

IMDB'S FILM REVIEWS OF “THE DICTATOR” BY SACHA BARON COHEN DEMONSTRATE HOW HUMOUR CAN BE A GEOPOLITICAL SIGNAL

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ABSTRACT

Humour is a multifaceted cultural institution that helps to politicise society and space. The IMDb reviews of Sacha Baron Cohen's comedy *The Dictator* (2012), a parody of democracy in which the topics of racism, political incorrectness, and sexism, as well as their relationship to the discourses of Neo-Orientalism and the Global War on Terrorism, are present, are analysed in this paper to discuss the political nature of Humour. The reviews are seen as speech acts that establish more general interpretive frameworks for how audiences can approach issues about Humour's political and serious aspects. The analysis focuses on how the "Humour is serious" claim and related arguments are made to denounce or defend the use of "immature" and sophomoric Humour in politically sensitive issues. The paper also examines IMDb's role as a platform that opens up opportunities for political participation.

Keywords: Humour, Political, *The Dictator*, Neo-Orientalism, Racism

INTRODUCTION

The central argument of modern popular geopolitics has gained traction in recent years: how popular culture distorts how people perceive the geopolitical world.¹ At the same time, curiosity has been sparked about how Humour, despite its outwardly innocent nature, serves various cultural functions by which society and space are politicised.² The cross-disciplinary debate over the political nature of Humour has strongly emphasised how considering Humour as an innocent cultural practice, as an antidote to seriousness, is a flawed viewpoint by its very premises and even that there is no such thing as innocent laughter. This is true even though Humour can be perceived as a geopolitical tactic in which political processes shift away from the serious realm.³ It is reasonable to claim that in this interdisciplinary research, a

distinct idea has gradually emerged that emphasises "Humour is serious," an argument that seeks to condemn the derogatory, subordinating, racist, and misogynistic language used in Humour.⁴ The assertion that "Humour is serious" also supports the idea that Humour is a (geo)politically embedded institution, as evidenced by how ethnic stereotypes are revived in media- and everyday-joking-based Humour and how the larger institution of social othering is simultaneously upheld.⁵

In this essay, the political nature of humour is examined through an analysis of the film reviews for Sacha Baron Cohen's most recent comedy, *The Dictator* (2012), which features frequent references to sexism, racism, and political incorrectness. The language critics used to assess and conceptualise the movie is highlighted here, not the movie's actual content. The research material is made up of 286 IMDb reviews that were posted between May 1, 2012, and April 12, 2013. To establish interpretive patterns through which the issue of discussing politically sensitive issues through the use of "immature" and sophomoric Humour is either a) condemned or b) supported, the analysis focuses on how the claim that "Humour is serious" and similar arguments are expressed both explicitly and implicitly.

Here, the emphasis is on the literary expressions that allow Humour to be condemned or praised politically, on the ways that (socio-)political settlements influence how moviegoers discuss the humour in the film, and, conversely, on how the tastefulness or tastelessness of Humour influences the political nature of their argumentation. This includes discussions of the complex nature of neo-Orientalism, racism, and sexism with the underlying inquiry of why the same joke can be perceived as either an insulting or subordinating or alternatively as a socio-politically critical and emancipatory practice. A kind of interpretive "guidebook" that the audience can use to assess Humour's political and serious nature, film reviews are seen as narrative interventions that construct larger schemes for approaching the politics of humour.⁸

Four different viewpoints have been used primarily to develop the theory of Humour. According to the socially critical perspective, or what Sev'er and Ungar call "power-based approaches," Humour participates in the mechanisms that uphold social inequality.⁶ The other theories include psychoanalytic theories, sociological theories that emphasise the social function of Humour, and traditional incongruity theories.⁷ It is interesting to note that while the emphasis has been on the serious nature of Humour, a new argument challenging the notion that Humour is inherently good has gained credence when analysing the debate on "power-based approaches," especially those in which Humour practices and geopolitical processes have been combined. Lockyer and Pickering support their reasoning with the following three points: Humour can harm people's social standing; Humour can have serious political implications and repercussions; and Humour is a unique, universal mode of human interaction.⁸

