

Regenerating Ronald McDonald with the Method of Grotesque Realism

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ABSTRACT

The thesis is Ronald McDonald is antenarrative (an anticipatory prestory) to the regeneration and renewal of a festive carnival life behind the clownish mask.ⁱ Ronald unmasked is preparing what George Ritzer calls “McDonaldization” (efficiency, calculatability, predictability, & control by non-human technology) for its renaissance. I think this clown needs some help, and it is help that the theory of McDonaldization needs, to embody humor, grotesque laughter as a material force of transformation. Ronald McDonald’s romantic (late) modern humor needs degradation and profanation, so that a more postmodern grotesque realism can materialize. Ronald needs to be carnivalized, a McDonaldization that is liberating and renewing globalization in the womb of belly laughter. Fatten up this plastic clown!

Ronald McDonald is the poster clown of globalization. An analysis of Ronald McDonald using the grotesque aesthetic method that Bakhtin (1968) invented, is a gateway into the transformation of Ritzer’s (2002) theory of McDonaldization through the grotesque realism of the festive carnival, in ways that could be a metamorphosis of the spectacle of globalization.ⁱⁱ This is also rebellious action research; I aim to transform McDonalds, not as reform, but as a revolutionary sphere of counter-globalization. Not just with Bakhtin, but with Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal, Yue Cai and I are inviting you to a play which infuses McDonaldization with grotesque realism.

Here I will focus on Ronald, and on developing a postmodern theory of grotesque realism. My contribution is that up to this point McDonaldization has been analyzed as a manifestation of modern, late modern, and postmodern global capitalism; here I want to reread it through the eyes of grotesque realism. I will show some grotesque Ronald images, define terms, and then give as many examples as space allows.

I. GROTESQUE RONALD McDONALD IMAGES

Image one presents a reversal of Ronald, a satire of his joyful, non-violent, non-military, and non-racist depiction, contrary to official representation. Ronald reports directly to CEO Jim Cantalupo, and is ambassador (invader) for McDonaldization goodwill (globalization) program.

Image 1: Ronald in Grotesque Reversal

Ronald’s usual image is On World Children's Day; more than 100 countries teamed up to raise funds for Ronald McDonald House Charities and other critical children's causes (www.rmhc.com).



Theory of Grotesque Epoch Shifts - Bakhtin calls this the transition from Pre-Romantic Grotesque (antique grotesque of Medieval & Renaissance) to the Romantic Grotesque to the Modern Romantic era where spectacle separated from festive carnival spheres to become the only world order. We can add a postmodern grotesque aesthetic shift: an anticipatory antenarrative modern dream of a separate sphere of sustainability, slow food, simplicity, a utopian age.ⁱⁱⁱ Of course the post-postmodern grotesque nightmare of Biotech, genetic reengineered food and bodies, cloning of human organs from pigs, the cross-gene splicing, and the Mad Cow plague is already upon us. The post-postmodern body also participates in other spheres, the Cyborg; the material body is becoming a Cyborg, like Darth Vader and Robocop. The theme of madness annihilates the utopian postmodern antenarrative and its romantic grotesque reality dream. Ironically, we escape the grotesque modern of Charlie Chaplin's Modern Times only to enter the madness of postmodern Genetically Reengineered Cyborg, a grotesque rendition of human monstrosity.

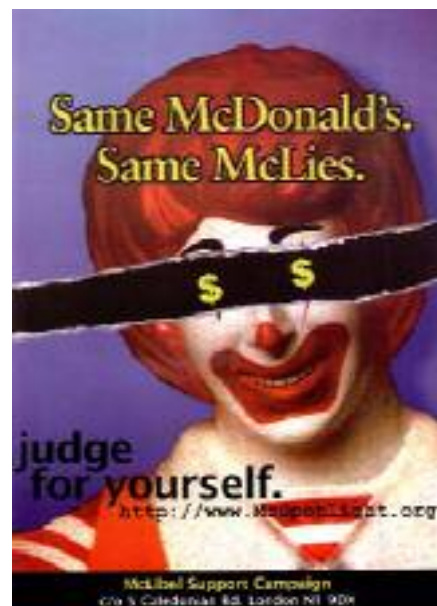
If my extension of Bakhtin is correct, there must be dialectic to grotesque, and maybe Ronald McDonald's next metamorphosis will liberate us from the post-postmodern inhuman monstrosity we are becoming. Can Ronald McDonald find a brain, a festive "carnival consciousness that prepares the way" (Bakhtin, 1968: 49)? What is the festive carnivalesque subjective consciousness is preparing our way not only beyond McDonaldization, but beyond Evangelical Capitalism, and the Cyborg? What is the principle of grotesque laughter, that ambivalence that will be transformative of McDonaldization and post-postmodern conditions? The romantic grotesque spectacle of McDonald's transformed in the 1990s to the grotesque romantic trickster, but another transformation is on the horizon.



