

Ashes to Ashes: The End (and Means) of Sacha Baron Cohen's *The Dictator*

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Let's start with the end. In Sacha Baron Cohen's *The Dictator*, the Gadaffi-like President Prime Minister Admiral General Haffaz Aladeen (Sacha Baron Cohen) is set to sign a new constitution that will end his reign and institute democracy in the African nation of Wadiya, a very thinly veiled substitute for Eritrea.



Aladeen: "Wadiya will remain a dictatorship"



Aladeen: "Democracy has hairy armpits and could lose five pounds."



Aladeen: "But democracy . . . I love you."



Aladeen: “And that is why I call for real democracy, a real constitution, and real elections in Wadiya.”

Except, of course, this is not the end. This happy, pro-social ending fuses romantic fulfillment and global political harmony in what might initially seem the most absurdly contrived way (think *Love, Actually*). But the film lurches past this point, and what follows is a series of gags that completely undermine its pat neatness. We briefly witness:

The first round of democratic elections in Wadiya, with tanks encouraging voters to make the right choice. . .



Aladeen’s blissful marriage to Zoe (Anna Farris), somewhat tempered by her revelation of her Jewishness . . .





Zoe: "I'm Jewish"



Aladeen: "That's fine. I don't mind. It's great"



Wadiya's nuclear weapons program NOT dismantled. But at least when Aladeen travels to his secret nuclear laboratory, he does so in a convoy of energy-efficient vehicles . . .



Zoe beginning work as "first lady" of Wadiya . . . as feminist liberator of Wadiyan women . . . or as traditional mother . . .

Zoe: "We're opening 300 women's centers . . . but I'm going to have to take a break for a little bit because . . . I'm pregnant."



at least if she has a boy.

Aladeen: "What? Are you having a boy or an abortion?"

Even this is not the final scene, though, as outtakes of the most abject kind play through the remaining credits.



Cohen speaks in character as Aladeen, telling the actor playing his bum-wiper in this scene that “You don’t need to touch it.”

What are we to make of all “this”? Is it a continuation of the satire, making the general point, “Once a dictator, always a dictator”? Is it a violation of the film’s textual boundaries to remind us that the satirical attitude needs to be brought into the real world? Or is it, as the last, bum-wiping outtake would seem to suggest, an insistence that pre-social comedy trumps pro-social?

At least since *Da Ali G Show* brought him to the attention of some North Americans, starting in 2003 (2000 in the UK), Cohen has been engaged in anarchic, pre-social comedy that occasionally, given an acceptable target, can be read as pro-social satire. There are those that, because of their political fame or notoriety, the HBO set consider worthy of satirical mockery:



Pat Buchanan duped into saying that of course Saddam Hussein had “BLTs,” which he used on the Kurds.

There are others who, although not normally directly in the public eye, contribute to a fascistic cultural discourse and seem likewise to be fair game.



A stylist at a runway show agrees with Bruno that “trailer trash” are “primitive, rubbish people”

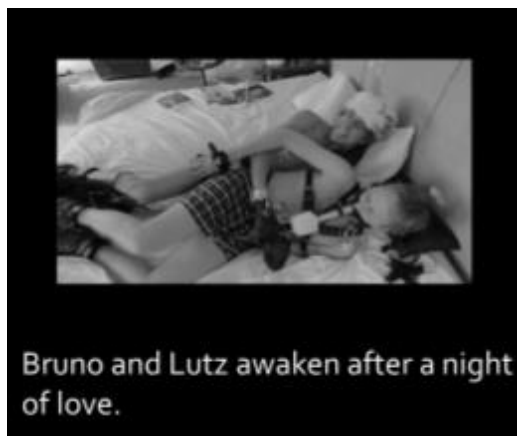
And yet, there are many who, even if their names do suggest an allegorical significance, seem purely the innocent victims of Cohen’s sadistic pranking.



