

Running Head: The Leadership of Ronald McDonald

The Leadership of Ronald McDonald:  
Double Narration and Stylistic Lines of Transformation \*

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**Abstract**

This research note reports a study of Ronald McDonald's leadership. The argument is that rather than just being a spokesperson or marketing device for the McDonald's corporation, Ronald performs an important transformational leadership function. Ronald's recent restylization as a fitness-nutrition leader is part of McDonald's most daring organizational transformation. Using the Bakhtinian theory of double narration, we argue that while Ronald is crafted by the actual leaders of McDonald's, his leadership exceeds official corporate narratives because of the cultural meanings associated with his character as a clown. This clown persona has enabled Ronald to emerge as a leader along two interrelated lines of organizational stylistic transformation: from epic to novelistic corporation and from purveyor of unhealthy foods to a nutrition-fitness enterprise.

*Keywords:* Transformational leadership; McDonald's corporation; Double narration; Bakhtin

## **The Leadership of Ronald McDonald:**

### **Double Narration and Stylistic Lines of Transformation**

Got to get ready to enjoy the view; lookin' kinda cool; lookin' kinda new. There are things we should be trying, me and you; a new day is here and fun is overdue. Gettin' even cooler, steppin' to a new beat; there's a tingling inside me and its spreading to my feet. McDonaldland is changing; everything is rearranging. I can't sit still, because it's a beautiful day, and Ronald McDonald has something to say.

The excerpt above comes from the lyrics of a song performed by Ronald McDonald in three of the *Wacky Adventures of Ronald McDonald* films (1998-1999). This is a song about change and transformation at McDonald's. It suggests McDonald's has a "new beat" more in step with the times and that this should be celebrated. The new McDonald's that Ronald alludes to is one that has emerged from the late 1990s in response to criticism over high-fat, high-sugar foods, public concern over growing levels of obesity, numerous changes in chief executives and, in 2002, the reporting of its first financial loss in 47 years of operations.

Here, we examine how these challenges have been managed by McDonald's in terms of transformational leadership. Acknowledging that the conditions McDonald's faced made transformational leadership a viable organizational response, we show that at McDonald's this was manifested in a way that extends beyond the direct leadership behavior of managers. While transformational leadership is commonly understood in relation to the behavior of "real-life" leaders (e.g. CEOs, executives), we show how the leadership function can also operate through fictional characters such as Ronald. In this case the result has been a "greening" of McDonald's and a focus on breaking the assumed relationship between fast food and poor health.

Ronald's unique leadership comes from his capacity for "double narration" (c. Bakhtin, 1981). That is, although he is orchestrated by the corporation to deliver a corporate message, he

can also mock and criticize McDonald's itself. This allows the organization to critically question itself and imagine a future different than its past. The clown role is ideally suited for such double narration and for demonstrating the pluralistic nature of the new McDonald's. The present work contributes to leadership theory by examining how fictional characters can provide a transformational leadership function that is different to that available to flesh-and-blood leaders. This function relates to the organizational aspects of transformational leadership (Pawar & Eastman, 1997) which involve *idealized influence* and *inspirational leadership*. That is, creating a vision for the future and demonstrating how that vision can be achieved (Bass, 1999). Ronald McDonald is more than a marketing ploy, he is a leader who communicates and embodies the McDonald's vision to the public – a group that includes McDonald's employees.

We proceed in five parts. We start by outlining transformational leadership theory and relating it to the change challenges that McDonald's has faced in its recent history. Second, we examine the development Ronald McDonald's character as a transformation leader starting with his "makeover" in 1998. Third, we explore two stylistic lines of transformation that comprise McDonald's response to the change and relate this to Ronald's transformational leadership. These are a shift to a more pluralistic organization and a refocusing on a healthier "green" image. Fourth, we review the implications of our discussion for leadership at McDonald's. We conclude by summing up our argument in terms of how Ronald's double narrated transformational leadership emerges from, yet exceeds what McDonald's could expect from him.

