

Hyperrealizing "Borat" with the Map of the European "Other"

Dickie Wallace

A friend and I viewed *Borat* on one of those early weekends when the "buzz" around the film was peaking in late 2006. The American media had made sure that we were aware of the film's utterly belligerent humor, the ludicrousness of the Kazakhstani connection, and the over-the-top irony of the film's antisemitism. What we were not prepared for, however, was how oddly "at home" we felt at various points in the film. My viewing companion, a native of Bucharest, was somewhat taken aback when, during the early scene in Borat's home village, she heard people in the background speaking. She whispered, "Why are they speaking Romanian?" From the ethnographic fieldwork I had conducted in the Czech and Slovak Republics, as well as the former Yugoslavia, I knew enough "pan-Slavic," I thought, to place Borat elsewhere: "No, he's speaking Polish, isn't he?"

Later in the film, we thought we heard Goran Bregović. She attributed it to an old film soundtrack, while I was trying to recall something by the Yugoslav group, Bijelo Dugme. As we left the theater, I said I had heard something that had to have been Macedonian or maybe Macedonian-based Romany. She said it was Romany by way of Romania. She had also heard *manele*, music she described as Turkish or sounding like Romany, but popular in the working-class neighborhood where her family lived.

Our curiosity pushed us to explore this more, and we found that we were both right. Yes, Borat's crude, rustic hometown was a Romanian village with a largely Roma population and the people were speaking Romanian; yes, Borat was speaking in a kind of bastardized Polish/Hebrew mix—including his now-famous greeting, "Jagzhemash!!!" And, yes, we had heard Bregović's "Ederlezi," evoking the magic realism from *Dom za vešanje* (Time of the gypsies, 1989). The soundtrack also featured Macedonian Roma singer Esmā Redžepova, the Macedonian Roma brass band Kočani orkestar, as well as the Romanian manele star Ștefan de la Bărbulești and Romanian Roma-fusion groups Mahala Rai Banda and Fanfara Ciocărlia.

Thus, although Sacha Baron Cohen labels his Borat character as being what is, from most American or European perspectives, the utterly alien, barely traceable "Oriental Other" of Kazakhstan, Borat is actually from someplace a bit "closer to home." Baron Cohen creates the character out of Europe's own "Other," Europe's local "Oriental," grafting western stereotypes and formulas of eastern European and Balkan characteristics into a hybrid of absurd "realities." As such, Borat encapsulates close to a western worldview, on the margins of his primary audience's consciousness. The character is close enough that viewers can comprehend him without having to bridge an overly wide cultural gap to reach Borat's absurd "reality"; they find him familiarly exotic and thus perhaps more consumable as a media image.

This article maps out the traces of the phantasmagoria of the Other out of which Borat is formed, as Baron Cohen draws references from eastern Europe and the Balkans. He exploits a Saidian discourse of this orientalized part of Europe, substituting the region's "signs of the real" for a "real" that becomes "Borat's Kazakhstan." We can see these in his Baudrillardian "hyperrealizing" of Borat with particularly evocative locales, playing off folkloric archetypes and harkening to regional rituals, music, and language.

Othering

In describing eastern Europe and the Balkans as Europe's "Other" or painting it as Europe's "Oriental-in-the-backyard," I am referring to Edward Said's seminal *Orientalism*, yet also alluding to Larry Wolff's *Inventing Eastern Europe*, Milica Bakić-Hayden's "Nesting Orientalisms" thesis, and Maria Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans*.¹ I am using Bakić-Hayden's "gradations" proposal, whereby "'nesting orientalisms' is a pattern of reproduction of the original dichotomy upon which Orientalism is premised." "Asia is more 'East' or 'other' than eastern Europe," she writes, and, "within eastern Europe itself this gradation is reproduced with the Balkans perceived as most 'eastern,'" while "within the Balkans there are similarly constructed hierarchies."²

Todorova, on the other hand, wishes to avoid orientalizing the Balkans. She instead wants to create a different species of descriptive analytics in a separate category called "balkanism."³ Todorova's "Balkans" are tangible, yet transitional, while she sees Said's oriental as a vaguer and more elusive descriptor completely on the other side of a dichotomy, polar to the west.⁴ The term *oriental* as Said uses it, denotes a kind of place on the Other side of a racial, religious, and colonialist divide, something that she does not see in her imagining of the Balkans: Balkan people are white, not non-white; Christian, not Islamic; and were not colonized.

In locating the character's "real" connections, however, Borat reveals an orientalist continuum and, for this reason, I find myself disagreeing with Todorova. Baron Cohen has managed to exploit Bakić-Hayden's "gradations" for his Borat, where the Balkans and the whole of eastern Europe are less-or-more oriental in Said's sense of the term. Skittering through these degrees of Otherness, Baron Cohen exploits the west's understood signs for the Balkans and eastern Europe, for its differences, for

1. "Orientalism" was the west's institutionalization and stylization for "dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1979), 4. Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, 1994); Milica Bakić-Hayden, "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia," *Slavic Review* 54, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 917-31; Maria Todorova "The Balkans: From Discovery to Invention," *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 453-82; and Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York, 1997).

2. Bakić-Hayden, "Nesting Orientalisms," 917.

3. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 11.

