

**Who Are You Calling a %&@*#?:
How Depictions of Intolerance in Hollywood are Presented and Perceived**

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Abstract:

Although intolerance is prevalent in various messages within the modern media, audiences are able to perceive subtle differences in those messages. This paper presents three different depictions of intolerance and discusses how those depictions are perceived by the general public. The jeremiad framework is used in order to discuss why the messages of intolerance in the movie *Crash* are generally accepted. The prophetic messages within the film condemn anger-fueled racism and predict the possibility of redemption. *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* is similarly analyzed using the tenets of satirical humor. Although the sexist, racist, and homophobic messages in the movie are incredibly offensive, they ultimately help audiences to acknowledge and disapprove of such behavior. Finally, three celebrities are presented as examples of real intolerant behavior. Mel Gibson, Michael Richards, and Isaiah Washington were faced with an immense backlash after uttering offensive, intolerant remarks. Public outcry confirmed the unacceptability of public displays of intolerance and each celebrity initiated apologia and image reconstruction efforts. Each example results in a certain degree of hopeful optimism which suggests an improvement in societal norms and patterns involving intolerance.

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Chapter 1—Introduction

With the ever-increasing presence of media messages in the public sphere, the issue of intolerance has emerged as one theme which is both divisive and recurrent. This essay examines three different ways in which intolerance is presented thematically and realistically in Hollywood. Although the source of intolerant messages moves from the fictional to the real, a thread of realism connects each.

The fictional end of the intolerance spectrum used in this essay is represented by the 2004 film *Crash*. The fictional story, although inspired by true events, depicts a struggle of race relations in Los Angeles which contributes to a vicious cycle of hatred and mistrust. Paul Haggis, the film's writer, director, and producer, is essentially the creator of the messages behind *Crash*. As this essay asserts, the messages of intolerance within *Crash* are accepted by audiences because they fall within the realm of a jeremiad forewarning (Owen 252). Haggis showcases the social and cultural failings of modern society, namely racism, as the chief contributors to an overall decline in public moral and human decency. The framework of the jeremiad, dating back to seventeenth-century Puritan ministers, presents this decay and vice as present but also predicts a return to stability and prosperity. In the end, *Crash* echoes the positive suggestion that race relations could improve if society at large heeds the lessons presented by several of the film's fictional characters. Their atonement and redemption provides hope for audiences. *Crash* reveals that while racial prejudices exist, change is not outside the realm of possibility. The film's box-office success and public acclaim are just two indicators of how its handling of messages of intolerance was endorsed.

The middle ground of the intolerance spectrum addressed in subsequent discussion is represented by the highly controversial yet equally successful 2006 film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*. *Borat* blends reality and fantasy by presenting several factual episodes in a travelogue “mockumentary” with an overall fictional narration. The brainchild of improvisational comedian Sacha Baron Cohen, the film is excessively inappropriate and disgustingly hilarious. Messages of intolerance emerge in the lead character’s deep-rooted anti-Semitic, homophobic, and sexist beliefs. While audiences and critics voraciously protested language and behavior which was blatantly offensive, the film ultimately succeeded in winning wide acclaim. This essay suggests that the immediate outrage was allayed through Cohen’s use of satirical humor to mock and degrade intolerance (Schutz 77). *Borat*’s portrayal of intolerance was ultimately a clever way of coercing unsuspecting victims into letting down their guards and exhibiting similar opinions or behaviors. Audiences then had an appropriate outlet to berate intolerance itself. Satire therefore allowed a subtle means by which intolerance was acceptable to audiences since an underlying vision of rightness also existed.

Finally, the reality of actual offenses committed by persons in the public eye represents the factual, genuine side of the intolerance spectrum. Between the summer of 2006 and the spring of 2007, three Hollywood celebrities were engulfed by public outrage after uttering intolerant remarks. Mel Gibson barraged his arresting officers with anti-Semitic remarks after being arrested for suspicions of driving under the influence. A few months later, Michael Richards was caught on a grainy cell phone video yelling racist comments at several audience members during a comedy club performance.

Shortly thereafter, Isaiah Washington referred to another actor using a derogatory, homophobic term. In each case, public outrage at the inappropriate, offensive, and harmful remarks forced the celebrities to address the rhetorical situation. As this essay further develops, each celebrity was forced to construct apologia and image reconstruction efforts in order to salvage their career. In any event, the public response to and popular outrage at the actors' intolerant behavior suggests the progressive nature of modern societal and cultural advancement. The thread of realism running across each of the three aforementioned examples provides an impetus for discussing the pervasive nature of messages of intolerance in Hollywood.

The following discussion begins with a chapter on messages of intolerance in *Crash*. A discussion of background information will elaborate upon the film itself as well as the creator of the messages therein. The following literature review introduces the jeremiad as an early American, Puritan-based rhetorical device which is translated into a modern communication construction. The tenets of the jeremiad are then applied to *Crash* in an analysis of the film's content and prophetic message. From the jeremiad message of *Crash*, attention is then focused on the film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*. A background summary discusses the specific instances of intolerance depicted in the film as well as the range of acceptance it received from the public. The subsequent literature review details certain qualities of satirical humor as a comedic genre. Instances in which satire has been previously used as a rhetorical device to discuss issues of intolerance are also presented. An analysis of *Borat* using satire as a rhetorical device concludes the chapter. The final chapter confronts three celebrities who have recently roused public outcry for their

intolerant behavior. A literature review first presents previous research in the fields of apologia, image reconstruction, and Parasocial Interaction Theory. A summary of pertinent information then recounts the specifics of Mel Gibson's intolerant tirade. The subsequent analysis scrutinizes the actor's statements and behavior in terms of apologia and image reconstruction techniques. Michael Richards', and Isaiah Washington's intolerant behavior and corrective recourses are discussed in a similar format. The final sections suggest implications of intolerance in Hollywood, propose suggestions for future research, and give concluding statements.

Chapter 2—Issues of Intolerance in Hollywood

Numerous scholars have recently investigated the penetration of diverse yet consistently abrasive examples of intolerance in the public domain. Their inquiries will assist in a further understanding of general prejudices in Hollywood. “Looking into the Black Box: Intolerance of Ambiguity and Dynamic-transactional Processes in the Development of Issue-related Images” is an article in which scholars Werner Früh and Werner Wirth examined aspects of intolerance. The two have confirmed the importance of the symbolic environment surrounding every human being. These “sign symbols,” or language, convey the reality of the world to us (Früh and Wirth 541). Each individual could not conceivably experience every possible event in all of humanity so we depend on secondary experiences such as obtaining information through sources like the media. Our perceptions of the world are therefore heavily reliant on the “mass media of an enormous information industry” (Früh and Wirth 541). The researchers utilized the “Thomas Theorem” to explore whether or not the media create or define our realities “first starting as fiction, later becoming fact because it shapes the preconditions, the orientation and the basis for our decisions and further actions” (Früh and Wirth 542). The theorem deals directly with this interaction between the media and recipients of transmitted messages. Their conclusions indicate that the results of media messages depend on the nature of the audience. A passive audience would “only ‘copy’ the reality presented by the media and then forget it over time” whereas an active audience “constructs a world according to its own subjective traits on the basis of the information

offered” (Früh and Wirth 543). Needless to say, the pervasive nature of media messages is responsible for the equally invasive qualities of intolerance.

Jaeho Cho and several of his colleagues pursued an analysis of the aforementioned topic in an article entitled “Cue Convergence: Associative Effects on Social Intolerance.” Cho examined the effects of news story cues, or “labels used to characterize issue domains and social groups,” on audience processing and opinion expression (Cho 136). His study considered the cognitive effects of the mass media specifically in regard to the characterization of Arabs in news coverage of the war on terrorism. After September 11th, he found that Arab groups were presented as threatening and extremist through various cues. The labels used to characterize issues, groups, and figures in the news subtly changed and therefore, Cho propounded, influenced audience understanding (Cho 137). Additionally, the manner in which the war on terrorism was conveyed through news outlets resulted in two outcomes. First, “associations between evaluations of Arabs and judgments of intolerance” were strengthened. Second, the “speed with which such judgments are formed” was hastened (Cho 137). Cho’s internet survey strengthened his hypotheses that unfavorable news coverage of Arab groups became closely linked to intolerance for mediated expression of extreme perspectives, support for immigration restrictions, and opposition to minority empowerment (Cho 149). The language cues within the news media thus appeared to affect individual’s thoughts. Intolerance, xenophobia, and prejudice all contributed to perceptions of the Arab as a “radical outsider” (Cho 151). Cho also postulated that media coverage of Arab groups tended to reinforce intolerant beliefs. He concluded by once again affirming the

relationship between patterns and portrayals in the media and the ultimate cognitions and behaviors of individuals (Cho 152).

Karin Wahl-Jorgensen discussed a unique angle of intolerance in the media in her article, “A ‘Legitimate Beef’ or ‘Raw Meat’? Civility, Multiculturalism, and Letters to the Editor.” Her piece focused on the controversial decisions that news production staffs have to make in publishing letters to the editor. In discussing intolerance as it is presented in the media, the issue of expressing opinions in a respectful manner becomes clear. The author interviewed several newspaper editors in San Francisco, California where the ethnic diversity and highly politicized gay community contribute to some heated public debates (Wahl-Jorgensen 90). The “propriety and civility” of letters to the editor are thus considered before publishing them (Wahl-Jorgensen 90). The only letters that are rejected outright are ones that are “openly racist, sexist or homophobic *and* do not in any way contribute to the public debate” (Wahl-Jorgensen 90). While letters containing “hate speech” are rejected, the managing editors do often decide to publish letters which may appear to have racist, sexist or homophobic content. One such example came from an elderly man complaining that his everyday life had become more difficult as he increasingly encountered people who could not speak English. He cited immigration policies as the culprit. The editor in this case published the man’s complaints because he said that they were “general observations” not direct racism (Wahl-Jorgensen 99). There is a delicate balance that editors must maintain in allowing for free public debates while concurrently averting hostilities. Wahl-Jorgensen explored the belief that “the letters that might appear racist on the surface can be an important part of the struggle to make sense of our place in the world” (Wahl-Jorgensen 99).

Nevertheless, the focus of subsequent examples will bring into focus the direct portrayal of intolerance in films and from celebrities. Wahl-Jorgensen concluded, however, by stressing the importance of civility and rationality in the public discourse of a multicultural society (Wahl-Jorgensen 102). Intolerance in social commentary may indeed be part of a process of making sense of social change.

Not all academics would agree with Wahl-Jorgensen's claim that social commentary on the subject of intolerance is beneficial. Andrew Calabrese and Silvo Lenart critique the scope of "political correctness" in the media in their article entitled "Cultural Diversity and the Perversion of Tolerance." Calabrese and Lenart believe that the term "political correctness" should be eliminated because it has been "emptied of meaning through over-use and distortion" (Calabrese and Lenart 33). They discuss the "PC buzzword" and how it was originally used to *combat* intolerance. The term eventually became misrepresented because of a "concentration of elite control over the means of public expression and the silencing of opposing views" (Calabrese and Lenart 39). This may corroborate with implications in the Wahl-Jorgensen article that suggest the high degree of influence that newspaper editors have in determining whether or not a letter to the editor is racist or otherwise offensive. In this respect, Calabrese and Silvo may have some basis for questioning the legitimacy of true political correctness in the media. How sensitive creators of media messages are in constructing fictional messages of intolerance is one corresponding area of research which will be discussed in the following sections on intolerance in films

Chapter 3—Crash

The following section discusses the public's overall acceptance of messages of intolerance within the Academy Award-winning film, *Crash*. In doing so, an explanation of the film is provided for background knowledge. A literature review of previous research on the jeremiad as a methodology is then presented in order to facilitate an understanding of the rhetorical genre. The jeremiad as a rhetorical device is ultimately incorporated into an analysis of the film's message in order to "explain" why audiences embrace and exalt a film which so vividly portrays such offensive prejudices.

At the 2004 Toronto Film Festival, Paul Haggis unveiled *Crash*, an impassioned film depicting race relations in Los Angeles. Haggis, director and producer of the film, wrote the screenplay after experiencing an unsettling carjacking himself. In 1991, he and his wife were returning to their Porsche after stopping to rent a movie from a Blockbuster on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles. Just as he was about to follow his wife into their car, he noticed two men with guns approaching them. Haggis recalled the following in an interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle*:

We started to walk away when I felt a gun in my back. One of the guys reached down and grabbed the video then raced off in my car. Once a year for the next 10 years, I would think about who those kids were. Were they best friends or had they just met that night? Did they do this a lot or was this the first time? (Stein)

Haggis mulled over the incidents of that night until the events of September 11th, 2001 inspired him to pen the *Crash* screenplay (Stein). His personal confrontation with racial tension and crime fueled Haggis' development of the main plotline, racial epithets, and character development in *Crash*.

Haggis had previously worked in television on shows such as *Due South* and *Family Law* (Rydbom and Dickenson). *Crash* signified his first venture into feature film. Haggis has since received two Academy Awards (Best Picture and Best Original Screenplay for *Crash*), two Emmys, the Humanitas Prize, the Viewers For Quality Television Founders Award, the Ethel Levitt Memorial Award for Humanitarian Service, the Hollywood Award for Breakthrough Director and the WGA's prestigious Valentine Davies Award, presented to him for "bringing honor and dignity to writers everywhere" (IMDb-Paul Haggis). Haggis has continued his commitment to humanitarianism as co-founder of Artists for Peace and Justice, as a member of the Board of Directors of The Hollywood Education and Literacy Project, and as a member of the Advisory Board of The Center for the Advancement of Non-Violence (IMDb-Paul Haggis).

Crash was purchased by Lions Gate Films, a Canadian-based entertainment company specializing in film and television distribution, and was released nationwide in 2005 (IMDb-Crash). Production for the film was so limited that the \$6 million budget required Haggis to use his own home and car for several of the scenes (IMDb-Crash). The sizeable cast reportedly worked for near nothing because they were so deeply loyal to the project and its message. Sandra Bullock, Don Cheadle, Matt Dillon, Brendan Fraser, Terrence Howard, Chris "Ludacris" Bridges, Thandie Newton, and Ryan Phillippe are just a few of the many actors who remained faithful to the message of the film despite the meager budget and restricted resources. Sandra Bullock reportedly even purchased her own plane ticket to the set so that the production crew could use the money for other necessities (IMDb-Crash).

Crash opened in wide release on May 6, 2005 and had grossed a total of \$55.4 million domestically as of the spring of 2007 (“Crash - Movie Details - Yahoo! Movies”). Despite being released in 2004, the film could only meet Academy Award eligibility after playing for at least a week in Los Angeles (IMDb). The following award season, *Crash* surpassed frontrunner *Brokeback Mountain* to win Academy Awards for best motion picture of the year, best achievement in editing, and best writing for an original screenplay. This historic accomplishment made *Crash* the first film ever to be purchased during a film festival and then win an Oscar (IMDb). While overcoming such great odds to achieve outstanding acclaim, many factors drove “Crash” to become best motion picture of 2005. The powerful emotions of the film revolve around several subtexts concerning racism, crime, and anger.

Over a period of thirty-six hours in Los Angeles, the following fictional characters collide in *Crash*: “A Brentwood housewife and her District Attorney husband; A Persian store keeper; Two police detectives who are also lovers; An African-American television director and his wife; A Mexican locksmith; Two carjackers; A rookie cop; A middle-aged Korean couple” (Lions Gate Entertainment). Each character meets several of the others at some point in the film, thus driving the complex, overlapping nature of the plot. The tangle of their relationships and encounters is expressed in gradations of rage, betrayal, heartbreak, and redemption. Each “collision” between characters yields profound and provocative confrontations that result in everything from salvation to moral defeat. Much of the introspection urged by the film is derived from the continual racist remarks from every single character. *Every* character gives biting remarks despite their own racial or cultural background or their own cutting, personal confrontations with

bigotry. A hero of moral integrity in *Crash* can just as quickly revert to racial discrimination and prejudice, a victim of the film's viscous labyrinth of intolerance.

The movie opens with a scene following a minor car crash involving two LAPD detectives and a Korean female. The Latina detective emerges from her patrol car and approaches the Korean woman who is speaking with a police officer. The woman is recounting what happened in the accident, saying in a stereotypical accent and in broken English, "Mexicans no know how to drive. She brake too fast!" (*Crash*). The detective, enraged by the accusations, replies in mocking:

I'm sorry—you no see my 'blake' lights. See. I stop when I see a long line of cars stopped in front of me. Maybe you see over steering wheel, you 'blake' too! Officer, can you please write down in your report how shocked I am to be hit by an Asian driver? (*Crash*)

Later in the film, the detective herself is a victim of racial intolerance and ignorance when her partner calls her a Mexican. She responds that her father was from El Salvador and her mother was from Puerto Rico—neither of which is Mexico. Her partner then replies, "Who gathered up all those remarkably different cultures and taught them all how to park their cars on their lawns?" (*Crash*).

In another scene, a Persian shopkeeper is trying to purchase a gun to protect his store. Struggling with the language barrier, he is discussing the transaction with his translating daughter when the salesman behind the counter yells, "Yo, Osama! Plan the jihad on your own time" (*Crash*). The shocked and outraged Persian man calls the salesman an "ignorant man," to which he replies, "Oh yeah, I'm ignorant? You're liberating my country and I'm flying 747s into your mud huts and incinerating your friends? Get the fuck out of my store!" (*Crash*). Just as in the previous example, the victim of intolerance perpetuates the hatred. This hatred would later motivate the Persian

man to hunt down a Mexican locksmith whom he blamed for his own store being robbed. Nonetheless, intolerance is the root of a rage-fueled continuation of prejudice and crime.

The somewhat central plotline of the film revolves around two young African-American men who contemplate their own social situations. Walking down a dimly-lit promenade, one says, “We’re the only two black faces surrounded by a sea of over-caffeinated white people patrolled by the trigger-happy LAPD” (*Crash*). Their deliberations on reverse racism abruptly end as they confront a couple getting into their Lincoln Navigator and carjack them at gunpoint. The couple turns out to be the District Attorney of Los Angeles and his wife. Distraught by the traumatizing incident, the couple has the locks in their home changed. After the D.A.’s wife sees that a young Mexican man, whom she is sure is a gang member, has changed the locks, she yells, “And he’s not going to sell our key to one of his gang-banger friends the moment he’s out our door!?” (*Crash*). Once again, the perpetuation of racial intolerance erupts through those characters it contacts and ricochets into the lives of others.

Crash is an undeniably gripping, provocative film. It portrays the pain associated with the perpetuation of racial intolerance albeit in a fictional chain of events. By doing so, Paul Haggis attempted to relate his own personal carjacking experience through an embellished narrative of intertwining characters whose lives are each affected by the intolerance of others. The integrity and authenticity of the racial intolerance in *Crash* is certainly one area of potential debate. How “real” can the message of the harms of bigotry be when it comes from one wealthy, white male from the Hollywood elite? This, as well as other deliberations over the unique qualities of messages of intolerance in *Crash* is addressed in later discussions of the jeremiad rhetorical genre and its application

to the film. First, a literature review of the jeremiad explains the genre and its applicability to *Crash*.

Literature Review: The American Jeremiad as a Methodology

The jeremiad is one device by which fictional, constructed messages can be understood within the context of intolerance. Mark Stoda and George N. Dionisopoulos provided an articulate discussion of the American roots and basic tenants of the rhetorical device in their article, “Jeremiad at Harvard: Solzhenitsyn and ‘The World Split Apart’.” The article focused on the commencement address that Alexander Solzhenitsyn gave at Harvard in 1978 but also provided a rich historical conceptualization of the jeremiad itself. In the seventeenth-century, the Puritans’ “self-perception as a covenant people, chosen by God for a special purpose” dominated their extremely conservative lifestyle (Stoda and Dionisopoulos 32). The belief that they were venturing into a new promised land, an American wilderness, was strongly tied to a search for a new prototypal Biblical Israel (Stoda and Dionisopoulos 32). In order to provide the world with a model for “ordered and meaningful society,” American Puritans would frequently attend sermons that served as focal points to their solemn days of fasting and humility (Stoda and Dionisopoulos 32). This practice was closely tied to the importance of affirming their covenant with God to be obedient and virtuous in return for protection and blessings.

The first feature of the jeremiad accordingly placed the rhetor, the Puritan minister, in the role of a prophet serving as an intermediary between a divine authoritative message source and the intended audience (Stoda and Dionisopoulos 31).

The prophet acted as the “voice for an authoritative message grounded in a conception of inerrant truth, thus contributing to the authoritative transcendent tone of the proclamation” (Stoda and Dionisopoulos 32). The minister’s words were often sharp and critical but simultaneously provided a hopeful and promising prediction of times ahead.