As an implicit result of this argument that "Humour is serious," another argument that "Humour should be taken more seriously in critical research" is included. Dodds and Kirby emphasise that Humour is a serious issue that needs to be "taken seriously" in critical geopolitics and that laughter and unlaughter play a role in forming geopolitical subjectivities.⁹ Humour can illustrate what the banality of politics means in actual practice, much like

popular culture. In our daily lives, humour is constantly used. We joke around all the time, tell our personal stories through humour, and simultaneously consume various products from the entertainment sector that capitalise on people's innate desire to find joy in laughter. Even so, a recent critical discussion of humour has emphasised its serious nature and shifted attention, in particular, to concerns about the boundaries of tolerance.¹⁰ The debate over the Muhammad cartoon controversy has probably been the most egregious instance of this, and it illustrates how debating opposing perspectives on the limits of humour descended into a global geopolitical crisis.¹¹

The Muhammed cartoon controversy is notable for how humour transformed from a commonplace activity into a political issue on which all high-level administrative organs worldwide had to adopt an "official" stance and express their serious opinions.¹² The debate over racist humour has frequently served as an example of the severe side of humour and its connection to political issues. As an example of how humour and extreme political hatred can quickly converge, Billig uses the example of the racist jokes of the Ku Klux Klan.¹³ The playfulness of racist jokes and the seriousness of hatred, according to Billig, should not be distinguished because doing so would allow racists to use the just-a-joke defence. Offensive comic discourse relies on the rhetorical device of "only joking."¹⁴ Leading politicians have been known to make racist jokes, most notably former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. These jokes have drawn criticism and sparked a general debate about humour's serious or dark nature.¹⁵ As in the case of the racist jokes of the Ku Klux Klan, humour may also contain a meta-mode of seriousness or a specific meta-discourse that explicitly highlights that a joke is not "just a joke" but rather an intentional and goal-oriented act of racism.¹⁶

Purcell, Brown, and Gokmen discuss various examples of the "power" of humour and approach humour as a form of popular culture that shapes geopolitical worldviews.¹⁷ The seriousness of humour has primarily been discussed from viewpoints that portray it as a destructive and lethal "weapon." Still, an opposing viewpoint also emphasises humour's benefits: "Laughter has a calming effect, but comedy has the potential to subvert binary structures and let repressed anxieties out. While doing nothing to permanently change the prevailing psychic, socio-linguistic schema through which we become subjects, comedic discourse may reveal underlying racial anxieties."¹⁸ Similar to popular geopolitics, it has been noted that humour has the power to reframe contentious political issues like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, giving people a chance to recognise and laugh at the absurdity of the situation.¹⁹ As a result, humour is given its own category and can be used to view the world differently. Humour has also been regarded as a postcolonial resistance tool that can be used in self-conscious, unconscious, or semi-conscious ways.²⁰

THE NEGOTIATION OF GEOPOLITICAL WORLD VIEWS AND FILM REVIEWS

A noteworthy institutional factor in Humour's politicisation is the film industry. Films' role as socio-political agents diverts the way people perceive politics.²¹ As important as it is to examine how political worldviews and their relationship to humour is portrayed in the movies, it is also crucial to scrutinise how audiences react to and consider the political content of the films. There are two ways to approach the political content of a specific movie

review. First, film reviews represent a variety of perspectives on how people perceive their political environments in various forms and voices. Contrarily, and of utmost significance for this essay, all film reviews serve as "guidebooks" for the audience, providing a variety of "instructions," which are just implicit orders, on how to analyse the film in question and, consequently, how to comprehend the political meanings associated with it. This essay focuses on how film reviews produce intertextual knowledge, larger frameworks, and guidelines that aid audiences in comprehending the political nature of particular films. Reviews represent more than just reflections of reception.

