

Self-absorbed Americans need to broaden horizons

I've been thinking a lot about language lately. Two of the movies I saw over the long weekend rely on language and cultural differences to make their point. In both films, the scriptwriters count on Americans to be ignorant of other cultures, countries and languages.

As probably everyone knows by now, "Borat" stars a Jewish comedian posing as a Kazakh reporter. Relying on American naiveté, he pushes his character as far as he can go to see how the audience will react. He relies on American ignorance of other cultures to get away with being a "foreigner." In fact, his Kazakhstani ranting is mostly Hebrew with a smattering of Polish. But he knows no American audience will catch that.

(Some have raised concerns that "Borat" is anti-semitic. Speaking as a Jew, I can confidently state that the film is viciously and horribly funny. But if you've got a friend who's seen it, ask them if they think you'd like it. To paraphrase one reviewer on these pages, Borat is not everyone's cup of bor-scht.)

"Babel" also deals with cultural issues. Dialog occurs in six languages, but Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett, because they play Americans, understand only one. This is a key plot point. In fact, the surest indicator a character will do something important in "Babel" is whether or not they are multilingual.

Stop me if you've heard this one:

What do you call someone who speaks three languages? "Trilingual." What do you call someone who speaks two languages? "Bilingual." What do you call someone who speaks one language?" "American."

I first heard that in Europe. Tell me they don't love us over there.

I'm of two minds on American's lack of language skills. On the one hand, a single language means a unified country. It's absolutely essential to national cohesion and a common American culture.

And yet, as the world's only superpower and economic powerhouse, our ignorance of other cultures is our greatest weakness. In a time of tension in the Middle East, how many elected officials speak Arabic? How many have lived overseas? How many of us understand just how different other parts of



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the world are? How would such an understanding change our politics?

I was thinking more about language a couple of nights ago while lying in bed, listening to rock and roll from the other side of the world. Russia's #1 rock station has an internet feed. I'm a decent Russian speaker, and I like rock and roll, so I listen to keep in practice.

As I was drifting off to sleep, I heard a song called "Born in the USSR". Sung by a Russian who combines the poetry of Bob Dylan with the popularity of Bruce Springsteen, it deals with the frustration,

memories and hopes of people born in a country that no longer exists. It also rocks like nobody's business.

Translating Russian to English is tricky, but the last verse of the song goes something like:

"What will hope return to us?
What can beauty call its own?
Yesterday, a Lord of Empire,
Now an orphan, all alone."

Can you imagine what life is like in a country where that is on the top of the charts?

If you are even willing to try, that's progress. Now keep that energy going. Go see a foreign film. Take a trip somewhere interesting, but learn a few words in the local dialect first. Make a friend or two while you're there.

Better still, set up a home exchange with a family from another country. I did this a few years ago; it's what the internet was made for. Got a kid in college? Think about a semester abroad. At most schools, it doesn't cost that much.

Maybe travel isn't in the cards for you. If so, talk to an immigrant you know. Read books by foreign writers and journalists who know their stuff.

Nobody's asking you to speak Italian like Dante, or use your high school French to impress passersby on the Champs-Élysées. Just make an effort to learn a little more about someplace else, to overcome the happy accidents of geography that are both America's blessing and its curse. A little understanding, over time, might go a long way.

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