Having established the centrality of the Puritan minister as the creator of the jeremiad message, the four main sequences of the jeremiad may be recounted. First, the minister would direct the audience’s attention to their “deviation from the covenant” (Stoda and Dionisopoulos 33). Support for this deviation would be provided by quotes from the text of the Hebrew prophets; appropriately, the most common source of support came from *Jeremiah*. Second, the minister would discuss the current affliction apparent in the community. This malevolence, whether it was poor health, lackluster crops, or civic unrest, was attributed to God’s response to the community’s sinful violation of their covenant with Him (Stoda and Dionisopoulos 33). Third, the minister recalled the sin in a detailed account accompanied by exhortations to repent (Stoda and Dionisopoulos 33). Fourth, the sermon would conclude with the minister foreseeing the withdrawal of God’s wrath and the return of his praise in a restoration of the covenant. There was only hope for relief and promise of blessing if the community gave up their “wicked ways” (Stoda and Dionisopoulos 33).

The modern American jeremiad is no longer exclusively attributed to religious leaders but rather extends throughout political and social discourse. It has taken on uniquely modern features while at the same time retaining much of its early Puritan influence (Stoda and Dionisopoulos 34). The modern rhetor similarly takes a prophetic role through explaining a crisis in the form of “admonishment for deviating” from a

sacred truth. Moreover, a hopeful prediction that recommitment to those truths will lead to a better tomorrow provides hope at the end of the jeremiad (Stoda and Dionisopoulos 34). The modern American jeremiad contains a total of four very similar sequences which mirror the rhetorical devices of early Puritan derivation:

First, this chosen nation is deviating from the dictates of its ‘religion’.
 Second, the present undesirable condition is symptomatic of a deviation.
 Third, the remedy calls for a recommitment to the dictates of the religion.
 Finally, applying the remedy promises a return to prosperity and influence
 (Stoda and Dionisopoulos 34)

Authors Stoda and Dionisopoulos interpreted these four sequential steps of the jeremiad into their own collection of the three essential qualities necessary in a modern jeremiad:

From this previous work we can derive the elementary generic touchstones of the jeremiad. First, the rhetor assumes a prophet’s persona, serving as an intermediary between a god-like authority and an audience, to proclaim a message of “truth.” Next, the rhetor’s appeal alludes to a sense of collective destiny in the form of a covenantal calling to be blessed and to be a blessing, and warns that present deviation from the covenant is leading to disaster, but recommitment will return security. Finally, the rhetor’s message is grounded in a body of sacred truth, acknowledged as authoritative by both prophet and people. (Stoda and Dionisopoulos 34)

Hence, the jeremiad form of oration developed by Puritan ministers has translated very well into modern terms. As this discussion progresses, and with the issue of intolerance as our focus, the specific genre of film becomes the modern equivalent of a Puritan jeremiad sermon. A. Susan Owen provided one example of the modern American jeremiad in motion picture form in her article, “Memory, War and American Identity: *Saving Private Ryan* as Cinematic Jeremiad.” Owen used Steven Spielberg’s dramatic war film as an example of the jeremiad as a response to “conditions gone awry” (Owen 249). The film, she argued, relies on the crisis of national identity that resulted

from the Vietnam War. This public memory would sculpt an impression of Spielberg's World War II drama in a unique manner. Cynicism had permeated the American psyche of a generation during a time when war and Watergate illustrated a "violation of the fundamental political contract between government and citizens" (Owen 250). This "contractual" violation becomes the equivalent of breaking a covenant with God. By using contemporary audiences' Vietnam mentality to convey a World War II drama depicting the atrocities of war, Spielberg used the American jeremiad in a modern, secularized way. He merely replaced scriptural loyalties with "a rendering of the national past" (Owen 252).

Similar to prior delineations, Owen acknowledged three rhetorical functions that the jeremiad has in American literature and public address: "To name the covenant (the special people), to make public lamentation for a decline (a falling away from a promise), and to imagine redemption (connect the past to the future)" (Owen 252). Spielberg translated this formula through an updated application of the classic jeremiad. As Owen demonstrated, "Spielberg begins with a falling away, the entailments of post-Vietnam traumatic memory (the 'greater good' is lost). He acknowledges the 'sin' which disrupted communal ethos. He concludes with a call home to the mythic past" (Owen 253). In doing so, Spielberg satisfied each of the major premises behind constructing a jeremiad discourse.

Although Owen expounded upon a meaningful interpretation of *Saving Private Ryan* through the lens of the jeremiad, she held some doubts. She concluded with reservations as to whether or not the jeremiad can facilitate social critique. In her discussion of the film, Owen suggested the possibility that the jeremiad failed as a

rhetorical device because “those disillusioned or turned cynical” would likely read “declarations of redemption through a return to the principles of that covenant” as ironic or comical (Owen 250). In other words, the American public might have been too skeptical for the jeremiad to have gotten its message across. The fact that Spielberg attempted to present World War II to a post-Vietnam audience using the jeremiad may have proved ineffective. The audience may have also dismissed a return to idyllic times, or the redemption phase of the jeremiad. This possibility is attributed to the belief that modern secular motivations rely so heavily on public memory and tangible history rather than distant spiritual covenants. In any event, the merit of enlisting the jeremiad as a means of interpreting cinematic messages of intolerance is a worthy subject of further inquiry.

Analysis of Crash as a Modern American Jeremiad

While the American jeremiad has its roots in seventeenth-century Puritan New England, its fundamental elements have endured and still exist in contemporary social commentary. The chastising sermons of ministers such as John Winthrop have expanded across all genres of communication. While religious leaders may continue to use the jeremiad form in sermons, a popular secularization of the jeremiad modus operandi has also occurred in more modern contemporary messages in book, television, and movies. The film *Crash* is one such example. As the following sections reveal, the film retains the defining qualities of the American jeremiad while also adapting them to modern audiences. In *Crash*, the director, Paul Haggis, embodies the prophetic preacher whose

sermon consists of the messages within the film. Those messages then fulfill the requirements of a jeremiad to discuss the current affliction, recall the sin, and forecast a return to God's graces.

The Prophetic Preacher

In translating *Crash* in terms of a jeremiad, Paul Haggis becomes the prophetic preacher. As screenplay writer, director, and producer, Paul Haggis is undeniably the creator of the rhetorical message. He therefore embodies the modern equivalent of the Puritan minister. His prophetic admonitions come in the form of cinematic fiction rather than sermonic forewarnings. Just as in Puritan New England, Haggis was inspired to write his screenplay after a personal encounter with sin and corruption. After his car was stolen from him at gunpoint in 1991, Haggis spent years reflecting on the episode. The 1990s were prosperous years for the United States both economically and politically. To the contrary, the shocking attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001 aroused immediate discussions of moral decay and societal decline. It was ultimately the events of September 11th which motivated Haggis to revisit his carjacking experience. Just as many "saw in those horrific events signs of divine displeasure at the growing ungodliness of American society" (Gutterman and Murphy 49), Haggis was also inspired to ask challenging questions. He said in one interview,

I never actually set out to write [*Crash*]. I just kept asking myself different questions. Then, after 9/11, I have a black friend, he's a writer, who said, and he hated admitting this, but he felt kind of good about all these Arabs and Muslims who were now being searched on the airplanes, because now it was someone else's turn. I went 'Ooh, that's interesting.'

So that was one of the kicking-off points and I started to investigate it more, because I wanted it to be universal. I was interested in the deeper responsibility, the more human aspects of our fears, than the sociological aspect of it. (Applebaum)

Haggis thus observed a social evil that he needed to point out to the public. In the opening scene of *Crash*, Ria (Jennifer Esposito) and Detective Graham Waters (Don Cheadle) sit uneasily in a car. The two were involved in an accident just moments prior. Detective Waters then proposes some philosophical musings that forecast the tone of the entire film.

GRAHAM: It's the sense of touch. In any real city, you walk, you know? You brush past people, people bump into you. In L.A., nobody touches you. We're always behind this metal and glass. I think we miss that touch so much, that we crash into each other, just so we can feel something.
(*Crash*)

One film critic said of the opening monologue that although it is undeniably provocative and a true observation of Los Angeles, “it doesn't really sound like anything a policeman would say, or, for that matter, that just about anyone would say. It sounds like something Paul Haggis said, or thought, and wanted to put into a screenplay” (Phillips). This criticism is valid and provides further support for the contention that Haggis acts as a prophetic minister. Abiding by the first sequential step of the Jeremiad, Haggis proclaims the “deviation from the covenant” that he has witnessed is an isolation and segregation among members of modern society. This segregation then results in xenophobic racial intolerances. Whites, blacks, Latinos, Iranians, and Asians are each depicted as isolated sects of American society who fear and discriminate against those who are different from them.

The Sermon: Discussing the Current Affliction

If Haggis is the modern equivalent of the prophetic Puritan minister, the film itself can be considered the “sermon.” *Crash* as an “authoritative message grounded in a conception of inerrant truth” represents and characterizes the “authoritative transcendent tone” of the jeremiad (Stoda and Dionisopoulos 32). As a rhetorical instrument, the jeremiad has four main sequential steps that the *Crash* “sermon” therefore also follows. The minister first directs his congregation’s attention to their deviation from their covenant with God (Stoda and Dionisopoulos 33). For example, John Winthrop might address seventeenth-century Puritan sinners in a sermon inspired by Mathew 19:19, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Spurgeon). In addition, the Old Testament says, “Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart; thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him. Thou shalt not revenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (de la Motta). Paul Haggis addresses this same subject, albeit under secular characterizations, in *Crash*. His “congregation,” or the movie-going audience, perceives the falling away from God’s covenant through depictions of racial intolerance in Los Angeles.

The Christian underpinnings of American society promote an amicability and tolerance among individuals. Haggis’ screenplay provides evidence to the contrary of an American reality in which racism is pervasive and omnipresent. This racism, therefore, comprises the deviation that Haggis’ jeremiad addresses. Directly inspired by his own carjacking experience, one early scene depicts two young black men, Anthony (Chris “Ludacris” Bridges) and Peter (Larenz Tate) walking down the 3rd Street Promenade in

Santa Monica, California. The two men, ironically named after saints, have just left an Italian restaurant complaining about the racist service. The scene perfectly demonstrates the paranoia built on misperceptions that fuels much of the racial strife apparent in *Crash*. It is these misconceptions and xenophobic outbursts that Haggis presents as a “sinful deviation.” Racist language is the tangible indicator of this deviation. Haggis therefore directs his audience’s attention to the racist behaviors that he sees as commonplace:

ANTHONY: You see any white people in there waiting an hour and thirty two minutes for a plate of spaghetti? Huh? And how many cups of coffee did we get?

PETER: You don’t drink coffee and I didn’t want any

ANTHONY: That woman poured cup after cup to every white person around us. Did she even ask you if you wanted any?

PETER: We didn’t get any coffee that you didn’t want and I didn’t order, and this is evidence of racial discrimination? (*Crash*)

Anthony, commenting on his observation that all of the white people around them are afraid of them, points out a white couple walking down the sidewalk—Rick and Jean (Brendan Fraser and Sandra Bullock). As they approach their Lincoln Navigator, Jean notices the two men and reaches for her husband’s arm. Anthony then reveals a handgun and, quite contrary to the behavior of their sanctified namesakes, steals the SUV at gunpoint.

ANTHONY: Look around! You couldn't find a whiter, safer or better lit part of this city. But this white woman sees two black guys, who look like UCLA students, strolling down the sidewalk and her reaction is blind fear. I mean, look at us! Are we dressed like gang bangers? Do we look threatening? No. Fact, if anybody should be scared, it's us: the only two black faces surrounded by a sea of over-caffeinated white people, patrolled by the trigger-happy LAPD. So, why aren't we scared?

PETER: Because we have guns?

ANTHONY: You could be right. (*Crash*)

The second main sequential step of the jeremiad involves the minister discussing the current affliction apparent in the community (Stoda and Dionisopoulos 33). Haggis suggests that one affliction is crime, as is apparent in the aforementioned carjacking example. Anthony and Peter are able to steal the car from the white couple *because* they are white. In a later scene, they reveal that a black person would only steal from another black person under dire circumstances, and even then would be chastised:

PETER (to kid): How's it going, Mo Phat?
(They bump fists and keep walking.)

ANTHONY: Man robs purses from old ladies and you're all "How's it going, Mo Phat." Nigga would steal teeth from a cripple.

PETER: You calling *him* a thief? And we do what?

ANTHONY: Man steals from black people. Only reason black people steal from their own: 'Cause they terrified of white people. Burbank, Santa Monica, Sherman Oaks: these are scary-ass places for a brother to find himself. Drop "Mo Phat" off at a Starbucks in Toluca Lake, brother would run like a rabbit

PETER: No, no, no. I'm starting to understand. By your work you're setting an example to the neighborhood; sorta like a big brother thing.

ANTHONY: You ever see me steal from a black person? (*Crash*)

Anthony thus attempts to instill in Peter an understanding of their motivations for stealing cars. They would not steal from another black person because it would be disrespectful and shameful to steal from "your own [people]". Since they view white people as the "other", and as oppressive, their thefts are validated.

Another example of criminal abuses triggered by racial tensions demonstrates sexual assault and mistrust of the authorities as problems which currently afflict society

because of intolerance. Cameron and Christine Thayer (Terrence Howard and Thandie Newton), an African American couple, are returning from an awards dinner when they are pulled over by Officers Ryan and Hansen of the LAPD. The scene directly preceding this episode involves Ryan on the phone with Shaniqua Johnson. Ryan insults her, questioning her intelligence and degrading her name, giving the audience a clear indication of his racial prejudice against black people. The two police officers begin their patrol when the dispatcher's voice announces over the radio that two approximately twenty-year-old males who are considered armed and dangerous had stolen a black, late-model Lincoln Navigator. Ryan sees the Thayer's Navigator, driven by a black man in his 40s with a different license plate number, and flashes his lights. His partner assures him that it's not the stolen vehicle, but when Ryan sees Christine's chalk-white face pop up from the passenger seat he bumps the siren and pulls over the vehicle. Ryan gets Cameron's license and registration and asks Hansen to run it. As Ryan asks Cameron to step out of the car and performs a field sobriety test, his wife also exits the vehicle. She is slightly intoxicated and irritated at the officer's actions. After yelling at the officers, Ryan takes Christine by the wrist and twists her into the car face first, kicking her feet out from under her.

CHRISTINE: Ow! You fucking pig!

CAMERON: Christine, stop talking.

RYAN: That's quite a mouth you have. (to Cameron) 'Course, you know that.

CHRISTINE: Fuck you. That's why you're doing this, isn't it? You thought you saw a white woman blowing a black man and that just drove your little cracker ass crazy!

CAMERON: Christine, shut your goddamn mouth!

RYAN: I'd listen to your husband, ma'am.

(Ryan runs his hands up the sides of her torso...)

RYAN: Do you have any guns or knives on you, anything I'm going to get stuck with?

CHRISTINE: I'm wearing a cocktail dress, what do you think?

RYAN: You'd be surprised the places I've found weapons.

(He slides his hands over the sides of her breasts. Hansen pretends not to see, as he quickly frisks Cameron. Christine turns her head so she can catch her husband's eyes.)

HANSEN: Clean.

(But Ryan is nowhere near finished.)

RYAN (to Cameron): So, what do you think we should do about this, Mr. Thayer?

(Ryan squats and runs his hands down to her ankles...)

RYAN: My partner and I just witnessed your wife performing fellatio on you while you were operating a motor vehicle.

(Now his hands start up the inside of her calves.)

RYAN: That's reckless endangerment...

(Hansen looks away, knowing this is wrong)

RYAN: ...which is a felony. Then we could charge your wife here with lewd conduct and performing a sexual act in public.

(His hands reach up her thighs into her dress and linger there. Christine looks away from her husband, her rage replaced by humiliation.)

RYAN: Now, you say you're a block from home. We can use our discretion, let you go with a warning. Or we can cuff you and put you in the back of the car.

(Ryan removes his hands)

RYAN: What do you think we should do?

CAMERON: We're...sorry. We'd appreciate it if you'd...just give us a warning. (*Crash*)

This pivotal scene depicts several of the societal afflictions that Haggis acknowledges as derived from a breaking of the covenant with God. In the previous

carjacking example, crime is the affliction apparent in society. Sexual assault and mistrust of the authorities are afflictions demonstrated in the example with Officer Ryan and the Thayers. Christine is assaulted and victimized by the officer as a result of his racism. As Christine implies, the officer was offended at the sight of what he thought to be a white woman engaged in a sexual act with a black man. Officer Ryan proceeds to degrade and humiliate Christine in front of her husband—who does nothing in objection to his wife’s treatment. Haggis as the jeremiad prophet would suggest that these societal misfortunes are once again the result of racist intolerance. Christine accuses the officer of treating them disrespectfully and degradingly because of the color of their skin. The jeremiad would attribute these offences to a malevolence (racist intolerance) attributed to God’s response to the community’s sinful violation of the covenant (Stoda and Dionisopoulos 33).

The Sermon: Recalling the Sin

The third sequential step of the jeremiad consists of the minister recalling the “sin” in a detailed account accompanied by exhortations to repent (Stoda and Dionisopoulos 33). The spoken dialogue of *Crash* is arguably an example of the “sins” committed by modern society. The racism that Haggis sees as pervasive in society is as equally pervasive in the film’s dialogue. One example of “sinning” occurs after Rick and Jean return home after experiencing the carjacking.

JEAN: I would like the locks changed again in the morning. And you know what, you might mention that next time we'd appreciate it if they didn't send a gang member...

RICK: A gang member?

JEAN: Yes, yes.

RICK: What do you mean? That kid in there?

JEAN: Yes. The guy in there with the shaved head, the pants around his ass, the prison tattoos.

RICK: Those are not prison tattoos.

JEAN: Oh really? And he's not gonna go sell our key to one of his gang banger friends the moment he is out our door?

RICK: You've had a really tough night. I think it would be best if you just went upstairs right now and...

JEAN: And what? Wait for them to break in? I just had a gun pointed in my face!

RICK: You lower your voice!

JEAN: ...and it was my fault because I knew it was gonna happen. But if a white person sees two black men walking towards her and she turns and walks in the other direction, she's a racist, right? Well I got scared and I didn't say anything and ten seconds later I had a gun in my face. Now I am telling you, your amigo in there is gonna sell our key to one of his homies and this time it'd be really fucking great if you acted like you actually gave a shit! (*Crash*)

Jean is still extremely upset over the carjacking experience but lets her rage pour out in racist stereotypes. The locksmith, who is within earshot of Jean's diatribe, hears her offensive language yet maintains his sheepish demeanor. He kindly gives her the new keys and returns home to his young daughter. Once again, Haggis points out the fact that when in a stressful or life-endangering situation, people commonly lash out at that which is unknown to them. Jean had been assaulted by two black men and translated that experience into a self-assurance that any suspicion she had of minorities as being dangerous was confirmed. Racism such as this bubbles over within the entire screenplay.

The Sermon: Forecasting a Return to God's Graces

The fourth and final sequence of the jeremiad sermon occurs when the minister foresees the withdrawal of God's wrath and the return of his praise in a restoration of the covenant (Stoda and Dionisopoulos 33). Haggis enlists his own modern means of conveying his hope for relief and promise of blessing if the community gives up their "wicked ways" (Stoda and Dionisopoulos 33). In *Crash*, this redemption is apparent in the redeeming qualities of even the mostly offensively racist characters. Jean, Anthony, and Officer Ryan are three characters who atone for their intolerant behavior. Jean atones for her intolerance of the Hispanic locksmith after an episode in which she slips on her stairs and takes a painful fall. Confined to her bed and in agony, she has nobody to care for her—except for her housekeeper, Maria. Jean had been repeatedly condescending and disrespectful toward Maria during several prior scenes. Vulnerable and ashamed, however, she embraces Maria as she adjusts the pillows supporting her back.

JEAN: Do you want to hear something funny?

MARIA: What's that Mrs. Jean?

JEAN: You're the best friend I've got. (*Crash*)

Jean seems to have redeemed herself by acknowledging Maria as her only true friend. The audience is thus presented with the possibility of redemption once racial intolerances are eliminated and replaced with common decency and respect.

Similarly, Anthony, the carjacker, is repeatedly demeaning of Asians. In one of

the final scenes of the film he is shown releasing a vanload of Asian people who had been illegally trafficked into the United States. Resolving not to sell them to his crime boss, he atones for his previous intolerance by freeing them in an area of Chinatown and giving one of them forty dollars, saying, “Look, here's 40 bucks. Buy everybody chop suey” (*Crash*).

In addition, the tension between Officer Ryan and Christine Thayer culminate in perhaps the most emotionally poignant scene of the entire movie. Officer Ryan, the confirmed racist, stumbles upon a car accident while on patrol with his new partner. Realizing that one of the cars had flipped over after impact, he races into the smoking vehicle. The driver is obscured and tightly restraint by her seatbelt. When she turns her head, gasping for breath, Ryan discovers that it is Christine Thayer. She screams and resists the officer’s approach, remembering his disgusting assault on her. The two struggle until Ryan assures her that he is trying to rescue her from the burning Jeep. He points out the gasoline leak approaching the flames in front of them and wrestles with her seatbelt. The dramatic scene culminates as Ryan is able to pull Christine out of the vehicle as it explodes into flames. She sobs in his arms and looks up into his eyes for answers—any way of making sense of what just happened. She is confused, angry, and grateful. In a sense, Ryan has atoned for his prior actions and saved the life of a fellow human being. His character is flawed and we come to understand that his prejudices stem from problems in his own personal life. Despite his racist tendencies in the past, we observe a change in Ryan’s demeanor that suggests he has realized the error of his ways. There is hope that Ryan, and each of the other characters, will acknowledge their intolerances and reform their behavior and speech.

