

Bakhtin and *Borat*: the Rogue, the Clown, and the Fool in Carnival Film

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IN THE FAUX-REALITY mockumentary *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*,¹ Kazakh journalist Borat Sagdiyev and his producer (and at least one unseen, unnamed camera man) travel from Kazakhstan to the United States to document American culture for the edification of Kazakhstan's citizenry. Upon arriving in America, Borat alters the documentary's course of action without informing his producer, using his cross-country tour of America to set about finding and marrying Pamela Anderson, whom he sees on television in his New York City hotel room in an episode of *Baywatch*. Borat nevertheless continues to meet and interview a diverse assortment of Americans, all the while surreptitiously plotting his route to Los Angeles to find Anderson. Throughout the movie, Sacha Baron Cohen, who is one of the film's producers and screenwriters, as well as the creator of and the actor playing Borat, invites audiences to laugh both at Borat and the Americans he encounters. And for American audiences, *Borat* becomes an opportunity both to witness and to question the limits of their tolerance, hospitality, and open-mindedness.

A more kairotic moment for *Borat* to have debuted in the United States is hard to imagine. The film capitalised on the popularity of reality television in the United States at the time by taking on the

style of a documentary, providing a seemingly realistic record of Borat's trek through the United States. At the same time, popular celebrity-centered reality television shows such as *The Osbournes*, *The Anna Nicole Show*, *The Simple Life*, *Rob & Big*, and *The Hills*—all of which aired between 2002 and 2006, the year of *Borat's* release—contradicted the notion that celebrities are special and separate from the everyday person, and not easily accessed by anyone who wishes to drive to Los Angeles and find them (as Borat eventually does with Anderson). At the same time, various twenty-four hour global and national news channels offered Americans increasingly partisan, hyperbolised news and entertainment, the lines between which have sometimes been difficult to discern. In this context, *Borat* was notable as a risible “reality” movie about a foreign journalist's quest to find and marry an American celebrity.

When *Borat* debuted, praise from prominent American film critics was widespread: Peter Rainer, of *The Christian Science Monitor*, lauded the film's “painfully funny” achievements.² Manhola Dargis, in a review for *The New York Times*, praised *Borat's* “brilliance,”³ And Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* declared the film “a tour de force that sets off comic and cosmic explosions in your head.”⁴ *Metacritic.com*, an online aggregator of movie and television reviews, lists *Borat* as having achieved 89% in its critic approval system, which the website labels “Universal Acclaim.” Despite this resounding critical acclaim, discussion of the film among the general American public and cultural and political commentators revealed its controversial nature. For example, only a few weeks after *Rolling Stone* featured Cohen, in character as Borat, in the November 13 issue, in 2006—a sign of the triumphant success of Cohen's “tour de force”—George Saunders articulated in *The New Yorker* the unease that some American viewers felt about the film. As he wrote, Borat's performance had exposed “what hypocrites Americans really are,” leading them, using his strategy of apparently naïve provocation, to anger, frustration, and the point of utter exasperation.⁵

Borat, like other examples of political or satirical comedy in contemporary American culture—such as *Chappelle's Show*, *The Colbert Report*, *The Daily Show*, and *Idiocracy*—might best be understood as something Americans were not necessarily supposed to be either for or against. To see the film as merely an attempt to divide or deride Americans oversimplifies its textual significance, reducing the film's complex operations largely to a matter of comedic style. In scene after scene, Cohen uses ambivalent humor to demonstrate that Americans do indeed have a breaking point, despite their view of themselves—at least as it is depicted in the movie—as tolerant of others's cultures, customs, and values. When Borat elicits ambivalent laughter from those with whom he interacts, such laughter is directed toward tolerance as an American value, signifying the Americans's best intentions for multiculturalism and diversity. At the same time, this laughter also plays a substitutive role, becoming one of the reasons that Americans in the film withhold criticism of Borat's questionable or problematic values. In using ambivalent humor, Cohen asks Americans not to reject but to question the confidence that they have in their tolerance, destabilising the Americans's apparent belief that their acceptance of cultural difference is not only noble, but limitless.

Borat is one of a few eponymously named American satirical programs that use this subversive, ambivalent humor to highlight problems and contradictions in American culture. Like *Chappelle's Show* and *The Colbert Report*, *Borat* can be understood to function in accordance with Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the carnival text that "overcomes all oppressive social norms" by giving voice to folk truth through "grotesque realism."⁶ In each of the above named programs, the author or director creates characters in whose guise he then performs, acting in the service of making a broader social commentary through their ridiculous and ridiculing behaviours. Of these performances, Dave Chappelle's is the most directly personal. Chappelle introduces into these skits, which he co-writes and in

which he plays various characters, a series of brief comments that appear to express Chappelle's own thoughts and opinions. In contrast, the main character on *The Colbert Report* is Stephen Colbert, but it is widely understood—though never explicitly addressed on the show—that the real Stephen Colbert's own left-leaning politics contradict those of the right-wing character that he plays. But Cohen's *Borat* represents a figure whose views are even further distanced from those of their author. However, because these are visual rather than written texts, their creators physically embody the characters who are part of the satirical, and often carnival acts. This embodiment makes it all the more difficult for these creators to maintain their distance from the characters's actions. Such a permeable relation between author and character presents audiences with the difficult task of determining the extent to which the author can or should take responsibility for the characters's behaviour. It also prompts the audience to identify who exactly is the target of these characters's carnival subversions, leading them to wonder whether they now also form a part of that target.

