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Cultural Learnings of *Borat* Make for Benefit Glorious Study of Documentary

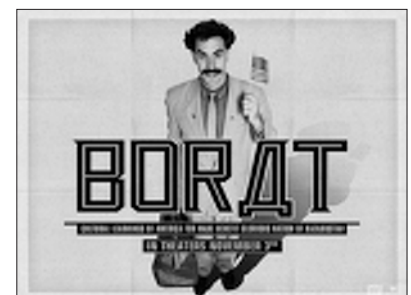
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Introduction

The genre to which a film is assigned reflects how a culture understands the boundaries between perception and reality—what can be accepted on screen as true or false, right or wrong. *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (Dir. Larry Charles, 2006), for example, has challenged our cultural assumptions by challenging our generic assumptions. Is it a documentary? A mockumentary? A narrative fiction? Most efforts to categorise the film focus on the humour, referring to it as comedy and mockumentary. But they do not account for how Borat Sagdiyev (Sacha Baron Cohen) interacts with people on screen or for his own claims that these encounters produce significant information about the world. Fictional genres always bear some degree of indexical relationship to the lived world (Sobchack 1984), and that relationship only intensifies in a traditional documentary. *Borat*, however, confuses the genres: a fictional TV host steps out of the mock travelogue of his fictional hometown and steps into a journey through a real America. The indexical relationship between the screen world and the real world varies, then, with almost every scene, sometimes working as fiction, sometimes as documentary, sometimes as mockumentary.

Documentary and mockumentary practices exist simultaneously in the film. Whereas a mockumentary sheathes its fictions within a documentary style, though, *Borat* sheathes its documentary elements (the interviews are perfectly real to the unwitting participants) within a fiction. Generic stability is complicated further when Borat drops his initial documentary plan of tracking down actress Pamela Anderson, whom he has seen as “CJ” in the television series *Baywatch*. But from interviews with actual people and from news and clips of Anderson’s pornographic home video, Borat is disillusioned, believing that he now knows the true Anderson behind the mediated form on screen. One television program is thus exchanged for another, and this uneasy exchange throughout the film characterizes its unsettled nature as a genre and as a description of reality.

Borat’s fictional voyage—complete with interviews, staged encounters, and provocations—is not so distant from the documentary tradition, which has been on shaky ontological and epistemological ground since Auguste and Louis Lumière staged their first actualities and Robert Flaherty enlisted Allakariallak to play Nanook in *Nanook of the North* (1922), a re-enactment of past Inuit life. *Borat* bears a resemblance to a variety of documentaries—notably, to Jean Rouch’s “ethnofictions” and hoax documentaries. It also suggests the modes of documentary Bill Nichols has called “reflexive” and “performative” for the way they question documentary authority, disorient the audience, and ask us to reconsider the premises that underpin the documentary’s claim to truth and knowledge (Nichols 1994). The film just as readily invokes Stella Bruzzi’s “performative documentary” for its emphasis on performative elements of both the filmmaker and the subjects (2006).



However, as a mockumentary and a documentary of a mockumentary, and even a fake mockumentary, the film continually retreats behind layer upon layer of reference—in an interrogation of American bigotry (Strauss 2006) that recursively implicates the media itself. He elicits damning information, for example, by staging an inter-cultural encounter between the American (Western) subjects and the racist, misogynist, anti-Semitic, homophobic, and socially ignorant Borat, the caricature of the Eastern foreigner, a modern-day Other. Sam Ali of the *Newark Star-Ledger* has expressed concern that this construction of the foreigner is dangerous to Muslims. In spite of Baron Cohen's (and Borat's) denial of any Muslim identity, Ali declares that Kazakhstan's predominantly Muslim population, combined with Borat's anti-Semitism and misogyny, is enough to cast Borat as Muslim in the American imagination. A fair enough point: Borat's rehearsals of Occidental xenophobia feed a stereotype. But they also clearly expose bigotries behind the rhetoric of enlightenment and equality. In this latter regard, the film may accomplish more than Baron Cohen set out to do. The performances do more than "let people lower their guard and expose their own prejudice," as Baron Cohen has explained. The meeting of "primitive" and "modern" subjects—in World Fairs, museums, and documentaries—has frequently served to bolster the imagined superiority of the modern culture and its claim on these institutions. *Borat* situates its modern subjects inside the presumed authority and possession of its own visual technology: a documentary film about America by a Third World admirer. And little by little, the admirer undoes the authority of his American knowledge, along with the authority of the documentary format and the claims of enlightenment through Western technology. Further, *Borat*, like "Borat" on and off screen, refuses to abandon the documentary charade, forcing the audience, like the eponymous documentarian, to exchange one form of programming for another. Americans are, in every sense, trapped by the technology of their understanding, unable to see Others beyond media stereotypes.