Hope is one of the paramount aspects of the conclusion of the jeremiad and is likewise important to the ultimate significance of *Crash*. As film critic Roger Ebert confirms, “One thing that happens, again and again, is that peoples’ assumptions prevent them from seeing the actual person standing before them” (Ebert). In standing with the jeremiad, Ebert points out that “Haggis is telling parables, in which the characters learn the lessons they have earned by their behavior” (Ebert). In true jeremiad form, Haggis’ screenplay is often sharp and critical. The final sequence of the rhetorical strategy, however, includes the possibility of redemption. As is visible in the atonement and lessons learned by almost every character, Haggis’ message is ultimately hopeful and promising. Ebert continues:

[*Crash*] shows the way we all leap to conclusions based on race -- yes, all of us, of all races, and however fair-minded we may try to be -- and we pay a price for that. If there is hope in the story, it comes because as the characters crash into one another, they learn things, mostly about themselves. Almost all of them are still alive at the end, and are better people because of what has happened to them. Not happier, not calmer, not even wiser, but better. (Ebert)

Ebert believed that seeing *Crash* would provide audiences with sympathy for, and an understanding of, people not like themselves. The diverse characters in the film learn that they share the same fears and prejudices of the unknown as everyone else. Hope is aroused in the ultimate redemption, compassion, and dignity found within everyone. The definitive message of the film from a jeremiad critique is that, while intolerance is damaging, it can be eliminated.

Critics of the jeremiad interpretation of *Crash* might question the existence of an idyllic, non-intolerant society to which we can return. It is hard to imagine a time when some form of racism or intolerance of a perceived inferior did not exist. The audience

may scoff at a return to peaceful times, or redemption, when modern secular motivations rely so heavily on public memory and tangible history rather than distant spiritual covenants. American slavery, the holocaust, and genocides in Central America are all much more present in the public consciousness than a utopia in which racial tensions are nonexistent. Some argue that the film also fails to address the heart of the issue: What really makes people racist? Why is everyone so afraid of everyone else? Haggis conveys the negative effects of racism but does not address the root cause of such behavior. He embodies the prophetic minister in more of an indirect way. His approach to intolerance urges people to realize for themselves what is negatively affecting society by showing glaringly obvious examples of racism.

Crash nonetheless addresses intolerance as an evil which has far-reaching detrimental effects. The blatant racism depicted in the film is thus acceptable in the sense that it is constantly acknowledged as wrong. Haggis in no way condones the behavior, but rather admonishes it in true jeremiad fashion. The film is hopeful in its ultimate suggestion that even the most racist character can redeem himself/herself. The true success of the film would become apparent if audiences were able to acknowledge prejudices within themselves and correct their behavior. In this sense, the jeremiad would be complete and triumphant in affecting change. The following chapter on intolerant messages within satire as a rhetorical genre illustrates a similar underlying hope.

Chapter 4—Borat

Messages of intolerance in film often take on a less serious, although just as equally offensive, tone. This section analyzes several aspects of intolerance by employing satire as a rhetorical device. The film *Borat* is analyzed due to its abundance of sexist, anti-Semitic, and homophobic messages as well as the reactions that audiences had to those messages. Unlike the overall acclaim that *Crash* received, the success of *Borat* was matched by equal levels of disgust and outrage. Satire provides clarification of why this occurred and how *Borat* was ultimately so highly praised. A preliminary discussion of the film is followed by subsequent analysis of its messages within the realm of satire.

Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan is both a popular and controversial film from comedian Sacha Baron Cohen. Cohen spent his young adulthood with his family in London where he attended Haberdasher-Askes Boys School and later Cambridge University (Yahoo!). He left London before going to university to spend a year in Israel at the Rosh Hanikra Kibbutz learning more about his roots and Jewish faith. Upon returning to Britain, Cohen attended Cambridge, where he worked toward a degree in history while continuing his focus on acting. He acted in productions of *My Little Fairy*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, and *My Fair Lady* before finally making the jump from stage to screen on the Paramount Comedy Channel (Yahoo!). Cohen won Best Newcomer in the British Comedy Awards, which led to his own program, *Da Ali G Show*, on the British Channel 4 network (Yahoo!).

Derived from one of his three principle alter egos in *Da Ali G Show*, the Borat character is a fictional journalist from Kazakhstan. Cohen originally developed the character in the early 1990s for a comedy series on Channel 4 in the United Kingdom and later brought the show to HBO in the United States (“Overview: ‘Da Ali G Show’”). The premise of the show originally relied heavily on Cohen’s relative obscurity. He would prepare months in advance for interviews with unsuspecting everyday people and even high-ranking officials, which he would conduct in character as Borat. The comedian would grow facial hair and refrain from bathing for an extended period of time in order to convince his interviewees that he was a genuine foreign journalist. His goal was to mislead unsuspecting participants and provoke them into agreeing with his own absurd statements. Many thought Cohen’s Kazakh alter ego was a hilarious addition to segments of *Da Ali G Show* but it wasn’t until the *Borat* movie was released in 2006 that the character received international notoriety.

Borat was officially debuted at the Toronto International Film Festival on September 7th, 2006 (French). It opened nationwide in the United States on November 3rd, 2006 and earned a substantial \$26.4 million its opening weekend despite its limited release (Rich). The opening actually set a box office record for earnings from a film released in fewer than 1,000 theaters (Rich). The film was number one for two weekends in a row and even surpassed its first weekend earnings taking in \$29 million its second weekend (Lin). To date, the film has grossed \$259 million worldwide and was released on DVD in March of 2007 (“Box Office Mojo: Borat”).

Unlike typical movies with a cast and a complete script, *Borat* is a comedic “mockumentary” travelogue composed of several episodes in the fictional journalist’s

investigations of American culture. Cohen conducted interviews with various personalities and interacted with unsuspecting Americans who were deceived by the authenticity of his character. While maintaining fictitious undertones, the realness of *Borat* is derived from the authenticity and genuineness with which people react to the phony Kazakh journalist. Much of the film's controversy is derived from the blurring of reality and fantasy which was so critical to the film's success.

Those who were interviewed or otherwise participated in the film were required by producers to sign comprehensive release forms before even seeing Cohen. Several individuals have sought legal action, however, claiming that they were deceived or tricked into taking part ("US students sue over Borat film"). The bulk of the lawsuits' objections lie in the fact that the release forms gave the participants' consent to appear in a "documentary-style film" ("US students sue over Borat film"). The resentful litigants argue that *Borat* is in fact a work of fiction and that their cooperation in making the film was therefore deceitful on the part of the filmmakers. Several of the University of South Carolina students who appear in the film consuming mass amounts of alcohol, watching pornographic movies, and praising slavery have claimed defamation of character as a result of the film's release. The *Borat* controversy, however, extends far beyond a few disgruntled undergraduates.

Many of the film's critics have disapproved of its abhorrent racial and cultural intolerances. In 2005, the Deputy Foreign Ministry of Kazakhstan, Rakhat Aliyev threatened to sue Cohen for what was perceived as an insult to the country and culture (Kinahan). The Borat character comes from a small fictional village in Kazakhstan which is depicted as completely backward by western standards. Through his

misogynistic behavior and open hatred of gays, Jews, Uzbeks, and Gypsies, the Kazakhstan government claimed that Cohen had defiled international perceptions of their country. In the fall of 2006, Kazakhstan launched a multi-million dollar “Heart of Eurasia” campaign headed by two renowned western public relations firms (Silverstein). Many theorized that this was in direct response to the prejudices that Cohen had associated with the Kazakh culture. Some propose Borat’s characterization of Muslims as prejudiced in its “old racial stereotypes concerning cleanliness, dietary habits, sexual promiscuity, etc.” (“Borat: the Modern Cloak of Prejudice”). Borat’s denigration of Jews has become especially controversial in light of recent public anti-Semitic prejudices in the public realm.

One controversial episode in *Borat* finds the eccentric journalist at a guest house in Newton, Massachusetts which happened to be owned by an elderly Jewish couple. Upon realizing that his hosts are Jewish, Borat becomes alarmed and must “escape”. When he later sees cockroaches on the floor he claims that the Jewish couple had shape-shifted. He then throws dollar bills at them as a distraction so that he can run to his van. The blatant anti-Semitism received condemnation from the Anti-Defamation League, among others (“Statement On The Comedy Of Sacha Baron Cohen, A.K.A. ‘Borat’”). During previous appearances on *Da Ali G Show*, Borat had proclaimed the Jews as the cause of every social malady in his country. Reaction to the alleged anti-Semitism ranged from outrage at the possibility of such intolerance being perpetuated to complete indifference. As *Rolling Stone* reported, Cohen is Jewish and observes Orthodox Judaism. He explained the overt racism as a “dramatic demonstration of how racism

feeds on dumb conformity, as much as rabid bigotry” (Strauss). In the same interview he revealed more about the Borat character saying:

By himself being anti-Semitic, he lets people lower their guard and expose their own prejudice, whether it’s anti-Semitism or an acceptance of anti-Semitism. ‘Throw the Jew Down the Well’ [a song performed at a country & western bar during *Da Ali G Show*] was a very controversial sketch, and some members of the Jewish community thought that it was actually going to encourage anti-Semitism. But to me it revealed something about that bar in Tucson. And the question is: Did it reveal that they were anti-Semitic? Perhaps. But maybe it just revealed that they were indifferent to anti-Semitism. (Strauss)

Borat has caused Hollywood and the international media to take notice. The film’s outrageous depictions of various forms of intolerance have been abhorred by some and praised by others. Cohen won the 2007 Golden Globe award for best actor in a musical or comedy. *Borat* was also nominated for an Academy Award for best adapted screenplay.

Criticism of the use of racism for comedic effect as well as the distortion of reality and fiction continue to foster mixed reactions. In the following section, the film’s intolerant messages are elucidated through a literature review of satire. Although the messages in *Borat* were offensive on the surface, satirical humor serves to ridicule and debunk intolerance through both blatant and subtle means. The result of negative satirical messages, however, is a positive promotion of compassion.

Literature Review: Implications of Intolerance as Perceived Through Satirical Humor

A working knowledge of satirical humor will aid in subsequent discussion of public perceptions of intolerance in film. As will be developed in later sections, modern

films abound with examples of intolerance portrayed under the guise of humor. Satire is one of the ways this is done. A common perception of satire is “making a fool of or poking fun at well-known things, situations, or public figures” (Buijzen and Valkenburg 154). Satire in a rhetorical sense, as Karyn Rybacki and Donald Rybacki defined it, “finds humor in the human condition and holds up the vices, practices, and customs of a culture to comic scrutiny” (Rybacki and Rybacki 319). In this respect, the authors cited satire as a comic device containing strong rhetorical properties. They enlisted the unprecedented work of Charles E. Schutz, who laid much of the groundwork for using satire as a rhetorical tool in Political Humor: From Aristophanes to Sam Ervin, to divulge the three main qualities of satire:

First, the author is the initial aggressor against a political personage or social institution. By his comic genius he has translated his anger or resentment into a satirical attack in which his target is made the butt of humor for an audience. The target becomes a victim and the aggressor’s anger is expended peacefully, and, possibly, constructively. He has revealed the victim’s vices or failings for public correction, and he may have educated some of the public to his standards. Second, the audience has participated vicariously in the satirist’s sublimated aggression. They too have been purged of the need for more direct action in expression of their aggressions. And the satirist’s use of sexual allusions, comic blasphemy, and ridicule of authority allows the audience in its imaginative participation and laughter to express forbidden emotions and thoughts in a socially permissible and cathartic manner. ... Third, there always lurks in the dim background of satire a vision or standard of rightness. ... But comedy is not moral censure, otherwise it would become diatribe or preachment. The satire humorously prods or tickles its audience into an awareness of absurdity or abnormality. They have become more rational, but they aren’t aware of their education, and their subsequent political action is their own. Satire is negative on its first level, and the positive remedy of the satirized must be inferred. (Schutz 77-78)

This rich framework provides much of the essential information necessary for later discussions focusing on the use of satire in presenting cinematic instances of intolerance.

Rybacki and Rybacki used the example of the satirically racist protagonist of *All in the Family*, Archie Bunker, to illustrate three possible outcomes of satire on an audience (Rybacki and Rybacki 320). Those who did not “get the joke” and understood Archie’s racism as exaggerated and ridiculous would have thought he was right. The show would have therefore confirmed their prejudices (Rybacki and Rybacki 320). On the other hand, public acknowledgment of bigotry would have relieved some. This may have meant the first step in solving or eliminating the social evil—racism. Still others were “challenged and disturbed” by the controversial show and were “forced to think about the continuing problem of racial and religious prejudice” (Rybacki and Rybacki 320). Satire, therefore, can yield unpredictable and varied results from its audience.

In linking satire to the aforementioned pervasiveness of intolerance in the media, Cooper and Pease discussed satire as a tool used by the television dramedy *Ally McBeal*. Their article, “‘Don’t want no short people ‘round here’: Confronting Heterosexism’s Intolerance Through Comic and Disruptive Narratives in *Ally McBeal*,” analyzes the comic juxtaposition of one character’s outlandish hatred of little people with the tragic murder of a transsexual. The parallel between comic hatred of “short people” and “society’s often brutal intolerance of sexual minorities” provide overlapping storylines which “call into question heterosexual norms by spoofing and lampooning bigotry and intolerance” (Cooper and Pease 304). Satire has been extremely valuable in rendering as absurd these cultural assumptions which have previously subjugated “out-groups such as women, people of color and sexual minorities” (Cooper and Pease 302). In addition, it has surprising strategic power to “advance social change” through surprise and shock (Cooper and Pease 302). In the *Ally McBeal* example, satire was especially effective in

pointing out the “failings of a status quo” and urging society to “correct them through thoughtful action rather than tragic victimage” (Cooper and Pease 302).

Eyal Zandberg confirmed satire as a valuable social and rhetorical tool in his article, “Critical Laughter: humor, popular culture and Israeli Holocaust commemoration.” Zandberg analyzed a comedic television show and its impact on audiences (Zandberg 561). The author proposed that the collective memory of the Holocaust played a large role in interpreting the satirical comedy of an Israeli sketch comedy show. Unlike tragedy, Zangberg argued, satire is a “rebellion against the given” and strengthens “critical self-reflexiveness” (Zandberg 576).

In considering the specific nature of certain genres of satirical movies, an analysis by Aaron Reinheld of the Weekend Update segment of *Saturday Night Live* will provide insight into the particulars of a satirical news program. In “*Saturday Night Live* and Weekend Update: The Formative Years of Comedy News Dissemination,” Reinheld noted the impact that the show has had on 30 million viewers for over 30 years (Reinheld 191). The Weekend Update news segment provided audiences with the same blend of “political satire, social commentary, and outrageous humor” as *SNL*. Weekend Update, however, came to be considered a serious voice in the American political landscape (Reinheld 191). The realistic presentation of true news stories in a satirical fashion caused an unanticipated reaction from audiences. Writers of the segment told Reinheld that they are constantly told how much the “news” they present during Weekend Update actually changes their opinions (Reinheld 194). Despite confirming that the stories are satirical and humorous, the information “sparks discussion” and can

heavily influence public opinion. The writers are aware of this power and have come to understand how influential satire can be on the public consciousness (Reinheld 194).

Lisa Gring-Pemble and Martha Solomon Watson, on the other hand, discussed the completely unpredictable outcomes of satire being used as a rhetorical strategy in “The Rhetorical Limits of Satire: An Analysis of James Garner’s Politically Correct Bedtime Stories.” Their analysis was disparaging of satire citing instances in which some forms of humor may “facilitate audience acceptance of the very ideas the satirist intends to disparage” (Gring-Pemble and Watson 132). Relating to the prior discussion of political correctness (Calabrese and Lenart), James Finn Garner published a book in the mid-1990s mocking the “PC trend”. Politically Correct Bedtime Stories retold classic childhood fairytales with exaggerated political correctness—such as Goldilocks and the Three Bears as a “melanin-impooverished young woman” visiting the home a three anthropomorphic bears living as a “nuclear family” (Gring-Pemble and Watson 140). Proponents of political correctness argue that it “denotes theories and practices designed to end discrimination and other injustices with regard to curricular requirements, affirmative action in hiring, and campus language and codes of conduct” (Gring-Pemble and Watson 134). Opponents, however, refer to the movement as “cultural Marxism,” blaming extreme conservatives of “excesses of multiculturalism run amok” (Gring-Pemble and Watson 134). Garner was a self-proclaimed opponent of political correctness. He blamed PC proponents of “debasement of the idea of sexual or racial equality and wasting credibility trying to get people to eliminate certain ways of saying things. You’re not converting them, you’re annoying them” (Gring-Pemble and Watson 135). To his shock and dismay, therefore, Garner was “appalled to learn that some children’s

classics were actually being revised to remove allegedly offensive material and that kindergarten teachers were being advised to avoid certain stories” (Gring-Pemble and Watson 135).

The unexpected response to Garner’s book can be better interpreted through John Meyer’s outline of humor’s four basic rhetorical functions-identification, clarification, enforcement, and differentiation (qtd. in Gring-Pemble and Watson 137). While identification and clarification work to create bonds between the rhetor and audience, enforcement and differentiation provide for separation. Enforcement uses humor to “reassert social norms” and thus “marginalizes and holds up for ridicule those who do not follow them (Gring-Pemble and Watson 137). Differentiation similarly “creates contrasts and highlights differences (Gring-Pemble and Watson 137). These two forms of humor help the satirist to “correct, censure and ridicule the follies and vices of society and thus to bring contempt and derision upon aberrations from a desirable and civilized norm” (Gring-Pemble and Watson 137). As Gring-Pemble and Watson argued, the satirist subsequently has unique challenges in effectively conveying humor. If a satirist involves *reductio ad absurdum*, or extremely absurd humor, the extremism of the expression may lose the audience (Gring-Pemble and Watson 138). Satire requires strong participation on the part of the audience to understand the author’s purpose. Since satire works to entertain through “highlighting incongruities,” it may inadvertently make transformation of opinion necessary (Gring-Pemble and Watson 146). In other words, as satire holds ideas up to “ridicule and disparagement,” it introduces the possibility that alternate perspectives exist (Gring-Pemble and Watson 146). Additionally, the *reductio ad absurdum* satire, taken to an extreme, may encourage some audiences to accept more

moderate forms of the subject being mocked—whether it is political correctness or even intolerance. The authors concluded their discussion with a warning; In a sense, *reductio ad absurdum* extremist satire may allow for more moderate views that the satirist is attempting to debunk to actually become tolerated or accepted.

Analysis of Intolerance and Satire in Borat

Satire as a critical methodology has its roots in ancient Greece. Aristophanes, an Athenian comic playwright, once satirized great philosopher Socrates in a play called the *Clouds* (Schutz 35). The serious political intent of the Greek comedies, however, sought to do more than amuse the audience with humor and ridicule (Schutz 35). Satire was developed in ancient Greece as a socially approved medium for “criticizing social authorities and conventions” (Schutz 35). Horace, a Roman satirist, believed satire to highlight important ethical and social problems in a simple manner and with “earthy humor” (Schutz 50). Satire can take on any form from ancient drama to classical poetry to modern motion picture. The consistent qualifications of any satire, however, are that it is amusing and humorous. Moreover, satire is without exception an attack on a person or social institution.

In discussing public perception of intolerance, satire becomes vital in understanding messages of intolerance in *Borat*. Critics accept the film despite its blatant use of hurtful language and stereotypes. The reason for this, as satire illuminates, is that the ultimate goal and outcome of the movie’s message is to attack modern social institutions and mentalities just as Aristophanes did in ancient Greece. Sacha Baron

Cohen uses various humorous tactics to “proceed from a sensed wrongness of social reality to some apprehension of the rightness of what could be” (Schutz 78). The implied social failings that Cohen observes in the reality of American society, however, are not scorned outright. On the contrary, they are presented in an exaggerated manner and without narratives of moral authority. At no point in the film are racists or homophobes labeled as “bad” or “wrong.” The beauty of satire is that such opinions and behaviors as these are targeted without being openly disdained. Rather, implied in the background of these failings is some ideal of appropriateness. The compromise between the real and the ideal is articulated through the satire genre by encouraging laughter at societal shortcomings with a hint that things could improve (Schutz 78). While public outrage and critical acclaim for *Borat* seem to be contradictory, they are actually both supportive of positive attributes of satirical rhetoric. Those who are outraged at the intolerance depicted in the film actually serve to bolster the strength of satirical criticism. The intolerance is presented only in order to increase awareness of its absurdity and hint at positive remedies for the inferred problem.

Satire: Stage One

The first stage of satirical humor, according to author Charles E. Schutz, acknowledges the author of any satirical message as the “initial aggressor against a political personage or social institution” (Schutz 77). This distinction arouses an important point in regards to an analysis of *Borat* as a satirical message. Sacha Baron Cohen becomes the “author” behind the Borat character’s outlandish and offensive

behavior. Cohen acts as the creative mind behind the film's messages despite the fact that much of the film is improvised and unscripted. In this respect, it is vital to understand the mind of Cohen as well as that of his brainchild, Borat.

