

December 2007

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

Roymieco A. Carter

Leila E. Villaverde

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/taboo>

Recommended Citation

Carter, R. A., & Villaverde, L. E. (2017). Laughing at Ourselves (in the Dark): Comedy and the Critical Reflections of Social Actions. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 11 (1). <https://doi.org/10.31390/taboo.11.1.12>

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 retrospect 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 are 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 intermediality² 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, Luenell, 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

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 hysteric 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/ decentering, 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 decenterings 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."³ *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.

²L. Semali and A. Watts Pailliotet (Eds.). (1999). *Intermediality: The Teachers' Handbook of Critical Media Literacy*. Denver, CO: Westview Press.

³A. Watts Pailliotet's Deep Viewing: A Critical Look at Visual Texts in J. L. Kincheloe and S. R. Steinberg (Eds.). (1998). *Unauthorized Methods: Strategies for Critical Teaching*. New York: Routledge, p. 123.

Roymieco A. Carter is an assistant professor of art at Wake Forest University and Leila E. Villaverde is an associate professor in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.