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ABSTRACT

Fast food is regularly referred to as a symbol of decline—of cooking skills, families, and the community at the dinner table. With inspiration from theories on domestication and Actor Networks, and using examples from studies at McDonald’s in Sweden, this paper argues that McDonald’s restaurants can in fact be regarded as home and the meals eaten there as “proper” family meals. A meal at the restaurant is for many parents the easiest way of up-holding family life, but also of creating “family” and “home” in new ways.

Introduction and points of departure

There seems to be a lot of reasons why McDonald’s could not be “home” and why a meal at McDonald’s could not be equated with a family meal. Swedish ethnologist Anna Burstedt points to the simple fact that consumers want to experience something different when they choose going out to eat, as opposed to the everyday day meal eaten in the kitchen at home. In the restaurant one should be able to sit down without having to worry about dishes, preparation and screaming children (Burstedt, 2004). Besides, the food at McDonald’s is not home made, but industrially processed, and thus generally regarded as more complicated, non-natural and artificial (Fredriksson, 2000), and it is also branded. So dinner at McDonald’s is pure leisure time consumption, while dinner at home is much more connected to production. Not just the production of food, but of “the family”, both in terms of etiquette, manners, values and gender and generation, and also in terms of emotional bonds created by the community of eating together and by the food stuff as objectifying love (DeVault, 1991; Miller, 1998; Murcott, 1983). That food is such an important medium for communicating moral and ethical values, not least to children, and that cooking is often regarded as an act of love, especially from mother to children, is a main reason why fast food regularly is referred to as a symbol of decline—of cooking skills, families, and the community at the dinner table (Bell and Valentine, 1997; Jönsson 2004). From this point of view it seems certain that places like McDonald’s restaurants could never be regarded as home, and the meals eaten there could not be regarded as “proper” family meals.

Such views are furthered by theories on globalisation, the way the global is colonising the local, capturing individuals between the local rooms where they live their lives and the global arenas where they interact with other global citizens (Featherstone, 1995, Ritzer, 2004, Robertson, 1992, Tomlinson, 1999). Through processes of “displacement” and “deterioralization” distinct and meaningful local communities are replaced by “non-places” without a “distinctive content” (Ritzer, 2004:10). Mike Featherstone describes the way the sense of place gives way to the anonymity of “no place spaces” or simulated milieus where it is impossible to feel at home (1995:102). In the “global city” (Sassen, 1991) familiarity and intimacy is only reachable in fantasy using objects of nostalgia (Ritzer, 2004; Tomlinson, 1999) or in a new post-modern imagined community (Appadurai, 1990, 1996). It is easy to see how McDonald’s restaurants from this perspective could be described as “non-places”, where real familiarity and intimacy is not possible to reach, and where family members are not able to feel at home and perform family properly.

Doing ethnographic fieldwork at McDonald’s-restaurants in Sweden has however led me to another conclusion. As places invested with meaning, value, joy, and sociality McDonald’s-restaurants are genuine and authentic local rooms, maybe even “homes” for many families (cf. Caldwell, 2004). Moreover, the routines and the materiality of the restaurant offer ways of upholding family life, but also of creating family, everyday life, and home in new ways, that are in accordance with the demands and rhythms of today’s world. My argument is thus that McDonald’s restaurants can in fact be regarded as home and the meals eaten there as “proper” family meals for some families.

In my own discipline, Ethnology, a North- and Central European little sister to anthropology, the 1990’s brought the “linguistic turn”, characterising many disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences at this time. Culture, understood as an underlying grammar, was something to be read out of texts, objects, everyday conversations etc., sometimes resulting in more of an armchair ethnology than the traditional fieldwork. Methods like cultural analysis, that was set forth by professors Orvar Löfgren, Jonas Frykman and Billy Ehn in books like Culture Builders (Frykman and Löfgren, 1987), On Holiday (Löfgren, 1999) and Magic, Culture and the New Economy (Löfgren and Willim, 2005), even rendered, and still is rendering, Swedish Ethnology an international reputation. Also discourse analysis, following Michel Foucault, and, concerning gender, Judith Butler, hold a high reputation among Swedish ethnologists.

