Borat in the United States

Many American viewers, including students at the State University of New York College at Oneonta, claim that the satire in Cohen’s film is directed against narrow-mindedness and bigotry still existing in American society. They notice the dissonance between the people’s indifference to Borat’s improper behavior, including public defecation and masturbation in front of a Victoria’s Secret store window, and their outrage at the friendly foreigner’s hearty greeting with his attempts of hugging and kissing strangers on the subway train and the streets of Manhattan. American individualism is taken to an extreme to show its absurdity in the face of a different culture.

While most Americans find Borat hilarious, others express their concerns about stereotyping Muslims as being primitive and promiscuous (symphora, 2006). Comparing today’s anti-Muslim jokes to blackface humor in the 1920s, one blogger implies that cultural hegemony acts as a “modern cloak of prejudice”
that allows Cohen to escape the usual criticism because anti-Muslim bigotry is so indoctrinated in American viewers’ minds that it goes unnoticed. The same critic argues that Cohen uses a post-modern “distancing” technique to justify his humor as being “directed at the reaction of his redneck audience.” This technique allows the audience to “enjoy the anti-Muslim humor while feeling morally superior to the poor rednecks” (xymphora, 2006). It is exemplified in the rodeo scene (CBS News, 2005) where Borat gets instructions from the owner of the premise to shave his moustache that makes him look like a Muslim. Ironically, he later gets booed by an outraged audience for singing that “Kazakhstan is the greatest country in the world,” while his absurdly twisted speech on the war in Iraq is accepted almost as normal.

We support your war of terror! May we show our support of our boys in Iraq! May U. S. of A. kill every single terrorist! May George W. Bush drink the blood of every single man, woman or child! May we destroy the country so that for the next one thousand years not a single lizard survives in that desert!

In another episode, Cohen’s hero makes fun of the American upper-middle class at the dinner party where Borat receives instructions in dining etiquette while simultaneously “applying” them in practice. One of his pranks takes place immediately after the soft-spoken hostess declares her faith in Borat’s cultural reformation:

I think that the cultural differences are vast. And I think he’s a delightful man, and it wouldn’t take him very much time to, you know, become Americanized.

Testing the limits of bourgeois hospitality, Borat returns to the table with a white plastic bag full of his excrements. However, this action does not enrage the hostess as much as the appearance of the African-American prostitute Luenell, spontaneously invited to the party by Borat who took a moment of absence from the dinner table to make a phone call. The hostess begins expressing her concern with a delicate hint: “It’s getting very, very late and it’s time that we end our party and everything…” However, when Borat asks if Luenell can at least stay for desserts, all traces of tact and hospitality are quickly evaporated: “Absolutely not! And neither can you.”

The etiquette instructor encourages Borat to act sincerely while paying compliments or showing interest in the guests, and her advice is taken seriously. Borat speaks his mind. By testing the limits of acceptability, he shows that violations of the basic norms of behavior can be forgiven much easier than the breaking of social and class boundaries.

Viewed through the lens of postmodern critique, Cohen’s satire targets the disconnected, absurd, and pretentious nature of some aspects of modern society. He uses the same technique of surprising the unsuspecting participants with vulgar bodily humor and “naïve” impropriety both in the Ali G show and in Borat, but it may take much longer before audiences become completely desensitized to it.
Conclusion

Overall, the film contains so many unjustified attacks against marginalized groups of society such as women, minorities, and people with disability that its displays of bigotry and anti-Semitism blends in quite naturally instead of shocking the viewers as something terribly wrong. It makes fun of the former Soviet republics without even bothering to know or care about their problems. The mockumentary has the characteristics of a postmodern project where viewers contribute their own interpretive meanings into the reading of the text (Howells, 2006 p. 169). However, Borat remains in the satirical genre, but fails to perform its cleansing function as such. It would have been therapeutic if Borat could strike issues such as ethnic and gender discrimination with satire, but a successful assault would require a better target and a better context. In its current form, the film only manages to dismiss those problems altogether as small bits of a bigger, more absurd “reality.”

Instead of curing societal ills through laughter, it simply adds more filth into the mix of contemporary popular culture. One such example is the swearing that accompanies the nude wrestling scene between Borat and his manager. Few people would understand the true meaning of Davitian’s foul language, but those few would know that “che” means simply “no,” and not “up yours,” as the film suggests. For a bilingual Armenian teenager watching it somewhere in Glendale, California (or should we start calling it “the monkey house” just for laughs), the shockingly fresh ascendance of Armenian foul language onto television screens can cause a lot of damage, while contributing no cultural value. Therefore the response of a former Soviet critic to this cultural product is quite unambiguous. Whether translated from “Kazakh” or not, it remains “che.”

Note

1 Glendale, California, has the largest Armenian population in the United States.

References


In the Shadow of Borat

Post, p. 9.

Gayane Torosyan is an assistant professor of communication arts at the State University of New York at Oneonta.
Examining Borat and His Influence on Society

Pauline Carpenter

Borat Sagdiyev is a controversial fictional character created and played by British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen. He is one of three fictional television host/journalists made up by Cohen in his HBO television series, Da Ali G Show. Recently, 20th Century Fox released a movie starring Cohen as his character Borat titled *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*. Borat is a fictional Kazakhstan journalist who interviews real people who believe that Borat is an actual journalist and that they are being filmed for a Kazak television program. The character is portrayed as foreign, awkward, and eager to know about American ways. In his interactions with the individuals he is interviewing, he reveals racist, anti-Semitic, and sexist views. His naïve manner, which may resemble a stereotype of foreigners held in the Western world, ironically enables people to tolerate him. Cohen claims that the intention of his humor is to capture people’s reactions to the foreign character’s boorish and otherwise unacceptable behavior (Strauss, 2006). Borat and the situations he creates are intended to expose the interviewees’ indifference to, at best, and blatant evidence of, at worst, prejudice and racism. The character has received worldwide attention and has sparked controversy since its beginnings.

Specifically, criticisms have been raised about the portrayal of the character and its effect on the image of the country and people of Kazakhstan (Mong, 2006). It has been argued that misinterpretations by the general Western public in the post 9/11 era create a stereotype for Kazakhstan, for which Kazakhstan has little power to defend (Idrissov, 2006a). It may also reinforce already existing ideas of ‘otherness’ and allow racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic content to be acceptable (Anti-Defamation League, 2006). The treatment of the subjects in the film is also ethically questionable, especially regarding the underprivileged residents of the Romanian village who were filmed as Kazakhstan villagers (Ionescu & Pancevski, 2006). Regardless of Cohen’s intentions or assertions of a political agenda, one
must question the actual social impact of the Borat character as it grew to become an international sensation. An analysis of the development of Cohen’s characters and career reveals that although Cohen has political sensibilities, his agenda may not be primarily political in nature, and that access to major media outlets imposes a powerful influence that has negative social outcomes.

Sacha Baron Cohen and his Three Characters

Sacha Baron Cohen was born and raised in England and comes from a Jewish middle-class family. Growing up, Cohen attended a private school and in an interview with *Rolling Stone Magazine* (Strauss, 2006), Cohen described how he has enjoyed Peter Sellers and Monty Python films since he was young. Educated at Oxford University, he completed a master’s degree for which he wrote a thesis on the Jewish involvement in the American Civil Rights Movement. He has close ties with Israel since his grandmother currently lives there and he himself had lived on a kibbutz in Northern Israel for a year. He also speaks Hebrew fluently. When Cohen graduated from university he aspired to become an entertainer and gave himself five years to make it in show business.

His early career began in England in 1994. Channel 4, a public television broadcasting corporation in the United Kingdom, had an opening for the late night comedy show *The Word* and was looking for a replacement. This is when Cohen sent in a tape of a character ‘Kristo Shqiptari’ a fictional Albanian television reporter, one of the predecessors of the character ‘Borat.’ Kristo, who has the same accent, mustache, and quirks as Borat, did not make the part but Cohen succeeded in impressing the producer of Channel 4. In the meantime, another character created by Cohen, Ali G, became popular. Originally, as Cohen explained in the *Rolling Stone* interview, Ali G came into being after he and a friend learned that their bogus ‘gangsta’ rapper characters were convincing to normal people on the street as authentic. After appearing as Ali G on *The Eleven O’Clock Show*, a satirical comedy program on Channel 4, *Da Ali G Show* was aired on the same channel by the year 2000. Ali G’s premise was to interview influential people with idiotic and ignorant questions. The irony in the situation is how people being interviewed would mostly go along with the ridiculous material. Originally named MC Jocelyn Cheadle-Hume, the producer of Channel 4, Harry Thompson, changed the wanna-be gangsta character’s name to Ali G, an “ethnic” name, so that the people being interviewed would be less likely to challenge him in fear of being accused as a racist. Thompson was aware that people would behave with more tolerance to an ethnic minority in front of a television camera and so this aspect of Cohen’s character was manipulated. An example of Ali G content would be in an interview with Pat Buchanan, an American politician, Ali G successfully got him to use the term BLT instead of WMD (mis-termed previously by Ali G himself) in a discussion about weapons of mass destruction.
Pauline Carpenter

Cohen’s third character is Bruno, a flamboyant, gay Austrian fashion reporter who also convinces his interviewees that he is genuine. Often directed to people of the fashion world, Bruno would lead his interviewees to again expose prejudice and ignorance and to contradict themselves while participating in ridiculous conversations.

While Ali G was rising to fame, Cohen was working on another character named Alexi Krickler, a reporter from Moldova, who was strangely dressed and incapable of understanding British English expressions and culture. In an interview Cohen claims that Alexi Krickler, the forefather of Borat, was based on a quirky Russian man who Cohen met and was amused by on a vacation to a beach resort in Russia. A final version of this character is Borat.

Cohen’s most recent upsurge in his comedic career is the filming of the movie *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan.* Directed by Larry Charles (most known for his work on *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*), and co-written by Cohen and Anthony Hines (also the writers for *Da Ali G Show*) this movie was an international hit. It was received with great attention in Western countries, while Russia banned the film and Kazakhstan’s largest chain of cinemas will decidedly not be showing it.

**An Examination of the Character Borat**

From the history of the development of the character, Borat, it can be assumed that the character was intended to be of Eastern European background, which may have been presented by the British comedian to be seen as humorously backwards to a British audience. The character Kristo Shqiptari, from Albania, developed into Alexi Krickler from Moldova, and then finally Borat from Kazakhstan. All are characterized with dark puffy hair, a full moustache, and all speak with what is intended to be a thick Eastern European-resembling accent. His personality is well intentioned, but also naïve, racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic. The anti-Semitism resembles an older Eastern European stereotype that draws heavily on the history of Eastern Europe as a place of violence against Jews and Roma. Borat’s statements are intended to be so ridiculous that it should be impossible to believe that they are serious. Some examples of these statements are that his sister is a prostitute, with whom he sometimes fornicates, the national drink of Kazakhstan is made of horse urine, and that women are kept in cages and rank in order of importance after horses and dogs.

His genre of humor may be described as ethnic and Semitic and influenced by British humor. It also bears similarities to Minstrel Shows in 19th century America, where White actors attempted to portray Blacks humorously through stereotypical characters. Cohen’s character Borat makes fun of existing general stereotypes of foreigners within the British and American public. In order for Cohen’s humor to exist, participating subjects cannot know of their actual involvement in the situation
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and there is a play on the information gap between the comedian and the subject. He has been compared to Andy Kaufman (The Associated Press, 2006) who tricks people into believing a ridiculous encounter is real. Kaufman has also created and played the foreign character, Latka Grapas, who possesses a naïve, awkward, and ridiculous presence on the sitcom _Taxi_. It may be noted that Latka was not from a specific country. Similarly, Peter Sellers also portrayed a foreign man whose nationality was ambiguous in the film _Dr. Strangelove_. Charlie Chaplin also used a similar idea in _The Great Dictator_, which was an obvious take on Nazi Germany, but in this film the swastika, the German language, and the country names were skewed so not to be exact, which presented a sensitive situation with more taste. In the Borat film, Cohen used Hebrew and bits of Polish when his subjects believed he was speaking Kazakh. To a Western ear not familiar with languages of the Eastern European or Middle Eastern regions, it is difficult to differentiate and so it is easy for Cohen to dupe people into believing he is speaking Kazakh. Cohen can be criticized for using an actual nationality in his character development, which is insensitive to the danger that the created stereotype’s effect may have on Kazakhstan.

Comparisons can also be made to Canadian comedian Rick Mercer who, in his act _Talking to Americans_, exposes some Americans’ ignorance about Canada. Likewise, the point of Cohen’s joke is the exposure of bigotry and ignorance of some American people. A humorous aspect for viewers of Borat is that if they know that Borat is actually not from Kazakhstan it is funny to watch the subjects in the film get duped and simultaneously reveal their socially unacceptable beliefs. After all, this is the point of the joke.

Borat and the Media

The problem with the style of humor used by Borat is that he creates an image of the way people might be like in Kazakhstan. This stereotype may be quickly accepted by those who are unaware that he is not actually from Kazakhstan or at least considered by those who know he is not from Kazakhstan. For the joke to work, it would require that the subject Borat approaches does not have any idea about Kazakhstan so that the character can be believable. Cohen rarely comes out of character and so after subjects encounter Borat, they are left to believe that the interaction was indeed genuine. This is easy when targeting uninformed people who are unaware of other cultures except for their portrayal in the media. In this time of post 9/11, the view of foreigners as outsiders is strong. (One might also argue that Borat’s depiction of the animosity between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan is mirrored by the conflict between the Muslim world and the West). The skewed presentation of foreigners (especially Muslim, and Middle Eastern) in the media result in the acceptance of Borat as a real person. Henceforth, a stereotype of a person from Kazakhstan is planted. In addition to this, the filming style is meant to mock the idea that foreign countries have lower quality media. This also adds
to a negative stereotype of Kazakhstan as being a backward and undeveloped nation. The film’s picture is of low quality and the film workmanship is presented as amateurish. Cohen’s website for Borat is intended to be seen as tacky and far from advanced in graphic design techniques and style. Whether or not media production in Kazakhstan is as developed as it is in the West, the portrayals of such are patronizing to the abilities of Kazakh people.

A general understanding of stereotypes is that they come from somewhere. What is different in the case of Borat is that the stereotype was created first and viewers are left trying to find the grain of truth. The general western public has not been exposed to any major Kazakhstan people in the media, therefore Borat has a major impact and provides a framework for which to compare any new knowledge or information regarding Kazakhstan. Even for those who are aware and ‘in the know’ that the character development is entirely fictional, if one is not familiar with Kazakhstan than this film’s depiction will automatically be the first bit of ‘knowledge’ about the country. Some evidence of this may easily be discovered in responses to the character posted on the Internet. In the editorial section of the Montreal Gazette online (2006), one woman who is an international graduate student from Kazakhstan studying in the United States wrote that whenever she tells people that she is from Kazakhstan people ask her if she knows ‘Borat, the sixth most famous man in Kazakhstan.’ She is then constantly put in a position to explain that Borat is a satirical fictional character who far from represents the country or people of Kazakhstan accurately.

Additionally, a man who adopted a baby girl from Kazakhstan writes an article revealing the effects of Borat’s created stereotype in Slate Magazine (Weiner, 2006). He is motivated to discover what Borat got right and wrong about Kazakhstan since “after all would you want your daughter associated with a urine-drinking, wife-beating, cow-punching, sister-fucking, prostitute-ridden, anti-Semitic nation?” (para. 1). Even though the author of the article is aware that Borat is fictional, he used Borat’s Kazakhstan as a framework to describe the truths and discrepancies about the country. He concludes his article by examining what Kazakhstan can do facing this satirical onslaught while criticizing Kazakhstan’s initial responses to Borat as being “the old-fashioned Soviet way: with paranoia and thinly veiled threats” (para. 12). More disturbing is the way the article wraps up. “What will I tell people, post-Borat, when they ask me where my daughter is from? I will proudly say she is from Kazakhstan. It is niiliice. Big country, people good. People big enough to laugh at themselves. I like. You like?” (para. 13). How unfortunate that a little girl will likely grow up in an environment where her own father holds patronizing views of her country of birth.

The Kazakhstan government is not ignorant to the effects of such a negative portrayal of Kazakhstan, and mixed reactions to the character have been reported in Western media. Feelings of being offended are expressed, while some Kazakhs stressed acceptance of the humor (Wolf, 2005; BBC News website, 2006). What is interesting to examine are the power structures behind this situation. If a major
American media outlet (20th Century Fox) decides to release a film depicting a possible stereotypical presentation of Kazakhstan and its people, than there is little that Kazakhstan can do to protect itself, or correct any assumptions that are created as a result of such a film. Competing with 20th Century Fox in the media world is next to impossible. In fact, the reality has been that negative responses to Borat by Kazakhstan have been presented in the Western media as defensive and unaware of the actual intention of the film. Kazakhstan was not in on the joke and therefore could be seen as backwards, irrationally offended and their problem was that they did not ‘get it.’ This kind of reaction might be typical of a naïve person unable to understand social or cultural situations. Someone like Borat.

Responses by Kazakhstan authorities have generated negative press in Western media. Kazakhstan is often presented as unreasonable when the relationship between Borat and Kazakhstan is discussed. The foreign press secretary for the embassy of Kazakhstan, Roman Vassilenko, has attempted to clarify misconceptions about his country brought on by the Borat film. This was reported by Radosh (2004) in The New Yorker online, and the article has a humorous slant that makes fun of these attempts. When Vassilenko was asked about Borat’s claim that “in Kazakhstan, the favorite hobbies are disco dancing, archery, rape, and table tennis” Vassilenko responded with “only the first and the last” (para. 5). The reporter also asked about kokpar, a sport played in Kazakhstan. The author reported his response in a way that suggested that he viewed the practice as barbaric. “When Vassilenko was asked about it, he hesitated, then explained, ‘That’s the one where a goat, a dead goat’—a headless dead goat—‘is, um, being held as a sort of prize. And then one rider has it, and he has to run away with it form others who seek to catch it and snatch it from him.’ And then they have a party” (para. 8). The additional quote “And then they have a party” is from one of Borat’s songs, “Kill the Jew;” which describes having a party after the Jew is thrown down the well. From this, it may be interpreted that the author’s intention is not to help the Foreign Press Secretary clear the Kazakh name, but to make fun of the situation.

Additionally, the elimination of Cohen’s original website for Borat with the Kazakhstan domain .kz was presented as irrational and undemocratic in Western media. Reporters Without Borders, a Paris-based organization subsequently placed Kazakhstan on a list of countries to watch, stating that the government shut down websites that mocked or criticized Kazakhstan. An article in Foreign Affairs (Cukier, 2006) also criticized the Kazakh government for lack of freedom of expression by stating that the “government’s reaction was itself humorous, but the underlying issue is not” (para. 2). Although freedom of expression may be at stake, it is hardly necessary for the Foreign Affairs article to call the government’s reaction “humorous,” adding to the ridiculousness of the Kazakh stereotype.

Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev made a visit to America to meet with George W. Bush. At around the same time, there was a placement of a large multi-page advertisement “Kazakhstan in the 21st Century” in The New York Times.
British media reported that Bush and Nazarbayev were meeting to discuss the Borat film. This claim was denied by Erlan Idrissov (2006b), Kazakhstan’s Ambassador to the United Kingdom, who stated that the visit had nothing to do with the Borat film. Moreover, the meeting was not to speak about Borat, but was about more serious things, such as America’s increasing political and economic ties with Kazakhstan. Multiple media sources also accused the Kazakh government of being unreasonably defensive in its retaliation to Borat by placing an expensive 4-page advertisement in *The New York Times*. Idrissov also explains that “the advertisements highlighting my country’s achievements which recently appeared in U.S. newspapers were placed to coincide with the visit of the Kazakhstan President to Washington; they were not intended as a reply to Borat. Might it just be that the claims to the contrary by the film-makers’ publicity agents derive from their desire to maximize takings at the box office?” (para. 5).

Cohen grabs at opportunities to promote his film by staging Borat in media-covered events. Promotion of the film has also involved improvising with the controversy Borat evoked from Kazakhstan. One major appearance was at an MTV Europe awards in 2005. When Kazakhstan officials were informed of the rude character claiming to be from Kazakhstan, Foreign Ministry spokesman Yerzhan Ashykbayev retaliated with the threat of legal action against Cohen. Cohen then reacted by making a filmed statement claiming not to know Cohen and that he supports his government’s decision to sue this Jew. He also made outrageous comments about Kazakhstan’s social progression, such as “women can now travel on inside of bus” and “the age of consent has been raised to eight years old.” This comeback was a powerful weapon against Kazakhstan’s attempt to regain dignity—instead they lost more in the eyes of the Western media. Additionally, Cohen showed up at the White House in Borat character with a slew of media workers gathered around him. The appearance was to hold a press conference and Borat commented on the 4-page advertisements as falsifications created by Uzbek imposters. He also reports that there is a screening the next night and he came to the White House to personally deliver an invitation to George W. Bush, who just happened to be receiving the President of Kazakhstan the very next day. In his press conference, Borat stated that the visit was intended to promote his film. His conference video was placed on his website, borat.tv. This spectacular and creative publicity stunt succeeded in both promoting the film and reinforcing the theme of Kazakhstan being an insignificant, ridiculous nation.

The power structure imbalance between the Western media giant-backed Cohen and the Kazakhstan people is obviously apparent and the people of Kazakhstan are more than aware. Initial reactions in defense of the honor of their nation were seen as over-reaction by Western eyes. As an article at brandchannel.com (Saur, 2006) clearly acknowledges, “Those savvy to the PR world know the inherent folly of attempting to combat sarcasm or satire with earnestness” (para. 5). Of course those of the Western PR world might know this, but would they know how to respond...
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in another way? Kazakhstan, not being Western, would likely not be aware of this language of power, and so it is unfortunate that they are judged by such standards. It is interesting to note the change in the public reaction of Kazakhstan toward Borat. A comparison of Erlan Idrissov’s two articles clearly shows a change in approach, although the point of view remains the same. The Ambassador to the United Kingdom’s first article appears in Guardian Unlimited (2006a), written on October 4th, 2006. The article is titled “Offensive and unfair, Borat’s antics leave a nasty aftertaste“ and displayed bitter views about Borat’s Kazakhstan and his keen awareness of the danger it has on the image of his country and people. Multiple reactions from cybercitizens are posted below his article, stating that Idrissov should lighten up, and that the Borat movie will not have a negative effect on Kazakhstan. He is also told to appreciate the attention that Kazakhstan would otherwise never receive. One article condemned the country for having low human rights records, almost seemingly justifying the portrayal of Borat. Idrissov’s second article was written over a month later on November 12th in the Daily Mail (2006). It is titled “We survived Stalin and we can certainly overcome Borat’s slurs” and has a more optimistic slant. It begins with expressions of appreciation for the press inquiries the film created and also commented on the talent of Cohen and the humor of his comedy. The second part of the article criticized the negative aspects of the film and the portrayal of Kazakhstan in the media, using examples such as the reaction to the advertisements and the misunderstood visit of the Kazakh President to America. This change in writing from the first to the second letter shows how Kazakhstan media spokespeople were pushed into a corner and had to react in an acceptable manner for Western tastes in response to the tasteless representation of their own country.

Picking On Someone Your Own Size

Cohen’s humor is largely anti-Semitic in his often negative portrayal of Jews, especially through the Borat character. This characteristic is a more acceptable form of humor for Cohen, since he is himself a Jew. In fact, it has been reported in the Washington Post (Heller, 2006) that in Israel Borat was seen in a different light, since Cohen was using Hebrew that corresponded, more or less, to what his “Kazakh” was captioned as in English. Cohen included an additional layer of jokes that could only be understood by people who speak Hebrew. With ethnic comedy, the important factor is who is delivering the comedy about whom. It may be acceptable for a Black comedian to deliver Black humor, making fun of Black stereotypes, as does Dave Chappelle. However, a White comedian would not be considered humorous, or politically correct, with such humor since there is a history and current status quo of Blacks being marginalized by the dominant White majority. Only in the 19th century when Blacks held significantly less power than they do today were Minstrel shows acceptable to mainstream culture. Comedians like Russell Peters can also be tasteful in their humorous interpretations of stereotypes affecting themselves and
other more or less equally marginalized groups. This power structure is important when considering a target group of which to make fun.

In the case of Cohen with his character Borat, he is a Jewish British national poking fun of an Eastern European nation with 50% of the population being Muslim. Although there are no direct inferences toward poking fun at people of Islamic background, the character’s dark hair and mustache, dominant characteristics, and cultural signifiers of Middle Easterners may be criticized as too similar to a Western stereotype of a Muslim. In today’s age, with a heated conflict between Western and Muslim worlds, this is tasteless at best and dangerous at worst.

One of the most exploitive aspects of the making of this film is the depiction and use of the Roma villagers, who were used to illustrate Borat’s homeland in Kazakhstan. Another stab to Kazakhstan’s image, the film crew went into Roma to a remote and poverty-stricken village where they paid residents to take part in a film without knowing what the film was about, and especially unaware of their roles. The unawareness of Borat’s subjects is ethically questionable; there is no reason why these people should have been left in the dark, except, of course for convenience. If the villagers were aware of the actual situation, perhaps they would have refused to participate or perhaps would have demanded more money. The portrayal of these lower-income people as humorous is distasteful and patronizing to their way of life. Western reporters have made their way into the village to interview the residents and after the villagers were made aware of the reality of the situation, they feel angry and foolish (Ionescu & Pancovski, 2006). It is also disturbing that it is likely that these people have too little power to do anything about their situation due to their low socio-economic status. Because of the way they are presented in the film, viewers may have interpreted their situation as humorously backward, instead of as people in need of economic opportunities. Unfortunately this part of the film also supports the depiction of Kazakhstan as a backward, barbaric country.

Other involuntary participants involved in Cohen’s film have felt exploited. A number of people are in the process of suing the producers of the film. Some of these lawsuits, so far, have been thrown out of court and others are still underway. However, it may be safe to assume that a company such as 20th Century Fox was able to afford keen lawyers to consult throughout the movie production. Also, after a $18,000,000 budget that multiplied in its earnings, the company can afford not only the best lawyers, but can afford to go to court for a much longer period of time. The likelihood of winning a case against powerful 20th Century Fox is low and the people searching for justice are faced with a serious fight.

Conclusion

Cohen will defend his character Borat as being a tool to uncover racism and anti-Semitism in America. However, it is ironic that the very methods he employs in the production and filming of his character are themselves discriminatory.
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Borat on a television program can have a negative effect on those watching in two ways. They may either adapt the stereotype shown of other people or they are a member of the group about which the program encourages stereotypes, such as a Kazakh, an Eastern European, or possibly a Muslim, and then they must face these growing stereotypes in society. The film was especially hurtful since the access to major media allowed it to reach significantly more people and therefore the effects are more widespread.