Borat: The Mockumentary

The mockumentary refers to a rapidly growing subgenre of the documentary. This form draws on recognisable documentary conventions to serve story-telling purposes. Examples range from the newsreel in *Citizen Kane* to Christopher Guest's improvisational offerings of *This is Spinal Tap*, *Waiting for Guffman*, *Best in Show*, and *A Mighty Wind*, to the television show *The Office*, whose format has since been imported to the United States, France, Germany, and Canada. The mockumentary format often explores mundane character and situations, critiquing the limits of human empathy and imagination. The mockumentary also comments on the relationship between the subject and the media itself, such as in the relationship between filmmakers and serial killer in *C'est arrivé près de chez vous* (Remy Belvaux, André Bonzel, Benoit Poelvoorde, 1992). The subgenre can also resist the marketing conceits of Hollywood aesthetics and production. As Alexandra Juhasz notes, for example, the documentary pretense of *The Watermelon Woman* offered an affordable production style while countering the Hollywood histories that omitted lesbians of all races (Juhasz 2007:17-18).

Amidst these diverse practices and theories, mockumentaries "represent a commentary on or confusion or subversion of factual discourse" (Roscoe 2001:1). Alisa Lebow wonders if the notion of mockumentary "mocks...the very viability or sustainability of the documentary category" (2007: 228). The fake documentary, Juhasz argues, carries with it voices that simultaneously replicate and challenge the authoritative voice of the documentary, which figures for most historians as a "discourse of sobriety" (Bill Nichols 1991) and "a tool of scientific inscription" (Brian Winston 1993).

To this end, *Borat* fits the mockumentary model. Borat travels through the U.S. to make a documentary with the help of his producer, Azamat Bagatov

(Ken Davitian). Borat's warped interview style, however, quickly dispels any air of sobriety in this presumed authoritative voice. In the case of the interview with feminists, the misogynist Borat, obsessed with Pamela Anderson's voluptuous "CJ," rejects the women's political autonomy and cognitive capacity. Refusing to hear the women out, he cannot fully participate in his own interview. As much as Borat's behavior is intended to provoke (or, in some cases, incite), it equally calls attention to the limits of documentary interviews as a source of knowledge because, of course, the interview's structure and content are a function of the person holding the microphone. Borat's puerile obsession with Pamela Anderson, one that leads his documentary on an unplanned cross-country voyage, functions both as traditional plot device (the journey narrative) and as meta-narrative critique of the vagaries, vicissitudes, and vices behind documentary production.

