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# Brüno is So Gay

Thomas Duering

Few comedians are as willing to confront American culture's greatest taboos for the sake of a joke as Sacha Baron Cohen. Baron Cohen originally gained popularity in America with his adorably ignorant and bumbling character, Borat. According to Biography.com, "*Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* was a surprise smash, bringing in more than \$128 million at the box office". Because of *Borat*'s success, Baron Cohen is now known for a unique style of filmmaking in which his characters present themselves to people under false premises in an attempt to catch funny reactions on film. Sometimes his social experiments put him in real physical danger. For example, in *Brüno*, he journeys to the Middle East and antagonizes a leader of a terrorist organization and later flaunts his sexuality among homophobic hunters with loaded rifles. Sometimes the responses people give him are shocking and revealing glimpses of the mentalities that exist in our society. *Borat*, in particular, sometimes revealed misogyny and deep prejudice toward foreigners. *Brüno* promises to shock with revelations of hypocrisy in celebrity culture and evoke discomfort in the form of homophobia as Cohen takes on the roll of an outwardly (and absurdly stereotypical) gay Austrian fashion journalist. While *Borat*'s critique of our fear of foreigners seemed hilariously and frighteningly relevant in our post 9-11 society and led many to feel more socially aware, *Brüno*'s outwardly gay persona may offend more than it enlightens.

Most comedy crafts its humor in scripted scenarios, but Baron Cohen's filmmaking is loosely scripted and most scenes involve interaction between himself and people who don't know the real reason why they're being filmed. Because nobody can be sure how people will respond to Baron Cohen's character, he has described what he does as "extreme acting" (NPR). Maintaining character and constantly improvising gives Cohen a rush that he says is unlike anything in this world. The unique nature of Cohen's comedy makes it difficult to judge, but some of *Brüno*'s scenes are undeniably funny, like when he wears the jewel of his wardrobe to the *De La Prada* fashion show in Milan, Italy and becomes stuck to almost every piece of fabric backstage. Let it be said that *Brüno* is funny. How funny it is may depend greatly on how tolerant the viewer is of male frontal nudity or explicit scenes of homosexuality. This movie definitely deserves its R rating. The success of *Brüno* has not been as great as *Borat*, and the sensitive nature of homosexuality is almost assuredly a major factor in this.

As sensitive as foreign relations were when *Borat* was released, it seems that feelings toward homosexuality are just as, if not more, sensitive at the moment. A vast number of Americans have ambivalent views about Gay Rights and while some feel stronger about certain rights than others there is still a conflict with many core values held by Americans (Stephen).

Many who believe homosexuality to be a simple choice view it as an immoral choice and feel homosexuals do not deserve the same rights as other citizens. Some who believe it to be a psychological disposition think of it as an illness that needs to be cured. Legal scholar David Richards proposes that it should be viewed as an ethical choice similar to freedom of religion. The philosopher, Michael Ruse, examines the many theories concerning the cause of homosexuality and finds that most are insufficient but also finds little value in “phobic” positions. A major question, which *Brüno* does not attempt to address, is whether homosexuality is a lifestyle choice or a genetic/psychological disposition. After all, Baron Cohen claims that he’s just trying to make a funny movie. Despite how funny Baron Cohen thinks a close up shot of a penis spinning around to the beat of blaring techno music is, during the movie’s run time in theaters, many in America were too shocked to laugh at this scene while others were so disgusted that they left the theater.

Perhaps that is precisely the reaction Baron Cohen wanted to get from some people. In his interview with NPR, Cohen declares that homophobia is the last prejudice in society which is “okay to have.” The organic nature of *Brüno*’s comedy expands beyond the movie screen; indeed, the reaction of homophobes in the audience may even be part of the joke. Late in the movie, Brüno decides to give up his homosexuality in an attempt to become more socially acceptable and famous. At a swinger’s party, a powerful allegory is made about homosexual exclusion from mainstream culture. As Brüno moves from room to room in an awkward limbo among the heterosexual orgy, one can get a taste of the pungent discomfort that a gay man trying to live in a society ruled by straight people must feel daily. As he bashfully stands in the corner and asks if anyone would like a sandwich or compliments people on how great a job they are doing at having sex, his otherness is painted in colors more vivid and flamboyant than himself. The scene even becomes violent as a randy dominatrix tries to force herself on him and he narrowly escapes by crashing through a window and running off into the woods while shouting, “Don’t call me gay!” Many in the gay community have taken issue with *Brüno* by proposing that the movie perpetuates stereotypes, but Baron Cohen says that Brüno’s sexuality must be so absurd that only a true homophobe could believe he was real.

Despite the social commentary that can sometimes elevate these kinds of movies beyond a simple comedy, Baron Cohan insists in his NPR interview that, “we’re trying to make a funny film.” The question is, “is *Brüno* funny?” The short answer is yes. The long answer is that those who are not comfortable with their own sexuality may feel attacked. This is the movie’s greatest paradox. The homophobic portion of society being commented on will most likely be so turned off by the movie that they’ll never be able to laugh at themselves. In this way the movie’s shocking openness limits its audience to the people who are already comfortable with homosexuality. In truth, the real comedy isn’t *Brüno* itself, but it is the masses of people who won’t watch it out of their homophobic principles. The real joke is on them.

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