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"I haven't heard anything about religion whatsoever": Audience perceptions of anti-Muslim racism in Sacha Baron Cohen's *The Dictator*

Abstract: Since the late 1990s, Sacha Baron Cohen's characters have raised controversy, criticism and protest from various groups (for example, from Black activists in 2002 and Hasidic Jews in 2012). The comedy has also been described as satirical or anti-racist. Baron Cohen, as either Ali G, Borat, Bruno or General Aladeen, has consistently provided comedy that leads to public debate on the relationship between comedy and race, ethnicity and stereotype, and the nature of racism and 'othering' in comedy. Despite this significance, very little research has been conducted on how audiences receive the comedy. We present results from a recent focus group, audience reception study of the comedy of Baron Cohen, which recorded discourse from young people aged 18 to 29 years (n 49). The article examines the perceptions of Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism in the comedy, focusing on *The Dictator*. Four discourses are outlined from the focus groups. First, discussions that show agreement in the focus group and argue the comedy is Islamophobic or anti-Muslim; second, discussions that show disagreement in the focus group over the presence of Islamophobic or anti-Muslim content; third, discussions that view no, or almost no, signifiers in the comedy that denote either Islam as a religion or Muslims as an ethnic group; and forth, one example that suggests the comedy uses signifiers of the 'other' for ironic satire. These conversations are analysed through rhetorical discourse analysis to highlight the tropes that construct meaning in each.

1   Introduction – Race, Racism and Baron Cohen

The paper reports on an audience reception study of the comedy of Sacha Baron Cohen. With the context in mind that Baron Cohen's characters have provoked

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criticism and protest from various groups (Kelso 2002; Walker in Howells 2006: 161) but have also been described as satiric and anti-racist (Rojek 2001; Howells 2006), the study showed clips from the movies *Ali G Indahouse* (2002), *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006), *Bruno* (2009) and *The Dictator* (2012) to stimulate discussion on Baron Cohen's comedy in relation to definitions of humor, comedy and funniness, concepts of offense in relation to the comedy and representations of race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, nationality, and the 'other'.[1] The focus groups provided a rich dataset that can only be touched upon in this article. Here we discuss a section of the data – perceptions of Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism in the comedy.[2]

Research on Islamophobia and/or anti-Muslim racism forms a vast literature and it is outside of the remit of this paper to document it. Elsewhere, Weaver (2011b, 2013) uses a definition of racism that employs Wieviorka's (1995, 1997) dual logic of racism - as involving practices and discourses of exclusion (through varying extremes) and inclusion (with the characteristic of stereotyping). The definition is used to evaluate the content of comedy and the interpretations by audience groups. The framework sets up the potential for racist content to be identified in comedy that uses race, ethnicity and racialized religious identities and representations, and is nuanced by a consideration of the polysemy of humorous incongruity, which allows for the identification of ironic, satiric or reversed readings of the material (Weaver 2011b).

We argue the term 'anti-Muslim racism' provides a more descriptive concept than 'Islamophobia' because it does not over-emphasize fear or a focus on Islam in this form of racism. The terms were used synonymously by the moderators of the focus

groups because of the everyday or commonsense familiarity that social actors may have with 'Islamophobia', which is also the accepted term in much of the academic literature on anti-Muslim racism (see for example, Meer and Modood 2012). Signifiers of anti-Muslim racism, or to use more generic terminology, signifiers of orientalism (Said 2014 [1979]; Moss 2015) appear regularly in Baron Cohen's comedy. On this, Moss (2015) describes how Baron Cohen presents 'a diffuse orientialism made up of African, Middle Eastern and gay stereotypes' (2). For example, Borat is intensely anti-Semitic, thus offering a stereotype of an uncivilized, anti-Semitic Eastern Muslim. This reading was expressed in our study when focus group 1 were asked to comment on 'the running of the Jew' clip in *Borat*:

> Male 1: I think it forces a form of Islamophobia and it sort of represents…
> because I know the majority of Kazakhstanis, I think the majority are Muslims
> and so it enforces this opinion that Muslims are anti-Semites. So I don't think
> it's good in that respect.
>
> SW: So you think there's an Islamophobic reading or interpretation of the comedy?
>
> Male 1: Yes.

The Dictator is replete with signifiers that are stereotypic of Islam and Muslims – from the name 'Aladeen', his long beard, misogyny, anti-Semitism, and anti-Americanism. The film also displays minarets and thus typical Islamic architecture. This film is discussed in the article.

