

Information Culture Playlist featuring *Breaking Bad* and *Borat The Subsequent Moviefilm*

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INF311: Information in the Cultural Imagination

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Bill's Information Culture Playlist

For the information culture playlist, we will look at Vince Gilligan's television series *Breaking Bad* and Sascha Baron Cohen's film *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm* (we will refer to as *Borat 2*, for short). We will analyze both the main characters of each creative piece, Walter White, and Borat Sagdiyev, respectively. I argue that both *Borat 2* and *Breaking Bad* will be important to include in the information playlist. Firstly, we will discuss *Breaking Bad*, which showcases the use of symbolism. Walter is shrouded in symbolism and we will come to see that this is important to understanding how Gilligan wishes to convey feelings. Secondly, we will look at *Borat 2* which shares common themes and discourse with the conditions we live in today. Borat is not afraid to poke fun at what is happening in our world, and this serves as another interpretation of our culture in the present. Lastly, we will combine *Breaking Bad* and *Borat 2*. Both creative pieces are satirical and employ the use of satire to reveal truths. The level of understanding for satire requires a level of literacy that must be achieved. Satire itself is important because it helps us understand truths and intentions in our information culture context.

Breaking Bad

Breaking Bad is a 5 season, 62-episode series that debuted on AMC on February 8th, 2015. The season's span over 3 years of Walter White's life. He is a 49-year-old high school teacher who becomes a meth dealer upon learning of his terminal lung cancer. His desire to provide for his family while undergoing chemotherapy leads him to become a prominent meth trafficker in the Albuquerque area. *Breaking Bad*'s brilliance as a television series can be attributed to Gilligan's extensive use of symbols. We will see to some of the examples that symbolize the life of Walter, and the types of feelings that Gilligan wishes to convey to the viewer. These symbols are quite deeply rooted in our education. We will reference the work of Lev Vygotsky to help us understand these symbols through the study of words, structures, and images. This will help us understand why these symbols are so significant in our information culture playlist.

Walter White as Heisenberg

Heisenberg is a pseudonym which Walter first showcases in episode 6 titled “Crazy Handful of Nothin’,”. Tuco Salamanca was a drug dealer who wanted to know Walter’s name. Walter decided to give the name Heisenberg, inspired by German physicist Werner Heisenberg. This is important as Heisenberg is a name that foreshadows what life is to become for Walter. Werner Heisenberg is well known for his Uncertainty Principle, states certain properties known do not imply other certain properties. Gilligan made sure that Heisenberg would reflect the nature of uncertainty. Walter’s personality is described as “sociopath and family man, scientist and killer, rational being and creature of impulse, entrepreneur, and loser”.¹ This Heisenberg complex is an important symbol, as Walter switches between his two sides frequently.

