

Fiction and Humor in Transforming McDonald's Narrative Strategies

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The article builds on and expands a narrative perspective on strategy. Specifically, we develop a more Bakhtinian model in which corporate fiction and humor serve the firm's strategic dialogic imagination. We develop this model through an analysis of the McDonald's corporation. Through the grotesque humor of its fictitious Ronald McDonald world, McDonald's develops its dialogic imagination and transforms its strategic narratives. That is, strategic transformation is enacted narratively in and through its corporate fiction regenerating and revitalizing existing strategic narratives. Implications for research on McDonald's in particular and strategy in general are discussed.

Key words:

INTRODUCTION

The view that strategy is a type of narrative seems to have arrived in mainstream organization research (Barry and Elmes, 1997). Since then linguistic and discursive analyses of strategy have been undertaken. For example, Rindova, Becerra and Contardo (2004) analyzed the language games of competitive wars and Starkey and Crane (2003) examined environmental strategy relative to narrative constructions of firm identity. These studies seem to validate Barry and Elmes' (1997) view on strategy in which multiple voices, such as authors and readers, co-create narrative fiction, which then can be examined, like fiction, in terms of various genres and attributes of success, such as credibility and novelty.

Building on this narrative perspective and particularly the Bakhtinian view, that strategy is a dialogical rather than a monological narrative, that is, a co-construction of various voices rather than one singular voice of some strategist for example (Barry and Elmes, 1997), we examine one voice that seems to be missing from the strategy discourse to date and that is the voice of corporate fiction and humor. While Bakhtin's theory has been applied in management studies of humor before, for example in Rhodes' (2001) study of carnivalesque grotesque humor in Homer Simpsons' popular culture and Boje's (2001) study of activist carnivalesque street theatre of resistance to Nike Corporation, we do not focus on humor as mocking, degrading debasement of corporations (nuclear power plant in Simpsons; Nike by the activists), but rather focus on the positive force of self-renewal and self-regeneration in fiction and humor and the role this plays for strategy.

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Specifically, we will focus on the case of the McDonald's corporation to use Bakhtin's (1968) method as an illustration of how corporations may use narrative fiction to develop dialogic imagination and novel voices in strategy narratives. Using the cartoon series produced for McDonald's, the McDonaldland videos, we explore how grotesque humor degrades fictitious actors as they descend into a world of lower bodily functions, degenerating into grotesque and ridiculous caricatures of themselves. But because of and through this degeneration, the fictitious actors also gain access to miraculous transformation and redeem and regenerate as they ascend from this lower bodily stratum. The lower bodily stratum symbolizes death as well as fertility as the McDonaldland characters are reduced to excrement but are also re-born from the womb.

As such we explore how McDonaldland transforms McDonald's corporation in the lower material bodily womb of the earth and underworld to immortalize the 'spectacle of the marketplace' (Bakhtin, 1968: 393). We hypothesize that this occurs more through thrusting the fast food banquet into the underworld (McDonaldland) where it becomes transformed into the grotesque banquet. And in this way, McDonald's Corporation achieves double-body: the dying of the old McDonald's that has gone out of fashion; the regeneration of the new body in the hellish 'flames of carnival' (Bakhtin, 1968: 394).

In short, we suggest that a Bakhtinian reading of McDonald's use of fiction and humor uncovers a dimension of strategy and strategic transformation that has been missed in prior research. Management research has not examined the strategic use of fiction and humor, and, from our analysis as strategy being read primarily as rational, would likely consider corporate fiction and humor through Ronald McDonald videos, public relations and advertising, just another rational action to promote growth and profit maximization.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we examine how McDonald's strategy has been researched in organizational literature making the case for the missing dimension of strategy. Then we explore what this dimension might look like from a narrative, particularly a Bakhtinian, perspective illustrating it with examples from McDonald's and then discussing its wider implications for organization studies.

MCDONALD'S STRATEGY IN THE LITERATURE

A review of some of the flagship management journals reveals 48 articles published on McDonald's strategy between 1985 and 2003 alone in three Academy of Management Journals, 11 in AMR, four in AMJ and 33 in AME. In these articles McDonald's is cited and researched as an example for a highly successful competitive strategy and for its exemplary application of rational, Taylorist, systems of operation. Bachmann (2002), for example, includes the saga of McDonald's using the QVC (quality, value and cleanliness) formula to be successful in a market that better-financed firms fumbled or rejected, and thereby McDonald's not only laid claim to the fast food era but also created opportunities for nearly limitless growth; McDonald's out competed Burger Chef (General Foods) and Burger King (Pillsbury):

The odds against small, undercapitalized McDonald's competing with food industry giants were great. But they stuck to their strategy of providing inexpensive, quickly served hamburgers and maintaining a slavish devotion to their QVC formula—Quality, Value, Cleanliness. In the end they won the race, not by diversifying but by specializing. (Bachmann, 2002: 1)

The recurrent theme in this as in several other articles seems to be that McDonald's is attaining, if not limitless, certainly enormous growth of the kind only firms like Wal-Mart may match (Safferstone, 2002) through the single-minded adherence to a system standardized to Tayloristic precision (Kelly, 1997) and carefully micromanaged in every detail (Quinn and Anderson, 1996; Usher, 1999).