Ethnography Amok

The most clearly mockumentary moment comes with the introductory tour of his hometown of Kuzcek. The format mimics the ethnographic film, and in this parody it produces a fantasy of the primitive Other so excessive that the documentary form becomes a sick joke and, more deeply, an absurdly grotesque spectre of the Dark or Other Europe in the Western imagination. Like Luis Buñuel's *Las Hurdes*, also called *Terra sin Pan* or *Land Without Bread*, *Borat* verges on surrealism (Philip Martin has described *Borat* as "vérité surrealism"), imitating what Jeffrey Ruoff, in his discussion of *Las Hurdes*, calls "surrealist ethnography." The ethnographic connection is important because *Borat* belongs to a subversive genre that can be traced to a robust period of film history. In the 1920s, artists and anthropologists alike experimented with cultural codes and ideologies and produced startling juxtapositions intended to challenge the legitimacy of categorisation and the authority of meaning-making (Clifford 1981). The opening of *Borat*, like the entire film *Las Hurdes*, challenges the easy distinctions a modern documentary makes between us and them, between enlightened civilisation and primitive culture. Unlike other ethnographies of its time, most plumbing Africa for subject matter, *Las Hurdes* finds its Other in Europe. As the opening intertitles explain, *Las Hurdes* is a "filmed essay in human geography" focusing on the Hurdanos who inhabit a remote area between Portugal and Spain. *Las Hurdes* takes the viewer on a tour of "a sterile and inhospitable area" that holds "strange and barbaric" ceremonies and is home to extreme privation. The deadpan chronicle of utter dejection calls to our attention the delimiting, segregating power of narration and to the ethics of the objective encounter with death and disease. Viewers are presented with the death of a baby, with a "choir of idiots," and with dwarfism caused by "hunger, by lack of hygiene, and by incest." At one point, a bull exits a home. As religious as they are—a Buñuellian attack on Catholicism—the strictures of purity are grossly unsettled: the incest taboo is broken; humans and animals cohabit. Meanwhile, the relationship between voice-over and image is broken: the voice-over explains that a goat has fallen off the cliff, but a tell-tale puff of smoke suggests otherwise; what appears clearly to be a child is called a dwarf and is, according to the narrator, twenty-eight years old; similarly, a woman who appears to be seventy is said to be thirty-two.

Borat's tour of Kuzcek seems to draw directly from *Las Hurdes* in subject matter, theme, and style. Standing in front of his home, Borat kisses a woman he then introduces as his sister; incest pervades the town as we later learn he and his wife, Oksana, share a progenitor in Boltok the Rapist (father to Oksana, grandfather to Borat). The proliferation of incest confounds the traditional ethnographic activity of charting kinship and presents a community forsaking even the most basic taboos. They are morally suspect or lawless, flouting traditional boundaries, defiling privileged spaces (Borat, for example, shushes a cow in his lounge). Borat is a primitive figure outside reason, unaware of law or structure. His mother, who appears to be in her

seventies or eighties, is announced as the oldest woman in Kuzcek. “She is forty-two years old!” Borat proudly tells his audience, echoing the scene in *Las Hurdes*. Nightmares of archaic medicine carry on the surreal ethnography: the town mechanic is also the town abortionist. This introduction, following its ethnographic imperative, presents a barbaric ceremony as well, “The Running of the Jew.” Borat’s narration is as full of pride as Buñuel’s, in *Las Hurdes*, is dry—both obtusely shameless and uncompassionate.

Meanwhile, Kuzcek, a fictional town in Kazakhstan, evokes the ready-made Western image of the barbaric post-Soviet Other. The “kindergarten” of children with guns suggests terrorist training camps. Kuzcek is as fictional a town as ‘Jewtown’, name-checked in the fake Kazakh national anthem. Moreover, the town on screen is Glod, Romania. The lawsuits by Glod villagers, outraged at their depiction in the film, reveals how deeply the trafficking of this grotesque European Other affects viewers on both sides of the camera.