2   Studies of Comedy Audiences

There is a small literature that examines how audiences receive comedy. Social class and educational status have been shown to structure the reception of comedy. Kuipers (2006) has found that age structures comedy taste in the Netherlands. Friedman (2014) in a study of the 2009 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, shows how a

bourgeois comedy taste in the UK distinguishes itself from mass taste not just through an appeal to 'intellectual' acts but also through an embodied mode of appreciation that distances itself from laughter. Although age and class differences were not central to this study, as all the participants were of a similar age and class status (as students or young employees), the studies add evidence that social background affects comic appreciation. In other research, concepts of Britishness have been shown to affect the reception of British comedy that is remade oversees (Mills, 2012), and nationality has been shown to be a factor in comedy reception (Chiaro, 2010; Bore, 2011). In this study, we will see that faith and religion, ethnicity or race, and nationality, play a key role in structuring the perception of the comedy of Baron Cohen.

In relation to race and ethnicity, minority groups have been critical of the way in which white comedians have portrayed minority groups. Means Coleman (1998) provides a rich discussion of African American readings of African American representation in US comedy. The study provides complex results, but importantly for this study, observed that 'participants expressed considerable concern over white America's acceptance of the more negative images of the African American' (1998: xvii). A similar finding was observed from some of our Muslim participants. Jhally and Lewis (1992), in a focus group study of African American responses (n 52) to *The Cosby Show,* highlight that audiences of this 'inoffensive', non-stereotypic comedy saw it erase structural issues of race and racism in US society. In a different form, the erasure of stereotypes of Muslims is shown to be a key finding in our research. Lewis (1991) found that *The Cosby Show* constructed polysemy – '[i]n terms of race and

class, it can mean one thing to one audience and something else to another' (205). This also resonates with our study.

In one of only two studies of audience responses to the comedy of Baron Cohen, Popovic (2012) conducted 18 semi-structured interviews on the reception of *Da Ali G Show* in the UK and Croatia. Popovic found that UK respondents were able to enjoy this transgressive comedy inside of a politically correct frame of interpretation and reporting. This frame did not exist in Croatia and thus was not mobilized. The Croatia fans self-identified as a niche rather than mainstream audience. A similar finding is identified in this study as those that appreciate the comedy tend to account for its 'unproblematic' status through a series of devices that do not render their enjoyment politically incorrect. In another study of Baron Cohen's reception - a focus group study of *Borat* - Torosyan (2007), through an oddly 'closed' postmodern lens, argues the movie is 'overly superficial, vulgar and erroneous, even for the genre of satire' (15). This focus group study of US students found that 'while accepting the genre of the movie as satire, most students agree that it actively enforces racial and ethnic stereotypes' (6). In our study, the majority of participants did not react in this way.

2.1   Textual Analysis of Baron Cohen's Comedy

The textual analysis of Baron Cohen's comedy are numerous, with most accounts discussing the centrality of ambiguity, extreme incongruity, polysemy or the 'postmodern' in the comedy.

Beginning with Ali G, some argue Ali G is clearly satirical or positive (Rojek 2001; Gilroy 2004). Howells (2006) provides a discussion of the polysemy of Ali G and argues that the character transgresses politically correct race discourse. Howells is

broadly positive about the character and reactions to him. Saunders (2008) argues that Ali G contains an important postmodern, ambiguous dimension. Others identify the character's polysemy but also the potential ridicule of the marginalized (Malik 2002; Lockyer and Pickering 2009). Weaver (2011a, 2011b) describes Ali G as producing a Baumanesque form of liquid racism that is inherently ambiguous although not always viewed as such by audience members. This is a polysemic, malleable and slippery form of racism, or, simply put, more than one racism at once, and, simultaneously anti-racist. Ali G is identified as expressing three strands of liquid racism. These are: 1. 'Postmodern minstrelsy' – the idea of Ali G as a black man; 2. 'Ethnocultural hybrid racism' – the idea of Ali G as a white man pretending to be black; 3. 'Anti-Asian racism' – the idea of Ali G as an Asian man pretending to be black. There are many more potential meanings that could be extrapolated from this typology, as additional layers are added to any one reading (for example, one could see Ali G as a white man pretending to be an Asian man pretending to be black). Weaver (2011a, 2011b) argues that any 'strong' reading will create or inflict erasure on other readings and thus create liquidity. Anti-racism is also present in the comedy through some of its satiric or ironic readings. Reflexivity is postulated as a mode of viewing liquidity because the multiplicity of readings become clearer to those who engage in self-evaluation and analysis (Weaver 2011a).

Academic studies on Borat are relatively significant in number and most also emphasize polysemy. Saunders (2008) details the layered, postmodern humor and global minstrelsy of Borat (and Ali G). Torchin (2008) describes how *Borat* plays with genre in the construction of this mockumentary. Wallace (2008) discusses how there is a 'hyperreality' in Borat, in that it contains Europe's 'other' but is always hybrid, an

imitation and fluid. Others have attached Borat to the mythic image of the trickster (Kononenko and Kurharenko 2008), with Bassil-Morozow (2012) arguing that Borat represents a risky, 'gonzo trickster'.