Finally, in the earlier mentioned interview with Rolling Stone (Strauss, 2006), Cohen comments on a major Thirds Reich historian Ian Kershaw from whom he learned the negative effects of apathy. Cohen quotes him by saying “The path to Auschwitz was paved with indifference” (para. 3). Strangely, Cohen seems to be indifferent to the patronizing attitudes toward Kazakhstan by both himself and the general public since his character rose to fame. He seems to be indifferent to the exploitation of the villagers in Romania and to the potential interpretation of Borat’s character as a representation as a Muslim. He also donned indifference when the Anti-Defamation League expressed concerns about the possibility of people misinterpreting his humor, thus creating tolerance for anti-Semitism. The path to Cohen’s rise to international fame and stardom through the production of the Borat film was paved with indifference.

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Examining Borat and His Influence on Society


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Borat and the Problem of Parody

Bronwen Low & David Smith

Why do we laugh at Borat and what are we laughing at? A reading of some of the many reviews of the film suggests that these are complicated questions. Borat has garnered overwhelmingly positive reviews, scoring a 91% rating on the Rotten Tomatoes’ compilation of the perspectives of 178 critics: the site declares the critical consensus on the film to be that it is “offensive in the funniest possible way” (rotten tomatoes.com). Individual film critics have called it the “funniest film of the year,” “convulsively and savagely funny,” and “riotously uproarious.” Strauss (2006) of Rolling Stone calls the film “one of the greatest comedies of the last decade and perhaps a whole new genre of film” (n.p.), suggesting that part of Borat’s appeal lies in its complex, even elusive, relation to genre. Other film critics concur.

For instance, Covert (2006) calls it “a gene-splice of Andy Kaufman’s high-wire character humour and caught-on-the street pranks from Punk’d” (n.p.), while Burr of the Boston Globe describes the film as “Jackass with a brain and Mark Twain with full frontal male nudity” (2006, n.p), exclaiming “this is Candid Camera as confrontational art.” Alexander (2006) also suggests that a new genre has been birthed which she names “evil comedy” (n.p.). In this chapter we work to unpack the sources and nature of laughter and Borat, in conversation with some of the film’s reviewers, and in relation to some of the multiple genres Borat evokes. Is Borat parody or social satire? Is it performance art? Does it most resemble Jackass? There seems to be a growing fascination with saying and hearing people say publicly what society says they shouldn’t. Is Borat another (increasingly common) “wardrobe malfunction,” a contrived faux-pas bound to garner publicity but which says less about the act and more about the reaction? Or is Borat best understood psychoanalytically as one extended “dirty” joke? Who is the joke being played upon, and what does one need to know to get it?
The Problem of Parody

Many film critics refer to Borat as social satire, described by Dargis (2006) in the New York Times as “pitiless” (n.p.). This genre designation is very important if Borat is to be read as a potentially political transformative text. But what is satire? In Jonathan Swift’s A Modest Proposal (1729), one of the most famous examples of sustained social satire in English, Swift argues that poor Irish families should sell their children to the (largely English) rich to be eaten. The grotesque plans are delivered in a seemingly neutral tone and the argument is made in quantitative, economic terms. Lore around the piece’s historical reception has it that many were outraged, including an audience that stormed the stage at one of Swift’s public readings, and that the piece almost jeopardised Swift’s patronage. This suggests that not everyone understood that Swift was satirising the indifference of landlords and economists to the state of the Irish poor. A Modest Proposal is both satire and parody, genres which despite popular usage are not coterminous. Satires expose a subject to ridicule, often through exaggeration or irony (which involves saying one thing and meaning another), for the larger purposes of social, political, and cultural critique. They are sometimes, but not necessarily, designed to make people laugh. Parodies, on the other hand, are usually comic. They ridicule through mimicry, taking an existing form or genre and manipulating its conventions, style, and techniques in order to mock. Parodies need not be critical. A Modest Proposal parodies the instrumental discourses of economists and the rhetoric of policymakers in which the elegance of the argument is detached from the morality of the case, and in so doing satirises—in order to expose—the disregard of economists and politicians for the state of Ireland’s poor as well as England’s economic exploitation of Ireland. The response of those who seemed not to “get” the joke raises the dilemma of audience reception which will always dog parody and satire: one needs to know the conventions of the genres which are being exaggerated, mimicked, and ridiculed. This dilemma is what the Anti-Defamation League (2006) invokes in relation to Borat when they issued a press release statement shortly after the film’s theatrical release which included the following sentiments:

We hope that everyone who chooses to see the film understands Mr. Cohen’s comedic technique, which is to use humour to unmask the absurd and irrational side of anti-Semitism and other phobias born of ignorance and fear. We are concerned, however, that one serious pitfall is that the audience may not always be sophisticated enough to get the joke, and that some may even find it reinforcing their bigotry. (n.p.)

The concept of sophistication is vague but might signify awareness of the related genres and discourses which are being mobilised and reinterpreted; in the case of Swift’s proposal, the erudite reader or audience should be familiar with the rules of the Latin satires of Horace and Juvenal.

Another dimension to the problem of satire and parody is the risk of offending
the audience, including those in the know. For instance, a reading by Peter O’Toole in 1984 of selections of *A Modest Proposal* at the reopening of a Dublin theatre is said to have prompted outrage in the form of a mass exodus of dignitaries in the audience (Fox, p. 7). Which suggests that even if this modern, educated audience at some level “got it” (although they also might not have), they still found the reading to be in poor taste, making one wonder what an audience need be subjected to (in this case the culinary details of infant cannibalism) in order to be incited to think differently. This raises a series of questions for *Borat*: Is the film parody, satire, or both? What is being ridiculed for what purposes? What do we need to know to “get the joke” in *Borat*? Are the possibilities of the comedic technique worth the potential pitfalls?

One genre parodied in an extended fashion in *Borat* is the traditional documentary, which followed in the footsteps of early anthropologists who tried to “go native” and infiltrate a foreign culture or place in order to find out how it works. In this sense, *Borat* shares many of the characteristics of the mockumentary (for an extended discussion of *Borat’s* relationship to this genre, see Campbell, this volume). We see Borat interviewing local authorities on everything from humour, etiquette, sexual mores, talking “Black,” and Christianity. In his inquiry into “cultural learnings of America” the curious outsider is in some ways an impossibly unreliable informant and in others a comedic catalyst for exposing some difficult truths about “America.” By playing a superlatively (and naively) anti-Semitic, misogynist, racist, and homophobic character, Sacha Baron Cohen succeeds in having some of those he meets collude with him by tolerating his bigotry or share their own latent or freely expressed prejudiced sentiments. This process of ridiculing through exaggeration—as well as irony, given that Cohen is Jewish—makes *Borat* at one level satiric. Sean Burns (2006) from the *Philadelphia Weekly* offers a powerful description of the film’s satire when he commends it for “blowing the lid off people’s secret prejudices and hidden resentments and airing out the rancid stupidity that breeds them. Cohen makes a farce out of things that we’re not supposed to joke about, cutting ugly hatred off at the knees and robbing it of all its power” (n.p.).

In Cohen’s first extended interview outside of character, he makes clear this satiric intent by saying: “I think part of the movie shows the absurdity of holding any form of racial prejudice, whether it’s hatred of African-Americans or of Jews” (in Strauss, 2006, n.p.). Of the film’s power to expose and educate about one aspect of prejudice, anti-semitism, Anderson (2006) writes “but these moments (of anti-Semitism) are so uniformly outrageous, unreasonable, that anyone who actually is anti-Semitic may think twice” (n.p.). But of course the humour and satire rely predominantly on the people Borat encounters not getting the joke, which complicates the pedagogic project. A prime illustration of this is the infamous scene from the *Ali G Show* in which patrons of a country western bar in Tucson are more than willing to join Borat in a vigorous rendition of the song “Throw the Jew down the well, so my country can be free…” Another, from the film, happens when a gun
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salesperson responds earnestly to Borat’s query about the best gun for shooting Jews. It might be that viewing the film provides the critical distancing from Borat’s views necessary for “thinking twice” that meeting him didn’t; however, if this were the film’s prime objective, Cohen could have used the occasional Brechtian distancing technique for breaking the spell of the comedy. Or the film could occasionally flag its satiric intent in the manner, perhaps, of A Modest Proposal, in which Swift offers jibes such as “I grant this food may be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for Landlords, who as they have already devoured most of the Parents, seem to have the best Title to the Children” (Swift, par. 12). To the contrary, Cohen refused, until the Strauss interview, to ever break character in public. Here Cohen operates in the tradition of performance artists such as Andy Kaufman, whom we discuss below. Within the framework of satire, this decision might be read as a sign of Cohen’s respect for his audience, necessary for the satire not to be pedantic or condescending. And Cohen says as much when he responds, in interview, to a question about the Kazakh’s government’s outrage about the film:

I was surprised, because I always had faith in the audience that they would realize that this was a fictitious country and the mere purpose of it was to allow people to bring out their own prejudices. And the reason we chose Kazakhstan was because it was a country that no one had heard anything about, so we could essentially play on stereotypes they might have about this ex-Soviet backwater. The joke is not on Kazakhstan. I think the joke is on people who can believe that the Kazakhstan that I describe can exist—who believe that there’s a country where homosexuals wear blue hats and the women live in cages and they drink fermented horse urine and the age of consent has been raised to nine years old. (in Strauss, 2006, n.p.)

While the joke might be on those people, left unclear is whether or not they’ll be enlightened by the joke.

More compelling an argument for Borat’s power to re-educate through satire and parody is that it exposes indifference, which Cohen also brings up with Strauss (2006). Speculating about the Tucson experience he notes that while the warm reception to his hateful song might have been a sign of rampant anti-Semitism, it might just as easily have signalled an indifference to anti-Semitism. And he adds:

I remember, when I was in university I studied history, and there was this one major historian of the Third Reich, Ian Kershaw. And his quote was, ‘The path to Auschwitz was paved with indifference.’ I know it’s not very funny being a comedian talking about the Holocaust, but I think it’s an interesting idea that not everyone in Germany had to be a raving anti-Semite. They just had to be apathetic. (n.p.)

Exposure to the evidence of widespread apathy might very well prompt critical reflection for some audience members—particularly those who do get the joke and think of themselves as tolerant—about the ways they also tolerate sentiments of bigotry in others. Despite this potential, it is still unclear whether or not the “joke” is worth the risk that it might inflame bigotry or offend its traditional targets.
The risk that the satire might actually back-fire has an important precedent in the top-rated 1970s television program All in the Family, which starred Archie Bunker, a reactionary, working-class, “loveable bigot.” Producer of the show Norman Lear argued that the show was designed in part to bring into the open and then rebut Archie Bunker’s prejudices and bigotry. Vidamar and Rokeach (1974) unpack Lear’s argument about the pedagogic value of All in the Family into two parts: “mixing humour with bigotry releases tension, and this catharsis reduces prejudice; poking fun at bigotry and bringing it into the open gives the viewer insight into his own prejudices, thus helping to reduce them even further” (p. 36). However, their empirical audience study of 239 U.S. adolescents and 168 Canadian adults offered evidence to the contrary. Not only did low prejudiced people and high prejudiced people take very different, often conflicting, things from the show, identifying with different characters (ie., Bunker vs. Mike, his liberal son-in-law) and interpreting episodes’ messages differently, but more of the frequent watchers of the show fell into the high prejudiced group. This means that the majority of the viewers were interpreting the program in ways directly counter to the stated intentions of its producers. This study has important implications for Borat given that while his opinions are often repugnant, like Archie Bunker he is at the same time an appealing, even loveable character.

All this to say that satire is complicated, and that Borat’s satire is especially muddy. Part of the problem of reading Borat as straight satire is that it is hard to separate those moments where we are (critically) laughing with Cohen, as Borat, at bigoted North Americans and North American culture and our own implication in this bigotry and culture, and where we are laughing at Borat as himself. For with his upright posture, fishnet underwear, 1970s B-movie styled television show, earnest, inappropriate questions, and day-glow, lime-green “banana-slinger” bathing suit wrapped around his shoulders, Borat is very funny. He aspires to be the worldly “Euro” playboy with his daring swimsuit and sunbathing habits but is just too far off the mark. He draws upon comic archetypes, like the “funny walk” characters from Monty Python. He sports a Groucho Marx moustache. His is the comedy of the committed fool whose seriousness contrasts with the ridiculousness of his circumstances. It is likely that much of the time even people who do get it are not laughing at themselves laughing at Borat but in fact are just laughing. And since Kazakhstan is as much a part of Borat as are his bigoted beliefs, audiences are also laughing at this country, no matter how fictionalized. In order to further explore some of these complex relations between laughter, power, and knowledge in satire and in Borat, we now turn to the genre of performance art.

Borat and the World as Stage

While Cohen might not have thought his audience needed him to speak as anyone but Borat in order to get the joke of Borat, his resistance to breaking char-
actor is also part of the performance art traditions of Andy Kaufman and others. Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* might inadvertently have invented a sub-genre of satire. Those who don’t get the joke and so become part of the problem which the satire addresses also become a source of amusement for those who do. The comedy of the unsuspecting subject of the joke has a long popular history, starting with the 1940’s radio show *Candid Radio* which became *Candid Camera, TV Bloopers and Practical Jokes, Just for Laughs, The Jamie Kennedy Experiment, MTV’s Punk’d* and *Jackass*, and *Borat*. We laugh at those who don’t know to laugh. The gentler version of this genre then lets the victim in on the joke and the final image offered for the audience is of them laughing (though we imagine that for everyone who laughed at being laughed at there must be at least an equal amount who fail to see the humour—sequences which never make the final edit.) *Borat*, however, never tells its subjects they’ve been victimized and in fact actively edits all those who see behind the curtain out of the footage. And, à la *Blair Witch*, it allows a space for an audience to not get it. Where Swift does insert distancing techniques into his speech, Cohen leaves us no strong clues in his film, and, moreover, maintains his performance off-stage.

This is not uncommon in the world of performance art. Guillermo Gomez Peña and Coco Fusco lived in a cage in a central piazza of Madrid for three days, pretending to be an anthropological exhibit of members of a recently “discovered” tribe. Many of the Madristas who saw the exhibit bought their ruse hook, line, and sinker, which was the artists’ intent—even though their “authentic” and “traditional” tasks included working on a laptop computer, exercising, sewing voodoo dolls, and watching television. The oeuvre of American performance artist Andy Kaufman represented a seminal moment in the history of this art form because he hit prime-time with it. At first in his famous stage routine of the “Foreign Man” (who Borat is surely an homage to), he would dupe the audience into believing he was the worst of performers and that they were being tortured by his act. He’d next burst into a shockingly good imitation of Elvis Presley, and then return back to his timid “Foreign Man” persona. The pleasure for the audience was in realizing that they had been duped. However Kaufman quickly upped the stakes of the genre by sustaining his characters off stage and even having them meet each other in real life (by having his sidekick Bob Zmuda or his brother Michael sometimes play the personas). He also staged outrageous fights on shows he was on (*Saturday Night Live, Taxi, The David Letterman Show*) and then steadfastly denied they were staged.

This led to mass confusion amongst even his most ardent followers, to the point where many felt that he had staged his own death and would return 20 years later. And Kaufman left many clues that this was indeed the case—he said he would do as much, at the time of his death he was writing a screenplay about a character that was going to fake his death, and he ensured that the details of his very real death would be shrouded in mystery.

What Kaufman and Cohen share in common is their commitment as perform-
ers, and the fact that their baseline gauge of the effectiveness of their performance is whether or not it is funny. But not funny to everyone—funny to them. And the smaller audience that is in on the joke with them. In Kaufman’s case he seemed to want the joke to only be shared by him and a few co-conspirators, and he wanted to be sure to have the last laugh. The best laughter that Kaufman could envision was that of an audience—possibly as small as only himself, but an audience nonetheless—laughing at another audience for not laughing. This is an inversion of Candid Camera, for the joke’s now on you, the viewer.

Borat attempts to dupe his audience (or a select part of it) and the subjects of his films—with the exception of Pamela Anderson and a few paid actors (including the African-American woman who played the escort) who had agreed to participate. In fact, amongst those who clearly understand Borat as satire, the question did arise (on various internet forums) of whether Pamela Anderson was in on it or not. This parsing by the audience of who gets the joke and who doesn’t has some culturally disturbing implications. It departs from satire’s model of attacking the powerful, or rather it makes the cognoscenti the powerful, excludes them from the joke, and has them laughing at the perceived lumpen, both in the film and in the theatre seats. It becomes just as funny that someone would be outraged by Borat’s sexism (the NYC feminists) as that someone would support his prejudice. This means laughing at people’s mental failings to recognize the comic genre they are in, which is not necessarily in the spirit of satire’s critical commentary.

Satiric intent also does not explain the comic appeal of many of the most talked about moments in the film, including, for instance, the scatological scene in which Borat brings a bag of his own excrement to the table at the formal Southern dinner party. Or the nude wrestling scene, in which the intrepid reporter emerges from the shower to see his naked, obese, and hirsute producer masturbating to a picture of Borat’s love interest, Pamela Anderson. Borat, enraged, attacks his producer and they begin a wrestling match which leaves audiences speechless or laughing uproariously. The power of these scenes brings us to Freud’s work on humour and the “dirty joke.”

**Freud and Why We Laugh**

Freud explains that at its simplest level, the pleasure of the joke is the pleasure of non-sense, of flying in the face of reason and its prohibitions through things like verbal play. The relation to the prohibition becomes more complex in what Freud describes as two types of aggressive, non-innocent, or “tendentious” jokes: obscene jokes, which are sexually aggressive; and hostile jokes, which can be satiric or defensive. Freud posits that the obscene or “dirty joke” is a more sophisticated version of smut, designed to sexually excite the listener by exposing sexual facts and relations. The obscene joke makes the smut’s indecent expression indirect and therefore more socially acceptable in societies of “a more refined education” (Freud,
1963, p. 100). The more subtle the joke the greater its social acceptability. The hostile joke, like satire, is often directed at those in power or positions of authority or at institutions which embody dominant values and mores. Both forms of tendentious jokes require three parties: the joke teller, the listener who laughs, and the (often absent) object of aggression. And both forms hold the same purpose: they “make possible the satisfaction of an instinct (whether lustful or hostile) in the face of an obstacle which stands in its way.” (Freud, p. 101) the obstacle being the “repressive activity of civilization” (p. 101) which restricts undisguised expressions of sexual desire and hostility towards others. In both forms the pleasures lie in the expression of usually repressed feelings. This suggests that the often raucous laughter from audiences at socially taboo moments in Borat, such as the ones described above, can be interpreted as releases of repressed desire and interest. And the cruder the scene the stronger the release and its pleasures, which helps explain the attention paid to the above scenes. This taboo-breaking quality also explains why a number of reviews of the film invoke the Jackass films in relation to Borat.

Jackass as Genre: How Far Can you Go?

Jackass began as a series on MTV featuring the extreme stunts and pranks of a cast of characters including Johnny Knoxville, Bam Margera, and Steve-O. Hugely popular, it spawned two Jackass films and some other spin-off television series after it ended. The genre puts its subjects at real risk of bodily injury, overturning the logic of a safety-conscious culture by pushing the limits of the characters’ ability to tolerate physical pain and fear. It does this in the service of comedy, the laughter of release as audiences wonder how far the Jackasses will take the stunt. They get shot by guns, strapped to rockets, catapulted, and turned into human wrecking balls. Or how far they’ll take the joke, because the characters also play complex pranks on each other. For instance, one cast member thinks he’s playing a prank on a taxi driver by pretending to be an Arab terrorist on his way to the local airport, only to have the taxi driver pull a gun on him and lock him in the trunk of his car, threatening to take him to an underpass and kill him. They also revel in crude, adolescent toilet humour, defecating in showroom toilets, in each other’s faces, and inserting foreign objects in their anuses.

It might be that this celebration of the gross services social satire. Film critic Kirk Honeycutt (2006) notes of Borat that

the weapon wielded by Cohen and Charles is crudeness. People today, especially those in public life, can disguise prejudice in coded language and soft tones. Bigotry is ever so polite now. So the filmmakers mean to drag the beast out into the sunlight of brilliant satire and let every one see the rotting, stinking, foul thing for what it is. When you laugh at something that is bad, it loses much of its power. (n.p)

This applies much less to Jackass than to Borat, given the former is mostly designed to make people laugh in a “tendentious” (both obscene and hostile) sort of way.
The Jackasses don’t drag the beast of prejudice out of the dark but do occasionally expose some of the silliness of social convention, as in the scene in which they repeatedly break the prime convention of golf etiquette, which insists that players need to be completely quiet while someone swings, by hiding in the bushes blowing a foghorn. While it would be hard to make a case for Jackasses’ pedagogic potential, the tendentious joke might have some important work to do.

Holocaust Jokes and Laughter as Self-Revelation

In an article on Holocaust humour and the complex relations between laughter and violence, including laughter as violence as well as laughter as a defence against violence, Rosen (2004) argues this point clearly. One dimension of his work with implications for *Borat* has to do with trauma. Rosen argues that “World War Two may also have deprived the West of its barbaric enemy—its enemy as ‘other,’ as absolutely foreign,” and that one response to this traumatic self-revelation has been the refusal “to remember the crisis in which the enemy emerged at the core of its own identity” (p. 42). This refusal has taken many forms, including the “de-Nazifications” of the Nazis by turning them into comic figures and consequent erasures of the victims in productions such as *Hogan’s Heroes* and *The Producers*. However, certain forms of the Holocaust joke, Rosen explains, “trick” the listener into identification with the Nazis through laughter, disabling “the critical faculty that forbids identification with the enemy” and “enabling a return to the traumatic moment where the ‘enemy’ punctured—or emerged from within—the self” (p. 42). In this model, it is not critical distance which prompts the confrontation with the bigot within, as previously suggested, but a momentary, and perhaps critically important, fusion of self and disavowed other. Biancholli (2006), writing for the *Houston Chronicle* about *Borat*, says as much: “Expect to laugh uproariously; expect to choke back horror and revulsion, often at yourself” (n.p.).

It remains unclear, however, whether there are any particular psychic or social preconditions which prompt these moments of self-revelation or how widespread they might be in *Borat’s* audiences. What if *Borat* works as entertainment mostly because it offers the pleasure of seeing people do and say what the liberal consensus says they shouldn’t? The release of repressed feelings might be pleasurable, but is it pedagogic?

Wardrobe Malfunction

We have observed a growing obsession in North American culture with watching celebrities do what they are not supposed to do, which we might read in light of Freud as a mass media-driven return of the repressed. We are calling this trend a cultural “wardrobe malfunction,” with due respect to Justin Timberlake. The pop star coined the term to describe the moment during the 2006 Super Bowl
half-time show when he ripped off, “by mistake,” one of Janet Jackson’s gladiator breastplates, baring her breast, replete with nipple ornament, on prime time TV. This incident helped make Jackson the number one searched for person on the internet of all time, according to the 2006 edition of the Guinness Book of World Records. The wardrobe malfunction has been contagious. Paris Hilton made waves when she exited a car and flashed a bare crotch; Lindsay Lohan followed suit, as did Britney Spears who clearly hoped to reignite her celebrity fire before a horde of paparazzi waiting to document the moment. Because the malfunction incident is staged, the media coverage of it quickly becomes absorbed with the meta-story about the creation of the media event; this meta-story then justifies delivering the “malfunction” to the viewer in ways the original story would not have. For instance, when Janet Jackson’s breast was “accidentally” exposed during the Super Bowl, Fox media had to cut away from the scene in their coverage, but then commented upon it over and over when it emerged that it was deliberate. The wardrobe malfunction has several key elements. It works to outrage by exposing what a loose social consensus has made taboo. It gets attention, and there is almost no such thing as negative attention in celebrity culture. Which is why it is also a premeditated decision to “accidentally” or incidentally utter or perform the inadmissible. A complex example of the wardrobe malfunction is Ann Coulter’s staged blunder at the 2007 Conservative Political Action Conference, where she circuitously called John Edwards a “faggot”: “I was going to have a few comments on the other Democratic presidential candidate, John Edwards, but it turns out that you have to go into rehab if you use the word ‘faggot’!” (Ann Coulter entry, n.p.). She later defended herself by saying “I’m so ashamed, I can’t stop laughing!” This was a multivalent moment. Coulter makes an intertextual reference to Grey’s Anatomy star Isaiah Washington, speaking to the popular culture newshounds in the audience. She also comically plays on her reputation as a macho “ball-buster” in contrast with the metosexual Edwards (reputed to pay $400 for a haircut), showing herself to be one of the “boys” in the Republican power club. She works to cozy up to her audience of Republican conservative stalwarts by breaking the code, while saying she can’t, of liberal so-called political correctness and censorship of language. It becomes a way to use “faggot” and not to use it, translating Republican back-room chat about Edwards to the public while suggesting that she also knows how to play to more liberal audiences. And she complicates it all by saying she was being comedic. In line with the wardrobe malfunction genre, her inappropriate use of the term then gets endlessly regurgitated in broadcasts and print media.

In part, the wardrobe malfunction exists because there are no unforgivable sins in American celebrity culture. Ultimately, what makes you bad makes you good, and America is big on redemption, on 3rd and 4th acts following seemingly career-ending blunders. After Mel Gibson’s drunken, anti-Semitic slurs, he was invited to give a keynote address for Yom Kippur. Michael Richards’ on-stage, seemingly drunken and very unfunny use of the N-word against some hecklers during his
stand-up at a comedy club first led to public derision, a series of public apologies on television, the first on the David Letterman show, and then subsequent meetings with Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton in which he apologised and sought healing. One media critic has even suggested that this might be the beginning of a career recovery for Richards (Richards facing ruin or opportunity?, n.p.). These incidents are not wardrobe malfunctions because they aren’t deliberate, designed to appeal. Or if Richards’ was an attempt at humour, he didn’t have the comedic and cultural cleverness to pull it off. But they speak to the growing tendency of celebrities to say what they aren’t supposed to and the public’s acceptance of and interest in this, both of which drive the wardrobe malfunction.

There are a number of implications of the wardrobe malfunction for understanding Borat and its appeal. The pleasures of both involve hearing or watching someone say or do what they are not supposed to in public, as with the dirty joke. They fly in the face of notions of the “politically correct.” Those who are outraged become part of the story, objects of entertainment for those who aren’t. But more generally, we think that Borat can be read as an extended response to the popularity of the wardrobe malfunction, an investigation into why what shocks or offends can also be so popular and so funny. What is worrisome about this is the potential that the wardrobe malfunction and Borat open up a new modality around political correctness in which we are given the freedom, in the name of curiosity, comedy, and even satire, to offend. And so to act like celebrities. For while the people Borat interviews and interacts with in the film do not know he is a comedian, they do know that they are on film talking in front of a camera crew. If the people on the street are the stars, what’s to stop us all from calling each other derogatory expletives? Which raises the question of what the real difference is between really being racist or pretending to be racist? If Michael Richards had made his use of the N-word funnier would it have made a difference? And does it matter, given he was meeting with Jessie Jackson the next day?