The term "speech act" refers to John L. Austin's theory that using utterances is, by nature, performativity and connotative, as it is a "doing" of something. Austin has used the wedding dedication utterance "I do," in which pronouncing two words serves as a performativity implementation and legitimation of specific social structures, as an example of what a speech act can mean in its clearest form. Austin divides speech acts into three categories: locutionary acts, in which senses and references are expressed; illocutionary acts, which include orders, assertions, declarations, and apologies; and perlocutionary acts, which advance specific effects on the audience, such as persuading, pleasing, or embarrassing them.²²

In recent geopolitical research, Austin's definition of a "speech act" has been used as a theoretical basis for performative approaches. A methodological viewpoint based on the logic of causality challenges the idea of naturally existing subjects.²³ Amid dissatisfaction with discourse analysis and Michel Foucault's "methodological archaeology," performative approaches became useful and used.²⁴ Although discourse analysis's objectives and performative approaches' objectives differ, there are some common perceptions about how the processes of creating meanings and structures work. Whereas Judith Butler uses the term per-formative to refer to "the reiterative and citational practise through which discourse produces the effects that it names," Foucault defines discourses as groups of signs, "practises that systematically form the objects of which they speak."²⁵ According to Butler, movie reviews can be viewed as performative interventions or speech acts that name and frame the effects of political discourses.

IMDb serves as a very well-liked platform for political interventions in the case of movie reviews. With 42 million registered users and over 100 million monthly visitors, IMDb is a hugely popular website offering a wealth of movie-related information and a semi-interactive forum for viewers to assess, judge, and generally criticise everything happening in the movie industry. IMDb reviews don't reply to other people's comments, but they contain discussions about some common subjects in which various opposing views and opinions are put forth. IMDb's geopolitical aspects have been examined from various angles. Still, the one that has received the most attention is that it serves as a space where fandom can react to geopolitical processes like terrorism and counterterrorism.²⁶ Klaus Dodds' analysis of the geopolitical context of IMDb reviews from the perspective of audience reception preferences is fascinating. He discusses how IMDb provides a platform for people, in this case, "fans," to create their own geopolitical interpretations.²⁷ This is a part of Dodds' criticism that popular

geopolitics has overly frequently used textual studies to analyse popular culture material while ignoring audiences and consumers.²⁸

Accordingly, Jason Dittmer presents an intriguing theory about how the visual effects of movies and the critical awareness of the political nature of the movie industry are linked with each other in a nonrepresentational way through an analysis of IMDb reviews of the post-9/11 superhero movies.²⁹ In this essay, movie reviews are examined in relation to broader situational discourses that establish and perform the geopolitical nature of popular culture. IMDb is viewed as the audience's voice and a platform for political performances that are communicated as "speech acts," allowing individuals to take on political roles. This somewhat supports Bore's claim that IMDb provides a method for people to give their subjective opinions a sense of authority.³⁰

THE DICTATOR'S GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

Sacha Baron Cohen is the star of the 2012 American comedy *The Dictator*, directed by Larry Charles. The movie, a mockery of democracy, is set in the fictitious oil-rich African country of Wadiya, ruled by an oppressive dictator named Hafez Aladeen (Sacha Baron Cohen), who is seen as a "takeoff" on the late Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. To address concerns about his nation's nuclear weapons programme, dictator Aladeen is called to a UN assembly in New York, which is the main focus of the main plot. The humour primarily stems from the events that follow the highly racist and chauvinistic Muslim dictator having to share his life with an anti-racist feminist in "free" America out of necessity. The movie plays up stereotypes of Islamic culture, society, and politics in more or less immature and sophomoric ways while simultaneously mocking Western culture and American foreign policy, particularly the Global War on Terror.