Mild-mannered Cohen provides a stark contrast to his eccentric alter ego. The shy comedian said the following about his newfound fame after the success of *Borat*:

I think that, essentially, I'm a private person, and to reconcile that with being famous is a hard thing. So I've been trying to have my cake and eat it too - to have my character be famous yet still lead a normal life where I'm not trapped by fame and recognizability...I guess I've been greedy. Maybe it's time to let go. (IMDb)

A proper English gentleman, Cohen considered pursuing a PhD before becoming a comedian (IMDb). While studying history at Christ's College in Cambridge, he wrote his thesis on Jewish involvement in the American Civil Rights movement, focusing especially on the 1964 murders of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner (IMDb). Cohen has said the following of his academic endeavors:

I remember, when I was in university I studied history, and there was this one major historian of the Third Reich, Ian Kershaw. And his quote was, 'The path to Auschwitz was paved with indifference.' I know it's not very funny being a comedian talking about the Holocaust, but I think it's an interesting idea that not everyone in Germany had to be a raving anti-Semite. They just had to be apathetic. (IMDb)

Cohen's interest in issues of intolerance, as well as his own Jewish faith, helped give him insight into imagining the anti-Semitic Borat character.

Borat, on the other hand, represents the polar opposite of Cohen's rationality and decorum. As an example of satire, the character serves as a foil for not only Cohen but for American society as well. The political personage or social institution targeted by the comedian is arguably the entire American mindset. Borat has traveled to the United States to study its political and social culture. His hope is to return to his home country

of Kazakhstan with some insight into what makes the United States the “greatest” country in the world. It is Borat’s hope that whatever lessons or inspirations he may acquire about the might of the United States will help his own country to flourish. To the audience’s dismay, much of the “greatness” which Borat observes is actually sexist, homophobic, and racist behavior which he is able to extort from unsuspecting average American citizens. Borat loudly proclaims his own prejudices in order to coax people into letting down their guards and exposing their own support or apathy for intolerance.

In observing the Borat character, it becomes immediately apparent that he possesses fervent hatreds for gypsies, Uzbekistan, and the Jews. His intolerances seem ridiculous, and thus comical, to audiences. The underlying satirical message behind the narrow-mindedness, however, is that the same attitudes and behaviors exist in innumerable ordinary people. By exaggerating Borat’s anti-Semitism, Sacha Baron Cohen provides an opportunity to presumably translate his own anger and resentment of intolerant people into a satirical attack against them. The victims, or targets, of this attack are the intolerant people whom abound in modern American society. Those prejudices, and the people who hold them, thus become the “butt of the joke” and provide a platform onto which Cohen can build his satirical humor.

Misinformation and Indifference as Contributors to Racism

One of the first instances of intolerance that Borat reveals in the film is Kazakhstan’s hatred for Jews. His anti-Semitism is applauded and celebrated by his peers in one scene in particular early in the film. Borat, explaining the premise for his

visit to the United States, provides an example of his prior journalistic experience. As a Kazakh television reporter, he gives the play-by-play commentary for an annual event called the “Running of the Jew.” In a scene resembling the Spanish tradition of the Running of the Bulls, Borat is perched on a fence among hundreds of cheering Kazakhs. The crowd is focused on a dirt road sparsely populated with men in white clothing. The men linger in the street until a giant, green, papier-mâché head emerges from around a corner. The menacing figure is made to resemble an “evil Jew” complete with an exaggerated nose, horns, and long, claw-like fingers. The men run from the approaching “Jew” as Borat narrates:

BORAT: Here comes the Jew. It’s a big one this year.

(The crowd taunts and jeers at the “Jew” while it intently pursues the men running to escape. Members of the audience dangle large reproductions of money over the street.)

BORAT: Whoaaa... He nearly got the money there. Wait, here comes Mrs. Jew.

(A female version of the Jew character emerges from around the corner. She is also green, possesses sadistic features, and wields a butcher’s knife. She pauses in the street and a large, white papier-mâché egg appears from beneath her dress. Children swarm the egg and begin to kick it.)

BORAT: Go kids! Crush that Jew chick before he hatches!

(The scene ends and the movie cuts to Borat, walking along a road, continuing the explanation of his trip to the United States.)

BORAT: Although Kazakhstan glorious country, it have problem too: economic, social, and Jew. This why Ministry of Information have decide to send me to U S and A, greatest country in the world, to learn lessons for Kazakhstan. (*Borat*)

Much of Borat’s anti-Semitism stems from misinformation, another satirical point the audience may gather from Sacha Baron Cohen’s comedy. Many prejudices are derived from misconceptions or a complete lack of understanding of others. Borat, for

example, convinces his Kazakh production manager, Azamat (Ken Davitian), to broaden their documentary into a travelogue detailing the entire United States:

BORAT: Eventually, I persuade Azamat that we would travel to California and make our reportings along the way. He insist that we not fly in case the Jews repeated their attack of 9/11. (*Borat*)

Another notable characteristic of Borat's anti-Semitism can be paralleled with Cohen's belief that apathy is just as dangerous as raving anti-Semitism (IMDb). As was mentioned previously, Cohen was inspired by a historian who once alleged, "the path to Auschwitz was paved with indifference" (IMDb). Cohen revealed a surprisingly common indifference in people during several instances in *Borat*. One episode in the film takes place at a General Motors car dealership. Borat asks the salesman how fast he would need to drive a Hummer into a crowd of gypsies in order to kill them. Unfazed by the question, the salesman describes the might of the Hummer and assures him that hitting a gypsy at 35 to 40 miles an hour would kill him and hardly damage the robust vehicle. In a similar episode, Borat is looking to buy a gun to protect himself from any Jews that might attack him while on his journey:

BORAT: What is the best gun to protect from a Jew?

SALESMAN: I would recommend either a 9 millimeter or a 45. (*Borat*)

In both cases, the salesmen indulge Borat in his violent racism. Perhaps simply motivated to please a customer in order to make a sale, both men demonstrate not only apathy, but also outright support of intolerance. It may be presumed, therefore, that the salesmen's apathy contributes to an environment that would allow intolerance to thrive. Hitler's rise to power in Germany, as Cohen has suggested, has been credited to a similar atmosphere of apathy.

Another extremely satirical example of absurd racial intolerances occurs when Borat and his production manager, Azamat, find themselves in search of a place to stay one night. They find a quaint bed and breakfast but are terrified to discover that their gracious hosts are in fact Jewish:

BORAT: They'll kill us. We need to escape.

(The camera cuts to a close-up of Borat's face, surrounded by darkness, presumably recorded on a night-vision camera.)

BORAT: It is three in the morning. I am in a nest of Jews. They have cleverly shifted their shapes. One of them has taken the form of a little old woman. You can barely see her horns. She have tried to poison me already. These rats are very clever.

AZAMAT: Look, the Jews have shifted their shapes!

(Several cockroaches are shown scurrying across the floor.)

BORAT: Ok, Ok. How much shall I give them.

AZAMAT: I don't know...

(Borat throws dollar bills at the cockroaches.) (*Borat*)

Fighting Apathy to Prevent Sexism

The belief that everyone can be intolerant, and that they look as equally ridiculous as Borat in doing so, is supported in misogynistic examples as well. Borat's blatant sexism is another satirical foil for similar opinions held by ordinary people. In addition, his sexism is once again supported by misinformation provided by his Kazakh government. Borat's ignorance of the truth allows him to believe that women are scientifically inferior to men. Sacha Baron Cohen's exaggeration of sexist judgments is

exemplified by the following segment in which Borat meets with a feminist group in New York:

BORAT: In Kazakhstan, it is illegal for more than five womens to be in a same place except for in brothel or in grave. In U S and A, many womens meet in a groups called feminists...

BORAT: So what means this 'feminism'?

FEMINIST: It's the theory that women should be equal to men in matters economic, social, (Borat laughs)

BORAT: Do you think a woman should be educate?

FEMINIST: Definitely.

BORAT: But, is it not a problem that a woman have a smaller brain than a man?

FEMINIST: That is wrong.

BORAT: But government scientist, Doctor Yamakav, prove it is size of squirrel. (*Borat*)

Borat's misogyny is supported by false knowledge which allows him to further insult the feminists by saying, "Give me a smile baby—why angry face?" and "Listen pussycat, smile a bit" (*Borat*). Both condescending insults could just as likely come from any other American citizen. Under the stark contrast of Borat's extreme misogyny and the feminists' complete opposite positions, the absurdity and hurtfulness of sexism is revealed. Just as with the example of racism, the satire modus operandi is what provides for this insight.

While previous examples have demonstrated an apathy towards Borat's racism, the feminist group was outraged and appalled at his sexism. Another person did provide another measure of correction to Borat's chauvinism as well. A driving instructor preparing Borat for his cross-country drive was surprised to hear, "When I buy my

wife...” and asserted, “A woman has a right to choose who she has sex with” (*Borat*).

Borat responded in shock to the possibility of a woman having an opinion or free choice.

While his assertion to the contrary is reprehensible, the audience finds humor in the absurdity in such extreme sexism.

Jingoism as a Mask for Intolerance

Concluding the first stage of Schutz’s definition of satire is the condition that the satire’s “target becomes a victim and the aggressor’s anger is expended peacefully, and, possibly, constructively” (Schutz 77). As was mentioned earlier, the “target” of Cohen’s satirical mocking may be interpreted as those racist, sexist, homophobic, and generally intolerant individuals that he encounters in the film. As the aggressor, Cohen makes those people the victim by making them appear foolish and extremist. One instance in which this occurs in the film is at a Salem, Virginia rodeo. Borat is at the Imperial Rodeo to sing the national anthem to an enthusiastic crowd. Before his performance, Borat speaks with the general manager of the rodeo, Bobby Rowe. The jingoism and ridiculousness that followed exemplify two points. First, the strength of satire as a reflexive rhetorical tool is demonstrated in the similarities evident between Borat’s anti-Semitism and Bobby’s xenophobic bigotry. What Bobby says at the rodeo sounds just as equally ridiculous and prejudiced as what Borat says of the inferiority of women or the “evil” Jew. Second, the humor of Borat’s entire journalistic inquiry into the greatness of the United States is apparent. Borat’s backwards Kazakhstan and Bobby’s glorious America both possess comical intolerances. Bobby is just as uninformed and intolerant

as Borat. While Borat's prejudices seem ridiculous, the audience begins to understand that the prejudices held by many Americans are just as absurd.

BOBBY: Now, of course, every picture that we get back from the terrorists or anything else, the Muslims, they look like you—black-haired and black-mustached.

BORAT: Yeah...

BOBBY: Shave that dog-gone moustache off so you're not lookin' so conspicuous—so you look like maybe an Italian or something...

BORAT: Yes.

BOBBY: ...as far as people lookin' at you. I see a lot of people and I think, 'There's a dog-gone Muslim. I wonder what kind of bomb he's got strapped to him.'

BORAT: Yes.

BOBBY: And you probably aren't a Muslim. Maybe that's not your religion. But you look like one of them. When this thing gets over with, and when we win it, and kick their butts over there and all of 'em, them son of butts, hanging from the gallows, by that time you'll have proven yourself and you'll be accepted.

(Borat leans in to kiss Bobby on the cheek, in the way of a European greeting.)

BOBBY: I ain't gonna kiss you!

BORAT: Why not?

BOBBY: The people that do the kissin' over here are the ones that float around like that...

(Bobby flits around and gestures his hands effeminately.)

BORAT: In my country, they take them, they take them to jail and they finish them.

BOBBY: Take them out and hang 'em!

BORAT: Yes!

BOBBY: That's what we're tryin' to get done here! (*Borat*)

Bobby Rowe needs little encouragement from Borat to prattle on about his discriminatory observations. He encourages Borat to shave his moustache because, as far as he is concerned, anything different will not be tolerated or accepted. In addition, he expresses his desire to hang homosexuals. Beneath the patriotism, Bobby's belief in American greatness obscures intolerances for people of Middle-Eastern descent as well as homosexuals.

Bobby Rowe is an elderly man who is perhaps more indicative of intolerances deeply imbedded in an American psyche of generations past. An equally disturbing declaration that Borat observes while traveling in an RV with several college fraternity brothers confirms, however, that intolerance has bridged the generational gap. The three young men who reveal the following insights, Anthony, Justin, and David, are students at the University of South Carolina:

BORAT: Do you have slaves here?

ANTHONY: No.

JUSTIN: We wish.

ANTHONY: We wish.

BORAT: It is a shame.

ANTHONY: Big shame, big shame...

BORAT: It would be better country if...

ANTHONY: It *would* be a better country. We *should* have slaves.

JUSTIN: In our country, the minorities actually have more power.

ANTHONY: Anyone who is a minority has the upper hand. We have the Jews, we have anybody who's against the mainstream. (*Borat*)

The undergraduates exhibit the same jingoistic attitude and xenophobic prejudices that Borat revealed in Bobby Rowe.

Satire: Stage Two

The second stage of Schutz's definition of satire incorporates the audience into the satirical work. By laughing at Borat's antics and the absurdity of the people he encounters, the audience has "participated vicariously in the satirist's sublimated aggression" (Schutz 77). In addition, Cohen's use of sexual allusions, comic blasphemy, and ridicule of authority "allows the audience in its imaginative participation and laughter to express forbidden emotions and thoughts in a socially permissible and cathartic manner" (Schutz 77). There exist three possible outcomes, however, which provide a deviation from Schutz's sure set results of using satirical humor. The audience may not necessarily have been unvaryingly purged of the need for more direct action in expression of their own aggressions. The variance in audience perception speaks for the unpredictable results from and responses to satire as a genre.

The first possible outcome from an audience having seen *Borat* would be a person who did not "get the joke." This person would not have understood Borat's prejudices as exaggerated or ridiculous but rather would have believed him to be right. The film would have therefore confirmed their prejudices. The extremely absurd humor used by Cohen might lose the audience. On the other hand, the audience might acknowledge the extremity and humor in Cohen's satirical prejudices and accept more moderate forms of intolerance. This outcome is negative in its varying degrees of acceptance or perpetuation of intolerance (Rybacki and Rybacki 320).

A second possible outcome would be a public acknowledgment of the bigotry in the film as somewhat of a relief. Recognizing the impervious nature of subtle prejudices in American society may mean the first step in solving or eliminating them. An audience member might recognize qualities of himself/herself in either Borat or the people he encounters and abandon such behavior. This result would prove to be positive in its repulsion and reversal of intolerance (Rybacki and Rybacki 320).

The third possibility, and perhaps the most common, would be for an audience watching *Borat* to feel challenged and disturbed by the controversial film. They would be forced to think about the continuing problem of racial and religious prejudice. This outcome is the most common and most likely because of its neutrality. The two prior outcomes, whether positive or negative, require either a more extreme view prior to the film or a powerful enough inspiration after viewing the film to change personal viewpoints. The third possibility simply denotes thought and not necessarily action on the part of the audience (Rybacki and Rybacki 320).

The disparity between each of these outcomes demonstrates the unpredictable effect satire may have on its audience. The format the film utilizes similarly provides for a certain degree of uncertainty in response. As opposed to a completely fictional film, *Borat* is both filmed and presented as a factual travelogue documentary. The start of the film lacks any indication of its fictitiousness; there are no credits or acknowledgements of actors, production companies, or movie studios who were involved. Rather, the film is presented as a recording from the Kazakhstan Ministry of Information. The way that “Borat” blurs the lines between reality and fantasy may, as is apparent in the diverse

range of responses to the film, elicit an inconsistent response to intolerance from audiences.

Satire: Stage Three

Schutz concludes his description of Satire with the suggestion that there always “lurks in the dim background of satire a vision or standard of rightness” (Schutz 77). Comedy, however, is not moral censure, as Schutz clarifies, “otherwise it would become diatribe or preachment” (77). A differentiation may therefore be drawn between the aforementioned tenants of the jeremiad and the current discussion of satire. Satire as a rhetorical device stops short of preaching and simply provides an awareness of absurdity or abnormality. In the most ideal outcome, the audience would have become more rational but is not aware of their education.

The standard of rightness underlying *Borat* is precisely the reason why the examples of intolerance in the film are accepted, if not celebrated. Satire as a rhetorical theory “operates in a world of clear standards and boundaries” (Griffin 35). The satirist is aware of clear-cut differences between the “good” and “evil” in society. Accordingly, Sacha Baron Cohen as the satirist is certain of his own moral position and assumes a corresponding certainty in his audience (Griffin 35). Borat’s exaggerated anti-Semitic, sexist, and homophobic attitudes are so offensive that the audience will recognize them as being not only extreme, but on the “evil” side of the moral standards spectrum.

The satirical criticism of American society in *Borat* is also consistent with the genre’s negative depiction of social authorities or conventions (Schutz 35). Intolerance is

portrayed but only in a negative light. Schutz expounds upon the acceptance of messages in satire:

The criticism is negative; like almost all humor, it derides without advocating positive reforms or explicitly stating the applicable standards of judgment. But, as can be seen in Aristophanes and most satirical comedy, there are implied standards of politics. The comic ridicule, posited on the standards, is intended to motivate the audience toward particular reforms. (Schutz 35)

The satire in *Borat* is a critique of false understanding. That is, the intolerances demonstrated by each and every individual are recognized as foolish certainties that should be exposed and eradicated (Griffin 52). The underlying vision of rightness in *Borat* allows messages of intolerance in the film to be ultimately embraced by audiences. As the following chapter suggests, messages from actual people in the public eye, on the other hand, face widespread backlash from modern audiences.

Chapter 5—Perceived Intolerances from Celebrities

In previous examples, the issues of intolerance and prejudice in Hollywood have been examined as positive, even constructive, media manifestations. The rhetor behind *Crash* assures audiences that although racism exists, it can and should be recognized and eliminated in order to improve society. Religious undertones mirroring a jeremiad sermon diagnose xenophobic intolerances as the root cause for societal iniquities, such as racism, sexual assault, and mistrust of authority, but predict the possibility of redemption and moral salvation. While *Borat* displays outrageous opinions of racist, sexist, and homophobic prejudices, the film's use of satirical humor mocks and degrades those who genuinely support such beliefs. In this respect, use of prejudicial language in these films has been more or less accepted by critics; The language itself is not acceptable, but rather its use is tolerated as its ultimate purpose is to acknowledge its harm. The jeremiad portrays intolerant language as the root of social iniquity and the satire genre mocks prejudice as ludicrous. Both films have been celebrated and widely acclaimed in their presumed efforts to discourage or invalidate existing prejudices in audiences.

The response to intolerances from public figures such as politicians, athletes, and celebrities, however, has demonstrated popular rejection of presentations of actual intolerant messages. In the cases of Mel Gibson, Michael Richards, and Isaiah Washington's publicized intolerances, audiences were immediately aware of and displeased with the stars' prejudicial eruptions. As is evident in the public responses to each celebrity's demonstration of prejudice, the general public will not accept or tolerate

such acts. As opposed to the aforementioned films, a public person who commits an act of intolerance is immediately challenged to recognize and apologize for their misdeeds.

Since audiences demand an apology from celebrities who commit public acts of intolerance, public expectations have developed into a genre of atonement. First, the celebrity must genuinely apologize for their behavior and the offended audiences judge the sincerity of that apology. Any and all communications the celebrity has with the public may be further analyzed as reaching two distinct groups. The first group is composed of members of whichever minority group the celebrity has offended. Gibson offended people of the Jewish faith, Richards insulted African Americans, and Washington degraded homosexuals. Each of these groups will therefore have very different short-term and long-term reactions to the celebrities' acts of atonement than audience members from outside those offended groups. Individuals not directly targeted by the celebrities' prejudicial statements could rely on previously established parasocial bonds to perceive the apology to be genuine. Second, corrective actions are generally sought in order to remedy the offense. Two typical actions are entrance into rehabilitation programs accompanied by the desire to meet directly with leaders of the group which took the brunt of the intolerance. Each of these undertakings can lack certain qualities of sincerity.

In a demonstration that perhaps subtle messages within the media, such as jeremiad or satirical constructs, have taken steps toward the eradication of genuine prejudice, each celebrity did initiate image reconstruction campaigns. In *Crash* and *Borat*, intolerance was portrayed as pervasive but the films only implied that it was inappropriate. We learn from this implication in some way so the use of intolerance has

an even greater value. Audience response to actual messages of intolerance from celebrities demonstrates that such behavior in real conditions is not tolerated. In order to preserve their reputation, and corollary livelihood, public figures are forced to atone. The ultimate objective of this atonement comes in the form of image reconstruction campaigns on the part of each celebrity. The campaigns are apologetic and remorseful in tone and, as the following sections elaborate, suggest the possibility of redemption. When restorative actions are successful, celebrities redeem themselves and regain popularity by denouncing the very prejudices they have embodied. The approaches taken by Gibson, Richards, and Washington have resulted in mixed success.

