

The image shows a news article header. On the left, there is a portrait of Tony Broadbent in a hexagonal frame. Above the portrait is the word 'OPINION' in gold. Below the portrait is a gold box with the name 'Tony Broadbent' and a smaller line of text below it: 'Award-winning author, writer, speaker brand strategist and'. To the right of the portrait is a 'NEWS' tag in a blue box. The main title of the article is 'The Janus Identity Revisited - The Two Faces of Sacha and Zuck' in bold blue text. Below the title is a quote in blue text: 'If only more people spoke truth to the powers that rule the Internet, we might yet save and reshape it anew for the purposes it was originally intended for. And help reshape society for the better, too, along the way.'

The Janus Identity Revisited - The Two Faces of Sacha and Zuck

Media & Culture

Tony Broadbent Mon, 02 Dec 2019 11:27 GMT



The Janus Identity Revisited - The Two Faces of Sacha and Zuck

Media & Culture | Tony Broadbent | Mon, 02 Dec 2019

Life may not always be a 'cabaret', but as 'all the world's a stage' it's long been accepted that life all too often resembles a 'theatre of the absurd.' The twin masks of tragedy and comedy: the pluperfect symbols of opposition and the conflicted state of mind that's increasingly now the default position of the world's governments and far too many international corporations. Is it any wonder then that humour doesn't always travel? How can it, when to work best it's all too firmly locked into time and place.

At least, the better sort that reflects the human condition of a particular culture or society, as then it's all too timely and tailored to whatever is the present exact need of its different audiences; be that by generation, social group or ethnicity. Or outrage.

A country's sense of humour; and by implication, its sense of itself; further refined by whatever waves of immigration have impacted its idea of national identity and how well it has or has not embraced the resulting multiculturalism. Each country's comedic output shaped and marked by

the history of its acceptance of free expression; each successive government administration's response to its most caustic critics and most hilariously excoriating satire, always the most telling and/or most damning metric. That's why jokes that can have people rolling in the aisles in one country, can have people scratching their heads in bafflement in the country next door, so to speak. Or, even more crushingly, of them being utterly indifferent to the existence the comedian and his or her scriptwriters.

Case in point: The arch humour of English comedian, actor, screenwriter, film director and producer Sacha Baron Cohen and me. We were born some twenty miles from one another, although some twenty years apart; we're both British; both London boys, so to speak. So you might think there'd be some affinity between us; however small. But, no, I've long been indifferent to Mr Cohen's so-called comedic charms: his too-broad, too-brash, too-boorish humour not at all to my taste; his seemingly never-ending parade of way-over-the-top, fictional satirical characters, however, cleverly intentioned, not at all my cup of tea.

The 'fake news' journalist Borat Sagdiyev from Kazakhstan; Austrian fashionista Brüno Gehard; wannabe gangsta Ali G; Israeli anti-terrorism expert, Colonel Erran Morad; and Admiral General Aladeen; that he created and portrayed, not one of them spoke to me. But then, as none other than Mr Cohen himself recently, said of his comedy: "I'm not going to claim that everything I've done has been for a higher purpose. Yes, some of my comedy, OK, probably half my comedy, has been absolutely juvenile and the other half completely puerile." So, regardless of his many chosen 'masks of comedy' there was absolutely nothing there for me. Mr Cohen lived in his many worlds and I lived in mine. And life, being all too short, and far too short for such twain minds to meet; the doors to me once closed, remained very firmly shut.

Then I happened to catch Sacha Baron Cohen's performance in the Netflix drama series 'The Spy' and was stunned by how accomplished a dramatic actor he really is. He's absolutely extraordinary in the role of the Israeli, Eli Cohen, who infiltrated the Syrian government in the 1960s. So: "Nice One, Mr Cohen." It's all too obvious to me, now, there was always much, much more there than had previously met my eye or ear, and high time, however

tardy my conversion to follower and fan, I opened up the door to such a talented individual.

I mean we can all change our minds when given sufficient new information and/or cause, can't we?

Then, last week, Thursday, 21, November, dear Sacha; as I now think of him; all but blew the bloody doors off with an explosive 24-minute speech he gave to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), in New York, attacking Facebook and other social media platforms for enabling the proliferation of hate speech and misinformation.