Baron Cohen is not Kazakh, nor does he resemble a Kazakh, but he does sport the uncertain appearance of a general Eastern stereotype, an easily “substitutable other” (Shohat and Stam 1994: 189), which is necessary for the film’s effect on American audiences. Bobby Rowe, the rodeo manager, suggests Borat shave his moustache so as not to look Muslim, although Borat tells him that his people “follow the eagle.” The point here is that Baron Cohen, though Welsh and Jewish, is mistaken for “Muslim” (both in the film, by Rowe, and outside it, by Ali) rather than for Iraqi, Iranian, Balkan, or any other genuine ethnicity. “Muslim” is not an ethnicity; it is a religion. But the term does refer to an established set of images that Americans use for categorising the Dark side of Europe, as well as the Middle East. Borat is summarily converted into one of those “Muslim extremists” who occupy the lead stories of nightly newscasts. The terms “Muslim” is a trope, not a category. It signals the enemy. Understanding here is quite beside the point. As punctuation to this theme, Borat does not even speak Kazakh; he speaks a mixture of Polish, Russian, and Hebrew. Ken Davitian’s character, producer Bagatov, speaks Armenian, rounding out the Eastern pastiche. Meanwhile, the native Kazakh language exists only as a hypothetical trace of reality in the English subtitles on screen. The musical soundtrack, too, is not Kazakh, but mostly Balkan, with music provided by Sarajevan composer Goran Bregovi and by the Macedonian Kocani Orkestar, among others. Ederlezi, a traditional folk song of the Romani (and a piece refashioned by Bregovi for Emir Kusturica’s *Dom za vesanje/ The Time of the Gypsies*) is used to represent Borat’s own tormented emotional state. This use of Romany and Jewish culture to construct Borat’s anti-Ziganist anti-Semite dissolves the Kazakh fantasy back into the plural voices that simply do not exist to Americans who see Eastern Europe and the Middle East on even the widest, brightest television screens money can buy. *Borat’s* projection of the West may be equally fraught, however. The film offers a skewed mapping of America, placing in Georgia a sequence filmed in Newton, MA, while sequences from South Carolina and Texas are presented as if down the road from once another. This false mapping of actual encounters in the ascendant culture prevents even Borat from achieving authority. At the same time, this distorted arrangement of place plays with the way documentaries can and do dispense with continuity editing in favour of ‘evidentiary editing’—editing according to a rhetorical logic (Nichols 2001).

***Borat* and the Documentary Tradition**

Nanook director Robert Flaherty once explained that “sometimes you have to lie. One often has to distort a thing to catch its true spirit” (cited in Lerner 27). This distortion is reflected in John Grierson’s phrase “the creative treatment of actuality,” said to derive from Grierson’s response to Flaherty’s work (Winston 1995: 11-14). And indeed the work of the Grierson group is known for the re-enactments and often poetic

representations of social services and civic issues. Humphrey Jennings' film *The Silent Village* stands out as an exceptional example of early dramatic recreation. The film stages the Nazi occupation of the Czech town of Lidice as the occupation of a Welsh village, with language prohibition and mass arrests. In doubled historical narration, the violence against Lidice articulates Britain's own violence against Wales, which in turn, illustrates the Nazi occupation.

The place of fiction in documentary is possibly most notable in Jean Rouch's "ethno-fictions." These films brought together truth and fiction in 'ethnographic fantasies built around historical and social realities, complete with a cast of 'fictional' characters" (DeBouzek 1989: 304). The improvisations were intended to reveal more about people's lives than any authoritative documentary could. In *Moi, Un Noir*, day labourers in Treichville take names like "Edward G. Robinson," "Eddie Constantine," and "Dorothy Lamour." These names indicate the omnipresence of Western media culture and register the effacing impact on African self-representation. *Petit à Petit* takes this encounter with the West in reverse, from Cote D'Ivoire up to Paris, with Damoure Zika's ethnographic expedition to study French in order to assist in the development of office buildings back in Abidjan. This playful "reverse ethnography" turns the trip into a parodic pilgrimage, blurring the documentary boundaries between "us" and "them" and between "art" and "science" (DeBouzek 1989).

For Baron Cohen, the mixing of Eastern and Western spaces does not validate an inferior Other; it exposes the equivalent strangeness and otherness of those people whom Borat, the misogynistic, anti-Semitic primitive, is caricaturing. But their own caricatures prevent them from seeing that mirror. Like ethnographic surrealism, the film "attacks the familiar, provoking the irruption of otherness" (Clifford 1988: 145). In other words, Borat's primitive figure encourages condescending instruction and complicity from people who themselves emerge as grotesque primitives.

