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"Hey, Hey, He Gay, He Gay . . . Okay" . . . Or Is It?: The Sociological Importance of Bruno

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**“Hey, Hey, He Gay, He Gay . . . Okay” . . . Or Is It?:
The Sociological Importance of *Brüno***

by

Christopher T. Bishop

A Thesis Submitted to the Honors Council

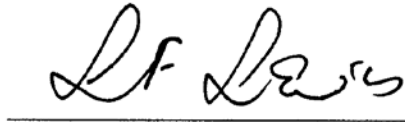
For Honors in Sociology

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Abstract

Sacha Baron Cohen is a British comedian who has garnered a great deal of controversy over the years. Through his characters, Ali G, Borat, and Bruno, he attempts to trick people into letting down their guards and revealing any prejudices (racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, misogyny, et cetera) that they may have. In doing so, each of his three characters has sparked a debate concerning the different issues they bring up: with Ali G, it was whether the character was racist or exposed racism; with Borat, it was whether the character was anti-Semitic or revealed anti-Semitism; and with Bruno, it is whether the character reinforces homophobia or mocks it. I am concerned with the last of these three debates, specifically in relation to Baron Cohen's film *Brüno*. Many say the film reinforces gay stereotypes and is thus harmful for the gay community, while a seemingly equal number of people say it effectively mocks homophobia and is thus beneficial for the gay community. Using the data I collected from thirty-one interviews conducted after five separate screenings of the film, I argue that *Brüno* is not harmful for the gay community as audiences understood that the Bruno character is based on exaggerated stereotypes of homosexuals. That is, the film did not reinforce any negative stereotypes. But, I also explain that the film did not change any opinions on homosexuality either. Also in this work, I argue that within the world of cinema, *Brüno* fails to fit into any pre-existing genre, including the "mock-documentary" genre where it is most commonly placed. Rather, I suggest the film is better categorized as what I call a *Real Fake Mock-documentary*. While "mock-documentaries" are made up of fictional characters in fictional situations, this new term encompasses the fact that *Brüno* involves a fictional character placed into real situations. I conclude by noting that the content, release, and debate surrounding *Brüno* all reveal that it is still difficult to bring up the issue of homosexuality in American society, even forty years after the Civil Rights era.

Introduction

A debate is currently raging between media critics and political groups who think the recent film *Bruno* reinforces homosexual stereotypes and those who posit that the film exposes and makes fun of homophobic members of its audience. The film stars controversial comedian Sacha Baron Cohen and revolves around his flamboyantly gay Austrian character, Bruno. The Snoop Dogg quote used in the title of this work, taken from the last line in the film, illustrates the film's intent in addressing the issue of gay rights. A seemingly endless supply of articles and blogs that fall on one side or the other are piling up on the Internet and in newspapers and magazines. Many say that the film is beneficial to the homosexual community, while others say it is detrimental to the cause of gay rights. For instance, Aaron Hicklin, editor of *Out Magazine*, shared his excitement about the film because it “does something hugely important, which is showing that people's attitudes can turn on a dime when they realize you're gay. The multiplex crowd wouldn't normally sit down for a two-hour lecture on homophobia, but that's exactly what's going to happen. I'm excited about that” (Barnes 2009). On the other side, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) claimed that the film reinforces “negative stereotypes and ‘decreases the public's comfort with gay people’” (Associated Press 2009). But how are those who are watching *Bruno* actually reading and understanding it? Are they laughing because they think Baron Cohen's character is portraying how homosexuals really act, or are they laughing at the people who believe that Bruno's antics represent reality? The objective of this project is to explore how people in fact make sense of *Bruno*. By doing so, I hope to provide insight into which

side of the debate is indeed closer to the truth. Also, I aim to demonstrate how popular culture texts have meaning, and what kind of impact they can have on larger cultural and political issues such as gay rights. A fair amount of attention has been given to Baron Cohen's other two characters, Ali G and Borat, but nothing of sociological importance has yet been written on Bruno. Thus, this work can hopefully begin to fill a gap in the existing research.

Who is Sacha Baron Cohen? This question will be addressed in the first section of this paper. He will be placed within a wider cultural context, and we will see that what he has done in his work, especially *Briino*, is quite deliberate. Next, I will describe the narrative of the film. I must make clear that my intention is not to write a review of the film, but rather to describe in detail the events of the film so that later discussions will make sense. After that, I will discuss where the film is situated in terms of the wider world of film. I will show that it is in fact part of a new and developing format in mainstream cinema. Next, I will lay some theoretical groundwork and interpret the key cultural references made in the film. What will follow is a discussion of what critics, viewers, and public figures said about the film and why. That is, I will unpack the debate surrounding the film about its impact on the gay community and offer reasons why people felt the way they did. Then I will share my own findings, taken from interviews with people who had just seen the film, of how viewers actually read and interpreted the film. From this, I will discuss whether or not *Briino* is harmful for gay rights. If people leave a showing of *Briino* and think that the film accurately depicted homosexuals, then I believe it is fair to say that it is potentially detrimental to the cause of gay rights. But, if

they found that the humor of the film was in its attack on homophobic members of society, then it would be reasonable to think that it is not necessarily damaging. Finally, I will conclude by illustrating what the film and its release reveal about our society. The purpose of this project, then, is to examine the debate surrounding *Brüno* and to provide a framework for studying other debates on cultural objects. Simply speculating about what people take from a film, book, or other work of art is all well and good, but this often leads us away from reality.

In his writings on method, Max Weber rejected the “assumption of any ‘objective meaning’” (Girth and Mills 1946: 58). There is no single truth about anything, and in accordance with this, sociologists must take into account the meaningful nature of social actions (Smith and Riley 2009: 12). I am following in this tradition by presenting a particular way of thinking about the issues that surround *Brüno*. This perspective is based on my social position, one that I share with many others in my generation. I am a white, middle-class college student attending a rural, liberal arts university. I, like many others in my generational cohort, believe in gay rights and feel that anyone who is intolerant of homosexuals is missing something very important in the way he or she thinks. Thus, I am not alone in how I perceive these issues. These views likely may have pushed me towards presenting a picture where *Brüno* is seen as less harmful to gay rights than it really is. But, I have tried my best to present as neutral an account as I possibly could that will hopefully provide a valuable insight into how viewers understood the film.

Sacha Baron Cohen

As a satirist, [Sacha] Baron Cohen has an agenda; his humor is meant as an attack on political and religious institutions, as well as the bourgeoisie, the ruling classes, and other social groups. It is also educational in that it is meant to teach the audience something about the undesirability of that which is being attacked (Saunders 2008: 24).

The previous quote illustrates the intent of what British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen aims to accomplish. By putting on the mask of one of his three main characters (Ali G, a dimwitted wannabe gangster from a middle class London suburb; Borat, an anti-Semitic journalist from Kazakhstan; or Bruno, a gay Austrian fashion reporter), Baron Cohen attempts to expose some of the more undesirable aspects of society. With Ali G, it is primarily racism and misogyny; with Borat, it is mostly anti-Semitism and misogyny; and with Bruno, it is predominantly homophobia. Each character poses as a journalist for a fictitious news agency in order to gain access to people from all sectors of society, including politicians, celebrities, and average citizens. How did Baron Cohen come about wanting to critique society through comedy? What other major works has he developed besides *Bruno*? What other controversies has he stirred up as a result of his work? A brief look at Baron Cohen's biography will reveal the answers to these questions and more. (For a more comprehensive look at Sacha Baron Cohen, Ali G, and Borat, see *The Many Faces of Sacha Baron Cohen: Politics, Parody, and the Battle Over Borat* by Robert A. Saunders.)

Sacha Noam Baron Cohen was born on October 13, 1971 in Hammersmith, London, England to a comfortably middle class Orthodox Jewish family. While he was

growing up, his family was very much interested in the arts. His mother taught dance, and his grandmother was “an acclaimed ballet dancer in Germany before fleeing the country during the Third Reich” (Saunders 2008: 10). His brother, Erran, is a composer and trumpet player who produced the music for Sacha’s *Da Ali G Show*, *Borat*, and *Brüno*.

Baron Cohen attended the prestigious Haberdashers’ Aske’s Boys’ School in Hertfordshire and was an excellent student. Attending this school greatly influenced him, as it was there where he met many of the friends he would work with later in his career. As a teen, Baron Cohen was politically active and participated in anti-fascism demonstrations and marched against apartheid. From “Habs” he spent a year in Israel before returning to England where he attended Christ’s College at the University of Cambridge and studied history. This is the part of his life that has allowed him to do his comedy without being deemed racist, anti-Semitic, or homophobic. Most every article about Baron Cohen mentions Cambridge because “‘it makes the disturbing parts of his act less unacceptable. Because it’s coming from a smart man, an educated man.’ In other words, if he were undereducated he would just be a racist, but his Oxbridge degree affords him a greater level of tolerance among the culture police” (Saunders 2008: 12). During his last year at the university he wrote a thesis entitled “The Black-Jewish Alliance – A Case of Mistaking Identities.” This work, which sheds light on why he chose to later critique society, investigated Jewish involvement in the American Civil Rights movement. He conducted research in Atlanta, Georgia in 1992 and saw racism first-hand. This greatly affected his later work as he would spend much time in the

American south as Ali G, Borat, and Bruno. He found that the “‘Black-Jewish alliance’ is a misnomer. An alliance implies a reciprocal relationship, acknowledged and supported from both sides. This was not the case. . . . Ever since the meeting of the Jews and Blacks in urban America, there have been tensions between them” (Saunders 2008: 11). His work won him praise from both his peers and professors alike, but rather than further pursuing academics, Baron Cohen decided instead to follow the work he had done in the Cambridge University Amateur Dramatic Club and become an entertainer (2008: 12).

Many of Britain’s most well known comedians and performers influenced Baron Cohen. According to Saunders (2008), “he [Baron Cohen] frequently cites the actor Peter Sellers as the most seminal force in shaping his early ideas on comedy” (22). The two comedians have a lot in common. Both possess dramatic skills, a devotion to comedy, and a gift for playing foreigners for laughs. Each comic also completely buries himself in whatever character he is portraying at the moment (Saunders 2008: 22). Seller’s most famous character, Inspector Clouseau from *The Pink Panther* films, best exemplifies his talent for impressions. Baron Cohen was also a big fan of Monty Python, especially the film *Life of Brian*. In fact, watching this film was “among his most formative experiences in early life” (Ibid). The actors, like John Cleese, who contribute to the Monty Python films and sketches, took pride in tackling cultural taboos. Baron Cohen follows this tradition. Despite the fact that he has never explicitly noted Andy Kaufman as an influence, one must wonder if the American comedian provided Baron Cohen with a template of what could be done in terms of remaining in character to

extreme lengths. Kaufman was famous for making people wonder whether they were watching a performance or reality (as seen in his most notable alter-egos Foreign Man and Tony Clifton), and it seems quite plausible that Baron Cohen would have been inspired by this.

After Baron Cohen graduated from Cambridge, he spent five years in cable television obscurity before joining the cast of a fake news program called *The 11 O'Clock Show* (Saunders 2008: 33). This is where he was able to cultivate his three characters, especially Ali G, before he got his own show, *Da Ali G Show* on Britain's Channel 4. This led to the release of Baron Cohen's first full-length feature film, *Ali G Indahouse*. Rather than sticking to his formula of interviewing people in power and duping them into saying embarrassing things, Baron Cohen chose instead a fully scripted film that revealed a good deal about Ali G's life and background. Despite its less than stellar acting and weak plot, the film went on to become "the highest grossing British film of 2002" (2008: 46). Reviews were not favorable. The *Daily Mail* declared it "the very worst British film ever made" (Gilroy 2002). Regardless of the bad press, Baron Cohen became so popular and well-known in Britain that he eventually had to bring his act to the States. *Da Ali G Show* (or *Ali G in da USAiii* as it was called in Britain) came to America in 2003 and was shown on HBO (Home Box Office). It lasted for two seasons, each comprised of six episodes.

Who is this character that led to Baron Cohen's first real dose of popularity? Ali G is an uneducated, white British gang member from Staines, a London suburb (where he lives with his grandmother), who wishes he were a black "gangsta". He wears baggy

clothing, sunglasses, a doo-rag, and lots of elaborate “bling.” His forte is revealing the shortcomings of prominent figures in British and American social and political life through formal interviews. He has the uncanny ability of making his “subjects” let their guards down and say things they would probably not say under normal circumstances, resulting in varying degrees of humiliation. For instance, he asks the famous astronaut Buzz Aldrin, “Do you think man will ever walk on the sun?” To which Aldrin replies, “No, the sun is too hot. It is not a good place to go to.” Ali counters with, “What happens if they went in winter when the sun is cold?” Aldrin answers, “The sun is not cold in the winter” (*Da Ali G Show* 2006). In another clip, Ali interviews former United Nations Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali. He begins by introducing him as “Boutros Boutros Boutros Ghali” and proceeds to ask him if Disneyland is a country and what the funniest language is. Not everyone is as receptive to Ali as Aldrin and Ghali are, however. Andy Rooney, the well-know American reporter, ends his interview with Ali abruptly when he becomes frustrated at how poor Ali’s grasp of the English language is and his overall stupidity (*Da Ali G Show* 2006).

These interviews were not very controversial, especially in regards to race, the issue at the heart of the Ali G character. A fine example of an interview that was racially charged was the one in which Ali spoke with Dr. Michael Howitt Wilson, of the Guild of Catholic Doctors, and Dr. David Cook, Lecturer in Genetics. It went like this:

Ali G: Wouldn’t it be great if we had the technology to make sure dat everyone was black? Or is dat just a dream?

Dr. Wilson: You couldn’t –

AG: Ain’t dat a bit racist?

DW: I think – no I don't think –

AG: That's a bit racist, innit?

DW: I think it's a bit racist –

AG: Speak to me 'and coz me 'ead ain't listenin'.

DW: I think it's a bit racist to suggest that it would be a good thing for everyone to be black.

Dr. Cook: You see your point was very interesting. You said why shouldn't everybody be black – but that's because you happen to be black.

AG: (nodding in assent) Aii (Howells 2006: 160).

Of course, the joke here is that Ali is not black, but he managed to convince Dr. Cook that he was.

From sketches like this, Ali G created a fair amount of controversy for Baron Cohen. In her piece “Lighten up?! Humour, Race, and Da off colour joke of Ali G,” Tara Atluri (2009) describes how people were not sure if Ali was making fun of racists or black street culture:

The joke could be read as a hyperbolic performance that mocks notions of whiteness and blackness, gesturing to the instability of the racial stereotype. However, the joke could also reinforce the stereotype, as Ali's appropriations of hip-hop could generate anxious laughter due to the seemingly impassable boundaries of race (208).

Howells (2006) notes that “these seemingly competing theories about Ali G lead us to conclude that his humor is polysemic. That is, in other words, both multi-layered and open to differing and even opposing interpretations. There is no simple, single meaning. Many of these interpretations are dependent on or particular to the individual viewer” (168). Two different viewers watching the same episode of *Da Ali G Show* could be

laughing at completely different things. Thus, how one reads Ali G (and certainly Borat and Bruno, as we will see) depends on his or her own background, culture, and experiences.