There has been only one academic study of *The Dictator.* In this, Ridanpää (2014) describes textual ambiguity and polarization in readings of the movie. The study examines IMDb reviews of the movie, which see the humor as 'serious' and political, and polarize around either support or condemnation of the comedy on the basis of whether joke targets deserve ridicule. There are parallels between this and our data.

3. Theory Development: Liquidity, Erasure and Trace

The liquidity of readings of *The Dictator* are evaluated in this audience reception study. It is argued that liquidity is applicable for reading the focus group discourses in a form that relies on 'solid' identifications or positions and the erasure or lack of awareness of other positions. In this comedy, a discursive 'site' is observed that creates anti-Muslim racism, and other readings, as liquid, contradictory and ambiguous. The resulting sum total or conclusion is a discourse of anti-Muslim racism in existence and in 'erasure' (Derrida, 1976). It is both built and broken down in articulations and denials of it. There is thus a 'trace' (ibid) of other positions in the articulation of any, as each resists other tellings or begins to fail in its own telling.

These findings have significant sociological implications because, in building on Weaver (2011a, 2011b), it reinforces the definition of liquid racism as a description of an aggregate rather than particular instances. In these cases, accounts moves towards solidity to the degree that they are read and agreed upon by audiences. It was found that most individuals did not move coherently from one reading of the

comedy to another. The liquidity of the comedy exists at a macro level or between individuals or groups. At the individual level, perceptions are quite fixed, seem tied to background and show little sign of flexibility. If liquidity is displayed by individuals, it does not form a clear movement between readings but rather a vague openness to ambiguity. This suggests that we are *not* liquid individuals even if certain discursive forms provoke liquidity as an aggregate.

Overall, in the majority of the focus groups there develops a display of either uncertainty, incoherence or disagreement in relation to the meaning of the comedy as the discussions progress and there are clear attempts to fix this. Liquidity begins to (re)emerge as groups talk and are probed on the comedy. From the evidence collected, we will not assert that one reading is dominant and follow Michel Foucault's comment on the complexity of discourse:

> we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies. (Foucault 1978: 100)

The sections that follow are attempts to present these discourses and unpack the strategies they embody. As mentioned above, reflexivity of the viewer is essential for viewing liquid racism as 'liquid' – there needs to be some feedback of subject position and 'other' position in order to grasp multiple readings. Methodological reflexivity (the self-awareness of the researcher and awareness of observer effects) was important in this research as a means of viewing and recording liquidity. Without the moderators allowing for interpretations to emerge, and encouraging particular discussions through probing, particular readings could not have been recorded.

4 Methodology – Focus Groups and Audience Reception

We conducted ten focus groups with between two and eight 18 to 29 year olds in each. We played four identical clips at intervals - one from each of the four movies. The clips were followed by discussion. Focus groups lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. Incentives were offered to participants in the form of refreshments, a payment of £10 for participation, and up to £10 of incurred travel expenses. A sample of 49 participants was achieved. The sample is stratified by gender and ethnicity. All participants were students or young graduate employees at a metropolitan university in the UK. The sample was assembled from volunteer respondents to an internet advert and invitations for participants sent to the Islamic, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT), Kazak, African-Caribbean and Jewish societies (to achieve participation from individuals who share the identity markers of Baron Cohen's characters). Being a fan of the comedy was not a prerequisite. Participants had viewed differing amounts of Baron Cohen's comedy before participation. For each film, we prepared a standard set of four questions to ask the participants and concluded with two more questions, amounting to the same 18 questions being posed to each group (see appendix one). Led by the resulting discussion, we used ad hoc follow-up questions to elicit elaborations.

4.1 Anti-Muslim Racism and Focus Group Discussions

The subject of anti-Muslim racism appeared without prompting in some of the focus groups, particularly those where it was considered that the comedy could be read in this way. In others, where anti-Muslim racism was not read, it did not appear without prompting and was introduced. We acknowledge that in the latter cases

there is an 'observer effect' but care was taken to only introduce the topic and not shape responses. This approach was necessary because it would have been impossible to understand the reason for *not* reading the comedy in this way without such an intervention and thus it was agreed that this was appropriate as a part of the moderators' role to 'stimulate' discussion (Hansen et al., 1998: 272). Although there are power relations at play in focus group discussions, which see the researcher in a position of being able to direct discussion, it was a central concern not to impose definitions on the participants. It should be acknowledged that the 'strong' reading of anti-Muslim racism in focus group 1 provided a point of discussion for the researchers and thus a topic to investigate in the later focus groups.

In a reflexive manner, and in order to understand the range of readings of the comedy, the researchers, in meetings throughout the project, discussed the meanings of the comedy and the meanings presented in the focus groups. Both authors accept the comedy as polysemic yet during the course of the research expressed differences of opinion on particular aspects of it. The framework of liquidity therefore aligned with the experience of conducting the research.