The film opens with a dedication to the late North Korean dictator Kim Jong IL, so the parody of dictatorship as an administrative system begins immediately. Viewers must be familiar with Islamic culture and politics and analyse them as either the antithesis of Western society, a progression of Orientalism, or a parody of it to comprehend *The Dictator's* political dimensions fully. Edward Said argued in his seminal book *Orientalism* that the concept of "the East" or the "Orient" is fundamentally a product of colonialist imagination, which the West has used to justify its superiority by evoking simplistic black-and-white comparisons between the East and the West.³¹ One of the main points in Said's writings relates to how various historical and cultural institutions in the West have perpetuated stereotypes that the Orient is inferior to and different from the West. Depending on the perspective, current popular representations of the East can be viewed as either (1) mirrors of contemporary political events or (2) subordinating socio-cultural performances that spark a bipolar conflict between two imaginative counterparts. Among others, Derek Gregory has drawn attention to the persistence of colonial Orientalist representations and military and popular cultural images of the "war on terror."³² The phrase "banal neo-imperialism" captures well how Orientalism's social structures can be observed in various popular culture mediums, with *The Dictator* as a particularly potent recent example.³³ *The Dictator's* pervasive, overflowing racism-themed humour frequently references Orientalism's historical legacy.

Programmatically, *The Dictator's* themes are intended to be politically provocative; however, as with *Borat*, audience expectations were already political. In several post-Soviet nations, the movie was censored, much like how Baron Cohen's earlier film *Borat* had drawn harsh criticism and been subject to censorship. Before its international premiere, the political leaders of several post-Soviet nations, including Belarus, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, banned the movie. Pakistan and Malaysia later followed suit. The state censors in Uzbekistan only cut the movie by twelve minutes, but it was still screened in theatres, which was deemed "strange."³⁴ Similar to Kazakhstan, where showing *Borat* is still against the law, the movie was only made illegal two weeks after its premiere, which was unexpected.³⁵ The reasons for the ban have been seen as obvious, but there have been few official announcements. Distributors of Tajik movies claim that "the mentality of people" is what led to the film's ban in Tajikistan.³⁶

It is incorrect to compare Tajikistan to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and other nations, said Daler Davlatov of the Tajik Tatan distribution company. We have a different mentality, so it's wrong.³⁷ A parallel and widely accepted interpretation of the movie is that the mannerisms and gestures of the lead character were too similar to those of Emomali Rahmon, the president of Tajikistan, and other Central Asian "dictatorships."³⁸ This would suggest that the political content of the movie went beyond the level of banality even before it was released because it was a topic of discussion on the level of what Tuathail refers to as "practical geopolitics."³⁹ If Baron Cohen had intended to dress up as the dictator Aladeen as planned, he would have also been prohibited from promoting his film on BBC TV shows.⁴⁰ Similar attempts were made to stop Baron Cohen from pulling off a "red carpet stunt" at the 84th Academy Awards, where he was invited as a member of the cast of Martin Scorsese's *Hugo*, which was up for Best Picture.⁴¹

THE POLITICS OF PROMOTING THE DICTATOR

The movie reviews that are the subject of this essay include arguments from a wide range of viewpoints, from objective professional analyses to more passionate fan opinions. The reviewers had the option of expressing their nationality, but even though there were some similarities between informed races in terms of how they developed their interpretations of the politics of humour, identities or any social, cultural, or national positions are not taken into consideration in this context for further interpretations.⁵⁸ Although it can be difficult to draw a clear line between political and non-political content, the following discussion focuses on the reviews that specifically highlight the political aspects of the movie.

If humour and laughter are taken to be inherently political issues, then any reviews that criticise or comment on humour can be seen as politically charged speech acts. On the other hand, the claim that there is no such thing as innocent laughter is problematic in and of itself. The film's cinematic qualities and the (still surprisingly small number of) reviews in which the movie's humour was praised without addressing its political nature were the main topics of what is here defined as "non-political" criticism of humour.

