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CMNS 322: Documentary Media
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Term Paper:

Fishing for Prejudice: The Ethics of Sacha Baron Cohen’s Pursuit of the Truth

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Fishing for Prejudice: The Ethics of Sacha Baron Cohen’s Pursuit of the Truth

“During times of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act.”

- George Orwell

Within the technological climate of 2019, the immediacy of the internet has provided for an immerge and infinite ocean of information readily available at our fingertips. More so than ever before, audiences are required to question the validity of information, as fraudulent news is disguised by the codes and conventions of facts, characterising an age of disinformation. Still, many audiences fall into the trap of blindly trusting online information, adding to the perpetuation of ill-informed discourse. It is imperative that modern documentary filmmakers keep this in mind when producing their work.

Praised for his comedic and satirical films, Sacha Baron Cohen has become an expert in presenting himself as various fictitious characters to expose the underlying prejudice of Americans. He is notorious for his use of elaborate makeup, costumes, and accents to transform himself into different personas. From becoming a Kazakhstani journalist in his 2007 film Borat, to impersonating an Israeli anti-terrorism expert, a left-winged professor, and a far-right conspiracy theorist more than a decade later in his 2018 televised series Who is America, his works are criticized for misleading people into self-ridicule. Despite ongoing criticism, Baron Cohen is willing to push ethical boundaries in order to achieve his chosen narrative. In light of a documentary filmmaker’s quest in finding the most authentic and accurate portrayal of the truth,
can ethical disregard ever be justified when seeking to uncover the truth? *Fishing for Prejudice: The Ethics of Sacha Baron Cohen’s Pursuit of the Truth* explores the ethical dilemmas presented to documentary filmmakers and attempts to define the ethical boundaries within which filmmakers should be restricted to when working to uncover truths.

Baron Cohen’s film *Borat* and television series *Who is America* are evidence of documentary’s polysemic and ambiguity: containing both fiction and non-fiction, these works lend themselves to multiple different categories. Firstly, *Borat* and *Who is America* contain mockumentary qualities through documentary codes and conventions used to mock and satirize authority (Roscoe & Hight 2001). *Borat* follows the story of a fictional reporter, going by the name of Borat Sagdiyev, from Kazakhstan as he traverses the United States in a quest to uncover the qualities of the great nation. Similarly, his new television series *Who is America* features a series of interviews with a wide variety of guests, including former Vice-President Dick Cheney, former Georgia State representative Jason Spenser, and President of the Virginia Citizens Defense League Philip Van Cleave. In true Baron Cohen fashion, the series also features fraudulent self-representations misleading participants into a false-sense of comfort, through which they unintentionally reveal controversial and derogatory opinions.

Throughout these works, Baron Cohen consistently adopts styles and aesthetics that are indicative of the documentary genre, such as the use of a hand-held camera in *Borat’s* New York subway scene and the consistent interviews present both in *Who is America* and in *Borat*. The documentary style is used throughout his works in order to “validate its claims to truth” (Roscoe & Hight, 2001, p. 46). In addition, the use of mockumentary lends more artistic freedom to the
filmmaker, as it is not constricted by the rules of documentary; as such, Baron Cohen has been offered more flexibility to experiment and to take risks. Furthermore, as the use of “satire has long served as a pedagogical role, and shapes our expectations that some ‘truths’ will be uncovered when we are in its midst” (Campbell, p. 61), it aids in situating the deliberate use of mockumentary in these works. Despite borrowing the codes and conventions of documentaries, mockumentaries are fiction, and thus do not fall under the umbrella of documentary genres. Indeed, this form can be problematic as it the line between fact and fiction is increasingly blurred and holds the “assumption that audiences will recognize the text as spoof” (Roscoe & Hight, 2001, p. 47). While some audiences might recognize his works as satire, the authority of documentaries might persuade others to believe these works as facts. As a result, the works have not always addressed “a knowing and media-literate viewer” (Roscoe & Hight, 2001, p.52). The risk of audiences believing Borat’s racist and derogatory antics as a truthful depiction of the average Kazakh man was recognized by the Kazakhstani Government, as they were immediately appalled by Borat’s derogatory portrayal of their nation to the rest of the world, as “Kazakhstan's Foreign Ministry [was] threatening to sue him” (Wolf, 2005, n.p).

Although these works are considered mockumentaries, they do not solely revolve around fictional characters; rather, they rely on the unwitting participation of real people. While Baron Cohen’s impersonated characters are fully fictitious, the filmed responses, situations, and participants are entirely real; therefore, his works became a document of what he has provoked. Part of what makes Borat and Who is America so successful is the ease at which some people will candidly admit to their bigoted, sexist, and racist beliefs. This is both shocking and amusing to viewers, as most audiences recognize Baron Cohen’s act as a ruse, which demonstrates
a level of dramatic irony. Baron Cohen uses the prejudice of his characters to allow for others to express their own, in turn “holding up a mirror to Americans through reactions he provokes” (Cenite, 2009, p. 22). As these works contain documentary qualities, particularly the use of non-actors and their unscripted reactions, the filmmaker is held to a different ethical standard and is criticized for his ability to accurately and honestly convey the truth.

According to Ruby (1988), the documentary filmmaker holds responsibilities towards the film, the participant, as well as the audience. First, by assuming responsibilities towards the film, the filmmaker should assure that the work is an accurate reproduction of the original intentions of the film. Second, the responsibility towards the participant denotes informed consent, where the participant is made aware of any potential injuries that could come to them in light of their participation. Lastly, the filmmaker has a responsibility towards the audience watching his film by guaranteeing truth and authenticity, and “to reconcile as best they can the sometimes conflicting interests between accuracy and persuasion” (Pangrcic, n.d., p. 94). Despite mockumentary tendencies, these responsibilities remain while making Borat and Who is America, “because [they are] partly a treatment of actual events […] and arguably makes a statement, documentary ethics warrant further examination” (Cenite, p. 27). In other words, since Baren Cohen’s works surpass purely fictional filmmaking, overlapping into the realm of documentary films through the use of real people and real candid scenes, it then becomes appropriate to hold him accountable to ethical standards of documentary filmmaking.