As Bakhtin's discussions of carnival culture and literature make clear, the problem of determining the subject of subversive laughter is commonly asked in relation to carnival texts. The difficulties audiences can have in determining who bears responsibility for carnival subversions may be illuminated in part by examining such carnival texts as *Borat* in accordance with Bakhtin's theorisation of what he called "carnival character masks." These masks—the rogue, the clown, and the fool—can be plotted on a spectrum of naïveté based on whether or not they in fact express the genuine view of the author. In addition to a textual function that Bakhtin referred to as the "author image," this spectrum of characters can be helpful in enabling us to reconsider film's carnival significance, as well as in predicting or determining the range of responses that audiences may have to carnival texts. Because carnival texts like *Borat* push the boundaries of what may be acceptably ridiculed in

mainstream culture, audiences may have difficulty recognising that carnival texts often ask us to question our own values and ideologies. Accustomed to authors who are prepared to bear responsibility for whatever offensive behaviour they perform, audiences may respond to carnival texts by critiquing the performer rather than by considering whether they themselves, and mainstream culture at large, should bear any responsibility for the absurdities or contradictions that such a carnival performance serves to reveal. In what follows, I summarise Bakhtin's comments on carnival character masks, and then review some of the ways that each mask is used in *Borat* to achieve the film's critical objectives. I conclude with brief observations about how analysing the use of carnival character masks in visual texts like *Borat* can lead to more fruitful and nuanced discussions of the significance of both carnival and satirical cultural commentary.

Bakhtin's Theory of Carnival Character Masks

Wherever in literature they are found, rogues, clowns, and fools are agents of the carnival or carnivalesque.⁷ Rebellious and oppositional, the carnival is a literary attribute that Bakhtin characterises as “A boundless world of humorous norms and manifestations opposed to the official and serious tone” of “feudal” or mainstream culture.⁸ Bakhtin's writings on carnival characters spreads across much of his corpus, but perhaps the most detailed description of these figures appears in his essay “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel.”⁹ In this essay, Bakhtin devotes the entire seventh section to defining the roles and potentials of the carnival characters, beginning with a definition of the chronotope—the way in which time and space is configured in prose—to which the mask characters are crucially related. Bakhtin observes how these characters are connected to the space of the public square and spectacle, which he notes are both carnival locations.¹⁰ Defined by their unfamiliar and alien status, these characters are metaphorical reflections, he argues, “of some

other's mode of being."¹¹ Consequently, these masks "simply do not exist" beyond their function as outsiders or others; they function only as "prosaic allegorizations" or "prosaic metaphors" that reveal and subvert the falsity of official culture at the same time as they serve to endorse certain folk truths.¹²

Bakhtin suggests that when carnivalisation arises in literary texts by means of these masks, it does so in accordance with the absence or presence of naïveté in the character who serves to mock that text's official culture. "Prose," Bakhtin writes,

offers two responses to high pathos and to seriousness and conventionality of any sort: the gay deception of the rogue—a lie justified because directed to liars—and stupidity—also justified, as it is the failure to understand a lie.¹³

The rogue stands in opposition to the fool in terms of their awareness of being an agent of carnival; the former responds to deception with deception, while the latter remains unaware that such deception even exists. Bakhtin describes the clown as a "synthetic form" of the rogue and the fool, making the binary into a spectrum.¹⁴ Performing a sustained but deliberate naïveté, the clown oscillates between the playful deception of the rogue and the utter stupidity of the fool.

Bakhtin distinguishes the rogue from the clown and fool early on in "Forms," claiming that, unlike the other carnival masks, "the rogue still has some ties that bind him to real life."¹⁵ Thus, the mask most closely aligned with the author and with extratextual reality is the rogue, who Bakhtin describes as the "gay deceiver" who "continually dons and discards [other] masks so as to expose the falsity of those who presume their roles and institutions are natural."¹⁶ Rogues maintain at least two important ties to the real world outside of the text: their relationship to their audiences, and their relationship to the text's authors. The actions of rogue characters allow audiences to make certain assumptions about the author's intentions because, at least in carnival texts, rogues target the very persons and ideologies of an official culture that the author selects as their

target. For example, a rogue and his audience will understand the ways in which his trickery targets both his fellow characters and his audience, as it is this trickery that results in the mockery of the same mainstream ideology to which both the characters and audience subscribe. Despite his “deliberate stupidity,” the rogue fully understands the implications of his actions: accordingly, he must ensure that his audience realises this too so that he can laugh (back) at them for laughing at his parodies of their culture.¹⁷ Thus, a rogue will in some way reveal to his audience his “unmasked” self, implying the motivations that lie behind his deceptions. In this way, the rogue implicates his audience in a triangle of mockery in which, by virtue of being masks for their authors, they deceive their fellow characters and mock their own audiences.