DISAPPROVAL OF POLITICAL SATIRE

The Dictator is politically insensitive. The entire plot and logic of the movie derive not only from being politically offensive but also from the discursive context of political insult itself. The movie is meant to be politically incorrect, racist, and sexist. The movie seems proud of its self-awareness of being politically incorrect, racist, and sexist. Negative feedback is inevitable if one assumes that all entertainment should be accurate regarding delicate subjects. It was consistently argued in the reviews through the rhetorical acts of condemnation, scorn, accusation, and insult that the movie's apparent racism, sexism, and political correctness were the reason it was thought to be of low quality.

The movie has dozens of jokes where the stereotypes of Islamic culture are combined with those of dictatorial administrative systems. Examples include, for instance, how Dictator Aladeen orders his staff to slit throats in the most arbitrary manner imaginable and in any random circumstance - as all dictators worldwide do. Aladeen enters the political meeting in New York on a camel, followed by a large group of dozens of luxury sports cars. The long beard, which in this instance is mockingly imitated by Osama Bin Laden, is one common stereotype associated with the facial appearance of male Muslims and is described as being "iconic" and "supreme" in Aladeen. The jokes frequently centre on instantly recognisable stereotypes that combine racism, political unrest, and cultural diversity. In the film reviews, the denigration of humour was used as a rhetorical attack on Orientalism.

The author, felix1966 from Montreal, accuses statements like "there is seriously nothing funny about this movie at all," "it will only appeal to you if you are a racist, sexist, American or under 12 and think poo and willy jokes are funny," and "it will only appeal to you if you are a racist, sexist, American or under 12 and think poo and willy jokes are funny" of being racist satire rather than humour.⁴² Racist humour is frequently viewed as an act of aggression, while the condemnation of racist humour involves verbal acts of aggression. Critical remarks frequently included some "rhetorical aggression," such as the following succinct phrase: "Torture is not funny, overt racism and stereotyping is not funny" (author: Dr Hilary Rhodes from Australia). Similarly, to give more "power" to expressed arguments, capital letters and strong accentuation of the argument through the simplification of expression are frequently used:

It is SO OFFENSIVE to watch this movie for Arabs, Indians, and Muslims. How other countries were portrayed in this movie makes me feel utterly repulsed. It portrays Arabs as cruel, repulsive, "ride camels daily," callous, etc. (Written by Iman Salam)

These rhetorical techniques are equivalent to those frequently used in political demonstrations. Several reviews linked criticism of the film's poor cinematography and scorn with criticism of its poor, politically incorrect sense of humour. This was made especially clear in reviews that emphasised how the movie, in its overtly controversial manner, is desperate to offend, "trying too hard to shock," and that "the stereotypes were overdone and probably have been repeated in a hundred other spoof movies or episodes of Family Guy"

(author: st-shot from the United States) (author: Krish Swamy). It is crucial to emphasise that disliking The Dictator's Humour, especially how doing so frequently led to accusations of stereotyping and racism, does not imply that political satire was being condemned as a genre of movies. Although The Dictator didn't live up to the audience's expectations, it was surprisingly frequently apparent that they wanted and expected a good political satire: "It is not a bad idea to base the comic on US-Middle East relationships, but the "masturbation" joke had nothing to do with it" (author: Monika Kadlecova from Czech Republic).

A debate about the criticism of ethnic and religious humour was also sparked, centring on the unfavourable aspects of Baron Cohen's upbringing. A significant portion of the humour in Borat comes from the extreme hatred of Jews, which, when one considers the geopolitical history of the last 100 years, sounds like an outrageous and despicable idea. The Dictator continues to make fun of Jews, but this time the humour is primarily based on the political conflict between Israel and the Islamic world. While playing a Wii first-person shooter game based on the Munich Olympics in his spare time, Aladeen plans to create a nuclear weapon to bomb Israel.⁴³ At the film's conclusion, Aladeen falls in love with an American anti-racist feminist, but when they are getting married, it is revealed that his future wife is Jewish. Some viewers, though, did not accept this justification and instead denounced the practice of using one's own ethnicity as a justification for being racist, sexist, and politically offensive:

Even though I knew his Jewish heritage, I could never have predicted that he would make patriotic and crude jokes about his religion. Since I'm not religious, it doesn't matter what religion someone practices. I don't consider myself patriotic either; it's ridiculous and childish. However, with The Dictator, it seems Mr Cohen was on a mission to prove how honourable Israel and the Jews are to the rest of the world.
(Author: Brazilian/Austrian Bossa Nova)

The phrases "Film is rubbish," "piece of crap," "grotesque and childish," and "gross and disgusting" were continuously uttered. They serve as descriptors of the political discourses of the contemporary era, to which the film's title explicitly alludes. They also "teach" us the "correct way" to laugh at politically sensitive subjects while never necessarily condemning them. In these statements, humour is taken seriously and politicised. Still, this politicisation of the reviews does not imply that if a movie is deeply ingrained in modern politics through its subject matter, the logical response to evaluating it would automatically be to make political statements. Instead, the logic behind this is that through these reviews, an interpretative framework is established and voiced, one that contends that making fun of serious issues is not funny, that subjects like ethnicity, sexuality, religion, or international relations are not topics to laugh at, and that even if they were, there are models and parameters by which the (specific type of) laughter must be performed.

IN FAVOUR OF OFFENSIVE HUMOUR

There were essentially two arguments in the "The Dictator" reviews on IMDb to defend the movie's political offensiveness and accuracy. The first point of view was that being politically

offensive was a good thing and a way to be funny. This point of view was continuously shaped by statements that demonstrated the need for self-defence. In the opposing argument, it was either stated explicitly or impliedly that Baron Cohen's offensive parody goes beyond the discourses of being politically offensive and acts more as a critique of prevailing political values and stereotyping practices. If the first viewpoint contains the declaration that humour, no matter how politically charged, is something that should not be taken too seriously, the latter viewpoint is perceived as being, affirmatively and constructively, something that needs to be taken seriously when it comes to the political dimensions of the film.

This point of view asserts that Baron Cohen's humour deviates as much as possible from seriousness and, in a similar vein, deviates from any intelligence or wit. This position must be interpreted as self-defence, as a rhetorical rebuttal to those who automatically interpret politically charged humour as an insult. Another possibly more intriguing perspective was that Baron Cohen's humour was regarded as a work of genius that was not only politically charged but also clever and positive:

The satirical element is, of course, the main draw. The Dictator sinks its entire jaw into themes of racial oppression, the contradictory nature of democracy, the recent state of the world economy, the rise of China and its own brand of "democracy," etc. Other satires may show their political teeth. It is purposefully designed to annoy the appropriate people while entertaining everyone else. Crude but not particularly offensive. The fact that this movie does necessitate some background knowledge of current global socio-political issues is a drawback. In the absence of that, many of the jokes and digs would pass the uninitiated by, as in the case of Aladeen's stirring climactic speech extolling the virtues of dictatorship.

Bringing up these points of contention necessitates assuming that Baron Cohen always acts ironically. The irony is the understanding of words as opposing their intended meanings, revealed only after they are voluntarily "misunderstood." It has been argued that irony turns oppressive when its target is embarrassed, humiliated, or not understood.⁴⁴ This raises a crucial question about whom the laughter in the movie is aimed at. Although the film's structure makes it clear that the mockery is directed at Islamic society's political and cultural systems, it was relatively frequently believed that the film's laughter was also directed at Western societies, particularly American society: "What was refreshing was the way his character took a swipe at both Americans and Arabs simultaneously" (author: amala and from Australia). One elusive and frequently cited instance of this "simultaneous swiping" was a scene in which Aladeen and Nadal, the head nuclear scientist, fly over New York in a helicopter while carrying two American tourists.

