

## **Still Very Excite: A Retrospective of Ethnic Humor, Political Correctness, and Hate Speech in Sacha Baron Cohen's *Borat***

**Abstract:** During four years of Donald Trump's presidency, controversies about the limits of free speech and virtues of political (in)correctness dominated the media coverage. Shortly before the November 2020 election that marked the end of this era, the release of a sequel to Sacha Baron Cohen's incendiary comedy *Borat* reiterated the critical role of humor in this increasingly divisive debate. Returning to the post-9/11 cultural landscape of the 2006 original, this paper uses a variety of analytical lenses ranging from discourse analysis to postmodern theory to zoom in on the workings and aftermath of Cohen's provocations. *Borat's* gleeful exposure of the (non-)boundaries of humor, the paper argues, puts a glaring spotlight on an American society whose moral fabric is increasingly—and sometimes hilariously—worn down between the whetstones of free speech and political correctness.

**Keywords:** film studies, Borat, ethnic humor, political correctness, hate speech, language, censorship

### **1. Introduction: Returning to the Scene of the Crime**

In late October 2020, the sequel to the cult film *Borat*, succinctly titled *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm: Delivery of Prodigious Bribe to American Regime for Make Benefit Once Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, hit the silver screen. Or rather, it popped up on Amazon's streaming service where it was published exclusively due to the ongoing restrictions of public life. Returning to the US from his native Kazakhstan, this time Borat Sagdiyev (Sacha Baron Cohen) must deliver his fifteen-year-old daughter Tutar (Maria Bakalova) to Mike Pence to restore his country's and his own reputation, both of which were ruined by the first "moviefilm." That plan, however, falls flat when Borat shows up dressed in a Ku Klux Klan robe at a Pence rally, at which point Rudy Giuliani is selected as the future husband of Tutar who strives to live in an (actual) golden cage, just like her idol Melania Trump. Instead of pushing everyone's buttons like the first film did, the sequel has a more straightforward political message that targets Trump supporters and COVID-19 deniers. And even though Cohen reliably delivers his pranks and the country's fragile state in 2020 presents much bigger targets than it did back in 2006, many scenes appear schematic and scripted. Overall, the film struggles to replicate its precursor's subversive humor—perhaps not least because four years of constant outrage may have

thoroughly desensitized audiences to professional provocateurs like Trump and Sagdiyev.

Following the 2006 premiere of *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, several American talk shows, among them *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* and Jay Leno's *The Tonight Show*, wanted to have a word with Cohen. On stage, the hosts asked the British comic to answer accusations his alter ego had provoked through politically incorrect jokes, blatant misogyny, and a supercharged ethnic humor, which some observers—including the Anti-Defamation League—argued exemplified hate speech.<sup>1</sup> Amusingly, Cohen refuses to respond directly to these accusations. Instead, he remained fully in character, forcing talk masters and audiences to play along with the fake Kazakh's outrageously eccentric personality, hence adding another layer of disarray to the political correctness (PC) debate.<sup>2</sup> When Jay Leno asks him, "[w]hat do you say to people that say [your film] was homophobic and antisemitic?" Borat responds: "Oh, thank you very much!"<sup>3</sup> The audience's laughter following this remark not only stops Leno dead in his tracks but also alludes to the lingering tensions between tolerable humor, free speech, and political correctness.

From the perspective of humor studies, it prompts us to make sense of this laughter: Does it represent a mental defense mechanism that drives the appalled, politically correct majority to deride a hilariously over-the-top provocateur, discounting his hackneyed follies as absurd? Or are Leno's viewers verbalizing a deeply felt relief—an audible dispensation from the invisible chains that secure the "dictatorship of the pure of heart"<sup>4</sup> through "the corruption of our language on a truly Orwellian scale"?<sup>5</sup> While the answers remain buried in the subconsciousness of Jay Leno's audience of that *Tonight Show*, their reaction underlines two competing perceptions of public discourse in twenty-first century America: on the one hand, unabridged free speech as the archetypical thesis of Enlightenment and democracy, and authoritarian control of permissible speech, humor, and proper morality as its ostensible antithesis. Returning to the scenes of the *Borat's* 'crimes,' this paper explores the increasing tensions between these views in general and the role of humor in their cinematic synthesis and deconstruction in particular. Provocative comedic performances such as Cohen's, I suggest, present lenses that put into focus the ever-growing divisions between proponents and enemies

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Sienkiewicz and Nick Marx, "Beyond a Cutout World: Ethnic Humor and Discursive Integration in South Park," *Journal of Film and Video* vol. 61, no. 2 (2009): 5-18; 5.

