

Cultural learning for the benefit of all...

Julie Roberts

In the recently released controversial film 'Borat! Cultural learning of America for make benefit of glorious nation of Kazakhstan', Jewish comedian Sacha Baron Cohen (aka Ali G) plays a naïve journalist from the former-Soviet Union stumbling through the morass of his own and America's prejudices. In what The Guardian³³ called 'a breathtakingly offensive' manner, Borat exposes the extent to which cultural stereotypes, bigotry and inter-cultural misunderstandings underpin world events.

Viewing Borat in the Melbourne suburb of Elsternwick, renowned for its high-density Jewish population, felt extremely uncomfortable: Cohen's film, set in his fictionalised vision of Kazakhstan, begins with a recounting of the annual 'chase the Jew' event. But just as an African-American is now the only person who can utter the word 'nigger' with impunity, it seems that anti-Semitic jokes can be made, as long as it's by a Jewish person. The theatre was nearly full and the audience laughed, and gasped, its way through the film appreciatively.

As the film's credits rolled the man sitting next to me turned and began a conversation, he was an Iraqi, born in Baghdad, currently in Australia on a medical fellowship. He was disappointed in the film; he had expected something that was more overtly anti-American, something that spoke out more strongly against the 'American Invasion'. We spoke for a while of the war in Iraq, he told of the missing members of his family, of the hospitals that are unable to effectively deal with the illnesses and injuries of the Iraqi people, of the growing rates of cancer due to poor nutrition and high stress. He spoke also of the regular kidnapping of friends and colleagues. It was a sobering conclusion to the comedic exploits of Cohen.

At home later that night I returned to my reading of Vikram Seth's *Two Lives* (2005). Indian-born Seth's book is the story of his uncle, a Hindu and his uncle's wife, Henny, a German Jewess who escaped Germany in the late 1930s. Aunt Henny, had a sister and a widowed mother both of whom were unable to escape Germany and were eventually killed in concentration camps. The part of the book to which I turned after the movie was comprised of letters written between Aunt Henny and her pre-war friends in Germany, mostly she tried to piece together the war years and last days of her mother and sister. The letters from her German friends told of the horrors of the war and the indignities and deprivations of post-war Germany. The letters attest to the ways in which the war impacted upon a group of friends, some of whom were Christian, some Jewish or part-Jewish, and in the case of Seth's uncle, Hindu. They reveal the difficulties facing the notion of reconciliation between Jew and non-Jew Germans post-war. People who were once carefree young friends now had to renegotiate such friendships in light of the realities of the war. Which of the non-Jews had supported their Jewish friends? Who had betrayed them? Was it possible, for instance, to maintain a relationship with a dear

³³ Peter Bradshaw, 27 October 2006.

friend, a Christian, who had shown much support during the war but had also, knowingly married a Nazi, a man who was possibly also a Storm-trooper? Seth's book lays before his reader the deep personal rents and tears in relationships caused by Hitler's attempt at ethnic cleansing.

I relate all this to introduce the question of art and ethnicity. The film, the book, the artwork: these cultural products are powerful vehicles for examining complex and perplexing issues. Seth's *Two Lives* reveals the almost insurmountable grief of a holocaust survivor and lays bare the complexity of human relationships at a time when one's racial and religious identity becomes the concern of the state. Cohen's alter-ego 'Borat' can say in his films that which cannot be said in real life – or more correctly perhaps – says loud and volubly that which is often spoken covertly, thus forcing his viewers to cringe and reject the ignorant assumptions underpinning such comments. His chosen medium of comedy reveals the foolishness and ignorance at the heart of racism, bigotry, sexism and all forms of discrimination. He might not effectively critique the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq, but Cohen alerts us, even as we laugh, to the ways in which deeply imbedded ignorance and fear of the 'other' provides a fertile ground for the manipulation of the masses and the justification of war.

The arts have a long tradition of providing a space within which the dissenting voice, the subversive position, and the critique of dominant paradigms can be challenged. This tradition was recently jeopardised in Australia when new laws of sedition were instituted. The cultural community – those involved in visual and performing arts, literature, film and even television – were outraged at the processes of censorship and control implied by such laws. The arts, in countries such as Australia and New Zealand, have long been a 'free space' for the expression of positions both popular and unpopular.

In both countries, film and the visual and literary arts have provided a medium through which issues of identity and belonging could be played out. That space, I would argue, is less policed in New Zealand, reflecting, arguably the more advanced level of Aotearoa's inter-racial relations. Australia, for all its marketing hype of multi-culturalism often

struggles to permeate ethnic equality and acceptance beyond its 'life-style' manifestations. That is, often what is presented in multiculturalism (and, implicitly, a sophisticated acceptance for the range of ethnicities that co-exist here) is little more than a recitation of the cafes and restaurants that line popular shopping strips. Melbourne, for instance, where I live, celebrates its Little Italy, Little Greece, Chinatown, Little Saigon, the Turkish dominance of Sydney Road, and the Jewish-ness of East St Kilda and Elsternwick, as I've already mentioned. It celebrates its Chinese-born Lord Mayor, John So, whose fractured, heavily accented English is mocked endearingly rather than cruelly. Melbourne has not seen, nor is likely to witness, the tensions that erupted on Cronulla Beach in Sydney last year. Nevertheless Asian students at the university where I teach still report discriminatory behaviour and even I, an Anglo-Australian can see the institutionalised racism that privileges those for whom English is a first language and whose cultural origins are Anglo-Australian.

In Australia we have yet to produce an equivalent of *Once Were Warriors* (1994). In the visual arts, as important as Aboriginal artists such as Gordon Bennett, Fiona Foley and Tracy Moffat have been in using the mediums of painting, photography and video to explore tensions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous, they have not pushed these issues as consistently as artists in Aotearoa, such as Peter Robinson, Jacqueline Fahey, Shane Cotton and Robyn Kahikiwa, to name but a few. Increasingly, in Australia, non-Indigenous artists of non-Anglo-Australian backgrounds are presenting their positions in their art, Guan Wei, is one who immediately springs to mind, and it is perhaps in this area – of art made by artists of immigrant and refugee background – that Australia has a more obvious presence. Not that I am proposing a competition between the countries. I leave that to the sports field. But it is of interest to contemplate the different ways in which these two countries, who share much in common beyond a shared geographical neighbourhood, have manifest quite distinct relationships between the different peoples who now occupy their spaces.

In each place, however, the long European tradition of using art as a vehicle for the exploration of complex, uncomfortable and troubling issues has been utilised by the dispossessed, the

disenfranchised, the marginalised and the reviled to speak out and assert their own position. This space, singled out from every day reality and protected by the parenthetical relationship provided by its assertion as 'art' contributes to shifts in attitudes and beliefs. Borat's 'cultural learning' beyond the scatological jokes lies in the capacity of the comedic film to imbed a note of horror in our laughter, to ensure repugnance for ignorance and discrimination underpins our reaction.

It is impossible to measure art's capacity to contribute to social change and shift in attitudes and beliefs, in a sense we can only measure art's power by looking at those cultures where rigid censorship exists – almost invariably such societies are intolerant dictatorships. In so-called democratic countries however, such as Australia and Aotearoa, while we may not always support positions expressed and we may not always be amused by attempts at comedic intervention and we may even criticise art that is too heavily overlaid with political intent, but the space that art provides for such activities to take place must be inviolate.

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