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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" (rottentomatoes.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 *Jack-ass*? 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

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-

acter 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 Margero, 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 *Gray’s Anatomy* star Isaiah Washington, speaking to the popular culture newshounds in the audience. She also comedically plays on her reputation as a macho “ball-buster” in contrast with the metrosexual 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 Rutgers 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.

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