Shock jocks like Howard Stern perfected the wardrobe malfunction technique to garner attention for their programmes, but it does occasionally backfire on them. Don Imus would be the most recent example of this when he was fired for uttering racist remarks about the Rutger’s women’s basketball team. His defence of himself was that he had made “some idiot comment meant to be amusing” and that “our agenda is to be funny and sometimes we go too far. And this time we went way too far. Here's what I’ve learned: that you can’t make fun of everybody, because some people don’t deserve it.” From a pedagogic perspective, when these entertainers, and that’s all they really are, do go too far, issues become clearer and strategies for engaging with them are well-researched and developed. Going too far is not the issue. The problem is when the real issues are overwhelmed by the complexities of the comedic strategies these performers are employing.

Young audiences who flock to Borat have some understanding of what it means to speak “tongue-in-cheek,” to be ironic, particularly since irony is a dominant
mode in smart-aleck MTV-driven youth culture. But their understanding might not move further than an awareness that being ironic gives people permission to say what they would not otherwise, or to laugh at things they aren’t supposed to. They aren’t necessarily directed to think about the discrepancy between what is being said and what is really meant. All the youth know is that they want and are allowed to laugh. And some targets of Borat’s comedy, such as the Jewish couple running the B&B or the Kazakh people, clearly “don’t deserve” to be the butts of the joke. However, it is not only naïve or unsophisticated audiences, youthful and otherwise, who are implicated in the “problem” of Borat. Satire and its devices, including parody and irony, are increasingly hard to read well in the “knowing” age of the wardrobe malfunction. As well, Borat works with and within multiple genres, mobilising many but not sitting easily within them. This elusiveness is a big part, we feel, of what makes Borat so pleasurable. It repeatedly sets up and then defeats viewer expectations about what might or should happen next, and keeps audience members feeling unsettled about what they are laughing at and why. While central to Borat’s appeal, this genre-blurring quality also makes Borat problematic as cultural pedagogy, for its messages and meanings are as slippery as its genres.

References


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Did We Miss the Joke Again?
The Cultural Learnings of Two Middle East Professors for Make Benefit Insights on the Glorious West

Christopher D. Stonebanks & Özlem Sensoy

This is Natalya. [He kisses her passionately] She is my sister. She is number-four prostitute in whole of Kazakhstan.

May George Bush drink the blood of every man, woman, and child in Iraq!

Introduction

Both the film Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan (2006) and its creator, writer, lead actor, and producer Sacha Baron Cohen have received an amazing degree of attention. While the film’s humour has been praised for its skilled unmasking of all “isms” in America, its box-office and mainstream success is testimony of its broad-based appeal. By its 16th week, Borat had raked in nearly $250 million dollars in worldwide box-office sales ($130 of it domestic U.S.).1 Why?

Is it because there is a hunger in North America for critically-conscious social commentary in film? Certainly, Borat’s domestic sales do show it on par with other heavyweight films, recognized for their social consciousness, such as Erin Brockovich, Good Morning Vietnam, Traffic, and The Truman Show. If box office revenues are any indicator of success and acknowledgment of excellence, then certainly Borat finds itself in this category. If, rather, peer review and critical acclaim are the indicators of success, then Cohen’s 2007 Golden Globe for Best Actor in a Film Comedy, his Best Film nomination at the Golden Globes, and a Best Adapted Screenplay nomination for the Oscars should all be evidence that this is a great film, worth seeing. Adding to all of these arguments are the critics’ reviews that note the movie’s deep provocation of dialogue about social issues. In a recent Rolling Stone article in support of many of the accolades of Cohen, Strauss (2006) pondered a scene from Cohen’s television program, The Ali G Show (from which the character Borat was born). The scene is set in a country and western bar in which
Did We Miss the Joke Again?

Borat encourages patrons to sing along to a song called, ‘Throw the Jew Down the Well.’ Strauss writes, “Did it reveal that they were anti-Semitic? Perhaps. But maybe it just revealed that they were indifferent to anti-Semitism.” Strauss’s not-so-subtle applause for Cohen’s skill at revealing such indifference is evidence that there is a hunger for socially-relevant artistic production in the North American context.

This exposure of mainstream ideologies is nothing new to those who live in other parts of the world, although it is an aspect of artistic production that is less widely accessed in current mainstream American culture. Thus we can agree that filmmakers such as Cohen should be applauded for their efforts to reveal insidious indifferences toward anti-Semitism, and toward other marginalized social groups. However, an important aspect of just how this revelation occurs (and for whom it occurs) has been absent from the discussions we have witnessed. The characters, settings, situations, and revelations of all -isms (revelations that are explained to be social commentary) depend upon a purposeful articulation of all things expressed as opposite to “America.” What we will argue is that unlike the humour tropes that have made Borat as profitable as other films utilizing sexism, heterosexism, classism, and ableism as comedic devices (films like Dumb and Dumber or Wayne’s World), Borat overwhelmingly depends on the central character’s embodiment of Muslim-Eastern stereotypes, embodiments that we read as xenophobic cinematic Islamophobia. What “we” ultimately laugh at is that which simultaneously revives us. In this article, we will describe how the discourses that Borat’s humour and social commentary rely upon continue to marginalize those who embody the non-White, non-Christian, non-heterosexual, non-male body, and argue that if the racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia in North America were truly taken up in cinematic critique, the box office, mainstream distribution, and attention toward this film might look quite different.

Why Study Borat?

With the ascent of courses in North America’s teacher education programs that require increased knowledge about race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and other socially-constructed categories of difference, courses such as “Multiculturalism” or “Media Awareness” in current university curricula are common. Given this attention, one might fairly expect there would be significant attention and discussion about the “desert minstrel” (Steinberg, 2004) characterization that Borat portrays. Surely, in our Canadian context, from Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau’s 1971 commencement of the Multiculturalism Act to our current deliberations on how we can best prepare our citizens to participate in a multicultural community, Borat himself as a stereotype ought to be as central to conversations about the film as Borat’s prejudice towards others is. But, once again, this critique is absent from mainstream, public discussion. Despite the torrent of accolades heaped upon Cohen’s
creation, whether purposeful or not, Borat represents another illustration of what it means to be of the continued stereotyped nefarious Muslim Other.

**If You’re Not in It, You’re out of It**

Clearly, a quick read of the positive reviews of *Borat* reveals to the viewer that there is a higher understanding of the content, and that if you missed “it,” it likely indicates a deficiency on your part; perhaps comedic, perhaps social. The prevailing arguments of support are best summed up by the late, great Joey Ramone, “If you’re not in it, you’re out of it.” A kind of “academic-hipster” challenge, if you will. A challenge that silences you for fear that you might seem at once uncool, unsophisticated, and dumb. Art/film critics like Lepage (2006) state that “…Cohen is the *Sex Pistols of humour*” (P. H. 7), Goodman (2006) quotes a comedian and founder of the comedy club *Yuk-Yuks*, Mark Breslin’s assertion “(t)he kind of people who would go see an independent comedy are smart enough to get the joke” (P. D. 10), and Groen simply states “*Borat* at its best is pure satiric genius …” (P. R. 7).

So all of these accolades do leave us wondering if, as was the case with so many Western media caricatures of everything that is associated with the Middle East, West Asia, Islam, and Muslims in general, we have once again “missed the joke.” Are we, “out of ‘it’?”

To better comprehend the responses to *Borat* within the United States, Canadian, and United Kingdom markets, we began with a simple request to our research assistant, Patrick Boisvert: 15 “online” hours to amass as much information as possible regarding critical reviews of *Borat*. Through his searches he perused at least 26 major Canadian television, news, and magazine sources, 23 American television, news, and magazine sources, and 17 British television, news, and magazine sources. The end result of the 15 hours (plus) in front of his computer: 53 positive (to glowing) reviews, 16 somewhat ambiguous assessments, and only six negative critiques. Of the positive reviews, much was said of the film being an insight into the “American Psyche,” revealing “… America as it is, not as it imagines itself to be” (Monk, 2007, B. 1), noting its social contributions of revealing the many “isms” of North America and the “genius” of both the film and Cohen himself (Mallick, 2006). Of the positive reviews we accessed, nothing was mentioned of the racism associated with the Borat character. Curiously, Borat is often referred to as being to “itself”; an actual person altogether separate from Cohen, compounded by Cohen’s reluctance to market his film out of character. For instance, when Borat initiates racist and sexist conversations, it is portrayed as if it is a natural conversation, as opposed to one of the participants having a script and the other simply responding to the words. What is lost is the understanding that there is no Borat. Cohen exists and the words spoken by the character Borat are Cohen’s. To our recollection, the only spontaneous racist statement that came from the non-acting participants was the cowboy/general manager of the rodeo, Bobby Rowe, who spoke about Muslims...
and terrorists and cautioned the Borat character that he “looked like one of them” (following this up with a healthy dose of homophobia).

Herein is the overwhelmingly overlooked element of *Borat*; that the film is heavily reliant on the West’s fear, and sentiments of superiority over the East and Islam. It is through the ignorance, backwardness, oppressive normalcy of Borat the character that the humour plays out. His ignorance is positioned as opposite to the audience’s (West’s) enlightenment, modernity, and stance of liberty and equality. These are among the oldest tropes of Orientalist rhetoric, namely to position the Other as something that both reviles and appeals to “us” (Said, 1978). It (the Orient and those who represent it) is both exotic and inferior.

**Absent from the Debate**

Much of the North American discourses in regard to multicultural issues, in cinema and otherwise, are still predominantly dominated by power bloc voices (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997). “Sikhs carrying kirpans,” “Filipinos eating rice with spoons,” and “the problem” of “Muslim girls wearing hejabs” in school are all subjects of news headlines and 24-hour punditry debates. Recent North American politicians’ offhand comments like “les yeux bridés,” “Paki,” or “Macaca” are, to a greater and lesser extent, examined and explained by those who have uttered the words, rather than those to whom the words are aimed. Much is the same in the Borat discussion; amongst the multitude of accolades showered upon Cohen is the small minority of voices that question the nobility of Cohen’s film. Specifically absent are the voices of Kazakhs, and all those who are implicated with the stereotypes that Cohen has evoked. Again, those who are not the targets of the offense tell all of us what is and is not offensive and racist. Like the character Borat, “we” who are the Oriental other are too backward to understand the significant contributions this film makes as social commentary, contributions that outweigh any offense we may feel. Few have asked, what might the character mean for those it names as representing?

In one of Edward Said’s (2002) last writings, he reflected that some forms of speaking on behalf of certain ethnic/racial groups by Occidental (Western) researchers are now considered inappropriate. Purposefully using the word “Negro” to demonstrate what not so long ago was acceptable public vocabulary, Said wrote “… it has now become inappropriate to speak on behalf of ‘Negroes’…” (p. 71).

While many in the power blocks now shake their head in public disapproval to speech that is now reserved for private conversations, xenophobic and paternalistic statements and sentiments still permeate North American discourse. For example, the overwhelming multitude of non-Muslim men and women who define what a hejab signifies to Muslim women in public spaces exists alongside popularly-expressed sentiments to “help” those Muslim women. This discourse of aid depends upon a deeply-embedded way of knowing the Muslim woman as inherently oppressed.
Going further, to know the non-Muslim woman as liberated is dependent upon
knowing the Muslim woman as oppressed. Sally Field, playing Betty Mahmoody
(not her birth surname), in the popular film, *Not Without my Daughter*, was a
powerful illustration of this sentiment. A non-Muslim woman who is presented as
knowing “both sides.”

Cinema does not differ greatly from popular sentiment, since any popular media
representation depends upon a discourse the audience is already familiar with to tell
its story. The hero overcoming unanticipated obstacles story, the unrequited lovers
story, the road trip story are all formulas that movie-going audiences are familiar
with. Just saying “unrequited lovers story” serves as a short-hand vocabulary for
all the meanings, plot turns, likely scenarios, scenes that the audience can expect to
encounter. The many racisms perpetuated in film have, over time, undergone trans-
the beginning of racist/stereotyped portrayals of African Americans in film and the
changes that have occurred over time. Comparatively, and in no way suggesting that
those of African diaspora are now free from Hollywood’s stereotypes for we would
argue that the oppression of people of Black heritage has gotten more complex
rather than been “resolved,” a peruse of Shaheen’s (2001) tome chronicling ethno-
racial stereotypes about Arabs (Iranians, Muslims, and the Middle East in general)
in cinema reveals that there has been little to no change in their treatment. Why?

A familiar tool in the medium of film is the need for the Other to propel the
storyline, to assure a “they” in comparison to “us.” The movie medium has run
through their ethnic, religious, and ideological characters to act as foils, sidekicks,
clowns, or some other prop against the Hollywood archetypes of “good.” Jews, Com-
unists, Irish, Native Indians, African Americans, Africans, Aboriginals, Asians,
etc … have all had their share at playing the role of antagonist or supporting role
to the West’s White protagonist. Where some groups, the Irish for example, have
managed to break away from the monolith stereotypes of Hollywood, often by just
fading into Whiteness, or fading out of view altogether, others like the West’s image
of the “Middle-Eastern Muslim” retain the status of terrifying villain, backward
buffoon, or oppressed victim, often in need of salvation from their own ethnic and/or
religious tyranny. *Borat*, with its reliance on the primitive buffoonery of the main
character, sets out on a quest to gain knowledge from the wise West. And whether
intentionally or not, its impact is part of a familiar pattern of stereotypes about
people of the Muslim East and needs to be understood for the stark similarities this
representation has to minstrel-like characteristics.

**Desert Minstrels and Brownface**

Before we risk being perceived as oversensitive killjoys, and for the sake of
clarity, yes, we understand the humour. We comprehend the comedic devices and
the ridiculousness of the contexts and how the movie’s message relies heavily on
the over-the-top ignorance of Borat, the shock of his targets, and that this makes the situations funny. What we are attempting to do in this article is to unravel that rather than a novelty and bravery of social commentary, Borat parallels a typical, familiar, historical pattern of minstrel-like portrayals of Muslims, Middle-Easterners, East Asians, South-East Asians and the generalized Eastern Other in cinema—whether it falls into the category of a continued acceptance of “brownface,” from Sam Jaffe in Gunga Din (1939), Peter Sellers in The Party (1968) to Will Ferrell in Austin Powers (1997), that has been used to represent “the East” or whether it is something altogether different.¹ We also question, whether Borat is being perceived by audiences and critics as a satire in the same manner of Spike Lee’s Bamboozled (2000), demanding its audience to question the morality of enjoying overt racial stereotypes, or falling into the same ethical dangers that comedian Dave Chapelle warned in response to his now infamous “Pixie Sketch”; whether the audience is laughing at the satirical elements or at the stereotypes themselves. Just as movie stories depend upon a short-hand plot signal (such as “the love story”) to tell their stories, we believe Borat uses the short-hand vocabulary that “Eastern Muslim foreigner” offers (via its tools like dark moustachioed men, brown skin, ‘funny’ clothes, and the thick non-descript accents) to tell its story.

In using Steinberg’s (2004) term “desert-minstrel” in reference to Muslim-Eastern characters, we are offering two thoughts: first, that there is a Muslim-Easterner equivalent, in film, to the slow-witted, lazy, superstitious jester that stereotyped African Americans for decades; and, second, that in using “brownface,” modified from “blackface”—a term associated with minstrel shows, we are suggesting that the prevailing characteristics of the Muslim-Easterner in popular film is a creation of those who wield power, as opposed to those that such images represent, even when played by actors who are of Muslim-Eastern origin. While the blackface image and discourses embedded in it may have gone underground (only to be revealed in unguarded moments by men like Michael Richards or Don Imus), we believe the colonialist roots and contemporary political and military social discourses in the West continue to uphold the brownface stereotypes upon which films like Borat rely.

On the subject of brownface, Stephen Colbert, in his usual earnest yet deadpan style, noted the futility of his guest, Iranian actor/comedian Maz Jobrani’s, stance that he would no longer audition for stereotypical terrorist roles and said, “...would you be willing to see White actors in Arab-face?” (October, 2006). Of course, as far as we are concerned these brownface roles have been played by White actors, and the stories of the Muslim Middle East have been told by non-Muslims and non-Middle Easterners for centuries. Perhaps, one might be led to believe that there is something altogether acceptable about brownface, if you agree that it exists at all. Consider Will Ferrell’s character of Mustaffa, the assassin, in Austin Powers. A quick internet search for the character’s image and you will have to decide for yourself: either Ferrell spent quite an extreme amount of time and energy tanning, or someone applied brown pancake makeup to assure that the audience not
be confused about what “Mustaffa” ought to look like. If the second is the case, brownface exists. As to whether brownface is acceptable, then the consideration must be made as to whether or not it serves to benefit or detract from the peoples it represents, and perhaps that answer can be found in those actors of Muslim and/or Eastern decent that have played these roles.

Actor/comedian Omid Djalili, of Middle-Eastern origin, describes the recurring jobs he was offered as the “Arab-scumbag” (2001) roles. His own way of handling the humiliation of the stereotyped acting work was by adding more comedy to the part. Despite this, in his 2003 National Public Radio interview, the actor/comedian begins to further reveal the degrading nature of these characters.

NPR: … in the lavish adventure movie The Mummy Djalili played a “greasy” Egyptian prison warden.

Djalili: Really, a “filthy Arab” … just the butt of all the jokes. And I slide down a rope and John Hannah says, “What’s that awful smell?” and my buttocks comes into view and it’s all that stuff (laughs).

Although there are connections Djalili (2001) makes with his acting predecessors who endured similar ethnic stereotyping, such as Nadim Sawahla and Burt Kwouk, “… who always performed with gusto, but also seemed to do it with an ironic twinkle in their eye,” one has to wonder whether or not other film viewers pick up on such subtleties. In essence, as Dave Chapelle pondered, are they laughing with or at the stereotyped characters?

Are You Laughing at Borat or with Borat?

Part of the process of analyzing whether or not the humour in Borat is based on Islamophobia or racialized Islam is to determine whether or not Borat is seen by the audience as a Muslim. From our searches we can not comment on Cohen’s intent because, as to date, he has not directly addressed the race, ethnicity, or religious aspect of his Borat character, or for that matter his Ali G character. What we can discuss is the seemingly purposeful ambiguity that Cohen utilizes in regard to religion and race and the perceptions it evokes in scenes with everyday Americans, and with viewers. Although the responses of film-goers to the Islamophobia elicited by the Borat character are ignored by the majority of film critics who positively reviewed the film, they were major considerations for those who found the film to be utilizing a “baser” comedic approach.

Although rarely using the term “brownface,” some authors referred to the “blackface” nature of Cohen’s characters, noting earlier work with Ali G elicited this response in viewers. Not really disapproving of Cohen’s work, in Yakasai’s (2003) review he quotes a 19-year-old London resident, originally from Mali, who notes that he can see “… a similarity between him and the old comedians wearing shoe polish as black” and continues with his “man on the street” examination conclud-
Did We Miss the Joke Again?

... from various sources that he should not be taken “...too seriously...” and that ultimately, he is “...a novelty...” Fast forward to 2006 and Cohen's character is smashing attendance records and reaching a wide audience. In another positive review of Borat, Rich Cohen (2006) noted that Baron Cohen was met with accusations of racism earlier in his career:

He’s been criticized for performing a variation of the minstrel show: a Jewish boy in blackface. When he went to promote his first movie, Ali G Indahouse, he was met by protesters, some carrying signs that said, AL JOLSON, GO HOME.

Although he does describe Borat as a “...perfect mirror of the age,” Rich Cohen also raises Sacha Baron Cohen’s often cited graduate thesis on “Jews in civil-rights movements” stating, “In fact, every article about the comedian mentions Cambridge (look, I just did it myself) because, I’m convinced, it makes the more disturbing parts of his act less unacceptable.” In discussing Sacha Baron Cohen’s international ascendance from the British cable market, where his act had lost its edge, to the United States, Rich Cohen wrote, “... so he came to America, which offered the same shot it offers all pilgrims—the dream, the hills and prairies, but mostly a chance to start over, and a whole nation of fresh marks.” Perhaps, what Rich Cohen did not intend in the analogy, is that the pilgrims received all their bounty at the expense of another. In Sacha Baron Cohen’s case, part of his success comes from not only revealing America’s trouble with racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, etc..., but does so at the expense of its accepted perceptions of the stereotyped Muslim and Middle-Easterner. But there is no suggestion that Borat is Muslim; his only religion seems to be anti-Semitism (Hoberman, 2006).

Certainly, there is not part of the film where Cohen scripts Borat to state explicitly that he is Muslim. Even if we analyze the major religions of Kazakhstan it would not reveal as much as the choice of using Kazakhstan as Borat’s place of birth because it evokes so much of the “one of those “stan” countries”, much like the “Iraq, Iran ... whatever!” mentalities in the viewer. As Drummond (2006) observes, “… ‘Borat’ resonates so much with audiences because of the West’s unease about Muslim cultural attitudes. (...) Borat’s blend of misogyny, anti-Semitism, and general backwardness all carefully correspond with American stereotypes of Islam.” Drummond further remarks that these are very specific stereotypes that the West has imposed upon the “Muslim culture.” Similarly, Tierney (2006) writes, “What bothers me most about the movie is its premise: that villagers who have not embraced Western values are violently anti-Semitic, racist, homophobic and misogynistic. Borat is an absurd caricature, but we wouldn’t laugh if we didn’t think there was some truth to the stereotype of the morally backward peasant” (Tierney, 2006, P A 15).

“Are you laughing with Borat or at Borat?” is an important question. Cohen’s character, as Drummond points out, is more than just a “generic Third Worlde who did not remind audiences of a Muslim in any way whatsoever.” In trying to uncover
hidden racisms, Cohen has chosen a character that represents racist stereotypes and a stereotype that one is “free” to exploit. Quite frankly, no Muslim group would have received any attention from the media or moviegoers in general, because, as Drummond sums up, whereas Americans may have felt guilty at laughing at an “African tribesman,” they “… felt no guilt in laughing at Borat.” As the majority of reviewers praise Cohen and his valour, very few note this aspect and ask “why are we laughing?” or at the very least say, yes, you may have laughed, but “(j)ust don’t call it politically courageous satire” (Boler, 2006).

Conclusion:
We May Have Missed the Joke, but Here’s What We Didn’t Miss

We didn’t miss that Borat depends upon a classical, gendered Orientalist discourse to tell the story of a backward Muslim man, oppressing Muslim women. But this time, the Muslim woman’s oppression is not marked by her veil, it is marked by her villager-body, whorish allusion, and willingness to have sex with anybody willing to take her. Although a familiar sexist stereotype of old-school Western sexism, this Madonna/whore binary is not unknown in Western representations of Muslim women. In a brilliant critique of National Geographic’s representation of the Arab world and Muslim women, Steet (2000) writes that Muslim women have been the object of the Western male gaze, and their bodies displayed and presented as an accessible soft-core porn for over a century. In fact, the belly-dancing seductress is a common representation of all that is sexual, yet exoticized enough to allude to a perverse fetishism of the Muslim woman’s body. By representing Muslim women’s oppression as the same as Western women’s (i.e., both are fetishized and sexualized objects), Borat as a character is brought closer to its mainstream audience: presumably “men” (i.e., all “normal” heterosexual men) who share the fetishized, sexualized fantasies about women’s bodies. As evident in the film, Borat’s ability to befriend and ally himself with American men depends upon a narrative of classic sexism.

We didn’t miss that this gendered Orientalist discourse, establishing a binary within a binary (male/ female, liberated/ oppressed), is simultaneously tapping into heterosexist norms in mainstream Western culture. In a critique of the masculinist, homophobic discourses in pro-wrestling, Jhally & Katz (2000) argue that the creation of an heroic, masculine body whose very body and essence is a spectacle of heteronormativity, depends upon the creation of a feminized body against which the masculinity is on display. In describing the relationship between the hyper-masculinity on display in pro-wrestling, and its relation to homophobia, they write, “The hyper-masculine wrestling subculture is also deeply infused with homophobic anxiety. Macho posturing and insults…can barely mask the fear of feminization that is always present in the homoerotic entanglement of male bodies.” It is hard to argue that a very real pro-wrestling Smackdown style homoerotic entanglement of male bodies does not take place in Borat. Once again, Borat embodies traditional
mainstream White male heteronormative fears and fascinations. This is further evidenced by the way in which Borat is welcomed into the fold of traditional White male collegiality. Many of the film’s “real life” men express a liking for Borat, and many in fact give Borat tips on how to take his overt sexism and homophobia underground (rodeo official advises: shave the moustache; car dealer nodding his head in understanding as Borat says, When I uh, buy my wife, she was, cook good, her vagina work well and she strong on plough. But after three years when she was, uh, fifteen, then she become weak, her voice become deep, etc). We believe this affinity is a glorification of nothing other than a traditional “old boys club” fraternity. Borat embodies all of the sexist, homophobic, xenophobic sentiments that mainstream “old boys” can no longer express in public.

We also did not miss that Borat depends on a class-narrative to set up the jokes. Social class is an undeniable organizer of social life in the United States. How is Borat different from the “White trash” on display in any classist depiction of poverty in rural United States? He has poor manners, speaks with a drawl, is at times incoherent, travels with a chicken, has sex with his cousin, dresses in clothing that is out of style and too big for him, he does not know “big city” ways, has never been in a “fancy” elevator, and on and on it goes. How different is Borat from the Hillbillies on their way to Beverly Hills?

To us, it really is not so funny. In fact, for both of us of who come from Middle Eastern heritage, this film was difficult to watch. Although yes, to some degree, it could be argued that it has evoked a debate on its social commentary. Rather than brilliant social critique, the comment we heard was this: mainstream middle-America is racist, sexist, heterosexist, ableist, classist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic—although we suspect that if you spoke to anyone on the growing margins of middle-America, you would find few surprised faces to this comment. What is significant is that liberal North Americans and those who would describe themselves as progressive and who are most likely to find this film appealing and powerful, fall into the same myopic views that further continue to oppress others, which is now articulated within a global, colonialist vocabulary of difference.

Notes

1 http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=borat.htm
2 Of interest is that Rich Cohen (2006) notes that Sacha Baron Cohen’s hero is Peter Sellers and that he is friends with Will Ferrell.