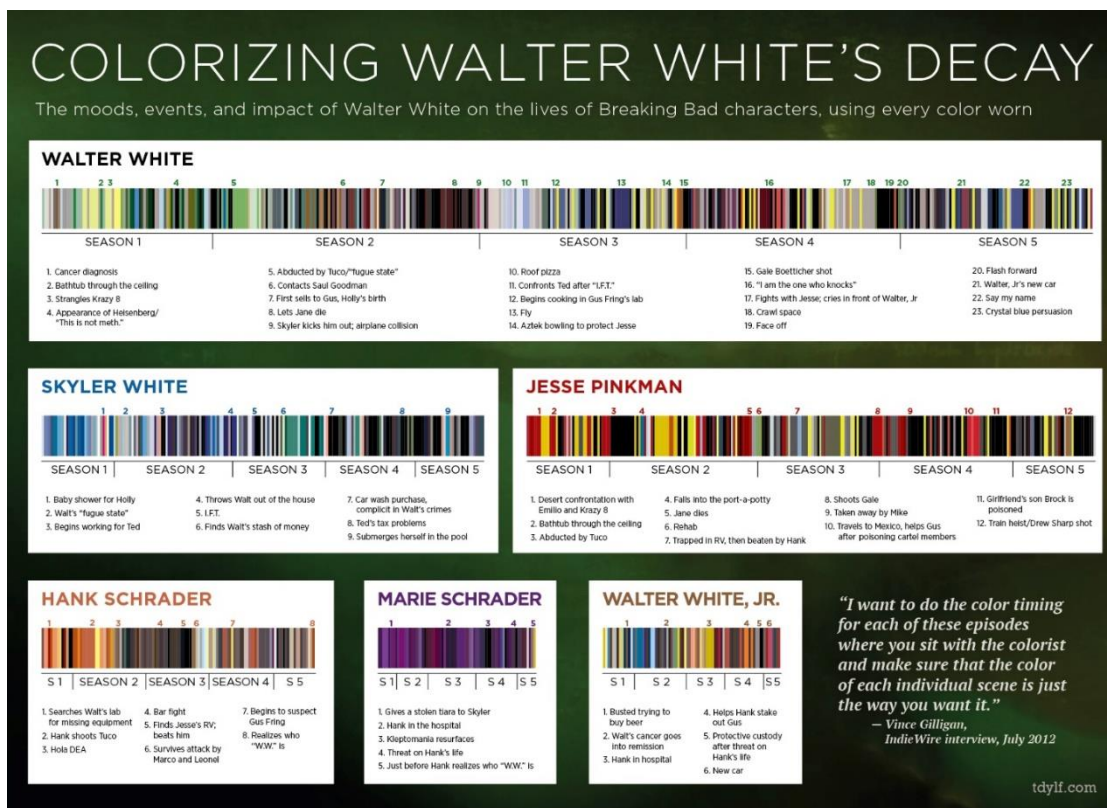


Fig. 1. Infographic for character colour schemed clothing in the *Breaking Bad* Series “Colorizing Walter White’s Decay”. Created by John LaRue

¹ Anthony Scott, “Bad in the Bones”, NY Times. Jul. 24, 2013.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/28/arts/television/how-walter-white-found-his-inner-sociopath.html>

Color Symbolism in Breaking Bad

As discussed, Walter White is a complex character. In the “Pilot,”² he is portrayed as a normal, hardworking teacher. At this point he is unimpressive in the *Breaking Bad* world. This is reflective bland beige colours he wears. As scenes progress and Walter is met with conflict, the beige disappears. In the later parts of “Pilot,” Walter learns of his cancer, which is reflected in his clothing turning to a dark brown. The beige scheme presents itself in other times of Walter’s conformity to his world, like in “Gray Matter,” where he starts working with his new drug cooking employees.³ Darker colour schemes arises in times of tense situations and at the introduction of Walter’s alter-ego, Heisenberg is associated with dark green which can be interpreted as Heisenberg’s greed and desperation. Walters’ first batch of meth in “Pilot” was made with a green apron. Throughout the *Breaking Bad* series (see fig. 1) we can see the alternation of light and dark colour schemes. We can also extend this to all the other characters. Another prominent example is the colour red, which typically signs aggression or violence. Jesse Pinkman consistently wears red throughout and this reflects Jesse’s aggressive nature. Some prominent examples include his red clothes during the bathtub falling scene,⁴ and Gale shooting scene.⁵ It is quite evident how much thought has been put behind each character and their emotions. This sometimes serves to foreshadow or emphasize certain feelings.

Esoteric Symbols and Information Culture

Storytelling has been an important part of our study of information culture, as discussed in INF311. The use of esoteric symbols is a way of conveying a message to the audience. Heisenberg and different emotions are expressed by Gilligan in a colour symbolic scheme. Understanding these symbolic hidden

² *Breaking Bad*, S1E1, “Pilot,” written by Vince Gilligan, aired Jan. 20, 2008, on AMC.

³ *Breaking Bad*, S1E5, “Grey Matter,” written by Vince Gilligan, aired Feb. 24, 2008, on AMC.

⁴ *Breaking Bad*, S1E2, “Cat’s in the Bag...” written by Vince Gilligan, aired Jan. 27, 2008, on AMC.