### **Transforming McDonald's**

Transformational leadership researchers (e.g. Burns, 1978; Rafferty & Griffin, 2004) have long suggested that leaders motivate followers by raising awareness of organizational mission and getting followers to transcend self-interest. Transformational leaders "transform the needs, values, preferences and aspirations of followers from self interests to collective interests" (House

& Shamir, 1993, p. 82). This is evident when leaders generate awareness of mission and/or vision and influence followers by arousing their motivations and developing their abilities (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Transformation is achieved when followers internalize the vision espoused by their leaders (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993).

A major characteristic that differentiates transformational leadership from other styles is the leader's efforts to engage followers' self-esteem, self efficacy, and self-confidence (Shamir et al., 1993). To do this, leaders display individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, idealized influence and inspirational motivation (Bass, 1999; Yukl, 1999b). *Idealized influence* and *inspirational leadership* refer to the leader's envisioning of a desirable future, articulating how it can be reached, setting an example for followers, and showing determination and confidence. *Intellectual stimulation* is about helping followers to become more innovative and creative. *Individualized consideration* means paying attention to followers' development needs (Bass, 1999).

Research in transformational leadership varies broadly from the study of the micro-behaviors of individual leaders to a consideration of transformation at the organizational level (Hunt & Conger, 1999). The bias, however, has been towards studying specific interactions between leaders and followers (Yukl, 1999b) emphasizing interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects rather than organizational aspects of transformation (Pawar & Eastman, 1997). Here, we focus on transformation at the broad organizational level at McDonald's. At this level, "an essential leadership function is to help the organization adapt to its environment" by, for example, "influencing outsiders to have a favorable impression of the organization and its products, [and] gaining cooperation and support from outsiders upon whom the organization is dependent" (Yukl, 1999b, p. 39). The emphasis here is on the idealized influence and inspirational leadership aspects of transformation.

At the organizational level, McDonald's transformation is towards a vision of becoming health conscious and a force in America's war on its own obesity (Kapica, 2004). The company has been re-positioning its products as being more nutritious and its image as more aligned with health and fitness. On 16 March 2003 (McDonald's, 2003b) in the United States, McDonald's launched several "lifestyle initiative strategies" (including listing nutritional information in trayliners and brochures) and in 2003, 150 million salads were sold in the United States. In terms of its image, on 16 September 2003 McDonald's partnered with Bob Greene (TV personality Oprah Winfrey's personal fitness trainer). The following year it partnered with former Miss Universe Alicia Machado and with television fitness guru Donna Richardson. On April 15 2004, McDonald's unveiled its global strategy to appeal to health conscious consumers as part of its long-term balanced lifestyles initiative (Niedens, 2004). The world over McDonald's is re-envisioning itself as a provider of health, nutrition, fitness and wellness.

McDonald's transition is attributed commonly to the leadership of Jim Cantalupo. In the sixteen months from January 2003, as CEO and Chairman, he resurrected the flagging stock price and kept it rising until his death, after which it began to sag (MacArthur, 2004). His strategy was "to blunt attacks on McDonald's as a purveyor of unhealthy food" by changing the menu, adding McSalads, and launching the fitness-nutrition campaign (Gibson & Gray, 2004). Cantalupo was succeeded by Charlie Bell, another heroically portrayed header. After 28 years of climbing the corporate ladder, in 2004 at the age of 43 he became McDonald's youngest-ever chief executive. Tragically, Bell stepped down from his position as CEO in late 2004 after being diagnosed with cancer. He was replaced by another McDonald's veteran Jim Skinner.

In sum, fluctuating economic fortunes, and public challenges to the social value of its products meant McDonald's had to transform itself organizationally. This is a challenge that the corporation has responded to arduously, especially in terms of its new vision as a supporter of

healthy lifestyles and provider of nutritional foods. This heralds the type of transformation change that influences “whole organizations and even entire cultures” (Northouse, 1997, p. 130).

While the leadership of the transformation at McDonald’s might have been articulated by Cantalupo and progressed by Bell and Skinner, the leadership story of McDonald’s does not end there. As we explore, the clown Ronald McDonald, a comic icon for McDonald’s since the 1960s, also increasingly provided a critical leadership function that has enabled the organization to respond to the change challenges outlined above.

