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Borat in the Age of Digital Inauthenticity

By: Isabella Bidmead

Abstract: Parafiction, as coined by Carrie Lambert-Beatty in 2009, is fiction that intersects with lived experiences, and is “experienced as fact”. While Lambert-Beatty uses this lens to examine various performance art pieces, she mentions Sacha Baron Cohen as a cultural touchstone for her audience to understand her concept but does not analyse his work in any depth. The structure of this essay will use *Borat* and *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm* as both case studies and temporal bookends to look at the rise of parafictive works in digital spheres. When *Borat* came out in 2006, there was little in mainstream media that it could be compared to. With the release of *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm* in 2020, we are a culture inundated with parafictive works, and as such we experience the parafictive in a way that would not be possible in 2006. **Key words:**

parafictive, Borat, Sacha Baron Cohen, digital media, film

The year is 2006. *Borat* has come out, and things are no longer good, but “*very niice*”. Poised right before the social media age ushered in the idea of “going viral”, *Borat* achieved a massive significance to the point where certain items or phrases, such as a *mankini*, or the phrase “my wife”, refuse to be decoupled from the now “infamous foreign journalist” even fourteen years later. However, as we now know, *Borat* the character was never a journalist from Kazakhstan trying to gain fame, but accomplished comedian and satirist Sacha Baron Cohen, disguised in a now trademark suit and accent. Here, I argue that the original *Borat* was an early example a form of parafiction which has now become integral in our daily, digital lives. This evolution in the prevalence of

parafictive works will be illustrated through the assessment of the development between *Borat* and its sequel, *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm* (2020).

Carrie Lambert-Beatty in “Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility” coins the term “parafiction” to describe a type of fictive work that is “experienced as fact”.ⁱ It differs from pure fiction in its interaction with reality; fiction, regardless of subgenre, exists in its own world. Parafiction must “have one foot in the field of the real.”ⁱⁱ Her article explores several performance art pieces from the early 2000’s, ranging from an exhibition of a false historical event, to a faux corporate renaming of Karlsplatz in Vienna.

The examples that Lambert-Beatty outlines are places where a stricter definition of parafiction thrives, such as political satire, or performance art. In addition to the performance pieces that she cites, she also briefly touches on Sacha Baron Cohen, *The Daily Show* and *Brass Eye*, as specific, more notable political examples, but does not analyse these works at all. There are clear separations in the art; Cohen takes off his wig at the end of filming, and does interviews as himself, or a team of artists comes forward to take credit for the piece. But in 2020 we are confronted with the issue that we encounter parafictions nearly daily, even if we do not immediately recognise them as such.

Lambert-Beatty acknowledges that parafiction has existed for decades prior to her identifying and naming the concept, and goes as far as to name Marcel Duchamp’s legacy lurking behind the genre.ⁱⁱⁱ However, while building upon Lambert-Beatty’s concepts, I argue that video bloggers (vloggers) and other social media influencers are also type of parafictive personalities. Lambert-Beatty, when she coined the phrase, could not have

considered this as in 2009 their existence was just burgeoning; Facebook was just taking off, YouTube was barely more than a clip-hosting website and Instagram had not even been invented.

While there are currently an incalculable number of current examples of vloggers based around parafictive elements, it is important to see where the genre started, as this would also give way to social media influencers on other platforms throughout the years. Youtube was founded in late 2006, and one of the earliest examples of both vlogging and short form scripted series can be found in Lonelygirl15.

Lonelygirl15 is now described as a webshow, one of the first of its kind, and a pioneer in Youtube scripted series. But unlike the majority of scripted series that followed it, people believed Bree, the “lonely girl” in question, to be a real person, not an actress. “The most important thing? People needed to believe Bree was real... So with Lonelygirl15, they did everything they could to make it feel completely authentic.”^{iv} People followed Bree’s periodic uploads, interacting with her and believing the idea that here was a lonely teenager, giving regular updates on her life. The fiction began to fall apart some ways into the series, when darker and more supernatural storylines were added in, but there remained healthy debate around the veracity of Bree herself, until it was officially announced that the entire “series” had been scripted.

Lonelygirl15 was certainly a pioneer, and it would be foolish to assume that had the persons responsible not written a character like Bree, no one would have. It is however, important that one of the defining genres on early social media, lifestyle vlogging, is parafictive. Social media as we are familiar with it today, was arguably built on parafictions, and is now a near inherent feature of it.