<sup>2</sup> Leshu Torchin, "Cultural Learnings of Borat Make for Benefit Glorious Study of Documentary," *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* vol. 38, no. 1 (2008): 53-63; 61.

<sup>3</sup> *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, season 14, episode 202, directed by Anthony Caleca and starring Borat, Martha Stuart, and Damien Rice, televised by NBC on November 9, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Morris Dickstein, "Correcting PC," in *Our Country, Our Culture: The Politics of Political Correctness*, ed. Edith Kurzweil and William Phillips (Boston: Partisan Review, 1994). 42-49; 44.

<sup>5</sup> Hilton Kramer, "Confronting the Monolith," in *Our Country, Our Culture: The Politics of Political Correctness*, ed. Edith Kurzweil and William Phillips (Boston: Partisan Review, 1994). 72-75; 75.

of politically (in)correct speech. The movie, it becomes clear, warrants a reexamination because it contributes a uniquely sardonic amalgamation of this antagonism by stress-testing the integrity of free speech and political correctness within the social and political coordinates of post-9/11 America.

## 2. Inquisitive Hate: Free Speech, Hate Speech, and the Limits of Humor

As a fundamental human right, freedom of speech is firmly anchored in the United States' legal framework. The First Amendment guarantees free expression and only a very limited set of narrowly drawn exceptions may curtail this privilege. While authorities can put constraints on the time, place, and manner, they cannot restrict speech solely based on its contents, also known as content-neutral restrictions. In turn, content-based restrictions are allowable only if the speech in question contains incitements to imminent violence, actual threats of violence, defamation, or in some rare cases, obscenity. The figure of hate speech refers to "speech that maligns a person or group based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation or disability."<sup>6</sup> Legally, it does not differ from other speech and enjoys full protection under the First Amendment.

While it may legally represent a—however socially deplorable—form of free speech, the model of hate speech has become a nexus of numerous controversies, scandals, and backpedals. Arguably, it has also exceeded any clear boundaries of class and status with even the president constantly being accused of engaging in hate speech. However, unlike Donald Trump, Cohen's Borat character uses the powder keg of hate speech not merely to garner attention and slander his opponents but as the groundwork on which to build his painful inquisition of post-9/11 American sensitivities. It would be difficult to argue that *Borat's* 'inquisitive hate' is directed against any particular social or ethnic group. Instead, throughout the movie everyone—Caucasian "vanilla faces," African American "chocolate faces, shape-shifting Jews, and frigid feminists—becomes a target of the insensitive reporter's insolent remarks that plainly meet the official definition of hate speech.<sup>7</sup>

Still, for most viewers the satirical intent behind these statements is so evident that allegations of a hate crimes and calls for censorship are seemingly left for those without a sense of (acid and puerile) humor. On a dramaturgical level, the movie thus merely "reproduce[s] the external

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<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Freedom of Expression at a Glance," April 22, 2013. <https://publications.america.gov/publication/freedom-of-expression-at-a-glance/>.

<sup>7</sup> Sasha Baron Cohen, performer, *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, directed by Larry Charles (Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007), DVD, 84 min.; at 37:36; 25:28; 41:06; 16:03.

markings of racist beliefs in the service of comedy with what is presumably an ironic tone.”<sup>8</sup> In their essay “Beyond a Cutout World,” Matt Sienkiewicz and Nick Marx use the television show *South Park* to criticize the shortcomings of existing interpretative models for such ‘ethnic humor.’ They argue that close reading techniques are mostly unfit for analyzing politically incorrect productions such as *South Park* or *Borat*. Conversely, a more discursive and context-sensitive evaluation—as attempted in the following—is needed to accurately capture their meaning. In an analysis of *Sarah Silverman: Jesus is Magic* (2005), A.O. Scott scrutinizes some axiomatic characteristics of politically incorrect movies, many of which also apply to *Borat*. Scott proposes that the overly offensive style may in fact be a defensive mechanism and the mocking of political correctness can sometimes be a form of PC in itself. Similarly, in trying to fathom the central ambitions of *Borat*, it seems reasonable to assume “that only someone secure in his [...] own lack of racism would dare to make, or to laugh at, a racist joke, the telling of which thus becomes a way of making fun simultaneously of racism and of racial hypersensitivity.”<sup>9</sup> Historically, political scientist Dennis Chong explains that most matters of politically correct speech in the United States today are connected to the early 1990s and