4. *Ibid.*, 17.

its mysteries, and for assumptions of barbarism. From Bram Stoker's use of Transylvania to Rebecca West's *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon* travelogue, from its time on the other side of the Iron Curtain to Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts*, the region has been constructed in western discourse as a close-at-hand European, yet an eastern enigma.⁵

Eastern European and Balkan people, for example, are in that social construction of race called "white." In western European thinking, however, many have been understood as historically part of the "Slavic race." In early twentieth-century racial subcategorizations, peoples of the whole region were lumped together as Trans-Alpines. That is, they were European, but of a different race than the perceived "dominant" race, the Nordics of western and northern Europe.⁶

The west sees eastern European and Balkan people as Christian, but as slightly exotic in their Orthodoxy. They have the cross, but it often takes on unfamiliar shapes. Their iconography seems to be like that of western Christian imagery, yet seems frozen in time at the cusp of the Baroque. Orthodox priests wear elaborate vestments similar to Roman Catholic priests, yet they may marry. Thus they appear foundationally the same to western eyes, yet inexplicably peculiar, a few gradations from the familiar.

Eastern Europe was never colonized per se by the west, but the historically client-state status of much of the region has made it a "lesser" Europe. Eastern European people were not part of expansionist capitalism, nor were they colony-holders themselves. Their nonparticipation in the colonizing project further contributes to western Europe's Othering of eastern Europe and the Balkans.

Said also described the oriental as having been "feminized" and "sensualized" by the west—the east metaphorically took on a "forbidden" allure.⁷ This was not a fit for the Balkans, Todorova wrote, because the Balkans were, in her words, "masculine," as well as "crude" and "disheveled." Todorova also claimed that Balkan people had never internalized the west's orientalist discourse in the way that Said described.⁸ She wrote that the self-image of the Balkan people themselves was in part created by the fact that they had not seen themselves as oriental, but instead had an identity "erected against an 'oriental' other."⁹ While I agree with Todorova that eastern Europeans orientalize the Other to the east as part of their European identity, I would argue, based on my ethnographic experience, that many people in the region also internalize a "self-Othering" vis-à-vis the Europe to the west.

As Baron Cohen constructs Borat from whatever is convenient, gradations of Balkan and east European crudeness and masculinity serve his

5. Rebecca West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon: A Journey through Yugoslavia* (1941; New York, 1982); Robert Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History* (New York, 1993).

6. Cf. Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race* (New York, 1970); and Lothrop Stoddard, *Racial Realities in Europe* (New York, 1924).

7. Said, *Orientalism*, 6, 162–63, 166–67, 182–84, 189–90, 220–22, 309–12; Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993), 64, 111–12, 120–22.

8. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 20.

9. *Ibid.*, 17.

purposes well. The character is nothing if not a chauvinistic boor played like a holy fool, yet the taboos of the forbidden also contribute to Borat's naive prurience. Borat is an assemblage of references that are ostensibly connected to the real Asian, or "oriental," Kazakhstan, yet we will see how Baron Cohen's cultural, linguistic, and historic allusions jump to and fro over the continuum of Europe's familiarly exotic "local Other" to create a seemingly "real" source for Borat and his absurd behaviors.

Simulacrum

Borat's jumping-off place, the hometown of his presumed formative years, is hyperreality. His Kazakhstan is the stuff of nonsense, it is "the *derealization* of the whole surrounding world of everyday reality" in "the whole new culture of the image."¹⁰ Borat's Kazakhstan is a representation that has replaced any kind of reality—this is a simulacrum. As Jean Baudrillard explains it, the world in which we live has been replaced by a copy world, wherein we are seeking simulated stimuli and nothing more. He borrows a metaphor from the story, "Of Exactitude in Science," in which fabulist Jorge Luis Borges tells of cartographers who created a map of an empire that was so detailed that it ended up covering the very things that it was designed to represent. In the story, the map ends up being considered useless and is eventually left in tattered ruins throughout the empire.¹¹

Baudrillard inverts Borges's story, however, describing how the empire eventually declines and all that then remains is the map. The representational map no longer refers to any existing reality, so it no longer truly represents anything, instead it is just hyperreal. "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance," Baudrillard writes, "it is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. . . . It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real."¹²

For Baron Cohen's primary target audience in the west, Borat's representation of Kazakhstan has replaced the real Kazakhstan. And, if we consider Americans' notoriously poor sense of world geography, we can almost assume that for most, there may not have been any such original Kazakhstan in American thinking in the first place.¹³ The film cre-

10. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, 1991), 34, 27.

11. Jorge Luis Borges, "Of Exactitude in Science," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (1960; New York, 1998).

12. Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," in *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford, 1988), 166.