In America, Ali G gained his popularity through *Da Ali G Show* on HBO, but Baron Cohen's next character made it big on the silver screen. Borat Sagdiyev is a professional journalist from Kazakhstan, the world's ninth largest nation. He is arguably an amateur anthropologist, spending his segments of each episode visiting America and learning about its culture. Unlike Ali G, Borat interviews normal, everyday citizens rather than politicians and celebrities. Borat's signature language, with phrases such as "chram" (genitals) and "jagshemash" (hello), is a combination of Hebrew, Polish, and gibberish (Saunders 2008: 14, 73). He is misogynistic (he is amazed that in American democracy "women can vote, but horse cannot!"), homophobic, and anti-Semitic and manages to manipulate people into revealing their similar prejudices. For instance, in one episode, featured on the *Da Ali G Show* in Britain, Borat interviews a wealthy southern American hunter on his ranch and discusses hunting Jews:

Hunter: You don't have any Jews up in your country do you?

Borat: Jews? We have a many Jews! They cause a lot of uh, the one who like the money?

H: Yeah. That's one of their traits, alright.

B: In my country, the big-nose people, they make a lot of trouble. They make trouble here in America, too?

H: Everywhere they are.

B: Yes.

H: They were so bad in Germany, in controlling the economy and all the money and stuff. That's why when the Nazis got in power, they said, "we're gonna have a final solution to these Jews."

B: Yes, "we're gonna hunt the Jew."

H: Kill 'em all.

B: It is a shame you cannot have in one of these [ranches] a deer and then a Jew and say you can hunt the Jew.

H: You can't be that way in this country, you know?

B: Why not?

H: I know. It's ok with me, but it's not with other people ("YouTube - Borat-Hunting").

Frightening revelations like this are commonplace in the Borat segments. One elicited an exceptional amount of controversy. In an Arizona bar, Borat performed his own country and western song entitled "So My Country Can Be Free," also known as "Throw the Jew Down the Well." The chorus goes like this: "Throw the Jew down the well/ so my country can be free. You must grab him by his horns/ and then we have a big party." It gets worse. Not only did Borat sing these hateful lyrics, but he actually got the patrons of the bar to sing them with him over and over again. The skit resulted in an investigation by Britain's Office of Communications. The office eventually decided that no television standards were violated because, "when such hard-edged comedy is concerned, it is very difficult to censure a characterization if its purpose is to use the very attitudes which it intends to mock" (Saunders 2008: 75). The bit also drew criticism from the Anti-Defamation League who were concerned that, while the intent was understood, "the irony may have been lost on some of the audience, or worst still that they simply

accepted Borat's statements about Jews at face value" (Ibid). Here again we see the debate as to how audiences actually read and interpret Baron Cohen's humor.

In 2006, a few years after *Da Ali G Show* ended its run on HBO, Baron Cohen was ready to release his feature length film about the Kazakhstani reporter entitled *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*. It shares the story of Borat's visit to America in an effort to film a documentary about the country. Along the way he becomes infatuated with the actress Pamela Anderson, and he shifts his goal slightly to incorporate finding and marrying her. Despite predictions that the film would not do exceptionally well, it went on to gross over \$260 million worldwide, receive overwhelmingly positive reviews, and result in a Golden Globe for Baron Cohen (*Box Office Mojo*). But, the film also garnered a great deal of controversy by stimulating "more lawsuits than any motion picture in recent memory" (Saunders 2008: 152). Two of the three USC fraternity members featured in the film filed an injunction even before its release. With their lawsuit came a deluge of other supporting "actors," from an entire Romanian village to a Manhattan executive, seeking damages for the pain and suffering caused to them by the film (Ibid). Because they all signed release forms before filming, however, all of the cases were eventually thrown out of court.

It is clear from this brief analysis of *Ali G* and *Borat* that Sacha Baron Cohen's comedy has resulted in a considerable amount of controversy. From debates to how audiences actually read the films and shows to lawsuits filed by participants, his work makes people think critically of the issues he presents. As we will see, this is certainly also true of *Brüno*.

Bruno

Bruno is the subject of a lot of homophobia. The main difference between playing Borat and Bruno is that it is a lot more dangerous doing Bruno, because there is so much homophobia. So for example, when I was doing Bruno at the Alabama, Mississippi football game a few years ago, 60,000 people in the crowd started chanting faggot, and started throwing stuff at me, taunting me, spitting at me, threatening to kill me. Those kinds of situations are a lot more common when you are playing a gay character. It is almost as if homophobia is one of the last forms of prejudice that really is tolerated (Saunders 2008:72).

The above quote was made by Sacha Baron Cohen during an interview with National Public Radio (NPR). It provides insight into how important and pervasive the issue of homosexuality is in our society. To deal with this issue, Baron Cohen utilizes the humorous and biting strategy of satire. Berger (1997) defines satire as the “deliberate use of the comic for purposes of attack” (157). This attack can be directed “against institutions and their representatives, social groups and their cultures, or individuals,” and is based on the agenda of the satirist. With Bruno, Baron Cohen is attacking these groups because he wants to reveal homophobia (and anti-Semitism, misogyny, racism, stupidity, et cetera) in all aspects of society. Celebrities, politicians, and ordinary folks are all fair game for his attacks. There are three elements of satire. The first is “fantasy (often grotesque).” For Baron Cohen, this is his over-the-top character, Bruno. The second is a “standpoint based on moral norms.” For this instance, the moral norm could be that American society does not (in theory) discriminate. The third element is “an object of attack”, which in this case is society’s homophobia (Berger 1997: 158). Thus, Bruno is a

flamboyantly gay character (and while the character is exaggerated, it is not difficult to think of people who act somewhat similar to him – this is part of what makes the character work and allows his those being duped to believe that he is real and not just a character) who attacks the hypocrisy of our society’s dealing with homosexuality by revealing its homophobic tendencies. It is important to note that satire is bound by context, that is, time and place. If we look years into the future or at a different location, we would find that viewers would not understand every aspect of the satire – they simply would not recognize and appreciate every reference. Finally, it is not necessary for the audience to agree with the satirist to begin with. “Satire can also be educational: it may be a *result* of the satirist’s labors that the audience comes to understand the undesirability of what is attacked” (Ibid). Later, we will see if this aspect can be applied to *Bruno*.

On *Da Ali G Show*, Bruno was the least used character – he does not appear in every episode like Ali G and Borat do. But, he is arguably the character that elicits the most shocking views from those he interviews. In one episode, he gets a fashion designer to agree to put people with no fashion sense onto a train and say “bye-bye.” This theme of getting interviewees to agree with horrid Nazi policies is common for Bruno. In another episode, a club owner admits that if house music were around in the 1930s, then World War II never would have happened. In season two, Bruno interviews the organizer of a pro-America expo and at one point, starts hitting on the man. “You’re so cute,” says Bruno. The man responds, “I like women.” “You’re bi [bisexual]?” asks Bruno. “No, your interview is over. Be professional, not some fucking fag.” One final

example, shot during an Arkansas gun show, reveals how nearly violent people can become when accused of being gay:

Bruno: What's your biggest gun?

Daniel (participant at gun show): Caliber wise, it's my seven magnum.

B: Do you need to use lube with a gun like that?

D: Absolutely.

B: How far can you put it up the poopenschaft?

D: I probably wouldn't use it up the poopenschaft [still likely does not understand that Bruno is gay].

B: What is it about shooting that makes it the number one activity among gay guys?

D: That I don't know. I don't know any gay people, and I'm not gay.

B: Why are you denying it? I'm gay.

D: If you call me gay one more time, I'm fixin' to knock every tooth outta your head. Be careful what you say, be real careful [Bruno remains silent] (*Da Ali G Show* 2006).

The nature of Bruno's character may explain why Baron Cohen waited so long to make a movie featuring him. But finally, on July 10, 2009, *Bruno* (which had a working title of '*Bruno: Delicious Journeys Through America for the Purpose of Making Heterosexual Males Visibly Uncomfortable in the Presence of a Gay Foreigner in a Mesh T-shirt*' (Boyakasha.co.uk)) was released in the United States. It would remain in theatres for six weeks and go on to gross almost \$140 million worldwide, \$60 million of which came from the U.S. (*Box Office Mojo* (1)). What follows is the film's narrative. It is purely descriptive as I have left out any commentary or analysis – these will come up

later. There have been accusations that many of the scenes in the film were staged, and I will address this issue shortly.

Brüno is the tale of one man's quest for fame and love. The story begins with a montage of homosexual activity between Bruno and other men complete with subliminal messages, such as "Black Guys" and "Herpes Free," set to the background of techno music. We then see Bruno, a tanned and hairless "nineteen year old" with styled blonde hair wearing a yellow (and revealing) lederhosen, walking down an Austrian street describing his fashion series, *Funkyzeit*, the top fashion series in any German speaking country, "apart from Germany." He cuts to a segment of his show called "In or Aus." We find that autism is in because it is funny, while Chlamydia is "aus." Following that he shows an interview with fashion designer Kunal Nayyar in which the interviewee promotes the show while exposing his pubic hair, as requested by Bruno. Next is an interview with supermodel Heather Hahn in which she explains how difficult it is to walk properly, especially the turns, in the world of modeling. After we see Bruno yell at models in an outdoor fashion show, we are introduced to his assistants, Kookus, who helps him with his wardrobe (including a pink fuzzy one piece suit complete with a fabric penis) and his bulimia, and Lutz, the one whose name Bruno cannot remember.

Next comes one of the most controversial scenes of the film where we meet Bruno's pygmy flight attendant boyfriend, Diesel, and see exactly what the two do in the privacy of their own bedroom. What follows is extremely graphic: an exercise machine with an attached dildo is inserted into Bruno (penetration is not shown – a black box covers the region where it is occurring); a fire extinguisher is expelled into Diesel's

derriere; Diesel is propelled across the room in a chair onto Bruno's penis; a hand vacuum is placed onto Bruno's penis and turned on; Diesel is rotated in a complete circle while being penetrated by Bruno; and Bruno pours Diesel a glass of champagne that is lodged in Diesel's behind. After this explicit demonstration of the two's "affection" for each other, we go to Milan where Bruno is filming a segment for his show. He arrives in a suit made entirely of Velcro, and while backstage he proceeds to get clothing and curtains stuck to his outfit. He causes pandemonium before "accidentally" falling onto the main stage, and, making the most of the opportunity, he walks down the catwalk for a bit before he is apprehended by security. Cue string music as a backdrop to Bruno being rejected by security at all of the subsequent fashion events and clubs to which he goes. Because of what he had done at the fashion show, Bruno is "schwartzlisted" and fired from *Funkyzeit*. He decides that the fashion industry is "superficial and vacuous" and resolves to go to Los Angeles to become a celebrity and "the biggest Austrian superstar since Hitler."

But then, even more tragedy strikes. Diesel breaks up with Bruno. Distraught and crying, Bruno is ready to fly to America. As he is waiting his "assistant's assistant," Lutz, approaches him and requests to go with him. The two converse in German (Lutz) and pseudo-German (Bruno) and decide to make the trip together. Upon arrival to the states, Bruno runs around with a sheet over his head in an attempt to avoid the non-existent paparazzi. Confused onlookers watch as he runs into a pillar. In an attempt to become "the biggest gay movie star since Arnold Schwarzenegger," he hires an agent named Lloyd Robinson, who gets him a part as an extra on the television show *Medium*.

After ruining take after take, Bruno is fired, and so he decides to make his own show about celebrities. In order to look his best, he visits “Pink Cheeks,” an anal bleaching salon. While being bleached, Bruno’s agent, Lloyd, calls him and tells him that he got a network to agree to a test screening of Bruno’s show. Breaking character after Bruno mentions his “aschenholla,” Lloyd requests audio of the conversation he just had with Bruno because he wants the crew to “hear what this fool is saying.”

The next scene brings us to a furniture-less mansion. This is where Bruno is to interview celebrities for his show. But, with no furniture, he needs to figure out where the celebrities will sit. He thus asks the Mexican workers who were cleaning his pool to come inside and get onto their hands and knees so that the interviewees have a place to sit. Paula Abdul enters, and without much hesitation, sits on one of the workers. During the interview, Lutz wheels in a naked worker covered with sushi. At this, Abdul’s manager decides to end the talk and exit the premises. (Next was supposed to appear a scene with LaToya Jackson in which Bruno asks for her brother’s, pop star Michael Jackson, phone number. When she does not give it to her, he asks to see her phone and tells Lutz Michael’s number. The scene was deleted before the premiere because of Michael’s death (Brooks 2009).)

After the failed interview with Abdul, Bruno is blacklisted in Hollywood. Now there is no way for him to interview celebrities like “Stevie Wunderbar” (Stevie Wonder), “Wilhelm Schmidt” (Will Smith), “Bradolf Pittler” (Brad Pitt), or “The Fuhrer” (Mel Gibson). But they make the show anyway and premiere it the next day for a focus group. The show is called “A-List Celebrity Max-Out.” It features a great deal of Bruno dancing

with close-ups of his barely covered genitals. He interviews former reality show star Brittny Gastineau and gets her to claim that Jaime Lynn Spears, Brittny Spears' younger sister, should abort her baby because she is "white trash." After more slow-motioned close-ups of Bruno's nearly exposed, swaying genitals, a highly anticipated interview with Harrison Ford appears. Ford is leaving a restaurant and Bruno barely lets out a few words when the star yells, "Fuck off!" What follows is another very controversial scene in which we see a close up of Bruno's penis moving in every imaginable way until it stops and "looks" at the audience before saying "Bruno!" The focus group is clearly not impressed. One participant proclaims, "No logical person would consider a show like this unless they had some sort of a mental or moral defect." Bruno is clearly upset until he decides to follow a suggestion written by one of the participants saying that the only way he will get famous is by making a sex tape.

The target for Bruno's sex tape is 2008 Republican presidential candidate Ron Paul. While his crew is fixing a light in the hotel room they are filming, Bruno and Paul go into another room that is being taped by a hidden camera. Bruno puts on some music and attempts to seduce Paul. Once Bruno drops his pants, Paul is out the door and ends the interview. As he leaves the hotel room, Paul exclaims that Bruno is "queer as blazes" and "queer as crazy." After failing to seduce "RuPaul," Bruno decides to see psychic Gary Williams in order to speak with his old boyfriend, Milli, from the group Milli Vanilli. He asks Williams what Milli says he should do to become famous. He responds that Bruno should set up a foundation or something to benefit others. Bruno then proceeds to mime, very graphically, kissing and performing oral sex on the ghost of

Milli. When he is done, Williams says, “Well, good luck with your life,” and Bruno leaves.

In order to find a charity that can help him become famous as fast as possible, Bruno enlists the help of charity public relations consultants Nicole and Suzanne Defosset. They suggest possibly making bracelets out of extinct animals or helping with “Dafar,” which according to them is in Iraq. Bruno understands that Darfur is the big cause now, but he wants to know what “DarFive” is going to be. He thus decides to solve a world problem. Because “[George] Clooney’s got Darfur, Sting’s got the Amazon, and Bono’s got AIDS,” Bruno decides to fix the problems in “Middle Earth” (the Middle East). While walking around Palestine dressed in an unusually skimpy traditional Jewish outfit, Bruno is angrily chased by a group of Hasidic Jews. His goal while there is to have both sides, the Israelis and Palestinians, sign a peace agreement. While talking with Yossi Alpher, ex-Mossad Chief, and Ghassan Khatib, former Palestinian Minister, Bruno confuses Hamas with hummus. He gets them both to agree that hummus is very healthy. He then speaks with Avraham Sela, a professor at Hebrew University, and Adnan Al-Husseini, Palestinian Governor of Jerusalem. Bruno wants the Palestinians to give the Pyramids back to the Israelis, but Al-Husseini sets Bruno straight about how the Pyramids are actually in Egypt. Seeing that his efforts are failing, Bruno begins to sing a song he wrote that urges them to not to kill each other, but rather to “shoot a Christian.” He then grabs each man’s hand and puts them together while he sings about peace. They both applaud Bruno for his talents.