McDonald's is lauded for its exemplary rational systems of production and product development (Meyer and DeTore, 1999), strategic planning (Beam, 1996) and knowledge management (Quinn and Anderson, 1996). Along similar lines, McDonald's is applauded for its exemplary and consistent strategy across the organization, its systems and culture (Robinson and Dechant, 1997) and for having measurable targets and progress checks at every level (Robinson and Dechant, 1997) allowing it to collect and act on corrective feedback for continuously improving quality (Usher, 1999).

Additionally, McDonald's is praised for the relentless application of rational systems of standardization and control that make McDonald's highly consistent across locations (Hallowell, Bowen and Knoop, 2002; Robinson and Dechant, 1997) and allow it to offer exemplary service reliability across time and locations (Usher, 1999). Along those lines, McDonald's has been lauded for its exemplary and strategic use of information technology (Quinn and Anderson, 1996) and its thick manuals of detailed procedures (Usher, 1999) that allow managers to create a nearly scientific approach to everything from service delivery (Meyer and DeTore, 1999) to the management of people. McDonald's has not only adopted elaborate technologies for employee scheduling (Quinn and Anderson, 1996) it has also sought to control employee values (Organ, McFillen and Mitchell, 1985; Starkey and Crane, 2003) and the display of emotions by employees at work (Ashforth, 1993; Wharton and Erickson, 1993). It has also attempted to engineer the behavior of its customers by providing role models who act out appropriate scripts for behavior in McDonald's restaurants (Bateson, 2002).

McDonald's has also applied a rational and consistent approach to franchising and has turned its experience and decision-making skills relative to the management of franchises as well as locations and design into a strategic resource (Combs and Ketchen, 1999; Nutt, 1999); so much so that it has been called 'the king of franchising' (Beam, 1996: 1). McDonald's has also developed a rational and aggressive approach to branding and capturing market share (Meyer and DeTore, 1999) and strategically used size and brand awareness to build competitive fortifications with 'moats' to protect against competitors (Sexton, 2001). This has allowed McDonald's to gain enormous power and sheltered it in industry shakeouts making it one of the Big 3 in the fast food business, alongside Wendy's and Burger King (Safferstone, 2002: 161), gaining it the reputation of being one of the 'gladiators of the competitive environment' (Brock, 2000: 259).

McDonald's exemplary application of rational systems strategies to almost every aspect of its business has made it a metaphor for a powerful if not glamorous organization that seems to mass-produce success in the same fashion that it mass-produces hamburgers (Marks and Mirvis, 2001). It has also made McDonald's an example of monolithic and perhaps overly simplistic strategic and managerial practices (Calori and Dufour, 1995) that verges on a cookie-cutter approach (Hallowell, Bowen and Knoop, 2002).

Yet, this cookie-cutter approach has provided the foundation for McDonald's global strategy, which seems to be overwhelmingly successful (Beam, 2002; Gupta and Govindarajan, 2001) accounting for over 60 percent of revenues in 1999 alone (Ireland, Hitt and Camp, 2001) and making it a symbol of globalization (Evans, 2002) as well as a powerful force in the global economy (Ireland, Hitt and Camp, 2001) with 30,000 outlets in 121 nations. McDonald's has been praised for pursuing growth as aggressively and systematically overseas as in domestic markets (Brock, 2000) and for its exemplary global value-chain management (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2001) and global knowledge deployment (Beam, 2002). It has also been lauded for its systematic and successful strategies of internationalization through strategic alliances, joint ventures, foreign direct investment and wholly owned new ventures and licensing (Burton, Lan and Lu, 2000; Ireland, Hitt and Camp, 2001; Wright *et al.*, 1998). Such successful internationalization in turn allows McDonald's to leverage its

global power, by, for example, getting preferential legal treatment around patent rights in Vietnam (Van Glinow and Clarke, 1995), and to prevail successfully in riskier, developing economies like Russia (Shama, 1993).

While McDonald's has been praised for its global-but-local approach (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2001; Hall, 2001; Kanter and Dretler, 1998), and its ability to stick to its core strategy (Nayyar, 1993) while allowing variation on the periphery around things like facility design and capacity (Usher, 1999), it has also had problems adjusting to the norms of other cultures such as, for example, in the former Soviet Union (Ashforth, 1993) and in the UK (Bateson, 2002). Consequently, McDonald's also had to modify its strategy and adapt to local conditions by, for example, varying its menu (Hall, 2001) or adjusting its training and recruitment practices (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2001) to accommodate local preferences. For example, in Hong Kong, McDonald's tried to move in on the local cooking territory not with the usual burgers and fries but with the traditional Chinese rice dishes. McDonald's stated that the reason these new items were created was to provide their customers with a variety of choices in the local setting. Another great example is McDonald's creation of Green Curry Burger in the Hong Kong outlets.