⁵ *Breaking Bad*, S1E2, “Full Measure.” written by Vince Gilligan, aired June. 13, 2010, on AMC.

meanings relies on theories of the semiotics of signs and symbols. I argue that understanding this is a part of our upbringing and information culture contexts. In an article published in the *Chinese Semiotics Studies*, Fuji Ko describes these symbols and their impact on viewers in her article *Esoteric Symbolism in Animated Film Storytelling*. Ko uses the example of a 2016 film *Moana* where the lava god Te Fiti changes colour throughout the film.⁶ When Te Fiti's heart is restored from conflict, her colour scheme shifts from red to green. This non-verbal semiotic symbol represents the shift from negative to positive attributes. The abstraction of these attributes and colours can be attributed to the three-dimensional Vygotskian model of human development.⁷ The abstraction of colours and ideas is deeply engrained in us as we subconsciously developed as children. Viewers of *Breaking Bad* and *Moana* are met with such dominant information cultural cognitive signs that have been learned through the stages of Vygotskian development. As we can see, a deeper understanding of symbols and their abstract meanings is essential to understanding the media presented in *Breaking Bad* and *Moana* alike. These symbols are important, and they are why *Breaking Bad* should be included in the information culture playlist. Next, we will discuss *Borat 2*.

Borat 2

Borat 2 is a sequel movie, to the original film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*. (we will refer to as *Borat 1*), a mockumentary comedy film. This style of mockumentary includes real footage of actual people with the actors of *Borat 1* and *Borat 2* put in comedic situations. *Borat 2* was released on Amazon Prime on October 23rd, 2020. Borat is a fictional Kazakhstani journalist who first came to America in *Borat 1* to learn of American culture. *Borat 2* was filmed during the 2020 pandemic and the days leading up to the 2020 Presidential election. Borat was tasked by the Kazakhstani government to deliver his daughter as a bride to Vice President Mike Pence. Borat is known for his lack of decorum, especially considering controversial topics such as sexism, racism, and homophobia. Yet, all the jokes that Borat makes in both *Borat 1* and *Borat 2* are from American culture

⁶ Fuji Ko, "Symbolism in Animated Film Storytelling" in *Chinese Semiotics Studies* 14 (3), 2018, 356.

⁷ Ibid, 348

and discourse of their respective times. *Borat 2* pokes fun at the relevant discourses today. Our very own discourse and information culture are being prodded by Borat.



Fig. 2. Borat performing as Country Steve at a militia rally. Courtesy of Amazon Studios

The Discourse of 2020

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic is something we still live at the time of this writing. The United States elections have just concluded in the election of President-elect Joe Biden. *Borat 2* was created considering these two historical moments. The US has faced more than 250,000 deaths from the pandemic,⁸ and President Donald Trump has denied the election loss.⁹ This is an unprecedented time and *Borat 2* came out of surprise as Borat was assumed to be retired by actor Baron Cohen. Viewers of Borat are treated to a

⁸ WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard on World Health Organization. 2 Dec. 2020.
<https://covid19.who.int/>

⁹ “Trump delivers 46-minute diatribe denying his election loss”, CBC, 3 Dec. 2020.
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/trump-rant-biden-1.5826116>

movie that is straight off the press. One controversial scene includes Borat poking fun at the far-right Trump supporters by showing up to a militia rally to perform a song as “Country Steve” (see Fig. 2).¹⁰ His country-inspired song suggests Obama is a criminal and COVID-19 is a liberal hoax. In the movie, many of the people who attended the rally genuinely enjoyed Borat. They were oblivious to the fact that Cohen was a comedian. Had Borat not showed up, the rally attendees would have engaged in the same racist, and misleading rhetoric anyway.