A Documentary Into Darkness

In its turn toward documentary, Borat leaves the fake Kazakhstan for the real world, making his way across America in a quest for knowledge. The tour begins in New York City but soon turns into a cross-country journey through the American South as Borat begins his pursuit of Pamela Anderson. Here the fictional reporter conducts interviews with politicians, a humour coach, an etiquette coach, and he engages University of South Carolina frat boys, an American rodeo, a kosher bed-and-breakfast, teen-aged hip-hop enthusiasts, and a Pentecostal service. Xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and misogyny make appearances, but so, too, do surprising shows of good humour, courtesy, and willingness to indulge this stranger who aggressively tests their limits. Senator Bob Barr graciously, if awkwardly, swallows the "human cheese" he is offered. The Southern hostess of a dinner party, perhaps believing this man has never seen a toilet, responds generously with a demonstration of the facilities. The tolerance may be born from condescension, but it is in equal measure kind. New Yorkers fare somewhat worse in their demonstration of stereotypical "uncivil" behaviour. Borat is met with threats of violence and outbursts of obscenity.

The bulk of the voyage takes place in the American South, where the distinction between primitive and civilised is tested in each encounter with the natives. The New Yorkers, with their aggression and curses, illustrate an ignoble savage, to be sure, but it is the American South that will be the America of this trip, as storied with bigotry and violence as the is atavistic Kazakhstan the film imagines. Perhaps there is something cheap in this regional selection. Scenes from the South are selected for their focus on backward or religious attitudes, and this conviction is helped along by *Borat's* imaginative geography, which unifies all Southern states and even adds a sequence from New England into the southern trip, creating a "pasted" American Other much

like Kuzcek. But such pastiching and stereotyping are the rampant themes here, and the film rather self-consciously participates in them.

The Pentecostal service offers a stunning occasion for collapsing distinctions between us and them, West and East, modern and primitive. The sequence presents a combination of religious and political fervour that viewers might easily associate with the Islamic East. The appearance of the politicians, including Congressmen Charles “Chip” Pickering, and a State Supreme Court Justice erodes any pretence of a separation between church and state and, by extension, the notion that enlightened civilisations maintain a rational, secular distance from primitive religious fanatics. Pentecostal worship itself provides a considerable spectacle: its practitioners speak in tongues and swoon with the spirit. How is this Christian performance so different from the Kazakh ceremony depicted at the beginning of the film? If this is a congregation of savages, though, they are eminently welcoming and obliging toward Borat’s provocative joking. “Nobody loves my neighbour,” he answers to the claim that Jesus loves everyone. Yet they provide him with his ride to Los Angeles, where Borat is united with his producer, Azamat.

The complex, genteel primitivism of his Southern dinner hosts and of the Pentecostal church is countered, however, with a more shameful heart of American darkness. At the Imperial Rodeo at the Salem Civic Centre, Borat interviews manager Bobby Rowe. In passing, Borat refers to his country’s practice of hanging homosexuals. “That’s what we’re trying to do here,” responds Rowe, before continuing with his recommendation that Borat shave his moustache so he look less Muslim (and could pass for Italian). Borat performs at the Rodeo, too, and introduces his act with the claim, “We support your war of terror!” The crowd cheers, ignorant of, or indifferent to, the change of preposition from “on” to “of.” Borat continues to test the limits of their support in his cry, mentioned above, “May George Bush drink the blood of every single man, woman, and child of Iraq.” The cheers subside, and then line is finally drawn: “May you destroy their country so that for the next thousand years, not even a single lizard will survive in their desert!” But the crowd’s open hostility is reserved for the expression of Borat’s nationalism. He sings the fictional Kazakhstan national anthem to the tune of the U.S. national anthem. The merger of the two testaments of national pride forces the audience to link Eastern primitivism to Western civilization and aggrandizement. Such heresy is not tolerated, and the crowd boos Borat from the stadium of sacred animal rites.

At other times, Borat fails to perturb, but the result is equally startling. A request for a gun to shoot Jews is met with seeming aplomb. In his encounter with University of Southern Carolina frat boys, casual misogyny and racism are met with enthusiasm as the students bemoan the end of slavery and complain that minorities now have all the rights. A used-car salesman sanctions the term “pussy magnet.” For Baron Cohen, apathy is as pernicious as open bigotry. This was his argument in response to the Anti-Defamation League’s complaint about an episode outside the film, in which Borat performed his song, “In My Country There is a Problem” (alternately known as “Throw the Jew down the Well”) to enthusiastic reception in a Tucson bar.¹

The willingness of the participants to accept this warped character as a credible representative of Kazakhstan speaks to a condescension that insulates them from their own primitive biases. And so the West’s cultural schizophrenia, in which one voice testifies to enlightened democracy and another voice testifies to tribal bigotry, remains intact.