4.2   Focus Groups and Methodological Issues

We found that participants who are more familiar with the comedy helped explain it to others who were not familiar with the comedy, filling in the gaps in understanding (Morgan 1996). We recruited some international students who were not familiar with the stereotypes present in Ali G*.* They were unable to provide in-depth reactions to the film but with the presence of those who could explain the character's 'background', the international participants related the character to their

own culture. This was not insignificant for the development of dominant readings and the reproduction of frames because this most often involved individuals reaching consensus on what was funny and why, or what the comedy meant, with those who had not seen the comedy before conforming to the dominant reading. Unfamiliar participants related the characters to their own contexts and then agreed with the dominant interpretation, rather than engaging a counter position.

Several focus group sessions had a consensus in regards to Baron Cohen's work, but there exists the possibility that some members may have disagreed but felt unable to go against the majority. One of the possible drawbacks of using focus groups is the possibility for one speaker to dominate the conversation, and that others are suppressed (Bryman 2012). We were not host to any overly dominant speakers. However, some participants took some extra encouragement to speak.

5   Data Analysis

As outlined above, we recorded four responses to potential anti-Muslim content in *The Dictator*. The data is analysed using principles of rhetorical discourse analysis (Weaver 2011b) to explain the rhetorical devices or tropes that are used to construct meaning in the discussion. This highlights how readings of the comedy are presented and how other readings of the comedy are discounted or erased. Comments are presented that best exemplify the reading, its construction and erasure. Not all comments are included in the analysis.

5.1   Discourse One: Those that argue the comedy is Islamophobic or anti-Muslim

The first discourse comes from those who argue the comedy is Islamophobic or exhibits anti-Muslim racism. The discourse in this section comes from some but not all Muslim participants. Although non-Muslims did express this reading of the comedy, all were from ethnic minority groups. No white participants expressed this reading.

The first comment comes from focus group 1. In this group, the topic emerged from the participants. Being the first focus group, it served as a point of discussion and comparison for the researchers. It was where the 'strongest' readings of anti-Muslim racism were articulated and consisted of an all Muslim group of six males, who were members of the Islamic Society at the university. They clearly self-identified as Muslim for reasons of faith group membership and ethno-cultural identification. The group were of mixed national, race or ethnic background.

> SW: … what do you think he's trying to say in this comedy?
>
> …
>
> Male 1: … I don't know where he's from exactly but I think if you look at *all* his movies, he does portray himself as a Muslim. So I think there is an *element of Islamophobia*. Dictator, Ali G, these are all Muslims and so he's portraying them in a bad light, in an already Islamophobic climate so I don't think it's good...

This comment describes the comedy of Baron Cohen as containing an 'element of Islamophobia'. This is said to be present in 'all' of his characters, although General Aladeen and Ali G are specifically named. The discourse draws on the idea that many of Baron Cohen's characters could be Muslim men. *Stereotype* as a trope is identified as present in the comedy. This stereotyping is referred to as the content of Islamophobia and the idea of 'portraying them [Muslims] in a bad light'. The comment identifies the contemporary rise of anti-Muslim racism (Meer and Modood

2012) as producing a social context where this is problematic. It is an account of how the comedy might produce problematic representations and implicitly focuses on anti-Muslim racism as a cultural racism (ibid). There is erasure attached to the tropes used. 'All' of the characters are described in this way but it is difficult to see how Bruno fits this model – this is a use of *hyperbole* in the making of a generalization. The metaphor 'bad light' also erases consideration of any other reading, particularly a satirical dimension. The acceptance of the comedy as not 'good' prevents approbation or subversion through the text. In this account, the identification of stereotype is descriptive and builds fixity while the other tropes in the text more obviously create the trace of other readings, as they form a more superficial barrier with polysemy.

Here is a second example from focus group 1 that responds to the same question:

> …how many people are there who will find it funny? 1.5 billion people [Muslims], they're not going to find it funny. Movies like these will get banned in some of the countries for these exact reasons because you're disrespecting their religion. (Male 2)

While the first account focused on how the comedy is problematic in terms of its use of negative depictions in an Islamophobic climate, this respondent focuses on the offense that the comedy produces for Muslims because of the depiction of religion. Offense, psychological hurt and insecurity are frequently documented in the reception of racism by ethnic minority groups (Rattansi 2007), and this respondent is describing an issue on the basis of the comedy 'disrespecting' religion. The participant either misses or chooses to not accept any satirical component of *The Dictator,* which mocks the very political regimes that would ban such a film, and the banning of the material because of religious offense appears justified for this

participant. Such a discourse would run up against opposition from those that see the criticism of religion as a fundamental component of free speech in liberal democracies. In terms of its rhetoric, it employs a rhetorical device of *deduction* to claim that all Muslims (1.5 billion worldwide) would not find the comedy funny – this is an attempt at the erasure of other readings and amounts to a reductionism. Such an erasure soon sees the trace of polysemy emerge and is unsustainable - there were Muslim participants in our study, in different focus groups, who clearly enjoyed the comedy.

