

Diana Gulotta

Debra Finkel

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“Borat” and “Lost in Translation”

“Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan” exposes the many unflattering habits of Americans while, at the same time, exposing our country’s out-of-date views of the former Soviet Union. “Lost in Translation”, an American-made movie filmed entirely in Tokyo, displays the Western influence in other countries and emphasizes the stereotypes about the Japanese that are perceived by Americans. The movie also exposes misperceptions that the Japanese have about Americans, ultimately causing communication that becomes lost in translation. Art Silverblatt’s keys to media literacy and the theories of cultural studies help conclude that the Borat movie and “Lost in Translation” reveal the many stereotypes reinforced by American filmmakers, as well as the influence of Western culture in Hollywood films that feature foreign individuals or countries.

Borat, an American-made film, follows Kazakh reporter Borat Sagdiyev, played by British actor Sacha Baron Cohen, as he travels in a dilapidated ice cream truck across the United States with his producer Azamat. Their purpose is to develop a documentary that will be used to teach Kazakhstan, which is a part of the former Soviet Union, the “American” way. It is a fake documentary, or “mockumentary,” and Borat meets and sometimes insults unsuspecting and innocent Americans while interviewing them for his movie.

When the Borat character departs from his home in Kazakhstan to produce his movie, he “bids farewell to the village rapist, cautioning him against too much raping. Humans only” (Newman). He arrives in America with a “jar of gypsy tears to protect me from AIDS” (Newman).

Silverblatt's keys to media literacy include not only the media communicators, but also the intended audience and the various experiences and perceptions within that audience. The Borat story is an American-made film that was filmed in America and distributed by an American company (IMDb.com). Cohen is British. Although much of the film pokes fun at Americans, Borat perpetuates the influence of the U.S. or Western political economy through the inaccurate depiction of his homeland of Kazakhstan in the movie. Borat proved to be a popular movie in the U.S.

Although American-made, like many other domestic films, Borat was distributed beyond North America. However, MTVmovienews.com reports that Borat opened in only 837 theaters when wide releases typically debut in 3,000 theaters. Despite this fact, Borat earned the No. 1 earnings spot the weekend it opened.

"The New York Times" reports that Russia's Federal Culture and Cinematography Agency, which certifies films for public distribution, declined to provide the needed certification for distribution of "Borat" (www.nytimes.com). Yury V. Vasyuchkov, an agency official, explains why Borat was not widely distributed in Russia. He said the film had the potential to "offend religious and ethnic feelings in a country where such feelings have been strained in recent months by ethnically tinged political conflicts and even violence (www.nytimes.com)."

In addition, several predominantly Muslim countries would not distribute the film, including Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman and Qatar. Despite this fact, the film that does not apologize for poking fun at the prejudices of Americans, earned \$32 million in ticket sales the first weekend in the U.S. alone. It earned another \$20 million in the other countries that agreed to distribute it (www.nytimes.com).

Also American-made, "Lost in Translation" tells the story of two lonesome Americans trying to find what exactly is missing in their lives. Bob is played by veteran actor Bill Murray. Bob is a has-been adventure actor in his homeland. However, like many other American actors, Bob finds that he is still very popular in Japan. He reluctantly travels to Tokyo to film a whiskey

commercial for Suntory. Ironically, Francis Ford Coppola, father of the film's writer and director Sophia Coppola, did a Suntory whiskey commercial in the 1970s.

"Like many other Hollywood symbols, the rest of the world gets access to them [American actors] only in reruns," said John Fraim (metaphilm.com). Fraim said that this is most likely the case with Bob. "While the American audience has moved on to younger upstarts like Brad Pitt and Sean Penn, the Japanese are still enamored with the adventure actor of old reruns."

Charlotte, played by Scarlett Johansson, is the wife of a shallow and work-obsessed photographer. She is sometimes snobby, and a recent Yale graduate who has not decided on a career path. Charlotte simply followed her husband of two years to the beautiful, illuminated city.

Neither Bob nor Charlotte can beat the jet lag, so, instead of sleeping, the insomniacs pass the time drinking and socializing in the bar of their upscale hotel. They also spend time eating meals together, watching late-night Japanese television, and scoping out the fast-paced party life in Tokyo. Throughout their time together, the film tracks the growing attraction and romantic tension between Bob and Charlotte.