The rogue’s close relationship to the author—both as a function of the text and as a biographical entity—also tethers him to reality because he represents “precisely the stance of the novelist.”¹⁸ Bakhtin asserts that, after the emergence of “‘autographed’ literature,” audiences required some information about authors in order to make assumptions about the text’s historical, cultural, socio-economic, and ideological provenance.¹⁹ If, as Bakhtin asserts, members of the audience were to recognise that a rogue has deliberately feigned his foolishness, then it would be natural, in Bakhtin’s formulation, for them to see the rogue as the author’s direct mouthpiece in the text: an vehicle only of the author’s true beliefs.

Like rogues, clown and fool characters instantiate carnival inversions of mainstream culture, but they are less directly connected to their authors’s intentions and the world outside their texts. The rogue purposefully transforms himself in order to allegorise the people and ideologies associated with the normative or official culture. Knowingly appropriating “the language of priests and monks, kings and seigneurs, knights and wealthy urban types, scholars and jurists,”²⁰ the rogue uses imitation as part of his mockery, reappropriating the same ideologies that are also latent

in the languages and practices of his audience.²¹ In contrast, the clown and fool appear not to realise that they “represent a metamorphosis of tsar and god... Under such conditions man is in a state of allegory.”²² Yet, like the rogue, these characters also “degrade” official culture by eliciting the audiences’s laughter at the ideologies they parody. But unlike the rogue, neither the clown nor the fool takes pleasure in letting the audience in on the joke. This is in part because the extent to which the clown and fool understand that they serve as parodic allegorisations of a culture remains unclear. Unlike the rogue, the clown and the fool seem to hope for, and even sometimes to assume, that they have the approval of mainstream culture, which the rogue rejects, preferring to laugh *at* his audience as much as *with* them.

Clowns and fools are also distinct from rogues in that they can seem otherworldly. Rogues clearly understand the world outside the text and have an interest in ridiculing it. But because clowns and fools do not understand the extratextual world, they clearly do not belong to it, remaining detached from the audience’s reality. However, it is because these characters “are ‘not of this world’ [that] they possess their own special rights and privileges” for degrading the ideologies of ‘the world’s’ official culture.²³ This otherworldliness complicates the relationship between audiences and these two characters. An audience can depend on the rogue’s irony, trusting that he understands that, while he wears a mask, his words and deeds are not in earnest. But the same assumptions cannot be made of clowns and fools because, unlike the rogue, these figures appear genuinely to espouse offensive or objectionable feelings in their words, actions, and thoughts. Moreover, these characters’s bizarre behaviour distinguishes them from the audience, granting them an exclusive “right not to understand, the right to confuse, to tease, to hyperbolize life.”²⁴ While clowns and fools may seem unreal to their audiences, these masks, Bakhtin asserts, are “not invented” but “rooted deep in the folk” and grounded in their audiences’s foundational senses

of reality.²⁵ Consequently, audiences will often look to these characters, perhaps even subconsciously, for implicit information about the author's intentions. And while rogue characters can provide audiences with a more direct understanding of these authorial intentions, uncovering a kind of truth, audiences cannot be quite so assured of the clown's or fool's ability to clarify the text. Whether the clown or the fool functions as the *medium* or the *target* of the author's mockery remains uncertain, as neither offers any direct clarification about their relation to the extratextual or real world.

Because the clown's place on the spectrum of naïveté falls "Between the rogue and the fool... as a unique coupling of the two," he exhibits neither unqualified deception nor total stupidity.²⁶ A clown's foolishness retains an unrevealed and unspoken irony because he is, in fact, "a rogue who dons the mask of a fool in order to motivate distortions and shufflings of languages and labels, thus unmasking them by not understanding them."²⁷ The clown's form of parody, like the rogue's, engages in a "malicious distortion" of the values of mainstream culture.²⁸ But the clown neither laughs at his audience nor acknowledges that his actions degrade their values. Just as a clown in court, this character mask never removes his mask before his audience. By laughing at his parodies, the clown's audience degrades their own ideological structure, confirming their place and role in a culture that both sanctions the clown's spectacle and is its very subject. To determine whether a character is in fact a clown, audiences must be given some indication that the character's naïve foolishness is a mask behind which lies an unspoken and ulterior objective: to carnivalise the official culture. In identifying such a dichotomy, audiences can recognise clowns as embodying their authors's intentions, albeit with some degree of ambiguity.

The fool, in contrast, hopes for mainstream culture's endorsement, but invariably fails to understand why he cannot earn it. His naïveté about what society expects from people is entirely sustained and, as such, the fool's behaviour cannot be considered a "mask" of

his true self. The fool's foolishness leads us to dismiss that he masks or hides the same parodic intentions that are harbored by the rogue or clown. Because the fool does not explicitly indicate to audiences that he is a "transformed" mockery of mainstream culture, there is even greater potential for the audience to become confused about whether he is the agent, instrument, or subject of the author's parodies. As Bakhtin explains, the

fool introduced by the author for purposes of 'making strange' the world of conventional pathos may himself, as a fool, be the object of the author's scorn. The author need not necessarily express a complete solidarity with such a character.²⁹

Though fools may not directly express the opinions of the author in the way that rogues and, more indirectly, clowns will usually express them, by "regarding fools or regarding the world through the eyes of a fool," Bakhtin notes, "the novelist's eye is taught a sort of prose vision, the vision of a world confused by conventions of pathos and by falsity."³⁰ In witnessing this vision, audiences may find it frustrating to attempt to read the fool as a direct reflection of their author's carnivalesque intentions. If the fool resists being understood by audiences in the simple way in which rogues and clowns may be understood, it is because the author's intentions are so much more indirectly expressed through a fool's actions, if they are even expressed by them at all.