Current academic discussions of anti-Muslim racism tend to describe it as a cultural racism (Meer and Modood 2012), that racializes religion and culture. These accounts assert that religion and culture are tied and that religion is often *not chosen*. Although some of the participants in our study saw the comedy as anti-Muslim, the participants in focus group 1 agreed on a view of it as unjustified that is quite different to the academic definitions of anti-Muslim sentiment as a cultural racism. A view was presented in focus group 1 that saw culture as criticizeable because we are born into it (i.e. of no choice) and religion as not a suitable subject of humor because it is chosen:

> LB: Did you find Sacha Cohen's character in this film funny or offensive?
>
> Male 1: Funny and very offensive. It was funny but very offensive.
>
> LB: Do you want to expand on that a little bit?
>
> Male 1: … as an Arab man, I don't mind much, to be honest, when someone is making jokes about my ethnicity. I don't mind, that is fine. Some do but when it comes to my religion, I don't think that it should be an option for people. I think religion should be respected… (Male 1)

This represents the use of the rhetorical device of *prolepsis* (Lockyer and Pickering, 2001). Lockyer and Pickering (2001) describe how this is used to make criticisms of comedy and present the speaker as someone who *usually* displays a fully functional sense of humor, but that the particular example has gone too far. This is an account that runs contrary to academic arguments that see anti-Muslim racism as a cultural racism rather than a criticism of religious practice. As religious or cultural criticism is *not necessarily* a racist activity, this is an account that begins a process of self-erasure.

4.2 Discourse Two: Discussions that show disagreement over the presence of Islamophobic or anti-Muslim content

This section outlines conversations in focus groups that dispute the presence of anti-Muslim racism in the comedy. These discussions always happened in groups of mixed ethnicity and/or religious affiliation. They thus highlight how background, culture and belief shape readings of the comedy. All offer serious descriptions of the comedy. All use devices to fix the meaning of the comedy, and all encourage the erasure of other positions but leave traces of them through inconsistencies of various kinds. This is the state of liquidity.

The first is a conversational extract from focus group 4, which contained three participants. One white British female is of the option that racism is not expressed. Two ethnic minority Britons argue that it is an issue in the comedy:

SW: So you both mentioned religion.

Male 1: Yes.

Female 1: Yes, I think it creates a stereotype as well, because people would have a negative perception when it comes to Muslim with the whole beard and everything.

> You watch this and it's going to confirm to you that they're actually like this, they like to have control of things, they like to dominate everyone. They're going to have this negative perception of what a Muslim or these countries are, wherever you get these countries.
>
> Male 1: Definitely, yes, I agree with that.
>
> SW: [name of female 2], did you have something you wanted to say about it?
>
> Female 2: I completely understand your points but I'm going to be completely honest and say that I thought it was funny, because I would say that obviously it's satirical and I think there's…
>
> SW: So for you, if it's a satire, how does that change it?
>
> Female 2: Because you know that it's not… it's a film, it's a comedy, and I think there are certain levels. I don't think all satire, like it can vary on how funny it is and sometimes it can go too far, but I think sometimes you can't take everything so seriously.
>
> Female 1: Well, then I think that's what's wrong with the world, I don't think we take things seriously enough…

The first speaker, an ethnic minority female, argues that there is *stereotype* and negative perceptions of Muslims and Muslim countries in the comedy. These are domination, and perhaps patriarchal domination, and the display of General Aladeen's beard. The ethnic minority male agrees with this statement. Here tropes are identified in the comedy but there is a reliance on *deduction* in the presentation of audience affect, and polysemy is not acknowledged. The second female, who is white British, argues that the film is satirical but when encouraged to expand does not offer a definition of satire as a trope that might speak truth to power or send up racism. What is offered is a description that articulates an 'it's just a joke' rhetorical defence of comedy that sees humorous communication as of no consequence because it is not serious. This defence of the comedy encourages the trace of other readings because it tends to ignore the rhetorical or affective dimensions of comedy and satire, which is implicitly asserted in the final comment.