13. As has been widely reported, the Kazakhstan government was initially very upset with the release of *Borat* and took out newspaper advertisements in the United States to show what they call the "real" Kazakhstan (*Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, 14 September 2006). Gauhar Abdygaliyeva, a Kazakh woman living in the United States, wrote about her frustration that Americans know about her country's existence only from watching Borat: "Almost every time I meet people and tell them where I come from, they ask me about the 'Kazakh journalist' Borat." The misuse of her flag also saddens her: "The

ates these simulacra, as the character of Borat and his representation of Kazakhstan create the only Kazakhstan, the completely bogus hyperreal Kazakhstan that exists in the American imagination.¹⁴

Baudrillard uses the example of the "infantile world" of Disneyland to explain the simulacra as "a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real." He explains that "real childishness is everywhere," but this is concealed by the representation of childishness as adults go to Disneyland "to act like a child in order to foster illusions of their real childishness."¹⁵

We can certainly see this in *Borat*. Borat's practices refer to those of a journalist, but his mannerisms are absurd as Baron Cohen plays him as a wide-eyed, if perverse, man-child ("I like you. I like sex! Is nice!") as he interjects Borat's seeming ingenuousness into the childishness of American culture.¹⁶ In so doing, he uses Borat's "exotic, oriental" bearings to bring out the backwardness and naiveté of various Americans. For example, a gun store owner, to our horror, seems to have no problem understanding why Borat would want a gun to hunt Jews—it fits the gun store owner's "reality" and Borat's hyperreality.

Meanwhile, the sad, gracious hosts at a refined Southern dinner party strive to make sense of their Kazakh guest, remaining agreeable and amiable for as long as they can stand. Their understanding of the world requires order and "order always opts for the real."¹⁷ Their struggle to comprehend Borat within their "real," to respect their established order and rules of etiquette, gives Baron Cohen, via his Borat-simulacrum, his parody. In behaving like a buffoon, whose sole intention is to break the rules and upset the order, he finds his sharp and often cruel comedy. Baudrillard writes, "Parody makes obedience and transgression equivalent, since it cancels out the difference upon which the law is based."¹⁸ The established order, that is, the desperately polite dinner party hosts, have no defenses against this parody, because the "law" they are following is a "second order simulacrum," whereas the Borat simulation "is a third-order simulacrum, beyond true and false, beyond equivalences, beyond the rational distinctions upon which function all power and the entire

Kazakh flag Borat uses in the movie, with an eagle soaring in the blue sky under the sun, is our symbol of independence and pride. If your eyes have ever welled up when you saw the Stars and Stripes, you will understand how we feel about it." Gauhar Abdylgaliyeva, "My 'Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan,'" *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*, 9 November 2006.

14. Television station manager Stuart Kellogg of WAPT in Jackson, Mississippi, was tricked by Baron Cohen and crew: "We were gotten. Our folks researched the production company, which has its own Web site and sounds legitimate. They did their homework, but . . . who knows what an accent from Kazakhstan sounds like?" See David Marchese and Willa Paskin, "What's Real in 'Borat?'" at www.salon.com/ent/feature/2006/11/10/guide_to_borat/index2.html (last consulted 1 November 2007).

15. Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," 172.

16. We might find no better example of the perverse man-child Borat than when he is sitting on his bed, replete with plush animals showing us pictures from one of his hobbies: "going to capital city to watch a ladies while they make a toilet."

17. Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," 178.

18. *Ibid.* (emphasis in the original).

social stratum" —Borat upstages the staging of the dinner party and we laugh, even as we cringe.¹⁹

Place

The Borat-simulacrum retains references and traces throughout the film. The simulated map of reality actually does find its realities in "Europe's Otherness" of the eastern European/Balkan context. And, the obvious place to begin a tour of this local Other is the hyperreal village of Kuzçek, Borat's professed hometown, fictitiously set in the film's imagining of Kazakhstan, yet actually staged in rural southeastern Romania.

Borat was originally supposed to be from someplace not quite as far east as Kazakhstan. When Baron Cohen originally conceived of a bumbling English-deficient reporter as far back as 1994, he developed a prototype character, Kristo, a television reporter from Albania or Moldova, who appeared in a few sketches with LWT/Granada TV and the BBC's *Comedy Nation*.²⁰ For the *Eleven O'Clock Show* and Filmfour Productions, however, Baron Cohen and his writers eventually moved the character to Kazakhstan. They picked Kazakhstan rather haphazardly out of an atlas: "We wanted to choose an ex-Soviet backwater . . . that no one had ever heard of," Baron Cohen told interviewer Terry Gross in January 2007. "I think we chose Kazakhstan fairly randomly," said Andrew Newman, who produced some of Baron Cohen's first comedy shows, "We thought it would not be that easy to check up about."²¹

The Romanian village of Glod is the primary village that plays "Kuzçek" in the film.²² It is a poor place, a village of primarily Roma people speaking a Romany-tinged Romanian dialect, with high unemployment and relatively little mobility out of the village.²³ Romania's selling of itself to the film industry as an inexpensive, yet accessible site for making movies, made it a sensible option for Baron Cohen's production crew. In Glod,

19. *Ibid.*

20. Baron Cohen claims that the original inspiration for his reporter was a Russian doctor he had met when he was 23 years old. Terry Gross, "Meet the Real Sacha Baron Cohen. Interview with Terry Gross," *Fresh Air* from WHYY, National Public Radio, 4 January 2007.

Some detractors claim that Mahir Çağrı, a Turkish man whose enthusiastic broken-English web site statements won him a cult following on the Internet in the late 1990s, had to have been Baron Cohen's source because so many Boratisms can be found there: "You come visit, you can stay my home," at www.answers.com/topic/mahir-a-r (last consulted 1 November 2007).

21. Kirsty Scott, "The Baron behind Borat," *The Age*, 12 November 2006.

22. The English-language press often refers to the "village of Moroieni" as the filming site. The producers also thank "The Villagers of Moroieni" in the final credits of *Borat*. Glod is, however, one village in the Moroieni *comuna*.