“Parafictioneers produce and manage plausibility. But plausibility (as opposed to accuracy) is not an attribute of a story or image, but of its encounter with viewers, whose various configurations of knowledge and "horizons of expectation" determine whether something is plausible”.^v In this sense, social media vloggers in their prime, achieve a sense of plausibility that *Borat* would never be able to achieve. For all Cohen’s skill, he pushes the interactions with the public, to the point of incredibility, even in the most gullible. A middle-aged man standing in a grocery store picking up literally every item and asking what it is, is inherently more suspect than a isolated teenaged girl going through hard times.

Like Cohen, influencers are often known by social media handles, as opposed to their real names (although a fake name is not inherently necessary for a character, as seen with Stephen Colbert). Messy parts of their lives that do not fit their “brand” are easily cropped out, edited away, or kept out of frame. There is undeniably a certain level of “putting your best foot forward” for all participants in social media, but for many influencers and vloggers, it really is putting on a whole new persona. This can include different vocal affectations, different clothing preferences, and even differing ideological viewpoints, for the benefit of the audience.

“The crucial skill for parafiction is stylistic mimicry,” Lambert-Beatty explains, a necessary aspect for the deceptive nature of the genre.^{vi} Accuracy in the mimicry is essential, and as the technological aspects of digital mimicry have improved, so has the prevalence of parafictive works. Changing your appearance is no longer a complex learned skill with expensive equipment, as in the early days of Photoshop. With relative simplicity, anyone can download a variety of free or inexpensive phone applications, and

end up with the same results. Entire careers are built off of images of perceived authenticity, only enabled to achieve that level of authenticity due to photo manipulation.

Perhaps here lies the crux of the difference in *Borat* and *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm*. The audience of these films has changed dramatically over the past fourteen years, and things that were just on the edge of plausibility, are now expected and commonplace. *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm* has arguably more political bite than the first, but there is less shock for the viewer. In the first *Borat*, the anti-Semitic viewpoints that Cohen was able to coax out of the people he interacted with were not spoken of in mainstream culture. Now, you barely have to scratch the surface of social media comments to find similar viewpoints. We have become increasingly used to seeing extremist ideals online, to the point where it's reached a normality that *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm* is unable to breach.

Again, I make no argument that parafiction did not exist prior to *Borat*, nor even that there were no mainstream examples of the phenomenon. Rather, I contend that the ubiquity of parafiction that is seen today in all of its various formats could only be achieved because of digital technology breakthroughs inaccessible to the mass consumer in 2006. Parafiction, now, is not just for political satirists, artists, or reality tv producers. It is available to anyone with a smartphone, and a social media account.

There is simply less shock value in *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm* than in its predecessor. Part of the appeal of the first movie lied in a curiosity of allowing such antics to be filmed, and the bewilderment of the people Cohen interacted with. That innocent bewilderment is lost in the sequel. His subjects, and the rest of us, accept that there is a certain amount of insanity, which just happens to be captured on camera. None

of this is to demean Cohen's skill as a satirist; he is still able to produce incredible content, with a deft hand showing the relative ease with which Americans are sucked into conspiracy theories, and is able to lower the guard of many subjects.

Yet, in the scenes where he is not dressed as the iconic reporter, but rather has his reporter "in disguise" as a country singer, and footage is surreptitiously taken from producer's phones, it does not seem unthinkable that this could instead be some aspiring right-leaning influencer, or one of many prankster Youtubers. It's difficult to see the quality of Cohen's ingenuity, in the absence of his iconic persona. The influx of digital inauthenticity in the people we see online has both made us more suspicious, and made us less surprised when we are shown to have been duped. In a world where the audience is always living with the parafictive, Borat's ignorance does not have the same emotional impact. We expect inauthenticity, we expect to be duped by the people we see online. *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm* needs us to be shocked for its message to have impact; this process is a hallmark feature of political satire. Lambert-Beatty, in 2009, writes on the entry into the "post-truth era". In 2020, we are fully ensconced in it, and what might have signposted our way back, has been fully obscured by the prevalence of digital inauthenticity.

Endnotes

ⁱ Lambert-Beatty, Carrie. "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility." *October* 129 (2009): 43.

ⁱⁱ Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe", p.43.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe", p.57.

^{iv} Cresci, Elena. "Lonelygirl15: how one mysterious vlogger changed the internet." *The Guardian* (London), June 16, 2016.

^v Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe",p. 73.

^{vi} Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe", p. 60.

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