In fact, green curry is a taste of Thai but incredibly popular in Hong Kong. Attacking the local market taste with a third nation specialty is another one of McDonald's global-but-local approaches.

Along similar lines, McDonald's has successfully adjusted its part-time employment practices to switch from the shrinking pool of teenage workers to disabled workers (Hall and Hall, 1994; Reno, 1994; McWilliams, 2001) and a growing pool of senior citizens who, at little or no training cost, provide a reliable source of labor (Feldman, 1990; Mirvis, 1997; Paul and Townsend, 1993; Robinson and Dechant, 1997). McDonald's has also used a rational systems approach to adjusting its training strategy for its corporate lawyers enabling them to more effectively work around labor laws and avoiding having to hire temporary workers full time with commensurate benefits (Thomas, 2002).

While some praise such strategic adaptation and McDonald's rational systems approach to everything including the systematic circumvention of labor law as contributing legitimately to competitive advantage (Thomas, 2002), others criticize McDonald's for exploiting unfair advantage under the guise of rational strategic goals. In one such critique, McDonald's labor practices are used to illustrate the plight of the working poor who, in the absence of corporate strategies that develop their careers, seem stuck in jobs that do not pay enough to make a living and have no benefits (Kossek and Huber-Yoder, 1997).

Along similar lines, Seiders and Berry (1998) mention McDonald's in the context of firms who are at risk of losing their customers' credibility and loyalty and cite:

The 1995 action brought against McDonald's by a woman who allegedly suffered extensive third-degree burns when she spilled a cup of the restaurant's coffee that is served at 180 degrees. The outcome was extreme and, in the view of some, recurrent—because McDonald's had previously received 700 reports of coffee burns. (Seiders and Berry, 1998: 6)

In this case, McDonald's seemed at risk of being perceived not only as unresponsive but also as negligent by customers again because it thought it more important to stick to its strategy and detailed procedures for serving coffee rather than adapting and being responsive to changing expectations.

By the same token, McDonald's has also made strides to be responsive and to adapt its strategy to better align with stakeholder expectations. For its acts of corporate social responsibility, for example, hiring disabled workers and accommodating disabled customers (Hall and Hall, 1994; McWilliams, 2001; Reno, 1994) or sponsoring Ronald McDonald houses, McDonald's has been praised as an exemplary global citizen (Kanter and Dretler, 1998; McWilliams, 2001). It has also been praised widely for having extensive environmental

programs (Anderson and Bateman, 2000; Berry and Rondinelli, 1998; Harrison and Caron, 1996) and for striving to be an ecologically sustainable organization (Starik and Rands, 1995) with a strategic reputation for environmental stewardship (Jennings and Zandbergen, 1995) strong enough to pressure other firms in its value chain to become greener as well (Russo and Fouts, 1997).

Highly publicized strategic alliances and collaborations, such as McDonald's partnership with the Environmental Defense Fund and The Natural Step group and its work on biodegradable containers with Earthshell (Berry and Rondinelli, 1998; Bradbury and Clair, 1999; Starik and Rands, 1995) enhance McDonald's reputation for being environmentally responsible (Rondinelli and London, 2003). Of course, they are also part and parcel of a strategy enacted specifically to signal social responsibility to McDonald's stakeholders (McWilliams, 2001). McDonald's alliances with environmental groups such as the Environmental Defense Fund illustrate how McDonald's seeks to carefully engineer strategic adaptations that seem responsive enough to stakeholders but do not distract from its core competitive advantage (Bachmann, 2002). Moreover, they illustrate the fine balance that McDonald's has sought between rigidity and flexibility, adaptation and renewal. As Starkey and Crane (2003) observe McDonald's cannot adopt a truly environmentalist strategy without losing that which provides its competitive advantage. The transformation that turns the golden arches green would threaten McDonald's very existence:

In the story of green alliances, for instance, the prince must stay in some ways a frog because a transformative kiss from business would be the kiss of death for the environmental group and, indeed, for the legitimating aspect of the green partnership for business itself. Similarly, McDonalds cannot turn its golden arches green. (Starkey and Crane, 2003:13, quoted in Livesey, 1999: 33)

While this latter research adopts a specifically narrative perspective on strategy examining McDonald's strategic identity as constructed through stories of green alliances for example, the tenor of most of the research on McDonald's strategy seems to be that strategy is an uncontested narrative. That is, strategy serves as the grand narrative through which the organization's epic journey—away from weaknesses and threats toward strengths and opportunities (Barry and Elmes, 1997) is told. Hence, the literature we have reviewed is replete with examples of how McDonald's brilliantly implements one or another strategic move and how, eventually, even its greatest shortcomings may be turned into competitive strength.