A second example is from focus group 8. This extract contains four speakers, three female and one male. The focus group contained six participants (four female and two male). Three participants argue that anti-Muslim racism is not expressed in the clip and one participant disagrees with this. In this focus group, the topic of anti-Muslim racism was directly introduced by one of the moderators:

> LB: Do you think the film is any way Islamophobic or demonstrating qualities of anti-Muslim racism?
>
> Female 1: No.
>
> …
>
> Male 1: I'm curious of the role, the depiction of practising Islam. There were no depictions of practising Islam in that clip were there?
>
> Female 2: Well, there were minarets and general things. Again, you would only pick up on these kinds of things I guess if you already knew.
>
> LB: Yes.
>
> Female 1: I think other than the location of the country and then the calligraphy, he talked about the Arabic writings and all of that, there wasn't really any reference to Islam in the movie.
>
> Female 3: No. I think unless you're looking to be offended, finding any excuse, then there's not really anything there that could be deemed as Islamophobic.

The definition of anti-Muslim racism built by three participants is one that uses *denotation* as a trope. For the comedy to create anti-Muslim readings it must clearly display Islam. Female 1 dismisses racism outright but then qualifies her comment - there were signifiers of Arabic culture but not Islam. This is a reading that erases potential meaning creation through connotation or implied meaning. Female 3 not only dismisses this reading but also sees those who see it as 'looking to be offended'. This is a rhetorical device of *argumentum ad hominem* – it attacks the character of the arguer - in this case the 'offended'. Female 2 argues that anti-Muslim racism

could be present in the comedy for those aware of some signifiers. She had previously said the following on stereotype in the comedy:

FB: Do you think that ethnicity or race plays a key part in this scene?

…

Female 2: … had he picked, for example, an Asian, let's say the leadership in Burma for example, had he picked any sort of leader like that, it wouldn't have worked because it wouldn't have been a set of stereotypes that you can associate… for example, you can't have let's say a bearded man, you can't have the harem. It wouldn't have resonated with the audience more, they wouldn't have been able to go, oh that's that stereotype, that's what this is a parody of.

…

SW: Do you think that's problematic?

Female 2: Yes, depending on the viewership. If you were watching it with a sort of eye of how ridiculous it is, but if you buy into those stereotypes anyway, it's just a confirmation bias I think.

As we have seen in previous extracts, the problematic aspect of the comedy is described through an identification of stereotype in the comedy text. This participant shows understanding of how different audiences may receive the comedy differently and that confirmation of the stereotypes may be a possibility for some. It is more open to the polysemy of readings and less reliant on tropes to build the explanation. The other members of the focus group did not agree with this position.

4.3   Discourse Three: Those that do not view any signifiers in the comedy that denote either Islam as a religion or Muslims as an ethnic group

This section outlines a discourse of agreement that *The Dictator* does not contain anti-Muslim racism. The first is from focus group 2, which contained all white

Europeans but with some religious diversity. The focus group contained seven people (four male and three female). In this case the topic was introduced by the moderator:

> SW: If I can throw in a question about Islamophobia; do you think it's at all anti-Muslim or Islamophobic in its depiction?
>
> Male 1: Not so far. I haven't seen the film but from that I wouldn't have got any of that.
>
> SW: Anybody else?
>
> Male 2: It's just more an attack on dictators rather than any race particularly.
>
> Female 1: I didn't really see that.
>
> Male 3: It's not really focusing on their religion as such.
>
> Female 1: There's been no mention of it.
>
> Male 2: There's been no mention of their God or anything like that. It's just been making fun.
>
> Male 3: I think it's a generic state. It's just taken every stereotype about the thing and just rolled it into one. It's not based on one. I don't think it really is based on North Korea, I think because of everything that was going on there with the Arab Spring, it just took all of them and rolled it into one big extreme example.

It is clear that anti-Muslim racism is not read by any of the participants. Again, it is the *denotive* representation of Islam that is required to signify anti-Muslim racism and there is no such representation. Male 3 is aware of the presence of *stereotypes* but the idea of *equal opportunities offending* – of using more than one stereotype and combining them - is used to erase the existence of particular stereotypes, and the potential for critique does not emerge.

   Focus group 3 provides a second example. This group contained some European national diversity but only one non-white participant. It contained eight participants

(four men and four women). Again, in this focus group, the topic was introduced by the moderators:

> SW: … do any of you feel there's a perhaps an anti-Muslim element to this comedy?
>
> Male1: I haven't heard anything about religion whatsoever in this film so far
>
> Female 1: Yes.
>
> Male 1: It's just like… I guess it's a leap you have to make, an assumption that they are.
>
> Female 1: Yes, the race themselves kind of almost implies it and the location geographically sort of implies it, but they've made no comments whatsoever.
>
> Female 2: They kind of imply that they're anti-women though and that's the only thing I've seen.
>
> Female 1: But whether you relate that to Islam or not is kind of your own prejudices.