Borat: Hoax Documentary

Borat has much in common with documentaries that chronicle hoaxes, such as *The Couple in a Cage* (Coco Fusco and Paula Heredia, 1997), *The Yes Men* (Chris Smith,

1. The chorus of this song runs “Throw the Jew down the well/So my country can be free/You must grab him by his horns/Then we have a big party.”

Sarah Price, Dan Ollman, 2003) and *Ceský Sen/Czech Dream* (Vít Klusák and Filip Remunda, 2004). In these films, the stars perform alternative identities (undiscovered Amerindians in *The Couple in the Cage*; WTO officials in *Yes Men*; hypermarket industrialists in *Ceský Sen*) to elicit truths about the institutions in which they appear. *The Yes Men* (whose UK DVD cover boasts similarities to Ali G, Baron Cohen's other alter ego) chronicles the adventures of Mike Bonanno and Andy Bichlbaum as they impersonate World Trade Organisation representatives on television and at conferences all over the globe. In these appearances, they make extreme claims and proposals—outsourcing slavery, recycling food products for Third World distribution—intended to test the limits of their audience. Armed with PowerPoint presentations, business jargon, and three-piece suits, the Yes Men mimic and decry corporate behaviour, showing the human cost of profit-margins. Their mission is one of “identity correction,”² which challenge the perceived superiority of the subjects.

The Couple in the Cage chronicles the journey of Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Peña in their “Guatanaui World Tour” exhibit, a critical response to the Columbus Quincentennial. In this exhibit, Fusco and Gomez-Peña inhabit a cage as “undiscovered Amerindians” on display at sites throughout the world, including the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, in Washington, DC; the Plaza Colón, in Madrid; and the Australian Museum of Natural Science. The institutional sites were chosen for their colonial legacies, where the “‘savage’ body” was produced from imperial conquest (Taylor 1998: 165). While Borat's improprieties are designed to reveal those of his subjects, the caged couple's are designed to “highlight, rather than normalize, the theatricality of colonialism” (167). Or, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett observes, the “ethnographic burlesque” of *The Couple in the Cage* “shifts the locus of repudiation and admonishment from the ‘other’ to the practices of ‘othering’” (177).

In a sequence from Sasha Cohen's *Da Ali G Show*, Borat plays with this shift from “other” to “othering” when he tackles how one museum produces knowledge. Visiting Middleton Place Plantation in South Carolina, a living museum where actors play their historical roles by carrying out plantation work as if in the 18th century, Borat demonstrates how slavery can be written out of historical memory in the very act of preserving it. He marvels at the primitive culture before him and laments the state of U.S. technology, which he had held in such high esteem. Approaching one man, Borat attempts to help: there are now machines that can do this work, Borat tells him. Perhaps the poor man is a slave? The man attempts to explain: “This is the 18th Century; I am a historic interpreter.” Failing to make his point, the man tries again, stating that the museum is a historic site, a “time machine back to 1750 or 1760.” “You make a time machine?” Borat dumbly asks, compelling the actor to ask his partner for help, but she can only complain, “I'm trying hard, but he keeps asking about buying a slave, and that hasn't been done since 1865!” The actor-educators have erased slave labor from their 18th-century lesson in plantation economies, but their conviction that Borat requires instruction in the museum's narrative blinds them to the obvious misrepresentation: 1865 is not the 18th century. As a result, the educational institution grows unstable and even anxious about the history it displays. In effect, the camera captures triple performances: their work performance as 18th-century characters, their instructional performance as live educators for Borat, and their performance for the camera as historically savvy Americans. All of these performances repudiate Borat, turning him into the primitive Other who must be taught how to see—or not see—history, nationality, and ethnicity.

