

Mini Ethnography: Spend one hour at a Mc Donald's.

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Course Instructor: Prof. Jane Desmond.

Valeria Baiamonte

The most beautiful thing in Tokyo is McDonald's.
The most beautiful thing in Stockholm is McDonald's.
The most beautiful thing in Florence is McDonald's.
Peking and Moscow don't have anything beautiful yet.

Andy Warhol ¹

Who knows what Warhol would have said considering the enormous contemporary changes in Chinese society (and generally speaking in former Communist Bloc's Countries). Maybe a pervasive sense of disappointment for this lost outpost. Probably just a sarcastic giggle, full of far-sighted awareness. I think about this as I walk to the McDonald's restaurant in Piazza Annibaliano, in a wealthy, residential area, as part of my psychological preparation for my "McDonald's experience". It will be the third time in my life I tread the threshold of the "Road to Hell" to the Golden Arches, as an aspiring critical-consumer. The visual impact of the restaurant on the surrounding buildings is not invasive, as it is set on the low ground of a block of flats, with only the colored logo popping up. It is 8:45 p.m. and the place is rather crowded. The place is furnished with the typical bright yellows and reds of the McDonald's brand. In addition, the walls are further decorated with geometrical patterns. The color spectrum (characterized by blue and greenish, acid hues)

¹ Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again* (1975).

together with the blinding lights contradicts the allegedly hospitable intention, or cosy, familiar place pretensions. Furthermore, it is December and the air-conditioning makes people freeze. I suppose it is meant to quicken the customers' consumption in order to make more room for others as fast as possible. I get into the line and wait for my turn. The menu presents local flavor, as part of a tendency to localize food. There is a menu by the well-known chef Gualtiero Marchesi in order to display the concern of the brand for an idea of Italian culinary tradition. In short: a fast-food brand pretending to embrace a slow-food philosophy. The options do not seem very appealing in any case. I order the basic meal (one hamburger with a portion of French fries and a beverage). The price is rather low and each item specifies the exact amount in grams and the nutrition facts table with the calories and fats-carbs-proteins recommended daily percentages. I must encounter a very conscious and aware clerk for, as I ask if it is possible to have a Diet coke, he sardonically replies: "Sure: If you don't mind the calories in your burger...". I smile back at him. I take my seat and I notice that there is an extremely varied group of people. Most of the customers are very young, especially teenagers of both sexes. I suppose it is a very wide-ranging group: all social strata seem to be represented. Most of them seem Italian but there are a few immigrants also (Asians and Africans, apparently). There is a diastratic variation also: some people loudly use dialect whilst others are soft-spoken, talking in a rather affected way. From this point of view, McDonald's is a very democratic space for it provides low price meals, affordable for everyone and the service is very fast. All teenagers are in groups: I'm stunned by the fact that very different people choose McDonald's as their meeting place. Their dress styles and hairdos are different. There are bunches of sassy girls (apparently 13-14) with very heavy make-up, stilettos, holding a Louis Vuitton bag, queuing next to girls wearing casual clothes. On one corner there are three 13-14 years old

guys. They wear casual, rather shabby clothes and they do not communicate at all. One is sipping his drink staring at the table, another one is texting on his iPhone, the third one is eating and his gaze seems lost. Next to my table there is a group of four guys, approximately of the same age. They almost have the same haircut, wear preppy, brand clothes and they boast more self-confidence. From the extreme assertiveness of his gestures and the pitch of his voice I guess one of them is the "leader of the pack". At one point he also raises his voice and invites at his table a cute girl in a group they were all eyeing at. There is a young couple: they seat in front of each other. They are at ease, and they smile at each other while eating, lingering at the table after they have consumed their meal. Two young men sit, eat and leave in the same amount of time I would tie my shoelaces. There are a few people alone: they are all women. There is a lonely girl sitting alone, sipping her drink, staring at the table. When she finishes she immediately leaves. Another one is carrying a tray containing at least 3 portions of French fries, and she is alone: probably a compulsive eater. The third one is a middle-aged woman, wearing sneakers and a fur coat: she pays at the cash desk and leaves with her meal bag. When I sat down at the beginning of my observation, I noticed there was only a child, with her mother. Only later does another child come in, accompanied by his distinguished father, dressed in a very elegant way. While the mother and the child were sitting in front of each other, chatting and laughing, the other couple sits side by side: there is no eye-contact and they are quite silent. The son is playing some videogames and the father doesn't seem to be at ease. He eats his hamburger in a rather awkward way, holding it as a vol-au-vent. He is probably not accustomed to eat here. A table of friends is laughing loudly: some boys are throwing plastic glasses at each other. A girl of the group is compulsively taking pictures of them with a professional camera. I guess that since the advent of Facebook everyday

petty occasions are events which require immortalizing. Apparently you cannot have genuine fun if there is no proof in virtual space that you actually had it. I compare them to my generation. What Yunxiang Yan reports about Chinese youngsters is also probably true about Italian teenagers: "eating at McDonald's has become an integral part of their new lifestyle" (49:1997). I clearly remember I was a teenager when the first McDonald's opened in my hometown in Sicily, approximately 12 years ago. It was a commercial success. Plenty of people, especially youngsters, liked going there because it was perceived as something brand new, as the possibility to have a taste of America at home. But for nowadays teenagers McDonald's is no more a novelty: it is part of their familiar urban setting and informs their cultural perceptions. Italian young people do not go there to have a bit of America, but because it is a place where you can have a fast meal for a cheap price. When something stops being perceived as new, then it can happen it may lose its appeal. In Italy for instance there are a few cases in which McDonald's restaurants had to close for falling sales. In Modica, a small town of my region, McDonald's was forced to close its restaurant, because tourists and residents preferred the local specialties. The same thing happened in 2002 at Altamura, a town renowned for the high quality of their bread, especially for the "focaccia" (a flat bread made with olive oil and herbs). An intriguing 2009 documentary, "Focaccia Blues" directed by Nico Cirasola, chronicles this strange occurrence. McDonald's restaurant closed because local teenagers snubbed the multinational company, preferring the bakery next to it. Only elderly people used to go there on summer time, for free air-conditioning.

The interior architecture of the McDonald's restaurant displays a coexisting of front and back region, as one can glimpse part of the kitchen and the deep-fryers are completely visible from the counter. As a matter of fact, this overlapping of spaces contradicts the

claims of healthiness. The back region, which, according to Erving Goffman, is the place “where suppressed facts make their appearance” (The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, 1959), unveils the deceitfulness of the front region with its bright signs and ads, emphasizing the genuine and healthy quality of the food provided. On the one hand, the direct display of the cooking products aims at stressing the freshness of the product itself: part of the appeal McDonald’s wants to refer to is the business philosophy of QSC+V (quality, service, cleanliness and value of their food). On the other hand, I contend that this exhibition, a sort of “window display”, dramatically points out the deceptive nature of this philosophy, further enhanced by the pervasive smell of cooking fat which mocks any idea of healthy eating. The nutrition facts table with the exact fat and salt percentage contained in a single French fries cart makes it self-evident.

At 10:15 p.m. I leave my field work area. As I leave I notice a bunch of male teenagers outside, lounging about the exit, a few leaning on a streetlamp. They are all dressed with baggy clothes, their underpants peeping out of their trousers. I am impressed by the fact that they are able to fake a “hip-hop style” with their moves, hand gestures and their language as well. It seems like another sort of “Americanness” has pervaded the consciousness of Italian teenagers. It coexists with older symbols, like McDonald’s, which have already been digested.