Aladeen and Nadal engage in a boisterous and obnoxious conversation in "Arabic," talking about how Aladeen had severely damaged his Porsche 911 (pronounced "nine/eleven" here) and how he intended to purchase a brand-new "911, 2012". The conversation then shifts to how they should visit some attractions, including the Empire State Building, Yankee Stadium, and the fireworks over the Statue of Liberty, with Aladeen imitating loud explosions, giving

Nadal high fives, and then smiling evilly at their American travelling companions. The scene concludes when Nadal inquires about Aladeen's back issues, and Aladeen displays his homemade back brace, which resembles the explosive belt of a suicide bomber, before they begin to demonstrate their advanced English speaking abilities by counting down from five. American tourists begin to scream as they approach zero, and Aladeen and Nadal find themselves detained and arrested. The audience is left to determine whether the joke here is on Al-terrorist Qaeda's activities or Americans' biases against the Islamic world.

Suppose Baron Cohen's movie is considered a work of critical irony rather than an immature, slapstick comedy. In that case, it also establishes that the movie is critical of racism, sexism, and the propensity to view the world through exaggerated stereotypes. One frequently cited illustration used to support this claim was the scene in which the dictator Aladeen was presenting his speech to the American audience and outlining the advantages of dictatorship:

Imagine if America were a totalitarian state. You could distribute the country's wealth among 1% of the population. Lowering their taxes and offering to help them when they lose money at the casino could make your wealthy friends even wealthier. You could disregard the low-income population's needs for healthcare and education. Your media would seem independent but secretly under the control of one person and his family. Telephones could be wiretapped, and foreign prisoners could be tortured. You may have rigged elections. You might make up a reason for going to war. Nobody would object if you filled your prisons with members of one specific racial group. The public could be intimidated into backing policies against their interests using the media.

It is simple to see that the sarcasm in this instance is not directed at any particular dictatorship but rather draws attention to the widely held assumptions about the shortcomings of American society. The reviews frequently mentioned that the political satire in the movie had been misunderstood, which is related to the widespread belief that irony requires sophistication, wit, and intelligence.⁴⁵ By doing so, these reviewers aimed to elevate themselves above the "common" viewer while also praising the inventiveness of Baron Cohen's humour. This viewpoint advances a strongly dissident argument that the movie is not sexist, racist, or stereotyping. Rather, it is the complete opposite:

The intent and essentially the point of the movie, if you can call it that, is to depict these forms of racism or intolerance to raise awareness of them generally and perhaps even have a laugh about them while watching the movie, while also feeling a little guilty and ashamed at ourselves for doing so. Cohen's intention is clear: he wants to draw attention to these problems by demonstrating how ridiculous or offensive, such behaviour or actions can be. He also wants to highlight the problem more so that viewers will talk about it and, in some ways, become more knowledgeable after watching the movie. Cohen's eccentric behaviour undoubtedly has a purpose and a message. (Writer: Canadian cult film enthusiast)

Thus, if not emancipatory, at least some degree of educational impact is represented by Baron Cohen's humour. In this way, a movie's significance is thought to go beyond the entertainment industry's demands. Additionally, it is argued that humour has the potential to be educational. As implied in a review with the heading "Viva la Wadiya," the movie can be seen as the antithesis of those modern "pointless rubbish" comedies, which is essentially what all the unfavourable reviews think *The Dictator* is:

Each of Cohen's films has tackled a sensitive subject that immediately stirs debate, whether it be homophobia, xenophobia, stereotyping, or different political agendas. As time passes and the new year arrives, I have a hunch that his work will grow even more beloved as certain issues and controversies eventually simmer. They will soon be historical archives for America's endearing naivete towards diversity. (American writer Steve Pulaski is the source.)

The reviews above illustrate what is typically unexpected from arguments articulating humour's serious nature. These reviewers break two rules that Janet Staiger refers to as being "perverse spectators": they don't act as expected and re-hierarchize outside of expectations.⁴⁶ Staiger has used the idea of the "perverse spectator" to approach the politics of film reception. In this concept, perversion does not refer to anything "cranky" or "peevisish," as it has been defined in some dictionaries, but rather to the willingness of the spectator to deviate from the norm while still acknowledging its opposite: the spectator's inability to do otherwise.⁴⁷ Staiger emphasises that, even though perverted reception suggests a political act, acting differently does not always imply acting in a politically progressive manner. Both view offensive or racist humour as repugnant, and thinking of humour as innocent entertainment implies normative modes of reception. However, to view offensive and racist humour as helpful and educating requires taking a somewhat perverse, non-normative perspective that the majority of the audience would never even consider when viewing the movie.