A BAKHTINIAN READING OF MCDONALD'S STRATEGY

In contrast to the monological, grand narrative approach we have examined above in organization research, we suggest building on a Bakhtinian, more plurivocal, conception of McDonald's strategy (Barry and Elmes, 1997). In this conception, strategy is not only narrative but is served by the dialogic imagination (Bakhtin, 1981) developed through grotesque humor and fiction. Specifically, through strategy as dialogic imagination McDonaldland allows McDonald's corporation to descend into the lower bodily stratum where the mud slinging and degradation of its critics (McDonaldization) contributes to the 'spectacle of the marketplace' (Bakhtin, 1968: 393) and provides new avenues for degeneration but also regeneration. As McDonald's plays with grotesque fiction and humor in McDonaldland, it develops its dialogic imagination, so that transformations experienced by the fictitious characters of McDonaldland feed into its strategic narrative (Barry and Elmes, 1997) regenerating its rational strategy and contributing to its enormous success in the marketplace.

Dialogic imagination allows corporations to transform strategy through multiple voices and competing definitions (heteroglossia): 'there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others' (Bakhtin, 1981: 426). Specifically,

through the use of grotesque fiction and humor actors and behaviors undergo a dialectic transformation and metamorphosis in which degradation is turned into transformation in their social context. So the degradation and regeneration in the fictitious sphere allows for transformation in reality, which Bakhtin (1968) captures by analyzing a series of words all beginning with 'R': renewal, rebirth, regeneration, reconstruction, and revitalization. Grotesque humor, then defines a path of transformation by decent into the underworld degradations, that accomplishes rebirth in the cycle of decent (death) and ascent (metamorphosis). As individuals transcend in terms of metamorphosis either ascending or descending, the characteristics of the original physics of the body are abandoned while new images become the center of the system (Boje and Cai, 2004).

This focus on strategic renewal and regeneration is not only in contrast to the monologic, epic narratives of much of organizational research on McDonald's but also to applications of the grotesque method used by critics of McDonaldization. McDonaldization, a term coined by Ritzer (1993), suggests that McDonald's is a form of cultural imperialism and points to the negative impacts of McDonald's expansion (Boas and Chain, 1977). McDonaldization writings describe grotesque humor but focus on its degenerative role as it is used in the mud-slinging by McDonaldization foes (including counter-globalization, slow food, vegetarian, & animal rights movements). José Bové, of France, for example, did dismantle a McDonald's restaurant one night, and deposit it (and dung) on the front lawn of a government official (Kincheloe, 2001: 7); women wear nothing but a bikini of lettuce to burlesquely protest animal rights for PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals). There is grotesque humor, parody and satire on the Internet; a 2003 United Kingdom exhibit featured a bronze casting called Last McSupper showing Christ and company eating a McMeal and Unholy Trinity shows Ronald McDonald crucified, flanked by also-crucified Hamburglar and a Big Mac.[i] We assert that these studies do not address the grotesque method for self-renewal as dialogic imaginings of the corporation.

The grotesque method, as part of a strategic dialogic imagination, allows the firm to regenerate itself as it develops ascending and descending images along the vertical line from higher official strata to the lower underworld strata. The grotesque method, as part of a strategic dialogic imagination, allows the firm to regenerate itself as it develops ascending and descending images along the vertical line from higher official strata to the lower underworld strata. Simultaneously, McDonald's corporate bodies are renewed for the next generation of employees and customers. Ronald, being the clown-symbol of McDonald's Corporation, he is carefully and detailed controlled, every aspect of his behavior is micro-managed. Ronald's clownery shows that the fashion, speech, and gestures change with the fashion, as a way to renew McDonald's to each generation of customers and employees (to old dies; the new is born) (Boje and Cai, 2004). The images are grotesque because they are material bodily images that involve animal, human, earthly and cosmic bodily tropes where each convexity (cave, stomach, womb, mouth, gaping jaws) has symbolic meaning. Bodily fluids and substances (spit, urine, dung, semen, and blood) also have grotesque meanings that are highly ambivalent (conveying both degradation/descent and renewal/regeneration). Degradation images include being disrobed (literally or rhetorically), having dung and urine tossed at you, being an official mocked in public, having official rituals degraded such as uncrowning the king. Finally, the grotesque method calls us to pay special attention to religious symbolism (transubstantiation, ecclesiastic travesties, gospel story theme allusions, and dying and being born again). In its ancient meaning carnival meant the 'procession of the dead gods' (Bakhtin, 1968: 393). Our task is to trace the full cycle of descent and ascent along the vertical plane and trace as well how it is incorporated into strategic advantage along the horizontal plane of time (historic renewal) and space (global expansion).

