

Borat Subsequent Moviefilm: The joke's on who?

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The prevailing social and political situation *begs* for bitter, outraged satire. In the leading imperialist nation, the fascistic president has suggested bleach as a COVID-19 treatment. Responding to massive protests against police violence this past summer, president-elect Joe Biden postulated that the police could be trained to shoot people in the leg. There are entirely too many faces in need of well-aimed pies and more...

As we have written, comedy in film and television is beginning to find its way—see Barry, Corporate, Bojack Horseman and Lady Dynamite for example—but it is only a small, limited beginning.

It is all the more unfortunate that the latest effort by comic actor/writer Sacha Baron Cohen rejects a more serious, hostile—in a word, genuinely critical and *humorous*—treatment of contemporary problems.

Baron Cohen has talent. At his best, he can sidle up to his deserving victims (the best are politicians and high society swine) with a combination of ego-stroking and good acting. Not so long ago we noted a powerful and hilarious example in Baron Cohen's Kinder-guardians bit on *Who Is America?*, where his Israeli commando character lures a group of right-wing American politicians to endorse arming five-year-old school children as a defense against the school-shooting epidemic.

That same character drew former vice president and war criminal Dick Cheney into autographing a “waterboard kit” and led to the resignation of Georgia state representative Jason Spencer, who chased Baron Cohen across the floor of a gym lunging backwards with his rear end exposed, ostensibly to combat Islamic fundamentalism.

Precious little of this finds its way into *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm*. Like the original *Borat* (2006), the sequel retreats from using the title character as an

artistic means to unearth and display the idiocy of deserving targets. Rather, the film largely wallows in the title character's story—one hesitates to call it a plot. Results are abysmal, painful to recount and extend for over an hour and a half.

The Borat-Cohen character, imprisoned for supposedly humiliating Kazakhstan in the original 2006 film, is sent on a special diplomatic mission to Donald Trump in Washington. The aim is to win favor for the Central Asian nation. Unable to gain access to Trump, Borat decides to give a monkey—Kazakhstan's finest film director and minister of culture (ha-ha-ha!)—to US vice president Mike Pence. However, Borat's daughter Tutar follows him as a stowaway to the US and eats the monkey-director, prompting a revision in their plan. Tutar, who dreams of becoming the next Melania Trump, will get breast implants and seduce the president's personal attorney and aging madman, Rudolph Giuliani.

Along the way, Baron Cohen makes oblique, harmless jests at various celebrities from Jeffrey Epstein to Dog the Bounty Hunter. He taunts and prods at a broad range of people, most of whom are ordinary, harmless and utterly underserving of his antics. Rather than laugh at a cell-phone vendor, cake shop owner, hairdresser, farm supply clerk etc. etc., one tends to view them as bullied.

The film's treatment of all things Kazakh reeks of unfairness and ignorance—and Western middle class snobbery. Kazakh officials are all corrupt; the villagers hate Jews and dwell in backwardness and squalor; women are beneath farm animals and daughters come with an owner's manual from the Ministry of Agriculture and Wildlife.

One scene or two in *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm* hit the mark. An encounter between Borat, his teenage

daughter and a South Carolina “pregnancy counselor” highlights the sickness of Christian fundamentalist culture in regard to abortion, even in the case of incest against a minor.

Likewise, Borat and Tutar cause a memorable stir at a Southern debutante ball. The couture can’t conceal the cultural backwardness and primitiveness. One stately looking old creep names a price to Borat for sleeping with Tutar: “Five hundred” he whispers. Another tells Borat that “in the South we like pretty young girls, okay; they’re fun.” Their horror at Borat’s father-daughter “fertility dance” is welcome, deserved.

But all of this lies beneath a pile of increasingly unjustified jabs at everyday people.

So when Borat takes Tutar to the babysitter Jeanise with a dog bowl and chains, shoving his own purported backwardness in her face, the film becomes all but unwatchable.

As if the treatment of Jeanise didn’t turn the stomach, Borat dresses as his idea of a stereotypical, money-grubbing “Jew” and enters a synagogue where old ladies—one of them a Holocaust survivor—kindly try to explain that the holocaust was real, that Jews aren’t evil—and then they hug him and feed him soup.

Something is deeply wrong here. Frat-boy, “gross-out” humor aside, what leads Baron Cohen to such miserable results?

In our review of Baron Cohen’s film *Brüno* (2009) we characterized his artistic process and attitude in these terms: “He sets out to demonstrate, in *Borat* and *Brüno*, that anyone, pushed hard enough, or perhaps made comfortable enough to speak freely, will reveal himself or herself to be anti-Semitic (*Borat*) or anti-gay (*Brüno*). Both films and the approach taken in making them reflect a dim and often contemptuous view of human beings.”

Borat Subsequent Moviefilm doubles down in this misanthropic regard, inviting the viewer to revel and laugh at just how rotten everyone supposedly is. One can’t help but ask of Baron Cohen, “Yes, and as for you yourself, sir, what exempts you from this all-encompassing muck?”

What about the “controversial” treatment of “America’s Mayor” (Giuliani)? Thoroughly underwhelming! One fumes certainly as Giuliani tells the fictitious *Patriot News* reporter (Tutar) that China deliberately manufactured and spread the novel

coronavirus and that Trump saved a million lives and acted swiftly as the pandemic ripped across the United States. But this hardly adds much to what we already know about the small-time Mussolini and his outlook.

And when the heavy old crook prepares to have sex with the young Tutar? He’s fascistic *and* lecherous? Stop the presses! “Breaking News!!”

For all of its tiresome references to genitals and bodily functions, *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm* is entirely safe.



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