23. The newspaper *Ziua* describes Glod as a place with colorful houses where the pubs are full all day long because no one has work. A few rich people in the village have "palaces," but many houses are described as primitive, with layers of plastic bags serving as windows. Laszlo Kallai, "Afacerea 'Borat' in Glod," *Ziua*, 25 November 2006, at www.ziua.ro/display.php?data=2006-11-25&id=211812 (last consulted 1 November 2007).

they found a pliant enough local population to get the backgrounds and extras they needed.²⁴

Glod provided the rustic decrepitude needed for the basic backwardness that would explain Borat's naiveté and "primitiveness." His production company, however, apparently had to go to some lengths to get the absurd local behaviors they wanted. In creating their hyperreal "map" of a Kazakhstan village, *Borat* producers had Glod residents misrepresenting their activities even as they acted within the tableau of their lives—this might be called "acting," but many with small extra parts in the village claim they did not understand what was being asked of them and did not know they would look like clowns. Some reports claim they were told that they were making a documentary about the hardships of poverty and village life, so they were quite shocked and humiliated when journalists came to Glod and showed them how they had been represented in the film. One of the most degrading stories concerned how the film crew sought out a man with one arm. They filmed him with a fist-shaped sex toy taped to his stump—he did not know what it was, so the story goes, and was mortified when he found out when watching the film, saying "They made us look like primitives, like uncivilised savages. Now they're making millions but have only paid us fifteen lei."²⁵

24. A. Lăzescu, "După SUA și Franța, România arată că poate ține loc și de Kazahstan în filme," *Ziarul de Iași*, 7 November 2006, at www.ziaruldeiasi.ro/cms/site/z_is/news/dupa_sua_si_franta_romania_arata_ca_poate_tine_loc_si_de_kazahstan_in_filme_136616.html (last consulted 1 November 2007).

25. Reports from Glod are rather contradictory. While some scream "exploitation," others claim that the compensation was reasonable, that extras very much knew what they were doing, and that they now just want more money, especially since they know how well the film has done. Cf., Alin Ludu Dumbravă, "My Name Borat!" *Șapte Seri*, November 2006, at www.agenda.liternet.ro/articol/3496/Alin-Ludu-Dumbrava/My-name-Borat-Borat.html (last consulted 1 November 2007); Andrei Gorzo, "Sălbaticul—Borat," *Dilema Veche*, November 2006, at agenda.liternet.ro/articol/3533/Andrei-Gorzo/Salbaticul-Borat.html (last consulted 1 November 2007).

The most widely circulated article attacking Baron Cohen was first published in a Sunday edition of the *Daily Mail* in November 2006. The writers brought the film to Glod to see how villagers would react, and the villagers did so with, reportedly, fierce indignation. News services and blogs picked up the article and have reprinted various parts of the story, helping to create a minor *Borat* backlash. Bojan Pancevski and Carmiola Ionescu, "Borat Film 'Tricked' Poor Village Actors," *Daily Mail*, 11 November 2006, at www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in_article_id=415871 (last consulted 1 November 2007); cf., "Românii vor să-l tragă în teapă pe Borat," *Antena 3*, 14 November 2006; www.antena3.ro/index.php/video/revistapresei/Romanii-vor-sa-l-traga-in-teapa-pe-Borat_ch_23740_ext.html (last consulted 12 November 2007); and "Stanovnici rumunjskog sela tuže Borata," *Jutarnji list*, 15 November 2006, at www.jutarnji.hr/kultura_i_zivot/showbiz/clanak/art-2006,11,15,borat_glod,50409.jl (last consulted 1 November 2007).

Among Romanians, opinions about the treatment of Glod villagers have been mixed. Some think they were grossly exploited, others say they are Roma scamming money now that they know of the film's great success. Yet one Romanian blogger wrote, "The way that we look at gypsies, that's the way the Western Europeans look at us." *Scorpion* 2006, "Borat, Journalist from Kazakhstan," at www2.blogger.com/profile/04553558362288267989 (accessed 27 February 2007; no longer available).

Ritual

One of the most famous (or infamous) "Kazakhstan" scenes in the film is when Borat, presumably for Kazakhstani state television, provides a running narration for the festival, the "Running of the Jew." The irony of the observant Jew Baron Cohen doing this scene has been much remarked upon, but less obvious is the odd inappropriateness of supposedly basing this over-the-top antisemitism in Kazakhstan. Eric Weiner, writing for *Slate*, quotes the National Conference on Soviet Jewry as reporting: "Anti-Semitism is not prevalent in Kazakhstan and rare incidents are reported in the press. None have been reported in the last two years."²⁶ Kazakhstan appears to have a more benign attitude toward Jewish people than many other places Baron Cohen could have situated his Borat character.²⁷

On the other hand, eastern Europe and the Balkans have, of course, a long history of persecuting Jews. From the pogroms to the Holocaust, the list of insults and atrocities suffered by the Jewish people in eastern Europe and the Balkans is staggering, so for Baron Cohen's brutal satire it makes sense that he evokes a feel for this historically antisemitic part of the world. The "Running of the Jew" has deliberate folkloric overtones in *Borat*. While the name of the festival might immediately call to mind the Spanish Sanfermines (the "Running of the Bulls" in Pamplona), the "Running of the Jew" perversely resembles folk traditions that take place all over eastern Europe and the Balkans, particularly during the spring. In the film, Borat excitedly covers the annual event, describing how men with wads of cash in their hands tease giant horned effigies of a Jewish man and woman—the latter carries a cleaver and challah. The monstrous stereotypes look like large papier-mâché puppets, as if they are peasant-produced folk art. As part of the chaotic ritual, boys run into the street when the Jewish woman-effigy "lays" a "Jew Egg" and Borat encourages them to "Crush that Jew chick!"