radical factions on college campuses [that] were intent on promoting the interests of women and racial and ethnic minorities through changes in the curriculum, affirmative action hiring and admissions, codes against hate speech and sexual harassment, and revisionist scholarship in the humanities, law, and social sciences.<sup>10</sup>

Chong examines how the hate speech versus free speech debate, language etiquette, and PC virtues have impacted the attitude of college students since the 1980s. Based on several case studies, the author concludes that those factors in combination with intellectual campaigning have decreased the support for hate speech on campuses. This same process, however, has had no visible impact on the traditionally high level of permissiveness for nonconformist ideologies and lifestyles among high school and college students.<sup>11</sup> *Borat* uses the satirical mode and its devices of irony, exaggerations, and larger than life stereotypes to expose racism, homophobia, and misogyny as the nonsensical but persistently recent topics that they are. The film accomplishes this by constantly testing the soundness and stability of accepted speech through the injection of hate speech into its discursive framework, most often in the form of racial slurs, sexist and pornographic lingo, including references to rape, pedophilia, and extremely

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<sup>8</sup> Sienkiewicz and Marx, “Beyond a Cutout World,” 5.

<sup>9</sup> A.O. Scott, “A Comic in Search of the Discomfort Zone,” *The New York Times*, November 10, 2005. <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/11/movies/a-comic-in-search-of-the-discomfort-zone.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Dennis Chong, “Free Speech and Multiculturalism in and out of the Academy,” *Political Psychology* vol. 27, no. 1 (2006): 29-54; 32.

<sup>11</sup> Chong, “Free Speech and Multiculturalism,” 30.

prejudiced blanket statements.

During his cross-country quest to unearth the most ‘authentic’ form of America, the Kazakh journalist—who knows the country only from shows like *Baywatch*—takes the concept of free speech at face value, almost entirely avoiding the use of euphemisms during his social interactions. For example, while negotiating over a car he demands the puzzled dealership owner “put [a] pussy magnet” in the already obscenely large Hummer truck. In doing so and inquiring, “If this car drive into a group of gypsies, will there be any damage to the car?” Borat constantly unnerves his counterparts.<sup>12</sup> But he also implicitly proves how dramatically polite private language and obscene mass-cultural signifiers have drifted apart. Increasing sexualization, brutalization, and emptying of meaning of mass entertainment products like movies, advertisements, or song lyrics, it becomes clear, sharply contrast with the withdrawal of individuals from public discourse in fear of offending anybody. Sex and violence as well as prudishness and self-censorship thus operate under the same pretext of freedom of (non)expression. Visibly embarrassed, the car dealer thus awkwardly answers Borat’s first question by stating “there’s no—there’s no such thing in this country as a—as a magnet.”<sup>13</sup> However, he also quite enthusiastically agrees that the Hummer would be the perfect tool for vehicular manslaughter and “doing 35-45 miles per hour will do it,” while even warning the prospective mass-murdering owner that his victims “could crack your windshield.”<sup>14</sup>

Later in the film, Borat visits a Texan rodeo whose organizers agree to the producer’s polite request to directly speak to its mainly conservative audience in the name of international understanding. Clad in a theatrically patriotic attire, the supposed cultural ambassador Borat expectedly and mercilessly abuses the organizers’ Southern hospitality. He mocks the political bigotry of the “US and A” and its conduct in the ongoing Iraq War, which by 2006 had escalated into a bloody civil war and US retaliations that often hit the civilian populace. Still, many in the rodeo crowd cheer after hearing Borat’s fervent avowal that the Kazakh people “support your War of Terror. [...] May George Bush drink the blood of every single man, woman, and child of Iraq!”<sup>15</sup> The faces of some, however, betray a certain puzzlement concerning the collateral realities of the War on Terror. This absurd interaction between speaker and audience impressively demonstrates the latter’s powerlessness to immediately discern between the concepts of free speech and hate speech as soon as a layer of humor is added. But it also underlines the contextual nature and path-dependency of hate speech as Borat’s insults of the

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<sup>12</sup> Cohen, *Borat*, quotations at 22:24; 22:32.