"Lost in Translation" was written by Sofia Coppola, who, despite claims her movie was racist, won an Academy Award for best writing, original screenplay. Coppola, the media communicator, spent several years in Tokyo and said she never thought about setting the movie anywhere else. "When I had spent time in Tokyo, I thought, 'Oh, I really want to film this. I love the way the neon at night looks,'" she said (movies.about.com).

Cultural studies often delve into the media's perpetuation of stereotypes. Although an American film, ironically, one of the first major financiers for "Lost in Translation" was a Japanese company, Tohokushinsha Film Corp., which distributed the movie in Japan (*New York Times*).

Despite Coppola's love for Japan and financial backing by a Japanese company, the movie offended some Japanese people through its use of stereotypes. Yoko Akashi is a

Japanese woman living in New York. She wrote an article about “Lost in Translation” for “Japan Today” (www.japantoday.com). She states:

In the film, Japanese are always portrayed as inferior to the main Anglo-Saxon characters. The Japanese are “funny,” two-dimensional, cartoon-like characters who can’t pronounce English words correctly and often mix “L” and “R” sounds. At one point, Charlotte asks Bob about the mixing up of the “L” and “R”.

Akashi provides an answer for this question, saying that English is not the native language of Japan. She continues by pointing out that the Japanese were speaking English the best they could out of courtesy for the Americans. But the main characters, she said, “didn’t even attempt to speak one word of Japanese. And let’s not forget they’re in Japan, not the U.S.”

An article from the “Commonweal Foundation” notes that a reviewer from the “London Guardian” said that Coppola was “shoehorning every possible caricature of modern Japan” into her story. Another Asian-American Web site called the film “Lost in Racism.”

Not long after the opening credits of the movie, Bob is seen in the Tokyo hotel elevator, towering over the Japanese. Kazuho Tsuchiya, a 33-year-old Japanese graduate student who has lived in the U.S. since 1997, said he was disappointed by the film’s “diehard stereotypical images” (New York Times). “Jokes about short Japanese men are a cheap laugh,” he said.

In another scene, a pompous Japanese director berates Bob about his tone, expressions and body language during the filming of the whiskey commercial. Bob is bewildered when the director’s translator uses less than one-quarter of the Japanese words used by the director. Bob wonders if the translator is leaving out some critical information barked out by the director. Additionally, the director is treating Bob like he is a stupid American actor, turning the tables on stereotypes.

Early in the movie, a Japanese prostitute visits Bob in his hotel room. In a hilarious scene, the prostitute becomes very aggressive, almost accosting Bob, insisting that he “rip her stockings”, although it sounds like she is really saying “lip my stockings” many, many times.

Bob and this Japanese call girl literally go round and round in a misunderstanding of the language before the frustrated prostitute leaves before starting what she had intended to finish for Bob. This scene is one of the best examples of why the movie is entitled “Lost in Translation.”

“A real call girl in Tokyo at a hotel like that for a star like him would have been top shelf and spoke some passable English,” Tsuchiya added.

Robin Antepara, a freelance writer in Tokyo, where she teaches at Waseda University, provides her perspective on “Lost in Translation.” In an article entitled “Culture Matters: Americans through Japanese eyes,” Antepara contends that the Japanese portrayed in the movie are Westernized Tokyoites (Commonweal Foundation, 2005).

In the Japan I know, a radically different paradigm of power exists – worlds away from the loudmouthed Japanese in the film. Unlike the story’s in-your-face Tokyoites, the average Japanese is more muted and nonverbal, at least where the expression of personal opinions is concerned. A popular maxim – “the protruding nail must be pounded down” – captures the *weltanschauung* of the culture, one in which blending in and maintaining harmony are of paramount importance (2005).

Antepara also mentions the Japanese “dominant cultural model of silent watching – one in which the individual identity is submerged with the Other.” This is very different than anything found in mainstream American culture, she said (2005). However, Charlotte’s behavior in “Lost in Translation” mirrors the Japanese model of silent watching several times throughout the movie. The camera peeks over her shoulders as she sits half-clothed in her hotel window, contemplating the city below. Additionally, when the American starlet who had flirted with Charlotte’s husband gives a press conference, Charlotte stands at the back of the room, listening, unnoticed.