Methodologies: Apologia & Image Reconstruction as Celebrity Recourse and Consequences of Parasocial Relationships

Apologia

Many scholars have explored aspects of public apology as a rhetorical recourse to public accusations of wrongdoing. Since the celebrity examples of intolerant behavior have resulted in demands for public apologies, apologia, or the speech of self-defense, deserves further explanation. Both Charles Marsh in “The Syllogism of Apologia: Rhetorical Stasis Theory and Crisis Communication” and B.L. Ware and Wil A. Linkugel in “They Spoke in Defense of Themselves: On the Generic Criticism of Apologia” discussed the merits of apologia rhetoric (Ware and Linkugel 22). Marsh credited Ware

and Linkugel with providing for the evolution of apologia scholarship (Marsh 42). In the case of celebrity response to accusations of intolerance, many choose to face their accusers and enlist aspects of apologia to speak in defense of themselves. Ware and Linkugel acknowledged previous scholars' identification of four "modes of resolution": denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence (Ware and Linkugel 124). Marsh provided the following succinct definitions of the four subgenres: *denial*, challenging the facts of the accusation; *bolstering*, evading the charge by identifying oneself with something attractive to a judging audience; *differentiation*, separating an action or attribute from a larger context in which a judging audience views it; and *transcendence*, incorporating an action or attribute into a context in which a judging audience had not previously included it (Marsh 42). William L. Benoit has further refined the tenets of apologia in his conception of image reconstruction.

Image Reconstruction

The following overview will provide a foundation for discussing messages of intolerance coming from individuals in the public eye. While cinematic messages of intolerance in jeremiad and satirical form are widely accepted, intolerance from public personas is not. In specifically dealing with image reconstruction techniques after public fallout following harmful statements, William L. Benoit has provided invaluable discussion of precedent and methodology.

In "Blowout!: Firestone's Image Restoration Campaign," Benoit suggested that when confronted with a need to restore a damaged reputation, communicators have five

general rhetorical options. The first is denial. Simple denial happens when an accused denies committing an offensive act or denies that the act even occurred. An individual could also shift the blame for an incident and claim that another party all together is responsible. The second option is evasion of responsibility which can be done in four different ways. An individual could claim that he/she was provoked into committing a wrongful act because of a prior offensive act committed by the victim. Another option would be defeasibility, or asserting that the act occurred only because of lack of information or ability. Evasion of responsibility could also occur by either claiming that the act was a complete accident or that it happened mistakenly even though good intentions were intended. The third option, reducing the offensiveness of an action, may occur in any of the six following ways: bolstering, or emphasizing good qualities; minimization, or portraying the harmful act as minor; differentiation, or claiming that the offensive act should be distinguished from other similar but much more offensive acts; transcendence, or putting the act in a larger context in which more important values exist; attacking one's accuser, or to call into question the credibility of the accuser; and finally, compensation, or offering payment or restitution to the victim. The fourth option is to seek corrective action, such as fixing the damage caused by the offensive act or taking steps to make sure that a similar act will never occur in the future. The fifth and final option is mortification. Mortification generally takes the form of an apology and expresses sorrow and regret for the harmful act (Blaney, Benoit, and Brazeal 380-381).

Benoit's research on the Firestone image restoration campaign, albeit a corporate example, exhibits several models of what he calls "making it right" (Blaney, Benoit, and Brazeal 384). As Benoit and his colleagues explained, Firestone's immediate reaction to

the dangerous nature of their tires consisted of recourses of mortification and corrective action (Blaney, Benoit, and Brazeal 383). They first issued a statement of apology for the loss of life and injuries related to the failure of their product as a means of mortification. This successful tactic, Blaney, Benoit, and Brazeal contended, was followed by an equally beneficial corrective action; Firestone announced the recall of several different tire models which were suspected to have caused blow-outs (Blaney, Benoit, and Brazeal 383). The company's image reconstruction took a turn for the worse, however, when it turned to shifting the blame to Ford. Firestone accused Ford of misinforming the owners of their popular Explorer SUV of the safest tire inflation pressure (Blaney, Benoit, and Brazeal 383). Both the corporate world and the public were immediately aware of this negative, distasteful change in Firestone's discourse and reacted in an accordingly negative manner. Firestone recognized this disfavor and subsequently returned to their "make it right" campaign, saying that it was "dedicated to gaining your trust, and includes important upgrades in manufacturing and quality control" (Blaney, Benoit, and Brazeal 384).

Of the five exhaustive categories of image repair strategies (denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of an event, corrective action, and mortification), Benoit has suggested that corrective action and mortification are generally more effective in several instances of image reconstruction (Blaney, Benoit, and Brazeal 381). The previous Firestone example suggests that the public responds supportively to mortification and corrective actions but becomes hostile toward other tactics in some cases. Benoit and Brinson additionally found that AT&T initially tried to blame low-level employees for an interruption of service in "AT&T: 'apologies are not enough'"

(Benoit and Brinson 77). After this strategy backfired, a promise of corrective action ultimately proved successful. Similarly, Benoit and his colleagues referenced an analysis in their Firestone article on the discourse following accusations that breast implants manufactured by Dow Corning were harmful (Blaney, Benoit, and Brazeal 381). They found that denial of the problem caused even more damage because the company's own internal researchers had actually discovered the implants' risk. Once enlisted, mortification and corrective action were able to salvage the reputation of the company. Finally, Benoit concluded from previous research in his Firestone article that Sears' tarnished image after accusations that the company's automotive branch was performing unnecessary repairs could have been saved had they attempted mortification (Blaney, Benoit, and Brazeal 381). Bolstering and claiming good intentions were not enough to repair their image. In response to public outcry, therefore, precedents suggest that mortification and corrective actions generally prove to be the most successful image restoration tactics.

Benoit has laid much of the groundwork for a specific discussion of *celebrity* image reconstruction as well. It would undoubtedly be helpful to briefly address the concept of image restoration theory, disclosed in "Image Repair Discourse and Crisis Communication," as it applies to celebrities. There are two prerequisites that precede any image repair discourse; The accused must be held responsible for some action and that act must be considered offensive (Benoit 178). As forthcoming discussions address, statements of intolerance from celebrities meet the criteria of being offensive. On the other hand, the public generally holds the individuals responsible but celebrity behavior

is often the opposite. It has become commonplace to entail subtle ways of redirecting their own responsibility by shifting the blame for their intolerant behavior.

Moving away from corporate image reconstruction and toward individual image repair strategies, Maria E. Len-Rios and Benoit confirmed in “Gary Condit’s Image Repair Strategies: Determined Denial and Differentiation” that denial and differentiation were not beneficial to Gary Condit by any means (Len-Rios and Benoit 96). On the contrary, Condit’s “lack of candor, unpersuasive denials, and failure to shoulder responsibility for any mistakes” during an interview with Connie Chung without a doubt ruined his hope for redemption. Future discussion acknowledges the public’s disfavor for denial and differentiation but also calls into question the results of more subtle ways of redirecting responsibility for intolerant behavior.

A similar discussion of image reconstruction in Benoit’s “Queen Elizabeth’s Image Repair Discourse: Insensitive Royal or Compassionate Queen?” revealed additional insight into the restoration of a personal tarnished image. The article confirmed the common inclination to take restorative action when one perceives his/her image to be at risk. Entertainment figures, he noted, are worth mentioning for their consistent and predictable image restoration discourse when their image is threatened. The example of Queen Elizabeth’s “saving face” occurred following “public displeasure with the Royal Family’s lack of response to Diana’s death” (Benoit and Brinson 146). The Queen responded to backlash at the widely perceived insensitivity to Princess Diana’s death in a public address. According to Benoit, the Queen’s address was both appropriate and successful. She had never before given a speech to repair her own, or the Royal Family’s, image. In doing so, however, the Queen “effectively denied the charges,

provided a plausible excuse, and directed her viewer's attention to another, allegedly more important issue" (Benoit and Brinson 153). Denial, evasion of responsibility, and the reducing offensiveness of the event were all, therefore, used successfully by the Queen in this case.

Benoit's discussion of President George W. Bush in "Image Repair in President Bush's April 2004 News Conference" provides a stark contrast to the Queen Elizabeth example (Benoit 137). According to Benoit, President Bush's use of persuasive discourse to repair his image was unsuccessful. In April of 2004, President Bush was facing criticism for the increased number of casualties in Iraq. Benoit believed that President Bush's repeated denial that he made any mistakes and his refusal to apologize for anything may have made him appear inflexible and oblivious. In addition to denial, President Bush used two other rhetorical tactics. He employed transcendence to justify the war. He could not deny that he "invaded Iraq or that soldiers were dying," so he "stubbornly clung to his belief in the existence of Iraq WMD" (Benoit 139). President Bush also attempted to bolster his image by expressing his resolve to "stay the course" and "not waiver" (Benoit 139). Following his refusal to admit wrong-doing or to apologize, partisan reactions varied. A majority "disapproved of his handling of the war in Iraq," however, so his popularity remained unchanged following his image repair news conference (Benoit 142). Benoit's article made the significant observation that it is "an error to refuse to admit mistakes when so many in the audience believe that the rhetor has made misjudgments" (Benoit 143). As he observed, "Such a refusal compounds the damage to image from the initial mistake, risking creating the impression of pig-headedness, stupidity, or even cowardice in owing up to one's mistakes" (Benoit). These

points will prove invaluable in later analyses of public reaction to a celebrity who might initially deny his/her prejudices.

Similar to Marsh's suggestions, this paper calls for an integration of image reconstruction and apologia theories. The similarities between both communication rhetorical devices are many. Apologia, therefore, will be used in combination with image reconstruction discussions in an effort to further provide evidence of the immense similarities between the two rhetorical devices. The implications of speaking in self-defense in an image reconstruction effort are invaluable in considering celebrity responses to public outrage.

Parasocial Interaction Theory

Another important consideration in any discussion of celebrity image reconstruction is the impact of Parasocial Interaction Theory on audience members. The success or failure of any mediated image reconstruction effort, such as in the case of an intolerant celebrity, is highly reliant on the relationship that he/she has with the public. Image reconstruction is typically sought after the public disapproves of an open demonstration of intolerance. Parasocial Interaction Theory, as Edward Schiappa and his colleagues discussed in "The Parasocial Contact Hypothesis," has implications for celebrities as well as for the broader issue of broadcasted intolerances (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 92).

First, in terms of relationships with celebrities, the researchers point out that people process "mass-mediated parasocial interaction in a manner similar to interpersonal

interaction” (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 92). It is interesting to note that the human brain processes media experiences similarly to how it processes direct experience (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 95). Providing audiences with an “apparently intimate face-to-face association with a performer,” publicized images have led people to believe that they have close relationships with celebrities (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 95). Celebrities are often much more than just distant Hollywood actors for many audience members. People familiar with their big screen and small screen characters have developed a deeper, parasocial bond with the public personalities. The success of any image reconstruction attempt by the actors will therefore be inescapably linked to positive or negative character traits which the actor has previously portrayed in any public display.

In addition, the frequency with which an audience has contact with a celebrity influences this relationship. According to Schiappa, “length of an acquaintance is positively related to attributional confidence for both interpersonal and parasocial relationships” (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 97). The longer the public is aware of a celebrity, therefore, the more willing it will be to trust their actions and values. Real, as well as perceived, “friendships” become stronger with increased exposure over time.

Second, modern audiences have changed their prejudicial attitudes toward minority groups because of increased exposure and consequent parasocial bonds with them. Direct parasocial relationships with minority groups have been proven to lower levels of public prejudice for those groups (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 92). Interpersonal contact is in point of fact “one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice between majority and minority group members” (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes

92). Hence, audiences who have been exposed to wider ranges of diversity through media images have become more accepting of those people different from themselves. This point is vital in a discussion of public response to publicized intolerances. Modern audiences, Schiappa and others have suggested, react very differently to public figures expressing intolerances than any previous audience in history. Exposure to mediated images of minorities, such as homosexual characters on *Will & Grace*, have been proven to show a significant correlation between viewing frequency, parasocial relationships, and ultimate reduction of prejudices (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 97).

The same ever-increasing media exposure that connects audiences with celebrities, and fosters parasocial relationships with them, concurrently connects those same audiences with minority groups. Positive parasocial relationships between celebrities and fans are therefore not necessarily an unquestionable support toward a celebrity's apologia or image reconstruction attempts. Depending on where parasocial bonds are stronger, whether with celebrities or with minority groups, celebrities discussed in future sections will each have varying degrees of success in apologizing and atoning for their prejudicial behavior.

William Brown and his colleagues explained in "Media Coverage and Public Opinion of the O.J. Simpson Trial: Implications for the Criminal Justice System" that after regular exposure to media personalities, audiences come to regard celebrities as "friends" on a certain level. Audiences thus experience feelings of comfort and enjoyment from media exposure to these personalities (Brown, Duane, and Fraser 267). Parasocial Interaction Theory reveals that the relationship between a "media user" and a "media personality" results from a perceived interpersonal relationship (Brown, Duane,

and Fraser 267). These relationships are seamlessly integrated into everyday life.

Benson P. Fraser and William Brown acknowledged in “Media, Celebrities, and Social Influence: Identification with Elvis Presley” that the proliferation of entertainment media worldwide has resulted in an increase in opportunities to develop parasocial relationships with celebrities (Fraser and Brown 185). Audiences have come to crave exposure to their favorite media personalities in order to fuel psychological bonds. Public relations executives, publicists, and image consultants have all capitalized on the fact that building celebrity images has become a major global industry (Fraser and Brown 185). Americans are especially voracious in their appetites for pop culture; they are avid consumers of celebrity gossip and have spurred media outlets to give celebrity behavior, of the legal or illegal nature, front-page status (Knight, Giuliano, and Sanchez-Ross 183).

Although contemporary audiences immerse themselves in parasocial relationships with celebrities that are imaginary yet tangible, Ellis Cashmore points out that audiences have nonetheless remained intelligent, witty, and skeptical (Cashmore 82). Fans are neither gullible nor dim-witted for their parasocial interactions; they are not “suckered by the wiles of artful celebrity-manipulators” (Cashmore 83). Quite the contrary, following celebrities can be a gratifying and meaningful pursuit. The celebrity himself/herself is actually not the most important aspect of a parasocial relationship. Rather, audiences’ *interpretations* of what celebrities are like, regardless of the accuracy of these assessments, are what actually influence parasocial bonds (Cashmore 84). These assessments are substantive and provide enriching, even inspirational personal growth. The importance of these interpretations will be discussed in a later section.

Fraser and Brown similarly contend in “Media, Celebrities, and Social Influence: Identification with Elvis Presley” that heightened media awareness has given mass audiences the opportunity to develop relationships with “mythic” characters (Fraser and Brown 184). In the past, legitimate heroes have expressed our deepest goals and values. Recently, however, celebrities have come to occupy this “hero” role (Fraser and Brown 184). The modern celebrity is often someone who is famous simply for being well known and may or may not serve others “sacrificially” in the way that a true hero would (Fraser and Brown 184). Additionally, the celebrity is distinguished by his image or trademark, closely tied to parasocial interpretations, which is created and affirmed by the media.

Confirming the importance of the media, any celebrity’s status is dependent on public attention. Jennifer Knight and her colleagues suggested in “Famous or Infamous? The Influence of Celebrity Status and Race on Perceptions of Responsibility for Rape” that when celebrities violate moral norms, the public is thrust into a psychological dilemma in which it is natural to “reject” or “diminish” the notion that a moral failure has occurred (Knight, Giuliano, and Sanchez-Ross 183). Identification with celebrities through conceived personal relationships once again affirms the possibility of celebrity misdeeds being wrongly construed by the public (Knight, Giuliano, and Sanchez-Ross 183).

A discussion of media accountability research will prove helpful in future discussions of direct parasocial relationships with media personalities. Michael Cornfield investigated the journalistic choices made by news media outlets, for example, in presenting news in the form of a story in his article entitled “The Press and Political

Controversy: The Case for Narrative Analysis". He insisted that we rely on documents and dialogues to establish truth (Cornfield 48). In addition, news organizations, in search of stable circulations they can market to advertisers, have long known that a good story builds readership. Story serialization, such as continuous coverage of a celebrity in trouble, can induce people to purchase successive editions of their publication. This serialization is especially apparent in print and broadcast media outlets but is becoming even more prolific on celebrity blog sites like PerezHilton.com. Hilton has confirmed that he crafts celebrities into character roles to represent villains and heroes in order to make his site an appealing melodrama of celebrity news. Cornfield defined a celebrity story as showing readers the private side of a public figure (Cornfield 50). This corresponds with Fraser and Brown's suggestion that people crave celebrity camaraderie. Cornfield confirmed the well-established pretext that the celebrity's fame sparks widespread interest in his/her tastes in "recreation, food, clothing, humor and friends, as well as his innermost hopes and fears (Cornfield 51). In other words, fans want to know everything about their celebrity "friends" from their favorite restaurant to their political beliefs. The public wants to hate who their celebrity "friends" are feuding with and pay more attention to people their celebrity "friends" like.

New technology has also given celebrities the ability to craft their own image in the media. In his article, "The Internet and Litigation Public Relations," Bryan Reber and his colleagues defined litigation public relations as "the management of the communications process during the course of any legal dispute or adjudicatory proceeding so as to affect the outcome or its impact on the client's overall reputation" (Reber, Gower, and Robinson 25). The researchers explained that negative publicity

about a celebrity in trouble can cause reputation damage which publicity, or vindication confirming that an offense never even occurred, may not be able salvage. Citing their belief that the media has an inherent bias in favor of prosecutors in high-profile cases, they said that when allegations are made public, the media tend to cast the lawsuit in terms of “victim versus villain” (Reber, Gower, and Robinson 25). Litigation public relations therefore aim to counteract negative publicity and ensure balanced media coverage. In addition, public relations practitioners are steadily incorporating the attributes of the Internet, such as blogs and discussion boards, as integrated parts of their communication strategies with the public (Reber, Gower, and Robinson 25).

This onslaught of public relations power comes at a time when performance of a “mediated identity” is commonplace in Hollywood. As Andrew Tolson explored in “‘Being Yourself’: The Pursuit of Authentic Celebrity,” this common celebrity practice involves ways in which one might be perceived as authentic and how the projection of a public image can simultaneously amount to a way of “being yourself” (Tolson 445). Tolson examined Geri Halliwell of the Spice Girls in terms of image management. Self-image management, he explained, is an acknowledged practice in which celebrities experiment with a particular genre of personal disclosure—such as a public exhibition of private moments through a website or candid interview (Tolson 450). He clarified a celebrity’s need to project an aura of authenticity through their public persona. Halliwell revealed in a documentary that, much like Elizabeth Taylor, she struggled with being “ordinary” (Tolson 455). The way a celebrity’s life is reported essentially makes it difficult to be ordinary. Even in her best-concerted effort to be an ordinary person, Halliwell was still a celebrity *trying* to be ordinary. Tolson further developed the notion

that parasocial relationships with fans affect celebrities and in fact become reciprocally influential to both parties.

Implications Specific to Mel Gibson's Arrest

Discussion of public response to Mel Gibson's documented anti-Semitism must be distinguished as possessing a slightly different context than the cases of Michael Richards or Isaiah Washington. Gibson was arrested for driving under the influence prior to uttering anti-Semitic remarks on Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu, California. The offensiveness of his behavior may therefore be slightly differentiated from the behavior of the other two men. A broader investigation of celebrity criminality, therefore, will prove helpful in analyzing the specifics of Gibson's offense and any parasocial responses it may elicit.

Gibson's arrest can be analyzed through a similar examination of celebrity criminal trial media coverage performed by William Brown and his colleagues. In their examination of the O.J. Simpson trial, the scholars presupposed that the role of the media and its impact on the United States legal system has intensified in recent years. Citing previous historical examples such as the criminal trials involving Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, Charles Lindbergh, Patricia Hearst, and Sunny von Bulow, the authors examined several features of celebrity criminality (Brown, Duane, and Fraser 262-264). These features included the possibility of criminal behavior resulting in additional fame and even the belief that courts grant special treatment to celebrities. Additionally, social scientific studies have shown that it is often the case that pre-trial publicity causes higher

guilt attribution (Brown, Duane, and Fraser 265). Knowledge of a defendant's arrest, for example, may initially predispose public opinion toward believing the defendant to be guilty. An ugly mug shot and a misleading headline are just two concrete examples of reasons why guilt may be prematurely assumed. In the case of a celebrity, however, the popularity of a defendant might actually garner public sympathy (Brown, Duane, and Fraser 267). The psychological involvement of a media user with a media personality, along the lines of Parasocial Interaction Theory, therefore differs in cases of celebrity criminality. As the theory suggests, many media users may treat celebrities as "friends" and are therefore more likely to be reluctant in believing that a celebrity "friend" could be guilty (Brown, Duane, and Fraser 266).

Parasocial Interaction Theory also suggests that the public's media exposure to a celebrity may bias their opinion in favor of that celebrity should he/she be accused of committing a crime (Brown, Duane, and Fraser 267). Celebrities have long been believed to intuitively fare better during legal troubles because of traditionally beneficial qualities like physical attractiveness and a high socioeconomic status (Knight, Giuliano, and Sanchez-Ross 183). These qualities have been proven to result in more lenient judgments. Research suggests that celebrity status is also an indicator of leniency under the law (Brown, Duane, and Fraser 277). Parasocial Interaction Theory would suggest that strong parasocial bonds with celebrities lead the public to sympathize with the very public legal troubles they may face.