References


Christopher D. Stonebanks & Özlem Sensoy

2, 2007, from http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4309854,00.html

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The Mocking Mockumentary 
and the Ethics of Irony

Miranda Campbell

“Shocking and Provocative.” “Death-defying satire.” “Edgy.” “A New Genre.” A quick survey of film critics’ reviews of Borat reveal language that is drenched in the rhetoric of innovation, avant-gardism, and subversion. The genre that Borat makes use of, the mockumentary, and is indeed generally seen as subversive, in that it undermines the documentary’s claim to objectively tell the truth. It is also a relatively new genre, that was spawned by the proliferation of available archival footage since the 1950s, but that has gained increasing popularity over the last 30 years, with This is Spinal Tap often cited as a key catalyzing film by directors and critics alike. As a genre, the mockumentary mobilizes irony, either in the parody of the form of the documentary or in the satirical treatment or critique of an issue. This mobilization can be relatively gentle and mild, such as parodies of the documentary like The Rutles that mockumentary theorists Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight identify as the first “level” of irony in the mockumentary. For Roscoe and Hight, the “levels” of the mockumentary become increasingly sophisticated, and Level 2 and Level 3 of the mockumentary involve critique / hoax, and deconstruction of the genre, respectively.

So where does Borat fit within these levels? How does it make use of the mockumentary genre? Is it subversive? New? Edgy? In its take-up of the mockumentary, how does Borat position its audience and its subjects in relation to one another and in relation to the documentary form? Borat is both pleasurable and problematic—new yet familiar. The film’s use of irony has been recognized as and conflated with critique, but an examination of Borat suggests the need for the disentanglement of this association, and at the very least, a recognition that irony, critique, and subversion are not one and the same. All in all, this film raises some questions about the goals and deployment of irony, the implicit hierarchical ranking of humour, and the positioning of who gets to be “in” on the joke and who is left outside on the margins.
Questions of Audience: You’re Either With Us or You’re Against Us

Sasha Baron Cohen knows that controversy sells. Prior to its theatrical release, *Borat* made headlines due to its negative reception from Kazakh government members who condemned the portrayal of their country. Not to be outdone by being denounced, Cohen as Borat gave a press conference outside of the White House to invite George W. Bush to see the film. As a result of these events and other such publicity stunts, *Borat* hit the nightly news, and was largely a familiar household name even before the film opened. As such, the viewers of the film were well aware of its fictional nature prior to its release, even if they were not familiar with the Borat character from *Da Ali G show.*

The film is nominal parody of the documentary genre, as it contains a repository of familiar documentary conventions: it opens with grainy footage and titles that inform the viewer that the film is a presentation from the Kazakhstan Ministry of Information, makes use of hand-held camera footage in the New York subway, and contains a Blair-Witchesque camcorder diary scene in which Borat records his feelings of fear about staying overnight at a bread and breakfast run by Jews. Due to the publicity events prior to its release, the audience is aware throughout the film that it is a parody of the documentary form. As such, the audience is not required to decode the film’s use of documentary conventions, or invited to skeptically test the film’s factuality; rather, the audience is placed in a privileged position of knowing. We are rewarded for our cultural knowledge of what the mockumentary sets out to do even if we have not had to exert ourselves to detect where the line between fact and fiction has been drawn.

Of course this character is extreme, larger-than-life, and satirical, we smugly say to ourselves. Of course *we* understand that this representation of a Kazakh individual is some sort of hyperbolically ironic version of the West’s ignorance of places they are unfamiliar with. We understand, but those Kazakhs themselves are just too darn serious, taking the representation at face value as an actual depiction of themselves. One review of the film instructs the viewer to “skip it” if “you can’t detect satire. Taking any of Borat’s behavior as authentic to his country makes you as clueless as he is.” While these remarks are not specifically directed to the Kazakhstan audience, the implications and ramifications are that any group who objects to an unrealistic portrayal of themselves is just plain stupid, as if the problem is that they can’t get the joke.

But part of the problem here in this review is the very fact that the remarks are not intended or directed towards a Kazakh audience, as the intended audience for this film is not Kazakhstan at all. Similarly, in a *Rolling Stone* interview, Cohen comments that Kazakhstan’s reaction to *Borat* was not what he expected:

I was surprised, because I always had faith in the audience that they would realize that this was a fictitious country and the mere purpose of it was to allow people to
bring out their own prejudices. And the reason we chose Kazakhstan was because it was a country that no one had heard anything about, so we could essentially play on stereotypes they might have about this ex-Soviet backwater.

The real surprise here for Cohen is that Kazakhstan sees itself as an audience for this film at all, because this is not the audience that Cohen claims to have “faith in.” Rather than act as an audience, Cohen’s use of the entire country of Kazakhstan is as a prop or a blank slate to prompt a revelation about issues elsewhere, about something (America) and somebody else (Western audience). As much as Kazakhstan may be hyperbolically or fictitiously rendered, it is not a fictitious country. The country is marginalized three-fold: first, by actual experiences of marginality and poverty; next, through an unfair depiction of it; and lastly, and most problematically, as we roll our eyes, chuckle, and presume that they didn’t get that the unfair depiction was obviously and satirically unfair.

My goal here is not to invoke morality as a counterpoint to irony, or to suggest that all humour needs to be flattened in the face of “serious” issues. Rather, at the heart of these questions about who the intended audience is, how it is positioned, and how irony and satire are being used, is not the question of the “edgy” use of politically incorrect or offensive humour (this has been deployed well by other fresh faces on the comedic scene, such as David Cross and Dave Chappelle, for example), but the creation of a value-laden system in which humour is used to re-inscribe existing cultural hierarchies. In a GQ article about Dubai and his experience with people in the Middle East, George Saunders comments “it occurs to me that the American sense of sophistication/irony—our cleverness, our glibness, our rapid-fire delivery, our rejection of gentility, our denial of tradition, our blunt realism ... also causes us to (wrongly) assume a corresponding level of sophistication/irony/worldliness in the people of other nations.”

Saunders goes on to illustrate this point with an anecdote about a “sickly Arab man” with rotten teeth and “a leg problem” who put cookies he was eating into an envelope circulating on an airplane that was intended to collect funds for needy children (he actually thought his cookies would be sent to the kids and that cookies would help!, we chuckle). He follows this with another anecdote of a Pakistani mujahideen soldier who asked him to “convey a message to President Reagan for him” (as if all Americans have a direct line to their president!, we guffaw). Saunders’ assumption, as is Borat’s, is that there is hierarchy of humour, irony is a superior form, and “people of other nations” are not up to Western standards, which therefore renders them naïve, innocent, and rather silly. This superiority is positioned and inflected around cultural lines: we get it, you don’t; we are worldly and ironic, you are backwater and simple (especially when you don’t get that the portrayal of you as backwater and simple was a joke). All of this rings of a translocation of racism in which it is jokes instead of intelligence, economic power, or level of “development” that lends itself to justification for feelings of superiority. Call it the cultural imperialism of the smugly tongue-in-cheek.
And to what extent does this smug privileging of irony actually hinder or hurt? In the case of Borat, it’s not just about ironic in-jokes circulating amongst a Western audience. Borat’s production crew did not fully disclose the nature of the film to the Romanian gypsies of the Glod village who appear in the opening sequence of the film in the depiction of “Kazakhstan,” and these individuals have now filed lawsuits. They are upset about the misrepresentation of their lifestyles, and about their lack of knowledge about the true purposes and intent of the film (they thought they were participating in a documentary about Romanian poverty). Associated Press journalist William J. Kole reported that “a 23-year-old woman who gave her name only as Irina said she felt bewildered and dismayed that Glod’s poverty was reduced to a parody.” To be sure, Irina’s misgivings—the experience of poverty in Glod being turned into a hyperbolic depiction of poverty only then to serve as a vehicle for comedy/satire whose audience is situated elsewhere—does ring some alarm bells. While some of the film’s American participants (Pamela Anderson, and Luenell, who plays a hooker) are in on the joke and were made aware of the fictional nature of the documentary that they were participating in, the gypsies of Glod were not, and are reduced to tools to serve as vehicles for later comedy-critique while simultaneously being introduced by Borat as “the town rapist” and “the town abortionist.”

One of the film’s most comically and ironically rewarding scenes takes place in the conclusion of the film, when Borat returns to his hometown in “Kazakhstan” after his journey to America. Borat gloats that when he was away, he got an iPod, but his neighbour only got an iPod mini. This joke is both classic and current: a familiar “keeping up with the Joneses” motif is overlaid with the latest trends in technology, and as such, pleasantly resonates when the viewer recognizes how the classic tale has been updated. But this joke takes place in “Kazakhstan” (Glod), where keeping up with the Joneses likely does not include a race for the best iPod. The film both invokes and hyperbolically renders the poverty of the people of “Kazakhstan”/Glod, but also erases it through a depiction of a people who raise livestock inside their homes but can also afford iPods (if only iPod minis). Does this clue us in to the fact that the representation of these people is a farce? Perhaps. But what is farcical about an actual experience of poverty being turned into a farce?

Gypsies do not only quietly occupy the backdrop of the film as stand-ins for the people of Kazakhstan, but also form one of the re-occurring components of Borat’s extreme racism in the film. The overt goal of Borat’s anti-gypsy statements is to reveal people’s willingness to tolerate Borat’s racism. Take, for instance, Borat’s question to a car salesman about how fast he would have to drive a Hummer into a group of gypsies in order to kill them, to which the salesman calmly responds “30 or 40 miles per hour.” Of course the (Western) audience recognizes such comments as a hyperbolic ploy to produce certain results. But this ploy produces the comedy as well as the problem. Gypsies are treated as an abstraction, again, as a prop for comedy-critique. As much as gypsies are positioned as prop in the film, they are
not props: we witness their actual lives and living arrangements. While the film may open with images that explicitly aim to set the scene as one of poverty (see, for example, a shot of a house next to a retaining wall overflowing with garbage), and contains explicit references to gypsies as targets of extreme racism, the exposure of these issues is not the goal of the film: we laugh at those who go along with Borat’s extreme statements rather than consider or reflect on the situation of the actual gypsies who are featured in the film. Gypsies are invoked, but only invoked to draw our attention elsewhere.

This element of positioning an unsuspecting individual, such as the car salesman, to see how he or she will react to the extremes of Borat’s character, forms the basic structure of the film. In their work on the mockumentary, Roscoe and Hight place the mockumentary hoax in the category of critique (Level 2), and discuss examples in which audiences have been unaware while viewing a film that is a work of fiction, not a “true” or “real” documentary, and have reacted with outrage when they realize that they have been duped. Clearly, this is not the Borat case: it is not the audience who has been duped, but the film’s subjects: the individuals who Borat interviews and interacts with are those who experience the hoax. In this way, Borat emerges out of the Tom Green school of comedy of pranks on the unsuspecting. The audience is positioned as allied with the filmmaker as both know what is really going on. Moreover, the audience member is in on the joke, but not part of it: both voyeur to the ignorance of the unsuspecting and smug in his distance from this individual.

Roscoe and Hight argue “mock-documentaries [that perform critiques] explicitly highlight their own fictionality, but generally do so in order to ask their audience to reflect on the validity of the cultural or political position of their subjects.” In the case of Borat, as in The Tom Green Show, the audience is not invited to critically reflect as much as they are invited to ridicule the ignorance of the subject (object?) of the prank: we gawk at idiots rather than reflect on larger systemic social problems. Indeed, the “mock” of the mockumentary in Borat is a mocking of individuals rather than a mocking of documentary factuality. As such, the audience is positioned to react along the lines of “I can’t believe he just said that!” rather than “I can’t believe this problem still exists!” Cohen’s uptake of the mockumentary takes the genre out of one that posits a dialogue of knowingness between the structure of the documentary and the viewer, and into one that posits not a dialogue but an entente of knowingness between film maker and audience.

So, in the end, has Cohen reworked the mockumentary to new ends such that Borat could be considered “a new genre”? In his discussion of the history of the mockumentary, Thomas Doherty casts this genre not as inflammatory but as “soothing” because it repays a lifetime of arid channel surfing with an oasis of cool attitude and flatters spectators with assurances of their media sophistication and oh-so-wry sensibility. Americans may be hazy about the dates and details of real history but a nation
of televisual scholars boasts an encyclopedic knowledge of the tropes and turns of history-by-the-screen—which is why it is always advisable, whether in mock docs or doc docs, to keep a sharp eye and ear out for the selective memory of the audio-visual filter.

For Doherty, the mockumentary is reassuring because it plays on the knowledge the viewer has gained over a lifetime of media viewing, and places the viewer in an empowered position in which he or she is enabled to recognize the constructed nature of both mockumentaries and documentaries. For all of Borat’s shock tactics, scathing humour, edginess, and ability to generate controversy, Cohen’s version of the mockumentary is soothing as well. The viewer is spectator to the folly of others, but is not implicated him or herself. This viewer is further soothed by the revelation of familiar follies: frat boys are close-minded and vulgar and like to drink, Texan rodeo-goers as pro-Bush and anti-Iraqi, and New Yorkers don’t like to be bothered by strangers and enjoy a certain amount of personal space on the subway.

While it is true that America has become a place where dissent and critique has become scarce, it is also true that certain types of critiques are familiar and increasingly sanctioned in certain arenas. When Borat walks into a Texan rodeo and announces that Kazakhstan supports “your war of terror,” we laugh at the hapless idiots in the crowd who mishear and cheer along; we thereby ridicule working class people rather than policy makers or larger structural problems. The joke itself is only possible because the actual critique being made is familiar now that the war in Iraq has become extremely unpopular: if a charming Brit in a mustache points out to us the misguided nature of the Iraq war, so much the better. Somehow the critique, made on the backs of unassuming average people, becomes progressive and subversive rather than somewhat obvious.

**Borat as Mook, or, From “A-Ha” to “Ha-Ha” in a Fluorescent Lime Banana-Slinger**

As we have seen, instead of asking the viewer to recognize, question, or reflect on the structure of the documentary genre, *Borat* invites viewers to ridicule the “real life” behaviour of the individuals who are involved in the film. Cohen has argued that he sees the character of Borat “essentially as a tool” or a mechanism to use in order to reach a certain goal: “by himself being anti-Semitic, he lets people lower their guard and expose their own prejudice, whether it’s anti-Semitism or an acceptance of anti-Semitism.” Be that as it may, the character of Borat is not purely mobilized in order to reveal prejudice or explode Western stereotypes about Central Asian countries. In the opening sequence, when Borat announces that he enjoys sunbathing and proceeds to lay out his towel in what can be only described as the most ridiculous of bathing suits, what stereotype of Central Asia or American prejudice has been exposed? Had we really stereotyped Central Asians as wearers of silly bathing suits, and did we need Cohen to explode this stereotype for us?
Perhaps not. Perhaps a funny bathing suit is a funny bathing suit. This is Cohen playing out of the Jackass school of comedy, in which genitals and bodily functions form the cornerstones of humour.

As a character, Borat does not always act of as tool (instrument) of the film maker in order to reach certain objectives, as he often acts as a tool (bozo) plain and simple. Take, for example, the extended sequence in the film in which Borat catches his producer Azamat “desecrating” his Baywatch magazine by masturbating with it. The pair engage in an extended scene of naked wrestling in which Borat and Azamat try to sexually humiliate one another, and then chase each other, nude, through their hotel. This scene eventually results in a return to witnessing the reactions of unsuspecting individuals to Borat’s extreme behaviour, but is it really a revelation that the attendees at the banquet in the hotel are surprised and outraged to have two naked men crash their gathering? These slapstick and scatological types of humour are seen throughout the film: Borat defecates on a busy street in New York City, masturbates in front of a Victoria’s Secret window display, washes his face in the toilet, and has Azamat blow dry his penis and ass. These types of gags may seem extreme, but have a long trajectory in the history of scatological humour, and may also suggest that Cohen is somewhat disingenuous in claiming that Borat operates primarily as an instrument of social critique. Rather than operate purely as this type of instrument, Borat could be best described as a “mook,” which Douglas Rushkoff characterizes as someone who is

not real. He’s a character: crude, loud, obnoxious, and in-your-face. He’s Tom Green of The Tom Green Show. He’s the daredevils on Jackass who indulge in dignity-defying feats like poo-diving. He’s a creation of marketers, designed to capitalize on the testosterone-driven madness of adolescence. He grabs them below the belt and then reaches for their wallets.

Evidently, Rushkoff’s comments do not suggest that the mook is a vehicle for social critique, but is rather a bankable vehicle for bringing in the bucks from teenage boys.

So how does this “mook” humour fit within the mockumentary genre? Satire and irony revolve around the “a-ha”/eureka moment of critical illumination of something that was previously hidden to the audience, and as such, is essentially a learning moment in which individuals are confronted with the disjuncture between what they thought knew and the actuality of a situation. Cohen replaces this type of moment with “ha-ha” moments that direct the audience’s attention to laughing at both the Borat character (i.e., Borat in a bathing suit), and at Borat’s unsuspecting victims. As much as Borat is a hyperbolic “tool” for social critique, we also laugh at him and his silly antics. These two forms of comedy are not one and the same, and as we shall see, are also overlaid with existing cultural prejudices.
The Muslim Mook: Invocations and Deflections

As we have seen, Cohen’s remarks suggest that he sees Borat not as a mook, but as a vehicle for social critique. He has commented that people’s interactions with Borat form a “dramatic demonstration of how racism feeds on dumb conformity, as much as rabid bigotry.” A great deal of this exposure of “tolerance” towards Borat’s extremism revolves around the revelation of either the anti-Semitism of the people whom Borat interviews, or their failure to object to Borat’s anti-Semitism. But many of these types of revelations come at the expense of a silent re-affirmation of anti-Muslim sentiment. One of Kazakhstan’s key problems with Cohen’s representation of the country is that he has portrayed its citizens as anti-Semitic when this is in fact not the case. Cohen has not chosen just any population to use as a tool to expose the lasting problem of anti-Semitism, but has chosen a predominantly Muslim population to cast as anti-Semitic (Kazakhstan has a secular government and roughly half of the population are Sunni Muslims.) What is ironic about an Orthodox Jew covertly playing a Muslim? Is this black-face for the post-9/11 age? This Muslim-Jew antagonism is not overtly on the table as a topic of the film, but forms an oblique subtext instead (contrast Borat with 2007’s Oscar-winning short live action film, West Bank Story, where Muslim-Jew tensions are overtly and satirically rendered through a spoof of West Side Story).

As we have seen earlier, Cohen expressed in the Rolling Stone interview that he chose to play a Kazakh character because most people know nothing about this place. We might not have had the prior knowledge that Kazakhstan is a Muslim country, but Borat tunes us in to this fact though visual cues. The size, shape, and colour of Borat’s mustache reads as Arab. Even though Kazakh people are not Arabic, this representation conflates Islam with Arabic people (and the misnomer of this de-facto conflation is not one of the prejudices that the film seeks to reveal). While we may subconsciously recognize Borat as vaguely Arabic/Muslim, the film also has brief moments in which this is brought to the fore.

In Texas, the rodeo manager instructs Borat to shave off his mustache because he looks like a Muslim, stating that “every picture that we get back from the terrorists, or anything else, the Muslims, they look like you.” This rodeo manager reveals another common prejudicial conflation: that Muslim is a synonym for terrorist. Borat deflects this comment, but not by countering with another religious affiliation (after Sunni Muslims, Russian Orthodox observers form the next largest religious group in Kazakhstan). Instead, Borat responds that he is a Kazakh, not a Muslim. Borat replaces a national identity for a religious identity, and keeps the Muslim identity below the radar, both recognized (by this individual at the rodeo and presumably by the viewer as well), and deflected. Borat later states that Azamat refuses to fly to California in case the Jews repeat the attacks of 9/11, and the joke similarly operates around the invocation and deflection of Islam. Everyone knows
that it was fundamentalist Muslims, not Jews, who were responsible for 9/11. Here, Islam is silently vilified as we know that Borat’s anti-Semitism is grossly misplaced. Instead of casting Jews as terrorists, the joke expects that we will recognize this misplacement and “correct” it by substituting Muslims as terrorists instead. This Muslim-as-terrorist conflation is also invoked in the beginning of the film, in which Borat points out the local kindergarten in his hometown, and we are shown a group of youngsters playing with automatic weapons.

This representation panders to another common prejudicial view: that Muslims indoctrinate their children to become terrorists, and the education of the young revolves around acquiring skills for warfare. The shot lasts less than two seconds: actually foregrounding and “discussing” such views may suggest that these types of prejudices are being satirized or ironically rendered, but this is not the case (contrast the kindergarten scene with, for example, the Running of the Jew sequence. The latter runs for nearly a minute, and is obviously overblown and satirical). All in all, Cohen’s use of Borat perpetuates a general sentiment of Islamophobia, in which all Muslims, regardless of national background, level of religiosity, or political convictions, are cast as terrorists. This equation of Muslim as terrorist is evident in “Ruth in Virginia’s” comments that she sent by e-mail to CNN when Paula Zahn was discussing the debut of Canadian CBC television show Little Mosque on the Prairie: “I see no humour in Little Mosque on the Prairie. I see a Muslim and I think 9/11. This country has been without mosques since it began, and yes I see the religion in a negative light. I feel threatened by mosques being built in our country.” Clearly, this type of Muslim-as-terrorist conflation remains pervasive, yet this type of thinking is not one that Cohen satirizes or explodes. Rather, it rides through the film, present yet not really on the table.

**Satire as Pedagogy?**

**Some Conclusions on the Cultural Teachings of Borat**

Satire has long served a pedagogical role, and shapes our expectations that some sort of “truth” will be uncovered when we are in its midst. Borat operates within these expectations, but what it teaches us is that a critique has already been made, and that this critique is edgier and far more subversive than our petty objections to it. In Borat, the mockumentary and the irony to be found within it become vehicles for a closing-down of reflection, rather than tools through which viewers note disjunctures between their assumptions and what is presented to them. If a critique has already been made, our interpretive capacities are not necessary—we can sit back and enjoy the ride. Along the way, the film confirms what we already know, both explicitly and silently, and throws in a few poo jokes for good measure. We chuckle along as we relearn the obvious, and are stroked as we get the joke: moments of illumination are put indefinitely on hold while Borat turns around to show us the rear view in his banana-slinger. In terms of humour, bums, poop, and
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genitals are indeed funny, but Borat needing to be taught how use the toilet being cast as some subversive critique is just plain shitty.

References


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The Problem with Borat

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There is just something about Borat, Sacha Baron Cohen’s barbaric alter-ego who The Observer’s Oliver Marre (2006) aptly describes as “…homophobic, racist, and misogynist as well as anti-Semitic.” While on the surface, Cohen’s Borat may seem to offend all races equally—the one group he offends the most is the very group he portrays as homophbic, racist, misogynist, and anti-Semitic. Or in other words, the real parties vilified by Cohen are not Borat’s victims but Borat himself. The humour is ultimately directed at this uncivilized buffoon-Borat. He is the butt of every joke. He is the one we laugh at, and are intended to laugh at, the most inasmuch as he is more vulgar, savage, ignorant, barbaric, and racist than any of the bigoted Americans “exposed” in the 2006 film Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan. This would not be quite as problematic if the fictional Borat did not come from a very real place and did not so obviously (mis)represent Muslims.

While the 2006 film has received coverage and praise for revealing the racism of Americans, very few people are asking whether Cohen’s caricature of a savage, homophobic, misogynist, racist, and hard core Jew-hating Muslim is not actually a form of anti-Muslim racism. To be characterized as any of the above is a form of discrimination, and watching this film it is hard not to walk away wondering why funny man Cohen feels the need to depict a Muslim character in such a vulgar and deplorable light.

A lot of Internet discussion is focused on whether or not Cohen’s character Borat is racist in general, and anti-Semitic in particular. When people realize that Cohen is himself Jewish many conclude that he is not racist but rather holding a mirror up to American culture in order to demonstrate, through comedy, how racist Americans are. But rarely is the question raised about whether Cohen’s portrayal of Borat represents anti-Muslim racism. And when the question is raised, it is usually dismissed as being a bit absurd. The justifications for this are that first of all
Kazakhstan is not a Muslim country; second, Borat never claims to be Muslim; third, no one has even heard of the country; and last, it is just comedy. The third defense is quite peculiar, as if the geographical ignorance of the west somehow excuses racism against an “obscure” country.

Let us examine some of the reasons many people claim Borat is not an example of racism against Muslims. First, it seems to be widely held on the Internet that Kazakhstan is not a Muslim country. Indeed, many forums I visited described it as being half-Muslim and half-Christian. Like so many others, I knew almost nothing of the country before the Borat controversy, so I did a little demographic digging. To get some clarification, I consulted the websites of UNESCO and the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA). While many on-line blogs and opinions claim that Kazakhstan’s population is divided almost equally between Muslims and Christians, the 2006 data of ARDA paints a very different demographic picture. According to ARDA, Kazakhstan is divided along the following religious lines: Muslim (49.81%), non-religious (26.34%), Christian (14.06%), atheist (9.38%), ethnoreligionist (0.16%), and other (0.25). Clearly Muslims are the majority and are almost twice the size of the next largest group, which makes them a rather large majority. And the second largest group is “non-religious,” meaning it could easily include people who were born or raised Muslim but do not adhere to it and/or practice it at all like many non-practicing Christians in the West.

Officially, the country is secular. However, this also does not mean that it is a non-Muslim country, only that it is secular, which literally means “not connected with religion.” Secular means that the State is separate from religion or that religion does not guide or influence the affairs of the State, but this does not change the fact that the majority of its private citizens are Muslim. Indeed the Kazakhstan National Commission for UNESCO (2002) reports that, “Kazakhstan is officially a secular state, but Sunni Islam is the major religion.”

Many in Europe and North America may not consider Kazakhstan a Muslim country because of its “moderate approach to Islam” or may feel that “it doesn’t seem Muslim.” However, this has nothing to do with the country or its people and everything to do with Western monolithic misperceptions of Muslims as religious fanatics and extremists. In post-9/11 North America and Europe to be “Muslim” has become synonymous with being a “fundamentalist” or “fanatic.” Indeed the Pew Research Center (2006) found that “many in the West see Muslims as fanatical, violent, and as lacking tolerance,” but also feel that Europe’s Muslims are more “moderate.” Yet the very use of prefices and disclaimers like “moderate Muslims” betrays a Western prejudice. It implies that to non-Muslims, Muslims are generally considered to be the opposite of moderate-fanatical. In this respect, when we encounter a Muslim who is not a religious fanatic or some sort of “terrorist,” we are shocked and feel the need to differentiate that person from the fanatical and crazy majority by kindly labeling them “moderate.”

Nothing could be more racist. This is similar to saying about someone “he/she
is okay for a Black person.” The implication here is that most Black people are not okay. Extremists, fanatics, or fundamentalists exist in all faiths and yet when we speak of Christians or Jews we do not feel the need to make the necessary distinction between extremists and moderates. For example, when we speak of Christians in the U. S. we do not preface it with words like “moderate” or “secular,” even though one can easily argue that Christian fundamentalism exists and is on the rise in the U. S. (Reuters, 2005). This notwithstanding, loaded words like “moderate” and “secular” are reserved for Muslim people and Muslim countries.

