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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* make 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/worldiness 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

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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 through 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

genitals are indeed funny, but Borat needing to be taught how use the toilet being cast as some subversive critique is just plain shitty.

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