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WHAT'S SO FUNNY: COMEDY IN AMERICA

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Based on reviews and articles I had read about the new faux documentary *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, I expected that when I actually saw it, I would be disgusted. I imagined sitting low in my theatre seat, covering my eyes, horrified by the displays on the screen. When I finally got to see the movie, I was disappointed at my lack of disgust and horror. It was not nearly as outrageous or offensive as I felt all those articles had promised it would be. My disappointment made me think about my extensive exposure to vulgar comedy and the nature of comedy in America. Perhaps I have been desensitized to bodily functions and nudity, especially when they are presented in the name of comedy. Perhaps years filled with *American Pie's* and *Scary Movie's*, capped by the summer of raunchy sex farces (like *Wedding Crashers* and *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*) have made it hard for me to be shocked and appalled by anything, even the scene of a hairy naked man wrestling a fat naked man, which constitutes the climax of the Borat movie.

For those who have not seen the movie (or read every article written about it) the idea is as follows: a journalist from Kazakhstan named Borat drives an ice cream truck across America, hoping to meet the woman of his dreams, Pamela Anderson. Because Borat is new to America and knows nothing of American decorum or tradition, he unwittingly does and says things to the locals along his path that both infuriate them and end up making them look like horrible people. Take for example the man working at a rodeo who, trusting the seemingly simple foreigner, tells Borat that America is currently working on making it acceptable to “string up” homosexuals. The concept of lulling unsuspecting locals into a false sense of confidence so that they will reveal their innermost prejudices may sound cruel and potentially humiliating for all involved, but the movie has been very well received in America, debuting at number one and managing to keep the top spot for the following week as well. It is difficult to find an unfavorable review of the film, and the “comic elite” in America is calling creator and star Sacha Baron Cohen a “revolutionary” (Stein; Rottenberg). Still, despite the positive reception from critics, Borat has caused worldwide controversy as well, which made me wonder: what is it exactly that separates those who hate the movie from those who love it? Is it just that people who hate it don't “get it”?

Cohen, due to his performance as Borat, has been compared to Andy Kaufman, called a “Johnny Knoxville with a sense of humor,” and a Dadaist (Stein; Rottenberg). His performance blurs the line between the “wildly surreal and the all-too-real” as he allows his subjects no “comforting recourse to ironic detachment” (Rottenberg). It is reported that during filming, Cohen was extremely dedicated to the project, refusing to break character between the time he woke up and the time he went to bed. The

mustache is real, the suit remained unwashed to make him smell more “foreign,” and all promotional interviews were conducted with Cohen in character (Rottenberg). This kind of ultra-real comedy, in which unwitting targets do not realize they are part of the joke, is, according to those in the know, a trend emerging with the release of *Borat*. Referred to as “street comedy,” it relies on extreme absurdity, well-placed realism (such as the authentically smelly suit), and little-to-no money (Stein). It is a descendent of *Jackass* and Stephen Colbert, but without the “twinkle in [the] eye” (Rottenberg). The look of *Borat*—the grainy, cheaply shot footage—is intentional, as is the fact that *Borat* hails from a real country. As British comedian David Baddiel points out, “if it had been an older comedian, Borat would have been from Stupidlandia” (Stein).

It is in the spirit of this new brand of guerrilla comedy that the faux documentary becomes so successful as a genre. *Borat* simply would not work as either a social commentary or a shock-filled comedy if a viewer felt that everyone on screen was in on the joke. The genuine reactions to Borat deliver most of the laughs, and it is knowing that these people are revealing their true selves, their innermost thoughts and beliefs, that allows the film to comment on American society and culture.

When considering some of the most famously disgusting comedic outlets, such as *South Park*, *Team America: World Police*, and even *Mad* and *Cracked* magazines, it seems obvious that even if the public is sure to be disgusted, comedy just has to go as far as it can go. Comedians revel in the challenge to make audiences cringe. It is with this in mind that one considers how a group of the most respected comedians in America, following an advance viewing of *Borat*, shared a “sense of collective astonishment” (Rottenberg). In a group that included a *Simpsons* writer, Garry Shandling, and one of the creators of *Seinfeld* (the other, Larry Charles, actually directed *Borat*), there seemed to be a consensus that what they saw was “something totally original,” and that Cohen had changed comedy in the same way that Marlon Brando changed dramatic acting after *On the Waterfront* (Rottenberg; Stein).