That it is Ronald’s who became a transformational leader is especially relevant given McDonald’s organizational context. McDonald’s is known for efficiency and standardization more than adaptiveness (Ritzer, 1993/2002). The dominance of a standardized technical core, a bureaucratic structure and a federated network of franchisees suggest McDonald’s would be an organization unreceptive to transformational leadership (Pawar & Eastman, 1997). As a hybrid organization, however, it is notable that it is from the activities of a less bureaucratized marketing and advertising function that Ronald’s character emerged. It is in such “boundary-spanning” functions, those that interface directly with the environment, that transformational leadership is more likely to find fertile soil (Pawar & Eastman, 1997). In the case of Ronald’s, it is here, on the boundary between the inside and the outside of the organization, that his transformation leadership is made possible.

### **Leadership and Double Narration**

Ronald has been reincarnated by McDonald’s as part of its pursuit of a health-conscious vision. For Ronald this does not just mean being an entertaining clown. Since 2003, he has held the quasi-formal executive position of *Chief Happiness Officer*, and, on 16 April 2004, he became the *Ambassador for an Active Lifestyle*. He performs in a *Get Moving with Ronald* road show (endorsed by American Academy of Pediatrics) (McDonald’s, 2003b). He is part of McDonald’s

*Healthy Lifestyles Strategy*, the objective of which is to make McDonald's "the leading restaurant promoting healthy, happy, active lifestyles everywhere we do business" (Kapica, 2004.). In 2004, Ronald went on a 36 day cross country walking tour of the United States. with Bob Greene. They lead workouts for employees and customers in McDonald's parking lots.

In the United States there are at least 250 official Ronalds. To ensure consistency, an entourage of handlers, schedulers, script writers, costumers, chauffeurs, and body guards accompany them on road shows. Clearly, McDonald's deliberately uses Ronald as a means of propagating its corporate strategy and change agendas. It is our argument, however, that Ronald's leadership is not limited to that which is orchestrated by the corporation. Instead, the corporate discourse he speaks is only one part of his "double narration." This notion of double narration that we use is based on Bakhtin's (1984) idea of "double voiced discourse." This doubling first involves corporate authors translating their intentions and values through Ronald as a form of corporate mouthpiece. Second, however, Ronald also narrates through an ancient clown heritage. This is a heritage whose cultural meaning exceeds the intentions of the corporation. As Bakhtin explains:

The clown is one of the most ancient of literature's images, and the clown's speech, determined by his specific social orientation (by his privileges as a clown) is one of the most ancient artistic forms of human discourse (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 405).

What double narration alerts us to is how when an author (the corporation) represents the words of a character (Ronald) what that character says is never under the full control of the author. This enables the character to have his own voice which always exceeds the "expression of the author's ultimate authority to make meaning" (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 149).

When an author expresses him or herself through a character, s/he can only do so indirectly; the author is residual in the character but the character takes on a life of his or her own



because s/he is different to the author (Palmieri, 1998). The result is that the character's speech can, in principle, contain two separate meanings (Hirschop, 1998). Hence, "language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's [writer's] intentions; it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 294). Although Ronald's speech is designed to transmit the corporation's message, the possible meanings of that speech are not restricted to that message. In Ronald's case this is largely because, given he is a clown, his speech and appearance align with what is culturally expected as clown behavior. These expectations derive from the idea that "between the rogue and the fool emerges a unique coupling of the two, the image of the clown" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 404). Further, there is the long standing clown characteristic of being able to talk back to power (Bakhtin, 1968)

As we will see, although Ronald's license to speak back to corporate-power and to parody the corporation is limited, it is still present and his ability to make the corporation to be self-critical is important to McDonald's transformation.