<sup>13</sup> Cohen, *Borat*, quotation at 22:24.

<sup>14</sup> Cohen, *Borat*, quotations at 22:45; 22:38.

<sup>15</sup> Cohen, *Borat*, quotation at 32:09.

army and government go unnoticed for a long time in front of a very conservative crowd as long as the speaker wears the Stars and Stripes and a cowboy hat—before he is finally booed off the stage.

In its totality, Borat's eccentric Texan performance indicates that speech is by no means a specific and stable set of values that could be clearly defined, but rather a set of rhetorical abstractions that are situation-dependent and “filled with whatever content and direction one can manage to put into [it].”<sup>16</sup> Perhaps more surprisingly, it also demonstrates how performances enacted under the label of free speech can function as a powerful virtue signal for political or cultural agendas. Stanley Fish clarifies this in his book *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech and it's a Good Thing, Too* by stating that

we give our preferred verbal behaviors that name [...] because in the rhetoric of American life, the label “free speech” is the one you want your favorites to wear. [It] is not an independent value but a political prize.<sup>17</sup>

When Borat performs a derisory version of Kazakhstan's national anthem—including the line “all the other countries are run by little girls”—nobody dares to wrest the microphone from the faux ambassador's hands to stop the charade, possibly out of fear of appearing culturally insensitive by stopping the song performed under the label of free speech.<sup>18</sup> Apart from mere provocation, what Cohen accomplishes with scenes like this amounts to candid advocacy for unrestrained speech that exceeds the ideological appropriations and partisan trenches of the so-called culture wars between conservatives and liberals in the US. Borat assumes the age-old role of the court jester daring to speak the unspeakable and only getting away because he manages to make the king laugh. The king in this case are the spectators that made the movie a success at the box office, grossing over \$26 million on its opening weekend and demonstrating with their wallets the validity of the proverb ‘in a joke concealed is the truth revealed.’ This truth might be an audience's desire for unabridged free speech and the end of constant self-censorship dictated by political correctness. It might also be the longing for a world with less complexity where difficult issues can be brushed aside with jokes or appeals to ‘common sense.’ Borat's outrageous antics for some explicate a utopia of limitless self-expression, free from consequences and sans the need to care about morals and sensitivities.

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<sup>16</sup> Stanley Fish, *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech and it's a Good Thing, Too* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 102.

<sup>17</sup> Fish, *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech*, 102.

<sup>18</sup> Cohen, *Borat*, quotation at 33:13.

### 3. Smoke and Mirrors: Otherness, Ethnic Humor, and Postmodern Theory

In emphasizing the absurdities of both a wholly PC world as well as the opposite extreme of ruthless freedom, *Borat* also puts a finger on the theoretical sore spots of political correctness, subjecting the concept to a sardonic stress test and providing its own synthesis from the resulting moral panic. At first glance, Borat Sagdiyev is a larger-than-life former Soviet ‘Trashcanistan’ Other who makes a fool of himself by going well beyond what most Americans would view as appropriate speech and behavior. However, no one in the movie really challenges his offensive behavior, likely in fear of appearing intolerant concerning his opaque but obviously foreign ethnic background. These dynamics lay the basis for the movie’s subversive humor as well as its funniest moments that ask the question: Have the United States turned into a nation of thin-skinned “PC *apparatchiks*”?<sup>19</sup> In a 1994 article titled “Confronting the Monolith,” art critic Hilton Kramer addressed this very question. He asserted that PC pervades nearly all aspects of social and professional life, and has become an overriding force that corrupts language on a scale comparable to Orwell’s newspeak in 1984. Kramer moreover discounts PC proponents’ demands to abolish white and male hegemony as an intellectually dishonest because equally racist and sexist endeavor.