Image 2: Latuff's image of Ronald McMurderer^{iv}

Latuff (2002) presents a juxtaposition, a morph of president Bush in the White House with Ronald McDonald, a satire of what Ali and Camp (2003) call "Evangelical Capitalism" (a combination of neo-conservative and evangelical fundamentalism ideologies that produce imperial preemptive invasion and colonial occupation).^v "McMurderer" in the counter-globalization resistance movement is a reference to the number of animals killed by McDonalds in slaughterhouses; here it is morphed with an allusion to the number of U.S., U.K. and Iraqis killed in the invasion and occupation.

Image 3: McSpotlight McLies image of Ronald



McSpotlight (.org) is a popular counter-globalization website that took off with what has been dubbed the McLibel trial in the U.K. Two activists distributed pamphlets in a McDonalds' restaurant that gave facts about nutrition, deforestation, and animal slaughter. Here the mask of Ronald is dollar signs.

Image 4: Hamburglar^{vi}



Hamburglar uses rhetorical humor, "My favorite thing in the whole world is hamburgers. No, I mean chesseburgers, No I mean hamburgers!" There is also 'Grimace' a seriously overweight purple monster giddy from snacking.

McDonalds corporate has promoted the Ronald clown as their Chief Happiness Officer for 41 years, since Ray Kroc introduced Ronald as corporate symbol at the 1963 Macy's Thanksgiving Parade. In 1963, Ronald was a marketing gimmick created by ad exec Barry Klein and Ringling Brothers clown Michael "Coco" Polakova, to put McMagic into the fast food world.^{vii} Willard Scott (NBC Today Show) played Ronald until he was dumped in 1966; "I was too fat," says Scott.^{viii} Woods (2002) theorizes that "Ronald the Clown has experienced a metamorphosis into a fun-loving, powerful creature who promises children magic... a character known by the academic world as a trickster."^{ix} The metamorphosis of Ronald from just nice and bland to trickster took place after the McLibel suit filed by McDonald's backfired into a counter-globalization 'megaspactacle' (means spectacle that morphs into scandal, a Best & Kellner's 2001 term); it was also a way for McDonald's to compete with the more grotesque clown of Simpsons and South Park.^x Ronald was made into more of a trickster clown; reaffirming family values while breaking the rules to confirm the rules exist (Woods, 2002).

Ronald has trouble fitting into clown history. Ronald is a neat whiteface, not a grotesque whiteface of 20th century; nor is he quite the 'auguste clown' category, a clown like "Bozo" who "stumbles, performs pratfalls, slaps and is slapped, and often is the butt of jokes";^{xi} Ronald is not very physically aggressive, and does not engage in much slapstick; he is grotesque in some episodes: he can shrink to a microscopic size or become a giant. August clowns were more popular in later half of 19th century. "The 'Grotesque' Whiteface clown exaggerates everything about himself, his pants, shoes, collars, ears, and wig are bigger, wider, or baggier than is usual."^{xii} Ronald exaggerates his (grotesque) feet.

My thesis is Ronald is becoming more grotesque real, once the harmless plastic clown, has become the trickster, but is also undergoing a new metamorphosis; tweaking McDonald's authority to capture the rebellious desire of child consumer market niche carries lower stratum, of more grotesque laughter leading to a more rebellious clown.

