

'BORAT', LARRY CHARLES/SACHA BARON COHEN, 2006
'SHOCKING'?

WHAT IS IT ABOUT 'BORAT' THAT IS SO SHOCKING? IS IT THE RACIST, BIGOTED, MISOGYNISTIC AND DISCRIMINATORY VIEWS HE COAXES OUT OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE HE MEETS? IS IT THE WAY IN WHICH HE GOES ABOUT EXTRACTING THOSE VIEWS? IS IT, EVEN, HIS REPRESENTATION OF A KAZAKHSTANI MALE? OR IS IT A CONGLOMERATION OF ALL THESE FACTORS.

BORAT SAGDIYEV IS A CHARACTER CREATED BY SACHA BARON COHEN; THROUGHOUT THE FILM, WE FIND OUT THAT HE IS MISOGYNISTIC, PREJUDICED AGAINST HOMOSEXUALS, ANTI-SEMITIC AND GENERALLY RACIST. THE ARGUMENT PUT FORWARD BY BARON COHEN, IS THAT IN ORDER FOR THE PEOPLE HE MEETS TO EXPRESS THEIR SIMILAR VIEWS, HIS CHARACTER MUST LULL THEM INTO A FALSE SENSE OF SECURITY, IN WHICH THEY FEEL FREE TO TALK. THE DOWNSIDE OF THIS IS THAT IT'S HIGHLY MANIPULATIVE, BUT IT ALSO MEANS THAT WE GET A GOOD VIEW OF THE EXTREME BELIEFS SOME PEOPLE HOLD.

FOR EXAMPLE, THE SCENE WHERE COHEN (AS BORAT) ATTENDS A RODEO IN SOUTHERN AMERICA; HE MEETS A MAN BACKSTAGE, THE MISE-EN-SCENE BEING THAT OF WHAT WE TYPICALLY EXPECT OF A COWBOY AS HE WEARS A STETSON HAT, JEANS AND COWBOY BOOTS. WORRYINGLY, AS BORAT SPEAKS ABOUT HOW IN HIS NATION (KAZAKHSTAN) THEY HANG HOMOSEXUALS, THE MAN REPLIES THAT IS WHAT THEY ARE "TRYING TO DO HERE". WHAT IS MORE SHOCKING, THAT BARON COHEN LIES ABOUT THE CUSTOMS OF KAZAKHSTAN, GIVING THEM A BAD NAME, OR THAT THIS AMERICAN MAN, WHO HAS EVEN A TINY DEGREE OF POWER TO DICTATE THE FUTURE, HOLDS SUCH AN EXTREME AND UNFAIR VIEWPOINT?

SIMILARLY, WHEN COHEN MEETS A GROUP OF FRAT BOYS IN AN R.V., WHERE THEY, AFTER HEARING BORAT SPEAK ABOUT HOW WOMEN ARE TREATED IN KAZAKHSTAN (HE SAYS THEY ARE NOT ALLOWED TO RIDE ON BUSES, FOR EXAMPLE), THEY CASUALLY MENTION THEIR OWN HIGHLY MISOGYNISTIC BELIEFS; THAT WOMEN SHOULD NOT HAVE RIGHTS AND SHOULD NEVER BE ALLOWED TO HAVE POWER OVER A MALE.

THESE MEN, FRAT BOYS AND COWBOYS, ARE ALL BEING MISLEAD. 'BORAT' IS NOT EVEN A REAL MAN; HIS VIEWS ARE

FICTIONAL AND HIS CLAIMS ABOUT HIS COUNTRY ARE FICTIONAL. DOES BARON COHEN'S MANIPULATION OF THE PEOPLE, PRYING THEIR VIEWS OUT OF THEM BY FALSE MEANS, LESSEN THE IMPACT AND MEANING OF WHAT THEY ARE SAYING? I WOULD THINK NOT. I BELIEVE THAT, IN THE CAUSE OF SHOWING EXACTLY HOW BIGOTED AND IGNORANT MANY PEOPLE CAN BE, THE WAY IN WHICH THIS IS DONE IS IMMATERIAL (WITHIN REASON, OF COURSE).

THERE IS VERY LITTLE INTENTIONAL SOUND OR MISE-EN-SCENE WITHIN THE FILM. AT THE VERY BEGINNING, COHEN USES THE NATURAL STATE OF THE VILLAGE TO HIS ADVANTAGE, TO SHOW HOW POOR AND UNDERDEVELOPED THE AREA BORAT COMES FROM IS, PERHAPS TRYING TO RATIONALISE HIS ARCHAIC BELIEFS. THIS IS A DIRECT CONTRAST TO THE MISE-EN-SCENE OF AMERICA; WHERE IN KAZAKHSTAN THE BUILDINGS ARE LOW AND SHACK-LIKE, IN AMERICA THERE ARE SKYSCRAPERS AND HUGE MARBLE BUILDINGS WITH GOLD LETTERING AND PLANT ARRANGEMENTS BORDERING THEM. THE MESSAGE MAY BE; WHAT EXCUSE DO AMERICANS HAVE? BORAT IS FROM AN AREA WHERE HE APPEARS TO BE UNDEREDUCATED AND IN AN OUT-DATED SOCIETY, BUT AMERICANS LIVE IN A HIGHLY DEVELOPED AND EDUCATED SYSTEM. SIMILARLY, BORAT'S DRESS SENSE AND FACIAL HAIR ARE STEREOTYPICALLY EASTERN-EUROPEAN, AND HE IS TOLD BY THE MAN AT THE RODEO THAT UNLESS HE SHAVES OFF HIS MOUSTACHE HE COULD BE MISTAKEN FOR A TERRORIST, AND WOULD BE DISTRUSTED.