Others have made similar arguments, for instance inquiring if the fear of hurting someone’s feelings should be the focus of a time when “[f]ew Americans share or pursue a common good, and Martin Luther King’s majestic vision of an integrated nation is still far from realization.”<sup>20</sup> *Borat* disrupts this culture that is further complicated by the uneasy climate of post-9/11 America. Cohen’s lanky stature, large bushy mustache, and outmoded baby blue, baggy suit are designed to maximize the unfamiliarity of his appearance. His outlandish behavior and mannerisms constantly transgress social, personal, and gendered boundaries. In one take, he can be seen taking a dump in the shrubbery in front of Trump Tower in Manhattan; he relentlessly tries to kiss men on the cheeks yet refuses to shake the hands of female interview partners and people he believes to be Jewish. This behavior fans fear by fulfilling various stereotypes typically associated with Muslim identities, for instance primitivism and illiteracy, misogyny, and anti-Semitism. However, none of his collocutors dare to address this politically incorrect subtext, except for one ultraconservative Texan who after Borat’s rodeo speech remarks that

every picture that we get back from the terrorists or anything else; the Muslims, they

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<sup>19</sup> Kramer, “Confronting the Monolith,” 73. Emphasis in original.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Brustein, “Dumbocracy in America,” in *Our Country, Our Culture: The Politics of Political Correctness*, ed. Edith Kurzweil and William Phillips (Boston: Partisan Review, 1994), 25-33; 31.

look like you: Black hair and a black moustache. So shave that dadgum moustache off, so you're not so conspicuous, so you look like maybe an Italian or somethin'. As far as from people lookin' at ya, I see a lot of people and I think "there's a dadgum Muslim, I wonder what kind of bomb he's got strapped to him."<sup>21</sup>

Even so, it is Borat's declared mission to learn about American culture as a model for his own developing country that leads to him being treated with indulgence and politeness. His intercultural encounters, especially with members of the white upper class, expose further chinks in the armor of PC, namely the underlying "bigotries behind the rhetoric of enlightenment and equality."<sup>22</sup> Similarly, literary scholar Morris Dickstein claims that PC culture has spawned an ethos of conformity that relies mainly on journalistic and academic opinion leaders and rarely allows for new intellectual impulses and perspectives. In "Correcting PC," Dickstein blames the left for promoting an orthodox way of thinking that clashes with the 1960s cultural revolution's struggle for pluralism and the disentanglement of individual expression from conformist ideologies and groupthink.<sup>23</sup> Despite the refined manners paraded by members of the polite society, Borat perpetually succeeds at triggering both conservative and progressive impulses to patronizingly present themselves as epitomes of morality and civilization in front of supposedly ignorant Others. By orchestrating this clash between civilized and primitive cultures, Borat reveals a pervasive mindset of superiority and self-righteous beliefs that are only thinly veiled by a normalized rhetoric of compassion, humanism, and tolerance. These dynamics become apparent both during his high society encounters and meetings with radical feminists. During both Borat assumes the role of the culturally illiterate noble savage: a postmodern Queequeg who stands perplexed before the Kafkaesque innuendos of a society whose reactions to Borat's transgressions are, for the most part, speechlessness and dismay.

This becomes apparent at the end of the film's second act when Borat is invited to attend an all-white dinner party at a venerable mansion to act as a guest of honor. After some awkward mix-ups—including him confusing the terms retired and retarded—he excuses himself and after a while returns from the bathroom holding what appears to be his feces in a plastic bag, leaving the socialites utterly perplexed. When he invites an obese African American prostitute to the party, both are promptly seen off with the promise that "the Sheriff is on his way, the police are coming now."<sup>24</sup> During these uncomfortable 'intercultural' encounters, the hosts' bias-free,

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<sup>21</sup> Cohen, *Borat*, quotation at 30:30.

<sup>22</sup> Torchin, "Cultural Learnings," 54.

<sup>23</sup> Dickstein, "Correcting PC," 43-46.