One illustration of the dialogic imagination is an exploration of a video (*Have Time Will Travel*, produced by Klasky/Cuspo) in which Ronald (clown-like leader of the gang, wears red and white shirt and socks, and has a yellow jumper, with a M over his heart, and it says Ronald on his back; can transubstantiate one material into another) goes on an adventure with his friends. These friends are themselves transfigured in some way as they represent various foods who as characters have risen from being dead meat. For example, there is Birdie who used to be a Chicken McNugget but now is part bird and part girl. She is the most intelligent and enthusiastic of Ronald's friends and has a bird's beak, bird's wings, with fingers, and bird's feet which she recently keeps shoed, and wears a pink jumper. Grimace is the most dim-witted, but a loveable purple blob symbolizing a milk shake who used to have four arms but in recent times has only two. Hamburglar is a boy with a hamburger head (in 1971 his head literally was a hamburger, in recent time the head is more like a Rugrat character, the bandit's mask replaced by sunglasses, the flowing black cape by a blue denim jacket with a big 'M' on the back). Hamburglar has an insatiable appetite for burgers, and his addiction prompts him to steal them; he also is a little prankster and is forever trying to get out of work (which gives Ronald opportunity to give him corrective sermons).

In the particular video, we'd like to examine (*Have Time Will Travel*) Ronald and the gang enter McDonaldland, a make-believe underworld into which Ronald descends for his adventures and is transformed from the normal human-like clown into a cartoon look-alike. In this adventure, Ronald and his friends travel in a time machine to a prehistoric land where a huge dinosaur eats their time machine. To save the day Ronald blows up a small burger into a giant patty, the size of a mini-McDonald's restaurant, in which he and his friends hide. Then they are eaten by a T-Rex as the giant burger is swallowed whole into the belly of the beast and travels coffin-like down to the belly floor. There the gang finds their time machine and fly out of the T-Rex, presumably through the digestive track and out the back end to safety and back to their own time.

In this 30-minute cartoon there are many images of transformation from the burger's transformation into a giant, restaurant-like, patty, which also serves as coffin or ship in a biblical Jonah and the whale story to the transformation from dinosaur meal to excrement, a descent into the belly and the ascent into rebirth as if risen from the dead. These images may demonstrate how McDonald's dialogically imagines itself. While competitors and McDonaldization foes may seek to undermine its strength or even contest its identity, in McDonaldland McDonald's is always reborn, always rises from the ashes and takes on biblical, and miraculous characteristics.

So while the underworld adventure journeys of McDonald's into McDonaldland in the cartoons may not directly explain how McDonald's crafts its strategy (Mintzberg, 1987), they nonetheless represent a voice, or multiple voices, in the multiple narratives that constitute strategy (Barry and Elmes, 1997). From this perspective it becomes possible to hypothesize a link between the material womb of bodily regeneration and the RAP (Recognition, Attitude of Competitiveness, & Patriotism) that was McDonald's management philosophy, taught in the early 1970s, in Hamburger University to counter restaurant infiltration by unionists (Boas and Chain, 1976). Unionization is one of the cosmic fears that its McDonaldization project might be halted; the other fear is that communities, as they did in the early 1970s might stop McDonald's from building more franchises. The 'P' in RAP, is the gesture of wrapping McDonald's in the flag of patriotism, with All American Meals, and all-American boys and girls behind the counter. This strategy worked during Vietnam, to protect McDonald's from the assault against all Americana symbols in that era, however, in contemporary times, McDonald's has come to symbolize negative aspects of globalization (the 'P' in RAP has become a problem). The Klasky and Cuspo Production video series is careful not to invoke patriotic symbolism; the more religious symbols come to the forefront; this we believe is the

strategic shift: from patriotic imagery to carnivalesque banquet image that is wrapped in religious symbolism.

McDonaldland plays a very strategic role in dealing with McDonald's 'cosmic fear' by revitalizing official corporate management philosophy in the cosmic equivalent of the lower material bodily stratum of a specially crafted underworld grotesque banquet, where Ronald performs many miracles. In McDonaldland, official conceptions of management philosophy undergo a process of 'carnivalization: in every Whacky Ronald episode (Bakhtin, 1968: 394). There is even a Whacky vision of hell, a parody of a Disneyland theme park in Birthday World (read Disney World), where characters descend into theme park rides from an intimidating, gloomish, mechanical hell; as McDonald's is working more closely than every with Disney to merchandise characters in Happy Meals, this is a form of self-reflective humor and self-degradation, which we argue serves some strategic purpose.

Specifically, we suggest that one of the transformative roles of humor and fiction is to allow for the passing away of the old McDonald's strategy as its former corporate body, linguistically speaking, becoming imagined with new emergent meaning. We suggest that in the McDonaldland Klasky and Cuspo videos McDonald's is dialogically imagining strategic changes, developing biography, enshrining ancient culture and giving McDonaldization museum status, and exploring the galactic expansion of McDonald's fast food empire. We believe (consciously or unconsciously) corporate McDonald's is running scenarios of its destiny, deciding how to extend its greatness, and exercising creatively its managerial force while, not just globally, but with super galactic aims: boldly going where no fast food giant has gone before, conquering fashion tastes, renewing vitality, creating something of enormous strategic consequence.