Borat's mock folklore evokes spring traditions in various parts of eastern Europe. For example, Slovak villagers developed the ritual of the *morena* as they overcame death at winter's end. On the eve of Smrtná Nedela, or Passion Sunday, girls would create a representative of death—the *morena*, a witch effigy—out of straw. The next morning after church services, they would parade through the village down to the river where they would disrobe the effigy and set her afire before throwing her in the river.²⁸

26. Eric Weiner, "The Real Kazakhstan: What Does Borat Get Right and Wrong about His Native Land?" *Slate*, 3 November 2006, at www.slate.com/id/2152789/ (last consulted 1 November 2007).

27. We see scant evidence of religion early in *Borat*, except as fleeting glimpses: three Kuzček villagers wear crosses around their necks. Later, Borat is saved by Evangelical Christians in the United States and the immediate effect is a newfound ability to forgive Pamela Anderson for not being a virgin. Back in Kuzček for the denouement, Borat tells us that the "Running of the Jew" is now seen as cruel, and we see it replaced by a mock Passion play because, "We are Christian now." What religion they were before is not clear.

28. Cf., Emilia Horváthová, *Rok vo zvykoch nášho ľudu*, trans. Zlata Tuhy (Bratislava, 1986); Rastislava Stolična, et al., *Slovakia: European Contexts of the Folk Culture* (Bratislava,

Throughout Croatia, similar events take place every spring in *karneval* celebrations when a *mesopust*, a traditional or current evil archetype, is ceremoniously vilified and torched. I once witnessed *karneval* in a small Croatian town, for example, at a time when the government, through the press, was mounting a strong campaign against the Croatian doctors' union which was threatening to strike. Taking this cue, older schoolchildren constructed Dr. Death, an effigy with a fistful of cash bribes in one hand and a carton of Marlboros in the other. After the children marched through town in their *maškare* costumes, Dr. Death was burnt and tossed off the bridge at the edge of town.²⁹

In an early clip from *Da Ali G Show*, Borat's "news reportings" are "framed" with short folkloric segues. In one, we briefly see a tall figure dancing with two peasants in a woolly goat costume in a dilapidated courtyard. Borat peaks out from under the red-faced goat mask and says, "In Kazakhstan, we like to dance with head of goat on us." The mask bears a resemblance to those of the Šokci people who perform the *Busójárás* celebration that takes place every February in Mohács in southern Hungary, the *capra* or *brezaia* of rural Romanian Christmas celebrations, or the *karakondjul* masks of Bulgarian *Kukeri* spring rites.³⁰

Of course, folk costumes are not exclusive to the eastern European region, and carnival is celebrated all over the world, particularly in Catholic countries. The Borat character, however, is not evoking the glamorous carnival of Cádiz or Rio de Janeiro with sexy people in sequins dancing atop ornate parade floats. Instead, Borat's background is deliberately "primitive," a look that evokes an Other, a backwardness in the backyard of Europe.

Violence

Baron Cohen builds his character on another primitivism that an orientalizing western audience has come to expect of eastern Europe and, particularly, the Balkans: tribalism and ethnonationalism and the understood violence that comes with it. Primordial ethnonational hatred, irrational factionalism, and the utter inability to compromise create the basis for the verb *to balkanize*. When Borat introduces Kazakhstan to us for the first time with a grainy map, we hear him referring to "those assholes Uzbekis," and he takes potshots at Uzbekistan for the rest of the film. In a *Guardian* mock interview he calls them, "nosy people with a bone in the middle of their brains."³¹ In actuality, Kazakhstani-Uzbekistani interactions have been prickly—border disputes and water rights have marred relations over the years, but they have not come to arms.

1997); Mykola Musynka, "Folk Customs of Carpatho-Rusyns: Easter," Carpatho-Rusyn Association 7, no. 1 (1984): 4, at www.carpatho-rusyn.org/customs/eastr.htm (last consulted 1 November 2007).

29. Cf., Olga Supek-Zupan, "The Meaning of Carnival in Croatia," *Anthropological Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (April 1983): 90–94.

30. Mohácsi Busójárás Gallery, at ees.bme.hu/events/gallery/mohacs/ (last consulted 1 November 2007).

31. Rob Fitzgerald, "You Dirty Borat!" *The Guardian*, 28 October 2006.

The Balkans and eastern Europe, however, have managed to hold the west's imagination as the source of primordial nationalist violence, perhaps more than any place on earth. In a Borat clip from *Da Ali G Show*, we see an absurd form of violence used to resolve petty disputes—in one case, after Borat has offended a neighbor by calling his horse fat, they fight it out by slapping each other's penises as hard as possible till someone gives in.

Westerners also perceive the region as a place awash with weapons, where children are inculcated with tribalist violence. *Borat* delivers on this stereotype: as Borat introduces us to a Kuzçek kindergarten, we see a dirty courtyard of kids, one brandishing an AK-47. Another with a gun on his lap has a carton of grenades at his feet.