The second common defense to the charge that Cohen is anti-Muslim is that his character Borat never says he is Muslim. Indeed, in one part of Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan (2006) he says he worships the hawkg, which suggests that Borat is some sort of pagan. However, cultural studies scholars and students both know that what is suggested through visual imagery and symbolic representation is often more important and more telling than what is actually said. Indeed, during the Rodeo scene in the film, Rodeo manager Bobby Rowe says to Borat:

…Of course every picture that we get back from the terrorists…or Muslims, they look like you [emphasis mine], black hair and black Mustache. Shave that God dang mustache so you are not so inconspicuous, so you look like an Italian… I see a lot of people and I think there’s a God dang Muslim and I wonder what kind of bomb he’s got strapped to him. And maybe you’re not a Muslim…but you look like one of them [emphasis mine].

This, in essence, is my main point. While the Borat character never says he is Muslim, he looks Muslim and thus the average American is likely to assume that he is Muslim. Torchin (2007) maintains that, “The point here is that Cohen, though Welsh and Jewish, is mistaken for ‘Muslim…” Sam Ali (2006) problematizes the Borat character, arguing that its construction is dangerous to Muslims. While Cohen denies Muslim identity of Borat, “Ali declares that Kazakhstan’s predominantly Muslim population, combined with Borat’s anti-Semitism and misogyny, is enough to cast Borat as Muslim in the American imagination” (Cited in Torchin, Ibid.). He concludes that, “like it or not, Borat is a Muslim stereotype.” While Torchin is not as critical as Ali, she does concur that, “Borat’s rehearsals of Occidental xenophobia feed a stereotype.”

This is especially true after 9/11, and we must always take into consideration the political and historical context in which images and representations exist. The power of the image cannot be ignored or understated here, and when you combine fictional images with real life geo-political context, Borat becomes so obviously “Muslim.” His black hair, black thick mustache, and thick accent, as well as his backward views toward women, gays, and Jews connote “Muslimness” as it is currently and stereotypically defined in the west due to Islamophobia. Although “Muslim” is a religion and not an ethnicity, Torchin maintains that the term—as
applied by the Rodeo manager for example—nonetheless refers “to an established set of images that Americans use for categorising the Dark side of Europe, as well as the Middle East.” Ultimately, she continues, “Borat is summarily converted into one of those ‘Muslim extremists’ who occupy the lead stories of nightly newscasts. The term ‘Muslim’ is a trope, not a category. It signals the enemy.”

This means that the connotative meaning behind the character Borat is ultimately more important than the denotative meaning. A connotation is an idea or meaning suggested by a word or thing; it is the set of associations that is implied by an image or a word:

Denotative functions are the direct meanings of a sign. They are the kind of thing you can look up in an ordinary dictionary. Yet, cultural signs and images can also have secondary, or connotative, meanings. These meanings get attached to the original word [or cultural text] and create other, wider fields of meaning. At times these wider fields of meaning can act like myths creating hidden meanings behind the more apparent. Thus, systems of connotation can link ideological messages to more primary, denotative meanings. (Hall, n.d.)

Connotation depends heavily on the historical context in which the word or image is read/ viewed. As Derrida has shown, meaning does not reside in a text but in the writing and reading of it (Hodder, 2000). Thus there is no “original” or “true” meaning of a text outside specific historical contexts (Hodder, 2000). In this respect different types of texts must be understood in the contexts of their conditions of production and reading. Hodder (p. 704) explains that “text and context are in a continual state of tension, each defining and redefining the other, saying and doing things differently through time.” Thus, we must always be cognizant of the complexity of meaning as well as the conditions of the production and reading of texts. This suggests that the meaning we ascribe to an image or representation, such as Borat for example, relies heavily on social, political, and historical context.

For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, the image of a young man with long hair, round sunglasses, and a tie dyed shirt implied or suggested hippie. And in the racist and paranoid post-9/11 atmosphere everything about Borat, from his accent to his mustache, highly connotes “Muslimness.” Unless you have been living in a parallel universe or in an “Al Qaeda cave” after 9/11, the image and behaviour of Borat blatantly connote Muslim as they are currently ill defined. Borat is a mixture of every racist stereotype about Muslims, the most dangerous being that Muslims hate Jews—a point to which I will return. I find it hard to believe that an intelligent man like Cohen, educated at Cambridge, did not know that the average audience would assume Borat is a Muslim. Indeed I will go so far as to suggest that this was his intention. But since I cannot prove this, it is an issue best left alone for the purposes of this article. Whether or not Cohen intended Borat to be read as a Muslim is really not the point here. What is important is that the meaning of a text or cultural artifact does not exist in its production but ultimately depends on the
context of its reading (Hodder, 2000). And in the context of post-9/11 Islamophobia, audiences are most likely to “read” Borat as Muslim.

The third common defense of Cohen is that his Borat character is not offensive to Muslims because no one has ever heard of Kazakhstan, and the country was in fact chosen for its obscurity. For example, Oliver Marre argues that “it is not the Kazakhstani government which has anything to fear…the country was chosen for its obscurity, not as a target for satire.” This “logic” is absurd. If Cohen wanted to be obscure and inoffensive why did he simply not make up a country? Just because people do not know that Kazakhstan is a real place does not make his depiction of its people any less offensive. Is Marre suggesting that our ignorance of Kazakhstan’s existence somehow excuses Cohen’s racist depiction of its people? I certainly hope not. After all, while the rest of us might not know they exist, the citizens of Kazakhstan are aware of their own existence and thus have every right to be offended.

Even a conservative policy advisor from the United Kingdom finds the obscurity argument absurd and offensive. Writing in the opinion section (Comment is Free) of The Guardian, Peter Franklin (2006) shoots down the obscurity defense:

Another excuse might be the obscurity of the Kazakhs, on the assumption that xenophobia requires a degree of familiarity to breed contempt. However, this would be to forget two things: Firstly, Kazakhs are hardly obscure to themselves and, secondly, we are much more familiar to them then they are to us. So how do you think they feel when we finally notice their country only to insult it?

Relying on the obscurity defense, when Borat portrays Kazakhs—and implicitly all Muslims—as backward and mentally deficient, Cohen creates a false impression that nobody of real import is being offended (Ali, 2006).

Ironically, the ethnic/religious group that many people assume should be most offended by Borat is Jews due to Borat’s rabid anti-Semitism. However, Borat is a fictional anti-Jewish character being portrayed by Cohen who is actually an observant Jew. As such, I must agree with Marre (2006) that, “the one thing it would be difficult to accuse Cohen of is anti-Semitism, not merely because he is Jewish, but because, having been raised by Orthodox parents, he still practices his religion.” Marre goes on to explain that while Cohen was studying at Cambridge, “he was involved with Habonim, a Zionist youth movement.” In his third year at Cambridge he wrote a thesis about the role of Jews in the American civil rights movement. Clearly, Cohen is not anti-Semitic, but because he almost never appears out of character, we are constantly reminded that Borat, his Muslim alter ego, is.

Cohen never appears as himself in interviews or awards shows. Instead he parades the bigoted, misogynist, anti-Jewish Borat around as if he were a real person. And this is highly problematic, for it plays on our unconscious in a type of repetitive Orwellian double-speak or reverse psychology that causes us to forget that the anti-Semitic Borat is not real, and that the man playing the part is in fact Jewish and quite sympathetic toward Jews. Speaking about Cohen, Marre explains that
At an awards ceremony, hosted by GQ magazine, he was presented with the editor’s special award. In accepting the gong, he said: ‘I would like to dedicate this award to you, Mel Gibson. Melvin, it is you, not me, who should receive this GQ award for anti-Jew warrior of the year.’ Cohen was speaking in the guise of his alter ego (or one of them), Borat...

Here we get a clear indication of who or what Borat is to Cohen, for he describes Borat as an “anti-Jew warrior.” So while Borat is generally racist, he is intended to be especially anti-Jewish, and this is indeed the impression audiences walk away with from the film Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan. In the beginning of the film, Borat gives us a tour of his homeland and tells the audience that though it is a great nation, Kazakhstan has many problems: “social, economic, and Jew.” And then there is the annual village event, the running of the Jew, in which townspeople dress up as demonic Jews and chase the locals. And of course we cannot forget Borat’s paranoid and deeply racist reaction to the kind and hospitable Jewish couple who owns the Bed and Breakfast. He and his companion are afraid to eat food prepared by the couple and accuse them of being “shape shifting Jews.” To me, this does not suggest anti-Semitism but rather anti-Muslim racism on behalf of Cohen.

In scene after scene Cohen victimizes Jews through Borat’s rabidly anti-Jewish statements and paranoid assumptions. However, Muslims are the real victims insofar as to be accused of being anti-Jewish (as well as the myriad other bigoted things Borat represents) is itself an attack and form of discrimination. I can’t help but wonder about the motives for Cohen’s lofty “reverse discrimination.” By repeatedly depicting the fictional Muslim Borat as being anti-Jewish, the real-life Cohen in fact appears to be quite anti-Muslim.

Given the long-standing tensions between Muslims and Jews in the Middle East over the illegal occupation of Palestine (Boyle, 2003), Cohen should know better than to fan the flames of such tensions. Moreover, he should be chastised for his irresponsibility in perpetuating the baseless stereotype that Muslims hate Jews. Indeed given his obsession with portraying Muslims as savages and/or buffoons (let us not forget that his other alter egos is Ali G, the absurd though admittedly hilarious wannabe gangsta rapper with an undeniably Muslim name), one must wonder if it is not Cohen who has some sort of disdain for Muslims. Borat sleeps with his sister and farm animals, takes naked pictures of his own son, has no respect for women, condones rape, and masturbates in public (just to list a few of his disgusting traits). The depiction of Muslims in such a vulgar manner suggests a level of disdain for them.

Returning to “Borat’s” aforementioned statement about Mel Gibson, the biggest problem is that Cohen conflates a fictional character with a real person and his actions and/or statements. By equating Borat to Mel Gibson and/or showing him to admire Mel’s anti-Semitism, Cohen implies and/or suggests that Muslims are also anti-Jewish. It all happens at a very subconscious level, and the sugges-
tion is that like Gibson, Muslims are anti-Jewish. This is unfair because Borat is being compared to a real person and real events though he is in fact made up. But what makes it more problematic is that while he is fictional, Borat “represents” real people and a real region—Muslims and the Middle East-Central Asia.

In appearance after appearance, Cohen is in character as Borat, the anti-Jewish buffoon. He does not even break character when asked to address serious matters such as statements made by the government of the nation he has represented in a negative light—Kazakhstan. For example, “when told that the government of Kazakhstan was intending to engage in a campaign against the film… Cohen responded in character: ‘I fully support my government’s decision to sue this Jew’” (Cited in Marre, 2006). Again, one wonders why Cohen constantly makes defamatory remarks against Jews while posing as a character that so obviously connotes and represents “Muslimness.” Just what is he trying to prove and whom is he trying to provoke? Pitting Muslims and Jews against one another, even if only through fictional comedy, could not be more irresponsible given the current geo-political landscape. But instead of being reprimanded, Cohen was awarded a Golden Globe, which is disappointing but not shocking given the current culture of blatant anti-Muslim racism in which we live.

When novelist Jeanette Winterson was asked about Ali G, another of Cohen’s characters, she commented that she found him impossible to stomach: “I don’t know what is it that makes his character so offensive, but he [Cohen] allows the liberal middle classes to laugh at Black street culture in a context where they can retain their sense of political correctness” (Ibid.). But Marre explains that most cultural commentators prefer to see Ali G as a parody of a White wannabe. I am inclined to agree with Winterson and Dexter that Cohen’s Ali G character is really a racist parody of Black street culture. And I also want to stress that while the character Ali G looks White, his name is indeed Arabic and Muslim. So it may also be argued that perhaps Cohen is making fun of Black street culture or Black Muslims, or Arab (not White) wannabes, or all of them at once.

In the case of Borat, I argue that Cohen is more or less a “Jewish Minstrel” portraying Muslims in a savage and offensive manner. We cannot refute that when White comedians of the 1930s-1950s painted their faces Black to “entertain” the crowd, it was a form of anti-Black racism. Similarly, Cohen is a non-Muslim “painted up” as a Muslim, and this can easily be read as anti-Muslim racism. Yet he is being likened to comedic legends such as Andy Kaufman and Peter Sellers (MSNBC). While these legends are also known for never breaking character, the former made fun of Jews as a Jew and the latter made up fake countries for his characters so as not to offend real people. Ultimately, when a White guy paints his face brown and plays the part of the Black buffoon it is obviously racism, and the same can be said of a non-Muslim playing the part of a savage and anti-Jewish Muslim character.
Given the tension and violence in the Middle East between Muslims and Jews, these two groups should know better than to make fun of the other or perpetuate the stereotype that Muslims hate Jews or that Jews hate Muslims. In other words, if anyone does not have “the right” to make fun of Jews at the current historical juncture, it is Muslims. And similarly, Jews of all people should not be making fun of Muslims and portraying them as savage and vulgar anti-Semites. Because of his celebrity and success Cohen is in a position of power over the people—Muslims—he is representing. He can choose to represent Muslims positively or negatively in a manner that reaffirms and creates harmful stereotypes. The latter results in a type of cultural oppression insofar as “…in cultural oppression…the dominant group represents the subjugated in such a way that negative connotative meanings and myths are produced” (Hall, n.d.). This is precisely the way in which Cohen represents Muslims through Borat—he produces and re-produces negative connotative meanings and myths about Muslims as barbaric and rabidly anti-Jewish. Even his Jewish “victims” in the film felt it was an anti-Muslim representation. In a Boston Globe article (2006), Miriam Berhar, the kindly Bed and Breakfast owner whom Borat attacks in the film, claims that, “to me, it’s an anti-Muslim movie, not anti-Jewish, because Kazakhstan is mostly Muslim.”

Conclusion

Comedy is no excuse for racism. When Michael Richards of Seinfeld went into an anti-Black tirade at the Laugh Factory in Las Angeles in late 2006, no one found it funny. Instead he was called out publicly and driven to “apologize” on David Letterman. But Richards was not dressed up as a character when he revealed his racism, so it was easy to point the finger at him because the racist comments came directly out of his mouth. But Cohen’s racism is a lot subtler and much more difficult to call out. Indeed, Cohen has never said a bad word (that I know of) against Muslims, not as himself and not even when he is in character as Borat. Still, it is possible to argue that Cohen is being racist against Muslims in his very depiction of Borat. While many are quick to come to his defense, the fact remains that Kazakhstan is a Muslim country. What’s more, even though Borat never claims to be a Muslim, everything about his physical appearance, his behavior, and the way he sounds implies and connotes Muslim—in a perjorative manner—especially after 9/11. Indeed one of the racist Americans exposed in the film Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan warns Borat that even if he is not a Muslim, he looks Muslim and thus Americans are likely to assume he is one.

Overall, to be portrayed as a “Jew-hating Muslim” is a form of racism and negative stereotyping, for clearly Cohen is not really attacking Jews. Indeed, as previously mentioned, even his Jewish “victims” in the film ultimately found the film to be anti-Muslim. That so few people make the same connection is sad, but not surprising. It merely reaffirms the reality of unabated Islamophobia that has
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existed for decades but has spiraled out of control since 9/11 (Deen, 2004). Sadly, in the “post-9/11 world,” Islamophobia is the only acceptable racism left. Rather than applaud racism against other human beings—even if done through fictitious comedy—we must name it and stand against it. What are needed at the current juncture are realistic positive images of Muslims. Replacing the “bearded Muslim terrorist” with a mustached Muslim savage does very little to move humanity forward in a time when intercultural literacy is most needed.

References


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Borat in an Age of Postironic Deconstruction

Antonio López

The power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them. ... To tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them, to forget any fact that has become inconvenient, and then, when it becomes necessary again, to draw it back from oblivion for just so long as it is needed, to deny the existence of objective reality and all the while to take account of the reality which one denies—all this is indispensably necessary. Even in using the word doublethink it is necessary to exercise doublethink. For by using the word one admits that one is tampering with reality; by a fresh act of doublethink one erases this knowledge; and so on indefinitely, with the lie always one leap ahead of the truth.

—George Orwell, 1984

I will speak to you in plain, simple English. And that brings us to tonight’s word: ‘truthiness.’ Now I’m sure some of the ‘word police,’ the ‘wordinistas’ over at Webster’s are gonna say, ‘hey, that’s not really a word.’ Well, anyone who knows me knows I’m no fan of dictionaries or reference books. I don’t trust books. They’re all fact, no heart. And that’s exactly what’s pulling our country apart today. ‘Cause face it, folks; we are a divided nation. Not between Democrats and Republicans, or conservatives and liberals, or tops and bottoms. No, we are divided between those who think with their head, and those who know with their heart.

—Stephen Colbert, The Colbert Report

At first they appeared to be innocent Lite Brite kits assembled by mischievous teens. Placed in various locations across the greater Boston area as a guerrilla marketing campaign for the adult cartoon show Aqua Teen Hunger Force, it’s hard to conceive that these simple magnetic devices with batteries, duct tape, and LEDs would launch a hysterical terrorisms scare by city authorities. Summing up the gulf of reaction between the establishment and the pop culture public, on the YouTube page featuring a video of the guerrilla marketers in action, one observer in the comments area stated, “Just to clue you in: Bombs are traditionally not covered in
LEDs which trace out the shape of a cartoon moon person giving you the middle finger. Generally, as terrorists don’t want their bomb plots foiled, they tend not to decorate their bombs in bright lights advertising their presence and then leave them lying around for weeks.”

Yes, in retrospect the overreaction by Boston authorities does seem severe. But they are to be forgiven, somewhat, for being baffled by the cultural lexicon trafficked by marketers. In the ensuing days of the event, even pundits were having a difficult time labeling the action, ranging in superlatives such as “a terrorist hoax,” “prank,” “viral campaign,” “publicity stunt,” “marketing stunt,” “ad lights,” and “non-terrorist’ embarrassment in Boston” (Weaver, 2007, paragraph 11). Not surprisingly, the operation resulted in the Cartoon Network chief’s resignation, but despite the fall-out (not the radioactive kind) the show still managed a ratings spike. In the end, it’s the parent company, Turner Broadcasting, a subsidiary of Time Warner Inc., who profited the most. It was probably well worth the $2 million they paid to Boston for the trouble. To paraphrase an ancient Chinese curse, “May you live in confusing times.”

In an era when fake news is real news and real news is fake, it’s getting more difficult to discern what is commentary, propaganda, or a sales pitch. Even our random conversations threaten to be infected with the viral advertising practice of peer-to-peer marketing. This is what happens when a culture smuggles persuasion techniques in “postirony,” the simulacra of irony in which phrases are merely signs of sardonic currency, but are vacated of any political or critical content. Postirony is the embrace of contradictory ideologies as normal, acceptable, and desirable. It’s kitsch cognitive dissonance. It’s a wink to political consciousness while simultaneously discarding it. It’s Neil Postman’s idea that we are entertaining ourselves to death, but with the clipped smile of a Republican used car salesmen who just completed Newt Gingrich’s seminar on How to Become a Bolshevik Operative in the American Political System. It’s Gen X cynicism gone horribly astray. It’s the droll, expressionless face of Bill Murray in Lost in Translation and Broken Flowers, and is so deeply imbedded into the vernacular of advanced technological societies, few are conscious of it.

Examples abound, such as war critics viewing a highly disparaging parody like Team America as an indictment of the War on Terror, while wingnut warmongers simultaneously embrace it as a symbol of patriotism. Or Mars, Inc., can launch a Snickers viral Web campaign whose hip hop protagonists battle an evil record company selling out African American youth, but in reality the parent company allegedly engages in exploitative child labor practices in Africa to produce its candy. And then there are the misogynistic BudLight ads that discretely promote alcoholic behavior while telling us to “drink responsibly.” None of this is surprising given that marketers and their “marks” inhabit a violent, repressive world empire that is also supposed to be a democracy. Talk about doublethink. In the Age of Postirony, war is peace because who cares about constitutionally challenged militarism or a
mediated political system as long as at the end of the day the numbers on the stock exchange board still climb.

All this is exacerbated by the business of doing business. That is, we live in a commodities system with a media traditionally driven by advertising. The problem is that models are changing, and so too are consumers, especially one of the most coveted demographics: teens. Take, for example, the following description for a marketing industry conference attempting to unlock the mysteries of the teen market, called “What Teens Want”:

 Teens are wired different than any another consumer group. They navigate through media clutter with a heightened “BS” meter to sniff out hidden advertising agendas. In a post-scarcity media world, there is no shortage of brands or media pipeline channels. Attention is the new scarcity. Loyalty, trust and affinity become the new pipeline. When there is so much choice, what is the new role of earned attention?

The curious word here is “attention,” because as we’ll see, it was the problem of attention in the first place that created a cultural climate in which “cool” became the flattened emotion of knowledge work, with “postirony” as its current lexicon. Given that irony has been a potent tool of social criticism, it remains to be seen if such a strategy can still work. By using Sasha Cohen’s Borat character as a case study, we’ll examine how irony may still be possible in an age of postironic deconstruction.

Doublethink Trouble, Doublemint Gum

It may be useful to think of postirony as the postmodern equivalent of George Orwell’s (1990 [1949]) “doublethink.” Consider the following passage from 1984,

His mind slid away into the labyrinthine world of doublethink. To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully-constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them; to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it, to believe that democracy was impossible and that the Party was the guardian of democracy; to forget whatever it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back at the moment when it was needed, and then promptly to forget it again; and above all, to apply the same process to the process itself. That was the ultimate subtlety: consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the art of hypnosis you had just performed. Even to understand the word ‘doublethink’ involved using doublethink. (p. 35)

Now compare this passage with the following from Alex Shakar’s (2002) novel, The Savage Girl,

...Our culture has become so saturated with ironic doubt that it’s beginning to doubt its own mode of doubting. If everything is false, then by the same token anything can be taken as true, or at least as true enough. Truths are no longer
absolute; they’re shifting, temporary, whatever serves the purpose of the moment. Postironists create their own sets of serviceable realities and live in them independent of any facets of the outside world that they choose to ignore…. Practitioners of postironic consciousness blur the boundaries between irony and earnestness in ways we traditional ironists can barely understand, creating a state of consciousness wherein critical and uncritical responses are indistinguishable. Postirony seeks not to demystify but to befuddle, not to synthesize opposites but to suspend them, keeping open all possibilities at once. And we marketers, in forging a viable mode of postironic consumerism, must seek to foster in the consumer a mystical relationship with consumption. Through consumption consumers will be gods; outside of consumption they will be nothing: a perpetual oscillation between absolute control and absolute vulnerability, between grandeur and persecution. (p. 140)

Postirony is a strategy to deal with cognitive dissonance, a condition when one simultaneously possesses contradictory beliefs that result in mental noise. Like doublethink, postirony is a defense and a control strategy, but unlike in 1984, I don’t believe postirony was consciously constructed as a master strategy for mind control, but evolved as a result of an emotional tactic for the workplace to become a market language.

Irony can still be one of the primary forms of mental resistance against doublethink because it is through an ironic disposition one can distance herself from the ambient realm of misinformation and marketing. This underlies my weak theory of why dark humor is prevalent in Great Britain. I believe the one way a population can cope with becoming a decrepit and dying world military power is through sardonic humor. Monty Python is the best anecdote for imperial impotence, or the cross-dressing comic Eddie Izzard. As Shakespeare demonstrated repeatedly, the court jester was the only person permitted to speak truth to power without getting his head chopped off. Sadly, modern societies don’t employ tricksters in high office, but our corporate media abound with them. Consider John Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and now Cohen, a Brit. In modern parlance, they speak “truthiness to power”

Within postirony there is a space where interventions can disrupt internal paradoxes to form a kind of empowering dialectic. Comedian Colbert’s term “truthiness,” for example, has entered the zeitgeist because it so precisely mirrors the contradictory situation of infotainment as news we’re dealing with. It’s an update of the newspapers term “bellyfeel,” which describes an intuitive belief that belies logic, but truthiness, because it is satire and thereby politically safe, pierces the liminal zone of noisy dissonance to clarify the manner in which news is now packaged in mainstream media, tricky business, to be sure.

Such strategies are difficult to contrive. Look no further than Fox News’ “irony deficient” rightwing counterpunch, The 1/2 Hour News Hour, which fails to muster even a snort with its canned laughter and inability to maneuver postirony, because, unlike media critics, they are the party-member analog of 1984 who are so enmeshed
with doublethink, they can’t navigate its treacherous realm with authenticity. As the blogger Plaid Adder notes,

Irony has been defined many different ways, but the definition I think works best here is that irony is what we see when we contemplate the gap between what appears to be and what is, and/or the gap between what is and what ought to be. The main project of *The Daily Show* is to satirize the media; and because the media are responsible for creating perception, and because the perception created by the media has lately become massively and outrageously divergent from anything one might call reality, and because reality right now just sucks so hard, every aspect of *The Daily Show* is about irony.¹

*The 1/2 Hour News Hour* is trying a complex ninja move when trying to parody the parody, and fails because, as Addeler explains, the key to successful humor is in deriding authority, not underdogs:

Mocking the powerful has the positive effect of reminding everyone that though these figures may be powerful, they are not superhuman, and can be resisted/outwitted/defied; it also has the therapeutic effect of validating the anger and pain we feel as we suffer for these people, and reminding us that in fact, it’s not us, it’s them. Mocking the vulnerable is just bullying, and all it does is pander to the audience’s worst instincts. Right-wing pundits in the main either don’t understand this rule, or have a seriously warped understanding of who’s vulnerable and who’s powerful. Take, for instance, Rush Limbaugh’s hilarious impression of Michael J. Fox on Parkinson’s medication. What made him think that was funny? Did it remind him of when he was a boy and they all used to band together on the playground to torment the kid with cerebral palsy? Or in his mind, is Michael J. Fox a servant of some vast international conspiracy of Parkinson’s sufferers out to destroy all that is good in the world?²

Still, the lack of an effective ironic approach from conservatives seems odd considering that rightwing humor can be some of the most biting, as in the T-shirt with the phrase, “This shirt brought to you by capitalism,” accompanying a photo of Che. The key point is that for irony to work, it has to reveal some kind of innate truth, such as bullying by authorities, or hypocrisy. Without a moral compass, it is just another stream of humorless “weasel words” recycled from the PR industry.

Irony is also a finicky tool because you run the risk of going over people’s heads or outright offending them. Remember Lenny Bruce? In the epoch of National Security Agency keyword filters trying to ferret out terrorists on the Web, or humorless Homeland Security officials assembling watch lists, words are powerful markers of patriotic infidelity, but taken out of context, black—or sardonic—humor can be totally misunderstood. Ironically (!), this could even have an adverse effect on the most pro-war of our society. Take, for instance, the Green Beret motto, “Kill ‘em all, let God sort ‘em out.” If you were a computer program, how would you interpret the motives of the phrase’s authors?

