

Borat: Whose pie and whose face?

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29 November 2006

Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan, directed by Larry Charles, screenplay by Sacha Baron Cohen, Anthony Hines, Peter Baynham and Dan Mazer

In *Borat*, the mock documentary that opened in a number of countries this month, British comic Sacha Baron Cohen portrays fictional Kazakh television reporter Borat Sagdiyev on a cross-country American tour. An anti-Semite, sexist and homophobe, Borat does his best during his journey from New York to Los Angeles to provoke those he encounters with his crude language and behavior.

Cohen's specialty, honed on British television, is to inhabit a supposedly transgressive personality obsessively—in some ways quite brilliantly—then place himself in the path of ordinary people or “celebrities,” come out with the most outrageous statements or questions, and see what emerges. In short stretches, in the presence of the pompous, self-promoting or politically reactionary, the results can be entertaining and even enlightening. At other times, Cohen is simply crude and embarrassing.

In the new film, the British comedian has chosen to stretch his Borat character over an entire film and, in the course of so doing, offer some commentary on American life, on anti-Semitism and anti-gay sentiment, on our conceptions about life in a former Soviet republic, and various other issues. Someone ought to have sounded the alarm. A film, even the most shapeless, obliges its creators to dramatize an idea or a mood. Unhappily, on full display for us in *Borat* is everything weak and unresolved, or worse, in Cohen's comedy and his social outlook. His American collaborators, including director Larry Charles, may also have contributed their own confusion to the mix.

The film has been successful at the box office and it has been hailed by its admirers as hilarious, pitilessly satirical, and even “revolutionary” in its approach to comedy.

Borat is composed of several types of sequences. First, there are the opening and closing scenes set in fictional “Kazakhstan” (actually, a village in southern Romania); second, various encounters with ordinary Americans; third, episodes where Cohen “draws blood”—i.e., in which he elicits a positive response to his Jew- or gay-baiting.

The scenes set in mythical Kazakhstan establish the film's general tone and approach. Borat introduces us to his sister, the “number four prostitute” in the country, with whom he shares an incestuous kiss, along with the town “rapist” and its mechanic/abortionist. He informs us that one of the town's annual highlights is the “running of the Jews,” in which two giant papier-mâché Jewish caricatures are chased through the streets and beaten while they attempt to “get the money.” Borat leaves the town in triumph, en route to the US, in a car drawn by horses.

What's being satirized here? Joel Stein in *Time* magazine writes that “Sure, it seems as if comedian Sacha Baron Cohen is mocking Kazakhstan. He is not. He's mocking you. After all, you're the idiot who doesn't know where Kazakhstan is or if it's the kind of place

where, as Borat claims, there's a ‘Running of the Jews.’”

How are “we” being mocked, and presumably made to consider our shortcomings, by this sequence? The argument might be: a preposterous scene like this encourages spectators to recognize the falsity of their own notions about the rural population in Central Asia—that these are ignorant people, dominated by violence, incest and Jew-hating.

However, the scene is not organized in a manner that would lead to any such rethinking. It is not nearly preposterous or artistically distanced enough. The filmmakers have used a real town (although obviously not Kazakh), whose real poverty and backwardness are obvious. Toothless women, a man with one arm, unshaven and sullen bystanders, a cow in a living room, nothing but a series of clichés—how does this mock our preconceptions? On the contrary, the scene's overall effect is to arouse disgust and strengthen the spectator's sense of superiority over these pitiable creatures. From the outset, one has the unhappy suspicion that the cynical, well-heeled filmmakers share in the prejudices they claim to be deriding.

This suspicion is reinforced by the response of the inhabitants of the Romanian town, Glod, to the entire process. They apparently feel they have been exploited and made to look like fools. Glod is a wretchedly poor place, largely Roma, without sewers or running water. The residents, desperate for work and money, were paid a pittance by the filmmakers.

Certain of the American sequences are merely gross and pointless. Again, how are our preconceptions “mocked” and challenged by seeing Borat defecating near one of Donald Trump's hotels, masturbating in front of a Victoria's Secret store window, washing his face in a toilet bowl, releasing a chicken in a subway car, or wrestling with his supposed producer in the nude? Other sequences, in which the victims of his extended pranks are baffled and sometimes appalled by his behavior (Borat discussing the status of women with a group of veteran feminists, taking a driving lesson, learning how to tell a joke; purchasing a vehicle, receiving instructions in etiquette, eating with a Southern dining society, disrupting a local television morning program, etc.), are, for the most part, sophomoric and tedious.

Stein in *Time*, referring to these and other scenes, writes that “we” are being mocked because “you're the idiot who believes so much in cultural relativism that you'll nod politely when a guy tells you that in his country they keep developmentally disabled people in cages.” This is absurd. In practice, a number of astonishingly polite and patient individuals put up with Borat's unpleasant antics (we have no way of knowing how many people threw him and his film crew out on their ears), and then, for their efforts, they are lectured by the media.

In the tactics of Cohen, Charles and their collaborators, as well as the comments of Stein and other admirers, there is a level of social insularity, sneering and intellectual sadism that is positively disturbing. In its own fashion, this underscores the social and moral

divide in American life. A privileged layer, which thinks itself sophisticated and knowing, feels contempt for wide layers of the population.

Manohla Dargis, in the *New York Times*, asserts that “Sacha Baron Cohen doesn’t blow bullies out of the water; he obliterates them.” On the contrary, for the most part, it is Cohen who plays the bully. That Dargis doesn’t even notice this is revealing. *Salon*’s Stephanie Zacharek associates cruelty and comedy, observing, “Sometimes we can’t face up to our own capacity for cruelty—but at least we can get a gag out of it.” She should, perhaps, speak for herself.