When McDonald's invests in the production of videos like *Visitors from Outer Space* where McDonald's takes on galactic proportions, the carnivalizing of space, with grotesque planetary and alien bodies, embeds the spatial radii in the McDonaldization of future time. The animation is quite Baroque, lots of visual grotesque detail and exaggeration, interlaced graphically with corporate images. It is McDonald's corporate terrestrial space embrace of the temporality of human and nature time, where the corporation seems almost to swallow space and time in its gaping mouth. It is hyperbole and fantastic 'chronotopic artistic imagination' (Bakhtin, 1986d: 46). This is a space fairy tale, yet also a realistic niche for futuristic corporate expansion; after all people in space need their fast food, and as such McDonaldization is double-bodied (on the threshold between globalization and Star Wars Empire). In our analysis, we pause frequently to analyze the mixing of real corporate markers (restaurant in McDonaldland Square, M's emblazoned on buildings, characters, and space vehicles) and how charming it is embedded in a space fairy tale that morphs into a legend of Fast Food Star Wars, a hyperbole. In this romantic tale, the rebellion is already crushed, the Jedi Knight (Hamburglar) is rescued by his father Darth Vader, played by Ronald McDonald, revealed behind the grotesque mask to be mechanistic rationality, all made concrete and graphically visible in the territorialization of outer space. This is not just artistic fantasy, it is corporately strategic infusion of fantasy time with corporate logo, and it is 'naïve realism' the idea that the public would put up statues in its metropolitan parks to the McDonaldland characters.

Striving for a polyphonic narrative that is graphically visualized, allows us to extend strategic narrative analysis into its visual imagination. As Bakhtin (1986d: 49) puts it, 'time and space merge here into an inseparable unity, both in the plot itself and in its individual images'. The concrete locality of solar system, is an echo to McDonaldization, both its celebration, its parodic degradation, and in the process its renewal and regeneration descent and ascension; uncrowning and crowning), in fact, its metamorphosis as corporate futuristic strategic scenario. As we transcribe and analyze the dual-one (visual and verbal) dialog, we see that the videos are imbued with the mood of their contemplators, the McDonald's executives,

the Leo Burnett ad agency, and the Klasky-Cuspo visual talent. Together, in this video, they condense strategy and space, into historical future; McDonald's strategic is chronotopic, its plan graphically imagined, McDonaldization globally, transformed into a galactic adventure, but also a strategic biography, in the early stages of becoming, a metamorphosis that could not occur without grotesque humor (the carnivalesque). Temporally extending the corporate life cycle back to the past, into the future.

As a final illustration of dialogic imagination, we will look at another Klasky/Cuspo video (The Legend of Grimace Island). Grimace was created in 1971, part of the original McDonaldland gang; then he had four arms, and was furry; he lost two arms by the end of the 1970s. He is Ronald's most loyal and naïve friend. Grimace symbolizes chaos, a bodily doublet of cosmic chaos and fear. The word Grimace means to 'quince' in 'fear', his wry expressions seeking to amuse with twisting, contorting fright, not with disgust, not grim, but just anxious, timid, uneasy, ever-vigilant for danger. His corporate graphic material bodily construction is that of a purple mike shake, but symbolizing also the cosmic shake that accidentally triggers and always unleashes the chaos effect. His bodily character is grotesque: overweight, all stomach.

Grimace is a perfect example of what Bakhtin (1968: 459–61) means by ambivalence, the praise-abuse duality role-played in the episodes. He is the dual-body, the becoming chaos and the degraded fool. His praise-blame duality is blame and ridicule for being dim-witted and awe of his chaos power. His character is ambivalence, the double-body of shaking cosmic terror and accidental cosmic chaos. The comic drama series work out conflicts inherent in the praise-abuse of the other characters: Birdie is praised for her intelligence, and ridiculed by Hamburglar for her goodness; Hamburglar is praised for his inventiveness, but scolded often by Ronald and Birdie for his lack of team play, his low concern for others, his passive-aggressiveness, and his constant torture of Grimace. Of the four main characters (Ronald, Hamburglar, Birdie and Grimace), only Grimace never wears an 'M'. He is the straight man; his humor is literal, predictable, and dependable; only his chaos unleashed unexpected humor results.

This episode centers on Grimace, and allows the creative genius of Klasky-Cuspo to unfold new semantic horizons in his character. To give Grimace courage is a revolution in his characterization. This episode is also a parody of Treasure Island, even a satire on the 1989 Brough's video, *McTreasure Island*. Since both deal (with the same theme, this is an excellent place to compare the two depictions. We can also see how the series progresses, what changes occur between the first and second episode. The *McTreasure Island* vessel is a 18th-century pirate's ship; the Klasky-Cuspo vessel is a magic ship, exaggerated out of a tiny model ship in a bottle, into a pleasure vessel, where the two main sails are emblazoned with huge golden 'Ms' and atop the main mast flies a flag with a huge 'R'. This new history is much deeper than 18th century Treasure Island; this is a much more primordial island. This is not the linear, gradual evolution of Grimace, the new series discloses his semantic possibilities; the real treasure of Grimace Island is discovering Grimace's unrecognized, underutilized, and hidden power. In the 1971 Disco era (1971–1998) Grimace is a joke, a quivering fear, a docile character, of only dumbness. In the new series, he is a cosmic life force; able with Ronald's help to confront his cosmic terror.