### **The Development of Ronald's Character in Film**

Before turning to the specific organizational transformations that Ronald has led in McDonald's, we first examine his character development in the series of films (1998-2002) animated by Klasky Csupo Inc, the award-winning producers of highly popular cable and network television cartoon shows *Rugrats* and *The Simpsons*. Klasky Csupo was given the task of re-invigorating Ronald for the 21<sup>st</sup> century McDonald's. As Klasky-Csupo CEO Terry Thoren enthused, "We were thrilled to be challenged with this latest evolution and think Ronald as an animated hero is a natural next step for one of the world's best-known live characters" (Animation News Network, 1998). The first of the films was released in 1998 and was distributed through McDonald's outlets for \$3.49 in the United States. The new Ronald was a super-hero clown who transmuted one material into another, changed the weather with a breath, and commanded animals with a

thought. More than an entertainer, he became an exaggerated figure who used speech and actions made him more super-human than any clown before him, or than any real-life leader.

The new Ronald also demonstrated his clown capacity for double narration. For example is the 1999 film *The Visitors From Outer Space* we find Ronald criticizing the corporation's bureaucratic management style. Early in the film he parodies McDonald's reputation for having standard operational plans for all conceivable contingencies. Under threat from an extraterrestrial encounter, Ronald says to his friend Hamburgular, "well of course I believe in aliens; that's why I have the MAAP, the McDonaldland Alien Action Plan; M-A-A-P." As he speaks he holds up a small red book, with a large "M" emblazoned on it. In the background, on Ronald's shadow, his new image appears over his older images, indicating his personal transformation.

The visual images of the new Ronald reinforce the spoken parody of debasing McDonald's historical management style. There is corporate renewal as well as clown transformation being represented. This is a corporate-uncrowning where double narration enables Ronald to support the corporate agenda while criticizing the corporate tradition. This develops Ronald transformational leadership characteristics of creativity, risk taking and experimentation (Bass, 1999). It also establishes Ronald's character as containing a level of corporate dissent eschewed by the consent driven focus of transformational leadership (Tourish & Pinnington, 2002). The parody communicates that the old bureaucratic McDonald's is not suited to the current crisis (the aliens) and that a new, agile and dynamic McDonald's is demanded. While such critique might be unpalatable in direct terms, through Ronald's clown persona it is acceptable. As ever, the clown is able to talk back to institutionalized power (Bakhtin, 1968).

While Ronald's scripting is instigated by Claspy-Kuspo in conjunction with McDonald's executives, it is Ronald himself, as a clown, which makes such scripting possible. Both the clown and McDonald's are speaking here. It is in this interface that Ronald begins to highlight the

problems of McDonald's current realities so as to pave the way for envisioning a new McDonald's that is able to meet the challenges of its changed environment.

This need for a new vision continues as a metaphor later in the same film. In one scene Ronald climbs onto a children's playground set and transforms it into a rocket emblazoned with a large "M." He says "whoa, haaaa" as he appears out of the hatch. This metaphor, where McDonald is represented by the rocket, suggests that it is Ronald who is able to fly in a new direction. This is reinforced later when Ronald wrestles with a comet's tail, saying "Oh ahhh, No I gotta turn this baby around... Ahh, hup, here we go." Ronald is characterized with the ability to set a direction and pursue a singular course of action in spite of obstacles from the environment. Together the scenes from this film exemplify the development of Ronald's character as a transformational leader – as someone how can break with tradition and pursue a vision that might, at first glance, appear unrealistic to others.

The theme of transformation is further developed in 2001's *Have Time Will Travel* when Ronald and his gang use a time machine to travel to the time of dinosaurs. After they arrive, a T-Rex opens her jaws and promptly devours the time machine. The gang is stranded and takes refuge in a cave. Inside they encounter their alter-egos; Ronald meets a prehistoric self, as do the other characters. They sing a song with the words "you are just like me", as Ronald reveals that under the fur of his counterpart is an "M-heart" just like his.