In recent years, however, there has been somewhat of a turning back to materiality and ethnography. One inspiration is Material Culture Studies as advocated by for example British anthropologists Daniel Miller and Alison Clarke in books like Tupperware (Clarke, 1999) and Home Possessions (Miller, 2001), and journals like Journal of Material Culture and Home Cultures. A more recent inspiration is European versions of Science and Technology Studies (STS) like the French Actor- Network Theory (ANT) by Bruno Latour and Michel Callon, and the British counterpart Sociology of Translation, with John Law as a prominent predecessor. The accusation of too much armchair ethnology has led to a rising interest in ethnographic fieldwork inspired by George Marcus multi-sited fieldwork approach (Marcus, 1995).

Studying McDonald’s in Sweden

This interest has been guiding the topic of my study for the past three years; parents and children dining at McDonald’s. The restaurant seemed to me to be the perfect place to be, where I could have a coke or a cup of coffee while watching people coming and going, having dinners and conversations, celebrating birthday parties etc. The restaurant can also be regarded as a node in an almost world-wide network involving not only restaurants, customers and staff, but also for example food, package, transports, commercials and technology, a perfect place for doing multi-sited fieldwork, and pondering the agency of not only humans but also foodstuff and technologies etc. In this article I will, however, primarily stick to one particular restaurant, a Drive In situated in Göteborg, the second largest city in Sweden with about 500.000 inhabitants. In Sweden McDonald’s is not connected to poverty, rather it is a place where people from all social classes go once in a while, especially teenagers and parents with small children (Brembeck, 2003). In particular the McDrives in suburbia have a middle class clientele. Poor people tend not to have cars, and to live in rented apartments in the city outskirts, and thus rather go to instore McDonald’s in shopping malls. In fact, people like young single mothers might not go there at all, maybe just to have a cup of coffee and to treat the
children to a rare Happy Meal. McDonald’s is too expensive if you are on a tight budget.

My study of McDonald’s is part of a larger research programme called Commercial cultures in an ethnological and economical perspective that is carried on at Center for Consumer Science at Göteborg University (www.cfs.gu.se). As part of my project I have assembled a lot of information observing restaurants, interviewing executives, staff, and customers, studying the homepage, and collecting promotional objects. During the spring of 2003 I had the opportunity to take part in several children’s birthday parities at this particular restaurant. I was video filming and taking photographs just like the rest of the adults/parents. I also took field notes using a diary, and had lots of small talk with the parents while they were waiting to bring there children home. Some of these parents I had met at several occasions at the restaurant, and I now decided to ask them to help me with my research, by documenting an “ordinary visit” to the restaurant with their children, using disposable cameras. 10 families agreed to partake and after having exposed the films, I decided to meet with each of the families on their next visit to the restaurant to watch and discuss the snapshots. I equipped myself with a tape recorder and some questions in case the conversation would run short. The ethnography in this article is mainly from this co-researching endeavour, but the concluding arguments are of course also based on the large amount of further data and impressions gathered during my fieldwork. But let’s first give voice to the Haglind family (the name is of course fictive), that I met at the restaurant on a beautiful summer’s eve in August of 2004.