Ali G. demands to know from veterinarian Dr. George Washington why so many soldiers from Vietnam, “Vietnam vets,” subsequently wanted to work with sick animals

This oscillation between the pro-social – some people need to be laughed at – and the pre-social – everyone should be laughed at – is the key ambiguity that underpins Cohen’s work, which veers without warning between satire and cringe (which draws upon bifocalism: our identification simultaneously with persecutor and victim).

The feature films *Borat* (Larry Charles, 2006) and *Bruno* (Larry Charles, 2009) are built around this division: Cohen inserts Borat into a credulous world and, from a profusion of footage, mines out a semi-coherent narrative of ignorance, bigotry, and intolerance. *Bruno* was less successful, perhaps mostly because sexual tolerance is still largely viewed as a private issue (despite the overturning of “Don’t ask. Don’t tell”), not one that affects public discourse. Faced with overt and explicit sexuality, we reserve the right to be disgusted. *Borat*’s irony still allowed a point of relatively stable superiority for audience members, a feeling of being in on the joke (even while sympathizing with some of the butts of the joke), but *Bruno* “went too far” for most audience members, its anarchistic indulgence in and display of taboo sexual practices violating even liberal standards of decency.



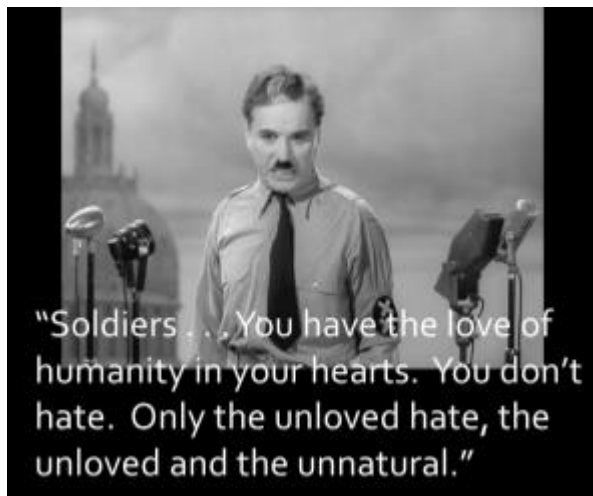
The lack of agreement about what constitutes an acceptable target necessarily opens Cohen up to criticism and, occasionally, fierce condemnation. Reviewing *Jackass 3D* for *Variety*, Justin Chang observes that “even [the Jackass team’s] socially transgressive stunts, as when Knoxville dons his familiar dirty-old-man prosthetics, never approach Sacha Baron Cohen levels of mean-spirited anarchy.” Probing more deeply, Randolph Lewis condemns Cohen’s means, at least in *Borat* where he tricked subjects into participating and then claimed an ethical motivation. Lewis likens Borat’s disguises to the ring of invisibility that Gyges, the selfish and deceptive figure

from Plato's *Republic* (88) used to pursue his own selfish ends. In the guise of exposing prejudice against the Other, Cohen violates the sanctity of the Other invoked by Levinas. Furthermore, Lewis charges that the documentary component of *Borat* is mostly about product differentiation, giving his film "the *frisson* that made his quasi-documentary something unusual on the postmodern mediascape: an outrageously sadistic satire with self-described good intentions" (92). At least for *Bruno*, Lewis points out, Cohen made no moral claim, allowing audiences to judge the sadistic technique of the film without distraction (92).

With the majority of the public and every public relations person more or less aware of Cohen's schtick after *Bruno*, he was forced to drop the quasi-documentary component of brand Cohen, as numerous critics noted. Dennis Lim wrote in the *New York Times*: "what happens when the most aggressive and confrontational satirist in contemporary comedy has to make do without real-life foils and stooges?" And Peter Debruge in *Variety*: "Having pulled the improv equivalent of streaking through a mosque with 'Borat's' ambush tactics, Sacha Baron Cohen retreats behind the veil of scripted comedy in 'The Dictator.'" Nevertheless, Debruge insists, Cohen had an opportunity precisely *because* of the pre-scripted nature of the film, an opportunity that he missed: "what the pic most sorely lacks is the sort of humanist appeal Chaplin delivered at the close of 'The Great Dictator.'" Baron Cohen may be ballsy, but he doesn't have the nerve to make that kind of statement" (Debruge).

