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# *Conversations Behind Closed Doors*

Borat: A Minor Film Analysis

We all have things that we do not say. Topics we do not tread, or at least if we choose to test the waters, our company is confidential and exact. Even in the country of free speech, Americans are intentional with the audience of their opinions, because while it is not essentially a legal offense, the social ramifications are much greater. While America is not the birthplace of social etiquette, its censored 'play nice' culture is apparent and standalone in the Western world. When Borat enters however, he challenges the average American's determination for political correctness with uncomfortable ideas, inappropriate social behaviour, and vulgar comments. Yet, somehow in his efforts to antagonise, many in this 'mockumentary' find the comfort to divulge their contentions on icy political topics. They stop projecting 'The American Dream' and start telling 'The American Reality'.

## *The Man & Mockumentary*

Borat is a Kazakh reporter whom his country has endorsed to come to America, learn from their society and return with ideas for betterment. While in America, Borat witnesses Pamela Anderson on an episode of 'Baywatch,' falls in love and becomes hellbent on marrying her. This propels him to travel cross-country.

This 'mockumentary' stars comedian and British actor, Sacha Baron Cohen as Borat Sagdiyev. As so charmingly termed, this film exists in a market onto its own with its show style, as despite Borat, Azamat Bagatov (Ken Davitian) and Pamela Anderson, every other individual in this movie is under the impression of the plot and is oblivious to the satirical reality.

While it makes for 'good comedy', Borat has a surprising effect on its unassuming guest stars, in the sense that his uncivilization and the 'foreign' premise of this film reveal the extent

Americans will excuse his inappropriate behaviour to keep the niceties and maintain their layered façade.

## *Niceties But Not So Nice*

Have you ever heard of the “Don’t Say No” rule or the “Yes and” expression? These are the guidelines to successful improvisation, and it seems that many Americans live by this playbook as well. We first see this skill in motion, when Borat elicits his first acting challenge on Pat Haggerty, humour coach. To assimilate into American culture, Borat understands that he must assume American behaviour and social customs. But, on his way to understanding, he poses outlandish questions and disturbing family stories.

In ascertaining the appropriate topics to make socially acceptable jokes on, Borat questions whether he can joke about “retardation.” Haggerty retorts that, “Americans try not to make fun of things that people cannot control.” Haggerty’s stance of political righteousness is short-lived however as after Borat retails an alarming story of his sister taunting his other brother in a cage, for his supposed “retardation,” Haggerty laughs alongside Borat when he gets to the dark-humoured incestuous punchline. While he may have been simply subconsciously reading Borat’s body language and following conversational cues, nonetheless Haggerty still high fives him when prompted.

Was Haggerty merely assuming a character to reflect a romanticised American society which Borat broke through, or was he so determined to ‘keep the peace,’ that he was willing to forsake his own ethics to engage with Borat?

This show really begs the question, how far are Americans and society overall, willing to go and how much are they willing to excuse to keep order and uphold political correctness?

# *American 'Botox' Behaviour*

Even in our greatest efforts to control our outward perception, our bodies betray us. While it is a hated human trait in scrutinous situations; under police investigations or accusations of lying, it undoubtedly allows us to communicate with others and understand people's unspoken limits. Idiosyncrasies are our micro-expressions, subtle fluctuations in behaviour, body language, tone, and facial expression, often undetectable to ourselves. In Borat, his American victims seem to have complete sovereignty over their idiosyncrasies however, which suggests that maybe the best actors are everyday people.

When Borat walks into a car dealership, he indicates that he wants to, "attract a woman with a shave down below." This is a strange expression, maybe not so much his desire but more that it was vocalised to a stranger and customer service representative. Nonetheless, after consideration of his vehicular artillery, he suggests, "corvette or a hummer."

'Borat' makes us forget that it is unscripted, thanks to the unwavering composure and consistent demeanour of those whom he interacts with. Yet, there is something uncanny about their behaviour, as it has the comedic discomfort of 'The Office' in a real-world situation where there is no comedic intention, other than Borat's.

I have, with no intention to offend, termed this American disposition as 'Botox' behaviour. Similar to the numbed expressions of people with 'Botox' injections, the control that Americans possess over their own idiosyncrasies to the extent which there are none, is so exact and refined that it is jarring to our human sensibility.

American 'Botox' Behaviour again makes its presence known in the emotional passivity of the attendees and host of a formal party Borat attends. After first insulting a women's appearance and her adjacent husband to no response from the implicated or other attendees, Borat returns from a trip to the bathroom with a bag of his own faeces, pretending that he is unfamiliar with such facilities. While there is slight hesitation, the host gently communicates, returning with him upstairs and patiently explaining bathroom etiquette.

## *How 'Hush' Hides Hate*

By presenting as an ally to American values and culture, Borat successfully encourages even the tight-lipped to slip and say those unspoken ideas that course through the veins of American society. We see the greatest surplus of honesty when Borat attends a rodeo in the Deep South. He is welcomed as a vocal advocate of American culture and converses with several Southerners. In enacting his fictitious ethnic custom of a kiss greeting, he is admonished by an old cowboy, who indicates that, “the people over here that do the kissing are the ones that float around like that”, finishing his caution with a flamboyant ‘flapping’ gesture. Borat responds to his adverse implication saying that in his country, “we take them to jail and finish them,” to which the American responds, “that’s what we are trying to do here.”

We can understand that the explicit undertones of violence speak to the apparent views and attitudes of certain American communities towards gay people and the LGBTQ+ community. However, the unabashed articulation of murder and hatred on camera, without a fear of social retaliation or an inkling of empathy indicates how American efforts for ‘politeness’ are possibly only the surface of a much darker culture penetrating American society. This is where we see more power in what is left unsaid, and the great threat of silence.

## *How Borat Echoes a Pervasive Narrative*

Evidently, to consider Sacha Baron Cohen as merely a comedian and actor would be a great insult. Cohen’s acting career is defined by his profound comedic blueprint. He has mastered creating content which presents an overarching social commentary, by washing contentious and congested political topics with humour and digestible creative frameworks. Cohen is recognised for numerous characters alongside Borat who successfully challenge order and ignite socio-political debate, some of which include Ali G and “Who is America?”

In ‘Borat,’ his ability to subvert American social etiquette highlights the American performance of political correctness. As we see however, it merely prevents discussions and honesty around

serious political issues, by instead pretending they do not exist and are not pervading daily life in America. From transgender rights to immigration riots, America is rife with political division. 'Mockumentaries' like Borat serve as a reminder that ignoring social tensions and coexisting with the façade of social integration does not dissolve these tensions but simply creates broken communities, and a broken country.

'Borat' truly compels us to consider what we are not saying, why we are so afraid to air opinions, and especially why we feel the need to release certain inhibitions to give freedom to these deep-seated ideologies.