The Borat movie also highlights stereotypes, but the Borat character is much more outgoing and obnoxious than Bob or Charlotte.

Nancy Condee, director of the graduate program for cultural studies at the University of Pittsburg, says that the Borat movie character plays on Americans' opinions of Kazakhstan during its previous association with the Soviet Union.

Bad hygiene, commodity hunger and uninhibited disregard for the disenfranchised sum up the traits ascribed to the East, a make-do world tyrannized by poorly controlled bodily functions and consumer desire, assuming they are two different things (www.post-gazette.com).

His documentary includes the "hijacking" of Americans for interviews. Emily Upper provides the following opinion in the "Journal of Historical Studies."

These Americans interviewed, like the humour coach and the etiquette teacher, automatically utilize all ideas of stereotypical cultural boundaries because Borat presents himself as the naïve, anti-Semitic, sexist from Kazakhstan. Just because Baron Cohen says he is this man, and the interviewed Americans actually believe in who he is claiming to be, the interviewees reverse roles with Borat and become the naïve, uncultured ones, causing a brilliant method of self reflection, which, I believe, many people need during this time of general lack of cultural understanding (cssaame.com).

During Borat's journey across the United States, he travels through the South and visits a gun store. Borat asks the salesman what kind of weapon he would recommend for shooting Jews. The salesman, without hesitation, suggests a Glock automatic.

The Borat movie also exposes the stereotype foreigners place upon actresses in the U.S. Not long after this arrival, Borat finds himself in awe of the beautiful, buxom blonde, Pamela Anderson, who played C.J. on "Baywatch," an American show that was popular in

America in the 1990s. It is the most watched television show of all time in the world, and is still very popular in foreign countries.

Interestingly, "Lost in Translation" also explores the perceptions that Japanese people have about Americans. With a physique similar to that of Pamela Anderson, Anna Faris plays an airheaded American actress who flirts endlessly with Charlotte's husband. She is a blonde who shakes her hair around and has a high-pitch laugh. Predictably, Charlotte's husband acts like a puppy around this actress. Charlotte, the more intelligent American female in the movie, frequently makes petty remarks about this actress, showing the negativity between Americans in the film.

Steve Vineberg, in a movie review, suggests the scenes involving Charlotte's husband and the American actress are the weakest. "Coppola doesn't think much of these two, so she doesn't bother to humanize them," he said (Christian Century).

The Japanese stereotypical perceptions of Americans are also displayed during a scene in which Charlotte calls a female friend back in the states. Although Charlotte is on the verge of tears, due to loneliness and the overwhelming nature of Tokyo, her friend brushes her off quickly. Furthermore, the film highlights the isolationism and uncertainty of two American characters who, by financial standards, are considered well-off. Both Bob and Charlotte are spending several days in a high-end, downtown hotel. They eat well in nice restaurants, splurge on mixed drinks and embed themselves within the Tokyo night-life. Despite having many modern luxuries at their fingertips, including huge marble bathtubs and automatic window blinds, they still seem lost and depressed. This emphasizes foreigners' views of Americans as spoiled and selfish.

Douglas Kellner, a third generation cultural theorist, believes that political economy should be considered when analyzing the cultural representations embedded with a media production (17). According to Kellner, political economy "calls attention to the fact that culture is

produced within relationships of domination and subordination and thus reproduces or resists existing structures of power” (17).

Both “Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan” and “Lost in Translation” unveil the Western influence and financial domination crafted by Hollywood. Kiku Day is a former Japanese resident who writes for “The Guardian” in the United Kingdom. She refers to the U.S. domination over other countries that is depicted through Hollywood.

The U.S. is an empire, and from history we know that empires need to demonise others to perpetuate their own sense of superiority. Hollywood, so American mythology has it, is the factory of dreams. It is also the handmaiden to perpetuating the belief of superiority of U.S. cultural values over all others, and, at times, to whitewashing history (guardian.com).

Day says the “caricatures” in “Lost in Translation” display longstanding American prejudice about Japan. She reminds readers that the US forced Japan to open the country up for trade in 1864. In addition, the U.S. dropping of nuclear bombs on Japan during World War II led to occupation of the country by U.S. troops, followed by the infiltration of the American culture.