Chaplin, you will recall, had used the ending of *The Great Dictator* to break away from his characters, to speak not as Adenoid Hynkel nor as the humble Jewish barber nor even as the

Tramp finally finding his voice, but as Charles Spencer Chaplin, addressing with the utmost urgency both the diegetic audience of amassed soldiers before him and the cinema audience.

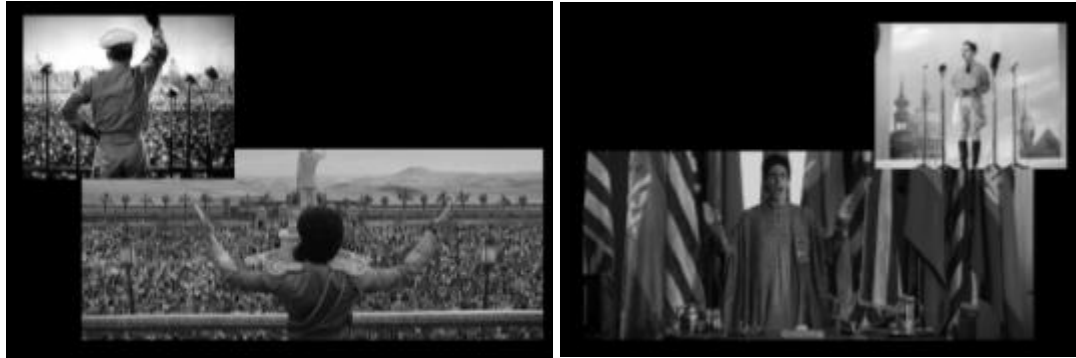


If Aladeen's speech is not up to Chaplin's, though, I suspect it is less because of a lack of nerve than a difference of their relative ends. Let's for a moment, recall how *The Great Dictator* was developed. According to Chaplin's account, he had initially resisted Alexander Korda's suggestion, in 1937, just after the release of *Modern Times*, that he make a film about Hitler "based on mistaken identity, Hitler having the same moustache as the tramp" (Chaplin 386). In his autobiography, Chaplin hedges about his motives for changing his mind and undertaking the project. His first explanation emphasizes the suitability of the subject to his method: ". . . I was desperate to get working again. Then it suddenly struck me. Of course! As Hitler I could harangue the crowds in jargon and talk all I wanted to. And as the tramp I could remain more or less silent. A Hitler story was an opportunity for burlesque and pantomime" (386-387). A page later, he asserts a satirical motive: "I was determined to ridicule [the Nazis] mystic bilge about a pure-blooded race" (388). Certainly, the film was written by 1938, [after the invasion of Bohemia and Austria?] before the war had started, was filmed during 1939 as Poland was invaded, and was premiered in New York in October 1940 and in London in December 1940,

with heavy German air raids underway. Whatever Chaplin had originally intended, events had come to pass that rendered the film, in this new context (of much broader public awareness), “a casual mixing of horror and humour,” in Michael Wood’s words. The turn of events during the film’s production may also explain the abrupt shift in the last ten minutes of the film and the ending, which Chaplin felt bound to defend in the *New York Times*, shortly after the New York premiere: “To me, it is a logical ending to the story. To me, it is the speech that the little barber would have made – even had to make. People have said that he steps out of character. What of it? The picture is two hours and seven minutes in length. If two hours and three minutes of it is comedy, may I not be excused for ending my comedy on a note that reflects, honestly and realistically, the world in which we live, and may I not be excused in pleading for a better world?” (“Mr. Chaplin Answers”).