Again, we see in this film important metaphors that establish Ronald's character as a transformational leader. The first part of this is the danger of the T-Rex, a prehistoric animal that threatens the life of Ronald and his companions. The second part is the alter-egos of the gang. While the T-Rex communicates a general fear of the old, the addition of the alter-egos (who still have M-shaped hearts) signifies a continuity with tradition. The metaphor suggests that the success of the new McDonald's, as represented by Ronald and his time machine, is threatened by

that which is old fashioned. This justifies for the need to change in order not to be killed by a past that is no longer suited to today's environment.

In this film, the meaning of McDonald's transformation develops further in the way group rejoin with their time capsule and leave. Ronald takes a regular hamburger and enlarges it to giant size using an enormous tire pump. The gang climbs into the hamburger and when the alter-ego gang push the giant burger just outside the cave mouth the T-Rex swallows it whole. In the belly of the beast the grotesque stomach juices splash the time machine. The gang members enter the machine in order to make their escape. Here, Ronald shows that despite the overwhelming fear of a dangerous past coming to bear in the present, the iconic hamburger, together with his super-human powers are enough to break free to the future. As Ronald's companions follow his lead, his character is that of a transformational leader with the powerful capacity to direct his group into the future.

While in the first three films Ronald had developed a character as a leader capable of double narration and of realizing transformations, what they did not do was to establish Ronald in terms of the corporate vision so central to transformational leadership. It is in the second three films that this happens. For these films, a committee of McDonald's, Klasky-Csupo, and Leo Burnett (McDonald's advertising agency) executives, designed changes to Ronald's songs, body-look, and gestures (McDonald's, 1998; Hume, 1998; Kramer, 1999). The executives were wanted to ensure that Ronald did not appear too much of a salesman, but rather wanted the characters to be edgy, timely, and more in step with popular culture (Kramer, 1999).

The McDonald's corporate executives believed Ronald could do more than just be a figurehead "spokesclown" at "high-profile public relations stunts such as delivering Happy Meals to the United Nations" (Kramer, 1999, p. 14). Bakhtin's (1981, p. 37) words apply to Ronald: "there always remains in him unrealized potential and unrealized demands." The implication is

that the actions of the executives indicate their concern about how Ronald is being represented and that they see some unrealized potential. At the same time there is a surplus humor that is somewhere between an animator's signature and the deep premodern history of a powerful folkloric clown archetype. In other words, his potential for double narration was being actualized.

In his visual and verbal style Ronald's character changed after the first three films. The first films established his character as a powerful leader able to forge into the future. In the later films, this character becomes fully linked into the transformation of the McDonald's corporation itself. Here Ronald becomes an embodied idealized image of the vision that McDonald's wants to realize – a vision of being seen as a health conscious, fitness oriented organization.

The actor who plays the new Ronald is thinner, more athletic, and more active. To descend into the McDonaldland he jumps onto a treadmill and as it spins faster, he transforms into an animated cartoon character. This contrasts to the earlier films where he is transformed after diving into a tube filled with plastic colored balls. These changes position him as someone who is athletic and active. It is his magical powers drawn from his characterization as a clown that enable him to change and be changed as a forerunner and leader of the more general transformations going on in the corporation.

In sum, the development of Ronald's character in the Klasky Csupo films position him directly in terms of a transformational leadership orchestrated in relation to corporate imperatives of repositioning the organization around health and nutrition through his super human and heroic leadership powers. Further, his clown persona allows him to talk back to McDonald's legacy of high-fat fast food and old-fashioned managerial leadership practice in a way that enables to new McDonald's to manifest.

### **Stylistic Lines of Transformation at Mc Donald's**

In the previous section, we saw how Ronald McDonald's character has developed into that of an

exaggerated transformational leader who is double-narrated through formal corporate-speak mixed in with the clown-like ability to parody and criticize the corporation and his super-natural powers. The influence of Ronald's character cannot be under estimated. American children rank him as second only to Santa Claus as the most recognizable person (Royle, 2000) and many of McDonald's youthful employees were no doubt watching those films only several years ago. Further, the abundance of Ronald McDonald iconography in the retail outlets and society more generally suggests that Ronald's changes would be highly visible to McDonald's employees and customers. The corporation is active in securing Ronald's power. As stated in the McDonald's Operations manual: "You should do anything you can to appeal to children's love for Ronald and McDonald's." (cited in Turner, 2001).