Borat quite regularly talks of violence and brutality as the solution to two vexing problems, Jews and Gypsies, in his hyperreal Kazakhstan. In an *Ali G* piece he goes hunting at the Serengeti Ranch in Texas and converses with his guide about the need to kill Jews as if it is a quite reasonable desire.³² And, in a mock interview for Hrvatska Televizija HRT2, interviewer Ivana Nanut prompts Borat with questions about violence toward gypsies. He first recounts his methods for trapping Gypsies when he was the town Gypsy-catcher. Perhaps even more distasteful, however, is his description of "Gypsy Bingo," a game where they force Gypsies to run across a minefield and make bets on which Gypsy will be blown up first. This plays on two horrific features of the region: The Roma have been persecuted consistently over the centuries, with the worst being the genocide perpetrated by the Nazis and Nazi puppet states, one of which was Croatia. A more recent horror has been the chaotic laying of landmines throughout former Yugoslav territory in the wars of the 1990s. Many minefields have yet to be de-mined and in some areas of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia people are still in danger of being killed or maimed.³³ Baron Cohen perhaps naively presents this as funny and his too-genial interviewer agrees.³⁴ In any case, it is part of the Borat schtick and summons stereotypes of a violent and malevolent place for the hyperreality of Borat's Kazakhstan.³⁵

32. "Borat Hunting the Jew," *Da Ali G Show*, Season 1, at www.youtubeindir.com/izle_Borat-Hunting-The-Jew_LMXC75YeHe4.html (last consulted 1 November 2007).

33. Cf., "Hrvatski centar za razminiranje," at www.hcr.hr (last consulted 1 November 2007); "Centar za uklanjanje mina Bosne i Hercegovine," www.bhmac.org (accessed 5 January 2007; no longer available). Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina are two of the dozen countries listed with the highest rating of "Severe" for landmine threat. By comparison, Kazakhstan's mine problems receive the second lowest rating, "Affected," the same rating given to western European countries like Germany, France, England, Italy, and Denmark. "Landmines: Eliminating the Threat," *Newsweek*, 2007, at www.newsweekeducation.com/interactive/landminemap/landmine.swf (last consulted 1 November 2007).

34. Ivana Nanut plays to his misogyny, even seeking to marry Borat and agreeing that a luxury cage would be nice. They never discuss Borat's antisemitism. "Borat in London" (2006), Hrvatska Radiotelevizija HRT2, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=AC5MODwaOoU (last consulted 1 November 2007).

35. Associating Gypsies, or Roma, with Kazakhstan is not completely absurd since Kazakhstan has a small Roma population. Roma are, however, much more closely associated with eastern Europe (even as governments try to minimize their existence). The World Romani Congress and almost all other Romani web sites for example, write primarily

Sound and Language

As I noted earlier, the *Borat* soundscape, both in terms of soundtrack and language, places the Borat character very much in eastern Europe and the Balkans. The music reflects little of the real Kazakhstan but instead comes from all over southeastern Europe with the brass and flash of Romany bands and manele singers, along with Bregović's "Durdevadan" or "Ederlezi," a beautiful piece of music, but "a byword for cinematic musical essentialisation" as one blogger described it.³⁶ In other words, the song is now so famously associated with Romany culture, the former Yugoslavia, and the Balkans in general, that it evokes clichés with just a few notes.³⁷

"Borat" is a decidedly non-Kazakh sounding name. Although "Bo[lat]" is a possible name in Kazakh, the randomness with which Kazakhstan was chosen as Borat's home country indicates the unimportance Baron Cohen gave to matching name to place.³⁸ Notably, however, in Romanian slang *borât* is a vulgar word to describe someone as gross and disgusting. Ethnic Romanians sometimes associate this word with Roma people.³⁹ As it appears that the name was chosen before the choice was made to film in Romania, the seeming appropriateness of the name is apparently a coincidence.

Beyond the name, language in *Borat* has been one of the film's more confusing aspects. Anecdotally, I can report that many Americans seem to believe they are hearing Kazakh when listening to the film, but the mix of languages is actually much more complex—and nonsensical. Baron Cohen speaks a garble of Polish and Hebrew throughout, so we hear Borat greeting us with, "Jak się masz?" or quieting a cow in his house with "tiši."

about the problems of eastern European Roma, secondarily about western European and American Roma, and usually do not mention any other place (except to trace their roots back to India). Cf., Rom News Society, "Rom News Network," at www.romnews.com (last consulted 1 November 2007); Romani Home Page, "Opre Roma!" at www.romani.org (last consulted 1 November 2007); Patrîn, "The Patrîn Web Journal: Romani Culture and History," at www.geocities.com/~Patrîn/ (last consulted 1 November 2007); World Bank, "World Bank and the Roma," at web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/ECAEXT/EXTROMA/0,,contentMDK:20333806~menuPK:615999~pagePK:64168445~piPK:64168309~theSitePK:615987,00.html (last consulted 1 November 2007).

36. Catherine (blog), "For Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Ederlezi," *Illyrian Gazette*, 13 October, 2006, at illyriangazette.blogspot.com/2006/10/for-make-benefit-glorious-nation-of.html (last consulted 1 November 2007); "Bregović i Belinda Bedeković na sound-tracku Boratovog filma," *Večernji list*, 13 October 2006, at www.vecernji.hr/newsroom/scena/652513/index.do, (last consulted 1 November 2007).