So far Bruno's plan has failed, and so, taking inspiration from what Professor Sela told him about hostages becoming famous, Bruno decides to be kidnapped by terrorists so that a video of it will be broadcast around the world. In Lebanon, he speaks with Ayman Abu Aita, terrorist group leader of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, about the possibilities of being kidnapped. Bruno tells the man that his "King Osama looks like a kind of dirty wizard or a homeless Santa." At that, the translator warns Bruno to leave immediately. He heads back to Los Angeles, but first, he makes a stop in Africa "for a little bit of shopping." At the airport he unloads items such as elephant tusks and feet before he picks up a cardboard box fixed with many tiny holes and "FRAGILE" labels. In it is an African baby. As he pulls the child out of the box, people watch with amazement and disbelief. He decides to do a baby photo shoot and holds casting calls to find other babies to accompany his "son." He proceeds to ask the parents of baby actors the following:

Bruno: Would you be willing to have your baby be strung up on a crucifix next to a vine?

Parent #1: Fine. Yeah, I don't mind her being up on a crucifix.

B: Is your baby comfortable with bees, wasps, and hornets?

Parent #2: George is comfortable with everything, so he's fine.

B: Is he comfortable with dead or dying animals?

Parent #3: Yes.

B: Amateur science?

Parent #1: What do you mean by that?

B: You know, some untrained people conducting scientific experiments.

Parent #1: Oh, it should be fine.

B: Is she ok with extremely rapid acceleration?

Parent #4: Yes.

B: Does she have to be in a car seat, or can she just freestyle it?

Parent #4: Oh yeah. You can freestyle it, put her in a car seat, whatever.

B: Is your baby fine with antiquated heavy machinery?

Parent #1: Yes. She's fine, she's been around that.

B: Would she be fine to operate them?

Parent #1: Yes.

B: Is your baby fine with lit phosphorus?

Parent #3: Yes.

B: Excellent. Does he like it?

Parent #3: He loves it.

Bruno then asks the first parent how much her daughter weighs, to which she replies, "thirty pounds." He asks her if the baby could lose ten pounds in the next week, and she says, "Yeah, I'd have to do whatever I could." She even admits to be willing to allow her daughter to get liposuction as a last resort. Bruno awards her daughter with the position and tells her that her daughter will be dressed as a Nazi officer and will push a cart with another baby, dressed as a Jew, into an oven. The mother feels good that her child got the job.

In the next scene we see Bruno and Lutz in a hotel room singing a German lullaby to the African baby, while Lutz rocks the crib back and forth with the exercise machine's dildo apparatus. The next morning Bruno leaves the hotel on a scooter with the baby sitting on the handle bars listening to obscene rap music. As they pull into the road, they narrowly avoid getting hit by a car. The next stop is Dallas where Bruno will appear on the talk show, "Today with Richard Bey." The almost entirely black audience is upset when they are finally alerted to Bruno's sexuality. He wants to find "Mr. Right," but the

audience is not happy about that. They are then completely appalled when Bruno's son is brought out in a stroller. The baby is wearing brown leather pants and a black shirt that says "Gayby." Bruno notes how he picked up the baby in a "country called Africa." At this an audience member corrects him and says Africa is a continent. Bruno counters by saying that Africa is "full of African-Americans." He then tells the audience that he swapped the baby for an iPod. The audience is very angry at hearing this. One woman screams, "WHAT?!" He then reveals the baby's name, O.J., which he considers a traditional African name. A woman accuses him of using the baby as an accessory to attract men. Bruno admits that the baby is a "real dick magnet." To demonstrate his love for the child, he shows a couple of pictures of him and the baby, including one of O.J. hanging on a cross with babies dressed as Romans at the base of it, before showing pictures of him and other gay men with O.J. in a hot tub in some obscene and graphic poses. At this, at least half of the audience storms out of the studio. A woman from the state child services department then appears and takes O.J. away from Bruno. An emotional scene ensues. Bruno is enraged, and with tears streaming down his face, he is taken away by security.

To drown his sorrows, Bruno visits a restaurant and attempts to commit "carbicide" by eating too many desserts. Other customers are curious at what this oddly dressed man is doing. Before he can carry out the deed, Lutz arrives to save him. The next morning the two are lying in bed and are attached to each other by an intricate S&M contraption. Their hotel room is completely trashed – sex toys are strewn about, gerbils are running around in a drawer, and plastic wrap covers the walls. They cannot find the

key to separate themselves, so they call for help. Bruno asks a hotel employee to help find the key, but the employee is disgusted and shaken and says, “I can’t do this,” and calls his superiors. The manager arrives and Bruno requests for him to turn off the television because the remote is lodged in Bruno’s behind and he is afraid that he will accidentally order the film *Mr. Magorium’s Wonderful Emporium*. The two are kicked out of the hotel without being separated. Thus, they begin to wonder around outside. They stumble upon the anti-gay activist group “God Hates Fags,” complete with young children, and ask some of the members to unlock them. To their surprise, none of the picketers release them, so they get onto a bus. A police officer is summoned and the two go to jail for a brief time and are released, finally separated. Outside of the police station Lutz proclaims his love for Bruno and his excitement that they can now be together. But Bruno rejects Lutz, and the two men part ways. We then see Bruno lugging around several racks of his clothing. Outside of an electronics store, he breaks down and cries out for Lutz. He then realizes what all of the world’s biggest stars, including Tom Cruise, John Travolta, and Kevin Spacey, have in common – they are all straight. He thus decides “to quit guys” in order to become famous.

Bruno’s first step towards heterosexuality is to visit Pastor Jody Trautwein, a gay converter, in Alabama. He proceeds to ask the pastor what he can and cannot do when he becomes straight. The pastor responds that he can do anything as long as it does not remind him of his past homosexual behaviors. Bruno is disappointed that he can no longer stick flutes or other woodwind instruments up his “schtinker” or listen to music by Sinead O’Connor, the Indigo Girls, or the Village People. But he can go hiking or lift

weights “around some other men who are not gay.” Next, Bruno visits Danny Shirley, martial arts master, in order to learn how to defend himself against homosexuals. According to Shirley, spotting a homosexual is “very hard to do because some of them don’t even dress no different than myself or you.” With this, we know that Shirley believes Bruno to be straight. Bruno wants some specific things to look out for that will help him to spot a gay man. Shirley responds that a homosexual is probably “a person that is being extremely nice to him [any man] to start with.” He adds that “they [homosexuals] probably would attack from behind.” After Bruno acts out some rather sexual potential attack positions on Shirley, he is taught how to defend himself against one dildo and then two dildos. We then return to the pastor. After questioning the pastor’s sexuality and commenting on his “amazing blow job lips,” Bruno heads to Fort McClellan Army National Guard training center in Alabama. He is berated by two officers for not wearing the proper uniform or following orders. Bruno compliments one officer’s skin and tells him that he could be a general in the “bitch army.” He then goes outside, joins the other trainees, and when asked to salute, he gives the Nazi salute before being quickly corrected. Again, we go back to the pastor as he shares Jesus’ influence on him with Bruno. After an inspirational speech, Bruno asks the pastor, “Are you hitting on me?” The pastor, complete with a perplexed and uncomfortable look, responds, “No, I’m not.” Bruno is then encouraged to try a very straight activity – hunting.

Next, we find Bruno meeting with Mike, Donny, and Robert (who is wearing a hat with a confederate flag design), three hunters from Cullman County, Alabama. Bruno admits that he has never killed an animal, but he did once “suffocate a hamster in

'Micanus' (meant to sound like "my anus")." Attempting to talk like a straight man, Bruno asks Donny and Robert if they prefer the "'vageena (vagina)' or the mammary glands." Robert responds the former and Bruno agrees that they are his "favorite." After an afternoon of hunting, the four men are sitting around a fire. Bruno proclaims, "Look at us. We are so like the *Sex and the City* girls. Which one are you, Donny?" Donny replies, "I ain't either one of 'em. I'm Donny." "That is such a 'Samantha' thing to say," Bruno says. The three hunters are clearly uncomfortable at each overtly gay comment Bruno proceeds to make. After he notes that all the stars in the sky "make you think of all the hot guys in the world," about thirty seconds of silence pass before they decide to go to bed. Afraid that Donny might be a homosexual, Bruno attempts to share a tent with Mike so that they can both be safe from Donny. Bruno is rejected but returns an hour later. This time he is naked and carries some prophylactics because a bear got into his tent and "devoured everything apart from these condoms." Mike is very upset, leaves his tent, and smacks the camera.

A week later, Bruno meets with Dr. Paul Cameron, second stage gay converter. Dr. Cameron tells Bruno that "women are good for us even though we find them terribly conventional, and we find that somewhat irritating, that they complain so much. But we need that." Bruno is concerned about "making the sex" with women. Cameron says he simply needs to find a woman who is "tolerable" and get her to seduce him. To accomplish this goal, Bruno attends a swinger's party. Outside and acting as the female role, he has one of the male swingers show him several sexual positions. During the lesson, Bruno briefly breaks character and smiles. We then move back inside where

group sex is occurring. Bruno approaches one couple and proceeds to touch the man and tell him that he is doing a “great job.” The man does not appreciate Bruno’s encouragement and yells, “I didn’t come here for no fuckin’ queer shit, ok?” As Bruno attempts to leave, a woman leads him into a small bedroom. She is quickly revealed to be a dominatrix and proceeds to whip Bruno with a belt. When he finally can take it no longer, he crashes through the window and runs away announcing that he will become “über straight.”

It is now eight months later. We are at a cage fighting event in Arkansas called “Straight Dave’s Man Slammin’ Max Out.” The beer-drinking crowd is excited for the violence to ensue. Straight Dave (Bruno in disguise) enters to “Back in Black” by AC/DC. In a pre-fight speech, Straight Dave has the audience yell and repeat “Straight pride!” A bit later someone yells, “You’re a faggot!” Straight Dave challenges the heckler. It is Lutz. The two men enter the ring and begin to fight – the crowd is overcome with excitement. All of a sudden, in the middle of the tussle, Bruno and Lutz’s eyes lock. Celine Dion’s song “My Heart Will Go On” begins to play in the background, and the two kiss. The audience becomes infuriated and begins to throw their drinks into the ring. Bruno and Lutz remove each other’s clothes (they never get completely undressed) and the audience wants blood. One man yells into the camera, “We don’t have no faggots here in Arkansas. Take that shit somewhere else!” At one point, the two lovers narrowly avoid being seriously injured by a thrown chair. The song ends with shots of shocked audience members. One man is so upset that he is crying. Here we see an audience that was offended by affection when they were looking for violence. The

footage of the “fight” is shown all over the world, and thus, Bruno achieves his goal of becoming “über famous.”

In love, Bruno and Lutz decide to get married in California. But, because gay marriage is illegal in the state, Lutz attempts to pose as a bride. Upon Lutz’s being revealed in a bride’s gown, Ronald Beams, the minister who is to perform the ceremony, tells the two that he “cannot marry two men or two women.” Bruno counters with, “If she is a man, then how did it give birth to our son?” and points to O.J. standing next to them in a white tuxedo. “You gave birth to a little black child?” asks the minister. Lutz says, “Yes.” The minister begins to probe further but then notes, “I don’t even know why I’m asking.” Marriage is not an option, but the two are still very happy, especially since they got O.J. back (for whom they had to trade a MacBook Pro). At this point Bruno is so famous that he can afford to make his own charity video. Bono, Sting, Chris Martin, Elton John, Slash, and Snoop Dogg lend their talents to the video. In it, Bruno calls himself the “Austrian Jesus,” and Snoop Dogg refers to him as “the white Obama.” They all proclaim Bruno as “the dove of peace.” The film ends with Snoop Dogg’s summation of the film’s intent, “Hey, hey, he gay, he gay . . . okay.”

Before looking at the controversy surrounding the film or how one could read it, I would first like to discuss where *Bruno* fits within the wider world of cinema. This will provide an explanation as to how the film is able to work as an effective satire.

Documentary, Fiction, or Something Else?

What Sacha Baron Cohen does best, that is, taking a fictional character and placing him into real-life situations, is arguably new to the world of mainstream cinema in that audiences now see this as its own genre. He does not make documentaries or fictions, but rather a combination of the two. In terms of the cinematic genres that currently exist, *Brüno* can most appropriately be placed into the category of a “mock-documentary,” or “mockumentary” as it is known in the popular media. Hight and Roscoe (2001) choose “mock-documentary” for two reasons:

- (1) because it suggests its origins in copying a pre-existing form, in an effort to construct (or more accurately, re-construct) a screen form with which the audience is assumed to be familiar
- (2) because the other meaning of the word ‘mock’ (to subvert or ridicule by imitation) suggests something of this screen form’s parodic agenda towards the documentary genre. This is an agenda which we argue is inevitably constructed (however inadvertently by some filmmakers) for mock-documentary’s increasingly sophisticated appropriation of documentary codes and conventions (1).

Yet, *Brüno* also differs from standard mock-documentaries. It deals with a fictional character that is placed in a real situation, while mock-documentaries often contain almost exclusively fictional characters in fictional situations. Before going further, it would be beneficial to discuss what constitutes a documentary and what makes a fiction. Further analysis of where *Brüno* fits within the field of cinema will then be made clearer.

When viewing a documentary, an audience has certain expectations. They expect to see “real people, places, and events, rather than fictional characters and issues” (Hight

and Roscoe 2001: 21). They assume that they will be given access to facts, evidence, and new knowledge. To put it another way, documentaries should provide us with events on the screen that “would have happened, as they happened, even if the filmmaker had not been present” (2001: 21). In theory, documentaries share a truth about something and aspire to objectivity. But “the markers of documentary authenticity are historically variable” despite filmmakers’ best intentions (Renov 1993: 23). That is, at any point in time, documentaries can either be fine conveyors of truth or biased and unrealistic accounts. In fiction films, on the other hand, audiences expect a fabricated story where little, if anything, is based on factual events (except, of course, for the many films that claim to be “based on a true story”). In a way, we are made to see documentaries as the truth (even though we can certainly argue against them) and fictions as lies. Even though we know that fictions are untrue, we can still believe them, at least while we are watching: “Spectators – perceivers of fiction in general – do not *lose* consciousness, as the various metaphors of delusion suggest, but rather *imaginatively entertain* the propositions and imagery of fictional texts” (Smith 1995: 118). Thus, we know when we are watching a fiction, but at the same time we allow our minds to temporarily believe that what we are watching could actually happen.

Renov (1993) discusses “the four fundamental tendencies of documentary: 1. to record, reveal, or preserve; 2. to persuade or promote; 3. to analyze or interrogate; 4. to express” (21). The first tendency of documentaries, “to record, reveal, or preserve,” has the effect of replicating the “historical real” (1993: 25). Documentaries are meant to be snapshots of time, a look into a specific historical context for future generations to study.