Cohen as Borat

Cohen has received controversy in the past from *Borat 1*. The Kazakhstani government found that *Borat 1* to be deeply offensive in his mocking of Kazakhstan. Cohen claims however that his intentions were not to offend or mock Kazakh.¹¹ The joke was that a country such as Kazakhstan portrayed in the *Borat* films could even exist. Cohen had said the joke was on those “who believe that there's a country where homosexuals wear blue hats and the women live in cages and they drink fermented horse urine and the age of consent has been raised to nine years old.”. Comparative literature scholar Alexei Lalo dismisses the idea that *Borat 1* is offensive to Kazakhstan.¹² He claims it is more offensive to Americans and that “it is largely US-American civilization that is the true object of the joke”.¹³ *Borat 2* is not much different from *Borat 1*. The amount of jokes made about America at the expense of Kazakhstan is the same. Cohen adopts the jokes well to fit the 2020 American discourse.

¹⁰ *Borat the Subsequent Moviefilm*, directed by Jason Woliner (Amazon Studios 23 Oct. 2020). 01:09:00

¹¹ Afira, Akbar. “Baron Cohen Comes Out of Character to Defend Borat.” *The Independent*, 17 Nov. 2006. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/comedy/news/baron-cohen-comes-out-of-character-to-defend-borat-424656.html>

¹² Alexei, Lalo. “Borat as Tragicomedy of Anti US-Americanism.” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 11 (2). 13 Jul. 2009.

¹³ *Ibid*, 4.

Borat and Information Culture

The themes and subject matter and Borat are easily understood by viewer Viewers watching the first movie know that the rhetoric Cohen describes could never happen in real life.¹⁴ This is why Borat and his movie are important in our information culture playlist. Borat teaches us the unjust, and the wrong in our world by being utterly relatable in a way. Although *Borat 2* is supposed to be a comedy, it speaks the truth of what is certainly wrong with 2020 by poking fun at it. Next, we will combine *Breaking Bad* and *Borat 2* to discuss satire and its importance to our information culture playlist.

Breaking Bad and Borat 2 Satire

Satire is used to intentionally hold wrongdoing of individuals, corporations, government, or societies up to ridicule. Typically, satire employs the use of humour or irony to criticize stupidity or vices. Both media pieces are satirical. Albeit they are satirical in very different ways. I claim that *Breaking Bad* is an individualized and hidden satire that requires deeper interpretation. Although *Breaking Bad* is not meant to be funny, Walter's life entire life is ironic, which we will discuss later. On the other hand, I argue that *Borat 2* is undeniably for sure a satire. The satire that Cohen is like the Socratic method. Cohen uses Borat to bring out people's true intentions.

Walter's Life is Ironic

The satire in *Breaking Bad* is subtle and is not as obvious as *Borat 2*. Gilligan mocks viewers by thrusting Walter through into grotesque satirical situations. Walter is fundamentally flawed. Heisenberg is ironically fully Walter's fault. Walter is a vindictive and egoistic person. He left Gretchen (who ironically loved him) as he was unsure about her rich upbringing. Walter refuses money from Gretchen to pay for his entire treatment of cancer. Heisenberg would have never happened if he took the money. He should have never had a family with Skyler, and the family did everything for ironically manifested Heisenberg.

¹⁴ Cate, Blouke. *Borat, Sacha Baron Cohen, and the seriousness of (mock) documentary*, (Comedy Studies 6 (1), 4-17, 2015

Breaking Bad has been coined as a “morality tale” by critics.¹⁵ Walter’s transformation from a teacher to a murdering drug dealer is justified by his morals. Walter is supposed to be a teacher, husband, and father. As we can see, Walter’s life is satire. We can learn from the Walter-Heisenberg duality that his character is completely ironic. We recognize that Walter White is a result of poor moral decisions.

Borat and Socratic Irony

I argue that the metaphor that Cohen is like a modern-day Socrates. Socrates was known in the 5th century as the gadfly who tricked people into revealing the extent of others' knowledge. Socratic irony involves one displaying the dissimulation of being ignorant, to show that another person’s ignorance. Thus, this situation is ironic. Cohen uses Borat as an ignorant disguise to elicit a response from people. One example is when Cohen shows up to a Christian anti-abortion clinic to discuss getting a baby out of his daughter (of course the baby was a toy).¹⁶ Cohen, very well knows what an anti-abortion clinic would think about the situation. He wanted the reaction of the camera for his mockumentary. Andrew Jones, a communications philosopher argues the importance of such satire in his publication *The Necessity of Satire in Media Literacy: Stephen Colbert’s Use of Sophistic and Socratic Irony*. Socratic irony’s purpose is the revelation of the truth.¹⁷ Jones attributes the success of Socratic satire in comedian Stephen Colbeck’s testimony at the House Judiciary Committee hearing regarding *Protecting America’s Harvest*. Colbeck on behalf of farmers and his speech was credited as witty and sardonic. “Please don’t make me do it again, it is really, really, hard,” said Colbert during his 2010 testimony after one day of picking beans.¹⁸ Jones argues