37. "Durdevdan" and "Ederlezi" both mean Saint George's Day. The tune is an old Romany tune, but Bregović arranged and rewrote some of it for his famous Yugoslav group Bijelo Dugme for their final 1979 album, *Ćiribiribela*, an album that reflected South Slav folk traditions.

38. Coincidentally, when a legitimate Kazakhstani television journalist tried to report from the United States in Fall 2006, his credentials were carefully reviewed because of the hyperreal Borat—and, in a perverse inversion of unfortunate realism, the journalist's cameraman's name was "Bolat." "Real Kazakh Journalist Faces Skepticism in U.S." *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, 1 December 2006.

39. The Romanian verb *a borâ* means "to vomit" and *borât* indicates something vomituous, so the crude expression *figan borât* means "vomitous Gypsy."

Sprinkling absurdities throughout Borat's speech is obviously Baron Cohen's game, but we can also hear how he uses language onomatopoeically, with whatever sounds like it fits—or can raise an eyebrow. To refer to genitalia, he uses the strong guttural sound of "chrám," something like a Russian slang word for penis, but a word that could also refer to a church or temple in a host of Slavic languages. By contrast, in a promotional segment for *Borat*, however, he refers to a small penis as "bishkek," which would also be the capital of Kyrgyzstan. In the film, he consistently calls a vagina, "vazhín," which is the Romanian pronunciation of *vagin*. In other words, he uses real words that sound exotic, yet are often just close enough to English so that his audience can easily follow.

Listening to other speakers in *Borat* confuses matters again, however. Actor Ken Davitian, who plays Borat's producer, "Azamat Bagatov," always responds to Borat's Polish-Hebrew in Armenian. The Kuzçek village extras are barely audible, but they speak Romanian, though with what might be a rural Romany dialect. The professional actor playing Borat's wife, Oxana, however, speaks a kind of Romanian that would be heard on Bucharest streets. When we first meet her, she appears to shout, "What you say about me, you skinny piece of shit? Why don't you do something useful and dig your mother a grave?" in the subtitles. Her words in Romanian, however, are, "Cine sunt eu, mäh? Dute-n pizda mätii! Mäh, te sparg, te nenorocesc!" which means, "Who am I? Go to your mother's c*nt! You. I'll crush you, I'll maim you!"

Subtitles also fail to represent ostensibly "Kazakh text" in Borat clips from *Da Ali G Show* as "Russian-Kazakh" text is often written in completely nonsensical arrays of Cyrillic letters. For example, while subtitles read, "Borat's Television Programme," the "original" text that this is supposed to be translating reads, "ИЩКФЕ ЕУДУМШЩШЩ ЭКЩЛКФЪЪУ," which looks like a cat walked over a Cyrillic keyboard. For the purposes of *Borat*, it does not really matter what is being said in reality, it is the representation that becomes more important—if the audience is led to believe that "ИЩКФЕ" means "Borat" or "Oxana" is a native Kazakh name and that she is yelling in Kazakh, this is just the hyperreality of Borat.

Palimpsest

As a friend of mine mused, "For the film's purposes, Borat could just as well be a Klingon, couldn't he?" And, pursuing this line of thought, Borat's hyperreal Kazakhstan could be the apocryphal Ruritania, Agatha Christie's Herzoslovakia, TinTin's Syldavia, Dilbert's Elbonia, Li'l Abner's Lower Slobovia, Chitty Chitty Bang Bang's Vulgaria, Tom Hanks' Krakozhia, or the modern dentistry-less Molvania, or Groucho's Freedonia. These Balkan-sounding "everycountries" are the internal European "Others," the convenient fictions to the east that make the fictions of the west possible.⁴⁰

40. Cf. K. E. Fleming, "Orientalism, the Balkans, and Balkan Historiography," *American Historical Review* 105, no. 4 (2000): 1218–33.

No, I realized, *Star Trek's* Klingons would not work. The Borat character needs some familiarly exotic references to create at least some plausibility for the cultural map of his homeland. These are the Balkan and eastern European voices, rituals, music, and history appearing as traces throughout "Borat's Kazakhstan." Baron Cohen uses the hotchpotch of a Gypsy bear and lycanthropic nephew, a cursing Romanian and a Hebrew catchphrase, a horned Jew with a challah and a vulgar Romanian word like *borât* as an underlying *scriptio inferior*. This is all raw material to be animated into his *golem*. Borat's archetypal forebearers range over the geography of the European east, from the foolish wisdom of a Turkish Nasreddin to Bosnia's Mujo and Haso, to Russia's *urodiviyi* Basil, from the Bulgarian's naive but conniving Bai Ganio, to the Czech's bumbling but lovable Good Soldier Svejk.