A part of everyday life

“How does it actually happen when you decide to go to McDonald’s?” The Haglinds, mother, father, son and daughter, turn silent and look confused. We have decided to meet at “their” restaurant, a Drive In close to a large shopping mall outside the city. They usually go there twice a month, which makes them fit the average for Swedish families (Brembeck, 2003). They live, like most of the customers this late summer’s eve, in the residential area of terraced houses nearby. They are on their way home, the parents have picked up the son from the handball training session, and the daughter from the after school recreation centre, and now they are sitting relaxed with their dinner at the table; salad for mother, Big Mac & Co for father and son, and a Happy meal for the six-year-old daughter; “with chicken nuggets, not hamburgers”, she states. We are crowding together at a table for four, and the son is fetching another chair. I have taken out my tape recorder, and suspended the little microphone on an empty Coca-Cola cup. The clock is close to six, the evening sun is shining trough the windows, and inside the restaurant a peaceful mood is spreading, in spite of a fairly high sound level. In a corner the TV set is on. This is one of the very last days of the Olympics in Athens 2004, and two wrestlers dressed in red and a blue garments are grappling together. The restaurant is more than half full. It is mostly families with children, like the Haglinds, that have chosen to have their dinner at McDonald’s, and the dinner conversation is going. I hear a dad at an adjacent table asking his son about his day, and questioning about the new pedagogues at the recreation centre. Haglind’s neighbours are seated a couple of tables away, and I have to wait for a while for my interview, while the two families are coordinating the ride to school for their youngest ones.

I have met with the Haglinds before, and they are a cheerful and talkative bunch, enjoying being in the centre of my interest. But now all four of them are silent and look at me in confusion. “Is it different?” I ask trying to help. I see them reflecting and looking at each other. “Maybe it is you children nagging?” I try again turning towards the children. But no, “not usually”, eleven-year-old Calle tells me. Helpful as they are to me, who are trying to explore the place of McDonald’s in the everyday life of Swedish families, they start discussing with each other. “Is it maybe on weekends when everybody is at home? Or when they have done some errands, or on the way home from the handball training session like this time?”

They all agree, however, that there are no discussions or conflicts about the visits to McDonald’s, and that it is not decided in advance before leaving home. It is something that simply happens when you start feeling hungry. This statement is something they have in common with the rest of the families I have met during my study. A visit to McDonald’s is nothing decided on beforehand, nothing you plan for, or long for, nothing you negotiate with the family members. It is something that simply happens. For sure, many parents agree that the children’s hunger is the trigger: “It is when the ‘hunger crisis’ occurs, and it always does after a couple of hours in town, that is when you end up at McDonald’s”, as Anna, a women I met the night before at the same restaurant expressed it. But also Anna agrees that it is nothing you plan in advance.

Investigating the ordinary

Thing that “just happen” is nothing new to me as an ethnologist. On the contrary, the investigation of the ordinary, the obvious, the unproblematic is somewhat of an ethnological speciality, as is showing how matters of course are built step by step, over longer periods of time, where ideas and actions are linked to the various prerequisites of every day life (Frykman and Lofgren, 1996). The families I have met at McDonald’s have not equipped themselves for a day in the city with their children by bringing a packed lunch or by fitting the visit in between two meals at home. They don’t need to, since they know where the restaurants are situated. And if they don’t, already the smallest child of three years of age, is able to recognise the “golden arches”, that most certainly will show along the shopping route of the ordinary family. Besides, there are Burger King, Pizza Hut and lots of other options. There is no need to plan in advance. Well inside you know exactly what to expect. You know what it looks like, you know the menu, you know the taste of a Big Mac before taking the first bite, you know exactly how to behave at the counter, and how to balance the order on the tray without overturning anything, you can feel the weight of a large Coke before lifting it to take a drop, you know how to manage the ketchup pump and the napkin stand and you are used to shoving the litter the right way into the recycling bin. There is no need for thinking, since you have done it so many times before, it has turned into unproblematic every-day knowledge, the way tying ones shoes or pouring the breakfast cereals has.

Supporting assemblies of actants

That habits, like slipping into McDonald’s, is not a passive activity, but always involve an active process of creating meaning is highlighted by Melissa Caldwell, studying the introduction of McDonald’s in Moscow. The ordinary Muscovite consumer has incorporated McDonald’s and its products as significant, and meaningful elements in their social life, she argues (Caldwell, 2004:6). From an ANT-perspective (Latour, 1999), the habit can be studied as an assembly or a small network of entities, or more precisely, an order of relations of certain entities or “actants”, a series, an ordered space or territory, a rhythm or a pulse that is repeated certain ways creating a tune that is easy to follow (Brown & Capdevila 1999). Since actants might be human as well as non-human, ideas as well as technologies, the rhythm of ordered relations at the Drive In restaurant include among other things the car, the restaurant, the hamburgers, the staff training courses, the child-friendly furnishing, the biological and cultural processes of hunger, discourses on children, parenthood and family, the capabil-
ity of the fluorescent lamp to bend in the shape of a “M”, the capability of the child to memorise visual symbols, the supermarket, the full time work of the parents, consumer society, the cupboards requesting to be filled, the work free Saturday, the long road to the nearest grocery store, the tiredness of the parents. Many different actants are co-working to generate the easiness by which the parents slip into the restaurant.