THE SOUND IN THE FILM IS GENERALLY DIEGETIC DIALOGUE, ALTHOUGH THERE ARE OCCASIONS WHEN STEREOTYPICAL EASTERN-STYLE, NON-DIEGETIC SOUND WILL PLAY AROUND BORAT, WHICH SIMPLY ENHANCES THE DOCUMENTARY STYLE OF THE FILM (SUPPOSEDLY MADE FOR KAZAKHSTANI AUDIENCES). STANDING OUT, HOWEVER, IS A SCENE WHERE, AGAIN AT THE RODEO, BORAT GOES IN FRONT OF THE AUDIENCE TO SING HIS NATIONAL ANTHEM TO THE TUNE OF THE AMERICAN NATIONAL ANTHEM. BEFORE HE STARTS, HE HAS A SMALL DIATRIBE AGAINST IRAQ AND CONDONES THE WAR; THE AMERICANS CHEER AND CLAP, EVEN AS HE BECOMES MORBID AND HORRIFIC IN HIS DESCRIPTIONS OF WHAT HE WANTS DONE TO THEM. CONTRASTINGLY, WHEN HE BEGINS TO SING THE ANTHEM, CLAIMING THAT KAZAKHSTAN IS THE GREATEST COUNTRY IN THE WORLD, THE AUDIENCE GET SO ANGRY HE HAS TO BE TAKEN AWAY BEFORE

HE IS ATTACKED. WHAT'S SHOCKING ABOUT THIS IS HOW THE AMERICANS WERE MORE THAN HAPPY, EVEN ENTHUSIASTIC, TO HEAR ABOUT THE MURDERING OF IRAQIS, BUT COULD NOT TOLERATE THE THOUGHT OF ANOTHER COUNTRY BEING CALLED 'GREATEST'.

LASTLY, THERE IS THE CASE OF THE ANTI-SEMITISM DISPLAYED WITHIN THE FILM. WE FIRST ENCOUNTER IT FROM BORAT HIMSELF; THE 'RUNNING OF THE JEW' IN KAZAKHSTAN FEATURES GROSSLY OFFENSIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF A JEWISH MALE AND FEMALE. THE FEMALE AT ONE POINT, EVEN LAYS AN EGG, AND BORAT SHOUTS TO THE CHILDREN ATTACKING IT "SMASH THE JEW EGG!" BARON COHEN JUSTIFIES THIS BEHAVIOUR WITH THE FACT THAT HE HIMSELF IS JEWISH, AND SO HAS NO TRUE ANTI-SEMITISM IN HIM. HOWEVER, WHEN IN AMERICA, BORAT OFTEN MAKES REFERENCES TO HIS ANTI-SEMITISM (SOMETIMES PAINFULLY BLATANT, AS WITH THE CAR AND GUN DEALERS), AND IT IS IGNORED AND NOT COMMENTED UPON. WHEN HE ASKS THE CAR DEALER IF A CAR WOULD KILL A GYPSY WOMAN IF HE RAN HER OVER, THE MAN REPLIES THAT YES IT WOULD. WHY DOES HE NOT QUESTION BORAT'S INTENTIONS, OR EVEN REFUSE TO SELL HIM A CAR? THIS SEEMS VERY WORRYING, AS IF SOMEONE WITH REAL INTENTIONS HAD OBTAINED THE CAR, THEY COULD DO REAL DAMAGE.

IN CONCLUSION, I THINK THAT THE MOST SHOCKING ELEMENT OF 'BORAT' IS THE VIEWS AND BELIEFS IT ELICITS FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE; IT SEEMS HORRIFIC THAT IN A COUNTRY SO HIGHLY DEVELOPED AND ADVANCED THAT PEOPLE COULD STILL HAVE SUCH OUT-DATED AND OFTEN MURDEROUS BELIEFS. THOUGH I DO NOT CONDONE BARON COHEN'S REPRESENTATION OF A KAZAKHSTANI MALE, I UNDERSTAND WHY HE HAS MADE IT THAT WAY, AND BELIEVE THAT MOST PEOPLE WOULD REALISE IT WAS NOT A NECESSARILY ACCURATE REPRESENTATION.

BY LILY MIDDLEMASS