His speech: striking in its sincerity, intelligence, acuteness of observation, and unabashed humanity. And even though Sacha appeared as himself, rather than, as people might have expected, one of his satirical personas; the speech was still larded with brilliant flashes of his trademark humour. Sacha speaking truth to power, as only such a sharp mind and tongue can.

Sacha Baron Cohen's ADL speech a rebuttal to remarks made by Facebook CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, in a major "public relations" speech, some weeks previously. Dear Sacha duly sashayed, scalpel in hand, to cut each fatuous Zuck utterance into little pieces. Carefully revealing the layers of conceits concealed beneath Zuckerberg's public face, with a precision and surety of hand that would have done a Harley Street surgeon proud.

The ADL speech was posted to their website late Thursday night. And occasioned an all too brief flurry in the Friday and Saturday news cycles; when it was amongst the most shared pieces in the better newspaper/news sites in the US and UK. It was even reported on the BBC and a number of US and UK cable news channels, before it all but disappeared under the welter and weight of other breaking news.

But it shouldn't at all be relegated to last week's news and fade from memory until it's forgotten. Its message is still all too currant and will remain so in the weeks and months and, yes, given the pace of government legislative bodies, for years to come. And I urge you to search out Sacha Baron Cohen's ADL speech; on YouTube, if necessary; as I believe it to be one of the more important speeches of the year. As it not only pointedly addresses the unfettered, unregulated power of the world's biggest social

media platforms; Facebook, YouTube, Google, Twitter, et al; it also and very importantly points to their all too inevitable influence and unseen effect on this December's General Election in the UK, and next November's presidential election in the US.

To give you a better sense of Sacha Baron Cohen's ADL speech, but also not to give too much of it away; as I don't wish in any way to diminish its full impact for you; here are one or two telling moments:

"Today around the world, demagogues appeal to our worst instincts. Conspiracy theories once confined to the fringe are going mainstream. It's as if the Age of Reason; the era of evidential argument; is ending, and now knowledge is delegitimized and scientific consensus is dismissed.

"Democracy, which depends on shared truths, is in retreat, and autocracy, which depends on shared lies, is on the march. Hate crimes are surging as are murderous attacks on religious and ethnic minorities.

"All this hate and violence is being facilitated by a handful of Internet companies that amount to the greatest propaganda machine in history.

"I'm speaking up today because I believe that our pluralistic democracies are on a precipice and that the next 12 months, and the role of social media, could be determinant.

"These are the richest companies in the world, and they have the best engineers in the world. They could fix these problems if they wanted to. The truth is, these companies won't fundamentally change because their entire business model relies on generating more engagement, and nothing generates more engagement than lies, fear and outrage.

"Take the issue of political ads. Fortunately, Twitter finally banned them, and Google is making changes, too. But if you pay them, Facebook will run any "political" ad you want, even if it's a lie. And they'll even help you micro-target those lies to their users for maximum effect.

"Zuckerberg said that social media companies should "live up to their responsibilities", but he's totally silent about what should happen when they don't. By now it's pretty clear, they cannot be trusted to regulate

themselves. As with the Industrial Revolution, it's time for regulation and legislation to curb the greed of these hi-tech robber barons.

"In every other industry, you can be sued for the harm you cause. Publishers can be sued for libel; people can be sued for defamation. But social media companies are largely protected from liability for the content their users post; no matter how indecent it is; by Section 230 of, get ready for it, the Communications Decency Act. Absurd!

"Maybe it's time to tell Mark Zuckerberg and the CEOs of these companies: you already allowed one foreign power to interfere in our elections, you already facilitated one genocide in Myanmar, do it again and you go to jail.

And no 'Get Out of Jail For Free' card in this game of 'Monopoly'. (My comment, that, to round everything off.)

One last thought: Dear Sasha, thank you for saying what you did. If only more people spoke truth to the powers that rule the Internet, we might yet save and reshape it anew for the purposes it was originally intended for. And help reshape society for the better, too, along the way.

Please now count me as one of your biggest fans. And I don't care who in the world knows it.