CONCLUSION

Even though political discourses, policies, and actual decisions are frequently established in practical and formal geopolitics, the geopolitical order becomes understandable and significant to "common people" through popular culture.⁴⁸ It gives access to geopolitical events in an easily digestible and frequently already interpreted format.⁴⁹ The importance of the "war on terror" and its relationship to Islam as a religion, the injustice embedded in dictatorship as a political system, and images of conflict between the East and the West have all permeated popular culture. Popular culture is filled with vast amounts of information about our political environment. Still, due to its self-explanatory nature, it is often overlooked unless contextualised, conceptualised, and expressed. The products of popular culture frequently contain political messages, but it is much more difficult to determine whether or not these messages are acknowledged as intervening.

Carter and McCormack focused on how "existing notions of intervention rarely consider the role of popular culture as an agent" and how "geopolitical intervention is conventionally

conceived as the outcome of an elite form of popular practice, in which 'the public' does not figure" in their research on the function of film as an effective geopolitical assemblage.⁵⁰ This becomes even more difficult when humour is involved. Humour frequently has unintentional or imperfectly intended political intentions, conceals messages that may be intended, and leaves their meanings open to varying degrees of interpretation. These questions are frequently purposefully left open for the audience to evaluate and interpret, such as whether the artist is politically incorrect for a specific, affirmative, or destructive purpose, and whether he/she conveys a political message or insults without any intent.

The purpose of this example is to show how the adage "humour is serious" does not always mean the same thing to different people. Humour is a politically embedded institution and is not as innocent as it may appear at first glance. The same racist, sexist, or politically incorrect joke may be viewed as light-hearted entertainment that shouldn't be taken too seriously or as a highly relevant socio-political issue that demands attention. Additionally, as stated by Dodds and Kirby, political insult can range in severity, so it ultimately comes down to personal preference on whether political insult or offensive humour should be condemned.⁵¹ But as this essay emphasises, the frameworks within which we make our individual interpretations are these decisions, individual interpretations, and their performativity expressions.

IMDb serves as a platform for politicising the act of watching movies. The familiarity of IMDb performances can be seen "as evidence for the position that popular cultural renditions of politics are a relevant and part and parcel of political sense-making and performances," according to Van Zoonen, who has discussed how IMDb reviews offer a highly influential route for people to perform their "political self" or "selves."⁵² Like the Internet in general, IMDb reviews serve as a platform for developing contextual frameworks for interpreting, evaluating, and criticising movies, as well as serving as a forum for discussing a film's political content. More people now have access to it thanks to recent changes to the Internet. How, for instance, new media tools have been adopted and permitted to be adopted by general populations in the Middle East has been widely discussed.⁵³

Finding the laughter directed at the issues of racism, political incorrectness, and sexism and their connection to the Neo-Orientalist and War on Terrorist discourses to be prejudicial or emancipatory, and especially speaking out these opinions, means entering politics, establishing alternative interpretative patterns regarding the issue of how the serious and political nature of humour should be perceived, and acknowledging and legitimising its serious nature. By making the practices of naming equal to the practices of producing, this essay helps readers understand how the politicisation of humour is ultimately a matter of rhetorical acts or acts of doing something with your speech. As a speech act, the politicisation of humour includes several illocutionary purposes that all address the issue of how seriously humour should be taken in their own unique ways. As a result of the proliferation of opinions and interpretations in film reviews, people's methods of evaluating films and their political nature are diverted. Disapproval, condemnation, scorn, and praise are all examples of illocutionary speech acts that politicise humour and undermine the notion that humour is serious.

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