It takes a deft trickster to deploy irony as a critical weapon when as a cultural
rhetorical practice it has become so commonplace it fails to rise above the din of absurdity. So it remains to be seen if Jewish comic Cohen’s anti-Semitic Borat, the bumbling pumpkin who must navigate his way through the treacherous landmines of New York snobbery and Middle American prejudice, is a combatant in the global psych warfare of postironic marketing, or is just an ingenious clown exploiting weaknesses in the moral character of flawed people. After all, Cohen is just a comic, right? A few things clue us in that Borat may indeed be an insurgent. The Borat character is a TV reporter, i.e., a member of the media, and is also a refugee of modernity’s forgotten realm. That is, his character is not a child of the Internet, but rather of the Second World, which was obliterated by the termination of the Cold War. In pre-9/11 literature on media activism, 1989 is considered a watershed because it is at that moment “modernity” finally collapsed (represented by the end of the battle between world behemoths, U. S. and USSR). It’s when we “officially” enter the age of neo-liberal globalization. But multiple “modernities” still exist. Not everyone is wired into the techno-realm of the U. S. and Europe, and it is from this perspective that Borat seeks to be a tour guide (with a 1917 map of the U. S., no less!). In doing so, he is an insurrectionary caricature who becomes an agent of the transition from an isolated power grid to global nomadism. He’s training us how to be productive citizens, and hence modernized workers, in the global economy. But before we probe deeper into his methods, we are still like proverbial fish that do not know the sea; we must explore this illusorily territory of marketing cool as if it were the foreign land that Borat reports from. How as cultural reporters would we map the territory?

**Psychological Warfare—Infowars—Ontological Warfare**

For McLuhan, media content was like the meat thrown to the guard dogs. It’s just a way to divert attention from the actual changes that media forms have been making on our perception. So beyond the mirror shades of cool are more insidious conclusions made by German media theorists and French philosopher Paul Virilio. As reported by Geert Lovink (2003), there is a school of thought that underlying all media strategies is militarism. “Media from now on are merely spin-off products of the military that basically deal with the war of perception. The rest is merely noise” (p. 26). Not surprisingly, the flipside is that the “trauma” of the Second World War produced modern media criticism. “War is the father of all media, and the founding fathers of media theory are Heidegger and Benjamin (McLuhan being a good third)” (p. 27). Disinformation and war are the key to our historical moment because it is the propaganda environment that sets the tone of our social and economic system. The concern is that underlying all our decisions is a deeply embedded consumerism at the service of a war economy, and militarism shoring up and expanding the “free” market:
The Big Digital Bang is threatening to crush (or “liberate”) all meaning, to keep every cry against injustice out of the broadcasting range. That’s at least the fear of a group—perhaps a diminishing group—for whom “media” means more than just a job processing other people’s data. But through this data smog and processing fog, the lessons of the Cold War were learned and universalized: through this haze of the “media” we see the vague outlines and traces of invisible psychological warfare, without clear fronts and with a low-intensity paranoid conflicts on the horizons. Infowar precludes the friend-enemy distinction, which according to Carl Schmitt, forms the basis of politics. (Lovink, 2003, p. 307)

In CIA parlance, propaganda campaigns are “playing the Grand Wurlitzer,” i.e., keying all the right notes to generate a grand campaign of information that is more akin to noise than music. Curiously, there is something a bit old school (and dare we say Borat-ish?) about the image of a Wurlitzer organ. What comes to mind are silent movies (in which directed visuals merely require a soundtrack), skating rinks (in which we as citizens are to mindlessly lap in circles), churches (again an environment where our behaviors are orchestrated), or funerals (no comment necessary). So why noise? There are two kinds of propaganda: black and gray. Black propaganda is an outright lie, as in, “Saddam Hussein is responsible for 9-11.” Gray propaganda is a lie that contains an element of truth to make it more believable, such as, “there are weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.” Granted the reality quotient here is minuscule, but because there was a history of WMDs in the past, its potentiality makes the idea feasible. The philosopher Robert Anton Wilson was fond of saying that 25% of political information is true; we just don’t know which part. What makes gray propaganda effective is that it distorts and confuses issues, and also puts people on the defensive. Think of the “Swift boating” of John Kerry’s presidential campaign. It muddled and distorted key elements of Kerry’s character, making it a distraction that ultimately hurt his image and detracted from the discussion of issues. If you compare this with CIA led-operations in Third World countries over the past 50 years, you’d see similar tactics used to discredit politicians who were out of favor with Washington’s policy goals.

Borat toys with America’s unconscious militarism when he performs at the Salem rodeo. To great cheers he amps up the cruelty of war: “We support your war of terror… May ‘Supreme Warlord’ George W. Bush drink the blood of every single man, woman, and child of Iraq… May you destroy their country so that for the next thousand years, not even a single lizard will survive in their desert!” At first the crowd cheers, but as the statements get bloodier, they are increasingly confused. Did he really say that? Is that what we really think?

Fugitive Poseurs: Origins of Postirony

Native American writer Gerald Visner postulates that Indians compartmentalize an internalized caricature of themselves, which manifests as a “fugitive pose.” Treated as internal enemies in their own lands, Native Americans have had to develop
mental strategies to combat spiritual and psychic colonization through a defensive posture that is unemotional and distant. Indigenous people are typically the first to bear the brunt of “enclosure,” the systematic practice of capitalist restructuring that in essence smashes land-based cultures like bags of dry clay, then remodels them into the system of commodities. It’s not just a matter of turning people into workers, but it’s restructuring their spatiotemporal reality. With enclosure comes “the loss of traditional culture bearings: the emergence of a sense anomic associated with the loss of a stable and cyclical cultural life” (Andrejevic, p. 30).

This gives pause to the concept of “early adapters,” which is usually reserved for those heroic individuals of the capitalist avant-garde that innovate new technology, invent edgy software or develop new styles. The real early adapters are those who have figured out how to maneuver around mind control and colonization of their souls that results from the embedding of capitalist ideology into the entire thought universe of a society. In the case of Native culture, humor is one of many strategies. In the Native American written and directed movie, *Smoke Signals*, there’s a humorous scene that plays with the fugitive pose:

Victor Joseph: You gotta look mean or people won’t respect you. White people will run all over you if you don’t look mean. You gotta look like a warrior! You gotta look like you just came back from killing a buffalo!

Thomas Builds-the-Fire: But our tribe never hunted buffalo—we were fishermen.

Victor Joseph: What! You want to look like you just came back from catching a fish? This ain’t “Dances With Salmon” you know!

If the fugitive pose evolved out of a historical situation in which Native Americans were systematically relocated from their tribal lands and assimilated into the thought system of the colonizers through boarding schools (“Kill the Indian, save the man” was the educational slogan of the day), it should be noted that in the late 1800s there was a popular genre of “abduction” literature in which White female colonists were kidnapped by “savages.” After entering an alien world, they return altered. Vizner notes that there is some similarity between these stories and modern alien abduction myths. The connection I see relates to the ambient environment of the new technological society that produced both of these “hysterias”; these stories exist in an environment in which there is a prevailing sense of dislocation resulting from new technology. Since the invention of electricity and the telegraph, traditional notions of place and self have been radically disrupted. In both cases—abduction literature of the 1800s and that of the aliens at the end of the 20th Century—according to common literary tropes the most “innocent” of our society, women, were being forced through alien sexuality to reproduce hybrids. It is my contention that there is a deep cultural anxiety about the radical shift in perception brought about by mechanical reproduction (a sexual metaphor, if you think about it). As cybernetic hybrids, we, too, require a fugitive pose.'
Consequently, there are a few things worth noting about the “turn” that media technology brought about in the 19th Century. One is the sense that recording technology, as media scholar Mary Ann Doane (2002) has noted, became a means to contain catastrophe and time.

The rationalization of time characterizing industrialization and the expansion of capitalism was accompanied by a structuring of contingency and temporality through emerging technologies of representation—a structuring that attempted to ensure their residence outside structure, to make tolerable an incessant rationalization. Such a strategy is not designed simply to deal with the leakage or by-product of rationalization; it is structurally necessary to the ideologies of capitalist modernization. (p. 11)

The second is what media archeologist Jonathan Crary (2001) interprets is the double bind of perception. This, he says, results from conflicting modes of mental engagement originally required of industrial work’s tight focus and the multisensory shock created by exploding urban environments and new media. This is at the root of our contemporary predominance, if not false, diagnosis of ADD:

In a culture that is so relentlessly founded on a short attention span, on the logic of the nonsequitur, on perceptual overload, on the generalized ethic of ‘getting ahead,’ and on the celebration of aggressiveness, it is nonsensical to pathologize these forms of behavior or look for the causes of this imaginary disorder in neurochemistry, brain anatomy, and genetic predisposition… [T]he behavior categorized as ADD is merely one of many manifestations resulting from this cultural double bind, from the contradictory modes of performance and cognition that are continually demanded or incited. (p. 36-7)

He further laments the “the sweeping use of potent neurochemicals as a strategy of behavior management” (p. 37).

Perhaps “fugitive” maybe too strong a word, because fugitive implies a self-knowing subject engaged in an act of exile, a conscious running from the system. It may be more accurate to describe the modern cyborg as a “fugue,” someone who wonders in a narcoleptic state. This is closer to the dangers of the increasingly over-stimulated media environment warned of by McLuhan. In his re-working of the Narcissus myth, rather than being enraptured by our reflection, McLuhan (2002) says that just as media technology expand our senses, we extend ourselves into our mediated reflection. In the process we “autoamputate”—we numb the parts of ourselves that get over-stimulated, yet we stimulate ourselves further just so we can feel something. Like screeching guitar feedback gone awry, the result is getting trapped within an iterating loop:

The Greek myth of Narcissus is directly concerned with a fact of human experience, as the word Narcissus indicates. It is from the Greek word narcosis, or numbness. The youth Narcissus mistook his own reflection in the water for another person. This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the
servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image. The nymph Echo tried to win his love with fragments of his own speech, but in vain. He was numb. He had adapted to his extension of himself and had become a closed system. Now the point of this myth is the fact that men at once become fascinated by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves. There have been cynics who insisted that men fall deepest in love with women who give them back their own image. Be that as it may, the wisdom of the Narcissus myth does not convey any idea that Narcissus fell in love with anything he regarded as himself. Obviously he would have had very different feelings about the image had he known it was an extension or repetition of himself. It is, perhaps, indicative of the bias of our intensely technological and, therefore, narcotic culture that we have long interpreted the Narcissus story to mean that he fell in love with himself, that he imagined the reflection to be Narcissus! (pp. 41-2)

I take this as a valid explanation for why films and television are increasingly more violent and more sexual while incorporating faster edits, and are developing more complex plotlines. I predict that future films will be five minutes at the most; anything longer will just be too slow for our over-stimulated, multitasking society (YouTube and the “media snacker” mentality has almost brought us there already).

Not surprisingly, artists surfing the edges of these societal shifts at the end of the 19th Century began to change their practices from representing external objects to describing psychological states. Consequently, by WWI two significant cultural developments manifested in the fine arts. First, mass media became the subject of paintings with the literal incorporation of newspaper headlines (The Futurists), or by the physical collaging of newsprint (Picasso). Secondly, Dada and Surrealism emerged to create an absurdist dialectic with mass culture. Satire became the primary rhetorical tools for commenting on the contradictions of modernity, especially in light of the carnage produced by the First World War, but also from the dehumanizing and mind-numbing impact of industrialization. Additionally, thinkers like Freud and Jung popularized the idea of dreams and unconsciousness, enabling artists to incorporate the new vocabulary of juxtaposition as a tool for social criticism. The quintessential example is Magritte’s “Treachery of Images” featuring the infamous pipe with the inscribed French phrase, “This is not a pipe.” Magritte was commenting on our propensity to mistake reproductions with the things themselves. This is a byproduct of how mechanically reproduced arts create another double bind of having to simultaneously embrace an image as a thing, and its dual condition of the thing represented. That artists would now be questioning the fundamental principles of language—visual and print—indicates a growing unease with the instability of meaning of normal discourse.

Not only does irony emerge in Surrealism as a way to cope with having to contain different modes of perception simultaneously, double binds requiring complex mental acrobatics become currency in the emergence of American cool, especially in the dialog of film noire and later with the guise of post-WWII aviator glasses reflecting the world back at us. Alan Liu (2004) argues that “cool” is how
culture deals with the flattening of emotion required of a Taylorized workforce. The “Fordization of the face” symbolized the emotionless assembly line worker who could be fired for smiling. The smoothing and management of worker emotions was further codified as we transformed from an industrial economy to one based on knowledge work, and the invention of a white-collar middle class. “For better or for worse, a good firm has one structure of feeling” (Liu, p. 125).

Liu further explains that cultural “cool” became a way of enclosing (or displacing, really) dissent, and creating a feedback system, much like the one described by McLuhan, in which cool could be a perpetual motion machine that serves as a kind of emotional restraint system.

The contradiction in looking to high-tech consumer culture for refuge from the knowledge work that produces such culture is not lost on the cool themselves. Their response to the contradiction—at once their fiercest, most genuine critique to date and the symptom of a profound defeat—is irony, our great contemporary ‘Fordization of the face’… Even when knowledge workers have graduated and gone to work, ‘cool’ is how they instantly retreat to their mental ‘room’ instead of joining the broader, public history of peoples resistant to rationalization. (p. 305)

I Saw the Best Minds of My Generation
Starving Hysterical Sardonic at the Postaprony of Dawn

Still, traversing the margins of this space of cool were the subcultures that acted as capitalist escape valves. Fluxus, Yippies, Situationists, and punks all deployed irony, hoaxing, and pranking as tools for social criticism and activism. As the progenitor of Gen X, punk brought irony to its critical apex and then wiped it out. I should know, because I was there. Having grown up in the post-1960s hangover of Los Angeles, many of my generational ilk graduated from the pop psychology of the 1970s to a haze of nuclear holocaust dreams and Ronald Reagan. Like many of my peers, we started out as skaters navigating the concrete ruins of suburbia and then matriculated to the slam-a-thons of hardcore punk. In Los Angeles (and elsewhere in the technological world), punk’s primary aesthetic was appropriation and irony. We stole from every avant-garde movement known in the 20th Century and regurgitated them with a very dark strain of humor. Consider the names of artist and bands of the era: Dead Kennedys, Jello Biafra, Diana Cancer, etc. We utterly believed that hippies had failed to make the revolution and we were left with the tattered shreds of ineffective social protest and ecological apocalypse. In retrospect, this was a skewed view, but this is how things seemed in 1980.

Unfortunately, as a social movement punk failed as well. For one it substituted one dysfunctional family for another. Drugs, alcohol, and violence were constant reminders of our psychological frailty. But more importantly, our logic was nihilistic. The movement was so cynical it could cease to believe anything anymore. Sadly, this may have become one of our cultural legacies: the one thing that got adapted
by the culture of marketing was punk’s postmodern pastiche aesthetic, and cynical irony. But it’s one thing to use irony as tool for social critique and sensibility, and another as an advertising technique. Like French cheese, irony remains authentic and alive as long as you don’t refrigerate it.

**Authenticity in the Mirror World Colonies**

Generally when I encounter any official statements made by government officials, I assume that the opposite is true. In some ways we live in a mirror world. When you stare at your reflection, left is right, and right is left. Trouble is, we often mistake the reflection for reality. This is what Socrates decried when he said any wizard could perform the simple trick of imitating the world: just hold up a mirror. The ancient Aztecs of Mexico understood this. Tezcatlipoca, AKA Smoking Mirror, was a god of war, illusions, and the dark arts, and was primarily accessed through obsidian mirrors. In an interesting historical twist, the precursor to film, phantasmagoria, were 19th Century performances created with a mix of smoke and mirror. Reflections and refractions, especially when you point mirrors at each other, can trick perception, something we call in less polite circles, mind fucking. Unfortunately there is no better phrase to describe the mediated reality we maneuver on a daily basis.

Having grown up in the border region of the Southwestern United States, I have been interacting with border culture my entire life. Over the past years I’ve seen an interesting transition take place in which a population that traditionally has strong resistant strains in its mental make-up to be immune to “mind fucking,” is trying desperately to avoid the brainwashing that has so thoroughly pervaded its northern neighbors. One of the strategies is an aesthetic practice called *rasquachismo*. Roughly translated as “kitch appropriation,” it’s a folk art practice that reconfigures invasive pop culture. Imagine Bart Simpson with a poncho, the Starbucks label with Poncho Villa instead of a mermaid, or the Nintendo logo becoming “No Intiendo” (“I don’t understand”). The U. S. and Canadian analog would be culture jamming. For *rasquachismo* wit is paramount: it’s that ability to laugh at our folly to make it bearable. This was the insight that makes *Stranger in a Strange Land’s* (1991) hybrid alien-human protagonist learn to laugh: the tragedy of others is ultimately what makes us giggle. Michael the Martian-human says after an epiphany, people “laugh because it hurts... because it’s the only thing that’ll make it stop hurting... The goodness is in the laughing. I grok it is a bravery...and a sharing...against pain and sorrow and defeat” (p. 387-8).

For Mexicans, humor is a matter of survival. Being cultural hybrids themselves, Mexicans are dealing with dual modes of consciousness from their European and indigenous ancestors. As they are being integrated into the global marketplace, now they are contending with NAFTA, Wal-Mart, and Taco Bell. As one worker building the first McDonalds in the northern Mexican state of Zacatecas says of his El Norte-loving brother,
Every head is a world... There’s the head of McDonald, the head of Soriana, and the head of Jaramillo over here; the head of the guy who invented cars, the guy who invented airplanes, and the guy who invented televisions. No one is the same. No one does the same thing in the same way. [But now] the whole world is coming out of one head, and from that head you’re getting everything. It’s happening all over Mexico with these stores like Wal-Mart and McDonald’s, stores that came out of the head of allá [there]. Down here, in Mexico, that head is developing all its thoughts. (Silverstein, 2005)

By taking the codes of corporate invaders and mixing them with ironic juxtapositions, Mexicans maintain a critical distance that allows them to individuate in the face of branding’s mental tyranny. Remember, advertisers know that once an image has been placed in a person’s mind, it can’t be taken out. This is the danger of the “head developing all its thoughts.” But rasquachismo is alive and well among Mexican punks. When I saw Mexico City’s premiere alternative music band Café Tecuba perform in New York City, the crowd’s folk taxonomy was decidedly more “real” than that of the prevailing hipster crowd I had seen at the Village Voice’s Siren Music Festival the day before. The Siren Music Festival’s Coney Island kitsch locale provided the backdrop for the predominantly white swarm of music fans that appropriated hip hop, punk, and White trash fashion, exhibiting all the signs of rebellion but possessing none of its content or perspective. This was evidenced by the uncritical presence of Budweiser, Army, and X-Box as ubiquitous sponsors of the festival; nary a peep of protest from the cheap beer-drinking crowd. By contrast, at the Café Tecuba show immigrant youth, who are forced to live invisible lives in one of the most visually stimulating cities in the world, fully engaged satire as an instrument of mental mutiny. Several kids had the “Hecho en Mexico” (Made in Mexico) clothing label tattooed on the backs of their necks, while others slam danced with Mexican wrestler masks. You couldn’t tell if it was a rock concert or lucha libre wrestling match (Mexican wrestling has long been associated with working class resistance). In the metropolis at the center of global marketing, Mexican youth asserted their identity by contextualizing it with grave humor and irony.

In Mexico City, naco (“tacky” or “trashy”) is synonymous with cool. As one T-shirt company writes on its MySpace page (with misspellings intact),

Naco is originally a derogative term used by upper and middle class Mexicans to describe things and people they felt were way beneath them in terms of hipness, taste and economic status. It’s usually employed as a synonym for “poor & igno-
rant”, but Naco-ness knows no economic or educational boundaries. Naco-ness is about complete earnestness. The typical Naco is very passionate about his/her likes. They will argue for hours on end that Quiet Riot is, indeed, the best band ever, after Creedence Clearwater Revival, of course. Their dislikes are irrelevant. Naco-ness is a style that goes beyond kitsch, camp or plain old cheesiness. It is very spiritual in its acceptance of the Self, and so, if one’s Self wants to dress in unbuttoned brightly colored shiny shirts, skin-tight faded black jeans, gold chains,
white socks and black shoes, topped off by a magnificent mullet, so be it. Naco is more a state of mind. It's more a self-assured disregard for what others think is cool without being arrogant or closeminded. Naco-ness is about being your own person regardless of if you’re ever in the right or not. Ultimately, Naconess is about being yourself…

Contrast this with Williamsburg, the Brooklyn neighborhood that has been at the center of contemporary American cool, which launched the everyman trailer trash look that has spread across American malls. The look is “keeping it real” by slumming in working class culture. Built into all these style strategies, the common denominator is a return to some sense of authenticity. Lowbrow and low tech, we seek eternal return to humbler, less technological times. Cohen one-ups them by building a character that’s a hybrid of an international class of hillbillies, recycling the clichés of incest and other prejudiced beliefs surrounding the global underclass, but also orienting us to a world that actually remains substantially divided among classes, culture and technological access. The need to mine the past for authenticity is to create a dialog with the present. Observes media critic Mark Andreyavek (2004),

In short, what emerges in the promise in new media is a tension very similar to that noted of by Walter Benjamin in his excavation of the prehistory of consumer capitalism in the nineteenth century: the way in which the promise of the future resonates with the unfulfilled desires of a mythical past—what he referred to as an ‘ur-past’… The deployment of the unfulfilled potential of the ur-past may have politically progressive potential, insofar as it offers an alternative to the given state of affairs, but as Benjamin’s own analysis suggests, it can also serve as an alibi for the self-proliferation and extension of the logic of the present. (p. 26)

Confuse and Conquer!

In addition to disinformation and propaganda in the service of our war economy, there is also the ambient vocabulary of advertising, our ubiquitous social and religious subjectivity more commonplace than church altars and frescos during the Italian Renaissance. Sadly, the cultural practices initiated by Gen X in the form of irony have been thoroughly incorporated by marketing. Consider the listless, droll voice of the male narrator that doesn’t care about anything, or the hapless male drinker of Bud Light who is perpetually perplexed and stupefied. It may be that postirony is the snarky aesthetic or wink-wink device for the ever “elusive” species of male consumers ages 16 to 34, AKA the mook. In short, the “mook” is a perpetual 13 year-old with thriving libido, Dionysian appetite, and cash to spend. He is also the Narcissistic stereotype often conjured when critics attack MySpace and YouTube for being cesspools of fart jokes and frat boy drink fests. And guess what? Like the drunken college students in the RV featured in Borat, they are soon entering the work force, just in time to mount the crushed emotional syntax of knowledge work.

One of the biggest disappointments concerning postirony is the demise of
culture jamming as a critical weapon against advertising, which is the act of taking the codes of marketing and aiming them back at themselves, a kind of pointing the mirror at the mirror technique. For example, a typical culture jam is defacing a billboard so that its meaning is completely reversed by rearranging its words or altering its image. Unfortunately, billboard “liberation” and guerrilla marketing are now common marketing techniques, and it has become impossible to tell what is social critique and what is a sales pitch anymore. There was a NBC billboard, for instance, that advertised the show Friends by displaying a picture of the show’s three actresses accompanied by the tagline, “Cute Anorexic Chicks.” Is this a feminist media critique, or the “wink-wink” persuasion method that tells us, yeah we know this is bullshit, but buy the product anyway? This technique was also used in Sprite’s “Obey Your Thirst” campaign, which featured Sports stars mocking the idea that celebrities can convince consumers to buy something.

Additionally, these days it is very common to use deconstruction—a central pedagogical tool of media literacy—as an advertisement tool. A few examples include Sprite’s “subluminal” TV spots that poke fun at subliminal advertising while doing it, and Fed-Ex ran a commercial in which it showed audiences how to construct a successful Super Bowl ad. In some ways this is a victory for human intelligence: advertisers know that people, especially youth, are increasingly skeptical of the ad industry. People making ads, the primary practitioners of postirony, are probably the most cynical of the bunch. I take this as evidence that humans are not as stupid as we assume, and that advertising is less effective than cultural critics argue. But as the quote from the teen marketing conference explicitly states (“In a post-scarcity media world, there is no shortage of brands or media pipeline channels. Attention is the new scarcity”), the problem is the level of clutter that makes discussing such issues so difficult. You have to sift through so much crap to triangulate anything ethical. This may be the ultimate triumph of “camp.” Recalling Sontag’s (2001[1964]) discussion, she remarks that camp is a sensibility that one knows but cannot define. “To emphasize style is to slight content, or to introduce an attitude which is neutral with respect to content. It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical” (p. 277). Because postirony is antipolitical in nature, it takes great skill to insert a “sensibility” of authenticity back into irony.

One such strategy is tactical media, and though he may not be conscious of it, Cohen deploys it with ease. Tactical media are micro-political interventions, if you will. They are fluid activities that subvert through flexible and malleable forms. Consequently, there are many ways to define and create tactical media, which depend on the fundamental ambience of our society’s postmodern subjectivity, which is self-referential, reflexive and collaged; basically the “mash-up.” This is why Lovink (2003) states, “There is no need for globally recognizable signifiers. Instead, tactical media work with the basic, but difficult recognition of difference” (p.258). Cohen plays this difference most clearly with the technique of “solecism”—intentional
word distortions. Through wordplay he defuses newspeak’s snarky marketing language, as in the case of, “I am big like can of Pepsi,” in reference to his male girth. But also as a foreigner from a decidedly un-sexy, dead imperial backwater like Kazakhstan, he can play up the contrast for affect.

With hoaxing as a prime technique, Borat’s pranking is a malleable cognitive weapon that navigates perception and prejudice. In an MTV saturated culture of Punk’d and Jackass, Cohen understands how discomfort engages our critical faculties; it breaks us down emotionally. Admittedly, his characters make me squirm, especially Ali G. There have been times while watching him when I feel saddened by the manner in which he targets his victims. Yet Borat strikes us as a simple everyman who is naively trying to find his way in the world. In other words, he is “us;” so we can project ourselves into his misadventure because in many ways we, too, are like country bumpkins when facing daily hypercapitalist mediation. The fact that he addresses us on camera is his way of garnering empathy, conversing with us because as the audience we inhabit the kitsch psychic realm of Kazakhstan. But in reality we’re actually citizens of “Americanistan,” some imagined nation that we occupy in our multimedia groupthink.

Borat is also an ambassador of reality TV. The film’s mockumentary style is a hybrid narrative documentary, partly scripted, partly improvised on-camera action. Borat navigates this distorted zone of authenticity, much like the characters in reality game-docs who are half performing, half surviving the scripted desires of the show’s producers. As many commentators of reality TV havens stated, this is partly a way for us to process and normalize living in an increasingly surveilled world. Shows like Survivor are also forums that help us cope with the experience of being mediated at the workplace. Trump’s The Apprentice is the penultimate example of this trend. The mistake most critics make is that they identify the realms depicted on these programs as fake. I’d venture to say they are no more artificial than our daily lives when we perform a variety of roles as students, employees, citizens, and the public. The difference is a degree of surveillance and amplification.