Given the aforementioned unpredictability in forecasting the outcome of public opinion, any response Gibson may give to accusations of his anti-Semitism will be influenced by prior public knowledge of his character. Some of the prior research would

suggest that Mel Gibson's image restoration attempts would have overall success. Other scholarly debate has ensued in response to allegations of his previous racist tendencies. Thomas Cooper specifically addressed the historical context under which Mel Gibson's anti-Semitic tirade occurred in "Of Anti-Semitism, Romans de Sade, and Celluloid Christianity: The Cases For and Against Gibson's Passion". Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, while incredibly lucrative and even more controversial, was believed by many to be anti-Semitic and hurtful to the Jewish community (Cooper 251). Yona Metzger, one of Israel's two chief rabbis, believed the film to be feeding stereotypes that Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus (Cooper 252). Gibson was subsequently portrayed by the media as highly insensitive to public perceptions despite personal statements claiming the opposite. Among other criticisms, Gibson's film allegedly portrayed Jews as accusatory, grumbling, scornful, punishing, and engaging in other negative expressions (Cooper 261). To a viewer who only knew Hollywood types, Cooper argued, the darkly dressed and mean-spirited Caiphas "might more readily resemble the stereotypical villain" (Cooper 262). Gibson claimed that he was just telling the same old crucifixion story, but critics steadfastly argued that he added and subtracted scenes. His poetic license, therefore, put his own personal beliefs onto a story in the public domain (Cooper 263). Gibson tried to contend that his Jewish counterparts in Hollywood would not have worked with him if he was indeed an anti-Semite but critics countered that Gibson financed the film entirely on his own; collaboration with Jewish industry executives was thus not necessary. Skepticism lingered on how loyal Hollywood and fans would truly be to Gibson on projects after *The Passion of the Christ* and especially in light of later examples of his apparent pattern of anti-Semitism.

Chapter 6—Mel Gibson

Mel Gibson's Malibu Meltdown

Mel Gibson achieved fame epitomizing the archetypal action hero in such films as the *Lethal Weapon* franchise, *Air America*, *Ransom* and *The Patriot*. He was catapulted to super-star status after winning a 1996 Oscar for directing the epic film “Braveheart”. The movie in which Gibson also starred won best picture (Anderson). Gibson accumulated popular acclaim for several other films until, in February 2004, he released a film that he financed, produced, and directed entitled *The Passion of the Christ*. The film garnered more than \$650 million at the box office and won the largest response of any religion-centered film of the century (Cooper 252). This success was overshadowed, however, by an immense controversy that erupted from the film’s alleged anti-Semitic depictions and their biblical, if not historical, inaccuracies (Cooper 251). Gibson, as the chief financier and creative mind behind the film, was barraged by an immense onslaught of accusations from the Jewish community that it was anti-Semitic. Rosemary Church suggested on her CNN show that the Jewish community perceived *The Passion of the Christ* as part of Gibson’s anti-Semitic agenda (“Insight”). One of Israel’s two chief rabbis, Yona Metzger, actually expressed deep concerns that the portrayal of Jews in “The Passion of the Christ” had global political and social ramifications in its portrayal of Jews causing the death of Jesus (Cooper 252). Gibson’s behavior during an early morning tirade in the summer of 2006, therefore, must be placed in the context of the heated accusations of his anti-Semitic agenda.

On Friday, July 28th, 2006, actor Mel Gibson was pulled over by Los Angeles County Sheriffs on suspicion of drunk driving. Officers reported to the Sheriff's Department that after "deputies were alerted by their radar that his speed was above the posted limit," they were alarmed to find that Gibson smelled of alcohol (Anderson). It was later determined that the celebrity's blood alcohol content was 0.12, placing him above the California legal limit of 0.08 and within the realm of obvious intoxication and delirium ("What Happened that Night?; The Girls at the Bar with Mel"). Tourists who had been drinking with Gibson at a nearby Malibu bar later confirmed that he was refusing the offers of other patrons to call him a cab after becoming obviously intoxicated. Entertainment news website TMZ.com reported that Gibson became agitated when he was stopped on Pacific Coast Highway, presumably on his way home at around 2:30 in the morning. He then began swearing uncontrollably and attempted to continue on his way. After refusing to cooperate with officers, Gibson was subdued, handcuffed, and placed in the backseat of one of the patrol cars (Levin). What followed would shock and outrage Gibson's fans and critics alike.

An audiotape recorder inside the officer's car recorded Gibson's profane tirade laced with racial epithets. The actor was recorded saying, "My life is fucked. You mother fucker. I'm going to fuck you" (Levin). He then launched into a torrent of anti-Semitic statements saying, "Fucking Jews... The Jews are responsible for all the wars in the world" (Levin). He then asked the officer if he was a Jew. The officer became alarmed at Gibson's tirade and feared an even larger emotional outburst. He called ahead to alert his sergeant of the situation. Upon their arrival at the station, officers escorted Gibson into a room where he was videotaped yelling at a female officer, "What do you

think you're looking at, sugar tits?" (Levin). News of Gibson's behavior was reported to entertainment websites such as TMZ.com and PerezHilton.com almost immediately and was picked up by major news corporations like ABC and CNN within hours.

Controversy is nothing new for Gibson, however. Prior to accusations of bigotry, he has dealt with other personal evils. Gibson was arrested while filming in Toronto in 1984 after driving drunk and rear-ending a car. He then entered Alcoholics Anonymous in 1991 but has publicly confirmed thoughts of suicidal despair when approaching a relapse ("GMA Exclusive; Diane Sawyer Interviews Mel Gibson"). In an interview with ABC newswoman Diane Sawyer, Gibson discussed the evils that surfaced during his shameful encounter with the Los Angeles Sheriff Department. Only two days after the incident, Gibson told Sawyer that he had battled with alcoholism all of his adult life ("Arrested for DUI; Mel Gibson Apologizes"). He divulged not only his life-long struggle with alcoholism, but also his struggles with drugs that left him at "the height of spiritual bankruptcy" and even contemplating suicide ("Arrested for DUI; Mel Gibson Apologizes"). In the *Good Morning America* interview, Gibson confirmed that he had indeed been drinking from an open bottle of tequila in the car prior to being pulled over on Pacific Coast Highway ("GMA Exclusive; Diane Sawyer Interviews Mel Gibson"). The actor told Sawyer that he has been angry all his life and can, at times, snap for no reason.

Gibson has a similar history of prior controversy on the topic of anti-Semitism as well. Gibson's father, Hutton Gibson, has been reported as saying that while he does not "deny" its occurrence, he believes that the Holocaust was "exaggerated" ("NNDB"). Hutton proposed the idea that the six-million Jews believed to have been killed under

Hitler's regime actually survived the Holocaust and simply relocated to New York, Los Angeles, and Sydney, thus accounting for their disappearance ("NNDB"). Hutton also believes that it was not terrorists who commandeered four airliners on September 11th, 2001, but rather "Jews—using remote control to pilot the planes" ("NNDB"). Hutton began participating in the Latin Mass Society after becoming suspicious of the Catholic Church and currently publishes a newsletter on his religious convictions. Mel was highly criticized after telling *Reader's Digest*, "My dad taught me my faith and I believe what he taught me. The man never lied to me in his life" ("NNDB"). Although Mel has repeatedly stated that he does in fact believe that the Holocaust occurred and that it was a horrible atrocity, his father's radical religious beliefs continue to fuel claims that he is anti-Semitic.

Mel Gibson's Road to Recovery

The media coverage of Mel Gibson's late night arrest and subsequent behavior provided a heated situation for him to address. An analysis of Gibson's immediate statement to the press provides evidence of two of the rhetorical devices which scholar William L. Benoit identifies as being most effective in image restoration attempts; Mortification and corrective action have been proven to be effective when used in unison. Mortification, once again, is an apology for the act while corrective action is a plan to fix the problem (Benoit 179). On Saturday, July 29th, Gibson issued the following statement regarding his arrest on suspicion of driving under the influence:

After drinking alcohol on Thursday night, I did a number of things that were very wrong and for which I am ashamed.

I drove a car when I should not have, and was stopped by the LA County Sheriffs. The arresting officer was just doing his job and I feel fortunate that I was apprehended before I caused injury to any other person.

I acted like a person completely out of control when I was arrested, and said things that I do not believe to be true and which are despicable. I am deeply ashamed of everything I said, and I apologize to anyone who I have offended.

Also, I take this opportunity to apologize to the deputies involved for my belligerent behavior. They have always been there for me in my community and indeed probably saved me from myself.

I disgraced myself and my family with my behavior and for that I am truly sorry.

I have battled with the disease of alcoholism for all of my adult life and profoundly regret my horrific relapse. I apologize for any behavior unbecoming of me in my inebriated state and have already taken necessary steps to ensure my return to health. (Gibson I)

The short statement alludes to the fact that he had indeed consumed alcohol before attempting to drive home. Gibson referred to his battle with alcoholism in terms which may suggest an evasion of responsibility, or what Benoit calls defeasibility (Benoit 179). Gibson subtly implied that the alcohol was the true culprit for his racism. Since Gibson's image restoration attempt is manifested in a statement of self-defense, apologia may be enlisted for further elaboration (Ware and Linkugel 124). The apologia tenet of differentiation, or separating an action or attribute from a larger context in which a judging audience views it, is apparent in Gibson's allusion to his battle with alcoholism (Marsh 42). Referring to alcoholism as a "disease" which he has "battled with" his entire adult life, Gibson acknowledges this one episode as a "relapse" which was not indicative of his normal behavior.

Although Gibson acknowledges the influences of alcohol on his conduct, the overarching themes of the statement are remorse and regret. Mortification, therefore, emerges as the paramount theme of Gibson's statement. He admits that he "acted like a person completely out of control" and "said things that [he does] not believe to be true and which are despicable" (Gibson I). He briefly apologized to the arresting officers and to anyone he may have offended. Gibson did not directly address the charges of anti-Semitism, but rather apologized broadly and indirectly for his crude behavior. The statement concluded with an admission of complete shame and an assurance that he had "already taken necessary steps to ensure [his] return to health" (Gibson I). These "steps" suggest that corrective actions have been taken, but only for Gibson's own relapse into alcoholism and overall health. There is no indication that any corrective action has been taken in regards to the hurtful and racist statements that Gibson made. This first, brief statement, thus, presented Gibson's attempts at mortification and corrective action only on a personal level and within a limited range.

As we shall see, the difference between Gibson's first statement and his second statement is remarkable. His first statement addressed "Mel the drunk driver" and his second statement addressed "Mel the anti-Semite". Both statements exhibited overall themes of mortification and corrective action, but on very dissimilar levels. The first steps of rehabilitation were personal and direct. Gibson sought treatment for his alcoholism and took immediate steps toward recovery. The second step was of a lasting, public nature and addressed fundamental flaws in Gibson's character, namely his apparent anti-Semitism. On Tuesday, August 1st, five days after the initial incident, Gibson released the following statement:

There is no excuse, nor should there be any tolerance, for anyone who thinks or expresses any kind of anti-Semitic remark. I want to apologize specifically to everyone in the Jewish community for the vitriolic and harmful words that I said to a law enforcement officer the night I was arrested on a DUI charge.

I am a public person, and when I say something, either articulated and thought out, or blurted out in a moment of insanity, my words carry weight in the public arena. As a result, I must assume personal responsibility for my words and apologize directly to those who have been hurt and offended by those words.

The tenets of what I profess to believe necessitate that I exercise charity and tolerance as a way of life. Every human being is God's child, and if I wish to honor my God I have to honor his children. But please know from my heart that I am not an anti-Semite. I am not a bigot. Hatred of any kind goes against my faith.

I'm not just asking for forgiveness. I would like to take it one step further, and meet with leaders in the Jewish community, with whom I can have a one on one discussion to discern the appropriate path for healing.

I have begun an ongoing program of recovery and what I am now realizing is that I cannot do it alone. I am in the process of understanding where those vicious words came from during that drunken display, and I am asking the Jewish community, whom I have personally offended, to help me on my journey through recovery. Again, I am reaching out to the Jewish community for its help. I know there will be many in that community who will want nothing to do with me, and that would be understandable. But I pray that that door is not forever closed.

This is not about a film. Nor is it about artistic license. This is about real life and recognizing the consequences hurtful words can have. It's about existing in harmony in a world that seems to have gone mad. (Gibson II)

The most striking features of Gibson's second statement were its modified target audience and its overall change in tone. He has had time, and most likely publicists, to create a message that was aimed directly at the Jewish community. On the surface he began by purging certain previous apologia themes of differentiation. He no longer acknowledged alcohol as an influence which caused him to blurt out nonsensical insults. On the contrary, he relied heavily on mortification in saying "There is no excuse, nor

should there be any tolerance, for anyone who thinks or expresses any kind of anti-Semitic remark” (Gibson II). He did not, however, accept full blame for his behavior. In apologizing specifically to the Jewish community for his “vitriolic and harmful words,” Gibson subtly blames “a world that seems to have gone mad” for his outburst (Gibson II). Instead of alcohol instigating his anti-Semitic remarks, it was the pressure of a deranged world that was responsible.

In a further act of defeasibility, Gibson put a burden on the leaders of the Jewish community to help him in his journey through recovery. The second half of the statement was differentiated by requesting more than just forgiveness. Gibson sought further corrective actions, namely toward the Jewish community, by asking for their direct involvement in his process of recovery. In his search to “discern the appropriate path for healing,” Gibson’s corrective actions seemingly went beyond himself and reached deep into the issue of intolerance (Gibson II). By doing so, however, the ultimate outcome of his clinical “treatment” for alcoholism and anti-Semitism will not lay directly in his own control. The Jewish community was placed in a position of power as the guide and authority of his recovery. The burden was thus put on the Jewish community not only to accept Gibson’s apology but to oversee his entire moral rehabilitation.

Gibson relied on another tenet of apologia rhetoric to demonstrate his compassion for and tolerance of all of humanity. Bolstering, or evading charges of intolerance by identifying himself with something attractive to a judging audience, was evident in Gibson’s faith in Christianity (Marsh 42). This process in his attempt at mortification was supported, he claimed, by the tenets of charity and tolerance professed by his own religion. Gibson said that honoring God is accomplished through respect for all of God’s

children (Gibson II). His devotion to Christ accordingly served as support, or bolstering, for his assertion that his anti-Semitic remarks merely came from anger and were not legitimate prejudices.

Audiences' Parasocial Interaction with Mel Gibson

Mel Gibson's strong and overwhelmingly positive parasocial bonds with audience members may have served an integral part in his image reconstruction efforts. In examining the O.J. Simpson case, William Brown and his colleagues concluded that "despite the massive media coverage and information disseminated about celebrities...there is little evidence indicating that the publicity hurt the celebrities" (Brown, Duane, and Fraser 264). In fact, along the lines of Parasocial Interaction Theory, they suggest that media coverage may actually garner support for the celebrity if he/she was popular (Brown, Duane, and Fraser 264). Just as one would automatically defend a good friend accused of any wrongdoing, parasocial relationships with celebrities can foster similar reactions. Audience members who have developed strong psychological parasocial bonds with Gibson throughout his long, successful career might stand by his side just as they would support a good friend. Gibson as the action hero has embodied the rugged, independent, capable man who can surely handle himself. An audience member in this mindset would seriously doubt that the same likeable star of the Lethal Weapon franchise could be a hate-filled anti-Semite.

As William Babcock and Virginia Whitehouse explain in "Celebrity as a Postmodern Phenomenon, Ethical Crisis for Democracy, and Media Nightmare," Arnold

Schwarzenegger as an action hero is just as credible to audiences as Arnold Schwarzenegger as a governor. The scholars propound the Schwarzenegger example as a case in which parasocial bonds have redefined the meaning of an informed citizen (Babcock and Whitehouse 176). While he may not have handled his liquor well this past summer, a parasocially-supportive “friend” would perhaps see Gibson as just another drinking buddy who fell off the wagon. John Derbyshire, for example, wrote in his August 2nd column on National Review Online, “The guy was *drunk*, for heaven’s sake. We all say and do dumb things when we are drunk” (“Conservative media figures jumping to Mel Gibson’s defense”). Similarly, David Horowitz, a right-wing writer and political analyst, appeared on Fox News’ *Hannity and Colmes* in an interview with co-host Sean Hannity. Horowitz told Hannity, “People deserve compassion when they are in this kind of trouble” (“Conservative media figures jumping to Mel Gibson’s defense”). Both instances demonstrate a “forgive and forget” mentality that close friends of the actor might think.

Mel Gibson’s Image Reconstruction Tactics & Parasocial Bonds put to the Test

After issuing two public statements of mortification and seeking corrective actions, Gibson’s image reconstruction efforts were tested with the release of his most recent film, *Apocalypto*. The movie was plagued by Gibson’s personal scandal, an R-rating, subtitles because of an ancient dialect, extremely violent content, no recognizable stars, and formidable opening weekend competition (Finke). Indigenous activists in Guatemala even protested allegedly racist depictions in *Apocalypto* similar to claims

made by the Jewish community at *The Passion of the Christ* (“Mel’s Mayan meltdown: passions flare over Apocalypto”). Outraged Guatemalan leaders said that “scary-looking Mayans with bone piercings and scarred faces hurling spears and sacrificing humans” promote harmful stereotypes of their culture (Finke). Disney’s Touchstone Pictures, the production studio that carried the film, had been highly pressured to abandon Gibson’s self-financed epic. Disney had even previously abandoned a Gibson mini-series on the Holocaust that would have aired on its ABC network. Disney claimed that Gibson had taken too long in procuring a script and actually dropped the project immediately after his anti-Semitic summertime tirade. Instead of folding under the pressure, the studio emphasized that *Apocalypto* was a Mel Gibson picture and even used Gibson’s voice in the trailer. This was in defiance of former fans such as *The View*’s Barbara Walters, who publicly announced, “I don’t think I want to see any more Mel Gibson movies” (“Insight”).

Despite such extremely unfavorable odds, the film was not only number one in the box-office during its opening weekend in early December 2006, but it had a bigger opening weekend than Gibson’s Academy Award-winning movie *Braveheart* (Finke). It has yet to be determined how much of the film’s initial success was due to media hype and controversy. It would be fair to say, however, that Gibson’s newsworthiness at the time of the film’s release, whether for negative reasons or not, contributed to an extraordinary amount of attention focused on the film’s opening.

What is so unique about celebrity image is that negative attention may actually have no effect on or even improve professional success. Despite the myriad of hurdles set before the film, *Apocalypto* was successful at face value. It had a huge opening

weekend. Whether or not the public was swayed by parasocial bonds or accepted Gibson's mortification and corrective actions, they nonetheless continue to support his work. Image expert Michael Levine said about *Apocalypto* that, "If this movie fails, the sense will be that he is forever dirtied... Even if the movie is a home run, I don't think it will fully cleanse him from the crisis. But I think it will help" ("Apocalypto': Mel Gibson's doom, or revival?"). The film's success has certainly confirmed Gibson's longevity in Hollywood. Talent manager Bernie Brillstein attributes this success to the public's "very short memories with celebrities" ("Apocalypto': Mel Gibson's doom, or revival?"). Film critic Michael Medved similarly suggests that it is important to consider the numerous other industry personalities whom have been arrested several times for drug possession and drunk driving. Medved believes that the public has a tremendous capacity to separate "somebody off-screen and his behavior off-screen, from quality work" ("Insight").

The true test of Gibson's image reconstruction discourse will come in future years. *Apocalypto* did not include Gibson as an onscreen actor nor was he connected to the film in anything more than name. The next film in which Gibson appears onscreen in an acting role may arouse a very different reaction at the box-office. Additionally, Gibson's image will be tested every time he is presented in the media. The public may tire of Gibson's persona if during every representation of him in the media his drunken antics are rehashed and reevaluated under current circumstances.

In considering all of the aforementioned influences on Mel Gibson's reputation, several inferences can be made. First, Gibson committed a terribly offensive act that was recognized as such. The initial reaction of the news media and the public at large was of

extreme distaste and disapproval of his actions and expressions. The discrimination and offensiveness of his racist remarks were undeniable. The public was also immediately aware of every detail of his hateful, drunken tirade due to the prevalence of news media in Hollywood. The ever-invasive nature of the media is supported by parasocial research confirming audiences' mass consumption of celebrity images and gossip. Media consumers crave the most recent news on the successes and failures of their perceived "friends". Due to these parasocial bonds, however, public perception of failures may be skewed. Some of Gibson's fans, for example, may have automatically sympathized with his prior difficulties with alcoholism. In other words, if a good "friend" commits a wrong the automatic response for some would be to side with that friend and see him through his hard time. There are those individuals, however, who may never forgive Gibson for his behavior. The Jewish community which Gibson directly offended with his anti-Semitic comments would be justified in holding disdain for the actor even after his rehabilitation treatment.