The intent of the second tendency, “to persuade or promote,” is fairly evident. Documentaries are often meant to convince people to change (or maintain for that matter) their positions on a given issue. For instance, Frank Capra’s *Why We Fight* gave the American people reason to believe in the country’s role in World War II. Persuasion often works because of documentary’s “truth claim,” the idea that viewers should “‘Believe me [the documentary], I’m of the world’” (1993: 30). Documentaries also attempt “to analyze or interrogate.” By this, Renov means that they “should encourage inquiry, offer space for judgment, and provide the tools for evaluation and further action – in short, encourage an active response” (1993: 31). They should present an issue in such a way that viewers feel compelled to do something about it. The final fundamental tendency of documentaries, the one least used historically, is an aesthetic one – “to express.” Here documentaries use visual representations in such a way as to make a statement about the issue at hand. Words and a narrative are useful, but the images can reveal a great amount about the subject. A film with no words at all can be just as effective as a film with a full verbal narrative.

Does *Briuno* fit in with Renov’s four tendencies of documentaries? The short answer is “no,” but it does make use of at least two of them. First, the film attempts “to record” a snapshot of life in America in the later part of the first decade of the Twenty-First Century. It tries to show that homophobia is present, and some members of future generations will be able to understand this fact through watching it. Others will likely interpret it in different ways, just as people today do. The film is not representative of every American in this decade, of course, but it will show how some people reacted when

faced with the presence of a flamboyant homosexual. Second, the film aims “to persuade” the audience into agreeing with the notion that homosexuals are not inferior to heterosexuals, and whether or not it achieves this goal will be alluded to later. What this brief discussion should convey is that *Briino* should by no means be classified as a documentary. And because of this, it does not possess the “truth claim” mentioned above that most effectively allows persuasion to occur. This means that audiences will not take the events of the film for granted and assume that they are true. Rather, they will question what is real and what is staged.

Documentary and fiction are reconciled with the genre known as “mock-documentaries.” Hight and Roscoe (2001) discuss three degrees, or types, of mock-documentaries: parody, critique, and deconstruction. The first degree attempts to parody some facet of popular culture. These are “fictional texts which both make obvious their fictionality (the audience is expected to appreciate the text’s comic elements) and are comparatively muted in their challenge to the nature of the documentary project itself” (2001: 68). These films tend to strive for humor through “comic quotation, imitation, and transformation” (2001: 30). They do not necessarily attack what they are parodying, but instead may even pay homage to the target. *This is Spinal Tap* (1984), a tale of the triumphs and failures of a fictional rock band, is an excellent example of a parody film. Like parody films, degree two critique films feature some element of acceptance of “the assumptions and expectations of factual discourse” (2001: 69). But, this degree also includes ambivalence towards the documentary genre – they appreciate it but also wish to be critical of it. These films attempt “to offer a parodic critique of those aspects of

popular culture which a character and/or event is seen to represent” (2001: 70). Included in this degree are mock-documentaries which develop the “*satiric* possibilities of the form in order to critique an aspect of popular culture” (2001: 71). A key example of critique films is *Bob Roberts* (2001), a film that satirizes media and the political system. Also included are “hoaxes.” These films intentionally try to confuse its audience so that they are unsure if they are watching fact or fiction. These become reflexive works once their fictional status is uncovered – at that point people are really able to think about the films’ intentions. *Forgotten Silver* (1995), a film that seeks to prove and convince the audience that cinema was invented in New Zealand, best epitomizes the hoax genre. The final degree of mock-documentaries is deconstruction. These films intend to “engage in a sustained critique of the set of assumptions and expectations which support the classic modes of documentary. The documentary project itself, then, is ultimately their true subject” (2001: 72). One of the finest examples of this degree is *Man Bites Dog* (1992), a film that seeks to “deconstruct the documentary genre at a variety of levels” (2001: 74).

In order to elicit a wide and complex range of interpretations from audiences, mock-documentary texts can seek to engage in all three degrees. As a result, there has been a “developing tendency to place upon the viewer the task of determining which aspects of the text are fictional” (Hight and Roscoe 2001: 74-5). I believe that in terms of mock-documentaries, this helps us to understand where *Brüno* fits best. The film combines at least two degrees to some extent, resulting in audiences wondering what was real and what was staged. *Brüno* is a parody film in that it strives to be humorous and make fun of homophobic people. But, it does not try to make its audience believe that it

is fictitious. On the contrary, it wants its audience to think and/or know that what they are seeing is real, and it wants them to know that Bruno is a fictional character, but that the situations he gets himself into are indeed genuine. *Brüno* is a critique film in that it satirizes homophobia in America. There is no real ambivalence towards the documentary genre, however. The film is more than happy to utilize the ways in which a documentary is made. What *Brüno* fails to be, though, is a deconstruction film. There is little evidence that the filmmakers were attempting to critique documentaries in general. In fact, utilizing this genre is what helps the film to be effective.

Perhaps a more effective explanation of how *Brüno* works is that because it is neither a true documentary nor a true fiction, it is able to create a critical impulse in its audience. If it were purely fictional, audiences could and would dismiss it as just that. If it were a legitimate documentary, audiences would perhaps be led into believing its intent because, after all, “the camera does not lie” (Hight and Roscoe 2001: 11). But since it combines these two genres, viewers are forced to question the ambiguous methods. They know that Bruno is a fictional character, but they cannot quite figure out where the other “actors” or “participants” stand. This is what separates *Brüno* from other mock-documentaries.

Thus, is it possible that *Brüno* defies categorization? Genres have certainly blurred over time, so it is reasonable to believe that the film fits into a unique place within cinema. In his work, Weber discusses “ideal types,” which refer to the “construction of certain elements of reality into a logically precise conception” (Girth and Mills 1946: 59). They are purely theoretical, that is, nothing in reality would actually fit

into them. For instance, Renov's "tendencies of a documentary" constitute an ideal type for a documentary. No film perfectly incorporates these tendencies, but they are used to provide us with a means of thinking about documentaries. The same goes for Hight and Roscoe's description of a mock-documentary. No film perfectly exemplifies what a mock-documentary is, but the term gives us a framework with which to work when discussing certain films. In attempting to place *Brüno*, "documentary" and "mock-documentary" are both inadequate. I have stretched and adjusted each term so as to illustrate how *Brüno* fails to fit completely into one category or another.

What is *Brüno* then? Each of Baron Cohen's characters, Ali G, Borat, and Bruno, is a journalist from a foreign land. As journalists, they attempt to share a story about some aspect of society, whether it is flattering or critical. Because of this role, the people Baron Cohen interviews give him access that he would likely not get if he were not a journalist. His characters, of course, are fictitious, but they are placed into real (or at least the people involved believe them to be real) situations. These situations elicit responses from these interviewees that reveal their prejudices and ignorance towards Jews, women, homosexuals, foreigners, and others. Because there have been no films prior to Baron Cohen's *Borat* and *Brüno* that involved fictitious journalists entering real situations and provoking people to reveal their intolerance, his films are unique, and, as a suggestion, we may call them *Real Fake Mock-documentaries*. By combining a healthy dose of reality, fiction, narration, and journalism to the mock-documentary form, these films attempt to uncover unflattering aspects of society so that people realize they exist and maybe even decide that they should not. Of course, this will only be an ideal type as

no films will ultimately match perfectly with its characteristics. But, it can provide a way to think about future films that appear to be like *Brüno*.

Cultural Theory and References

To truly be able to understand how people make sense of *Brüno*, it is necessary to lay some theoretical groundwork and interpret several of the cultural references made in the film. Stuart Hall, “the single most important figure in the history of British cultural studies,” is greatly interested in how culture is received, and his work is often evoked when discussing the reception of cultural texts (Smith and Riley 2009: 149). He posits that the producers of a cultural text encode a message into it, while the consumers must decode and make sense of that message. But, there is no guarantee that all consumers will decode the text in the same way. This allows for the possibility of misunderstanding what the producers intended. Thus, there are multiple possible “readings” of any given cultural text. The dominant reading is “the one that was intended and which supports hegemonic ideologies” – it supports the status quo (Ibid). Hegemony is “the social, cultural, ideological, or economic influence exerted by a dominant group” (“Hegemony”). Thus, “hegemonic ideologies” are the prevailing ideas of those who have greatest influence in the country, and they are accepted as true even though they may be, at best, partial truths. The oppositional reading is “one that is made by someone who is aware of the dominant codes in a message and rejects them” (Smith and Riley 2009: 149). And finally, the negotiated reading is “made by someone who accepts some parts

of the dominant reading, but makes some adaptations which reflect their own needs and perceptions” (Ibid).

Hall omitted two key aspects from his theory, one concerning the production of *Brüno* and one pertaining to its reception. First, he did not acknowledge the fact that the sending of a text is a complex and oftentimes conflicting process. From Hall’s Marxist perspective, in the United States capitalism is the sender and producer of a text. This is true to a large extent as a prominent reason for the release of *Brüno* was the desire to make a substantial profit. After the success of *Borat*, there were expectations for *Brüno* to earn as much or more. This, I believe, was the principle goal of Universal Studios. But, the further we move from Universal and the closer we get to the primary producers of the film, like Baron Cohen and Larry Charles, we see that they intended to make an edgy, controversial comedy that exposes what they deem to be undesirable aspects of our society. Of course, they likely would have been pleased if the film went on to be financially successful, but this, I argue, was not the number one reason why they made *Brüno*. All of these producers had different agendas, and this is shown in the fact that certain scenes from the original cut of the film were removed from the final cut. For instance, in the original version, one of the characters was “a black model called Jesus who wears a loincloth and a crown of thorns” (Smart 2009). Fearing a backlash from religious groups, Universal had Baron Cohen edit the scene from the film. This reveals both Universal’s fear of upsetting any large groups that could potentially contribute a sizeable amount of money to their profits and Baron Cohen’s attempt at offending and

satirizing any and all groups. Hall's theory simply does not account for possible conflicts among the producers of a cultural text.

Second, Hall failed to anticipate that a hegemonic ideology could be undermined or that it can change. The hegemonic view of sexuality in America is that most people are heterosexual, and this is considered normal and appropriate. Homosexuals, on the other hand, are abnormal and deviant, in sociological terms (with no moral judgment), and are perceived as being morally corrupt and inferior to heterosexuals. The producers (Universal Studios, Sacha Baron Cohen, Larry Charles, et cetera) of *Brüno* reject the notion that homosexuals are morally corrupt – this is what Hall was unable to predict. The producers released the following statement regarding the film's intent:

'Brüno' uses provocative comedy to powerfully shed light on the absurdity of many kinds of intolerance and ignorance, including homophobia. By placing himself in radical and risky situations, Sacha Baron Cohen forces both the people Brüno meets and the audience itself to challenge their own stereotypes, preconceptions and discomforts. While any work that dares to address relevant cultural sensitivities might be misinterpreted by some or offend others, we believe the overwhelming majority of the audience will understand and appreciate the film's inarguably positive intentions (Barnes 2009).

In addition to this most likely being the producers' legitimate intention, it could also, of course, be a way for the producers to defend themselves against charges that the film is actually homophobic. Regardless, this statement means that the producers themselves would be a part of the oppositional reading, in Hall's terms. The dominant reading of the film would be that homosexuals are morally deficient, while the oppositional reading

would recognize that homosexuals are abnormal but that they are just as moral of a group as heterosexuals are. The negotiated reading would reconcile these two positions based on the position and experiences of the viewer. Baron Cohen assumes that the audience will understand his irony and his aim at producing oppositional readings. If he thought otherwise, he probably would not have made the film. Thus, while Hall's theory may not be completely adequate for a film like *Bruno* that challenges the hegemonic discourse, it does provide us with a way of thinking about the different ways people can read the film.

Within the film itself, people who interacted with Bruno often responded in one of two ways: either they were repulsed and angered, or they were more visibly tolerant. Peter Suderman (2009) sums up rather well how people react to Bruno: "How does one respond when confronted with someone who is at once obnoxious, obscene, and painfully earnest? Generally, the answer is some combination of confusion, forced politeness, and, when pushed too far, a measure of anger and irritation." The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman explains these reactions with the terms *proteophobia* and *proteophilia* (Saunders 2008: 64). These two responses come as a result of interacting with someone who we are unable to classify, that is, we have not seen anyone like them before and cannot easily place them into a category. For Bruno, many people are unsure of how to react to him. Some do not know whether he is gay or straight, and some cannot figure out where he is from. Those who react with fear and disgust are experiencing proteophobia. Bruno elicits this form by assuming that all men are gay, thereby giving him the freedom to hit on every man he sees. Prime examples of people who experience proteophobia in the film are Ron Paul and the hunters. Upon discovering that Bruno is both gay and

attempting to seduce them, these men respond by yelling, cursing, and leaving the situation. Another telling example is the reaction of the predominantly black talk show audience upon finding out that Bruno was gay – they let out groans of disapproval upon hearing he was looking for a man to help raise his son. The alternative reaction is to experience proteophilia and “show deference to his [Bruno’s] warped worldview” (2008: 64). These people perhaps either accept Bruno for who he is, or they may not understand that he is gay and interact with him thinking that he is straight. For example, Danny Shirley, the martial arts master who teaches Bruno how to defend himself against gay men with dildos, seemingly believes that Bruno is a straight man looking to learn how to defend himself from gay men. Thus, Shirley allows himself to be placed in positions that he would not most likely allow if he knew Bruno was gay. Another example of proteophilia is when Paula Abdul accepts Bruno and follows his invitation to sit on another human being without much thought. Saunders (2008) notes that “these reactions often (though not always) break down along political lines with leftists tending towards proteophilia and social conservatives demonstrating proteophobia” (64). From these examples and others in the film, *Bruno* seems to follow this trend for the most part. Thus, proteophobia and proteophilia help allow us to understand why people respond to Bruno in the ways that they do.

Bruno employs many cultural references that viewers may not entirely understand. They might recognize them as references, yet they may not comprehend their full meanings. For one thing, the film manages to exploit the differences in class in the United States. There are at least two groups that he does satire with in terms of

socioeconomic standing – the relatively poor and uneducated and the relatively wealthy and educated. Each group generally reacts in a different manner. The poorer, uneducated people react in more overtly homophobic ways. This is most clearly seen in the hunters and cage fighting audience. The wealthier, educated people are overly politically correct and tend to give him more respect than he may get otherwise in order to hide their homophobia. This is exemplified with Ron Paul. Of course, he eventually loses his political correctness, but up until that point he is rather kind to Bruno. Baron Cohen has explicitly noted why he likes to satirize the elite:

We're interviewing the most pretentious and superficial people, and Bruno is the most pretentious, superficial person that anyone's met, and so they let their guard down . . . the kind of people that we tend to target with Bruno tend to be superficial, tend to have a value system I don't really respect (Saunders 2008: 70).

There have been criticisms that Baron Cohen does not do enough satirizing of the elite, especially in *Briino*. Toby Young (2009) asks, "Is this 'satire'? I have always thought of satire as one of the few weapons the powerless can wield against the powerful - a way of bringing the high and mighty back down to earth. By that definition, Bruno is the exact opposite of satire. Baron Cohen is encouraging the sophisticated, liberal elite to look down on those in a lower-income bracket." This is arguably true, at least to some extent. Baron Cohen does indeed attack ordinary folks with his comedy. In fact, one way he attempts to fight the stereotype against homosexuals is by employing the most common stereotypes of southerners and getting people who fit that mold to reveal their homophobia. He finds the most backward "rednecks" he possibly can and puts them into

situations that will allow them to reveal their feelings towards homosexuals. Because he also did this in *Borat*, it is likely that audiences share these same stereotypes against southerners. (In fact, during one screening of the film, the audience members laughed simply when the word “Alabama” came up on the screen.) By doing this, Baron Cohen seems to be saying that everyone’s views must be questioned, not just the elites. This is not to say that elites are not equally represented in *Bruno*. On the contrary, many elites, including celebrities, politicians, and religious leaders, are effectively satirized throughout the film.

