

In this essay I will analyse the film **Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakstan** (2006). Since its release in 2006, this film has been the cause of a lot of controversy due to its explicit anti-Semitism and extremely racist and sexist content. I am going to examine how this content affects different groups of viewers and how this shocking effect is achieved within the film.

Anti-Semitism has been the greatest cause of criticism of this film. One of the most shocking scenes is the 'running of the Jew' in which a giant papier maché Jew chases people down a roadway, trying to get their money. The figure is wearing a prayer shawl and a skull cap, as well as having horns and a hooked nose. This scene is presented as a documentary of a cultural phenomenon (something done in Borat's village on which he commentates) and is too similar to other such cultural activities like 'the running of the bulls', of which it is a parody, to be recognisably fiction. The viewer hopes that this is fiction, as it is a horrific portrayal of open prejudice and persecution. The western European viewer also feels a deep sense of guilt in relation to the Holocaust and the late intervention in the Second World War which allowed so many Jewish deaths. Older viewers would find this particularly offensive as some may have witnessed persecution of this nature. I personally felt very uncomfortable watching this part of the film because I could not deny the fact that I found the slapstick nature of the scene and the sheer stupidity of it humorous; however, on re-evaluating the implications, I feel quite guilty that I continue to laugh.

Some anti-Semitic scenes of the film are incredibly offensive towards people of Jewish origin because they contain blanket allegations. For instance, Borat says that he is afraid that "the Jews will repeat their attack of 9/11." This is shocking to the western audience, as this was a recent terrible iconic event which many people have still not recovered from. However, the allegation does raise an interesting point concerning the blanket condemnation of Muslims. This line of the script makes a bold statement that Muslims are the new Jews in terms of scapegoating. The shock factor in this scene is therefore satirical in intention, although still highly offensive.

Another element of this film which is extremely shocking is the real opinions which Borat has coaxed out of the people he is interviewing. Sheer racism and sexist attitudes are revealed when the interviewees are lulled into a false sense of security. For example, while at a rodeo, Borat speaks to a cowboy who informs him that he should shave his moustache off so that he looks less like a Muslim. "I see a lot of people and think - there's a goddam Muslim, I wonder what kind of bomb he's got strapped to him." It is this 'real' documentary aspect of the film

which many people find truly shocking, as it is hard to believe that the interviewees honestly believe these things. After Borat tries to kiss the cowboy goodbye, the cowboy reacts badly and informs him that it is only homosexuals who do that and that he should stay away from them. Borat replies, "In my country, we take them all to jail and we finish them." The cowboy responds, "That's what we're trying to do here." The climax of the scene is where Borat and the cowboy high five, which seems to imply a toast to what's been said. Part of Borat's performance style is to unpick the seams of his subject's tidy appearance and to coax out their real undiluted views. One of the ways he does this is with physical contact - such as trying to kiss the subject, or reaching out his hand for the high five.

Borat's attitude towards women is appalling because he regards them as sexual objects and labour slaves. When he passes a woman in the street, he says, "Very nice, very nice! How much?" His reaction to seeing Pamela Anderson on Baywatch: "This C.J. was like no Kazakh woman I have ever seen. She had golden hair, teeth as white as pearls, and the asshole of a seven-year-old. For the first time in my life, I was in love." This is a stereotypical chauvinistic attitude. It is not so much shocking as offensive. It is somehow easier to take with a pinch of salt than the racism and the anti-Semitism. It might be that women viewers would find it more shocking, but the Borat character does not particularly pose a threat to women in the way that his stated views might suggest.

The power of vulgarity is used right the way through the film as almost a fail safe way of ensuring that each scene will cause uproar. For instance, the naked hotel fight is vulgar and physically gross. I think that it draws on the crude nature of some British humour, which cause the viewer to laugh rather than turn away in disgust. It is a parody of an epic battle which pushes the boundaries of taste. Certain editing devices are used, for instance, a huge black block is used to censor Borat's genitals, but the very size of the block is a crude joke. I found this scene funny rather than shocking - or only shocking in a way which made it more funny. Some viewers, however, may be overwhelmed by the physicality of this scene and find it unacceptable. Similarly, he pushes the boundaries of social taboo and tests the limits of people's tolerance, when he brings his own faeces to the dinner table and then invites a prostitute. At this point, the people who are shocked are the hosts of the dinner party. This is participant shock rather than viewer shock.

Borat uses racial and sexual slurs and sheer vulgarity through physical 'slapstick' in a deliberate attempt to shock and offend. This is the pushing power of the film - without shocking both the audience and some of the participants the film would be just a string of banal events. However not all meaning within the film is shocking; there is an underlying element of satire which is designed to critique racism and expose and make fun of views which are the darker side of average 'normal' people.