The feeling of meaning is generated when everything fits, when the habit and the special assemblage it involves solves problems, makes every day life easier, renders confirmation, happiness and satisfaction. Even if the parents have met have had a hard time recapitulating the process leading up to the visit to the restaurant, there is total agreement about the values the visit holds: it is easy, convenient, fast, and quite inexpensive for a large family. Moreover you always know what to expect, the children know what to expect, no unpleasant surprises are waiting inside. And there is something for everybody. The parents know that the children like the food, eat it and get satisfied. This is especially important for parents, where the evening meal at home often is turned into a daily fight. Besides, the food is considered tasty.

The adults often go there for lunches or buy meals for themselves from the Drive In, because they think McDonald’s food tastes nice, not every day of the week, but now and then.

For families with toddlers the bibs and the micro wave ovens are effective actants. Shopping with a one-year-old and a three-year old child are extensive projects lasting for several hours, and many parents argue that these trips would be much more difficult to carry through without McDonald’s. Simply finding another restaurant where kids are as welcome and smoking is not allowed is difficult. At McDonald’s you never have to worry if your child is noisy and makes a mess at the table. There are really no good alternatives to McDonald’s, they argue.

Folds of time

Processes of localisation and habit formation evolve over time, sometimes over quite a long period of time. In her studies of McDonald’s in Japan, Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney (1997), shows how behaviour such as not touching food with one’s hands when eating, not standing while eating, not drinking directly from a bottle, not chewing with your mouth open, formerly considered as revolting, have needed one generation to become “normal” parts of every day snack culture (1997:161-182). The first McDonald’s restaurant in Sweden opened in 1973, so McDonald’s has been around for a lifetime for the young parents visiting the restaurants and definitely during the lifetime of their children. “Their” Drive In has generally been there for as long as they have lived in the neighbourhood. Somewhere during this time span, the visit to the restaurant has turned into a habit, almost a routine. From an ANT-perspective also memories and experiences, both social and individual, are powerful actants in the creation of habits. Time folds around the present and memories act on equal terms with the elements of the present situation (Brown & Capdevila, 1999). Sidney Mintz argues that naturalisation involved interlinked processes of familiarisation, domestication and shared belonging happening over time (Mintz, 1985). Likewise, Swedish ethnologist Orvar Löfgren argues for a perspective focussing historical formations over time, starting with sacralisation, at the introduction of something new, followed by institutionalisation, cementation, routinisation and eventually trivialisation, implying that the phenomenon has turned into a self-evident part of every day life (Löfgren, 1990). Once was the first time. Once every thing was new and hade a special solemn aura. Many parents born in the late sixties or early seventies narrate how a visit at McDonald’s in their childhood happened only once a year, at the breaking-up day of school. They remember queuing in front of the counter together with their parents, their best dresses on, and the whole summer holiday waiting ahead. Likewise, many recount the thrill and high status of their first McDonald’s birthday party, when they were introduced in the 1980s.

In Caldwell’s studies from Moscow, Ohnuki-Tierney’s from Japan and in many others, the first meeting with McDonald’s appears as imbued with promises of modernity. The restaurants acted as carriers of modernity, and this was the reason for their special aura of solemnity. It was via the hamburgers, the modern interior design, the clean toilettes, the informal way of eating, that people in Beijing, Tai Peh and Söul met western modernity, James L. Watson argues in “Golden Arches East” (1997). It was about eating modernity, Sidney Mintz reminds, in the after word of the book. This is also something I have met myself in Singapore, where the parents encouraged their children’s French fries appetite, as a way to break even with the traditional rice-based diet and to acquire a modern lifestyle, good grades and hopefully some day a well-paid office job in some high-rise building (Brembeck, 2002).