Filmmakers are in a position of power and hold control over the narrative; as such, Baron Cohen would have been well aware of the potential damages to the participants caused by his works. Prior to filming, the film crew is required to have participants sign a release form – a
standard journalistic practice where participants sign away their rights to legally pursue anyone affiliated to the film or series. This standard consent agreement “disclaims 16 specific kinds of liability, including defamation, false light, misappropriation, and infliction of emotional distress” (Cenite, 2009, p. 25), and on numerous occasions saved Baron Cohen from heavy lawsuits. Despite signing consent agreements, many participants were left feeling ridiculed, duped, and entrapped due to the lack of informed consent. This is where Baron Cohen as a documentary filmmaker fails to carry out his responsibility towards his participants. Nichols, (2001) argues that proper informed consent entails that “participants should be told of the possible consequences of their participation” (p.10). By this definition, Baron Cohen’s works do not meet the ethical standards of documentary films.

Albeit shocking and to the detriment of his subjects, these works use humour to demonstrate derogatory and bigoted opinions. Here, comedy is used as a vehicle to convey truths about societal issues regarding ongoing prejudice in America. Yet, the film’s and series’ subjects become unknowing victims of satire and self-ridicule. According to Cenite, who in 2009 researched and investigated the ethical implications of Borat’s informed consent (or lack thereof), “such practices can be justified only if greater goods results” (Cenite, 2009, p. 26). Had the participants been fully informed of the extent of the film/series’ purpose and the fictitious nature of its’ characters, it is undeniable that the outcome would have changed. It is unlikely that participants would have been as generous with their criticism and inflammatory comments.

Fitting to the ambiguity of documentary as a genre, ethics are equally as difficult to restrict to one simple definition, making it harder to arrive to a consensus on where the line should be
drawn between hoax and social justice. Part of what makes these ethics so ambiguous is its interpretability, as the rules differ on a case by case basis. As “ethics exist to govern the conduct of groups regarding matters for which hard and fast rules, or laws, will not suffice” (Nichols, 2001, p.9), there is a lack of clearly defined right and wrong, as most of the decision-making requires context. In her article, Pangrcic criticizes the ethical standards to which we hold documentary filmmakers as being too ambiguous, confusing, and unachievable, as upholding all aforementioned responsibilities (to the film, participants, and audience) would be impossible. In exploring Baron Cohen’s works, it is unlikely for him to be able to fulfil his responsibilities to both the film and his participants, as “without the informed consent of the subjects, the form lacks ethical integrity; without freedom for the filmmaker, it lacks artistic integrity” (Anderson & Benson 1991, p. 151). From this perspective, Pangrcic gives more agency to Baron Cohen as an artist as well as a filmmaker, permitting for more creative freedom, and excusing the lack of informed consent by attributing it to being necessary for the film’s outcome. As such, “tensions often arise between the filmmaker's desire to make a compelling film and the individual's desire to have his or her social rights and personal dignity respected” (Nichols, 2001, p. 40).

While Pangrcic might be ready to remove the criticism from Baron Cohen’s works, many are not. Because of the comedic nature of mocumentaries and the ways in which Baron Cohen presents his works, “the audience is not invited to critically reflect as much as they are invited to ridicule the ignorance of the subject[s]” (Campbell, p. 57), contradicting Cenite’s justification for the lack of informed consent. These deceptive practices would be more justified in documentary films had they been used against larger corporations, authority, or systems of power, as opposed to the mocking specific people by painting them as uneducated and inferior. The same distinction
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between punching up versus punching down is important here as punching up refers to going after authority, whereas punching down is considered much more oppressive. The costumes, makeup, and accents used to fool participants in Borat and Who is America would be put to better use in a more complex ploy to unmask systemic problems. While Who is America does host guests of high political importance, such as former Vice President Dick Cheney, this series still continue to fish for prejudice in small towns, such as in Kingman, Arizona. This series aims to unmask the prejudice in America; instead the participants become unsuspectingly the face of prejudiced America. Baron Cohen offers these faces as potential answers to the title of his series, Who is America.

Baron Cohen’s Borat and Who is America consistently challenge the already blurred limitations of ethics. Because of their satire and use of documentary style, these works fall under the category of mockumentary; however, they also capture the very real reaction of unwitting participants, thus documenting prejudice in America. This is evidence of the multiplicity and overlapping of film genres, requiring a more complex set of rules and structures to ensure proper ethical measures are taken. In light of this documentation of real events, Baron Cohen lacks ethical regard for his participants: improper informed consent coupled with misrepresenting himself left many victims in the wake of his works. While some might argue that misleading participants can be excused in light of unveiling truth for the greater good of society, this would not be applicable for Baron Cohen’s Borat or Who is America. Cenite makes the very important distinction that “public interest is not public curiosity” (Cenite, 2009, p. 31); rather it is only this vested interest for the common good that outweighs the potential harm of participants. In this case, Baron
Cohen’s works use the face of random individuals, painting them as responsible for the prejudice in America, as opposed to uncovering the systems in place that allow for this prejudice to thrive.


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Ruby, Jay “The Ethics of Imagemaking; or, ‘They’re Going to Put Me in the Movies. They’re Going to Make a Big Star Out of Me…” in Alan Rosenthal, *New Challenges for*
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Filmography