This new style of aggressive comedy is expected to horrify older viewers, namely those over the age of thirty-five. Says journalist Joel Stein, “If you’re over 35, you think you have the right to keep your regrettable moments private. If you’re under 35, you realize that everything is public now.” As one woman in the film tells Borat, when he asks her to clean him after using the toilet, “That is a very private thing.” But it isn’t anymore; nothing is. And the younger generations are used to that. In the era of reality television and Internet video stars, everyone’s idiocy and/or talent is on display for all to see. The notion of privacy as an assured right no longer exists, and everyone, at every moment, is at risk of revealing his or her true nature. The arrival and popularity of Colbert, YouTube, and *Jackass* means the medium will continue to grow. No one is safe. At the Toronto Film Festival in September 2006, *Borat* “earned a rapturous reception,” even though the projector malfunctioned midway through the movie and despite the festival’s renown for debuting future Oscar contenders, which *Borat* reportedly outshone (Rottenberg). The movie has also created a lot of buzz on college

campuses, as well as within the film industry. So it may be safe to assume that this type of movie, a colorful mix of vulgarity and supposed social commentary, is inevitably going to be more fervently anticipated, and finally received, by those Americans who are presumably more liberal, more open-minded, and more creative. Or is it just that this was the right time for this movie to be seen in America?

Professor Paul Lewis suggests in his critique of the film that the latter may be the case, and the movie's reception internationally suggests it may be an entirely cultural issue. *Borat* has definitely not been so welcome in Russia, or in his supposed homeland of Kazakhstan. The former has not banned the movie, as was reported, but its Federal Culture and Cinematography Agency, which is responsible for certifying films for distribution, has refused to certify *Borat* (Myers). The agency contends that its decision was based on "potential to offend religious and ethnic feelings," although due to rampant illegal DVD production in Russia the film will likely still be seen (Myers). This implies that there may still be some demand for the movie despite belief by officials that it will offend many within the country, particularly Russia's large Muslim population.

Borat is the first movie that has been refused certification for distribution in Russia since the collapse of Soviet censorship in the 1980's (Myers). Even Kazakhstan has not explicitly refused distribution of the movie. This leads one to wonder whether Russia's choice to refuse distribution for *Borat* is based on cultural, ethical, and religious reasons, or something else entirely. Daniil B. Dondurei, editor of *The Russian Art of Cinema* magazine, argues that the decision was motivated by politics. He cites "ethnic tensions, but also close relations between Russian and Kazakhstan, and a taboo in Russia against satirical depictions of national leaders or political systems"—a notable cultural difference from America, where leaders and politics are not only satirized publicly but frequently, on two intensely popular shows, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* (Myers).

In Kazakhstan, where they were likely expecting a "major, if probably hysterical, hit to [their] image," the government went on the defensive in the wake of the release of *Borat*, taking out a four-page tourism advertisement in the *New York Times* and the *International Herald Tribune*, and producing television ads for distribution in America (EP Staff). The print ad, described by journalist Josh Rottenberg as "unintentionally funny," tries to appeal to potential visitors with such tidbits as, "The country is home to the world's largest population of wolves" (Rottenberg). Initially, the government of Kazakhstan threatened legal action against Cohen but has now invited him to visit. Cohen is considering going to Kazakhstan (in character, of course), and sees it as the "ultimate opportunity to conflate his made-up character with reality" (Stein).

So, Russia does not find *Borat* funny; Kazakhstan does not find *Borat* funny (although they are beginning to adopt the adage "If you can't beat 'em . . ."); and Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar, all of which have "barred distribution of

the film” due to predominantly Muslim populations, do not find *Borat* funny (Myers). Then why does America seem to find him so funny?

The answer to this question appears to lie in an interesting cultural conglomeration: *Borat*, both the movie and the man, embodies everything that Americans find humorous. He is a combination of highbrow satire, lowbrow sight gags, extreme and inaccurate caricature—he creates in the average viewer, through his own inadequacies, a quiet feeling of superiority. This recipe has proven successful in so many of America’s most popular comedic outlets: *The Simpsons*, most notably; network sitcoms like the 1980s hit *Perfect Strangers*, which capitalized on the inherent humor of a foreigner trying to start a life in America; even *The Daily Show*, which earned its extreme popularity by emphasizing for a delighted audience the constant foibles of politicians and other public figures.