<sup>24</sup> Cohen, *Borat*, quotation at 49:50.



neutral speech appears cold, condescending, yet by no means morally superior. Instead, the eccentric Kazakh emerges victorious from the on-screen popularity contest. Not only because his mannerisms are amusing; in fact, apart from the corny jokes and puns pervading the film, Borat's provocations and digressions are what expose the surrounding moral structure not only as obstinate and ridiculous but ultimately as second-rate to the values of the half-civilized Other who drinks from toilet bowls and carries Gypsy tears as protection from AIDS. From an abstract PC standpoint, his antics may be cringeworthy and offensive. But however pejorative his values, they seem perfectly able to integrate themselves with each new person and phenomenon he encounters in the Land of the Free, without the need of altering his attitude or the mindsets of those around him. On the one hand, Borat's thoughts bypass any verbal hygiene filters, thus appearing despicable and dirty. On the other hand, his unsophisticated beliefs appear 'clean' because they lack self-censorship and stem from an unbiased conjunction between consciousness and reality, ostensibly void of ulterior motives and artifice.

In addition to appealing to these basic instincts, Cohen has clearly understood that public appearances and the media play a vital role in the construction of sociocultural identity, acting both as authors, mirrors, and filters of reality. At the same time, media-generated meaning is concealed, refracted, and censored according to a plethora of opaque interests. The cultural envoy Borat learns to borrow the tools of politicians and opinion leaders of the establishment, often using their PC slogans against them. He succeeds in this because he, the Other, and minority member is—at least to a degree—insulated from rebuke both in his fake Kazakh and Cohen's real-life Jewish identity; he is clearly racist and sexist yet remains largely unchallenged. This 'PC anarchism' empowers him to act as a trickster who orchestrates the politically correct citizen's nightmare in the form of an inescapable mirror cabinet. In doing so, he concurrently embodies and deconstructs the tenets of postmodern constructivism as the theoretical foundation of political correctness.<sup>25</sup> According to the so-called transformationalist view (which includes Marxist, deconstructionist, and feminist theory) human perception of reality is strongly determined by language.<sup>26</sup> In "The Postmodern Argument Considered," Jerry L. Martin examines how the PC movement in the humanities and elsewhere has turned away from pursuing 'objective truths' and instead thrives mainly on political activism with the goal of transforming society. Martin maintains that, although attacks on objectivism and empirical science emanate mainly from the left-wing political spectrum, some of their tactics resemble demands made by 1930s fascism. Implementing the transformationalist dogma at the university,

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<sup>25</sup> Mathias Hildebrandt, *Multikulturalismus und Political Correctness in den USA* (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2005), 406.

<sup>26</sup> Jerry L. Martin, "The Postmodern Argument Considered," in *Our Country, Our Culture: The Politics of Political Correctness*, ed. Edith Kurzweil and William Phillips (Boston: Partisan Review, 1994), 163-78; 164.

he insinuates, incapacitates the very social institution that can and should critically engage the issues of PC culture.<sup>27</sup>

Language is at the very heart of these developments. As the primary human toolset for the construction of meaning, it is also the foremost transmitter of prejudices and stereotypes, and a way of exerting social control, for instance by “making everyone accept definitions [...] as neutral and universal [...] which in fact represent the particular standpoint of straight white men from the most privileged social classes.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, politically correct language posits that “injustices, based on sex, race, class, and other social variables” can be vanquished by introducing value-free expressions, thereby reforming white and male-centric patterns of speech.<sup>29</sup> In her essay “Words, Words, Words,” Deborah Cameron explores the reasons behind the implementation of PC speech codes, viewing identity politics as a necessary path to empowering historically underprivileged groups of people. Because of persistent systemic imbalances, she contends, PC represents a valid and long overdue corrective to the hegemony of the majority.

To achieve this empowerment, some have suggested that “reality should be viewed as simply a linguistic invention. Fact, truth, and so forth can be approached only through the nuances of speech.”<sup>30</sup> It is this radically utopian yet also radically simplistic belief that reality could be altered under the pretext of social change and voluntary assimilation that is satirized by *Borat*. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard, one of the key figures of postmodern theory, describes the results of such ‘engineered realities.’ Any semblance of a coherent and commonly shared reality, the Frenchman suggested, becomes obsolete. Instead, we are left with a “hyperreality”: a second-hand reconstruction of reality via networks of signifiers and social values and thus the basic operation of compulsory speech (and thought).<sup>31</sup> Cohen’s character has internalized this theoretical framework and makes a mockery of it by testing its stability through encounters with ordinary people on the sidelines of academic theory.

