

## Morton Marcus: 'Hot Fuzz' proves Brits are more adept at comedy than Americans

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Two weeks ago in this column, I lambasted what I called "The New American Comedy" — the rude, crude, shock comedy of Jim Carrey, Adam Sandler, Mike Myers and their ilk. I said their films were virtually plotless, their antics childish, their dialogue without wit or any verbal sparkle, and that generally speaking their comedy operated on a level of fourth-grade toilet humor. That audiences had made these comics and their films box office hits, I concluded, was sad proof of the dumbing down of our culture.

Now Edgar Wright and Simon Pegg's madcap "Hot Fuzz" has hit the screen, and remembering their last — and first — zany hit, "Shaun of The Dead," brings up the question, "How about the Brits' new comedy?"

On the surface, the new British comedy looks much the same as its American counterpart. It's in your face, over the top, and filled with shock humor. But closer viewing reveals a lot more going on. Take "Shaun of The Dead," "Hot Fuzz" and Sacha Baron Cohen's "Borat"

All three films are satires, parodies to be exact, imitations of genre films made for the purpose of exposing and ridiculing the low-minded, cliché-ridden originals. In Wright and Pegg's case, the films are light spoofs suffused with an affectionate homage. In "Shaun of The Dead," the target is zombie horror films. In "Hot Fuzz," it's both the quaint English village Ealing comedies of the 1950s and American police action films of the 1980s and '90s. In fact, the 20-minute parody shoot-out sequence in "Hot Fuzz" probably made John Woo swoon with envy.

Genre films follow formulaic plots with various moments always present. In the Western, for example, the hero usually shows his prowess with fists and six-shooters somewhere in the first third of the film, has usually saved the heroine from a minor skirmish somewhere in the middle, and in the end engages the villain in a showdown at sundown on a clapboard town's muddy streets. Since the viewer knows the plot and all these steps, in a parody it's important to make the plot original. The viewer has to be surprised, shown unexpected story directions to hold his attention. American comedy plots are merely pretenses to showcase the comics' usual shtick.

The plotlines in "Shaun" and "Hot Fuzz" are strong and original. "Borat," a more trenchant satire aimed at the prejudices and mores of American values, spoofs the documentary interview film, targeting Americans from different walks of life, most of whom didn't know they were being put on by Borat, a naive television commentator who came to America to learn about this country's attitudes and beliefs.

The shock humor in "Borat" has to do with Borat's assumptions of what's correct behavior. He's not only naive, but innocent, and brings with him all of his country's prejudices and moronic beliefs. The point here is how those Americans he interviews deal with his nonsense, since how they do may — and does — expose their own prejudices and moronic assumptions.

Unlike the American comics, who usually play extensions of themselves, the Brits are actors. Local television producer Peter McGettigan put it succinctly when he said that American film comics today are looking for laughs while the Brits are acting parts.

The Brits never break character as the Americans continually do. Carrey, no matter what his character, will at any moment mug the camera or shove some kind of vegetable stalks up his nostrils like a six-year-old whose actions say, "Look at me. I'm so funny and cute." In British comedy the viewer is concerned with whether Shaun will find a way to save himself and his friends from the zombies, whether Nick will chill out and expose the murderers. In addition, both films, and "Borat" as well, are filled with one-liners and nuances of language that American comedy has generally chosen to abandon.

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All of which prove to me that British comedy is alive and well in its new guise.

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