Gibson's two public statements after his arrest, repeatedly enlisting both mortification and corrective actions, pursued two channels of image reconstruction that have proved effective in numerous prior cases. Underlying the positive tactics of mortification and corrective actions, however, there were traces of defeasibility. Gibson apologized to the officers, the Jewish community, and every other individual who may have been harmed or offended by his behavior. His apology and corrective actions taken in respect to the Jewish community, however, subtly redirected blame toward a "mad world" which may have influenced his alcohol consumption and subsequent drunken tirade. He enrolled himself in a rehabilitation program to address his personal evil,

alcoholism, but ultimately put the success of his recovery on the very audience he offended.

The present discussion of Gibson's standing is certainly limited and future attention to his role and image in Hollywood will prove vital in understanding the implications of image reconstruction and parasocial interactions. The preceding discussion has only addressed the immediate impact of Gibson's most recent offense and is therefore limited in this respect. Continuing discussion is nonetheless important in investigating issues of intolerance in Hollywood. The following chapter analyzes Michael Richards as another celebrity who was engulfed by similar public outrage.

Chapter 7—Michael Richards

Michael Richards Drops the “N” Word

Michael Richards will always be remembered for playing the scatterbrained, kooky neighbor on the 1989-1998 television smash hit *Seinfeld*. Named for the comedian who headed the comedic cast, Jerry Seinfeld, the NBC show followed the daily lives of Jerry, George (Jason Alexander), Elaine (Julia Louis-Dreyfus), and Kramer (Michael Richards). The neurotic foursome earned the show praise from loyal fans and even won several Golden Globes (“Seinfeld”). Michael Richards himself was awarded three Emmy awards for his outstanding supporting role in the comedy (“Biography of Michael Richards”). Nobody was laughing, however, after Richards’ stand-up performance at a West Hollywood comedy club in November of 2006 revealed a much more offensive, distressing side of the actor.

Michael Richards performed on November 17th, 2006 at the very popular Laugh Factory on Sunset Boulevard. During the opening bit of Richards’ act, a group of audience members filed into their seats a little bit after the start of the show. Two of the men, Kyle Doss and Frank McBride, told NBC’s the *Today* show that Richards spotted the larger, racially mixed group and became agitated that his act was interrupted (“Kramer’ Apology Not Enough?”). Doss recalled that as his group was taking their seats, Richards said, “Oh, all the blacks and Mexicans are here” (“Kramer’ Apology Not Enough?”). Doss and McBride, both African-Americans, were shocked at the bluntly

racist comments that Richards aimed at their group. A few more minutes into the act, Doss said that he began to “playfully heckle” Richards saying that his friend didn’t think he was funny (“‘Seinfeld’ Actor’s Racial Rampage”). Richards then turned on the audience members and his ensuing actions were captured in a grainy cell phone video.

Richards became visibly agitated and shouted the following at the hecklers in the audience:

Fifty years ago we’d have you upside down with a fucking fork up your ass! You can talk, you can talk, you’re brave now, motherfucker. Throw his ass out. He’s a nigger! He’s a nigger! He’s a nigger! A nigger, look, there’s a nigger! (“Kramer’s Racist Tirade -- Caught on Tape!!!”)

A wave of confusion and anger swept over the crowd as one audience member yelled back “It’s not funny. That’s why you’re a reject, never had no shows, never had no movies. *Seinfeld*, that’s it” (Hall). Several more people in the audience can be heard whispering shocked comments and much of the audience gets up to leave the show during the three-minute tirade. Richards responded by saying, “Well, you interrupted me, pal. They’re going to arrest me for calling a black man a nigger” (“‘Seinfeld’ Actor’s Racial Rampage”). One of the hecklers at whom the tirade was directed shouted, “That’s unfucking called for, ain’t necessary” (“Kramer’s Racist Tirade -- Caught on Tape!!!”). The comedian later said that he went back to the club later that night. He said that he wanted to “get back on the horse, as they say” and apologize to as many people as he could but that many of the victims of his outburst had already left (“Michael Richards (‘Kramer’) Apologizes”).

News of the incident spread over the weekend but millions of people were able to view the cell phone footage online after entertainment website TMZ.com posted the clip at 4:30 a.m. on Monday, November 20th (“Richards: ‘I lost my temper onstage’”).

Harvey Levin, managing editor of the website, was the same person who first reported Mel Gibson's anti-Semitic tirade after being pulled over in Malibu. Levin said upon first viewing the Richards video, "My jaw really did drop. I knew immediately this was a huge video" ("Richards: 'I lost my temper onstage'"). News media coverage of the incident, such as on the *Today* show and CNN, used the footage in their stories. YouTube also helped to make the clip one of the most viewed online videos by Monday afternoon ("Richards: 'I lost my temper onstage'"). Levin reinforced the impact of millions of people being able to watch the racist outburst saying, "When you hear the anger in Michael Richards voice it just takes it to a whole other level" ("Richards: 'I lost my temper onstage'").

Immediately following the internet frenzy over the cell phone video, Jerry Seinfeld issued a statement saying, "I am sick over this. I'm sure Michael is also sick over this horrible, horrible mistake. It is so extremely offensive. I feel terrible for all the people who have been hurt" ("Seinfeld' Actor's Racial Rampage"). The Laugh Factory also released a statement in a press conference that it held early Monday morning. Club spokesman Paul Rodriguez said that Richards had been invited back to perform at the club the following night but that he did not apologize for his outburst as he had previously claimed (Hall). Rodriguez then banned Richards from ever returning to the Laugh Factory saying the following:

We do not condone, accept or will have him repeat that onstage. He has always done cutting-edge stuff, and I was sitting in the back waiting for a punchline or something, but there was nothing. The African-Americans in the audience were rightly offended. (Hall)

Owner of the comedy club, Jamie Masada, offered everyone in the audience during the evening of the incident full refunds and said during the press conference, “It was ugly. It was hurtful. There was no call for it” (Hall).

At the urging of former cast mate and close friend Jerry Seinfeld, Richards agreed to appear via satellite on the *Late Show With David Letterman* on the night of November 20th. Seinfeld was already scheduled as a guest on the show and told Letterman, “I’ve known him for many years, and I know how he works on stage. None of that justifies what happened. He’s someone that I love and I know how shattered he is about this. And he deserves a chance to apologize, and that’s all he wanted” (“Richards says anger, not racism, sparked tirade”). Richards’ public relations apology campaign began with his *Late Show* appearance and continued with several other media appearances.

After referring to African-American audience members as “niggers,” it was revealed that Richards might have previously behaved in a similarly offensive manner toward Jewish audience members. A woman who attended an earlier comedy show reported to TMZ.com that the comedian had lashed out at an audience member in a similar tone, shouting, “You fucking Jew. You people are the cause of Jesus dying” (“Michael Richards’ New Jew Review”). Richards’ publicist quickly told the press that his client was Jewish so the act was only meant to mock a “red-neck” opinion. As an article in the *Jewish Journal* revealed on November 21, however, Richards was neither born of a Jewish parent nor was he a convert (“Michael Richards’ New Jew Review”). The journal article examined Richards’ childhood and career and determined that despite the fact that some people falsely believed his *Seinfeld* character “Kramer” to be Jewish, Richards himself is not (“Michael Richards’ New Jew Review”).

Following the discovery, Richards' publicist told the press that his client was "very fragile, and he's dealing with his psychiatrist regularly in Los Angeles. He wants to get to the bottom of his anger" ("Michael Richards' New Jew Review"). The Internet was ablaze with agitated commentary on Richards' racist tirades but one place that he *did* get support from was Mel Gibson. The actor told *Entertainment Weekly*, "I feel really badly for the guy. He was obviously in a state of stress. You don't need to be inebriated to be bent out of shape. My heart went out to the guy. Poor fucker, he's getting it now" ("Michael Richards' New Jew Review"). Just as in the case of Mel Gibson, the public did not tolerate Richards' behavior. Public response demanded that he address his intolerances and atone for his racist comments.

Michael Richards Reels from his Not-So-Funny Performance

Michael Richards was faced with charges of racism after screaming the n-word at hecklers at the Laugh Factory in West Hollywood. When the comedy club issued a statement condemning Richard's behavior, the comedian agreed to appear on the *Late Show with David Letterman* on November 20th—the same night Richard's good friend and former *Seinfeld* costar, Jerry Seinfeld, was scheduled to appear. Letterman recounted Richards' "dynamic" way of performing which would often reach a point of frightening the audience. As the only mediated apology available to widespread audiences, the following is a portion of what transpired on *Letterman*:

LETTERMAN: Michael, are you there?

RICHARDS: Yeah, I'm right here.

LETTERMAN: Michael, welcome to the show.

RICHARDS: Hello. Hi. (audience laughter)

LETTERMAN: How are you doing?

RICHARDS: I'm not doing too good. (audience laughter)

LETTERMAN: Yeah, why don't you explain exactly what happened for the folks who may not know.

RICHARDS: I lost my temper on stage. I was at the comedy club trying to do my act and I got heckled and I took it badly and went into a rage and said some pretty nasty things to some Afro-Americans; a lot of trash talk and ... (audience laughter)

SEINFELD: (to audience) Stop laughing. It's not funny.

LETTERMAN: And you were actually being heckled or they were talking and disturbing the act?

RICHARDS: That was going on too.

LETTERMAN: Uh-huh. (audience laughter) And did you...

RICHARDS: I know I'm hearing your audience laugh and it's—I'm not even sure this is where I should be addressing...

SEINFELD: They're just used to...

RICHARDS: ...the situation. I've already heard you make some jokes about it and that's Ok, but I'm really busted up over this. I'm very, very sorry to those people in the audience, the blacks, the Hispanics, the whites, everyone that was there that took the brunt of that anger and hate and rage and what came through. ("Richards says anger, not racism, sparked tirade")

Seinfeld and Letterman both contributed to two early apologia tactics of Richards' image reconstruction. Seinfeld attempted to bolster Richards' image, or evade the charge, by identifying him with something attractive to the judging audience (Marsh 42). Letterman said, "We all got a kick out of [his performances] because it was in good fun

and he was, and is, a very funny guy” (“Richards says anger, not racism, sparked tirade”). Seinfeld similarly attempted to add “something attractive” to the forthcoming apology simply by arranging Richards’ appearance on the show. Seinfeld is a wildly popular entertainer and provided bolstering for Richards’ character by saying, “I asked him if he would come on the show tonight so that he could explain what happened because it’s just one of those awful, awful things and I think he’s a little mystified about what happened but I think most importantly he wanted to apologize” (“Richards says anger, not racism, sparked tirade”). Many critics actually doubted Seinfeld’s motives because of the bad timing of Richards’ outburst. The seventh season of *Seinfeld* was released at the same time as Richards’ videotaped epithet. Skeptics therefore saw Seinfeld’s push for a public apology as a response to individuals such as Reverend Jesse Jackson who had called for a boycott of the latest *Seinfeld* DVD (“No *Seinfeld* for You?”). Both of these elements of apologia were thus somewhat diluted by their sources. True apologia is speech in self-defense, originating from the offender himself. In their introduction to Richards’ segment, Letterman and Seinfeld did, however, provide somewhat of a foreshadowing of the image reconstruction Richards would himself attempt.

At one point during the apology, Richards became agitated and expressed second thoughts about appearing on the show when his use of the term “Afro-Americans” caused some in the audience to laugh (“Richards says anger, not racism, sparked tirade”). Richards told Letterman, “I’m hearing your audience laugh and I’m not even sure that this is where I should be addressing the situation” (“Richards says anger, not racism, sparked tirade”). At this point in Richard’s attempt to apologize, one central theme of Parasocial Interaction Theory emerged. The parasocial bond that audiences have with

Michael Richards is completely based in his portrayal of the “Kramer” character on *Seinfeld*. The public associates Richards with his hysterical, and often bumbling, sitcom character. Richards’ attempt at image reconstruction was therefore hampered by widespread media images which essentially undercut any sincerity he may be attempting. The audience’s response came from parasocial bonds which were formed with a comedian. In not taking Richards seriously, the audience most likely did not pick up on his attempt at mortification. Additionally, Richards’ meager attempts at genuine atonement may have been so inadequate that the audience found his attempts comical. He expressed remorse for his prejudiced words but his bumbling, unrehearsed demeanor, much like that of the “Kramer” character, prevented the public from interpreting his statements as sincere. Richards continued his apology by saying:

I’m concerned about more hate and more rage and more anger coming through—not just towards me but towards a black/white conflict. There’s a great deal of disturbance in this country and how blacks feel about what happened in Katrina and you know, many of the comics, many of the performers, are in Las Vegas and New Orleans trying to raise money for what happened there. And for this to happen, for me to be at a comedy club and flip out and say this crap—I’m deeply, deeply sorry and I’ll get to the force field of this hostility, why it’s there, why the rage is in any of us, why the trash takes place—whether or not it’s between me and a couple of hecklers in the audience or whether it’s between this country and another nation. (“Richards says anger, not racism, sparked tirade”)

This portion of Richards’ attempted image reconstruction demonstrated another way in which his efforts failed. The extensiveness of the issues Richards addressed as part of his desired corrective actions was far outside of his capabilities. Richards told audiences that he wanted to find out “why the rage is in any of us.” An appropriate goal would have been to focus on why his own anger exploded into racism onstage. To the contrary, Richards suggested his interest in understanding the rage behind everything

from accusations of racism behind the treatment of people after Hurricane Katrina to the hostilities between nations around the world. His goals were far too broad and expansive to be perceived as realistic. Support for this interpretation was widespread among bloggers who believed that Richards' apology was "shallow" and "not enough" ("Michael Richards Racist Remarks Inexcusable, Apology Shallow").

Letterman pressed Richards to continue to discuss the incident further. In asking whether or not he would have responded to the heckling in a similar manner had the individual been of a different race, Richards responded:

It may have happened. I'm a performer. I push the envelope. I work in a very uncontrolled manner on stage. I do a lot of free association. – It's spontaneous, I go into character. I don't know. In view of the situation and the act going the way it was going, I don't know. The rage did go all over the place – it went to everybody in the room. ("Michael Richards 'Kramer' Apologizes")

Richards also confirmed, "I'm not racist, that's what's so insane about this, and yet it's said, it comes through, it fires out of me and even now in the passion that's here as I confront myself" (Hall). In concluding the segment, Letterman asked Richards if there was much more he could do, or would do, after apologizing. Richards responded, "I just have to do personal work. I'm still wheeling from this. It's just been a few days. I don't know yet" ("Michael Richards 'Kramer' Apologizes"). The effectiveness of Richards' apology was questionable immediately following the interview, let alone in subsequent weeks. Richards' "personal work" was the most basic and fundamental response possible to qualify as a corrective action and he did not reveal any specifics. But even this weak commitment to personally explore his own issues was overshadowed by the sweeping generalizations he made promising an investigation into all of the

intolerances ranging from racism in New Orleans to prejudices between foreign countries.

Following the *Letterman* apology, Richards continued his image reconstruction attempts by seeking corrective actions with the communities he may have offended. He expressed interest in discussing his remorse with leaders of the black community and reached out to Reverend Jesse Jackson and Reverend Al Sharpton. After Richards' appearance on *Letterman*, Sharpton said, "I [told Richards] you need to sit down and deal with this. This is not about accepting an apology, this is about starting a process to really deal with the continual problem of racism in this country" ("Sharpton: Comedian's apology not enough"). On Sunday, November 26th, Michael Richards appeared on Reverend Jesse Jackson's nationally syndicated radio program, "Keep Hope Alive" ("Michael Richards Apologizes on Jesse Jackson's Show"). Jackson, a renowned civil-rights leader, expressed hope that the Richards interview would create an opportunity to discuss cultural isolation in the entertainment industry ("Michael Richards Apologizes on Jesse Jackson's Show"). Citing a broader atmosphere of intolerance in Hollywood, Jackson called for everyone—public figures and entertainers of every background—to refrain from ever using the "n-word" ("No *Seinfeld* for You?"). Jackson denounced the use of such hateful language saying, "Its roots are rooted in hatred and pain and degradation. And whether it's hatred toward African-Americans or whether it's self-hatred, a concession toward it is still wrong" ("No *Seinfeld* for You?"). As part of his extended apology to all those whom he hurt or offended, Richards told Jackson that he had never before used such language. He also revealed that his public relations team had advised him to attend regular appointments with a psychiatrist for counseling ("No

Seinfeld for You?”). Richards reported that he was undergoing treatment to “get to the source of where that anger comes from” (“No *Seinfeld* for You?”). In addition, Richards repeated that his tirade came from anger and not from racism saying, “That’s not an image that I carry around every day, [that] every time I look at an African-American I think he should be upside down and hung from a tree. I have too much love for the African-American” (“No ‘Seinfeld’ for You?”). Reverend Al Sharpton told the press, however, “I think that what he did was so injurious that he has to sit down with a group and decide how he tries to ... deal with healing the obvious problem he’s got in his own mind and his own heart, because it couldn’t come out of you if it wasn’t in you” (“Sharpton: Comedian’s apology not enough”).

The overwhelming results of Richards’ image reconstruction attempts were mediocre and ultimately failed to restore public approval. As John McWhorter reported for National Public Radio, “Of course, he now wishes he hadn’t done what he did, for purely practical reasons. His reputation is in tatters and, especially now with the Internet preserving everything for everyone to watch at the click of a button, it will stay that way” (“Do We Really Care What Kramer Thinks?”). Richards was called to atone for his public display of intolerance but his manner of apology was disappointing. His unrehearsed, insincere apology on *Letterman* did not convince the public of any sincere attempt to apologize. In a *Los Angeles Daily News* article, activist Najee Ali criticized Richards’ *Letterman* apology as “damage control in light of the DVD of the seventh season of *Seinfeld*” (“No *Seinfeld* for You?”). Backlash such as this showed that the actions of defeasibility in enlisting leaders of the black community to understand his anger were not viewed as appropriate by many. Trey Ellis, a blogger on the *Huffington*

Post, scorned Richards' apologies to Jackson and Sharpton saying, "Calling up Jesse and Al as if they were the co-Popes of black folks is almost as dumb as your lame, racist onstage repartee" ("No *Seinfeld* for You?"). In confirming popular sentiment, Ellis concluded, "There is nothing you can do to win back black fans. That ship has sailed" ("No *Seinfeld* for You?").

Chapter 8—Isaiah Washington

Isaiah Washington Drops the “F” Word

For ABC network, *Grey’s Anatomy* has been an award winning and immensely successful show. The primetime romantic drama follows the working lives and the emotional highs and lows of surgical interns Meredith Grey (Ellen Pompeo), Isobel Stevens (Katherine Heigl), Cristina Yang (Sandra Oh), and George O’Malley (T.R. Knight) during the first years of their surgical internships at Seattle Grace Hospital. Several of the interns learn that the demands of their job are such that leading a normal life becomes nearly impossible. Working relationships and romantic relationships therefore become intertwined as the attending doctors of Seattle Grace, Addison Montgomery-Shepherd (Kate Walsh), Calliope Torres (Sara Ramirez), Derek Shepherd (Patrick Dempsey), Miranda Bailey (Chandra Wilson), and Preston Burke (Isaiah Washington), teach the interns more than just surgical protocol. While the show deals with some extraordinary and sometimes controversial medical content, the vast majority of the show’s success relies on the steamy relationships that develop at the hospital. For better or for worse, some of the *Grey’s Anatomy* drama escaped from the small screen and threatened the real life reputation and career of one of the show’s principal characters.

During the fall of 2006 *Grey’s Anatomy* was going into its third season. The show relied on the strengths of every actor in its ensemble cast, including cardiothoracic

surgeon Preston Burke. Doctor Burke, played by Isaiah Washington, was a central part of many surgical and romantic plotlines. He certainly won the admiration of fans as he charmed intern Cristina Yang (Sandra Oh) into a passionate, and at times dysfunctional, clandestine relationship. Burke performed groundbreaking surgeries even after overcoming a potentially debilitating gunshot wound to his arm. Unfortunately, the off-screen drama instigated by Isaiah Washington began to overshadow his own character's outrageous plotlines.

As E! News reported on October 11, 2006, tensions were running high between Isaiah Washington and Patrick Dempsey as the cast was on location shooting a camping scene for *Grey's Anatomy* (“Grey’s’ Dempsey, Washington Get Physical”). The two doctors portrayed by the actors are often involved in primary storyline feuds but this real life tension escalated into a physical altercation between the two men back at the Seattle Grace Hospital set in Los Angeles. Washington was reportedly agitated when his fellow cast mates were ill-prepared to shoot a scene. On-set sources told the *New York Daily News* and *People* that when Washington muttered a disparaging remark at T.R. Knight, Patrick Dempsey stood up for him (“Grey’s’ Dempsey, Washington Get Physical”). Washington then grabbed Dempsey by his throat in an aggressive manner and shoved him (“Grey’s’” Dempsey, Washington Get Physical”). Sources told E! News that punches were not thrown and that the incident was quickly addressed by the show's executive producer, Shonda Rhimes (“Grey’s’ Dempsey, Washington Get Physical”). Rhimes reportedly met with both Washington and Dempsey and resolved the conflict. ABC remained silent as the episode came to light but representatives of the actors told the press that “In any close-knit family, sometimes people argue. But everybody made

up and went back to work” (“Grey’s’ Dempsey, Washington Get Physical”). E! News confirmed that everyone on set had moved on (“Grey’s’ Dempsey, Washington Get Physical”).