When McDonald’s was introduced in Sweden in 1973 modernity was already here and the food was not altogether new. The first hamburger showed in 1955 on a national housing exhibition, H 55, in Helsingborg in the shape of a patty of fried minced meat served between to pieces of toast and with onion. Already at the end of the fifties the modern housewife could shop deep frozen French fries in the grocery store and in the sixties she could supplement with deep frozen hamburgers (Eriksson, 2004). The hot-dog sellers experimented with hamburgers during all of the sixties in an attempt to keep the customers at the traditional hot-dog stand. During the seventies the hamburger was not only taken for granted in the hot-dog stand, but was increasingly served at home and more and more accompaniments could be bought in the grocery store. A competition among producers in 1973/74 resulted in the introduction of the hamburger dressing in it’s colourful plastic tube and in 1976 hamburger bread was produced in seven different sizes to suite all kinds of hamburgers an tastes. With good reason, one might argue that the hamburger was “institutionalised” (Löfgren, 1990) in Swedish homes already in the seventies. The basic ingredients, such as the hamburger, the bread, the dressing and some salad were easily accessible for everyone and the operations of making a hamburger were well practised. To continue referring to Löfgren, one might argue that the hamburger in the beginning of the new millennium has become “trivial”, it has become so quotidian and simple that you hardly reflect on it. The home made hamburger has lost it’s aura of progress, modernity and festivity for most people. None of the parents I have talked to make their own hamburgers at home, they told me, apart from occasionally at some children’s birthday party, something that seems to be contradicted by the mountains of deep frozen French fries, huge packages of deep frozen hamburgers and giant bags of hamburger bread in the discount stores. The once so modern home made hamburger seems turned into a low price staple.

Domesticating the hamburger

“McDonald’s food” is not the same as the home made burger meal, the families agree. McDonald’s hamburgers are much tastier and hold quite different values than a quickly fried burger from the home freezer, squeezed into tasteless hamburger bread from the grocery store, they all agree on that. “McDonald’s food” is something special. Home made burgers are too awkward, take too long time to make, and besides, they are neither tasty nor healthy. If you take your time to cook at home, the meal should be a ‘proper’ one, in Sweden including for example potatoes, meatballs, baked Falun sausage, spaghetti and mincemeat sauce, fried fish and a salad, that is proper home made food, and maybe some ice cream for dessert.
The way local interpretations of McDonald’s food is incorporated in every day cooking is an important part of the process of domestication that Caldwell proposes as the best way to study the meeting between the global and the local. Her own example from Moscow is the "milk cocktail" (molochnyi kokteil), a home made version of milkshake with vanilla ice cream mixed with berries from the dacha, that had become popular among Muscovites after the introduction to Russia by McDonald’s in the early 1990s (Caldwell 2004:5-6). A Swedish example is Swedish made deep frozen hamburgers with Swedish made “American hamburger dressing” and Swedish made hamburger bread, eaten in the kitchen or in front of the TV on a Friday night. This combined with the amounts of McDonald’s food brought home from Drive Ins, and the various hamburger menus served at hot-dog stands and other food outlets, there is no doubt that the American hamburger-or if you like, the American version of the traditional Swedish “pann bifff”- has turned into a taken for granted and ‘normal’ ingredient of Swedish diet.