This episode expands the bodies of meaning of Grimace and the community of Grimaces, their tribal warfare, their history, their underworld. This is no longer Treasure Island; this is ancient history 'already heavily laden with meaning, filled with it' (Bakhtin, 1986a: 5). The new episode travels past Treasure Island, to the semantic depths of native culture, returning with a boon more valuable than pirate's treasure. The milkshake character gets a primordial past, courage to overcome cosmic fear, and McDonald's corporation is resituated with new meaning, perhaps able to confront its own global terror. Grimace is

squeezed into the McTreasure Island episode of 1989, but in 1999, Grimace is a double body: made primitive and able to contemporize (another example of metamorphosis appropriated for corporate purpose). The exchange is dialogic, the contemporaneity of McDonald's characters, storylines, and images, but also the discourse of animation exploring the archetypal possibilities.

Grimace is not kin to 'materialist aesthetics' of corporate marketing; his aesthetics is more tribal, communal, and cosmic. Grimace's material body is a dual body: a dialog between corporate milkshake sales and cosmic forces. Grimace is part of peasant native culture, part of the struggle between premodernity and modernity; there are no golden arches on this island. The characters jump from the deck of their McYacht into a whirlpool, where they descend into the primeval underworld, beneath McDonaldland (also an underworld). They descend into the deep currents of primeval culture, to bring back the treasure to McDonaldland, and then to McDonald's world. McDonaldland and McDonald's world becomes more multifaceted.

Grimace's phraseology, his grammatical style, the 'D'Ah' utterance is rooted in the forces of cosmic fear. Grimace never wears an 'M'. He is an outsider, a foreigner, a communalist. We can picture the dialogue between the authors, the corporate executives speaking managerialism, the ad agency wanting 'Ms' emblazoned on every surface, the animation artists discourse of archetypal aesthetics, able to take corporate where it has never been before. This is a strategic dialogue, where behind every McDonaldland character, is the voice of an executive, ad agent, or artistic talent. In this dialogism, every utterance in *The Adventure of Grimace Island* has many authors and they have their respective addressees.

Grimace's utterances are part of the 'dialogism', the system of utterances (Bakhtin's most misunderstood concept). We know from the 1998 McDonald's press release (McDonald's, 1998), related releases (Hume, 1998; Kramer, 1999) and the credits at the end of each video, that a committee of McDonald's, Klasky-Cuspo, and Leo Burnett executives and creative talent, worked out the characters' utterances. The 1999 press release (Kramer, 1999) tells us that the executives were worried about the characters' utterances, not wanting, for example, to make Ronald too much a salesman, but wanting the characters to be edgy, timely, more in step with popular culture; the disco epoch of McDonaldland (1971–1998) was over; the new Rugrat epoch of the new video series was meant to rejuvenate, Ronald, Grimace (the whole gang) and McDonaldland; in the words of a Leo Burnett executive, 'to reignite the power of this icon', Ronald (Kramer, 1999: 14–18). Participants indicated that McDonald's corporate executives believed Ronald could do more than just being a figurehead spokes clown at 'high-profile public relations stunts such as delivering Happy Meals to the United Nations' (Kramer, 1999: 14–18).

Grimace cannot see his own cosmic power without Ronald's reflected gaze; Ronald can see Grimace's powers, and through the Ronald-mask we imagine the strategists can see it, and the animation talent in this episodes, reveals its semantic depths. Grimace's outsiderhood, his foreignness, and nativeness, plays a powerful role in McDonald's. Ronald (and executives behind his mask) see possibilities for Grimace, see the courage of Grimace, see his great cosmic force, his power over chaos, and in this episode Grimace gets a transmutation magic (the ability to change his material body, at Ronald's request, into surfboard. Grimace sees the corporate world through a native's purple eyes. Grimace does not renounce his Grimace Island culture and worship the god of consumption; he does seek the protection of his savior, the one who addresses his cosmic fear, Ronald.

As such, Grimace's (like Ronald's) utterances have authors, corporate and animator ones, and addressees, superaddressees, beyond Ronald, Hamburglar, and Birdie. Holquist (1986: xviii) in his introduction to Bakhtin (1986) gives some introduction to superaddressee. The relevance of superaddressee is that it makes the utterance strategic, authored here by a

corporate committee, to address audiences beyond the McDonaldland gang, possibly beyond kids. The corporate discourse and the native discourse of Grimace is a dialogic encounter between two cultures, which as Bakhtin (1986: 7) tells us, 'does not result in merging or mixing' since 'each retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched'. McDonaldization too is a dialog between two cultures: McDonald's and 121 foreign nations. Grimace is a mask, where the corporate, ad agency executives, and animator's dialogue with the native, explore the semantic depths of the underworld. Grimace engages the McDonald's corporation in dialogue, to surmount their closedness, their rational managerialist philosophy, and see the depth of meaning in a non-materialistic culture. Grimace is part of the history of popular culture; each strategic change is rooted in a particular popular culture epoch: pre-McDonaldland (1948–1970); McDonaldland without women (1971–1980); Disco McDonaldland (1971–1998); the Klasky-Cuspo McDonaldland (1998–2002). Each utterance, each change in character material bodily form, is linked to 'socioeconomic factors', (Bakhtin, 1968: 2) to the dialogue of the strategic actors behind the masks of the McDonaldland characters.