Admirers of *Borat* point to three sequences in particular as evidence of its incisive social satire. In one, Cohen/Borat pretends to be interested in buying a gun. He asks the gun shop owner, “What kind of a gun would you recommend to kill a Jew?” The man replies, “I’d recommend a 9-mm or a Glock automatic.”

In a second, more extended segment, Borat chats with rodeo producer Bobby Rowe in Salem, Virginia, and tells him at one point, “We hang homosexuals in my country!” Rowe responds, “That’s what we’re trying to do here.” Introduced to the rodeo crowd, Borat declares, “We support your war of terror!” to noisy applause, before breaking into the supposed Kazakh national anthem, at which point the crowd turns on him and begins booing.

In the third, Borat is picked up as a hitchhiker up by three university frat boys in a recreational vehicle who, when quite drunk, reveal stupid and backward opinions about blacks and women.

The contention is that Borat penetrates to the hidden truth beneath the polite, “politically correct” surface. Josh Rottenberg in *Entertainment Weekly* calls Cohen’s Borat “a cross-cultural Trojan horse, sneaking past his subjects’ defenses and giving them license to bare hidden prejudices—to confess, on cable TV, a wish that it were legal to hunt Jews, for example, or to keep slaves.”

Again, Stein in *Time* writes, “By not even winking at his ruse, Baron Cohen is able to get his interviewees to show their inner selves, and it often isn’t pretty.” Director Charles claims, “I never felt like we tricked anyone in a cruel way. We gave people a chance to be themselves.”

The implication of all this is clear and it is nothing new in such circles. America, the thinking goes—or large portions of it at least—is a seething cauldron of racial and ethnic hatreds, misogyny and other prejudices; its backward and violent population is barely kept in check by the forces of law and order. In film and art, this means that the “radical” and “refreshing” position is to discover how filthy we (in reality, *they*) truly are.

Isn’t it obvious, however, that to a certain extent Cohen, Charles and company “found” (or chose to film) precisely what corresponded to their preconceptions about the American population? This is the irony: a film purportedly dedicated to mocking stereotypes largely ends up confirming and reinforcing them.

Are there racists, anti-Semites, anti-gay bigots and other similar types in America? Absolutely. One would probably not need to spend \$15-20 million and several weeks or months of filming to discover them. First of all, a good number of these characters appear on the cable television networks, in fundamentalist church pulpits, at military briefings and at major political party gatherings on a regular basis. In any event, the need to expose and combat anti-Semitism, racism, and similar poisons remains.

But does everyone in America, for example, hate the Jews? Cohen plays a raving anti-Semite. As Ron Rosenbaum on *Slate* notes, “The usual corollary derived from this is that he himself can’t be anti-

Semitic, but I wonder if there’s another corollary: This is a practicing Orthodox Jew’s vision of the world, even of the most Jew-friendly nation in the world: ‘They all hate us even if they try to disguise it, but you can find it right beneath the surface.’”

In fact, levels of racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia have dropped dramatically in the US since the 1950s and 1960s. Cohen seems to share the misanthropic vision of a David Mamet, who writes, as a recent *New York Times* reviewer noted, “as if Father Coughlin is still on the radio, Henry Ford still hawks *The Dearborn Independent*, and Fritz Kuhn’s German American Bundists still march through Yorkville.”

As a means of conducting social research, the method of *Borat*’s makers is entirely without value. We have no ways of knowing the circumstances under which anyone was filmed or what footage was rejected. It is clear that certain people were in on the joke, such as actress Pamela Anderson, who undergoes an “abduction” in one of the film’s final sequences. The “black prostitute” who Borat invites to his Southern dining society gathering is, in fact, a performer. Certain aspects of the scene with the University of South Carolina fraternity boys were stage-managed.

The victims of Borat’s pranks were set up. Did some of them deserve to be set up and exposed? Undoubtedly they did. I feel no sympathy for Rowe, for example. In other cases, the operation is murky or arbitrary.

This raises perhaps the most important point. The comic moment is not a fixed and abstract point; it has a social and psychological content. Cruelty may be inseparable from genuine comedy, but cruelty toward whom? The weak or the strong? A pie in the face is amusing if the face deserves the pie. A kick in the rear is funniest when every audience member has all along wished to deliver such a kick.

Perhaps the greatest genius of the cinema, Charlie Chaplin, tapped deeply into the desire of his audience to get even, in one fashion or another, with the powers that be. Film theoretician Siegfried Kracauer wrote that behind the unresolved endings of many Chaplin films “there lurks, perhaps, a desire to exalt the power of resistance of the seemingly weak who time and again cheat destiny.”

We experience this impulse only rarely in contemporary comedy. It is not entirely absent from *Borat*, but it is a feeble presence. Accidentally, in their scattershot manner, Cohen and Clark sometimes hit on appropriate targets. The film is at its most amusing when it exposes the charlatanry of the evangelical churches (Borat is saved, “comes to Jesus” and begins speaking in tongues), for example, or when Borat mangles the national anthem.

Audiences are responding to all sorts of elements in *Borat*, its amorphous anarchistic side, its adolescent humor, as well as its backwardness. It can be tempting, even convenient, to fall for what the media designates as brilliant and irreverent. However, to be blunt, too many people are still leaving their critical faculties behind them in the theater lobby. All in all, *Borat* is a shabby and unworthy enterprise.



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