What Borat does is remediate that experience by incorporating reality TV’s aesthetic practices, but then hybridizes them further with physical comedy and social commentary (recall that the first show he sees on his hotel television is Cops). Imagine if such situations were exploited on shows like The Simple Life starring Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie. If you examine the subtext of that program, which in many ways is the reverse of Borat (for in their case it’s the city sophisticates who visit “backwards’ rural America), what you actually see is a very conservative ideological agenda in keeping with the show’s host network, Fox Network. In the case of the city girls, they are ultimately the fools with no moral compass or values, precisely the opposite of Cohen’s character. Though Borat is a flawed human, especially in his views of women and Jews, he has a distinct view of the world. In the end he realizes his infatuation with Pamela Anderson is based on il-
lusions, and instead falls in love with a woman who is the antithesis of Anderson’s hypermediated personas.

Cohen also mediates the idea of a TV journalist. This is particularly evident when he appears on the local morning news program and violates every convention of etiquette, protocol, and respect for the medium, including breaching camera position and the pre-defined spaces of the TV studio. He mocks the self-importance that media stake in our world. Also, Cohen’s ability to navigate postirony makes him a more effective reporter than Michael Moore. Though Moore’s shtick has been somewhat useful in bringing important issues to the fore, there is a certain pomposity that is out of step with the culture of postirony; postironists are too self-absorbed to incorporate an ego as large as Moore’s. Borat’s character is a true clown, his mustache a stand-in for whiteface (and a bit of a Groucho Marx rerun as well), and in doing so it becomes easier to insert ourselves as protagonists on his pilgrimage. This is bit like the theory of cartooning: the more general and simple your lines (such as Peanuts), the easier it is to project your imagination. The more detailed, such as superhero comics, are for older audiences who have less imagination than little kids. This is also in keeping with McLuhan’s theory of hot and cool media. Moore is a “hot,” well-defined character needing less interaction, whereas Borat is “cool”; he engages more senses.

In another gesture to postirony, Borat must be unbearably uncool to be cool. This is reminiscent of the cultural trend to mine ‘80s’ nerd culture with movies like Napoleon Dynamite. As mentioned in the discussion of the “ur-past,” it’s not just a postmodern practice anymore to recycle the past; there is an effort to inhabit it. Uncle Rico in Napoleon Dynamite, for example, explicitly orders a time machine to reenter ancient times of media lore. In Borat’s case you can do so through the film, or his Web site, which is the design antithesis of Web 2.0.

Just as the Borat film’s graphics begin with footage from an imaginary scratched propaganda film, it concludes with his return to “Kazakhstan” where villagers now own iPods. A laptop sits prominently on the table where Borat’s cassette-playing boombox was before. Though he’s displaying technological cool as a sign of civilized advancement, at the same time he rejects Pamela Anderson’s “plastic” for a more “authentic” women in the guise of an African American, overweight prostitute (the ultimate social pariah as we learn when he invites her to be his guest at the Southern etiquette dinner). In doing so, Borat’s “cultural learnings” is trying to make our mediated culture more humane by inserting “authentic” humans into the mix. As for the poor souls of “Kazakhstan” who’ll eventually enter the knowledge work economy, may they do so with an ironic rich diet.

Postscript

There is a disheartening downside to all the Borat hype. When the Halloween parade in Greenwich Village coincided with the release of Borat, that night there
were dozens of Borat doppelgangers roaming among the revelers, and the movie’s infamous ice cream truck was one of the parade’s floats. Did I see Cohen, or just one of his many apparitions flirting with the crowd? I also encountered several costumed revelers dressed as Dr. Seuss’ “Star-Belly Sneetches.” You may recall the story about conformity in which legions of Sneetches compete to outdo each other with body modifications in order to stick out from the crowd. With dozens of Borats roving the Village, would the Cohen character cease to stand out or get obscured as so much cultural product does in our media saturated world? Only truthiness will tell.

Notes
2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truthiness
3 KlaxonCow, fifth paragraph, Feb. 19, 2007 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qCKwPbh1EA&eurl=
4 http://whatteenswant.com/whatteens/index.jsp
5 http://journals.democraticunderground.com/Plaid%20Adder/101, paragraph 8, 2/28/06
6 http://journals.democraticunderground.com/Plaid%20Adder/101, paragraph 6, 2/28/06
7 I can’t help but think of Hummer H2 ads that repeatedly depict the earth as an alien landscape in which cars, served by new humans, must inhabit. The SUV is a kind of fugitive pose against global warming and vagrancies of impending disaster brought on by the onset of capitalism. Not surprisingly, the majority of these ads target women, not just female drivers, but also to “nag” the family patriarch into obtaining them.
8 http://www.myspace.com/usanaeco

References

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My Name Is Sacha:
Fiction and fact in a New Media Era

Michael Hoechsmann & Giuliana Cucinelli

If high-grossing movies can be made with just a video camera and a few guys in a van, the studios might find real competition from every fool with a digital camera and access to YouTube… If you’re under 35, you realize that everything is public now. Even if your racist rant were for a show in Kazakhstan, it would be on the Internet anyway. Never trust anyone under 35. Especially if he has a video camera. (*Time Magazine*, October 29, 2007)

When Sacha Baron Cohen’s character Borat made his big screen debut in *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* he was already part of a feedback loop for avid Web 2.0 netizens who had previously received a taste of this immature menace on the YouTube video sharing site. Cohen’s first performances of the Borat character had been screened on TV on *Da Ali G Show* and were then recycled across media platforms, particularly Web 2.0 sites such as YouTube. *Da Ali G Show* is a TV program that tests the lines between fact and fiction, a news show with a tongue in cheek edge that borrows from journalistic codes and conventions and comments on various socio-political events throughout the world. Congruent with other fictionalized first person narratives of YouTube producers such as lonelygirl15, Ali G’s Borat was just another make believe character in the new circuits of media circulation. Taking his product, or production, to the silver screen was the next innovation, a feature film length video clip that demonstrates the powerful nature of the new first person narratives of the Web 2.0. These narcissistic narratives have become the lingua franca of online video communication and Borat has trumped the denizens of YouTube by cashing in one such narrative on the silver screens. At once ribald comedy and vulnerable personal narrative, Borat the movie is emblematic of a set of forces at work in contemporary media, a mixture of Web 2.0 narcissistic narrative, the mockumentary style of documentary filmmaking, and the fictionalized veritas of reality TV.

In this era of the quickcam v-idiot, where producing and distributing media
representations is possible for anyone with a camera, an editing suite and broad band capacity to upload to a Web 2.0 application, it is not surprising that quality will sometimes be sacrificed for sake of the unrehearsed, whimsical production. Many producers of media content in the Web 2.0 domains present that which is on their minds, unrefined, narrowly crafted productions that merit little attention. While the whimsical is the currency of content on domains such as YouTube, some amateur media makers have seized the moment to create productions worthy of attention. The interruption of the one-way flow of media, emblematic of the mass media of the previous century, has enabled some extraordinarily creative media messaging to occur. Enabled by an economy of viral, point-to-point, communication, where media messages flow on horizontal axes from producers to consumers, some YouTube producers have found mass audiences for the expression primarily of point of view narratives. The narcissistic forms of story telling that have emerged have also begun to affect the mass media forms of television and film. One of the “effects” of the new media is the documentary form of fictionalized cinema verite.1 This new form relies on a hybrid of old style and new media production techniques and narrative conventions, where direct cinema2 meets the webcam and becomes the instant pudding of contemporary media.

When director Larry Charles joined forces with Cohen to create Borat, they set out to explore the reality of American culture with the intention of providing probing and humorous commentary, but without making any claims to scientific veracity. Charles and Cohen cobbled together a number of genres and techniques of media production to create a fictionalized mockumentary, a satirical film that was both a work of fiction and a documentary. Demonstrating the power of the feature film industry to emulate and extend the amateur productions of YouTube, Borat was a popular and economically viable hit release. Since its release in November 2006, the film has grossed over $260 million dollars worldwide, and has earned Cohen an Oscar nomination and a Golden Globe. The questions Borat the movie raise for media criticism are multifold. To what extent is this feature length movie an extension of amateur videos on the Web 2.0? To what extent is Borat the film a new form of viral communication? Where is the line between fiction and documentary? Is a fictionalized mockumentary more revealing of truth than is a documentary based in realism? Where are the lines of truth and fiction in media storytelling today?

Boratumentary

To begin to understand the Borat phenomenon, we need to first explore the space it occupies within the history of media. Over the last decade, many media texts have blurred the boundaries between reality and fiction, including reality TV, comedic newscasting, and viewer produced media. Reality TV shows3 have become the surprising innovation in television programming, low budget fictionalized
“reality” spectacles that have caught on in a big way with audiences looking for television content that addresses their lives in a raw, affective manner. Like Borat, these programs not only blur the fine line between reality and fiction, but also set out to use this tension as a means to draw in audiences schooled in media skepticism. Raised on television, contemporary audiences no longer care about the boundaries between reality and fiction, but seek narratives that raise questions of ethics and value in the hedonistic, secular contexts of a postmodern world. Alongside reality TV, we have also witnessed in the past decade a tremendous growth of irreverent journalistic programs like Da Ali G Show that used parody, jamming, remixing and comedy to report on the news. Television shows such as The Daily Show and The Colbert Report in the U. S. and This Hour Has 22 Minutes in Canada probe the top news stories of the day in humorous and ironic fashions.

Programs such as these have satisfied jaded television audiences seeking an alternative from standard news programming that presents news within what is now a highly contested myth of objectivity and neutrality. Finally given a chance to talk back, audiences have embraced new media outlets such as YouTube that have created sites for them to play in the spaces between fact and fiction, producer and viewer. In the interstices of fan fiction, media production and online distribution, everyday viewers can become stars and recast themselves for the eyes of other. Whether it is a Hollywood director, or a kid next door, any media maker can tamper with truth and rely on the privileged conventions of the documentary and journalism genres to make an apparently credible, albeit fictional account. Given these developments, we are occupying new spaces in media storytelling that challenge assumptions we had previously held. If it were the case that all that was solid in media accounts of fact and fiction has now melted into air, we could yearn for a golden age. However, what we have now is simply a destabilizing of assumptions of verisimilitude that provides us an opportunity to look more critically at that which we have taken for granted.

In fact, questions of reality and fiction have been central to the development of the documentary genre since the early days of cinema. When documentary films first appeared, many people were skeptical about this new form of art. The first experiments in cinema, such as the Lumiere brothers’ Workers Leaving a Factory and The Gardener (1895), were films that left ambiguous the staged nature of the filmic spectacle. Here the camera played the role of God, directing the viewers’ eyes and selecting and deflecting elements from the reality of the setting. Many argue this was a precursor to the documentary style, while others believe these shorts were a first attempt at fiction. Regardless, audiences were astonished with the way in which reality was captured and transformed by film. As documentary developed into its own genre, set apart from the fictional narratives that dominated audience attention in the early era of the silver screen, the stakes grew larger, this genre somehow carrying the baggage of truth telling for the cinematic apparatus. And questions abounded about the truth or fiction of this new form of representation, or “factual entertainment” (Bruzzi, p.120).
In 1930, John Grierson published an essay called “First Principles of Documentary” which acted as a manifesto for documentary makers over the years. In his manifesto, Grierson defines documentary as “creative treatment of actuality” and emphasizes that documentary has a sensational capacity for revealing that which is taken for granted and commonplace, that which time has worn smooth (in Hardy, p.37). Grierson felt that the “original” actor and “original” scene are better guides than their fictional counterparts for interpreting the modern world, and that materials “thus taken from the raw” can be more real than that which is acted (in Hardy, p.37).

Though the term documentary was not yet in use at the time, Robert J. Flaherty is credited with making the first feature length documentary film, Nanook of the North (1922). Flaherty tried to capture the life of Canada’s Inuit people as accurately as possible, providing a natural view of their everyday actions and interactions. While he tried to portray reality, he had to do so with the bulky and primitive film equipment of the day and hence many of his scenes are staged, despite being shot with amateur actors portraying their own lives as accurately as they normally would. He also altered reality somewhat by imposing a nostalgic view on the film, asking, for example, his subjects to hunt with traditional weapons rather than modern rifles.

As the concept of documentary evolved, artificiality became increasingly contested and eventually embraced. Other documentary makers experimented with camera techniques and film montage to enhance the genre’s capacities for truth telling, recognizing the impossibility of a pure, authentic documentary form.  

The Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov is a key figure in the history of the documentary form and cinema in general, one who recognized the intervention of the camera and tried to utilize it artistically to enhance reality. Vertov was one of the early innovators of documentary technique, deploying elements of filmmaking such as freeze frame, fast and slow motion, close ups and jump cuts, but he is most recognized for his pioneering approach to filmmaking called Kino-Pravda (cinema truth). Vertov’s work is central to understanding what truth means to, and in, a documentary film. Best known for his documentary Man and a Movie Camera (1929) that shows people undertaking aspects of their daily life, Vertov attempted to construct reality with an avant-garde style. He toyed with a theory called cine-eye, based on the idea that the camera eye, with its lenses, editing, and other production aspects, could render reality more accurately than the human eye.

Vertov engaged in camera experiments and image juxtapositions that he believed could demonstrate how the raw materials of everyday life as caught by the camera could be synthetically reconstructed into a naturalistic order (Nichols, p.144). The legacy of documentary filmmakers such as Flaherty, Grierson and Vertov has created a genre that recognizes filmic reality as self-consciously constructed. It is not a naturalistic medium, and hence the goofy on camera antics of Sacha Cohen do not necessarily render Borat less meaningful, or real, than other documentary films. But there are clearly some new developments at play in Borat, relating to developments in the media over the past decade.
For the purposes of this article, we eschew some of the differences between platforms such as television, documentary film and user-produced Web 2.0 video. Our purpose is to examine contemporary forms of media storytelling that purport to uncover and represent truth or reality. Reality TV, recent mockumentaries by Michael Moore and others and online viral docudramas made by purportedly authentically real people, have further clouded the distinction between the real and the fictional. To a great extent, it simply no longer matters if a filmic representation is real or not. Audiences play the role of arbiter, deciding whether to accept or reject a particular product as authentic or not. We believe that Borat inherits the baggage of the documentary genre, but carries alongside the more recent legacy of reality TV, mockumentaries and Web 2.0 user-produced videos. Ultimately, we feel that Borat is an extended version of the same video clips already circulating online, including those produced by Cohen/Ali G. In the following section, we consider Web 2.0 production and “reality,” drawing on the case of lonelygirl15. Lonelygirl15 is, for all extents and purposes, the reverse of Borat. She pretended to be authentic and was exposed as a ruse. Borat, the character, is a ruse, but he can be exposed too as an authentic representation of an archetype of contemporary society.

Viral Borat

With advances in interactive media and technology, first the Web 1.0 of the World Wide Web and e-mail and now the Web 2.0 of social networking and user-driven content generation, communication is becoming increasingly viral. Most scenes from Borat the film are posted online and circulate on such websites as YouTube and Google Video. A compilation video posted on YouTube with Borat’s best moments has received over three million hits and close to 2000 comments. The notion of viral communication derives from the concept of point to point contact, an actual one to one transmission that quickly multiplies exponentially as more people become involved in communicating a given message or idea. An originary message or idea is referred to as a meme, a viral knowledge node that seeks out other minds to propagate itself further (Lankshear & Knobel 2003). This concept is a way of conceptualizing a type of face-to-face communication that has been around for millennia but that has now been given a technological delivery system and a high speed, worldwide distribution network. Whereas former memes could only pass to and from people in several degrees of separation from one another, now total strangers can learn directly from one another. Thus, ideas can proliferate across space and time at a speed and scale formerly unimaginable. And whereas in an era of mass media, a small number of powerful corporations controlled the air waves, in this interactive media environment, virtually anyone—the virtual every one—can at least try to transmit their ideas to a broad audience and as ideas come into contact with other, new knowledge can form. Borat the movie trades on the popular commerce of memes. His ribald humour is primarily derivative. His jokes
are not new, but rather are performative utterances based on stereotypes and folk wisdom.

New media outlets and social networking sites such as YouTube not only showcase such performative displays but also enable and enhance the circulation of such memes for a worldwide audience. Borat, like other celebrities (internet celebrities) such as lonelygirl15, expresses the ideas and ways of being already in circulation. Borat has the uncanny ability to tap into our lives and touch our most sensitive nerve with his childlike verbiage. His slapstick humor covers up his bigotry and his ignorance as showcased by his racial slurs and genuine moments of outrageous behavior. This performative self is the truth in fictionalized clothes. Like lonelygirl15, Borat walks the ever-thin line between what is accepted and what is expected by the viewers in this age of viral communication. Lonelygirl15 arose as one of the early celebrities of the v-log. Ironically, and as we found out later, lonelygirl15 was everything that the usual Web 2.0 performer is not—she auditioned for the part, read from scripts, and was produced professionally with proper lighting, camera, and editing. It turned out that this girl was not lonely, but surrounded by a production team, and certainly not 16, as she had claimed, but rather a 19-year-old actress called Jessica Rose hired to create a new online franchise. Despite or because of the notoriety of being outed by her audience, lonelygirl15 was chosen as a spokesperson for the UN Millenium Campaign to fight global poverty and a v-log was posted to YouTube at a second lonelygirl15 channel, lg15standup.

Standing up against global poverty might not have been the predicted outcome the lonelygirl15 organizers had bargained for, but it suited their goals of creating and sustaining her brand identity. They counted on the “affective economics” (Jenkins, 2006) of identification others would have for her. Lonelygirl15 was, for a time, every girl, someone working through her turmoil and problems online, but a legitimate girl teens could identify with or a girl next door. When the jig was up, when it was revealed that lonelygirl15 was a hoax, the backlash was immediate and massive in scale, but modest in emotional force. The outing of lonelygirl15, that YouTube character that was ultimately too scripted and too neatly produced to be authentic, was international news. When the story broke that lonelygirl15 was a fake, all hell broke loose—for a week or so. This event was published and debated more widely than the average flood or famine in the global South. But the backlash online was modest and receded quickly. “How dare she,” shrieked the regulars of the YouTube (virtual) community. Beyond a certain smugness on the part of some of her online rivals, nobody really seemed to care, and it has not stopped her from continuing with her YouTube presence.

The needs of this audience for an affective alliance with a reliable YouTube regular was greater than a rational response of anger or rejection. YouTube is a media environment co-created by its audience, a vehicle for the distribution of videos, both good and bad, free of charge and to a potential audience of millions. If there is a prevailing ethos at YouTube, it is one typical of the lightheartedness
of the peer to peer communication of youth—have a laugh, don’t take things too seriously. When push came to shove and the ruse was exposed, the audience did not abandon her. The audience cared enough for her and wasn’t ready to lose lonelygirl15. Like lonelygirl15, Borat is an interloper, a ruse. He plays willfully with audience expectations of verisimilitude, casting himself as believable, trustworthy and authentic, all the while hoodwinking his unsuspecting interviewees. Here he differs from lonelygirl15/Jessica Rose who began her escapades on YouTube disguising her true identity. Cohen/Borat does no such thing. His audience knows he is a fake, or, at minimum, an actor.

As we move from one era of media to another, truth-claims stand at the forefront of our imaginations, the unresolved issue of new media times. Where does the “real” end, and where does the fictionalized veritas begin? In the older era, we had some conceptual tools to help us along. The “willing suspension of disbelief,” a term coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1817) to describe how readers disengage from reality and suspend their skepticism for a brief period to enjoy a piece of fiction, is used similarly in media theory to describe the way audiences ignore the troubling vagaries of truth/fiction in order to embrace a fictional narrative. Over time, media audiences have grown weary of this task, seeking something more meaningful than much of the mainstream fare of Hollywood movies and TV. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the earliest, and most impacting, examples of new media production are predicated on verisimilitude. We are who we are, auteurs of the v-log: all of our narcissism is just the baggage we carry. Borat, in this lens, is high art narcissism. Lonelygirl15 and earnest YouTube critics such as LazyDork are examples of popular culture, lowbrow merchants of truths or falsehoods who hide behind the pretense of the “real.” The successful ones lead the parade of narcissistic pretenders who are YouTube “stars.”

Issues of narcissism don’t lead to easy resolution. The stars era of the mass media (Dyer, 1986) cultivates narcissism as art. When the lower stratum, the unrefined denizens of the new Web communities, attempt to draw on star power to project their image as somehow worthy of audience adulation, they unsettle the dynamics of the us/them relations established and sedimented in traditional media. Here Cohen/Borat rides to the rescue, even when riding on a mule drawn carriage into a celebrity gala. Borat is the first old style celebrity of the new media age. He checks his authenticity at the door; he is an actor playing a part in a faux documentary which is both a fictionalized feature film and a telling, revealing documentary about America at the turn of the new millennium.

So what truths does Borat the movie reveal? While sidestepping questions of fiction and truth in storytelling, Borat the movie is nonetheless an instructive tale, at once the story of an overindulgent and parochial America and of the innocent immigrant thrust into the cultural melee. It is the story of a narrow minded culture of excess, a self assured and inward looking America that is bigoted, outlandish and arrogant. Various contributions to this volume take up these themes.
Our interest in the narcissistic elements of new media storytelling bring us to our focus on the Borat character. Borat is the ultimate “bohunk,” the White-faced Eastern European immigrant and “other.” Hidden from Western eyes for the last half of the 20th century, Eastern Europeans have begun to reemerge on the world stage and Borat is one of the first to portray an Eastern European who is not a spy, soldier, or criminal. As happy go lucky as the Black Sambo, a naïve Tonto, and a sexually dangerous Caliban, Borat floods the imaginary with the excesses of a primitive dystopia that time forgot. These archetypes of otherness derive from a racialized history of cultural encounter between the European and American North and the post-conquest South. But hidden behind the Iron Curtain and isolated from the grand narratives of world history, the Eastern European represents another form of primitive—a culture, or set of cultures, held in suspension, frozen in the permafrost of cultural isolation from the circuits of global capital. He represents the half way there of a culture suspended between modernism and postmodernism, a culture that missed the transitional stages leading from modernity and is struggling to catch up. He is not a “noble savage,” untouched by the modern era, but a new form that we will call “commie savage.” His is a land of clock radios and VCRs, a land of cast off technologies, the recycled gizmos from Western culture. He comes to the table of North American overconsumption with a simple, yet unsatiable appetite for the stuff of modern life, carrying with him the baggage of a rustic, authentically modern world.

Borat stands in for the everyday life of the immigrant to North America. He lacks what Pierre Bourdieu calls “cultural capital” (1964) and, particularly, its articulation in embodied dispositions, or “habitus.” Borat’s ungainliness and awkwardness serve to differentiate him from the presumably refined ways of being, casually enacted by born and bred North Americans regardless of class background. Borat’s lack of knowledge and manners is most evident in his toilet and sexual behaviour. Whether defecating on a busy New York street or washing his face from a toilet bowl, Borat is clearly an uncouth anachronism in a society obsessed with cleanliness and in total denial of the lower bodily functions. When he appears at a dinner table with a bag of excrement in his hands, he confirms his status as cultural outsider. This cultural faux pas of the commie savage serves at once as proof of the cultural superiority of America and the backwardness of the former republics of the Soviet empire. In a culture obsessed with sanitation, this action provokes horror and disbelief.

Where Borat walks on fertile American soil is in his enactments of virile masculinity. He is obsessed with sex, much like the culture that he has come to chronicle, but unlike most of the members of that culture, he hides nothing. Whether masturbating in public, wrestling naked or in his underwear with his male friends, or asserting his desire and right to have any woman at any time, Borat is not only polymorphously perverse, but aggressively sexual. If fictionalized accounts enable difficult questions to be raised, then this is where Borat the character raises the questions that America denies. He is the truth to America’s half-truths, a culture
immersed in sexualized icons that is quicker to impeach presidents over infidelity than over warfare. The happy-go-lucky nature of American male sexuality is fueled by the mass media industries where the mantra “sex sells” is taken for granted, but also by a huckster culture of masculine excess, best represented in the American passions for sports and war. American men, as interpellated by the media and government are obsessed with killing and f*cking. Borat only aspires to the latter, but he does so with a libidinal bravado beyond the norm. Borat transgresses culturally held values precisely at the point of verisimilitude. He takes at face value common sense assumptions that are nestled in the imaginary of the American male, acting out that which is represented in the media as thought it were the reality of gender relations in America.

Ultimately, Borat is an instructive tale. It reveals a culture of excess and a sexuality run amok. It tells an archetypical story of a newcomer who dares to transgress, who will not conform to the deadening of senses required by the social decorum of a society that lives a deeply contradictory lie. And Borat is an example of a new hybrid form of documentary, both ironic, comedic mockumentary and high art narcissistic viral communication that trades on what Henry Jenkins calls “transmedia navigation” (2006), storytelling across media platforms in an era of media convergence. Watching Borat is enriched by viewing other material available online, including those clips that landed on the cutting room floor and those which predate the filming of the feature length movie, but introduce and provide further context for the character and the concept. And, of course, seeing Cohen/Borat take the gag further by performing in character on various talk shows, demonstrates that the show no longer ends when the final credits roll. When Martha Stewart teaches Cohen/Borat how to make a bed under Jay Leno’s watchful eyes on The Tonight Show, the circular funhouse of mirrors that is North American media is on full display. An authentically real convicted felon who is a household name for her domestic arts provides lessons on how to perfectly tuck in sheets to a fictional character in a televised spectacle viewed by television audiences and recycled across multiple Web 2.0 Internet sites. The twists and turns in this departure from anything like the everyday reality of most people is beyond comprehension, yet this is truth and reality in a hyper-mediated world. Borat’s cultural learnings of postmodern media for make benefit glorious media interpretation, indeed.

Notes

1 Cinema verite is a sub-genre of “observational” documentary that emphasizes the presence of the camera within the location. The camera is used to provoke the subjects and they are encouraged to react to the situations knowing that the camera is present.

2 Direct cinema is also a sub-genre of observational documentary and aims to capture reality as accurately as possible through the use of handheld shots and on location shooting. It is often associated with documentaries created in North America during 1958-1962. There are many similarities between cinema-verite and direct cinema, but the main difference is
that direct cinema aims to neutralize the presence of the camera and hence not alter the
reaction of the subjects.

Reality TV emerged in the 1990s with shows such as The Real World (MTV), Survivor
(CBS), The Simple Life (FOX) and Big Brother (CBS). It is a genre of television that captures
“reality” through various settings and game-like programming. Many reality television based
programs have a surveillance/voeuvreism focused approach. Although reality television pro-
ducers tend to state that their programs are not scripted, many viewers and critics question
the authenticity of these shows.

Arguably, the mediating influence of cameras and sound and lighting equipment make a
pure documentary impossible. The emergence of the apparatus of the surveillance video
camera and the street webcam in recent times might offer the resolution to a conundrum
that has plagued documentary film since its beginnings: how can we film human subjects in
their natural surroundings without staging the shot? Of course, these modern technologies
only portray reality settings when the human subjects are unaware of their presence.