It may seem that *Borat*, having just one main character, cannot demonstrate the complexities of all three carnival character masks. And yet, because of the direct involvement of the author in both the creation and performance of that main character, Cohen's film becomes an ideal exemplification of Bakhtin's theorisation of these carnival characters. In the following sections, I will examine some of the ways in which the rogue, the clown, and the fool are manifested in *Borat*, arguing that the film effectuates a carnivalesque contestation of American ideology as it relates both to multiculturalism and tolerance.

Sacha Baron Cohen: Author and Rogue

Given Bakhtin's definitions of rogue characters, Cohen himself, as the creator, writer, and actor who portrays Borat, can be understood as the film's rogue. To look at Cohen as the rogue, however, is to recognise Cohen as a function of his own text, or what Bakhtin calls the "author image."³¹ Bakhtin makes a distinction between the author as "he himself is somehow embedded in the novel" and what Morson and Emerson describe as the "author-as-creator": the biographical person whose creative efforts produce the text, but who remains "always outside the work, or tangential to it."³² Bakhtin asserts that while audiences cannot help but seek out the author's image, aiming to anchor the text in an historical, cultural, or ideological moment, this image remains relatively unhelpful in this enterprise. Certain of the text's more concrete features, Bakhtin argues, could indicate its historical, cultural, and ideological context at least equally well, if not altogether more effectively. In the end, however, Bakhtin does not deny that helpfulness of the author-image, which remains a relevant consideration so long as it "is deep and truthful." Under these circumstances, Bakhtin notes, the author-image "can help the listener or reader more correctly and profoundly to understand the work of the given author."³³

In view of Bakhtin's observations, it is clear that Cohen can never be a character in *Borat* in the same manner that Borat himself is a character in the movie. As Bakhtin qualifies, the "image of the author cannot, of course, itself enter into the fabric of images that makes up the literary work."³⁴ Yet because *Borat* may also be seen as a continuation of Cohen's previous performance strategies, the film also reminds us of the extent to which Cohen is himself embedded in the text, performing (as is his custom) as the same character that he has also created. In other words, Cohen's particular author image—an image with which many viewers will be at least partly familiar—demonstrates many of the characteristics of the rogue. Part of Cohen's comedic strategy is to "continually don and discard

masks,” just as any rogue does. In addition to Borat, for instance, Cohen plays a number of characters, including those that whom he plays on *Da Ali G Show*, such as “Ali G,” a character who apes youth gangsta culture, and “Brüno,” a parody of certain fashionisto and homosexual stereotypes.

Cohen based Borat on a Russian doctor named Alexi Krickler, a man who Cohen met in Astrakhan. “He had some of the elements of Borat,” Cohen explains in his *Rolling Stone* interview, “but he had none of the racism or the misogyny or the anti-Semitism.”³⁵ By refiguring Krickler as a journalist from a highly fictionalised Kazakhstan, Cohen “transforms” a character with whom he had already become familiar, subverting a normative archetype in a way that is similar to that which Bakhtin describes as “transformation” in his essay on carnival masks.³⁶ But Cohen’s choice to represent a character from Kazakhstan is strategic: “it was a country,” he remarks, “that no one had heard anything about,” and which allowed him to “essentially play on stereotypes [Americans] might have about this ex-Soviet backwater.” In thus inventing Borat, Cohen creates one of the three masks that he adopts in *Da Ali G Show*.³⁷ The mask of Borat enables Cohen to exercise what Bakhtin calls one’s “right” to question the norms and values of official culture. But in *Borat*, Cohen does not switch masks as he does on *Da Ali G Show*; and nor does he explicitly admit to the film’s American audience that he is wearing a mask (as any typical rogue would do). Rather, if he performs as a rogue, then his performance is not limited to exactly these textual operations. Instead, his roguishness arises from the fact that he, as the biographical author of the text, appears in his *own* text. It is this fact that creates for Cohen an author image that is already familiar to audiences, connected with another text outside of *Borat*: namely, *Da Ali G Show*. Cohen does not directly declare his intentions to the audience, but rather uses his physical presence to remind us that he is only playing Borat for the duration of this film. In the style of a rogue, Cohen’s inextricable association with the character

reminds us that he has worn other masks before this one, and will eventually take off the mask of Borat too, proceeding to play other characters. In the same way, however, the fact that Cohen dons only one mask for the entire length of the feature film may contribute to the depth of Cohen's "gay deception," confusing audience members who are not familiar with *Da Ali G Show* or with Cohen's comedic performances outside of this text, and causing them some difficulty in understanding the falsity of Borat's naïveté.