But the domestication process not only involves the incorporation of local versions of new food stuff at home, but also of new behaviour. Good examples are Ohungki-Tierney’s from Japan (1997), where the introduction of McDonald’s has made earlier tabooed behaviour like eating while holding the food in your hands or eating with your mouth wide open, accepted and normal. Also in Sweden it is evident that the incorporation of McDonald’s to every day life has changed life and behaviours in different ways. The most obvious reason for going to a McDonald’s restaurant to have a meal for the parents I have been talking to was that it made every day life easier in a number of ways. It is a quick and easy way to solve the food-question in a way that is satisfying for the whole family. You are spared of whining, nagging, stress, uncertainty, and all the work that goes into shopping for food and preparing a meal. “Of course it is wonderful to be spared of cooking, if you can go to a place where you get cheap food and entertainment for the kids”, as one mother told me.

Making life easier

But also the rest of the day is influenced in a positive way by having a meal at McDonald’s, not least for the women, who were the one’s doing most of the housework in the families I interviewed. “It is really quite nice when you get home after having done a lot of errands that you have already eaten so that you don’t have to start by making dinner”, one woman told me. Her eleven-year old son agrees, and argues that it is a great difference if you get home and have already eaten at McDonald’s, because then you have more time and can start with your hobbies right away, instead of having to wait for the dinner. To be spared of the dreary intervening time, the waiting, the preparing, cooking, table laying and the stress of having hungry and whining family members wandering around means a lot. Having a meal at McDonald’s means a quicker way of reaching the goal of the family gathered around the dinner table eating in peace (hopefully). This might be considered a way of promoting ‘instant gratification’ (Bauman, 2002), that the morality of postponing pleasures, work before fun, of former days (Brembeck, 1992) is giving way for hedonistic pleasures. But it is also possible to interpret as a way to organise a life with many offers and a constant lack of time. To be spared of the dreary intervening time can be a rational way of handling a life of time pressure, abundance of offers and with possibilities to buy all kinds of service. And also a way of generating time for relaxation and interests of your own beside work or school and thus be better prepared to endure another days work. To answer the ‘hunger cries’ of the children by a visit at McDonald’s, was also for many parents, especially mothers, a way of expressing good motherhood. Parents wanted to give their children something they enjoyed, to please them in today’s world that is considered stressful not only for the parents themselves but also for their children. The visit to the restaurant was also partly seen as a compensation for the tough day at school or at the day-care institution, the long working days of the parents and their tiredness at home.

Just like at home

Few myths are harder to disturb than the one of the happy nuclear family: mother, father, and two rosy-cheeked children, gathered in the soft lamplight around the dinner table, intimately sharing both food, and the events of the day, and more hidden: the upholding of the gender- and generational order, where adults, especially fathers knows best, and mother is the expert on relations. For many families the McDonald’s meal was the easiest way to reach this ideal in its entirety. Few parents and children agreed that having a meal at McDonald’s was different from eating at home. The behaviour at the table was the same, as was the topics of conversation, and the time spend on eating, the family members withheld. Most of them hadn’t in fact reflected on the possibility that there should be such a difference. “It is just about as at home”, the informants argue. This is also in accordance with my own impressions from the restaurants. The atmosphere was generally calm, homely, and familiar. The families often knew each other, they were living in the same neighbourhood, and the children were friends from school or day care, and the mood ranged from that of the friendly local restaurant with fairly loud voices and cheeriness, to a sober and quiet murmuring. Few parents felt stressed by the high pace, and sound level at the restaurants, most in fact looked bewildered when I put the question, and they argued that the only time a visit at the restaurant was stressful was if there were no free tables available, and you had to wait with tired feet, an empty stomach, and dissatisfied children.

It was only in the longer interviews I made, where the parents were given more time for reflections, that some differences between eating at home and at McDonald’s appeared. Maybe there was less fuss at the restaurant, since there were so many other distractions, so many other things to look at for the children, and also less tiresome discussion about finishing the food e.g., the parents figured. At McDonald’s everybody is sitting calmly at the table eating. There are so many other things to look at, and so many other activities beside making fuss of the food, sulking, and bickering your brothers, and sisters. The restaurant is a place for food, and relaxation, where there is little room for family disputes. The actants of the McDonald’s restaurant are contributing to stabilising the every day life, helping the family to live up to the ideal of the happy family for a moment, the materiality of the restaurant is stabilising life. Without the chairs and the tables in their fixed positions, the food coming quickly to the table, the other customers, the TV in its corner, the children jumping in the ballroom, or passing by carrying interesting Happy Meal offers, this would have been much more difficult. The McDonald’s visit turns into a way to shape the family in consumer society.