One important cultural reference made in the film is the relation between Nazism and homosexuality. Throughout the film (and television show), Bruno repeatedly brings up references to Hitler and the Nazis. For example, his goal in coming to America is to become “the biggest Austrian superstar since Hitler.” Later he calls Brad Pitt “Bradolf Pittler,” and Mel Gibson “the Fuhrer.” In the scene where he interviews parents about their children being photographed with O.J., Bruno gets the winning mother to agree to have her child dress as a Nazi and push another baby dressed as a Jew into an oven. And while training with the National Guard in Alabama, he performs the Nazi salute instead of the standard military salute. A substantial part of the reason why Baron Cohen utilizes so many Nazi references is because of Bruno’s nationality – he is Austrian. Hitler, of course, was born in Austria, and the country is infamous for denying its involvement with the Nazis during World War II. This makes the country a tempting target for satire. But, two other links to Nazis that Baron Cohen may be nodding to is homosexuality in the Nazi Party and a Nazi fetish among homosexuals. Lively (1995), a very controversial

ideologue, argues that a large number of leading Nazis were homosexuals. He even claims that homosexuals (more specifically the “Butches,” or strongly masculine ones) helped the Nazi movement succeed. Ernst Röhm, leader of the SA (Storm Troopers) was a homosexual, as were many of his SA associates, and Hitler knew this. During the infamous “Night of the Long Knives,” Röhm was purged by Hitler, not explicitly because of his homosexuality, but because of political reasons (Lively 1995). This link has led to a fetish among some homosexuals for Nazi eroticism. This can be clearly seen with the work of artist Tom of Finland. He produced a large amount of gay erotic material that included men in Nazi uniforms performing sexual acts on themselves and other men (*Tom of Finland Foundation*). This fetish is also associated with sadomasochism (S&M), a form of sexuality that identifies with power and transgression, and heterosexuals participate in it as well. The link between Nazism and homosexuals is quite complicated, but what is important to take from this brief discussion is that the stereotype of gay men having a Nazi fetish does exist. It is a cultural trope that is present, and people can pick up on it even if they do not completely understand it. With Bruno, Baron Cohen is playing on this conception.

A strong theme present throughout the film deals with the culture of celebrity. This, of course, is linked strongly with Bruno’s main goal – to become a celebrity and be known worldwide. What eventually allowed Bruno to become famous was the video of his scandalous cage fight/love session with Lutz. This is a nod to both how people can become famous for not really doing anything and how “whether the social response is one of condemnation or compassion, repugnance or approval, the subject or subjects [of a

scandal] typically loom large in the public imagination” (Cashmore 2006: 142). Aside from Bruno’s own intentions, we see many instances of where Baron Cohen is attempting to mock this celebrity culture. But ironically, he himself has become a huge star because of his work as Ali G, Borat, and Bruno. Even bigger than he, though, are his characters. His three fictional jokers have become what Chris Rojek has termed “celeactors” or “fictional characters who achieve celebrity-like status” (Smith and Riley 2009: 167). Ali G, Borat, and Bruno are just as well-known, likely more, than Baron Cohen is as himself. Nonetheless, in *Bruno* he makes it clear that this particular culture is perhaps not as romantic as it may seem. The first target we see is Paula Abdul. Being a celebrity, she believes that she is worthy enough to sit on a person at Bruno’s request. The only reason she eventually leaves is because the sight of naked man covered in sushi convinces her manager that they should depart. This is Baron Cohen’s attempt to mock how celebrities are portrayed as being somehow superior to others. Interestingly enough, according to the film’s commentary, Baron Cohen based this scene loosely on the famous Milgram experiments. He wanted to see how far celebrities would go simply because they were asked to do so by an apparently legitimate authority.

Next, Baron Cohen wants the audience to examine how celebrities attempt to claim their own charity for which they are known. He raises the question of whether celebrities participate in charity primarily for the cause or for the fame (based on the commentary, he leans toward the fame motive but would admit that some do charity for the right reasons). Bruno’s charitable efforts fail, so he decides to adopt a child from Africa to boost his celebrity. This is most clearly in reference to celebrities like Brad Pitt

and Angelina Jolie and Madonna, who are famous not only for their work in the entertainment industry, but also for the many children they have adopted from the Third World. This raises a similar question as before: do celebrities adopt children for love or for fame? From Bruno's reaction when O.J. is taken from him, we might infer that Bruno does indeed love O.J., but he certainly does not mind the publicity that he gets from the child. One of the most shocking parts of the film is when Bruno interviews parents who want their children to be in a photo shoot with O.J. We learn that parents do not mind if their children are hung up on a crucifix, made to operate "antiquated heavy machinery," required to deal with "lit phosphorus," or forced to get liposuction, as long as it furthers the child's (and by extension, their) career. This is a strong critique towards the parents of child actors, and the fact that this scene is arguably more disturbing than Bruno's gyrating penis reveals the effectiveness of this critique. The final scene of the film features several very prominent musicians and mocks the phenomenon of how celebrities will collaborate on a project, no matter the quality, in order to help a cause. The "We Are the World" collaboration, a project led by Michael Jackson to raise money for Africa, is perhaps the best example. Taking a cue from this project and others like it, Bruno enlists the help of Elton John, Bono, Sting, Slash (from Guns 'N roses), Chris Martin (from Coldplay), and Snoop Dogg to proclaim Bruno as the "dove of peace." Are these collaborations simply about celebrities jumping on the charity bandwagon, or do they really believe in those causes? Baron Cohen is most likely skeptical of the latter, but he would probably admit that while the main reason for participation is publicity, at least some celebrity concern is present.

One reference in the film that is a bit more subtle is the fairly common perception that gay men are more likely to abuse children than heterosexuals are. This is shown in the segment where Bruno goes to Dallas to be on the Richard Bey talk show. After narrowly avoiding being hit by a car while riding a scooter with O.J. on the handlebars, Bruno arrives at the studio. To show that he cares for O.J., Bruno shares some photos of him and the child. In one photo Bruno is wearing a beekeeper's suit while O.J. sits in his arms and is covered in bees. In the next one, we see O.J. on a crucifix with other children dressed as Romans standing at the base. What follows is a photo of Bruno and O.J. sitting in a hot tub with three other men. The next photo takes us back to the hot tub and shows one man with his face in another man's behind, one man with his shorts in his hand, and Bruno and O.J. sitting in the middle. This is when the predominantly black audience decides that they have had enough, and most of them walk out of the studio. This reaction to the clearly edited pictures reveals, at least to some extent, the somewhat prevalent concern that gay men abuse children, even more frequently than straight men do. But, the audience likely would have reacted in a similar manner if it were men and women performing sexual acts in the hot tub. The number of Americans who believe that homosexuals are child molesters has declined significantly. In 1970, more than 70% of respondents to a national survey agreed with the assertions that "Homosexuals are dangerous as teachers or youth leaders because they try to get sexually involved with children" or that "Homosexuals try to play sexually with children if they cannot get an adult partner" (Herek 2009). But, in 1999, a survey found that only 29% of men and women believe that homosexual men are likely to sexually abuse children (Ibid). This is

still a significant part of the population, and it helps to explain the audience's reaction (I will discuss more on its reaction shortly). Herek (2009) has concluded that "gay or bisexual men are not any more likely than heterosexual men to molest children. This is not to argue that homosexual and bisexual men never molest children. But there is no scientific basis for asserting that they are more likely than heterosexual men to do so. And . . . many child molesters cannot be characterized as having an adult sexual orientation at all; they are fixated on children." Whether or not *Bruno* reinforces the idea that gay men are more likely to sexually abuse children is a legitimate question that I will allude to further.

Of course, the most blatant cultural reference made in the film is homophobia in America. Our first dose of blatant homophobia is presented to us by presidential candidate Ron Paul. After Bruno attempts to seduce him, he storms out of the hotel room and calls Bruno "queer as blazes" and "queer as crazy." Granted, the tenor of the term "queer" has changed to the point where the gay community uses it freely with a much less negative connotation. But, based on the force with which he said it, I have a feeling that Paul was not using it in the same form as gays do. The next display of homophobic activity occurs during Bruno's appearance on the Richard Bey show, which features a predominantly black audience. Here Baron Cohen is referring to the notion that despite the hardships and discrimination faced by African-Americans throughout American history, many still believe that homosexuals are morally inferior to heterosexuals. In fact, blacks possess "greater disapproval of homosexuality" than do whites (Lewis 2003: 59). This shows Baron Cohen's willingness to be an equal opportunity offender – no group or

individual is safe from his satire. We then experience the intolerance of the three hunters as Bruno attempts to share a tent with one of them. Next, we find that the swinger who Bruno compliments on his sexual abilities was not there for any homosexual activity, to put it nicely. And finally, the pinnacle of homophobia in the film occurs during the climactic cage fight. After Bruno and Lutz begin to kiss, we see audience members yelling obscenities, throwing cups and chairs, running away, and even shedding tears.

A legitimate question to pose is whether or not these reactions were truly homophobic. Toby Young (2009) writes, “Baron Cohen doesn’t ‘shed light’ on the homophobia of the TV audience so much as provoke them into a homophobic reaction - and he keeps pushing until they finally snap.” This is in reference to the talk show scene where the audience is disgusted by the pictures that Bruno shares with them. This particular aspect of the scene may not be considered homophobic as anyone who saw those pictures and thought they were real would also be disgusted. But what about the audiences’ blatantly disapproving reaction to Bruno saying that he wanted to find a man help him raise his child? If this is not homophobic, then I am not sure what is. Another legitimate critique deals with the climactic Arkansas cage fighting scene. Here the audience members were given shirts with antigay messages on them and as much cheap beer as they could drink. Is it surprising that they reacted to Bruno and Lutz kissing in such a violent way, and was it really homophobia? Their reactions are not completely shocking given the alcohol and the South’s stereotypical reputation, but I do not believe that being under the influence of alcohol excuses their actions. While it may have been forced or provoked homophobia, I would contend that it is homophobia nonetheless. It

reveals that homophobia may lie just beneath the surface of one's personality, and if he or she is put into the right situation, this prejudice may be encouraged to appear. How would their reactions have been different without the presence of alcohol? This I cannot answer for certain, but if I had to guess I would posit that the audiences' reaction may have been less violent without the presence of alcohol, but at the same time more convincingly homophobic because they would have been less provoked into reacting a certain way. The issue of what is and what is not homophobia in *Bruno* is not always clear, but the fact that so many people reacted so negatively towards Bruno, regardless of whether it was provoked, still reveals something about our society's views toward homosexuality.

One possible occurrence in the film, but one we will never know for sure, is that many of the people who Baron Cohen duped may have taken a long time to figure out that Bruno was gay and subsequently acted in a nearly violent and irrational way. This is most clearly illustrated in Ron Paul. Why might this be so? First of all, only about 3.7% of men and women in America define themselves as "homosexual or bisexual, have same-gender partners, or express homosexual desires" (Laumann et al 2000: 300). This means that some people, especially in rural populations, are so far away from the homosexual worldview that they just do not understand or recognize it. Many people simply do not know anyone who identifies themselves as a homosexual because the homosexual community constitutes such a small segment of the population. Most of the people who reacted so negatively to Bruno's actions may not have even realized that he was gay until he made a sexual advance towards them. There is clearly a stigma in

America to being gay, so when these people, especially men, discovered Bruno's sexuality, they tended to get defensive and angry so as to avoid any accusations that they, too, were gay. Another reason why people may not have immediately thought Bruno was gay because he is a foreign character. This may mean that they thought nothing of his behavior and assumed he was acting differently just because he was foreign. That is, they may actually have thought that he was acting like an Austrian, not a homosexual.

A big question that has been raised many times in the media is "how much of *Brüno* actually happened?" For instance, Young (2009) claims that "once it dawns on you that more than 50 per cent of the 'real-life' characters are actors, the laughter dies in your throat." At the time this article was written, it was based predominantly on what the author thought from watching the film. But now, with the release of the film on DVD, we have the advantage of being able to listen to commentary of the film by Baron Cohen and director Larry Charles. In actuality, very few people were actually in on the joke. The only characters who were played by actors were Bruno, Lutz, Diesel, O.J., Kookus, and the Hispanic gardeners. Harrison Ford, Richard Bey, and the musicians in the closing music video were the only people in the film who knew that Baron Cohen was making a film with a fictional character. Other people, like Lloyd Robinson (the agent), the dominatrix, and the child services woman who took O.J. from Bruno, knew that they were helping to advance the plot of the film, but they believed that Bruno was a real person and not a character. Everyone else in the film, including celebrities, politicians, and average people, actually believed that Bruno was a flamboyant gay man from Austria, and thus, acted accordingly.

Both Paula Abdul and Ron Paul later talked about their being duped by Bruno. One night, Abdul “woke up...in a pool of sweat at two o’clock in the morning, going ‘Ahhh!’ I ran to the Internet and I remembered, ‘Oh my god, a year ago, they got me.’ I had no idea it was Sacha Baron Cohen” (Access Hollywood 2009). She explains why she went to the interview in the first place: “I was told I got the Austrian/German ‘Entertainer of the Year Award.’ I thought ‘Wow! That’s pretty fantastic’” (Ibid). Before the film was released, Paul told a reporter that, “I was expecting an interview on Austrian economics. So, that didn’t turn out that way. But, by the time he started pulling his pants down, I ran out of the room. This interview has ended. When this all gets out, I’m probably going to have to apologize to my supporters because I think most of them are going to figure out why in the world didn’t I sock this guy in the nose?” (Rhee 2009). These two interviewees and the others in the film were all convinced in one way or another to interview with Bruno.

A few scenes in the film were indeed staged to some extent. Bruno’s appearance on the television show *Medium* was known to NBC but not to the other actors in the scene. The Richard Bey talk show was staged in the sense that Bey and his crew knew that Baron Cohen was making a movie, but the audience had no idea that Bruno was a fictional character. And the climactic final cage fight was set up, but the audience was there for a real fight and believed that it was one. As I have mentioned, audience members were given t-shirts designed with antigay slogans to wear and cheap beer to drink. Interestingly enough, the filmmakers attempted to film the scene one other time, but the audience got so violent that the actors and crew had to escape and re-shoot the

scene.

One part of the film that received no commentary was the one with the alleged terrorist leader, Ayman Abu Aita. Since the film was released, Aita has filed a suit against the filmmakers claiming that “the whole thing was a lie. I am not a member of Al Aqsa” (Itzkoff 2009). He is, however, a member of a regional committee of Fatah, which governs the West Bank and is the dominant party in the Palestine Liberation Organization. He added: “We were betrayed by this guy when he said that he was a journalist. We thought he was a foreign journalist and we hoped he would speak about our cause” (2009). Because a lawsuit is pending, Baron Cohen and Charles were most likely unable to address the events in that scene. But, aside from this part of the film, the two seemed more than willing to discuss everyone’s role in the film.