In 1999, McDonald's hired ad agency Leo Burnett, who hired a LA stylists to refashion Ronald's hair: give it waves and more hipness; a recent software distributor gives Ronald images a spiked hair look.^{xiii}

Epochs & Rhizomes - There is a difference between an epoch by epoch succession of globalizations (say from pre to mod to late-mod, postmod and post-postmod) and the more rhizomatic theory of Deleuze and Guattari (1987).^{xiv} I will briefly transform the shift model into a rhizomatic one. Bakhtin (1968: 5) uses carnival, festival and spectacle as three interacting and interpenetrating spheres. He also uses the doublet

of festival and carnival as something that is dialectically opposed to official spectacle. In rhizomatic terms, the festive carnival through grotesque realism (particularly its laughter) is reterritorializing the terrain of spectacle; simultaneously spectacle is deterritorializing the terrain the festival and carnival, reappropriating them to more serious and official spectacle purposes. Bakhtin (p. 6) argues for epoch shift, saying that, in the premodern Roman imperialism, the spheres of spectacle, carnival and festival (triumphal procession) were combined and victors were both glorified and derided in the same ritual. With the Middle Ages, the spheres became more separated, and in the modern era the carnival became a parody of its former age. In the Medieval and Renaissance, the carnival closely resembles the spectacle sphere, but is becomes a component, a part of the cultural and marketplace system (p. 7); there are temporary times for festive carnival, where the distinction between actors and spectators is suspended; this is similar to Boal's (1979) hybrid concept of spect-actor.^{xv} Grotesque realism read as a rhizome is a hybrid of festival, carnival and spectacle aesthetics. The spectacle of globalization deterritorializes the festive-carnival spheres only to be reterritorialized; McDonaldization should work the same way, and Ronald McDonald is the figurehead of the rhizomatic transformations.

Can we find in Ronald the rhizomatic antenarrative fragments of the next renewal and rejuvenation to McDonaldization? I propose to theatrically enact the grotesque methodology, to put Ronald McDonald into the life giving womb of grotesque realism, and kill Ronald, so that he may be reborn.

Conclusion Ronald is awakening to his own death, anticipating an even more grotesque carnivalesque spirit after being devoured in the womb of the earth. Ronald's aesthetic of grotesque realism is unstable, the earlier streams of white-face (romantic) grotesque is mixing with auguste, and trickster, and now with the de-materialized concept of virtual, reengineered grotesque; Ronald is turning into hybridity of forms, a polymorph. Ronald began by breaking away from grotesque by being neat-white-face and non-threatening, not event auguste. Now Ronald is being daily unmasked as the clown figure of globalization, now in its Evangelical Capitalism phase of Empire returned to Imperial colonizer. Ronald is no long a static clown face, he is becoming reborn in response to the rhizomatic stratum (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987); Ronald the symbol of McDonaldization reterritorialization of the globe is being reterritorialized. Ronald is transitioning from the fragments of "broken grotesque figure" (Bakhtin, p. 53) with phallus cutoff, sexually alienated, belly crushed to flatness, and totally sterile image of fast food merchant's romantic petty realism – into a carnivalesque grotesque counter-globalization image. Ronald is in flux, his grotesque realism refusing its duality poles, no longer willing to be split in two between former spectacle grotesque flatness and current festive-carnivalesque grotesque. Ronald McDonald is experiencing the first trickster phase of this transformation, but a deeper rhizomatic stream of grotesque realism has a grip on this clown.

Ronald McDonald's material bodily form, his grotesqueness, is being regenerated, renewed, and reformed. His globalization appetite is changing in anticipation of the boundaryless, nationless post-Empire of Evangelical Capitalism. This is not the musings of bookish scholarship, the antenarratives and images of his renaissance are in multiform re-expression all around us. Ronald McDonald is having clownish dreams of his own renewal and rebirth; it is an antenarrative process of folk not academic writing.

McDonaldization is on the borderline between spectacle, carnival and festival spheres. Our theatrical enactment aims to push Ronald into the real, to put him in a moment of existential crisis, to kill him and transform him through renewal. As such, making Ronald more grotesque, is not destruction, it is part of rebirth and regeneration brought on by the popular sphere of the marketplace, a reterritorialization of McDonald's by grotesque realism. In our carnivalesque theatre we suspend hierarchical rank, McAuthority, and corporative divisions; ours is a unique kind of globalization transformation, unleashing the Bakhtinian-Rabelais, Brechtian, and Boalian style of expression on McDonalds. It is not a ready-made script with explicit dialog, but an emergent kind of playfulness with idiom and plots of renewal and powers of resistance. There are no bystander spectators in this theatre, and ambivalent laughter, not naked destruction is our aim; we degrade McDonald's in order to reform it. I invite you to become carnival spect-actors in the regeneration of its grotesque realism. Free Ronald McDonald, release him from the bondage of white-face neatness, and liberate his body into the earthly renewal of Mother Earth, so that the material spectacle of globalization can have a more Medieval clown

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