If Cohen were to suggest in *Borat* that he rejected any association between his author image in the text and his biographical identity (or author-as-creator), such as, for example, by using a pseudonym, then he would establish more distance between himself (as the author of a carnival text), and the film or text itself. But Cohen has never denied his creation of Borat (or of other character masks), neither on *Da Ali G Show* or elsewhere.³⁸ And although they have been infrequent, in Cohen's interviews about Borat and other characters he plays from *Da Ali G Show*, his candor in discussing himself as the creator of these texts and characters indicates that it is his desire that his audience should know that Cohen himself understands what he is doing when he is within the text, such as when he is playing Borat. (It is, as it were, an "open secret.") But in order for Cohen to achieve his goal of transparent deception (as the rogue), the audience must have acquired a degree of this extratextual information, whether it concerns Cohen's intentions or at least about the process of film production and distribution in America. Perhaps Cohen-as-rogue assumes that audiences may know that Cohen is a Cambridge-educated British Jew, a person whose performance as a racist, misogynistic, anti-Semite they can only assume to be parody. Or perhaps Cohen-as-rogue assumes that, regardless of their familiarity with Cohen's authorial identity, audiences will understand that the creator of Borat must not actually share Borat's values or support his behaviours, as it would be unlikely for any movie with as wide a release as *Borat* to have been sanctioned by authorities, such as the Motion Picture Association of America, or

the studio funding the production of the film, if it did, in earnest, promote Borat's clearly misanthropic values.³⁹ This second assumption, of course, suggests a risk on the rogue's behalf; it requires audiences to share the rogue's understanding of the extratextual world or his view of its official culture and its authorising structures. But it also establishes the space in which audiences also become the very subject of the rogue's trickery. If the audience does not share Cohen's understanding and, as a result, misunderstand the satirical objectives of the film (and instead interpreting as sincere and taking seriously Borat's offensive acts), then such an audience would only further the film's larger critical objective to scrutinise the cultural discernment and sensitivity to difference of those living in America.

Cohen-as-Borat: The Clown

Because the clown is a "synthetic form" that blends the worldliness of the rogue with the otherworldliness of the fool, we cannot say that any single character or "image" is the clown in *Borat*. Rather, the clown is a blend of Cohen as the author image and Borat as his foolish carnival mask. When Cohen plays Borat on-screen, he becomes the clown in the "public spectacle," a figure whose parodies of official culture are not only sanctioned by his audience but performed for their entertainment. And as the clown, Cohen wears the mask of the fool, never removing it while within the audience's gaze.⁴⁰ Yet in order for Cohen to be a true clown, his audience must also somehow perceive that his foolish behaviour is a mask, a guise behind which he is also actually laughing.

This is perhaps most easily perceived in the film during a scene in which Borat and his producer arrive at a bed and breakfast, run by a Jewish couple who also live there. Borat and his producer become anxious and paranoid when they realise that the bed and breakfast owners are practicing Jews. The owners bring sandwiches, drinks, and dessert to their new guests's room, and then sit on the beds to chat. Borat feigns cordiality by taking a bite of one of the

sandwiches, only to then spit that bite into a napkin, in view of the camera, while the couple is distracted. During the night, Borat and his producer awaken to find two bugs crawling on the floor near to their bedroom door and begin to exclaim that “the Jews have shifted their shapes!” Borat then throws dollar bills on the floor near the door because, he says, he thinks the money will appease them, but when that fails, Borat and his producer flee the house in the night, driving away in escape. In this scene, the audience is expected to realise that Borat’s actions and attitudes are outrageous and offensive, regardless of whether the audience actually know that Cohen, the actor and writer, is himself Jewish.

As with the rogue, this expectation creates a space in which audiences bear the burden of determining the subject and scope of *Borat*’s carnival antics. In this space, audiences may become the subjects of the joke in at least two respects: if they fail to recognise that Cohen is a clown wearing a mask, and so take the film as a serious endorsement of the clown’s on-screen action, or if they themselves laugh at or with the clown as he reacts in fear to his kindly hosts, they mistake Borat’s prejudice against and fear of Jews as real.

Borat: the Fool

As the main character of the film, Borat is the primary agent of the carnival laughter whose “simpleminded incomprehension”⁴¹ jettisons etiquette and “overcomes all [of the] oppressive social norms” that are part of the official culture.⁴² Carnival laughter is deeply ambivalent, affirming both the right to laugh at official seriousness and the futility of doing the same. According to Bakhtin, the “grotesque realism” of carnival subversions affirm the ambivalence of life. His primary example of carnival literature comes from the literature of Rabelais, in whose “work,” Bakhtin notes, “the material bodily principle, that is, images of the human body with its food, drink, defecations, and sexual life, plays a predominant role.”⁴³ In carnival texts, these grotesque representations of the human body

are “presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life,” but are now made public, presented “as something universal, representing all the people.”⁴⁴ In this reversal of public and private, the common and grotesque, carnival literature embodies the duality of ambivalence that typifies folk culture’s contestation of mainstream culture.