The film’s fusion of styles and genres results in a collision of reality and fiction (e.g., the controversy surrounding the realness of Borat’s abduction of Pamela Anderson in a traditionally embroidered ‘wedding sack’) that satirizes the postmodern struggle against “the regime of truth and the tyranny of objectivity.”<sup>32</sup> The movie blurs the lines between hoax, mockumentary,

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<sup>27</sup> Martin, “The Postmodern Argument Considered,” 164.

<sup>28</sup> Deborah Cameron, “Words, Words, Words. The Power of Language,” in *The War of the Words: The Political Correctness Debate*, ed. Sarah Dunant (London: Virago, 1995), 15-34; 31.

<sup>29</sup> John W. Murphy and Jung Min Choi, *The Politics and Philosophy of Political Correctness* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1992), 2.

<sup>30</sup> Murphy and Choi, *Political Correctness*, 57.

<sup>31</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1994), 167.

<sup>32</sup> Martin, “The Postmodern Argument Considered,” 167.

documentary of a mockumentary, fake mockumentary, and ‘ethnofiction.’ Film studies scholar Leshu Torchin investigated possible connections between the fuzzy genre and style of *Borat* and its contentious interpretations, illustrating how the movie’s mixture of fact and fiction fluctuates depending on its labeling as documentary, mockumentary, or ethnographic film. This refusal to provide a stable form, Torchin argues, encourages viewers to find their own angle to *Borat*’s underlying thesis.<sup>33</sup> The film’s uncertain genre hence reveals so many glaring contradictions that it becomes an allegory for the disparities between PC’s demands for utter morality and the comedy of seeing imperfect humans falling painfully short of these demands.

Finally, the film’s ethnic humor delivers additional jabs against the theoretical foundations of PC culture. Borat regularly voices his disgust of Jews and Uzbeks. This disgust, however, is not inspired by personal, ideological, or historical reasons; he despises them merely because his country’s “institutions and customs [e.g., “The Running of the Jew”]<sup>34</sup> [are] designed to reinforce such useful, identity-defining prejudices against ‘The Other.’”<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Borat has culturally inherited a homophobic attitude yet thinks nothing of bare wrestling with his producer Azamat at their New York hotel. Moreover, he is incapable of identifying the openly homosexual participants of a gay pride parade, and upon being enlightened exclaims: “You telling me the man who try to put a rubber fist in my anus was a homosexual?”<sup>36</sup> *Borat*’s erection of one-dimensional and abstract race and gender stereotypes can be associated with Baudrillard’s figure of the simulacrum: they are images without real-life equivalents that signify his society’s internalized threats of Otherness but have little bearing in the infinitely more complex personal life of individuals. In other words, while Borat’s prejudices exist as persistent simulacra or archetypes of his learned morals, but have little to do with his lived realities.<sup>37</sup>

For instance, throughout the movie he is fascinated with the lifestyle and coolness of African Americans. PC advocates might object to this veneration as an illegitimate, racist exploitation that associates every person of color with the rap, drugs, and gang culture. At the same time, Borat’s use of the absurdly retrograde term “chocolate face” does not significantly deviate from the common conduit of euphemisms. In “The Case of ‘People First,’” Helena Halmari looks at digital archives of the *Houston Chronicle* and shows how politically correct speech affects journalist reporting. She shows that non-PC premodifications (e.g., incarcerated people) are often reserved for unwanted members of society, while PC postmodifications (e.g., people with

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<sup>33</sup> Torchin, “Cultural Learnings,” 53-54.

<sup>34</sup> Cohen, *Borat*, quotation at 04:01.

<sup>35</sup> Jim Emerson, “Borat: Patriot Games,” *Roger Ebert*, November 2, 2006.

<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/borat-cultural-learnings-of-america-for-make-benefit-glorious-nation-of-kazakhstan-2006>.

<sup>36</sup> Cohen, *Borat*, quotation at 26:13.