Given his extraordinary presence and power, Ronald's full impact is realized in relation to the way that his double narration is refracted along two stylistic lines of organizational transformation. By this term we refer to the way that the creation of the new Ronald is related to ruptures in the McDonald's narrative and to the emergence of a newly narrated McDonald's. The new narratives involve transformation from epic to novelistic corporation and towards a green narration. It is through these transformations that Ronald realizes his transformation leadership capacity of *idealized influence* and *inspirational leadership*. He "envisions a desirable future, articulates how it can be reached, sets an example to be followed, sets high standards of performance, and shows determination and confidence" (Bass, 1999).

#### *From Epic to Novelistic Corporation*

Our use of the terms "epic" and "novelistic" again draws from Bakhtin (1981, 1984) and suggests that the literary genre of the novel can be used as an allegory for the way that "real life" is authored (Holquist, 1990). For Bakhtin (1981) the epic is a "unitary linguistic medium for containing ideological thought" (p. 367). In the novel, on the other hand, language is

“decentered” to allow different characters, with different points of view, to exist together within the whole work. The novel has a broad diversity of “voices” that enter into dialogue. These voices are “reciprocally permeable”, “they are brought close to one another [...and...] potentially intersect one another, creating the corresponding interruptions in areas of intersection” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 239).

An epic corporation is linked to a narrative that positions the organization as being the creation of a heroic leader who single handedly leads and defines it. For McDonald’s this leader was Ray Kroc, the legendary leader who turned McDonald’s into a multi-million dollar global corporation based on efficiency, predictability, calculability and central control (Ritzer, 1993/2002). Following Kroc’s death in 1984 and the subsequent changes in popular opinion regarding fast-food, McDonald’s needed to break free of its epic (Ray Kroc) construct that was wedded to uniformity and runaway expansion, and to deal with the shift in consumer preferences and public opinion. To do so McDonald’s had to become more “novelistic.”

While the epic has no place for “openendedness, indecision and indeterminacy” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 16), the novel is less pre-ordained, more future oriented, and enables different ideologies to come into contact with one another. For organizations a novelistic corporation has multiple points of view that are in dialogic relations. By dialogic, Bakhtin (1981) means that the points of view are juxtaposed and co-existing. The diversity of viewpoints in a novelistic corporation exist outside of an extant and unchangeable corporately defined ideology.

The novelization of McDonald’s is visible in the Klasky-Csupo films. They questioned McDonald’s past and brought new ideas and perspectives to bear on its image and its management. This involved a combination of the older epic voice with newer ways to imagine the corporation. This led McDonald’s ability to dethrone its epic past so as to create the space for a different future. The more novelistic McDonald’s has embraced more voices, more types of

food, more languages, and been localized in important ways. Ronald was pivotal in leading this change. It is unprecedented for a clown to hold corporate positions, such as a role in the latest global strategy and corporate transformation (Kaplica, 2004). Nevertheless, McDonald's blurred the lines between clown and "real" leader so as to enable corporate renewal through supporting the entry of new and more diverse business practice and organizational identity.

### *Green Narration*

Within the novelistic corporation which Ronald has paved the way for, the strongest new narrative at play in McDonald's is that which we refer to as a "green narration." It is here that Ronald has led the organization in reformulating itself into a more health conscious and fitness oriented organization. In his 2004 live show, *Get Moving with Ronald*, Ronald not only does fitness workouts with Bob Greene, Donna Richards and Alicia Machado, he also becomes a fitness coach, instructing crew members, children, and accompanying adults with workouts. He also performs skits focused on healthy eating habits and fitness. *Get Moving with Ronald* (sponsored by the American Academy of Pediatrics) is intended to teach children the importance of a more active lifestyle, and the need for fitness activity in everyday life.