In true Rabelaisian carnival style, Borat the fool exposes one of “life’s prurient little secrets” by presenting a bag of his own faeces to the host of a dinner party.⁴⁵ Apparently a sign of his appreciation for dinner, Borat is led to present the fecal gift after she declares that Borat could easily fit into American culture, ignoring his many offensive remarks, including his proposition of sex to his fellow dinner guests, and his many inappropriate allusions to her physical attractiveness. By offering the gift of offal, which serves as a punch-line to his hostess’s seemingly indefatigable attempts to accommodate her unusual guest, Borat becomes the tool of Cohen’s ambivalent laughter, which tests the limits of official American culture of tolerance. As Saunders observes, it is likely that most Americans would be provoked to scorn and object to Borat’s actions, and yet Borat’s host herself appears relatively unperturbed, allowing Borat to stay among the guests. Rather than rebuking Borat and his gift, she merely demonstrates to him how to flush the faeces in a toilet. Shortly after this incident, Borat invites his friend Luenell, a prostitute, to the party. Harboring no ambivalence about Luenell’s occupation, Borat affirms the sex worker’s presence, having already bragged (at the beginning of the film) that his sister is the “number four prostitute in all Kazakhstan.” When Luenell arrives, however, Borat’s hosts call the police to have Borat removed from the premises, demonstrating that their tolerance, far from sacred, has its limits. Audiences, however, are left to question whether Cohen’s grotesque carnival inversions of American ideology are really fair; as Saunders suggests, Borat’s carnival performances seem to push the boundaries of social custom simply too far. While Borat seems

to be well-intentioned, his host seems quick to judge Luenell, and equally quick to dismiss Borat for associating with her. And yet, Borat's actions also "push the boundaries" of social custom, going beyond the point at which most Americans could be expected to remain comfortable. But the scene's ambivalence, and Borat's ambivalent moral position, is part of its carnival subversion; like all carnival texts, it asks the audience to accept the fool's transgressions, and to take responsibility for their own reactions to the fool and the structure of their own cultural norms.

Using what Bakhtin calls "the time-honored bluntness of the fool's language," Borat the fool draws attention to Americans's inability or unwillingness to take seriously the offensive or bigoted words of someone from another culture, even when those words appear to be delivered sincerely.⁴⁶ When Borat visits a gun store and asks the middle-aged white male behind the counter to advise him which gun is best for killing Jews, the clerk selects a weapon and describes its capabilities. In no way does the clerk advise Borat against purchasing a gun for the purpose of killing Jews. Rather, when the clerk ultimately refuses to sell Borat a gun, it is not because of this stated intention, but because Borat is not an American citizen, and is therefore ineligible to obtain the firearm under American federal gun control laws. Ignoring Borat's anti-Semitism, the clerk allows this social wrong to remain unchecked, while observing the gun laws in no uncertain terms. Perhaps if Cohen had removed his fool's mask and let the clerk in on the joke—revealing that he was not a buffoon or an anti-Semite—the clerk may have explained that he had ignored Borat's remarks out of uncertainty and ambivalence, not knowing how to discourage the man's anti-Semitism. But Borat's mask is not lifted, and the clerk remains silent in the face of Borat's outrageous suggestions and requests. Using Borat to expose and contest the American man's preparedness to tolerate bigoted, and potentially even lethal, hatred for another group of people without question, Cohen

exposes the unstable and volatile aspects of American tolerance and the orthodoxy of cultural naïveté.

Borat often performs as this sort of foreign, otherworldly guest among Americans in his travels, but as the fool he never fully comprehends why they do not see the world as he does.⁴⁷ At the end of an interview with three American women, Borat laughs at their suggestion that women and men possess brains of the same size, and, referring to one of the women, explains to his audience (in overdub): “I could not understand what this old man was saying.” At another point in the film, when Borat attempts to pay for antiques of America’s Confederate States with pubic hair, he claims that his home country values the body hair highly, using it as a form of currency. At this suggestion, the owners of the antique store, like the feminist women that Borat had interviewed earlier, lose their temper. But the store owners also take what little cash Borat can offer in order to ensure that he goes away as soon as possible. In these examples, and in many more throughout the film, Borat evinces an almost complete naïveté, seemingly baffled that he cannot convince Americans of the apparent propriety of his actions. But as the wearer of the mask, Cohen realises that Americans do not see the world as Borat does. Using the mask of the fool, Cohen as Borat “makes strange” the Americans’s conventions, asking both his viewers and interviewees to explain, reconsider, and even justify their ideological norms as against Borat’s actions and apparent expectations. By testing the limits of his interviewees’s patience, Cohen demonstrates to his American audience that tolerance is not only often ridiculous, but can in fact defeat its apparent purpose: to permit and allow for the inclusion and affirmation of difference.