By allowing a visitor to disrupt the proceedings, this encounter offers an appeal beyond that of *The Couple in the Cage*. Fusco and Gomez-Peña use the museum as part of their interrogation of colonial encounter and theatricality, so it is the museum visitors who bear the brunt of the interrogation, both in the live performance and in the video documentary. Gomez-Peña has stated that his ideal spectator would “open the

2. From their website, <www.theyesmen.org> (last accessed 14 February, 2008).



cage and let us out” (Taylor 1998:169). But, as Diana Taylor rightly notes, there is a “prohibition against uninvited intervention” (169), which would have been amplified for those who read *The Couple in the Cage* as performance art requiring protection. The exhibit effectively questioned the role of the museum visitor in the face of uncertain morality (two people caged). Museum protocol prevents contact with the exhibit, no matter how pernicious (or simply alive) its content might be. Borat is the inappropriate visitor who, in violating the limits of museum protocols, contests the authority of its knowledge. He is the visitor who, by attempting to buy a slave, he has opened the cage to let out captives.

This recursive play with epistemological framing appears again in the scene with humour coach, Pat Haggerty. Borat wishes to learn about humour in order to better understand the U.S. and to better interact with its citizens. He asks if Haggerty laughs “on people with retardation,” to which the humour coach answers that such jokes are not acceptable because this is a condition that one does not choose and which “causes pain and hardship.” But perhaps they have not seen really funny retardation, says Borat, who then launches into a story about his sister, who teased his retarded brother, Bilo, mercilessly with her “vazhine” (vagina). “You will never get this!” she had taunted Bilo repeatedly, until one day he broke free from his cage and, in Borat’s broken English, he “get this! High Five!” There is a beat before Haggerty tells Borat that Americans would not find this joke funny. This is true and not true at the same time: The story, its impropriety, and Borat’s apparent glee in the telling are hilarious in their excess, and the joke certainly had American audiences laughing from the safety of their seats. The advice that Haggerty gives seems quite sound, but performed at one register removed, the joke is once again funny. Haggerty’s sober zone of repudiation—of Borat’s backward sensibilities—is undone time and again by American audiences.

Borat: Recursive Documentary

Although it is a chronicle of hoaxes, *Borat* differs from *Ceský Sen*, *The Yes Men*, and *The Couple in the Cage* in its refusal to provide a clear backstage. While the other films rely on exposing the machinations and constructions of official institutions, commercial and corporate businesses, or educational resources like museums, *Borat* postures as transparent documentary. The pranksters of the first two films explain their processes to the camera, keeping the viewer in on the action—even if the Yes Men never reveal their true identities. *Ceský Sen* incorporates the moment of deception and interviews the dupes who now know the truth. Even *The Couple in the Cage* provides interviews with the audience, an approach that Taylor and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett claim “makes explicit what was implicit in the live event, namely that the installation staged the viewer in ways that were unstable and untenable” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998: 177). But *Borat*, like the eponymous documentarian, refuses to tell the truth. Even when Borat is stripped naked and engaged in a disgustingly real nude wrestling match with Azamat, the charade continues. When the naked men run into the elevator, and into a meeting, audiences are not sure whether the event is staged. And that uncertainty situates them within the instability and untenability of performance itself: the film refuses to delimit knowledge—its documentation of America—according to the protocols of the cinema exhibit.

Borat appears at first to work like documentary hoaxes, with its bumbling mockumentarian spurring revelations through creative entrapment. Then there is the suggestion of the performative and reflexive documentaries as his encounters challenge the limits of documentary authority and the boundaries of truth and fiction, and of enlightened and primitive subjects, but *Borat* begins and ends with a fiction. The entire project is thrown into uncertainty as each sequence provides a step backward from verisimilitude, offering a performative documentary about performance and a mockumentary of a documentary of a mockumentary.