In *Get Moving with Ronald*, McDonald's asserts that "obesity is a symptom of energy imbalance" (Kaplica, 2004, slide 14) and "sedentary lifestyles" (slide 15) and that "McDonald's offers a range of menu choices to meet nutritional needs" (slide 43). Ronald's show is used to meet the education component of McDonald's global strategy (slide 17), that is, to "share information in a user friendly way to help all people achieve personal responsibility in their own wellness." The show answers to a raft of obesity lawsuits, and growing consumer consciousness that the United States., United Kingdom., Australia, and other "McDonaldized" (Ritzer, 1993/2002) nations are experiencing epidemic rise of childhood obesity.

While McDonald's has introduced new menu items and attempted to reduce the trans-



fatty acids in existing items (Bradford, 2003), it is in re-envisioning the public perception of McDonald's where Ronald's transformational leadership is played out. Sustaining Ronald's influence and popularity as a virtual leader is pivotal to countering the perceived reality of fast food's contribution to obesity. Children growing up watching Ronald in Saturday morning cartoons or purchased his films at McDonald's for \$3.49 are well aware that Ronald is scripted as a leader.

In sum, aggressive in-school, corporate cartoons (and advertisements) aimed at toddlers, and (Happy Meal) toy-tie-in marketing to children are ways to keep McDonald's associated with fun, ecological sustainability, while asserting that obesity is either a matter of lack of personal willpower and a societal (rather than corporate) responsibility. The biggest challenge facing the fast food industry is to overcome the perception that its food is high in sugar and saturated fat content or somehow contributive to the risk of chronic heart disease. Ronald plays an important part in leading this transformation.

### *Integrated Transformation*

The two stylistic lines of transformation described above are interdependent. The corporation became more novelistic by incorporating ever more diverse partners, such as Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), People for Ethical Protection of Animals (EPIC), and now nutrition-fitness leaders. As this limit is being reached, however, a new unity of narration is emerging that ensures coherence does not dissolve completely. For example, although McDonald's partnership EDF is collaborative (Starik, Rands & Gordon, 1995), it is also the case that that "[n]either party freely, unequivocally, and unambivalently moved into the new story of market-based environmentalism" (Livesey's, 1999, p. 33). The EDF partnership is an example of green narrative being used reposition the corporation as consonant with society's shifting preference for environmental stewardship (Livesey's, 1999). This might easily become the next epic.

### **Discussion and Implications**

As we have sought to demonstrate, Ronald has an important transformational leadership function at McDonald's. In doing this, he is more than just a conduit for a corporate message. Ronald's ancient clown heritage and super human imagery has been a powerful force for transformation. As we will discuss below, this has several important implications for the transformation process at McDonald's.

It is our argument that McDonald's has had to devalorize its epic past, even its epic leader, Ray Kroc. McDonald's became an increasingly pluralistic and novelistic corporation, with Ronald being key to this transformation. Ronald has played a game of leadership that refocused the linguistic and symbolic reality of McDonald's (see Pondy, 1978). This refocusing enabled the emergence of a form of "post-heroic leadership" (Huey, 1993) that is more distributed and interactive than the model of following the dictates of an all-knowing single leader. This is an important contribution given that much transformational leadership theory assumes that effective performance depends on "leadership by an individual with the skills to find the right path and motivate others to take it" (Yukl, 1999a, p. 292).

At McDonald's, a retreat from the epic leadership of its past facilitated a transformation in the form of a narrative where the old image of fast food as unhealthy was passing away and a new one was being incorporated into the corporate strategy and image. Consistent with transformational leadership, Ronald embodied a new vision for McDonald's which was communicated with enthusiasm and inspiration (Raferty & Griffin, 2004). As part of its transformation, McDonald's became an inter-animation of multiple languages, stylistics, and genres. Ronald's ability to lead such changes suggests a need to study leadership in terms of parodying, debasing, degrading, de-crowning, and otherwise dismantling the old corporate body, while simultaneously appreciating the possible revitalization, regeneration, and re-crowning of a

reborn corporate body.