"Borat's Kazakhstan" is an orientalized palimpsest. It is a map à la Borges that is effectively hyperreal for most film viewers. Because of the west's naiveté, viewers only have this absurdist mental map of Kazakhstan, but through it all Baron Cohen gives us a "real fake," a pastiche of significations of an Other understood to be authentic.⁴¹ On his Tocquevillian journey in *Borat*, Borat presents the Americans he encounters with efficient cognitive simplifications, with traces of realities and of stereotypes that elicit their embarrassing and sometimes ugly behaviors as they are forced to try to capture that distance between their comfortable known and the difficult unknown.⁴² Borat leads them into this, performing his man-child routine that is, as Baron Cohen describes it, "warm and loveable, yet naïve."⁴³ He acts "like a child in order to foster illusions of [the] real childishness" of the victims of his "underground comedy."⁴⁴

For his audience, Baron Cohen creates tropes fostering a false familiarity in the complex relationship that the west has with its Other and with itself. This gives the film a gravitas, because the repressed always feels like it is at stake—Borat's western audience thinks it is beyond the primitive misogyny and chauvinisms of his hyperreality, yet it always senses that the primitive gun shop owner is just below the surface. Slavoj Žižek has written about the Balkans as having been "caught in another's dream": "Far from being the Other of Europe, former Yugoslavia was rather Europe itself in its Otherness, the screen onto which Europe projected its own repressed reverse . . . the Balkans as the madhouse . . . where rational rules of behavior are suspended."⁴⁵ Real and hyperrealized ethnocentrism create a

41. Cf. Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (London, 1987), 4.

42. With *Borat*, Baron Cohen may have written a twenty-first-century update to *Democracy in America*—perhaps it could be titled "Hypocrisy in America?"

43. Gross, "Meet the Real Sacha Baron Cohen."

44. Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," 172.

45. During the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Žižek wrote about this western "projection" that was keeping the east in its place as the utterly irrational: "In former Yugoslavia, we are lost not because of our primitive dreams and myths preventing us from speaking the enlightened language of Europe, but because we pay in flesh the price for being the stuff the Other's dreams are made of. . . . Against today's journalistic commonplace about the Balkans as the madhouse of thriving nationalisms where rational rules are suspended, one must point out again and again that the moves of every political agent in

head-on collision with our taboos, as if absurdist nationalism and racism, as well as rape and incest, are commonsensical in the Kazakhstan of the fool, Borat. The western audience is "fascinated by the spectacle," feeling the tension of wanting to ignore or marginalize the Other, while knowing that it ought not ignore it. Baron Cohen relies on this east-west edge-of-consciousness engagement with gradations of the west's "Other"—and with its own self—to create a "web of artificial signs [that] will be inextricably mixed up with real elements."⁴⁶

"Go and organize a fake hold-up," Baudrillard writes, "In brief, you will unwittingly find yourself immediately in the real, one of whose functions is precisely to devour every attempt at simulation, to reduce everything to some reality: that's exactly how the established order is, well before institutions and justice come into play." In other words, when you fake a hold-up of a bank, "a police officer really will shoot on sight; a bank customer will faint and die of heart attack."⁴⁷ Baron Cohen is well aware of this; indeed he seeks out this edge, for this is where he finds his "underground comedy": he claims that in 42 or 43 separate instances when attempting to film *Borat* in the United States police intervened.⁴⁸ The fake will become the authentic and this perceived naturalism will turn the absurd into common sense until that amazingly receding point where Baron Cohen may have pushed his Borat too far.

As Baudrillard states, the hyperreal "is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality." For much of Baron Cohen's primary audience, this is true—the west sees the simulacra, this "third-order simulation," and accepts this "substituting the signs of the real for the real."⁴⁹ For them, "Borat's Kazakhstan" is Kazakhstan.

We can understand why the Borat character succeeds so well in duping the Americans he encounters and provoking his audience, however, by examining Baron Cohen's use of fools and archetypes, sounds and symbols. We can see why the parody hits "closer to home" as we scratch the seeming hyperreality and discover it is palimpsestic—beneath the surface,

former Yugoslavia, reprehensible as they may be, are totally rational within the goals they want to attain—the only exception, the only truly irrational factor in it is the gaze of the West, babbling about archaic ethnic passions." Slavoj Žižek, "Caught in Another's Dream," in Rabia Ali and Lawrence Lifschultz, eds., *Why Bosnia? Writings on the Balkan War* (Stony Creek, Conn., 1993), 233–40.

Notably, my Bucharest-born *Borat* viewing companion tells me that she aligns with Todorova's argument that the Balkans should not be treated like the "oriental," that it is a different concept. I counter, saying that "orientalism" is not about the place itself, nor about the region's people's opinions. What Žižek criticizes is the "gaze of the West," the western discourse about the place. My friend, for example, asserts that, as a Romanian, she is not from the Balkans and is not culturally Balkan. I respond by countering, with "orientalism," Said critiques the fact that I, an American, think she is from the Balkans. Said writes that it is about "how it is said, by whom, where, and for whom." Edward Said, "Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World," in Diana Brydon, ed., *Postcolonialism: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* (New York, 2000), 31.

46. Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," 178.

47. *Ibid.*

48. Gross, "Meet the Real Sacha Baron Cohen."

49. Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," 178.

Borat originates in the "real" backyard of Europe where the west finds both its "repressed self" and its Other. Baron Cohen creates his character from the familiar exoticism of eastern Europe and the Balkans, in a "second order" formed in the west's orientalist discourse of the region as both an enigma and a madhouse. With formative moments physically placed in a Romanian village and with words, music, costume, and actions drawn from all over the map of "Europe's Other," these background "realities" effectively bring about the bricolage that is Borat.