¹⁵ Jennifer Baker. “What’s Stopping Me: Breaking Bad and Virtue Ethics” in *Philosophy and Breaking Bad*. Nov. 26, 2016. 4.

¹⁶ *Borat the Subsequent Moviefilm*. 26:35

¹⁷ Andrew, Jones. “The Necessity of Satire in Media Literacy: Stephen Colbert’s Use of Sophistic and Socratic Irony” in *Baltic Journal of Law & Politics*, 11(1). 190.

¹⁸ CNN. *Mr. Colbert goes to Capitol Hill*. (Youtube), Sep. 24, 2010.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Of4EFOghk4&ab_channel=CNN, 05:15.

that this use of Socratic irony forces the audience to recognize the cold, hard truth of a bean picking migrant.¹⁹ Borat is a satire in the same way that Colbeck testified at the House Judiciary Committee.

Satirical Literacy in Information Culture

The satire in both *Breaking Bad* and *Borat 2* are important contributors to our information culture playlist. University of Alabama literature professor Jessie Dunbar argues that “representing” satirical discourse destroys “represented” racist language.²⁰ To use Borat as an example, we can say Borat does not wish to give us moral lessons, nor should we look for them from him. His racist speech and discourse are merely to entertain and provide food for thought. Borat is “representing” Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan is “represented” in Borat’s rhetoric. Cohen had hoped that we as viewers would see the irony there could never be a racist like Borat, or a country like Kazakhstan represented *Borat 2*. This satire is important as it gives *Borat 2* entertainment. Similarly, the same satirical literacy can be applied to *Breaking Bad*. Although none of *Breaking Bad* satire pertains to the race, the satirical literacy itself is equally important. The “represented” discourse of Walter’s morals trumps the “represented” image of Heisenberg. We recognize that Walter made all the wrong decisions. Yet, we can relate with the good Walter more than Heisenberg. As a result, we conclude that satire is important in our literacy and culture. I find that including *Breaking Bad* and *Borat 2* based on satirical literacy is very beneficial. It is important to understand characters such as Borat and Heisenberg are simply for entertainment. Once you embrace the fact, that satire is for entertainment purposes, we can learn that Borat and Heisenberg are products of information culture. What makes Borat funny and Walter relatable is thanks to information culture.

¹⁹ Jones. *The Necessity of Satire in Media Literacy: Stephen Colbert’s Use of Sophistic and Socratic Irony*. 205.

²⁰ Jessie Dunbar. “Teaching Satirical Literacy and Social Responsibility through Race Comedy.” In *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, 42(4), 79–91. Dec. 2017. 80.

Final Remarks

Breaking Bad and *Borat 2* are two very different media pieces. The symbolism behind *Breaking Bad* and the up-to-date discourse of *Borat 2* make both films equally enjoyable and important to information culture. One big theme shared by both media is the notion of satire. Both are satire in different ways and the satirical literacy required to understand both are an important part of our information culture. I argue that satire should become a topic for next year's cohort of INF311 students, with my information culture playlist as evidence of why. The symbolism in *Breaking Bad* is deeply engrained in our information culture, way before we developed as children. The political, racial, and social discourses in *Borat 2* are relatable because of recent events, straight from information culture today. Finally, the satirical literacy required for truly understanding *Breaking Bad* and *Borat 2* is what makes both media truly entertaining. The information culture playlist should be entertaining. It should teach us why Borat only for fun and why Walter White's life is such an ironic joke.

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