Borat also makes caricatures of the people of Kazakhstan. In a story written for “The New Yorker”, Daniel Radosh interviewed Roman Vassilenko, the press secretary for the Embassy of Kazakhstan. Vassilenko is adamant that, despite what Borat has portrayed, women are not kept in cages and the national sport is not shooting a dog and then having a party (www.newyorker.com). Furthermore, in Kazakhstan, you cannot earn a living catching Gypsies. Kazakh wine is not made from fermented horse urine, and it is not customary for men to grab each others' testicles.

“He says things that make people think that Kazakhstan is a really backward country,” Vassilenko said.

Interestingly enough, Borat's portrayal of his homeland is way off base, satirizing American's perceptions of the Eastern countries. An article by "CBS News" describes Kazakhstan as "an oil and gas-rich nation of Central Asia that is looking to become a bigger player on the world stage." In addition, Kazakhstan is the only Muslim-majority country with troops in Iraq (cbsnews.com).

Kellner's cultural theory work has focused on the media culture as a complex political, philosophical and economic phenomenon. These ideas are displayed through Kazakhstan's response to the Borat movie. Because American audiences overall believed Borat's portrayal of Kazakhstan, the Kazakh government launched an American PR campaign.

Vassilenko provides more insight into the launch of a PR campaign in the states. "To make sure the joke is lost on nobody, we want to tell the [American] people about the real Kazakhstan," he said. He added that the controversy associated with Borat "is making the PR campaign more worth it."

The PR campaign included a visit with U.S. President George Bush in 2006 by Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev. Furthermore, this campaign placed several pro-Kazakhstan ads in major U.S. newspapers. Some question the motivation behind the PR campaign.

"People dealing with Central Asia are not at all persuaded by them [ads]," said Georgetown University professor Thomas Melia, deputy executive director of Freedom House, a human rights organization (cbsnews.com). He said some who study Kazakhstan consider Nazarbayev a corrupt dictator and know that government abuses are commonplace.

"They're essentially putting out an ad that the country is a dictatorship, because real democracies don't need to do that [sort of campaign]," Melia said.

Interestingly enough, Dr. Martha Olcott of the Carnegie Endowment for Peace, a Kazakhstan expert, said the opposition party in Kazakhstan has used Borat's descriptions of the country as material against Nazarbayev (cbsnews.com). Sacha Baron Cohen "may have gotten

encouragement from the opposition party,” she said. She said Cohen may have been paid by the opposition to portray Kazakh culture negatively.

The attention the Kazakh government has placed on wooing Americans and the American government serves as evidence of the influence and importance of Western countries in the world. Nancy Condee, director of the graduate program for cultural studies at the University of Pittsburg, points out that Borat plays on Americans’ opinions of Kazakhstan during its previous association with the Soviet Union.

Bad hygiene, commodity hunger and uninhibited disregard for the disenfranchised sum up the traits ascribed to the East, a make-do world tyrannized by poorly controlled bodily functions and consumer desire, assuming they are two different things (www.post-gazette.com).

“Lost in Translation” also displays the influence of the US on other cultures. In addition to the fact that Bob, an American actor, is filming a whiskey commercial for Japan, throughout the movie, almost all of the Japanese people act submissive to the American characters, sometimes idolizing them. Antepara said she would “cringe every time another self-serving Japanese pranced across the screen.”

Furthermore, the Tokyo hotel bar featured two different American lounge singers who performed popular American songs, such as “Scarborough Fair” and “Midnight at the Oasis.” Additionally, the Tokyo nightlife featured karaoke, a practice with its roots in Japanese, but widely popular in the U.S.

“Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan” and “Lost in Translation”, are both critically acclaimed films that were considered successful based on profits and Academy Award recognition. Nonetheless, both movies created controversy and offended some viewers by reinforcing existing stereotypes about the people of Kazakhstan, Japan and the United States. Additionally, both films played upon Western influence in foreign companies. A great work of art usually stirs emotion and forces an audience

to find a purposeful meaning or messages. Although not everyone would agree with how these two movies conveyed message and meaning, it is obvious that both films created much-needed conversation and study about cultural messages and stereotypes that can damage relationships between the United States and foreign countries. In studying Hollywood films like Borat and "Lost in Translation", Americans should ponder the following question: Do the same things in movies that entertain me and make me laugh help create negative perceptions of Americans by foreign countries?

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