Cohen's Carnival Purposes, Bakhtin's Further Implications

At the end of the film, Borat reflects on the lessons he has learned in America while a montage depicts his many interactions with Amer-

ican citizens and residents. The lesson Borat takes home with him is that, like Americans, Kazakhs should value cultural tolerance and diversity. In the final scene, Borat is depicted having returned to his home village in Kazakhstan, where, as he claims, “We no longer have a Running of the Jew. It’s cruel!” Having married Luenell and brought her back with him to his home village, Borat apprehends a queue of villagers, each of whom stands outside their home, presenting a flower to their new resident. But ultimately, Cohen does not share what he calls Borat’s “abstract and deadened idealism” about mainstream culture.⁴⁸ *Borat*, as a carnival film, reveals life’s grotesque reality through Borat’s foolish actions, provoking the audience to laugh not only at Borat but at most of the Americans he encounters too. Bakhtin characterises such a communal laughter as “the laughter of all the people.” Since it is actually “universal [and] directed at all and everyone,” however, this laughter is also ambivalent: “it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives.”⁴⁹

Borat’s particular ambivalence is emblematic of the two valences between which this film and other carnival texts operate. On the one hand, there is the mockery of the carnival masks, which is a procedure carried out through their interactions with other characters, the latter of whom usually represent the persons of an official or mainstream culture. On the other hand, there is the author image’s critique of that culture. As an abstract concept, such a critique underlies the entire movement of the text, supervening upon the masks’s individual acts of mockery. As part of the mainstream culture that the masks ridicule, audiences might respond to the carnival spectacle with a degree of apprehension or disdain, since they may not becoming themselves the punchline of a joke, or the subject of the film’s critique. At the same time, to understand that the mockeries carried out by the masks are part of a larger, more general cultural commentary offered by the author image, would be pointless if audiences were also to hold the author image

responsible for the mask characters and their grotesque, reprehensible, and unfair behaviours. Any criticism of carnival texts along these lines would miss the point, as it would sidestep the question of whether the larger critique offered by the author is to any degree legitimate. For example, audience members might agree with Saunders when she suggests that, even when Cohen's characters push the Americans they interact with to unreasonable limits, this does not indicate the contradictoriness or flawed nature of the Americans's values of tolerance and multiculturalism. But it is the very outrageousness and grotesqueness of the masks's actions that allow the carnival text to subvert the expectations of mainstream culture. To imagine that the primary concern of the carnival text is to explain a certain culture's expected norms of behaviour, or to respect the culture's boundaries or borders of politeness, would be to miss the point that (or to ignore the question of whether there are) problematic elements about the way in which Americans practice cultural tolerance. *Borat* and Cohen do not accept responsibility for that expectation, nor does the film provide audiences with solutions to the problems its confrontations and interventions point to. Instead, the audience itself must adopt the responsibility of determining both what is the subject of the film's ambivalent critique, and how they should respond to the film and its critical position.

Bakhtin's analysis of the rogue, clown, and fool in carnival literature can be usefully applied to other carnival and satirical visual texts as well. For example, questions have arisen as to whether Stephen Colbert, the author image that we meet in the *Colbert Show*, should be held responsible for racially insensitive comments made on Stephen Colbert's Twitter account (the account belonging to what may be seen as Colbert's carnival mask).⁵⁰ Essentially, in Bakhtinian terms, this situation could be understood to generate a question of whether Colbert should be treated as a rogue who, like Cohen, is aware that racism would offend his American audience but should also be held responsible for the racist remarks of his carnival mask

persona. For Colbert and other satirists like him, Bakhtin's analysis of carnival masks allows us to scrutinise the relationship between the comedian's character mask and the comedian as author-creator, appealing to the world outside the text: What level of naïveté can the audience detect in the action or speech of these characters? To what extent can we ascribe the behaviours of carnival masks to their authors? And, to what extent does it matter that these identities might have shared intentions when we set out to determine the legitimacy of the author's intentions, or his responsibility for the masks's actions? What larger criticism, if any, may be prompted by the masks's actions or remarks, and what responsibility should both the author and the audience bear in relation to those critical issues? Such questions may encourage a more substantive discussion of texts like *Borat*, which draw from the rich history of the carnival tradition in challenging audiences to reconsider their values and ideologies.

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Notes

- 1 Sacha Baron Cohen, et al., *Borat: Cultural LearningRollis of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, DVD, dir. by Larry Charles (Beverly Hills: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 2007).
- 2 Peter Ranier, "International Lam-poon's Vacation," in *The Christian Science Monitor Online*, November 3, 2006, accessed April 26, 2014, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/1103/p11s01-almo.html>.
- 3 Manohla Dargis, "From Kazakhstan, Without a Clue," *The New York Times Online*, November 3, 2006, accessed April 26, 2014, <http://movies2.nytimes.com/2006/11/03/movies/03bora.html?ref=movies>.
- 4 Peter Travers, "Comedy of the Year," *Rolling Stone*, November 16, 2006, 134.