It is important to take from this brief discussion of what was real and what was staged that, aside from Harrison Ford, Richard Bey, and the musicians, all of the people Bruno interacted with reacted in a genuine manner. They actually believed that they were dealing with a gay journalist from Austria (at least eventually), and this is what makes their reactions so revealing and sociologically significant. Just because the cage fight was staged does not make the audience members’ reactions any less real. Why don’t people want to admit that what happened in *Bruno* was almost entirely real? Aside from the fact that for viewers it is simply not clear what is and is not real, perhaps by conceding that the events really happened, one would be admitting that these negative aspects of society really exist. The fact that the status of many of the scenes is uncertain (unless one has seen the commentary) adds to the idea that people must question the

content of the film. This goes back to the discussion of documentary and fiction. If everything were real there would be no need to question anything, and if everything were staged, there would also be no reason to question anything. But since some events were predominantly real and some were partially staged, viewers are forced to sort out what they think belongs to each category. In doing so, they may also contemplate the intent of the film and question their own position on homosexuality.

Critical Reception and the Debate Surrounding *Brüno*

Crude and offensive, but with ample cultural insights and gut-busting laughs, *Bruno* is another outlandish and entertaining mockumentary from Sacha Baron Cohen (Rotten Tomatoes).

This quote is taken from Rotten Tomatoes, a website that compiles reviews of films and forms a consensus on their quality. It attempts to describe the average critic's feelings towards *Brüno* (or nearly any film one can imagine). The film earned a score of 67%, which means that 67% of the reviews that were utilized were positive. However, this fails to provide us with a complete picture of what people thought. Opinions of the film were quite varied and oftentimes polarized, depending on a source's political agenda. Many found the film to be hilarious and potentially helpful to gay rights, while a seemingly equal number found the complete opposite. Three key issues I wish to address are who is supporting the film, who is attacking the film, and why. I would especially like to highlight what the gay media thought of *Brüno*. Because the film centers on a gay character played by a straight actor, it will be interesting to see what the gay community thought of the performance.

The mainstream media produced a large number of positive reviews of *Brüno*. Owen Gleiberman of *Entertainment Weekly* decreed that “the movie is a toxic dart aimed at the spangly new heart of American hypocrisy: our fake-tolerant, fake-charitable, fake-liberated-yet-still madly-closeted fame culture” (2009). Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* suggests that the reader “make the shameless, sidesplitting *Brüno* numero uno on your funny-time list. You’ll hoot and holler as it strips down its targets and sticks it to them, hardcore. Baron Cohen is the pure, untamed id of movie comedy” (2009). “‘Bruno’ is a no-holds-barred comedy permitting several holds I had not dreamed of. The needle on my internal Laugh Meter went haywire, bouncing among hilarity, appreciation, shock, admiration, disgust, disbelief and appalled incredulity,” notes the famous critic Roger Ebert (2009). “Baron Cohen and his writing team manage to strike a balance that, while familiar, still retains the power to surprise. Their comic sensibilities are as sharp as ever, making *Bruno* not just a brilliant bit of satire, but quite likely the funniest film of the year,” proclaims Jason Buchanan of *TV Guide* (2009). And David Edelstein of *New York Magazine* writes that, “Is *Brüno* riotous? Yes, more so than ‘Borat,’ in which Baron Cohen’s targets were ducks in a barrel and largely undeserving of ridicule. He doesn’t aim much higher here, but his tricks are more inventive” (2009).

Brüno has also garnered its fair share of negative reviews. Peter Rainer of the *Christian Science Monitor* posits that “there’s good bad taste and then there’s just plain bad bad, which is what describes most of ‘Brüno’” (2009). Kirk Honeycutt of *The Hollywood Reporter* believes that, “‘Bruno’ is only intermittently funny and all too often the ‘ambushes’ of celebrities and civilians look staged. The movie is even a tad – dare

we say it? – tedious” (2009). “Forget satire; this guy doesn’t want to scorch the earth anymore. He just wants to swing his dick,” comments Anthony Lane of *The New Yorker* (2009). “‘Bruno’ seems fatally out of tune, with every staged encounter falling as flat as the protagonist’s hot-ironed bob,” remarks Ann Hornaday of *The Washington Post* (2009). And Joe Morgenstern of *The Wall Street Journal* reveals that, “Here’s the bad news: Brüno is no ‘Borat.’ Here’s the worse news: Brüno crosses the line, like a besotted sprinter, from hilariously [sic] to genuinely awful” (Bruno - Metacritic.com).

What can account for such different interpretations of the film’s quality? The issues of gay marriage and gay rights are “wedge issues,” or “those social concerns which divide liberals from conservatives” (Saunders 2008: 142). At the root of these issues is sexual mores. Left-wing people tend to be pro-gay marriage, while right-wing people are generally against marriage between same-sex couples. This can be complicated somewhat. Many modern day right-wingers, notably libertarians, want to keep government intervention to an absolute minimum, so this group is often in support of gay marriage for no other reason than the government should not be able to dictate who can and cannot marry. At their most extreme, libertarians are ambivalent toward the issue. Politics can help to explain why some sources reviewed *Brüno* positively while others reviewed it negatively. Left-wing media would most likely positively review the film because they would be more inclined to appreciate and approve of the producers’ intentions to attack homophobia. Right-wing media (excluding libertarian sources), on the other hand, would be more inclined to be more critical of the film as they are often less approving of issues dealing with homosexuality. Overall, it turns out that these

assumptions are correct. The vast majority of sources that found the film funny and effectively satirical were the more left-wing media outlets, including *Rolling Stone* and *New York Magazine*, among many others. Conversely, a large portion of the reviewers that found the film to be tasteless and nearly unbearable to watch were from right-wing sources, such as *The New Yorker* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Not all sources follow this trend, however. For instance, *The New York Times*, a generally left-wing newspaper, printed “in spite of Mr. Baron Cohen and Mr. Charles’s [director Larry Charles] high-level skills and keen low-comic instincts, ‘Brüno’ is a lazy piece of work that panders more than it provokes” (Scott 2009). Thus, the politics of a particular media outlet will not always reveal how the source will interpret a particular film or other cultural object, but they will give us a strong sense of what a source might conclude.

What members of the gay community and media have said about *Brüno* clearly reveals the debate surrounding the film. By some it is being hailed for its exposing of homophobia, and from others it is being accused of being “pinkface” and making fun of the gay community (King 2009). (“The epithet is a recent addition to the cinematic lexicon: simply put, it’s a riff on the term *blackface*. It carries the same pejorative connotations but applies to straight actors taking on gay roles” (Ibid)). The gay website *Queerty* argues that there is a golden rule about *Brüno*: “Gay rights organizations hate it, while gay media loves it” (*Queerty - The Gay Blog* (2)). The site claims that gay rights organizations often dislike the film because they “are in the business of crying foul whenever someone or something does anything to remotely offend the community, which gets interpreted as oppression. Gay media, on the other hand, is in the business of

promoting art and culture, because what's good for other folks' media projects is good for their mission statement and bottom line, too" (Ibid). There is arguably some truth to *Queerty's* golden rule, but it is far too simplistic, and whether or not the site's reasoning explains each segment's views is debatable. Granted, many gay rights groups have serious issues with *Brüno*, and many members of the gay media enthusiastically approve of the film, but within specific gay media outlets and organizations, opinions can and do vary. The following paragraphs will illustrate this point.

Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) president Jarrett Barrios, after seeing the film, made a statement saying that "the movie was a well-intentioned series of sketches – some hit the mark and some hit the gay community pretty hard and reinforce some damaging, hurtful stereotypes" (Associated Press 2009). In reference to the images in the film of Bruno and O.J. in the hot tub with two other men, Barrios warns that "scenes like that don't help America understand the hundreds of thousands of gay families who get up every day, do the carpool then rush home to make dinner and be with their children" (Ibid). Thus, for Barrios, *Brüno* had well-meaning intentions, "but some people in the gay community will be as troubled as GLAAD is that the movie doesn't decrease homophobia, but decreases the public's comfort with gay people" (Ibid). Rashad Robinson, senior director of media programs for GLAAD, worried that, "Some people in our community may like this movie, but many are not going to be O.K. Sacha Baron Cohen's well-meaning attempt at satire is problematic in many places and outright offensive in others" (Barnes 2009). Others in the gay community share Barrios and Robinson's fears and problems with the film and Baron

Cohen. Gay activist Gary Burns notes, “I think the guy’s [Baron Cohen] just a ponce. He walks around pigeonholing and stereotyping gay men to be viewed as lisping mincing and most of us are everyday Joe Blows with the same aspirations and dreams as everybody else. I think the imagery that he portrays will mean that lay people sitting at home will think ‘that’s what poofs all are, that we’re all like him’, and we’re not all like him” (Taylor 2009). He also makes clear that, “I am not dressed as Dolly Parton, I wear a suit. I believe it’s important that gay men are portrayed as ordinary everyday people... People can’t just parade around and say it’s satire... for every reaction there’s a reaction” (Ibid). Some simply ask that Baron Cohen and the producers make it clear that the film is indeed intended to reveal homophobia. “We strongly feel that Sacha Baron Cohen and Universal Pictures have a responsibility to remind the viewing public right there in the theatre that this is intended to expose homophobia,” said Brad Luna, a spokesman for Human Rights Campaign (Barnes 2009). The last line of the film, spoken by Snoop Dogg, arguably fulfills this request.

Many gay leaders and commentators were much less harsh towards *Bruno*. Stephen Milioti, a writer for *The Advocate*, a leading gay publication, questions GLAAD’s position on the film and asks, “Do you really think the movie’s target audience who will elect to spend \$10.50 to see a movie about a flamboyant gay man is going to have their ‘comfort’ decreased? Will hordes of people really come out of the theater deciding not to speak to their gay friends and coworkers anymore? Probably not. The people who shell out for Bruno will probably accept him, and his anal sex references, pretty well. The audience that wants to stay away will stay away” (2009). “Well, I not

only liked it – I started laughing at the opening Universal logo with the umlaut above the ‘U’ and pretty much didn’t stop until the closing credits rolled. I thought it was a subversive masterpiece, a triumphant cri de coeur against homophobia,” writes Steve Weinstein, editor-in-chief of Boston’s *Edge* (Melloy 2009). Aaron Hicklin, editor of *Out Magazine*, is clearly in support of the film and notes that, “You’d really have to be quite dense and idiotic to think this [*Bruno*] was in any way an accurate reflection of the way gay men live their lives” (*Queerty - The Gay Blog* (1)). *Queerty* believes that, “*Bruno* doesn’t need to be a finely tuned teaching moment; that’s asking too much of mainstream cinema fare. But the film let’s [sic] us laugh with and at stereotypes. It’s a pornographic enterprise into America’s remaining taboos. If the film starts even one conversation about ‘how wrong’ all of that is, it’s a success – and, dare we suggest, something we should support” (*Queerty - The Gay Blog* (1)).

Some members of the gay community recognize that different people will interpret the film in different ways. Emma Ruby-Sachs, a writer for the Huffington Post, writes the following:

Most audience members laugh at Bruno’s ridiculous portrayal of gayness, but some will use the negative aspects of Cohen’s satire to justify their hatred. They will sympathize with those characters reacting violently to his sexuality. These are not the people the movement for LGBT equality is hoping to recruit. They are a lost cause [sic] whether or not *Bruno* inadvertently reinforces their homophobia. Those audience members who consider themselves to be decent, tolerant individuals (perhaps they want to reserve marriage for straight people, but think gay people are okay as long as they aren’t too swishy) will identify with Sasha [sic] Baron Cohen who is, after all, playing a great big joke on the

homophobes. They will be shocked by the violence of some of the reactions in the movie. They will want to disassociate themselves from the bigots and hatemongers who throw chairs at a couple kissing in a wrestling ring and contemplate ways to break the bones of gay men in case they make a sexual advance (2009).

Hank Stuever, a gay writer for *The Washington Post*, thinks that *Brüno* will not “hinder their [gays’] hopes for pop-culture progress. Nor is it likely to inspire any” (2009).

Arnold Wayne of *Dallas Voice* thinks that, “the brilliance of ‘Brüno,’ and what sets it apart from ‘Borat,’ is how it doesn’t really make fun of people for a wide range of their beliefs, but just for one: How they react to a gay perspective on life. The ending (no spoiler here) is a bit of genius that hammers home the inanity (if not insanity) of homophobia. For those who get it, it’s the satire of the year; for everyone else it represents the sum of all queers” (2009). For more moderate critics like Ruby-Sachs, Stuever, and Wayne, the film is neither absolutely good nor absolutely bad for gay rights. That is, they believe that some viewers will understand Baron Cohen’s intentions, while others may not.

All of these comments and reviews from mainstream and gay media are able to illustrate, quite clearly, the many ways in which viewers can read the film. The fact that so many of them drew so many different conclusions truly expresses the polysemy of *Brüno*. In the end, the ultimate tension “surrounding ‘Brüno’ boils down to the worry that certain viewers won’t understand that the joke is on them and will leave the multiplex with their homophobia validated” (Barnes 2009). In the next section, I will

utilize the data I have collected and attempt to provide insight to the question of whether *Briino* effectively mocks homophobia or reinforces gay stereotypes.

Empirical Data - How Audiences Actually Read the Film

In essence, what I am trying to do with this work is to discover, at least partially, whether or not *Briino* has fallen victim to what Gilroy (2002) calls the “Beavis and Butthead Syndrome.” This is “a condition of mass popularity in which the original satirical intentions are misrecognised as affirmation of the object or process they try to subvert or ridicule” (Gilroy 2002). Because of how popular and widespread the Bruno character has become, do people believe that Baron Cohen’s representation of homosexuals is real and accurate? Or do people understand and accept his intentions? What follows is my own impression of how some people in northeastern and central Pennsylvania read the film. (Much of what I have done is interpretive, and different scholars may discover slightly different findings. As a result, I have included all of my data as I worked with it in the appendix so that readers may check my conclusions.) What interviewees shared were initial reactions after just having seen the film. Over time they may have altered or complicated their views.

In order to collect my data, I visited three different movie theatres in northeastern and central Pennsylvania. At the conclusions of five separate screenings of the film, I attempted to interview as many viewers as I could. Because people were generally in a hurry to leave the theatre after they watched the film, my interviews were relatively short. Ideally I would have been able to sit down for at least ten minutes and discuss my

questions with people, but this simply was not possible. In the end I was able to interview thirty-one different people who had just seen the film. (One man responded to my questions via e-mail as he was could not stay at the theatre for an interview.) I tried to speak with people of different backgrounds and ages, but, as I will explain further shortly, the audiences whom I saw were rather homogenous. That is, they were predominantly white male students (either in high school or college). (In fact, I do not believe there were any minorities at any of the screenings I saw.) Of course, it would be unwise and irresponsible to generalize how people read the film from only thirty-one brief interviews, but my data will still be useful in helping to understand how people make sense of *Briino*.