<sup>37</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 167.

disabilities) are mainly used for neutral or positively connoted members of society. This pattern of biased journalism, Halmari reasons, impedes the adoption of PC into private language, amplifying the need for even more euphemisms and the early 1990s ‘people first’ shift in ethnic signifiers in which “premodified nouns [e.g., colored people] were to be replaced by postmodified nouns [e.g., persons of color].”<sup>38</sup> It also epitomizes how politically correct terminology gets diluted over time and often dissociates itself entirely from its intended meanings. As the Australian art critic Robert Hughes deliberates in *Culture of Complaint*:

Seventy years ago, in polite white usage, blacks were called “colored people”. Then they became “negroes”. Then, “blacks”. Now “African-Americans” or “persons of color” again. But for millions of white Americans [...] they stayed Niggers, and the shift of names has not altered the facts of racism, any more than the ritual announcement of Five-Year Plans and Great Leaps Forward turned the social disasters of Stalinism and Maoism into triumphs.<sup>39</sup>

Hughes explores connections and fault lines between multiculturalism and political correctness, criticizing a spreading culture of victimhood in American society. On the one hand, he sees multiculturalism as a fundamentally beneficial development that contributed greatly to the American success story. On the other hand, he also criticizes the politicization and intermingling of PC with multiculturalism, which he sees embodied most vividly in some asinine euphemisms such as ‘follically challenged’ for ‘bald’ or ‘differently logical’ for ‘wrong.’ In “Is Big Really Beautiful? Political Correctness and the Language of Avoidance,” Irina Perianova surveys the use of euphemisms in contemporary language patterns, using linguistic samples taken from everyday situations and people from different cultural backgrounds. She concludes that today’s influence of politically correct speech has its historical roots in capitalist business practices and marketing slogans that aim at increasing sales by being as inoffensive as possible.<sup>40</sup> In the examples cited above, Borat turns into an epitome for the bizarre alliance between moral authority and capitalism by “undermining [euphemisms] as fantastical paranoid creations.”<sup>41</sup> Cohen, it becomes clear, has made himself into the laughable lock that embodies the paradoxes of a society that hides its persistent prejudices behind the masks of PC, fake morality, and virtue signaling. Using humor to remove this mask, Borat also exposes the shortcomings of political correctness as an artificially crafted parallel reality that is all too often

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<sup>38</sup> Helena Halmari, “Political Correctness, Euphemism, and Language Change: The Case of ‘People First,’” *Journal of Pragmatics* vol. 43, no. 3 (2011): 828-40; 828.

<sup>39</sup> Robert Hughes, *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 26-27.

<sup>40</sup> Irina Perianova, “Is Big Really Beautiful? Political Correctness and the Language of Avoidance,” in *Political Correctness: Mouth Wide Shut?*, ed. Kalaga Wojcieche et al. (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009), 93-103; 99.

<sup>41</sup> Jim Emerson, “Patriot Games.”

utilized in the service of ideological and economic interests.

#### **4. Conclusion: Sharing a Laugh**

In conclusion, *Borat* offers valuable commentary on the state of free speech and political correctness by capturing the widening rifts in the moral and social fabric of the post-9/11 US society. For some critics, this makes the film into “the Bush-era movie par excellence.”<sup>42</sup> On a superficial level, the movie utilizes crass comedic devices such as sexualization and toilet humor to appeal to the baser human instinct of its audiences. As seen in this paper, upon closer discursive and contextualized inspection, it becomes apparent that Cohen shines a fierce spotlight on the subconscious id of all social strata of a country whose common sense of identity is being ground down between the cultural grindstones of free speech and political correctness.

Since *Borat*, other inflammatory comedies such as *Tropic Thunder* (2007) or *The Interview* (2014) have sparked controversies about the limits of humoristic expression. However, Cohen’s scrutiny of American sensibilities arguably remains among the genre’s most impactful examples because it illustrates the hilarity that ensues when dissecting nuance and ambiguity with the bluntest of instruments. Exposing and deconstructing the shakiness of (post)modern social and moral conventions, *Borat* invites proponents on both sides of the growing ideological rift to at least acknowledge each other’s standpoints—and perhaps even share an awkwardly self-conscious laugh. Despite its release almost fifteen years ago, *Borat* not only continues to provide incentives for private, public, and academic debate but also contributes its own satirical impulses to many of the inconsistencies among free speech and PC crowds, as well as the uncomfortable and often hilarious limbo in-between them.

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<sup>42</sup> David Ansen, “Cohen’s ‘Borat,’” *Newsweek*, December 12, 2008, <https://www.newsweek.com/cohens-borat-82853>.