America, it seems, has a history of humor based on “patronization of the other,” satire based upon stereotypes beginning with the caricature of Yankee Doodle during the American Revolution (Stein). Yankee Doodle was depicted as a country “bumpkin,” the opposite of the perception of the British as fancy and sophisticated, and was originally created as an “ignorant clodhopper [to] appeal to the British soldiery as an apt caricature of the rustic rebels” (“Songs and Oaths”; Tandy). Eventually, the character of Yankee Doodle was proudly adopted by American soldiers to emphasize and proclaim their difference and independence from the British (“Songs and Oaths”). These exaggerated characters generally develop into recognized facsimiles of a given ethnic or economic group, as Yankee Doodle came to symbolize patriotic Americans, and are then embraced in the culture. Such is Borat.

One trick, Rottenberg argues, that makes Borat (and Cohen) so successful is that he is playing on the average American’s inherent notion of a “foreigner,” and their almost guaranteed lack of geographical knowledge (Rottenberg). Cohen, Rottenberg says, capitalizes on the average American’s willingness to believe even “the most absurd things” about how people live and behave in foreign countries. Because Kazakhstan represents one of the “many gaping holes in the average American’s shaky knowledge of geography,” anything that Borat says about the country will go unchallenged by his subjects (Rottenberg). As Stein says, Cohen preys on the “fear, fascination and, most of all, patronization of the other—the foreigner” (Stein). The irony is that while Cohen plays the “clueless, desperate-to-fit-in, optimistic foreigner” that has become a comedy staple, Borat’s “attempts to be American pinpoint exactly how the world sees us: garish, violent, nouveau riche, a land of Donald Trumps and 50 Cents” (Stein).

An interesting contradiction lies in Cohen’s performance in the film. He simultaneously plays a “leering, filthy, poor and opinionated foreigner and a confidence man who triumphs over the skills who fall into his lap,” creating a caricature of a foreigner, and emphasizing the true feelings of his subjects (Lewis). Borat’s success lies in the audience’s knowledge that he may be fake, but the targets

are very real. This duality allows the audience to laugh both at him and with him, and seamlessly combines the film's use of both exaggeration (satire) and reality (documentary).

According to journalist Carina Chocano, Borat's encounters with average Americans are "gems of fish-out-of-water buffoonery" and test some "surprisingly ambitious sociological theories." But to what end? Borat's main target appears to be bigotry within the United States, particularly in the South. Lewis claims that audiences, by assuming a position of "imagined superiority" over both Borat and his subjects, "take an angry pleasure in the appalling statements he brings out of others" (Lewis). By revealing these people's darker sides, Borat is giving the viewer a "shot of security and a double infusion of enhanced self-esteem" (Lewis). Viewers are given some sense of pride and the idea that things could be worse: they could be the person on screen, saying bigoted things and making a fool of him/herself.

Also, the indiscretions of the people on the screen become a novelty in our contemporary politically correct society. As Jay Roach, director of *Austin Powers*, says, "Political correctness has led to a more civil society because people with racist attitudes have taken them underground" (Rottenberg). Until now! Borat reveals the true feelings of his subjects, much to the horror of the audience. But there is something compelling about hearing beliefs and ideas that are normally not allowed in a public forum. Particularly because it is socially unacceptable to publicly reveal one's prejudices and hostilities, Borat quickly becomes both a window and a mirror, allowing people who do not share the opinions of those featured in the movie to see what others really think, and to allow those who do share these beliefs to see themselves represented in popular culture for better or worse. This onscreen candor creates something akin to a car crash: even if people hate what they are seeing, they can't turn away. Of course, the fact that Cohen's antics as Borat create humor within the spectacle makes it palatable to a wider audience, horrifying viewers some of the time, and making them laugh the rest of the time.