Piling black-boxes

Most children also agree that the parents too are much like at home, neither stricter nor more kind-hearted, although there is of course no room for any obvious exercise of power in the public, normative space of the restaurant. But there were in fact a few examples of the opposite, the children using the invisible normative boundaries of how to behave, and not to behave as a parent, and the decree to act as a ‘good’, democratic Swedish family, into a power-
play with their parents. Carola, one of the mothers I interviewed, was one of the few parents, who did not like to go to McDonald's. She liked the food, but felt that the atmosphere was stressful, and not very inviting. But she still went there at regular intervals because her daughters wanted to. Her own favourite was Burger King. She felt uncomfortable at McDonald's, she told me. She felt stressed, and always finished the food in a hurry. This is not what she herself would choose. She liked the food, and often used the McDrive, but considered the atmosphere pressing, and not very nice. The children liked it though. Sofia, her eldest daughter, was stressing her mother by very, very slowly picking the fries one by one, and very slowly chewing them while looking untroubled, and relaxed, and now and then taking a quick look at her mother. Maybe that is why she is so uneasy, Carola says. She herself wants the meal to be quickly finished, but Sofia delays it. The visit at the restaurant is turned into a hidden power play, where Sofia is all the time stretching the limits of her self-determination, protected by the invisible conventions of not raising your voice too loud, and not using any physical means pertaining to the public space of the restaurant. For Sofia the pieces of French fries were actants in her attempts at challenging the parental authority, and creating a larger space for actions for herself. Family relations are renegotiated; maybe even a process of equalizing is going on, driven by the nice relaxing feeling of being just like everybody else, of living up to the standard of normality for a while.

Another way of looking upon Sofia’s behaviour is how she is piling many ‘black boxes’ on her side. A ‘black box’ according to Latour contains agreements on how to understand reality, taken-for-granted ideas, not anymore open for questioning, that have been materialised in societal institutions; in ways to behave and to think, in institutions like the school, the family, the media, and physically, in buildings, furniture, clothes and the planning of a restaurant’s interior design (Latour, 1998). Sofia’s ‘black boxes’ contain ideas of the democratic family with good relations between parents and children, values of not raising your voice too loud in public, the child friendly environment of the restaurant announcing the fact that here is a family caring for their children. On top of all her black boxes Sofia can rule her mother, and make her hide her indignation, and make her stay at the table until her daughter has finished her fries, even though she is boiling with rage and feels more and more stressed an uneasy inside. No wonder she often chooses the McDrive instead, since she considers this ‘less stressful’. In the context of the home the generational order is easier to uphold. Carola feels split in an awkward way between the wish to be a good parent and give in to the wishes of her children and her need for a more distinct parental authority, where the children are submitting.

At the restaurant there were many examples of the performance of traditional gender roles, for example several examples of fathers benignantly inquiring about the day at school and the children politely responding, while mothers were occupied wiping their baby’s mouths and keeping the table tidy. But the environment also generates/makes easier a more equal relation between the spouses. Surely it is most often she, who supervises the children’s food intake, but she is relieved from cooking and washing the dishes, and may spend time on her own interests when the family gets back home. And since the food is eaten with your fingers, this makes for a more equal relation between parents, and children, everybody is eating on equal terms, also really small children not only ‘want’ but ‘can do’. The democratic potential of eating with your fingers brings us ‘out of civilisation’ to a ‘becoming-human’ outside of the generational order (Wenzer 2004). It is thus quite possible to argue that a visit at McDonald’s is a part of everyday life, but also a way of changing it in different ways, that the restaurant is a way of up-holding family life, but also of creating ‘family’, and ‘home’ in new ways, that the visit to the restaurant is a way to create an every-day life in accordance with the demands and rhythm of today’s world.

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