Washington appeared on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* in November with his cast mates to discuss the issue of tempers flaring on set. The following is an excerpt from the show in which Oprah Winfrey discussed the initial incident with actors Isaiah

Washington, Patrick Dempsey, and T.R. Knight:

OPRAH: Was it an argument, or a fight?

WASHINGTON: No, it was not a brawl, fisticuffs and all that stuff, no, no, it was not, it was not.

KNIGHT: And the thing is, we’ve been together three years, and you form a — for lack of a better word — a kind of family and so we’re gonna argue. The hours are fifteen hour days, and now we’re working a lot of weekends, and, so, it’s gonna happen, but I think the strength of our cast is, like, how we handle it, so we don’t, like, deny it.

OPRAH: (to Isaiah) I heard you did a public statement saying that your behavior was below your personal standards. So you still feel that way?

WASHINGTON: I feel that the actions that... I’ve had an opportunity over the last four weeks to get some serious self-examination about my part in the argument.

OPRAH: So you basically lost your temper, right?

WASHINGTON: Yeah, I lost my cool. But it wasn’t coming out of a place of animice for Patrick or T.R. or anyone, it was coming out of a place of trying to stay focused about the work, and the one thing I understand about myself and my passion about everything I do is that the opposite of love is indifference.

OPRAH: Elie Weisel says that all the time.

WASHINGTON: Absolutely. And if I will ever become indifferent to this man (gestures to Dempsey), this man (gestures to Knight) or this show, anything, there wouldn’t be anything for me to argue about, there wouldn’t be anything for me to care about. And I really feel that, out of

that caring, we got ourselves into a debate that had to happen, and it happened at that point, it happened at that time, and as a matter of fact, I realized I have more in common with this man (gestures to Dempsey) than I ever thought in terms of clothes, cars. I don't have his hair.

DEMSPEY: I think we've all really learned a lot from this experience, and I think we're all much tighter because of it, because I think what happens is we just needed to be open and to be able to communicate and not let things build up, and I think we've come to that point where we're like 'Okay, it's much freer to communicate with each other' and we're more relaxed with each other because of it. And I think the whole company's tighter because of that.

WASHINGTON: Apologies were made to each other ... and we went back to work. ("Isaiah Washington Speaks!")

During the interview, Washington admitted some culpability for his "unfortunate use of words" ("Grey's Stars Still Seeing Red over Slur"). He said that he had "lost his cool" but that it did not stem from any "animice" for Dempsey or Knight ("Grey's Stars Still Seeing Red over Slur"). T.R. Knight, who had been targeted by Washington's comments prior to the physical altercation, did not move on, however. On October 19th, Knight released a statement to the press which read, "I guess there have been a few questions about my sexuality, and I'd like to quiet any unnecessary rumors that may be out there. While I prefer to keep my personal life private, I hope the fact that I'm gay isn't the most interesting part of my life" ("Anatomy' Star T.R. Knight Says He's Gay"). According to Knight, the disparaging remark aimed at him by Washington was in fact a derogatory slur regarding his sexuality. *People* reported that Knight gained the confidence to publicly come out of the closet after Washington called him a "faggot" ("T.R. Knight: Isaiah Washington's Slur Made Me Come Out"). Knight told Ellen DeGeneres in an interview for her talk show, "I've never been called that to my face. So I think when that happened, something shifted, and it became bigger than myself" ("T.R.

Knight: Isaiah Washington's Slur Made Me Come Out”). Knight continued by saying, “I was under no delusions. My friends on the set knew. We talked about it. Publicly it’s not my thing to call up *People Magazine* and be like, ‘Hey you want to know something about me?’ ...I could have just let it slide and not said anything, but it became important. It became important to make the statement” (“T.R. Knight: Isaiah Washington’s Slur Made Me Come Out”). *People* reported that Isaiah Washington’s slur forced Knight to come out of the closet. Media coverage of the *Grey’s Anatomy* controversy subsided somewhat until events unfolded in January, 2007 at the Golden Globe Awards.

After winning for best dramatic television series, the *Grey’s Anatomy* cast and crew excitedly answered questions in the awards press room. When an E! Online columnist extended a question to executive producer Shonda Rhimes about the skirmish between Dempsey and Washington following the homophobic slur, Washington leapt from his queue of costars and grabbed the microphone (“Grey’s Stars Still Seeing Red over Slur”). He told the reporters present, “No, I did not call [co-star] T.R. [Knight] a faggot. Never happened, never happened” (“Apology aimed at healing ‘Grey’s Anatomy’”). Rhimes’ immediate reaction was to giggle and proceed with answering questions, but the press, cast mates, and viewing audiences would not move on as quickly.

Katherine Heigl, whose character is best friends with Knight’s character on the show, was the first to express her disbelief at Washington’s statement following the Golden Globes. She told *Access Hollywood* during a post-ceremony interview, “He needs to just not speak in public. Period. I’m sorry, that did not need to be said, I’m not okay with it...Drawing attention to it and saying the word again is just unnecessary. And

I'm probably going to get in a lot of trouble for being that blunt" ("Grey's Stars Still Seeing Red over Slur"). Heigl later said that she would protect her real-life best friend's feelings and loyally defend him. Two days later, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) mirrored Heigl's sentiments saying, "When Isaiah Washington uses this kind of anti-gay slur—whether on the set or in front of the press—it does more than create a hostile environment for his cast mates and the crew of *Grey's Anatomy*. It also feeds a climate of hatred and intolerance that contributes to putting our community in harm's way" ("Grey's Stars Still Seeing Red over Slur").

Washington's violent and hurtful behavior on the *Grey's Anatomy* set was not the first time he acted in such a manner. In 2000, the actor was shooting a scene for the television show *Soul Food* in which Washington was supposed to give his wife a "superficial kiss" ("Fire Isaiah Washington"). The cast and crew were shocked when he gave his cast mate a "forceful, aggressive kiss" which left her "startled and mad" ("Fire Isaiah Washington"). Tensions rose on set as executive producers moved in to control the escalating anger. In addition, Washington was a guest on a show called "High Incident" in 1997 when he and a crew member got into a "physical altercation" ("Fire Isaiah Washington"). The incident was so serious that police were called and Washington was removed from the set.

As the following sections develop, Isaiah Washington's initial behavior on the *Grey's Anatomy* set as well as his subsequent attempts at apology were greeted by varying degrees of acceptance. Gay rights activist groups and the general public demanded responses from the shows producers, the ABC television network, and Washington himself. Following the Golden Globes debacle, however, serious doubts

were aroused as to the sincerity of Washington's initial apology. Additionally, his casual use of the incredibly offensive word "faggot" struck a cord with audience members.

Isaiah Washington Attempts to Bandage his Public Wounds

Following Isaiah Washington's use of the derogatory term "faggot" toward a fellow cast mate, angry reactions flared. At the Golden Globe awards ceremony in January, 2007, Washington unwittingly launched into an apologia dialogue when he told reporters, "No, I did not call [co-star] T.R. [Knight] a faggot. Never happened, never happened" ("Apology aimed at healing 'Grey's Anatomy'"). Washington enlisted what Benoit would deem tactics of denial, or a concomitant refusal to engage in mortification (Benoit 140), as well as reducing the offensiveness of the event, or minimizing the severity or offensiveness of his behavior (Benoit 179). Washington denied that he called his cast mate a "faggot" in the first place and then attempted to diminish the severity of the accusations by laughing off the incident during a light-hearted awards gala. Both early attempts at image reconstruction failed. Not only did Washington lie about the initial comment to T.R. Knight, he also used the offensive word once again in a room surrounded by news media. Public response to Washington's statements at the Golden Globe awards pushed the ABC network to issue the following statement:

We have a long standing policy to create and maintain respectful workplaces for all our employees. We dealt with the original situation in October, and thought the issue was resolved. Therefore, we are greatly dismayed that Mr. Washington chose to use such inappropriate language at the Golden Globes, that he himself deemed 'unfortunate' in his previous public apology. We take this situation very seriously. His actions are

unacceptable and are being addressed. (“Isaiah Apologizes for ‘Unacceptable’ Remark”)

The statement refers to the “previous public apology” which occurred during an episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in November. When Washington revisited the incident at the Golden Globes, and the term “faggot” resurfaced, public outcry erupted. Websites such as “Fire Isaiah Washington” arranged online petitions which were submitted to ABC in hopes of removing the star from *Grey’s Anatomy* (“Fire Isaiah Washington”). The site’s operator, Joshua Garcia, said that Washington’s “physical violence and discrimination” toward cast mates was unacceptable. In addition, he expressed concern that ABC was creating a “double standard in society of it being ok to discriminate against homosexuals” (“Fire Isaiah Washington”). Garcia’s petition alone accumulated 21,067 signatures within a few months of its creation (“Fire Isaiah Washington”).

Washington’s Forced Image Reconstruction

Soon after the Golden Globes, Washington, surely feeling pressure from his employers, initiated a more intensive image reconstruction campaign. He issued the following statement on his own behalf:

I apologize to T.R., my colleagues, the fans of the show and especially the lesbian and gay community for using a word that is unacceptable in any context or circumstance. By repeating the word Monday night, I marred what should have been a perfect night for everyone who works on *Grey’s Anatomy*. I can neither defend nor explain my behavior. I can also no longer deny to myself that there are issues I obviously need to examine within my own soul, and I’ve asked for help.

I know the power of words, especially those that demean. I realize that by using one filled with disrespect I have hurt more than T.R. and my colleagues. With one word, I've hurt everyone who has struggled for the respect so many of us take for granted. I welcome the chance to meet with leaders of the gay and lesbian community to apologize in person and to talk about what I can do to heal the wounds I've opened.

T.R.'s courage throughout this entire episode speaks to his tremendous character. I hold his talent, and T.R. as a person, in high esteem. I know a mere apology will not end this, and I intend to let my future actions prove my sincerity. ("Grey's Anatomy Star Issues Statement on 'Anti-Gay' Remarks")

While Washington's statement did address the severity of the situation as well as his regrettable choice of language, it also acknowledged that he was in fact "repeating the word." This admission directly countered Washington's claim at the Golden Globes that he had never in fact called his cast mate a "faggot" in the first place. Redressing his previous attempts of denial, Washington focused on what Benoit would deem as the most widely acceptable and successful image reconstruction tactics, mortification and corrective actions (Blaney, Benoit, and Brazeal 381). He apologized not only to T.R. Knight but also to the entire lesbian and gay community. His acknowledged corrective actions included both personal treatment through psychoanalysis and therapy as well as public treatment through meeting with leaders of the gay and lesbian community.

Washington's next move was to fire longtime personal publicist, Cynthia Snyder, amidst the public relations catastrophe ("Isaiah Apologizes for 'Unacceptable' Remark"). He then hired Allen Mayer and Kelly Mullens from public relations company 42West ("Isaiah Apologizes for 'Unacceptable' Remark") and ("Isaiah Washington Fires Publicist"). The crisis-management team has done damage control for clients such as R. Kelly, Tommy Lee, and Paula Poundstone ("Isaiah Washington Fires Publicist").

With his new public relations team and under increasing pressure, Washington continued his corrective actions campaign by meeting with gay-rights groups on January 22nd. Kevin Jennings, executive director of the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, was very optimistic about conversations with Washington (“Isaiah Washington Meets With Gay-Rights Groups”). Jennings stressed the importance of an ongoing dialogue with the actor as a process of atonement and self-exploration (“Isaiah Washington Meets With Gay-Rights Groups”). Neil G. Giuliano, president of GLAAD, echoed the optimism in Washington’s steps toward healing in saying, “Isaiah understands that he is going to be judged by more than his apology. He knows that his future actions—including the genuine first step that today’s meeting represents—will demonstrate his sincerity in becoming part of the solution to anti-gay bigotry” (“Isaiah Washington Meets With Gay-Rights Groups”). On January 24th, just two days later, Washington announced that he would be checking into rehab as the next step in his healing process (“Isaiah Enters Treatment”). He agreed to undergo psychological evaluation following discussions with ABC executives.

Parasocial Strain between Isaiah Washington and the Public

In light of Washington’s apologies and attempts to restore his image, the public has expressed doubt over his sincerity. “TV Guide Editor’s Blogs” is one website which has allowed fans to speak out about the incident (“Isaiah Washington Speaks: ‘I’ve Asked for Help’”). Popular opinions included entries such as the following:

I don’t think it’s sincere. I think his manager or whomever is telling him he had to make a statement in a last ditch effort to save his job and career.

Washington's poor lack of judgment and carelessness at the time can't be forgiven with just an apology now. He damn well better let his actions show his sincerity, because after all that's happened, how the hell can we expect him to be sincere?

And there's also the question of why he waited until now to apologize. Makes things even more suspicious. Personally, I think it's a bit too fake-sweet sounding to be real.

It doesn't ring true. If he truly held T.R. Knight, as a person, in high esteem, he would never have talked like that in the first place, let alone a second time. When you hold someone in high esteem, you don't even think those thoughts about a person. I think this is a hastily thrown up barricade against the consequence he so richly deserves. Someone has pointed out to him that leaving the show under these circumstances is going to mean a long time of unemployment as an actor. ("Isaiah Washington Speaks: 'I've Asked for Help'")

Disapproval of Washington's apologia and image reconstruction can be paralleled with similar reactions to attempts by Mel Gibson and Michael Richards. Washington enlisted defeasibility in his corrective actions by putting the true success of his atonement process on the strength and effectiveness of his rehabilitation program. In addition, he put the outcome of his healing process in the hands of the group he offended. Washington could only achieve complete redemption, therefore, if the homosexual audience he offended ultimately forgives him. If they do not forgive him, he can say that he did all that he possibly could in seeking redemption.

Despite the widespread disapproval of Washington's image reconstruction efforts, *Grey's Anatomy* creator and executive producer Shonda Rhimes has denied rumors that Washington would be removed from the show's cast. She told *People Magazine*, "I found [those rumors] not only ridiculous but offensive that we would consider replacing a member of our family. And also the [idea] that one black man was interchangeable with another seemed disturbing to me" ("Fire Isaiah Washington"). The ultimate result of

Isaiah Washington's apologies shall be determined outside of the context of *Grey's Anatomy*. The popular show, and the popularity of the ensemble cast, has been able to support Washington's career in the short term. It has yet to be seen, however, how Washington will be accepted by audiences after his character, much like Michael Richards' "Kramer" character, fails to provide enough parasocial support for image restoration attempts to succeed.

Chapter 9—Implications

The preceding discussion reveals a new genre which has emerged in response to the intolerant statements of Hollywood's elite. Celebrities who publicly offend social groups are forced to partake in a ritualized form of public atonement. In order to save their reputations and careers, they must repent and atone for their misdeeds through various mortification techniques, namely public statements of apology. They must then take subsequent corrective actions such as meeting with the offended group and/or entering a rehabilitation program. Some celebrities, however, have also used aspects of defeasibility by shifting the blame for intolerant behavior to external factors, such as alcohol or rage. Additionally, the successful completion of rehabilitation programs as well as acceptance by the offended group has become actual indicators of a successful apologia and image reconstruction campaign. The notable factor in the trend is how subtly defeasibility is worked into processes of atonement.

Mel Gibson, Michael Richards, and Isaiah Washington each enrolled in a rehabilitation program following their prejudicial rants. Gibson sought treatment for his alcoholism, while Richards and Washington focused on counseling for anger and rage issues. When Isaiah Washington entered rehab to receive psychological evaluation, critics questioned the sincerity of his, as well as others', apology and the legitimacy of his rehabilitation treatment. As ABC news reported on January 25, 2007, the day after Washington began treatment, the actor was, "just the latest in a string of celebrities and politicians who have sought psychological or addiction treatment following public scandals" ("Grey's' Isaiah Washington Going to Rehab"). Critics and the public alike

seem to be aware of the ritualistic quality of rehab as a step in atonement and doubt such expiation as being truly genuine. From an image reconstruction perspective, the standard protocol of going to rehab may actually prove to be more harmful than beneficial.

According to William Moyers, an addiction treatment expert, “Going to rehab is a good option for people who need help, but going to treatment for people who are looking just to shift the blame and otherwise avoid the consequences is not a good thing” (“Grey’s’ Isaiah Washington Going to Rehab”). Rehab for some, therefore, may appear to be the Benoit image reconstruction tactic of evasion of responsibility. Gibson’s alcoholism and Richards and Washington’s rage can each be classified as tactics of defeasibility which placed responsibility for their behavior on a “medical condition” and not on themselves. While rehab has saved millions of lives, skeptics such as Moyers question whether it can save a career (“Grey’s’ Isaiah Washington Going to Rehab”). When the public is therefore aware of a celebrity using rehab to clean up their image instead of vanquishing their demons, the result may be mistrust and ultimate failure of genuine atonement (“Grey’s’ Isaiah Washington Going to Rehab”).

An additional trace of defeasibility may be found in the statements of apology and mortification released by the celebrities prior to entering rehab. By requesting direct communication with leaders of either the Jewish, black, or homosexual communities, each celebrity evaded a certain degree of responsibility for their atonement process by enlisting the help of others. If they were unable to fully atone for their behavior, therefore, the minority group itself would be forced to assume a certain amount of accountability. The celebrities reached out, so it is ultimately up to the offended group to oversee the celebrities’ process of atonement and ultimately accept their apologies. Mel

Gibson provides additional evidentiary support for such a claim of defeasibility in his bold statement that the world seems to have gone mad (Gibson II). Assigning responsibility to the influences of a misguided world is a subtle way for Gibson to apologize, but not completely. Instead of solely victimizing the Jewish community, Gibson himself claims to be the product, and even victim, of a cruel world.

As with any academic inquiry, a multitude of questions have yet to be answered. These questions will ideally inspire future research to be conducted in the area of perceived intolerances in Hollywood. Just as this essay was completed, in fact, several issues on this subject arose. Although preceding discussions addressed the harmful use of the “N” word and the “F” word, these offensive slurs are only a small sample of intolerant messages pervading the media. The “W” word, for example, has recently caused a stir among media professionals and the viewing public alike. “Wetback”, a derogatory term for someone from Mexico or Central America who has entered the United States illegally, was recently used by several people in the public sphere. New York Times columnist Frank Rich used the word freely in republications of previous commentary in which Bill O’Reilly and Rosie O’Donnell both used the term (“Commentary: The hypocrisy of repeating the ‘w-word’”).

The growing population of Latinos in the United States shall certainly contribute to much more media sensitivity to new culturally offensive terms in the future. In addition, further research should be conducted on the offensiveness of these different types of intolerance. Gay rights activists, for example, were disgusted that Isaiah Washington was not fired for using the “F” word while degrading another actor’s *sexuality* when Don Imus *was* fired for uttering an offensive *racial* term. Imus called

several Rutgers athletes “nappy-headed hos” and was subsequently fired from his CBS radio program (“Off the Air: The Light Goes Out for Don Imus”). Activists might call this a double standard in Hollywood. An apparent hierarchy seemingly exists in which certain terms are subtly deemed more offensive than others. Public reaction to uses of different derogatory terms supports such an inference.

Chapter 10—Conclusion

Although intolerance is prevalent in various messages within the modern media, audiences are able to perceive subtle differences in those messages. The preceding discussion addressed the messages of intolerance in *Crash* as appropriate within the context of a jeremiad. Paul Haggis, as the film's prophetic preacher, urged the public to acknowledge the harm behind perpetuating a cycle of hatred and mistrust. If accomplished, this recognition could result in an overall improvement in social and cultural relations. Similarly, *Borat* addressed intolerance as ridiculous and unnecessary. Specific instances of intolerance depicted in the film, as well as the range of acceptance it received from the public, suggest that satirical humor is successful in debasing intolerant behavior. Finally, three celebrities who have recently elicited public outcry for their intolerant behavior have engaged in tactics of apologia and image reconstruction because of public backlash at their perceived intolerances.

The underlying theme of each preceding discussion of intolerance is one of hopeful optimism. In the analysis of *Crash* under the tenets of the jeremiad, intolerance was accountable for several societal afflictions. The ultimate outcome of a jeremiad presentation of even the most biting racial prejudices is that harmony *can* be achieved. The process must begin with atonement and repentance, but has the possibility of resulting in a return to God's good graces. The discussion of satirical representations of intolerance in *Borat* similarly suggested a vision or standard of rightness. Although intolerances were exhibited offensively and grotesquely, the film's message assured audiences that such attitudes should be mocked and degraded in order to ultimately

extinguish them. The examples of people in the public eye, including Mel Gibson, Michael Richards, and Isaiah Washington, similarly suggest a subtle trend that a similar standard of rightness forced a process of apology and atonement from each of the actors.

The hopeful optimism associated with each of the aforementioned examples correlates with the slow process of a societal elimination of intolerance. As cultures expand and interact in a global community, friction between different groups is inevitable. The results of such friction are evident in the incidents of intolerance and conflict discussed in this paper. Different mediums, such as film, and frameworks, such as the jeremiad forewarning or satirical criticism, have encouraged the process of acknowledging and eliminating intolerance. Reactions to celebrities who have committed public acts of intolerance serve as proof that the public will not accept such displays of intolerance. Further research and future events will ideally demonstrate a continuation and expansion of this trend.

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