Satire as a form of humor is pervasive throughout American comedy and is seen as a highbrow alternative to parody or irony, intended to "attack vice, and promote virtue" (Granger). Tony Hendra defines satire as an "intellectual judo, in which the writer or performer takes on the ideas and character of his target and then takes both to absurd lengths to destroy them" (Turner 55). Throughout his travels, Cohen (as Borat) challenges his subjects, creating situations in which they can either receive him well, or not. Take, for example, the men on a New York subway that Borat attempts to greet with kisses. There is nothing overly aggressive or intrusive in the way in which Borat approaches the men; he only tries to kiss them on each cheek, in a way that is common in many European countries. More often than not, he is met with harsh language and the threat of bodily harm. This simple experiment reveals much about these men: homophobia, ignorance regarding other cultures, distrust, disassociation from the people around them, and probably even fear. The movie is full of similar

incidents and similar people, all of which are startling in their hostility. Because the events on the screen are shocking and uncomfortable for the viewer, it becomes both natural and necessary to laugh to alleviate the uneasiness. Also, given the prevalence within American society of the traits exhibited by the men on the subway, the men become instantly recognizable to the audience, who “laugh along because [they] see [them]selves . . . and to face up to this sort of unvarnished, unpleasant reality is a powerfully subversive thing” (Turner 56). Unexpectedly, these men become representative of everything that is wrong with our society, and it becomes not only acceptable but obligatory to find the humor in their ignorance. How could we not? Suddenly we are aware that it is all around us, all the time!

In his book *Planet Simpson: How a Cartoon Masterpiece Defined a Generation*, Chris Turner notes that satire often emphasizes the “blazing hundred-foot-high neon gap between What Is and What Should Be,” or the difference between how people know things to be and how they want them to be (57). He explains further, saying that this idea is particularly important in comedy in America because “America’s ideals are so central to its society and so celebrated in its history and culture” (58). America prides itself on being welcoming, open-minded, and accepting. But Borat’s experience certainly does not confirm this notion. In actuality, the people that he meets are the exact opposite. This is usually so, says Louis D. Rubin Jr., who asserts that American comedy arises out of a gap between a “cultural ideal” and fact, with the ideal usually being revealed as “somewhat hollow and hypocritical, and the fact crude and disgusting” (Turner 58).

In addition to the more subtle comic devices Borat uses to get a laugh, there are present in the movie displays of all levels of comedy, described by Turner: sight gags, catchphrases, referential humor, and sophomoric humor—the previously mentioned bodily functions (Turner 59). Through the use of many levels of comedy, Borat is able to appeal to all types of viewers, and the movie never feels heavy with pretension, or like one would have to be a genius to understand the jokes. A child could watch the film and laugh. The sight gags and slapstick humor combined with the more subtle social satire create comedic stimulation for all the senses. The catchphrases (“High five!”) act as both an effective marketing tool and an easy way for people leaving the theatre to feel that they can actively participate in the movie. Just because the show is over does not mean you have to stop talking like Borat!

The referential humor in *Borat*—though limited—creates cultural cohesion, another potential reason that the film has been so successful in the very home of its main cultural reference: *Baywatch*. The references to the culture in Kazakhstan are quite obviously the fruits of Cohen’s imagination and are, for the most part, unspoken. Borat’s history and habits are never explicitly tied to Kazakhstan specifically, but instead embody most Americans’ notion of a foreigner. The choice of Kazakhstan as Borat’s home is effective because it “blends into all the other ‘stans’ we don’t understand” (Lewis). But the American people and references are real. As Cohen

himself says, “The joke is not on Kazakhstan. I think the joke is on people who can believe that the Kazakhstan that I describe can exist” (Strauss). It is America that is Borat’s punch line, and it was also American audiences who turned test screenings into “tent revivals, with audiences convulsing with laughter” (Rottenberg).

So is it that *Borat* just happened to be the right movie at the right time in America? Can timing, and America’s general taste for vulgarity and satire, account for the movie’s phenomenal success here? Paul Lewis calls *Borat* the “perfect ethnic joke for post-9/11 America” (Lewis), capitalizing on America’s fear of foreigners as potential terrorists and turning it into laughter and fascination at the foibles of a naive newcomer. It is probably true that, before 9/11 and the country’s increased fears of terrorism, Borat would not have received the hostile reaction he did from the people he met throughout his journey. And, without their prejudice caught on tape, the film would not be the shocking glimpse into American intolerance it has become. It is for this fact in particular that *Borat* becomes such a fascinating lesson in American self-awareness. It reveals much about the American character, and it says much about the way that America is viewed by foreigners (of which Cohen is one), but has still been embraced by the very people that it criticizes. Despite the unfortunate truths that may be revealed through the *Borat* movie, America must always be commended for its ability to laugh at itself, loudly and enthusiastically.

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