From this, I must admit that my work does have its shortcomings for two primary reasons. First, with my limited time and resources, I was unable to gather the amount of data necessary to provide a truly representative account of how people made sense of the film. If I were given a large sum of money and I had a large team working for me, I would have sent researchers to theatres around the country to administer in-depth interviews with thousands of people from different backgrounds and political persuasions who had just seen the film. I would have made sure that they asked people about their thoughts on specific scenes in the film (i.e. the talk show scene or the cage fight), rather than just the film overall. This most likely would have resulted in an account of almost every possible reading and about how many people shared each reading. And second, while conducting my interviews, I felt that each question was clear and did not lead interviewees to a certain response. But, upon analyzing what was said, it became clear to

me that some people may have misinterpreted a question or two (this is addressed further in the discussion of my data). If I were to re-do the interviews, I would take a bit more time with each person and make sure that they answered the question I gave them, rather than accepting answers to similar, yet different, questions. Regardless of these shortcomings, I believe that my data is still relevant and can provide useful insight into the debate surrounding *Brüno*.

First and foremost, who actually saw the film and why? There was an approximately two to one ratio of men to women who watched the film. This ratio is also true for who I was able to interview. Everyone I spoke with was white, and no one who watched the film at these showings, as far as I could tell (this is purely superficial), was a minority. The average age of those I interviewed was about twenty-four years old. The oldest viewers I spoke with were fifty-two years old, while the youngest viewer was fifteen (he, of course, watched the film with his parents). Twenty of the thirty-one interviewees were students, while the rest had jobs ranging from cashiers to musicians (there was even a hypnotist/funeral home owner!). All of the interviewees had either completed or were in high school, and half were in college at the time of the interview. All but one of the people I spoke with was from Pennsylvania (one man was from Delaware). There was a nearly two to one ratio of people (nineteen to eleven, with one moderate) who considered themselves to be on the left politically to those who thought they were on the right politically, although a couple of the younger respondents were apparently not sure what being on the right or left meant. Twenty-four out of thirty-one (77%) interviewees supported gay marriage, six were against it, and one had no opinion.

Less than half of the interviewees had seen *Da Ali G Show*, but all but two of the viewers had seen *Borat*. When asked why they saw *Briino*, the overwhelming response was because they had greatly enjoyed *Borat* and because the theatrical trailer for *Briino* had sparked their interest. There were two other notable and interesting reasons for seeing the film. One man said that he saw it because, “I have lots of gay friends and people have thought I was gay, so I find humor in this stuff.” Another man proclaimed that, “I like seeing homophobic people being ripped on.” Thus, the average person I spoke with was a white male in his early twenties who was politically on the left and in support of gay marriage, and he had seen *Briino* because he enjoyed *Borat*.

The first question dealing with readings that I asked interviewees was whether or not they thought the film portrayed homosexuals in a positive light. Responses were varied and complex. Because several responses did not explicitly answer the question, I believe that some people may have misinterpreted the question and thought that I meant whether they thought the film was good or bad in general. For instance, one woman said it was “friggin’ hilarious,” which did not adequately answer the question. But, most people understood the question’s intent. Eleven interviewees thought that the film portrayed homosexuals in a negative light. For instance, one man shared that, “I’d say the portrayal is actually more negative since Bruno is such an extremely flamboyant homosexual. A lot of people find that degree of behavior to be offensive or at least inappropriate, so I would have to go with negative.” Another man said, “Probably negative,” and added, “I’m not for homosexuality at all.” Many respondents thought the portrayal was negative but understood that the unflattering over-exaggeration was what

Baron Cohen used to expose homophobia. One person noted that homosexuals were “not portrayed well, but he [Baron Cohen] made fun of people who hate gays.” Another interviewee said that the film “focused on people who were against that [homosexuality], but they were not portrayed in a good light, though.” Finally, one woman thought that “the film portrays them [homosexuals] as ridiculous, so negative, but it’s obvious they’re not like that.” Only six interviewees believed the film portrayed homosexuals in a positive light. One person thought it was a positive portrayal because it “showed they [homosexuals] have a sense of humor.” Another felt that “everyone but Bruno” was portrayed positively, including Lutz, Bruno’s homosexual assistant. Because his answer was a bit off-point, one man likely misinterpreted the question and thought I asked him whether the film was positive or negative for homosexuals. He thought that “he [Baron Cohen] allows you to see how people act in real situations, so positive definitely.”

Another position was that *Bruno* showed homosexuals in either a positive or negative light depending on who was watching it, or that it was unclear if it was positive or negative. One person thought that “it depends on how you watch it. It could be positive because it doesn’t make fun of them. It shows how people are homophobic.” Another thought that it “depends on your beliefs on homosexuality. If you’re not open about it, then it’s not a positive portrayal.” Finally, one respondent said that, “He [Baron Cohen] exaggerates what people think homosexuality is and becomes that. It’s satirical, but I’m not sure if it’s positive or negative.” Although a few interviewees most likely misinterpreted this question, we are still able to gather that, at the very least, most people

understood that Baron Cohen intended to make fun of homophobic members of the audience, even if Bruno himself is a negatively portrayed character.

Next, I asked whether or not *Briino* was helpful for homosexuals. Responses to this question were fairly equally divided and just as complex as answers to the previous query. Several respondents believed the film was helpful for homosexuals, but they gave many reasons for why that was the case. One man said that “overall, yes, the film is helpful. Gay converters came off as being very negative towards women, so I think the movie will turn people off gay converting at least a little bit.” Another man believed it to be helpful because “it puts them [homosexuals] out there more.” One woman said that, “It might be helpful in that it makes people aware of stereotypes that probably aren’t true.” Finally, one man thought it “could be empowering, because it shows who has taboos and breaks them down.” Almost an equal number of people thought that the film was not helpful for homosexuals. But, most negative responses were brief and without explanation, and when probed further these respondents had little more to say. One man did say, however, that it is “not helpful because people who see it are probably not homophobic in the first place, so it’s not breaking down any boundaries.” This implies that the film could possibly be helpful in changing minds for the better as long as it is viewed by a homophobic audience. One opinion that was present but only rarely was that the film was neither helpful nor hurtful for homosexuals. As one man noted, “It’s not helpful, but it’s not hurtful. It’s just a funny thing. Because of the ending it is helpful. People who get it know it’s a farce so they know gay people aren’t really like that.” With

the responses to this question we see that people who saw the film are just as unsure of whether or not the film is helpful for homosexuals as the media is.

The final question pertaining to readings that I asked interviewees was perhaps the most important in determining whether or not people understood the intent of the film. Their responses reveal that they did in fact understand what Baron Cohen intended the film to do, at least in as much as they realized Bruno was based on exaggerated stereotypes. Is his portrayal of homosexuals an accurate one? (This question was added after I had already concluded many of the interviews, so only thirteen people were able to respond to it.) No person whom I interviewed responded that it was an accurate depiction of how homosexuals behave (while two females, one twenty-seven and the other thirty-one years old, did say that they did not know whether or not it was an accurate portrayal). Interviewees either said that it was not accurate but instead stereotypical, or that there may be people somewhat, but not completely, like Bruno. For instance, one woman said that, "He's picking out the most exaggerated characteristics of gay stereotypes and making a character, so no, it's not an accurate portrayal." Another woman remarked that, "It's hilarious, but that's not how gay people are." One man said with confidence that, "No, it's wildly exaggerated. They [homosexuals] are clearly not like that. The movie rips on the most stereotyped version." Others recognized that there may be some aspects of reality in Bruno's character. One man revealed that, "There are people that I've come across here and there that are similar to his character, but the majority of homosexuals that I have met have not been similar to Bruno." Another person explained that the character is "a little farfetched. There are different types and kinds of people. Maybe

Bruno is based on a very open person.” Finally, one woman admitted that the portrayal is not accurate but, “I’m sure there are people who act like that.” What is important to take from the responses to this question and the others is that both right and left-wing people alike understand that Bruno is a character that is not intended to make fun of homosexuals but instead plays off of gay stereotypes.

Is *Bruno* harmful for gay rights? Based on the data that have I collected, I would argue that the film is not detrimental because, overall, people understand that gay people are not generally like Bruno and that the real target of his work is the homophobic members of the audience. I simply have no evidence that the film reinforces gay stereotypes and increases people’s homophobia. Viewers recognized that Baron Cohen utilized stereotypes of homosexuals in order to elicit homophobic responses from those that he duped. No one who answered the question concerning the accuracy of the portrayal believed that Bruno represented reality. Even right-wing people who were against gay marriage comprehended the fact that Bruno was based on exaggerated stereotypes of homosexuals (more on this shortly). I believe that if one is tolerant and sees the film, he or she will likely leave the theatre confirming their negative views of homophobic people. And if one is homophobic and sees the film, he or she will most likely remain so when they leave the theatre, but only because he or she was already intolerant, not because the film persuaded him or her to think that way. It is assuredly possible that some viewers will leave theatres with their homophobia validated, but based on my work, this likely will not happen very often.

Conclusion

What does the content and release of *Brüno* reveal about American society in the year 2009? I contend that it helps to illustrate how it is still difficult to bring up topics like homosexuality. Certainly over time Americans have become more accepting of homosexuality. The National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago has been polling people since 1973 about whether Americans consider homosexual behavior to be morally wrong. In 1973, “73 percent of the people polled described it as always wrong and only 11 percent as ‘not wrong.’ By 2006, those saying homosexuality was ‘always wrong’ had dropped to 56 percent, and 32 percent said it was not wrong” (McKinley Jr. 2009). But fifty-six percent is still the majority of the population. Also, gay marriage continues to be banned state by state, although now and again a state upholds the legality of this union (i.e. Iowa and now Washington, D.C.). These facts help to explain why *Brüno* made about \$70 million less than *Borat* did in the United States (*Box Office Mojo* (1) and (2)). *Borat* was controversial, but it dealt with different issues, issues that create less fervent reactions in people than homosexuality does. Many of the people who saw *Borat* failed to see *Brüno*, perhaps due to its subject matter. This is striking because the main reason why people saw *Brüno* was because they enjoyed *Borat*. Clearly there was something about *Brüno* that pushed many viewers away, and it is likely that this something was the film’s strong emphasis on homosexuality. By and large, Americans are still uncomfortable with facing homosexuality even forty years after the Civil Rights era.

Does a film like *Bruno* change people's views on homosexuality? I do not believe that people's opinions of the gay community were swayed after they had seen the film. Everyone understood that Bruno was based on stereotypes, but people who supported gay rights appreciated and supported Baron Cohen's efforts at mocking homophobia, whereas those who were against gay rights understood the film's intention, but still remained true to their beliefs. This is seen in the fact that a number of people recognized that the character was based on stereotypes, but were also against gay marriage. This very well could reveal that many people who oppose gay marriage are not simply homophobic bigots. Rather, they have their own complex reasons for opposing it. It is also quite likely that most people who are against homosexuality will refrain from seeing the film altogether. *Bruno* could potentially change the views of those who are not quite sure where they stand on the issue of homosexuality, but this is best left for another research project.

An important question remains: is there a more effective way to critique homophobia? Marshall K. Kirk and Erastes Pill of the National Gay Task Force might wish that Baron Cohen had taken a different approach and instead followed their three primary focuses in persuading heterosexuals to accept homosexuals: "one, to desensitize and normalize; two, to emphasize gay victim status; and three to demonize defenders of the family" (Medved 2000: 163). Thus, in their view, the best way to persuade someone who is against gay rights to change his or her position, one must "talk about gayness until the issue becomes thoroughly tiresome," "portray gays as victims, not as aggressive challengers," and vilify those who are homophobic (2000, 163-5). Doing so should result

in more tolerance. *Brüno* arguably accomplishes these steps, though maybe not exactly as the authors had intended. Homosexuality is certainly brought up over and over throughout the film, and homophobic people are indeed vilified. On the surface it may seem that Baron Cohen decided to depict homosexuals more as the “aggressive challengers” than victims, but the scene where he is nearly knocked out by a flying chair suggests otherwise. We must remember, though, that Baron Cohen’s primary mission was to make a comedic and controversial film, not necessarily to change the country’s viewpoint on homosexuality. He would likely be quite satisfied if this did in fact occur. However, his main concern was more in-line with asking questions like, “How do you defend yourself against a man with a dildo?,” or “How do you defend yourself against a man with two dildos?,” rather than changing people’s minds.

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Appendix

I. *Brüno* Questionnaire

Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions. Your responses will remain completely confidential, that is, no one will know what answers you specifically gave. If you are uncomfortable with a question, you do not have to answer it, but I would truly appreciate your response.

- 1.) What is your age?
- 2.) What is your occupation?
- 3.) What is your educational background?
- 4.) Where do you live?
- 5.) In general, where would you classify yourself politically - on the right or on the left?
- 6.) Have you seen *Da Ali G Show*? If yes, how much of it?
- 7.) Have you seen the Borat film?
- 8.) How did you come about wanting to see *Brüno*?
- 9.) How does this film portray homosexuals - positively or negatively? Why?
- 10.) Is the film helpful for homosexuals? Why?
- 11.) Is Sacha Baron Cohen's portrayal of homosexuals an accurate one?
- 12.) What is your stance on gay marriage?

The purpose of this questionnaire is to help determine how the viewers of the film *Brüno* interpret the main character's actions and comedy.

II. Coded Data

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Occupation	Education
1	Male	21	Student	In College
2	Male	22	Movie Theatre Manager	High School
3	Female	23	Movie Theatre Employee	Associate's Degree
4	Male	25	Movie Theatre Manager	Bachelor's Degree
5	Male	32	Movie Theatre Employee Hypnotist, Funeral Home	High School
6	Female	51	Owner	Completed College
7	Male	19	Student	In College
8	Male	16	Student	High School
9	Male	18	Student	High School
10	Female	17	Student	High School
11	Male	22	Student	High School
12	Male	15	Student	High School
13	Male	22	Student	High School
14	Female	18	Student	In College
15	Female	19	Student	In College
16	Male	19	Student	In College
17	Male	17	Student	High School
18	Male	52	N/A	Completed College
19	Female	52	Nurse's Aid	Completed College
20	Male	19	Student	In College
21	Male	18	Student	In College
22	Male	20	Student	In College
23	Female	17	Student	High School
24	Male	20	Student	In College
25	Female	31	Mechanic	Some College
26	Female	27	Correction Officer	Some College
27	Male	27	Musician	Completed College
28	Female	26	Musician	Completed College
29	Female	19	Student	In College
30	Male	19	Student	In College
31	Female	20	Student	In College
		Avg.		
	20M/11F	23.97	20 Students - 11 Others	21 had at least some college

Interviewee	Residence	Politics	Seen Ali G Show?	Seen Borat?
1	Newark, DE	Right	Yes	Yes
2	Selinsgrove, PA	Left	No	Yes
3	Selinsgrove, PA	Very Left	Yes	Yes
4	Selinsgrove, PA	Very Left	Yes	Yes
5	Winfield, PA	Very Left	No	Yes
6	Elysburg, PA	Very Left	No	Yes
7	Elysburg, PA	Left	Yes	Yes
8	Milton, PA	Left	Yes	Yes
9	Milton, PA	Right	Yes	Yes
10	Milton, PA	Left	Yes	Yes
11	Milton, PA	Left	Yes	Yes
12	Milton, PA	Left	Yes	Yes
13	Milton, PA	Left	Yes	Yes
14	Shamokin, PA	Both	No	No
15	Shamokin, PA	Left	No	Yes
16	Patsinous ???	Right	Yes	Yes
17	Northumberland, PA	Right	No	Yes
18	Northumberland, PA	Right	No	Yes
19	Northumberland, PA	Right	No	Yes
20	Selinsgrove, PA	Right	No	Yes
21	Selinsgrove, PA	Right	No	Yes
22	Northumberland, PA	Right	Yes	Yes
23	West Cameron, PA	Left	No	Maybe
24	Honesdale, PA	Left	Yes	Yes
25	Berwick, PA	Right	No	Yes
26	Carbondale, PA	Right	No	Yes
27	Scranton, PA	Left	Yes	Yes
28	Clarks Summit, PA	Left	Yes	Yes
29	Peckville, PA	Left	Yes	Yes
30	Olyphant, PA	Left	No	Yes
31	Prompton, PA	Left	Yes	Yes
	All But 1 in PA	19L/11R/1B	18Y/13N	29Y/1N/1M