To date transformational leadership theory has been more concerned with the effects of “the expression of an idealized future based around organizational values” (Rafferty & Griffin, 2004: 332) rather than examining how critique of the past may play a part in the leadership process. In Ronald’s case this critique is done through a constrained but still Rabelaisian (Bakhtin, 1968) humor. The old and new body, make for a double-bodied corporation. It is the cycle of metamorphosis that, in McDonald’s and other long-lived corporations, is ongoing. Without it, organizations do not adapt to changing environments. Ronald has the freedom act through his clown mask and to enact a “carnivalization” of leadership (see also Rhodes, 2001).

Our study also alerts attention to a phenomenon called narrative leadership, an area that that has been under-researched. The role of a narrative leader is to facilitate the transformation of one way of narrating the corporation to another, in this case from epic to novelistic. In terms of narrative strategy (Barry & Elmes, 1997) this is a transformation to more novelistic or polyphonic narration. It is also a means of reformulating meanings and changing organizational cultures (McConkie & Wayne, 1986), and transmitting tacit norms (Feldman & Skoldberg, 2002).

As a final point, our analysis suggests that a new category of leader is needed; something called a “clown leader.” As Ronald takes on the ancient masks of rogue, clown, and fool, he integrates diverse forms of laughter (rogue destructive humor, clown merry deception, and fool’s right not to comprehend the system). It is this appropriation of a clown type by the world’s largest restaurant corporation that is central to its transformation. A method used to transform clowns into leaders is to represent them in adventures of misfortune (Bakhtin, 1981) which are overcome by their leadership powers. This is what happened Klasky-Csupo created the new Ronald.

### **Conclusion**

Ronald McDonald is a leader who has spearheaded McDonald's greatest transformation. This is a transformation to keep the corporation as fashionable, fit and healthy as its clown. This was a change critical to McDonald's ongoing success, given the public criticisms of the health value of its products. As Ronald has been reformulated so has the corporation (and vice versa) and in so doing, Ronald's leadership has facilitated the organizations transformation. The corporation was based on a history of epic narration and it needed a radical change along to first stylistic line of transformation we have discussed. It needed to dialogue with more partners of differing points of view until the corporation turned novelistic, something it did very successfully. When that first line was stretched to the limit, the corporation embarked along the second stylistic line of transformation towards a newly dominating green narrative.

It is our conclusion that as a leader Ronald is double-narrated and that this doubling is unique to his fictional persona of a clown. It is a function that no flesh-and-blood leader could fulfill. This makes Ronald more than just a puppet for a pre-ordained corporate message – his double narration ensures that he takes on a leadership function of his own. He does so through the power of a more ancient character, the clown voice that goes back to the Middle Ages. Further, this double narration is not just orchestrated centrally. Ronald is more than a figure head, he is a culturally potent carnivalesque clown leader. He plays with a transcendental aesthetics that are both immortalize him in film as a leader of extraordinary spatial and temporal powers and localize him as a tangible being in neighborhoods around the world.

An issue that we raise is whether the leadership of Ronald McDonald is a carefully orchestrated ploy on the part of the McDonald's Corporation to enhance its power through indirect means. Indeed, given Tourish and Pinnington's (2002) argument that the key elements of

transformational leadership are remarkably similar to the defining traits of cults. There is much reason to be skeptical about new forms of leadership that might enhance corporate power in a way that creates new forms of authoritarianism whose operations are far from transparent. This is even more salient for leadership such as Ronald's, whose influence might not easily be noticed given his fictional character. McDonald's has added new items to its menu, but this has augmented rather than replaced the previous unhealthy items. This might be considered a type of surreptitious corporate trickery designed to make reduce people's guilt and anxiety about a high-fat high-sugar fast food diet.

While manipulation may well be part of the corporate intention, our analysis of double narration suggests that Ronald's behavior cannot be reduced to the intention of his script writers. More affirmatively, it is possible that out of the fantasy life of carnival clowns and cartoons has emerged a more clown leader, one that has radically transformed the Golden Arches. It has not yet happened, but what began as false pathos (at least calculated pathos) may, through double narration, turn into deep corporate commitment to the new corporate vision: to become the leading restaurant promoting healthy, happy, active lifestyles everywhere it does business.

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