This extract expresses a similar *denotive* definition of anti-Muslim racism that sees comment on Islam as the only signifier of it. This then, is not a definition that sees anti-Muslim racism as a broad cultural racism that makes use of a number of stereotypes of Islam and Muslims. Male 1 asserts this position strongly but then introduces the possibility that anti-Muslim racism could be implied. Female 1 begins to offer examples of connotative meaning that might signify an anti-Muslim reading and Female 2 clearly strengthens this assertion. Female 1's retort to that is an *argumentum ad hominem* however, that re-establishes the vagueness of the connection, by attributing any reading of misogyny in the comedy to the character of the viewer. This reading, where complete ignorance of the stereotype would be the least problematic reading, erases readings where the stereotype might be enjoyed, questioned or disputed. It therefore 'closes' polysemy. Despite the use of denotation as a requirement, the trace of connotation works to liquidise the reading. Before

this, the group were discussing how much they had enjoyed the comedy. Then,

when asked if it connects to racism, only vague connotations are seen where strong

denotive meanings are required.

4.4 Discourse Four: *The Dictator* as ironic satire

Baron Cohen's work has been described as satiric or ironic (Rojek 2001; Howells

2006). These words were used several times in the focus groups but, as we saw in

section 4.2, once asked to explain further, satire and irony frequently became

synonyms of humor more generally, not specific tropes with distinct characteristics.

Two respondents, in focus group 9, did give a description of the ironic use of anti-

Muslim racism that went beyond this tautological tendency:

> SW: If I said, is this potentially a racist comedy or an anti-racist comedy, or an Islamophobic, or anti-Muslim comedy, would you agree or disagree with any of those descriptions of it?
>
> …
>
> Female 1 I think it was playing on the idea of Islamophobia, like how the people are portrayed, like playing on the idea but I don't think it actually was Islamophobic… so the actual movie wasn't but it was playing on the idea of Islamophobia.
>
> Female 2: It's not Islamophobic because it doesn't mention religion so far. Well, I have seen the rest of the movie but I can't remember but I don't think it does. It doesn't really mention religion. It portrays a culture. I don't think we can even say it portrays a certain ethnicity or a certain religion or anything, but it represents a certain culture, or a certain view of the culture that resembles some of the Western depictions of Islamic culture; I don't even want to put a label on it. Yes, it refers to real life depictions, media depictions…

In this extract, female 1 offers an account of the comedy that relies on the notion of

'playing' with Islamophobia. The comedy does not intent to be Islamophobic but it

does use this topic in order to create comedy. This describes an irony that is more

than straightforward joking at or about Islam and Muslims. Female 2 offers

something similar although she begins with a *denotive* definition of Islamophobia that matches that given by other participants. Next, she goes on to elaborate a description of irony that has a satirical dimension. It is the resemblance of 'Western depictions of Islamic culture' in media and society that the comedy draws on. Here, it is very much the view of the 'other' from the position of the hegemonic group that is the subject of the joke. In terms of erasing the liquidity of other readings, this happens through the denotive dismissal of Islamophobic content. The trace of Islamophobia reemerges with the description of *irony* and 'depictions of Islamic culture', because this is necessary for the depiction of anti-Muslim *stereotype* or *caricature*. The rhetoric of the statement is achieved through a description of a *topothesia* – or an imaginary place – and the identification of that place in stereotype.

5   Conclusion

There are a number of implications that spring from this discussion that will now be outlined.

Although it is impossible to identify the existence of anti-Muslim racism in the minds of the participants, or equally, to identify if claims of offense are genuine to strategic, it is possible to identify the textual and rhetorical properties that are used to *explain* the relationship between the comedy and anti-Muslim racism. As stated above, there are signifiers or stereotypes of Muslims, Islam and orientalism in much of Baron Cohen's comedy in general and in *The Dictator* in particular (Moss 2015). All texts are polysemic but comedy, specifically, is prone to multiple meanings because it is built on structural incongruity and because it is 'not serious' (Weaver

2011b). Comedy might reproduce or resist stereotypes, or if it is layered or 'liquid' in construction, contain the potential to be read in many ways. We have shown that focus group participants read the comedy in a number of ways and that no one reading has primacy. Each reading contains contradictions, erases itself and other readings, and contains the trace of other readings (Derrida 1976).

There is an implication for scholarly discussions of Islamophobia. The majority of our respondents did not view *The Dictator,* or the rest of Baron Cohen's comedy, as containing anti-Muslim racism. The majority of these respondents were white British, atheist or no religion. Most generally enjoyed the comedy and viewed comedies as 'just humor'. They also enjoyed the 'extreme' nature of the comedy and viewed its extreme nature as the generator of the humor. This is an observation that mirrors Freud's (1905) argument that people explain the funniness of tendentious humor through structure rather than content, because content is always social and more easily criticized (see Billig 2005: 157 for a more detailed discussion of this). To follow Freud's argument, we can speculate that the depiction of the culture of the 'other', or the socially alien culture, through stereotype and hyperbole, which is important in this comedy, could act as a key component in its enjoyment. This was described in several of the discourses.