Interviewee	Why See Bruno?	Film's Portrayal of Gays
1	Fan of SBC	Negative
2	Trailer	Negative
3	Trailer	Positive
4	See Offensiveness	Negative
5	Liked Borat	Positive
6	My Son Wanted To	Positive
7	Trailer	Both
8	Liked Borat/Fan of SBC	Negative
9	Liked Borat/Fan of SBC	Both
10	Liked Borat/Fan of SBC	Both
11	Liked Borat/Fan of SBC	Both
12	Liked Borat/Fan of SBC	Both
13	Liked Borat/Fan of SBC	Both
14	Boyfriend Drug Her	Negative
15	Boyfriend Drug Her	Negative
16	Liked Borat	I Don't Know
17	Liked Borat	Negative
18	Liked Borat	Negative
19	Trailer	Positive
20	Liked Borat	Negative
21	Liked Borat	Negative
22	Trailer	Both
23	Friends Told Her	Both
24	Liked Borat/Fan of SBC	Negative
25	Liked Borat	Positive
26	Liked Borat	Both
27	Gay Friends/People Think I'm Gay	Positive
28	Like Seeing Homophobic People	Both
29	Liked Borat	Both
30	Like Borat	Both
31	Fan of SBC	Both
	Borat and Trailer - 2 Main Reasons	11N/6P/13B

Interviewee	Helpful for Gays?	Is Portrayal of Gays Accurate?	Stance on Gay Marriage?
1	Yes	No	Support It
2	N/A	N/A	Support It
3	N/A	N/A	Support It
4	N/A	N/A	Support It
5	N/A	N/A	Support It
6	Yes	N/A	Support It
7	Yes	N/A	Support It
8	N/A	N/A	Support It
9	Both	N/A	Support It
10	I Don't Know	N/A	Support It
11	Both	N/A	Against It
12	N/A	N/A	Support It
13	N/A	N/A	Support It
14	Yes	N/A	Support It
15	Yes	N/A	Support It
16	Yes	N/A	No Opinion
17	No	N/A	Against It
18	No	N/A	Against It
19	Yes	N/A	Against It
20	No	No	Support It
21	No	No	Support It
22	N/A	No	Support It
23	N/A	No	Support It
24	Neither	No	Support It
25	No	I Don't Know	Against It
26	No	I Don't Know	Against It
27	Yes	No	Support It
28	No	No	Support It
29	No	No	Support It
30	Neither	No	Support It
31	Yes	No	Support It
	9Y/8N/9NA/2Neither/2Both/1IDK	18NA/0Y/11N/2IDK	24S/6A

III. Partial Transcript of Interviews/Coded Data

I was forced to categorize many responses to these questions, even though many of them failed to fit easily into just one category. This clearly revealed to me how categories are much more complex than they appear.

Gender

- 1*. male
 - 2. male
 - 3. female
 - 4. male
 - 5. male
 - 6. female
 - 7. male
 - 8. male
 - 9. male
 - 10. female
 - 11. male
 - 12. male
 - 13. male
 - 14. female
 - 15. female
 - 16. male
 - 17. male
 - 18. male
 - 19. male
 - 20. male
 - 21. male
 - 22. male
 - 23. female
 - 24. male
 - 25. female
 - 26. female
 - 27. male
 - 28. female
 - 29. female
 - 30. male
 - 31. female
- 20 men, 11 women – nearly 2:1 ratio of men to women

* The number assigned to each interviewee is based on the order I listened to each interview's recording.

1.) What is your age?

1. 21
2. 22
3. 23
4. 25
5. 32
6. 51
7. 19
8. 16
9. 18
10. 17
11. 22
12. 15
13. 22
14. 18
15. 19
16. 19
17. 17
18. 52
19. 52
20. 19
21. 18
22. 20
23. 17
24. 20
25. 31
26. 27
27. 27
28. 26
29. 19
30. 19
31. 20

Average age = 23.97, oldest is 52, youngest is 15 (youngest I saw at a showing was probably 12 or 13)

2.) What is your occupation?

1. student
2. movie theatre manager
3. movie theatre employee
4. movie theatre manager
5. movie theatre employee
6. hypnotist, own funeral home
7. student
8. student

9. student
10. student
11. student
12. student
13. student
14. cashier
15. cashier
16. student
17. student
18. not gonna say
19. nurse's aid
20. student, super market
21. student, super market
22. movie theatre employee, student
23. student
24. student
25. mechanic
26. correction officer
27. musician
28. musician
29. student
30. student
31. student
- 20 students, 11 others

3.) What is your educational background?

1. high school diploma, 3 years of college completed
2. high school
3. associate's degree
4. bachelor's degree
5. high school
6. psychology, music therapy, hypnosis, floral design
7. high school, working on degrees in psychology and theatre
8. high school
9. high school
10. high school
11. high school
12. high school
13. high school
14. high school, started college
15. high school, started college
16. high school, in college
17. high school
18. college

19. college
 20. high school, in college
 21. high school, starting college
 22. high school, in college
 23. high school
 24. high school, in college
 25. some college
 26. some college
 27. college grad
 28. college grad
 29. high school, in college
 30. high school, in college
 31. high school, in college
- All completed or are in high school

4.) Where do you live?

1. Newark, DE
2. Selinsgrove, PA
3. Selinsgrove, PA
4. Selinsgrove, PA
5. Winfield, PA
6. Elysburg, PA
7. Elysburg, PA
8. Milton/Lewisburg, PA
9. Milton/Lewisburg, PA
10. Milton/Lewisburg, PA
11. Milton/Lewisburg, PA
12. Milton/Lewisburg, PA
13. Milton/Lewisburg, PA
14. Shamokin, PA
15. Shamokin, PA
16. Patsinous???
17. Northumberland, PA
18. Northumberland, PA
19. Northumberland, PA
20. Selinsgrove, PA
21. Selinsgrove, PA
22. Northumberland, PA
23. West Cameron, PA
24. Honesdale, PA
25. Berwick, PA
26. Carbondale, PA
27. Scranton, PA
28. Clark Summit, PA

- 29. Peckville, PA
 - 30. Olyphant, PA
 - 31. Prompton, PA
- All but one are in central/northeast PA

5.) In general, where would you classify yourself politically - on the right or on the left?

- 1. right
 - 2. left
 - 3. very left
 - 4. very left
 - 5. very left
 - 6. way to the left
 - 7. liberal all the way
 - 8. left
 - 9. right
 - 10. left
 - 11. left
 - 12. left
 - 13. left
 - 14. both
 - 15. left
 - 16. right
 - 17. right
 - 18. right
 - 19. right
 - 20. right
 - 21. right
 - 22. right
 - 23. left
 - 24. left
 - 25. right
 - 26. right
 - 27. left
 - 28. left
 - 29. left
 - 30. left
 - 31. left
- 11 are on right, 1 is both (moderate), 19 are left
nearly 2:1 ratio of left to right

6.) Have you seen *Da Ali G Show*? If yes, how much of it?

1. yes, not much, mostly clips on YouTube
 2. no, but I know what it is
 3. yes, quite a bit
 4. of course
 5. unfortunately no
 6. no, but I've heard of it
 7. yes, once or twice
 8. yes, own DVD
 9. yes
 10. yes
 11. yes
 12. yes
 13. yes
 14. no
 15. no
 16. yes
 17. no
 18. no
 19. no
 20. no
 21. no
 22. yes
 23. no
 24. yes, couple times
 25. no
 26. no
 27. yes, 3 episodes
 28. yes, couple episodes
 29. yes, couple episodes
 30. no
 31. yes, entire season
- 13 haven't seen it, 18 have seen at least some

7.) Have you seen the *Borat* film?

1. yes
2. yes
3. yes
4. yes
5. yes
6. yes
7. yes
8. yes
9. yes

10. yes
 11. yes
 12. yes
 13. yes
 14. no
 15. yes
 16. yes
 17. yes
 18. yes
 19. yes
 20. yes
 21. yes
 22. yes
 23. maybe
 24. yes
 25. yes
 26. yes
 27. yes
 28. yes
 29. yes
 30. yes
 31. yes
- 29 have seen it, 1 has not, 1 might have

8.) How did you come about wanting to see *Brüno*?

1. I'm a fan of Cohen, and I thought the character looked like it had a lot of potential for comedy
2. the previews
3. the previews
4. wanted to see how offensive he could be
5. really liked Borat
6. my son, the preview looked so interesting, had to see what it was all about
7. from the trailers, it looked funnier than Borat
8. Borat, SBC
9. Borat, SBC
10. Borat, SBC
11. Borat, SBC
12. Borat, SBC
13. Borat, SBC
14. boyfriend drug me here
15. boyfriend drug me here
16. Borat film
17. Borat film
18. Borat film

19. previews
20. Borat film
21. Borat film
22. trailers
23. friend told her about it
24. Borat was hilarious, SBC is a really intelligent guy
25. Borat film
26. Borat film
27. because I have lots of gay friends and people have thought I was gay so I find humor in this stuff
28. I like seeing homophobic people being ripped on
29. Borat was so controversial, and I wanted to see it all over again
30. Borat film
31. he was really funny from Ali G show, not a huge fan of Borat but like his message Borat film and trailer are the main reasons, a few saw it because others told them to

9.) How does this film portray homosexuals - positively or negatively? Why?

1. I'd say the portrayal is actually more negative since Bruno is such an extremely flamboyant homosexual. A lot of people find that degree of behavior to be offensive or at least inappropriate, so I would have to go with negative N
2. not portrayed well, but made fun of people who hate gays B
3. showed they have sense of humor P
4. focused on people who were against that, not a good light though N
5. like how Borat was offensive to point out how people are backwards, trying to be as offensive as possible but in reality if you walk out thinking if homosexuals are good or bad you've missed the point P
6. everyone but Bruno is positive, the whole group was tolerant P
7. mix of both, more positive in the end, bashed anti-gays, there is some negative B
8. negative N
9. negative, little bit of both, portrays straight people in a negative way B
10. agree with 9 B
11. agree with 9 B
12. agree with 9 B
13. agree with 9 B
14. negatively N
15. negatively (seems to agree with 14) N
16. I don't know
17. negative N
18. probably negative, I'm not for homosexuality at all N
19. positively P
20. negatively (answered quickly) N
21. negatively (answered quickly) N
22. depends on how you watch it, could be positive, doesn't make fun of them, shows how people are homophobic B

- 23. depends on beliefs on homosexuality, if you're not open about it then no B
 - 24. the film portrays them as ridiculous, so negative, but it's obvious they're not like that N
 - 25. friggin' hilarious, positive P
 - 26. I'm in between B
 - 27. he allows you to see how people act in real situations, positive definitely P
 - 28. it's obviously a stereotype, I don't think it's either good or bad B
 - 29. he exaggerates what people think homosexuality is and becomes that, it's satirical, not sure if it's positive or negative as well B
 - 30. no effect on how you view homosexuals, just on how you view homophobes B
 - 31. neither, he's not trying to make them look good or bad, just trying to expose homophobic people B
- 11 say negative, 6 positive (only 2 said positive explicitly) but for different reasons, 13 said both, 1 "I don't know" People may not have completely understood the question

10.) Is the film helpful for homosexuals? Why?

- 1. I think, contrary to my answer to number 9, that this film is actually somewhat helpful for homosexuals. It seems like in recent history, homosexuals are being more and more accepted into our culture. If I had to guess why, I would think it's partially because people are being forced to accept them because of an increased outward presence. Even though the film portrays homosexuals in a negative light in my opinion, it increases exposure of this kind of behavior to non-homosexuals and consequently increases tolerance. And if the public is going to become more tolerant of this extreme form of behavior, then it will also be more tolerant of the average homosexual who is not so flamboyant. Y
- 2. n/a
- 3. n/a
- 4. n/a
- 5. n/a
- 6. yes Y
- 7. overall yes, gay converters came off very negative towards women, will turn people off gay converting at least a little bit Y
- 8. no N
- 9. little bit B
- 10. I don't know
- 11. could be in a way, shows how people really are gay B
- 12. n/a
- 13. n/a
- 14. sure Y
- 15. sure Y
- 16. it puts them out there more Y
- 17. no N
- 18. not even N
- 19. I do Y

- 20. no N
- 21. no N
- 22. n/a
- 23. n/a
- 24. not helpful, but not hurtful, it's just a funny thing, because of the ending it is helpful, people who get it know it's a farce so they know gay people aren't really like that.
Neither
- 25. probably not N
- 26. no N
- 27. it could be empowering, shows who has taboos and breaks them down Y
- 28. not helpful because people who see it are probably not homophobic in first place, not breaking down any boundaries N
- 29. same as 28 N
- 30. neither helpful nor hurtful Neither
- 31. might be in that it makes people aware of stereotypes that probably aren't true Y
9 say it's helpful, 9 n/a, 8 say not helpful, 2 say neither, 2 say both, 1 says "I don't know"

11.) Is Sacha Baron Cohen's portrayal of homosexuals an accurate one?

- 1. In general, no. There are people that I've have come across here and there that are similar to his character, but the majority of homosexuals that I have met have not been similar to Bruno. N
- 2. n/a
- 3. n/a
- 4. n/a
- 5. n/a
- 6. n/a
- 7. n/a
- 8. n/a
- 9. n/a
- 10. n/a
- 11. n/a
- 12. n/a
- 13. n/a
- 14. n/a
- 15. n/a
- 16. n/a
- 17. n/a
- 18. n/a
- 19. n/a
- 20. I don't think so N
- 21. no N
- 22. it's a little farfetched, there's different types and kinds of people, maybe a very open person N
- 23. would offend some people, some would be fine with it N

24. no, definitely not N
 25. I guess some, I don't know
 26. I have no clue
 27. No, it's wildly exaggerated, they're clearly not like that, rips on most stereotyped version N
 28. it's hilarious, not how gay people are N
 29. I'm sure there are people who act like that N
 30. agrees with 27-29 N
 31. no, he's picking out the most exaggerated characteristics of gay stereotypes and making a character N
- 18 are n/a, 6 said no, 5 said no but there are some like him, 2 had no clue
 People recognize that it is not accurate of homosexuals in general, but it is possible.
 No one I asked said it was an accurate portrayal.

12.) What is your stance on gay marriage?

1. I support it 100% without question.
2. support it
3. support it
4. support it
5. support it
6. support it
7. support it
8. support it
9. support it
10. support it
11. against it
12. support it
13. support it
14. support it
15. support it
16. no opinion
17. against it
18. against it ('never')
19. against it ('absolutely not')
20. support it
21. support it
22. support it
23. support it
24. support it
25. against it
26. against it
27. support it
28. support it
29. support it

30. support it

31. support it

24 support it (77%), 6 are against it, 1 has no opinion