Like Chaplin’s, Cohen’s project was inspired by an emerging socio-political context that offered the comedian a chance to work again, after he had exhausted the potential of the ambush comedies. Unlike Chaplin, though, Cohen very quickly embraced the emerging political context of the Arab Spring. Protests following Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation began on 18 December 2010. *The Dictator* project was announced in *Variety* on 20 January 2011, just one month later (and was misleadingly reported to be based on Saddam Hussein’s allegorical story *Zabibah and the King*). There is another, more crucial difference, for as Peter Debruge complains, what we find in *The Dictator* is not a reanimation of Chaplin’s plea. Instead, I would argue, we get a parody of it.

Cohen's engagement with Chaplin's film is everywhere to be seen. To take but one example, Cohen adopts from Chaplin's film the structural device of beginning and ending with a speech to the masses.



However, Cohen's parodic intent quickly becomes evident as several early scenes mock Chaplin's facile diagnosis of dictators as those who have never been loved. His mother, we hear in a CNN-like recap of his early life, died in childbirth.



And after we witness the culmination of his coupling with Megan Fox and his earnest invitation to her to stay the night so that they can cuddle, a succession of shots emphasizes the full extent of his rejection.



This thematic line reaches its climax, pun intended, when Zoe (Anna Faris), the manager of the health-food coop where Aladeen has taken refuge in America under the name “Alison Burgers,” teaches him the wonders of self-love.



Now able to “love himself,” Aladeen/Alison is ready to give that love to others, first to Zoe and then to the world at large, through her. But perhaps more crucial than the facile psychologizing of this scene is the display of the abject, the semen-soaked tissue thrust into the face of an unsuspecting shopper. For the abject is the surest sign of pre-social, anarchistic comedy and it is everywhere in this film, as if the boundaries of the scripted narrative had driven Cohen (and his regular team of writers) to the most ferocious reaction:



Efawadh, a goat-herd and Aladeen's body-double, drinks a pitcher of his own urine in front of the UN assembly.

Shortly after, invited to enjoy Aladeen's "stable" of companionate bodyguards, Efawadh can only take pleasure in milking them.



While helping a woman in labour deliver on the floor of the *Free Earth Collective*, Aladeen discovers that his missing cellphone is inside her uterus.

Another woman has her purse snatched one moment and then is hit, in the next, by Aladeen's hardened turd, falling from high above, thus more or less eviscerating the notion of a providential and just universe.



And in our post-human world in which the exclusion of signs of the body is perhaps the definitive design characteristic of Apple devices, Aladeen's countryman and former nuclear physicist Nadal (Jason Mantzoukas) reveals what

it really means to be a Mac Genius.

Exploding beyond the boundaries of the film itself, Cohen in character as Aladeen gave interviews and staged pranks, partly as promotion of the film. The most famous of these was at the 2012 Oscars, just in advance of the release of the film.



Aladeen pours the ashes of Kim Jong-il over “Bryan” Seacrest at the 2012 Oscars, then quips that Seacrest will at least be able to say he’s wearing Kim Jong-il

Once again, we have this curious mixture, this oscillation between satire and abjection.

Aladeen’s quip to Seacrest – “Now you can tell people you’re wearing Kim Jong-il” – suggests some subversive implications that *may* be of a piece with the film’s larger purpose. North Korean veneration for the ashes of Kim Jong-il is shown to be analogous to our veneration of celebrities (“Bryan Seacrest”) and our enslavement to fashion (the powerful discourse of which links bodies through clothes to social class). Had Seacrest effectively been tagged as a dictator of popular culture? And was not the juxtaposition or confusion of the polished, tuxedoed Seacrest with these pathetic material vestiges of the ultimate individual practically a performed vanity painting? Was this not an attempt to expose the truth about television as noted by Stuart Ewen: “style becomes the essence, reality becomes the appearance”? Was this stunt, in other words, a

paratext for the film itself that clarifies the film's meanings or an intertext that explodes the possibility of locating any such stable end?

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