In sum, this video, like the other videos, are not just corporate fiction and humor but part of the dialogic imagination. Grimace is the peasant native, the Island native, the carnival peasant confronting modern materialism, but appropriated by corporate handlers, to entice a new generation of consumers. Here, we show how corporate strategy can be reconceived in light of Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism, double-body, and carnival. Whether McDonald's stretches itself into mythical, prehistoric or galactic dimensions, the videos and clownery are not only part of a strategic narrative but in their polyphonic, carnivalesque and grotesque forms represent the dialogic imagination of the corporation. Through this imagination McDonald's can engage in transformation as it descends into the grotesque underworld and ascends reborn, revitalized and regenerated. To ignore this dynamic is to miss the dialogic imagination that not only forms part of the strategic narrative of the organization but also serves to transform it. As such, to examine the strategy of McDonald's merely as a purist narrative (Barry and Elmes, 1997) in which the corporation engages only in rational monologues, planning and implementing strategic moves with machine-like precision is to examine only the tip of the iceberg. To engage with strategic narrative at the level of dialogic imagination is to explore complexity that cannot be reduced to one, rational narrative.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to build on and expand a narrative perspective on strategy by exploring how fiction and humor may allow organizations to revitalize their strategic narratives. As we have seen in the case of McDonald's corporate narratives of fiction and humor, such as the Ronald McDonald cartoons, serve as dialogic imagination through which existing strategic narratives are revitalized and transformed. In turn, this transformation may be exactly what allows McDonald's not only to remain such a strong player in the marketplace but also to thrive in the face of new threats and criticisms. As such it may be McDonald's dialogic imagination that keeps it from being annihilated by a green identity (Starkey and Crane, 2003), and instead to emerge against all McDonaldization criticism with a revitalized image as an environmentally responsible corporation (Rondinelli and London, 2003).

From this Bakhtinian perspective then research on McDonald's strategy to date is missing one of the most important strategic dynamics. While much of it traces corporate actions as the outcomes of a rationalist monologue and purist narratives of some strategic model or another (Barry and Elmes, 1997), it sheds little light on underlying dynamics and the

complexities of multi-voiced strategic narratives. We think that Bakhtin (1986: 63) got it exactly right, when he said to ignore the speech utterance, including its secondary subcategories, leads to 'perfunctoriness and excessive abstractness, distorts the historicity of the research, and weakens the link between language and life'. In this sense, the research we have reviewed earlier on McDonald's strategy shows only a weak link between language and life and ignores important speech utterances and subcategories such as narratives of fiction and humor. Most importantly it ignores how such utterances may revitalize strategic narratives and how strategy is narratively transformed. We suggest that beyond perfunctory abstractions of strategic models, see for example Porter (1980), much of the research on McDonald's strategy seems to miss what happens as strategy is narrated by many voices and through various primary and secondary utterances (Bakhtin, 1986).

The implication of missing these utterances is that not only McDonald's dialogic imagination has been overlooked but also that research on strategy in general seems to miss an important narrative dimension. If McDonald's uses fiction and humor to engage its dialogic imagination, then other organizations are likely doing this also. Consequently, future research needs to explore if and how other firms develop dialogic imagination. Prime candidates are firms, who like McDonald's, invest millions of dollars into official corporate humor, for example, Southwest Airlines. From there it could be explored whether other firms who do not officially invest in corporate humor or fiction also develop dialogic imagination, in for example, corporate myths and humorous stories, or maybe even in the official corporate visions developed as part of corporate PR and image making. In any event, expanding the narrative perspective of strategy to include dialogic imagining and strategic transformation through grotesque humor and fiction opens up many new avenues for research.

Particularly, it opens up a new field of inquiry into the primary and secondary utterances that may form the grammar, structure, styles and genres not just of Ronald McDonald (Boje and Rhodes, forthcoming) but of an entire linguistic theory of strategy. Some of the elements of this theory like double-bodied and double-voiced humor and fiction have been explored here, but many other remain open such as a more systematic treatment of the grotesque method and carnivalization. Finally, a linguistic theory of strategy might enable the systematic treatment of primary and secondary utterances through an entire dialogic speech chain in which strategic narratives are traced through multiple addressees and superaddressees as well as various chronotopes, or conceptions of time and space (Bakhtin, 1981). As such, the development of the corporation's dialogic imagination may serve as a point of departure for a broader perspective on strategy as narrative, one that can accommodate the complexities of language and life.

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