Michael Moore has become one of the most influential documentary makers of contempo-
rary culture. In 1989, he produced and directed the controversial Roger & Me, which comments
on General Motors CEO Roger Smith’s decision to shutdown and move various GM factories
from Flint, Michigan. Since then, he has produced and directed Bowling for Columbine (2002),
Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004), and more recently Sicko (2007). As a result of Moore’s popularity, many
similar documentaries have received critical attention and the genre itself has regained immense
popularity with work like Albert Nerenberg’s Stupidity (2003), Morgan Spurlock’s Supersize Me

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Laughing at Ourselves (in the Dark):
Comedy and the Critical Reflections of Social Actions

Roymieco A. Carter & Leila E. Villaverde

This article carefully analyzes and historically situates *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006) and focuses on the construction of Sacha Baron Cohen’s comedic style. Viewing *Borat* at the movie theatre, turning our attention to the audience’s response in addition to making sense of our own interpretations, led us to question who was laughing at what and why. These nuances in laughter, when recognized, act as indicators of dramatically different reads. Through the use of critical literacy tools we teased out references to other comedians and connected the dots to the pastiche Cohen created in this mock-documentary. Throughout the article we discuss the object of humor, the catalysts for laughter, disbelief, misunderstandings, comedic pace, and decenterings. These are the elements that structure our analysis and function as backdrop for a socially relevant pedagogy that hinges on extrapolating the sociopolitical, cultural, and historical signifiers in mainstream media. The article walks you through how we searched out complexities and made sense of disorienting effects in Cohen’s intended comedy.

Setting the Stage

It is nothing new for a socially minded comedian to hold a mirror up to the public and watch as they applaud her/him for exposing their faults. Cohen has placed his name in the ranks of such comedians with the movie *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006). He uses American stereotypes and taboos as the subject of confrontation and reflection throughout the movie. The audience’s laughter is generated from numerous sources, but the most immediate response is from a nervous repulsion of personal image, manifesting culturally specific ideas and closely held beliefs. Charlie Chaplin, Richard Pryor, Andy Kaufman, Lenny Bruce and in retrospection Harold Lloyd were all masters of social comedic reflection. We laughed as Kaufman and Bruce
pointed to the ridiculousness of celebrity, language, and the thirst for spectacle. The tragic ascension of comedic great Richard Pryor gives Cohen a strong contemporary foothold for his style of socially infused comedy. A significant line from Pryor’s film *Bustin’ Loose*, (1981) is when he leads the KKK in true ‘brer’ rabbit fashion proclaiming, “You want to know where all the Black people are at . . . I will show you where all the Black people at.” Pryor just as Cohen illustrates contemporary issues by referencing a historical precedent. Although Pryor is not using comedic history as his reference, he sets the trend for such strategy and it becomes his trademark.1 More recently we have held our sides as Dave Chappelle and Carlos Mencia have pointed out the most obvious of our hidden social secrets. The common thread for Cohen and the comedians who stand on this rickety platform is that “truth” lies within the unflattering images we witness on the screen/mirror. So are we repulsed at the “truths” themselves or the way in which we are confronted with them?

The strength of this analysis is to link Borat and Cohen, the movie and comedian, to a long legacy of social satire and make necessary a critical inquiry of the political content of such work. It is the nuances of such work that provides the richest material for socially relevant pedagogy. We recognize these comedians’ tendency to come dangerously close or dwell in the precipice of intolerance, violence, discomfort, reification, familiarity, and folklore to construct some degree of social pause which may fold into laughter or rejection, question or validation, social responsibility or irresponsibility. Interpersonal conflict and tension are necessary tools when movies, television, and print desire the full attention of its viewing audience. We aim to push the pinnacle of this discomfort as the axis through which essential criticality and reflectivity can develop instead of the place where disengagement occurs. We deconstruct and discuss specific scenes from the movie to better assess what we learn from Borat, its timeliness and the public’s responses.

Given that Borat is a farce comedy masquerading as a documentary, the journey of Borat from his homeland to America and his cross-country trek set the stage for varying implausible situations. Cohen creates a persona that is wildly exaggerated and stereotypical. He unfolds his protagonist by allowing us to enter his world through the images of the village and people of Kazakhstan. Things begin innocently enough, people smile, wave, and perform for the camera. Borat enters, introduces himself, and quickly tells us that he likes us … and he likes sex. This shoddy attempt at flattery disarms the audience and produces a false sense of trust. What are we to make out of said juxtaposition? What analogies does he superimpose which connect us to sex and to him? The queries begin early. This introduction is where it all quickly turns sour. Borat establishes regional norms with the introduction to the town rapist and to the school where children play with AK47s. Borat is kind enough to help us understand that his demeaning view of women is not his alone; it is pervasive in his village where the mechanic is also the abortionist. When we arrive at his home we meet his neighbor, who he takes great pride in competing with for possessions. It is unclear if Borat is aware of the American
concept of “keeping up with the Jones,” but he clearly gets the general idea. In his words this practice defines “great success.” We conclude this tour by meeting his sister, mother, and wife. After he deeply kisses his sister and tells us that she is the #4 prostitute in all of Kazakhstan, we meet his aged 43 year old mother that he loves very much, insinuating a double entendre in how he communicates this. The “good boy who loves his mother” lastly introduces his wife, who immediately begins to yell at him. Although she does not speak English, she knows he has said something negative about her. With the entrance of subtitles we are back at a safe distance and reassured that this is only a film. The media buzz around the movie reiterated this is the funniest film ever. So what is the audience to do at this point, so early in the movie, but laugh?

Listening to the laughter in the theater made us long for the comfort of the fabricated laugh track that accompanies most sitcoms on television. The laughter transformed from humor to something more uncomfortable and sinister lurking in the darkness. The transformation is significant because humor can range from light-hearted or fun to dismissive and callous in seconds. Laughter must be understood in situ, the context where it takes place, how it came about, to discern its tenor. If audience members are asked to disclose reasons for their indistinctive chuckles often they’ll simply say, “it’s funny.” That retort is much too simple, we laugh for many reasons other than a stimulus response to humor. Laughter can act as an escape from an uncomfortable or stressful situation, a tool of group association and/or acceptance, as well as an unconscious, contagious impulse.

Is it fair to judge the audience’s intelligence, ethics, morals, or emotions when they are faced with a situation that they may not fully understand in the moment? The audience laughs during Cohen’s cultural slurs and social blunders. If we are watching Borat and accept the laughter as just a spontaneous, contagious reaction, then the subject of laughter must be identified and isolated. The scenes in the movie don’t necessarily need to be the source of humor in order to evoke our laughter. Social experience and interaction proves this time and again. One leader in the social group/collective breaks into uncontrollable laughter, no one else gets the joke, but all the members of the group laugh. We all have done this at some point in our lives. Borat, as protagonist, reaps the benefits of this social tendency as the surrogate leader of the theater in the hour and half experience. Cohen successfully comes through uncomfortable situations, setting the stage for other potential misunderstandings distinctive to farce comedy. He is well aware that it is not important for you or me to know why we are laughing in the moment, but knows he has got to get it out of us.

What Is So Funny?

The audience’s reactions throughout the movie mark the discomfort and awkwardness of viewers finding it hard to reconcile the actions of a fictional character, writing of a skilled comedian, and the use of common life experiences. Any
uncomfortable interaction we encounter during the day may not be as constrictive as the ones portrayed on screen. We are usually more adept at analyzing or evading these moments. We use our social (in)abilities, choosing to reject, support, or avoid the awkwardness of real life experiences.

The movie *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* and its supporting fanfare create a mental straight jacket that holds you firmly in place while Cohen plucks your moral and social biases like they were strings of a banjo at a bluegrass festival. Cohen uses his character to place the audience members in unnerving situations, and then takes issue with how they react or respond. What is so funny, is an important query in order to more poignantly understand the movie as text, as something to be read, not just enjoyed, rejected or dismissed. The question also begs us to consider when we laugh, with whom, at whom, at what, and why. Any student of critical pedagogy and theory quickly becomes disillusioned with it when desire and pleasure are at odds with a developing critical awareness about meaning and signification. The goal is to move within the discourse mapped out by critical media literacy theorists and fold in enjoyment of mainstream media as a central lens of analytical discovery. Here it is essential to identify the nature of such enjoyment to better understand self, other, comedic tradition, and social commentary (regardless of the medium’s intent to communicate or critique). It is this construction we turn a keen eye towards.

**How Are We Made To Laugh?**

Cohen appears to have left no stone unturned in his comedic research. His inspirations reach back to comedy from the late 1930s while engaging conversations in contemporary comedy. He is able to seamlessly integrate the comedic styling of Buster Keaton and Jim Carey. Borat employs Keaton’s style in the way he enters the Wellington Hotel. Cohen proves he is a true student of comedy in how he uses everyday situations as platforms for disorienting experiences. The build up for humor in the hotel scene is one of his more successful uses of cultural references. Cohen highlights Borat’s ignorance on what is expected in this consumer transaction as Borat tries to strike a bargain with the manager working the front desk. Haggling is not a strange occurrence generally, but it seems out of place at the front desk of a hotel. Americans rather spend hours on bargain-hunting websites to secure the best price of the season instead of engaging in face-to-face negotiations. This stealth approach safeguards the American hotel customer from any immediate embarrassment. In true classic comedic style the protagonist must be naive in the expectations of the experience. Borat attempts to negotiate his room price face-to-face which noticeably irritates the front desk manager. How dare the manager have to endure such indignities? Nonetheless the manager ushers Borat to his room.

The cultural critiques keep coming as Cohen asks us to indulge Borat’s apparent cluelessness as he enters the elevator and proceeds to unpack his clothes
(thinking this is his room). The manager, now in a lighter mood, tells Borat “You might want to repack your things. We are going to be moving again soon.” This is one of the few times Cohen uses subtle intonation to generate the humorous current. Borat’s response catches us by surprise. He says quickly and simply, “No, I will not move to a smaller room.” This scene is only a couple of minutes long, yet is one of the more successful portrayals of wit in the film. It also operates as a set up for the next scene where Borat discovers his hotel room. Borat rolls on the bed, discovers his throne (disguised as a simple upholstered chair where he gives orders to imaginary subjects), and last but not least refreshes himself by splashing water from the toilet bowl on his face. Cohen banks on audiences’ comparable experiences, moments where we have all entered a hotel room and marveled at its size and comforts. Some may have even jumped up and down on the bed, but Cohen pulls out the comedic sledgehammer and beats us into submission by highlighting the unthinkable as Borat bends over the toilet to wash his face. And of course the laughter echoes throughout the theater. So how does the otherwise questionable act of hygiene become laughable? What elements of American culture and ignorance is Cohen using to get us to laugh, and who or what at we laughing at?

The Suspension of Disbelief

The audience’s amusement fills the theatre and it is not without merit or theoretical value. It is an expectation when we look at the nature of mock documentaries. Laughing, as a response to a character’s actions in farce comedy, is often a result of the passive relationship the audience has with the film. If the audience is given the pretext of watching an action, horror, drama, suspense, or documentary, the protagonist washing his face in a toilet becomes an act of desperation or tragedy. Needless to say it becomes extremely difficult to laugh at such an act. However, in Cohen’s film the scene advances and the audience laughs without a second of contemplation.

Farce comedy was Charlie Chaplin, The Marx Brothers, Buster Keaton, Abbott and Costello, and Mel Brooks’s playground. There are traits of all these comedic styles in Cohen’s movie. The common elements in farce comedy revolve around a simple misunderstanding and/or the use of mistaken identity, satire, and improbable situations. For example, Brooks utilized simple misunderstandings as the catalyst for progress in The History of the World Part I and Chaplin uses both, misunderstanding and mistaken identity, in The Great Dictator. In order for these elements to succeed in farce comedy, the film must gain the audiences’ willingness to accept the premise being presented to them and set aside any knowledge of the parameters and construction of the film. How does Cohen do this? Is it through good marketing strategies? The media blitz and acclaim promotes Borat, as the “funniest movie ever,” and promises great entertainment. In exchange for a good time, does the audience check their intellect at the door? Again we don’t think it is this simple. There may be some willingness to accept whatever is presented on screen for entertainment; however
the incongruencies of a mock documentary provide far more spaces for questioning and critical analysis. The suspension of disbelief can only go so far in *Borat*.

The suspension of disbelief can easily be unpacked through a historization of the present movie. To carefully rummage through the visuals as potential references of other comedians, comedic styles, cultural references, codes or juxtapositions situates *Borat* in a tradition. A tradition that increases what meaning can be gained from Cohen’s pastiche; to dismiss *Borat* as repulsive, bad comedy, offensive, and not entertaining misses the few moments Cohen displays wit fit for critical pedagogy. Critically analyzing the cultural phenomenon Cohen and Borat have become interrupts the blanket acceptance of banality. This type of interrogation and intermediality holds popular media and its audience accountable for what cultural reflections are popularized on the big screen mirror.

**What Is the Big Misunderstanding?**

With moviegoers collective agreement to suspend judgment and their dedicated efforts to accept the promotional material, movie trailer, and celebrity interviews as truth, the press claim Borat’s antics are with “real” people in “real” situations. These claims beg the audience to ponder what is “real.” Remember regardless of suspension of disbelief or utter consumption of entertainment, there is one element we can accept without equivocation: movies are constructed events regardless of genre. This means all films have a point of view, an agenda, which directs decisions made about framing, angles and editing. The unquestioned “real” is limited when you watch Cohen’s movie as a critical piece of visual culture. As part of the visual culture, *Borat* through each scene or gag becomes a tool to revisit history, to understand the present, and to proceed cautiously, perhaps more informed towards the future.

The staging of each of his gags is evident and carefully planned. He uses fellow comedic actress, Luennell, to throw a wrench into the high society (Southern) dinner party scene. The dinner party is intended to be a lesson for the people of Kazakhstan in American manners and social graces. Borat has one hour to learn his lesson in the art of fine dining. We witness the growth of Cohen’s character at this point. He greets his etiquette coach with a handshake and a formal request to be taught how to dine like a gentleman. Strangely enough, this joke received very little laughter in the theatre and it reflects one of the bigger jokes in the movie. The character only moments earlier stood outside a building with a group of young Black men telling them “I like you people. . . Can you teach me how to dress?” With a new fashion sense and “urban” attitude he is thrown out of a hotel as he requests a room for the night. The scene then switches to Borat with suit and bowtie ready for his etiquette coach. We are presented with Borat sporting a suit and tie, then urban youth wear, then suit and bowtie through quick changes from scene to scene. Borat implicitly portrays *a priori* knowledge on what external, physical, and fashion details extend the most cultural capital in differing contexts. His ability to code switch all too
well between urban spaces and high society indicates his understanding of cultural capital in American culture. The misunderstanding is not that Borat doesn’t know any better; it is that the audience suspends recognizing that he does. Cohen as author of these comedic mishaps is ever present as you realize Borat knows more than he lets on. The movie is edited precisely to pit one scene against the next, to leverage the slippage of knowledge between these scenes and to make explicit to the keen observer there are no accidents in this comedic art form.

Why does the assimilated Borat in suit and bowtie not garner any laughter? Where is all the side splitting laughter at this joke? Why is the assimilated image a low point in the rollercoaster of unrest and humor? Could Richard Pryor have been right when he said “There’s a thin line between to laugh with and to laugh at.” Were we laughing with Cohen this entire time and in hidden moments like these where the joke isn’t so obvious do we realize that we are laughing at ourselves?

American culture, stereotypes, class, space (social and personal), and celebrity appear to be grossly misunderstood by Borat throughout Cohen’s movie. The concept of the movie folds back on itself in a system of continuous misleading events and ideas. It is a series of archived clips and comedic antics edited together in a loose narrative. Other movies similar to Cohen’s hang the comedy on a strong narrative. For instance, Charlie Chaplin’s The Great Dictator could be seen as a structural inspiration for the movie and Chaplin’s tramp character as representational inspiration for Borat, but is Cohen successful? Chaplin takes the social, political, and cultural climate of World War I and makes it a humorous, fictional commentary. The scene in which Charlie Chaplin as “Adenoid Hynkel” dances around holding the earth in his hands in the shape of a big balloon echoes the emotional attitude of the American people then. His understanding of the controversial issues surrounding war and political leaders made Chaplin’s humor relevant to the 1940s and still so some 60 years later. Conversely, Cohen makes a claim that Borat is setting out to make a documentary of real American people in real American situations. Chaplin’s film plot is clear to the audience, therefore the desired emotional response is equally clear. Cohen places the viewer in passive awkward situations with Borat and the experience becomes a test of endurance instead of a humorous insightful commentary. Simply because one can see Cohen as Chaplin’s student and of other preceding comedic greats does not mean he uses that knowledge intelligently.

The Fast and the Funny

Then there’s farce tempo. In all farce comedies, characters work faster than when they’re telling a story in narrative time. The genre also makes things larger and more exaggerated, personalities and events more concentrated. These dynamic personalities and isolated events create a sense of hyper-focus for the viewing audience. The altered scale of the instance fits a classic formula, the bigger the joke, the bigger the laugh, and bigger the risk in banking on an audience to get the
Laughing at Ourselves (in the Dark)

social or moral commentary. Lenny Bruce would focus like a diamond cutter on the behavior and language of the American population in the late 1950s and early 1960s. His desire to transcend the simple telling of jokes made him challenge what was popularly permissible. As we mentioned above the platform for these comedians is risky. The instability rests on the public’s reaction whether it is acceptance, critique, or dismissal. The artful comedian keeps the finger pointed at the “other,” whether that is a counterpart in the skit or a marginalized group, in order to keep the audience laughing. So what is the result, when the inevitable happens, the audience wipes the tears from their eyes and focuses on the image of the joke? They may realize the reflection is too familiar. In keeping true to the genre characters must be extreme and escalate dramatic action in response to any comedic gesture. Borat encountered his share of hysterical responses in the movie. Some subjects ran away from him, threatened him with bodily harm, and warned him with calling the police. Bruce in a much more tragic sense found that people stopped laughing and failed to see his comedic mission when the jokes about them were too much and too real. He found himself labeled as obscene and blacklisted by the people he was attempting to enlighten. Many times the audience is left with little time to react or catch up with the onslaught of editorial comments or the rapid-fire succession of comedic actions. What do we learn from this and what does this say about the culture of an audience? What leeway do we afford certain comedians? How do we perform selective intolerance with subject matter and characters?

The chicken on the subway scene is an excellent example of this quick-pace. Farce comedy typically moves faster than the expected pace of real-life action. It appears to be funnier to a viewing audience if hecticness builds and characters move frenzied toward the inevitable comedic fall. The chicken in this scene sets the pace. It acts true to nature. If you chase a chicken it runs and flaps its wings frantically making clucking sounds of distress. The passengers on the subway train were prepared for their usual daily travel routines. However, Borat enters the train and begins to immediately invade the passengers’ personal space. While he is attempting to greet his fellow passengers with unwelcome kisses, his baggage opens releasing a live chicken into this cramped uncomfortable space. This accidental, yet purposeful releasing of the chicken puts the event into motion.

Up to this point in the scene the only person behaving abnormally is Borat. It is important to realize that outside of Borat’s behavior on the train, the chicken and the passengers are behaving as we would expect, considering the intrusions. City train passengers do not expect to encounter a chicken running loose. They are commuting to or from homes, jobs, shopping, and almost any activity imaginable. They are mentally focused on the events of their individual lives. Chickens are alien to the city, its people, and the environment. This leads us to question whether people on the train have any experiences to draw from that would help them cope with this instigated experience.

So what does it mean when we analyze the actions of Cohen’s character and
discover his repeated troublesome social actions? Through disruption the common behavioral actions of individuals or groups are recast as odd or out of place. The participants are in partial to no agreement with the instigator. If the instigator and the recipient are in some sort of agreement prior to the instance, the moment is performance at best and rehearsal at worst. Throughout Cohen's movie we are left to judge for ourselves if this is an act of disorientation/centering, improvisation, performance or rehearsal. This displacement of popular actions or social norms is critically important, that we wholeheartedly agree with. We often learn more about norms when they are placed in opposition to whatever can serve as a destabilizing agent. Cohen's character uses his reporting of U.S. social norms as an all access pass. The politicians, the media channels, and people he met were quite accepting of Borat, is that humorous? He feigned ignorance at every turn never seeming to learn from his prior experiences. Borat changes the lens in our social glasses. We are no longer at the center of his reporting as the title of the movie would lead you to believe. Borat directs us to disregard our essentialist reading of American ideals and presents us as a system of complex beliefs. Borat's interactions with Bobby Rowe, the rodeo manager, and the fraternity brothers from the University of South Carolina offer alternative texts in the American cultural/civil curriculum. These encounters act as authentic sources for Borat's travels and reporting. They provided him with straightforward, unpolished, unedited views in American thinking. The term we avoid here is “truth.” At this level of inquiry the truth is a matter of position not accuracy. The men he interviewed spoke directly without qualm about their racist, sexist, homophobic, and xenophobic beliefs relaxing their politically correct decorum in the hopes of telling/convincing a foreigner how it really is or rather should be. The audience's inquiry skills are in flux throughout the film and are manipulated by sensationalism, audacity, and comedic tactics. We sit in our seats and vacillate between objective experiences, social interactions and our subjective understandings.

**Intended Decentering or Misinterpretation?**

The decentering of passengers on the subway means Cohen successfully removed them from their personal and/or social comfort zones or routines. It should not surprise anyone witnessing this spectacle to see the anger and discomfort expressed by the passengers. Ironically, while everyone is trying to get away from the agitated chicken, Borat is trotting around half-heartedly warning New Yorkers his chicken bites. Borat eventually catches his chicken and tells his fellow passengers “it’s ok” and that there is “no problem.” The audience is reeled into the situation via the lens of the camera as we follow the whirlwind of action through the sweeping handheld camera movements. The camera, as third party and obvious reminder that an author exists, is trying to keep up with all the overlapping antics of Borat, a displaced chicken, and the various irritated reactions of the passengers.

The hero in the chicken and train scene is not our Chaplin-like protagonist. It
happens to be an everyday guy on the train. When he is confronted with the distasteful actions of Borat he clearly and concisely states, “I ain’t the one.” He follows this statement with a threat of violence. Cohen intends to use this threat to reflect the stereotypical aggressive American intolerance for the misunderstood alien. Is he just the angry American with a John Wayne attitude or is he a guy that confronts an invasion of his personal space with an unmistakable warning of bodily harm? The businessman on a New York sidewalk portrays a similarly violent reaction. The location of the confrontation is significant in both moments when Borat is threatened with violence. On the train the denim and bandana wearing man is cornered. The same is true on the sidewalk, when Borat corners people, they react with a threat of violence. It is significant to notice the confined space Cohen created for some of his confrontations, giving subjects nowhere to run. The people passing by and the groups in the background have an out by moving around or away; in a closed space there is no out. The context affects the level of engagement and whether Borat is the dominant factor or the target of likely disapproval. The observing extras reveal attitudes not only of disbelief but disappointment/ disgust in his performance.

Cohen’s more subversive tactics are exercised in Borat’s appearance at the 38th Annual Kroger Valleydale Stampede Days Rodeo. We are introduced to the scene with a montage of good old Southern style. The rodeo announcer is booming. Vince Gill is crooning over images of cowboy hats, bulls, and cowboys prepping for their eight-second ride. Cotton candy is spun, spurs are adjusted, and a cowgirl comes out clad in red, white, and blue waving a big American flag. Movie-goers everywhere are slowly inducted into a slice of Americana Southern culture. After witnessing this spectacle, Borat seems seduced by the trusted fold of the “good old boy” network. Bobby Rowe, general manager of Imperial Rodeo, informs our roving reporter about how he needs to change his appearance so as not to be confused with the pictures we get of terrorist, Muslims, or anything else. Borat in appreciation leans over to kiss Rowe and is met with rejection and a homophobic lesson on “those guys that kiss and float around.” Borat and his new buddy are in agreement that “those guys” should be “jailed and finished (hung).”

Why is this exchange significant in a conversation of decentерings or misinterpretations? In this particular scene we observe a much more sophisticated exchange than the previous ones on the train and sidewalk. Borat bonds with the subject and uses this immediate trust/comfort to reveal elements of Rowe’s character that would not have come out in a confrontational exchange. Cohen highlights this moment by propping it up with an inflammatory rendition of the American Anthem. He flips the moment from inclusion and political rallying for the war on terror to anger, disbelief, and hostility by changing the words of the American Anthem to his version of Kazakhstan is Great. This moment alone asks anyone viewing the film one simple question. Did you really think this was “just a movie”? We know it is billed as a comedy and as a mock documentary that abstracts representation of truth in lived experience, but nonetheless it is a carefully crafted construction.
One that reflects behavior, attitudes, and actions that we recognize or otherize. Any film to some extent plays with what we know, what we think we know, what we don’t know, and hope to know. Any media can control our public focus. We know *Borat* is supposed to make us laugh. But is it possible, given the strength of the media source, the power of celebrity (even when it is a false construction), and the unwillingness of the popular viewing audience to form critical opinions on issues of global identity, sex, and class, for a film to tell “Americans” how to behave, what to think, and who to hate while we sit and laugh in the dark?

“Darkness” also acts as metaphor for the willing ignorance and refusal to know or question beyond face value. A socially relevant pedagogy pierces light through the blindfolds and places the responsibility on the knower to connect and disconnect from known and yet to be known. Watts Pailliotet (1998) states, “To be literate today means to actively engage with complex texts and to construct critical meanings through them.”¹ *Borat* as a complex text provides plenty of material to deconstruct and construct critical meanings with careful attention to not only the content of the movie, but to the audience reaction, in particular discerning the tenor of laughter. It is catching the nuances in laughter that point us to differing interpretations and levels of criticality. It is the interaction of audience response and text, these elements in relationship to one another, that offer specificity and context, while altering the way we read, think, and act. Comedy can masquerade, obscure, or numb these skills through laughter, thus why we focus on the very phenomena that may jeopardize or compromise the potential of an ever-evolving curriculum in socially relevant pedagogy. Keep in mind though, it is never sufficient to develop a critical awareness, a political consciousness, or sound pedagogy without doubt or skepticism. Critical knowledge alone will not guarantee less racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, or discriminatory practices of any kind and laughing doesn’t always mean enjoyment, approval, or consent. Critical reflections on these social actions reopen fundamental discussions on the power of representation for both self and other, and in *Borat*’s case the direction and aim of laughter.

Notes

¹The abstraction of “The Briar Patch” from the Uncle Remus Tales, a compilation of African slave tales on an American plantation, adapted by Joel Chandler Harris is so adeptly woven into Pryor’s comedy that the scene stands as something new instead of a retread of a classic tale.


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