Such recursive play, rather than erasing the potential for documentary evidence, instead amplifies our preoccupation with the factual, authentic world of *Borat*. Audiences look all the harder for the truth. David Marchese and Willa Paskin (in their essay “What’s Real in *Borat*?”) write that outing the figures in the film “has turned into a mini-media craze, with tons of news outlets trying to sniff out the stories behind the making of the film.”³ The film was comedy, it was documentary, and it was performance art serving up metaphors of the truth: trying to sort this out became sport not only in everyday conversation and news reports, but in the numerous lawsuits launched in the effort to “correct” misperceptions of what people took to be true. This craze for determining the empirical, referential world of *Borat*, a compulsion known as “epistophilia,” is cousin to “scopophilia,” the voyeuristic compulsion to see (Nichols 1994; 2001). Epistophilia, though, connotes learning, whereas scopophilia connotes mere consuming. Epistophilia suggests advancement; scopophilia suggests appetite. The former marks the civilizing impulse, especially of empirical, technological acquisition, whereas the latter marks the atavistic impulse. Borat takes viewers voyeuristically into their society, revealing all manner of vice and virtue, but he refuses to satisfy their epistemic pleasures, and so he leaves viewers dangling between atavistic glee and civilized revulsion.

Off camera, the dangling continued, as Baron Cohen refused to appear as himself, but instead appeared in character, forcing interviewers into playing along.⁴ Late-night talk-show hosts were obliged to both affiliate with and disassociate themselves from Borat in order to appear cosmopolitan and in on the joke yet politically tolerant (i.e., not “Borat”). “What do you say to claims that your film was racist, homophobic, and misogynist?” asked Jay Leno. “Thank you,” answered Borat. Hosts struggled to find the right tone. Ironically, some hosts took on the role of patronising educator while the other guests adopted a ridiculously tolerant posture, submitting to both gropes and jibes as the man from Kuzcek took over the studio. Audiences and guests could no longer determine what factual information or even what performative information the talk show was delivering. The talk-show genre itself had been hijacked.

Conclusion

This essay charts the terrain of *Borat* in order to ask questions of genre and function. The category of the mockumentary begins to help us understand the work of the film, but it fails to account for the elements of *cinema vérité*, the reportorial truth-claims, and clear documentary potential of Borat’s interviews. All these components tip this film, however briefly, speciously, or unintentionally, back into the realm of the documentary, whose tradition is rife with fictions and hoaxes that produce dubious knowledge about the lived world, as well as critiques of the production of knowledge itself. What makes *Borat* intriguing is its recursive strategy and status. In an era in which digital manipulations and suspect documentary practices call the truth-status of the mode into doubt, *Borat* illustrates a difficult middle ground: a thrilling yet slippery territory that defies easy dichotomies of truth and fiction, us and them, primitive and civilised, mockumentary and documentary, reference and performance. This refusal of stable ground and clear referents does not encourage detachment and irony—the failsafe position for those fraught with doubt. The epistemological impasses of *Borat* instead taunt audiences as they struggle to know more than their basest impulses will let them see. Lebow observes that the mockumentary “adds a layer of fantasy, ‘sexing-up’ documentary” in the destabilisation of references and thus returns interest to documentary, albeit “at the level of documentary studies” (2006: 225). But *Borat* suspends faith in the codes, the styles, and the politics of the traditional documentary, even as it promises to document what Americans fear most about themselves.

3. Articles that address the real of *Borat* include: Adam Parker, “Comic Critic or Cruel? Charlestonians among Borat’s Targets,” *The Post and Courier* (Charleston, SC) (December 17, 2006): G1; Devin Gordon, “Behind the Schemes” (“In *Borat* Sacha Baron Cohen plays unsuspecting folks for big laughs. Meet the real people who became punch lines”), *Newsweek* (October 16, 2006): 74; and Kathy Hanrahan, “Nation’s top movie *Borat* no laughing matter for some Mississippians,” *The Associated Press News & Local Wire* (November 12, 2006):

4. Borat’s visits to *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and *Late Night with Conan O’Brien* have been included on the DVD of *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (20th Century Fox). Also included in the DVD extras are Borat’s own television show, *Sexy Drownwatch* (featuring Lunelle), and news items of Borat’s disruption of the rodeo—none of which are able to identify Baron Cohen, and thus can do little more than report on the disruption we anticipate from the film that even as fiction, provides more information.

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