There are a number of explanations that might account for the reading of anti-Muslim racism being absent from the majority of respondents. First, it could be that signifiers of Islam or Muslim identity are not recognized. Zabalbeascoa (2005) makes an important comment on culture and humor appreciation:

> Some jokes and types of humor are challenging for the translator due to specific difficulties (restrictions) that have to do with the text users' linguistic or encyclopedic knowledge, or their degree of familiarity or appreciation for

> certain subject matters, themes, genres, and types of humor. … An ethnic joke is one that depends on the knowledge of certain features of a given ethnic group for its understanding, and a certain brand of ethnic humor for its funniness. (Zabalbeascoa 2005: 190)

If the participants were culturally unaware of signifiers of Islam or Muslims then this reading would be difficult to achieve. This is not unproblematic - Michel Foucault argued discourse tends not to be recognized as such when at its height. That the power of discourse 'is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself' (Foucault 1978: 86). Racism is an example of a discourse that is not always recognized as such when it is at its height. Second, the respondents display a narrow 'religious' rather than 'cultural' definition of anti-Muslim racism. The wide public use of the term 'Islamophobia' might encourage this because it implies that a depiction of Islam needs to be central to anti-Muslim racism. From our research, we can say that some public definition of Islamophobia are narrow and rely on denotation. Understandings of the concept from many of our respondents produced 'closed' readings. Thus a concept of anti-Muslim racism may have more descriptive potential. This adds weight to our critique of academic uses of Islamophobia as an inaccurate nomenclature. Thirdly, there is the potential that participants might deny or back away from their enjoyment of anti-Muslim material when the issue is raised.

A third implication concerns how descriptions of racism can rely on tropes in argumentation. Discourses that viewed the comedy as anti-Muslim were recorded. The more 'stable' of these tended to identify the trope of stereotype in the comedy and discuss the existence of racism in society. Others that employed rather than identified tropes to make their arguments, relied more heavily on the erasure of

other readings of the comedy, while paradoxically encouraging the erasure of their own argument.

The implications for critical humor studies are that it may be increasingly unrealistic to offer statements on what comedy does or means in relation to serious discourse in any singular way. Polysemy does not mean that representation does not happen but it does mean that clear statements on Baron Cohen's comedy such as it 'operates to deflate cant and humbug' (Rojek 2001: 24) or it is 'overly superficial, vulgar and erroneous, even for the genre of satire' (Torosyan 2007: 15) are unstable in conditions of liquidity. Comedy studies needs to begin analysis from the position of polysemy.

Overall, we have seen that the concept of 'liquid racism' is relevant for explaining readings of signifiers of Islam or Muslims in *The Dictator* and Baron Cohen's work more generally. Individuals do not necessarily have 'liquid' understandings of the comedy and rarely read more than one layer of meaning in a coherent manner. At the aggregate level, there is liquidity, as the meanings of the comedy are asserted, fixed, destabilized, debated and erased in the focus group discussions.

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Appendix one - Questions for Focus Groups

Borat

 1) Do you find the character funny/offensive? Why?

 2) Is ethnicity/nationality a key component of this humor?

 3) What did you think of the depiction of Jewish people in this clip?

 4) Is there anything else you would like to say about this character?

General Aladeen

 1) Do you find the character funny/offensive? Why?

 2) What observations are being made on rulers in that part of the world?

 3) Do you think ethnicity/race plays a key part in the scene? Why?

 4) Is there anything else you would like to say about this character?

Ali G

1) Do you find the character funny/offensive? Why?

2) What observations are being made on youth culture in this comedy?

3) Do you think race/ethnicity plays a key part in the scene? Why?

4) Is there anything else you would like to say about this character?

Bruno

1) Do you find the character funny/offensive? Why?

2) Bruno is depicted as gay. Do you think this helps or hinders the comedy?

3) Do you think race/ethnicity/nationality play a key part in the scene? Why?

4) Is there anything else you would like to say about this character?

And finally

We have examined these films in a critical context. Would you enjoy these films with friends or on your own?

What type of comedy or humour do you like or dislike?

Bionote

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Endnotes

[1] Each focus group viewed one clip from each of the four films at intervals punctuated by group discussion. We chose clips that introduced the characters, to give an impression of character construction to new viewers and to remind those that had previously viewed the comedy. The clips were chosen to depict and summarise the debated satiric and/or offensive content in each particular movie, in relation to the central characters and other groups represented. The focus groups were shown the first 4 minutes, 50 seconds of *Borat.* The first 4 minutes, 45 seconds of *The Dictator,* from 6 minutes, 32 seconds to 9 minutes, 30 seconds of *Ali G Indahouse,* and from 36 minutes, 13 seconds to 42 minutes, 8 seconds of *Bruno.*

[2] In this section of the data, discussions of *Bruno* (2006) were not present.