- 5 George Saunders, "Borat: The Memo," *The New Yorker*, December 4, 2006, 57.
- 6 Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 93.
- 7 See Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 1989. Stam's book is foundational for Bakhtinian film studies, and particularly the carnivalesque in film. Also influential for my own study is the premise of Dean McWilliams's essay "Bakhtin in Brooklyn: Language in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*." McWilliams notes that, by definition, film offers greater opportunity than the novel for demonstrating and instantiating (linguistic and therefore ideological) dialogue, as the former is simultaneously aural, visual, verbal, and textual. Therefore, film "might be termed the ultimate carnival of the arts and of the modes of discourse they encounter." See McWilliams, "Bakhtin in Brooklyn: Language in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*," in *Carnivalizing Difference: Bakhtin and the Other*, eds. Peter I. Barta, et al. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 248. I proceed from precisely this understanding of film as a novelised genre that provides literary opportunity for witnessing the interactions of characters and languages. Because of this potential, Stam notes, "the encounter of Bakhtin with film might be viewed as virtually inevitable" (17).
- 8 M.M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 4.
- 9 M.M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), 259-422. See also Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, 84-258. Commentary on these carnival masks occurs in the introduction to *Rabelais* and "Discourse," but with less specificity than in "Forms." In the *Rabelais*, Bakhtin treats these masks as a trinity of unique characters whose common function in the text is to provide an opportunity to create an "other" whose status as an outsider provides the author an opportunity for critique. His treatment of these characters in "Discourse" differentiates among the functions and potentials of the masks but is more brief than in "Forms." In this essay, I draw mainly from "Forms" and "Discourse."
- 10 In the introduction to *Rabelais*, Bakhtin writes that, after class stratification, comedy separated from "official" seriousness, and became the province of folk culture, while official culture appropriated seriousness. Comedy belonged, then, to public locations such as the public square and theatre as opposed to courtrooms and church sanctuaries (6-17).
- 11 Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," 159.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 159.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 166.
- 14 Bakhtin, "Discourse," 70.
- 15 Bakhtin, "Forms," 162.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 352.
- 18 Bakhtin, "Discourse," 402.
- 19 Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 352.

- 20 Bakhtin, "Forms," 160.
- 21 Bakhtin, "Discourse," 401.
- 22 Bakhtin, "Forms," 161-2.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 159.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 162.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 161.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 Bakhtin, "Discourse," 405.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 *Ibid.*, 404.
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 For further commentary on the author image, and the distinctions Bakhtin makes between the biographical author (the biological, biographical person) and the "author image" (textual indications of an authorial decision and creative act, such as the construction of a carnival mask character), see Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 429-32.
- 32 Bakhtin, "Forms," 160; Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 431.
- 33 Bakhtin, "Forms," 257.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 *Ibid.*, 70.
- 36 In Bakhtin's schema of carnival mask characters, "transformation" occurs when a character from an official culture appears in a parodied form. The transformation of such a character into a carnival mask typically results in the creation of a clown or fool, not a rogue: see Bakhtin, "Forms," 161. Notably, Borat's character simultaneously transforms or parodies two "official" professions esteemed by Americans: a doctor and a journalist.
- 37 Coincidentally, Bakhtin himself was exiled in Kazakhstan from 1930-1936. See Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 253-8. I wish to thank Dr. Frank Farmer for imparting this information to me.
- 38 Neil Strauss, "The Man behind the Mustache," *Rolling Stone*, November 30, 2006, 62.
- 39 Borat has, however, denied any association with Cohen. Strauss quotes the former as saying, "I'd like to state I have no connection with Mr. Cohen and fully support my government's decision to sue this Jew." See Strauss, "The Man behind the Mustache," 62.
- 40 As Bakhtin clarifies, without sanction from official culture, carnival could not go on. The carnival celebration in medieval times marked an officially-sanctioned moment in which members of the folk culture could laugh at otherwise sacrosanct official culture: *Rabelais*, 8-10. Bakhtin acknowledges that carnival "did not lead the people out of the existing world order and created no second life. On the contrary, [official culture] sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it" (*Rabelais*, 9). See also Ruth Coates, "Christian Motifs in Bakhtin's Carnival Writings," *Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the Exiled Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 141-2.
- 41 With the exception of his *Rolling Stone* interview, Cohen almost always promotes *Borat* on talk shows and premiers while in character, as Borat.
- 42 Bakhtin, "Forms," 162; Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 93.
- 43 Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 20, 18.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 45 Bakhtin, "Forms," 163.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 161.

- 47 Bakhtin's predicts that, in a carnival text, "the fool is often coupled with another character—with a poet, a scholar, a moralist, or a priest... — who presumes, and then tries to explain how the fool has failed to comprehend." Quoted in Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 360. Similarly, Borat typically has some sort of American foil for his foolishness. In his effort to understand American culture, Borat interviews and consults a variety of Americans, including Congressman Alan Keyes, three feminists, a car dealer, a group of college men, a driving instructor, a humor consultant who specializes in telling jokes, an etiquette teacher, and members of polite Southern society. When any of his American "guides" correct him, Borat expresses both surprise that his actions were transgressive, and his inability to see why the Americans might not agree with what he believes to be appropriate and proper. Following Bakhtin's hypothesis, Borat rejects the help of his American interlocutors, invoking the "right" of the fool to not understand.
- 48 Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 22.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 11-12.
- 50 Bill Chappell, "When the Twit Hit the Fan: 'I'm Still Here,' Colbert Says," *NPR.org*, April 1, 2014, accessed April 26, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2014/04/01/297683346>.

